

Reflection of Pandemic Crisis over Trajectory of Educational Leadership: Challenges of Higher Education Institutions in West Bengal

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Abstract The knowledge society is struggling to revive from the devastating impact of the Corona Virus throughout the globe [1]. India is no more exception. To be more specific, the education sector has not been spared too. Institutions have lost their former momentum in each aspect, e.g., teaching-learning, research and innovation, human and material resources management, etc. The Higher Education system strives to cope with this alarming situation significantly since postgraduate and research programmes are affected badly. The academic leaders of the Universities are at stake under such circumstances. Since last year, we have become compelled to develop with a few steps in our technology-based education. However, we must think about alternative ways to keep the higher education system normal. These can be possible while the educational leaders innovate the key to various issues and challenges, be more cautious, and acknowledge all framing grounds. Leadership strategy needs to look beyond the present scenario and evolve with a more futuristic and sustainable approach. In this paper, the researcher focuses on ongoing issues and challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic over Higher Education and possible alternative ways for educational leaders to evolve with new-normal phenomena. Due to frequent lockdown and unavailability of sufficient human resources, the researcher has opted narrative research method following convenient sampling. It includes teachers, research scholars, and postgraduate students from a few universities in West Bengal who are aware of the existing higher education system. Individual experiences and narratives are explored various issues and their probable solution for Institution builders.

Keywords: corona outbreak, evolution, higher education institution, educational leadership, technology-based education

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1. Introduction

Since a few decades, there has been excessive emphasis given on the quality of education. Around the last decade of the 20th century, almost each level of education (e.g., elementary, secondary, and tertiary) has witnessed rapid growth in terms of quality. Even after observing various policy drafts and reports related to education in India from the period of 1990s to till date, it has been seen that many steps were taken to empower quality education. For instance, Programme of Action, Operation Blackboard, Sarva Siksha Abhiyan, Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan, Rashtriya Uchchatar Shiksha Abhiyan, Right to Education Act-2009, etc. [2]. Nevertheless, why is there a sudden need to reorganize the Indian education system? On the other hand, why is there a sudden initiation among the policy planner to overemphasize quality education in

the last decade of the 20th century? - is a matter of discussion. However, it is essential to note that multiple initiatives have been taken in post-independent India to improve the quality of the education system, e.g., Radhakrishnan commission, Mudaliar commission, Kothari commission (1964), NPE-1968 & 1986, etc. These commission and committee drafts have played a crucial role in determining the structure of the Indian education system. It is futile to make any doubt about the vision of these policy-makers. However, at the same time, it is also true that these policy drafts and their recommendations were mainly theoretically kept inside. Very few works have been done practically throughout the nation. It remained primarily in the written format and hardly adequate to a broader range of population or grass root level for several reasons.

As a matter of fact, quality, access, or equity in education is a widely dominant trait, while eminent economists like, Mehebut-ul-Haq developed Human

Development Index (HDI), and Amartya Sen was given much more emphasis on welfare economics [3]. They have given importance to education as a crucial factor of national development. Many policy measures were considered in the interest of the Higher Education development. However, in reality, the quality output of a formal organization, to be more specific, the quality outcome of HEIs came into existence with effective leadership strategies [4]. An educational leader is able to think beyond administering already set rules or managing people in present circumstances.

Higher Education Institution plays a crucial role in national development [5]. It endeavors to foster specialized knowledge in each discipline. However, in the last few decades, most institutions (except a few like IITs and IIMs) have been unable to provide quality products or human resources that are globally competent. Most institutes failed to cater to research and innovations in terms of international standards. According to most popular global rankings like Quacquarelli Symonds (QS), Times Higher Education (THE), Shanghai Ranking Consultancy (ARWU), etc., very few higher education institutes in India holds a fair position in the ranking list. It simply denotes that most institutions are standing in the crowd of ordinaries [6].

In this present scenario, the lack of futuristic vision of the educational leaders, especially in higher education, might be one of the significant reasons for standing in the crowd of ordinaries. In addition, frequent lockdown due to the pandemic condition puts educational leaders in an uneasy situation. So, academic leaders need to think beyond theoretical aspects of monitoring or regulating university administration and develop their creative mindset to excavate sustainable decision-making to revive former momentum.

From March 2020, educational institutions are struggling to revive from the devastating impact of the Corona Virus throughout the globe. None but educational leaders have the authority as well as a vision to make any decisions to achieve organizational goals. In this pandemic situation, academic leaders are somehow bound to follow the online mode of teaching-learning. But to normalize or become habituated with this 'new normal' mode of the educational system, they sometimes fail to locate specific challenges or weaknesses. Thus, as a research scholar from an 'Education' background, the researcher tried to find out challenges are arisen in higher education system due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and excavate potential solutions for an educational leader to revive the momentum of Higher Education.

