



## Student motivation in higher education institutes during pandemic (COVID-19)

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### Abstract

The outbreak of COVID-19 has created an unprecedented crisis in all social and economic sectors globally, thereby affecting multiple demographics. Like all other professions, the student community is experiencing an extraordinary challenge. Not only have their normal lives been paused, their usual academic and co-curricular practices have been replaced by the virtual mode. However, gradually through unlock periods, the situation is coming back to a nearly normal lifestyle. This nascent state of neo-normalization, the dysphonic nature of the changed paradigms, the embedded risk and uncertainty, is evoking psychological concerns. At this juncture, maintenance of motivation has become crucial for students. The present paper is going to focus on the challenges to this motivation and some strategies to overcome the hurdles.

**Keywords:** Unprecedented crisis, student community, psychological concerns, motivation

### Introduction

COVID-19 is the disease caused by the most recently discovered Coronavirus called SARS-CoV-2. It causes respiratory infections ranging from the common cold to more severe complications in human beings (WHO). It is a contagious disease; people in close physical proximity are vulnerable to receive and transmit the virus. It may also be spread through non-living objects. The outbreak of COVID-19 started in 2019 and escalated to pandemic proportions rapidly. However, the exact nature and potential mutations of the virus are gradually coming to light through research. The unfamiliarity of the disease has been a setback in the usual intervention mode and poses an immense challenge to medical professionals and researchers. The pandemic has created an unprecedented crisis in all social and economic sectors globally, thereby affecting multiple demographics. To combat the disease, Lockdowns were adopted in various sectors.

Like all other professions, the student community suffered from a complete shutdown of academic institutions, private academic help (tuitions, coaching classes) and even co-curricular activities. They are experiencing an extraordinary challenge. Not only have their normal lives been paused, their usual academic and co-curricular practices have been replaced by the virtual mode. Their mobility has become mostly restricted to their homes. By the end of December 2021, it has been almost 2 years during which this alteration has taken place. However, gradually through unlock periods, the situation is coming back to a nearly normal lifestyle. This nascent state of neo-normalization, the dysphonic nature of the changed paradigms, the embedded risk and uncertainty, is evoking psychological concerns. At this juncture, maintenance of motivation has become crucial for students. Students in higher education (colleges and universities) usually find it extremely challenging to make

appropriate career choices. The contemporary situation of the pandemic has taken a huge toll on them in terms of mental well-being. Most of them are suffering from unparalleled uncertainty, anxiety, perplexity, and hopelessness. They have failed to sustain their motivation and zeal and find themselves ill-equipped to work through the crisis. The present paper is going to focus on the challenges to this motivation and some strategies to overcome the hurdles.

The concept of Motivation focuses on explaining what moves human behavior. The word 'motivation' has been derived from the Latin word *movere* which means 'to move'. Thus, the literal meaning of motivation is the process of evoking movement in an organism. Motivation thus is a phenomenon that prompts, compels and energizes an individual to act or behave in a particular manner at a particular time for attaining a particular purpose or goal. Motivation needs to be sustained for it to become truly effective. The major challenges to sustain motivation, according to Blankstein, Frederick, & Wolff-Eisenberg, are as follows:

- Students in higher education can generally adapt to the emerging institutional policies related to the pandemic. However, they wanted additional communication and support from their academic mentors.
- In many cases, the most significant challenges that students face are those that they had been facing long before the pandemic such as balancing university classes, assignments and home responsibilities. Having to pivot unexpectedly to the online mode of learning and finding a conducive environment to complete one's work has proved to be especially difficult for most students.

- Collaborative, technical, and specialized assignments present a special challenge to the students and the most difficult to complete.
- Students lack a sense of belonging and connection to others at their institution due to the disembodied nature of the online mode.
- Concerns regarding physical and mental health are present as they are surrounded by reports about how to be safe during the pandemic.
- Students are also concerned about their economic stability. Those who reported the greatest concerns were relatively less likely to know how to go about finding emergency aid resources.
- Students are anxious about how their course completion timeline might be affected by the pandemic.
- Students have also faced severe interpersonal crisis in families (with parents, siblings) and in their romantic relationships, leading to unprecedented emotional turmoil which in turn has become a crux of demotivation (AICTE, 2020).

