

**Leadership without entitlement:  
the case of Paro College of Education during the pandemic.**

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**Context**

The communication from the Office of the Prime Minister on the 5 March 2020 informed the Bhutanese that COVID-19 was in Bhutan. This was the beginning of disruption and a testing time for the Bhutanese. The Leaders had to find strategies to respond effectively without alarming the general public. The planned activities could not be implemented. Likewise, Paro College of Education like other educational institutions had to strategize to respond to the pandemic so that students were not affected.

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Schools and colleges nationwide also faced the challenges of convincing students to accept the wrenching changes in their institutions. Similarly, Paro College of Education had to deal with the challenges of ensuring that the institution did not face academic crisis.

Against this backdrop, this paper attempts to study the nature of responsiveness of the academic leaders, their adaptability and insights into turbulent times. The study is grounded in the overarching question of “How did the academic leaders respond, adapt and inspire to sustain learning during the turbulence sparked by the pandemic?”

### **Pandemic and Bhutan**

As of 1 September 2022, Bhutan had 59614 COVID-19 confirmed cases of which 59564 recovered and 29 were still active. Unfortunately, there were 21 deaths.

From the day Bhutan saw its first COVID-19 case, leaders discussed the opportunities and challenges of using technology to address the learning disruptions posed by the pandemic. Bhutan also had the challenges to ensure the sustained public health services, timely vaccination, efficient surveillance, economy, education and food security. There were also issues of managing misinformation so that public was not alarmed.

The Colleges of the Royal University of Bhutan (RUB) received notification that required the Colleges to continue teaching and learning using alternatives to classroom mode of education. The Colleges had the immense responsibility of ensuring that the pandemic did not adversely affect learning. Further, to facilitate smooth delivery of learning, the Royal University of Bhutan created RUB COVID-19 Task Force on Teaching and Learning.

His Majesty, the Druk Gyalpo took the lead to ensure the health safety and livelihood security of the public. His Majesty travelled the length and breadth of Bhutan to inspire the Bhutanese to work as a team to fight COVID-19.

### **Pandemic and Learning: the case of Paro College of Education.**

#### *Response: Alternative Plan*

The Programme leaders, Dean and the President (as Management Team) convened “Plan B” meeting on 21 March 2020. Plan B was to initiate online classes using relevant innovative Virtual learning (VLE). The college sought endorsement of Plan B from the Academic Board, Royal University of Bhutan.

The Wheel of Academic Law (WAL) required all tutors to meet the required 15 weeks of teaching and learning (60 face to face + 60 notional credit hours). The Academic Management decided and communicated that every tutor carried out responsibly for their academic tasks of assessment, teaching and evaluation online to meet the requirements of the WAL.

The remit proposed to the colleges by RUB COVID-19 Task Force on Learning & Teaching in April, 2020 gave confidence to Paro College of Education. One of the clauses of the remit was on:

*The continuity of current online mode of delivery as executed by respective colleges or with more appropriate changes. The changes to be considered could be informed by the achievement of learning outcomes of every module and the progress of students' assessment of their learning on every module (RUB COVID-19 Task Force on Learning & Teaching, April, 2020, remit, Immediate Thrusts, 8).*

The two academic remits and thrusts proposed by RUB was inconvenient and would have the snowballing (Domino) effect and would defeat the very purpose of virtual, online, distance and the blended learning of the colleges and the international best practices of the other Universities. Since the Royal University of Bhutan already made an impact with the digital pedagogy (Franks, 2020, University of Highland & Ireland) and have sync to the latest teaching & learning, the “Remit, II & III” would be a self-defeating to the University Teaching and learning. Few of the colleges had an encounter as they had no preparation for online classes and virtual learning modality in place.

