# COVID-19 AND ONLINE EDUCATION – OPPORTUNITY IN THE OUTBREAK

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There is a global rush to go online as firms and organizations scramble to deal with the fallout of social distancing dictated by the COVID-19 pandemic. In the midst of the outbreak, HEC’s directive for universities to conduct classes online is in line with the steps taken by universities worldwide to deal with the suspension of in-person classes that, until recently, was the global educational norm. However, a new normal driven by online education is taking shape.

Led by world-class universities like Harvard, Stanford, Oxford, Cambridge, Tsinghua, and Peking universities, higher education institutions around the world are in the process of implementing workable online learning management systems to overcome the cessation of educational work caused by the outbreak.

Needless to say, the education sector, like every walk of life, had not anticipated the scale of the disruption wrought by the outbreak. The speed with which it happened has left all stunned. However, a coherent response demands that we bounce back from the initial shock to design comprehensive coping strategies. Not doing anything is just not an option which, as a developing country, we cannot afford to choose.

At least in the education sector where the key business is imparting ideas and knowledge, the combination of low density and high productivity, made possible by the internet, offers a concrete opportunity to minimize the impact of the outbreak. A relatively high number of 78 million broadband subscribers representing a national broadband penetration rate of almost 37% shows that, if pursued collectively and single-mindedly, online education can become a national success story.

However, there is a certain amount of resistance against going online. Understandably, this resistance springs from the combination of the scale of real-life challenges associated with putting in place functional online learning systems and the inborn unease we humans feel when, caused by a crisis or an emergency, normal routines to which we have become acclimated disappear overnight.

But such is the nature of emergency; it never occurs at the time and the pace of our choosing. It rushes us, yanking us out of the inertia of the even keel and compels us to think on our feet to take measures which we would not have taken in normal circumstances.

Overall, the success of our universities in virtual education will depend on their presence on either the sunny or the seamy side of the global digital divide. At the practical level, the quality of the delivery of online education would depend on the level of preparedness of universities, the motivation of their staff, faculty, and students, and last but not the least, policy guidance and financial support provided by the government.

It is but natural that as part of the higher education system of a developing country like Pakistan, our universities are experiencing tough challenges in their efforts to get online education going. Some of these are related to the uneven availability of non-stop high-speed internet connectivity, supply of electricity, robust technological structures, learning platforms and adequate financial resources for quality online education.

On the supply side, the lack of availability of teachers with experience of virtual teaching coupled with asymmetrical faculty motivation to acquire this experience through learning by doing is slowing down the process of going online for most universities in the country.

On the demand side, staying at home means that students will have to access online learning offered by their universities from all over the country. This may not lead to uniform learning outcomes for all the students given unequal access to unbroken high-speed connectivity. Even where connectivity is not the issue, differences in levels of self-discipline required for a meaningful remote learning experience will lead to poor learning.

On the policy side, the guidelines issued by the HEC for universities and degree-awarding institutions are certainly helpful and commendable but basic. It goes without saying that the scale of the challenge goes beyond what they cover. Further, these guidelines are silent about the financial bottom line of implementing quality online learning management systems on a daily basis.

Moreover, the relief package announced by the government also does not include anything for higher education or education for that matter to help deal with the impact of the outbreak. This will result either in the provision of poor remoting learning experience and outcomes or in the indefinite mass closure of universities with meagre resources. Even for those universities that are not in dire financial straits, mass online education will be a strain on their finite resources.

Sooner or later, if the outbreak continues indefinitely the government will have to provide reasonable financial support to universities through the HEC for building quality online education infrastructure.

With the exception of a few leading universities, technological challenges faced by many second-tier universities means that they will continue to struggle with online education even if all other challenges, mentioned above, were somehow taken care, which we know will not be the case in a realistic scenario.

However, despite all these challenges, we constantly need to keep the big picture in mind and push the drive for national for online education. We should remember that national advances in higher education have come at a great cost in the last 18 years. Building upon these achievements means continued operation of universities through thick and thin. In the new normal post-outbreak, online education offers the only safe way of doing so

Granted that the virtual classroom may not have the interactive warmth and ease of a brick-and-mortar classroom but the overall benefit of online education far outweighs the loss of comfortable conviviality of traditional offline learning.

As is already evident from the direction of the global state of affairs, sustained national growth and development in the twenty-first century will be determined by the availability of a critical mass of workers skilled in advanced ICTs.

The ongoing evolution of advances in artificial intelligence, the gradual coming into being of the worldwide internet of things, and the unfolding fourth industrial revolution driven by robotics has increasingly made high levels of IT skills an indispensable personal competence for success in the modern workplace.

Therefore, the outbreak-driven imperative of online education should be seen as an unexpected but a necessary nudge toward the mass national acquisition of quality IT skills. At the high end of this skill acquisition lies the promise of not only a globally competitive tech-savvy workforce but also the possibility of capturing a relatively sizeable share of industries like global ecommerce and software with each valued approximately at more than US$3.5 trillion.

In sum, the outbreak has caused a unique moment in global higher education making the creation of online education systems key to the smooth performance by universities of their four cardinal functions, namely, their first-generation function of teaching, the second-generation function of research, the third-generation function of entrepreneurship and innovation, and the fourth-generation function of sustainable socioeconomic development, simply because these functions cannot be performed in the face of large-scale campus shutdowns.