Social Science

STUDENT WELFARE SERVICES IN HIGHER EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS DURING GLOBAL PANDEMIC: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT Students in Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) have undergone a drastic change in the past decades. The HEIs have witnessed expansion and the younger population are more socially and culturally diverse. There has also been a sharp rise in the number of International students. In the Global Pandemic, the students in HEIs have experienced a serious catastrophe. In this purview, it is vital to discuss about the difficulties faced by the students, the issues and challenges they came across, the student welfare services and its encouragement towards students' academic and psycho-social wellbeing. Secondary research design is adopted in the study.

INTRODUCTION:
The community for students is their college or university and a significant portion of the year they spend their time is in this community. The students in this community are a diverse group including traditional, commuter, older, international and veterans (Degree-granting, 2012).

COVID-19 caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus pandemic shocked the entire world bringing to a total halt in the early 2020. COVID-19 started to spread in China during December 2019 before moving to other countries. Almost by 31st July 2020, COVID -19 has spread across 217+ countries and territories with almost 17.1 million confirmed cases and 668,073 deaths. (WHO, 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic has brought in a lot of turbulence in all spheres of life and it has had an impact on all individuals and groups in every part of the world.

The year 2020 will leave an indelible mark in the history of mankind as the uncertainties it has caused by the Corona Virus Pandemic has led to the emergence of the "New Normal" and this virus has gone "viral" across the continents along the pathways of trade, commerce, health, education and what not. (AIU, 2020).

In the first wave of the pandemic, students faced a lot of problems in the first four or five months of 2020 and it has had a huge impact on the everyday lives not only to the prospects for their immediate but also distant future. (Owusu, 2020; Our world in data, 2020). As on April 2020, the number of the learners who had to stay back because of the closure of educational institutions reached almost a peak of 1598 billion from 194 countries which is a huge number (UNESCO, 2020). The Covid-19 pandemic has actually brought into the general scenario the mental health of various affected populations. The prevalence of this epidemic influences the creation of new stressors including fear and worry not only for oneself but also for the loved ones, imposes restrictions on physical movements and also social activities with sudden and radical lifestyle changes. (Changwon Son et.al. 2020)

It is also important to note that the practices of the students in Higher Educational Institutions had a drastic change like the switching over from live classes to online classes, practicals and tutorials, closed libraries, channels of student teacher communication changed, administrative support, new assessment methods, different workloads and performance levels, absence of social life and above all financial crisis including emotional problems of being away from friends and the educational setup. (Cao, W et.al; Abelskamp, G.E. et.al; Brooks S.K. Et.al; Owusu-Fordjour,C et.al; Aslam, F. et.al; Tormey, R et.al; Statista 1; Statista 2; Bezerra I.M.P; Kamarianos et.al; Khan I.A; Gonzalez T; Ma, H; Liu, X et al; Pan H.A.; De Vos, J; Statista 3; Elmer, T; Perz C.A., 2020).

Students in the Higher Educational Institutions faced a lot of challenges during this period and it raised a lot of concerns with respect to their mental and physical well-being. Most of the students have experienced trauma in the initial phase, but gradually they gathered courage through information received from time to time from various stakeholders. The student population across the globe faced similar kind of challenges and lot of initiatives came in flowing from several quarters to address the needs of the students.

In this paper, the issues and challenges faced by the students in the Higher Educational Institutions is discussed; the student welfare services and initiatives to improve psycho-social well-being of the students by various stakeholders during this global pandemic is also collated and documented from secondary literature.

STUDENTS IN HEIS DURING GLOBAL PANDEMIC:
Students in HEIs are a composite mix representing different backgrounds and social class. Their economic status differs and their problems are unique depending on the region they come from. They come with several expectations; foresee their future based on the education they will receive during the student period. The HEIs expose them to realities of life and also several other platforms where they can pick up skills to build their future. They meet several personalities

from whom they imbibe a lot of motivation, encouragement and guidance to shape and mould their professional paths ahead. But the long-lasting pandemic and the associated lockdown have invited negative impacts on higher education.

The pandemic has witnessed that students did face varied problems in their academic learning but the HEIs have tried their level best given the limitations to carry forth the academic teaching learning process. One thing has been clear that COVID-19 lockdown will prove as a watershed for higher education bringing newer models of delivery of higher education which will define as the higher education of the future (Mittal et.al, 2020). With a sample of 30,383 students across 62 countries, the study has revealed that amid the worldwide lockdown and the move towards online learning, students have expressed that they were most satisfied with the support provided by the teaching staff and their universities public relations (Alexander et.al, 2020). The capacity of the diverse Higher Education Institutions in the rural and the remote areas had problems in adapting technology and this in turn lead to further divide and complexities. These institutions did not possess the required paraphernalia like the devices, networking connectivity with the needed bandwidth etc for imparting the so-called online education (Mittal et.al, 2020).

