

# BUSINESS CONTINUITY OF EDUCATION DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN BANGLADESH: RESPONSE AND RECOVERY STRATEGIES

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**ABSTRACT:** The pandemic of COVID-19 is considered the most challenging problem faced by the world at this moment. This ongoing pandemic has ravaged many countries. Furthermore, the situation is deteriorating by the day due to the mutation of various variations. Many developed countries with well-established medical facilities continue to face problems, while Bangladesh, a developing country on the Indian subcontinent, is doing everything to mitigate the impact. This lethal virus has not only taken lives but has also wreaked havoc on the education system in this impoverished country. To maintain the country's lockdown and social distancing, the government has closed down all educational institutions and began an online learning period from the beginning of the pandemic till today. In this paper, the authors aim to highlight the challenging impact Bangladesh is currently facing in education and the response and recovery strategies taken by authorities to drive the education sector.

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**KEY WORDS:** Covid-19, Developing Country, Online Learning, Challenging Impact, Response and Recovery

## 1. INTRODUCTION

COVID-19, a notorious disease caused by the coronavirus, was initially generated in late 2019 in China. Within a month, it had started spreading exponentially all over the world. This ongoing pandemic was identified as a cluster by the World Health Organization (WHO) in December 2019, primarily in Wuhan, China's Hubei province. By the end of January 2020, a global emergency had been declared, and on 11th March, it was classified as a pandemic. According to the WHO's most recent report (August 2021), since January 2020, there have been approximately 1,335,260 confirmed cases of COVID-19, including 22,150 deaths by August. Although the vaccination process has started since the mid 2021, approximately 13,766,758 vaccine doses have been administered to all the divisions of Bangladesh. As the most preventive vaccine is still obscure, social distancing and non-medical interventions are thus the most effective measures to slow down the expansion.

As a consequence, the government is still struggling to reopen the educational institutes. Along with the fatal consequences of this disease, the COVID-19 pandemic has significant economic, cultural, social, and educational consequences. Governments and country heads' first and foremost priority in this

concurrent situation is to save as many lives as possible. Without a doubt, it should take precedence over everything. However, other important sectors are downplayed during this period. The education sector, one of the most vital sectors of any country, is under threat. Due to the lack of business continuity planning, emergency response planning, and damage controls, the country is losing the battle against this pandemic.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Worldwide Impact on Education

Education is the central pillar of the development of a country. This pandemic has led to out-of-the-ordinary levels of disruption to education, impacting over 90% of the world's student population. Although, some of the countries are now planning to reopen their educational institutes based on the successful rate of vaccination. However, many of the countries are still struggling with online learning methods. According to one of the reports of UNESCO (2020), approximately 87% of the students got disruptions due to the shutdown of institutions. Although online learning can be counted as a way to drive away from learning and teaching, it has become a monumental challenge for parents to educate their children. Students at every level are confronting a drastic change because of this new normal. As a result, a proper internet access and smart devices have become basic necessities for those related to academia. Besides, it is a new challenging experience for the teachers and instructors too. To conclude, we can say that COVID-19 is wrecking the education sectors alarmingly.

A study about this relevant matter remarked that, at the beginning of school closures in April 2020, globally, 94% of students were out of school in a context of enormous uncertainty and with families and schools having to navigate across options of hybrid and remote learning, or no schooling at all.

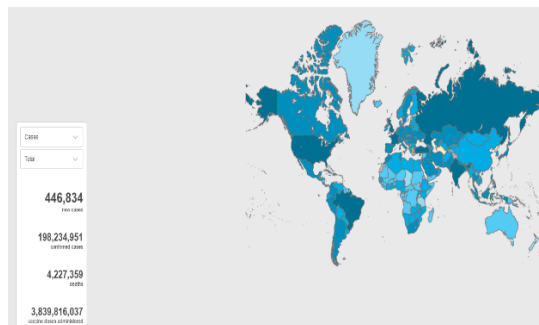


Fig. 1. Overview of infected countries.

Disruption in learning has affected students on different levels. For instance, researchers predicted that around 40 million children worldwide faced inconveniences to attend pre-school. On the other hand, higher education students can continue with online learning or recorded lectures. However, some institutions had to shut down for teaching and learning until further notice because of lack of technologies and internet resources.