2. Review of Related Literature

Hudson, L. et al. (2020) studied "Leadership in education during covid-19: Learning and growth through a crisis". This article explains themes that are based on group auto-ethnography. As participants, all researchers who are actually some students of graduate-level and a professor working in formal and informal leadership roles and shared their own experiences. Due to this pandemic, they faced three common things pandemic e-leadership and e-learning. Many of them did not consider themselves

educators before and became educators because of requirements. Those who were already educators had to rethink the way they taught and how they viewed technology. As leaders, they all changed their roles in the education system. As formal and informal leaders experienced different sets of barriers that need to be overcome, ranging from lack of information and directives to staff struggling with learning the new technology. To handle these barriers, they embraced a democratic leadership style. They found that e-leadership could encourage change in others through a sense of agency, which then propels purposeful and collaborative practice in education. Although predicting a crisis and its implications is reasonably impossible, building the skills necessary to support an educational community before a crisis may be possible. In the meantime, e-leadership continues to focus on building agency amongst its staff to promote a sense of security and confidence in the integration of technology into education so that their professional development continues [7].

Boin, A., Kuipers, S. & Overdijk, W. (2001) conducted a study on "Leadership in times of crisis: A framework for assessment". They define crisis leadership as the sum of activities aimed at minimizing the impact of a crisis. The impact is measured in terms of damage to people and critical infrastructure and restores trust in public institutions. To run the education system both during and after the crisis is undoubtedly a complex process. It has high symbolic value: organizations had better demonstrate that they seek to learn from failure. The official vehicles for learning, inquiry committees and investigation boards have to do their work in highly charged political environments that are infused with blame-game dynamics. According to them, effective learning resembles the maximums of scientific research: it continuously tests hypotheses against reality. Effective learning takes time, requires a special culture of inquiry, and may not lead to clear-cut results or politically desirable outcomes. They found that the consequences of natural disasters are becoming more severe by the year. Societies need to understand what crisis leaders should do to enhance crisis management effectiveness. In the absence of such an understanding crisis, leaders are subjected to a messy process of collective framing, from which they can just as easily emerge as winner or a loser. Given the increasing importance attached to crisis management, and evaluation of leadership driven by politicization and media dynamics is simply unacceptable [8].

Pfeifer, J. (2020) wrote an article on Crisis leadership for a pandemic: Covid-19. In this article, the researcher firstly argued that during this pandemic, it is very important to connect every single department of the government and definitely with the public to gain accurate and timely information. Developing a bond of trust between the public and crisis leaders is very important for removing the effect of crisis management. The spread message must be truthful, correct, and empathetic and should be rapidly updated when things change. He also acknowledges that crisis leaders need collaboration across all levels of government and with the key stakeholders who are outsiders of government to gather updated information about the pandemic situation and also to make different strategies and concerns about the public. In

this situation, public and private sectors also form collaboration to evolve different innovative ideas for eradicating the helpless situation. Crisis leadership is about having core capabilities with complementary capabilities of others and for the leader to produce an effective desired outcome that on group achieve alone. In addition, this is done by creating a network framework across sectors for command, controlling the situation, and giving fruitful outcomes [9].

Gigliotti, R.A. (2020) conducted a study on Leadership beyond covid-19: Crisis leadership implications for Chairs which was based on higher education. He explained how the present pandemic affect all sectors of the education system. College universities announced virtual instruction, restrictions on employment, and international student travel. This pandemic create a plentiful situation where student enrolment, registration, changes of faculty tenure, promotion process, the financial health of the department, reappointment, etc., became stuck in this situation. Leadership during this time needs a dual focus on making immediate decisions about solving the problems and also serving the long-term interest of the institutions. Further, the researcher included some effective characteristics of the leader that are important for resolving these circumstances: agility, clarity, compassion, honesty, preparation, resilience, trust, and transparency [10].

McNaughtan, J. (2021) conducted an interview on “positives and pitfalls: what is good leadership in a crisis” Most of the university leaders would opine that they are constantly facing a crisis due to covid-19 pandemic. Institutions are forced to move instruction to virtual platforms. In a time of crisis, good communication is a necessity. However, during this time, many university leaders ended up over-communicating because lots of unofficial and official emails and messages created confusion. While the uncertainty surrounding covid-19 may lead to some of these contradictory messages, the communication coming from institutional leaders decreased in value as constituents lost trust in the messages and were fatigued by the sheer number of public statements. Leaders must centralize institutional crisis communication to ensure that messages are consistent, vetted, and relevant to avoid this situation. For this university should create its own official website divided into two sections one for meaningful information (student information, faculty information, etc.) and one for presenting new information [11].

