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Confronting Covid-19 with a Paradigm Shift in Teaching and Learning: A Study on Online Classes

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Key Words:

Covid-19, emergency, online classes, stakeholders, challenges, prospects

Abstract:

There has been an emergency paradigm shift in teaching and learning in the private universities of Bangladesh resulting from the complete shutdown of the educational institutions for an indefinite period due to Covid-19. While the shift to online classes remains operative with doubts and enthusiasm, the activities showed a considerable achievement and positive shift in attitude towards this mode in the past few weeks which showcase the prospects of online classes with some areas to address and problems to be solved. So, the stakeholders' opinions, experiences and suggestions can be handy in capitalizing on, and utilizing this mode in coming days. Drawing on data from both the students and faculty members of different departments of Green University of Bangladesh (GUB), we illustrate the need to address and improve several areas including current state of mind of the stakeholders, potentials of the online classes as an alternative to onsite classes, the need for assurance of some facilities and orientation of this type of technobased new modes as precautionary to emergency. Though online instructions are not new in many parts of the world, we argue that it is here in Bangladesh a new experience with a very limited practice, and so it requires some corrections, improvisations and special considerations on the part of the concerned authorities to make the mode a viable solution to teaching-learning in the impasse resulting from the complete shutdown in the current crisis.

1. Introduction

Responding to the unprecedented crisis arising out of Covid-19 and the sudden obligatory closure of the educational institutions for an indefinite period, the Private University authorities faced a test of complying with the emergency order of complete shutdown for the overall greater interest of the nation and maintain trimester routine of holding classes with maximum possible completion of syllabus in easiest possible available way involving students locating dispersedly in different far corners of the country. The following consecutive meetings, consultations, and gateway hunting end up in the decision of holding online classes to maintain a network amongst the faculty members and students, particularly keep the latter engaged in academic activities and maintain human connection through virtual teamwork. According to Czerniewicz (2020), "In the Covid-19 context where social distancing is encouraged, it will be essential to pay attention to human connection in virtual teamwork and to find ways to ensure that human support is continued" (What we learnt from, para.11).

Though online classes are not new in this era of institutionalized education around the world especially in the developed parts, it has the least credibility among people of different levels associated in this field of Bangladesh due to some scams and uninformed conditions of the platform. So the very decision instantly invited various questions with doubt regarding effectivity of the mode. The challenges lie in absence of practice, almost impromptu start, connecting the students staying in diverse places with even more diverse complexities regarding availability of required internet speed, smart device, expenses on data, ensuring quality in teaching and learning etc. Although various challenges are there, the decision of conducting online classes rather add some values and diversities which will help our students be *knowmads* and fit for working in any contexts. As Moravec (2020) has stated,

Society needs knowmadic workers who work with context, not rigid structure. One key reality is that the jobs schools typically prepare us for — work as factory workers, bureaucrats, or soldiers — are disappearing. They are being replaced with knowledge-and innovation-based work which requires people to function contextually, working almost anytime, anywhere, and with nearly anybody. These emerging workers are knowmads, and they apply their individual knowledge across different "gigs" or contingent engagements to create new value (p.39).

This mode of class having no precedence in the country, doubts loomed large regarding the effectively of the instructions. The students on one side got divided regarding online classes and started propagating against the practice with a curious section waiting eagerly to taste the novelty while the faculty members initially found the new platform highly contentious and

reluctantly started with an observatory eyes resulting in impressive adaptability on the parts and remarkable number of participations. This interesting trajectory of the situations pushed the academics to novel search of viable way of instructions while the students proved to an impressive extent ready for the new mode. This study goes for searching the state of art of the teaching along with the challenges in the practical fields and tries to eke out some recommendations for further effectively of teaching learning in emergency mode like the current ones adopted due to corona pandemic.

