



Research article

Prolonged lockdown and academic uncertainties in Bangladesh: A qualitative investigation during the COVID-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The erratic nature of the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) forced the Bangladeshi government to shut down all the educational institutions since March 18, 2020. This prolonged closure not only detached the students from their study but also increased anxiety among them regarding their future academic as well as professional careers. The present study aimed to explore the perception and understanding of the students and teachers regarding the impact of COVID-19 on the academic life and career pursuit of university students in Bangladesh. With a semi-structured interview schedule, data for this qualitative study were collected from 8 purposively selected participants, using telephone interviews, affiliated with a public university in Bangladesh. Students argued that the extended closure is responsible for the delayed graduation of the senior students, thereby, mounting mental stress and frustration among them. The informants unequivocally opposed the online education platform, as a solution for the ongoing gap, due to scarcity of the resources, and unequal accesses and opportunities for all. It has been suggested that the education gap can be reduced by shortening the term, curtailing the preparatory leave, and taking extra classes over the weekends when the universities re-open together with enforced collective health hygiene.

1. Introduction

Originated from Wuhan, China, the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) (Harper et al., 2020; Wu et al., 2020), spread around the globe since December 2019, and forced the World Health Organization (WHO) to declare a global pandemic on March 11, 2020 (World Health Organization, 2020b; Chen et al., 2006). Unlike, SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) epidemic in 2002 (Chen et al., 2006) and MERS (Middle East Respiratory Syndrome) outbreak in 2012 (Lee et al., 2019), the overall case fatality rate of COVID-19 is still much lower (approximately 2.67 percent among the total confirmed cases) (Deng and Peng, 2020). Nevertheless, in the absence of precise antidotes or vaccines and the erratic nature of COVID-19, for instance, speedy transmission, high infection ratio, and death toll, make it a global challenge to confront (Ahorsu et al., 2020; Dar et al., 2017; Deng and Peng, 2020). As the disease is highly contagious, the WHO recommends maintaining the social distancing (e.g., at least 1 m between and among people, avoid

crowd and public gathering) to curb the disease (World Health Organization, 2020a).

Worldwide, countries have adopted different non-therapeutic measures and strategies, including shutting down the educational and administrative institutions, closing the market and other public spaces along with the transport system to restrict free movement and public gathering (Ahmed et al., 2020a; Anwar et al., 2020; Chen and Yuan, 2020; Satici et al., 2020). Educational institutions across the globe postponed on-campus activities to protect students and academic staffs from the risk of being infected with COVID-19 (Sahu, 2020; United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c). However, the prolonged closing has a significant impact not only on the academic life of about 1.3 billion learners from schools, colleges, and universities in 185 countries (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c), but also on their mental well-being. Studies across the globe have been reporting heightened mental health problems including anxiety, depression, stress, fear,

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substance abuse, poor sleep quality as well as suicidal behavior, particularly among students (Ahmed et al., 2020a; Cao et al., 2020; Gritsenko et al., 2020; Kaparounaki et al., 2020; Odriozola-González et al., 2020; Zou et al., 2020). The prolonged home confinement, restricted social interactions, insufficient mental refreshment, academic and professional delays and uncertainties are all intensifying the mental health problems among students (Cao et al., 2020; Grubic et al., 2020; Lu et al., 2020). Moreover, the concern over socioeconomic and health issues of family members and relatives during the pandemic cannot be overlooked (Cao et al., 2020; Odriozola-González et al., 2020).

The government of Bangladesh, following a confirmed coronavirus case in early March, announced a nationwide lockdown in a disguise of 'general leave' on March 26, 2020 to enforce social distance (Jahid, 2020; Opu, 2020; Shammi et al., 2020). Prior to the lockdown, the educational institutions were closed on March 18, 2020 and remained close until further notice (Shawon, 2020). Like other countries, the long-term closure of educational institutions set phenomenal difficulties for the students, hampering expeditiously their academic and professional dreams and ambitions (Theoret and Ming, 2020; Zhang et al., 2020). Consequently, students are experiencing an unprecedented rise of psychological disorders, such as anxiety, depression, stress, fear as well as sleep disturbance (Islam et al., 2020; Islam et al., 2020; Khan et al., 2020). Compared to others, students had higher anxiety, depression, stress and lower mental well-being in Bangladesh (Ahmed, Ahmed, Alim, Khan and Jobe, 2020b), and the growing mental health ailment can be attributed to the home confinement and exposure to social and electronic media (Hossain et al., 2020; Khan et al., 2020).

