



A Qualitative Investigation of Issues and Success Stories of Online Teaching in Pakistani Higher Education in the Context of Covid-19 Pandemic

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Online learning has become an inevitable mode of learning in the current cyber scenario; however, COVID-19 made it essential to disseminate education through the given method. Therefore, like the rest of the world, Pakistani universities switched to online learning when educational institutions were closed during the pandemic. Such experiences were relatively new in Pakistan, and in effect, teachers faced several impediments in dispensing online learning. The present position paper examines the issues and success accounts considering online teaching and learning at the University of Malakand, a public sector university located in rural Pakistan. The study responds to the questions pertinent to virtual learning barriers and ferrets out success stories of learning in rural Pakistan. The data were collected from the University faculty through interviews, and thematic analysis was employed for its analysis. The findings revealed that the significant issues in such learning and teaching were: poor internet connectivity, lack of university support, deficient virtual pedagogical skills of teachers, want for the promptness of teachers and students, and insufficient relevant gadgets for learners. Despite the foregoing concerns, many teachers reported success stories thereof. Hence, the study recommends that Information Technology (along with all its needed essentials) be made a sustainable component in online teaching and learning at the university level to cope with trends and issues in a contemporary ambience.

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INTRODUCTION

Integration of and engagement with Information and Communication Technology (ICT) ensures effective continuity and characteristic quality in teaching and learning (Yıldız & Koçak Usluel, 2016). Technology facilitates and thus enhances the quality and effectiveness of education. Therefore, learning becomes purpose-and-pleasure-oriented by the apt use of technology (Ungerleider & Burns, 2002). Online teaching and learning have indispensably become the concomitant mode of education with the onset of virtualisation. Nonetheless, the pandemic made it elemental to impart education through the given ways and means. In the given circumstances, Pakistani higher education moved to virtual learning with the closure of the universities in the wake of COVID-19. Because of the newness of online scenarios in the country, teachers encountered various issues while interacting with and giving out cyber learning. The research paper scrutinises the means and methods that facilitate such education coupled with and succeeded by the success stories of teachers teaching at the University of Malakand.

Aims and objectives

- To probe the issues in online teaching at the University of Malakand in rural Pakistan.
- To investigate the success stories of online learning in the said university.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Several studies have been conducted on online learning in the recent past, and they have identified different barriers to the viable conduction of online education in academic institutions. For instance, Yildirim, Yildirim & Dolgunsoz (2019)) extrapolates that lack of in-service training, deficiency of appropriate software, scarcity of ICT tools and techniques, and the inadequacy of technical and managerial support, applicable course contents and curricula deter effective online dissemination of education. When institutes of higher education (HEIs) were closed in the wake of COVID-19 in March 2020, the Higher Education Commission (HEC) of Pakistan advised HEIs to launch online teaching to graduate and undergraduate students (HEC, 2020). Consequently, most universities moved to the

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virtualisation of classes in Pakistani universities.

Initially, online learning was challenging; learners and teachers faced numerous technical glitches, and researchers identified several difficulties. As such, learners encountered the issues of poorly established ICT infrastructure, high bandwidth costs, unreliable supply of electricity, lack of general understanding, and failure of internet connectivity are common in the developing world (Alwani, 2016; Ghavifekr, Afshari & Amla, 2012; Luyt, 2013). These studies have examined online learning complications from students' perspectives. Nonetheless, a few studies (Jonassen & Reeves, 1996) have investigated the issues and success stories from the university teachers' standpoint through a qualitative design in universities located in developing countries like Pakistan, where the teachers and students faced multilayered hitches. Kent and Facer (2004) indicate that Information and Communication Technology (ICT) includes: computer gadgets, internet connectivity, and electronic channelisation arrangements such as radios, televisions, and multimedia projectors, commonly used in today's education. They also pinpointed that schools are a virtual environment where learners participate and experience varied ICT activities, whereas homes serve as complementary locales for such practical purposes. By and large, ICT can be utilised for the efficient and functional dissemination of education in assessment, evaluation and learning. Thus, it ensures educational reforms and pedagogical restructuring.

Studies have shown that apt use of ICT can drive up the quality of education and liaise learning to the real-life ambience (Lowther et al., 2008; Weert & Tatnall, 2005). As Weert and Tatnall (2005) spotlight, learning is a lifelong progressive and consciously enacted process where learners chase their expectations by seeking knowledge, detached from the dated traditional approaches. Over time, learners tend to expect and be willing to pursue innovative sources and practical means of knowledge acquisition to secure their future. Considering the preceding statement, ICT is vital for learners to acquire information-cum-knowledge and a general understanding of Information Technology. ICT is becoming pervasive in every field of human interest, including education, because of which all study material shall be available online anytime, everywhere. Teleconferencing classrooms has concurrently brought learners and teachers together to interact with ease and convenience; hence, learning no longer depends exclusively on printed material. Relevant and related resources are available on the internet, and learning is accessible through audio, visual and video presentations.

