COVID– 19 and Online Learning at the University of Yangon

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As an attempt to contain the spread of the COVID–19, the governments around the world have ordered the temporary closure of its educational institutions. Likewise, Myanmar's Ministry of Education (MOE) issued notifications on the closure of all schools, higher educational institutions and TVET institutes. The University of Yangon has suspended the ongoing examination and halted its classes since 23rd March when the first COVID–19 suspect in Myanmar was tested positive. The basic education high schools will be reopening on 21st July. However, both the MOE and the Higher Education Department are yet to confirm the dates for the universities to reopen. It is unlikely that all educational institutions would reopen under current circumstances. MOE has developed a national response and a recovery plan to ensure an educational continuity during the COVID–19 pandemic. This plan comprises two chronological phases, namely, a response phase and a recovery phase. MOE plans to apply diverse means for distance education to continue classes during the response phase.

With regard to the implementation of online learning, not only the developed countries but also the developing countries have been facing challenges. Based on the feasibility of online learning at the University of Yangon (UY), four political science students decided to carry out a research on the possible challenges for the UY's undergraduate students on online learning. The following observations are based on the findings of the research: –

First of all, almost all students possess appropriate smart phones for online learning. Nevertheless, the absence of computers with internet access for half of the students is still a challenging factor. To compensate for the absence of computers with internet, mobile phone based online courses can be a solution. UNESCO has created a website and listed a set of applications, platforms and

resources for the use of basic mobile phones. Another alternative is to provide or lend the students hardware such as laptops to the students who could not afford.

Although the students seem to have no problems in dealing with communication technology, they lack experience in using academic online resources. As most students lack experience in searching academic references, techniques on systematic search should be taught with the initiative of the university library, through social media platforms. Currently, the University of Yangon Library has announced free online training on EBSCO Discovery Service Search, which is literally about how to search academic references online.

Myanmar's current mobile data cost is affordable only for half of its students. Government should deal with the problem of high internet costs by negotiating with telecom operators to fix a reasonable price or for free. Zero-rating is when telecommunications companies or network and internet service providers offer free (or discounted) data to users with special services. Government can give incentives to internet companies and in some extreme cases they could even force them to reduce rates. There are also cases where internet companies themselves provide zero-rate service as a market strategy. In Bhutan, telecom companies are working with the government to reduce their data charges.

A formidable barrier for science students is the limitation to carry out practical classes. The most appropriate recommendation is to suspend practical classes for the moment and to resume only in the post COVID-19 era. Virtually, educators can conduct online simulations and use video clips to illustrate lab experiments. One university can team up with another to offer lab courses if practical is a must. If not feasible, educators can think of letting students do lab experiments at home.

Online learning is also difficult without regular electricity. Electricity blackouts also pose as a challenge. Therefore electricity cut offs must be prevented for a successful online learning. Based on reports of the World Bank and the Asia Development Bank, the Economist magazine criticized that government's deficiency, lack of experience and low performance are sources of the aforementioned problems. To solve this, the government should invite private investors to the electricity and energy sectors in line with the 2014 electric law.

In addition, it is also necessary to consider for the students who lack access to the internet, to create an all-inclusive learning sphere. Those students deserve special attention regarding online learning implementation. It is also mentioned in response and recovery plan that Higher Education Institution will ensure equal access to distance learning by designating IDPs and ethnic minorities as priority areas.

Last, but not least, students have shown keen interest to partake in online courses. But they are also doubtful on the effectiveness of online learning. Before the universities open, it is suggested that intensive deliberations among students, university authorities and government officials must be carried out to ensure the effectiveness of online learning and lessen the worries of the students. The response and recovery plan also recognizes the necessity of an effective communication between students and Higher Education Institution's academic staffs, to meet the needs of the students on distance learning.

To sum up, an element of all-inclusiveness is vital for a successful online learning. The ultimate goal of this article is to contribute towards the eventuality of online learning at the University of Yangon. Moreover, it also aspires to cultivate a culture of evidence-based policy making at the University of Yangon.

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