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LEARNING ONLINE IN THE WAKE OF COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 outbreak has caused many unprecedented challenges and restructured higher education in the world. Many countries have imposed emergency protocols such as quarantines, lockdowns, curfews, travel restrictions and social distancing measures and closed educational institutions temporarily in an attempt to minimize the risk of spreading COVID-19. In many countries education continues online rather than face-to-face due to this global disaster. Countries around the world are striving to ensure the progression of learning. Shifting education from face-to-face to online in response to a global public health emergency is an indispensable solution, but it comes with a lot of challenges. This paper seeks to explore and describe the attitudes and perceptions of undergraduate students of an institution towards online learning during COVID-19 pandemic, how the transition from face-to-face learning to online learning is going on and what kind of assistance leaners think they require at this moment. Data was collected through survey and interviews. The findings of this study will be useful to mitigate the loss of learning and well-being during crisis by identifying the difficulties encountered by learners in online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: Attitudes, Online learning, COVID-19, Learners

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 was initially identified in Wuhan, China. It has been quickly spreading across the world since December 2019. The World Health Organization declared that the outbreak was a pandemic on 11 March 2020. As of 6 August 2020, about 18 million individuals have been infected and approximately 700000 have died. To slow down the spread of pandemic many countries have closed their educational institutions. As a result, similar to many other fields, the education field has also been affected (Adnan & Anwar 2020). Several countries have implemented various solutions to continue the teaching and learning process. Unprecedented attention has been focused on learning online after the temporary closure of educational institutions.

On 10 March 2020, the first Sri Lankan local resident confirmed positive for COVID-19. In reaction to this public health emergency, Sri Lankan government temporarily closed all educational institutions around the nation prioritizing learners. The Ministry of Higher Education announced that university teaching will move online. In an attempt to assist all the undergraduate learners in Sri Lankan state universities to follow their academic programmes without interruption all internet service providers are offering free access to University Hosted Webservers until the nation returns to normalcy. The COVID-19 pandemic has changed learners' learning potency and process of acquiring knowledge, skills and attitudes. Shifting all the courses from

face-to-face learning to online learning is totally new to leaners in Sri Lanka. As they are suddenly compelled to learn online, it is vital to know about their attitudes and perceptions regarding learning online.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Many terms have been used to denote the idea of online learning. This makes it hard to develop a common definition. (Ally, 2011; Singh & Thurman, 2019). Khan (1997) indicates online learning as a new method for delivering education to distant learners deploying the web as the means of communication. Curtain (2002) points out that online learning incorporates both synchronous and asynchronous types of learning which intends to improve the interaction between teacher and student. Filling the void between learner and teacher utilizing web-based technology is considered as online learning (Lee, 2017; Moore et al., 2011). Online leaning is "the use of the Internet to access learning materials; to interact with the content, instructor, and other learners; and to obtain support during learning process, in order to acquire knowledge, to construct personal meaning, and to grow from the learning experience"(Ally, 2011,p.17). A host of terms such as E-Learning, Online education, Internet Learning, Tele-Learning, Virtual Learning, Distance Education, Web-enhanced Learning, Web-based Learning, Computer assisted learning, Computer-assisted instruction, E-tutoring have been used to explain online learning (Ally 2004; Singh & Thurman 2019).

In a systemic literature review of definitions of online learning (1988-2018), Singh & Thurman (2019) identifies forty-six definitions of online learning with eighteen similar words. All the definitions and terminologies indicate that online learning takes place in an online setting where learning content is delivered either synchronously or asynchronously and learners use technology to communicate with teachers or classmates.

Several studies focus on some instances of using online learning during uncertain (Basilaia & Kvavadze 2020). Layne (2015) reiterates on the necessity for preparedness of educational institutions to survive and thrive in the cases of natural disasters, global health threats, wars, vandalism and other unprecedented events. Learning online has become an important means of accessing higher education in the world due to harsh realities of the biggest global educational lockdown. Adsul (2020) demonstrates that learning online has become essential to ensure uninterrupted education during the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic.

