**IMPACT OF COVID -19 ON HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES UNDERGRADUATE DISSERTATIONS OF SRI LANKA**

1. **ABSTRACT**

*Due to the vicious impact of the COVID-19 worldwide pandemic, the education system drastically changes from traditional in-person classes to online format despite primary, secondary and higher education of most of the countries. Worldwide education specialists, teachers, lecturers, students and educators have widely discussed the challenges, difficulties and implications of education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Accordingly, there are few studies have been conducted on Sri Lankan university education during the COVID-19 pandemic situation concerning challenges, the importance of technological literacy and the effectiveness of the online teaching-learning process. Apart from studying bachelor’s degree courses of the university curricular, arts (humanities and social sciences) undergraduates are required to undertake a dissertation at the completion of the degree to demonstrate the skills and knowledge that they have acquired in their studies. Concerning the challenges and difficulties in conducting researches related to the fields of humanities and social sciences when completing the undergraduate studies, this study intended to find out the impact of the COVID-19 situation in Sri Lanka on the undergraduate dissertation while questioning the validity of the final output of art undergraduates. This study was designed based on the qualitative approach to get in-depth information from the selected sample belong to three universities in Sri Lanka. As the findings of this study attested, the arts undergraduates had to face mainly methodological and technical challenges when designing their research due to the COVID-19 situation in the county. As a research-designing challenge, especially for undergraduates who designed their study in the field of social sciences had to change or limit the sample/scope of the study. The same had occurred to the undergrad researchers in the field of humanities, with the limitation of access to primary and secondary library sources. The language of the recommended reading materials had a significant effect on accessing sources. Most of the Sinhala and Tamil medium primary and secondary sources were not accessible because almost all libraries were closed due to the COVID-19 situation. In this case, the only available option for students was to get reading material from the internet. Another challenge is that most students didn't get proper supervision and guidance from their supervisors due to communication and technical difficulties. Therefore, it is proved that there is an impact of COVID-19 on the accessibility and dissemination of knowledge of humanities and social sciences undergraduates in Sri Lanka, and as a consequence, it has impacted the quality output of the dissertation. It can be implied that there is a dissimilarity of quality research output between undergraduates who completed their researches during the pandemic era and the non-pandemic era.*

***Keywords:****Undergraduate Dissertation, COVID-19, Sri Lankan Universities, Humanities, Social Sciences*

1. **INTRODUCTION**

In relation to COVID Calendar, we are currently passing a phase of ‘living with the virus’ and adapting to the situation. This can be evidently seen due to the fact that the whole world has changed the systems to compatible with the situation. But the approach is not the same in different countries and communities. There can be observed some misalignment between resources and needs. In the face of the dominant COVID-19 pandemic, worldwide different sectors such as socio-cultural, political, economic, health, education and governance have become submissive. Since the first case of COVID was diagnosed in Wuhan, China in 2019, the world's top priority and intention were given to protect from the virus, finding a solution to the virus and preventing new cases. Countries with good-conditioned facilities looking for more improvements while countries that struggle to survive with minimum facilities look for help from outside. When a country facing this challenge by changing and adopting the systems, there is a misalignment between resources and needs in the different sectors of the country. Among these changing systems in the world, changes that occurred in education is significant and considered to be important, and it is not even devoid of misalignment between resources and needs.

Due to the vicious impact of COVID-19, the education system drastically changes from traditional in-person classes to online classes despite primary, secondary and higher education of most of the countries. Worldwide education specialists, teachers, lecturers, students and educators have widely discussed the challenges, difficulties and implications of education during the COVID-19 pandemic. This crisis has exposed the many inadequacies and inequities in the education systems. This is mainly due to the shift from the traditional teaching-learning process to the e-learning and teaching process. The need for technological equipment and network connections that needed for online education as well as the supportive family background that helps to keep the focus on the uninterrupted learning process has created a challenging situation for many students. However, people had to accept the challenge and find the resources according to the need.

