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Teaching in a Delhi University College during Covid-19: 2020 will be remembered for Many Firsts

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Abstract

Delhi University Colleges have put their best efforts to accomplish their academic and other related obligations since mid-March 2020 (initial phase of the pandemic) by completing the ongoing courses; holding the due examinations and providing the respective results in time. Off course there have been certain glitches in achieving these mammoth tasks. They have admitted fresh batches of students and have so far successfully been engaging their classes through various online mode as per their separate sets of academic calendars for the session of 2020-21. Even the promotion of the faculty members, due since long has been initiated successfully through online mode. This is to appreciate that despite the myriad constraints put by the pandemic, the faculty members, staff, the Principals and various other DU authorities have contributed and co-operated hugely in the implementation of the policies and decisions taken by the University of Delhi; University Grants Commission (UGC) and Government of India. Meanwhile a debate is going on among the stakeholders to resume the full-fledged academic activities on the campus in a phase wise manner as one of their main priorities. With the increase in declining cases of Covid-19 in Delhi and the vaccination programme being already launched, we may expect return of full normal academic activities on the campus in future, very soon.

Keywords: 1. College Education, 2. Teaching during Covid-19, 3. Online Teaching-Learning, 4. Open Book Examination, 5. Online Admission, 6. Online Internal Assessment.



Introduction

The Constituent colleges of Delhi University were going through their mid-semester break (8-14 March, 2020) and then all of a sudden and without any advance notice, announcement about suspension of all teaching and non-teaching activities and their immediate closure (till further order/notice) was made. Since 16th March, 2020 these educational institutions of higher education have been kept closed (except the administrative units/offices which opened later and have been functional partially throughout the period and thereafter) as per Government of India imposed countrywide lockdown as one of the measures to contain the Covid-19 outbreak. The University Grants Commission (UGC) issued Guidelines on Examination and Academic Calendar for the Universities in View of Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown on 29th April 2020 and revised the same on 6th July, 2020. University of Delhi started issuing various Guidelines in confirmation with those of UGC, viz. Conduct of Examination for Final Semester/Term/Year for the Academic Session 2019-20 in view of Covid-19 dated 14th May, 2020.

Delhi University Colleges have put their best efforts to accomplish their academic and other related obligations since mid-March 2020 (the initial phase of Covid-19) to complete the ongoing courses in time. They have admitted fresh batches of students and have so far successfully been engaging them through various online mode as per their separate academic calendars for the session of 2020-21. Meanwhile a debate is going on among the stakeholders to resume the academic activities on the campus as one of their main priorities as per UGC Guidelines for Re-opening the Universities and Colleges Post Lockdown due to Covid-19 Pandemic [D.O.14-8/2020 (CPP-II)] dated 05th November, 2020.

An analysis of developments around the university since mid-March, 2020 reveals that colleges have gone beyond their capacities to adopt and implement myriad Information and Communications Technology (ICT) tools, viz. internet, wireless networks, cell phones, computers, development of software, video-conferencing, social networking and other media applications and services etc. to help the students and staff in conduct of their respective obligations. In the name of safeguarding the interest of students and staff, University of Delhi took many policy decisions which were not there on its Statutes Books and may rightly be termed as Firsts. Some of these Firsts may be described briefly as given below:

1. Finishing the Ongoing Academic Courses in the Hybrid/Blended Mode

As stated earlier, during the second/third week of March, 2020 DU Colleges were to resume the academic engagements after the mid-semester break (after the festival of Holi) many of the faculty members, staff and students were outstation. Initially the classes were suspended for a week and later the total lockdown was imposed with the announcement by the Prime Minister (PM) that people should stay at the place only wherever they were putting themselves at that moment. Around sixty to seventy percent part of the ongoing academic courses had already been completed through the classroom teaching and the immediate challenge was to finish the remaining portion and prepare students for the upcoming annual/semester university examinations to be held in the month of May, 2020.



Faculty members were directed by the competent authorities to be available through online mode for students during the assigned hours as per time-table allocated to them earlier. They were also directed to provide 'E-resources' to the concerned students. Faculty members rushed to complete the task by adopting the forgotten/new technical skills of preparing power-points presentations; scanning and preparing the Portable Document Format (PDF) files for uploading the same on the college website; WhatsApp; E-mail communication etc. Students were flooded with so called 'E-resources' and both the faculty members and students expected things to settle down fast.

