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Impact of Covid-19 on Higher Education Sectors in Sri Lanka: A Study based on South Eastern University of Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Modern scientific and technological changes have enabled online education as an integral part of the education system in the contemporary world. Although online learning system was influential in the pre-Covid 19 periods to a certain extent, it has become an inevitable part of the teaching and learning process of higher education sectors during the Covid-19 era. As the Covid-19 posed enormous challenges on the traditional higher education system, there was a desperate need globally for every government to incorporate online education into their higher education system. However, online education was not given much importance in the Sri Lankan higher education sector before the Covid-19. But, the closure of universities due to Covid-19 had prompted the government of Sri Lanka to promote the online mode of education as an alternative solution to continue higher education activity during a crisis. Thus, online education has presently become an essential component of Sri Lanka's higher education sector. Nevertheless, there are many obstacles and challenges confronting the higher education sectors, particularly in the universities of Sri Lanka to perpetuate online education successfully. Against this backdrop, this study attempts to give an insight into the impact of Covid-19 on the teaching and learning process of South Eastern University of Sri Lanka, and the challenges faced by the university in perpetuating online education system during the Covid-19. The findings of the study show that the university encountered several challenges in terms of online delivery, problems related to practical test via online mode, assessment, examination and supervision of the thesis. The study further highlights issues concerning online teaching and learning environment and a lack of online teaching and learning skills among staff and students that were considered critical to the smooth functioning of teaching and learning process of the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka during the Covid-19 pandemic. The study argues that the university should focus on a hybrid education system to address the issues of online mode of education confronted by staff and students to make the teaching and learning process more effective.

Keywords: Covid-19, higher education sector, online education, South Eastern University of Sri Lanka

1.   Introduction

The coronavirus disease, which is dubbed as Covid-19, is one of the most critical perennial problems confronting the contemporary world today (Agba, Ocheni, & Agba, 2020). The viral infection was firstly discovered in Wuhan, the capital city of Hubei Province of China, at the end of the year 2019 (Kapasia, Paul, Roy, Saha, Zaveri, Mallick, Barman, Das, & Chouhan, 2020). The Covid-19, which initially had a significant impact on China, was brought under control to some extent by a lockdown and other social distancing measures immediately taken by the Chinese government with the record of more than four thousand deaths (Lancet, 2020). It subsequently spread across the world, and its effect was more significant in other countries than in China. As of 30th September 2020, more than three billion (33,557,173) cases of Covid-19 and a death toll of more than one million people (1,006,493) have been reported so far (Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center, 2020).

The novel Covid-19 has badly affected most of the developed and developing countries, including the United States, India, Brazil, Russia, the United Kingdom, France, Italy, and so on. The United States is the deadliest country in the world, and India, Brazil, Russia and other countries are next in line. Recognising the global impact of the novel coronavirus, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared it as a pandemic on 11th March 2020 (Jena, 2020). Most of the countries across the globe declared a countrywide lockdown and took social distancing measures to control the spread of the Covid-19. These measures significantly contributed to minimising the spread of the disease within a specific range, although they are not a remedy to the worsening pandemic.

Education is one of the most critical sectors affected by Covid-19 pandemic across the globe. In terms of the education sector, most of the governments temporarily closed educational institutions, including schools, universities and other public and private institutions to prevent the social spread of the virus. Although it was considered a wise decision, it badly affected the educational activities of the students across the world. The continuous lockdown has had a significant impact not only on students' education but also on students' mental health. It is estimated that more than 1.5 billion students and youth across the world are affected by the closure of schools, universities and other educational institutions due to Covid-19 (International Association of Universities, 2020).

Sri Lanka is one of the South Asian countries affected by the novel Covid-19. The first outbreak of the Covid-19 in Sri Lanka was detected with a Chinese tourist on 27th January 2020, and the infected local person was identified on 11th March 2020 (Erandi, Mahasinghe, Perera, & Jayasinghe, 2020). Subsequently, the government of Sri Lanka tactically initiated public health surveillance measures to control the spread of the disease. The number of victims then gradually increased. However, as of 30th September 2020, the number of cases was just 3374, although Sri Lanka has a population of about 21 million. Of these, 3230 have recovered, and 13 have died. Most of the cases were identified from Sri Lankan migrants (Health Promotion Bureau, 2020).

