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Academic Degrowth During COVID-19: Measuring the Digital Space to New Normalcy in Universities of South Punjab, Pakistan

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ABSTRACT
During the Pandemic of COVID-19, the whole world had to go under national lockdown/s time and again. Along other challenges, the academic activities suffered a lot. Academic institutions had to adopt technology for running of the academic process (online teaching). The adoption of technology in advance countries to some extent was easier, but for the third world countries like Pakistan, it proved a challenge due to certain technological issue which resulted in academic degrowth. The present study is designed to measure "Digital Space to New Academic Normalcy in Universities of South Punjab, Pakistan and the challenges the academic institutes and students faced during this new mode of teaching. A survey was conducted to access the challenges students had to face during online teaching in Covid 19. The responses were measured from 470 students of BS, Master and M. Phil studying at the public and private sector universities of the South Punjab of Pakistan through questionnaire. The findings of the study reveal that during the Pandemic of COVID-19, universities adopted online teaching with limited digital resources. Even after the lapse of more than one year universities could not significantly prepare themselves for incorporating digital resources for academic process and assessment. The academic process of 67% universities is still continued without Learning Management System. The academic activities are being conducted via Whatsapp which is an informal medium. In the light of collected data, it is concluded that there is a dire need for up gradation of digital devices in the academic institutions to move towards new academic normalcy in the wake of Pandemic of COVID-19.

KEYWORDS
Digital Space, COVID-19, Academic degrowth and Pakistan

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INTRODUCTION

During Pandemic of COVID-19, the whole world has to go under national lockdown/s time and again. Along other challenges, the academic activities had suffered a lot. Adoption of technology for online teaching in advance countries was easier to some extent as they had already much advanced digital technology to switch from physical classes to online. Educational institutions in advanced countries allocated a significant portion of academic budget for the provision of technology gadgets to conduct the online classes. (Qazi et al, 2020). But for the third world countries like Pakistan, the adaptation of technology for the running of online classes proved a challenge as digital resources were limited and less advanced which led to the academic degrowth. Students from privileged backgrounds, supported by their parents easily moved to the alternative learning opportunities i.e. online teaching, while students from less developed areas of Pakistan had seriously faced the situation of academic degrowth. During the pandemic of COVID-19, the universities had adopted online teaching learning process with available technological resources which somehow were not sufficient to run the academic activities in full spirit. Such situation resulted in the phenomenon of academic degrowth (Cosme, et al, 2017).Universities did not have properly trained staff which could help students as well as run the online system efficiently. Beside many challenges, the two hindered and made the online teaching-learning most challenging for the institutes first, students' non existence of personal email addresses created huge trouble as they could not receive material of the academic activity. Second, universities did not have any updated learning management system (LMS) and clear policy for the conduct and assessment of online teaching.

Since the beginning of twentieth century, there have been attempts to revolutionize higher education with the help of technology. Radio was the starting point in this regard, with the help of 'a super radio orchestra and a super radio university, every home has the potentiality of becoming an extension of Carnegie Hall or Harvard University' (Berland 1992). After radio, education through television was introduced for remote learning. It also had the potential of imparting education to thousands of students at the same time. With the advent of internet, online education became the dominant mode of remote learning. Many universities developed fully online courses to enhance their geographical reach and with the aim of providing learning opportunities to students who had family and employment related responsibilities (Figlio, 2013).