## 2.2. Different Impact on Countries Based on Their Economic Situation

The severity of impact is not the same in every country's education sector. Some developed countries with healthy infrastructure have managed to respond well, while some developing or underdeveloped countries have faced more disruptions. It has pushed the education sectors of developed and developing countries differently. This catastrophic event has affected the education sector of several countries based on their economic situation (Wajdi et al., 2020).

The students from developed countries seem to face little less disruption than the developing countries. Not everyone can afford all the utilities to enable online learning environment at home. Even if students can access the learning platform, there are other factors behind this scenario. Poor living conditions, financial stress caused by the pandemic, and lower digital skills are causing disturbances. Moreover, the students from the below-average socio-economic background seem to have a lack of family support too. Blaskó and Schnepf (2020) remarked about the European countries' students and stated that the Grade 4 students from Europe who belong to the lower socio-economic origins half as likely have the privilege of the Internet as their classmates. After surveying around seven low-income countries, less than 10% of the poorest households have electricity connections. This statement shows us the scenario of the struggles of the low-income countries' students. Similarly, the students from other developing countries are struggling too, that even some of them are led to drop out. Another example has been shown in a study that, in Ethiopia, an underdeveloped country in Africa where the majority of the population do not have electricity and internet connection as they live in rural areas, it is very tough for those students to continue with e-learning during this pandemic (Tiruneh, 2020).

On the contrary, developed countries like the USA and Canada helped their students by providing technological facilities and an e-learning environment. For example, to minimize the trouble and continue with online learning, a prestigious university in Ontario, Canada provided iPads with free data to 21,000 students (O'Rourke, 2020).

However, on the other side of the coin, the situation can be used as an advantage to implement a new network infrastructure and scale the internet access across urban and rural areas (Viner et al., 2020).

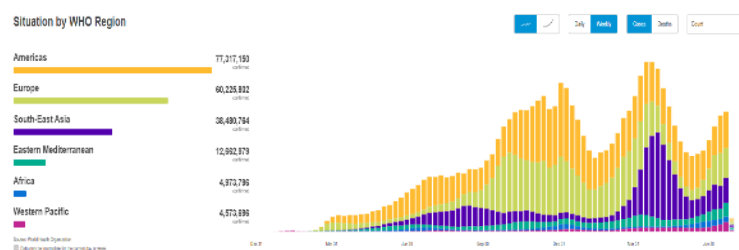


Fig. 2. Current situation of WHO regions.

Tadesse and Muluye (2020) highlighted that approximately 90% of wealthy countries rely on e-learning, with a further 20% utilizing a hybrid learning model. More than a quarter of the students from the low-income countries receive television and radio education from the high-middle-income countries. Most countries provide

a complete distance learning through online platforms and broadcasting to the rural students, for example, in Europe, Central Asia, East Asia, the Pacific, the Caribbean, and Latin America.

Bangladesh is one of the most densely populated countries in the world. After the abruptness of this pandemic, the country has faced several socio-economic issues. From economy to education, all sorts of fields have been impacted more or less. After the second wave, the delta variant has made the situation worse. For this reason, the plan to reopen universities and other educational institutions has been postponed again. The online learning creates a massive digital division among the students. Priyo and Hazra (2021) found that students make logical choices between live classes and recorded classes depending on their comfort zones at this moment of crisis. This indicates that an income and gender-based digital divide can impact the students' e-learning phase. Besides, as online learning is the new normal for many students and teachers, in the perspective of a developing country, the financial crisis is a great issue for many educationists. The Ministry of Finance (2020) declared that the most crucial goal in education for the coming fiscal year would be to restore curricular continuity and compensate for the loss caused by the long study breaks. Furthermore, the proposed education budget is mentioned as 11.6% of the national budget.

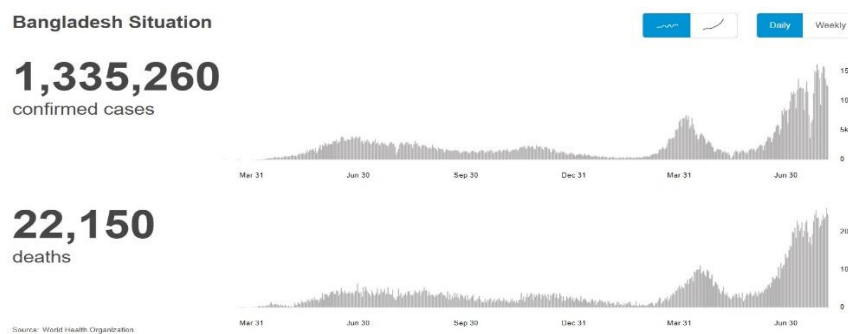


Fig. 3. WHO latest report on COVID-19 in Bangladesh.

