Remote Learning in Higher Education: An Experience of NSOU Learners

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Abstract

Remote Learning occurs when the instructor and learner or source of information, are separated by both social and physical distance and cannot meet in a traditional, conventional classroom setting in face to face mode of interaction. Information is typically transmitted via technology (Email, Discussion boards, Video conference, Audio and Social media etc.) so that no physical presence in the classroom is required; otherwise, it would be Hybrid or Blended Mode of Learning. Remote Learning can occur as synchronously or asynchronously as per the delivery of instruction. It is also referred to as Distance Education, Virtual Instruction, Online Learning or Remote Training and e-Learning. The sudden outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic has triggered a significant challenge and exposure to higher education. Due to the limited time that the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) had to prepare for the crisis situation, they had to change their infrastructure and establish new teaching-learning programs. The situation accelerates the trends of remote learning in the whole world. Due to the emergence of pandemic in the whole globe, it is important to understand the various perspectives and preferences of learners when it comes to remote learning. This study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the learners' experiences and preferences when it comes to the use of arena of remote learning or learning from the distance.

Keywords: Covid-19, Higher Education, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), Learners, Remote Learning.

Introduction

Remote Learning occurs when the instructor and learner or source of information, are separated by both social & physical distance and cannot meet in a traditional, conventional classroom setting in face to face mode of interaction. Information is typically transmitted via technology (Email, Discussion boards, Video conference, Audio and Social media etc.) so that no physical presence in the classroom is required; otherwise, it would be Hybrid or Blended Mode of Learning. Remote Learning can occur as synchronously or asynchronously as per the delivery of instruction and communication. COVID-19 forced Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to move to digital distance learning all over the world. According to UNESCO, 194 countries and regions temporarily closed their educational institutions due to the pandemic, affecting more than 1.5 billion students worldwide. The outbreak of the coronavirus crisis which led to a global pandemic has impacted the economy, businesses and the travel tourism industry, as well as education systems worldwide, disrupting the way in which students are educated around the world. Educational institutions faced and continue to face great challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic. About 1.5 billion learners of all educational levels in 191 countries were influenced by their institutions' decision to lock down due to the pandemic.

India enforced the world's largest and most rigid nation-wide lockdown from the midnight of 24th March 2020, and with it started the temporary closure of educational institutes (Ansari, 2020). The higher education institutions had followed the guidelines of the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) and University Grants Commission (UGC) adopted a substitute online teaching-learning measures to not disrupt the learning scenario of the students (Careers360, 2020), The UNESCO estimates that a total of 320.71 million learners have been affected in entire India during the lockdown (UNESCO, 2020). In the pandemic scenario where the lower socio-economic stratum (SES) has emerged to be the most vulnerable to the socio-economic impacts of Covid-19 (Gopalan &Misra,

2020; Baloran, 2020), digital divide deepened further thereby affecting their access to education. In addition, according to a report by Quacquarelli Symonds (QS), the internet infrastructure in India is still not ready to afford the online learning mandated in the pandemic situation ("COVID-19: Indian Internet infrastructure," 2020).

The educational institutions in the country, starting with pre-primary/nursery to tertiary level, are closed from 25 March 2020 and continued to shut down till October mid in spite of gradual unlocking process. The apex body in higher education in India vis-a-vis University Grants Commission to its commitment to provide quality education, has urged and suggested the higher education institutions to shift to online mode of teaching and evaluation. While the regulatory bodies as well as government have realized the importance of online learning, in practice, little or no support to the institutions has been materialized, especially in rural areas. While several arguments are associated with hindrances of online learning, insufficient digital infrastructure, and digital divide across dimensions and digital literacy gap and so on, are some of the major arguments related to it. Though the National Education Policy, 2020 talks about digital and online education, the preparedness does not seem to be conducive in India. In fact, the budgetary allocation for digital learning was reduced from 6.04 billion in 2019–2020 to 4.69 billion in 2020–2021 (*Banerjee, 2020).*

In view of these, it becomes more important to assess and explore the learning experiences and expectations of the new generation learners. The present survey was therefore conducted to analyze the students' perspective and experiences, which is especially important because of the transition and transformation in the novel teaching approaches and methodology.