As the statistical reports attest, approximately 220 million university students globally have been affected due to disruptions caused by COVID-19 (Farnell et al., 2021, pp.6). These disruptions were mainly caused by the change from traditional in-person classes to the online platform. But this situation is differently affected to the European higher education and Asian higher education systems, comparatively. *Regional/National Perspectives on the Impact of COVID-19 on Higher Education* (2020) confirms that the overall acceptance of the digitally enhanced learning-teaching process had grown over recent years in Europe. But this was more challenging for the Asian countries as it resulted in inadequacies and inequities. Mainly, access to technical equipment and network coverage and also this is highly impacted by financial background and the geographical location of the student.

According to the analytical report on *The impact of COVID-19 on higher education* (2021), the emerging evidence is synthesized into 3 levels of impact;

1. immediate impact (how the pandemic affected institutions and learners in the 2019/2020 academic year)
2. short-term impact (how the pandemic is affecting or is likely to affect the current 2020/2021 academic year)
3. medium-term impact (how the effects of the pandemic are likely to affect higher education systems, institutions and students by 2025).

Based on the above, it is clear that university students who belong to years from 2019 to up until 2025 was affected and will be affected by the COVID-19. This situation has more or less an impact on higher education of European and Asian countries alike. As concluded in the report done by the International Association of Universities (2020) on higher education in India, even though India has taken sufficient steps to combat the impact of COVID-19, the government and institutions need to invest heavily in technical infrastructure to enable the shift from conventional to a blended education model. Additionally, it highlights;

Learning assessment and examination approaches should also be reviewed in order to comply with online teaching and learning pedagogy. High-quality Open Source Educational learning resources in various Indian languages should be developed, especially in subjects requiring practical skills. The development and training of staff and faculty for online teaching and learning pedagogy through extensive capacity-building programs would go a long way in improving the quality of online teaching and learning. (Page 21)

The above requirements should be fulfilled for its effectiveness and improvement not only to Indian higher education but also to their neighbouring country Sri Lanka as well. More or less both countries share the same context in higher education.

Since many months of the COVID-situation have passed by now, Sri Lankans also at least aware of the requirements for the education process even though some cannot access or barely access those requirements. Rural villagers have a daily struggle to adapting to the ‘new normal’ of the education system apart from struggling to fulfil their basic needs. While many parents of the school children are trying to provide the facilities for the e-learning process, children are putting themselves in a less effective but necessary learning process. However, university education has a slight improvement when compared to primary and secondary education of the country. Yet, the financial background and the geographical location of the students of the higher education institutes have also experienced inadequacies and inequities of the education systems.

Based on the findings of Hayashi et al. (2020), the impact of COVID-19 on higher education in Sri Lanka can summarize as follows; (a) the adoption of online learning varied by discipline, university and household income, (b) poor internet connections disrupt online education. They are suggesting that the higher education institutes need to revisit curriculums, pedagogy and assessments for online education and blended learning. And most importantly, changing the mindsets and attitudes of faculty and students. When considering the aforesaid impacts and suggestions, higher education of Sri Lanka faces few challenges in the face of COVID-19, i.e. enhancing technological literacy and effectiveness of the online teaching-learning process, conducting practical tests, assessments and examinations via online mode and finally supervision of the thesis or dissertation. (Rameez, Fowsar, Lumna, 2020).

Apart from studying bachelor’s degree courses of the university curricular, arts undergraduates who are specializing in humanities and social sciences are required to undertake a dissertation at the completion of the four-year degree to demonstrate the skills and knowledge that they have acquired in their studies. This also gives students the ability to reach a level whereby they become autonomous learners.

1. **OBJECTIVES**

Concerning the challenges and difficulties in conducting researches related to the fields of humanities and social sciences at the completion of the undergraduate studies, this study intended to find out the impact of the COVID-19 situation in Sri Lanka on the undergraduate dissertation while questioning the validity and the quality of the final output of arts undergraduates.

1. **RESEARCH PROBLEM**

In this context, when focusing on the literature, it is clear that there are few studies have been conducted to understand how the Sri Lankan university system was functioning during the period of the COVID - 19 pandemic situation. However, most studies have focused on the challenges when conducting the lectures, the importance of technological literacy, and the effectiveness of the online teaching-learning process in university education. Therefore this study was an attempt to address and fill the research gap based on the practical issues that final year undergraduates were faced when they were completing their research component which was considering compulsory at the completion of their degree.