To minimize the academic loss during the unavoidable circumstance of COVID-19 pandemic, and to reduce the intensity of psychological problems among the young population, countries across the world sought an alternative way of teaching – the online-based class (Besser et al., 2020; Favale et al., 2020; Rajhans et al., 2020; United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2020; Zhang et al., 2020). Bangladesh is no exception. Initially, most of the universities did not have the required technological infrastructure or learning management systems. However, the Bangladesh University Grants Commission (BUGC) with the help of Bangladesh Research and Education Network (BdREN) – an initiative funded by the World Bank in 2009 – provided the required facilities to re-start the teaching and learning activities based on online platform (Rahman, Mustashin-Ul-Aziz, & Ahmed, 2020). Unfortunately, like other countries, Bangladesh is still experiencing some problems, such as inadequate technical and infrastructural facilities as well as lack of training for both educator and educands (Dhawan, 2020; Lassoued et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2020).

Several studies have already been undertaken regarding COVID-19 and its impact on the mass population in different issues. Still, to our knowledge, none of them explained the experience of enormous psychological pressure among university students due to academic and professional uncertainty. Therefore, in this paper, we aimed to focus on the perception and understanding of university students and teachers about the impact of COVID-19 on academic life and future career pursuit of the graduates.

2. Theoretical foundation

We linked this study with restricted opportunities theory proposed by Schiller (1995). An individual cannot escape from being vulnerable due to the lack of necessary supportive materials. An effective e-learning usually depends on many interrelated factors, such as uninterrupted high-speed internet, availability, accessibility and affordability of electronic devices, curricula and remote evaluation compatible with e-learning (Lassoued et al., 2020). However, the financial and pedagogical constraints along with inadequate technical infrastructures are considered as the major barriers for online education system (Lassoued et al., 2020; Mahmud and Gope, 2009).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, people in higher academia, including teachers and students, in Bangladesh are suffering from a lack of necessary resources, such as communication devices, uninterrupted high-speed internet connections, that are required to continue the online education (Zaman, 2020), despite some initiatives taken by the authorities of different universities and UGC of Bangladesh (Rahman et al., 2020). The evidence from Bangladesh contend that unstable internet connection remains a major constraint for smooth online class (Majed et al., 2020; Sarker et al., 2019; Zaman, 2020). The sudden increase of both consumers and use of high-speed internet is also stalling the server (LightCastle Partners, 2020). Moreover, the inability to afford desktop or laptop with necessary gadgets by students, particularly of public universities, largely because of financial constraints, is considered another major setback for online class in Bangladesh (Majed et al., 2020). In fact, in Bangladesh around 36.7 % households have the access to internet, and only 5.6 % have their computer facilities (Majed et al., 2020; Zaman, 2020). Under these dismal circumstances, the online education is exposing the existence of social disparities among the university students, and leading to mental health problems, including anxiety, depression and frustration, especially among the students from lower-middle income families, for their inability to afford required facilities (Zaman, 2020), and in some cases to suicidal behavior (Lathabhavan and Griffiths, 2020; Mamun et al., 2020). Besides, there is no proper guidelines about 'how to conduct and evaluate the classes' of the laboratory-oriented subjects (Lassoued et al., 2020), therefore, demotivating both parties - teachers and students, to continue online classes on a regular basis (Zaman, 2020).

