

ACCEPTANCE OF E- LEARNING BY UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: A PILOT STUDY FROM ASSAM, INDIA

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Received: 14 March 2020 Revised and Accepted: 8 July 2020

ABSTRACT:

The disruption caused by the present Covid-19 pandemic in the middle of an academic session has forced closure of classrooms, and immediate migration to online mode of instruction. This pilot study undertakes to investigate the undergraduate students' response to this precipitous change; and the assumption of a homogenous access to ICTcommunicationthrough the internet, across a variety of devices. Quantitative data were collected from students using Google forms from the batch 2019-2020, through random sampling, spread over the state of Assam. The data from students revealed a large majority were uncomfortable with online classes; the access and receptivity to ICT was far from homogenous; and vitally, that mental support to students from mentors should be more inclusive. With 75% of the students wanting offline mode of their semester examination, and 88% percent of students wanting to return to offline mode prior to examinations, the results unambiguously endorsed the weakness in the prevailing system.

KEYWORDS:E-learning; Covid-19 Pandemic; Pilot study; Assam; Student distress; Digital divide

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

In a world deeply scarred by the Covid -19 pandemic, every single aspect of human society, especially the mental health of students has been the subject of special scrutiny (Duan and Zhu, 2020; Liu et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020a, Wang et al., 2020b; Yang et al., 2020).Consequently, the acceptance of e –learning by students becomes primary to any study of student mental health(Ngampornchai, A. 2016; Lim, Hong & Tan, 2008). With social distancing a basic tenet of the protective measures, it was only natural that educational institutions were shut down as part of the early precautionary measures to safe guard the younger population. Thus Assam, in the north eastern region of India, locked down educational institutions till the 31.05.2020. Though a slow unlock has been initiated from June, 2020, educational institutions still remain closed given the rising trend of Covid-19 cases(Assam Tribune, July, 07, 2020) , across the country , even in the first week of July, 2020.

The institutions of higher education across the state followed directives of the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India (D.O.letter no. Secy (HE)-MHRD-2020 dated 21st March, 2020) that recommended regimes of work from home and online learning. Subsequently, on the 10th of May, 2020, the University Grants Commission, India, issued a public notice for the constitution of Redressal of Grievances Cells to address the concerns of students related to examinations and academic activities arising out of the situation caused by the pandemic. Governments have also uploaded necessary videos, suggestion, guidelines, information to take care of the mental health of the people, besides releasing various help line numbers(Hiremath, Kowshik, Manjunath, & Shettar, 2020).

The forced shut down necessitated a complete and sudden switch over to the virtual mode, which changed the modes of established classroom modes of interaction, engagement and collaboration. Though the use of ICT promises communication through the internet, across a variety of devices, simulates the teaching-learning process though the synchronous or asynchronous mode, it is certainly not an unqualified blessing (Kamba, 2009; Neetu, S 2019; Lakhera.A 2014; Pavel et.al., 2015; Trakru, M 2017;Varalakshmi & Arunachalam, 2020). Unfortunately, with no early resolution of the pandemic in sight, the shutdown of educational institutions continue in a period when undergraduate and postgraduate students in India were either in midterm or approaching scheduled examinations (Goothy et al. 2020). This left the students facing a very anxious and uncertain future with a possible range of psychological fallouts that could stimulate undesirable changes in behavior (Liu et al., 2020). If prior to the present global Covid -19 situation, mental issues were visible in one

fifth of undergraduate student the world over (Auerbach et al., 2016), the post Covid 19 situation could result in far more serious psychological implications.

