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Online learning at public campuses during COVID-19: Students' perceptions and practices

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Abstract

The Pandemic situation of COVID 19 had impacted the global education system leading to the cancellation of face-to-face classes and exams. Online classes had been started in universities and campuses on a large scale as an alternative to face-to-face education. The objective of the study was to find out the perception and practice of online teaching among students on public campuses in Nepal. The study was quantitative research design with survey methods. A Google online survey was conducted in response in which 402 respondent students of public campuses of Lumbini province were taken as a sample. The study found that the COVID-19 has resulted in public campuses shut all across the country so education has changed dramatically, with the distinctive rise of online learning, and started remotely on digital platforms. For this situation, the students are needed to adopt online learning. The majority 63% of students have been learning online during this pandemic situation. Online education is the best alternative of face to face learning as it is flexible, innovative, and interesting. Challenges like slow internet, shortage of adequate teaching materials, teachers' disinterest, unstable power, and unavailability of devices were also found for conducting online courses.

Keywords: Online learning, Public Campuses, COVID 19, opportunities, challenges

Introduction

COVID-19 had a massive impact on human life worldwide. According to a UNESCO report, as a consequence of the lockdowns, schools and universities in Nepal had been temporarily closed for ten-months now. As of the second week of May 2020, UNESCO (2020) estimates that nearly nine million (8,796,624) students in Nepal were affected due to school/university closures in response to the pandemic. Out of this number, 958,127 (11%) were in pre-primary, 2,466,570 (28%), in primary, 3,463,763 (39%), in secondary and 404,718 (5%) in tertiary education.

This tragedy had moreover shaken up the education sector. Dhawan (2020) states that several areas are affected worldwide and there is a fear of losing this whole ongoing year and semester or even more in the coming future. Numerous schools, colleges, and universities have discontinued face-to-face learning. They have been struggling to find better options to

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deal with this challenging situation. It creates the situation to initiate alternative learning classes as an opportunity.

Public campuses of Nepal had lacked the delivery of education due to the announcement of lockdown during this pandemic. In the early days, the administrations of public universities faced a dilemma in terms of how to continue their teaching and learning operations. Later government authorities and universities of Nepal planned to turn this massive situation as an opportunity and started alternative ways of learning. They had tried to overcome the solution for mitigating the learning loss of students by introducing distance learning as virtual and online teaching and learning. It had influenced the interaction between teachers and students. As a consequence of the pandemic, universities and campuses were constrained to carry out their activity with students' online education. Acharya et al. (2020) state that the closure of educational institutions for a considerably long period calls to change the education system dramatically and leads to the notable rise of online learning. Students can learn anytime and anywhere and develop new skills in the process leading to life-long learning (Dhawan, 2020). This paradigm shift in education could generate changes in students' perception so it is essential to consider the students' perspectives on learning in a computer-mediated environment and how they experience online learning.

Online education is the newest and most popular form of distance education today. Typically, it requires the use of the Internet to access learning materials; to interact with the content, instructor, and other learners, and to obtain support during the learning process to acquire knowledge, to construct personal meaning, and to grow from the learning experience (Ally, 2004, p. 5). The minimum requirement for students to participate in an online course is access to a computer, the Internet, and the motivation to succeed in a non-traditional classroom. It enhances the flexibility of the area by including the students and teachers from diverse geographical backgrounds. It gives learning a new relevance to contemporary society and professional practice.

Policy and Practice for Online Learning in Nepal

In 1958, the College of Education launched an adult education program over the radio, which marked the beginning of distant education in Nepal. It is considered to have been a milestone for distance education in Nepal. Policy and directives to regulate open and distance education in Nepal are Open Education and Distance Learning Policy 2007 and Directives on Distance Education/Open Learning Program 2007 with its third amendment 2014. The Ministry of Education of Nepal envisioned and prepared the policies related to the implication of ICT in Education in Nepal. The Ministry of Education (2013) presented the guiding principles for ICT in education in Nepal.

The first principle should be ICT for all students, meaning that the policy would act as an enabler to reduce the digital gap. The second principle should emphasize the role and function of ICT in education as a teaching and learning tool that would also encourage the application of all potential media and Technology. The third principle is to promote educational access and equity for all regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, disability, or location. The fourth principle is to emphasize the use of ICT to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the management system in education. ICT will extensively be used to automatize and mechanize work processes such as the processing of official forms, timetable generation, management of information

systems, lesson planning, financial management, and the maintenance of inventories (p.12).