Online Learning in India
Higher education in India is regulated by agencies such as UGC. The regulators – at best – have taken a very guarded approach towards allowing for the use of digital and online education in the higher education system.
There are three major regulations which guide the Indian higher education in the direction of digital adoption in the teaching learning space. The UGC (Credit Framework for Online Learning Courses through SWAYAM) Regulation, 2016, University Grants Commission (Online Courses or Programmes) Regulations, 2018 and University Grants Commission (Open and Distance Learning and online learning programmes) Regulations, 2020. The first stipulates that an Institution can only allow up to 20% of the total courses being offered in a program in a Semester through the online learning courses provided through SWAYAM platform. As per a press release on 31st Dec 2018 "More than 1600 courses available on SWAYAM Platform." More than 1,000 specially chosen faculty and teachers from across the Country have participated in preparing these courses. In order to ensure best quality content are produced and delivered, 9 National Coordinators have been appointed: They are, University Grants Commission (UGC) for Post-Graduation Education, Consortium for Education Communication (CEC) for Under-Graduate Education, NPTEL Consortium of 7 Indian Institutes of Technologies & Indian Institute of Science for Engineering, National Council for Education Research & Training (NCERT) & National Institute for Open Schooling (NIOS) for School Education, Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU)for out of the School Students, Indian Institute of Management (IIM) Bangalore for Management Studies , National Institute for Technical Teachers' Training (NITTTR) for teachers training program and All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) for ARPIT Courses (Annual Refresher Programme in Teaching), Self-paced & Courses by Foreign Universities.

One cannot discuss online education without a discussion on one of the most slippery subjects of Higher education – Open and Distance Learning. The New Education Policy (NEP-20) tries to give proper and systematic direction towards the transformation of digital learning in the country. The University Grants Commission (Open and Distance Learning) Regulations, 2017 provides the anchor for this space. In an ideal scenario, Open University should have been the beacon of digital education and should have evolved with advent in e-Learning. Dr B.R Ambedkar Open University founded in now Telangana in August 1982 was India's first Open University and IGNOU

which enrolls over 4 Mn students was founded in 1985 – and is perhaps world's largest Open University.

As per AISHE there are 16 dedicated Open Universities in the country (1 Central Open University, 14 State Open Universities and 1 State Private Open University). Also, the Open and Distance Learning regulations apply to traditional universities offering courses in distance mode. They are commonly referred to as Dual Mode Universities and are 110 in numbers. The 1 state private Open University is in Arunachal Pradesh.

The NEP 2020 and online education in India

The New Education Policy (NEP) 2020 has been released by the newly renamed Ministry of Education (formerly Ministry of Human Resource Development) and approved by the Union Cabinet of India in July 2020. The vision of NEP 2020 is to reshape and transform the education system and structure in the country.

The NEP 2020 has a special focus on online education. Universities and institutions like NITs and IGNOU will be conducting pilot research studies for maximizing the benefits of digital learning in India. Online tools and platforms like DIKSHA and SWAYAM (Study Webs of Active learning for Young Aspiring Minds) will be upgraded with new insight to training content, in-class resources, assessment aids, profiles, etc. that will allow seamless interaction. It also focuses on creation of public digital and interoperable infrastructure that can be utilised by multiple platforms. NEP 2020 emphasizes the creation of virtual labs wherein students can practice their theoretical knowledge and make course content available in different languages. The newly renamed Ministry of Education proposes to set up a dedicated unit for promotion of digital learning. The dedicated unit will comprise experts from the field of education, educational technology, administration, and e-governance who will focus on online learning needs of both the school and higher education. More emphasis will be given to online assessment and examinations.

Our Prime Minister once said, "*I dream of a digital India where quality education reaches the most inaccessible corners driven by digital learning.*" There is no doubt that the NEP Policy 2020 is a holistic attempt to turn his dream into a reality. NEP Policy 2020 aims to completely transform the Indian education system and make the country a "Global Knowledge Superpower" by 2030.

