Forum: Sustainable Development Goals 4

Issue: Implementing measures to improve the quality of online education

Student Officer: Saumya Tibrewal

Position: Head Chair

Introduction

Online education was initially introduced to overcome the obstacle of distance. But over time, the reasons for employing online education instead of the traditional courses taken in a brick-and-mortar school building began to increase. And today, online learning has become the only way possible to earn an education in most countries due to the emergence of the coronavirus pandemic in the December of 2019, forcing schools, universities and other education institutions to go into lockdown. As of now, there is no promising cure to the Covid pandemic and hence, this method of online learning is likely to prevail for a long time into the future. While this form of learning does seem easy and convenient, it comes with its own set of problems. Therefore, the main aim of this research report is to introduce the history of online education, previous attempts that have been made to solve issues hindering the flourishing of this form of learning and possible solutions via which online learning could be made better. This report will help you understand the motion better and has areas which could prove to be of help while making your resolution. Also, be sure to take a look at the guiding questions at the end of the report to help in the making of your resolution.

Although online education was already in use from way before, perhaps the biggest factor to accelerate the growth of e-learning has been the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic. While various countries have been affected by the pandemic differently, worldwide there are more than a billion children in 186 countries who have had their education process disrupted as schools have been closed. Now, an important question that may arise here is that is the method of online learning actually effective or has a classroom in a school building always been the way to go?

This question can be answered as a yes and as a no. Research and studies have shown that online education is definitely as effective as traditional schools, if not more. Via online learning, sky's the limit. You can have access to a variety of courses from anywhere and at any time. Traditional college tuition can be expensive and add to that the cost of living expense and other necessities, it can be an obstacle stopping students to further their education. But, with e-learning, you can save on these costs and still achieve quality level education. In this day and life, students are no less busy than adults. They have extra curriculars, working jobs and other commitments to attend to. In the case of traditional

schooling, the hours can't be adjusted or shifted around, but with online learning, a student can plan out and schedule his classes according to his convenience. Along with these benefits, online education helps instill a sense of discipline in the students because they've to be proficient in time management. This is a quality employers find very attractive and are likely to take into account skills of multi tasking and independency. Online learning also provides practice and preparation for real life learning. As online students are required to learn independently, these skills have been embedded in them early in life. So, when a job requires training periods and extra research to be done from an individual's side, online students thrive at this. Surveys have also shown that students opting online courses learn five times more material and content than students who opt traditional face to face courses. There has also been evidence of higher retention rates with online learning than offline learning. Aside from the points mentioned above, from an environmental perspective, online learning is more eco friendly and a study has found that less energy consumption and fewer CO_2 emissions in students.

So, does this mean that online learning is perfect and has no obstacles or problems affiliated to it? Unfortunately, that is not the case. E-learning comes with it's own set of problems, a few of which are hard to overcome and solve and provide a serious hindrance in the process of gaining knowledge. Online learning can get monotonous and boring over a course of time. Many times, they consist of never ending texts followed by tedious questions which fail to engage children. There is no intellectual advancement, instead there is only rot learning to pass exams and other tests. Talking about online learning, we can't forget the technical side of this form of education. More often than not, there are compatibility issues (audio issues, video issues, operating systems, phones or laptops and so many more), due to which students are not able to complete courses on time. All this mounts up to loads of frustration which can eventually lead to the student abandoning the course midway and not completing it. While online education provides many advantages, one of the serious problems which can't be forgotten is the lack of human touch. Students often get annoyed due to the lack of human contact and presence, the absence of a guiding teacher and the inability to discuss the material and content with classmates. Many times, online courses only provide theoretical content and material, overlooking the need for students to practice. In this way, students won't gain any experience or recall and apply any skills. In this way, the learning process does not reach its full potential.

Hence, in this way it is shown that while E-learning provides so many opportunities, advantages and benefits, it has a lot of room for improvement and is still a long way from being the perfect mode of education.

Definition of Key Terms

Online education

Online education can be referred to as the electronically supported learning that depends on the medium of the Internet to provide teacher/student interaction and the access of class materials and content.

Massive open online courses (MOOCs)

It is an online course that aims at unlimited participation and open access to everyone via the internet. It provides not only course material and content, lectures, readings and question sets, but also interactive courses to enable and encourage interactions among the students, professores, and other authorities.

Synchronous massive online courses (SMOCs)

This is a course in which there is an unlimited number of participants in which students are able to participate synchronously as well as in real time.

