

HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION DURING COVID-19

Dr.S.Bala Brahma Chary, Associate Professor & Head, Department of Public Administration
Nizam College (Autonomous), Osmania University, Hyderabad.

Abstract

The outbreak of COVID pandemic led to disruption of education services all over the world and face to face educational institutions either delayed their process of student support services or switched to distance education practices to overcome the restrictions imposed to curtail the spread of pandemic. Students of higher education also faced dilemma while choosing between face to face institution and distance education institution. In this situation distance education institutions gained popularity as they were already using measures which were conducive for the continuance of student support activities even during the COVID. To understand the factors influencing students to opt for distance education institutions during COVID pandemic a survey was conducted among the students who took admission in Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) and Uttar Pradesh Rajarshi Tandon Open University (UPRTOU) during the lockdown period. It was found that majority of the students did not choose distance education because face to face institutions were closed but they preferred distance education because it extensively uses various online platforms to reach to the students and it is cheap and easily accessible in nature. Students also wanted to utilize the lockdown period to enhance their academic credentials and professional skills. The study also revealed that distance education is gradually becoming first choice of study for many and thus government should focus and increase its financial assistance towards distance education.

Keywords- Distance Education, Face to face, COVID, Admission, Students

Introduction

COVID pandemic outbreak in November 2019 in China and its subsequent spread throughout the world in the form of different waves forced governments to put lockdown to curtail further spread of COVID. These stringent measures by governments affected almost every service industry in the world and education was not an exception. Higher education is one of the worst effected sector due to the COVID pandemic. Almost all the schools and colleges were closed down for the time being during initial phase of outbreak of COVID pandemic. According to UNESCO (2020a), “more than 1.5 billion students and youth across the planet are or have been affected by school and university closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic”.

Teaching institutions gradually started introducing alternative methods for delivery of education to their students to cope up with the situation in which every activity involving any type of public gathering or physical contact was stopped by governments all over the world during pandemic. Students faced dilemma whether opt for face to face mode of education or go for distance education. Rural students are worst affected during any such crisis as rural areas are lagging behind in terms of availability of infrastructure like internet and electricity and there is a huge ‘digital divide’ between rural and urban students to access to technology and opportunities to learn (Wang, 2013).

All these developments cumulatively supported the cause for increase in importance of distance education all over the world. Even institutions having face to face mode of teaching and learning switched to distance education practices for imparting education during COVID pandemic. Distance education has the potential to provide equitable conditions to disadvantageous groups to continue their education or to improve themselves (Robinson, 2008).

Distance education is known for providing maximum possible flexibility to its students in completing their study. COVID pandemic is no exception when it comes to adaptability of distance education. As the situation demands distance education adapts itself as per the requirements of the students and as per the need of time and place. Distance education provides both spatial and temporal flexibility to its students. Spatial flexibility means it allows students to choose their own geographical location of study and learning material and other teaching aids are provided at their choice of location. Temporal flexibility means it provides flexibility to students in terms of time span

required for completing their study. According to Moore and Kearsley (1996) physical separation of teachers and students in terms of time and space is the keystone of distance education.

In the fight against the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic and to overcome the disruptions caused by it to education sector, countries have used distance education as a defensive tool and also as replacement of traditional education. Although countries have been exposed to natural and man-made disasters previously also but the large extent to which distance education is being used as a solution to COVID pandemic crisis is unprecedented (Al Lily et al., 2020).

Different institutions, educators and students all around the world are looking for flexible and alternate ways to repair the damage caused by COVID-19's interruptions to learning process. In this context, the open schools and open universities, have continued to operate during the COVID-19 pandemic can provide the variety of courses to choose from and flexibility of time and place of learning to help students get back on track (Daniel. S. J., 2020).

The attitude towards distance education has changed during recent decades and now it is being widely accepted. COVID pandemic has changed public perception towards distance learning, especially employers, but there is still an opinion that study completed remotely cannot be treated at par with face to face education. However, during COVID pandemic when access to education is limited due to various restrictions, it should be highlighted that distance learning provides a viable alternative (Pregowska, A. et al., 2021).