Sri Lanka initially took concrete steps to control the Covid-19 compared to other countries. The government isolated Covid-19 infected areas and imposed a lockdown. The government subsequently declared a nationwide curfew due to the increase in the Covid-19 cases. The government adequately instructed the people to maintain the social distance and established a special task force comprising defence and health chiefs to take precautionary measures to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. This has enabled the government to identify and isolate people infected with the Covid-19 pandemic successfully. Several other measures were also taken to prevent the spread of the virus. All the Sri Lankan migrants and tourists who travelled to Sri Lanka were subjected to Covid-19 testing, 14-days compulsory isolation in quarantine centers established in different parts of the country (US Embassy in Sri Lanka, 2020) and subsequently underwent self-isolation at their homes for another 14 days under the supervision of area's Public Health Inspectors (PHI). Thus, Sri Lanka has been ranked second next to China for successfully containing the Covid-19 in the world (MENAFN, 2020).

The government further placed special surveillance on areas where the virus was most prevalent in cases where a complete lockdown was imposed. This is an initiative that has been alluded by a certain section of people as a commendable job by the government to combat the Covid-19 compared to other

South Asian countries (TRT World, 2020). The government also imposed travel restrictions to prevent the spread of the virus, as well as tactics, including isolating infected areas and wearing masks. Health workers were also involved in disinfection activities at crucial locations nationwide, and intelligence services were mobilised to identify Covid-19 affected patients. A separate fund was also set up by the president to raise funds as a part of Covid-19 prevention initiative. As such, the swift action taken by President Gotabaya Rajapakse to effectively contain the Covid-19 pandemic in the country has been alluded by people from many quarters.

In this context, the Sri Lankan government closed all the universities in the country on 12th March 2020 and suspended all academic activities (Adaderana, 2020). The government also imposed a nationwide curfew on 20th March 2020 (Newsfirst, 2020). During this period, Sri Lanka's higher education sector faced various challenges. The closure of fifteen national universities and other higher education institutions ultimately affected the teaching and learning activities of students. University admission, assessment and examination, graduation ceremonies, recruitment and promotion activities were temporarily postponed. Employees working in higher education institutions also faced severe challenges in receiving their salaries and other allowances on time because of the continuous curfew. In this situation, the government announced a strategy called Work from Home, and this move forced university teachers and other staff to carry out their academic and administrative work from their respective homes.

Most of the universities started their academic and other administrative activities with the help of technological devices and applications during the period of work from home. The introduction of online education instead of the traditional academic model is viewed as a structural change in the higher education sector in Sri Lanka. This kind of online education is new for most of the academics and administrative staff of Sri Lankan universities. For a long time, face-to-face teaching and learning process has been practised in Sri Lankan universities. Thus, it is seen as a difficult one to break this tradition and carry out educational activities in an innovative online environment. Many universities have been reluctant to launch online educational activities, and university teachers and administrators have also encountered complications in undertaking their duties. Teachers, students and other staff who have a lack of skill in modern tools and technology have faced several challenges.

The government took several measures to reduce the cost incurred to teachers and students engaging in online educational activities. As part of this, universities used their moodle-based learning management systems, and the government facilitated the continuation of academic activities using the Zoom app through the Lanka Education and Research Network (LEARN). Some web providers offered free online access to universities. The government lifted the nationwide curfew at the end of April 2020 (The Siasat Daily, 2020). Subsequently, the University Grants Commission permitted universities to re-commence their academic activities on 6th July adhering health guidelines. However, online education has presently become a significant part of the educational process of Sri Lankan universities. Against this backdrop, this study focuses on the challenges of online education confronting the students, academic and administrative staff of the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka (SEUSL) during Covid-19.

2. Research Method

This study focuses on the challenges confronted by the students, academic and administrative staff of the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka, one of the national universities in Sri Lanka during Covid-19 pandemic. It is a qualitative study with the limited application of quantitative information. A questionnaire survey, informal discussions and formal interviews with relevant stakeholders including lecturers, administrators and students were conducted from 1st May to 20th June 2020. A total of 120 students were conveniently selected, representing all six faculties of the university. The online tools and techniques were employed to obtain data. The contextual information was collected from authentic websites, research articles and official reports. The survey data were analysed using computer-aided software, and the results of the study were interpreted using texts and numerical information.