Small private online courses (SPOCs)

This is a course in which the number of students is limited and learning takes place in the asynchronous delivery method.

Synchronous small online courses (SSOCs)

These types of courses require a limited number of students and they also require participants to follow the lessons along with the live streams or web conferences.

Asynchronous learning

This is the type of learning in which work and progress is supported through the use of online platforms and in such a way that employees or participants are not required to be online at the same time.

Synchronous learning

This type of learning takes place via online platforms and when it is compared to asynchronous learning, this environment actually provides a greater and closer feeling of being in an actual classroom and eliminates the feeling of isolation or loneliness.

Background Information

As it has already been mentioned earlier, online education hasn't begun very recently. It goes back as far as the 1800s. In this part of the research report, a breakdown of the history of online education will be specified.

The Beginning

As mentioned earlier, the reason online education was initially formed and developed was for reaching students who couldn't be physically present on a university campus. By the beginning of the 1900s, technologies adapted and online education was not hitting the radio waves. In 1919, some professors at a University began an amateur radio station which became the first official radio station that was dedicated to educational broadcasting. Access to higher education was granted and expanded via televisions which made the invention of what was known as the telecourse. One of the Universities began to experiment with television for educational intentions in the years of the 1930s. In the 1950s, television frequencies were being reserved for educational purposes and this caught the eye of the public. Online learning officially emerged in 1982 when a science institute in California opened a school that employed computer conferencing to enable and use a distance related program for business executives. In 1989, a University began offering education programs through the medium of the Internet. In 1993, E-learning began to flourish. Classes and lectures were broadcasted via satellite late at night and students communicated through a Bulletin Board system.

In the year 2000, only eight percent of the student population were enrolled in online courses and were using the online mode of education but that number was increased by the year 2008 where the enrollment was now twenty percent of the said population. Neither has the medium of E-learning shown any decrease in its expansion. By the year of 2013, around thirty percent of all postsecondary student population were enrolled in some kind of distance education course. This year, the global pandemic has left no choice and prompted universities and schools to switch to online learning instead of holding classes in person.

Methods of teaching

If there are improvements to be made in the delivery methods of online learning, E-learning environments provide a greater degree of flexibility than the traditional classroom environment. Online platforms also help encourage and promote cultural diversity as it offers more diverse representations of the student populations. Due to interaction with students outside of one's geographical location, there is a major possibility of a variety of perspectives being accumulated on course content. This also promotes diversity.

Asynchronous learning

As it has been mentioned earlier in the report, this is a type of environment in which work and progress is supported through the use of online platforms and in such a way that employees or participants are not required to be online at the same time. Examples are threaded discussions, telephone calls, and e-mail. This is the representation of the anytime-anywhere appeal. The students learning via this method and courses can complete and cover class material and content as per their suitability. This method provides a lot of flexibility to students and reduces the burden of them having to stick to a rigid schedule. One of the other benefits is that the learner or the student can take more time to generate and formulate responses to the course content and questions set by the instructors and peer postings. They get time to find facts to strengthen their responses and written statements.

On the other hand, one of the limitations of this type of learning is that it has a greater potential to make the learner feel alienated or removed from the learning environment. This method of delivery is often viewed as less social and can make the student feel isolated. One of the ways to cure this is provide the student with a feeling of belonging to the institution which can be done by enabling links to university support programs and many more.

Synchronous learning

As it has already been mentioned earlier in the report, this method of delivery resembles face-to-face learning the most out of all methods of teaching. It takes place via online platforms and when it is compared to asynchronous learning, this environment actually provides a greater and closer feeling of being in an actual classroom and eliminates the feeling of isolation or loneliness. It provides a more supportive environment as the exchange of texts and interacting via voice gives the feeling of an actual conversation. Platforms such as web conferencing and video chats can also provide the feeling of the instructor and peers being right there with the learner. The tone of the voice also helps learners understand better and helps them get a greater insight into their course material or content. This form of learning also helps doubts get cleared on the spot and it can help alleviate any possible misconceptions and strengthen the foundation and core learning of the students.

Basing off of the previous information and taking into consideration the two dimensions that is time and distance and also the number of participants, we have four distinct groups of online distance courses that are namely massive open online courses(MOOCs), synchronous massive online courses (SMOCs), small private online courses (SPOCs), and synchronous small online courses (SSOCs).

Major Countries and Organizations Involved

As you will gather from the earlier parts of this research report, problems with online education are not a new thing or a recent development. They have always been prevalent and are now more dominant than ever with the onset of the pandemic and no certainty regarding the future. Given below are descriptions of a few organisations that have been involved to help support online learning and global education in general.