Distance learning model has emerged as a rescuer and maintains the continuity of the educational process in times of crisis. If needed in times of crisis, it is possible to shift the educational process of an institution to the distance learning paradigm in a rapid manner and without pauses in the educational process (Bojović et al., 2020). The method and practice of teaching available for face-to-face learning cannot be used for distance learning and teachers who are not technologically apt require proper professional development and training in order to orient themselves towards their students (Pokhrel and Chhetri, 2021).

Restrictions on frequent movement of people, goods and services imposed by national as well as different state governments in India during COVID pandemic caused disruptions in the delivery of academic support to students. Open and distance learning (ODL) institutions were presenting an alternative to bridge the physical distance between institution and students due to the obvious reasons. Therefore, the aim of this study is to examine the factors influencing students to opt for distance education institution during COVID. This study also analyzes the feedback of male and female students as well as rural and urban students on factors influencing them to opt for distance education institution during pandemic. Hence, findings of this study can help various governments and higher education institutions in general and distance education institutions in particular in framing their policies towards uninterrupted academic support to students in the event of any similar crisis in future.

Purpose of the study

The current research has been undertaken with the purpose to:

- Examine the factors influencing students to opt for distance education institution during COVID pandemic.
- Analyze gender-wise feedback of students on factors influencing them to opt for distance education institution during COVID pandemic.
- Analyze feedback of students on factors influencing them to opt for distance education institution during COVID pandemic in relation to their area of residence.

Method

The study was conducted between October 15 and December 28, 2021. To collect the data from participants, an online questionnaire via Google form was prepared and the same was sent to participants through SMS and email. Repeat SMS were sent to increase the participation. Details of purpose of study and information about researcher was placed on the top of the form. Participation in the survey was completely voluntary and filling of informed consent form was compulsory by participants before completing the survey. Survey contained two sets of questions. The first set contained 7 questions related with demographic profile of the participants. The second set contained

15 statements designed on 5 point Likert Scale regarding factors influencing students to opt for distance education institution during COVID pandemic. The draft of questions and statements were sent to experts in the field for suggestions and feedback and the necessary changes were made on the basis of feedbacks of experts before finalizing the draft.

Participants

The study included the students who took admission between January to July 2021 in two distance education institutions of India viz. Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), a central university and Uttar Pradesh Rajarshi Tandon Open University (UPRTOU), a state university during the COVID pandemic period. Total 563 students who took admission in different level of programmes of IGNOU and UPRTOU viz. Post Graduate Degree, Graduate Degree, Post Graduate Diploma, Diploma and Certificate programme participated in the survey.

Data Collection Tool and analysis

Google form was sent to participants through SMS and email. Repeat SMSs and emails were sent to increase the participation. The responses to the scale items were evaluated by using mean, standard deviation, frequency, percentage and t-test analysis using IBP SPSS 22.0 version programme. A five-point Likert scale was used to allow the participants to indicate how much they agree with a specific statement. The 5-point Likert scale used is an evaluation scale from 1 to 5, and the scale options and score ranges are given in Table 1 (Karadağ et al., 2008).

Table 1. Likert Scale Options and Score Ranges

Options	Scale options	Score ranges
Strongly Agree	5	4.20–5.00
Agree	4	3.40–4.19
Neither agree nor disagree	3	2.60–3.39
Disagree	2	1.80–2.59
Strongly disagree	1	1.00–1.79

Validity of the survey

The reliability of this survey based on five-point Likert scale questionnaire was evaluated by Cronbach's alpha, where the sufficiency level for the alpha coefficient is ≥ 0.70 (Cortina, 1993). In this study, Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the complete survey was found to be 0.84, which is a good internal consistency.

Findings and Discussion

The survey was divided into two parts. First part contained the demographic profile of the students.

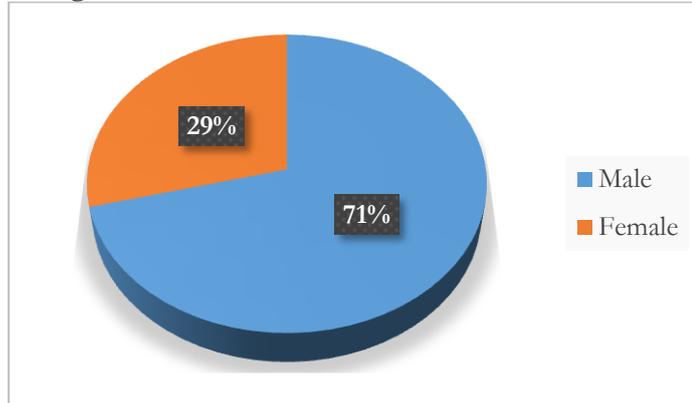
Table 2. Demographic profile of students who took admission in distance education institution

