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Impact of COVID-19 on Higher Education

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Abstract

COVID-19 has had a significant impact on education across the globe, with both educators and students greatly affected by the sudden shift to online learning and the absence of face-to-face interaction in a stimulating environment. This was exacerbated by the lack of training for educators in how to facilitate quality virtual learning, including operating online software to optimise student outcomes or mitigating the psychological impact on students forced to stay at home. Mandatory online learning also exposed the stark digital divide within the student community, with many students unable to access or afford the necessary technology or data to continue their studies. Furthermore, for students living or studying in remote areas, the deficit of vaccination centres has made it hard for them to return to physical learning spaces once they reopen. The devastating socioeconomic consequences of the pandemic has also impacted the financial resilience of educators, students and their families. A reduction or withholding of salaries and disruption of traditional revenue streams placed additional burdens on all stakeholders in higher-education that severely undermined their ability to teach and learn. This paper explores the causes for this and explores comprehensive suggestions that will improve education post COVID-19 pandemic.

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Acronyms

TVET: Technical and Vocational Education and Training

Introduction

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic not only ignited a global health crisis, but had severe socioeconomic consequences that threatened and undermined the entire education ecosystem. No institution or type of education remained unaffected, from secondary schools, to vocational training to colleges and universities. Students at all levels faced significant and similar challenges, however higher-education students, especially those who lived away from their family home and on campuses, experienced specific issues such as a higher risk of infection and financial insecurity that adversely impacted their education.

In order to analyse the impact of COVID-19 on higher education it is therefore necessary to take into account a very wide range of factors, including economic variables, transformations in learning and teaching processes (through the digital transition) and the resulting psychological impact on students.

1. The unprepared and unsupported shift to online learning

The unavoidable yet sudden shift to virtual learning during COVID-19 caught higher education institutions and educators off guard, and exposed a gap in their preparedness to provide quality and student-centred teaching online. Despite sincere efforts to ensure a smooth transition, students suffered education losses due to a lack of interaction, technological barriers and unfair and invasive practices during digital examinations. The most critical challenges of this ill-prepared transition to online learning are outlined below.

Unavailability or inaccessibility of essential devices and technology:

- 84% of teachers in developing countries reported facing challenges in delivering education digitally, with close to half of teachers facing issues related to connectivity, both in relation to signal issues and data expenses (India Today).
- With up to 55% of teachers also confronted with salary cuts, the additional costs of an unprecedented use of data caused severe financial difficulties and personal stress.
- This reality was also faced by many learners, especially in developing countries or economically-disadvantaged communities and families, for whom affording a laptop and consistent internet access was impossible.
- A staggering increase in the use of multiple wireless and electronic devices for long hours in many households, caused a rise in power shortages and connectivity issues in many countries that impacted students' ability to access online learning.

Poor quality of training for educators and digital teaching methods:

- Educators are highly skilled in their area of expertise however many have little experience in using digital technologies that are essential for online learning, such as meeting software including Zoom, Teams etc. The lack of training or support for educators in this new field led to countless problems in facilitating interactive online learning spaces, such as an inability to share their screens or unmute themselves.
- Retaining the same methods of offline teaching in an online environment, as opposed to utilising new, creative interactive virtual learning strategies also contributed to a loss of motivation for students. This was exacerbated by a lack of regular informal meetings

with students to allow them to raise concerns and suggest alternative approaches to increase student engagement.

- Students with disabilities were also increasingly left behind, with a failure to adapt to, or provide, learning software and schedules that catered to their specific needs.
- Even when educators were adept at navigating virtual platforms, not having access to physical opportunities to facilitate experiential hands-on learning for students studying science or medicine meant the quality of lessons decreased sharply.

1.1. Recommendations

The following recommendations would help mitigate these challenges for students still experiencing online learning, and prepare for any future scenarios that mandate its use.

Teacher training programmes and interactive learning strategies.