Vrasida and McIsaac (2000) say that online teaching is not easy, because it involves a greater preparation and hard work as compared to the conventional mode of teaching. It also requires training of both teachers and students along with

highly effective technological gadgets. In online teaching, teachers should expect to spend more time on course development, student assessment, and other course-related activities (Pallof & Pratt1999, Hall, 2002). The lack of the above-mentioned facilities affected the quality of education especially in developing countries like Pakistan. During pandemic of COVID-19, Pakistani universities adopted online teaching which resulted in academic degrowth due to above-mentioned problems. The present study aims to measure to what extent the universities in South Punjab of Pakistan had prepared themselves in order to meet the needs of the students for the online classes during the pandemic of COVID-19? What measures the Higher Educational Institutions adopted to mitigate the academic degrowth by providing technological facilities?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The use of technology in the educational domains is not new. Since the advancement of technology, it has been continuously used in academic institutions from record keeping to the process of teaching and learning. The use of technology had been considered as one of the major audio visual aids in the academic institutions. With the invention of internet, the online classes had been introduced in the academic spheres. The Online education refers to the use of Internet for teaching and learning. Reigeluth (2003) opines in his study that the use of technology in education is facilitating when once the issues related to its use in educational domains are resolved. Since the online teaching has been adopted by educational institution in the form of distance education, every effort has been made to fully use the technology to enrich the educational experience of the participants (Sherritt & Basom, 1997). In physical classes, teachers have the opportunity to monitor students' behaviors and regulate the teaching and learning process as per need, while in online and distance learning programs colleges and universities have to create such an academic sphere in which the learners and teacher may actively engage themselves in the process of learning. Any disparity between the learners and the teachers may cause academic degrowth. The universities which offer online teaching courses consistently update their technological systems. Such efforts include; easy access to the system, easy provision of online resources including library and portal of the students where they may know the progress of their course (Turoff, 1997). As more courses move online, educational institutions and teachers alike are challenged in terms of pedagogy, course content and its delivery, and administrative and technology support (Ives & Jarvenpaa, 2000). An increasing number of colleges and universities offer online programs today (Goral, 2001). So, we see that in our times distance and online education even in pre pandemic times had earned the status of moving industry into online training and education (Carnevalasses. le, 2003).

Tallent-Runnels et al (2006) conducted research to measure the result of test scores in online vs traditional classes. Their study was descriptive and qualitative in nature. They found that both the population of students obtained same scores. However, students who had prior knowledge of technology were more satisfied. As far as course completion is concerned, the students showed weaker outcomes when courses were fully online (Protopsaltis & Baum 2019, Baum 2019). Thus, we can infer that results about the effectiveness of online courses are directly proportional to the use of technology in the teaching and learning process.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The present study majorly falls under the category of online teaching learning process during the pandemic of COVID-19 in the universities of South Punjab, Pakistan. A survey was conducted to collect data from the selected institutes. Questionnaire was devised and administered among the students studying at the undergraduate and postgraduate level in the universities of Southern Punjab.

DATA COLLECTION TOOL

The data for the present study was collected through questionnaire. A survey questionnaire containing fifteen items of inquiry was distributed among the students through Google forms using friend a friend technique.

DATA SAMPLE

The questionnaire was distributed among five hundred students of the following universities of South Punjab, Pakistan:

- Bahadur Sub Campus Layyah
- Bahauddin Zakriya University Multan, Pakistan
- Ghazi University, Dera Ghazi khan
- Islamia University Bahawalpur
- Government College University Faisalabad, Layyah Campus
- Institute of Southern Punjab, Multan
- Women University Multan

DATA ANALYSIS

In this section, the data collected through questionnaire is analyzed.