Demographic variables		Fr equency	Per centage
Gender	Male	40	71%
	Female	16	29%
	Total	56	100%
Programme of Admission in Distance	Post Graduate Degree	21	38%
	Graduate Degree	21	38%

Education	Post Graduate			12	
	Diploma	66	%		
	Diploma	44		8%	
	Certificate	26		5%	
	Total	56		10	
Age Bracket	Total	3	0%		
	Less than 20	98	41%	17.	
	20-30	38		68.	
	30-40	3	03%		
	40-50	59	48%	10.	
	More than 50	21	3%	3.7	
	Total	2	6%	0.3	
	Total	3	56	10	0.00%
Empl oyment Status	Unemployed	4	39	70	
	Private Sector Employee	63	%	11	
	Government Employee	74	%	13	
	Self-Employed	32		6%	
	Total	3	56	10	0%
	Area of Residence	Rural	0	35	62
	Urban	3	21	38	
	Total	3	56	10	0%
Marit al Status	Unmarried	0	46	82	
	Married	3	10	18	
	Total	3	56	10	0%
	Quali fication	Intermediate	6	21	38
	Graduate	4	23	42	
	Post Graduate	9	10	19	
	Doctorate (Ph. D.)	4		1%	
	Total	3	56	10	0%

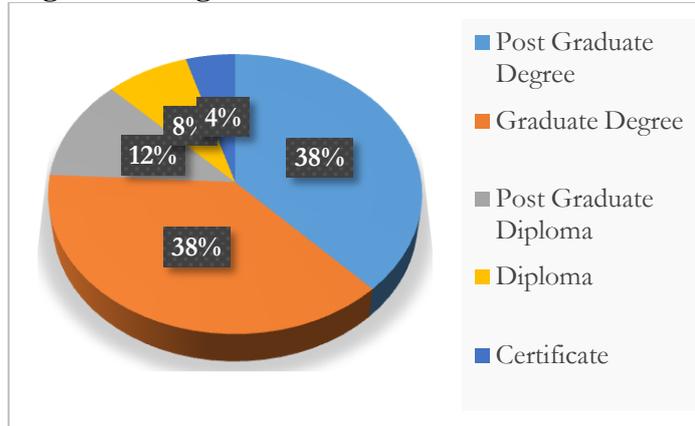
Total 563 respondents participated in the survey, out of which 400 (71%) were male and 163 (29%) were female.

Figure 1. Gender wise distribution of students



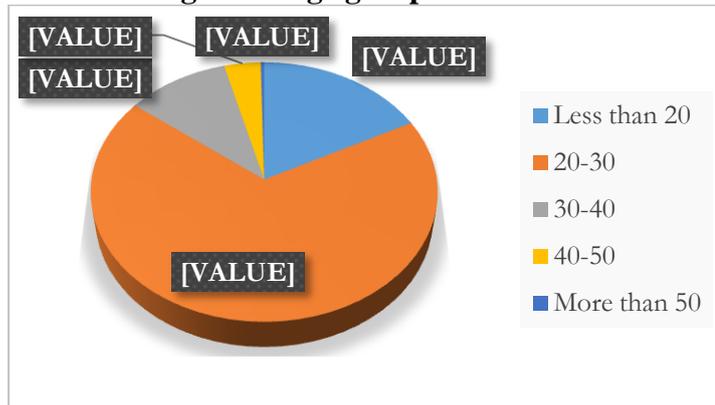
214 respondents were from Graduate Degree Programmes followed by Post Graduate Degree Programmes (213), Post Graduate Diploma (66), Diploma (44) and Certificate (26).

