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# Online Classes as a Medium of Education during COVID-19 Pandemic: A Case Study of Government College University, Lahore

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**Abstract**

*COVID-19 pandemic has changed the world around us. Many of the changes that it has stimulated are yet to fully manifest themselves. Like the other fields of life, education too was affected by the pandemic and its ramifications. This led to opting of online educational system by the educational institutions. Keeping in mind the importance of education which has been further augmented by the inclusion of education as sustainable development goal by UN, it becomes imperative that we ensure that all sections or our polity have an equal access to education and in this regard online education can be very helpful. Public sector educational institution like GC University, Lahore took a lead in devising an indigenously evolved and synthesized online education policy but it too cannot be deemed perfect for reasons that somehow cannot be controlled by the institution in question. It is pertinent to note that there are a variety of impediments that have hindered our attempts to realize the potential of online education, if we overcome those impediments and create a virtual educational environment that has utility and inclusiveness to offer only then we can call it a good online educational system otherwise all the exercise will be futile.*

**Keywords:** *Education, Online Classes, GCU Lahore, Covid-19 Pandemic, & SDGs*

## Introduction

Education is "the process of receiving or giving systematic instruction, especially at a school or university to improve knowledge and develop skills" (Oxford). It is considered to be one of the fundamental rights of all humans as good education warrants a life of dignity and fulfillment of individual potential. That is why the Sustainable Development Goals, which were chalked out in 2015 by the United Nations and are a number of ambitious goals to be achieved in the next 15 years to make our world a better place for everyone, has included education as its

goal. The SDGs also include goals like ending poverty, protecting the planet, and ensuring prosperity for all. The UN SDGs are a collection of 17 global goals set by the UN's member countries, are a roadmap on how to transform our planet where everyone can live in peace, prosperity, and dignity. Keeping in mind how education is very important in achieving all this education has been given a lot of importance in SDGs.

Recently the phenomena of online classes or online education became popular mainly due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Though, online education is not a new phenomenon. Distance learning methods or institutions are in place for long time now but due to the pandemic induced global shutdowns these methods were then employed by educational institutions that provide education through the conventional means. The COVID-19 pandemic is the novel human corona virus disease which was first reported in Wuhan, China, in 2019, and subsequently spread globally to become the 5th documented pandemic since the 1918 flu pandemic. By September 2021, almost two years after COVID-19 was first identified, there had been more than 200 million confirmed cases and over 4.6 million lives lost to the disease. (Moore, 2021) The pandemic has a deep impact on our life style choices and education was not an exception. An online class is course conducted over the Internet. They are generally conducted through a learning management system, in which students can view their course syllabus and academic progress, as well as communicate with fellow students and their course instructor. The Government College University, Lahore is one of the oldest seats of learning in the Muslim world. As a seat of higher learning GC University blends grand old traditions and modern educational standards to meet the ideals set by persons like Dr. Leitner, philosopher the poet, Dr. Muhammad Iqbal and the Noble Laureate, Dr. Abdus Salam and like the other educational institutions GC University, Lahore was no exception and it also had to shift to online classes in order to continue educating its students. This was a new territory for GC University, Lahore as in its more than 150 years of history, it had never used online education or arranged online classes for its students. Thus, this was an unchartered territory for all the stakeholders involved.

The researchers while undertaking the research set a variety of research objectives which included identifying the stakeholders involved. This research also aimed at underscoring the impacts COVID-19 pandemic has made on the educational system of Pakistan. One other objective this research aims to achieve is to furnish the problems faced by various stakeholders while conducting online classes and also to suggest workable solutions to all those problems.

**Significance of Research**

This research is important and significant because it revolves around the topic of education and the modern tools of education. Although online education has been an outcome of an unwanted situation but like every cloud has a silver lining, this situation has also presented us with a change which can help us to expand the reach and horizon of our education system. Through online education we can include all the segments of our society, who for various reasons have been excluded from our educational system. However, for that to happen it is imperative that we first identify the gaps and limitations that exist as all these gaps and limitations serve as the impediments in realizing the full potential of online education. This research has identified those impediments that have served as an obstacle and by removing them we can surely materialize the benefits online classes have to offer and also this could be the much-needed change that would help us to not only modernize our educational system but also make it inclusive for all the socio- economic groups.

