

# In-Class to On-Screen: The Not-So-Easy Shift to Online Education in Tier II and Tier III Cities

Amandeep

*Assistant Professor, Dayanand Postgraduate College, Hisar, Haryana, India.*

*Email: aman22809@gmail.com*

## ABSTRACT

The education set up in the country was adversely affected by the coronavirus pandemic, almost immediately halting classroom teaching or face-to-face teaching activities. This meant that the system was caught unprepared and infrastructurally lacking. This was even more of a problem in tier II and tier III cities, as compared to metro cities. This paper aims to examine all the issues relating to infrastructure, technological know-how, digital literacy, financial repercussions, etc. faced by students as well as tutors in these areas. The paper is a qualitative analysis, consisting of interviews of students and staff members in the context of the study. A set of 15 students and 15 tutors from several colleges in the city of Hisar, Haryana were interviewed. Alongside that, Focused Group Discussions of a group of 10 tutors and learners was conducted. The paper also examines the unwillingness/inability of those at the twilight of their careers to delve into the online mode, something which isn't usual or habitual for them. The findings of the paper would prove to be useful in highlighting the digital divide that exists within our society, putting an emphasis on those who are served by the media and do not have the technological means and knowledge to cope with the advancing society. This can also greatly help the academic institutions and tutors to better plan and execute their education modules.

**Keywords:** Online Teaching, Coronavirus, Digital Literacy, Digital Divide, Education

## INTRODUCTION

The Coronavirus pandemic has affected all avenues of the working society including the likes of health care, businesses, corporate ecosystems, etc. Education is no exception.

As a consequence of the threat relating to COVID-19 transmissions, the colleges and university campuses across the globe had to shut all the regular classroom activities, shifting to remote/online learning (Ali, 2020; Crawford, Butler-Henderson, Rudolph & Glowatz, 2020; Huang et al., 2020). As many as 186 countries had implemented lockdowns in 2020, affecting approximately 74% of the learners currently enrolled (UNESCO, 2020).

Adding to that, the New Education Policy (NEP), proposed by the Indian government also recommends harnessing education through application-based learning and lesson delivery apart from the routine in-class teaching (EDTECH in India, 2019).

The process of realizing that online learning is the future of education, which otherwise would have taken a while,

has been greatly sped up by the pandemic (Dhawan, 2020).

By 2022, almost half a billion consumers in India are expected to take to the internet for the first time (EDTECH in India, 2019).

Educational institutions in the country, which were reluctant to adopt online teaching methods, have now been forced into accepting the online medium of education (Dhawan, 2020).

The majority of the Indian Universities have been caught off-guard, and to avoid disruptions in teaching activities, are just trying to play catch-up as they had not invested appropriately in virtual teaching platforms and faculty development before the pandemic (Krishnan, 2020).

The government has also launched several digital e-learning platforms such as The Diksha Portal, e-Pathshala, Swayam, Swayam Prabha, etc. QR codes have also been embedded in textbooks to encourage students to read beyond the text (The World Bank, 2020).

Although the online medium provides flexibility in class timings, the students, as well as the tutors, need to have

sound technical skills to make use of it. This has also resulted in forced heavy investments into upskilling of academicians (Krishnan, 2020).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The research fraternity around the world has heavily invested in researching the effects of the health emergency on the scale of the COVID-19 pandemic. Education has been an important centerpiece of these researches.

Contrary to being one of the fastest booming internet markets, India ranks 120<sup>th</sup> when it comes to the adoption of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) (EDTECH IN INDIA, 2019). The students, for several reasons, have shown leanings towards face-to-face learning. This lack of motivation has in turn made it difficult for them to adapt to the online mode of education (Patricia & Hermida, 2020).

The learners have limited access to tablets, laptops, or other such technologies, which are important for effective online education. Mobile Phones have been the most common devices for accessing, often shared amongst siblings in a family (Krishnan, 2020). This effectively means that there is a dire need to reduce the digital divide (Dhawan, 2020). These factors, alongside many others like broadband costs, lack of technological know-how, etc., have made the tutors realize that replicating what they did in classrooms is not easy when it comes to the online medium (Krishnan, 2020).