2. Covid-19 and Online Education

With the emergence of Covid-19, the wheels of economy, education, trades and tourism throughout the world have been clogged for an indefinite time. Due to pandemic of corona virus, more than a billion students are unable to attend schools or universities, receive lessons from onsite classes.

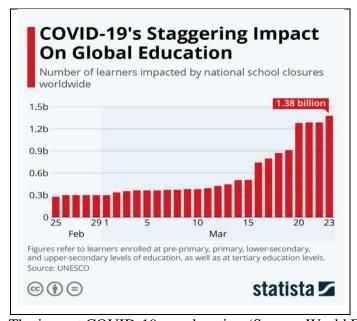


Figure 1: The impact COVID-19 on education (Source: World Economic Forum, 2020)

According to UNESCO (2020), "1,379,344,914 students or 80 percent of the world's learners are now being kept out of educational institutions by country-wide closures". In this uneven situation, online schooling has shown some rays which somehow have been able to start the wheel of education across the world. Recently, several studies have been conducted to address the impact, challenges and possibilities of online classes.

Czerniewicz (2020) observes, "Universities are "going online" on a scale never seen before because of Covid-19" and also reflects that it is not new to shift to online mode in emergency in many parts of the world and it was usually adopted specially in times of natural disaster or

political crisis. Similar findings can also be traced in another study where schools with their available resources have turned to the strategy of remote teaching in this emergency (Hodges et al., 2020). The decision to hold online classes due to Covid-19 pandemic is no longer a region-specific phenomenon; rather it has been a shift in the educational institutions globally. In a few months, the closures of the educational institutions impacted over 1.4 billion learners (UNESCO, 2020). Alibaig (2011) comes to the conclusion that, "Online Learning Environment is highly effective and facilitates the comprehensions and assimilation of concepts". Baum (2020) finds two contrasting stands on the parts of the institutions. Some are there who have already been in practice and will cope up with it quite easily while on other side, the policymakers who "are scrambling to accommodate may face unique struggles in trying to adapt."

Covid-19 pandemic has come up with challenges never imagined before and the international interactions and collaborations in education sector are at challenge and the growth has come to a stalemate which is quite visible. Moravec (2020) thinks that, "the sudden disconnecting of global engagements has made the absence of our growth through international education and internationalization efforts particularly visible."(p. 38). He also emphasizes that change is the norm of the world and society and emergency may arise at any point. So, he advocates precautionary measures and preparation for abrupt changes in times of need. He insists that we "must prepare students to be successful in environments and contexts that may differ greatly from what we experience today" Moravec (2020, p.39). As online classes are no longer new in many parts of the world, there have been experiments by the scholars and many of them are convinced of the effectivity of the mode. Cao et al. (2020) addressed the psychological impact of the Covid-19 epidemic on medical college students in Hubei Province of China. The study showed that the psychological health of the students is extensively affected when they face public health emergency like Covid-19. They identified three factors for students as positive anxiety symptoms- a. economic stressor b. effects on daily life activities and d. academic delays and difficulties during Covid -19 pandemic. They suggested supports of society, families, colleges and the government for students in this emergency breakout. Bao (2020) worked on online teaching in higher education of Peking University during pandemic Covid -19. She mentioned six instructional strategies to recapitulate current online teaching experiences for university instructors and suggested five high-impact principles for online education: (a) high relevance between online instructional design and student learning, (b) effective delivery on online instructional information, (c) adequate support provided by faculty and teaching assistants to students; (d) high-quality participation to improve the breadth and depth of student's learning, and (e) contingency plan to deal with unexpected incidents of online education platforms. Chick et al. (2020) showed the use technology to maintain the education of surgical residency programs during the Covid-19 epidemic. They suggested the flipped classroom model, online practice questions, teleconferencing in place of in-person lectures, involving residents in telemedicine clinics, procedural simulation, and the facilitated use of surgical videos for effective surgical education in the period of Covid-19 crisis. Hew and Lo (2018) discovered that flipped classroom accelerates student learning in the education of health profession. They emphasize on showing pre-recorded video clips to medical students before onsite classes and argued it very effective for students.