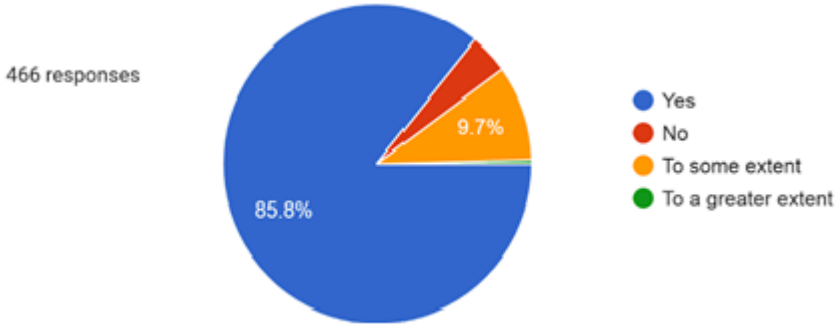

Figure.1. Effect of COVID-19 & academic degrowth

In response to the effect of Covid-19 and academic degrowth, 85.8% students responded that they faced academic degrowth during pandemic of COVID-19, While 9.7% responded that they had faced academic degrowth to some extent. Whereas, 4% population responded that they did not face academic degrowth as shown in the Figure 1. It shows that COVID-19 proved such a crisis which resulted in academic degrowth at large scale.

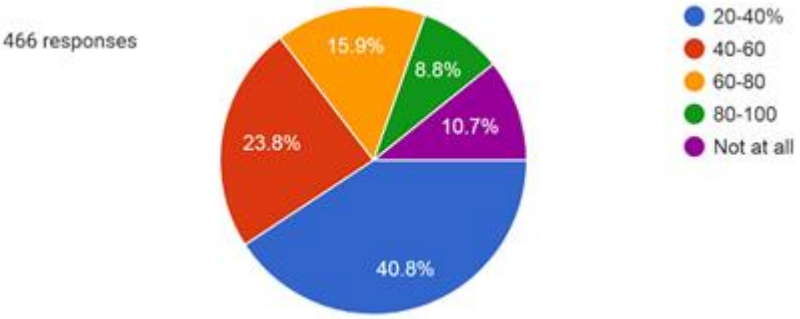

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Figure.2. Ratio of the use of gadgets in your classrooms prior to Covid-19

In order to measure the availability of the technological resources in the selected academic institutions and its use in the classrooms , 40.8% population of academic institutions is using the technology in the classrooms from 20-40 percent as indicated in the Figure 2. Unfortunately, 10.7 percent population of the selected universities was not using techonological rrsources in classrooms. while 15.9% population responded that they were using techonology ranging from 60-80 %. Only 8.8% population responded that their academic institution were using techonological gadgets from 80-100%.

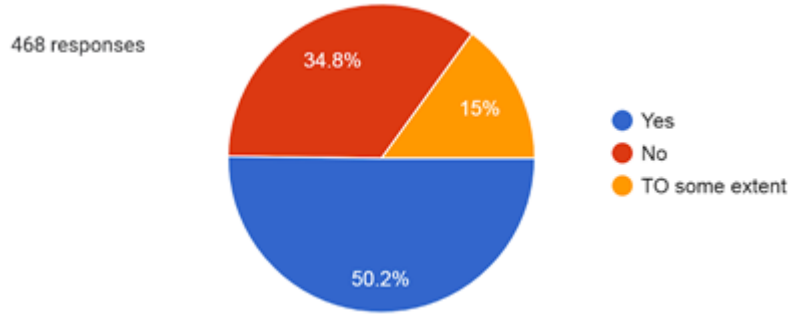

Fig.3. Academic institution generated academic email to get academic emails during pandemic of Covid-19

In response to the question of institutional email address, 50.2% population responded that their academic institutions had generated academic email addresses and provided them access to online resources, while 34.7% responded that they were not provided institutional email addresses. Whereas 15% responded that to some extent they were provided access to online resources through institutional email addresses.

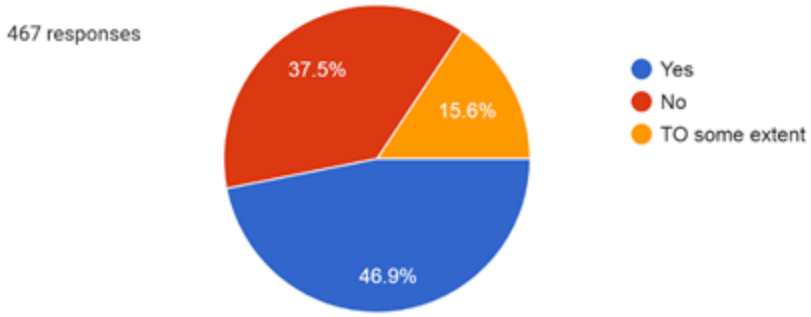

Fig.4. Functioning LMS

In reply to question related to the facility of functioning Learning Management System(LMS), 46.9% students responded that their academic institutions had functioning Learning Management System, while 37.5% responded that their university did not have any Learning Management System. Whereas, 15.6% responded that their academic institution had the Learning Management System to some extent.