Many of the faculty members started engaging the students on the popular online platforms such as 'Google meet', 'Zoom meeting' etc. Later a large number of concerns related with safety of data were raised about the 'Zoom meeting' platform because of the then Indo-China tensions. This created confusion among both the teachers and students. Since major portion of the ongoing academic courses had already been taught through the regular classroom teaching-learning mode, the remaining parts got somehow completed through online mode as per the technical skills of the concerned faculty member and the concerned authorities had a sigh of relief that their task got successfully completed fulfilling the academic interests of students.

Sadly, in the rush of finishing the academic curricula, there was hardly any check about the quality, quantity and technicality of the online contents and resources; chaos and confusion prevailed for the faculty members applied 'self-learnt/do it yourself' techniques to hurriedly finish their jobs. 'Self-innovation' was writ large without any quality control and 'virtual presence' of the faculty members and students became the new mode of academic engagements.

2. Changing Contours of Internal Assessment

According to University of Delhi, Ordinance-VIII-E (2), "25 percent of the maximum marks in each paper in undergraduate courses shall be assigned for 'Internal Assessment' and the remaining 75 percent for the annual/semester university examinations. Ordinance-VIII-E-2-(ii) (a) provides, "each student shall be assessed on the basis of the written assignments/tutorials as well as on the basis of project reports/term papers/seminars. There shall be 10 percent weightage for such written assignment and project reports/presentations/term papers/seminars. Each student shall be given at least one written assignment per paper in each term, subject to a maximum of twelve written assignments per year for all the papers taken together".

Regarding the attendance, the Ordinance-VIII-E (2) (iii) stipulates, "there shall be 5 percent weightage for regularity in attending lectures and tutorials, and the credit for regularity in each paper, based on attendance, shall be as follows: 1 mark for more than 67 percent but less than 70 percent; 2 marks for 70 percent or more but less than 75 percent; 3 marks for 75 percent or more but less than 80 percent; 4 marks for 80 percent or more but less than 85 percent and 5 marks for 85 percent and above. The entire process of 'internal assessment' of students at the university and college level is to be taken care by a Committee chaired by the Dean of Colleges and the Principal respectively.

Delhi University constituted a Working Group on Examination to oversee examination related matters, review the preparedness to conduct the examinations of 2019-20 and invited online suggestions/comments from the stakeholders by creating a dedicated E-mail for that purpose. Later,



DU issued a notification regarding Conduct of Internal Assessment, Practical, Viva-Voce, Oral (Moot Courts), Apprenticeship, Internship, Field Work etc. for 2019-20 (Dated: 13th May, 2020. For the first time, the notification stipulated the following:

- i. Regarding the ‘internal assessment’, it said, “instead of the three existing components of ‘internal assessment’, viz. Class Test, Tutorial Test and Attendance, only one component i.e. ‘internal assignments’ will be carried out”. It further directed the faculty members to give assignments to students through Email. Students were supposed to complete and send back the same to their teachers by Email.
- ii. The evaluation of practical examinations was supposed to be based on hundred percent continuous evaluation mode. It was also to be held through Email.
- iii. The practical and viva voce, oral (moot courts) examinations for the final and intermediate semester/term/year students of all professional and technical programmes, all such practical and viva voce as part of the requirements of the completion of degrees for final semester/term/year students were to be conducted through Skype or other online meetings applications. Students were allowed to take up online internship/activities including activities which could be carried out digitally or otherwise from home.

3. Challenges of Conducting Examinations

Delhi University is well known for running its timely and regular academic sessions but the Covid-19 provided a new and unseen challenge to its punctuality in conducting the examinations both for the under graduate (UG) and post graduate (PG) courses. In its notification, Conduct of Examination for Final Semester/Term/Year for the Academic Session of 2019-20 in view of Covid-19, the University proposed its final semester/year/term examination from July 1, 2020 with a delay of almost two months. The UGC issued revised Guidelines for Conducting Examinations during Covid-19 (dated 6th July, 2020) and Special Operating Procedures (SOP) (dated 8th July, 2020).

DU Notification said, “in case the situation did not appear to be normal in view of Covid-19 and to maintain social distancing, safety and health of students, the University would adopt alternative mode of examination, i.e. Open Book Examination (OBE) for final semester/term/year UG and PG students of all programmes and streams along with arrears (ER) of previous semesters/terms/years. Students would be allowed to attempt their examinations as per date sheet and courses as filled in the examination form from seating at home or any place as per instructions/guidelines issued in this regard.