Figure 2. Programme wise distribution of students



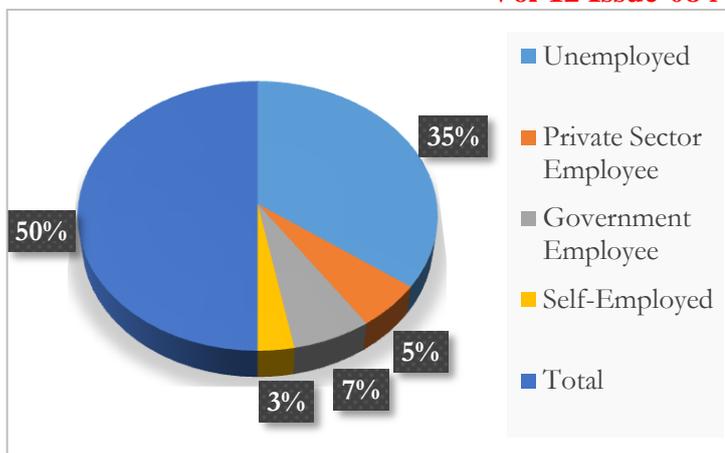
Out of total 563, maximum 383 (68%) respondents were from the Age Bracket of 20-30 years followed by 98 (17.4%) respondents who were less than 20 years of age. Only 02 respondents were of more than 50 years of age.

Figure 3. Age group of students



70% of the respondents (394) who took part in the survey were unemployed and the rest 30% (169) constituted private sector employee, government employee and self-employed.

Figure 4. Employment status of students



62% of the students who took part in survey belonged to rural area and 38% belonged to urban area. 82% (460) of the respondents were married and rest 18% (103) were unmarried. In terms of qualification, maximum number of the respondents 42% (234) were already Graduate, 38% (216) were Intermediate passed, 19% (109) were Post Graduate and less than 1% (04) were already having a Doctorate degree.

Table 3. Feedback of students on statements regarding factors influencing them to opt for distance education institution during COVID pandemic

I. No	Questions	Strongly Agree(%)	Agree(%)	Neither agree nor disagree(%)	Disagree(%)	Strongly Disagree(%)	Average	D
	There was a delay in admission process in regular colleges/Universities	14%	22%	13%	33%	19%	.78	.34
	I was unable to move to other State/District for education due to COVID pandemic	16%	25%	12%	31%	17%	.92	.36
	Regular College/University in which I wanted to take admission was closed due to COVID	7%	18%	12%	42%	21%	.49	.20
	Due to fear of COVID infection I was not interested in education from Regular college/University	12%	24%	13%	31%	20%	.77	.34
	In regular institutions there is a greater risk of COVID infection during admission process	18%	38%	11%	22%	11%	.29	.30

	In regular institutions due to compulsory physical presence in classes and practical there is a greater risk of COVID infection	19%	44%	12%	16%	9%	.49	3	.21
	I wanted to utilize lockdown period for enhancing my academic credentials through Distance Education while staying at home	31%	44%	4%	13%	7%	.79	3	.22
	I wanted to upgrade my professional skills during lockdown through admission in Distance Education	54%	40%	4%	2%	1%	.44	4	.73
	Education from Distance Education during lockdown will help me in getting employment	37%	42%	16%	3%	3%	.07	4	.95
0	Facility of online admission, online study material and online grievance redressal makes Distance Education a safer option during COVID pandemic	36%	50%	9%	2%	2%	.17	4	.81
1	Distance Education is a better option of getting education by staying at home during COVID pandemic	42%	47%	7%	3%	1%	.26	4	.80
2	Distance Education has always been my first choice of education	28%	36%	15%	17%	3%	.71	3	.13
3	Distance Education is cheap and easily accessible in nature	31%	44%	9%	10%	6%	.85	3	.13

4	Distance Education has a freedom and flexibility of choosing study centre and exam centre anywhere in country	44	45	6%	3%	2%	4	.85
5	Extensive use of social media and different online platforms by Distance Education to run online classes are very helpful	35	46	13%	3%	2%	4	.90

Despite the sudden lockdown announced by Government, face to face Universities and colleges tried to overcome the hurdles caused by lockdown measures by adopting online methods and continued their regular business though at a slower pace. Thus most of the students (52%) disagreed with the statement that they took admission in distance education because there was a delay in admission process in regular colleges/Universities and only 35% agreed.

In response to the statement that they were unable to move to other State/District for education due to COVID pandemic, comparatively greater number of students (48%) agreed with the statement and 41% disagreed. It was obvious as various restrictions were imposed by government on movement of people from one place to other.

As stated earlier, in lockdown most of the face to face institutions kept on functioning, however, the various teaching learning processes got delayed. Hence, when asked whether students took admission in distance education because regular College/University in which they wanted to take admission was closed due to COVID, only 25% agreed with the statement and majority 63% disagreed with it.

