

DISTANCE LEARNING IN AFGHANISTAN; CHALLENGES AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

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Policy Paper

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20 August 2020

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Definitions:

Common/Traditional Learning:

Takes place physically in classroom, or as a result of face-to-face interaction between student and teacher. The teacher or trainer designs the lesson plan and scheme of work, and adapts the activities by using different techniques and lectures, to facilitate and manages the learning process of students. A key element of the system is its inability to efficiently monitor the quality of methods and techniques used for teaching. The flow of information is solely based on the rules and regulations of the system. Due to this, creativity and advancement in the information system are restricted. Traditional methods are being used globally, and have been used throughout the history, and are still dominantly utilized in schools and further education. Some key methods are: memorize and repeat, lecturing, question and answer, demonstrations, roles plays, open/close practice, group discussions, exposure visits and assessment methods.

Advantages of Common/Traditional Learning System

The system has the following key advantages:

- Student and teacher establishes a close and friendly relationship.
- Pursuit of rules and regulations

- Feasibility in various circumstances
- Participation of more students in a class.
Provocation of thoughts and creativity.
- Greater opportunities to debate and share ideas.
- Use of available and actual resources and objects.
- Improvement in individuals' management and leadership qualities.
- Motivation for study and research

E-Learning:

This includes Online learning, digital learning, Distance learning, etc. UNECSO defines e-learning as “a type of learning that teachers teach their students without their physical presence and time contingency. This means that communication between teacher and students entirely or mostly takes place digitally or electronically”. The biggest advantage of e-learning is that; learners progress their learning without being bound with time or location.

In e-learning, flow of information is tremendously meaningful and organized. And information is transferred to learners after a vigilant classification, based on their learning levels using various technical tools and devices. Up-to-date transfer of information increases the use of e-learning services among learners. Currently, the e-learning systems are in a decent condition as they have adequate number of users and educational resources. As the systems remove out-of-date information and replaces it with new data, therefore, converse to the traditional learning system, e-learning focuses on quality instead of quantity.

Henceforth, it can be said that the traditional learners lack creativity and ability to manage information. They pursue classic learning system and their skills are beneficial in administrative and industrial sector, which could be ideal for

manufacturing societies. On the other hand, e-learners come handy for information-based society, as their operations depend on creativity, information management and academic development.

It is important to understand that e-learning does not mean transforming textbooks into eBooks, but it is a representation of modern teaching techniques with multiple characteristics. This include adaptability, being student-centered, lack of dependence on locality and time. In addition, e-learning gives ability to learners to have access to information at all times. Elements such as audios, pictures, quiz and others that are being provided for learning purposes can be accessed even if a learner is unable to attain them on time.

Advantages of E-Learning

- Removes dependence on time and location
- Unlimited access to resources
- Lower cost of learning
- Better time management
- Up-to-date information
- Adaptability
- Ability to learn through games and entertaining activities

Types of E-Learning

Considering the vast area being covered by e-learning, and usage of various devices and teaching techniques, e-learning can be categorized into many divisions such as:

1. Learning through websites
2. Computer-based learning
3. Learning through digital devices such as Tablets, PCs, PDAs

4. Learning through mobile phones

In addition, online learning has the following categories:

1. Individual study
2. Group study
3. Online classes

Distance Learning vs. Traditional Learning

Unlike teacher-centered traditional learning, distance learning is a student centered and comprehensive educational system. In remote learning, students stand at the center of attention and improvement of their skills and abilities are prioritized. In addition, being student-centered and focusing on memorizing activities are among the distinct features of distance learning that have been effective for reaching the goals of the system. Subjects taught in online classes are not different from subjects in traditional system. The only difference is facility of device that connects the teacher with student and establishes a suitable and remote environment for learning.

According to some researchers, progression of third world countries is connected to utilization of remote learning. By providing opportunities for students to continue studies, eliminating obstacles of access, transportation and time, preserving the social, cultural and economic aspects of the system, and by being more adaptable compared to the traditional system, the distance learning system expresses its distinctive features.

Challenges Towards Distance Learning in Afghanistan

Afghanistan is among the countries where global crisis such as the coronavirus pandemic has comparatively had more impact on. Even before the pandemic, Afghans were deprived of basic traditional education due to decades of war and

insecurities. Currently, many villages and rural areas are deprived from a suitable environment for education and do not even have access to textbooks. Hence, the slogan “We bring education to your home” of the ministry of education is improbable.

War and insecurities have severely affected the educational system of Afghanistan and prevented its advancement. The coronavirus pandemic also interrupted the learning process of students, due to which, educational establishments were closed for months. As a result of the pandemic, 18,000 schools were closed before the inauguration of the educational year 1399, and 9 million students were deprived from education. In addition, 169 higher education institutions were closed, due to which, 388191 students have been out of education. Consequently, educational institutions chose to provide remote learning services in order to enable students to pursue their studies during the lockdown.