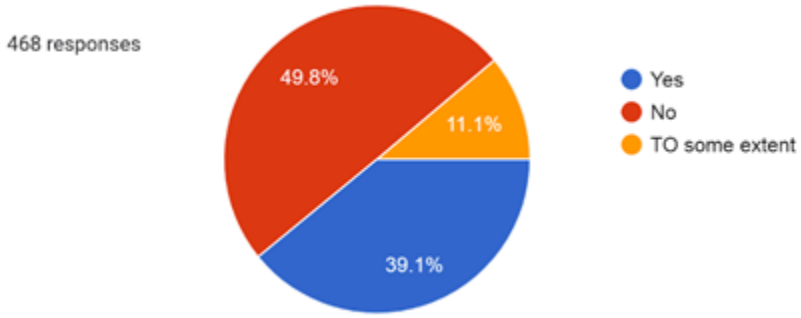

Fig.5. Training on "how to use your leaning management system" from your academic institution

The training of Learning Management System and its incorporation in the academic process is of much value. In response to the provision of the training of Learning Management System, 39.1% population responded that they were trained by their academic institutions for the usage of Learning Management System, While 49.8% responded that they were not given any training to use Learning Management System (LMS). Whereas, 11.1 % responded that to some extent they were trained.

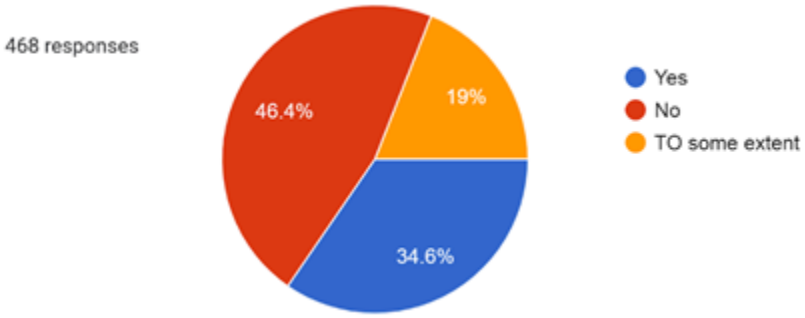

Fig.6. University staff to help in case of any issue

In response to question of the availability of the university staff who can assist student in case of any issue related to the use of techonology, 34.6 % students responded that their university has staff that can help in case of any problem regarding connectivity to the class and library, 46.4% responded that their academic institutions do not have such staff. While 19 % responded that they can get such help to some extent.

In response to conducting lectures on online forums, 80.6% students responded that their university is using zoom and Google teams for the delivery of lectures, whereas 12 % responded that their universities do not use any of these tools as shown in the Figure 7.