### **Adaptability: responding to crisis**

Despite the challenges posed by the pandemic, Paro College of Education responded and adapted to the situation effectively. The paradigm shift from bricks and mortar classroom which was traditional classroom to a virtual classroom which was a technological classroom (Bush, The Blended & Virtual Learning Frontier, 2012) was a new frontier of learning. Educators and students had to understand that online learning was an approach and not a replacement for classroom learning or according to me ‘mud & stone schooling’. We also had to be aware that online learning was a technique and not a “*fit in all*” adoption implemented to address the need of the prevailing situation.

To adapt to the situation Paro College of Education adopted the modality of learning and assessment system grounded on the following principles:

*Procedural:* Faculty must focus on the procedure of learning (How to learn?)

*Credit system and Unit:* The learning in the college is credit-based and to be converted to open book examination.

*Assessment:* is based on the Definitive Programme Document and have the online assessment template with feedback

*Learning focus:* Priority should be on outcome-based learning rather than seat-time policy and attendance

Further, the college established a call center to facilitate learning.

### **Insight: Challenges that need rectification**

The college's online classes were made through an approach of "zoom meeting" and in it there were standard structure of learning, teaching and assessment. It was one sided communication when the zooming was an approach to teaching. The faculty should insert small information which is handy and the learners able to communicate. The faculty, on the feedback, were asked not to dump the information. Therefore, in an approach of learning like this, "Through Zoom" there is a need of strategic planning. Having to understand the virtual learning (Calvani, 2003, pp. 4, the virtual learning), it is important that teaching faculty be aware of the information messiness when it is a lot of information through zoom. This approach does not provide an avenue for students' response and think time.

*Knowledge without information is empty*

*Information without knowledge is blind*

### **Commentaries**

#### *Challenges*

PCE's online learning was intended for an interactive exercise using Internet connection and other modern equipment and applications such as laptop, smartphones, tablets, and other devices. And the "Definitive Programme Document (DPD) has the design only for the regular session. Then during the pandemic, the college considered reworking online courses to the learners with online connections and preparation. It was ad hoc with unclear rules of interaction but later there were challenges on the expectations that were pre-empted. The college then with the help of the Academic Task Force (ATF), ICT unit and the library initiated different modalities of communication for learning such as group email for all the

classes, zoom meetings, WeChat and keeping the college as standard dais for teaching and learning.

The college kept in mind the challenges of such a learning that was ad hoc and unprepared compounded with lack of equipment and faculty readiness. The College assured leeway on students' objectives and outcomes of the learning. The college academic administration was charged and challenged but upheld the outcome based principle of learning. The academic administration resolved the challenges by initiating online attendance for participation, submission of assignment and tailor-made test and examination. The recent COVID-19 online classes did not have the provision of recording sessions for the future reference. Few faculty also questioned the protocol, decorum, conduct, dress code, interaction and efficient application of basic online technology like apt use of mute function. Teaching online made interpersonal interactions seem cold. Eye contact with learners and body language is essential but challenging to infuse this human touch in learning. The application of ICT to make teaching and learning interactive was most of the times impossible or limited to few questions and responses.

Online learning of this nature happened but it was not designed as instructional teaching and learning and the outcome determined, scheduled and sketched.

#### *Online teaching and learning outcomes*

The college committed to ensure uncompromising learning outcomes but reasonable degree of flexibility with accountability was considered important to cope with the online mode of learning. For instance, certain assessments could no longer take place as planned and alternative methods had to be initiated to assess the same learning outcomes. All learning outcomes must be achieved and demonstrated applying innovative approaches. An assessment plan was developed to introduce flexibility with faster approval routes for changes that were needed. This ensured that all assessment changes were reasonable and fair.

The College was emphasized that online platforms were to be viewed as learning environments, like classrooms and lecture theatres that enabled effective learning to take place. Some faculty just uploaded previous years' lecture recordings while the rest chose to conduct live streaming classes

(zooms & google classroom) and also used WeChat to engage learners. Live streaming was first time experience for many faculty but they were willing to take risks and in return received compliments for the positive learning outcomes.