- Institutions and digital learning platforms must provide quality, free and mandatory training for educators on how to use virtual software and utilise new online teaching strategies that engage students and create optimal academic outcomes.
- This training and support must be a continuous process and not a ‘tick-box’ exercise. Platforms and structures that encourage ongoing learning should be created, such as an online portal that allows teachers to communicate with each other globally, share resources and include a list of credible resources they can use to enhance their teaching styles.
- Examples of alternative learning strategies that could be adopted include:
 - **Flipped classroom style** - This approach has been widely implemented by institutes across the world yielding results that indicate that it may be an effective strategy for helping students learn and understand material. Placing the onus of understanding the topic thoroughly enough to teach it to peers can help both those who educate and learn the material.
 - **Asynchronous learning** - Where possible, a blend of lectures and separate online interactions would ensure that information is shared, uncertainty is solved and multiple spaces are created to cater for different students schedules and learning styles.

Government provision of essential technology and data:

- Education is a right, not a privilege, and a lack of financial ability to afford electronic devices or consistent access to the internet in a time of crisis should not deny any student access to education. To combat this inequality, government and/or state institutions should provide economically-disadvantaged educators and students with free or subsidised devices and data packages that will enable them to continue their education.
- Efforts should be made to eliminate ‘data deserts’ and invest in connectivity infrastructure in rural and poorer areas that enable reliable access to the internet.

Student participation:

- The meaningful participation of students in learning strategies should be an essential component of all higher-education systems, yet its importance has been amplified

during COVID-19. By putting the interests of the largest stakeholder, and primary beneficiary, of higher education at the forefront and creating formal routes for their engagement, continuous feedback loops on what is working, and what isn't will be established. This would enable a responsive curriculum and timetable for online learning that is owned by both educators and students in equal measures.

2. The economic impact of COVID-19 on higher education systems

The economic consequences of COVID-19 has been a significant challenge for the higher-education sector, with many institutions, staff and learners facing financial losses and insecurity as domestic and global economies look to recover from the pandemic. An overview of the most pressing impacts of this are detailed below.

Financial insecurity for students and educators:

- National lockdowns not only closed physical education spaces for students but often caused the temporary or permanent end of their employment. This resulted in a huge reduction in the income and financial stability of many students, which not only led to difficult personal circumstances but left them unable to pay for tuition.
- For students from lower-economic backgrounds or with caring responsibilities outside their education this was especially devastating. Faced with an impossible choice, some students were forced into precarious work to pay for food, accommodation and tuition despite the ongoing pandemic, putting themselves and their communities at a heightened risk of infection.
- Moreover, as referenced in the previous section, the shift from in-person learning to virtual relied heavily upon students and educators having access to their own technology. No longer able to work, many students could not access the resources they needed to participate and teachers were not given the means to support their students. Educators also required additional training and support in delivering online classes while in many cases, not being compensated for their work, impacting work-hours available for students and overall motivation.

Funding shortfall for higher education institutions:

- The cascading impact of the tuition fee deficit meant that many higher education institutions cut the salaries of, or even terminated, their staff, reducing the number of full-time educators.
- Many universities and colleges were also unable to provide essential financial support to disadvantaged and struggling students due to this loss of tuition revenue and other funding streams, such as parking and transportation, dining and hostel fees. These gaps exposed by the pandemic highlighted the over-reliance some education institutions have on private funding avenues largely propped up by students themselves.

2.1. Recommendations

The following recommendations could help alleviate the economic impact of COVID-19 on higher education stakeholders, however governments and institutions must remain flexible in their response and re-evaluate approaches as new situations and crises occur.

Prioritising access to, and funding of, education in crises such as COVID-19

- Education must be regarded by governments and other decision-making stakeholders as an essential right to be safeguarded during emergencies, alongside other critical services such as health, WASH and shelter.
- Education is pivotal in shaping and preparing future generations to prevent and respond to emerging crises, a failure to adequately invest in this threatens long-term societal health and stability. Sufficient and sustainable public funding of higher education should therefore be established in non-crisis periods to support resilient systems. During a crisis funding to education should not be cut or redirected.

Responsive and flexible pricing strategies

- Governments have a responsibility to provide free and quality education for underrepresented, disadvantaged, or vulnerable students, the majority of whom have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. In countries where higher education is not free, fees should be waived for these students and maintenance grants established or we risk losing a generation as a result of COVID-19.
- Where tuition fees do apply, many leading institutions are adopting optional pricing strategies that take into account the uncertainty surrounding upcoming semesters. For example, if an institution returns to on-campus teaching, it will impose its standard tuition rate, or something close to it. If conditions require classes to stay online for the fall semester, a different tuition rate will apply. Other institutions should follow this practice and governments should mandate this flexible approach.