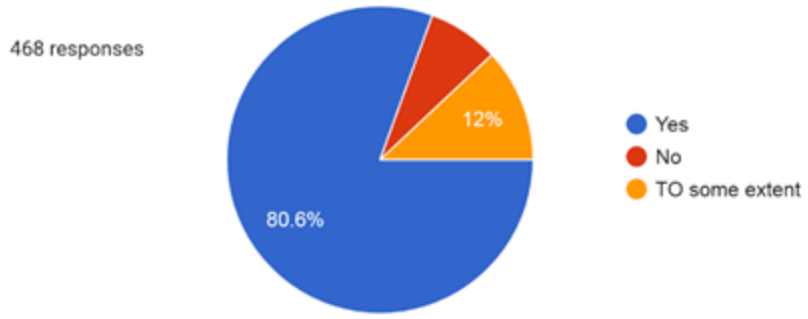

Fig.7. Academic institutions video based Lectures through google teams and Zoom

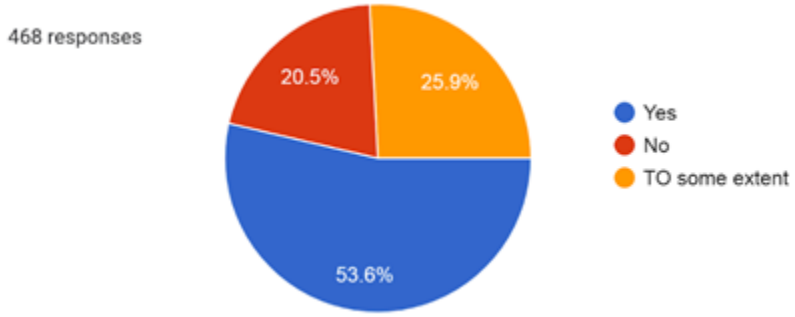

Fig.8. Academic emails from yourteachers were well scheduled and facilitating for successful process of teaching and learning

In response to the question of scheduled academic emails and successful process of teaching and learning, 53.6% students responded that they received their academic emails in scheduled and facilitating way, while 20.5 % responded that they did not receive their academic emails. While 25.9% responded that their academic emails were scheduled to some extent.

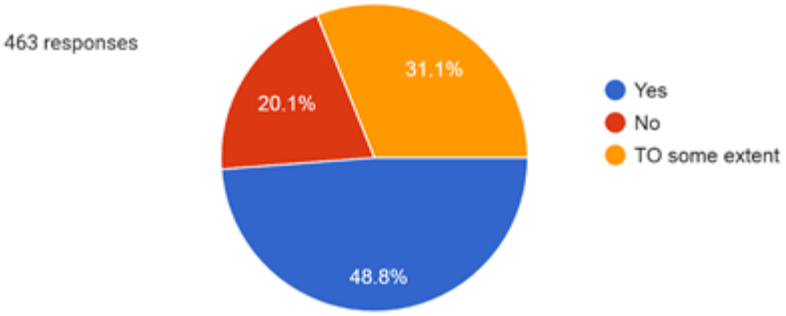

Fig.9. Teachers had been adopting/using different strategies to keep you/class engaged/active during the online lecture

Responding to the question of active engagement of the online lectures,48.8% responded that their teachers had adopted digitalized classroom to make them more active learners, While 20.1% responded that their teachers did not use sufficient strategies to make them active learners in the online classes. Whereas,31.1 responded that to some extent their teachers tried to make them active learners.

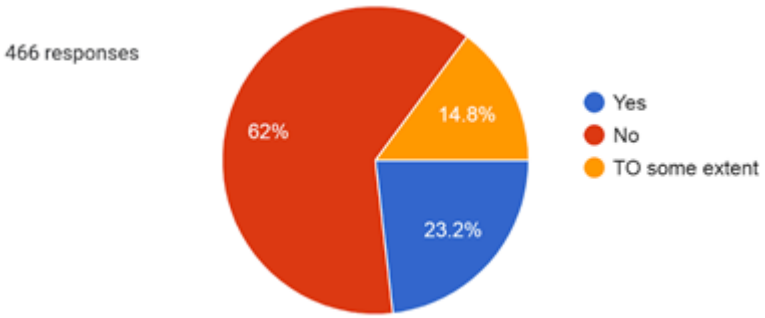

Fig.10. Academic institution used any software(like coursera or any other) for academic assessment

Responding to the question of adaptation of softwares for academic assessment, 23.2 % population responded that their academic institution had adopted software for the assessment, while 62% responded that their academic institution had any system for the assessment, while 14.8 % responded that their academic institution had adopted the mechanism for the online assessment to some extent.