Remaining student-centric was a challenge as students could not come to campus. The College communicated its stance to the faculty that students must be supported with alternative learning plans.

The Dean of Students Affairs carried out survey of e-learning before the closure of the college for online learning. Students' feedback was consolidated and communicated to all teaching staff. Common concerns included effectiveness of online lectures, changes in assessment, and self-discipline. The college Task Force met every Wednesday for a month and later fortnightly to discuss and support online learning. Further online meetings were conducted with ICT units, librarians and the Academic Task Force (College) to share experiences and rectify common mistakes and ensure achievement of learning outcomes. The college also regularly monitored and guided the low performing students and ensured that all the students were acquainted and advised on quality learning.

#### *RUB Academic Task Force and PCE Academic*

A provision for capacity building of faculty on e-learning was a requirement. The capacity building included face-to-face workshops, walk-in consultations, online training and self-help guides. The topics were on creating narrated slides (Camtasia) and running effective live streaming classes (Google classroom), designing alternative assessments, and using online proctoring tools for assessments.

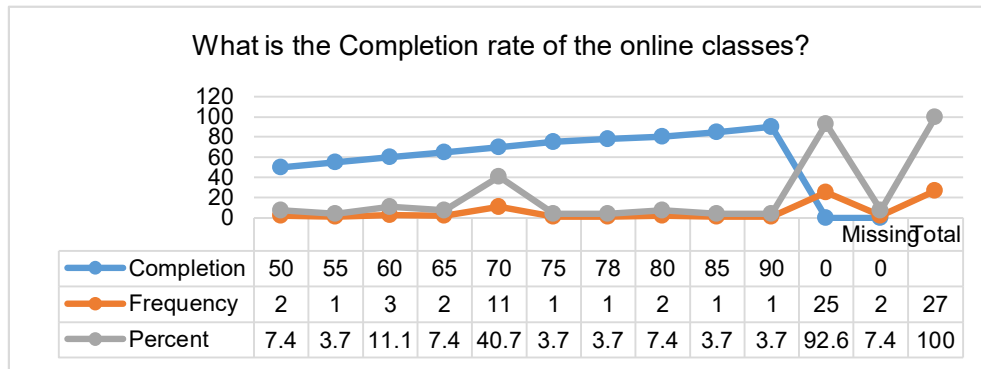
The survey which was across the board for RUB colleges (RUB COVID 19: Task Force on Learning & Teaching, April, 2020) was a strategic measure to address the situation. However, each of the college started to address their own situation. And the survey is inclusive of the college. The other colleges in the RUB looked at their own survey.

#### **Discussion on survey findings**

The discussion is on the survey findings of 27 faculty of Dzongkha Primary on online learning at Paro College of Education.

**Figure1**

*Completion rate of modules*



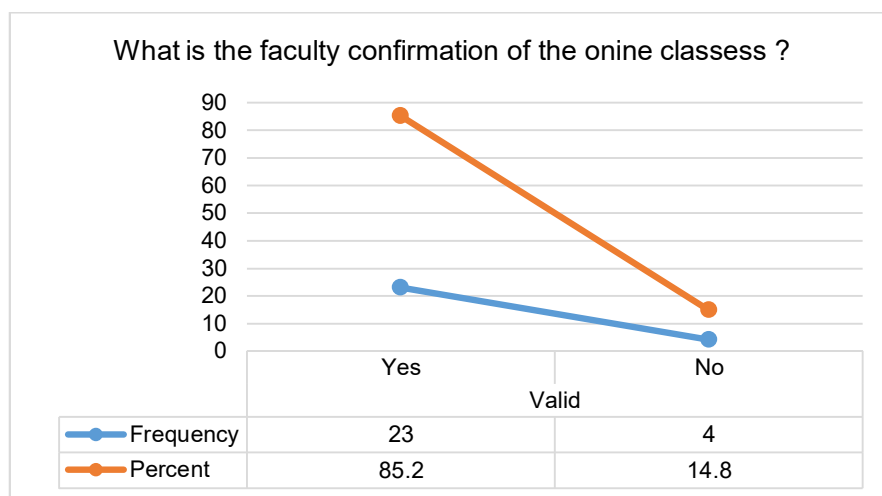
The graph illustrates the responses of 25 faculty members teaching Dzongkha Primary. There were 27 faculty members but two did not respond to this question. Majority of the faculty (11) had 70% coverage. None of the faculty teaching the programme had 100% percent coverage of their modules. The highest coverage was by 1 faculty with 90% of the module. The lowest was by 2 faculty with 50% coverage of the modules.

