The Impact of Covid-19 on Higher Education In Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Pandemics have a disruptive nature, and the COVID-19 pandemic is no exception. Across the globe the educational system has plummeted due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The whole education landscape from elementary to tertiary level has seen a shift during the lockdown period of the novel Corona virus disease 2019 (Mishra et al., 2020). The Corona virus has over-turned life (EdSource, 2020) and caused an enduring threat to educational institutions from kindergarten to tertiary level (Mishra et al., 2020). Hence, due to the pandemic, both teachers and students have been compelled to embrace the digital academic experience (Lederman, 2020). Steps are being taken to control the pandemic which is blowing out of proportion at an alarming rate, in Sri Lanka and globally. The situation in Sri Lanka is more catastrophic than in developed countries (Chandasiri, 2020). This paper portrays the chaos and disruption that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought about in higher education, not only in Sri Lanka but worldwide.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, Higher Education in Sri Lanka, Online learning

I.   INTRODUCTION

The education system plays a very important role especially in higher education (Goswami, 2013). Education is the best weapon in terms of national policy to enhance skills (Chandasiri, 2020). Education is an essential human virtue, and has been a potent tool for human-kind in facing challenges and furthering progress (Goswami, 2013). Higher education is a powerful tool in building a knowledge-based society in the 21st century, and is of vital importance to a nation (Goswami, 2013). It is in this backdrop that the COVID-19 pandemic made its appearance, from the beginning of 2020, bringing about the closure of schools and universities worldwide, and changing the way of learning (Simamora, 2020).

The Coronavirus pandemic can be considered as one of the most critical recurrent problems that is challenging the world today (Agba *et al*., 2020). Education is one of the crucial sectors affected by the COVID-19 pandemic across the globe (Rameez *et al*., 2020). The closing of workplaces and educational institutions to avoid the spread of the COVID-19 virus has led to many challenges (Wijewardene, 2021). In a bid to curb the spread of the COVID virus amongst students, online learning has surged to the forefront, replacing face-to-face learning. This has brought about a change in the way universities operate and COVID-19 is being viewed as a door that has opened to provide something new in the field of higher education. The world is witnessing wave after wave of the COVID-19 pandemic resulting in the paralysis of all sectors (Rifiyanti, 2020), and with it, causing crisis in the education and higher education sectors, globally. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, a decline in education, and increase in mental stress and technological challenges are key concepts that have emerged to the fore, globally (Chandasiri, 2020). However, it could be said that COVID-19 has provided higher education administrators an opportunity to initiate change that will shape the future of higher education.

COVID-19 and Higher Education in Sri Lanka

COVID-19 is a highly infectious disease caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), and has taken on pandemic proportions, affecting all the continents (Remuzzi and Remuzzi, 2020), bringing about a severe and fierce global health crisis (Mishra *et al*., 2020). As the COVID-19 pandemic spreads, there has been an increasing move towards teaching online because of the shutting down of schools, colleges and universities for an indefinite time, which seems to be the only option left (Martinez, 2020). Globally, education has experienced not only a closure of schools and universities but also a delay in the conducting of examinations (Chandasiri, 2020) and, in Sri Lanka, university students are under the impression that it would affect their future employment prospects (Chandasiri, 2020).

Sri Lanka made a shift to online tertiary education after all educational institutions were forced to close in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic and this shift saw a surge in the use of various digital platforms and applications (Hayashi *et al*, 2020). It is a well-established assumption that no pedagogical approach can replace formal education which has a teacher-taught direct interaction (Mishra *et al*., 2020). However, due to

student education being adversely affected as a result of the closure of universities (Chandasiri, 2020), an alternative was needed especially in the tertiary education system in Sri Lanka to address a vast student population on the threshold of their careers and employment. Undergraduates who would be graduates within a short period of time were the most affected (Chandasiri, 2020). Hence, due to the COVID-19 crisis, online education became a pedagogical shift from traditional method to the modern approach of teaching-learning from classroom to Zoom, from personal to virtual and from seminars to webinars (Mishra *et al.*, 2020). Students and teachers were forced to replace the formal education system and adopt a non-formal method of education, which, according to Mishra *et al.*, (2020), encompassed e-learning and methodology adopted in the distance education and correspondence courses.