Czerniewicz (2020) and Hodges et al., (2020) put emphasis on shifting to online classes in emergencies like Covid-19 with whatever resources the institutions have. Alibaig (2011) focused on the effectiveness of online learning environment whereas Baum (2020) discovered two distinct standpoints regarding online classes of the teachers and policymakers of the institution. Moravec (2020) advocated protective procedure for any sudden changes in times of need and accentuated the readiness of students to adapt any experiences. Cao et al. (2020) showed the psychological impact of the Covid-19 epidemic on medical college students in Hubei Province of China while Bao (2020) argued six instructional strategies and suggested five high-impact principles for online education and Hew and Lo (2018) exposed that flipped classroom accelerates student learning. But the current paper investigates into the challenges of online classes in GUB and also addresses the gateways to make it more effective and outcome oriented. Thus, this paper is unique in its urge and selection.

3. Covid-19 and Online Education in GUB

Being one of the top-ranked private universities in Bangladesh, GUB has always been complying with University Grants Commission (UGC) and practicing its every bit of instructions to offer quality education and produce skilled and knowledgeable graduates. In line with this practice, GUB has started online classes in the middle of the Spring 2020 to continue human relation between teachers and students as well as teach the untaught part of the syllabus for the rest of the semester. Consequently, the curricular activities of the university are on the roll in this unprecedented crisis. Both the teachers and students are interconnected online according to their schedule. The teachers being equipped with a different physical and psychological set up are conducting classes and students are receiving with the same sort of phycho-physical set up. As teachers of GUB, the researchers felt the urge to conduct this study

which aims at discovering to what extent online innovative teaching and learning can negotiate the emergency like Covid-19 and how it can be more effective and target oriented.

4. Methodology

The researchers conducted the study adopting both quantitative and qualitative approaches. For the quantitative part, they have collected data through questionnaire and interview whereas for the qualitative part, they have conducted Focus Group Discussion (FGD). The respondents include both teachers and students of Green University of Bangladesh and were chosen randomly from different departments. For the credibility of the paper, the researchers paid their utmost efforts to collect unbiased data.

5. Respondents

The data were collected from 80 respondents out of which 30 were teachers and 50 were students. Among the teachers, 66.66% was male and 33.33% was female whereas 55% of the students were male and 45% was female. The age range of teachers is 28 to 55 while it is 18 to 25 of students. The teachers have diverse socio-cultural, socio-economic, educational and disciplinary backgrounds and so do the students. For most of the teachers, the practice of online classes in the emergence of Covid -19 is the first experience whereas it is the first-time experience for all of the students Teachers have had their degrees from home and abroad and are qualified with either Doctoral or master's degrees. The students belong to different semesters and pursue undergraduate programmes in various disciplines. In the survey, the respondent faculty members are coded as Rf whereas the respondent students are Rs.

6. Data Collection

The main instrument for data collection was a questionnaire survey which consists of 13 different types of questions. Then it was followed by an interview and FGD of both teachers and students. The questionnaire was divided into three sections. The first section of the questionnaire consisted of five *Dichotomous* and one *Importance* questions and this part focused on the personal observation and experiences of teachers and students about online classes. The second section, having five important questions, was arranged on a 5-point *Likert* scale and focused on the challenges and possibilities of online classes. The third section contained two open ended questions where the respondents could have freely expressed their opinion about the problems and prospects of online classes. Then, the researchers conducted individual interviews which shed light on the necessities and effectiveness of online classes in

the emergence of Covid-19. The qualitative data drawn from open responses of FGD investigated into the difficulties and suggestions from both teachers and students.

7. Findings

7.1 Students

The immediate decision to conduct online classes after complete shutdown of all the educational institutions across the country has exerted diverse impacts on the students' understanding of its effectivity and reasonability. While they were asked whether online class is a complete solution in the emergency arising from crisis like Covid-19, the responses were fairly divided. However, most of the respondents were positive in their take and a number of students were not clear about it.

