Article

COVID- 19 Pandemic: Challenges and Opportunities for Higher Education in the Afghanistan context

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Abstract

COVID-19 adversely affected higher educational institutions around the globe. However, despite the COVID-19 predicaments educational remedial measures assisted educating the student. In the light of authors' research, observation, and experience in the academe, guidelines for COVID-19, and the necessity to have alternative solutions, this study explains the extent to which higher education is affected and it can respond appropriately to the future challenges. This study suggests the higher educational institutions to undertake further research to document and proliferate the impact of this pandemic to the system of education. Furthermore, a dire need exists for the higher educational institutions to enrich their curriculum to make it more responsive to students' learning needs even beyond conventional classroom practices.

Keywords: *COVID-19, higher education, curriculum, online learning, mental health services*

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Introduction

COVID-19 is an abbreviation of 'coronavirus disease'. According to Bender (2020), COVID-19 can also be referred to as 2019 novel coronavirus or '2019-nCoV'. This virus can be fatal as it is linked with 'Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV) (Meng, Hua, & Bian, 2020). This virus can be transmitted so quickly either through droplets or even touching the materials or any surface metals that have been infected from a person with a respiratory issue. Studies have shown that due to lack of immune to this infectious disease, people can be affected so quickly regardless of their age factor (Meng, Hua, & Bian, 2020; Bender, 2020).

Generally, school settings are more vulnerable to be affected by COVID-19, therefore thousands of schools have been closed around the world and Afghanistan is not an exemption. The report published by UNESCO (2020) highlighted that in 188 countries, 91.3% of the total enrolled learners at different levels were affected by COVID-19. In response to the current situation, the decree issued by the presidential palace to put all the public and private educational and higher educational institutions were put on leave around the country over fears of the spread of the COVID-19 (Ariana News,2020). Likewise, the closure of schools and universities were implemented in China in the year 2003 after the outbreak of 'Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome or SARS' virus. According to Fox (2007), due to the fear of spreading of SARS virus more than a thousand schools were closed, and as a result around one million students stayed at home and their teachers faced numerous issues with the use of technology to impart education.

As of April 30, 2020, because of 2171(out 10,000 tested) confirmed cases as per an online tracker report (Mehrdad, 2020), the COVID-19 pandemic really causes an enormous impact in the higher education institutions. Consequently, the country opted for an online learning system called as 'Higher Education Learning Management System(HELMS)', based on the instruction of H.E President of Afghanistan and mandate of Ministry of Education (Govt. of Afghanistan,2020). Subsequently, in addition to recording and uploading the lessons online teachers in different higher education institutions started using some online applications such as Zoom and Google Classroom to deliver education. In the context of Afghanistan, there are numerous issues with the online learning system such as lack of availability of internet facility in different areas, high cost of internet, electricity failures, and lack of electricity to name a few (Danis,2020). Besides, the majority of teachers in different higher education institutions are not prepared well to deal with online education. Being cognizant of the above problems, the Ministry of Higher Education of Afghanistan (MoHE) suspended the national memorandum for alternative delivery. The truth is,

the majority of both public and private higher education institutions in the country are not prepared well to implement this online system.

Concerning COVID-19, fewer studies have been conducted so far in the medical and other health services related fields (Usak, Masalimova, Cherdymova, & Shaidullina, 2020; Meng, Hua, & Bian, 2020; Gondauri, Mikautadze, & Batiashvili, 2020; Abdulamir, & Hafidh, 2020; Holshue et al., 2020). Nevertheless, very thin literature is available in the field of education on how COVID-19 or even SARS affected the educational system (Bao, 2020; Sintema, 2020; Yan, 2020).

2. Some recommendations for Afghanistan's higher education institutions

Based on the need for improvement in the instructional delivery in the Afghanistan context, this article presents opportunities for higher education to respond to the educational problems that arise due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.1 Integrate 'Health' and 'Environment' Courses in the Curriculum

Health and environment-related course should be integrated into the curriculum of higher education institutions. It is the need of the hour to align the curriculum of the higher education institutions to respond effectively to the world's needs at the present times. Türkoglu (2019) emphasized the integration and accessibility of health and environmental related course to all students in the higher education institutions irrespective of their field of study as every single person deals with problems related to environment and health. Türkoglu (2019) further argued that the learning materials focusing on enhancing environmental literacy can be developed not only for the classroom teaching but for educating the society at large. Related to this Keselman, Levin, Kramer, Matzkin, and Dutcher (2011) posited that the inclusion of environmental science educational programs would not only create citizens with environmental literacy but they would also demonstrate this knowledge in their social action to address the environmental health concerns. Furthermore, this environmental knowledge will create awareness and develop positive attitudes among the students to help students, and subsequently, they would acclimatize themselves with the issue the world is confronted with (Amin, Mahadi, Ibrahim, Yaacob, & Nasir, 2012; Türkoglu, 2019). In addition, the environmental knowledge will help to strengthen the educational health practices as well as implementing environmental education policies effectively.

On the other hand, Keselman, Levin, Kramer, Matzkin, & Dutcher (2011) opined that the integration of health and environment courses can pose some potential obstacles to the teachers ' lack of environmental health

knowledge among students, time constraints, and the pressure to follow the guidelines. However, much value is assigned to worldwide, particularly when the world is dealing with this pandemic issue. The attempt to enrich the curriculum can help the higher education institutions to need to understand the environmental issues of the future.

2.2 Improve 'Environmental Policies' and 'Hygiene Practices'

A key amount of measures and active improvement requires hygienic practices on all levels of learning in educational institutions. Hereafter the more beneficial and conscious positives outcomes will emerge.

