

# Online Teaching in Public Campuses during COVID 19: Teachers' Perceptions

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## **Abstract**

*The coronavirus pandemic has had a profound impact on education. Higher education institutions including public campuses have followed the recourse of online learning as an alternate to the face-to-face learning to minimize this impact and keep the students engaged during the pandemic. This paper discusses the changing scenario of delivering education in higher educational institutions in Nepal. The purpose of this study was to explore teachers' perceptions on online teaching. It also tried to identify the challenges and opportunities of online teaching in public campuses of Nepal. The study adopted a qualitative research design. Three faculty members of three different campuses from Rupandehi were taken as research participants purposively. The main finding was that the faculty members are ready to adopt online teaching to mitigate the learning loss of the students due to COVID 19. But there are some challenges for conducting online classes like unwillingness of campuses to implement the online classes, lack of physical infrastructures, lack of clear policy, and limited motivating factors for faculty members and students.*

**Keywords:** Online teaching, public campus, COVID 19, faculty, perception

## **Introduction**

COVID-19 pandemic has a massive impact on global human life; and it has traumatized the education sector as well. Dhawan (2020) states that several areas were affected worldwide and there was a fear of losing the entire year, semester or even more in the coming future. Various schools, colleges, and universities have discontinued face-to-face teaching. Educational institutions have been struggling to find better options to deal with this challenging situation. These circumstances make us realize that careful planning is an urgent need for academic institutions (Rieley, 2020).

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Being a faculty member of a public campus, I realized that the students of these campuses are lagging behind in education due to the announcement of lockdown during this pandemic. Public campuses were in dilemma regarding the continuation of their teaching-learning activities in the beginning days of the pandemic. Later, government authorities and universities of Nepal realized the alternative ways of learning and tried to mitigate the learning loss of students by by means of virtual and online teaching and learning. Acharya and others (2020) state that because of the closure of educational institutions for a considerably long period, education was changed dramatically; and it led to the notable rise of online learning whereby teaching and learning are undertaken remotely and in the digital platforms. Higher education faculties in the public campuses are being asked to teach online (Dhawan, 2020, p. 2). It is important to consider their perspectives on teaching adults in a computer-mediated environment. One way to understand how faculty members experience online teaching is by studying online teaching situations, using faculty members' reconstructed experiences, and elaborating the meaning that they assign to those experiences. Typically, online teaching involves the use of the internet to access learning materials; to interact with the content, instructor, and other learners; and to obtain support during the learning process (Ally, 2004, p. 5).

Online learning is catalyzing a pedagogical shift of our teaching and learning. Stern (2016) illustrates that there is a shift away from top-down lecturing and changing from the "sage on the stage" to "the guide on the side" (p. 2). It provides opportunities to access and share information more easily. It provides a mechanism for equal opportunity among students and teachers. It develops digital literacy skills that are increasingly required in contemporary society and workplace environments. Online teaching and learning cover a wide set of applications and processes, such as web-based learning, computer-based learning, virtual classrooms, and digital collaboration.

Transformative learning theory was developed by Jack Mezirow in the late 1900s. It provided a rich framework to analyze teachers' learning processes while teaching online. This learning theory has evolved 'into a comprehensive and complex description of how learners construct, validate, and reformulate the meaning of their experience' (as cited in Baran and others, 2011). The unexpected, unplanned, and sudden shift to online learning caused by COVID-19 has certainly been an experience that has led to cognitive difference as our expectations from education have been

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challenged. Instead of escaping away from this crisis, there was the suggestion for 'embracing' COVID-19 and the resulting situation as an opportunity for transformative event that will lead to innovation in education (Kitchenham, 2008).

The founder of experiential education theory was John Dewey. From experiential education perspective, the goal of education is to develop students' ability to transform experiences into new knowledge through reflection (Dewey, 1960; Kolb, 1984). The COVID-19 pandemic is proving to be a constructive disruptor, giving an opportunity for restructuring the conventional, classroom based educational system. The rapid transition to online education has not only benefited public campus teachers and students but also has created a momentum of continued education for practicing higher education in Nepal.

Self-determination theory highlights the importance of humans' evolved inner resources for personality development and behavioral self-regulation (Ryan and Deci, 2000). It explains the necessary context in which students are motivated to learn. According to this theory, motivation for learning occurs when three basic human needs are met, which are relatedness, autonomy, and competence.

### ***Impact of COVID 19 in Higher Education and Public Campuses in Nepal***

The alarming spread of the virus caused havoc in the educational system forcing the educational institutions to shut down. As a consequence of the lockdown, schools and universities in Nepal were temporarily closed for about eight months. As of the third week of September 2020, UNESCO (2020) estimated that nearly nine million (8,796,624) students in Nepal are affected due to school/university closures in response to the pandemic. 31% students of higher education have been studying in public campuses (UGC, 2020). Higher education institutions have been trying to change the mode of face-to-face education towards online learning. Public institutions have faced difficulty in adopting the updated technologies to implement online education.

