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**INSTITUTIONAL ROLE DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC:  
DEFINING THE LIMITS AND ASSESSMENT OF PREPAREDNESS**

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**INTRODUCTION**

The COVID-19 outbreak has almost exposed the global unpreparedness, especially in the case of public health emergency. Unlike the other historical epidemics, this has hit everyone hard, and reminded us that we are much below the expected levels of health care needs. It becomes necessary to execute intensified and sustained commitment to improve global public health sector. Probably no evidences are now required to show the plight of global health, social and economic conditions. As the spread of pandemic is global, every country is now concerned about the health of its citizens, and obviously this should be first priority. All other problems are directly linked to the precautionary measures of separation and social distancing that were to be imposed due to the highly infectious nature of the virus. However, to be frank, not only India, many developed countries have miserably failed to invest adequately in health sector. The impact of this pandemic is very high, it has not only pierced the health and economy, the education sector is also severely affected. The pandemic has significantly disrupted the higher education sector as well, which is a critical determinant of a country's economic future (**Chaudhary, 2020**). The academic calendars of all the institutes have to be rescheduled, with still an uncertainty. The stakeholders are trying very hard to make out the means acceptable and suitable to everyone, though with such a huge population and other issues, it is not an easy task to normalise soon. Closures of educational institutions will not only have a short-term impact on the continuity of learning for more than 285 million young learners in India but also engender far-reaching economic and societal consequences (**Chaudhary, 2020**). The impact can be minimised only to certain extent, which is being done by providing educational content to the students through various sources. It is also strongly felt that the impact of this pandemic on human psychology is not easy or early to forget, thus making our role still hard. Many follow up may be required to reinstate the trust and overcome the fear it has instigated, after the pandemic is over. An article (**Killgore et al. 2020**) indicated that resilience is shown to be greater among the people, who tended to get outside more often, exercise more, perceive more social support from family, friends, and significant others, sleep better, and pray more often.

**CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS**

Disasters are nothing new, they happen at times, there have been natural disasters, technical disasters, terrorist attacks or wars. But the impact of a pandemic is much more critical and significant because the scale and duration of its spread and pre-containment period cannot be determined. The after-effects of a pandemic lay their impact on global economy rather than threatening a limited geographical area. As the pandemics, by general meaning occur in multiple waves, each lasting several weeks or months, almost no individual or

organization can be said completely safe from it. The number of expected victims in fact is enormous, and the resources necessitated are near beyond imagination, never mind current infrastructure. This means that the effort and the attention must be at maximum level. No discount could be done to not pay too high price in term of human lives, or in the worst scenario of system collapse. Not only the sanitary and organizational system is affected, but all the different national economic, political, and infrastructural sides are in challenge (**Coccolini et al., 2020**). As the scope of this paper is limited to educational institutions, we will discuss some important issues and concerns, which are bound to be faced by the educational institutes. However, it is necessary to know that the impacts on schools, colleges and universities may not be similar, due to different age groups and mode of education content delivery. The present discussion will focus mainly on institutes of higher education (HEIs). This type of pandemic, as COVID-19 is, poses many serious unavoidable circumstances before different organizations, some of them may be generalised as:

1. Shortage of man power in the offices resulting due to illness itself or precautionary measures thereof. This will hamper the productivity and outcome. Development of plans which divides the work that must be done in the office and work that can be done from home, is also one of the challenges.

2. Investing the time and resources for planning the exposure reduction of the workers and other stakeholders, so that multiplication chain is broken. This time, of course will reduce the available time for many curricular and co-curricular activities.

3. Building the confidence for working together again, by overcoming fear psychology. This is very significant and really tough for a densely populated country, as India is, because inter-personal interactions are almost unavoidable. A system for providing extra hygiene to students will also be a challenge. Institutional instalment of health supplies such as hand sanitizers hand washing facilities see like minor practices, but they certainly boost the confidence level, reduce the fear as well as chances of infection.

4. Developing alternate, all inclusive practices, like online resources, making good use of information technology (IT) is really difficult, because majority of stakeholders, i.e. students do not have access to dedicated devices and infrastructure. Moreover, the internet packs may not seem affordable to many, along with connectivity issues at many places.

