What do Students Think of Online Education? Experience of Agriculture Students during the Covid-19 Pandemic

Muthuprasad T*, Aditya K S, Aiswarya S and Girish K Jha

Division of Forestry Statistics, Indian Council of Forestry Research and Education (ICFRE), Dehradun, India

Abstract

Covid-19 pandemic and consequent shut downs to prevent the gatherings has disrupted the structured education programs across the world. In spite of the scare that the students might miss out on learning, this also provided opportunity to explore the possibility of moving classrooms online. As this transformation from traditional classroom education to online mode has been quick and unanticipated, it was challenging for both faculty and students. We conducted a study to determine the perception and preferences of agricultural students for online learning through an online survey of 307 students. In spite of the advantages of online learning such as flexibility, convenience etc., students have reported that poor internet connection, lack of devices and quality content, incompetency of faculty in preparing digital content as the major challenges. Therefore, all these aspects should be weighed while designing curriculum as educational institutes embrace the instructional challenges brought by the COVID- 19 pandemic.

Keywords: Online education • Perception • Preferences • Collaborate • COVID-19 • Agriculture

Introduction

The COVID-19, considered as worst humanitarian crisis since World War II affected normal lives for almost a year now. Even though vaccines were developed at groundbreaking speed, due to logistic challenges in administering it to entire population, most countries still have COVID-19 restrictions in place. From early March 2020 social distancing, using masks, hygiene and avoiding public gatherings are being enforced to minimize the spread of COVID-19. Universities were considered as 'possible hotspot' for spread of COVID-19 and hence closed for indefinite period of time, which forced the universities to shift to online mode of education Even now, most universities continue to teach online, albeit in a combination with traditional classroom teaching. Universities had no time to plan for a transition from traditional class room teaching to online teaching. Due to lack of planning and preparation, both the teachers and students had to face difficulties in adopting to online learning. However, most reports on online learning were either anecdotal or isolated cases or a systematic study on the perception and preference of learners based on their experience was lacking. Considering that online education will continue at least for some foreseeable time, we examined the student's preference for online education through an online survey of 307 students who are studying agriculture in India. The data for which was collected through survey instrument developed in Google forms [1].

The results of our study indicated that majority of the respondents (70%) are fine with online education during the pandemic. Near to 60 percent students uses smartphones for online classes, with 85 percent students using mobile data pack as the source of internet. Nearly 70% of the students are of the opinion that the classes should be of less than 1 hour duration with not more than 4 classes a day [2]. Using content analysis, we found that students prefer recorded classes with quiz at the end of each class to improve the effectiveness of learning. The students opined that flexibility and convenience of online classes makes it attractive option, whereas broadband connectivity issues in

rural areas makes it a challenge for them to make use of this initiatives [3]. However, in agricultural education system where many courses are practical oriented, shifting completely to online mode may not be possible and need to device a hybrid mode, the insights from this article can be helpful in designing the curriculum for the new normal [4].

Key Implications

• The need to acknowledge and address the 'Digital divide': In a developing country like India, where the coverage of mobile networks, access to internet and access to e-devices like smart phones, tablets and laptops is limited, the students will face difficulties in accessing the online learning. As evident from our results, a majority of the students use mobile phones for attending class and depends on mobile data packs as a source of internet. The respondents also clearly indicated that they want the classes to be recorded, so that they can watch it later in case of internet troubles [5]. Teachers have to understand the fact that students can have these issues and try to address the issues. Teachers can provide handouts, lecture notes, and record the classes so that students can have different means of understanding what is being taught [6].

• The linear transformation from traditional classroom teaching to online teaching is impossible: With more than 70% students using mobile phones for attending classes and 85% using mobile internet packs, due to the capping of internet data available, the classes need to be shorter and lesser number of classes per day. This necessitates the adjustment both in the syllabus as well as the scheduling of classes. A linear transformation of time table for regular classroom teaching to online learning environment can be difficult for students [7-9].

• Challenge in making online learning interactive: Apart from the issue of access to devices and internet, another issue for achieving effective learning in online teaching environment is on the challenge of ensuring learners participation. Use of animations, multimedia tools, using technological options like break-out rooms and feedback at the end of the sessions (apart from 'am I audible?' and 'are my slides visible?') can help to ensure that students interact and learn [10].

• Difficulty in conducting practical classes: Universities around the world has not shifted to online learning prior to pandemic due to the challenge in organizing practical classes. Hence innovative solutions and models need to be developed for conducting online practical classes [11].

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