Universities around the world cancelled their onsite classes and they shifted their pedagogical processes to online media. For some of them it was not new but some encountered problems being it the first time. This transition had to be quick and also adequate attention needs to be given to these forms being the first time. (Aleksander, et.al, 2020). All this can have an adverse impact on the physical and mental health of both the learner and the educator in the entire process. Several academic contributions have already been published by researchers across the globe presenting studies on various aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, its consequences for physical and mental health, the economy, the society and the environment (Aleksander, et.al, 2020).

There were difficulties on the part of teaching-learning process. Like for example, studying from home requires greater self-discipline and motivation to follow online classes especially when students are switching over to the new system, this in turn loads up the students to some extent. In the same manner the teachers also being unfamiliar with the system tend to overload the students with study materials and assignments. (Aleksander, et.al, 2020). All this has to be viewed as part of research and necessary interventions have to be conceived accordingly in the near future for student well-being. This pandemic unearthed certain reality of the student life and it is a great learning experience for all involved in this field.

STUDENT WELFARE SERVICES IN HEIS DURING GLOBAL PANDEMIC:
The strong human-to human transmissibility of COVID-19 has affected the daily routines of the students all over the world. (Chen, 2020). Many university and college students had been displaced from their dormitories and their peer groups and they had been asked to leave the campus with their belongings so that they can continue their academic work as usual (William E, Copeland, 2020).

It has been witnessed that many such issues cropped up during this pandemic and it was through deliberation of different stakeholders that these issues were subsequently handled. The anxieties associated with the pandemic fuelled the situation and it depended on the social environment in which an individual operates from. Student mental health in higher education has been an increasing concern. COVID-19 has brought this vulnerable population into renewed focus (Changwon, Son, 2020). Of the 195 students, 71% indicated increased stress and anxiety due to the COVID-19 outbreak. Multiple stressors have been identified that has contributed to the increased levels of stress, anxiety and depressive thoughts among students. Fear and health about their own health and loved ones, difficulty in concentrating, disruptions to sleeping patters, decreased social interaction due to physical distancing and increased concerns on academic performance are some of the reasons. (Changwon, Son, 2020).

Online classes gradually became a norm, but the change from real to virtual had its own challenges. The process was also new to the faculty and students both hence, briefing sessions were made to ensure that the change was smooth. (Chattopadhyay, 2020). Almost 38 % noted that COVID-19 has impacted or is likely to impact their own current and

future employment opportunities such as part-time jobs and internships. Some 18 % revealed that the financial difficulties of their family members, mostly parents, getting laid off or receiving pay cuts has happened in the wake of COVID-19 (Changwon, Son, 2020). The higher education sector is in the process of becoming more sophisticated and diverse, there is an increased need for greater openness and transparency. The World Bank is rising up to support the countries to collect and make available detailed data on the performance of academic programs—including graduation and job outcomes (World Bank, 2020).

The pandemic has brought into focus the mental health of various other affected populations. The prevalence of epidemics increases or creates new stressors which includes fear and worry for oneself of loved ones, difficulties on physical movement, social activities due to quarantine, and also because of the sudden and radical lifestyle changes. (Changwon, Son, 2020). This pandemic not only restricted the movement of the people but it also gave an opportunity where in faculty, students tested their resilience and also learned new methods of learning, turning virtual into real. (Chattopadhyay, 2020). All official notification related to the pandemic given by the University, Government, UGC, WHO etc were all circulated on time and also updated on the university website from time to time. Psychological support was provided and students and staff are encouraged to carry out continuous efforts in the field of research and innovation to come out with innovative solutions. (Rajan Welukar, 2020)

Understanding the need for reinforcing the skill development aspects, the university organised about 30 hours of online personality development training programs for the final year students of the university. (Sundarajan, 2020). During this pandemic period Office of Students' Welfare conducted various virtual events through different clubs and chapters (Anand Samuel, 2020).It is observed that in countries like Indonesia several universities cancel courses and have chosen to continue online learning. School administrators, teachers, and students are all making efforts in various ways to adapt to the new online learning environment (Fatoni et.al, 2020). About 94.7% of the participants agree that they along with the family members engaged in motivating each other to follow the government instructions to fight the global pandemic. (Hanan A. Alfawa, 2020).

The office of the Academic research also started initiatives like conduct of viva-voce, synopsis, DC meeting and other research meetings for scholars through virtual mode, this coming as a great boon to the DC members, guides and scholars (Anand Samuel, 2020). March to June being admission this time conducted all the admission procedures digital in nature without direct human interaction (Anand Samuel, 2020). A cross sectional survey was designed to study the lifestyle changes and mental wellness of the employees and students of King Saud university, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia during COVID lockdown and it was found out that a high prevalence of self-reported anxiety, depression and insomnia was found among Saudi state university students and employees experiencing either all these constantly or occasionally. (Hanan A. Alfawa, 2020).