Lack of access to technology, Internet Connectivity, student learning environment, and tutors' and learners' motivation are the major challenges being faced in the effective implementation of the online teaching ecosystem (Krishnan, 2020).

Additionally, the lack of set benchmarks for determining the quality of online learning is also a major issue affecting the learning outcomes of many students (Dhawan, 2020).

The gravity of this is further deepened because most of the Indian universities are new to online teaching and are being rushed into it by the ongoing pandemic. There is a lack of training amongst those responsible for planning and execution of the teaching activities (Krishnan, 2020).

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

### For the Tutors

Q: Does the institution have adequate infrastructure for smooth running of online mode of education?

Q: Do you perceive a sense of unwillingness among the students and tutors when it comes to online learning?

Q: What effect has this shift had on the effectiveness of education?

### For the Students/Learners

Q: What are the difficulties you have faced in attending online classes?

Q: Has this shift impacted the approachability/interaction with your tutors?

Q: Do you perceive a sense of unwillingness among the students and tutors when it comes to online learning?

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

- Primary level analysis of current infrastructure and other technological logistics for online teaching in Tier II and Tier III cities schools.
- A qualitative analysis through in-depth interviews of the stakeholders involved (Students and Tutors) with a data set of 15 students and 15 tutors from several colleges in the city of Hisar, Haryana were done and examined.
- Focused Group discussions with Tutors and learners of 10 members each about the current system and its analysis were done and used to make inferences from the same.

## OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study aims to highlight the problems being faced by students and educational institutes in tier II and tier III cities.

It also looks at the several hurdles that the institutions in these cities face due to the lack or slow speed of inculcating technological advancements in the existing system. Furthermore, it individually examines the issues that the tutors and the learners face in terms of lesson delivery and learning activities.

## FINDINGS

### Affordability

The students, parents as well as institutions face the problem of affordability. While the colleges in tier II

and tier III cities have found it difficult to allocate the funds needed to ramp up the infrastructure, the parents are often not able to afford the devices needed by their wards. Internet charges, however, have become highly affordable in the past few years with growing competition in the sector. There are only a handful who are not able to catch up in terms of its affordability.

The students hailing from semi-urban and rural areas are faced with major problems like lack of devices, internet connectivity, limited understanding, etc.

Some of the major themes across interviews and FGDs were:

### **Lack of Access to Technology**

Six out of the 15 interviewees said that they shared a single mobile phone amongst two or more siblings to attend their classes, while three others said that they used their parents' mobile devices. Only six out of the sampled group had access to personal devices, while only two of them had laptops/computers.

The device sharing among siblings effectively meant that they were taking turns and would often miss classes when the timings coincided. This also meant limited access to revision times and other uses of the internet, adding to the already stressed situation of having to attend online classes on mobile phones.

### **Technological Understanding**

Most of the respondents said that they now had a fair understanding of the technical requirements they need to navigate through the online learning environment smoothly, albeit the many problems they faced when online teaching was thrust upon them. A majority of the students described the initial few months were spent with cluelessness, as they failed to grasp the tech at hand. The respondents also pointed out that the pedagogy of the teachers, which was haphazard at the start, is better planned now, making it easier for them to understand and follow. In the initial days, there were no set patterns, with all the teachers having a free hand and hence, doing things their own way. The respondents pointed out that there was a time when they were attending classes across multiple platforms like google meet, zoom, skype, etc., making it difficult for them to effectively keep pace with the routine teaching.

### **Connectivity Problems**

All the respondents agreed to have confronted with internet connectivity issues, which often interrupted their classes and other learning activities. None of the respondents had access to broadband services and relied mainly on mobile data for their needs.

### **Unplanned Teaching and Lack of Practical Experience**

Many of the respondents pointed out that the curriculum had felt disorganized for the past year. The classes were held in a very irregular manner and many of the tutors even skipped classes. This also meant that they had to rely heavily on their ability of self-teaching. The online classes also meant that the practical and laboratory activities, something the students were not logistically able to do at home or by themselves, were totally skipped. This, in turn, had an adverse effect on the students' learning, particularly in practical subjects such as agriculture studies and many other science subjects.

