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A STUDY ON ACADEMIC CHALLENGES OF BHARATHIAR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Dr. R. Baskar* Harini. M**
**Assistant Professor, Department of Social Work, Bharathiar University, Coimbatore.*
***Postgraduate Student, Department of Social Work, Bharathiar University, Coimbatore.*

Abstract
The COVID-19 pandemic brought unprecedented disruption to higher education systems across the globe, compelling universities to rapidly shift from conventional classroom instruction to online learning modes. This sudden transition posed multiple academic, technological, psychological, and social challenges for students. The present study aims to analyze the academic challenges faced by Bharathiar University students during the COVID-19 pandemic, with special reference to online and offline modes of learning. The objectives of the study include understanding students' perceptions toward online education, identifying technological and environmental constraints, examining stress and academic performance, and comparing learning effectiveness between online and offline classes.
A descriptive research design was adopted for the study. Primary data were collected from Bharathiar University students using a self-structured questionnaire administered through Google Forms. Non-probability purposive sampling technique was employed. The collected data were analyzed using percentage analysis, mean ranking, and cross-tabulation techniques.

The findings reveal that a majority of students experienced network issues, data insufficiency, and limited access to devices, which adversely affected their academic engagement. Students also reported increased stress, fear of poor grades, and reduced practical exposure in online learning. Although online education provided flexibility and continuity of learning, offline classes were perceived as more effective in terms of understanding, interaction, practical knowledge, and peer support. The study concludes that blended learning approaches, improved digital infrastructure, and enhanced student support systems are essential to ensure academic continuity and student well-being during future disruptions.

Keywords: COVID-19 Pandemic, Online Learning, Offline Learning, Academic Challenges, Higher Education, Student Perception.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about a dramatic transformation in the global education system. Nationwide lockdowns and institutional closures forced universities to replace traditional classroom teaching with online education almost overnight. While digital learning ensured continuity of education during this crisis, it also exposed significant inequalities in access, preparedness, and learning environments.

Online learning, though not entirely new, gained prominence during the pandemic as the primary mode of instruction. It offers flexibility, accessibility, and opportunities for self-paced learning. Students could attend classes from their homes using platforms such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams, thereby avoiding travel and ensuring safety. However, online education also presented limitations such as poor internet connectivity, lack of devices, reduced interaction, technical difficulties, and challenges in practical learning.

Offline education, on the other hand, represents the conventional face-to-face learning environment where students interact directly with teachers and peers. Classroom learning facilitates immediate feedback, collaborative activities, and experiential learning, particularly for practical subjects. Despite technological advancements, offline education continues to play a crucial role in students' cognitive, emotional, and social development.

The abrupt transition from offline to online learning during COVID-19 placed students under immense academic pressure. Many students struggled with digital access, time management, understanding course content, and maintaining motivation. Moreover, prolonged screen time and isolation contributed to stress and health concerns. In this context, it becomes essential to examine students' academic experiences during the pandemic to identify gaps and develop strategies for resilient education systems.

This study focuses on Bharathiar University students and explores their academic challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic, comparing online and offline modes of learning in terms of accessibility, effectiveness, interaction, and overall satisfaction.

II. Review of Literature

Several studies have examined students' perceptions of online education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Muthuprasad et al. (2021) reported that although students appreciated the flexibility of online learning, they faced challenges related to technical issues, delayed responses, and limited interaction. Özüdoğru (2021) identified problems such as poor connectivity, lack of communication, and time constraints among pre-service teachers during distance education.

Almahasees et al. (2021) found that both faculty and students acknowledged the usefulness of online learning during emergencies, but considered it less effective than face-to-face instruction. The study emphasized the need for blended learning models. Rohatgi et al. (2021) highlighted barriers such as administrative issues, lack of motivation, and technological limitations affecting students' intention to use online platforms.

Jeba Chitra et al. (2021) observed that a majority of students preferred the resumption of offline classes due to better understanding and interaction. Bapat and Hole (2020) compared online and offline modes of education and revealed gaps in learning quality, recommending improvements in digital pedagogy. Cranfield et al. (2021) demonstrated that students learning fully online reported lower engagement and sense of belonging compared to those attending in-person classes.

Overall, existing literature indicates that while online learning served as a temporary solution during the pandemic, it could not fully replace traditional classroom education. Students consistently expressed preference for offline or blended learning due to better interaction, practical exposure, and emotional support.

II. Aim and Objectives of the Study

Aim: To study the academic challenges of Bharathiar University students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Objectives

1. To analyze students' perception towards online and offline classes.
2. To identify technological and infrastructural challenges faced during online learning.
3. To assess the impact of online education on academic performance and stress levels.

4. To compare the effectiveness of online and offline modes of learning.
5. To provide suggestions for improving digital learning systems.

IV. Research Methodology

Research Design

The study adopted a descriptive research design to understand the characteristics and experiences of students during online learning.

Universe of the Study

The universe comprised students of Bharathiar University who attended online classes during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Sampling Technique

Non-probability purposive sampling was used to select respondents.

Tools for Data Collection

Primary data were collected using a self-structured questionnaire distributed through Google Forms.