It is important to note that in Effective online learning one has to consider various factors such as speed, student-teacher ratio, pedagogy, online teacher role, online student role, online communication synchronization, online assessment role, and feedback sources. However, due to the current classroom design this can only be thought about for a temporary solution for emergency distance teaching. (Fadoni et.al, 2020). The COVID-19 crisis has laid bare the inequalities in education systems. When we confidently hoped that education would be a social equaliser and a social mobility avenue, we are now staring in the face of the deep rifts between the connected and the unconnected. (Birgit et.al, 2020). This has been a factor of serious concern and measures to address them are being worked out at Institutions with the support of the stakeholders to diminish this difference. Let's hope for the best in the purview of student well-being who are going to be the pillars of the nation.

CONCLUSION:
A seven-pronged strategy is proposed for the universities to address the "New Normal" and to protect the interest of the students during and after COVID-19. 1) Strengthening Infrastructure 2) Capacity Building of Teachers 3) Evaluate various online platforms available 4) Assessment and Evaluation 5) Internships and Placements 6) Collaborations 7) Counselling of Students (AIU, 2020). In this pandemic, Students most often cite the unstable network as an area for

improvement. comments about improvement include, it would be better if the sound quality or video quality were improved, they were disappointed when the screen had low video quality due to network instability, the screen was very out of sync with the sound (Fadoni et.al, 2020). This was one of the most pressing challenges the students faced and the teachers and other stakeholders enabled them to surpass this with different kinds of assistance.

As the global youth population rises the demand for access to higher education increases and expectations of what higher education can provide also simultaneously rise. It is not easier to predict what jobs will be available in the future for the students, but we know that higher education must have to embrace change to meet future needs. When asked to the student their suggestions include, Class practice should be given. The scoring system should be shifted to an absolute grading system, Attendance problems should be resolved, the systematic environment should be supported, Substitution assignments should be increased, School fees should be reduced, Team project activities should be increased (Fadoni et.al, 2020). This all became too specific during this pandemic period as students faced severe vulnerability at various fronts. Student affairs and services, students, institutions, living and learning communities and higher education stakeholders are all compelled in a way to innovate and collaborate more effectively, especially across borders and regions, to mitigate the impact of this crisis on education, society, culture, attitudes and practices. (Birgit et.al, 2020). This is seeing innovations to a greater extent to help create an enabling environment for the students.

The above discussions reveal that students in HEIs did face problems during COVID-19 pandemic. It had an impact on both their Mental Health and Physical Health. They were quite clueless about their future but with the support of the HEIs administration, teachers, student welfare services they were able to overcome to some extent. They are not comfortable with online learning given their limitations but they appreciate the fact that their academics kept moving and they were able to move forward even during this crisis. They hope to see their HEIs reopen in the new future so that they can come back to their institutions to have their academic and psychosocial wellbeing to the fullest extent. It is witnessed across HEIs that Practitioners and scholars of student affairs and services, or SAS, have been challenged to respond to the crisis in ways that innovate and invent new avenues, to continue to preserve efforts to meet student needs, to enhance student learning and development, and to advance social justice for all. (Birgit et.al, 2020). This is the reality which many HEIs have understood and have started working towards this with full zeal. It is understood from the reviews that student welfare services in various forms have enabled them to come out of their current scenario and be optimistic about their future. Thinkers have also recommended in some places that during this pandemic, the coordination of social workers with socio-educational resources, Community Social Services, as well as the Departments of Justice and Health is also of special importance in order to follow up on those situations that require greater attention (family placement, child poverty, malnutrition, violence, school dropouts, etc.) and to be able to give an early and adequate response. (Javier Cifuentes-Faura, 2020).

A serious rethought has also to go into how post-COVID-19 world ways to ensure how do we ensure students become agents of social justice, develop a sense of belonging and empowerment to be part of knowledge creation, and ultimately develop the kind of attributes that equip them to shape the world into a shared place where fear of the other is replaced by care for each other. (Birgit et.al, 2020). The purpose of education is also to develop knowledge, empathy and concern for fellow beings how this could be brought into classrooms is a major question? The needs of students with social problems or in situations of risk must be responded to by carrying out prevention, evaluation, intervention, and follow-up work, in coordination with educational and community resources. Support must be offered to those in vulnerable situations and barriers that limit learning and the acquisition of skills must be eliminated, ensuring compliance with the principle of non-discrimination, social justice, and full participation of all students, regardless of their social and cultural status, gender, or personal characteristics (Javier Cifuentes-Faura, 2020).

Students are experiencing a new normal and student care is no longer a family responsibility, rather it is a social responsibility and all need to join hands to facilitate them move ahead in this crisis so that we have a healthy community and a strong nation. Their health and psycho-social well-being should receive topmost priority in policy making initiatives as well.

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