

■ EDU GUIDE ■

Have universities figured out ONLINE LEARNING?

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In the past, our perception of “online learning” was only limited to taking a skill development course on Udemy or Coursera. For most students, it was just another extra-curricular activity that we did alongside our main university work. However, that all changed in 2020 when COVID shut the world down.

All of a sudden, everything from grocery shopping to banking and even our education was shifted online. Initially, it felt fun to do class without having to get out of bed. We grew used to only digital forms of interactions with our peers and having Zoom as a “campus.” But slowly, the cracks in the system became apparent.

The transition from physical to virtual classes was anything but smooth. Faltering internet connection, sudden load shedding, faulty devices, and bad network in remote areas were just some of the technical hurdles.

Vaskor Dey Dhrubo, a Master’s student from the Economics Department at Jahangirnagar University, shared his struggle regarding online classes, “During covid, I went back to my hometown in Netrokona where the mobile network was very weak. I had to sit beside the lakeside to get any signal and even then, I’d get disconnected sometimes. Due to the heavy rain, I had to miss a few classes and that created some holes in my understanding. Thankfully it was dry during my exam period or else I wouldn’t have been able to sit for my finals!”



PHOTOS: ORCHID CHAKMA

His account sums up the stark differences in privilege in Bangladesh – while some students did online class lying in their beds, others had to walk for miles just to get a signal.

The learning experience of students was hampered in other ways as well. Saria Chowdhury, a fourth-year student of Chemical Engineering at BUET, reflected on her online class experience, “In our first year, we couldn’t do a lot of the extensive lab classes due to COVID. Since it is a very hands-on subject, the absence of practical work led to knowledge gaps in our foundation. However, I was able to recover by putting in extra effort such as reviewing recorded lectures provided by faculties and utilising online materials. But for many, those gaps remained.”

Three years down the line, online learning has developed extensively. Teachers have become more accustomed to utilising technology and discovered better tools for teaching. Students have also adapted to digital classrooms.

Regarding whether virtual classes match up to in-person ones, Dr Khandaker Ashraful Munim, Professor of Economics, Jahangirnagar University, responded, “Online classes can never replace physical classes. The main issue with online learning is that there is no two-way communication. There is no eye contact, no hand gestures seen, no free-flowing interactions – all of which are concomitant to learning. The students often become inattentive due to the many distractions in their surroundings. So, while online class is a good option for emergency situations, it doesn’t have the same impact as physical ones.”

In physical classes, teachers get to see students’ faces and decipher if they understood the concept or not. Online, teachers feel as if they’re talking to a wall. From the students’ perspective, it’s easy to get distracted by our phones, the doorbell ringing, or family members talking nearby. The atmosphere of an in-person classroom is much more controlled, which is why students can focus better.

Many people believe that online exams are much easier than physical ones as there is more leeway. However, Mansiv Hamid Shangram, a third-year EEE student at BRAC University, shared to the contrary, “In my opinion, online exams are much more stressful than those given in person. Teachers assume that students will copy-paste stuff so they set harder questions with a shorter amount of time. The reality is, in third year you can’t copy-paste anything because all questions require you to think outside the box. Even when a student has studied properly, it feels like a race against time.”

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“There’s also the added stress of scanning and emailing your answer script within the given time window. If your electricity goes out in those crucial moments and you don’t submit on time, you’ll be penalised,” Mansiv added.

Despite the flaws, virtual learning has brought about several great benefits. Teachers can now easily take make-up classes on Zoom or shift online during unforeseen circumstances without hassle. Students can also access materials easily from online portals and have the option of reading it digitally without any printing cost. Those who travel vast distances to university every day also benefit from online classes, as it saves them their valuable time, energy, and money.

There are many components of online learning that need to be further developed. On the infrastructural front, institutions should assist students who do not have equal access to smartphones or data, perhaps through financial grants. Moreover, in order to retain the attention of students in online classes, teachers could try to interact more by asking questions or opinions. They could also keep their video on as it feels more like an in-person session that way.

While some students prefer the comfort and convenience of virtual learning, others crave the face-to-face interactions of physical classes. Which one do you prefer?

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