3. South Eastern University of Sri Lanka

The South Eastern University of Sri Lanka, one of the national universities in Sri Lanka, is located at Oluvil in the Ampara District of the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka. This university was initially started as a South Eastern University College on 23rd October 1995; it was later upgraded to a full-fledged national university. The university, which initially had two faculties, the Faculty of Arts and Culture and the Faculty of Management and Commerce, currently has six faculties: the Faculty of Arts and Culture, the Faculty of Management and Commerce, the Faculty of Applied Sciences, the Faculty of Islamic Studies and Arabic Language, the Faculty of Engineering, and the Faculty of Technology (the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka, n.d.).

Students representing all religions and ethnic groups across the country are enrolled in the university. It offers various programs to cater to the needs of the country and the region. The university provides not only undergraduate, postgraduate, diploma and certificate courses. The university has presently 5633 internal students and more than 11168 external students and 211 academics, 33 administrative staff and 422 other staff. It is functioning under the auspices of the University Grants Commission and pursues academic activities under the guidance of the Commission (Academic and Student Affairs Division, 2020).

All educational activities of the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka were suspended following a decision by the University Grants Commission to close Sri Lankan universities temporarily. As a result, many events, including lectures, exams, supervision of research projects, and the annual general convocation, were temporarily suspended. However, the university staff were involved in the practice of carrying out their work from home as per the government instructions. Academics from many faculties were involved in online teaching and learning. Although there were many difficulties involved in the teaching and learning process via online, the university took tangible measures to implement the online education system.

4. Results and Discussion

As such, Universities in Sri Lanka were closed for academic activities from 13th March 2020, on the instruction of University Grants Commission. However, it was re-opened in the first week of June for the examination of final year students followed by other exams of different years of the academic programme. However, the universities across Sri Lanka have had hard times to grapple with an unprecedented dimension of Covid-19 to carry on their teaching and learning activities, administrative duties and the new challenge of e-learning.

The pandemic forced administrators of higher educational sectors, particularly the universities in Sri Lanka, to mobilise students and staff to cope with a new turn of events and come up with constructive and innovative ideas to address those challenges working in collaboration with various stakeholders of universities like academic staff, students, administrative and non-academic staff in the system.

The following sub-topics shed light on the impacts and challenges to the teaching and learning process of the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka during Covid-19 pandemic:

4.1 Online teaching and learning

The South Eastern University of Sri Lanka was re-opened on the instructions of the University Grants Commission on 15th June 2020. However, students were admitted to the university from 17th August 2020 (Lanka Education, 2020). Students were allowed to continue their education through online during the height of the Covid-19 outbreak. The Vice-Chancellor of the university had received monthly reports from the staff and created an environment for monitoring its progress. Strategies were also put in place to deal with crises faced by teachers, staff and students through online.

The Council, Senate, Faculty Board and other important meetings of the university were virtually

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held, and the significant decisions were communicated with staff through e-mails. At the faculty and department level, relevant Dean and Heads of the Department directed and monitored their team to ensure better online delivery. Learning materials for students were uploaded through the university's Moodle-based Learning Management System (LMS), and login accounts for teachers and students were also provided.

Several steps were taken to improve communication between teachers and students using e-learning techniques. Most of the students were able to communicate with their teachers and mentors through online mode. Online tutorials were also provided to develop teachers' online teaching knowledge. Although the university faced several challenges in terms of implementing online education, the initiatives of the university in dealing with education during a crisis situation were significant.

Before the Covid-19 pandemic, the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka was not thoroughly adopted e-learning using Learning Management Systems (LMS, i.e. Moodle) which stored all the learning materials uploaded by academics of the university. As the university remained closed for three months continuously due to lockdown enforced by the government, it was forced to turn to online learning (e-learning) using various online platforms like Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google Meet, and so on, to ensure that students completed their courses on time.