Apart from these challenges, there are certain specific challenges which are faced by students who were struggling through the changed mode of education. Some of these challenges faced by students in adapting to online mode of learning are as follows:

- Lack of interaction/communication with peers
- Inability to learn effectively in an online format
- Lack of access to an appropriate study space
- Lack of access to uninterrupted network/ internet connections
- Inability to conduct practicals and researches
- Need to provide additional care for family members and greater engagement in household chores
- Inability to physically attend professional conferences

(Schwartz, Ahmed, Leschitz, Uzicanin, & Uscher-Pines, 2020) <sup>[12]</sup>.

It is apparent that these are serious issues and that they need urgent redressal if student interests are to be preserved. However, this changed mode of education also has a silver lining. Despite facing these problems, students have also reported some advantageous aspects of online learning. They are as follows:

- More time for academic work
- Enjoyment of learning in an online format due to its multi-dimensional nature
- More productive while completing assignments
- Ability to be better prepared for classes

(Schwartz, Ahmed, Leschitz, Uzicanin, & Uscher-Pines, 2020) <sup>[12]</sup>.

Psychologists have come up with certain time-tested strategies which can go a long way in sustaining motivation during the present crisis:

1. **Psycho-education:** Proper and realistic understanding of the pandemic and post pandemic situation needs to be imparted to the students after evaluating them on their readiness to face the changed neo-normal.
2. **Distress tolerance skills:** Activities that help in self-soothing and self-care need to be adopted. These might

include exercising and taking massages etc. This would lead to better well-being of students (Nock, & Mendes, 2008) <sup>[10]</sup>.

3. **Motivation enhancement skills:** Motivation enhancement skills are likely to help the students voice their readiness to adapt themselves to the need of the hour. It also helps in identifying discrepancies in behavior that are responsible for resistance to change. Decision-balancing strategies can be exercised to achieve short term and long-term goals (Belur, Dennis, Ives, Vincent & Muck, 2014) <sup>[11]</sup>.
4. **Interpersonal effectiveness skills:** The students are prone to increased interpersonal problems as, due to the pandemic situation, their mobility and independence have been restricted. This is especially applicable to the students who were used to staying outstation. Hence proper skills to counter interpersonal problems are the need of the hour. Role-playing can be of great help in understanding the other's perspective.
5. **Skills to improve psychological flexibility:** Acceptance of the situation is of utmost importance; it will not only lead to greater psychological flexibility but also help in proper behavioral expression (Puolakanaho *et al.*, 2019) <sup>[11]</sup>.
6. **Time management practice:** Time management had been a matter of concern for students even before the pandemic situation and they reported about having struggled with balancing the household tasks and academic requirements. Proper time management can help in completing academic assignments on time and the students will therefore get more time for engaging in their hobbies.
7. **Self-regulatory learning skills:** Self-regulatory skills are very important in promoting autonomy and self-directed learning (Zimmerman, 1989) <sup>[15]</sup>. Self-regulatory learning is effective not only in goal-setting, planning, and monitoring progress but can also increase engagement in online environments (Lee, Shen & Tsai, 2010) <sup>[8]</sup>.
8. **Goal setting and formative feedback:** Formative feedback embedded in the goal-setting processes can also play a role in improving student engagement and performance. Researchers have pointed out the advantage of these automated tracking features to further promote student self-regulation (Delen & Liew, 2016) <sup>[5]</sup>.
9. **Resilience-enhancement Activities:** Resilience is an important factor when it comes to the sustenance of motivation. Resilience-building exercises have been extremely effective in maintaining balance (Kimner, Gopal, & Rocha-Salazar, 2020) <sup>[7]</sup>.

Apart from these, Conto, Dreesen, Kamei, Mizunoya, Rigole & Unicef, 2020 <sup>[4]</sup> have elucidated certain Facilitative Tasks that others can do:

- Monitoring performance in the regular teaching-learning process
- Tracking "wellness" data: regular follow-up of student's mental health status

- Embracing social networking: Peer and teacher support by creating e-mailing groups etc. to stay and feel connected
- Understanding social and emotional factors for better learning
- Conducting follow-ups by telephone, especially for disengaged and/ or emotionally distressed students
- Providing students with high-quality learning materials
- Sharing dynamic and rich media such as audiobooks, book/ journal article reviews, movies, etc.
- Offering peer-to-peer engagement: each student may be assigned as a mentor to other
- Giving creative assignments to students *viz.* artworks and performances like photography, story/ poem writing, etc. (Cho & Tobias, 2016) <sup>[3]</sup>.
- Promoting engagement through online discussion spaces: Teachers' proactive management of online discussion groups can have an immediate impact on student engagement as, in such a scenario, students tend to exchange posts that are more self-reflective and constructively critical (Joksimović, Gašević, Kovanović, Riecke, & Hatala, 2015) <sup>[6]</sup>.

