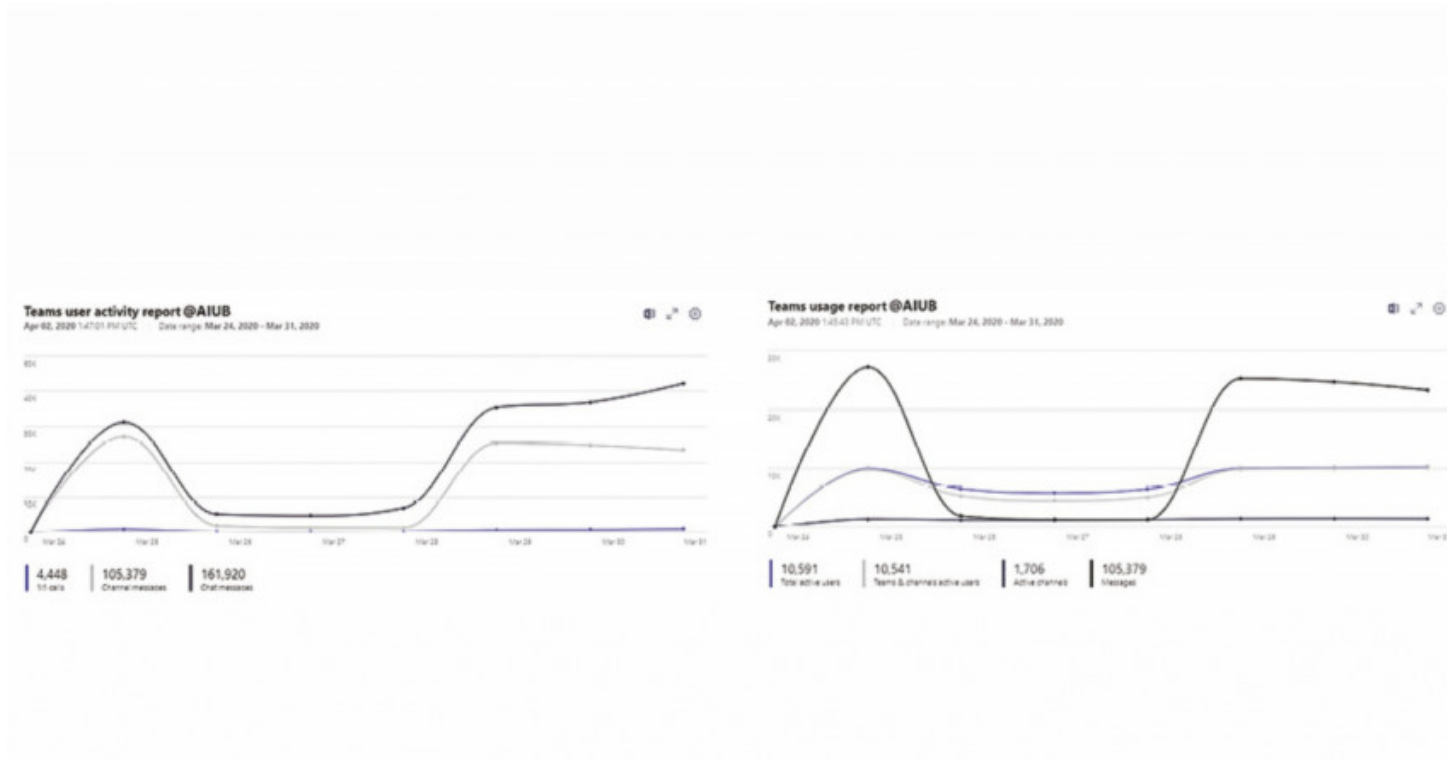


A PARADIGM SHIFT: The Case of AIUB



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It is a hard fact that the high-risk sites for the spread of the Covid-19 are schools, colleges and university campuses. This evolving situation will not only be vastly disruptive but also a paradigm shift in Higher Education Institutions (HEI). The coronavirus is most fatal for the aged with underlying health medical issues. That may be an appropriate description for HEIs brought about by the coronavirus.

