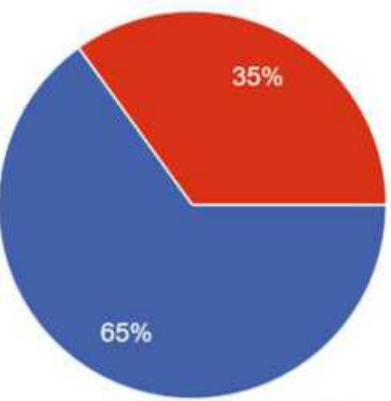


THE ONLINE SEMESTER REVIEW

Majority of survey respondents -- public college and university students -- talk about a troublesome online learning experience

Do you think recorded lectures are more effective for online teaching compared to live classes?*

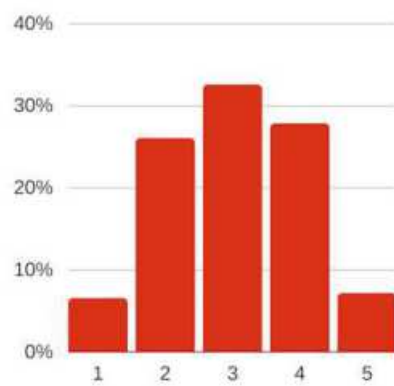
● Yes
● No



*For BraCU students.

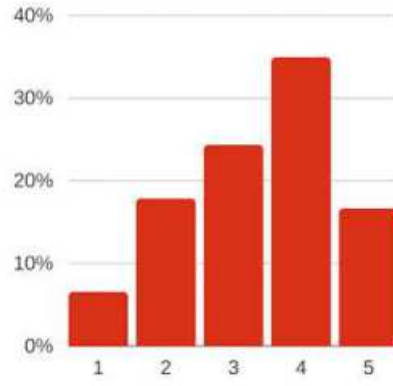
On a scale of 1 to 5, how would you rate the quality of your live classes (factors to be considered here include audio-visual quality, instructor's ability to deliver the lecture, the content covered, and so on).

1 - Very Poor; 2 - Poor; 3 - Neutral; 4 - Good; 5 - Excellent



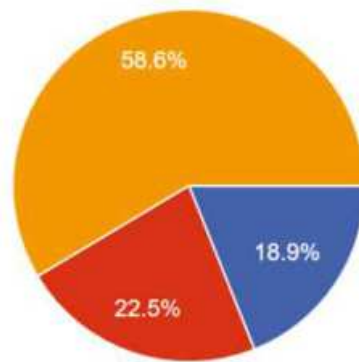
On a scale of 1 to 5, how would you rate the cooperation you got from your course instructors?

1 - Very Poor; 2 - Poor; 3 - Neutral; 4 - Good; 5 - Excellent



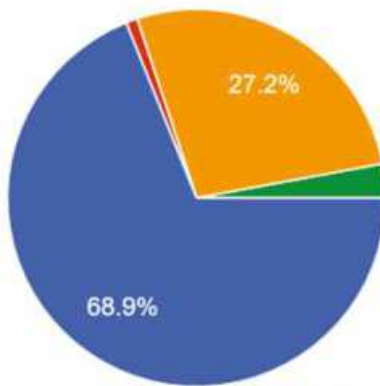
Do you think your university was able to deliver on its academic promises prior to the start of the online semester?

● Yes
● No
● Some were delivered



Were the recorded lectures made by your university instructors?*

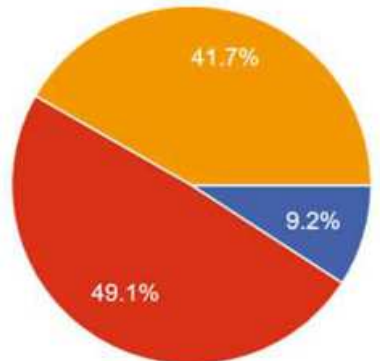
● Yes
● No
● Some lectures were taken from YouTube/other platform
● Most of the lectures were taken from YouTube/other platform



*For BraCU students.

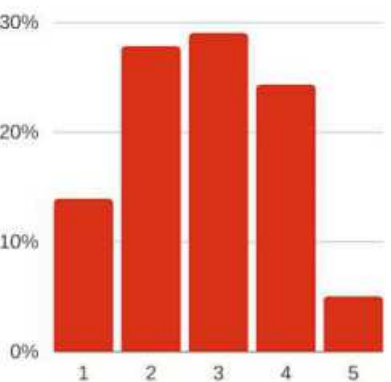
Do you think that an online semester can actually be an alternative to on-campus classes?