**Literature Review**

- The SDGs were initiated in 2015 by UN. It is a universal call for to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure that by 2030 all people will enjoy peace and prosperity. The SDGs are a mix of 17 goals and all these goals complement each other with an aim to ensure the objectives stated above. The SDGs for their implementation demand collective creativity, knowhow, technology and financial resources from all of society (UNDP, 2020).

- Education is at the very foundation of the SDGs. The SD, recognizes education as fundamental right. The goal 4 of SDGs is ensuring education for all. The SDG 4 calls for an inclusive educational system which ensures lifelong learning opportunities for all. The education should enable the individual to become an able and active member of not only his native area but also that of the world-a global citizen which embraces plurality and has skills which will help him to earn respectable living. The SDG4 will be instrumental in achieving the other 16 SDGs. (UNESCO, 2016)
- The COVID-19 pandemic had a far-reaching impact on education. The impacts ranging from short to long term implications for the students. The pandemic caused closure of educational institutions due to which the students had to face a variety of problems which made their physical and mental vulnerable and deprived them from a secure and prosperous future. All this will push the families towards poverty and economic hardship. (ACAPS, 2020)
- According to UNESCO, over 800 million learners from around the world have been affected, 1 in 5 learners cannot attend school, 1 in 4 cannot attend higher education classes, and over 102 countries have ordered nationwide school closures while 11 have implemented localized school closure. There is a need to take following measures to mitigate the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on education:
  - To prioritize education in the first phase of all emergency responses with immediate effect and to include education in their COVID-19 response policies.
  - To dedicate appropriate resources, financial and technical, to ensure the right to free, quality public education for all is maintained during the COVID-19 crisis.
  - To increase funding and support to education in crises to a minimum of 4.2% of emergency assistance in line with its needs.
  - To minimize the pressure on teachers, schools and school systems that remains open or volunteer to offer extra support. (Education, 2020)

- Inequality defines the educational problems in Pakistan. Poverty, gender and location intersect to entrench exclusion for already-marginalized children. Existing data sources help establish the scale and scope of the challenges. The World Bank has outlined three scenarios of learning losses that governments should prepare for when schools reopen:
  - There is a loss of learning for all students due to school disruptions
  - The lowest performing children fall further behind while the well- performing children move ahead – this is predicted based on the ability of the families to support children in keeping up with reading and writing and access to assets such as televisions and a good internet or cable connection
  - There is a sudden and large increase in numbers of children for whom learning falls

because of an increase in numbers of drop outs. (Malik, 2020)

- UNESCO's report on impacts of COVID pandemic on Education in Asia has taken Pakistan as a case study. The report has enumerated following problems that the education sector faced during the pandemic:
  - Connectivity issues
  - Girls have lesser access to digital devices than boys.
  - Teachers are not trained to use remote learning.
  - Difficulty for the parents to manage the children all day.
  - The use of technology meant an added economic burden on the parents. The marginalized got further marginalized. (UNICEF, 2021)

- Fouzia Malik, Faouzia Ajmal and Zohran Jumani in their paper titled "The Effects of COVID19 on Education in Pakistan: Students' Perspective" concluded following problems were faced by the students:
  - Difficulty to grasp certain concepts in e-class.
  - Lack of internet access.
  - Lack of guidance regarding use of online platforms.
  - Teachers also faced connectivity issues.
  - The workload of the teachers compounded due to the online classes. (Malik F. A., 2020)
- GC University, Lahore came up with its online policy and it centered it around following four key principles:
  - Course Readiness
  - Teacher training
  - Technology preparedness
  - Student preparedness