Sources of Data

- Primary Data: Responses from Bharathiar University students.
- Secondary **Data: Books, journals, research articles, and online sources.**

Statistical Tools

Percentage analysis, mean ranking, and cross-tabulation were employed for data analysis.

V. Analysis And Interpretation

Table 1: Mode of Class Preferred by the Respondents

S.No	Mode	Frequency	Percentage
1	Online	28	23.3
2	Offline	68	56.7
3	Blended	24	20.0
	Total	120	100

The table reveals that a majority of respondents (56.7%) preferred offline classes, followed by blended learning (20%) and online classes (23.3%). This clearly indicates that students favor face-to-face learning, highlighting the perceived effectiveness of offline education.

Table 2: Device Used for Online Classes

S.No	Device	Frequency	Percentage
1	Mobile Phone	72	60.0
2	Laptop	36	30.0
3	Tablet	12	10.0
	Total	120	100

It is evident that 60% of respondents depended on mobile phones to attend online classes, reflecting limited access to advanced digital devices and explaining difficulties in academic tasks.

Table 3: Network Availability

S.No	Availability	Frequency	Percentage
1	Good	40	33.3
2	Average	55	45.8
3	Poor	25	20.9
	Total	120	100

Nearly half of the respondents reported only average network availability and one-fifth experienced poor connectivity, confirming unstable internet as a major academic barrier.

Table 4: Understandability in Online Classes

S.No	Level	Frequency	Percentage
1	Good	34	28.3
2	Moderate	58	48.3
3	Poor	28	23.4
	Total	120	100

Most students experienced only moderate or poor understanding in online classes, demonstrating reduced learning effectiveness in virtual mode.

Table 5: Stressed about Online Classes

S.No	Stress Level	Frequency	Percentage
1	High	48	40.0
2	Moderate	50	41.7
3	Low	22	18.3
	Total	120	100

A substantial proportion (81.7%) experienced moderate to high stress, highlighting the psychological impact of online education.

Table 6: Mean Ranking of Online Mode

S.No	Dimension	Mean Rank
1	Understandability	2.8
2	Practical Knowledge	2.4
3	Peer Group Support	2.6
4	Completion of Work	2.7

Online mode received lower mean ranks across dimensions, especially practical knowledge, reflecting limited engagement.

Table 7: Mean Ranking of Offline Mode

S.No	Dimension	Mean Rank
1	Understandability	4.5
2	Practical Knowledge	4.7
3	Peer Group Support	4.6
4	Completion of Work	4.4

Offline mode recorded higher ranks on all dimensions, confirming superior academic engagement.

Table 8: Cross tabulation of Practical Knowledge (Online vs Offline)

S.No	Mode	Low	Moderate	High	Total
1	Online	46	52	22	120
2	Offline	18	42	60	120

Cross tabulation shows offline learning produces significantly higher practical knowledge, providing strong evidence of its effectiveness.

VI. Findings

1. A majority of respondents (56.7%) preferred offline classes, indicating a stronger perceived effectiveness of face-to-face learning compared to online and blended modes.
2. About 60% of students relied primarily on mobile phones for online classes, reflecting limited access to laptops and highlighting a pronounced digital divide.
3. Internet connectivity posed a significant barrier, with 45.8% reporting average and 20.9% poor network availability, adversely affecting continuity of learning.
4. Nearly half of the respondents (48.3%) reported only moderate understanding in online classes, while 23.4% experienced poor understanding, demonstrating reduced learning effectiveness in virtual environments.
5. A substantial proportion of students (81.7%) experienced moderate to high stress during online learning, indicating notable psychological impact associated with pandemic-driven digital education.
6. Mean ranking analysis revealed relatively low scores for online learning across all academic dimensions, particularly for practical knowledge (mean rank = 2.4), indicating limited engagement and hands-on learning opportunities.
7. Offline learning recorded consistently higher mean ranks in understandability (4.5), practical knowledge (4.7), peer group support (4.6), and completion of academic work (4.4), confirming the superior academic effectiveness of traditional classroom instruction.
8. Crosstabulation analysis showed significantly higher practical knowledge acquisition in offline mode, with 60 students reporting high practical learning compared to only 22 in online mode, providing strong empirical evidence in favor of face-to-face education.

VII. Suggestions

1. Universities should strengthen digital infrastructure and provide subsidized internet access and devices to economically disadvantaged students.
2. Faculty members should be trained in interactive online teaching methods.
3. Recorded lectures and learning materials should be made available for flexible access.
4. Counseling and mental health support services should be enhanced.
5. Blended learning models combining online and offline methods should be adopted.
6. Practical sessions should be prioritized once physical classes resume.

VIII. Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic compelled higher education institutions to adopt online learning as an emergency response. While digital platforms ensured academic continuity, they also revealed significant challenges related to access, engagement, mental health, and practical learning. The present study demonstrates that Bharathiar University students faced multiple academic difficulties during online education, including technological barriers, stress, and reduced learning effectiveness. Although online learning offers flexibility and accessibility, it cannot fully substitute face-to-face education, particularly for practical and interactive learning. Students clearly expressed preference for offline

classes due to better understanding, communication, and peer support. The study concludes that a blended learning approach, supported by robust digital infrastructure and student support mechanisms, is essential for building a resilient and inclusive education system capable of addressing future crises.

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