OBE was a new concept both for the students and teachers and was to be introduced for the first time in DU history at the UG level. Certain sections both from teachers and students started their protest against OBE taking the matter being raised at the University Grants Commission (UGC), Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) (recently renamed as Ministry of Education) and finally the matter reached to Delhi High Court. After crossing all the hurdles, OBE took place for the final year students during August 2020 and results were declared course wise with many discrepancies as reported by the students and teachers.



It may be noted that conducting OBE for DU was not an easy task and all credit must be given to both University and Colleges authorities and staffs for providing the logistics and human resources required for this massive exercise. Teachers also deserve credit for their co-operation for question setting and evaluation through online mode. Students except the final year/term/semester were promoted to the next year/term/semester on the basis of continued evaluation and assessment.

In addition, DU despite having many limitations because of Covid-19 Regulations, has been providing transcriptions and results of the passing out students. The constituent Colleges of the University have provided all co-operation in protecting the interest of students and staffs during the pandemic. It is worth mentioning that barring the various phases of 'complete lockdown' as announced by the Union Government from time to time, the institutions, particularly the College where the author teaches, have kept their administrative offices operational for the help of the students, staffs and other stakeholders. Head of the Institution (Principal) has always been available personally to guide, supervise and implement all Covid-19 related protocols and regulations being sent to the College.

4. Admission for the New Academic Session

Through its Press Release dated 20th July 2020, DU announced Admission Schedule for UG/PG/PG Dip./MPhil./Ph.D. maintaining that the registration process of all the programmes would completely be online for all categories and for all quotas. Updating the earlier notifications, the deadline for the ongoing online registration for admission into various categories was extended up to 31st July, 2020. The admission for the UG Programmes against the first cut off list started on 12th October, 2020 and the whole process was to be completed after admission through five cut off lists and one special cut off list by 22nd November, 2020. Admission for the PG Programmes started on 19th October and it was to be completed by 13th November, 2020 and the academic session was to commence for the freshly admitted students from 18th November, 2020. Admission for the PG entrance/merit based admission process started on 26th October, 2020 and the same was to be completed on 13th November, 2020.

For the first time in the history of DU, admission was granted to students without meeting them face to face and without verifying the submitted documents physically for the whole exercise was done completely online. Students were able to join their favourite courses by remaining lodged at their own places. As per DU information, the admission process for the current academic session came to an end on 31st December, 2020 after releasing seven cut offs for the UG courses while the engagement of the classes for the same is already in progress.

According to a recent Times of India Report, during the UG admissions (1920-21) at DU, total applications received were 3,36,000 for the total available seats of 64,662 and the number of total admissions granted were 85,000 in 61 colleges (two Christian minority colleges not included) (Ibrar & Chettri, 2021). The Report discussed in details about the vacancy in the reserved category seats and further mentioned,

“Despite several cutoff lists and special drives this year, 5.6 percent of the economically weaker section (EWS) seats at Delhi University are still vacant. The vacancy is the highest among all reserved categories, followed by 3.5 percent for scheduled tribe (ST) seats. Under the other



backward class category, the count stands at 1.5 percent and for scheduled caste candidates, at 0.6 percent. According to DU officials, the EWS category has more vacant seats this year than in 2019, when the reservation was implemented”.

5. Shifting the Classroom based Teaching-learning to completely Online Mode

For a change, summer vacation of the university was extended first up to 31st July, 2020 and later the same was extended up to 9th August, 2020, making it another first in DU history. For the first time, the University issued separate Academic Calendars (2020-21) for the existing and freshly admitted UG & PG student as per following details:

Table-1 DU Academic Calendar for 2020-21

Semester III/V/VII		Semester IV/VI/VIII	
Classes begin	10 th August, 2020 (Monday)	Classes begin	2 nd January, 2021(Saturday)
Dispersal of classes, preparation leave and Practical Examination begin	28 th November, 2020 (Saturday)	Mid-Semester Break	24 th March, 2021 (Wednesday) to 30 th March, 2021 (Tuesday)
Theory Examinations begin	12 th December, 2020 (Saturday)	Classes begin after Mid-Semester Break	31 st March, 2021 (Wednesday)
Winter Break	29 th December, 2020 (Tuesday) to 1 st January, 2021 (Friday)	Dispersal of classes, preparation leave and Practical Examination begin	30 th April, 2021 (Friday)
		Theory Examinations begin	15 th May, 2021(Saturday)
		Summer Vacations	29 th May, 2021(Saturday) to 19 th July, 2021(Monday)

Source: University of Delhi, Notification, No. Acad. 1/299/Academic Calendar/264, Dated: 28.08.2020.

