



# Online Learning: Challenges and Opportunities amidst COVID-19

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## Introduction

Since early March 2020, due to COVID-19, the world has witnessed an unprecedented emergency that forced everyone to stay home. The work culture shifted online, and we gradually started adapting to this "new normal." Most of the sectors, like jobs, businesses, education, hospitality, travel, and tourism, suffered a significant hit due to this pandemic [1]. The education sector in low and middle-income countries (LMICs) has suffered a significant hit due to limited resources and infrastructure [2]. Most of the LMICs were unprepared, and the pandemic also exposed the limitations of the government's preparedness for such emergencies [3].

Inaccessibility and limited or no access to education are human rights issues [4]. UNESCO [5] estimates that about 65% of school-going children are affected by this pandemic. Among them, girls will be badly affected and have twice as many chances to drop out of school due to social distinction related to girls' and boys' education [5]. In addition, students with disabilities are at higher risk of dropping out of school or college and being unable to complete their education [6,7]. Unable to complete education puts students with disabilities and girls in the most vulnerable groups that are at risk of having compromised future opportunities.

A report by NCPEDP's [8] Odisha (India) partner Swabhiman reveals that students with disabilities are unable to cope with online teaching and risk dropping out of school. 77% of students unable to access distance learning methods felt they would fall behind in learning.

## Major Challenges Faced by Students and Teachers

Teachers and professors could adapt to teaching online.

Considering the available resources, skills, and infrastructure, this task took longer than expected. Most of the teachers in LMICs lack skills in digital literacy and use the software effectively to disseminate knowledge to the students [9,10]. This delay in adaptation can affect the learning process, and students are likely to drop out [6]. The significant challenges reported by the teachers include the following:

- Missing the in-person connection: Teachers miss the face-to-face interaction with the class [6,11,12]. In the class, they could read the facial expressions and comprehend their students' understanding or difficulties, which is impossible in the Zoom or Microsoft team [13].
- Using the online platform: Most teachers are not familiar with it and find it challenging to navigate through it [6]. Even using small breakout rooms in Zoom is not as effective as monitoring and direct observation, which are missing [12].
- Reluctant to change: Due to the difficulties faced initially in the online process, the teachers are reluctant to adopt new strategies within the software to improve the learning experience for the students [14]. Senior teachers are finding it challenging even to adopt the online platform for teaching [15].
- Direct observation missing: Teachers raise the issue that they are unsure whether the student is attending the class or not, as they cannot see each student [13]. The online platform shows that the student is online.
- Time-consuming: The syllabus, which could take them less time, is taking too much time to finish, as they are adapting

to the new teaching style and are unsure about the students' learning [16]. The continuous evaluation of the teaching pattern is missing.

- Poor teaching experience: Talking to a computer screen seems like talking to a wall. Also, it is just a PowerPoint presentation and screen.
- Poor infrastructure and resources [2,6]: The internet connection in rural areas of LMICs is not strong compared to urban space. Which delays communication and impacts learning hugely. The students have had a negative experience with limited or no internet connection. Most of them lack a device to access online lectures or classes. The students are unable to access the learning material online.
- Taught but not learned: Although the syllabus is complete due to the above-mentioned challenges, authorities are unsure whether the student has learned [6].
- Language as a barrier: The students who have language barriers and could ask the teacher in the class to repeat the same content in the local language are missing the opportunity to ask, discuss, and learn.
- Missing field experience: Most of the courses have job experience or fieldwork, which is missing in this new shift to the online platform.

### Opportunities from this Pandemic

Although there are challenges associated with online learning, there are opportunities as well. This situation has exposed the limitations of infrastructure and resources. We can learn from this and create resources to deal with the present and future conditions. Apart from that, the learning that was not accessible to most of the students in person is now accessible to them. Since the teaching process has moved online, schools and colleges can invite experts from across the globe to deliver lectures and take webinars. Webinars and expert lectures could lead to global learning avenues for the students, which were not possible during a structured course schedule. Also, the pandemic provided us with opportunities to develop our soft and hard skills as we are at home and have time for ourselves. This situation also allowed us to reflect on our lives, pause, and track where we are going and how. Most conferences are online now and have free registration, which would not have been the case had it happened in person. These conferences give opportunities to develop networks, learn, and attend something that interests us free of cost.

### Conclusion

Each situation has its pros and cons and impacts the individuals differently. The present pandemic situation and its impact on the education sector cannot be overlooked in LMICs. We need to come up with innovative strategies to ensure the learning and development of the learners are not affected further. Adapting to a digital literacy strategy could be one such step. Also, the facilities and opportunities should be created on an equal basis for all, irrespective of caste, class, gender, ability, language, or rural/urban background. The strategies should adhere to three strategies-

Affordable, Accessible, and Acceptable, as well as usable by the maximum number of people. One such strategy would be to adopt a universal design strategy to maximize the use of the services. Responsible authorities need to collaboratively work to deal with poor access to education for all. Also, focusing on what resources we have and how we can adapt to them and maximize access using the resources can be an effective strategy. These strategies are likely to create an enabling environment that can nurture meaningful participation and learning opportunities for learners in LMICs.

### Acknowledgment

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### Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interest.

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