

A transitional phase in Educational sector: Challenges and Opportunities amid Covid-19**Dr. Kshipra Jain****Assistant Professor****Department of Economics, University of Rajasthan**

The twenty first century is witnessing unprecedented transitions in almost every walk of life starting from urbanization and globalization led changes to demographic and epidemiological transitions. In fact the belief that the boundaries are losing its essence to transform world into a small global village is shaped by the pace of globalization and migration which has knitted the world very closely. Despite this inter-mixing culture and easy movement across the borders, each nation ensures its position in the global arena through their rules, regulations and policies. This is first time in the history of mankind that a disease has affected the world economies to an extent that their policies are having similar overtones. The on-going crisis of Covid-19 has brought us together in an urge to save the mankind. The pace at which the disease is spreading has left the nations struggling to find the optimum solution and trying out different strategies in the background of multiple attempts to find an appropriate course of treatment.

One of the most tested and adopted strategy to deal with this highly contagious disease is to avoid social contacts as much as possible; hence leading policy makers to lock down the entire geographical area. This strategy was first adopted by Chinese government when they locked down their Wuhan city, the epic centre of the disease as the number of infections shot up in the month of December, 2019. As per the Chinese official reports, the disease has now been brought under control and didn't spread to entire nation though the virus managed to travel across the borders to far flung areas like United States of America to an extent that it has registered the highest number of infections till date. Nevertheless India too decided to lock down its entire economy after observing Janta curfew on 22 March, 2020 for more than two months with its easing down since June 1, 2020 onwards. The governments were very well aware of the discomfort it can bring to various sections of the society; however it was the need of the hour considering the speed at which the virus can infect a nation with a size of 1.3 billion people and limited health care infrastructure to deal with the challenge.

The effect of lock-down is varying from sector to sector; it has however most adversely affected the sectors which were not using much of the digital technology considering the need of present day work environment in accordance with social distance and lock-down norms; hence making use of internet mandatory. For instance, most of the corporate houses have adopted work from home culture and are almost working as before but on the contrary sectors like entertainment industry, malls, various businesses such as fabric related, shopkeepers, shoe makers etc are

adversely affected. Amongst these sectors, education industry is one such industry which is witnessing a mixed impact of the current situation and the effect will be more pronounced in the long-run. This paper is an attempt to understand the effect of Covid-19 on education sector in a comprehensive and elaborative manner. The paper argues the on-going situation in terms of challenges and opportunities that exists for educational sector which is the backbone for economic development of any nation.

Closure of schools

Across the globe, most of the educational institutes were closed by the end of March, 2020. Consequently there were more than 1.5 billion students and 63 million primary and secondary school teachers across 188 countries (i.e. 67.7% of total enrolled learners) with 300 million children in 1.4 million schools across India who got affected as per the UNESCO Institute for statistics report. There were of course many schools which were teaching their students about digital technology but these institutes were still far away from adopting virtual teaching methods as a substitute for traditional teaching practices. The education delivery mechanism changed overnight without giving much time to learners as well as educators to come at par with the change. Of course a sudden change is bound to bring lot of adjustment issues with it and educational sector was no such exception. The effect of lock down on economy is very well articulated in terms of GDP growth, unemployment, inflation levels, investment, demand etc but when it comes to education sector the task is daunting. There is a need to revamp the system completely and each one of the stakeholders be it provider, learner, administration or family has to participate in it to make it count and effective. Also education gained today is reflected in productivity of tomorrow; therefore it is of huge importance to address the challenges faced by this sector in the most opportune way. The next section of the paper will discuss about the challenges and opportunities for educational sector amidst covid-19.

Challenges & Opportunities

There are numerous challenges that the education sector is currently facing. And it would be impossible to pen down each of the challenges, however the paper would reflect upon the major challenges being faced by this sector. First of all, its important to understand that the four stakeholders in the education system i.e. the administration system, faculties, students and parents face different challenges. For instance, the administration has to ensure safety and security of its entire staff as well as students. Their task will be more challenging in terms of coordinating with their staff, faculties, students and their parents during the crisis as well as post the lock down when they have to ensure adequate safety and hygiene measures in terms of social distance and sanitizing practices. Similarly teachers have to learn and unlearn the modes of

teaching and use of ICT (Information communication technology) to deliver their lectures to students and also to ensure that students find themselves interested in learning from those videos as it will be different from the traditional modes of teaching. Further, with respect to students, they have to adjust and adapt to new modes of teaching. Of course the classroom teaching did provide them with opportunities to make friends, discuss their teenage issues and many other things from which they will be refrained in new modes of teaching. In addition to, parents have also undergo a phase of transition in not only providing their kids with necessary equipment for receiving education but will also have to provide for addressing various psychological issues.

Considering the wide spectrum of challenges, this section will throw light on few of the challenges which according to author are most challenging.

- Internet connectivity: The first and foremost challenge comes with availability and accessibility of internet; a must for having virtual classes. The government of India is committed to provide basic infrastructure across its length and breadth, however it is yet to be achieved. Of course internet has now reached to much interiors of the country but to attend school through internet requires more than internet connectivity. This is to include, *uninterrupted power supply, an electronic device* which becomes handy for classes (being dependent on mobiles will bring health hazards), *knowledge about handling* such technology and availability of their *learning material in the language* they have been taught. In lot of rural areas without excluding urban areas, electricity is an issue and without addressing this it will be difficult to deliver lectures. With the advent of mobile technology which has paved its way in interiors of the country but for having online classes, one needs more than a mobile phone and amongst mobile phones it should be smart phone. Further despite the availability, anyone in the vicinity must have knowledge about running the applications which will be used for classes. Last of the issue is the language of content. We are a rich land of language, culture and diversity however internet is flooded with material in English language and not the vernacular language. This will be a major challenge for student as well as faculties.
- The Great Divide: India is struggling with various types of inequalities built in its structure due to cast rigidities and being patriarchal. The virtual classes will add to these inequalities as it will spell out the gap between haves and have not clearly. At the outset not all the parents can afford to have expensive electronic gadgets and even amongst those who have, some of them will be affording gadgets coming from other end of the spectrum creating the divide. Apart from this, if there is more than one kid in the house with a need of these gadgets at the same time this will again be a question of choice. Such practical issues are bound to create divide in already segregated Indian society.