This study was directed to address the key research problem, ‘Although it is recommended that university education be conducted online during the pandemic era, in practice, how does it affect the dissertation of undergraduate students in the fields of humanities and social sciences?’. In order to investigate this research problem, discourse analysis was used as a research methodology.

1. **METHODOLOGY**

This study was designed based on the qualitative approach to get in-depth information from the selected sample. Considering the research sample, this study was conducted based on the selected universities which were located in three different provinces in Sri Lanka. When selecting the respondents, final year undergraduates who are from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences from the University of Colombo, University of Peradeniya and Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka have been chosen. From each university 10 respondents were chosen according to their medium (Sinhala/Tamil/English) of study on a random basis and therefore study sample consists of 30 respondents in total.

As per the selected methodology, 6 focus group discussions (FGDs) have been conducted since it allows the space to get an in-depth knowledge in this matter with the follow-up questions. However, with the travel restrictions due to the pandemic, only 4 face to face FGDs and the other 2 FGDs were conducted through the ZOOM technology. Table 01 shows the summarized study sample for easy reference.

**Table 01: Study Sample**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| University | No. of Sinhala medium undergraduates | No. of Tamil medium undergraduates | No. of English medium undergraduates |
| University of Colombo | 4 | 2 | 4 |
| University of Peradeniya | 2 | 2 | 6 |
| Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka | 6 | - | 4 |
| **Total** | **12** | **4** | **14** |

Apart from these primary sources, books, articles, statistical reports were used to obtain the secondary data.

1. **LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

Data accuracy was the first and foremost limitation of this study owing to the COVID-19 pandemic situation of Sri Lanka. Since some of the FGDs were not conducted face to face, there may be some data accuracy issues that occurred in communication. It also caused to miss the opportunity of observing the facial expressions of the respondent in face-to-face discussions when having them via Zoom. Then even if the respondent provides false information, the opportunity to gain an understanding of it also could be missed by the researchers. And this may lead to a change in the direction of research focus as well.

Another highly impacted limitation of the study was getting the mediation of interpreters. When conducting the FGD's with Tamil undergraduates, the help of an interpreter was used. As a result, when getting the opinion from Tamil students researchers had to limit the data with what the interpreter translated. Therefore this may lead to missing Tamil students' true opinions or even misinterpretations.

The point of view of the lecturers who are the supervisors of the research students was avoided in this research. This was mainly due to the fact that the focus of the study directed to find out the obstacles of undergraduate researchers from their point of view.

1. **FINDINGS**

Despite the challenges caused by the current COVID-19 pandemic, the dissertation has always been a challenge for undergraduates. Some of the challenges can be summarized as follows; (a) Lack of knowledge of research methodology in general, (b) facing obstacles in formatting research proposals and projects, (c) having a good skill in selecting research tools, data collection, and data analysis, (d) following research ethics including plagiarism, and (e) having a problem and challenges in writing and reporting the results (Qasem and Zayid, 2019). Among various solutions to overcome the aforesaid challenges, involvement of the institute, lecturers, and even peer companions is significant in the higher education system. These involvements help them do well in the earlier stage of writing research proposals and projects as well as overcoming challenges while writing the dissertation. Formal and informal group discussions and conducting training workshops (Qasem and Zayid, 2019) are undoubtedly an advantage for the young researchers.

With the influence of COVID-19, the traditional teaching-learning process, as well as research guidance and supporting system, have broken down while impacting final year research students of 2019/20 and 2020/21 academic years. While the online teaching-learning and even research supervision process cause less challenge to European students, Asian students of higher education are facing various difficulties in acquiring and disseminating knowledge. As the findings of this study attested, the arts undergraduates had to face mainly methodological and technical challenges when conducting their research under the COVID-19 situation in the county.

According to primary data of the study, final year undergraduates of the faculty of arts in Sri Lankan universities face the following challenges when completing the dissertation at the completion of their degree; (a) research-designing, (b) fieldwork (c) language of the reading materials, (d) sticking to the timeframe and (e) supervision of the study.