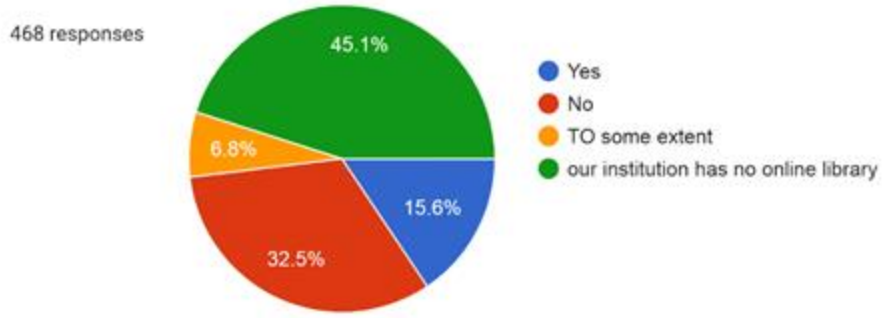

Fig.11. Access to online library system during covid 19

In response to the resources of online library, 15.6% responded that their academic institutions provided access to the online resources and library, 32.5% responded that they were not given access to the online library and resources, while, 6.8% responded that to some extent they were given access to the online resources. While 45.1% responded that their academic institution did not have online library at all.

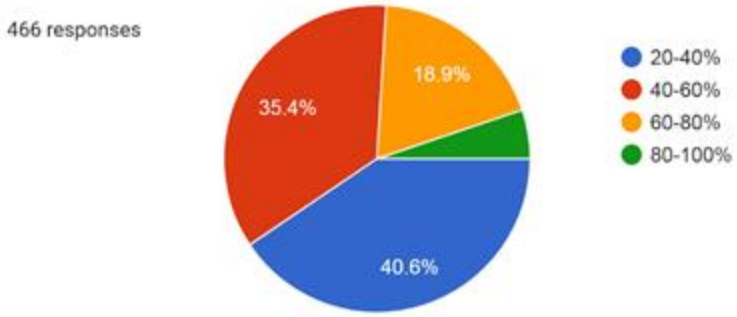

Fig.12. Improvements in the current digital academic apparatus of your institute if compared to the pre-pandemic one

In response to the improvement in digital usage of technology in the classrooms as compared to pre pandemic situations, 40.6% students responded that their academic institution has improved from 20-40 %. While 35.4% opined that they mark this development from 40-60%. 18.9% students responded that they see this improvement from 60% to 80%. Only 5% population responded that their academic institution improved the usage of technology from 80% to 100%. This proves that our academic institutions badly failed to facilitate the students during the pandemic of covid-19.Whereas; the improvement ratio of technological resources is not according to the need of the hour.

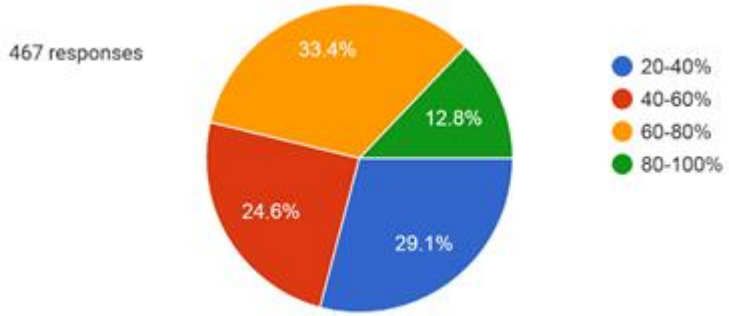

Fig.13. Ratio of academic degrowth due to online learning

In response to the question of the ratio of academic degrowth as observed by students during COVID-19, 29.1% students observed the academic degrowth was ranging from 20 % to 40%, while 24.6% consider that they observed the academic degrowth 40% to 60%. 33.4% population took this academic degrowth from 60% to 80%. While 12.8% considered this academic degrowth from 80%to100%. Out of the selected population,, the highest number of students reported academic degrowth from 60% to 80% which is alarming.