Statement of the Problem

All the learners of three types of HEIs, constituent campuses, community colleges, and affiliated (private) colleges in Nepal had obstructed in the semester and annual academic systems due to COVID-19. All universities of Nepal and almost all the programs had been running face-to-face class mode of teaching since their inception before the COVID-19 pandemic. These universities were built for face-to-face practices, having no infrastructure and preparedness for online classes. Students were not mentally and technically prepared for the online mode of learning under such circumstances, online learning in Nepal is more than challenging. To make the useful online mode of teaching-learning practices, faculties and students met the likelihood of psychological stress, anxiety, and trauma on one side and the other side is the fear of education practices due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Initially, few faculties of Tribhuvan University in their efforts started delivering their classes online from the very beginning of lockdown in Nepal still the efforts were insufficient in terms of coverage, later University Grants Commission (UGC) had issued the Guidelines for Facilitating Alternative Mode of Learning in Higher Education on 13 July 2020. This was as part of the Commission initiative to address the unprecedented impact of Covid-19 on the regular academic activities of universities and higher education institutions UGC (2020). Then Tribhuvan University formally decided to conduct online classes withholding examination schedules. All campuses under Tribhuvan University and other universities of Nepal followed it and decided to continue their class online. Public Campuses of Nepal had also been running online classes during the period of COVID 19.

Higher education institutions require intense and prompt attention to tackle such situations. So they had been trying to change the method of face-to-face education to online learning. The government also recognizes the increasing importance of online learning in this dynamic world. The severe explosion of Coronavirus disease can make us add one more argument in terms of online learning; that is, online learning serves as a panacea in a time of crisis. Public institutions had found difficulty in adopting updated technologies to implement technology-based teaching-learning systems even with colossal investment and promotion from the government of Nepal.

Many campuses under Tribhuvan and other universities of Nepal had resorted to online learning activities to minimize the impact and keep the students engaged. But there were challenges to conducting online learning activities due to the lack of tools required to connect and engage teachers and students online. The challenge was complemented by the fact that a large section of students belongs to remote areas that lack basic internet connectivity. Those who have access to the internet may not know how to make proper use of it. In the same way, how could it be useful in some places in our country where people have to climb up trees to access mobile networks? How can we think that online classes were useful? On the other hand, low-income public and community educational institutions have entirely shut their activities for not having access to e-learning solutions. The public campuses had transformed into quarantine sites. Tribhuvan University had started online classes through Microsoft Teams, part of Microsoft 365 for education which holds 82% of higher education in Nepal. Some Public campuses have started online classes by using Microsoft Teams and

others have been using Zoom and Google meets. However, there are some critical questions in the context of Nepal. Do all students have access to quality internet to attend the classes without disturbance? Are the teachers well equipped and trained enough to run the virtual classes effectively? Are all the students able to use this opportunity of distance learning? Based on these research questions researcher felt the necessity to find out the perception and practices of students' online education during COVID-19 in Public campuses in Nepal.

The objectives of this study were to find out the perception and practice of online teaching among students in public campuses in Nepal and to explore the challenges and opportunities of students to implement online teaching and learning. For this, the study stated the research questions; how do the students of public campuses perceive online teaching? How do they practice online teaching during COVID 19 periods? What are the challenges and opportunities for online teaching at public campuses?

Theories on Online Learning

There are different theories to online learning. The transformative learning theory has evolved into a comprehensive and elaborate description of how learners construct, validate, and reformulate the meaning of their experience' (as cited in Baran, Correia, & Thompson, 2011). According to this theory, learning begins with an experience that leads to a disorienting dilemma. The unexpected, unplanned, and sudden shift to online learning caused by COVID-19 has undoubtedly been an experience that has led to cognitive differences in our expectations about education (Kitchenham, 2008). This study tried to find the resulting challenges for education as a transformative event that will lead to innovation and a brand-new world for educators and students.

According to experiential education theory, experience alone does not produce knowledge; by reflecting on experiences, people can understand and transform their experiences into knowledge (Baker et al., 2002). Thus, from an experiential education perspective, the goal of education is to develop students' ability to transform experiences into new knowledge through reflection (Dewey, 1960). Experiential educators advocate for the use of experience and reflection to promote learning and research suggests that counselors in training value experiential activities. The COVID-19 pandemic is proving to be a constructive disruptor, allowing restructuring of the present informal, classroom-based educational system. This study tried to find the way of quick growth to online education and how assisted in keeping continuity of education programs on public campuses.