Before the outbreak of the Covid-19, most of SEUSL students were not involved in online learning. According to the online survey, 65% of students noted that the online education system saves time and money. It helps students to organise themselves and pursue a balanced education in the virtual world. About 80% of the students said that online learning enabled them to improve their knowledge by engaging in mutual discussions. Many students pointed out that although students felt lonely during the Covid-19, online education was an incentive for them. Some students noted that this type of education system contributed to the increase in mutual communication between students and teachers. It also became a mode of easy access to submit assignments and other proposals on time. (Chart 1).
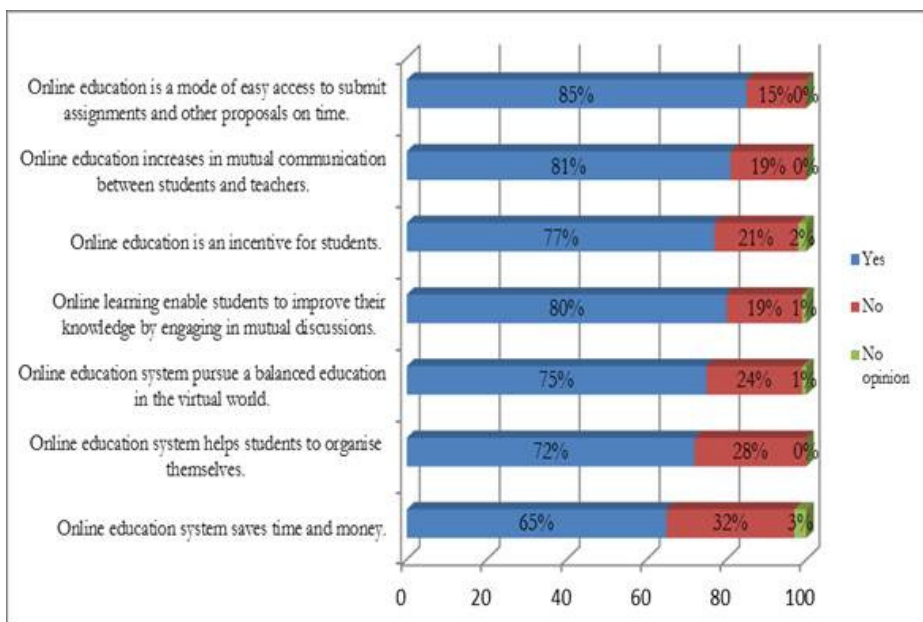

Chart 1: Opinion regarding online education

However, many students noted that they faced difficulties in paying full attention to online learning. Some students pointed out that they had struggled with e-learning due to the factors such as a sudden change in learning patterns, their economic status, loneliness at home, their lifestyle and lack of IT skills (Chart 2).
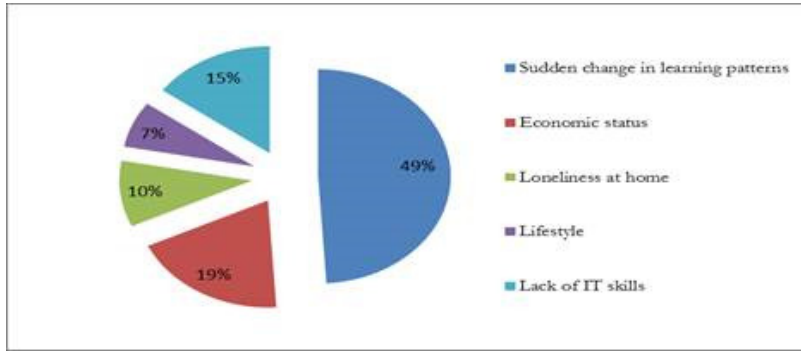

Chart 2: Problems related to online education

During the Covid-19, 59% of students were interested in pursuing higher education online. 41% expressed their dissatisfaction in online learning (Chart 3). The study found that some students who initially showed interest in online learning later lost their hope in the online method. One student mentioned that