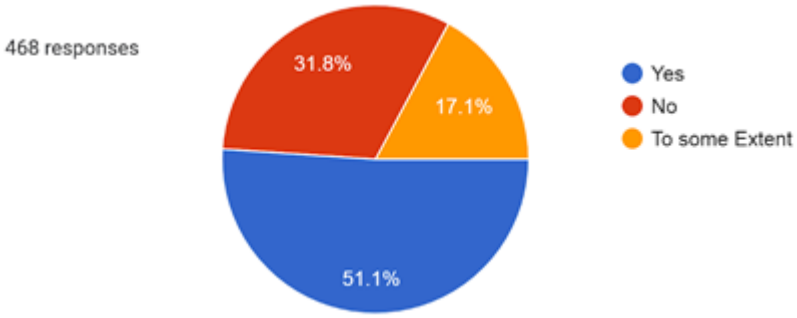

Fig.14. Academic institution assured the security of data

In response to question of the safety of the data during online classes during COVID-19, 51.1% students opined that their academic institutions had assured the security of their data, while 31.8% responded that their data was not ensured to be secured by their institution. While 17.1% are of the view that their data was not secure to some extent. It means that there is a significant population who had been anxious about the security of their data at their academic institutions.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis shows that 85.6% students responded that they had felt the academic degrowth, so universities should endeavor hard to mitigate the damage and should also build technological system in the classrooms in post-pandemic educational situations. The analysis also revealed that 40.9% academic institutions were using technology in the classrooms in Pre-pandemic times. It points out that even in this age of digitalized space our academic institutions are not using technology in the classrooms. The figures show that even 10.4% academic institutions at such a higher level of education do not use technology in the classrooms at all. The usage of technology in the classrooms with such ratio is alarming. Our classrooms should be technology friendly for the students and teachers to avoid losses in academics in case the teaching is shifted to online mode due to any reason in future. Lack of technological resources already caused huge loss to our students. The teachers and students both were not trained to use online tools when pandemic forced the closure of institutions. As a result, the teachers and students spent more time in grappling with these tools such as LMS, Google Meet and Zoom, instead of spending time to develop online courses and assessment criteria.

50% academic institutions did not even generate institutional email addresses of their students for online teaching and did not provide any well-connected forum for the conduct of online classes. This resulted into huge learning loss for the students as official email addresses provide more sophisticated features as compared to personal email addresses which can be used for online teaching and learning. Furthermore, 46.9% academic institutions had no Learning Management System. There is a dire need of efficient LMS system in all universities to provide course material, to facilitate teachers to keep track of students' progress and help in creating live sessions for the interaction and discussions. Higher education commission should ensure that every university should have a functional and updated learning management system (LMS).

The findings show that 60% of the students were not given any training regarding how to use technology for the online classes. This caused some major challenges for both the students and teachers, in some cases, the teachers had to guide their students about using LMS and other interactive tools, but it badly affected the quality of online teaching. The universities should arrange quality online training for the students. Unless students are not trained for the use of technology for online classes, the academic degrowth would sustain on higher degree level. Further, in online classes students faced the problems of connectivity and such other challenges related to the use of technology. 65% students responded that their academic institutions did not have such staff which could address these issues. The universities should ensure the availability of trained staff which could help the students in issues related to the use of technology and connectivity.