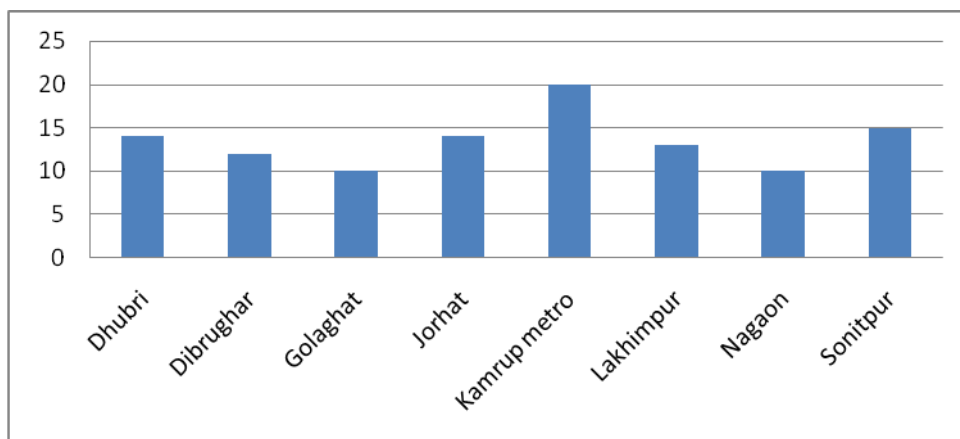
PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This pilot study is galvanised by the undergraduate students’ responses towards their acceptance of the unscheduled, sudden and forced E- learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. The main purpose of the study is to assessthe kind of problems faced by the respondents, their acceptance of E-leaning andthe mental support required during the pandemic period.

METHODS

The study adopted a quantitative approach. Required data were collected from 108 undergraduate students of the batch 2019-2020, spread over the state of Assam, drawn through employing random sampling method, using Google Form questionnaire. Students living in a fairly wide cross section of districts across Assam participated in the study, including rural and urban areas.An initial profiling of the respondents was based ongender, subject area and institutions. Among the respondents 50% were male, 49% female and 1% other. The breakup of the study area revealed 50% of students were studying science, 44% arts and 6% commerce; with 41.7% students from state government, 44.4% central government institutions and 13% students from private colleges.The district wise distribution of respondents is shown in figure-1.

Figure 1: Percentage of the 108 responses from different hometown district of the students



RESULTS

The results were analysed item-wise through applying simple percentage and graphical representations were made as given below.

Figure 2: Comfort levels of students with online learning

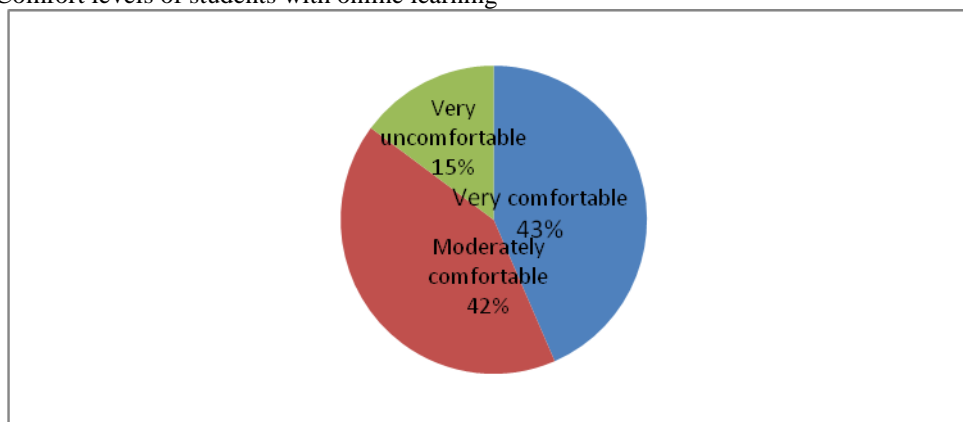


Fig 2: With only 43% of expressing their comfort with online classes during the lockdown, it left the majority less than comfortable. Thus 42% of students remained moderately comfortable while 15% were very uncomfortable or did not like learning from the online mode.