From the review of above mentioned related literature, it is apparent that a handful number of studies are conducted in the field of educational leadership and challenges for corona outburst. The researcher is unable to trace any research study, articles, etc., which encompass the higher education system of West Bengal.

3. Methodology of the Study

Following methods and procedures were adopted to complete the study in a systematic manner.

3.1. Operational Definition of the Key Terms Used

Pandemic crisis: The pandemic crisis is the ongoing global pandemic caused by the coronavirus disease 2019

or COVID-19. Here the researcher denotes the crisis of society, especially knowledge society, due to excessive outbursts of coronavirus.

The Trajectory of Educational Leadership: Educational leadership is the quality of leading an institution by adopting specific capabilities. The leader of an institution not only administers rules and regulations but also manages people and has a futuristic vision to achieve organizational goals. Educational leadership is a process, not a product. It is continuously moving in the arena of educational institutions. Hence, the researcher denotes the path of moving leadership quality (which may be upward or downward movement) as the trajectory of educational leadership.

Challenges of Higher Education Institutions: Here, HIEs or Higher Education Institutions refer to the colleges and Universities in which undergraduate, postgraduate, and Ph.D. programmes are enabled within the territory of West Bengal, India. In this study, the challenges of HEIs denote various issues and problems of the respective institution due to the contemporary pandemic situation.

3.2. Method

Considering the demand and nature of the present study, it is narrative research.

3.3. Population

The undergraduate and postgraduate students, college and university teachers, and researchers of all universities and colleges in West Bengal are considered as the human population. Documents, newspaper articles, significantly online articles, research papers, etc., are taken as a Non-human sample following a narrative approach.

3.4. Sample and Sampling Technique

The researcher has gone through a convenient sampling technique due to the unavailability of access to Human samples for the COVID-19 pandemic situation. In the first sampling phase, the researcher selected three universities of different status, consisting of two state universities and one central university from a rural region in West Bengal, by applying a convenient sampling technique. It also includes three undergraduate colleges. In the second phase of sampling, two teachers, two research scholars (Ph.D.), and one student, i.e., five human samples from each institution were taken according to the researcher's convenience. The researcher selected thirty (30) samples from six (6) Higher Education Institutions in West Bengal.

3.5. Tool and Techniques for Collecting Data

Hence, narrative research is a type of research where a human's viewpoint about a certain reality has been analyzed. Narrative researchers gathered the human stories and systematically described them. For this purpose-

- The researcher used two self-made semi-structured interview schedule to fetch required data from the human sample for this present study. The data

collected from the human samples were mostly in audio form.

- Document analysis had conducted from various online platforms (articles, research papers, etc.).

3.6. Data and Its' Nature

By nature, the collected data is entirely qualitative. The semi-structured interview schedule is the tool to fetch the required data from the human sample, supplemented with individual interviews via video call or face-to-face interaction [12].

3.8. Methodological Diagram

Research questions	Objectives	Nature of the data	Tools/ Techniques	Sampling Procedure
What major challenges have arisen due to the COVID-19 pandemic in Higher Education?	To find out challenges are arisen in Higher Education due to the COVID-19 pandemic.	Qualitative	<u>Semi-structured interview schedule for faculty members and research scholars.</u> <u>Unstructured interviews for students.</u> <u>Online platforms to fetch the data from the non-human sample.</u>	Convenient sampling was used (five samples from each three universities and colleges).
What are the possible solutions for an educational leader to revive the momentum of Higher Education?	To analyze probable solutions for education leaders to revive the momentum of Higher Education.	Qualitative	<u>Semi-structured interview schedule for faculty members and research scholars.</u> <u>Unstructured interviews for students.</u> <u>Online platforms to fetch the data from the non-human sample.</u>	Do

4. Discussion and Findings

There is no means to deny that the excessive outburst of the covid-19 pandemic has negatively influenced education and the other functioning of universities worldwide. The Universities have lost their normal momentum by the so-called 'new normal' protocols. According to the data collected from the respondents, various problems that are being faced by the university administrations and educational leaders need strategic (calculated) changes to cope up with this abnormality.

4.1. Challenges

Before discussing this, we must address leadership problems, i.e., the issues or challenges educational leaders face in this pandemic.