To ensure course readiness for online teaching, faculty members revised more than 1600 courses by adding e-resources, weekly distribution of lectures, grading strategies and reading material. All courses are approved by relevant chairpersons and the Panel of Digital Learning Environment of the University. The library staff worked 24/7 for providing students and teachers with reading material by electronic and postal services. The Directorate of Information Technology trained 800 faculty members and forty IT Coordinators for using the newly acquired online system. The University adopted a "distance learning model" for students who had internet connectivity issues. At students' request, the University sent course material by postal service without charging any amount. Such students' submitted assignments and final essays by post as well. More than 800 faculty members and approximately 15000 students shifted to online mode in a short time. GCU conducted mid-term and final examinations online for all degree programmes in accordance with the online education policy. Teachers could take 24-hour or less open book exam, long essay and/or viva for assessment. Assessment strategies in each department varied depending on the requirement of the discipline. Teachers also checked submissions for plagiarism. (GCU, 2021)

**Research Methodology and Conceptual Framework:**

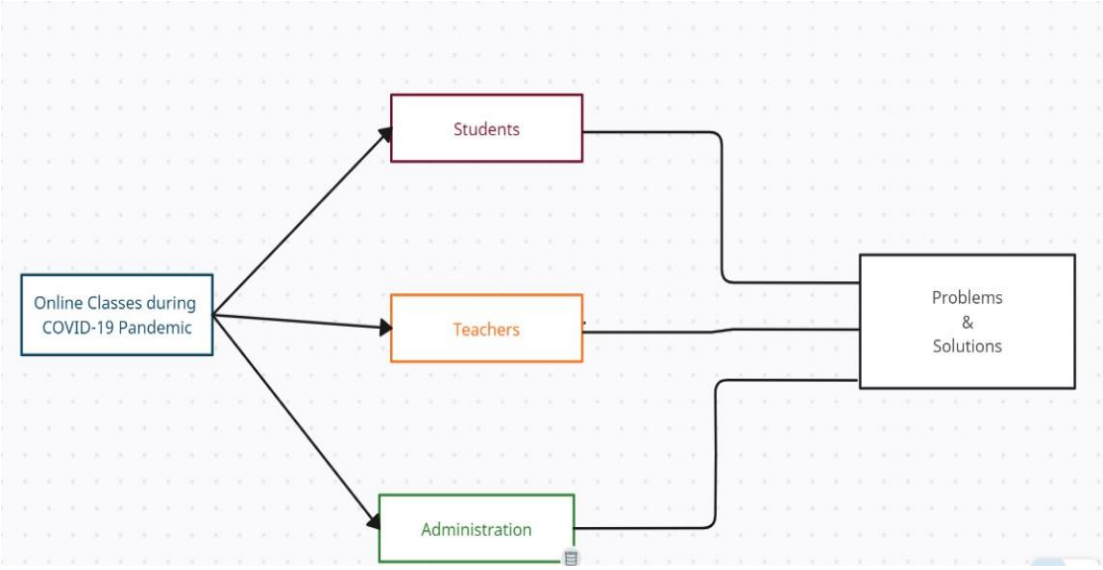
The Research methodology followed in this research is mixed methodology as both

qualitative and quantitative methods have been employed by the researchers in order to collect the requisite data.

Secondary sources like articles, journals and reports have been consulted to identify any research gap and establish profound understanding of the subject matter. These sources also helped the researchers in identifying the existing research on the subject matter and the existing research work done on the matter, helped the researchers to lay the base of their research.

In order to conduct primary research, the researchers used three specially designed questionnaires (see appendix 1, 2 & 3) to collect data from students, teachers and university administration. The responses were collected from GC University, Lahore only as the research is the case study of the very institution. Also, the reason for conducting out research from GC University is that it has a diversified student body which hails from various areas of Pakistan and hail from a variety of economic stratas. This diversity of GC University Lahore gave the researchers a chance to collect data across ethnicities and socio-economic stratas. Such a diversified sample size has surely helped to conjure up results that are representative of the subject matter of the research area at hand.