COVID-19 pandemic and the relevance of online education

With the imposition of lockdown due to spread of coronavirus all over the country since March, 2020, attending online classes has become the 'new normal' and have taken centre stage in students' life now. This 'new normal' is a transformed concept of education with online learning at the core of this transformation. Online education allows students to attend classes from any location of their choice while it allows schools to reach out to an extensive network of students, instead of being restricted by geographical boundaries. Students can clarify their doubts through live chats or forums by staying at the comfort and safety of their home. On the positive note, online learning has made both teachers and students become more technology savvy. Various mobile phone and computer applications and technology based programs have emerged as an alternative platform to regular classroom teaching during lockdown. Both the teacher and the student community were quick enough to acclimatize with computers and smartphones.

Review of Literature

The Covid-19 pandemic has scrambled and paused everyday life of human society as strict lockdown protocols are being imposed to combat the spread of the deadly virus which has been claiming millions of lives across the globe. Mankind as always has showed extreme resilience and accepted the challenges posed by the pandemic. Every sphere of human life has seen massive transformations and the educational sector also forced quickly to adopt and/or explore new teaching-learning methodologies powered by technological advances for the benefit of the student community (Radha et al. 2020). The pandemic forced the higher educational institutes such as Universities and Colleges to shift rapidly to distance and online learning. Though the online learning is not new to

learners, nor is distance learning. However, Covid-19 pandemic revived the need to explore online teaching and learning opportunities in the covid-19 affected countries (Almaiah et al. 2020).

The teaching–learning methodologies have been remodeled globally due to the evil outbreak of novel coronavirus that many schools and teachers around the world are struggling in alternative ways for delivery of instruction remotely (Molise & Dube, 2020).

The shift to virtual education has only negative impact but also accelerated the incorporation of technologies and innovations in education (Allen, 2020) such as flipped classrooms (Williams, 2020), national and institutional online learning platforms, contents and repositories, platforms and software for assessment, training, video conferencing, etc. (World Bank, 2020).

In another study, Verma et al. (2020), the students expressed their preference for online classes during the pandemic. Dhawan et al. (2020) opined that in natural or man-made crises like situation, the anywhere-anytime feature of e-learning is beneficial. Bączek et al. (2021) too observed that ease of access to educational materials, ability to choose the time and place to study were shown as the strongest advantages of online learning during the COVID 19 pandemic. However, Luaran et al. (2014) reported that though e-learning enabled learning at any place and time, it has many disadvantages viz. students require computers which have to be bought or have to be accessed at cyber cafes, which later led to reduced opportunities for face to face contact among friends (Luaran et al. 2014). In another report, Borstorff and Lowe (2007) cited that the main objection to elearning was the lack of face-to-face interaction among the students. Inquiring about the disadvantages of online learning in our study, a high number of the respondents felt it was related to issues with the internet followed by technical problems with the IT equipment. Similar results were observed by Qazi et al. (2020) where reliable internet support, affordability of gadget and access to online learning resources during COVID 19 were significantly linked to students' satisfaction amid COVID 19 pandemic. In a comparable study, Kaup et al. (2020) reported that technology related challenge and clinical skill training were the two paramount constraining factors related to e-learning. Dhawan et al. (2020) suggested that a plenty of online tools are available which are important for an effective and efficient learning environment and in order to maintain a human touch, the educators could use a combo of audio, videos, and text to reach out to their students. This would not only help in creating a collaborative and interactive learning environment but would also encourage the students to give their immediate feedback, ask queries, and thus learn interestingly. Earlier, other researchers too have commented that online programs should be creative, interactive, relevant, student-centric, and group-based (Partlow & Gibbs, 2003). Further, online teaching Institutions have to emphasize on collaborative learning, case learning, and project-based learning (Kim & Bonk, 2006). Rajab et al. (2020) and Shetty et al. (2020) were found that majority of the students preferred a combined approach of teaching after the pandemic for their better academic development.

In another study, Parkes et al. (2014) found that students were not sufficiently prepared for balancing online learning with their work, family, and social lives. Students were also found to be ill prepared for several e-learning and academic-type competencies along with a low-level preparedness concerning the usage of Learning Management Systems. Muflih et al. (2020) found that well preparedness to join online education and prior experience in learning significantly affected the student preparedness and attitude toward online learning. Similarly, Hergüner et. al. (2021) observed positive correlation between online learning attitude and online learning readiness. Barman et al.(2021) suggested blended mode of teaching-learning supported by advanced ICT tools.

Objectives
- To explore the learning experiences of the learners.
- To analyze the effectiveness of online learning.
- To evaluate the usefulness of university resources offered to the learners.
- To assess the perception of learners towards remote learning.