Self-determination theory is an approach to human motivation and personality that highlights the importance of humans' evolved inner resources for personality development and behavioral self-regulation (Ryan, & Deci, 1997). According to this theory, motivation for learning occurs when three fundamental human needs relatedness, autonomy, and competence are met. To increase motivation for learning during COVID-19, this study intended to know about a particularly relevant topic of choice like competency-based education, techniques for engaging online learners, or project-based learning all of which may build a toolbox for teaching during a pandemic.

Methodology

This study was a quantitative research design with survey methods. The students studying in public campuses in Nepal were taken as population. The public campuses of Lumbini Province were taken as study sites. The sample size for the study was calculated

using Slovin's formula $(n) = N / (1 + Ne^2)$. A Google online survey was conducted to get a response in which 402 respondent students were taken as a sample. A semi-structured questionnaire was prepared and used for data collection. For validation, the questionnaire test-pretest method was used. Data was extracted from the Google sheet and data cleaning was done. Then, it was transferred to SPSS 20 to analyze. The descriptive method was done for the number, percentage, mean, standard deviation of demographic variables. Similarly, the bivariate analysis was done using the Chi-square test to know the statistical difference among the future use of ICTs with different demographic and associated variables. The p-value of less than 0.05 was considered to be statistically significant. After the analysis process, the inferred data was presented as tables and graphs. The study was limited to the selected public campuses in Lumbini Province. The research participants were 402 students of different public campuses of Lumbini province.

Result

The responses were received from 402 students from public campuses of Lumbini province.

Demographic Analysis of Respondents

Table 1: *Demographic analysis*

		<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Gender	Male	190	47.3
	Female	212	52.7
Age group	18 and below	7	1.7
	19-29	370	92
	30-39	18	4.5
	40 and above	7	1.7
Educational level	Bachelors	263	65.4
	Masters	139	34.6
Faculty	Education	135	33.6
	Management	173	43.0
	Arts	77	19.2
	Science	17	4.2

The table 1 shows that the demographic representations of the respondents. There were 47% male and 53% female students who participated in this research. Out of 402 students, there were 190 male students and 212 female students. Most of the students 92% in this study belong to the age group of 19-29, and 4% students are from the age group of 30 to 39 group, 2% are 18 and below group, and only 2% are from the age group of 40 and above group. Among them, 64% of students are pursuing a bachelor's degree whereas 35% of them are pursuing a master's degree. 34% of students are from education faculty, 43% of students are from management faculty, 19% students are from arts faculty and 4% are from science faculty as the respondents.

The practice of online learningTable 2: *Practice of online learning*

		N	%		
Availability of internet at home	Yes	26	66.4		
		7			
	No	13	33.6		
		5			
Devices for online teaching	Smartphone	27	52.75		
		0			
	Laptop	20	39.1		
		0			
	Tablet	9	1.8		
*multiple responses	Personal Computer	33	6.4		
Comfort level for online learning	Poor	37	9.2		
	Below average	16	41.5		
		7			
	Good	19	47.8		
		2			
	Excellent	6	1.5		
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Tools used for online learning	Zoom	355	80.5	80.5	
	Microsoft teams	44	10	10	
	Google classroom	38	8.6		
	*multiple responses	Muddle	4	0.9	8.6
				0.9	
Availability of internet connection in the classroom	Yes	186	46.3		
	No	216	53.7		
Students satisfaction with online learning	Not all satisfied	42	10.3		
	Slightly Satisfied	126	31.6		
	Moderately Satisfied	193	48		
	Very satisfied	36	9		
	Extremely satisfied	5	1.1		
Opportunities of Online learning	Flexible	178	15.8		
	Manage time	192	17.1		
	Innovative learning	181	16.1		
	*multiple responses	Interesting increased motivation	192	17.1	
		Develop new skill	194	16.4	
		The best alternative for face to face	183	16.3	
	Nothing	4	0.4		
Challenges of online learning	Slow Internet	220	18.5		
	No internet access	220	18.5		
	Shortage of adequate teaching materials	146	12.3		
	*multiple responses	Teachers' disinterest	168	15.7	
		Unstable power	228	19.2	
	Devices are not available	183	15.4		