**Conceptual Framework:**




The above conceptual framework explains the relationship between the various stake holder and how they were affected due to the online classes during the COVID-19 pandemic. The stakeholders have been identified as students, teachers and university administration. In their own specific ways these three stakeholders were the enablers of this whole process as the students were receiving education, teachers were imparting it and the university administration was providing the assistance like platforms, training, guidance and above all requisite resources in order to insure the smooth conduct of the online classes at the GC University, Lahore. The problems faced and the possible solution to those problems has been identified in the course of this research.

**Finding:**

- **The Stakeholders:**
  The researchers have identified three stakeholders when it comes to online education:
  - The Students
  - The Teachers
  - The Administration (in this research it means the administration of GC University, Lahore)
- **How COVID-19 pandemic affected education in Pakistan?**
  On the basis of the information gathered through primary and secondary sources, following effects on education in Pakistan have been identified:
  - Lossoflearningduetoschoolclosureanddisruptionofconventionaleducation system.
  - The cost of education increased.
  - The number of dropouts increased.
  - This led to closure of educational institutions which meant teachers were laid off.
  - Girls' education was gravely effected.
  - The workload of the teachers increased.
  - Students from periphery were left out.
  - The learning was difficult especially in case of STEM subjects.

It is pertinent to mention here that already vulnerable situation of girl education in Pakistan further deteriorated in Pakistan due to the pandemic induced problems.

**Finding (Students):**

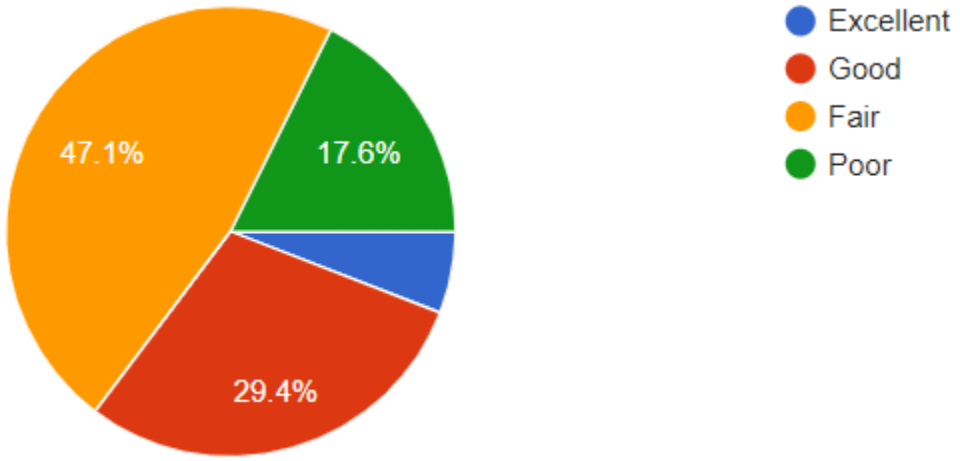
The data was collected through an open-ended questionnaire from the students of semester 6 and semester 8 of the department of Political Science, GC University, Lahore. The reason for choosing these students was they have experienced the online classes during the pandemic. A total of 35 students responded to the questionnaire.

- **Obstacles faced by Students:**

When the students were asked about the problems, they have faced in attending the online classes during the pandemic, their responses helped us to identify the following obstacles they faced while taking online classes.

- Connectivity Issues
- No proper place to take classes
- Difficulty in questioning the teacher during the class
- The class schedule at times was not feasible to the students.
- Load Shedding (Electricity problem)
- Monotony in the classes led to loss of concentration.
- Voice lagging
- Teachers not good at using technology.

- **Learning Experience:**
  When the respondents were asked about the learning experience from the online classes, following was their response:




Out of the 35 respondents, the majority termed their experience as fair, 29.4% of the respondents called their experience as good, 17.6% called their experience as poor while 5.9% respondents termed their learning experience as excellent.

- **How the online classes can be improved?**

When the students were asked that how the online classes can be improved, they came up with following responses:

- Classes should be taken according to the time table.
- By introducing practical assignments.
- Lesser attention on attendance more emphasis on learning.
- Recorded lectures for the students hailing from far-flung areas.
- Classes should be taken on Google Classrooms or MS teams as they are more convenient.
- Slides should be prepared along with the lectures.
- Training of teachers and students
- Better student-teacher coordination

**Finding (Students):**

Data was collected through a questionnaire from the faculty members of various departments of the GC University, Lahore. The reason for choosing these respondents was because they had the experience of teaching online classes during the pandemic. A total of 15 faculty members responded to the questionnaire. While choosing the sample size, only those teachers were involved as respondents who had the experience of conducting online classes.