Methodology

To address the main aim and research questions of the study, a survey instrument was designed. To provide answers to the research questions, quantitative data obtained from the survey's closed questions. Analysis of the qualitative data obtained from the open-ended questions followed a qualitative thematic analysis approach during which data were coded and clustered as themes. The combination of quantitative and qualitative data provided complementary information and a more holistic picture of students' experiences and perceptions regarding the transition from face-to-face to remote learning.

The questionnaire consists of both close-ended questions and open-ended questions designed through customization of google form in electronic media. The survey instrument were included learner's perception and experiences towards the distance or remote learning, benefits of the university online resources, teacher's help in pandemic situation, preferences of them about online learning and blended learning and so on.

> Respondents: Final Year Learners of MSW Programme of NSOU
> Research Design: Descriptive Research, cross-sectional study
> Data Approach: Quantitative
> Data Collection Tools: Structured Questionnaire
> Data Analysis : Thematic Analysis

The study was conducted electronically through the help of customized google form having mostly closed ended research questions.

Total Respondents (*n*): 1164

Data Analysis and Findings

Online Class and Teacher's Role:

The learners were responded that majority (99%) of the learners were attended the online classes as conducted by the University. Very few that is less than 0.5% said they did not attend any class. In regards to the teacher's role during online class learners opined that they are benefited by the help and academic support of the subject teachers. Further they said that the teachers were very useful during online class and helped their study.
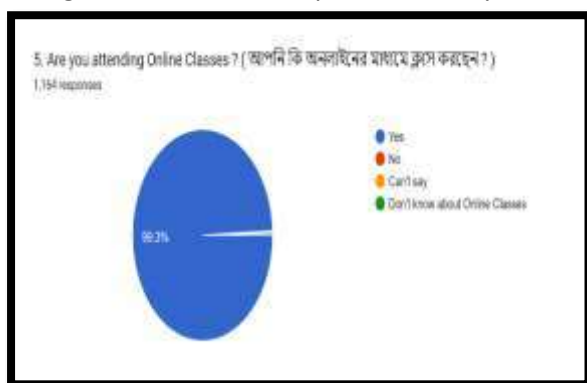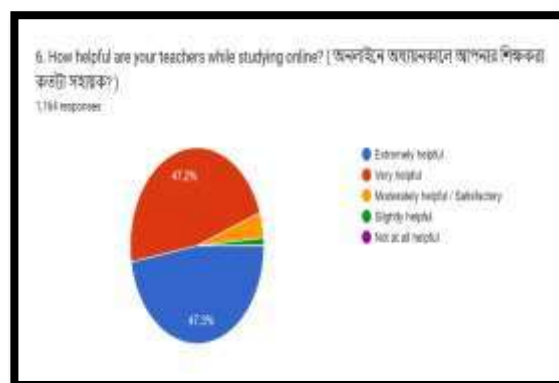

Fig.1 Online Class   Fig.2 Teacher's Role

Quality of Online Class

During the online teaching-learning methodology, learners found that the online classes were very good and they received quality lessons through the online mode of teaching.

Preferences of Attending Class

Most of the learners were preferred only Online Class but there some a significant percentage of learners opted for Blended Mode of learning. Very few responded for attending only Offline or Conventional or F2F mode of teaching.
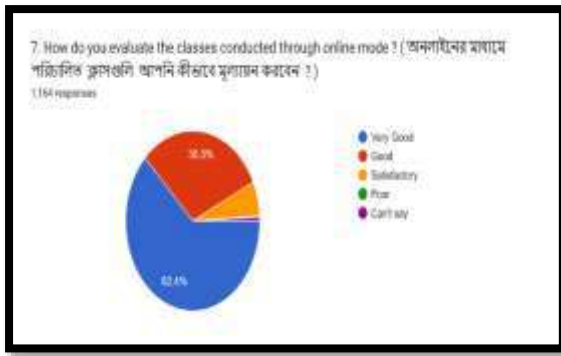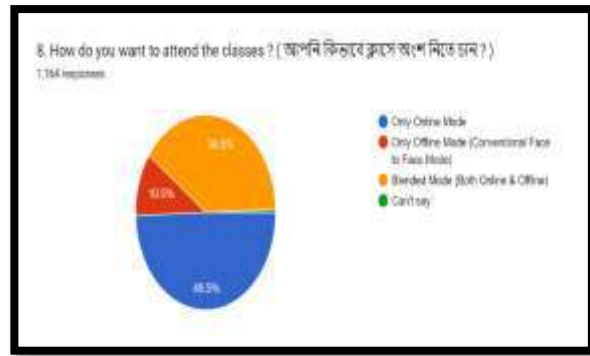
Fig.3 Quality of Online Class

