

AGENTS OF CHANGE

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A new direction in education

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currently staying in Chattogram. "The efficiency of the classes also varies. For instance, courses that involve numerous group projects and extensive teamwork are often not organised well."

Adyan Atiq, a student of Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, USA, currently staying in Dhaka, shared a different point of view. He believes that the institution did an impressive job in incorporating most of their usual services and facilities into the virtual classes. Initially, Atiq was unable to register for his classes through the conventional method, but the academic advisors helped him in tackling the technical difficulties. The professors also offered different office hours. "Extensive student feedback, coupled with weekly advisory sessions with the deans, ensured a smooth ride for all of us," he added.

Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University has also introduced a significant reduction in their tuition fees, despite being open for both in-person and virtual classes. However, many other

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universities are taking the full tuition fees, considering the extra tools that are needed for organising online classes. "Paying the full tuition fees is justified for my university, as they have utilised all resources at hand and invested in additional services to facilitate remote learning," added Purna Pratiti Saha, a student of Georgia Institute of Technology, USA.

Theory-based business and management courses are relatively easy

to conduct online, but other subjects that require more practical work are difficult to run. Joyita Saha, a student of Leicester Medical School, is currently in the UK, as her courses demand physical interactions. "I came back from Bangladesh to the UK in September 2020 for in-person classes, having no idea that the pandemic would last this long," she shared. "In the last semester, we had pre-recorded lectures and group projects, based on case studies. Eventually, we had to have face to face discussions with our clinical teaching fellows, based on the topics that we were taught in a particular class." These discussions always take place among groups of eight students, assigned in the beginning of the year, so the risk of transmission is relatively low. "We also had weekly clinical teaching with a general practitioner. Although our dissection classes were conducted virtually, we had the opportunity to book self-study sessions to work with the cadaver on our own," Joyita further said.

While time difference is a major issue, another big problem is internet connectivity. Universities are attempting to make the online experience for students as fulfilling as possible, but poor internet in countries like Bangladesh makes matters difficult. Many students adjusted to a different sleep schedule, often staying up late to attend meetings of different co-curricular organisations. "Studying in an American university is a dream come true for me. I was really excited to start my first semester. However, since the classes are held at odd hours, it initially took a toll on my health and messed up my sleep cycle," said Rahman Arafat, a student of Western Michigan University, USA, who

is currently residing in Dhaka.

Most universities are providing recorded lectures that can be accessed at any time, while others have shifted to multiple

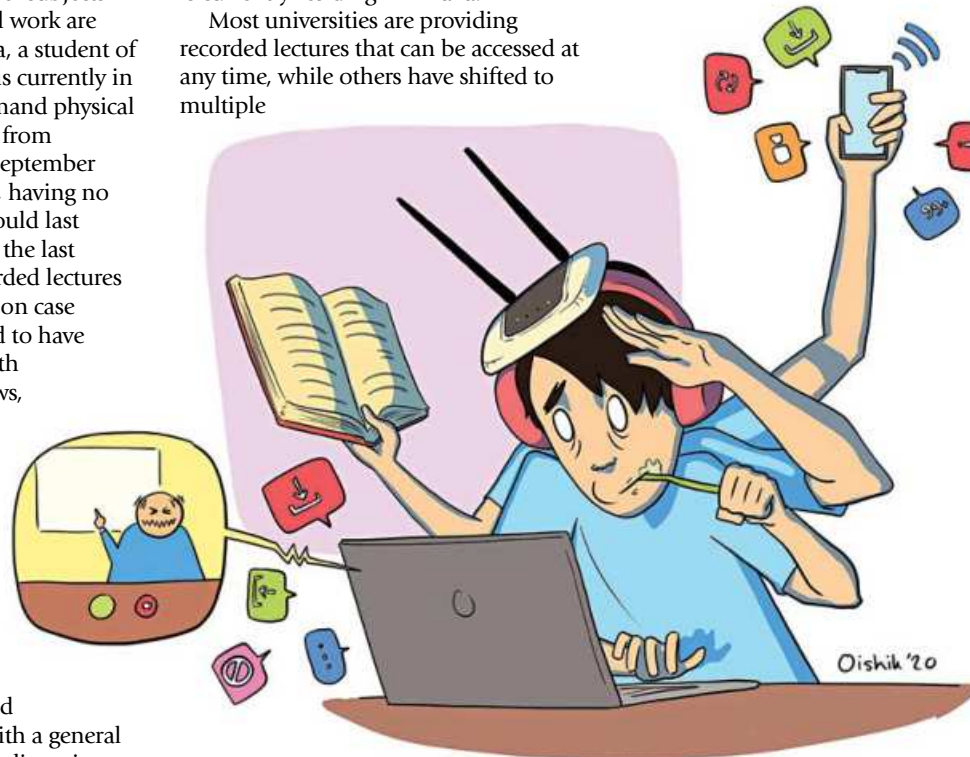


ILLUSTRATION: OISHIK JAWAD

choice questions or short quizzes for final examinations. Depending on the course, students can either sit for objective exams or upload longer, written assignments. Some professors are also conducting regular live sessions to interact directly with students.

Sadequa Nusrat, who is enrolled in a Maths and BBA double degree programme in Canada, shared that semester finals are being conducted differently by two of her universities. "While the University of Waterloo gives us a 24-hour time window to complete the test, either on paper or using a software called Latex, Wilfrid Laurier University uses an app called Respondus LockDown Browser," she said. "This browser does not allow the candidates to browse other sites and has a built-in

timer. Before the timer starts, it does a 360 degree environmental check and we need to show our ID cards to the camera."

Sadequa is currently staying in Dhaka, and plans to travel to Canada towards the end of April. She also mentioned that students are allowed to reschedule an exam, in case of any time-zone related issues.

Key advantages of studying online include not having to travel to the campus and being able to wake up only a short while before a class. While platforms such as Zoom, Canvas, Google Classrooms, Microsoft Teams and Collaborate Ultra are widely used, some institutions are using their own portals to conduct day-to-day activities. "Our practical lessons are being conducted

in a virtual lab simulator, where we can take the readings and do the necessary calculations," shared Atiab Jobayer, who is studying at the National Institute of Technology, India. Social media platforms have also become an integral part of education.

Although many students are steadily coping up with these unusual circumstances, their dreams and aspirations have been dealt a huge blow because of the coronavirus crisis, and it happened when they were looking forward to going abroad to explore new opportunities.

Bearing the mental health of the students in mind, some professors are giving breaks and rescheduling deadlines, to reduce academic pressures. "My university offers therapy sessions virtually, and the co-curricular clubs arrange fun activities like Netflix parties and workout sessions," shared Fahim Noor Chowdhury, another Bangladeshi student of The University of Waterloo, majoring in Economics. Fahim is currently attending online classes from Nepal, where his father is posted as an ambassador.

After finishing their initial courses online, these students are eager to start their actual campus life. They are looking forward to the vaccination drives and a safer year ahead. As the pandemic continues to impact our lives, educational institutions need to adapt by consistently ensuring the effectiveness of virtual learning. With more resources being available and educators striving to do their best, one can only expect this journey to be smooth for all.

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Heartiest felicitations
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