- **Obstacles faced by the teachers:**

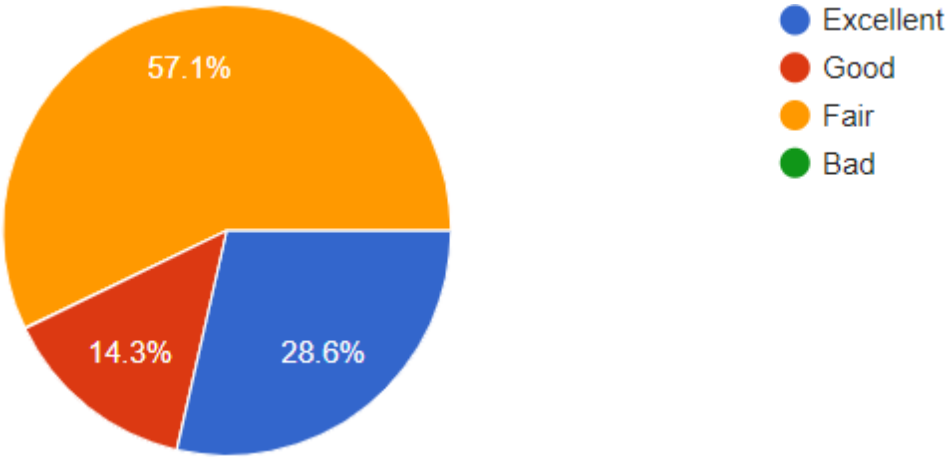
When the teachers were inquired about the obstacles that they faced while conducting online classes, following responses were obtained:

- Internet connectivity.
- Lack of concentration on the part of the students.
- Weak Participation of the students in the class.

- Lower attendance.
- Lower interaction.

❖ **Teaching Experience:**

When the teachers were asked about their teaching experience during the online classes, following responses were obtained:




57.1% of the respondents called their teaching experience as a fair experience while 28.6% of the respondents called their experience excellent while 14.3% of the respondents called their teaching experience. None of the respondents deemed their experience as bad.

❖ **How the online classes can be improved?**

When the teachers were asked that how the quality of the online classes can be improved, they provided following responses:

- Teacher training.
- Ensure high speed internet for the teachers at least.
- Recorded lectures.
- Teaching methods will be needed to change so that they may accommodate online classes.
- A compact evaluation system should be developed for subjective and objective assessments of the students.

**Findings (Administration):**

Data was collected through a questionnaire from the university officials attached with the initiation and conduct of online classes at the GC university, Lahore. The reason for choosing these respondents was because they had the experience of initiating and conducting of the online classes during the pandemic. Their responses were important because due to their responses we would be able to gauge the whole process from an administrator's perspective but also their input

enable us to understand the material impediments and potential of the online education and classes. A total of 5 officials responded to the questionnaire.

- **Models and Examples followed:**

  When the respondents were asked that what models were followed while developing the online classes, the respondents gave the following responses:

- Conventional Online platform like Zoom App was used initially for conducting the classes but by the second lockdown, GCU with the help of HEC had started taking classes on MS teams.
- Students who hailed from far flung areas for them "Distance Learning Model" was used where if necessary postal and courier services were used to provide the students with reading material.

- **Obstacles faced?**

  Whentherespondentswerequestionedabouttheinitiatingtheonlineclasses, they identified following as the obstacles:

- Connectivity
- Teacher training
- Technology illiteracy on the part of students as well as teachers

- **Feedback from teachers and students:**

  When the administrators were asked about the response or feedback of the teachers and the students to the online classes, the respondents said the feedback of the teachers and students was same as the obstacles faced by the administrative respondents.