The analysis also reveals that 19% academic institutions are still not using any forum in which student could have interactive video lectures with their teachers. This can have serious outcomes especially for the students of weak academic backgrounds. Further, the lack of social presence of teachers can result into demotivation and worse learning scores for students, as highlighted by Figlio (2016) "lack of personal contact with teachers and their peers can result in weaker outcomes and poor learning"(p,11). Universities should ensure that all the students have interaction with their teachers. Without proper teacher student interaction, the challenges of an academic degrowth cannot be reduced. In the similar vein, 51.2% students responded that their teachers do not maintain the interactive online classes so they remain passive learners in the online classes. There is

a dire need of teachers' training to make them learn and train how to make their classes more interactive so that students can actively participate in the online classes as this interaction was missing in most of the online lectures.

Moreover, 46 % students responded that they did not have any scheduled classes. This has seriously affected the quality of teaching learning process. Universities should ensure that online classes are being conducted as per scheduled time tables in case the same situation occurs in future. In addition, 77% students responded that their academic institutions did not have any system of academic assessment in the online classes. It is an admitted fact through research studies that assessment is the major milestone of the academic process. The universities should take immediate measures to devise proper system/criteria of assessment for the online classes. In this way, universities should develop their software for the assessment. Furthermore, 84.3% universities do not have any online library and students do not have access to the academic resources of their needs. Universities should take serious measures to provide online access to their students. The use of library and access e-library to the students has essential and important role in the teaching- learning process. This has become more significant in the scenario of current COVID-19 situation as teachers could give creative assignments to students if the facility of online library was available to them. Further, the analysis also shows that 75.3% universities are not providing any fee schemes for their students. The universities should develop a mechanism for the wellbeing of the students so that the students with economically under-privileged backgrounds may feel themselves inclusive in the academic domains. In addition, 49.8% students showed their concerns that the privacy and security of their personal data during online classes was not ensured by their academic institutions. This had created anxiety among students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Following recommendations can be made on the basis of analyzed data. First of all, quality digital literacy training should be conducted both for the students and teachers in universities. This should continue even the pandemic gets subsided as now we cannot live and survive without the use of technology. This will also help higher education institutions to fight future unpleasant situations. Further, it would also improve the current situation of the academic degrowth. In online teaching, an assessment criterion plays a vital role in maintaining the quality of education, so the universities should purchase different Softwares for this purpose. The teachers should be trained for open book exams. Further, Turnitiny accounts and its related training should be given to all faculty members. After re-opening of the institutions when the pandemic gets subsided, some remedial courses should be conducted for students in order to catch up on lost learning. To reduce the workload of faculty members as online teaching demands exceptional efforts in preparing course material, designing activities and assessment related tasks, universities should recruit office support staff and technology experts. The research has shown that hybrid courses in which face to face classes are supplemented with online tools generally better results (Dynarski, 2018). Therefore, it is need of hour to develop the standard infrastructure in universities for hybrid and blended courses.

CONCLUSION

In the light of the analyzed data and discussions of the study, it is concluded that in the process of online teaching, students had faced serious challenges of academic degrowth. In order to mitigate these challenges, universities are supposed to take serious measures in order to make teaching- learning process more effective and target oriented. The universities in South Punjab, Pakistan are seriously facing the lack of technological resources. The government and educational funding agencies in Pakistan should ensure the availability of the technological resources in the universities at earliest in order to mitigate the situation of academic degrowth in universities of South Punjab. Higher education commission should ensure the availability of technological gadgets which institutions may use for the delivery of lectures and the assessment of the students. Universities should enhance their technological and digitalized capacity to fulfill the academic needs of the students during emergency situation. Lessons should be learnt from this crisis and substantial budget should be allocated for this sector. The universities should be given funds to develop infrastructure for online teaching as now it is a necessity not a choice.

CREDIT AUTHOR STATEMENT

Abdul Rashid: Conceptualization, Methodology, Software, Data curation, Writing- Original draft preparation. Visualization, Investigation.**Prof.Dr.Qamar Khushi** Supervision.**,** Software, Validation, Writing- Reviewing and Editing

COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS:

It is declare that all authors don't have any conflict of interest. Furthermore, informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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