Since the worldwide spread of the coronavirus, many developed countries replaced classroom learning with remote learning. Following the footsteps of developed countries, academic institutions of Afghanistan also presented their distance learning plan to the president’s office. However, some members of the parliament, lecturers and experts criticized the plan and called it “flawed” and “impracticable”. The parliament members also criticized, that without understanding the circumstances of the society and consultation with the members of the parliament, the ministry of education had represented an ineffective plan to the presidential palace. According to the members of parliament, the plan is inapplicable since most of the people of Afghanistan have no access to electricity, internet and televisions.

On the other hand, some members of the parliament believe, that although the plan will not enable all students to utilize remote learning services due to poor economic

condition and lack of facilities, but the plan will at least give opportunity of pursuing studies to those who have access to the internet and computer. Conversely, experts of educational system consider the plan imperfect and believe that if the ministry of education sanctions the plan and decides to take exam based on remote services, the educational system will face numerous problems.

A contingency plan with the assistance of HELMS online system was welcomed by the president and sanctioned by the cabinet. With cooperation of governmental and private TV networks, the ministry of education will implement the plan using three methods; self-study, distance learning, and study in small groups with consideration of the guidelines of the ministry of public health.

The president backed the plan of ministry of education and has said “We cannot wait. It is time to step towards digital learning and digital governance, and take advantage of modern technology for education”.

The Higher Education Learning Management System (HELMS) is the most effective online learning system in the world. The system uses open source code which has above 90 million users worldwide and is being used by some of the most renowned academic institutions. However, the system was not as effective as it was expected to be. This was not due to the shortcomings in the system itself, but due to the poverty and other economic factors in the country.

The system is easy-to-use and can be accessed even by those students, who have comparatively poor understanding of technology. It covers about 170 academic institutions worldwide. Currently, 38 public, 11 private universities and a total of 147,589 students in Afghanistan have been registered in HELMS.

Despite excessive budgetary expenditures, a standard learning system is yet to be developed for students in Afghanistan. Some schools and private universities use Google Classroom, WhatsApp and other online services to pursue their studies, due to which, they are facing various problems. On the other hand, some renowned private universities and institutions stepped up to resolve the distance learning problems themselves. For instance, Salam University was able to develop and initiate an electronic system called “SLMS” within a limited timeframe. The system was more effective compared to the system of the ministry of higher education, through which, the university was able to share its whole curriculum with its students. Although the reopening of universities on 5th August, 2020 gave a new breath to the half-dead vessel of the higher education system of Afghanistan, public and private schools are still closed until now.

The lockdown due to the coronavirus pandemic rapidly pushed the education system of Afghanistan towards digitalization. In addition to the lack of acquaintance of people about online learning, absence of cooperation between the ‘Da Breshna Sherkat’ with the education system about provision of electricity, lack of access to high speed internet, lack of access to gadgets such as computers and smart phones, poverty, and poor economy of the country have led to the failure and triggering of discriminative stance between rich and poor students.

In order to overcome the obstacles to some extent, the ministry of education introduced three methods of online learning system: First, science subjects will be taught through TV networks or online platforms, Secondly, social subjects through radio. And lastly, small classrooms will be allowed for those students, who have no access to the first two methods by strictly following the guidelines of the ministry of Public Health.

As the ministries of education and higher education presented a contingency plan for the education system during the lockdown, it failed due to aforementioned reasons. Subsequently, a new online platform called “AfghanX” online learning system was developed under the Massive Open Online Courses network for the first time, which also had no effective results.

Considering the day-to-day worldwide innovations and advancements, the culture of online learning is spreading in developing countries and has recently come into the attention of academic institutions of Afghanistan. However, it is difficult to apprehend the ministry of higher education’s reason for enforcing the use of HELMS on all public and private universities despite its high vending cost. The ministry does not authorize any other systems except HELMS.

Disagreements between the private universities union and the ministry of higher education over the price of the system have created many problems. Despite its shortcomings and failed experiences, 11 private universities have agreed to purchase HELMS from the ministry until 5th August, 2020

As the constitution of Afghanistan allows establishment of private institutions, development of new learning methods should also be allowed. This will bolster innovative approach of private institutions about education, increase competition, and lead to development of more effective and efficient learning systems. Since the policy-makers of the educational system of Afghanistan have been unable to fill the gap that is created by the closure of educational institutions, it is better to include private sector in development of an effective learning system.