Education is often believed as a tool to part such man-made gaps but what if, when it itself is adding to these divides?

- **Overhaul of curriculums:** The curriculums would need a major revision as those are designed keeping in mind the traditional modes of teaching; but with lock down in place and a belief that the corona virus will take unexpected time to go; we have to alter our lives to live with it. Hence the original curriculums need to be revised in accordance with the skills needed for handling the present crisis. And this task is certainly not easy. Of course the schools, colleges etc. do revise their syllabus time and again; but a revision and significant changes are two different things. Not only this, teachers need to be trained adequately for teaching such revised course along with parents who also needs to be acquainted with such changes
- **Learning beyond curriculums:** Schools were not just buildings made up of some classrooms, laboratories etc. its much more than that. A student learn to mix with people coming from different background which increases their social quotient and also teach them skills which are beyond the syllabus but are very much within the syllabus of life. Not only this, teachers also provide a much comfort to students so that they may discuss their personal problems and find a solution. The role of school increases manifolds for teenage children as this is a transitional phase for them and many times they feel shy in discussing such issues from their parents and families. In such scenario peers and teachers emerges as the comforting partners. Also a child learns to make relationship on his own outside the familial ties. All such opportunities cease to exist with digital learning.

These are the challenges which needs to be addressed before we move from thinking digital to being digital. One should however not forget that this time change is not coming as an option; it has become a mandate. Further amidst these challenges, there exists opportunities for educational system to discover a new world of horizon. Below are few of the opportunities that stand in the time of crisis:

- **Learning anywhere anytime: Asynchronous learning:** One of the best advantages of this mode of teaching is that it extends the scope of learning beyond the classes. A student is free to learn at own pace and at any time. The class is not restricted to a geographical location; its scope widens. Such type of teaching will ensure that students understand the subject taught and they have an option of learning at their own will.

- Learning at own pace: Apart from learning anywhere and anytime, the student will have an option of learning at their own pace. A class is full of students with different level of understanding but since a teacher has to pursue a topic according to average understanding of class; it sometimes makes the weaker student to feel left out while for intelligent student its loss of time as they can learn at a faster pace. In virtual classes a student can take own time to understand a concept by revisiting the recorded lecture multiple time and an intelligent student can increase the speed of lecture delivering and save time.
- Online tests and assessments: The assessment of a student's knowledge is based on the marks they score in various examinations. But in this type of assessment there is always a chance of human error and sometimes practice of favoritism. The online test and assessment will be free from all such errors and biases; hence, a true picture of student's understanding can be assessed with certainty. Also it will reduce the work of teachers in terms of assessment of copies. Further, it will help contribute towards cleaner environment by saving paper which otherwise is used in huge quantity to be discarded later.
- Transform the skill set of our students: The virtual learning is required not only for conducting classes but will also allow students to develop a new set of skills. The talk of digital transformation is not new to school administration but the response to these changes was very slow compared to what was needed. Hence, in this scenario the school administration will have to adapt to these changes. Also we are moving ahead in a time where technology will rule the world; the kind of jobs in which the present generation of students will be engaging are yet to be created. Hence it's important that students becomes innovative in their approach and can experiment with the technology.
- Wider in approach: In the traditional mode of schooling, the lectures were confined to students present in the class, the virtual classroom will however be not confined to those present in the class. The teaching will now have wider approach to include all those who want to learn. In fact the class will comprise of those who are interested in particular topic rather than compulsion sitting in the class.
- Teacher collaboration: Since the mode of teaching is undergoing a change, it will require efforts on part of teachers as instead of black board teaching now they have to prepare video lectures. And these lectures will be available for all; in such case a teacher can take the help of other teacher's lecture if their topic tends to be same. In this manner, the horizon of knowledge will expand and it will promote teacher's collaboration. One might utilize their time in preparing lectures on topics for which adequate lectures are not available instead of repeating the same topics.

The Road ahead

The paper has tried to bring out both sides of a coin for educational sector during and post the crisis. There is no denial in the fact that there exist more challenges and opportunities than stated but it's not possible to spell out each of them adequately.

Some of the listed challenges can be addressed; for instance, the issues revolving around internet can be provided for by using radios and television as a medium for transmitting the education. Further, radio and television can make use of vernacular language to address the challenge of availability of content. Similarly government initiated a scheme under which Akash tablets were distributed to students in 2011; this scheme however went into cold storage but it can be revived now. Another ambitious project of government "Bharatnet" which aims to provide internet connectivity across the length and breadth of nation is doing a commendable work but it still needs to reach the most interior and difficult part of our country.

Conclusion:

This journey of moving from traditional to virtual classroom is not going to be easy but we have to learn to live in new normal world. The discomfort brought to different stakeholders of education sector due to sudden imposition of lockdown hold opportunities to learn and grow in rapidly evolving world.

Disclaimer: This article is inspired by many newspaper articles.

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