The table 2 shows that the practice of online teaching on public campuses. Availability of internet access at students' homes indicates access to online learning. The majority 66% of students had internet access at their home but 34% of students didn't have internet access at

their home. Technological devices are the most important factors for online learning, it determines the way of online learning through ICTs. 53% of respondents used smartphones for their online learnings. Whereas 39% had a laptop and 6% had a personal computer and only 2% used tablets for online learning. The Comfort level of using ICTs is a very important factor for online learning. Students should be skillful in using computers and ICTs. In this regard, 48% of students think they are good at using the ICTs for online learning whereas 41% of students think below average, 9% of them think they are poor and 1% think they are poor. Learning tools are very important for online learning. In this regard, 80% students used Zoom, 10% of students used Microsoft teams, 9% of them used Google classroom and only 1% of them used Muddle. Availability of internet connection in the classroom is another factor for using ICTs in teaching-learning activities that evaluate the conditions of the infrastructures of the classroom. The majority 54% of students didn't have an internet connection in their classrooms whereas 46% of students had an internet connection in their classrooms. The table also presents the students' satisfaction with online learning 48% of students were moderately satisfied with online learning 32% of them were slightly satisfied, 10% of them are not all satisfied, 9% of them are very satisfied and only 1% are extremely satisfied.

Regarding the students' perception about the opportunities of online learning 16% of students believed that online learning is flexible, 13% believed that online learning is helpful to manage time 16% believed that online learning is innovative for learning 17% of students perceived online learning as tools interesting increased motivation whereas 16% believed that ICTs developed new skills and 16% students believed that online learning develops new skills Even though online learning is more beneficial for students of public campuses but there are challenges for implicating in the classrooms. Where 18% of students faced the challenge of slow internet, 18% of them didn't have internet access, 12% faced the challenge of shortage of adequate materials, 16% of them faced the challenge of teachers' disinterest in teaching in online classes, 19% of students faced the problem of unstable power and 15% of them faced the challenge of unavailability of ICTs devices for online learning.

Bivariate Analysis

Table 3: *Bivariate analysis*

		Yes (%)	No (%)	p-value	Phi-square
Experience in online learning	Male	65.1	34.9	0.434	0.039
	Female	61.3	38.7		
Availability of internet at student's home	Education	40.9	59.1	0.014	0.163
	Management	53.0	47.0		
	Arts	44.8	55.2		
	Science	81.8	18.2		
Effectiveness of online learning	Male	80.8	19.2	0.294	0.052
	Female	84.8	15.2		
Availability of enough materials for online learning	Education	38.1	61.9	0.002	0.195
	Management	58.6	41.4		
	Arts	48.3	51.7		
	Science	54.5	45.5		

Bivariate analysis showed either significant or not significant association of understanding of online learning, Availability of personal technological devices at student's homes, the effectiveness of online learning, and availability of enough materials for online learning. The majority 63% of students have experience of online learning whereas 37% of students didn't have experience of it. Whereas 61% of the female students were known in online learning and 39% of female students didn't learn. Similarly, 65% of males used online learning, and 35% of them didn't use online learning. Here P-value is greater than 0.05 so there is no significant association between the male and female students for the experience of online learning. The availability of personal technological devices at students' homes is the primary indicator of online learning. It shows that the majority 52% of students didn't have personal technological devices at their home whereas 48% of students had such devices at home. There is a statistically significant difference among the students studying different faculty because the P-value is <0.05 . The study significantly found that the majority 59% of students studying education faculty lacked personal technological devices at their home whereas 41% of them had internet at home. But about to management studying students; majority 53% of them had personal technological devices at their home but 47% of them didn't have personal technological devices at student's home similarly 45% of students studying arts had personal technological devices at student's home at home but 55% of students didn't have personal technological devices at home. Most of the student's 82% studying science faculty had personal technological devices at home but 18% of them didn't have personal technological devices at home. So we can say that there is a statistically significant relationship among the students studying different faculties and having a personal computer at home. The relationship is modest. Online learning is the best alternative to face-to-face learning. Public campuses' classrooms have been changed by online learning. The table also shows the perception towards using online learning where 83% of students thought the usefulness of online learning but 17% of students didn't think of the effectiveness of online learning. Among them, 81% of male students believed in the effectiveness of but 19% of male students did not believe in the usefulness of online learning. Similarly, 85% of female students believed in the usefulness of online learning but 15% of them didn't believe in the effectiveness of online learning. There is no significant difference between believing the effectiveness of online learning and the sex of the respondents because $P > 0.05$. Internet technology has become the best source of knowledge. We can get enough materials for our study online. With the perception of getting materials through ICTs 49%, students thought getting enough materials through ICTs and 51% of students didn't believe in getting enough materials through it. There is a statistically significant relationship between the perception of getting materials for online learning and the faculty of students $P < 0.05$. The relationship is moderate where 38% of students from the education faculty believed in getting enough materials for online learning but 62% of them did not believe in getting enough materials in it. 59% of students from management faculty believed the helpfulness of online learning but 41% did not believe in the availability of enough materials online. 48% of art students believed in getting enough materials online but 52% of art students did believe in getting enough materials online. 55% of science students believed in getting enough materials but 45% of them didn't believe in getting enough materials online.