Public campuses are directed, constituted and funded by community people, and are obliged to follow the rules and regulations of the university they are affiliated to along with the instructions of Ministry of Education. They are financed and governed by the community and are not institutionalized for profit motive. They receive very small amount of financial support. Students

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of these institutions and their curricular and non-curricular activities are badly affected by COVID 19. These campuses were built for face-to-face teaching-learning practices, having no infrastructure, and preparedness for online classes. Faculties and students were not mentally and technically prepared for online mode of teaching; and the internet facility, the most important requirement of online classes, is hardly reliable. Under such circumstances, online teaching in Nepal is more than challenging. UGC, as the initiative to address the unprecedented impact of Covid-19 on regular academic activities of universities and higher education institutions, issued the guidelines for facilitating alternative mode of learning in higher education in July 2020. (UGC, 2020). It has created both opportunities and challenges in higher educational institutions of Nepal. They have, thus, tried to respond proactively to this disturbance through radical change in education with virtual or online learning.

Though public campuses have resorted to online learning activities to keep the students engaged during the pandemic, there are challenges to conduct online learning activities due to the lack of tools required to connect and engage teachers and students online. The challenge is complemented by the fact that a large section of students resides in the remote areas that lack basic internet connectivity. Even those who have access to the internet may not know how to make proper use of it. In this connection, there are crucial questions such as: How could it be effective in the places where people have to climb up trees to access mobile networks? How can online classes be effective?

On the other hand, public educational institutions suffering from financial problem have completely shut their activities for not having access to e-learning solutions. Some public campuses have started online classes by using Microsoft Teams and others have been using Zoom and Google meets. However, there are some critical questions related to the quality of internet service to all students and teachers. More precisely, the question is: Are the teachers well equipped and trained enough to run the virtual classes effectively? Are all students able to use this opportunity of distance learning?

Understanding the perception of faculties towards online education is necessary so that their concerns can be addressed properly. Some researchers have studied faculty readiness for online teaching. Lack of research was realized on how online teaching has been perceived by the faculties of public campuses in the local setting. Development of online education is still

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underway among in public campuses. So I chose this study to determine the perception of faculty members towards online education in public campuses during the outbreak of COVID-19.

### **The present study**

Considering the questions just presented, I realized the necessity to find out the perception of faculties and challenges of online classes during COVID-19 in public campuses. In the same way, I also felt the necessity to find the challenges and opportunities of online teaching during COVID19 and the necessary steps to be adopted for the betterment of online teaching and learning. The objective of this study was to make exploration on these crucial issues.

This study has attempted to find out the perception of faculties regarding online teaching. It tried to explore the public campus teachers' challenges and opportunities to implement ICTs in teaching and learning. The study was limited to the selected public campuses of Rupandehi district. The research participants were three faculty members of three different public campuses. Interview guideline questions were used for data collection; and responses were collected through messenger and zoom. Due to lockdown, virtual methods were followed for data collection.

In this study, I have tried to bring into light the major opportunities and challenges of online teaching and learning. The findings of the study are considered to be of great significance to different stakeholders for several reasons. This study is expected to bring out the physical, social, psychological, and technological conditions of online learning. The findings of this study may also contribute to the benefit for the higher education institutions like public campuses by providing significant insights into the online teaching by enabling them to support and prepare their programmes better for the days to come.

### **Methodology**

This study was based on a qualitative research design. I used a phenomenological study method that studies the process or record of research into the development of a particular person, group, or situation over a period of time Creswell (2014). Smith (2004) defines phenomenology in terms of the study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view. The research site was Rupandehi district of Nepal. The participants of the study were three faculty members of the different

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public campuses of Rupandehi district. For locating the research participants, first of all, I listed out all the public campuses of Rupandehi district. After that, I selected three campuses purposively. Finally, I interviewed the selected participants. I collected the data by conducting in-depth interviews of the participants using unstructured guideline questions. My questions were directed to the participants' experiences, feelings, beliefs and convictions on the theme in question. In the study, the participants' real names have not been disclosed as per the research ethics.

The experience of three faculty members was explored in depth. A small number of participants was considered sufficient as it was a rigorous analysis of exploratory nature (Daniel, 2012). I analyzed the collected data descriptively developing themes on the basis of the responses of the participants.

### **Results and discussion**

The themes generated from data collected for research purpose are presented and discussed as given below.