● Yes
● No
● It can be, if certain improvements are made



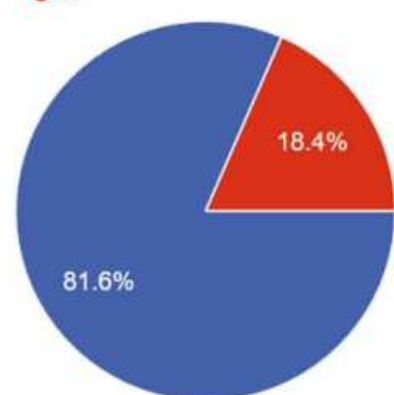
On a scale of 1 to 5, how would you rate the overall learning experience?

1 - Very Poor; 2 - Poor; 3 - Neutral; 4 - Good; 5 - Excellent



Do you think using an EdTech/MOOC platform like BuX allowed for a much smoother online learning experience, compared to live online classes?*

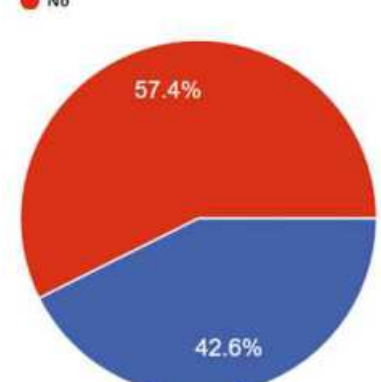
● Yes
● No



*For BraCU students.

Did your instructor(s) pressurize you to use a means of communication which was unavailable to you during the online semester?

● Yes
● No



Did you try to cheat/plagiarize in any of your quiz/test/exam/assignment?

● Yes
● No

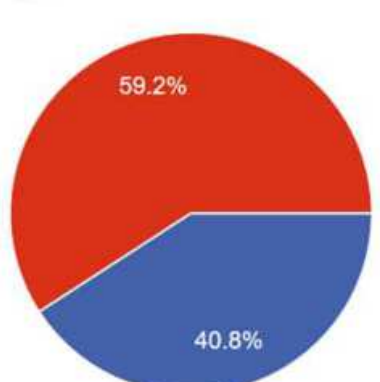


ILLUSTRATION: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD



PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

FAISAL BIN IQBAL

When on-campus academic activities were brought to a halt back in March, no one knew how long we would have to wait for things to go back to normal. Assuming the worst case scenario, education institutes all over the world took the decision to move classes online, where they would interact with their students through virtual meeting rooms, over platforms such as Zoom, Google Meet and Microsoft Teams, and carry on with their lessons accordingly.

UNCHARTED WATERS

Bangladesh was no different to this novel idea. Soon enough, we too saw our universities -- both public and private -- move their academic activities online. But this was uncharted waters for most of these institutions, and their instructors, who would have to conduct these classes. While some colleges and universities made a praiseworthy effort to train and educate their faculty on how to approach online learning properly, others failed to establish a proper chain of command and communication and instead, had their faculty conduct classes with little to no training.

Fast forward to the present day, and many universities (mostly the private ones) have already finished an entire online semester, and have started a second one. If you yourself have been a part of this rather peculiar learning experience, or have closely followed someone who has, you can easily tell it was no joyride. Being able to attend classes and exams from the comfort of your home is not necessarily a good thing, especially when you are unable to understand class lectures, or facing difficulties in communicating with your instructor, amidst the constant threat of a global pandemic.

Hence, it is crucial for us to look into the different positives and negatives of an online semester from the students' point of view, and the best way to do so, is by inquiring about their latest endeavour into this new unknown. Only then can we expect academic institutes to try and acknowledge and then address these issues, and to work on them for further development of this system that will possibly be around for a while.

A QUICK LOOK AT THE NUMBERS

In the last week of October, SHOUT conducted a small-scale survey where students from different public and private universities of our country were asked questions regarding their experience of the online semester. The questions focused on the academic experience of the online curriculum, and how well institutes and their respective instructors were able to handle it.

A total of 338 students took part in the survey, most of whom were from private universities including Ahsanullah

University of Science and Technology (AUST), Brac University (BraCU), East West University (EWU), Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB), North South University (NSU), and so on. Public university participants included students from Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET), Bangladesh University of Professionals (BUP), Khulna University of Engineering and Technology (KUET), University of Chittagong (CU), University of Dhaka (DU), and so on.

The survey indicates that 59 percent of the students were intimidated by the idea of an online semester. Prior to the start of online classes, it was quite natural for them to worry about the lectures, having to deal with assignments and projects alone, and above all, the ongoing pandemic with an increasing rate of infections. However, once the semester had ended, that number dropped down to 50 percent, meaning that students were starting to feel comfortable with the idea of an online semester. However, it was only the start.

When questioned about the quality of live classes, we received a mixed response, with the majority of the reviews ranging between "poor" and "good". The average score for the quality of live classes stood at 3.03 on a scale of 5. However, the score varied greatly between public and private universities. For public universities, the score stood at 2.7, while that of the private ones was 3.1.