Society awareness through proper learning on educational grounds will result in a positive response and more consciousness. Delivering the learners' proper awareness regarding COVID-19 and its outbreak results will purify the knowledge of learners on all levels in educational institutions, regarding such pandemic disease (Lee et al., 2003). The students should also be guided properly and professionally regarding the prevention of such a pandemic virus. Students should be equipped with health-related required tools for better hygienic practices. For overall such achievements, the university requires to adopt a policy to prevent such pandemic virus attacks (Lee et al., 2003). Therefore, the university should come up with a professional mechanism and work on a strong policy for such a highly important matter.

2.3 Feature an 'Online Mental Health(OMH)' and 'Medical Services'

For better standards and highly important prestige, there should be classified norms that ensure the needs of overall society, specifically students (Ludeman, Osfield, Hidalgo, Oste, & Wang, 2009).

Schools should improve and pay positive attention to medical directions for the betterment of students. The higher education should make the pandemic diseases and health concerns on top priorities, and publicize it on various platforms and mediums such as physical and virtual both on more easy approach phenomena that makes comfort and easiness to inform, aware, motivate, and persuade the students faster. In real the students suffered and enthralled with mental stress and phobia (McBride, Van Orman, Wera, & Leino, 2010) among a high percentage of college students, as they got real psychological disorders due to pandemic virus(Blanco et al., 2008; Dalky & Gharaibeh, 2018; Hinderaker, 2013; Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010; Pedrelli, Nyer, Yeung, Zulauf, & Wilens, 2015).

Online tracks on free of cost should be enhanced regarding medical counseling, psychological matters, anxiety, depression, and overall health-

related facilities should be offered to the students through medical experts, which will be more accessible and feasible to students to attach, join, and informed by the educational institutions (Hinderaker, 2013).

Furthermore, the higher education should also give full priority by designing a chart and overall mechanism signs, which specify the directions and awareness of medical acts, that develop public awareness (Lee et al., 2003). The information basic mechanism should be framed with a clear outlook and simple expressions that bring awareness among students regarding the transmission. On the other hand, mental strength and psychological guidance should also be included to be transferred to the students to make them mentally strong (Dalky, & Gharaibeh, 2018; Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010).

2.4 Transfer Courses, Align Curriculum Competencies, and Increase Teachers' Training for Online Learning Instructions

Due to COVID-19 overall high reputed and capable universities around the globe have shifted their learning activities toward online and distance tracks. As a major benefit, electronic learning (e-learning) accesses the students virtually, since it is not essential for the students to physically visit universities and training centers for learning activities (Knibel, 2001). Online Systems does not require physical interaction, which is the main and huge cause of virus prevention. Online tracks and mechanisms of learning improve learning with zero impact of dispersion of virus among the students.

Although teachers are facing numerous hurdles and challenges with online education system such as proper know-how, professional skills, and technological guidance. Such issues can be overcome and driven more effectively through proper trainings for effective Virtual learning. There are several software and advance tools available which in real sense enhance the teachers' and students' educational activities more efficiently and effectively. The advanced tools and countless technological devices and software are supportive platforms for the students and teachers in the online delivery of lessons (Barr & Miller, 2013). Furthermore, such tools and technological advancement brings opportunities to train the teaching staff and align their efforts more accurately for better learning outcomes in educational institutions (Ludeman et al., 2009).

2.5 Fortify 'Research Efforts, Data Monitoring, and Evidence-Based Practices

Higher education institutions are expected to be more responsive to their stakeholders. Ludeman et al. (2009) argued that the accreditation agencies, government entities, and other stakeholders expect a lot in terms of performance and quality from the institutions of higher education. In alignment with this, there is a need for the higher education institution to exhibit both effectiveness and efficiency in the administration of education as these stakeholders may demand the evidence to confirm the claims of effectiveness and excellence made by the institutions.

On the other hand, pandemic virus attacks bring challenges to higher education to react and positive response with proper measures and guidance. Much more effort and multidimensional researches are required to visualize the impact of COVID-19 pandemic misfortunes on overall country education mechanism.

Higher education should focus on overall documentation and a proper mechanism for data monitoring and data evidence of all programs offered by institutions to the students. The existing programs need to be more updated and accordingly than their current status for better outcomes (Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010). As less amount of research efforts have been observed and published so for in that clarify the situation and circumstances of the universities more evidently (Hinderaker, 2013). Afghanistan requires a well-organized and systematic data approach regarding health in the overall nation. Hence research guidelines and highly advanced and professional strategic approaches will be the surety of success. Research efforts clarify onward future challenges with more proper guidelines and transparencies (Ludeman et al., 2009). therefore, the teachers, researchers, and professional of higher education need to engage in the rigorous process of research to document the evidence which offers more benefits and outcomes to the students in Afghanistan against COVID-19.

3. Conclusion

COVID-19 pandemic affected the higher education institutions around the globe and as a result, thousands of schools' closure was implemented in a short span of time. Higher educational institutions especially in Afghanistan are confronted with numerous challenges in its planning system, implementation process, and the assessment procedures.

Educational institutions particularly in Afghanistan, are presented with surmounting challenges in its system of planning, implementation, and assessment. On the positive side, nevertheless, the global pandemic unlocked several opportunities to Afghanistan to give furtherance to its

system of education by integrating modern technologies. Thus, there is a need that the country's higher education institutions capitalize on these emerging opportunities to improve its evidence-based practices, offer mental health-related services that are accessible, and developing the curriculum in alignment with the needs of the present changing times.

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