Student's perspective:

First of all, let us talk about all the stakeholders of education, especially the under-graduate and postgraduate students who lack knowledge of Educational Technology. In this context, the teaching-learning process needs technology-based educators, but the students are not proficient enough in using smartphones and or other

3.7. Delimitation of the Study

- The study accorded only the institution to which under-graduate, postgraduate, and Ph.D. programmes in education enabled.
- The study was confined to the students, research scholars and faculty members and/or administrators who are accessible and pursuing their degrees or serving their respective institutions.
- The study accorded only articles and research papers accessible on online platforms so far as the non-human sample is concerned.

digital devices, modern gazettes. In a developing country like India, it is beyond imagination to expect all students to attend online classes with the help of laptops and personal computers. Even most of the students of postgraduate level do not have personal computers, hitherto now. In such cases, they are compelled to take the help of classmates for their regular assignments and dissertation work.

As personal computers are not available, it can be estimated that 80% of students have smartphones [13]. Because of this, Educational leaders in administrative posts have stressed mobile learning through platforms such as Zoom, Google-meet, Cisco-WebEx, Google-classroom, etc. [14]. However, it has some problems even being given more emphasis in the system, namely, the internet connectivity issue and network problem in remote areas, absenteeism, one-way learning without feedback, etc. Most of the students in higher education are permanent residents of rural areas or from small towns where they hardly get internet speed of 100kb/sec. Hence, students are unable to join their online classes. Secondly, even being successfully joined in these online platforms, some students engage engaged in other activities. Thirdly, the percentage of absences is very high in online classes.

Fourthly, the teachers are bound to use the lecture method for teaching where students' feedback is rare for improvisation.

Teacher's perspective:

Similarly, some teachers or educators also struggle to some extent in the online mode of education. Especially the Teachers, who are comparatively senior in age/service period, well accustomed to traditional and conventional teaching methods, and have no past experience using technology in the classroom. Despite having rich content knowledge and expertise in implementing various strategies and tactics in curriculum transactions, such teachers somehow lack confidence in the online teaching mode. Some of them are literally put a question mark on the new mode of teaching. Needless to say, these teachers have contributed more to the knowledge society than tech-savvy young teachers. In the pandemic situation, any other mode of education other than online teaching-learning is unthinkable. In these circumstances, the traditional teachers have been prioritized in spite of their knowledge and experiences. For instance, teachers accustomed in using the blackboard or whiteboard in a wide range in order to give lessons may not be acknowledged properly with the use the pen-tablet. With the closure of the university premises due to lockdown, it is challenging for educational leaders to arrange refresher courses. This kind of refresher might change the conventional lens of senior faculties in higher education.

Researcher's perspective:

The crisis is not only limited to the teachers, educators, and undergraduate and postgraduate students but also affects researchers of higher education institutions. Firstly, according to government rules and protocols, they have been unable to access their labs for several months. Lab-based research is disrupted due to COVID-19 protocol, especially in the fundamental and applied field. Most of the researchers cannot observe and experiment with their research sample in home quarantine. Secondly, online libraries for a journal, documents, and study materials have become difficult to access since the educatee requires the access codes of the institutions. Moreover, due to frequent lockdown, campuses have been inaccessible (out of reach) for students, which has hindered the research works. To be more precise, the reviews of related literature have noticeable disruptions. At the same time, Inter-University academic exchange programs, lab-exchange programs, and institution-based data collection procedures have been disrupted for that exact reason. Altogether academic researches and researchers are in need of a futuristic sustainable vision of educational leaders. It is necessary for the crisis period and the nearest future of the higher education sector. Only then it is possible to keep the higher education process unceasing.

4.2. Probable Solutions

Implement situational leadership style for the people who are in university administration. Hersey and Blanchard have given the theory of situational leadership. It can be easily understood with its specific nomenclature. In this kind of leadership style, a leader should always view the present situation and give their judgment or make the decision on that basis. An effective leader must look

after several factors to continue the institutional legacy. In this stage of crisis, where the mortality rate is continuously increasing, people are in stress not only by an increasing rate of COVID-19 but also by finding necessary day-to-day items like food, medicine, etc. *Continuous assignments* should be given to make students busy in teaching-learning. According to the data, it reveals that ongoing tasks make students busy with academic activities. Universities remain closed due to frequent lockdowns given by the government. However, for that very reason, students are in home isolation for a more extended period. They are busy doing other activities as compared to academic work. These kinds of habit formation indirectly affected the knowledge society over the last few months. Therefore, educational leaders may change this kind of habit and make them more knowledge-centric by giving instruction to the teachers to continuously assign curricular content.