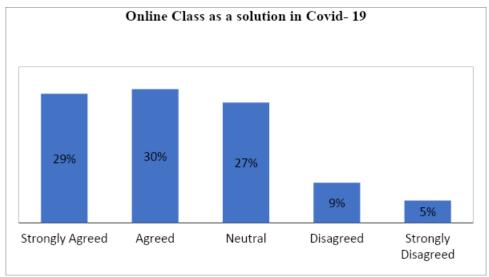


Figure 2: Effectivity of Online Class in Covid-19

Among them 29% respondents strongly agreed, 30% agreed and 27% kept neutral while only 9% respondent disagreed and 5% strongly disagreed. So the figure 2 shows that the substantial number of participants that is 59% of them are strongly agreed and agreed in the online classes and are thus convinced of its effectivity and positive impacts in the crisis of Covid-19.

Regarding smooth conduction of the classes, they were asked about the necessity of assurance of the amenities like better internet facilities. More than 81% students strongly agreed to the proposition while 19% only agreed.

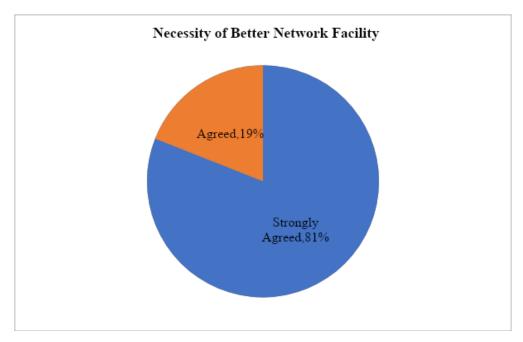


Figure 3: Assurance of Better Internet Facility for Students

Nobody kept neutral nor disagreed. This very response implies clearly the complexities the students are facing regarding internet facilities especially in the rural areas.

Another proposition was made to the students that some sorts of cost-effective data package can be offered by the mobile operators or the institution itself. In response to this question, 68% students marked it as extremely important to facilitate and continue online classes, 18% student felt it very important, 10% thought it somewhat important while a very scanty number, 4% did not consider it important.

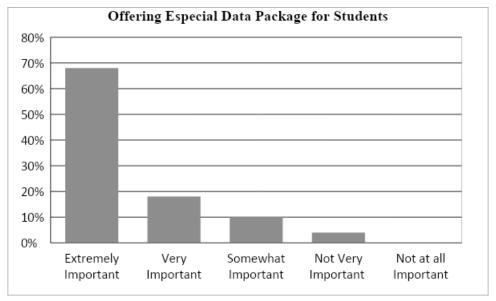


Figure 4: Data Package for Students by Mobile Operators or Institution

Here too almost all the students clearly stated the fact that online classes require huge data and they need special package otherwise it is weighing heavily on their financial condition

7.2 Faculty Members

The teachers were asked by the university authority to conduct the classes with a short training or orientation session with continuous support from the IT section of the university. They have, however, quite easily coped up with the situation and are handling the classes efficiently.

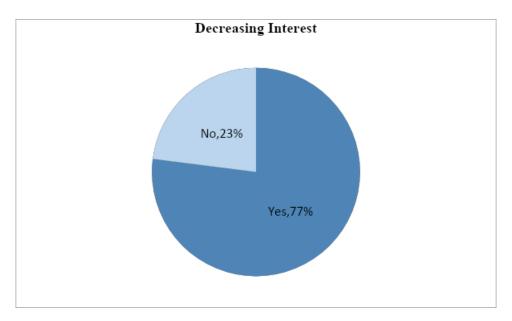


Figure 5: Decreasing Interest of Faculty Members

While they were asked if their interest in online classes is decreasing gradually specially for psychopathic tension due to Covid-19 and complexities in the online classes with yes and no option, more than 77% replied in the negative while only 23% admitted that their interest is decreasing especially for being not habituated to the mode and due to complexities for beginning the classes without much orientation and preparation.