Main Challenges for Establishing an E-Learning System

The followings are the key challenges that are being faced while enabling an e-learning system in Afghanistan

1. Lack of access to 24-hour electricity and affordable internet are the biggest challenges towards e-learning facility. Access to electricity and internet services end as soon as one travels a few kilometers outside the large cities. Standard and stable facilities lack even inside the large cities of Afghanistan
2. Poor economic condition of the people, lack of access to the internet and electronic devices can be considered the second key problem for e-learning. In addition, young generation is unacquainted with computer and other modern technologies. Disregard to computer learning in schools has magnified the problem.
3. Low speed internet and high prices of internet bundles offered by communication companies have also affected the use of e-learning services. Most of communication systems in Afghanistan are using 2G technology and are still testing 3G generations. While many countries in the world are using 4G technology and testing to enable 5G generation of internet.
4. Lack of support from the ministry of higher education is another obstacle towards e-learning. Instead of backing private institutions to establish an electronic learning system, the ministry strives to collect money and sell their application, which has triggered distrust between the ministry and higher education institutions. The ministry does not embolden innovations and actions of private sectors when it comes to developing an e-learning system.
5. Distrust of students and families about e-learning triggered by their limited

understanding about e-learning has also affected the use of electronic learning systems.

6. Lack of electronic libraries, learning resources, audios and visual resources is another key problem for students and teachers.
7. Absence of an organized plan of the government to enhance e-learning is also considered a key obstacle towards e-learning.
8. Absence of advocacy and legal support from the government has also had negative impact on the system.

Conclusion

A general evaluation of distance learning system in Afghanistan has unfortunately indicated, that enabling e-learning system has not been effective due to the absence of an organized strategy, lack of technical-resources, unfamiliarity, lack of mental and physical readiness of educational institutions, students and teachers for distance learning system.

The coronavirus pandemic was a good opportunity for Afghanistan to recognize its capacity and abilities regarding distance learning. It has enabled us to better understand our weak points and limitations about e-learning. Hence, if the experiences of the coronavirus pandemic are carefully discerned, an effective plan can be developed for the future.

As the global health organizations have forewarned us about the second wave of Covid-19 spread in winter and even after that, the ministry of education and higher education institutions should be therefore fully prepared. Even if the estimated upcoming intensity of the coronavirus spread is ignored, development of a distance

learning system is immensely required and beneficial. In addition to its traditional learning system, Afghanistan needs to have an organized plan and a clear strategy for distance learning. It is necessary to understand that establishment of a distance learning system does not mean that the system will replace the traditional system, but will be a part of a comprehensive educational system.

Following the experiences of e-learning systems in third world countries, the center for strategic and regional studies (CSRS) presents the following recommendations for developing distance learning policies and plans.

Policy Recommendations

1. Increasing public awareness to fortify and establish trust among youngsters, families and teachers about e-learning. Also, propagation of the culture of using online learning services, and convincing the society about the need for distance learning in the modern world are vital in this regard.
2. Empowering computer literacy and use of devices in schools, as e-learning fundamentally requires use of computer and electronic appliances.
3. Experiences of countries which are culturally similar to Afghanistan should be utilized. For instance, Malaysia is among the countries, who commenced distance learning system in 1971. Despite economic crisis in 1990, the country continued to pursue distance learning. Currently, many academic institutions provide distance learning services along with traditional learning to their local and international students.
4. The government should invest on infrastructural works in order to provide electricity, the internet, and other necessary gadgets for e-learning. Regarding internet services, establishment of technological substructures are not desired and the internet service providers seek high prices for low quality internet.

Such substructures should be undertaken to develop quality distance learning services in the country

5. Support of communication companies, the Da Afghanistan Breshna Sherkat, the media, and those establishments that favor from distance learning is vital for the success of e-learning program. In addition, strong internet connection, persistent access to electricity is also significant. In order to have permanent access to electricity, the government should efficiently manage country's water and hydroelectricity dams should be constructed instead of depending on imported electricity.
6. An independent budgetary unit with experts and experienced personnel should be established. The unit's duty will be to develop strategic plans for the development of e-learning system, and deliver and implement successful experiences of e-learning to the country.
7. A budget should be allocated to develop a curriculum, provide academic resources and learning materials for schools and university student, and recruit international e-learning experts in case of need. This is due to the fact that Afghanistan lacks professional personnel when it comes to developing an e-learning system
8. The government should appoint the parliament to compile a comprehensive law for e-learning and clarify its level of reverence. So that in light of the law, the disagreements between the ministry of higher education and private universities can be resolved. In addition, the law will be able eliminate the credibility issue of certificates that are being provided for graduate students by renowned online universities and institutions.
9. Those academic and research organizations that prioritize distance learning

should be backed and fortified. This is because such organizations are able to overcome problems for e-learning through their researches and point out positives and negatives of the system.

10. Establishment of At least one online school and an online university in the capital within the next five years will hasten the development of the system by experiencing unforeseen problems and opportunities. The institution will be able to recruit international experts in order to utilize their experiences. If the government is unable to do so, private sector should be permitted to invest in this regard.
11. While implementing the e-learning system, disabled class of the society should be specifically considered. As they mostly unable to attain education through traditional way due to cultural and physical limitations, distance learning will give them an opportunity to learn without attending any classes physically.
12. Subject of e-learning methods should be added to the faculties of education of the country. In addition, scholarships at online universities should be provided in order to propagate culture of online learning and train staff for online education institutions within the country.
13. Branches of regional and international online universities should be potentialized in the country, so that the citizens can benefit from its services.

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