

Virtual Learning during COVID-19 Pandemic: Pros and Cons

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The current outbreak of corona virus disease (COVID-19), declared as public health emergency of national and international concern by World Health Organization (WHO), led to unprecedented public health responses in Nepal and many countries around the world including travel restriction, closure of educational institutions, curfews in some places and quarantines. This pandemic has affected lives of millions in different ways in different geographic locations worldwide. Beyond the immediate threat to health, unemployment, insecurity etc., education is one of the sensitive areas which has been affected tremendously, students in Nepal not being an exception.

The closure of all educational institutions effective from 18th March, 2020 followed by the nationwide lockdown from 24th March, 2020 till date enforced by Government of Nepal (GoN) as an effort to limit the spread of COVID-19 has shed a light on numerous issues affecting the access to education.[1,2] As per the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) report 2020, a total of 1,190,287,189 learners are currently affected constituting 68% of the total enrolled learners worldwide because of

temporary or indefinite country wide school closures implemented by the respective governments in an attempt to slow the spread of COVID-19. In Nepal alone 8,796,624 students have reportedly been affected.[3]

At this time of crisis, various national level examinations such as Secondary Education Examination (SEE), Higher Secondary Education Board (HSEB) and universities exams have been postponed as well as affected various teaching and learning programs. Thus, various educational institutions have proactively encouraged and embraced online education system through introduction of virtual classes ensuring that learning persists for all the students across the country as best solution for the continuation of learning processes. With these initiations, Nepal has got a window to redefine education system during lockdown. Virtual education even gave an opportunity of emotional and moral support for both the students and teachers to stay connected. With appropriate availability of technology, online learning can be advantageous and effective in numerous ways since they can offer a great deal of contents, interactions, flexibilities and reinforcements. Learners can keep themselves engaged from any place using any devices such as mobile phone, laptop or computer at their convenience. In general, online learning is beneficial in accelerating learning and reinforces students and teachers at the comfort of home during this time of global crisis.

Even though distance learning is a new horizon with exciting possibilities for various developing countries like Nepal, it is not without limitations. Firstly, in Nepal, there is still a lack of easily accessible and affordable internet connection, appropriate electronic devices and availability of public internet centers and cyber cafes which are mostly centered in urban cities across the country.

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Almost one third of Nepal's population is not covered by 3G networks while 4G networks cover less than 20% of the population.[4] It should be kept in mind that many students who belong to rural areas have little or no access to internet. Moreover, the technical skills of teachers and students for handling virtual education may be insufficient. While students with good internet accessibility and appropriate technologies are being able to continue their study smoothly, it concerns those students who are deprived of good internet and electronic devices. This inequality has not been addressed properly and effectively. Also, low internet bandwidth and technical difficulties are the barriers to use online courses for both students and teachers which lead to less engagement and disturbance during online lectures. Secondly, there may be a feeling of isolation and less interaction as compared to classroom environment which may potentially lead to minimal participation, distractions, withdrawal or complete disappearance of students. A lot of peer-based learning, two-way communication and group discussion during online classes are not as fruitful as in traditional classroom settings.

Online learning is a challenge especially among medical students when the topic is related to specific clinical procedures and is practice based. Without face-to-face interactions, it is difficult even for teachers to be aware of nonverbal behavioral cues and ensure if students are disengaged, frustrated and disinterested in participation. Also, teachers and students cannot share their emotions easily which could hinder encouragement and enthusiasm for both parties. Thirdly, there is certain amount of social pressure in traditional classroom as such showing up on time, submitting assignment on time, following structured routines etc. to keep students in rules and regulation which may lack in virtual classes. Lastly, spending extended amount of time in front of a computer or any other devices could produce negative physical effect. Over engagement and staring closely at the screen for hours without taking break is monotonous and may potentially lead to wide range of health problems including visual discomfort, exhaustion, and muscle or joint aches. Lack of socialization and isolation may ultimately result in decreased academic achievement and even mental distress.

While in the era of advanced science and technology, virtual education in Nepal which is just flourishing could be challenging with lots of

obstacles but yet not unattainable especially at these time of crisis by COVID-19 pandemic. The virtual education requires refinements in terms of reliable and affordable internet, proper implementation of infrastructures, advancement in technologies and provision of well guided technical supports to all so that it can be well utilized, improvised and adapted in future which could ultimately enhance the learning process and broaden the scope of innovative ways of successful learning.

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