Since conducting the classes through zoom proved expensive so far internet data package is concerned, they were also asked if some sorts of cost-effective data package can be offered to the students by mobile operators or institution. 63% faculty members found it extremely important to offer internet package to the students while 28% marked it very important and 9% marked it somewhat important while none thought it unimportant.

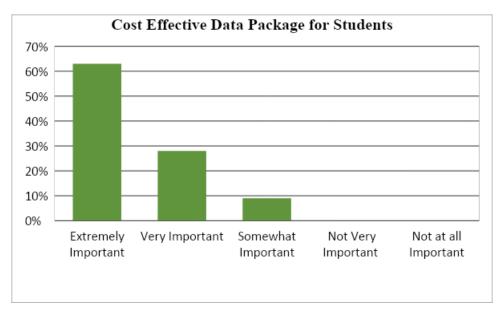


Figure 6: Especial Data Package for Students

Like the students' response, the faculty too feel the extreme necessity of data package offer for the students, and this shows how the issue is makeing them suffer interrupting the conduction of classes.

The faculty members were also asked about the online classes being the solution in the emergency periods like Covid-19 time, 36% strongly agreed while another 36% only agreed to the preposition with 18% faculty members who denied agreeing that online classes can be solution.

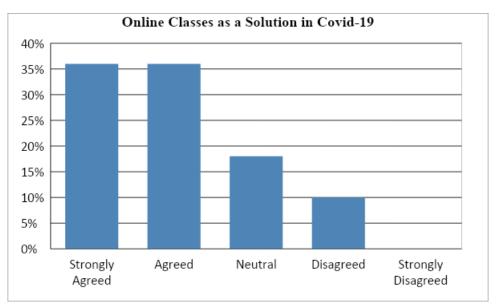


Figure 7: Online Classes as a Gateway in the Crisis

The majority of the faculty have been convinced that online classes can be a solution. However, a good number of 18% is found to disagree which shows the current understanding level of the faculty members regarding the mode.

Regarding the connection between effective conduction of classes and assurance of amenities like networking facilities, 69% faculty members strongly agreed that the amenities must be insured while 22% agreed and only 9% faculty members disagreed.

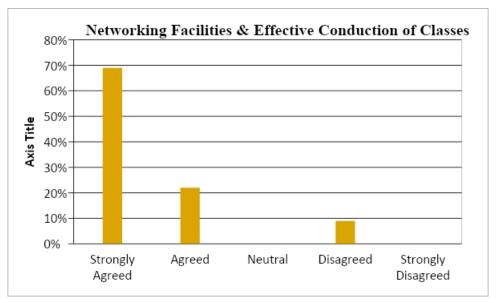


Figure 8: Strong Networking for Effective Classes

Weak internet network is making the participants suffer greatly, and this response points to the ensurance of strong internet connectivity for the success of this program .

As emergency may arise at any point, the faculty members were asked about the necessity of the practices of online classes in the normal situations to cope up quickly to emergency situations and make classes effective. 23% of them strongly agreed while 59% faculty members agreed that the practice should be ongoing while 9% disagreed and another 9% strongly disagreed about the continuation of practices of online classes in normal situations.

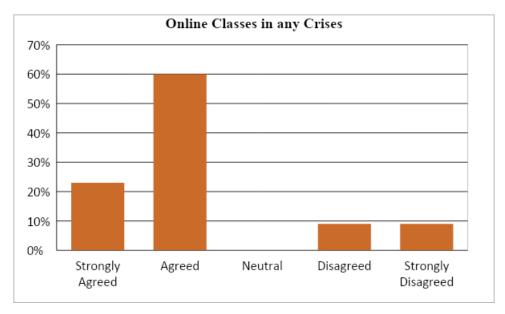


Figure 9: Practice of Online Classes in any Emergencies

The practice of online class in normal situations also sounds important to a majority faculty members, while a few disagreed perhaps for their advacand technological knowledge and personal interest oriented previous exposure.