The "black swan" an unforeseen event that changes everything, is upon us: a change that prompts us in HEIs to rethink how we operate at every level, one of those unpredictable, unforeseen events with extreme consequences.

In Bangladesh and elsewhere, students live in close community proximity, take classes in four-walled classrooms, eat and spends time for class work and activities in communal settings, and cheer on their teams where shaking hands, high fives and

hugs are common. With the shutdown, some HEIs has moved quickly to create a remote-teaching alternatives.

The Covid-19, a virus could be more of a catalyst for online education and other ed-tech tools. With social distancing as the most effective tool for flattening the infection curve absent a medical test kits, and a vaccine, the wave of sending students home and finishing the academic year/semester online is good for all of us. Social distancing is a temporary new norm, where HEIs can develop more of the pedagogical and administrative tools to operate as a distributed organization.

Unfortunately, in the country, most HEIs struggle with having a remote workforce for the duration of the shutdown. Unlike the tech sector, they are not built for remote work and may have little experience in doing or managing it.

There is also a financial backlash on this. Students may not be in the classroom, some of whom either typically welcomed the respite or may have actively resisted it, but are getting the same curriculum, course, and teachers and administrative staffs, and the cost of making the shift to online delivery and adding the requisite supports will actually be more costly.

No one wants to think about a scenario in which the situation persists into the next semester and universities are unable to reopen. Not a likely scenario, but a possible one. Even if campuses can reopen: Will the anxious parents want to keep their children closer to home? Will traditional-age students have discovered online education as a viable and more affordable alternative?

These events prompted the American International University – Bangladesh (AIUB) to go online (virtual).

The classes of all four Faculties of the institution has been shifted online, enabling students and teachers to conduct and undertake their classes within the safety of their homes. From the March 20, 2020, AIUB has successfully initiated all its classes, for both undergraduate and graduate programs, online through the Microsoft TEAMS Application. Since 2008, AIUB has been affiliated with Microsoft live.edu, currently known as Microsoft 365, making it one of most long-standing and strong collaborations, with the technology giant, in the country till date.

As a result of this collaborative affiliation, AIUB students, faculty members, and officials get unlimited user access to many of its applications, including the Microsoft TEAMS. It is a unified communication and collaboration platform that combines persistent workplace chat, video meetings, file storage, and application integration. Being one of the first private universities in Bangladesh to make the move within days of the initial outbreak in the country, AIUB has now gone fully virtual with its classes with the licensed MS TEAMS App that students, teachers and other employees can access using their own university email IDs.

In its ongoing Spring 2019-20 semester, approximately 10,000 active student users along with around 650 faculty members of AIUB are accessing this online platform, utilising it to its full capacity for online class lectures and team-based work projects. Faculty members are delivering lectures through video conferencing with embedded PowerPoint presentations, whiteboard incorporations, and desktop sharing options. Students can communicate with them through video, audio or message boards for queries, clarifications, and class participation, as required and appropriate. They can also participate in the quizzes and assignments through this platform. Several online meetings with the academic and administrative-support staffs are held regularly.

The platform enables an interactive and versatile set-up as an alternate medium to conventional in-class teaching and learning environments, augmenting another layer of advanced digitised education in the modern world today. The initiative safeguarded the students from incurring the loss of the semester, giving them, their parents, and guardians the peace of mind. To date, positive feedbacks are relayed by the teachers including the enthusiasm shown by the students to make the learning requirements more adequate and satisfactory, as the learning objectives are given utmost attention and consideration.

Agility, flexibility, and resiliency aren't just fundamental skills for the 21st century students. They're imperative skills for the 21st century educational institutions — especially in an era when disruptive pathogens and natural calamities are predicted to become all the more common.

Whether or not Covid-19 quickly subsides, the life as we knew it has been permanently altered.

Tumultuous times have a way of reordering reality and, in the process, opening doors to new opportunities and mind-sets.

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