Further there have been concrete and practical suggestions from various thinkers and writers that, if adhered to, can go a long way in enhancing student motivation at all levels. They are as follows:

- **Continue to communicate:** As higher education institutes adopt new policies and announce these decisions for the upcoming academic year, they should continue to communicate them broadly. Institutions should consider targeted outreach to certain student sub-groups, for example those living on campus or engaged in sponsored research, to relay specific policy implications (Blankstein, Frederick, & Wolff-Eisenberg, 2020) <sup>[2]</sup>.
- **Rethink technical and skill-based trainings:** Given the challenges that students encountered with technical resources, practical trainings, and field work, colleges and universities will need to increasingly adapt related coursework for remote instruction and gauge the extent to which relevant in-person classes can be prioritized. In such face-to-face classes, reduced class sizes, special sanitization procedures and seating arrangements, face coverings, and widespread testing will likely be necessary to ensure the safety of students, faculty, and the broader community.
- **Enhance connection and collaboration:** While there have been tremendous efforts across the higher education sectors to ensure instructional continuity, many students reported a lack of interpersonal connection with one another which is a key component of the educational experience, especially within residential institutions. Further, from a curricular perspective, group projects and presentations are among the most difficult types of assignments and require an interpersonal connection.
- **Invest in academic and financial advising:** Understandably, many students are concerned and uncertain about their economic and academic conditions and want more information from

departments providing corresponding services. Being prepared to reach a greater number of students and bolster awareness of these services may require investments in additional personnel and systems.

- **Target students with the greatest need:** Students from groups that were historically marginalized even before the pandemic are more likely to face challenges post-pandemic. When resources are scarce, which is the case for most higher education institutions, they should be made available to those who need them the most. This is not only important for furthering the mission of higher education institutions in serving the public good but is a practical step for ensuring students do not leave higher education without acquiring a degree. Data by student sub-groups is imperative for this equity-focused work to succeed (Blankstein, Frederick, & Wolff-Eisenberg, 2020) <sup>[2]</sup>.
- The Government of India is working hard to combat the effects of the pandemic at various levels. Considering the mental well-being of its student community, it has taken several initiatives to sustain Student Motivation during the Pandemic:
- The University Grants Commission issued a notice to higher education institutes on 5<sup>th</sup> April 2020 to initiate free counselling services to address mental health and psycho-social issues of the students. The promotion of students' well-being must be considered a priority in every higher education institute (UGC, 2020) <sup>[13]</sup>.
- The University Grants Commission has also instructed the higher education institutes to constitute a COVID-19 Grievance Cell to assist the students during this pandemic (UGC,2020) <sup>[13]</sup>.
- On 21st July 2020 Union HRD Minister launched the MANODARPAN initiative of the Ministry of HRD to provide psycho-social support to students for their mental health and well-being. This is an online platform where information related to mental health can be obtained. It has separate platforms for live chat, interactive webinars, etc. al, and is to be streamed continuously. Further, a 24x7 toll-free number for instant help has been incorporated (MHRD, 2020) <sup>[9]</sup>.
- The All India Council for Technical Education also issued a notice to their stakeholders to provide free counseling services to the students (AICTE, 2020).

## Conclusion

The current pandemic comes with a plethora of implications for the student community. The students worldwide are struggling to preserve the whole traditional cohesion in education in the changed contemporary scenario. They lack a sense of belonging and connection to others at their institution due to the disembodied nature of the online mode. Concerns regarding their physical and mental health are also present. A positive and sensitive approach is needed to address these issues if one seeks to minimize the setbacks caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. It is patently apparent that concrete measures to foster student motivation are required to counteract the changing dynamics which are deeply detrimental both for the students and the society at large. The study indicates that such measures are in the offing both due to efforts at the governmental level and the

management of Higher Education Institutes. Optimal use is to be made of the existing academic and financial resources to address the mental health and psycho-social issues of the students. This would be most significant in furthering the mission of higher education institutions to serve the public good.

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