On the question of whether due to fear of COVID infection they were not interested in education from Regular college/University, 36% of the students agreed with the statement and 51% disagreed. Thus it can be deduced that fear of COVID infection was not a major factor due to which students preferred distance education during pandemic rather distance education was their natural choice.

As expected, majority of the students (56%) agreed with the statement that due to greater risk of COVID infection during admission process in regular institutions they preferred admission in distance education and only 33% of the students disagreed with it. Majority of students (63%) consider that in regular institutions due to compulsory physical presence in classes and practicals there is a greater risk of COVID infection thus distance education is preferable and only 25% disagreed with this statement.

During initial days of pandemic period of lockdown and restrictions were being extended by government on regular basis and students had no clue when it is going to end. Thus three fourth of the participants i.e. 75% agreed that they wanted to utilize lockdown period for enhancing their academic credentials through Distance Education while staying at home and only 20% deferred with this opinion of majority.

A whopping 94% of participants consented that they wanted to upgrade their professional skills during lockdown through admission in Distance Education institution and only a meagre 3% disagreed with this majority view. Physical infrastructure not being a constraint, open and distance learning institutions are able to provide a variety of options to the students in the skill oriented programmes of various fields. When it comes to the view of students about possibility of distance education in providing employment, the response of the students was very optimistic as 79% of them agreed that they took admission in distance education because they believe that acquiring education from distance education institutions during lockdown will help them in getting employment.

It was not surprising that 86% of the students agree that they preferred distance education during pandemic because facility of online admission, online study material and online grievance redressal makes it a safer option during COVID pandemic and only 4% disagreed with this. Similarly, 89% students agreed that they preferred distance education institution because it is a better option of getting education by staying at home during COVID pandemic and only 4% disagreed. However, surprisingly 64% participants agreed to the statement that distance education had always been their first choice of acquiring education and only 20% disagreed with it. It indicates the increasing popularity of distance education.

During pandemic, loss of job and means of livelihood had become very common. Even though livelihood options were there, earnings had drastically reduced in various sectors. Affordability of education had become an important factor. 75% students agreed that they chose distance education because it is cheap and easily accessible in nature and for only 16% of students this was not one of the reason for choosing distance education.

Flexibility of choosing study centre and exam centre anywhere throughout the country becomes an important factor for students during pandemic when restrictions are imposed by government every now and then on frequent movements. 89% of participants agreed that this flexibility has encouraged them in taking admission in distance education institution. Only 5% participants were of the view that this was not their reason to take admission in distance education. As ODL institutions are already using different social media and online platforms to provide support services to its students even before the start of pandemic, 81% of participants agreed that they preferred distance education because it makes extensive use of social media and different online platforms to run online classes. 13% of the participants were neutral on this statement and only 5% disagreed with it.

Table 4. Gender-wise feedback of students on various statements regarding factors influencing them to opt for distance education institution during COVID pandemic

Sl No.	Gender	No. of respondents	Mean	SD	t-value	p-value	Significance of p-value
1	Male	400	.61	.11	-0.17871	.429728	Not significant at $p < .05$
2	Female	163	.66	.03			

From the table 4, it is clear that mean value of satisfaction level of male students on various statements regarding factors influencing them to opt for distance education was 3.61 as compared to female students having mean value as 3.66. On comparative analysis using T Test, the p -value was found as 0.429728 corresponding to t -value of -0.17871. It shows that female students were found slightly more satisfied than male students and the difference was found not significant at 5% level of significance.

Table 5. Feedback of students on various statements regarding factors influencing them to opt for distance education institution during COVID pandemic in relation to their area of residence

Sl No.	Area of Residence	No. of respondents	Mean	SD	t-value	p-value	Significance of p-value
--------	-------------------	--------------------	------	----	---------	---------	-------------------------

1	Rural	350	.64	.08	3	0	Significant at $p < .05$
2	Urban	213	.84	.30			

From the table 5, it is clear that mean value of satisfaction level of rural students on various statements regarding factors influencing them to opt for distance education was 3.64 as compared to urban students having mean value as 2.84. On comparative analysis using T Test, the p -value was found as 0.000574 corresponding to t -value of 3.62134. It shows that rural students were found more satisfied than urban students and the difference was found significant at 5% level of significance.