#### ***Faculty perception of online teaching***

Since the COVID -19 pandemic has disturbed the normal lifestyle of people across the world, the virtual world has come to the fore for rescue. Students and teachers of public campuses have to struggle while getting into these online platforms. Singh (2020) states that online education has emerged as an alternative to ordinary face-to-face classes. But most of the public campuses are lacking the basic technological devices to conduct online education. In this regard respondent 'A' said '*I am using only free Zoom applications which have limited time; due to this many classes of mine can't be completed, the campus doesn't provide any support for online teaching*'. This statement shows that there is a problem of managing devices and software for online classes in public campuses. Sapkota (2020) states that access to technical infrastructure, competence, and pedagogies for online learning was found to be the major challenges faced by the institution between the shifts of teaching methods. In this case participant 'B' said

*'... online education is one of the important education methods today, there are ambiguity and disagreement about what to teach, how to teach, the workload of faculty and students, the teaching environment, and the issues of educational equity'*.

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His statement gives emphasis on managing the basic devices and preparing the guidelines for online teaching. How to effectively educate students online is the most important consideration during COVID 19. Switching from a traditional face-to-face classroom to a computer-based online or virtual classroom makes the teaching experience entirely different for faculty members. Conducting teaching-learning activities from their resistance may not be appropriate; in the beginning he/she has to create a favorable environment for the online teaching-learning activities. Respondent 'C' said:

*'I'm not proactive about using computers and its different applications; for that I need the support of my staff but it is difficult to get help from them because of social distancing. It is better to manage ICT training which can be fruitful for conducting the online classes effectively'.*

This statement shows the real picture and perception of faculty members about online teaching in public campuses. They are not competent in using computer technology. In this regard, even UNESCO is aware that transitioning to online learning at educational institutions is a very difficult and highly complex undertaking for education systems, even in the best of circumstances; but it stresses that it has become a necessity (UNESCO, 2020). Pandey (2020) illustrates that to consolidate and strengthen the education system, four key factors must be considered: schools' readiness for conducting ICT classes, faculty member's readiness for conducting ICT classes, students' equitable readiness for ICT-assisted classes, and home environment readiness for ICT classes. Online education at public campuses has increased exponentially after the Covid-19 outbreak. There has been an overnight shift of normal classrooms into e-classrooms; that is, faculty members have shifted their entire pedagogical approach to tackle new educational conditions and adapt to the changing situations. Adopting online teaching and learning is beneficial in accelerating learning, and it has reinforced students of public campuses and faculty members in the comfort of home during the global crisis.

### *Alternatives ways of teaching and learning*

The novel coronavirus has forced all the education systems to find alternative paths of teaching, learning, and evaluation. Participant 'A' said:

*'I have been conducting my classes by applying internet technology to teach during a pandemic situation. I think it is the best alternative*

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*way to replace face-to-face classes with online teaching and learning'.*

From this statement we know that for some teachers the use of technology in teaching and learning is the best solution to replace the traditional education system. Higher education institutions and concerned authorities need to focus on how the education system can be made operational in the time of pandemic. One of the alternative paths can be a full-fledged ICT-based education that can work as the immediate and long-term alternative to combat the Covid-19 and similar pandemics in the future. Other respondents have similar views on the alternative ways of teaching and learning during social distancing. They said that online learning through Zoom is the best alternative for this situation. *'In the beginning days I used Facebook messenger to provide notes, homework, and assignments'* said participant 'C'. It proves that faculty members are worried about their student's education so they have been searching for alternatives to the conventional face-to-face learning during the lockdown. So the faculty members are ready to adopt online teaching to mitigate the learning loss of the students due to COVID 19. They perceive virtual and online learning as the most important alternative to survive education system in the period of social distancing. Online learning is the combination of contents and instructional methods delivered by the media devices facilitated through a computer intended to build knowledge and skills linked to individual learning goals and organizational performance (Singh, 2016).

### *Employing technology for minimizing learning loss*

It is obvious that the faculty members of public campuses have used the online learning system as a tool to help their students learn beyond the usual face-to-face model in the classroom. Participant 'B' said: *'It is impossible to meet students physically and teach them in classrooms these days; so teaching through technology is beneficial for them'*. This statement highlights the use of technology to minimize the learning loss of students during the COVID 19 pandemic. Universities and campuses have not been able to follow their academic calendar since students and the staff and faculty cannot continue their academic programmes such as running classes and taking exams in normal physical classrooms. Nepal's educational institutions, including campuses and universities, have been managing their programmes and organizing classes through alternative e-learning platforms (UGC 2020).



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All respondents believe that online learning is the most important way for minimizing the learning loss of students. So, public campuses should be proactively encouraged to embrace online education system by introducing virtual classes – ensuring learning opportunity for all the students throughout the country. During this hard time, the concern is not about whether online teaching-learning methods can provide quality education; it is rather how academic institutions will be able to adopt online learning in such a massive manner (Carey, 2020). Faculty members enjoy online classes because of the opportunity of being connected with technology for teaching, collecting teaching materials, sharing such materials to students, and connecting with international resource persons.