It is clear from Tables 1&2 that the academic session started for the immediate batches and freshly admitted students on different schedules and similarly their examinations will also be conducted on different schedules. Academic calendars issued by the University are tightly scheduled in a mechanical way and there is hardly any time left for other activities between the semesters. Faculty and staff members will be burdened with their responsibilities all throughout the year. Admission of new students, teaching and examination of the existing students would go simultaneously for many years to come. This may create a huge challenge for Colleges to meet the expectations of students and the University because of the logistics involved therein.



Table-2 DU Academic Calendar for 2020-21

FIRST BATCH/FIRST SEMESTER (Students Freshly Admitted in 2020)		EVEN SEMESTER (FIRST YEAR)	
Commencement of Classes	18.11.2020 (Wednesday)	Commencement of Classes	01.04.2021 (Thursday)
Preparatory Break and Practical Examinations	06.03.2021 (Saturday) to 14.3.21 (Sunday)	Preparatory Break and Practical Examinations	21.07.2021 (Wednesday) to 28.07.2021 (Wednesday)
Conduct of Examinations	15.03.21 (Monday) to 27.03.21 (Saturday)	Conduct of Examinations	29.07.2021 (Thursday) to 09.08.2021 (Monday)
Semester Break	28.03.21 (Sunday) to 31.03.2021 (Wednesday)	Semester Break	10.08.2021 (Tuesday) to 15.08.2021 (Sunday)
		Next Academic Session	16.08.2021 (Monday)

Source: University of Delhi, Notification, No. Acad. I/299/Academic Calendar/283, Dated: 09th October, 2020.

Critical Evaluation

This is true that Delhi University Colleges have bravely faced the academic challenges created by the pandemic and have successfully addressed the issues of ‘engagement of online classes’; ‘internal assessment of students’; ‘conduct of OBE’; ‘admission of fresh students’ etc., there have been a lot of embarrassing situations which could have been avoided with an advance & sound planning and effective implementation, the hallmark of any reputed institution.

This is also true that Colleges were caught unawares and were certainly not prepared initially for catering students fully through online mode of engagements because the main stay of teaching-learning programme in DU is based on classroom study although some of Colleges were using these online mechanism for a smaller part of their academic engagements. When the first phase of ‘complete lockdown’ was announced, Colleges were about to finish their academic courses for the major part of the concerned syllabi was already taught in the classroom mode of teaching-learning exercise. They did not face much of the troubles in reaching out to students through a bunch of online mechanisms because only a small remaining academic portion was to be completed, some segments of internal assessment were already completed and students had already filled their concerned examination forms.

The real challenges of online engagement surfaced during completion of the process of ‘internal assessment of students’ and ‘conduct of OBE’. Although the exercise of ‘internal assessment’ is based on continuous evaluation of academic performance of students, it was difficult to organize online tests for them and even the submission of written assignment online was not satisfactory as there were many issues about students’ access to online networks.

Holding the online classes is not without the real difficulties faced both by the teachers and students and their family members. The issue got the national headlines when a student enrolled in one of the most prestigious colleges of DU committed suicide for not having the proper access to a mobile phone/laptop for joining the ongoing online classes despite the various ongoing financial schemes



launched by the Government of India. It was difficult both for the teachers and students to adjust to the new situation. Any way the University relaxed the norms related with 'internal assessment of students' as has been discussed earlier and the task was completed somehow but it was not as rigorous as it used to be for earlier batches of students.

Conducting the examination for students was another contentious issue for there was no unanimity among the stakeholders about the conduct of 'online/offline' examinations for all the existing batches of students. Some were in favour of examinations only for the final year/semester/term students, while the immediate year/semester/term students were supposed to be promoted on the basis of their earlier performance to the next year/semester/term. Even the regulatory authorities were divided in their opinion and the matter went to Delhi High Court and the Court refused to stay the examinations. The University announced for the conduct of OBE online. It was completely a new concept for UG students and many glitches surfaced while conducting it because of the large number of students, viz. allocation of wrong subject and question paper; answer paper not being uploaded on the designated portal; lack of adequate time for completing the whole exercise etc. Later, issues related with evaluation of these answer sheets and declaration of result came in the limelight and even today, the results have not been declared by the University fully.