Association for Childhood Education International (ACEI)

This organization is a global community that looks forward and hopes to reform education as a whole. They aim to promote and support in the worldwide society the best education, development and well-being of children possible. To reach this goal, they host the Global Summit on Childhood and the Institute for Global Education Diplomacy which invites professionals and specialised educators to come together and have a thorough discussion about the issues that children face and how it affects their state of childhood. This ranges from education to health and even well-being. They bring together diplomats and professionals in education to figure out solutions to the hindrances causing obstacles and preventing students from receiving a suitable education.

Educational International

This organization is basically a coalition or alliance of over 30 million professionals in education that represent 400 organizations in 170 countries and territories. They all compromise the Education International. Their ultimate aim and reach is to promote quality education, equality in community and society and cater to the other interests of other education employees. As part of their program, they fight racism and xenophobia so that children face absolutely no boulders from receiving a quality education. They combat various forms and kinds of discrimination, including but not limited to exclusion of children on the basis of gender, socio -economic status, race and ethnic origin. They try and reach out to various other unions and global organisations and federations who would help them further global education.

The Global Partnership for Education (GPE)

This organisation world in around 60 developing countries through a multilateral partnership that tries to incorporate donor governments, international communities and professionals. They aim like any other organisation and additionally, aim to prioritize the poorest and more vulnerable and work hard to make sure they receive quality education. Alongside their partners, they develop and plan education strategies, promote collaboration in the field of education, share solutions to hindrances causing difficulties in reaching their aim, finance and provide monetary support for the implementation of programs and also record and assess the results. It was created in 2002 and ever since, it has helped 22

million children in school. They have helped increase literacy rates globally and also helped increase the scale of primary school completion. They have been able to train over 300,000 teachers along with other remarkable achievements.

Plan International

This community was founded over 75 years ago and is one of the oldest, largest and most dedicated children's development organizations in the world. Their ideal goal is to make sure every single child is able to achieve and reach his/her potential and also create a society where people's rights and dignity is respected. They help children deprived of basic necessities, poor families and their societies.

Save the Children

The goal of this community is to promote worldwide education and help ensure that every child achieves his/her rights in this world. They help reach this aim by increasing the quality of education given to instructors, teachers and professionals. They teach effective teaching strategies and tutor them on how to engage students in school material and course content. They also coach parents and guardians to help stimulate in the child a sense of learning to learn not only in classrooms but also outside of the classrooms. They coach parents on how to be supportive and encouraging for their children which has a huge impact on the child's education. Additionally, they also invest in the health, care and well-being of the child so as to make sure that they don't fall behind. In the year 2012, they had successfully been able to reach and help 9 million children.

The United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

This organization began in the year 1945 and has been since committed to providing quality education globally and a society where everyone has a right to education and believes that education plays a very important role in human, social and economic development. They also aim in the building of peace, eradication of poverty and everlasting development. They have a membership which includes and spans over 204 countries, 9 of which are associate members.

The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF)

This organization had been established in the 1946 and has always imagined of a world where the rights of every child was recognised and there existed no form of discrimination. They aim to reduce inequalities and fulfil global education goals such as the 2 Millenium Goals which focuses mainly on education, achieving gender equality in education. They hope to ensure that every child has the opportunity to learn and be able to receive an education during and after a crisis.

Timeline of Events

Date	Description of Event
1919	Professors at the University of Wisconsin began an amateur radio station.
1982	Online learning emerged when a Science institute opened its School of Management and Strategic Studies in California.
1989	University of Phoenix began offering education programs through the internet.
1993	Debut of the first Internet web browser, created by the University of Illinois.

Relevant UN Treaties and Events

As you will have seen, there was never a need for the UN to be involved in the field of online education because there was never a severe demand for online education. But ever since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, situations have changed and we have to adapt to these circumstances. Given below are a few resolutions which will help determine what rights children have to education as a whole which will help build your case upon online learning.

- The right to education, 18 June 2008 (Resolution 8/4)
- Rights of the child, 21 December 2010 (A/65/452)
- Thirtieth anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, 18 March 2019 (A/HRC/40)
- Recognizing the contribution of environmental human rights defenders to the enjoyment of human rights, environmental protection and sustainable development, 20 March 2019 (A/HRC/40)
- Rights of the child: empowering children with disabilities for the enjoyment of their human rights, including through inclusive education, 20 March 2019 (A/HRC/40)

Previous Attempts to solve the Issue

As mentioned in the earlier sections, the UN hasn't significantly contributed to the improvement of E-learning due to there never being a rapid rise in the transition from traditional classes to this form of learning, neither has there been such a high demand. But, that does not mean that online learning has never existed before. As it has already been described earlier in detail, online learning dates all the way back to the 1800s. Hence, there have been problems that have been faced and there have been previous attempts, steps and all sorts of solutions made to solve these hindrances.

