

# Covid-19- Health and Higher Education: Experiences from Bangladesh

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## Introduction

The countries all over the world is facing numerous difficulties in every sectors due to Covid-19 pandemic started since last year. The normal life is disrupted everywhere in the world. No matter whether the country is economically solvent or medically advanced, every country is suffering in some ways. The situation has compelled people to stay at home. More than a third of the global population at this time is facing lockdown. The economy has gone down in different countries. Elderly people are at home and those specifically at home care centres are almost abandoned, passing fearful time with great distress. Health systems even in most developed countries having great difficulties to cope with the situation. Billions of adults are at home, unemployed. People everywhere are maintaining social and physical distances [1].

Education, which is one the most important sectors is suffering a lot in worldwide. Millions of students are at home. Students are anxious about their study and career. COVID-19 started suddenly without or no preparation in place in many countries. The educational system during the COVID-19 era is characterised by a 'new normal'. (A new normal is a state to which an economy, society, etc. settles following a crisis, when this differs from the situation that prevailed prior to the start of the crisis like covid-19 pandemic) [1].

Like other countries, In Bangladesh Educational institutions have remained closed for about one and a half years due to Corona Pandemic. There are 49 Public Universities, 107 Private Universities and 3 International Universities in Bangladesh. In addition, a large number of college and Madrassas are affiliated with 17 public Universities. A total of 8,17,707 students of public universities and 3,49,160 students of private Universities and 32,67,584 students are from affiliated colleges. This large number of students are now suffering in getting proper education.

Moreover, millions of students from primary to higher

secondary level are also facing difficulties in their learning process [1].

There are mixed reactions among the students, parents and teachers. Parents and students are concerned with their education and career, while the government seems to have given more importance to the health protection of the students as it has stopped face to face education in the classrooms. However, the activities of educational institutions are mostly conducted online in a limited way. Nevertheless, it is not possible to ensure 100% participation of students in online education, especially in remote areas of the country. According to a study on the education management during the coronavirus pandemic, 69.5 percent of the country's primary and secondary students could not take part in online learning [2].

The development of the education system and the economic development of the country are intertwined. It would not be appropriate to think that we can achieve economic development without the development of education. However, at present among all the sectors of the country the education sector has suffered the most. Many private schools, madrasas, kindergartens and other educational institutes have been closed due to financial crisis. Private universities are going through more challenges since they do not get any financial aid from the government [2].

Currently, online learning has been used as an alternative way to augment the classical approach to teaching. The sudden transition from face-to-face teaching to 100% online learning a reality now due to COVID-19. However, online classes and exams are mainly running side by side at private universities. In the higher education system of Bangladesh, the problems of public universities and the problems of private universities are not the same. Public universities run on government (public) resource while private universities mainly depend on students enrolled. Online classes are being conducted at all public universities but an effective system for managing online exams is yet to

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be developed in most of the public universities. If courses are only completed online but there is no evaluation system, the students will be discouraged to continue their study. Universities and academic institutions are closed from 17 March 2020 [2].

Recently, as the Indian (Delta) variant of Covid-19 is visible in Bangladesh, the infection is increasing in the border areas and the surrounding districts including the capital. Health experts and concerned authorities feel that the administration needs to be stricter in implementing government guidelines and health regulations to reduce infections and deaths and bring the country back to normalcy. Research is being conducted to find out what kind of changes can be made in the education management system to encounter the second wave of Corona pandemic [3].

Bangladesh is going to be transformed socio-economically into a middle-income country, which is no doubt good news for the nation; but at the same time, if we cannot establish an effective education system in our universities, Bangladesh will not get to the status of a middle-income country. With that in mind, we need to be more careful about higher education. So far as we are informed, universities in the developed countries of the world are not only limited to conducting classes online, they are also arranging for students to take exams online and applying hybrid learning system. Bangladesh also has to think about the issue. However, the University Grant Commission (UGC) and all public universities are working on it to devise an effective online exam management system [4].

From my own experience I would like to highlight a few things about online education management in Bangladeshi universities. First, to diminish the discrimination among students of different income groups, at Jatiya Kabi Kazi Nazrul Islam University (JKKNIU), we have offered interest-free loans for poor students so that they can buy necessary devices (e. g. smart phones, laptops) to continue online classes. Secondly, training for both teachers and students is necessary as most of them were not familiar with giving and receiving online education. Therefore, workshops and trainings have been arranged. Thirdly, course curricula, syllabi, course materials and evaluation systems must be adapted to the global standard of online education mode.

The leading public universities in Bangladesh including ours one (Jatiya Kabi Kazi Nazrul Islam University) have meanwhile declared to begin to take all Examinations online after making several futile attempts to take the Examinations in persons or on campus mode. (The attempts went in vain because of increase in rate of transmission of corona virus which exceeded 15% of the suspected patients).

Personally, I think closing down educational institutions is a right decision of the government during the rapid spread of the Delta variant of Covid-19. In such a risky and anxious situation, the students attending face to face education will be under a great risk. Therefore, we have to work as a supportive force of the government to develop a modern education management system for

the students and the future of Bangladesh without any hesitation. In the changed situation, teachers, students and parents also want the use of information technology in the future education management to be more attractive, enjoyable and readily available.

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