With the indefinite closure of educational and higher educational institutions as a result of the pandemic, the global educational landscape has seen a shift in favour of distance learning (United Nations, 2020). This shift saw a swell in the use of numerous applications and digital platforms which included the digital learning management systems, collaboration platforms for live video communication, massive open online courses and tools for creating learning content (UNESCO, 2020). Online education could be seen as a "magical solution for higher education problems in Sri Lanka" and occupying the seat of 'enabler' instead of 'replacer' to face-to-face learning (Hayashi *et al.,* 2020). As such online education would remain an important means for delivering tertiary education both in Sri Lanka and worldwide, in a bid to realize knowledge-based economies, even though there are many obstacles and challenges confronting the higher education sector in successfully perpetuating online education (Rameez *et al.*, 2020).

Online Learning in Tertiary Education in Sri Lanka

Access to higher education especially in Sri Lankan state universities is already limited (UNESCO, 2020). The Sri Lankan government's decision to close all educational institutions from March 2020 caused a disruption in tertiary education institutions thereby bringing about a delay in the creation of leaders and skilled workforce that the country needs to successfully make a transition to upper-middle-income status (Hayashi *et al.*, 2020). Hence both teachers and students were forced to switch to the internet in order to mitigate the effects of disrupted learning, and higher education institutions utilized the existing Moodle-based learning management systems under the university web servers (Hayashi *et al.*, 2020).

Thus in the months that ensued, there was a radical shift towards online education. Universities in Sri Lanka resumed learning activities in July 2020 contingent on adherence to health guidelines on a limited scale with priory being given to final year students (Hayashi *et al.*, 2020) who were on the verge of graduation when the pandemic struck. Some universities conducted their own evaluation for improving online education, and provided recommendations on internet access and training for faculty (Dharmaratna *et al.*, 2020). In certain universities incoming first-year students have started their tertiary education online , and this seems to be the path being adopted by seats of higher learning in Sri Lanka, with the Government placing priority on improving access to quality tertiary education online (Hayashi *et al.*, 2020). Online education has thus enabled continuous learning without spreading COVID-19, has saved time and physical space in delivering course content, felicitated information sharing and on-demand learning and provided flexibility in teaching delivery, although the interaction between faculty and students has been challenging (Hayashi *et al.*, 2020). Research done post-pandemic has indicated that university students preferred 50% of classes online, rather than 100% face-to-face classes and online learning facilitated students to hold part-time jobs for income and experience (Hayashi *et al.*, 2020). However, on the results of a questionnaire distributed among 25 undergraduates randomly selected at the University of Sri Jayewardenepura, more than 50% indicated that they did not have a suitable device and/or internet connection at home to follow lectures online, although they preferred the online method of lecture delivery. Thus they were unable to access lecture notes, and videos uploaded, as part of their method of study. The lack of suitable technological facilities was an impediment to some for the furtherance of their education online. Internet connectivity is a crucial requirement for online learning (Rameez *et al.*, 2020); however, students who lived in remote parts of the country faced severe connectivity issues and problems with network coverage. Accessing well-equipped telecommunication equipment for students in poverty is challenging, and a lack of a suitable device such as a laptop, desktop, tablet or smartphone becomes a hindrance to students who have no option but to continue their education online (Rameez *et al.*, 2020).

The alarm and panic caused by the rapid increase in the number of COVID-19 cases in the country has put psychological pressure on young adults creating a psychological dimension ((Rameez *et al.*, 2020). Some voiced their concern about harm caused to their mental health as a result of prolonged usage of smartphones, which was the most used device to follow lectures. Moreover students' tendency to play fraudulent was seen during the conducting of online assessments, assignments and projects (Chandasiri, 2020). Almost 65% of the respondents were of the view that online education helps to save time and money. However, the flip side of online education came through strongly when around 60% of the students were of the view that they faced many difficulties in paying attention during online lectures. This is consonant with the findings of the research

conducted by Rameez *et al*., (2020) who found that some students struggled with e-learning due to factors such as sudden changes in learning patterns, loneliness, economic status and lack of IT skills.