> *"online education was the best method. This method helped us to carry out our understanding successfully. The lecturers performed well in online teaching. We were able to communicate via e-mail and WhatsApp. But I had to deal with psychological crises while continually engaging in online learning. Fellow students were unable to carry out their education better due to internet connectivity."*
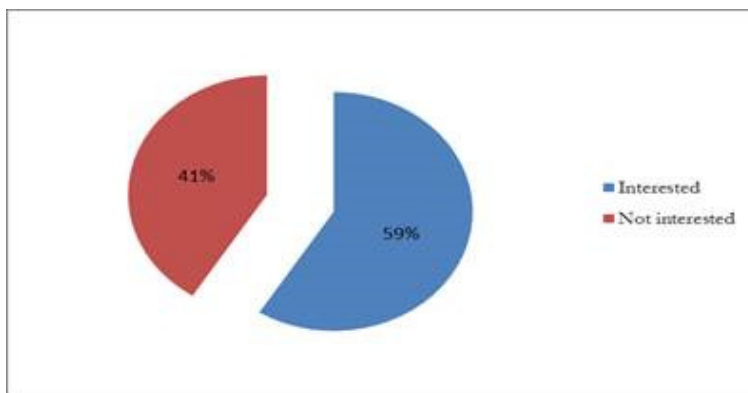

Chart 3: Students interest in pursuing higher education via online

However, students were confronted with many challenges as described below in terms of online teaching and learning.

Internet connectivity was one of the most critical challenges faced by SEUSL students during the Covid-19 pandemic. As for students who lived in backward and rural areas, they did not have proper internet facilities. Most viable technological and communication equipment was required for students

to be better involved in online learning activities. Accessing to well-equipped telecommunication equipment for students in poverty was a really challenging task. Thus, lack of devices such as laptop, desktop, and smartphones during the lockdown of Covid-19 ensured that students could not continue education via online. This might be attributed to financial difficulties on the part of students and their parents. More importantly, with more number of families and individuals were alarmed and panic over the outbreak of Covid-19, the students were not in a good mood to continue their studies online. Therefore, there was a psychological dimension of online education for students during the Covid-19.

The obvious drawback for e-learning was the digital divide among SEUSL students. Most families had limited or no access to the internet. Such a situation contributed to a lack of accessibility to e-learning by students. As some students lived in far-flung areas that did not even have access to the internet connections or rather lack of network coverage, this had posed a tremendous challenge to continue their online education. The 4G connection is required to get the best online delivery. Students in many rural areas faced several difficulties in getting 4G connectivity. In the absence of consistent online connectivity, it was tough to engage in relentless online teaching and learning activities. When the speed of internet connectivity was meagre, teaching and learning activities were interrupted. It led to a decrease in students' interest in the subject. Moreover, it was inappropriate on the part of teachers and administrators to expect the students to come on board while they were facing challenges of this nature under a health calamity of unprecedented and disproportionate dimension.

The issue related to the acquisition of practical knowledge was the next major challenge faced by SEUSL students. When students were engaged in learning activities using the internet, it was only possible to gain clarity on theoretical matters, but it was so difficult to gain practical or experimental knowledge. Due to the sudden curfew, the students could not carry with them their books and other documents required for self-learning. Some students had left their belongings in hostels. Thus, they faced difficulties engaging in e-learning. Those who wished to pursue higher studies in foreign universities also faced challenges in obtaining university admission and its related activities. Many of those who had been admitted were unable to go to the respective universities and pursue their education. It has also led to a delay in their academic years.

The university had confronted with the challenge of beginning the registration of freshers (new students) to various faculties and continuing the subject registration and exam registration via online. However, some faculties were able to prepare it online with the use of Google form and got it done by the students. The Faculty of Arts and Culture at the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka successfully conducted the orientation programme for new students during the lockdown period. Nevertheless, SEUSL staff had access to Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) or Learning Management System (LMS) from April 2020, as the university adopted online education as a semblance of normality, given the unavoidable circumstances. This initiative motivated the Work from Home (WFH) practices of staff and students of the university in the unprecedented crisis situation. Thus, online education helped ensured that learning of students continued uninterrupted without delaying their precious time during Covid-19 pandemic.

