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# Bridging The Learning Gap: Recognizing And Leveraging The Role And Potential Of Higher Education Institutions

**Manoj Shukla** Associate Professor, Department of Economics, Aggarwal Post Graduate College Ballabgarh, Faridabad.

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## Abstract

The covid-19 pandemic induced lockdown disengaged, distracted and disempowered children from the marginalized section as they did not have access to digital pedagogical methods. The expensive, inaccessible and non-unaffordable online education pushed a large number of schools going children out of education system and the learning gap among peers widened. Recognizing the need for filling the learning gap timely the paper highlights that it is incumbent upon higher education institutions to take up this key social responsibility with active involvement of student communities who have potential and will to collaborate in noble mission of educating and empowering the students particularly at the primary and middle levels. The study opines that college students while teaching these school students shall also relearn fundamental in languages and other subjects and enriching their own knowledge base. The paper aims to discuss how higher education institutions can create and leverage myriad platforms to train, motivate and encourage college students to trace, teach and empower such vulnerable students by covering up the learning gap and improving outcomes.

**Keywords:** Digital, Learning, communities, Empowering, Learning.

## 1.0 Introduction

Accessibility of equitable and inclusive quality education particularly at the school level is one of the building blocks for the nation's sustainable growth and prosperity. After two successive torrid years of pandemic for students, schools have fully reopened but the class is diversified group of students as there are students who could not participate in virtual learning during lockdown induced closure of schools. This learning loss culminating in learning gap need to be addressed in time effectively otherwise the future prospect of employment and income generation of these vulnerable group of students shall be jeopardized. The schools themselves do not have wherewithal to deal with this humongous challenge. Bridging the learning gap is an essential component of quality and lifelong learning. Sustainable Development Goals-17, a flagship global program mandated by the United Nations is giant step toward formation of inclusive, equitable and harmonious society. It has been clearly mandated that the youth should be made aware, involved and they should be at the epicenter of SDGs as they will play

a very crucial role in Localization of SDGs, so necessary for effective outcome in time. The idea is to make college students socially conscious and involving and inspiring them in the noble mission of addressing the learning gap among the school going primary and middle level students during the pandemic. It is possible when students teach them at their doorsteps and provide these children emotional and mental support. The practice shall spur students to serve with the noble motto “Yogakshemah Vahamyaham (Your welfare is my responsibility)”. School students need to learn fundamentals in the subjects of English and Hindi languages, mathematics, sciences and computer learning. The college students across Arts, Science and commerce programs have adequate knowledge base to teach these school level students. Higher education institutions vouch for holistic education where students are given ample opportunities through various platforms to participate and collaborate in various community outreach activities to make them become responsible citizens. Higher education institutions need to take up the cudgels for students from poor background to cover up their learning gap which was not of their own making and for this stockholder need to be coalesced for collective efforts towards achieving the SDG 4. 1 so that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary education and secondary education leading to relevant and Goal 4 effective learning outcomes. The institutions need to form a special club related to various targets on quality and inclusive education where student volunteers across all departments shall be involved and trained on issues related to SDGs implementation so that they understand their role and responsibilities. They will involve and work with local community on various SDGs and will become active partners in implementation and success of the UN Mission of achieving the SDGs goals by 2030.

## **2.0 Literature Review**

Education is the life line for children in the crisis (UN SDG-4 Document) and key enabler of all other SDGs (UNESCO.2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has created the largest disruption of educational systems in history, affecting nearly 1.6 billion learners in more than 190 countries and education is a global common goal a primary driver of progress across seventeen SDGs. (United Nations, 2020) and the report further posits that during the second quarter 2020, eighty percent of children in primary education have been effectively out of schools in countries with lower human development. Because remote learning was often ineffective, simulations indicate the school closures increased the global learning poverty and exuberated inequalities in education. (State OF Global Learning Poverty, 2022). Learning losses from COVID-19 schools’ closures could impoverish a whole generation. (UNESCO, 2021). The world Bank estimates that before the crisis about half of ten-year-olds schoolchildren in the developing economies couldn’t read and understand a simple story and that share could have risen to two thirds after pandemic (The Economist Sept 3,2022). Three are indicators showing national level decline in school children’s basic reading ability besides a dip in arithmetic abilities, confirming the “Learning Loss” believes to have set in amid school closures (ASER Report, 2022). During the pandemic most of the children couldn’t learn as they did not have