Conclusion

COVID-19 has changed the educational scenario up to such extent that in near future it is possible that there may not be clear cut demarcation between campus-based education and distance education. It is very much likely that the campus-based educational institutions will continue to use expertise and strategies of distance education which they have developed during the course of pandemic, as it is economically and educationally beneficial for themselves as well as for their students.

Only 25% students stated that they preferred distance education institution because regular college/university in which they wanted to take admission was closed during lockdown and only 36% students stated that due to fear of COVID infection they were not interested in education from regular college/University. On the other hand, majority of students (75%) chose distance education because it is cheap and easily accessible in nature and this factor became more important in COVID pandemic because the average income of people decreased during the period. Also during the survey more than half of the students stated that distance education had always been their first choice of study. Thus government should increase its financial assistance to distance education institutions.

More than 3/4th of the students who participated in the survey stated that they took admission in distance education during COVID with an intention to upgrade their professional skills and get employment, thus distance education institutions should focus more on offering professional and employment generating programmes and ensure hassle free delivery of these programmes.

Extensive use of social media and different online platforms by Distance Education to run online classes were other major factors which promoted students to opt for distance education thus these institutions should keep on strengthening these activities. The freedom and flexibility of choosing study centre and exam centre anywhere in country is the one other factor which prompted students to give preference to distance education over face to face institution. In order to provide education at doorsteps of its students, the past efforts of distance education institutions like IGNOU in strengthening online delivery of student support services gave results in a very unimagined way, as majority of students agreed that facility of online admission, online study material and online grievance redressal makes distance education a safer option during COVID pandemic.

In the study female students were found slightly more satisfied than male students and similarly rural students were found more satisfied than urban students on various statements regarding factors influencing them to opt for distance education during COVID pandemic. Since female students and rural students are both at comparative disadvantage in terms of frequent physical movement, the extensive use of online services by distance education institutions in providing academic support to student's doorstep has definitely contributed to this higher level of satisfaction by them.

Limitations of the study

The data was collected through a structured questionnaire and sample size was of only 563 students who took admission in IGNOU and UORTOU during the COVID pandemic. A comprehensive study of students from other distance education institutions would give a greater insight. The responses of the students are limited to only the study period.

References

1. Al Lily, A. E., Ismail, A. F., Abunasser, F. M., & Alqahtani, R. H. A. (2020). Distance education as a response to pandemics: Coronavirus and Arab culture. *Technology in society*, 63, 101317.
2. Bojović, Ž., Bojović, P. D., Vujošević, D., & Šuh, J. (2020). Education in times of crisis: Rapid transition to distance learning. *Computer Applications in Engineering Education*, 28(6), 1467-1489.
3. Cortina, J. M. (1993). What is coefficient alpha? An examination of theory and applications. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 78(1), 98–104.
4. Daniel, S. J. (2020). Education and the COVID-19 pandemic. *Prospects*, 49(1), 91-96.
5. Karadağ, E., Sağlam, H., & Baloğlu, N. (2008). Bilgisayar Destekli Eğitim [BDE]: İlköğretim Okulu Yöneticilerinin Tutumlarına İlişkin Bir Araştırma [Computer Supportive Education (CSE): A Research About Attitude of Primary School Administrators]. *Journal of International Social Research*, 1(3), 252-266.
6. Moore, M. G., & Kearsley, G. G. (1996). Distance education: A system view (No. C10 20). Wadsworth.
7. Pokhrel, S., & Chhetri, R. (2021). A Literature Review on Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Teaching and Learning. *Higher Education for the Future*, 8(1), 133–141.
8. Pregowska, A., Masztalerz, K., Garlińska, M., & Osial, M. (2021). A worldwide journey through distance education—from the post office to virtual, augmented and mixed realities, and education during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Education Sciences*, 11(3), 118.
9. Robinson, B. (2008). Using distance education and ICT to improve access, equity and the quality in rural teachers' professional development in western China. *International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, 9(1), 1-17.
10. UNESCO (2020a). COVID-19 educational disruption and response. Paris: UNESCO
11. Wang, P. Y. (2013). Examining the Digital Divide between Rural and Urban Schools: Technology Availability, Teachers' Integration Level and Students' Perception. *Journal of Curriculum and Teaching*, 2(2), 127-139.