Almost all the respondents of FGD came up with same reactions. They talked about the rescheduling of class slots in online mode. They believe that the classes of 8:30am are easy to manage onsite as both teachers and students are separated from their respective family then. But being with the family members, it becomes sometimes difficult to conduct online classes due to diverse association of both the parties. The respondent faculty members also recommended the improvisation of course materials for online classes as the onsite class materials do not all the time suit the online class mode. These are therefore some other imperative areas which need to be addressed.

8. Discussion

In response to two open ended questions regarding the challenges and suggestions for making the online classes more effective, the respondents as well as the interviewed come up with varied yet clearly pointed areas which are often overlapping and interdependent. Rf 6-pointed two major areas of problems; one is all about uninterrupted strong internet network, and lack of orientation and training of the faculty members. He feels that as the internet network often fails and there is electricity cut often in the rural areas, the teaching learning process gets hampered resulting in the motivation swing and less participation. Besides, he strongly feels

that if the faculty members are trained in proper handling of the whole process, it will be more effective and enjoyable as well.

Hopefully the COVID-19 threat will soon be a memory. When it is, we should not simply return to our teaching and learning practices prior to the virus, forgetting about Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT). ... Thus, the possible need for ERT must become part of a faculty member's skill set, as well as professional development programming for any personnel involved in the instructional mission of colleges and universities (Hodges et al., 2020, The Difference Between, para.28).

Rf 13 emphasized the need for the prerequisites for successful classes and pointed to the absence of smart device of many students and their uninformed state regarding this type of class. So, he insisted the revision of syllabus of fundamentals of computer so that the students can be well versed on online classes and the use of online library and other sources. This will ease the pressure emanating from emergency and sudden shift of instructions.

Rf 9 advocated the need for video mode of class so that at least the learners and faculty members can have interaction in an effective manner which is lacking, and which also requires more data. These suggestions call for the faculty training and the special data offer by the internet service providers.

Rf 21 suggests to review the strict schedule and advocates for flexibility of time slot and period too to ease the whole process. This might be an assurance of liberty to study at a time when convenient and continue if there is necessity and interest which can be a motivating tool and policy too.

The students often find the classroom and the physical presence of the teachers essential. Being habituated to this mode throughout their life, they feel alienated in online classes so far socialization is concerned and consider it an impossibility as an alternative to onsite classes. Rs 21 pointed to this aspect and cannot get benefitted from online classes because he is not convinced and still to have accepted it as a complementary mode.

Rs 3 too finds it lacking the liveliness of an onsite class and cannot understand many topics which he thinks is quite easily possible in in site classes. He also finds it boring to continue a class in normal length and suggests flexibility in schedule. As Chick et al. (2020) have stated, "During this rapidly evolving crisis, a great deal of flexibility will be required from both learners and educators and learning methods that are not well-studied may be necessary".

Rs 18 questions the normal length of the class of 1.30 hours without any break as well as the speed of the teacher's instructions which are often challenging for the learners to cope up with. So, she emphasizes the shortening of the syllabus and easing the class time by giving break and

talking for some time about distresses students. Her position is humanizing the whole situation and easing the way out in lieu of being too serious.