* 1. **Research designing challenges**

Research designing is the most crucial part of the dissertation and clearly “the research design refers to the overall strategy that you choose to integrate the different components of the study in a coherent and logical way” (USC Libraries, 2021). Therefore research designing requires careful choices and concentration due to the fact that its impacts on the research question and on the other way research question determine the type of design of the research. When dealing with these interconnected factors, undergraduates often have hesitations in choosing a methodology and determining the scope of the study.

A dissertation has a considerable emphasis on the methodology. The researcher can include either primary data collected only for the purpose of the dissertation or secondary data which already exist to access. Therefore, research designing is a key factor for young researchers to bring out the quality output. Rodrigo (2013) explains;

“Whether you do a primary or secondary study is dictated by a number of considerations including normal practice for your subject, personal preference, and existing research in your field.  Primary research can take many different forms: you might collect data through questionnaires and interviews, carry out an experiment, or do fieldwork.”

In the challenging phase of COVID-19 in the country, undergraduate researchers had to change the procedure and number of data collection. This has impacted mostly on the undergraduates who designed their study in the field of social sciences.

Respondents of the study revealed that they had to change or limit the sample (no of respondents as well as the target group) and scope as well as the topic of the study. For example, one respondent revealed that her research was on 'Domestic violence by intimate partners' of few selected areas of the country. Sudden curfew imposes by the government due to increasing cases of the COVID-19, the researcher had lost access to one of her selected areas and she had to limit the scope and finish the research with available data.

The same had occurred to the undergraduate researchers in the field of humanities, with the limitation of access to the primary and secondary library sources. One such example was that a researcher had to depend on the secondary sources of the study since access was denied to the university library where the primary source (Book) is available for his translation project. Hence, these recorded experiences are evident to the challenges faced by undergraduates during the COVID-19 pandemic of the country.

* 1. **Challenges of the Fieldwork**

Conducting fieldwork has been a difficult task for not only young researchers but also prominent researchers in the fields of humanities and social sciences. According to the responses of the participants of the study following are the disruptions or challenges in the fieldwork that they have experienced;

1. Building new relationships and rapport with new participants;

This was a challenge for the young researchers who used interviews, participatory observations and focus group discussions. Most of the respondents of the study sample were not willing to welcome strangers at a crucial period of COVID-19 for even limited discussions. Since they were not given the consent of the respondents, researchers were unable to get the proper sample of the study at the data collection.

1. Direct Access to the respondents;

Due to travel restrictions, curfew and lockdown imposed by the government, researchers had alternatives to access the respondents when conducting the fieldwork. The most widely used method was to make phone call interviews and discussions on online platforms. Even some of the respondents have asked the researchers to interview by calling to the mobile even though they are available at the moment. (This is mainly concerning safety). Some other respondents were not fully attending to the interviews since the phone call takes so long. There were several instances that interviews were interrupted due to the power cuts, household work, detractions and bad weather. Since there was no direct access to the field, it always brings the difficulty of finding/getting a suitable respondent to the study.

Not only researchers loosed direct access to respondents of the study, but government and health guidelines have also impacted on denial of direct access to libraries, museums and bureaus that researchers wish to collect data. Some of these functioned with limited access but some places were closed completely for months. When considering all the above facts, it is clear that denial of direct access has affected the accuracy of the data collected from the fieldwork.

1. Safety and health of both researcher and respondent;

Safety was the major issue that researchers find when conducting their fieldwork. Most of the respondents were not willing to give information and have discussions concerning their own safety. According to one researcher's experience, he was questioned impulsively by a respondent and he was asked to leave the premises immediately. This is undoubtedly a fair fact on their side but it is not fair to the study sample of the researcher.

All the above challenges can also be classified into health, ethical and logistical challenges of the fieldwork. All these have ultimately impacted the quality research output of undergraduate dissertations during the COVID-19 pandemic.