3. The hidden psychological toll of COVID-19 on students and educators

The mental health and wellbeing of students and educators has been a historically neglected topic and COVID-19 further exacerbated this critical yet overlooked issue. Keeping up with demanding academic programmes during a global pandemic, whilst forced to stay at home and cut off from essential support systems, pushed many actors in the higher education sector to breaking point. Examples of the consequences of this are highlighted below.

A student and educator mental health crisis:

- The most common psychosocial issues for students during COVID-19 were fear, distraction, lack of motivation and stress. This risk is greatly increased in those with pre-existing mental health conditions.
- Sickness and death of loved ones had a catastrophic effect on the wellbeing of students, especially when this occurred repeatedly in short spaces of time. For students studying and/or living away from home, dealing with this trauma in isolation magnified its impact.

- Managing multiple difficult extracurricular responsibilities, such as caregiving, mutual aid and personal wellbeing, alongside expectations to maintain high academic standards created an impossible workload for both students and educators.
- The closure of institutions, lack of extracurricular and outdoor activities, altered eating and sleeping habits, lack of peer-time fostered monotony, anguish and diverse neuro-psychiatric symptoms. This was especially dangerous for students with abusive or neglectful home situations and forced to stay, alone, in harmful environments.
- For educators, the unprepared shift to virtual learning detailed in section 1 of this paper resulted in heightened stress, feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem. All of which impacted their ability to teach or take on a pastoral role for their students experiencing similar mental crises.
- Similarly, the effect economic insecurities caused by COVID-19 had on the wellbeing of students and teachers referenced in section 2 cannot be underestimated.

Failure to support or mitigate the psychological impact of COVID-19:

- Many students reported an absence, or poor quality, of efforts to support their mental health during COVID-19. The extra burdens facing students as a result of the pandemic were often not acknowledged and no mitigating measures were in place to compensate for this. For example, an inflexibility of academic deadlines, tuition fee payments, workloads and class schedules.
- The majority of higher education institutions did not proactively offer resources or materials to students on the importance of mental health or provide any advice on how to cope with increasingly challenging circumstances.
- Psychosocial support services, where they did exist, were overstretched and unable to meet the increased demand.
- Informal spaces for student wellbeing, such as socialising or study sessions, were shut down with no virtual alternatives provided, increasing isolation and loneliness.

3.1. Recommendations

The unprecedented and complex challenges caused by COVID-19 were undoubtedly going to negatively impact the mental health of higher education students and educators: however, there are clear steps that could have been, and still should be, enacted to reduce their severity. The following recommendations are examples of these.

Accessible provision of mental health information and advice:

- Higher education institutions should actively promote the importance of mental wellbeing and psychological health among students and educators via different means such as social media, one-on-one conversations or counselling programmes.
- Confidential, professional mental health helplines should be created or expanded and made freely available at zero cost for all students and educators.
- Preventative mental health initiatives, such as extracurricular and socialising activities both online and offline, should be established to support the ongoing wellbeing of students.

- Beyond awareness, where financially possible, higher education institutions and/or governments should also provide practical support to students facing financial hardship, such as grants or waiving fees, to alleviate economic anxiety and stress.

Flexible systems that are responsive to student participation:

- The participation of students and their representatives in decision-making processes are even more critical in times of crises. No one understands the psychological toll of pandemic on students better than students themselves. They should be regularly and formally consulted ahead of major shifts to their academic programme, such as the re-shift to offline classes, and their recommendations on how to implement these while protecting the wellbeing of the student body be taken seriously. The same principle applies to the faculty of higher education institutions.
- Students and educators must also have routes to raise problems and suggest adaptations or changes that would benefit the mental health of their peers, for example, if a more flexible approach should be taken to deadlines or a more relaxed class schedule.

