

WALK THE TALK

Professor Imran Rahman
Vice Chancellor, University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB)

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a massive adverse impact on our education, mostly for public universities, who took a while to adapt to online education.

Many students could not continue their education during the pandemic. A majority of them were private university students whose parents depended on their businesses that were facing losses during the pandemic. Female students disproportionately suffered because parents gave priority to sons' education over their daughters' if there was a shortage of finances. In general, many students did not have the proper devices to connect to their classes, as smartphones are a poor substitute for laptops. Moreover, stable internet connections and the high cost of mobile data was a barrier for many.

ULAB was able to move from in-person classes to online classes very quickly, partly because we had used digital systems in parallel with physical classes. Moodle, our lesson management system, had been in place for seven years. Therefore, we had a less steep learning curve when transitioning to online classes. Yet, students did not know how to transition to online education fully. There was dissatisfaction across students worldwide with online education, but 20 months down the line, I no longer receive complaints from them regarding this. Students have now learned how to learn online, a critical 21st century skill.

Teaching online is an entirely different ball game compared to teaching in a classroom. One major issue is to do with the attention spans of students online. You have to break up the lessons since it's challenging to get students to engage online. We addressed this challenge by organising a series of workshops and training sessions for teachers. We formed a committee headed by a senior professor who would guide us on how to arrange these training sessions.

In the future, much of the learning will be done by students on their own from their homes using Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). This goes along with our liberal arts philosophy, where one of the things we try to instill in our students is the love for life-long learning and the ability to learn by yourself for the rest of your life.



Professor Dr Md Anwarul Kabir
Vice Chancellor, State University of Bangladesh

The Covid-19 pandemic has impacted every sector, including education. When the coronavirus started to spread in Bangladesh in early March 2020, the Government of Bangladesh, in the interests of the students, teachers and other concerned closed down all the educational institutions. At that moment, we were running our spring semester 2020, on the verge of scheduling mid-term examinations.

In such an untoward situation, State University of Bangladesh identified a number of virtual platforms such as Skype, Google Classroom, Viber etc. and after critical assessment, we resorted to appropriate platforms for our different schools by late March 2020. Later, we subscribed to BD REN Zoom platform which was suggested by University Grant Commission of Bangladesh (UGC). This platform brought about harmony among the schools and in ways we conducted classes and examinations. In addition, we had been successful to conduct lab classes in accordance with the guidelines of UGC. Happily, we had been able to keep our students from Dhaka and other regions up-to-date with every academic event and in this regard, the role of our students, faculty members and staffs is highly appreciable.

I believe change is the only constant. Although the education system has seen changes, it has become more inclusive. For example, a student, who did not come from Dhaka city, could be living in the safety of his home and still be attending classes. The higher education system of Bangladesh has been able to update itself to match something that is very common in foreign universities: remote/online classes. We have organized webinars and training for our faculty members and staff to ensure that online classes were conducted efficiently, maintaining the UGC guidelines.

As known by all, commute in Dhaka city can be a problem due to traffic conditions. Students felt that doing classes online saved a lot of travel time, and they were able to concentrate more on their studies. Students, in general, were happy to be home, close to their loved ones in these tough times. That being said, we also saw happy students when our in-person classes resumed; they met their teachers and friends after a long time.

In the future, we are prepared to go online again if needed, but we also hope to be able to continue in-person classes. It is very important for the students to feel normal and safe again.



Professor Dr Chowdhury Mofizur Rahman
Vice Chancellor, United International University

We started taking online classes two months after the declaration of closure of all the educational institutions due to Covid-19. This is because everybody was expecting the shutdowns would end after a short period and so, initially, we took some preparation time to embark on digital platforms.

We had to defer some lab courses which are now being taken on campus. Because of slow internet connectivity and frequent power disruption, some students in rural areas could not participate in live online classes. They downloaded recorded lectures to watch them later in offline mode. However, a significant number of students could not continue academic activities because some members of their family were badly affected by Covid-19 and parents either lost jobs or could not get salaries for months altogether.

We provided interest-free loans and instalment-based payments to help the students during the pandemic. We are planning to offer reduced tuition fees for some vital courses which the students may retake if they think they did not learn those courses upto their satisfaction level in online mode.

We will try to take the benefits of online mode of education after resuming on-campus mode of education. We can readily switch to online mode in case of emergency situations, like on the occasion of bad weather, prolonged strike, road blockades etc. Evening programs can be conducted for professionals and job holders online which will save them both time and money. However, we want all assessments to be carried out in face-to-face mode for transparent and authentic evaluation. We have plans to equip our classrooms so that in-person lectures can be broadcast online and be recorded for viewing by the students.

We will go for a hybrid approach to cope up with the new normal after the pandemic is over. Remote or online learning will compliment on campus education. We will adopt the best of both worlds to make the effective use of technology, while also ensuring the personal touch of in person classes is also available.



Professor Dr Shahid Akhtar Hossain
Vice Chancellor, Eastern University

The government of Bangladesh decided to close all the educational institutions, like many other countries, as part of preventive measures against the spread of Covid-19 pandemic.

Though the closure of educational institutions has been deemed as an effective strategy for breaking the transmission chain during the pandemic, it has also negative impact on students' academic progress, including learning interruptions, disruption to assessment, and complications due to the increased screen time on the various digital platforms. The pandemic has seriously affected the tertiary level students' social life, emotional health and financial condition by losing part-time jobs and in turn that will have far-fetched impact on their future education and career.

Eastern University motivated their students in using online platform to continue studies despite many difficulties. Initially it was very tough because the online system was completely new to us but gradually, we overcame that problem. To ease financial burdens, we gave special waivers on the students' tuition fees and other charges.



SEE PAGE S3



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