Figure: 3 Issues faced by students while assessing online classes during lock down

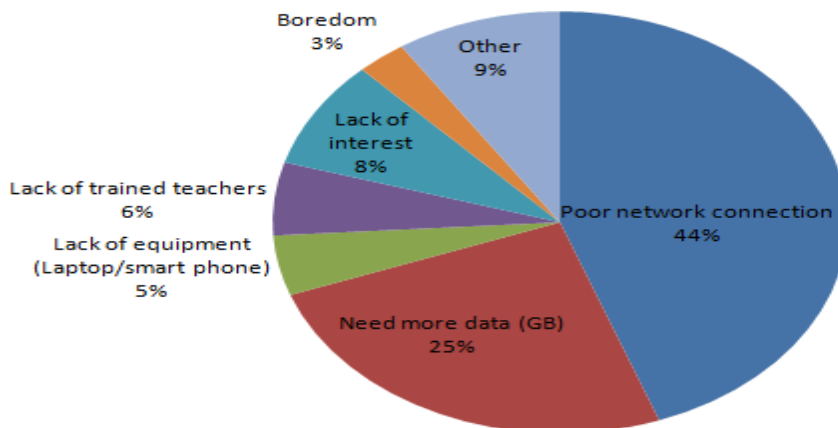


Fig 3: Access and receptivity to online classes clearly required improvement, with 44% of students harassed by poor network quality.25% required increased GB of data to effectively continue with the classes. A small percentage (5%) were not technically able to cope with the requirements of assessing online classes.6% students even observed that teachers were not trained to manage the online classes. Lack of interest, boredom and other reasons with online mode were expressed by 8%, 3% and 9% of respondents, which amounts to almost 20% of the respondents.

Figure 4: Perception of mental support given by teachers

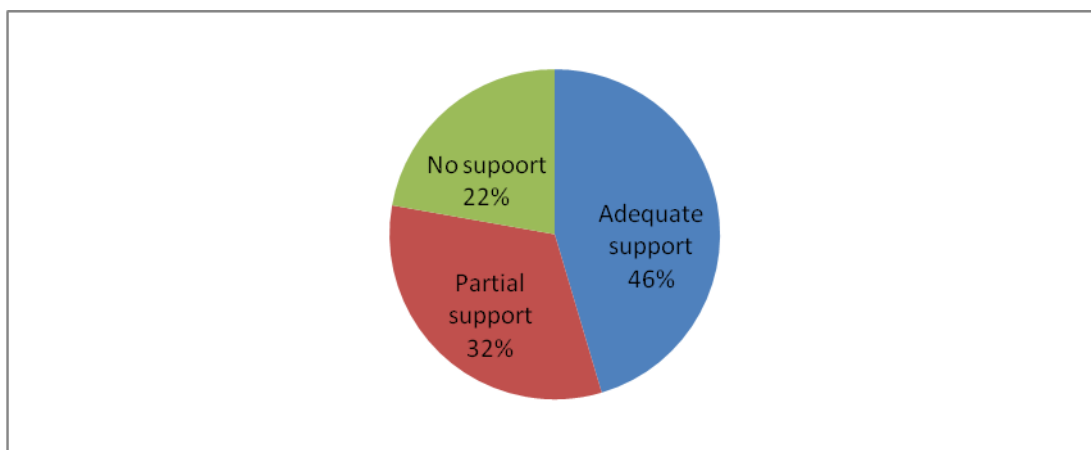


Fig 4: Mental support from mentors to cope with the situation was acknowledged by 45.4% of students ; while a significant 32.4% student were only moderately, satisfied, and a noteworthy 22.2% did not find any mental support from teachers.

Figure 5: Preference on Online vsOffline teaching

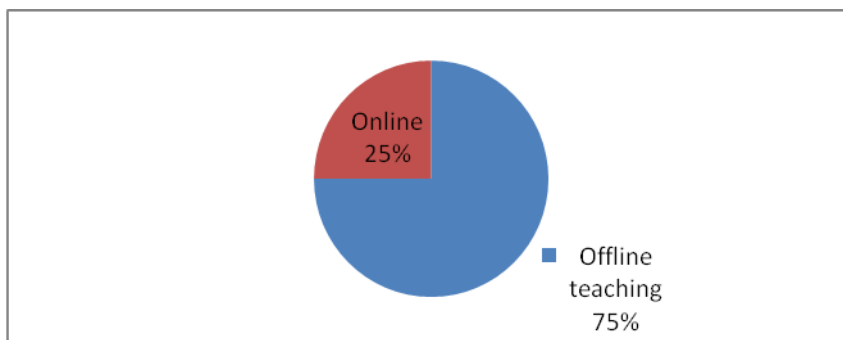


Fig 5: The prevailing discomfort with online classes is very evident, with 75% of the students wanting offline mode of their semester examination and endorsed by 88% percent of students articulating the fear of facing examination without first returning to the traditional classroom mode Fig 6.