One of the problems has always been that online learning does not provide the same amount of engagement and stimulation of the brain as the traditional classrooms have. They tend to get monotonous, boring and distracting. So, to prevent students and learners from getting bored, there are many ways in which online courses can be made interesting and interactive. On the part of the learner, always ensure that the course you're taking should match and suit your interests. Class content and material are being designed in the form of challenges and adventures and videos. They're being narrated in the form of a story, gamified solutions, simulators, etc. are there to make sure you're practicing as well as having fun. To add an extra amount of motivational touch to the course, often they come along with certification or a degree of qualification. They also promote healthy competition spirits by including rankings, classifications and prizes for distinguished winners. They can be in the form of cash or any other type of reward.

Another one of the problems encountered while learning via online platforms are technical glitches and difficulties. Often it is the case that students and learners get disconnected from the meeting or can't switch on their mic or camera or have network issues. More often than not, there are also internal issues with the devices they're using like in the Operating Systems. While this is not the fault of a student and is out of their hand, it still puts a damper on the progress of the student in his/her education. This often leads to frustration and the student quits before the course is over. There have been courses where not much internal memory or high-speed internet connection is required. That paired with simple and solid scripts for reference and additional content have gone a long way in helping improve the situation. It has also been advised to give priority to programs and documents which do not require to be downloaded and try to minimise the space files take on the system. In addition to all of this, most of the courses are provided with a detailed FAQ section and remarkable student care services to cater to every need of the students and learners to provide the best quality of education possible.

Possible Solutions

As it has already been mentioned a couple of times now, the UN hasn't been involved with the growth or betterment of online education. Even though there hasn't been a demand for online education in the previous decades, there has been a continuous and relentless effort to make sure every child gets the rights to education he/she deserves. Building on this, it would be preferred if a look at the earlier section of involved organizations was taken. All these organizations aim to provide children globally the rights, education, environment and life that they deserve. They try to eliminate any traces of discrimination and aim at a society and community where everyone believes in quality education and development.

Something that can be focused on to improve online learning, now that it has become a very integral part of our life, is that we can focus on all of these organizations or one big organization dedicating a branch or project to solely helping online learning flourish. The members of this project will help more children globally have a reach to online education. They could be pooling funds and donations for buying technological equipment and necessary devices required for a student to have access to E-learning.

There could also be the emergence of awareness programs and seminars to make sure that students know the importance of paying attention in online classes. These could be informative and educational sessions to explain to students how this current situation is the new normal and they will need to adjust and adapt. There could be more conferences explaining and instructing students how they should manage their time and courses to cope up with their syllabus. The importance of self learning can be instilled in the students and emphasised on. Courses could be prepared in a way where they are divided into several parts and consist of short lessons that can be finished in a short amount of time so that they don't take up too much of the students or learners time.

Online material should be supported with videos which help engage and give a sensory experience as they would leave a much better impression and retention in the memory of the student. If there are go-to resources to help along with quizlets, assignments and other additional content, it will immensely help the students. The idea of including and implementing Virtual Reality (VR) is a very good one as well. It is a new technology that has incredibly helped the world of E-Learning. On an average it has been found that a brain is able to only remember 10 percent of whatever it reads, 20 percent of whatever is heard and about 90 percent of what is being done or simulated. VR helps those who are physically disabled get to explore the entire world through their headset and helps them vastly learn and improve as well. With VR, content creation has also reached new limits and possibilities of the creations are endless and help students learn more than what they can learn from traditional classes. With VR, they can also access places and be in touch with destinations that aren't physically possible to travel to.

Hence, with all these developments from before so many more on the way, online learning can be vastly improved and can turn out to be very beneficial.

Guiding Questions

1. How can the UN be more active and provide more help in this issue?
2. How can teachers and parents be more supportive and provide a better environment for the student to learn?
3. Should mental health during online learning also be taken into consideration? If yes, how can it be incorporated?
4. How can students learn to attain discipline and management skills?
5. How can distractions for students be avoided?
6. How can more children have access to online learning with a limitation on resources?

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Appendix or Appendices

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