Star Forum
Online classes:
Increasing the education divide

THE Covid-19 pandemic has created great uncertainties in the education sector of Bangladesh. On-campus classes at universities have been closed since mid-March, creating legitimate worries about session jams and the future of our students. The University Grants Commission (UGC), on multiple occasions, has asked universities to begin online classes. Now, both private and public universities are adopting this new method of learning, amidst fears that students from disadvantaged backgrounds will be left behind due to the digital divide.

How can online education be made accessible for all students, especially those from remote and rural areas with poor connectivity and a lack of proper devices? Do universities and educators, who are used to traditional modes of teaching, have the technical capacity and resources to adapt to this new "digital" world? Will the pandemic push us to re-think education as we know it, or will it only contribute to greater educational inequalities in Bangladesh?

In last week's Star Forum, a webinar series organised by *The Daily Star*, students, academics and other stakeholders from the education sector came together to attempt to answer these questions.

"Anti-online protest is part of a wider student movement against administrative failures"

Tanvir Akanda
Student, Shahjalal University of Science and Technology (SUST)

Representational image.

SUST is the first public university to have announced a transition to online classes, but the students have protested against the decision from the very beginning—for some valid reasons. First, SUST does not have the necessary infrastructure to support online classes. Second, many students live in areas with poor internet connectivity. They will not benefit from this transition but the university has nonetheless imposed it without any plan or preparation whatsoever. Third, our education system is still heavily dependent on class lectures and exams where rote learning is seen as an essential component. How will online classes work in such an environment? Online learning is more like self-learning. You need proper learning tools as well as proper guidance including course content for this to work.

In our university, sometimes called the leading science and technology university in the country, lack of technological proficiency is still a big issue. Age-old methods are still used to conduct basic administrative and classroom activities. Many teachers do not have the knowhow to facilitate online learning. Under the circumstances, a shift to online classes without the necessary infrastructure will not work. Unfortunately, at SUST, the decision has been made without any discussion with the students. There has been no survey to understand how they feel about it, their accessibility or other related issues. Students should have a say in what happens to their education. If you follow the SUST timeline in recent years, you will realise that the present anti-online protest is but an extension of a wider student movement against how the administration has been functioning, disregarding the opinion and interests of the students.

"What protection is there for what gets said online by teachers or students?"

Samina Luthfa
Associate Professor, Dept of Sociology, University of Dhaka

There are three major questions that we have to answer: Are our universities ready institutionally for such a transition? Do students have the resources and abilities to fully participate in the online curriculum? Do teachers have the training and required technical expertise to conduct classes online and experiment with new and tech-savvy methods? Unfortunately, the answers to all questions are a resounding no.

We are not saying that it's impossible to conduct classes on digital platforms, but we need a well-thought-out and comprehensive plan on how to go about it. Currently, we don't have email lists, a learning management system, or an opportunity to rethink our syllabuses to suit a digital medium. Furthermore, not all teachers are capable of experimenting and engaging with their students digitally. Our public universities had three months to prepare for such a transition, but it is disheartening that they did not make use of this time.

So many students in both public and private universities don't have food on their tables—in our department alone, we identified 90 students who we are helping on a monthly basis—how are they expected to attend classes online? There are 198 students in my class, only 140 of whom could join on Zoom class, and only 30 managed to stay till the end. These network and accessibility problems cannot be fixed by academics. There needs to be a coordinated and concerted effort by the education and telecom ministries with input from other relevant stakeholders, including teachers and students, through a democratic process. We can and ought to provide free internet access to students. If we cannot provide 100 percent access to education, then we are violating the students' right.

Besides, what protection is there for what gets said online by teachers or students? As social scientists, we teach or say a lot of things that could easily be considered "offensive" by some. When there's a draconian law such as the Digital Security Act to censor free thought and speech, what protection is there for academics to conduct classes without worrying about being arrested? Would our institutions be able to protect us from possible harm?