The module tutors also reported the challenges of organizing group which affected 100% participation of students and uncertainty of fair assessment of assignments or examinations. The other challenges were associated with effectiveness of learning, students' attendance, feeding excessive information that increased workload of students, and gap in the theories and practicality of the lesson delivered through online. There was also disparity in learning owing to availability and accessibility to learning resources and facilities such as laptops and smart phones, internet connectivity. Incompatibility of IT accessories creating examination worries among students to attend to the proposed open book examination. Further, there was mismatch on the tutor's effort of uploading big files and the students' ability to respond to all. The graduating students' anxiety on the completion of the course was another issue.

The 7<sup>th</sup> College Academic Task Force meeting discussed and addressed the issue of information dumping by instituting proper instructional design

**Figure 2**

*Confirmation on the online teaching*



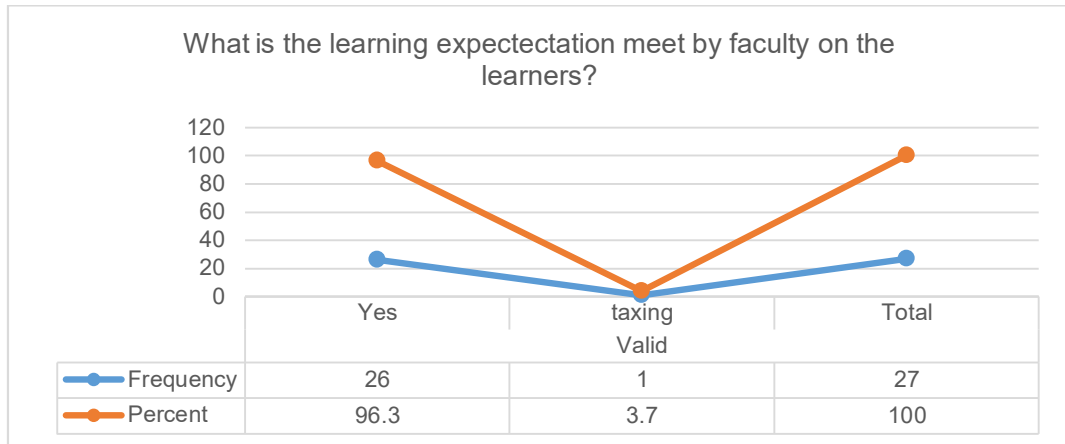
The respondents were the 27 faculty members teaching Dzongkha Primary. The findings showed that 85.2% confirmed the reliability of e-learning while 14.8 disagreed. There were certain things that needed to be executed judiciously by planning the online learning. For example, the mode of assessment and nature of task/ activity could be modified and organized different.

There were some recommendations from the module tutors on effective completion of the programme for progression or graduation. The recommendations included assigning individual weekly/ fortnightly tasks' using different apps and modes to enhance teaching, learning and assessment and; changing examination related modules into course works. If students were learning online, the module tutors reported that there were many ways in which the students' online teaching learning could be tracked by using Apps such as VLE discussion (Chat), WeChat, Zoom meet (conference), Group email, Messenger Apps (Facebook). Further, online participation of students' teaching learning could be tracked by assigning weekly journals, organizing class quiz forums, submission of assignments/ tasks on time as per the due dates.