* 1. **Language of the reading materials**

The language of the recommended reading materials had a significant effect on accessing sources. It was a common issue that researchers faced when finding the reading materials for the completion of their dissertations. Most of the Sinhala and Tamil medium primary and secondary sources were not accessible because almost all libraries including public libraries were closed due to the COVID-19 situation. Most of the researchers replied that they are completely dependent on the sources at the libraries of their respective universities. This is the only place that most of these researchers get access to books, articles, as well as standard research websites. In this case, the only available option for students was to get reading material from the internet using their private accounts with limited access.

The issue of the language seems to be worse for the researchers among the respondents who did their research in Sinhala and Tamil medium. According to them, there was a significant lack of reading sources available online for them. For example, old versions and editions of the Sinhala/Tamil medium books are available only at the university libraries. When discussing the personal experience one researcher revealed that the books/articles on 'Sri Lankan Traditional Folk drama' were not available online to continue his research which needed certain poems of the folk performances.

* 1. **Sticking to timeframe**

As Rameez, Fowsar and Lumna (2020) attest, “there was an opportunity to submit the students' thesis within the appropriate time frame.” Even though the deadline of the final submission of the dissertations was flexible, most of the researchers have exceeded the planned time frame. This has caused the disruption of the mental stability and therefore the procedure of the research. According to one researcher under the study, she was panicked seeing that she is not up to the planned time frame of her research. She had entangled by the fear that she will not be able to submit her thesis on time. The exceeding of her timeframe has mainly caused by the disruptions of the fieldwork due to the COVID-19 situation of the country. But, fortunately, her supervisor has guided her to stay on track and complete the dissertation by avoiding the time frame for the due date.

* 1. **Supervision of the study**

The role of the supervisor seems to be important for all emerging researchers. In the COVID-19 situation, as Rameez, Fowsar and Lumna (2020) explain in detail how supervision of undergraduate dissertation became an arduous task online for lecturers;

“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.”

It is clear that the lecturer had to adapt and find solutions to continue the supervision process in the challenging circumstances of the country. The same situation can be seen on the side of the researcher as well.

According to the point of view of the researchers, communication with the supervisor is very important for them to complete the most important task at the completion of their 4-year studies at the university. It was evident that these researchers were completely relying on the guidance of the supervisor. In one instance, a respondent revealed that her supervisor did not respond to the emails or phone calls at all during the lockdown period of the country. In her own words, “*I was clueless. I didn’t know how to proceed with the dissertation. I was also pressed against time. So I wrote emails to all the department members of the university explaining the situation and expecting any advice from any of them.*" This shows the impact that the supervisor has on the researcher and the dissertation.

Apart from these, most students didn't get proper supervision and guidance from their supervisors due to communication and technical difficulties. Communication errors have occurred by disturbing the supervision process. According to an experience of a respondent, he has composed a mail including all his questions and concerns. But his supervisor had responded only to few selected questions of the email. As he believes, this would not happen if that was a face-to-face discussion. The other common problem is the lack of technical knowledge of the supervisors to reply quickly and conduct online sessions. Generally, some lecturers of the country, as most of the others, were not used to e-teaching methods. This is a common observation that supervision was disrupted by technical difficulties. It is important to note that both parties, student and supervisor, are adapting to the new-normal of the e-teaching learning process. Therefore, obstacles in relation to technology could be common.

Additionally, challenges faced by students related to the dissertation were in obtaining a proper internet connection and power outages which led to several interruptions in the evaluation process after submitting the dissertation. However, based on the aforesaid challenges, this research more closely focuses on the problem from the angle of the student or undergraduate researchers when completing their dissertations related to humanities and social sciences.

1. **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic situation has caused methodological and technical challenges for the undergraduate dissertation process of the Sri Lankan universities. Therefore, it is proved that there is an impact of the COVID-19 on the accessibility and dissemination of knowledge of humanities and social sciences undergraduates in Sri Lanka, and as a consequence, it has impacted the quality output of the dissertation. The undergraduates belong to humanities and social sciences of Sri Lankan universities did not get the chance to properly engage in the research to show their true capacity. It can be implied that there is a dissimilarity of quality research output between undergraduates who completed their researches during the pandemic era and the non-pandemic era.

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