### **Lack of Motivation and Disinterest**

The students showed a strong bias towards the old system of classroom teaching and said that the online medium works only when it is used as a medium to complement the routine classes. Shifting the entirety of learning activities to the online medium was a cumbersome task and the students were disinterested in putting in the effort into something they found boring. Almost all the respondents agreed that the physical learning atmosphere provided by the traditional classroom method cannot be replicated in online classes.

### **Communication, Participation, and Lack of Accessibility to Faculty Members**

The students also highlighted that the online classes were subject to various disruptions stemming from nuisance caused by their classmates, internet issues, tech failures, etc. and are not as interactive and engaging as they would want them to be. This has an adverse effect on their learning as the classes would often move in a tangential direction towards things that are not very useful. Also, as they have not been to college since the start of the pandemic, their interactions with the staff members were

minimal, making it difficult for them to have any personal conversations apart from the course material.

On the other end of the spectrum, the tutors also faced their share of problems while shifting to the online medium. These problems included the general lack of infrastructure, training, and also disinterest of students. Some of the major problems they faced were:

### **Lack of Infrastructure**

The institutions in these cities had made close to zero investments in technological advancements prior to the pandemic. The faculty members faced multiple problems when it came to the availability of resources required for smooth conduct of classes. When it comes to high speed internet infrastructure, most of them were set up only after the colleges were shut down and even in this situation, they were forced to make the transition. Even in the move to the online medium, the colleges had certain formalities delaying the process including the process of printing hard copies of data that had already been submitted online and be sent as physical copy by post to the university the institution is affiliated to. This highlights that the institutions were still reluctant to embrace the technology fully and truly.

### **Lack of Experience**

11 out of the 15 tutor respondents said that they had no prior experience in conducting online classes. This affected their efficiency as they barely had any time to develop their skills in the area. They also pointed out that the institutions also failed to facilitate proper upskilling programs for them and hence, they went into the online teaching environment unprepared.

### **Nuisance and Disinterest of Students**

All of the tutor respondents said that the online classes made it difficult for them to maintain the discipline of the classroom. They were often not able to identify the genesis of the nuisance being created. Also, the respondents believed that a mix of disinterest, responsibilities at home, and tech-based difficulties meant that most of the students were not able to be regular in the online sessions and they could hardly do anything about that.

### **Age**

Four out of the five respondents, who were over the age of 50, felt that learning to navigate the online teaching environment was more of a task for them as compared to others. They pointed out that, in spite of giving their best efforts, it was extremely difficult for them to get the hang of these things at their age.

### **Teaching Environment**

12 of the 15 tutor respondents said that the online teaching environment wasn't engaging enough and they would prefer to conduct in-person classes as soon as possible. The respondents believed that alongside their teaching experience not being satisfying enough, they also got a sense that the learning outcomes of their students had dipped substantially.

### **CONCLUSION**

Consistent with the already present literature, the tutors and students face problems related to technology, interest, and training. When it comes to tier II and tier III cities, the main disparity is in the availability of technology and funds. The digital divide is a major concern as the people in semi-urban and rural areas, alongside having limited access to technological advancement, are also not well trained in using these new technologies. The tutors and learners in these areas almost had zero experience facilitating learning activities through an online medium, something that cannot be said about their counterparts in metros.

This effectively means that the educational institutions in tier II and tier III cities across the nation had to put a significant amount of effort and resources in order to cope with changes forced by the pandemic in the conduct of their education apparatus.

### **LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH**

This research only works towards confirming the problems that are prevalent and does not try to offer probable solutions to these problems. The paper also omits the administrative setup of the institutions and their coping capacity with the shift to the online medium. The paper also fails to talk about the measures being implemented by the colleges to counter the aforementioned problems.

## SCOPE FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Further research can be conducted in any of the following topics:

Solutions that are being implemented by the institutions to tackle the problems they are facing.

The administrative wing and the challenges it faced with the sudden shift toward online platforms and their coping mechanisms.

The changing nature of school education in the fast-growing digital world.

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