3. Materials and methods

3.1. Research design

We used the qualitative approach to conduct the study because it helps us to comprehend the meaningful and logical explanations of human behavior, thinking and actions based on subjective experiences, judgements and opinions (Abuhammad, 2020; Marvasti, 2004) of university students and teachers regarding the COVID-19 and its effect on the academic and professional career of the students. Our method focused on understanding of "how the COVID-19 pandemic affects the academic career of students" and "how this problem can be solved" from both students' and teachers' perspectives. In explaining the complex social issues with causal relationship, the qualitative approach enables us to gather validated human experiences in a particular social settings influenced by socioeconomic and politico-cultural issues (Lune and Berg, 2017; Maxwell, 2012). It also enables us to understand "how the participants construct and provide sense to their everyday life during the pandemic."

3.2. Study subjects

Using a purposive sampling method, we selected eight participants affiliated with a public university in the southwestern region of Bangladesh, an academic hub for students in that geographical area. Among the participants, there were six students, and the other two were teachers (See Table 1). The inclusion criteria for the student participants, to be selected in the study, were (i) enrolled in regular graduate (Master) program, (ii) preparing for career-related examinations. On the other hand, the criteria for the teachers to be nominated in the study was (i) knowledge and willingness to conduct online class during the ongoing pandemic. In the selection process of our study participants, we used theoretical purposive sampling (Bryman, 2012) as it ensure the saturation of our expected data from two categories of academic staffs and students. Moreover, we determined the number of informants by obtaining informed consent through a telephonic interview with the participants. In this context, after conducting interviews with two university teachers no new theme generated and the same happened in the cases of student interviews where no new ideas generated after the sixth

Table 1. Profile of informants.

Sl. No.	Name (Pseudo)	Age	Sex	Education	School	Marital Status	Place of Residence
1	Ahmed Malek (Faculty)	47	Male	PhD	Life Science	Married	Urban Area
2	Sadek Rahman (Faculty)	31	Male	Masters	Social Science	Married	Urban Area
3	Jahid Sheikh	23	Male	Graduate student	Social Science	Unmarried	Semi-Urban Area
4	Santo Saha	23	Male	Graduate student	Social Science	Unmarried	Rural Area
5	Amina	23	Female	Graduate student	Social Science	Unmarried	Rural Area
6	Fazlul Karim	24	Male	Graduate student	Social Science	Unmarried	Rural Area
7	Sameeha	23	Female	Graduate student	Social Science	Married	Urban Area
8	Fatema	24	Female	Graduate student	Social Science	Unmarried	Urban Area

Note: Owing to the confidential issue, informant's pseudo names were used.

interview. Due to the restriction of 'social distancing', we could not collect information from a larger sample group.

3.3. Interview outline

For this study, we fixed up the interview guideline by going through relevant literature, expert advice as well as selecting a university student for pre-interview. The main thematic questions for the students were – (1) are you feeling stressed during this pandemic? (2) do you think that this outbreak can hamper your career plan in the long run? (3) what sort of strategies, do you think, to be effective in recovering from this problem? (4) how do you manage your regular expenditure, as you are not able to provide private tutoring under the current situation? and (5) what do you think about the online education system? On the contrary, the basic questions for the teachers were – (1) how does the COVID-19 pandemic affect a student's academic life? (2) what do you think about the online class for university students at this moment? and (3) what would be the suitable solution to recover session jam as resulted from this prolonged closure due to the COVID-19 pandemic?

3.4. Data collection

Realizing the present context with the WHO recommended 'social distancing', we communicated with the participants before the interview and arranged telephonic conversation session according to their convenient time. Though it is a challenge to conduct in-depth interviews over telephone (Legard et al., 2003), interviewing over the telephone can be an extraordinary catalyst in research work during emergencies when it is difficult for the researcher to communicate directly with the participants (Silverman, 2013). Besides, telephonic interview confirms uniformity of the interviewer, and provides guarantee regarding standardization of the queries, and ensures researchers' safety along with creating a better opportunity for the participants who live far away from the investigator (Brinkmann, 2013). Moreover, the method is cost-effective. Using a semi-structured interview schedule, shared through digital media, i.e., Messenger, containing a written informed consent form, information was collected from the participants about the investigative issues.