Admission of the fresh batch of students was also a big challenge for the whole exercise was to be completed totally through online mode for the first time in DU history along with all the difficulties created by the pandemic. It was a new situation in the sense that without meeting the applicants and without physical verification of the required documents, admission was to be granted to them. Thus suddenly the notion of time and distance disappeared for the concerned students and technically the admission process became very easy and convenient for them provided they qualify for it and have access to the proper online network. At the same time, the whole process became very difficult for those who despite qualifying for the admission did not have proper access to online network.

Thus the success in getting admission to DU became dependent not on the qualifying marks only rather it became captive of having access to a strong and proper online network by which one could participate in the whole admission process. This is a well-known fact that access to online network is not uniform throughout the country and there have been Government imposed restrictions in particular areas too. Moreover, it may also be pointed out that the 'online literacy' of students and parents belonging to different socio-economic strata could also have played some role in making their choice/decision in getting admission to their desired courses and colleges.

Another adverse consequence of the online admission process has been that the size of the class has not been uniform, in some cases, the number of students in an average forty-forty five students class has increased and gone to that of more than the hundred and in certain cases and there is no adequate number of students. For example, the number of students in the BA (Honours) class of the author of this paper has crossed hundred while the sanctioned strength of the same is approximately forty. Engaging them in the online class remains full of challenges for it is very difficult to provide individual attention and care to each one of them personally. This is clearly a disadvantage in comparison to the regular face to face classroom teaching to the especially abled students and students belonging to poor strata of the society. It has rightly been said, "Can online education enable all students to participate in and benefit from it equally? Massive online education without addressing the huge access gap and disparities in digital infrastructure would not only exclude a



vast majority of students from learning opportunities but also exacerbate the existing socio-economic disparities in educational opportunities” (Reddy et al, 2020).

Access to the internet facility is not uniform for faculty members and students and those who have a very small living space as this is very common in a city like Delhi, have to face many difficulties regarding the online classes because of the privacy involved. Another problem associated with the online education is the availability of the technical gadgets, viz. mobile phone and laptop/desktop with the adequate internet data packs for a family having more than one student, requires additional investment of resources for this.

In the context of the pandemic, the situation is even worse, not better, for the suitability of online teaching as a surrogate. It also has a particularly heinous effect for women, both female students and female family members. Given the grossly unequal burden of domestic work that women share at home, often the female students would have to take up additional domestic responsibilities during lockdown (Bhattacharya, 2020).

Conclusion

Delhi University Colleges have put their best efforts to accomplish their academic and other related obligations since mid-March 2020 (initial phase of the pandemic) by completing the ongoing courses; holding the due examinations and providing the respective results in time. Even the promotion of the faculty members, due since long has been successfully initiated through online mode. Off course there have been certain glitches in achieving these mammoth tasks. They have admitted fresh batches of students and have so far successfully been engaging their classes through various online mode as per their separate sets of academic calendars for the session of 2020-21. This is to appreciate that despite the myriad constraints put by the pandemic, the faculty members, staff, the Principals and various other DU authorities have contributed and co-operated hugely in the implementation of the policies and decisions taken by the University of Delhi; University Grants Commission (UGC) and Government of India.

Meanwhile a debate is going on among the stakeholders to resume the academic activities on the campus in a phase wise manner as one of their main priorities. With the increase in declining cases of Covid-19 in Delhi and the vaccination programme being already launched, we may expect return of normal academic activities on the campus in future very soon. According to the latest Order issued by DU, “all Colleges/Centres/Departments shall be functional and therefore all teaching staff must attend to their work place with effect from 01.02.2021 subject to the compliance of Covid-19 protocols.” But there is an apprehension among the stakeholders that the hurriedly imposed online classes due to the extraordinary situation created by the pandemic without providing the necessary logistics and training are going to stay and become part of the university ecosystem on a permanent basis in future. This is surely going to adversely affect the outstanding ‘teaching-learning ethos’ developed and achieved by DU as a centre of excellence through its institutions over a century. Therefore, this is high time, a prudent, pragmatic and sustainable planning for future in consultation with all the stakeholders is done immediately to save the institution for generations to come.



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