access to digital devices. In most of the families mobile device was used by siblings in turn. The Annual State of Education Report 2021 states that 67.6 percent of students' families had one android phone. University social responsibility encompasses many different areas: to develop a sense of civil citizenship by encouraging the students and the academics and the administration staff to provide social services to their local community (Alzyoud, Sukaina & Bani-Hani, Kamal, 2015). In India 80 percent of children aged 14-18 years reported lower level of learning than when physically at schools and it is necessary we need to collaborate with schools in enabling them a "Learning recovering " period(UNICEF'S Report 2021). Teachers, parents, children and communities can work together along with the government, to put in place the protocols needed for children to return to schools and learning in a safe environment (Yasmin Ali Haque.2021). Union Ministry of Education's National Achievement Survey found that about 3.4 million students educational level across the country has gone down. During COVID-19, ninety percent of students have lost at least one language ability and eighty percent of students have lost one mathematical ability (Research Group, Azim Premji Foundation). India has the dubious distinction of becoming the country with the second largest covid-19 pandemic linked school closure in the world, next only to Uganda and has set the children back by years academically (Zubeda & Poorvaja; The Hindu). The online teaching does not serve the real purpose and there are reports showing that even in America online teaching has been disappointing and distractors. There is growing recognition and call for the social/public responsibility of HE, urging HEI to identify and address issues that affect the wellbeing of communities, nations, and global society and to introduce a range of innovation educational methods capable of fostering students' critical thinking and creativity within but also beyond subject knowledge (Santos et al., 2016). Universities in UK engage in a range of initiatives that are beneficial to the local communities from primary education to social welfare (Colin Brock & Zhou Zhons.2021). Higher education leaders have a very important role in achieving SDGs in time effectively. Leaders of higher education institutions are in a key position to contribute to an equitable and ecologically sound future by establishing SD as a central academic and organizational focus (Julia Heiss, 2019).

### **Roles of Higher education Institutions**

The core mission of holistic development of the students in the higher education institution shall be achieved successfully if we inculcate amongst our students the values of social responsibility, collaboration, empathy, concern for others and they understand and practice the flagship program of our Prime Minister "Sabak Saath Sabaka Vikas". This will give ample opportunities and wider scope to students to learn and utilize their latent potential in accomplishment of this global noble mission. Historically, higher education institutions have been socially responsible in recognizing socioeconomic problems of society and giving the solutions. The purpose of higher education is served if it connects with the community. UN's slogan "Localization of SDGs" conveys the message that the youth shall be catalytic in sensitizing, mobilizing and nudging the masses on SDGs. Post pandemic, schools reopening

has come with challenges and opportunities and higher education institutions have both the potential and resources to collaborate and contribute in the noble mission of covering up the learning loss among school students due to pandemic induced school closures for two academic years. Learning loss is not only at the primary and secondary level but those new entrants in the higher education institutions have learning deficiency which need to be covered before they are enrolled in the regular programs. Higher education institution need to rethink their new role and redesign strategy for providing inclusive and equitable environment to all. There is need to inbuilt such programs and partnerships that provide ample scope and opportunities to students take part in community outreach initiatives for their holistic development.