The *Bangla* language was used to conduct the interviews. The one-to-one telephonic interview was done without any break or interruption. On an average, the duration of each conversation was 22–30 min. The interviews were recorded with prior permission from the participants and kept strictly confidential. The participants were free to withdraw from the study at any time without prior justification. Accordingly, we were in a neutral position to collect data and maintain a harmonious relationship with the participants. We were cautious during the interview session and followed the rule of unrestricted acceptance, attentive listening, and explanation to endorse the validity of the data and to sidestep the partiality. However, after the sixth interview, it seemed that the investigation had reached an initial saturation point, and the data collection was discontinued after the eighth interview. We need to clarify that in a

qualitative research sample number is not so essential to make generalization rather than the depth of the data is more significant (Bryman, 2012).

3.5. Data analysis

Immediately after conducting the interviews, all the recorded data were transcribed to classify the themes and then the programming software NVivo 12 was used to code and interpret the data into themes. All the authors summed up the crucial articulations and framed the themes. Thematic analysis, along with narratives, was used as data analysis methods. By focusing on the way, the theme is treated or presented and the frequency of its occurrence, the authors linked the analysis to outside variables. Furthermore, following each interview, we considered relevant issues to include in the initial analysis based on the consensus among the researchers. Meanwhile, inconsistent issues generated from the interviews were fixed, and in some extreme cases excluded, after a careful evaluation and thorough discussion among the researchers.

3.6. Ethical issues

This study was reviewed and approved by the Khulna University Ethical Clearance Committee (Protocol No. KUECC-2020/11/02). All the participants gave their verbal informed consent over the telephone, which were recorded and can be submitted on request. All the authors of this paper also assured that there would be no academic misconduct, such as data manipulation and distortion.

4. Results

4.1. Informants profile

The participants in this study were from different geographical settings. Half of all the informants (4) were residing in urban areas, whereas three of them were from rural areas, and only one was from the semi-urban area. Excluding the teachers (2), most of the participants (5) were from a poor socioeconomic background. Though the informants' general characteristics, i.e., geographical location, economic solvency, age level, were different from each other, yet the narratives we got after in-depth interviews over the telephone were unique. At the same time, the stories they shared with us contained similar threads. These similarities helped us to identify the emergent themes for this study as well as to probe the necessity for further qualitative investigation through in-depth interviews among the students. We identified four themes –

- (i) Knowledge about self-isolation and social distancing;
- (ii) Impact on academic life and career pursuit;
- (iii) Post pandemic period solution to stress and study gap;
- (iv) Perception of online classes.

4.2. Theme 1: knowledge about self-isolation and social distancing

This theme represents the scenario of the COVID-19 outbreak, a growing international concern today (Gao et al., 2020). This theme represents the knowledge about COVID-19, quarantine as safety measure, i.e., self-isolation and social distancing, and how they understood the importance of maintaining 'social distance' during the lockdown situation.

The participants were well informed about the catastrophic impact of COVID-19 on the life and livelihood of people across the globe. The participants were also familiar with the concept of 'social distancing' recommended by WHO. However, it is essential to understand, what do they understand by social distance, or how to maintain social distancing? On this ground, the university students (6) were in consensus that social distancing is to 'stay at home' and keep specific 'distance among people' during direct face-to-face contact. The informants believe that social distance is the best way to contain the human transmission of the COVID-19. Karim (age 24), one of our participants, said that –

“Social distancing is an effective measure to stop the human-to-human transmission in direct contact. When I maintain social distance from outsiders, I feel safe.”

Our respondents emphasized on WHO-recommended social distancing strategy as narrated by Jahid (age 23) –

“I have to isolate myself not only from others (outsiders) but also from my family members if I see any symptom of COVID-19 in me. By self-isolation, I could save my family members, my community, and the society at large by minimizing human-to-human transmission.”