While some scholars believe online learning will provide many advantages and others argue that the unplanned and quick transition from face-to-face learning to learning online without proper preparation and professional training will cause unfavorable effects. Adnan & Anwar (2020) suggest that learning online cannot be effective in developing countries due to issues such as inadequate resources, digital divide, technical glitches, absence of face-to-face communication and financial problems.

Undergraduate education is free in Sri Lankan state universities. Most courses in state universities rely on traditional method of teaching which consists of lectures, tutorials, workshops and other face-to-face forms of learning. Liyanagunawardena et al.(2014) indicate that The Distance Education Modernizing project introduced fully online or blended-online programmes in Sri Lankan education system for the first time in 2003 but Liyanage & Strachan (2014) points out the following: The level of acceptance and people's reluctance to accept this new methodology is the major bottleneck in popularizing the online concept in Sri Lanka. Overall as a nation, it requires

policies and procedures recognizing online learning credentials as being equivalent to credentials earned in traditional ways (p.9) In response to the COVID-19 crisis face-to-face learning has been cancelled and several educational institutions have introduced online learning. Many teachers and learners experience online education for the first time. Suraweera (2020) describes that learning online is still at early stage in Sri Lankan higher education sector.

Previous studies offer no similar historical evidence of lengthy educational crisis. While learning online in the wake of COVID-19 has been studied recently in other countries, only a few have been conducted in a developing higher educational institution like Swami Vipualananda Institute of Aesthetic Studies (SVIAS). Some researchers suggest that the concept of online learning may prolong in post-pandemic period. "If designed properly, online learning systems can be used to determine learners' needs and current level of expertise, and to assign appropriate materials for learners to select from, to achieve their desired learning outcomes." (Ally, 2011, p.17). Therefore, it is essential to know about the attitudes and perceptions of learners who study in SVIAS to increase the quality and success of online learning.

METHODOLOGY

This paper attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What are the attitudes and perceptions of first the first year undergraduate students of SVIAS regarding sudden and unexpected transition from face-to face learning to learning online?

2. What are the challenges encountered by the first year undergraduate students of SVIAS regarding sudden and unexpected transition from face-to face learning to learning online?

This study aims to describe the overall attitudes and perceptions of the first year undergraduate learners of SVIAS towards learning online. This research is based on a survey which seeks to identify learners' attitudes and perceptions regarding the shift from face-to-face learning to online learning. The online survey was conducted from 1st July 2020 to 15th July 2020. A Google form was developed and administered through Learning Management System and WhatsApp group. The Google form contained questions for responses on Likert scale of 1-5 (ranging from "Strongly agree" to "Agree") and closed questions. It elicited information related to gender, reading news related to the COVID-19, participants' anxiety about the negative impacts of the COVID-19, communication with others during the COVID-19, learning efficacy process of acquiring knowledge, previous exposure to online learning, readiness to shift from face-to-face learning to online learning, devices for accessing the internet, course works, preference to participate in live sessions and overall satisfaction about online learning.

Then, unstructured interviews were conducted online to elucidate the learners' attitudes and perceptions about shifting from face-to-face learning to online learning. An invitation was sent to first year undergraduate students through WhatsApp group. Ten learners volunteered to participate. During the interviews the participants were asked about their biggest challenges regarding online learning. Three tables were developed and a descriptive analysis was carried out. To find out the common aspects in the interview data all the interviews were transcribed and a thematic analysis was done. The respondents live in different parts in Sri Lanka. All of them voluntarily participated in this survey.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Table1.1

Question (Q)	Gender	Number of respondents (NOR)	Percentage (P)
Q 1	Female	94	82.5%
	Male	20	17.5%