4.2 Practical, assessment, examination and supervision

The academic and administrators of the SEUSL faced several problems concerning online education due to Covid-19. Clearly speaking, the SEUSL had no qualms about holding theory classes via online, despite that there are some limitations. However, the SEUSL has had the problems of conducting the practical classes for students who come from the sphere of Science, Technology, and Engineering background. Even, the students who come from the sphere of social sciences and humanities have had practical classes in the field of Information Technology and Geo-Information System (GIS). Thus, conducting practical classes via online became a significant challenge to the academic and administrators of the university. Moreover, conducting exams online could not be possible due to the pandemic situation. Both of these factors (practical and exam) propelled the authorities and administrators in the universities in Sri Lanka to open their institutions in June to conduct only the practical and exams for students subject to the

condition of health protocols being strictly maintained like social distancing, wearing masking, hand washing and separate room per student in the hostels and so on.

Meanwhile, supervision of undergraduate and master thesis became an arduous task online. However, the process of supervising the students on their dissertations continued through online platforms such as e-mail, video conferencing and Zoom. Most of the final-year students engaged in online communication and refined their thesis. Many academics were focused on creating WhatsApp groups to communicate and supervise the students. During the Covid-19, final year students of the Faculty of Arts and Culture were requested to submit their thesis by e-mail. Most of the students submitted accordingly, and communications for assessment activities were also made by e-mail by the concerned departments. The viva-voce examinations were conducted via Zoom and Skype.

There was an opportunity to submit the students' thesis within the appropriate time frame. However, teachers and administrators faced many difficulties in overseeing and evaluating research thesis online. Challenges faced by students in obtaining a proper internet connection and power outages had led to several interruptions in the evaluation process. A university lecturer said:

"We had to face power interruptions two times while conducting an oral exam for final year students. Thus, it was difficult to conduct the oral examination properly. Some students were unable to take the exam properly due to poor internet connection."

It was observable that there were complaints that supervision of thesis through online modes is not as effective as in physical space.

4.3 Reluctance of academic and administrative staff

It is not surprising that not all staff of the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka were trained in online education, particularly in managing with online platforms and imparting their knowledge and services to the students via online modes. There was little time to train them in the context of curfew being enforced by the government due to pandemic. This has made some of the staff vulnerable and incompetent to access to online teaching and e-governance, which was considered as a supplementary to classroom teaching and learning. More importantly, all those who had access and know-how to handle electronic devises and software were also waiting for directions on how to proceed during the Covid-19.

Administrators have had issues like conducting Heads Meeting, Faculty Board Meeting, Senate Meeting, Council Meeting, Financial Committee Meeting and other appropriate meetings to arrive at crucial decisions to address the challenges confronting the university during the Covid-19. This is because of the fact that not all category of staff of the university had the luxury or knew how to use the online platform for meetings. However, the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka was able to conduct such meetings via online with those who were able to access to online discussions.

5. Conclusion

This article has identified the major challenges faced by the higher education sector in Sri Lanka during the Covid-19 period, especially the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka. Despite the worst impact on the higher education sector during this crisis, the government, the University Grants Commission and the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka took several steps to continue the educational activities of the students in a short period without being disrupted. The Covid-19 led new environment may have unique implications for learning, teaching and administrative practices in the higher education sectors of the country, although it has created a lot of complications in the same sector. Thus, this study recommends the following suggestions to the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka for it to be prepared for future crises.

Adopting a hybrid (traditional and online mode of education) education system will be more useful to address the issues of the online method of teaching and learning confronted by students and

staff in future since the university has re-opened from continuous lockdown due to the Covid-19. The university further needs to devise an alternative mechanism to continue its educational activities without an interruption during such a crisis. It is also necessary to develop infrastructure facilities required to continue the online educational activities. It may be useful for students to learn from their homes during health and other crisis, and reduce delays in students' academic years. The university should also focus on measures to address the imbalances that occur among students through such an online education system.

Meanwhile, the university should focus on developing their potentials by conducting skills enhancement programmes of students, teachers and administrators to ensure better delivery of online education. The university could also find a mechanism to provide a laptop or desktops to deserving students on a soft loan basis. The capacity of servers of moodle based learning management system could be upgraded, or a separate server could be placed for each faculty of the university and network coverage issues can be sorted at the faculty level. The initiatives mentioned above will tremendously help the university to improve its facilities in the sphere of online education in the future.

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