"Reducing the digital divide should be the priority"

Prof Fakrul Alam
UGC Professor, Dept of English, University of Dhaka

A few years ago, I started an experimental group on social media with my students from DU as a means to supplement class activities, with everybody's contribution. However, it has not been successful as the students are still not accustomed to such a practice.

Learning is a part of culture. Apart from the interactive classes, the students are expected to make their own inputs voluntarily. But we are more used to the practice where teachers simply teach and students memorise. Often, I have seen students around TSC as well as in the halls studying in groups, but that is not possible at the moment. From my own experience with students, I can tell you that connectivity is a huge issue for them. I think the quality of education will be gravely affected if we rush into online classes without a supporting infrastructure as well as proper planning.

At the Sheikh Hasina University, Netrokona, of which I'm a syndicate member, we had an online meeting recently where it was revealed that around 30 percent of the students were nowhere close to having access to a stable internet connection, nor did they possess smartphones or laptops. Providing these tools to the students will be a time-consuming process.

Since we are still uncertain about the end of this pandemic, we should immediately start our preparation to reduce the digital divide as much as possible. Even in a post-pandemic world, we must be prepared to continue online education besides the brick-and-mortar classes. We have ample time to do more research, learn from it and implement blended learning to establish a successful education system.

"Proper budget needed for a shift to online classes"

Prof Dr Kamal Uddin Ahamed,
President, Bangladesh Bishwabidyalay Parishad, and Vice-Chancellor, Sher-e-Bangla Agricultural University

Our education system is based on theory as well as practice-based learning, and online platforms only allow us to engage with the former. We have made progress digitally, but this crisis didn't give us much time to prepare. We had a meeting with the vice-chancellors from several universities, along with various members of the UGC, where we discussed the problems being faced and the steps that could be taken to resolve them. Until all the issues are resolved fully, it is not possible to conduct classes strictly online—we need to consider theoretical subjects and a proper examination system. But that does not mean we will sit idle. We must keep in mind that even if we cannot fully shift online, we must continue with it.

It is true that internet packages, smartphones, laptops, etc. can be costly for many students. At my university, we have advised all the tutors to provide the necessary academic materials in the most convenient manner. Both the students and teachers must be well-prepared to commence the practical examinations once the pandemic has passed.

We must assess the students' financial conditions and whether they will be able to afford and use all the digital means necessary to continue their education. The UGC did assess the matter through their pilot survey, but every university must further carry out their own evaluation in their own institutions. Moreover, the required budget must be allocated in order to redress the issue. We must adapt to the new ways and also boost up the students' morale while doing so. With proper support from the authorities, we can develop a culture that will guide us forward.

"Smaller private universities may consider merger with each other to survive Covid-19"

Prof Atiqul Islam
Vice-Chancellor, North South University

Private universities need to brainstorm and come up with ways to make this pandemic easier for their students. At NSU, we have reduced 20 percent of fees, given scholarships and waived late fees, and are trying to assist students affected by the economic downturn on an individual basis. No one's education should be stopped because of coronavirus-related deaths or unemployment in their families.

In terms of accessibility of online classes, the situation is a bit different for private universities. At NSU, we have had 93 percent of attendance in most online classes, which is more than the attendance at in-person lectures. However, most of our students joined with smartphones and had to buy mobile data since they could not rely on broadband coverage at home.

There are also other problems—how do you send assignments without a laptop? Many students have to write on paper, take photos and send those, which is definitely not ideal. How do you take lab classes for degrees like engineering and life sciences—do you wait till the pandemic situation ends, or take classes in smaller groups while maintaining distance? We have to understand the immediate situation and improvise.

At the same time, we must remember that public and private universities have different kinds of infrastructure. Out of 105 private universities, maybe only ten can survive without taking students in during the new semesters, especially since they do not receive government funding. If these universities are forced to close, what will happen to their students? We need to consider their situations. My advice to smaller private universities would be to consider mergers with each other in order to survive the pandemic.