### **2.01 Empowering and enlightening new entrants**

SDG-4 ensures inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. Teaching and learning shall be interesting and effective if the learner are confident and have basic skills for higher learning. Pandemic induced lockdowns kept most of secondary level students away from class rooms learning and majority of them could not cover the whole courses and the learning outcome was suboptimal which eroded their capacity to learn further and if it not taken care of in time, it shall have serious repercussions on higher learning and hence career prospects. It is very necessary and also justified that in order to make teaching and learning participative, collaborative and interesting these students are given extra attention. Bridge courses should be designed for first year students in the colleges to cover their learning gap. The institutions need to rope in alumni, bright senior students and volunteers from the corporate houses where under the corporate social responsibility scheme in its new version Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG), they are ready to participate and contribute in socio economic initiatives. The classes of Bridge courses may be organized on the holidays and after the college hours so as to avoid disruption in regular classes. Students shortlisted for these classes may be identified on the basis of the class tests as the marks in the qualifying examination may not be a perfect criterion.

### **2.02 Addressing the learning Gap at schools level**

This is major challenge for the whole community and higher education institutions in particular to involve all stakeholders for collaboration and contribution in this noble cause of inspiring, motivating and guiding the students at the school level through emotional and academic guidance so that they feel confident and capable enough to carry on their further studies with effective learning outcomes. Besides, fundamentals in each subject, school students shall also learn sustainable means and ways of living so necessary to make possible other SDGs. The strategy for accomplishment of this mission need a calibrated approach having following key steps.

- Identification and training of student volunteers: Promising and enthusiastic students having will, zeal and Zen having team spirit should be shortlisted .A short duration course

should be conducted wherein teachers and experts should communicate the purpose of this mission and the efforts required and to make them understand the value of their contributions in enlightening and empowering these deprived children by covering up the learning gap. The role of the teacher in charges in the group formation and success shall be crucial. A road map of activities highlighting programs, policies and practices with active involvement and consultations with stockholders should be prepared with clear roles and responsibilities.

- Adoption of Schools: The success of the mission require focused strategic planning and execution at the micro level with active cooperation of and collaboration of school administration and parents. The college authorities should identify and adopt the schools in the localities and villages with active involvement and feedback from of the college student volunteers
- Identification of students at the schools level: A formal understanding with the school authorities taking local leadership in the loop should be made for collecting data of students from schools. School teachers shall be active facilitators in engaging and goading the children and parents to be a part of this initiative.
- Group coaching at the doorstep: The teaching learning process should be done in the way that it is convenient and comfortable and with all due diligence of children safety norms. The classes shall be arranged in the neighborhood home of one of the students or the college students taking these classes may also invite school students in their own respective homes
- Monitoring of progress and outcomes: The college teacher in charges has the responsibility to monitor the progress of the initiatives. A complete record of such students shall be prepared mentioning the names of students, respective schools and their parents' contact number. YOU Tube videos of students engaged in noble mission should be shared with the others
- Recognizing and involving alumni: The older the higher education institution, the wider is its resource base. The alumni has both will and wealth to contribute in making this mission a success Alumni Associations should be encouraged to provide books, stationaries and the tablets to the students

### **3.0 Test of Academic Leadership**

The effective outcomes of the practice “Bridging the Learning Gap” entails committed and visionary leadership at different level in the higher education institutions. The greater challenge for the leadership is to communicate effectively the vision, purpose and policies to all stakeholders. Leadership should ensure all those who are part of this initiative are committed and capable and should show patience and empathy with the venerable students. Assurance and sustenance of quality is essential for keeping all involved in this practice. Leadership need to instill such practices which inspires both the leaners and the tutors.

### **Conclusions**

The core mission of higher education institutions is to prepare and transform youth to be lifelong learners and that is effectively achieved when students are socially conscious and understand their responsibility towards addressing social issues. Higher education institutions can and should play a transformative role by providing a platform where youth are provided skills to motivate and involve the community to adept and mitigate these challenges. Post pandemic, the mission of bridging the learning gap is one of myriad socioeconomic issues in which higher education institutions should form partnerships with the government, non-governmental organizations and the corporates for providing platform to the college students to contribute and learn by actively participating in social initiatives and doing so they shall learn the traits for being a social entrepreneurs so necessary for achieving SDG -4 in time effectively. The college students shall learn that they have the power to drive millions of students on to the path of learning .The practice will inspire and involve students in social engagement preparing them for taking up leadership positions for solving other social problems.

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