Religion played a significant role in shaping peoples' perception. Some people perceived that this pandemic is a punishment from the Almighty, and they suggested that keeping a strong faith on Him in this regard would save us all. Our informants also showed their concern about religious faith and belief to understand and to describe the COVID-19. Three of our informants agreed upon what Fatema (age 24) had said –

“I understand that we should maintain distance from others, and strictly follow the health hygiene practices avoiding COVID-19. However, only social distancing or other hygiene practices are not enough to keep us safe from the infections; rather, we must keep our faith on the Creator (Allah). Because, without His wishes and blessings, no one can get infected nor recover from the illness.”

4.3. Theme 2: impact of COVID-19 on academic life and career persuasion

The second theme explored the impact of COVID-19 on students' academic and professional career and how the students understood the effect of lockdown situation on their current and future life. Half of the informants (4) believe that the financial condition of the family is a crucial factor in surviving during the prolonged lockdown in the current pandemic situation, and this condition surely affected the students, particularly those from lower-middle-income families. Santo (age 23), for example, stated that –

“After the pandemic, the situation will be more difficult for the students who want to complete their study and to prepare for competitive career-related examinations. Students like me, who are from lower-middle-income families, may suffer the most. My father's income is not enough to maintain my family expenditure; therefore, I have to bear my educational expenses by providing supplementary classes (private tuition) to several school students and support my family in some cases.”

Parents of university students often expect that their children would take care of the family after completing graduation. Particularly, with limited income, parents from lower-middle-income families always struggle to bear educational expenses from childhood to adolescence.

Many students from lower-middle-income families support their educational expenses by providing private tuition while living on campus, which, to some extent, reduced the financial burden on their parents. The prolonged closure of the university due to countrywide lockdown forced the university students to discontinue private tuition, which eventually ended their secured source of earning. Therefore, students fear that it is not possible to support their families under the current pandemic situation. Jahid agreed with Santo's statement, and further added that –

“Under normal circumstances, I could do my daily activities smoothly like studying as well as preparing for job examination or going out for private tuition to support myself and my family. Under the current situation, however, I am forced to stay at home, and cannot go for private tuition, and could not support my family during this emergency.”

Furthermore, university students are concerned about their future professional career. The reason is that the public service in Bangladesh has a specific age limit. Thus, the senior students fear that this pandemic may curtail a valuable year from their life to apply and to be selected for the public services. One of the university students, Amina (age 23) stressed on the session jam that might affect and reduce their chances of getting public service in the post-pandemic period –

“I have already lost 6 months during my undergraduate. Now, the COVID-19 situation would widen the loss further as it would take more than a year to complete my graduation. I am worried that I may lose the opportunities to sit for public service examinations for at least a year due to this unexpected health emergency. I am afraid that I may not recover if the government is not willing to do something for us.”

All these negative thoughts of current and future academic life and professional career are at risk due to the prolonged closure of the educational institutions. Such uncertainty over academic and career issues also harmed the mental settings of the students. They are stressed, as they believe that in the post-pandemic period, the back-to-back classes, as well as examinations, would ultimately help them to complete their graduation and enable them to pursue their desired future career plan. Karim stressfully explained that –

“The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic is hampering my study. I have already lost two months, and I do not know when I would be able to go to university again. Staying at home, I cannot concentrate on my studies or prepare for the examinations. The lockdown has made changes in my career plan in many ways. I started preparing for IELTS and planned to sit for the examination in the next September. I was intended to pursue higher education abroad, and now I'm thinking of changing that plan. Because my father could not support me anymore as the shop, he owned was closed for more than two months.”

Concerning the future changes, students are terrified about the cumulative pressure they would face in the post-pandemic situation. Fatema, like other students (5), expect that there might be many changes, such as fewer classes or shorter terms, to re-adjust with the academic losses. However, these changes would make the adjustment difficult for the students as they stayed away from academic life for long. Mr. Malek (age 47), working as a university teacher, shared a similar thought –

“When the university was closed, the students were just two-weeks short from the term final examination. All the students were involved in academic activities and enthusiastically preparing for the examination. Because of the closure, I think the students might need to re-start where they left, and such would require some additional time to re-adjust and re-focus. The time they have already lost due to the pandemic would severely affect the senior students compared to the fresher and the juniors. Generally, the students at the final year of undergraduate and graduate programs are more serious about their education, as they are actively engaged in pursuing higher education abroad or preparing for public service examinations.”

