

14. Lockdown and College Fees: A Covid19 Challenge of Economic Downturn

Dr. Soma Roy

Department of Biotechnology,
Ranchi Women's College, Ranchi University.

14.1 Introduction:

As Tuition and college fees continue to rise, the online platforms of education in this pandemic needs to be discussed threadbare. Since cost of college education in India has been rapidly rising, students feel that they are getting a raw deal by taking online classes. Several colleges and Universities are now conducting online classes for the rest of the semester. Students are demanding a partial fee refund. While applying for admissions there are many clauses that the students sign, the question of legal backing to such demand will remain unanswered.

14.2 Not for Profit Organization:

Colleges run under not-for-profit basis. According to Supreme Court, education is a fundamental right, and it is a public good. The UGC as a regulatory body according to the act of 1956, does not give a provision of fees refund or reduction. In some way the students' rights have not been protected. So, the regulatory body defies the very basic outline of Supreme Court where it considers education as charity and not a business.

14.3 First Argument:

The above contradictory statements of the court and UGC gives us a valid point that during this pandemic, shifting of offline classes to online mode changes the basic infrastructure cost of running an institute. Since students are not availing the basic facilities such as clean classrooms, electricity, lodging or boarding, so there has to be a provision where this cost reduction can lead to cost cutting from the tuition fees. If these costs are not deducted from fees, the very motive of Supreme Court order runs out of law.

14.4 Lack of Opportunities:

During normal routine classroom, the students make use of the library, the playground, the canteen, the music room, the yoga room etc. During online mode all these usages cease. An amount for utilizing these services are taken in addition to the tuition fees during beginning of semester. So as access to these opportunities cease, the students have to be compensated.

14.5 Extra Cost of Online Classes

The diversity of Indian population is yet another important and very exclusive factor which is one of the major challenges of conducting online classes.

The diversity is so unique, and our pride as a culture, but it becomes ironically a hinderance to a vast section of population, which are deprived of the digital platforms in remote areas. I am taking the case of my own state of **Jharkhand**, where villages still lack proper electricity and internet. Students who have left their hostels in city and are currently based in their village hometown, are facing difficulty in resuming their studies in digital mode. Some semester exams are being conducted online, these students are neither availing the classes and are also missing their exams, inspite of fully paid semester fees. Even if they are able to take online classes and examinations, the cost of internet is disrupting their goal. Parents are unable to support the rising cost of their Ward's mobile. So it is very practical to cut fees cost, or adjust it according to the already paid semester fees.

14.6 Surfeit and Cross:

Subsidies - UGC should regulate the surplus amount that constitutes running of a college. Whenever a budget of an institute comes into force there is always a proposal of cross-subsidies. Many colleges follow this budgetary method. Departments, faculties, or even single courses with deficits can be subsidized by departments, facilities or courses with more reserves but in most of the colleges, the existence of cross- subsidiary mode goes largely unquestioned. Pressures on higher education funding combined with increasing emphasis on accountability and performance measurements changes the attitude of cross- funding. The Idea of cross-subsidization is not tolerated by senior- level University Officials. Looking at all these paradigms the UGC sent out an official announcement quote - " It is requested that in view of the prevailing extraordinary difficult circumstances, universities and colleges may consider the matter regarding the payment of annual/ semester fee, tuition fee, examination fee, etc sympathetically and if feasible they may consider offering alternative payment options to students till the situation returns to normal. If need be the universities and colleges may also consider individual requests from students received if any, concerning payment of fee, in a considerate manner, keeping in view the present Covid-19 Pandemic."

Solutions An equilibrium has to be reached where in a diverse country like India, students may not be well equipped with technology tools to avail remote learning. For college students, democratization of technology is an important issue, comprising internet connectivity, and telecom infrastructures, and affordability of online system, availability of laptop / desktops and online assessment tools. Students are facing many challenges like uncertainty about their exams, results, admission process, entrance exams, reopening of campuses and the huge impact of this pandemic had on their education and careers. The economic downturn of this crisis is beyond words. The plight of migrants, the sick, the Doctors and health workers have been in discussion forum and their problems are being highlighted. But the economic downturn due to Covid-19 on student is not getting sufficient response. There are many students whose parents have lost their jobs, or whose businesses have been affected resulting in financial burden. Parents are not being able to pay fees. So there has to urgent solutions, so that in the coming months the students do not suffer academically. Some basic and relevant solutions are:

- a. Government should immediately provide grants similar to migrant's grants.
- b. The educational institutions should annouce reduction of fees immediately
- c. They can charge only tuition fees and waive other form of fees immediately.
- d. Flexibility of pass marks so that students are free from mental anxiety.

- e. Educational institutions must develop a growth mindset and develop strategies to do justice to academic commitments.
- f. Academic quality and rigour should not be affected.
- g. Requirement of a well-structured plan that covers all aspects of academics and student life.
- h. Students must get the best possible online learning experience at minimum cost.
- i. Blended learning should be encouraged where transition from online to offline can be done in blended form, digital as well as face to face.
- j. A very unique program of Mentor - Mentee system must be followed, where each student can choose his or her mentor teacher. The Guru- Shishya mode can encourage students to discuss all their problems from academic to financial with their mentor. The Mentor teacher can take up their problems through proper channels.

14.7 Inference:

In a draft regulation of 27th November 2019, UGC came to a decision of formation of fee committees to regulate fees in colleges. The fee structure will be decided according to socio - economic conditions of that particular geographical area irrespective of caste. This is a very good initiative, where the student category according to economic status comes into forefront. All institutions have to submit their budget six months in advance. Operative costs of institutions should be factored in. These measures will lead to preparation for reduction of fees in these pandemic conditions.

Covid 19 pandemic has given us opportunities to gear up our regulatory bodies and fill the gaps. These difficult times should pave a path for assurance of a balance between student's right to access education and the college's right to provide education based on our constitution.

The lockdown situation has given rise to a "new" normal in the field of education where rights of all stakeholders need to be addressed. It will lead to inclusiveness and aid in holistic development of students. This will be a win -win situation for all.