

## EDITORIAL

### Lessons Learned by Teachers During COVID-19 Pandemic

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The COVID-19 pandemic has globally brought significant transformation in educational activities worldwide.<sup>1</sup> Pakistan, although suffered comparatively less than rest of the neighboring countries was and still is, one of the affected regions. In March 2020, with strict restrictions on social gatherings, the conventional education methods were suspended temporarily with an urgent need to shift to online teaching methods.<sup>2</sup> Online education is electronically supported learning that relies on the Internet for teacher/learner interaction and the distribution of learning resources. It may include audiotaped lectures, videos, text, animations, virtual training environments, real-time online lectures and interactive sessions with teachers.<sup>3</sup>

Online learning methodology was adopted by the west, long before it was even introduced in Pakistan. Considering, that the first-ever completely online course was offered in 1984 by the University of Toronto,<sup>4</sup> it seems that we are lagging far behind. The West, with its already existing online learning technology, had the economic strength to survive the pandemic, yet such online practice and technological advancement was not available to the developing countries like Pakistan. The shift from traditional classroom teaching to online teaching was a huge change to adapt to for all stakeholders including institutional administration, faculty, students, and parents. High-quality online teaching is not only difficult to execute, but it is more demanding than traditional on campus teaching. It requires more upfront planning, groundwork, more individualized response and assistance for learner and teacher for which we were not ready.<sup>3</sup> Despite strenuous efforts there were many shortcomings and blunders on part of management, teachers and students due to poor technical skills, reluctance, time constraints, inadequate infrastructure and

absence of institutional strategies and support. Just like any other educational institute of this region where online readiness was non-existent, medical colleges were no different in the face of this challenge. This urgent requirement to 'move online'<sup>5</sup> added to the stress and workload of university faculty and staff who were already struggling to balance existing teaching, research, and administrative duties, not to mention the stress related to their own health and safety concerns during pandemic. Power outages and connectivity issues at both learner and faculty end were also one of the recurring problems.

COVID-19 taught us quite a few lessons as far as education is concerned. During pandemic crisis, Higher Education Commission of Pakistan sprang into action and initiated faculty and management training workshops in the field of online modalities from undergraduate to doctoral level education by creating a collaborative environment.<sup>6</sup> Despite all impediments, educational institutes showed the will and desire to devise and follow practical solutions for implementation of emergency distant teaching strategies, with special focus on online lecture-based classes along with interactive learning sessions.<sup>7</sup> Transitioning to take lectures through screens, asking and replying to questions without face-to-face interaction, uploading relevant laboratory and clinical skills demonstration videos on campus/ learning management systems are some of the situations faculty and students acclimatized themselves to. Many senior teachers also had to adopt the new methods, and despite poor technical skills, gradually became accustomed to this new methodology. The struggle and commitment of institutional managements and faculty in providing students with quality education to the best of their abilities during these stressful circumstances has been commendable. It has taught us that, motivation and readiness to change practices with collaborative effort can help us adapt to any situation.

As faculty we learned that online teaching expanded our reach regardless of geographical location and time scale. Out-stationed and overseas students

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*Received: July 12, 2021; Accepted: August 25, 2021*

could listen to lectures along with their class fellows while maintaining social distance. In addition, if allowed by institutes, outside participants could join the educational activity at a specified allotted time. In this way, students got opportunity to interact with subject experts, from other institutions too. During virtual teaching it was also learned that a certain degree of student anonymity, may actually be preferred by a number of students over the traditional face-to-face setup, and hence may enhance their performance. Faculty using online technology could archive lecture content, syllabus, feedback and attendance and set up databases to add relevant supplemental learning resources.<sup>3</sup> Having to adapt themselves to virtual learning, faculty members also made best use of this technology for their own professional growth and development. Several open online courses from renowned universities were offered free of cost during the pandemic where teachers actively participated to deepen their content knowledge and teaching skills at their own pace.

One of the challenges faced was, and still is the constant doubt about students' academic honesty pertaining to their attendance, assignments, supervision of exams (impersonation or cheating during examinations), etc.<sup>1</sup> However, we are not alone in this ethical dilemma, it is an endemic problem in distance learning since it became popular, and it is because there is no guarantee that students are being honest.<sup>8</sup> Fear of academic dishonesty compromising merit in high stake exams compounded the teething problems of newly adapted environment and caused disruptions in conduction of exams and assessments throughout the country.<sup>9</sup> Thus, another lesson learned by educational institutes and faculty is to upgrade their online assessment methods and technical skills to use them for formative type of feedback. For high stake summative assessments, on-campus

modalities may be employed by dividing students into small groups, should the need arise again.

COVID -19 pandemic is a global calamity that has transformed the approach to education throughout the world. Few of the lessons that teachers learned about online education are, that they can adapt and overcome their limitations if they are willing, they can expand their audience, they can set up their own databases, they can join online courses at their convenience, and last but not the least, they too can be fooled!

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