5. Organizing the students activities where they get chances to develop their personality, like performing on stage, public speaking and verbally interacting through group discussions. Till now the classroom teaching is probably the most accepted means of learning and virtual learning modes are neither accessible to nor accepted by many.

6. Ensuring the quality of the contents delivered is another challenge, because mentor-mentee live interaction not only ensures the content delivery, but also significant in knowing the reaction and receptiveness of the students. Thus, it is very serious issue to ensure and sustain the qualitative aspects of teaching learning, during the containment period of this pandemic.

7. Identifying the core educational activities to emphasize upon and deferring the non-essential tasks, though related with the students or staff, for quite some time will also be a challenge to execute. Certainly the lesson plans and time tables may have to be adjusted, as to contain the chances for infection.

## **INSTITUTIONAL PREPAREDNESS AND PRESENT NEEDS**

Since December 2019, the world is potentially facing one of the most difficult infectious situations of the last decades. COVID-19 epidemic warrants consideration as a mass casualty incident (MCI) of the highest nature. An optimal MCI/disaster management should consider all four phases of the so-called disaster cycle: mitigation, planning, response, and recovery. COVID-19 outbreak has demonstrated the worldwide unpreparedness to face a global MCI (**Coccolini et al., 2020**). Even the wealthiest most altruistic countries may face their own MCI situations and be unable to provide the basic necessities to their own citizens (**Coccolini et al., 2020**). Preparedness planning is quite essential in order to contain various outbreaks and epidemics. Certainly no one was prepared for this situation, and this is the reason for panic and fear psychosis for students. Having identified few important issues, we will now emphasize upon the analysis of current situation and few recommendations about the needs and measures to be taken care of these and related issues. Some of these issues can be handled by higher authorities, some by staff and some of them relate to student's participation. The challenges may not be completely dealt with, but few steps may prove useful for obtaining optimum results. The issues dealt with below are not necessarily in response to the challenges listed above, but on overall assessment and key requirements in the present circumstances.

1. Core activities can be maintained by allowing a limited number of employees, in different slots, so that social distancing is followed with minimum loss. As the delivery of curricular contents to students through traditional classes cannot be restored in full strength presently, the students may be divided into smaller groups. This may be done very meticulously, so as not to overburden the students as well as teachers. The working hours may be extended and shifts can be adopted to avoid congestion.

2. A specific crisis management team is generally not constituted in educational institutions, but this is need of the hour now. This team may look after general etiquettes to be followed by the students, as well communicating vital information to the stakeholders. An institute and area specific health and safety advisory should be drafted and implemented, along with instructions received from government and local administration.

3. The investments in digital resources at institutional level have to be enhanced, along with necessary sessions on training the staff and students, to optimise the use of available resources.

4. A rapid communication and logistic plan, which avoids panic among masses must be prepared, which is required in case of emergency. Such faculty and students can be identified who can be easily trained to understand the crisis and may be deputed, if unavoidable. A planned co-ordination and communication desk will be helpful.

5. The curriculum may be relaxed and half yearly system of examinations may be deferred for the time being, as it creates more chances of spreading of infection. This is necessary to maintain the qualitative aspects of our education.

6. The entry, exit and necessary windows for documentation and other important tasks of students need to be re-planned, and necessary restrictions may be imposed, to maintain the required physical distancing. The currency exchange on cash counters may further be reduced.

7. Trust worthy communication means to be screened and recommended to be followed by the students, in order to avoid panic and unfaithfulness in the public, at least they can share to masses through their family members.

## CONCLUSION

Thousands of health care workers have been infected amid the ongoing corona virus outbreak, a sign of the immensely difficult working conditions for doctors, nurses, and health care workers in general. They should be instead among those best protected (**Coccolini et al., 2020**). With huge amount of donations and public support, we as a nation are sure to win this battle. The World Bank has also approved a fund of \$1 billion to India in the first week of April 2020, to carry forward: India COVID-19 Emergency Response and Health Systems Preparedness Project. The project will help India prevent, detect, and respond to the COVID-19 pandemic and strengthen its public health preparedness. We are quite hopeful that till the situations normalise, the educational institutes will be working hard to make sure hopeful that teaching and learning continues through innovative solutions and creating an enabling environment in student community.

## WORKS CITED

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