**Figure 3**

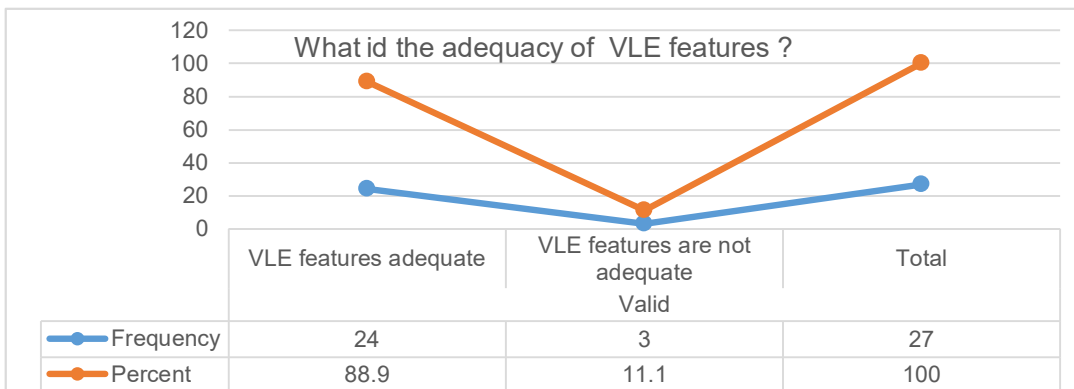
*Learning what they are expected to learn*



All the 27-faculty teaching Dzongkha Primary responded to this question. The survey findings show that students asked more questions on online platform and participated more in discussions as compared to regular classroom. The survey shows that the posts on the responses and the assignment on the VLE were 96.3 % clearly indicating high level of participation.

**Figure 4**

*Adequacy of VLE features*



All the 27 faculty members teaching Dzongkha Primary responded to this question. The common features extensively used for online teaching learning online were VLE discussion forums, document uploads, files and videos uploads, assignment submission. And in zoom, there is zoom interactions, zoom post and zoom chats and presentations. Majority of the faculty (88.9 %) indicated adequacy of VLE features while 11.1% disagreed and mentioned that availability of more features would have enhanced e-learning such as group formation and management

There were almost 70 percent interaction (Drop message in the WeChat) in the forum and 90% in terms of submitting their report but only 50% during the online lecturer and classes. Students were concerned and seriously attending the online classes. It was important that the tutors provided timely learning tasks and support materials. Students were meaningfully engaged and participated in the discussion forums. But there were complaints of not having facilities such as smart phone, computers, good internet connectivity and challenges of affording data package.

## **Conclusion**

The COVID-19 interrupted learning. However, students learnt to explore and adapt to different approaches of learning from that of brick-and-mortar classroom.

The main challenges posed by COVID-19 to learning were in the domains of assessment, examination and Teaching Practice which are discussed below.

*Assessments:* The shift to e-learning led to modification, postponement or even cancellation of some assessments.

For instance, internal assessments were perhaps thought to be less important and many have been simply cancelled. The lockdown ensuing from COVID-19 led to other disruptions. The examination unit of Paro College of Education proposed open book examination and approved by the College Academic Task Force for submission to the Office of the Vice Chancellor. This decision was aligned to the recommendation of the office of the Vice Chancellor.

Open book examination proposed by the Secretariat of Examination of Paro College of Education was put to halt by the Department of Academic Affairs, Office of the Vice Chancellor till further decision was made through the meeting of the Deans of Academic Affairs of all colleges.

Teaching Practice and practicum: The 7<sup>th</sup> College Academic Task Force Meeting and the 71<sup>st</sup> College Management Committee Meeting opted to ease the practicum module when it was assigned on online mode.

Graduate quality: The Fourth Year B.Ed students experienced major teaching-learning interruptions at the time of their graduation. They experienced major interruptions in their assessments, and finally they were graduating during a period when the college campus was closed and the nation had to be on several lockdown. Eventually they were severely affected.

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