### *Challenges*

Even though online classes are the better alternatives for mitigating the learning loss of students during lockdown, there are limitations of following such a strategy in real situations. In this concern, participant 'A' said:

*'Most of the students do not attend the class due to the lack of internet and devices, some of them show less interest because exams and sessions have become uncertain, and the big problem is the irregular power supply and slow internet'.*

As poor internet connectivity and unstable power supply are common problems, several students have to participate in online teaching-learning without reliable internet access and power supply. Another challenge of online teaching is turning students into passive observers rather than active participants. The students joining the class and listening to their teacher there may not be in two-way communication. The next challenge of online teaching is staying connected with students. In any online classroom, much of the learning is completed asynchronously and students often feel disconnected with their teachers, as well as their friends. It can be difficult for teachers to teach online when they struggle to devise how students are comprehending the course content, and whether they are participating in learning experiences.

As participant 'B' claimed: *'The major challenge is less attendance of students due to internet access problems. Most of them join through mobile data that is costly to them'*. This statement claimed that many of the students join their classes through their mobile phones which may not fulfill all the teaching objectives like presentations. Mobile data packages in Nepal are

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comparatively expensive which discourages students to search the materials through the internet. Participant 'C' has faced the same problem, as he said *'there is the problem of a power cut, no network, slow internet; due to these students have to join and rejoin again and again'*. This statement commented that the unstable power supply stresses the students as well as faculty members. The students join the class late, disconnect and reconnect the classes frequently because of the poor strength of the internet and frequent power cut. Due to this, there may not be good collaboration between teachers and students. It is one of the most difficult things to achieve when students are not physically present together.

Even though online teaching-learning is a new perspective with exciting possibilities, it is not without limitations. Online learning has many limitations ranging from learners' issues, educators' issues and content issues. It has a limitation for institutions to engage students and make them participate in teaching-learning process, for faculty members to move from offline mode to online mode involving changes in teaching methodology and managing time. With these considerations, the quality of online teaching-learning programmes is a real challenge for public campuses in Nepal.

### ***Opportunities***

Online education gave an opportunity for emotional and moral support to both the students and faculty members to stay connected during the pandemic. With the appropriate availability of technology, online learning can be advantageous and effective in numerous ways since it can offer a lot of content, interactions, flexibility and reinforcements. The online learning environment fosters additional learning experiences whereby learners can interact, collaborate, and take ownership of their own learning at their own pace and time (Ali, 2020). Hence, ICT immersed lessons provide a motivating and encouraging learning environment for our students and; it also leads to self-directed learning. Learners can keep themselves engaged from any place using any device such as mobile phone, laptop or desktop computer as per their convenience. In this concern, all three participants argued that the lockdown has positively provided an opportunity for learning through online communication. When there is a shift from a teacher-controlled environment to a more learner controlled environment, the role of educator becomes more of a facilitator, and minimal scaffolding may be required (Geng and others, 2019). Likewise Martin and others (2019) reported that educational institutions were modifying online lessons due to

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the recent outbreak of coronavirus (COVID-19). So, online distance teaching-learning has become a good alternative tool if accessible to everyone. It offers courses and lessons to students who are unable to be physically present in a traditional classroom or do not have the time to attend classes physically. Bary (2020) noted that the case of coronavirus is a huge opportunity for online education due to the closure of schools and colleges. In the same way, my participants also argued that great opportunities are provided by this pandemic for the transformation of the entire system of higher education.

### **Conclusions**

My reflection revealed that the perception of faculty members towards online education is positive; and they want to transform traditional face-to-face teaching-learning activities to virtual online learning. They perceive it as the opportunity to expand the horizon of their knowledge for enhancement in the personal and professional growth. They considered online teaching as an opportunity for their development and as a strong tool to connect the students in a virtual classroom who are otherwise dispersed geographically. Facing challenges, they have got this as a great online teaching experiment. Most of the public campuses have no experience of conducting online classes; and teachers do not seem to have adequate skills for running online classes as they have neither been trained to do the job nor had they been involved in online teaching before this emergency. Increase in the number of absent students, ineffective class delivery and the disturbance of the internet, electricity and other barriers related to the personal computer, smart phone or other devices are the common challenges of online teaching in public campuses.

There must be appropriate technological infrastructure to conduct online teaching. More emphasis should be given on clear institutional policy regarding the regulation of examination. Campuses should be provided with authentic online programmes such as Microsoft Teams and various educational softwares to make classes effective. Institutional email Id should be provided to the students and faculty members of public campuses. There must be a clear stipulation by the government and concerning authority like UGC in their educational policies regarding the online and distance learning programmes. There must be concern about the standards for quality control, development of e-resources, and e-content delivery. Most important thing is

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that there must be the availability of affordable internet connection, and appropriate electronic devices.

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