Fig.4 Preferences of Attending Class

Overview about Online Class and Mode of Attending Online Class

In view of attending more online classes, learners replied that they wanted to do more classes through the online mode. Most of the learners attended the online classes through their own personal Smart Phone or Android Phone. Very few used Tablet and Personal Computer for attending the online classes from their home
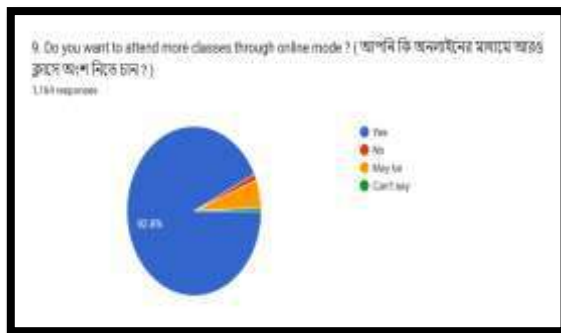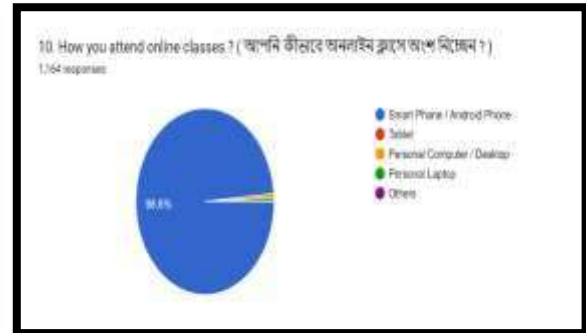

Fig.5 Overview about Online Class

Fig.6 Mode of Attending Online Class

Usefulness of Institution's E-resources

The respondents got very much benefit from the university/institution's e-resources like e-SLM (Study Material in electronic version), NSOU APP for students, other academic e-contents, LMS, OER. They opined that ICT tools were really helpful for them during online learning. E-mentoring support also somehow fruitful for them in this situation and also received motivation for study through this platform.
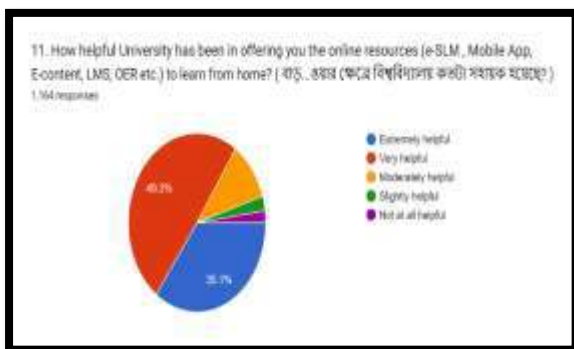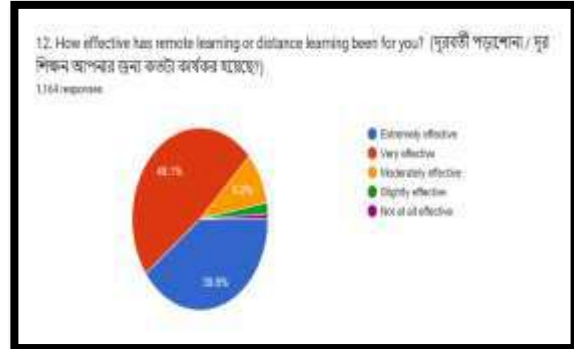

Fig.7 Usefulness of Institution's E-resources

Fig.8 Effectiveness of Remote Learning

Effectiveness of Remote Learning

Learners of the university found the remote learning or distance education very much convenient, helpful and effective for them even in the post covid situation. As in this system they have the scope to do the online classes as per their convenient place. Even they can avail the university/institution's e-resources like e-SLM (Study Material in electronic version) at any time. In the adverse situation they found the student app of NSOU very much useful and effective in the online learning.