"No one's asking the students how they feel about it"

Aanica Zulfiquar
Student, Jahangirnagar University

The general focus seems to be on how online classes will be conducted, what equipment and technology can be used, whether the teachers are equipped and so on. But I think we are missing a most crucial element—we are failing to ask, how are the students? What is the mental state of students locked in their homes, cut off from their peers and the education system at large?

Online classes have already started in many private universities, but I've heard many students say, I turn on Zoom but then turn off. They don't enjoy the classes, nor can they engage with the content. They don't find the platform conducive to learning. No one is asking them how they feel and what would help them to engage more effectively. Education is restricted to clicking on the Zoom link and handing in an assignment at the end of the day. As for those not doing classes—like me, who can't graduate because of a couple of pending exams and viva—no one's asking what pressures we are under, how we are dealing with the changing scenario, what our plans are for the future, etc.

Mental health matters and it is high time we paid attention to what the students are thinking, feeling and fearing. We need to create a safe space where we can openly discuss our anxieties and move forward. It's not enough to simply ask how the students are if we cannot assure students that we would be listening, with respect and understanding, to what they are saying. These initiatives could also come from the private sector as well as through government.

"We've to accept inequalities for the sake of continuity of education"

Prof Mohammad Kaykobad
Distinguished Professor, Brac University

Inequality has always existed amongst our students. They do not come from similar backgrounds, or have similar housing situations or even similar access to food. So even if online classes lead to greater inequalities among students, we cannot use that as an excuse to stop giving education. It would not be moral for teachers to sit at home and receive wages without doing their job of teaching. We need to maintain continuity in Bangladesh's education sector whatever the cost may be.

Students may well have reservations about online classes, but what is the alternative? It will be more harmful to their careers and futures if they drop out of university—they have to continue no matter what. Ten years ago, my students finished a four-year course in seven years due to the strikes and political unrest. In those days, we should have tried and moved online, but sadly, we did not do so.

Now we must take online classes in whatever circumstances that exist, and try and improve them if we can. In the USA, they have toll-free telephone lines. Can the government work with the telecommunications industry to provide free or low-cost internet to students specifically to access online classes? We can try and come up with such solutions, but in the meantime, we have to accept inequalities for the sake of education. Why should we deprive the 70 percent for the sake of 30 percent? We need to remember that this will not just hold back the students, but also be detrimental for the entire country.

"A national online education policy is the need of the hour"

Prof Dr Muhammed Alamgir
Member, University Grants Commission (UGC)

Soon after the educational institutions were closed, the UGC urged all universities to ensure students don't get separated from learning. In early May, after a meeting with various stakeholders in the sector, private universities were conditionally allowed to resume academic activities, while the decision for public ones was left to their academic councils. On June 25, vice-chancellors of public universities agreed to introduce online classes but sought the UGC's help to provide students with free or subsidised internet facilities, as well as smartphones for students who don't have one. The UGC is doing the best it can to mitigate the many problems related to this shift to online education. Questions have been raised about the unequal access to smartphones, laptops and internet connectivity among students. But one major problem, in my view, is our mindset.

As you know, we had conducted an online survey among some 19,000 students and 7,000 teachers of public and private universities, where we found that an alarming 71 percent of students are against online education and 63 percent of teachers don't think this form of education is a solution. With Covid-19 showing no signs of abatement, we don't know when the students will be able to return to their campuses. A shift to the online platform may widen the existing divisions but there is no alternative either. I think the universities, private and public, should take greater responsibility in this regard and identify and try to solve the problems of their students.

The UGC has conveyed its findings to the education ministry and other related ministries and departments and requested them to provide the students with free or low-cost internet facilities. We are constantly in touch with the authorities to address the immediate and long-term effects of this situation. We have also pressed for a national online education policy, which is most essential given all the confusion and uncertainties around. For now, however, all universities should switch to online classes with whatever means available at their disposal.