Some students started out with much enthusiasm along the trail of pursuing online education but soon encountered problems, leading to loss of hope that caused them to fall by the wayside.

In a study conducted by Rameez *et al*., (2020), one student mentioned that:

"...online education was the best method. This method helped us to carry out our understanding successfully. The lecturers performed well in online teaching. We were able to communicate via e-mail and WhatsApp. But I had to deal with psychological crises while continually engaging in online learning. Fellow students were unable to carry out their education better due to poor internet connectivity..."

Teaching online requires that the materials uploaded need to be teachable online (Chandasiri, 2020) organized and adapted to suit the technology method of delivery. Hence, emphasis must be paid to the teaching and technology method, and it is imperative that the structure of the course must change and be suitable for online delivery (Chandasiri, 2020). Thus a clear message that was generated was that, it is unfair to conduct online lectures based on the belief that the majority have access to the internet (Chandasiri, 2020) and that university authorities need to be mindful of the lack of internet facilities for a segment of students, when shifting from face-to-face teaching to online teaching, and that, adopting a blended approach is more appropriate. Access to online education is likely to differ considering uneven internet access (Hayashi *et al*., 2020). Undoubtedly, blended learning should be integrated into the regular curriculum to manage tertiary education, and Sri Lanka needs to revisit curricula, pedagogy and assessment for blended learning (Hayashi *et al*., 2020). A change in personal attitude makes it possible to create a world with a novel education system (Chandasiri, 2020). Additionally, in Sri Lanka, changing the mindsets and attitudes of faculty and students is critical whilst student engagement and credible online examinations will remain challenging (Hayashi *et al*., 2020).

Challenges

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused crisis in every sector and this includes the education sector (Rifiyanti, 2020). With the need to main 'social distancing' to stop the spread of the virus, face-to-face teaching and learning saw a shift towards online learning or e-learning, the main difference being that, in online teaching, teachers and students do not meet in person – hence the interaction has changed. However, it must be borne in mind that online learning is just one type of 'distance learning' – the umbrella term for any learning that takes place across distance and not in a traditional classroom (Stern, 2018). Online teaching and learning requires that educators and learners should have technical skills in the field of technology to be able to teach and learn respectively (Rifiyanti, 2020). This means that learners need to be aware on how to engage in self-learning in the online classroom in the absence of the mentoring that he/she receives in the face-to-face classroom. Similarly, teachers need to be able to effectively disseminate knowledge, design activities to guide and support students online and maintain a good interaction in the online classroom so as to make sure that effective learning is taking place. In order to run effective online learning, teachers are required to have competencies such as communication skills to run an online environment (and keep the learners engaged), technological competence, ability to provide informative feedback (to promote understanding of lessons), the ability to monitor learning (to understand the progression being made by learners) and provide student support, as learners are the primary stakeholders in every educational model (Roddy *et al*., 2017).

E-learning has been accepted as being suited for everyone (Radha *et al*., 2020) and has surfaced to the forefront as a forthcoming trend and as the accepted norm in higher education consequent on the pandemic. Although the online method of learning is best suited for everyone and e-learning has become popular among students across the world (Radha *et al*., 2020), some of the responses received from respondents consequent on interviews conducted by the researcher revealed that there were challenges faced by these primary stakeholders of e-learning. Some mixed responses received are collated below:

- "E-learning is good as we have quick access to material."
- "We can learn in the comfort of our home without wasting time and money on travelling and paying boarding fees."
- "E-learning helps us to study while working as our families are facing many economic crises."
- "This is a good system, because we can download the video of the lecture and watch it, if we miss a lecture."
- "Online learning is an obstacle for students and lecturers because it is difficult to access online learning applications due to poor connectivity and poor signals."
- "Many students come from different economic backgrounds. Due to the pandemic, family income has reduced and it is difficult to spend money on data and the internet, and smartphones or laptops."