Perception towards Distance Education and Online Learning
Overall the respondents were found the remote learning or online study or distance education as best suited and convenient for them. It is very effective and useful for them. They perceived this type of education and learning as the future of education or learning.

They also preferred to attend any workshop, seminar or any student related program through online mode. As this will give them autonomy in terms of attending the session as per their convenience.
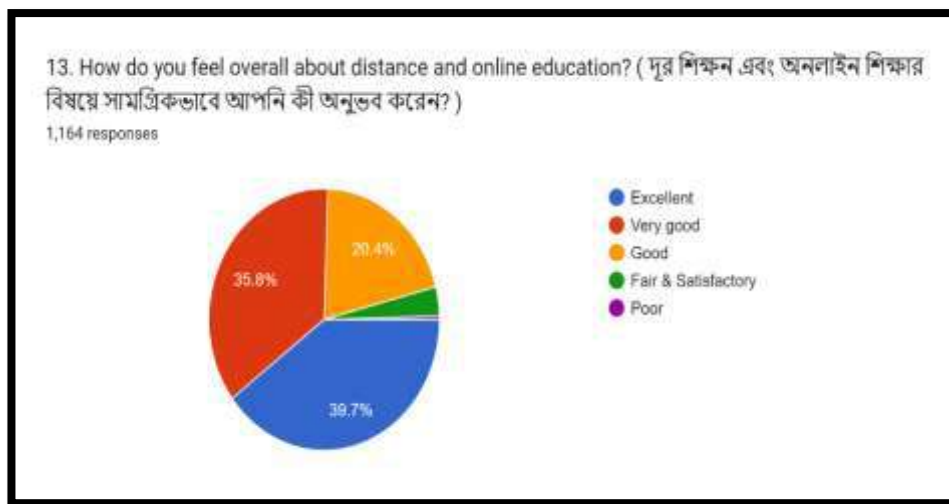

Fig.9 Perception towards Distance Education and Online Learning

Major Findings and Discussion

- Almost all (99.3%) learners attended online classes/sessions.
- As per the opinion of learners, Teachers were very much helpful during online study (94.5%).
- Learners felt that they received quality teaching / education (92.9%) conducted through the online mode.
- In terms of mode of class they preferred Online Class (49.5%), and Blended Mode (39.5%). Very few opined for F2F Mode (10.5%).
- Most of (92.8%) learners wanted to do more online classes / sessions.
- About 98.6% of learners attended the online classes through their own Smart Phone or Android Phone.
- Regarding the usefulness of online resources like e-SLM (Study Material), E-content, NSOU Mobile App, LMS, OER, ICTs etc. as offered by the University, learner's responded that they were very much benefited (84.4%).
- Most of the learners opined that the remote learning was very effective (48.1%) and extremely effective (39.8%).
- Regarding Distance Education and Online Education Learner's perception were responded excellent (39.7%), very good (35.8%) and good (20.4%).
- At the end, learners overall feedback were highly positive and encouraging in respect to the distance education and online learning.

Conclusion
Learners express both positive as well as effective towards the remote learning and consider it to be as the future of learning in Higher Education. Among the advantages of remote learning for learners, the most important are saving time, ease of attending classes at their own comfort, the ability to balance between work and study.

The disadvantages of remote learning of greatest importance to learners include the loss of social relation due to lack of physical contact with peers, feelings of fatigue resulting from excessive use of information and communication tools (ICTs), increase in internet and other costs, internet and technical problem etc.

Limitation of the Study

Firstly, the study was conducted only for MSW Learners.

Secondly, it was conducted only in higher education vis-à-vis only in one Open University (NSOU).

Thirdly, there may be differences in perceptions of remote learning depending on the levels of education (elementary school, high school, university), which creates implications for future comparative research

Scope for Further Study

The researchers' intention of the study / research was to find out the perceptions and experiences of respondents about the remote learning or distance education.

The results obtained encourages further exploration of this topic in different fields of study and/or making comparisons across the level of study and different HEIs.

The challenges faced in remote learning may be addressed through developing model teaching-learning pedagogy or mechanism and evidence based practices through further research, study and exploration.

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