Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Higher Education: Challenges and Way Forward

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the world, ushering in a new normal. Gravely affected is higher education, a key driver of socioeconomic development. For better or for worse, universities have scrambled to set up an infrastructure of online learning. While digitalisation of education is hardly a new trend, the pandemic has accelerated it. At the directive of the government, public sector universities in Pakistan have had to configure Learning Management Systems (LMS) and online course catalogues. Globally, educational technology (EdTech) has come to the fore and is constantly evolving, arguably laying the groundwork for more subsequent transparency in education. However, even though EdTech applications are attempting to approximate to an interactive classroom experience, the pandemic has deteriorated the social aspects of university education, including community participation and networking.

The rapid change in the mode of education delivery has also laid bare hitherto invisible inequalities in educational access. In Pakistan, students based in far-flung areas or from lower-income strata do not have reliable internet or computer access. Moreover, the students' home environment may not be conducive to learning.

International students currently in their home countries due to visa restrictions are also facing hardships. Despite the availability of EdTech, they are struggling to manage their workload across different time zones. Furthermore, it is important to consider the future outlook for incoming and prospective foreign students. Particularly relevant in this discussion are Pakistani candidates, who constitute a significant portion of the scholarship portfolios of international exchange education programmes such as the Fulbright Program. Adding to the precariousness is the corporatisation of higher education in developed countries - universities risk the suppression of federal funding if they do not re-open, putting faculty and students in peril.

Undoubtedly, higher education has critical bearing on the potential productivity of an individual and in turn, their contribution to socioeconomic development. Considering the rapidly changing landscape of higher education amidst the ongoing public health crisis, it is paramount to ensure that students are facilitated and their losses of the learning experience mitigated.

Attempting to bring these pertinent issues into policy discourse, the panel will discuss the following:

1. Opportunities for greater transparency afforded by the digitalisation of education,
2. Implications of online education for social capital formulation and collaboration among students,
3. Steps being taken to ensure equitable access to digital education,
4. Current situation and future outlook of international students and participants of international education exchange programmes such as the Fulbright Scholar Program, and,
5. Altering education for future students to prepare them for career opportunities in a post-pandemic world.

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