- "Due to the heavy traffic online, weak signals and poor internet network in rural areas, we find it difficult to follow the lectures and download videos sent by lecturers, and we cannot ask questions and clear doubts."
- "Online lectures make us bored and frustrated as there is no personal interaction, so we cannot focus on the lecture."
- "I have a headache and less energy as I keep staring at my smartphone for a long time, so I cannot concentrate."

Some students remarked that they had to "walk great distances to get a strong signal to be able to follow lectures online." This finding is similar to a finding in a research done by Hayashi *et al*., (2020) who state that students walk several hundred meters to get to a somewhat decent signal. Some responses such as students "being bored after about three weeks of online lectures, being anxious about the limited data availability due to lack of funds, poor internet access and insufficient internet signals, inability to understand the lecturer, lack of facilities and financial issues" were congruent with the findings in previous research (Irawan *et al*., 2020; Lestiyanawati and Widyantoro, 2020; Wargadinata *et al*., 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic outbreak has caused panic in higher education institutions since online teaching "migration" has been implemented suddenly, and students' anxiety needs to be relieved in various ways to ensure that they can actively and effectively engage in online learning Bao (2020). Educators must be mindful that instruction, content, motivation, relationships and mental health are some factors that should be borne in mind when imparting online education (Martin, 2020) and, quality management programmes and continuous improvement are pivotal for online learning success (Dhawan, 2020).

The online method of lecture delivery has come to the rescue in continuing higher education in Sri Lanka and globally during the COVID-19 pandemic, and is seen as the best method (Rameez *et al*., 2020). However, apart from the drawbacks explained above, the panic caused by the spread of the COVID-19 virus has been a psychological impediment for students to successfully engage in online lectures (Rameez, *et al*., 2020). Almost all respondents were hopeful that the authorities would provide solutions to minimize the issues currently faced by students pertaining to e-learning.

II.   CONCLUSION

Education is one of the most critical sectors affected by the COVID-19 pandemic across the globe, adversely affecting the educational activities of students. However, although many universities have been reluctant to launch online educational activities due to a lack of availability and skills in modern tools and technology (Rameez *et al*., 2020) academic activities in Sri Lanka have commenced gradually with the help of technological devices amidst several challenges.

Online education has presently become a significant part of the educational process in Sri Lankan universities (Rameez *et al*., 2020) and it is important to continue the educational activities in universities. Simultaneously, it is important for educators to provide student support to gauge the progression and development of learners in online learning (Rifiyanti, 2020) and to incorporate students' perceptions of e-learning to improve motivation (Saiffuddin, 2018). The new normal and the new environment brought about by COVID-19 will undoubtedly have implications for learning and teaching in higher education sectors of the country, whilst it has brought about a host of complications with it. The concern is not about whether the online teaching-learning method can provide quality education, it is rather how academic institutions will be able to adopt online learning in such a massive manner (Carey, 2020) and innovative learning solutions can help us deal with this pandemic (Liguori and Winkler, 2020).

In the light of the facts presented in this paper it would be ideal to adopt a hybrid method of education which includes both the traditional and online modes of education. Adopting a hybrid education system will be more useful in addressing the concerns of the online method of teaching and learning which both teachers and students have confronted (Rameez *et al*., 2020). Further it is important to develop infrastructure facilities that will promote online educational activities and conduct skills enhancement programmes whilst addressing the crucial issue of sorting out network coverage problems (Rameez *et al*., 2020). E-learning can be used together with traditional methods to bring efficiency and effectiveness in imparting quality education (Barboni, 2019). While universities across Sri Lanka grapple with the unprecedented dimensions of COVID-19 to carry on their teaching and learning within the parameters of the new challenge of e-learning, this article has attempted to shed light on some of the initiatives that will boost online education in universities and make the teaching and learning process more effective in a pandemic driven world. Additionally, this article has attempted to highlight some challenges faced by higher education institutions in Sri Lanka. As we do not know how long the pandemic situation will continue, a gradual move towards online/virtual education is the demand of the current crisis (Simamora, 2020).

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