- **Benefits:**

  When the respondents were questioned that how the online classes can be beneficial for the students and educational institutions, they underscored the following benefits:

- Economical for both students and educational institutions as the online classes save them from a variety of expenses.
- Inclusive as it gives a chance to students hailing from far flung areas to have access to best educational institutions and instructors.
- Students can get education without coming to the institution which saves them from commuting every day, boarding in a hostel and above all saves them from the emotional burden of leaving their home and family.

- **How it can be improved?**

  When the respondents were asked that how the overall process of online classes can be improved, following responses were obtained:

- **Monitoring:** There is a need to constantly monitoring the system so that any fallacy or loophole when identified is right away plugged.
- **Upgrading and updating:** There is a need to constantly upgrade and update the system so that it stays productive and responsive to the needs and demands

of the students and the teachers.

- **Teacher and student training:** The students and teachers should be given training so that they can benefit from the potential of the online classes but also because these trainings will enable them to obtain maximum output from the whole process.

**Suggestions:**

1. **Interactive platforms and Learning Management Systems (LMS):** Educational institutions should look towards developing learning management systems that are multi- purpose. They should be convenient to use and should have all the requisite information needed by the students. The LMS should be equipped with latest features like chat rooms, breakout rooms, virtual whiteboards, and polling tools to encourage active participation of students and convenient interaction between the students and teachers. In short, these platforms should ensure the whole experience become easy and useful for both the students and teachers.
2. **Course Handbook, Curriculum and Evaluation:** Revised and updated course material including electronic reading material should be provided to the students. In fact, an electronic student pack should be prepared for the students. It would be imperative to incorporate multimedia tools such as videos, animations, and interactive quizzes to enhance student interest and understanding.
3. **Student-Teacher Communication:** The teachers should provide the students with clear and unambiguous guidance when it comes to term papers, quizzes and submission deadlines. During the course of this research, it was identified that a lot of students were discontent with the gap in communication between the them and the teachers. By overcoming this gap, we would be able to achieve the course objectives. It will also be important that the teachers establish a regular channel of communication with the students so that the students may access them when they need their guidance or have to discuss something related to their class.
4. **Individual feedback:** It would be better that the teachers ensure personalized feedback to the students. This would help the students to overcome their deficiencies but will also help them to improve themselves. For these one-on-one virtual meetings can also be held with the students.
5. **Promoting Teamwork:** Teachers should work towards creating an environment that encourages and fosters cooperation and teamwork amongst the students. Combined or collective assignments can be given to the students and also the students should be encouraged to interact with each other and share knowledge with each other.
6. **Simulations and virtual labs:** For STEM subjects which involve a lot of lab work, it would be imperative that virtual labs should be established. These labs will enable the students to understand their course by gaining practical knowledge of their course and will also help them to utilize the digital platforms at their disposal in a better manner.
7. **Student Evaluation:** It would be better that for evaluation a standardized

rubric is developed which covers almost all the aspects of learning outcomes and it is needed that the rubric should be different for a different academic year as there must be a difference between a beginner level student and a senior student. Also, evaluation tools like open ended questions, online quizzes and timed assessments can be used to measure the knowledge retention and critical thinking skills of the students.

8. **Technical guidance for the students and teachers:** Detailed and apt guidance should be provided to the students and teachers so that they may benefit from the virtual platform in their use to maximum level. For this to happen, firstly the interface should be easy to use and then tutorials and training workshops should be organized for the students and the teachers.
9. **Flexible Class Schedule:** A student, in his home can face a variety of problems from electricity disruptions to unavailability of internet. Keeping in mind these impediments, it would be better that the teachers should be open to flexible class schedules. However, it is understandable that a teacher may also faces similar problems and to address these problems one possible solution can be recorded lectures, which the students can access at the time of their convenience.
10. **Students with disabilities:** It is mandatory for any online educational system to be mandatory. The educational needs of the students with special needs should also be fulfilled through these virtual platforms. One way of going about it will be to closed captions for videos and also alternative text for images should be provided so that the students can also benefit from it.
11. **Upgrade and Update:** The directorate of information technology as the institution should continuously work towards the betterment of the virtual platform in use of the institution. They should not only look to update the app but should also look at ways through which they can ensure that the overall experience of the users is continuously improving and for that to happen they are needed to upgrade the platform as well. The response and input of the students and the teachers can go a long way in achieving this.