This prolonged lockdown not only hampers the academic life of the students but also affects their social life. During vacation, students tend to enjoy their time. However, under the current situation, they are living in fear, stressed, and anxious. The home quarantine and the social distancing restricted their contact with friends and relatives only through virtual sources, for example, through Facebook, Messenger, and other social media. However, the informants said that they are missing their real-life activities, such as attending lectures and sessional classes at the campus, having fun with friends after the class. These activities refreshed them and helped them to boost their energy to continue the study. Now, the situation is different. Mr. Malek said that –

“If I always live in fear and stress in my life, how can I concentrate on my study? The students are stressed in both social and academic life, and the ongoing situation is making it difficult for them to continue with their study and normal life.”

4.4. Theme 3: solution to recover study gap after the pandemic

The closure of the educational institution for a specific time, such as summer break, or festival break, would not affect the students as they knew when they need to come back or re-start their studies. The uncertainty about the opening of the university, and incessant ‘infodemic’ in social media, have been adversely affecting the psycho-social well-being of the university students. As a young faculty of a university, Mr. Sadek (age 31) explained –

“If any student asks me when the academic activities will resume again? I do not have the exact answer. I think nobody can answer this now. The prolonged and proliferated academic uncertainty indulge students in a confusing situation, and they could not decide what to do – whether prepare for academic examination or join the race for competitive race public services, or to live in fear.”

The students were also concerned about the fact that after resuming the academic and administrative activities in the university, the students will experience a cumulative pressure of shorter terms, continuous class, and sessional tests and may have to prepare for the term-final within short notice. The third emergent theme our informants generated about the way out for the post-pandemic academic stress. Sameeha (age 23) apprehends the thoughts of many (5) about the university’s plan when the situation improves –

“University authority should start classes and examinations immediately after the re-opening from the lockdown. In the post-pandemic period, projects and thesis works should be shortened by any means.”

4.5. Santo added that –

“To recover the study gap, the university should arrange classes for six days (limiting the two-weekends into one) and shorten the preparatory leisure to organize final examination as early as possible.”

Likewise, Jahid, a master’s student, also suggests a recovery plan for the university –

“After the pandemic, the university authority should shorten the current term. I believe that students like me would be benefited if the authority manages to shorten the academic year. Because it would help us to complete the graduation in due-time and apply for the public service and other similar competitive examinations.”

Apart from suggesting a recovery plan for the university students, the student participants also advocated an extension of the age limit for public service for a specified period. Agreeing with the students, Mr. Malek also pointed out that the academic loss can be minimized by

reducing term-break, skipping preparation leave, and taking the extra classes over the weekend.

4.6. Theme 4: perception of online classes

There is an ongoing debate about starting the online classes in Bangladesh, or not (Tawhida, 2020). Our fourth emergent theme is about perception regarding the online classes during this pandemic situation to recover students’ academic losses. Most of our informants are unconvinced about the potentials of online classes in Bangladesh, mainly due to insufficient infrastructural and technological facilities, together with financial constraints limiting the family’s capacity to afford the ‘expensive’ internet services available in Bangladesh. They also pointed out that the geographical location of the residence of university students as an essential impediment to ensuring access to online classes as a significant number of students live in remote areas of Bangladesh without proper communication facilities. In this respect, the majority (7) of the informants’ view coincides with what Fatema thinks –

“We are living in a lower-middle-income country, where most of us are struggling financially due to the lockdown and other emerging issues. I do not have the luxury to use or avail Wi-Fi facilities, and we could not afford the telecommunication-based high-speed internet packages as well. Because those packages are costly. Furthermore, internet networks are not available everywhere, especially in remote rural areas of Bangladesh. For many students like me, availing ‘expensive’ internet services for attending a class is like daydreaming. Even if I manage the internet, I mostly get a 2G network in my village, and it would be impossible to attend the online classes using this network. Therefore, online classes are not a feasible solution for me, not financially as well as technically.”