Current research points out that ICT has transformed an educational scenario into a learner-centred one (Sánchez & Alemán, 2011). Since learners are proactively engaged in the learning process in ICT

classrooms, they can take independent decisions and make necessary plans when and if needed (Lu, Hou & Huang, 2010). Thus, ICT imparts sufficient facilities and promising possibilities in education from a futuristic milieu. Khaliq (2020) probes the issues with online teaching from students' perspectives and states that the students are not comfortable with the schedule of the online classes. They call it unusual because of their sudden appearance online, and they are a little uncertain of the commencement and end of the events they attend as they are at times mentally unprepared.

Moreover, online education (synchronous and asynchronous) raises uncertainty about conducting examinations as there are no set criteria for taking such evaluation tests in Pakistani universities. In addition, most universities provide boarding facilities to students who hail from far-flung regions where they avail themselves of basic facilities at hostels which otherwise they do not have in their hometowns. With the closure of universities due to the pandemic, students got stranded in limbo as their hometowns lacked the needed resources. Therefore, taking online classes became challenging, especially in rural areas. Nonavailability of smartphones, poor internet connectivity, and frequent power shutdown made their task even more arduous, besides the affordability of mobile package costs.

Pakistan is a country with an over 22 million population. Since most of the population lives in rural and far-off areas, they have the least access to life's basic amenities, and, in contrast, most universities are located in cities. Despite their troubles, students desirous to pursuing higher studies flock from rural to urban areas. However, launching the BS (Bachelor of Studies) in different disciplines and students' enrollment ratio made the government decide to set up new universities in rural areas. The initiative was hugely acknowledged and gained popularity over the past two decades now. Although such universities were established in makeshift or rented buildings where education-related resources were scanty, the students' intake ratio was still huge. It is yet another fact that qualitative education rarely can flourish in such locales and infrastructures. Subsequently, the outbreak of COVID-19 exacerbated the problems of students who faced issues even during face-to-face classes.

Nonetheless, teaching and learning continued through online means with the help of virtual gadgets. Several studies have examined issues in and with online learning worldwide and pointed out pertinent matters therein. However, rarely does one encounter research related to the faculty's difficulties from their perspectives. Further, the current study investigates the issues and success stories in a rural setting and a comparatively nascent University of Malakand in a developing country like Pakistan, where online learning is embryonic. So, it is intriguing to discover the issues in online education in a rural higher education setup and delve into teachers' success stories.

METHODOLOGY

Since this study aimed to explore teachers' perspectives on issues and success in online instruction in a rural university during the COVID-19 pandemic, a qualitative case study was employed for investigation. A case study design is considerably applied in social sciences as an academic and research inquiry (Bassey, 1999; Yazan, 2015)). The current study purposively used the method to answer the main research questions. Data were collected from the university teachers in rural public sector universities in Pakistan. The University of Malakand, like, other universities in the country, conducted online classes for graduate and undergraduate classes. The data under reference comprises the firsthand experiences of 17 purposively selected teachers from the faculties of numerical sciences, social sciences, humanities, biological sciences, and physical sciences. Teachers from these faculties participated in the online teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic and have practically experienced the online mode of instruction and its attendant hardships. The researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with the selected sample of teachers actively involved in online classes during the pandemic. The interviews were conducted face-to-face with the participants. From an ethical viewpoint, the consent of the participants was obtained before the conduction of interviews, and they were briefed about the purpose of the study. The interviews were conducted in the offices of the participants. Each interview lasted for twenty to forty minutes. The interviews were recorded verbatim in the form of written field notes. All the interviews were transcribed instantly and shared with the participants afterwards for authenticity and reliability. The thematic analysis was applied to the investigation of the given data. The following steps suggested by Braun and Clark (2006) were used such as: (1) familiarisation with the data obtained; (2) coding of data; (3) searching and identifying themes; (4) defining and naming themes; and (5) reviewing the themes.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The study aimed to observe and examine the complications the university teachers encountered in online teaching in lockdown due to COVID-19. The researchers inquired about the teachers' technical tools in online education, students' preparedness, the university's cooperation, and their success stories. It was identified that there were practical issues with online classes for teachers and students to continue them effectively. The study explored that teachers and students met the problem of internet connectivity and

low signals. As the university of Malakand (the research locale) is located in a remote rural region, the adversity escalated more than in urban Pakistan. This finding aligned with the results of Khaliq (2020), who reported such practical impediments in online learning. The study also testified to the effects of (Göktaş, Yıldırım&Yıldırım, 2009), who also surfaced scarcity of orientation sessions, scanty hardware, lagging appropriate skills, shortage of technical support, dated courses and curricula, and insufficient support from the university administration.