In this article, we have focused on the current state of mind of the stakeholders, potentials of the online classes as an alternative to onsite classes, the need for assurance of some facilities and orientation of this type of techno-based new modes as precautionary to emergency. The categories can be subsumed in two groups: category focusing on the challenges and those directed to the suggestions for better execution of the online classes. The faculty members as well as the students' views suggest that the need for assurance of required facilities especially of better internet network and cost-effective available data is felt strongly by both sides. They have come to believe that online classes can be conducted with greater effectivity and wider objective focused manner if the authorities attend on the issues. Based on the voices of the active participants in the classes, we can point out that the needs felt in the practical fields should be given priority. So, we argue that if the voices of the faculty members and students are heard, which is by now quite loud and explicit, the whole process will turn to be in a better shape and result oriented. Moreover, the initiative of online classes in Covid-19 era will pave path for solving problems of class conduction in any upcoming emergency in post- Covid-19 era and 82% of the teachers agreed upon this proposition. Thus, online classes, in post Covid-19 era would be a paradigm shifting in existing teaching and learning practice. Moravec (2020) states,

Never have our educational institutions been in a state so dire. And, never before have we had a global opportunity to create new futures for education. Investments in innovative approaches to international education, centered on the principles of invisible learning, should become a top priority as our institutions emerge in a post-COVID-19 era (P.41).

Now the question arises whether it is possible to take into consideration by the University authority all the issues raised and solve. The issues involve parties like the data providers as well as the government. So, we suggest that it might not be possible to solve all the problems raised. However, they must be taken into consideration and raised in the proper platforms and forwarded to the concerned authorities. That might bring out some alternatives and solutions to the problems to a greater extent.

We assume that the university authority is willing to listen to the voices of the respondents and the interviewed; is it then possible for them to address the said areas? The courses having fixed credit requires fixed credit hours to complete which is clearly contrasting to the students' demand to lessen the class hours. Moreover, a humanistic approach may be favourable which

main consider required breaks within the class and free discussion on life and issues of the days. This can serve to reduce the boredom and engage the parties with greater interest in the class activities. As Partarrieu (2015) has argued,

... a teacher's body language and cultural insights provide students with complex information. ... a teacher's human touch in the form of interactive learning, demonstration and improvisation are a fundamental part of a good learning experience.

It's hard to imagine a computer programme teaching drama, dance or pottery. (para.5) Moreover, we acknowledge that there remain contradictions in the views of the respondents aligned to their lives, experiences and perspectives. We also need to acknowledge the voices of the respondents who constituted minority and differ mostly from the majority in the issues discussed.

Nevertheless, the majority respondents focused almost unanimously on the similar problems regarding the amenities to ensure conducting smooth classes and orientations of the faculty members to the mode which can be solved to a great extent through some initiatives. Besides, the concerned parties can consider the humanitarian issues raised by the students, preparatory issues raised by the faculty members and overall social economic problems raised by both sides and contribute individually and concertedly to solve the problems to make the classes more interactive, effective and objective based. By solving the problems and implementing the demands, online classes initiated in the emergency period in Green University of Bangladesh as well as other private universities of the country can be a fitting alternative for onsite classes to steer education process smoothly even in crisis.

9. Conclusion

Online class is a reality and an alternative without choice in this crisis to continue academic works. The very adoption of this mode marks a radical departure from the previous modes practiced throughout life. So, the conduction of classes and its effectively are grappling with some problems and showing much prospects. In this situation, it is imperative to consider the voices of the active participants in the process and address them as much as possible with special focus on solving the recurrent problems and humanizing the process for its better acceptance, practice and result. The perspectives proffered in this article have emerged from the faculty members and students experiencing online class for the first time in their life for only a few weeks. However, we understand that the data used here may have limitations in that these were collected from the participants with little experience battling with external problems and internal deficiency of almost uninformed state regarding the mode. We keep in mind that

it is simply a start and it definite has kept us united in the time of ever largest crisis in human civilization. In the words of Lim (2020), "It's not perfect, but it's going well. ... Staying united and learning together through times of crisis has been our biggest lesson from this experience" (Educating despite the Covid-19, para. 20). After being habituated with further experiences and informed state on the part of the teachers and students, the data collected may show variations from the current one. So, the research opens up father researchers' gate to have further studies in coming days for further inquiry and further contribution in the field.

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