Under the current situation, the online class is not a practical solution for students enrolled in public universities. Because spending additional money on internet services to attend the online class is not the priority for most of the university students from low-income families in Bangladesh, especially during the pandemic. The lower and lower-middle-income families are struggling financially and sometime could not afford the necessary amenities. The informants insisted that the stories for the students at private universities, on the other hand, would be different. They perceive that students at private universities are mostly from solvent families compared to those of public universities, who can afford higher expenses of education.

The informants argued that before going for the online classes, ensuring equal opportunities for every student is vital for public universities as well as for the University Grants Commission of Bangladesh. They almost univocally said –

“University authority should ensure that all the students have the equal opportunities. The students may or may not join online classes but providing them with equal opportunity would be a question from ethical perspectives. If we cannot ensure equal access for all students, we must not start online classes.”

To validate their arguments against online classes, the informant mentioned several issues, and geographical remoteness is one of them. The informants of both students and teachers perceived that only theoretical classes are compatible with online classes, but experimental or laboratory-based classes are not. The participants also deemed that face-to-face interaction with teachers is the best method of teaching where students can ask questions and get a prompt answer from their teachers.

Teaching staff also raised questions about the logistic support of the universities required to conduct online classes. One of the faculty members explained that some universities in Bangladesh provide a desktop computer at the office with or without high-speed Wi-Fi internet service. The authorities are insisting on taking online classes while remained silent about other necessary logistic supports. He added that this current situation under the pandemic is new for both the university

and its academic staffs as well as students, and none is adequately ready for the take-off.

5. Discussion

Universities can be a significant epicenter of an outbreak for having the largest concentration of students (Van et al., 2010). In this regard, knowledge, belief, and perception of the students critically affect the spread of any disease. General students can easily comply with any illness and thereby play a significant role in curtailing the disease line by having the exact information and conscious practice (Akan et al., 2010; Asaad et al., 2019). Similarly, this study reveals that the participant holds enough knowledge regarding the COVID-19 outbreak and well-aware of how the virus transmitted from person-to-person. They, therefore, stressed on complying with the WHO recommended social distancing as the inevitable strategy to curb the human-to-human transmission of the virus. Meanwhile, only a handful ($n = 2$) of the informants believe that the hygienic precautions are not solely able to keep people safe from virus infection; instead, they must have faith in the Creator (Allah). Because only the Almighty, as per their belief, can save people from the contagious virus. Earlier studies also found that during natural disasters or health emergencies, religious faith can boost up the mental strength, thereby, help people to accommodate with severe stress (Chen and Koenig, 2006; Niaz, 2006; Overcash et al., 1996; Park, 2005) and a quick emotional recovery (Carmil and Breznitz, 1991; Hussain et al., 2011; Shaw et al., 2005). There is a strong correlation between religious belief and mental well-being as it provides connotation and persistence for individuals in their life (Gartner et al., 1991; Harrison et al., 2001; Koenig and Larson, 2001).

Our finding also shows that the long-term closure of the university negatively influences not only the academic life but also the personal life of the students. A handful number of the university students were engaged in private tuition to support themselves, and to some extent, their families. This prolonged lockdown severely affected their income from supplementary classes that, in some cases, caused mental stress. The earlier studies also suggest that economic solvency is a motivating factor to survive during the emergencies (Kotalik, 2005; Nichol, D'Heilly and Ehlinger, 2005; Zhai and Du, 2020). Besides, the prolonged shut down of the educational institutions certainly changes the education system that might affect the convenient learning process. For instance, delayed submission of research work, as well as internship projects, could produce enormous pressure on the mental well-being of the students (Asaad et al., 2019; Vidyadhara et al., 2020; Zhai and Du, 2020). Furthermore, there also remain questions regarding the valuation of the final year students (Gonzalez et al., 2020). The current study also indicates the concern of the students about the delayed graduation, which could hamper their persuasion of a professional career in the long run. On this ground, indeed, the completion of graduation on time would contribute to the societal and financial benefits for the students and their families, in terms of quality life for the individuals as well as a better living standard for families (Kuh et al., 2008; Sahu, 2020).