### 3. ANALYSIS OF THE CHALLENGING IMPACTS FACED BY STUDENTS AND TEACHERS

The COVID-19 pandemic has created a massive interruption of education systems in history. UNESCO is supporting countries to deliver education online due to lockdown. Although online education may bring many challenges, we cannot deny that it has some benefits. This drastic period has highlighted that a hopeful future of learning is ahead of us.

#### 3.1. Challenges

There have been some significant steps taken by the education authority to respond to the disruption caused by this pandemic. Thousands of students and teachers are still struggling to cope with the web learning system. Although the struggle has minimized or got normalized than before, previously, in the beginning, people related to education faced a lot of challenges.

- **Digital illiteracy** - In Bangladesh, many of the teachers and students still have insufficient digital knowledge. Due to this, many rural or village areas' institutions are still facing difficulties continuing with the learning process.

- **Lack of equipment** - To conduct a fully online learning environment, the students and teachers must need well-functioned digital equipment and management. For example – a laptop, an earphone, a microphone, etc. Within a short period of time, creating this environment and making everyone familiar with the process is a big challenge.
- **An increasing rate of dropout** - Bangladesh is a densely populated country. Due to the effect of the pandemic, this country has faced severe economic loss too. For this reason, many of the students quit studying and start a job to support their families.
- **Disruption in practical training** - Although some university authorities have switched to online learning, the practical training such as engineering lab exams and medical exams have been highly impacted because of the lockdown.
- **Lack of power supply and broadband** - Many areas of Bangladesh face severe power shortages and broadband issues that can directly impact the online learning mode.
- **Difficulties in maintaining integrity** - The face-to-face period influenced assessment and evaluation significantly. Depending on the nature of the course, different parameters relate to specific courses. For example, engineering courses have labs and other practical works. As a result, evaluating and reviewing every course based on the same pattern is highly unfair. Online evaluation of a chemical lab exam is not possible at this time. Furthermore, monitoring students' behavior in class and ensuring that they are not cheating during online exams are time-consuming and frustrating.

## 4. EMERGENCY RESPONSE OF AUTHORITIES BASED ON WAVES

### 4.1. First Wave – Beginning of the Pandemic

Bangladesh first started its lockdown on 16th March 2020. Due to this, all educational institutions, including training centers, were closed. However, within two weeks, with the help of technologies, 63 private and public higher education institutions from urban areas switched to an online learning period. However, as of the latest report (2020), approximately 61.8% of people in Bangladesh belong to the rural areas. It is quite difficult for them to continue with online learning. To mitigate this, authorities started broadcasting lessons through TV channels. All the board examinations, including the Higher Secondary School Certificate examination, are postponed and later canceled, and the students get auto-promotion. The World Bank (2021) report stated that educational institutions were closed in March 2020 and continued in 2021, which affected nearly 38 million students and over a million teachers. Initially, most public universities were closed in 2020; the government responded with the TV-based educational programs. A few months after school ended, it became clear that the teenage students' learning was at risk. The government and relevant authorities primarily decided to reopen public universities in 2021 and started the online classes through Google Meet, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and other social media platforms. The government officials and several education authorities started taking initiatives for vaccination. The

education ministry planned to reopen all institutions on 13th June. Nevertheless, due to the current situation of the increasing COVID-19 cases, the government has decided to postpone the reopening of all schools.

#### **4.2. Second Wave – Beta Variant of South Africa**

In late January 2021, Bangladesh first detected a beta variant on the sample, and during mid-March, the second wave started as the daily number of cases started rising. According to Bangladesh's leading health research institute, more than 80% of the samples were tested positive with the beta variant. Due to lack of planning and initiatives in social distancing, the cases started to rise exponentially from 500 cases to 6000-7000 cases daily. Under these circumstances, the country faced a shutdown, and people were not allowed to go outside without a movement pass. The education ministry proposed a short syllabus for board examinations but later switched to canceling all board exams because of high daily cases. Public universities were closed entirely for an extended period of time which hampered students' graduation. Education ministry and respective authorities decided to reopen online classes for students at public universities and proceed with physical examinations.