4. The impact of vaccine inequality on higher education

The COVID-19 vaccination campaign is an ongoing global effort aimed at protecting people's health, controlling the rate of infection, reducing severe outcomes and returning to normal life. However, higher education has been deeply affected by the inefficiencies and inequalities of the global vaccination effort, with too many areas, social groups and populations kept far from the main tool that can limit and hopefully defeat the pandemic. A summary of examples, and impact of, vaccine inequity in regards to higher education is explained below.

Delays, shortages and barriers in accessing vaccines:

- Many remote areas faced significant delays in accessing vaccines compared to urban areas. This national trend was amplified on a global scale with the vast majority of vaccines remaining in high-income countries.
- In the existing patent system, multinational pharmaceutical companies hold the exclusive right to produce vaccines and therefore maintain limited production capabilities and charge profit-making prices that render the supply of vaccines unaffordable for the governments of less-developed countries and territories.
- The insufficient supply of vaccines, limitedly supported by international aid programmes (e.g. COVAX), has been further undermined by the delivery of vaccines close to the expiry date and by the insufficient investment in infrastructure to keep the cold chain and vaccines usable at destination.
- As a result, a consistent and large percentage of the global population has never had the opportunity to get vaccinated against COVID-19, prolonging the pandemic and triggering new variants. In many parts of the world this kept national lockdowns in place and higher education institutions closed for far longer than necessary if equal access to vaccines were available.

- For international students this also often meant they were either forcibly kept apart from their families in countries where vaccination rates were low, or were unable to travel back to the country they study in once universities reopened due to their vaccination status.

Entrenching pre-existing inequalities and distrust:

- Vaccine inequity also exposed and exacerbated unequal power dynamics between the Global North and Global South, enabling students and educators in the former to return to higher education far quicker than their counterparts in the latter.
- Disinformation around vaccine efficacy also hindered the global vaccination campaign by strengthening vaccine hesitancy, especially in underrepresented or existingly marginalised groups. In some places, including within higher education communities, this triggered distrust between different demographics and undermined social cohesion.

4.1. Recommendations

Whilst the pandemic appears to be slowing down, or at least becoming less fatal, in many countries, combating vaccine inequality and hesitancy remains critical to both ending COVID-19 and preparing for any future pandemic. The following recommendations suggest ways to approach this and outlines the potential role of higher education institutions.

Prioritising underserved communities in vaccine rollouts and challenging misinformation:

- In order to leave no one behind, putting the needs of those traditionally last in line to the front of the queue is both strategically useful and conveys an important social message. For example, organising vaccine drives in remote or rural areas as a priority not an afterthought.
- Vaccination campaigns must involve multi-sectoral partnerships that meaningfully engages the local community on a continual basis in order to effectively dispel vaccine myths, including traditional and religious leaders, parents, teachers, students and education authorities.
- The vast knowledge and diversity of students and educators could be harnessed in efforts to challenge vaccine misinformation, for example in ensuring vaccine information is easily accessible, translated into local languages and through different mediums such as video, art or theatre.
- Remote areas with interrupted electricity supply of <8 hours daily or with no electricity at all should make use of solar refrigerators to preserve the safety and efficacy of vaccines. In the medium to long term, efforts should be made to invest in the infrastructure of these areas to ensure their preparedness for future health crises.

Challenging vaccine monopolies and hoarding:

- Higher education stakeholders should join civil-society and some governments' efforts to demand a TRIPS waiver and ensure vaccines are universally available to all. They should highlight the negative impact vaccine inequality thus far has had on academic outcomes and the ability of students to access their right to education.

- Medical and social science students and educators could also be utilised as critical and trusted voices in the movement for universal access to vaccines and highlight the dangerous consequences of a global healthcare system that benefits pharmaceutical shareholders over public health.

Utilising technology and alternative vaccination venues:

- Providing alternative vaccination centres would help the vaccine rollout in terms of efficiency (closer to where people live, work and study) and reduce vaccine hesitancy caused by a fear of traditional medical buildings. For example, large fields and open spaces could be filled with tents and seating equipment or places of community trust could be hired, such as churches, mosques, synagogues, schools or universities
- Electronic data systems should be used to track vaccination rates and send reminders to unvaccinated citizens. Utilising this technology would also provide real-time updates and data analysis of vaccination statistics that would enable targeted messaging to specific populations.

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