

Distance learning is here to stay: Shall we reorganize ourselves for the post-covid-19 world?

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Abstract

Distance learning achieved academic recognition in 1892 when the first college level program was introduced. Later, due to rapid technological advancements in the late nineteenth century, the most prestigious institutions across the world introduced distance learning. The Covid-19 pandemic has expedited distance learning in the education landscape following a sudden closure of academic institutions; and soon online delivery of courses was initiated at all levels of education. In the current scenario, distance learning is very likely to stay beyond the covid era, and authors envision a “hybrid” model of education with blended learning i.e. a combination of face-to-face and online teaching. The necessity to follow social distancing will force us to limit the class room activities as well as hands-on practical training sessions to a reduced number of students. It will require the void to be filled through distance learning education.

Key words: Distance learning, Covid -19 pandemic, online courses, hybrid model, blended learning

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“Distance learning” is the system of teaching and learning whereby there is geographical separation between the teacher and the learner and technology and media are used for communication between them.¹⁻³ In England, Europe and Australia, distance learning originated in the nineteenth century.^{4,5} It achieved academic recognition in 1892 when the University of Chicago created the first college-level distance learning program,⁶ and then it flourished across the world due to rapid advancement of technology. The idea of distance learning was also well accepted in Pakistan and the first Open University “Allama Iqbal University” was established in 1974.

The expanding role of technology in mass communication indicates that technology is the most compelling growing factor in distant learning and the internet is the most recent and most widely used technology for this purpose. These rapid technological

advancements have provided enormous opportunities for academic institutions to incorporate distance learning and currently the most prestigious institutions across the world are offering online and blended (a combination of face-to-face and online) courses.

The Covid-19 pandemic has expedited distance learning in the education landscape following a sudden closure of schools, colleges and universities across the world. It accelerated the adoption of internet technology as a teaching medium. To ensure continuity of quality education and online delivery of courses was initiated overnight at all levels of academic institutions. Although the world may appear to be returning to its former self, we have entered a new normal era where online or virtual sessions and telemedicine are replacing face-to-face teaching and learning activities.⁷⁻¹⁰ Didactic teaching sessions have been converted into virtual classrooms through video-

conferencing applications and online sessions are being conducted for teaching of procedural skills.^{9,10}

It is understandable that at the beginning, most teachers and trainers were apprehensive and doubtful when they were suddenly forced to use web-based technology for their teaching sessions. However, after initial glitches, even the most traditional teachers have adapted to innovative virtual technology for their teaching sessions! This adaptation is the need of the hour, when we are dealing with a pandemic with significant barriers to education and training. This rapid shift towards distance learning has highlighted the value of telecommunication and online education and it is highly likely that it will become more integrated into routine education and be considered essential in the new normal world.

With increasing medical student numbers without a corresponding increase in clinical teaching opportunities, there has long been a need to develop alternative resources for teaching and learning. However, the teaching community has been somewhat slow in coming up with alternatives or in adopting the available resources. The sudden push into online teaching and distant learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic would go a long way in meeting this long-standing need which has been pushed around for years, mainly due to limited experience and fear of the unknown.

Robert Franek, editor in chief of *The Princeton Review* and author of 'The Best 385 Colleges' has stated, "We can never unlearn the things we've learned the last few months during Covid-19."¹¹ Looking forward to post-COVID era, many educators have stated that they will incorporate aspects of virtual learning in their methods for teaching and learning.^{12,13}

The authors' experience with web-based teaching and learning during the pandemic has made them realize that online educational methods need to be incorporated in the current training programs. We believe it is the only way forward and distance learning strategies are very likely to stay beyond the covid era, especially with the current increased exposure to online learning offerings. Taking in the current scenario, we envision a "hybrid" model of education in the years ahead with application of blended learning. The problem of accessibility, especially in the remote areas of low-and-middle income countries is a

limitation that needs to be addressed for successful implementation of such programs. The onus for successful incorporation of advanced virtual technology in future curricular models lies on institutions and faculty, with special input by the Information and Technology (IT) teams. We must all gear ourselves to face future realities.

Conflict of interests

None declared by the authors

Authors' contribution

Both authors took equal part in the preparation of this manuscript.

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