Discussion

Since the COVID -19 pandemic had disturbed the typical lifestyle of people across the world, the virtual world has come to the rescue. Many educational institutions have also shifted their base to virtual platforms to conduct classes online. Students and teachers have to struggle while getting into these online platforms. In relation to perception and practice, 63% of the respondents were attending online classes during this pandemic situation. Allo, (2020) investigated the learners' perception of online learning during a COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia and found that students perceived online learning as very helpful in the middle of the pandemic. This study reports that online learning is good during the COVID-19 pandemic and presented the availability of internet access, financial issues, and online learning implementation. Singh (2020) states that online education has emerged as an alternative to ordinary face-to-face classes in India. While talking about the effectiveness of online teaching, the majority of 80% of students believed in the effectiveness of online learning. They think that it is the best alternative to face-to-face learning. It has become the best source of knowledge for the students of public campuses. The same result was found in India Agarwal and Kaushik (2020) studied Student's Perception of Online Learning during the COVID Pandemic which revealed the impact of online learning on the morale of students by creating a diversion from the ongoing pandemic situation.

The opportunities of online education in public campuses were found as flexible, innovative learning, interesting to increase motivation, development of new skills, and best alternative of face-to-face education. Although online learning is the best tool for remaining the gap on learning created COVID-19 there are different challenges for it. There are limitations while applying in real situations. While talking about the challenges of online teaching in public campuses of Nepal, the majority of 46% of students reported internet and power-related issues; slow internet, no internet access, and unstable power. Sapkota (2020) found that access to technical infrastructure, competence, and pedagogies for online learning were the major challenges faced by the institution between the shifts of teaching methods. The same challenges were found in a study in Pakistan. Faize and Nawaz, (2020) found the most reported problem in online learning was connectivity and the lack of resources (38.2%). Attending online classrooms requires a proper internet connection and ICT devices, which were not available to most of the students. Then the problem of disconnection and slow internet speed resulted in students' frustration and anxiety and frequent power breakdown in the country also impedes access to online learning. Similar technological problems with connectivity were faced by students of Ghana during online education in a study (Henaku, 2020).

Conclusion

This study was an effort to find the perception towards online teaching among students in public campuses in Nepal. It tried to explore the challenges and opportunities of students to implement online teaching and learning. The students' perception towards online education was positive as they believed that online learning is flexible, helping to manage time, as innovative for learning, as tools interesting increased motivation, and developed new skills They took online learning as the best alternative to face-to-face learning in such pandemics as COVID – 19. The challenges faced by students in online education were slow internet, no

internet access, and shortage of adequate teaching materials, teachers' disinterest, unstable power, and devices not available.

Due to the spread of the novel coronavirus, the delivery of the education system of public campuses are changing with online education as the primary means of instruction. They are shifting to online platforms to reduce the learning loss of students. The study concluded that online learning is the best alternative to face-to-face learning. So there must be appropriate technological infrastructure for the conduction of online learning. Faculty members and students should be given cheap or free internet access to solve the problem. Public Campuses should be provided with authentic online programs such as Microsoft Teams and different educational software to make classes effective. TU should provide institutional email Id for the students and faculty members of public campuses. There must be an accessible and affordable internet connection, appropriate electronic devices, and availability of the internet. Stakeholders of public campuses must aware of making policies, producers, directions, and strategies to cope with the current critical situation of a pandemic for mitigating students learning loss and transforming public campuses in the global context.

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