Table 1.2

Q	Strongly agree		Agree		Neither agree nor disagree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	NOR	P	NOR	P	NOR	P	NOR	P	NOP	P
Q 2	45	39.5%	63	55.3%	5	4.4%	1	0.9%		
Q 3	28	24.6%	46	40.4%	28	24.6%	9	7.9%	3	2.6%
Q 4	30	26.3%	57	50%	12	10.5%	6	5.3%	9	7.9%
Q 5	71	62.3%	37	32.5%	2	1.8%	3	2.6%	1	0.9%
Q 6	11	9.6%	40	35.1%	28	24.6%	27	23.7%	8	7%
Q 7	15	13.2%	50	43.9%	30	26.3%	18	15.8%	1	0.9%
Q 9	45	39.5%	66	57.9%	3	2.6%				
Q 10	27	23.7%	69	60.5%	14	12.3%	4	3.5%		
Q 11	16	14%	38	33.3%	41	36.3%	16	14%	3	2.6%

Table 1.3

Q	Desktop		Laptop		Tablet		Smartphone		No device	
	NOR	P	NOR	P	NOR	P	NOR	P	NOR	P
Q 8	0	0%	3	2.6%	6	5.3%	103	90.4%	2	1.8%

One hundred and fourteen responses were received. About 82.5% of the respondents were female and 17.5% were male. According to second question in the survey the participants were asked whether they read news related to COVID-19 every day. 55.3% of the participants agreed that they read news related to the COVID-19 regularly. The third question focused on the participants' anxiety about the negative impacts of COVID-19 on them and their family members. 40.4% of the learners agreed that they are worried about the negative impacts of COVID-19. Fourthly, they were asked whether they communicate with family members/relatives/friends who they no longer meet in person due to the COVID-19 lockdown. 50% of the respondents agreed. Fifth question dealt with learning efficacy and mode of accessing education. 62.3% participants strongly agreed that the COVID-19 outbreak has been disruptive

to their usual learning efficacy and process of acquiring knowledge. Results of the sixth question indicated that only 35.1% of the respondents had previous online learning experience. 43.9% of the participants exhibited their readiness to move to an online learning environment. About 98.3% of the participants have devices for accessing internet and it seemed that almost all the participants use smartphones (90.4%) rather than laptops to access the internet. Approximately, 57.9% of the participants agreed that course works are still being assigned while they are at home. Most students (60.5%) stated that they are interested in live classes where all the students and lecturer meet at the same time online for learning. Finally, the participants were asked about their overall satisfaction about online learning. The responses were as follow: Strongly agree (14%), Agree (33.3%), Neither agree nor disagree (36.3%), Disagree (14%), Strongly disagree (2.6%).

The key findings from the interviews are thematically analyzed below.

Availability of devices

Most learners possess smartphones that can be used for accessing the internet. There are significant differences in the learner attitudes and perceptions of learning online on smartphone versus a desktop or laptop because viewing resources on small smartphone screen is completely different from viewing the same resources on desktop or laptop. In addition, the quality of online learning is related to the suitability of digital devices. Alternative arrangements should be made for learners who do not possess compatible devices to access online learning platforms.

Internet connection

Access to the internet is a prerequisite aspect for online learning. Therefore, each leaner must have access to high-speed internet. The learners who live in metropolitan areas have good internet connectivity, while those who reside in remote parts often have poor and patchy internet connection or bandwidth issues. Mostly, they have to find a location that has stable internet connection. So, asynchronous methods to accommodate the leaners who have problems in attending synchronous sessions.

Lack of experience

Efficient online learning process depends on the learners' need to possess strong technical skills and computer knowledge. Some learners have minimal experience about using online platforms. They lack the skills and training required for learning online. Offering learners guidelines on how to use the online learning platforms can improve their learning experience. Lack of formal training and support create serious issues for some students.

Cost of data

During the interviews some leaners expressed their deep concerns about the cost of accessing the internet has significant impact on their learning because they belong to families with underprivileged backgrounds. They are battling with the means of securing the basic needs due to the COVID-19 lockdown. The cost of accessing the internet poses additional economic burden for them.

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 has been causing detrimental effects on all educational institutions and learning process in the world and Sri Lanka is not an exception to this public health emergency. The complete eradication of the COVID-19 pandemic cannot be achieved in near future but learners deserve an online learning experience that is comparable to face-to-face learning. Therefore, it is vital for policy makers and educational institutions to know how learners are feeling and assist them to identify ways to

minimize the problems they are encountering.

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