Figure 6: Fear of facing examinations without offline teaching

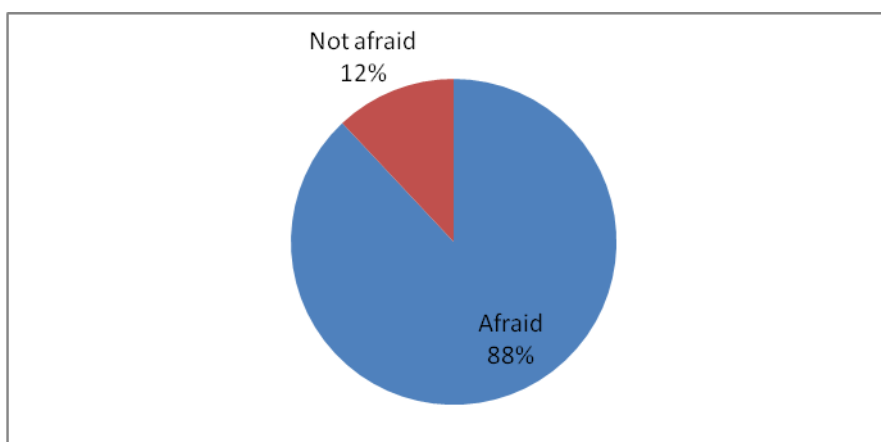


Fig 6: Only 12% respondents were not afraid of facing examination without offline teaching, leaving the 88% afraid of appearing in examinations without offline teaching. This has clearly disclosed the ineffectiveness of online teaching introduced by higher education institution in the state of Assam during Covid 19 lockdown.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Since the respondents were drawn from a variety of rural and urban areas, subjects and institutions; their access, familiarity, and technical support, would certainly impact their learning experience (Soni R. K, 2015). This is corroborated by our data where 44% of students were harassed by poor network quality and 25% required increased GB of data to effectively continue with the classes. The evidently smaller percentage of students who were not technically able to cope with the requirements of assessing online classes cannot be dismissed; as we are only as strong as our weakest link. The fact that 6% students observed that teachers were not trained to manage the online classes must be given due importance for effective e learning, especially over prolonged academic sessions. In addition, a significant 32.4% student was moderately satisfied, and a noteworthy 22.2% did not find any mental support from teachers. Change in characteristics of the teacher, content, and delivery, must be addressed to effectively (Navani, 2016), to tackle lack of interest, boredom and other reasons with online mode, expressed by about 20% of the respondents. Consequentially, 41% of students remained moderately comfortable and 14.8% distinctly uncomfortable with the online mode. This discomfort could trigger subsequent psychological problems of anxiety and frustration, leading to drop out or other undesirable mental issues like depression. Thus it is highly significant that the prevailing discomfort with online classes, is reflected in 75% of the students prefer the traditional classroom mode over the online or e learning mode. In the final diagnosis, massive 88% students feared of facing examination without first returning to the traditional classroom mode. These percentages underscore the deep psychological distress faced by students thrust into an online learning mode by the Covid -19 pandemic, without time for any preparation or initiation and demands to be addressed on a priority basis. This pilot study acquires more significance, in the face of the rising incidence of the epidemic with a total of 11386 cases in Assam and 697413 in India (Assam Tribune, July 07, 2020), which forces educational institutions to retain the online mode for the next semester or even for a longer period. In

May, 2020, the University of Cambridge in England had opted for complete online mode till the summer of 2021 (BBC News, 19 May, 2020). In India, though guidelines are being framed for online classes by the central government (Assam Tribune, July 07, 2020), the situation on ground reveals a deep digital and mental divide that the teachers, parents and policy makers must address for the well being of the students and their academic future.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST: The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest.

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