**Internet Connectivity:**

This is one point which is beyond the realm of a teacher, student and administrator. Internet connectivity is something that pertains to internet service provider and the authorities who regulate these companies. Firstly, the authorities should encourage these service providers to expand the reach of their services as a lot of areas are out of the reach of these companies and currently are not getting any internet services. Secondly, they should work towards improving their existing infrastructure to better the quality of services they are providing at the moment. This will also help in ensuring uninterrupted provision of internet services to the customers. Thirdly, there is a need to introduce student packages for enrolled students and under these packages cheap internet packages should be offered to the students so that the internet is not much of a burden on the pockets of the students and their families.

**Conclusion:**

Education is one of the most important tools to combat global poverty and disparity. It has been observed that all the countries and civilizations that have ruled had one thing in common and that is education. Education has served as the heart, as the base of any developed polity. Education is a big equalizer. For a country like Pakistan, which houses a considerable youth population, education is more than necessary. Consider, leaving out majority of your population from the opportunities this fast-developing world has to offer. That is why United Nations has placed education in its Sustainable Development Goals and it is numbered at four (4). There is no denying in the fact that education one important tool that can help nations in achieving SDGs.

The Online classes emerged as a solution to the problems that were being faced by the education sector during the pandemic. The shutdown of educational institutions and disruption of conventional educational system meant that the conventional means of education were no longer of any utility thus demanded a change. This change can turn out to be a silver lining for us, if we make it an opportunity. The online classes have this potential to help a third world country like Pakistan to develop an education system that can integrated the marginalized sections of its polity and that are currently out of its educational system's ambit. It is important to remember that Pakistan not only faces dearth of material resources but also human resource, through the online classes this scarcity of these resources can somehow be partially be addressed.

However, it is important to remember that without equitable technological advancement and inclusiveness we cannot benefit from the opportunities online education has to offer. The predicaments identified in the findings are needed to be removed so that this whole process can be made more beneficial for all involved and more importantly more inclusive otherwise we end up marginalizing more sections of our polity but if used aptly, Pakistan can use online classes as a mean through which it can bridge the widening socio-economic gap in its population and can also help it to comply with our quest of achieving SDGs.

The institutions like Government College University, Lahore can be set as a benchmark in devising a virtual online education policy which later can be used as a precedent or as a model for the other institutions and through this research will go a long way in identifying the existing holes and then in plugging them.

## Appendix 1:

**Questionnaire 1**
**Students**

Name: _____ Semester: _____

Native Area: _____

1. Have you participated in the online classes during the pandemic?

Yes No

2. From where did you attend your online classes during the pandemic?

---

3. What obstacles did you faced in attending your classes?

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

4. What was your learning experience?

Excellent Good Average Bad

5. According to you how can we improve the whole process?

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

**Appendix 2:**

**Questionnaire 2**
**Teaching Staff**

Name: _____

1. Have you taught the Online classes during the pandemic?

Yes No

2. From where did you conducted your online classes during the pandemic?

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3. What obstacles did you faced in teaching online classes?

_____
_____
_____
_____

4. What was your teaching experience?

Excellent Good Average Bad

5. According to you how can we improve the whole process?

_____
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**Appendix 3:**

## Questionnaire 3

## Administration

Name: _____ Designation: _____

1. In what capacity you were attached with the project of Online Classes?

_____
_____
_____

2. What model (s) or example (s) was followed to start the online classes in GC University, Lahore?

_____
_____
_____

3. What problems have been faced in conducting the classes?

_____
_____
_____

4. What feedback you have received from students and teachers about the online classes?

_____
_____
_____

5. What benefits can be reaped by using online classes?

_____
_____
_____

6. According to you, how this whole process can be further improved?

_____
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_____

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