"I don't think the online semester was effective at all. The whole online system was disrupted by network issues. We have very poor network quality in rural areas, as a result my friends couldn't even join their classes and the mobile data packages are also exorbitantly priced. This is a whole new realm for teachers as well. Online and offline education aren't the same. Teachers and students need to have good interaction and to achieve that a stable network connection and the method of delivering lessons need to be modernised. We lack technological infrastructure and proficiency in using certain software," commented Nafiz Imran, student at DU.

The difference between public and private university scores in this survey is quite noticeable. The score that stands out the most is the one obtained for the overall learning experience, since it manages to paint a good picture as to how students feel regarding their entire experience of the semester. The survey suggests that only 46 percent of public university students, and 60 percent of private university students were satisfied with their online learning experiences. Students pointed out different reasons as to why their experience was like this. A common point that comes up every now and then in the case of public universities is the lack of proper infrastructure,

which is why these institutes cannot seem to make full use of their true potential.

Students were also surveyed on other important factors. 49 percent of the students were unhappy with the idea of an online semester as an alternative to on-campus classes, while 42 percent were willing to believe that it is possible, only if proper measures are taken. When asked about fair grading, 48 percent of students believe they have been treated unfairly in terms of marking by their universities.

Again, 41 percent of the students admitted to have adopted unfair means while completing assignments or sitting for exams. This is indeed a worrying number. Despite adopting different measures, universities are still failing to restrict students from adopting such unfair means. This is where students themselves need to be honest and accountable for their own actions.

"Our group chat became a discussion thread where everyone sent answers, photos and discussed and there's no way I could get a good grade if I was the only one not cheating whereas the entire class was," commented another respondent, requesting anonymity.

Another important point to note is that 42 percent of the students were pressured by their university/instructor to use a means of communication or technology which they did not have access to during online classes. This is another issue with online classes. The infrastructure needs to exist on both ends. Without proper resources, it becomes impossible to attend classes, as there is very little alternative to what is being asked for by the institutes. As a result, many students are deprived of this learning opportunity.

A DIFFERENT APPROACH TO LEARNING ONLINE

The use of EdTech or e-learning platforms in universities is not a new concept. In fact, a lot of foreign universities use these platforms to manage their students' exams, assignments, and other necessary resources that might be required by the students and teachers. Certain universities in Bangladesh also use such platforms to collect assignments, distribute resource materials, and keep students posted about the latest developments in the particular course.

However, no matter how advanced these platforms are, they have never been used as a standalone learning system for the entirety of a semester. Hence, the thought of using such an EdTech or MOOC platform as an alternative to on-campus classes seemed a bit risky, but was also a more viable option for many universities in contrast to conducting live virtual classes.

BraCU has so far been the only Bangladeshi university that opted for a MOOC platform as their preferred learning system for the online semesters. BraCU's "buX"

was built using the popular MOOC platform offered by EdX, and allowed students to enjoy pre-recorded classes, attend various exams and quizzes, as well as submit assignments. The university also carried on with its regular virtual classes as discussion or consultation sessions, so that students who faced problems in certain modules or lectures could have their issues resolved. BraCU's unique approach sets them apart from the other universities in the country, and it is only logical to have a special look at their latest completed semester.

"buX is an amazing initiative by a Bangladeshi university, the first of its kind. It's not perfect but it made the learning process extremely convenient for all of us. It was definitely a new experience for me," said K Taen Zaman, an Economics and Social Sciences student at BraCU.

Sixty-five percent of the students who participated from BraCU believe that pre-recorded lectures are far better than live virtual classes (Note: Students at BraCU have experienced both). They were also more or less pleased with the quality of the lectures, and the content covered in them. In addition to lectures recorded by BraCU faculty members, there were also additional resources (class notes, YouTube videos, etc.) that were provided to the students. Overall, 82 percent of these students consider such MOOC platforms as the better option for conducting online classes in comparison to live virtual lectures. In total, 70 percent of the participating students from BraCU were satisfied with the learning experience they had.

That being said, BraCU too had its shortcomings, mostly with the quality of the lectures. While the majority of the students had no complaints regarding this matter, we cannot overlook the few that do. Learning is something that varies from person to person, and something that suits one individual might not meet the needs of another. Hence, these are issues that may seem petty, but ultimately hamper a student's interest in their studies.

CONCLUSION - IS IT WORTH THE EFFORT?

Online learning is no easy task, neither for students nor their instructors. And the first-ever nationwide online semester was bound to experience hiccups along the way. We can only learn from the errors, trying our best to not turn them into mistakes, and commit to a better learning environment for the coming online semesters. Hence, students and institutes need to reach a common ground, and establish a system where both can be benefitted.

Faisal wants to be the very best, like no one ever was. To stay home is his real test, to survive the pandemic is the cause. Write to him at abir.afc@gmail.com