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Policy Brief

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COVID-19 has undeniably affected Indian higher education and has necessitated momentous research deliberations. The nation-wide institutional closure due to the Corona crisis has affected students, academic staff and overall academia at large. Remote modes of education have emerged as an alternate method to continue the educational process and with this, higher education has shifted its operation from classroom setting to remote learning mode (Ansari, 2020). Conservative academic practices, traditional regulatory pattern and insufficient skills, and lack of technological understanding have affected remote (e-learning) mode of education (The Pioneer, 2020).

In this critical situation, the Indian government has been taking several steps and initiatives to address various issues and challenges. The Indian government led Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD), state and institutional agencies have been facilitating services such as helpline portals to connect with the needy and helpless students (PTI, 2020). These portals offer an academic support system through virtual study material and resources. The MHRD has also directed institutions to conduct M.Phil./PhD vivas through video conferences (Khandge, 2020). Such initiatives also include campus placement and urging companies for employment creation for graduates and postgraduates¹, assessing the academic loss by forming two panels under the University Grants Commission (UGC) (Agha, 2020), avoiding or delaying the process of student loans (Verma & Bhattacharyya, 2020) and revising the academic calendar without any educational interruption for students² and so on. The Indian government is trying to minimize challenges to education and maximize digital benefits in this pandemic situation³. Apparently, the obstacles and problems faced by students and academic staff can be analysed under three main gaps

of digital mode of education, mainly, access gap, usage gap and skill gap.

a.) The Access Gap: In the ongoing Corona crisis, the Government of India led Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) has initiated the remote learning mode for continuity of higher education. All higher educational institutions including central and state universities, public and private colleges and institutes have stopped their offline operations and have shifted to remote (online) mode. Therefore, higher education institutions are compelled to continue education remotely with online classes, submission of assignments, term-papers, sharing reading materials, submitting research assignments and taking subject notes from faculty members via remote access (Ansari, 2020). This has led to access gap to facilitate remote service for continuing education.

Due to the remote mode of education, access to technological resources has become a serious issue for many students. Lack of affordability of technology (e.g. low household income), lack of access to digital facilities (for instance, poor internet/ Wi-Fi connection), technologically unfriendly behaviour (technical glitches), and lack of access to internet facilities due to residence in rural areas are some of the major issues faced by teachers and students in the current scenario (Sharma et al. 2020).

In addition to this, the closure of higher education institutions also affected internal evaluation, and rescheduling as well as cancellation of examinations (Kunju, 2020). In the ongoing Corona crisis, the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) has cancelled or postponed all the examinations of higher education institutions. All the higher education institutions, including central and state universities,

¹See the Job offers on hold by MHRD. Retrieved on 12/04/2020 from: (<https://www.shiksha.com/engineering/articles/covid-19-pandemic-hrd-minister-urges-firms-to-not-withdraw-job-offers-blogId-34405>).

²See the directives for academic calendar during lockdown. Retrieved on 22/04/2020 from: (<https://theprint.in/india/education/modi-govt-wants-cbse-ncert-colleges-to-revise-academic-calendar-due-to-covid-19-lockdown/387761/>).

³See the guidelines provided by the Govt. of India for all clarification w.r.t. examinations, salary of faculty members, payment of fees, instruction for fake news, internships. Retrieved on 22/04/2020 from: (https://www.aicte-india.org/sites/default/files/Instruction_Col_Inst_15.04.2020.pdf).

public and private colleges and institutes, have stopped their internal evaluation and cancelled all examinations (Kunju, 2020; Hemal, 2020). Students are worried about their annual academic performance, grades, teachers' responses for coursework and the long-term consequences of this shut down on their studies (Lederman, 2020).

b.) Usage Gap: In current scenario, the usage of technological facilities are a major concern for remote learning mode. The use of technology has greatly affected the online teacher-students interaction. Both academic staff and students are vulnerable at this stage of remote learning mode. The academic staff have technological resources and facility of internet connection or Wi-Fi, however, the academic staff are not familiar with technologies and digital modes of education. Therefore, most of the academic staff are facing difficulties while operating digital devices for teaching and learning process. There are cases of interrupted internet connection and impediment of Wi-Fi network which hinders students from timely receiving emails and official information from their institution (Sengupta, 2020). In addition to this, the undesirable interruption of online lectures due to low Wi-Fi networks, poor internet connection, household chores, disturbance by family members and so on lead to an undesirable gap in the teaching-learning process.

c.) Skill Gap: In the time of Corona crisis, overdependence on technology has affected the skills and professional training of Indian academia. Both students and academic staff have no prior orientation and training of online teaching and learning. Under these circumstances, students are reluctant to continue studies online due to the difficulty in understanding any concept and phenomenon, technical glitches (for instance; laptop breakdown, system error in digital devices and computer-collapse), lack of classroom dynamics, and deficit of concentration level while attending the online lecture from home (Charnsil & Chailangkarn, 2020). The submission of assignments and reports, daily updates from faculty members and classmates, sending notes, sharing queries and problems by students to teachers have become ambiguous, unclear and uncertain through online medium (Yong, 2020). Therefore, online teaching and learning process has left teachers and students in chaos and confusion.

To identify and discuss this skill/literacy gap, following are the primary problems: a.) Strict timeline and lack

of direct engagement create a mechanized teaching process which may further lead to stress and anxiety among teaching community (Lederman, 2020). b.) Teaching materials need to be shared with students to ensure the effectiveness of communication, which further leads to over-burden on academic staff. (Lederman, 2020) c.) Technologically driven medium for communication is not a feasible method for many faculty members due to lack of experience of dealing with social media, emails and chats for sharing lectures and notes for study material (Spataro, 2020). d.) Faculty members neither have any prior experience of receiving online assignments nor have prior training of preparing online assessment-report of every student (Hodges et al. 2020). e.) Overburden of administrative activities related to marking online attendance of the students and evaluation of their online performance are also challenging for faculty members (Spataro, 2020). f.) Teachers cannot engage in laboratory-based learning from home, which has resulted in a temporary cessation of the practical tests by faculty members⁴. g.) Harassment of academic staff through online abusive and obscene messages and posts (Iftikhar, 2020).

To summarise, this brief has highlighted the obstacles and problems faced by students and academic staff due to the institutional shutdown. It is evident that the dynamics of physical classes are different from conducting remote (virtual) classes, but the academic staff have to involve with the teaching process in an enthusiastic and innovative way. Access to technology and determination to follow remote education are two significant challenges to continuing education for both students and faculty members. These problems are pertinent, sensitive and challenging to resolve by the Indian government. Considering the issues and challenges, the Indian government has been launching several initiatives and schemes for innovative and supportive educational system in this hour of crisis.

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⁴ See the details in the Boston University Website. Retrieved on 14/04/2020 from: (<https://www.bu.edu/covid-19-information/impact-on-staff-and-faculty/>).

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