

The issues and challenges faced by undergraduates in online learning during COVID-19 outbreak

W.P.N.L Sumathipala¹

Introduction

The new coronavirus (COVID-19) emerged in Wuhan City, China, at the end of 2019 (Chahrour et al., 2020) and the pandemic has affected many countries across the world in different ways. Specially this pandemic has negatively impacted the health, economy, education sectors in many countries. According to United Nation data in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has created the largest disruption of education systems in history, affecting nearly 1.6 billion learners in more than 190 countries and all continents (United Nation, 2020). Higher education system has also faced many issues and challenges during the pandemic. COVID-19 outbreak has caused a downward spiral in the world economy and caused a huge impact on the higher education system (Rashid & Yadav, 2020). The higher education system around the world has responded this pandemic situation and face to face learning classes has transferred to online learning system. In the situation of university education in Sri Lanka, all academic teaching is done through online methods due to the COVID-19 pandemic. But the problem is there are many issues with the online learning system in Sri Lanka. Higher education institutions in Sri Lanka had to deliver education services online at the onset of the pandemic, and this has continued since, even as limited face-to-face higher education has resumed (Hayashi et al, 2020). The quick transition from traditional face-to-face teaching to online was challenging for both students and academic staff. Access to digital devices, access to digital devices and the internet, conducting practical sessions, and examinations were the major challenges in online higher education, among other things (Rameez,2020). Online education is a kind of educational instruction in which medium for instruction is mostly electronic (internet) and student get the education at home (Kentnor, 2015).

During the COVID-19 outbreak, undergraduates those who are in Sri Lankan universities has faced various types of issues and challenges in online learning. The availability of the internet and online courses plasticity have enabled it as a vital part of imparting higher education (Luyt, 2013). According to study conducted by Asian Development Bank in 2021, limited access to digital devices and stable internet remains the key challenges in Sri Lankan higher education system. Smartphones and mobile broadband networks continued to be the main instruments to access online higher education in Sri Lanka, and there was no significant shift to computers and landlines during the pandemic. Students from

¹ Department of Demography, Faculty of Arts, University of Colombo, Sri Lanka

poor households or remote areas struggle the most (Asian Development Bank, 2022). According to above points, Sri Lankan higher education system is generally faced with problems of non-accessibility to the internet and non-availability of electronic gadgets. Hence, it is important to address the issues and challenges faced by undergraduates in online learning during COVID-19 outbreak.

Research objective

The purpose of this study is to explore the issues and challenges faced by undergraduates in online learning during COVID-19 outbreak.

Methodology

The study has used primary data obtained from a sample comprised of 108 undergraduate students (85 females and 23 males) who were enrolled in online learning process from several universities in Sri Lanka. Structured questionnaires were used to collect quantitative data. Google forms are used to collect data from undergraduates. Quantitative data were analyzed with SPSS using univariate bivariate and multivariate analysis techniques.

Results and discussion

According to data collected, with regard to the device that they use for their online learning, 33.3 percent of respondents have used laptops while 32 percent of respondents have used mobile phones. Also, 35 percent of respondents have used both devices laptops and mobile phones for their online learning. 89 percent of respondents have their own device for online learning and 89 percent of respondents have shared their device with their siblings those who are engaged with online learning in the family. When considering the below table 1, 79 percent of respondents have faced lack of network coverage. As a result of that 31 percent of undergraduates have to go to another place where internet facilities are available away from home during lectures. Specially, 11.1 percent of undergraduates have changed their usual residence district due to lack of internet connection in their usual residence. In particular, they visit their relation's or friend's place where there is good network connection to continue their online learning.

Table 1: Online learning challenges faced by undergraduate students

Problem	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Lack of network coverage	79	73
Having to go to another place where internet facilities are available away from home during lectures	31	28
Difficulty concentrating on lectures in the background of the home	57	53
Device problems	35	32
Not feeling the classroom atmosphere	56	52

Source: Sample survey, 2022

Online education has led to the emergence of various physical and mental illnesses. Mangis (2016), stated that online education has offered students the autonomy to work at their space and pace, the sedentary nature of online classes has triggered health issues. According to table 2, undergraduates have suffered from various illnesses due to the engagement in studies by using digital devices. Of them, 66 percent of respondents have headaches while 60 percent of respondents have backache for being seated a long time for online learning. The mean time duration of online learning of respondents are 6 to 8 hours per day. But the average amount of screen time recommended per day is 3 to 6 hours. Hence, spending long time on online learning has directly affected vision problems and hearing problems. As of the table 02 below shows, 29 percent of undergraduates have faced vision problems and 22 percent of undergraduates have faced hearing problems. The other important factor is 40 percent of students have faced mental stress due to online learning. In line with the above data, it could be recommended that online learning create many health issues among undergraduate students and it has affected to create unhealthy young generation in the country.

Table 2: Health issues faced by undergraduate students due to online learning

Health issue	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Headaches	72	66
Vision Problems	31	29
Hearing Loss	24	22
Backache	65	60
Fatigue and Insomnia	35	32
Mental Stress	43	40
Neck pain	12	11

Source: Sample survey, 2022

*Multiple choices

By looking at the table 3, it shows that 57 percent of undergraduates have missed their normal university life due to online learning during the COVID-19 outbreak. Moreover, Physical distancing and home isolation are major social issues faced by most respondents of the sample. 79 percent of respondents have lost fun time at university with colleagues while 52 percent of students were unable to meet their boyfriend or girlfriend. 39 percent of students were unable to participate sport tournaments and 41 percent of students were unable to do extra activities. Accordingly, the study revealed that most of students have become socially isolated due to physical distance learning.

Table 3: Social issues faced by undergraduate students due to online learning

Social issue	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Losing time to have fun at university with colleagues	85	79
Unable to participate sport tournaments	42	39
Unable to meet boyfriend or girlfriend	56	52
Missing activities by student unions in the university	58	54
Missing university life	62	57
Unable to do extra activities	44	41

Source: Sample survey,2022

*Mutiple choices

Conclusion

This study stands as a reference for considering the issues and challenges faced by undergraduates in online learning during COVID-19 outbreak. The study conclusively proves that there are so many issues and challenges faced by undergraduates due to lack network coverage of the country, lack of digital devices and having to spend a long time on online learning. Accordingly, most of undergraduate students have faced lack of physical space conducive for studying, mental health difficulties, physical health difficulties and lack of social connections. As a summation, it is needed to address the impact of COVID-19 on sustainable development goal 4: quality education for all. Particularly, undergraduate's education is crucial factor for workforce in a country which helps to prepare individuals to enter the workforce.

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