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Should education be quarantined too?



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The earth stands still. Time has paused. The bustling streets of yesterday are empty today. Schools and universities which were once filled with joyful youth are now silent. The race that stomped around the ends of the earth, have today been sent home by an enemy smaller than a microbe. Covid-19.

Yet, humans are not to be defeated so easily. Even hidden behind walls, humanity keeps moving forward. Homes have turned into schools, colleges and offices. Meetings, classes, summer schools, online courses and seminars continue at full speed from home.

Universities across the globe have shifted online to ensure undeterred continuation of education. Two Bangladeshi students I know who are studying at the University of Cambridge are continuing their studies from here in Bangladesh. The authorities at the University of Cambridge are evaluating their progress online. Another MIT student attested to similar policies being taken there.

However, keeping the mental wellbeing of the students in mind, the academic authorities have changed the grading system to a Pass/No Record policy. Due to the No Record Policy, students with poor results will have their records removed. Their CGPA will therefore not fall due to a poor grade and they will be allowed to repeat a course if necessary.

The European Girls Mathematical Olympiad 2020 was supposed to be held in the Netherlands this year. It also had to be conducted virtually due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Many large scale olympiads like the Bangladesh Mathematical Olympiad are

being arranged online. A group of young students, including some past contestants of the Bangladesh team in the International Mathematical Olympiads, have initiated a Special Online Math Camp for other math enthusiasts across Bangladesh. It is fascinating to see young college students teaming up to initiate, manage and conduct online classes on higher level mathematics for around 50 school and college going students. That too is being done with little or almost no institutional supervision.

In April, some physics students from different public and private universities, including the University of Dhaka and Brac University, initiated and arranged a month-long workshop called Online Physics Camp. The camp was successful, not only in terms of focusing on cutting-edge research topics and inspiring physicists in Bangladesh, but also in building a bridge between these students and leading institutes like Max Planck Institute and the Institute of Advanced Studies at Princeton University.

Several platforms are being used to conduct the online classes. Zoom and Google Meet are the two most popular streaming solutions used to conduct live classes. Google Meet has made its premium features available for free until September 2020 to support educational and business organisations continue their activities smoothly. Zoom allows us to conduct meetings or classes consisting of 40 participants for 40 minutes for free. Both Zoom and Google Meet allow screen sharing. Teachers can conduct classes not only by using slide presentations, they can also use the whiteboard features of these applications. A simple computer connected to the internet is enough to conduct a class presentation. However, to use the whiteboard facility of these applications, one needs a medium quality graphics tablet that supports a pen. Google Classroom, Piazza and Moodle are different tools being used for online learning. Elementary quizzes can be taken on Google Classroom, discussions on homework can take place on Piazza and Moodle is being used for document storage. Students need only an internet connected computer or smartphone to participate in the classes.

Many students around the world have been using the edX and Coursera platforms to take courses online. Now, almost a hundred universities are connected to edX and around 20 million learners are participating in online courses using this platform. By subscribing to these online tools and platforms, educational institutes will not only be able to continue their activities online but will also be able to elevate their existing systems to a global standard.

While looking for solutions to deal with this crisis, we are slowly realising the grave mistake of neglecting research, education and knowledge. The irony is that this late but significant realisation hit us only after educational institutes closed. In this situation, there is no better or easier alternative than an online system to continue education. However, many students do not have good internet access. These students are dependent on their university labs to access computers and the internet. The telecom industries, internet service providers and other tech companies should come forward to collaborate with universities to support these students in this situation. In fact, universities should actively seek support from the IT industries and ICT ministry to ensure easier access to the internet and technological support for their underprivileged students. Universities should also create funds and scholarships for students facing financial crises.

Additionally, there are some things that are difficult to complete using online platforms only. Assessments for these kinds of courses require teachers to be creative and

considerate to their students. For example, in some of the laboratory courses at MIT, instructors are grading students based on the steps and explanations or reasoning provided by the students, instead of grading practically completed projects. Moreover, due to the No Record policy, students are facing less mental distress while trying to learn during this crisis. We should be careful that students are not forced to take a course or enrol this semester if the current situation is too difficult for them.

Practical assignments for arts and videography projects need to be designed such that they can be completed from home with minimum equipment. Moreover, online forums should be managed so that students can join in discussions with teachers and fellow classmates.

Shifting to an online method can be difficult for teachers as well. Teachers can team up to prepare online content and run the live classes of a particular course.

We do not know when we will see the other side of this dark time and go back to normal. We do not even know what "normal" will look like post-pandemic. Uncertainty prevails. Instead of being caged by this uncertainty, we have to prepare for the future. And in this preparation, our greatest friends are technology, education and our humanity.

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