Online learning is a living fact, and there is no evasion of this contemporaneous and indispensable learning mode. It is much needed to make learning more effective on-campus, but it becomes inevitable in exigencies like the current pandemic. Pakistani universities, like other universities, continued teaching for almost two semesters with online tools, like Learning Management System (LMS), WhatsApp, ZOOM, and so forth, despite the tangible intricacies mentioned above. Hence, it is concluded from the findings that the university of Malakand should have a fully functional programme for inclusively blended learning, similar to other universities around the globe. That would help meet such an emergency quickly, making teaching and learning more efficacious. Secondly, students should be trained in a futuristic milieu and be prepared mentally for precarious and unanticipated situations, so they may be alert to cope with and adapt to them.

Contextualising the given setting and scenario, the University of Malakand must provide proper refresher training to teachers to equip them with sophisticated yet practical online teaching tools, means and measures. In such cases, the Ministry of Education, Pakistan, would greatly assist in providing material support. Ensuring internet stability, provision of the cyber appliances and other related support would facilitate the task. Timely provision of software linked to online education would update the knowledge dissemination. Disaster management plans and subsequent strategies adopted would help tackle situations like this.

Tools Used

The researchers inquired about the needed tools that most university teachers used. Most of them were equipped with WhatsApp, Zoom, and PowerPoint presentations for online teaching. However, most of them used PowerPoint slides for presentations and required explanations and would impart through the given means to students. When inquired, their response was the quick accessibility of WhatsApp to the students, who could use it at their convenience. Zoom was also availed, but it was taxing to schedule meetings and timely academic interactions; students were barely available for well-timed meetings. Moreover, the informal homely environment did not allow students to use ZOOM. Students used to be

engaged with domestic errands; especially female students would scarcely spare time for a well-timed presence for ZOOM meetings. Also, teachers did not have the experience and expertise to use virtual meetings on ZOOM. As one of the participants opined:

“I had not used the internet for teaching before this pandemic; it was my first experience. I did not know how to use other software except WhatsApp.”

That meant WhatsApp was used for teaching to facilitate students, indicating the deficiency and unavailability of other virtual software/facilities.

Internet Connectivity

Impaired and, at times, non-availability of internet connectivity was another grave concern for university teachers that hampered their online teaching attempts. They, too, reported complaints from students about the frequent power shutdown and intermittent internet connectivity. Thus, making it difficult for them to access online exchange of views and news. For instance, another participant informed thus:

“The main issues I face in online teaching during COVID19 are internet and low signal issues.”

In the earlier lockdown phase (April—July 2020), summer intensified the problems due to the regular electricity breakdown, making it worse for them to connect and teach conveniently. Hence, aggravating the situation and other attendant issues made it nearly impossible for teachers to achieve the required results.

Non-availability of smartphones was another challenge that widened the communication gap. As one teacher put down as:

“...there were 4 students out of 36 in a class who did not have smartphones, which disturbed me a lot.”

Teachers and students share similar problems and reciprocally affect one another.

Management Support

Although Pakistan’s Higher Education Commission (HEC) recommendations were conveyed to the teachers and notification was issued to the faculty for the commencement of online classes; however, it did not provide any prompt prop. Teachers solely depended on their available personal resources, which they utilised to conduct online classes. Besides, they were not trained in such a new mechanism for operating virtual education. Also, the students did not receive any orientation sessions about such cybernetic learning, which otherwise was a prerequisite to introducing things new in nature. Therefore, teachers had to take responsibility for coping with looming limbo efficiently; the university administration did not partake except for communicating notifications. The said administration should

have been proactive and synergetic, which could have mitigated teachers' problems in a complex setting and scenario.

While being on the subject, a teacher pinpointed thus:

“The University, just like other universities, introduced Learning Management System (LMS), but that was not useful because one could only upload material. Due to COVID, the LMS was slightly effective in the second lockdown phase, but there was no orientation session for students and teachers; so, most teachers and students depended on the WhatsApp groups.”

As a result, one would say that performing even easier tasks require proper guiding sessions and instructive orientations. Even such acquaintance sessions are planned for face-to-face classes during active academic sessions.

Preparedness of Students

Students are the most crucial stakeholders in the teaching-learning process and procedure. The preparedness on their part is essentially significant for the smooth running of the classes. Most university teachers opined that students were unwilling to online learning because they were not mentally alert. Their belief in online learning was a far cry; therefore, they were least interested; for example, one respondent said that his students informed him as:

“.....there is a big difference between online and face-to-face learning.”

Likewise, another teacher responded:

“his students told him they had not taken admission for online learning.

Some other teachers stated that their students told them that:

“they could not learn through online teaching.”