Online education, the virtual class, blogs, web conferencing and discussion, can be a way of confirming continuity of education for the learners, and such strategy would help to reduce the study related anxiety (Sahu, 2020; Zhai and Du, 2020). But, online classes could be a viable option only when the required resources – both technological and financial – are available and when there is consensus between the two sides – the service providers (the educational institutions and teachers) and the service receivers (the students) (Van et al., 2010). The web-based e-education is not a new concept for universities around the world (Sahu, 2020), however, it has proved to be an effective way of continuing the academic activities during the ongoing pandemic while keeping social distance and maintaining the safe academic environment (Rajhans et al.,

2020). Yet, there remains some drawbacks to ensure all-inclusive online education for all. For instance, the demand for digital devices and other facilities, including laptops or desktops together with high-speed internet connection, are putting extra burden on the parents and students. Recently a female school student in India committed suicide as she was unable to attend online classes (Lathabhavan and Griffiths, 2020). A 'suicide pact' by mother and son in Bangladesh related to online schooling reflects the unresolved issues associated with e-learning (Mamun et al., 2020). Besides, there are different courses like laboratory classes and works, filed works, music and art courses which are not possible to continue through online classes (Sahu, 2020). In a similar vein, our findings suggest that in Bangladesh, both students and teachers are reluctant regarding online education mainly because of the scarcity and inequitable distribution of the required resources. Hence, both parties are unwilling to agree with this solution. Nevertheless, if the concerned authority ensures equitable opportunities for all, the situation may be different, as indicated by the informants of the present study.

6. Conclusions

The participants of this study possess enough knowledge about the risk and remedies of the COVID-19 outbreak. Still, they are severely anxious about future academic and professional career due to the prolonged detachment from their study. The upcoming session jam, together with an uncertain professional career, might be an 'X'-factor for the mental distress of the university students. Therefore, it is high time for the university and other relevant authorities to devise practical approaches in a positive direction to overcome the educational gap with sufficient resources, as because only the supportive attitude along with transparent and clear communication would be an effective way to overcome these hurdles. In this context, not only the government and the university authority should come forward, but also the external stakeholders, for instance; industrial and other private organizations should step in with their funds to pull the academia from getting into troubles. Otherwise, the nation will have to bear the severe cost of psychological disorder outbreak among university students.

This present study is not free from limitations. For instance, data were collected from master students and two faculties from one university, thus, it may limit the generability of the findings. Moreover, data were collected over a short period of time, and the interview session was carried out over the telephone. A face-to-face in-depth interview would bring greater clarity about the perception of the respondents. Hence, more systematic, and lengthier follow-up studies are recommended for a better outcome.

Declarations

Author contribution statement

M. Z. Ela: Conceived and designed the experiments; Performed the experiments; Analyzed and interpreted the data; Contributed reagents, materials, analysis tools or data; Wrote the paper.

T. A. Shohel, T. Shovo: Analyzed and interpreted the data; Wrote the paper.

L. Khan: Performed the experiments; Analyzed and interpreted the data; Wrote the paper.

N. Jahan: Contributed reagents, materials, analysis tools or data; Wrote the paper.

M. T. Hossain: Conceived and designed the experiments; Analyzed and interpreted the data; Contributed reagents, materials, analysis tools or data; Wrote the paper.

M. N. Islam: Conceived and designed the experiments; Wrote the paper.

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Data availability statement

No data was used for the research described in the article.

Declaration of interests statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Additional information

No additional information is available for this paper.

Ethical Approval

The study was approved by the Khulna University Ethical Clearance Committee, Khulna University, Khulna 9208, Bangladesh (Protocol No. KUECC-2020/11/02).

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