Learning centric approach should be enabled in regular curriculum transactions. When institutional leaders assign academic tasks to the students, even in curriculum transactions, they should allow a learning-centric approach. For instance, if one of the students has a health-related issue or is responsible for taking care of his family or going through an economic crisis during this pandemic period, they should not enable a teacher-centric approach. It may lead him to discontinue the study. Sometimes, many teachers would like to run their classes in terms of a learner-centric approach. According to the data from the respondents, learner-centric strategies are suitable for the majority of students but not for all, especially at this pandemic time when living is more important than studying.

Teachers should *evaluate on the basis of day-to-day interaction*. In this pandemic condition, proper evaluation is a challenging job for a teacher. Most higher education institutes send subject-specific questions in Google form in the scheduled time. Students were/are writing it on their printed paper, and after scanning the written documents, they have to upload it to the same form. It seems like an open book examination, and often they delay uploading by saying connectivity or similar technological excuses. Until and unless the university administration should evaluate students based on a regular interaction and classroom presentation, it will be unable to provide an actual assessment of learning. Assignments should be given at *per reflexive level*. After analyzing various narratives from the respondents, it is visible that most of the assignments or projects were written or submitted on the basis of theoretical knowledge or bookish knowledge. The online mode of teaching-learning reflects that students seem to have a keen interest in studying instead of doing other activities. They simply follow the instruction given by respective authorities, complete all the requisite formalities, and await certification or completion of their courses. Leaders should take care of creative bent of mind or must motivate them to enhance productive work.

Educational leadership strategy must include an emphasis on *maximum student participation in online platforms*. An educational leader must look beyond what is visible to all. In recent days, the university administration has been bound to continue the online mode of education somehow forcefully. But most of the

students played a passive role. In other words, students have involved themselves in other activities after logging in to digital platforms (i.e., Google meet, Cisco-WebEx, Zoom). In this ongoing system of learning, teachers should emphasize more such methods of teaching where a maximum number of students may actively participate. University administration should instruct teachers to organize debate & discussion on a particular topic or assigns students for PowerPoint presentation. Institution builders may *organize seminars, and meetings to enhance online teaching capabilities*. Institution building is a process of developing specific capabilities, which makes the organization continue with its ongoing operations and innovate to continuously improve its performance [6]. Leaders play a significant role in the process of institution building. Hence, they should organize or instruct tech-savvy teachers to uplift other teachers. So that they enhance their capabilities of teaching in online mood.

According to the narratives of respondents, Universities will revive their former flow after *Monitoring the regular activities of staff*. Some institutes continuously check the day-to-day work progress of non-academic staff. Regular monitoring of the assigned tasks of staff has already been smoothening workload at a time. Some institutions lack this kind of leadership strategy, but most authorities have shown this path. Moreover, these institutions are rigorously working on all ongoing operations, i.e., from financial budget to student-support-system, curriculum development, and quality control.

Some respondents suggest that academic leaders should look after the accessibility of discipline-specific journals. In such cases, Higher education institutes should *provide institutional access codes of paid journals* to the research scholars so far as the literature review is concerned. From 2020 to till date, many researchers are unable to access particularly those journals for which institutional access is necessary. Sometimes, the price of paid journals is very high, and it is tough to access for an economically underprivileged student without any financial assistance. Authorities, especially those in administrative positions, might also emphasize developing e-books and e-materials for research scholars and students. After interviewing, it revealed that students were unable to produce productive works due to the inaccessibility of library books. One can hardly imagine buying all the books related to their course curriculum. Educational leaders should find out alternative ways in such a way that students could easily access books from their respective libraries, at least e-books and e-materials. Organize *frequent online meetings for all the teachers* to monitor the regular progress of the curriculum and other learning activities.

4.3. Conclusion

An educational Institution should continuously strive to improve its performance in accordance with the changing need of society. Leadership plays a crucial role in the overall betterment of any institution. Especially during the crisis, the leader has gone through several alternative ways not only in managing all the human and material resources but also in the decision-making process. This specific quality (decision making to overcome challenges)

distinguishes a leader from an administrator. However, Educational leadership skills are not developed by only theoretical knowledge; it needs creativity and experience to achieve a collective goal. The whole world is more or less afraid of the rapid growth of the COVID-19 pandemic. Even these pandemic crises indeed end once as history repeats itself.

Nevertheless, to fight this stage of crisis and normalize the higher education system as a whole, educational leadership strategies need to look beyond the theoretical perspective. There are so many challenges that might not be controlled by the people in administrative or leadership positions. For example, internet connectivity issues of the students who live in remote areas or forcibly gain the attention of all the students in online mode - are not entirely controlled. It must have certain intervening and extraneous factors. However, it is also true that it can be materialized if leaders endeavor all the possible alternative ways to achieve institutional goals. Educational leadership should change its conventional trajectory to evolve according to the situation.

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