So, the primal point was students' lack of mental preparedness for online learning, which made things even more confounding.

Indigenous Culture

The rural setting was one of the primary challenges to online education. And the university students are grown-ups as they have to be involved in social activities, like entertaining guests, attending social functions, and helping parents with domestic chores. That hampered them in being punctual for online classes as they were time-tuned. For example, a teacher said: *“He was busy in an online class and discussed a topic, then he tried to seek a student’s response. The next day, I asked the student why he did not respond to my question.”*

He replied thus:

“...I kept my mobile in my pocket, and it was on silent mode because I had to attend a funeral.”

Similarly, a couple of teachers recounted that they had noise issues from passing by vehicles while delivering lectures; this happened to teachers and students both. Society was in a new phase of adopting and adapting to a new learning mode. They learnt almost like in-person teaching. Students asked questions, read the material, and returned the assignment. Another respondent replied:

“One thing was common in the responses: attendance was low in online learning when teachers used ZOOM or Google Meet. The students could not attend the classes due to one reason or another. Most of the time, the students were busy with in-home chores, as most students belonged to rural areas. Female students were helping their mothers.”

During the interviews, most teachers viewed that students (males and females) were enrolled regularly (as on-campus students) at the university; however, they were not allowed to take online classes. That astonished the teachers as to why the parents were doing that. One possible reason was the non-credibility and less validity of the online classes for them. Many parents (mainly illiterate) were sceptic about learning through the online mode. To them, it was wasting time and money on cell phones. They also believed that their wards would misuse mobile phones, especially females.

Success Stories

Good Learners Benefitted

The researchers also reviewed the success stories of students engaged in virtual education since they came across such thriving accounts. The teachers reported that punctual and interested students benefitted from such learning. As one participant extrapolated:

“Some students were so curious and enthusiastic that they asked us questions about lessons every time and did not stop until they were satisfied.”

Encouraging Shy Students

Some students were retiring in face-to-face classes and hesitant to ask questions, but they were active in online queries. They asked questions and developed a regular rapport with the teachers. One participant confided that:

“Some shy students did well in the online classes. They could not interact with me in class, but in online classes, they outdid many active students in their routine classes.”

Equipping with Tools for Online Learning

Another redeeming feature of online learning was getting equipped with the electronic gadgets used in online learning. The researchers, being faculty members, did not effectually use the IT tools for online

learning. Most teachers were unaware that narration/demonstration was possible in PowerPoint presentations. Similarly, ZOOM and Google Meet were introduced during the lockdown phases in 2020 and 2021. Teachers conducted online viva voce, MPhil and PhD defences primarily through ZOOM. One of the teachers said:

“The COVID-19 introduced us to a new world, a borderless world, an open world where distances collapsed for us for the first time.”

Organising and Recording Lecture Materials for Future

During interviews, it transpired that participants also kept a record of lecture materials for future reference. They said that they would be utilising online sources for sharing material during face-to-face classes with their peers and would be able to supplement their lectures with their online lessons. A participant in the study related that:

“COVID-19 helped us in many ways in teaching and learning. We will save our lectures for the future and share them with the students; they will benefit from them, especially those absent due to one or another reason.”

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to converge on the glitches in online education in a rural higher education setup and explored the success stories of teachers therein. Six themes surfaced based on the data analysis: type of tools used, internet connectivity, management support, students' preparedness, indigenous culture, and success stories. The success stories (in turn) came up through the above mentioned themes: retiring students were encouraged to pose questions, and teachers learnt about online tools and helped them organise lectures and material for future classes.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

Online teaching and learning are in the rudimentary phases in Pakistan, especially in the remote rural regions, so the issues are many myriads. Nonetheless, it is heartening for students and teachers that they are eager to learn and progress in the given field. That would enable them to face (encouragingly) the prospective hazards if any.

All stakeholders should be fully supplied with modern means and ways of online pedagogical skills and technical know-how for dealing with such a crucial ambience. Orientation sessions are the hallmark for endeavours that need well-timed management to redress tentative issues. Parents, too, shall be kept well-informed of the entire scenario and should be made part of the necessary plans taken in this regard. They

should be updated about the pros and cons of the online education system and be convinced to cooperate when needed. Regular or intermittent use of hybrid education techniques be made a permanent feature of the education system.

Similarly, the university should compulsorily introduce a practice with a hybrid/fused stream(s) of delivering education, familiarising the students and teachers with a new and innovative mode. Thus they will be wary of and vigilant to any untoward state for avoidance. In Pakistan, private education shall soon cease with the implementation of the BS programme. However, aspirant (private) candidates shall access hybrid/online education to obtain degrees even if they are engaged part-time with education. Hence, it necessitates making the best use of the online education system and overcoming the issue of distant learners in Pakistan.

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