#### **4.3. Third Wave – Delta Variant**

India faced more than 300,000 cases daily in late April, and a new variant delta was introduced. As India is the closest neighboring country of Bangladesh, the government closed all borders with India to stop the transmission of delta variants. All flights from India were closed, including the transportation shutdown of all routes of India. Arriving passengers from India have to undergo a 14-day mandatory quarantine with health screening. However, illegal entry from various points from India to Bangladesh led to the virus being transmitted to several people and failed to stop the transmission, and the country first detected this variant on 8th May 2021.

Later, to control the damage, Bangladesh took an emergency initiative for mass vaccination and created awareness among the people about taking the vaccination. More than 5 million doses were bought with the plan to vaccinate over 50 million people by this year. The government also took initiatives of vaccination for the frontline medical students. Also, foreign-bound students of all ages have been given priority to register for vaccination. Furthermore, all private and public universities have been taking initiatives for the vaccination of the students in order to reopen face-to-face classes. Besides, from 6th August, a walk-in vaccination has also become available at most public medical centers to promote mass vaccination.

## **5. DISASTER RECOVERY PLANNING**

To minimize the impact of learning loss and accelerate the business continuity, the government and higher education authorities have taken several steps:

- To minimize the dropout rate, thousands of financially weak students and their families were contacted and given facilities by several organizations.
- UNICEF helped Bangladesh developed and implemented online learning and teaching strategies using several platforms such as television, radio, the Internet, and mobile phones.

- The World Bank helped the government of Bangladesh by financing 2.5 million needy students.
- Mass awareness spread mainly in rural areas among school children and their parents to motivate them in learning.
- Digitally illiterate teachers were given training on how to conduct online classes.
- The Ministry of Primary and Mass Education and the Ministry of Education built COVID-19 response and recovery plans with the help of GPE, UNICEF, and the World Bank.

## 6. RECOMMENDATIONS: WHAT CAN HIGHER AUTHORITIES ADOPT TO MAINTAIN BUSINESS CONTINUITY?

Mitigating the educational challenge due to the demographic disaster must be the top priority for global leaders and the entire education system. It is now necessary to develop a context that will help the students and drive the socio-economic infrastructure. Recommendations for tackling this pandemic for now and the future are categorized below:

- ***Provide free or cheap internet packages*** – As online learning is mandatory now, the authorities can help those students who face hardships to afford an internet connection.
- ***Focus more on prevention of dropout*** – Due to the challenges, many students are dropping out and quitting their studies. Institutions should focus more on motivating the students against dropping out and assist them with essential materials.
- ***Deliver smart devices to those who require help*** – As we mentioned earlier, without a personal smart device, it will be troublesome for the students as well as the teachers to continue with their lesson. To solve this, the government or educational authorities alternatively, can provide smart devices for them.
- ***Enhance risk management*** – A perfect risk management is undoubtedly needed in a disastrous event like COVID-19. Without a proper risk management strategy, a nation might fail to mitigate the attrition rate. Implementing contingency plans, business continuity plans, and emergency response plans at the right time will minimize the impact. Other than that, crisis-sensitive plans, policies, and programs should be imposed.
- ***Balance coordination among relevant people*** – To tackle this challenge, authority alone cannot make all the efforts until the students, teachers, and parents come forward. To make this happen, it is obligatory to have coordination among them. A large number of factors are responsible for mitigating the impact of the crisis. The national ministry of education should imply strong crisis planning and management leadership, which are essential to reassure the learners' development. A strong coordination is also necessary among all the relevant people in this field to maximize the output of the strategies taken.

## 7. CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic will be acknowledged as one of the most significant challenges of the digital era. On the education system, the impact of the COVID-19 crisis has been unprecedented and incomparably devastating. It has been impeding our ability to live our everyday lives for an extended period. The educational aspirations of nations have been jeopardized. However, it has been demonstrated that the education community is capable of fighting against all odds. There will always be losses and drawbacks, but they will be few and far between. Furthermore, there is no such thing as utter perfection. Business continuity planning, risk mitigation strategies, and effective risk management can help break down the barriers between the system and educational professionals. We should rely on enormous potential and unwavering effort to rebuild education's fundamental programs, as well as its fundamental goals, in the future. It is the responsibility of policymakers and the global community to adhere to values and propose solutions that will allow students to reclaim their promising future, but everyone involved in the education system must play a role in making this a reality.

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