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Psychological and Mental Health Issues Due to COVID-19 Among Bangladeshi Tertiary Educational Institution Students

Due to the rapid spread of the novel coronavirus-2019 (COVID-19), cases in Bangladesh have continued to increase with a total number of confirmed cases of over 1.03 million and over 16,639 deaths (as of July 13, 2021). Such a surge in COVID-19 cases has caused a devastating impact on every phase of human lives including students of all levels. The economic and psychological costs to students in higher learning institutions in Bangladesh are believed to be very high compared to other demographic groups in the country (Islam et al., 2020) as a large portion (29 percent of total education cost) of expenditure is spent for private tutoring (Toaha, 2015). All the educational institutions in Bangladesh have been physically closed since the early March 2020 and extended this closure till August 2021 (Ela et al., 2021; Xinhua, 2021). Based on the infection rate of COVID-19 in Bangladesh, it is uncertain when these institutions are going to physically open and return to normal (i.e., face-to-face teaching) teaching environment and the chances of opening of the higher education institutions in this calendar year appear quite unlikely. Moreover, the physical operation of all types of educational institutions depends on the discretion of the government as the govt. is always carefully monitoring the situation. Consequently, this situation has created severe psychological pressure and socio-economic turbulence among students enrolled at higher learning institutions (Faisal et al., 2021) as this prolonged closure will result in delayed graduation and they will be deprived of securing their desired jobs (Hossain et al., 2021; Ela et al., 2021). Here, we provide several explanations with an aim to better understand the situations and provide some guidelines to the respective authorities, particularly to the ministry of education in Bangladesh.

Psychological pressure is the result of many other factors. For instance, economic despair, uncertainty about the future, lack of recreation, and other constraints result in psychological depression. Due to the implementation of lockdown and spatial distancing policies, self-financing students enrolled at tertiary education institutions have had their private tutoring-based income badly affected (because they can no longer provide coaching services to school and college students for a monthly wage). The problem is so acute in Bangladesh because of very limited and

highly competitive educational loans and bursaries for the students to meet both their living expenses and tuition fees. Charging full tuition fees by some private institutions amid the COVID-19 pandemic has aggravated the situation. On top of this, the online teaching methods adopted by some of the private universities have added extra financial costs to the students and their families because they have to pay for stable internet packages and have regular access to a laptop/desktop/smartphone (Islam et al., 2020; Ela et al., 2021). Additionally, the recent increase in government taxes imposed on internet service providers has augmented the price of internet bundles, and many students and their families have found it costly and unaffordable (BDNEWS, 24).

The income generated from private tutoring/coaching services by higher learning institution students in Bangladesh is also partly used to support respective families financially (Ela et al., 2021; Faisal et al., 2021). Since the educational institutions are now physically closed and no tuition/coaching services are available, they cannot earn money to meet their own expense and support their families. This has, in turn, resulted in extra psychological pressure among students of higher learning institutions who were dependent on such income in the past but have been unable to earn money because of the lockdown (The Business Standard, 2020a). Furthermore, private universities students have to do more part-time jobs because they have to pay relatively higher tuition fees compared to public universities students. Public university students may face less economic pressure because the tuition fees at these universities are highly subsidized by the government and online teaching has yet to start (only a handful of public universities already started online teaching and learning).

Insufficient accommodation at public universities and almost non-existent housing at private universities in Bangladesh have forced many students to rent apartments/houses outside university premises. Although university dormitories are cheap and highly subsidised, many students especially those who stay outside the campus need to spend a handsome amount for their house-rent amid this pandemic. Many students were actually dependent on their private tutoring-based earnings to pay for accommodation, but it becomes difficult now as their earnings have been halted for more than a year. The unsettled rental debt by students resulted in a few incidents in Dhaka (the capital city) recently that has sparked an online backlash by netizens when several owners of the houses/apartments threw the belongings of students into a nearby drain (The Business Standard, 2020b). Such cruel and unexpected incidents/treatments across the country have put extra mental health pressure on students and resulted in acute mental anguish, despair, and anxiety (Dhaka Tribune, 2020a). Consequently, the mental health of students should be ensured by the respective Bangladeshi authorities, particularly the Ministry of Education and the University Grants Commissions through the implementation of appropriate policies and mentoring.

Students in different universities were at various phases of their study at the time educational institutions physically closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic (some were in the middle of their study year and some of them were at the start of their final year). However, students at all levels

and ages are experiencing mental stress thinking about their uncertain future (Ela et al., 2021; The Daily Star, 2020). Final year students who were expected to finish their degrees and get a job have suffered the most. They are mentally anguished because many of them cannot complete their degrees on time due to the abrupt closure of their universities (The Daily Star, 2020). Furthermore, recently graduated students have also experienced mental suffering because they are in search of jobs in a job market that has shrunk since the execution of the countrywide lockdown (Ela et al., 2021). Moreover, students who are looking for government jobs may encounter mental pressures because a government job in Bangladesh has an age limit (except a few sectors, those over 30 years are unable to be employed) and many of them are on the verge of this age limit (The Daily Campus, 2020).

It is evident that 85% of the labour force in Bangladesh are engaged in various informal occupational activities (e.g., wage labourers, self-employed individuals, unpaid family labour, piece-rate workers, and other hired labour) (SANEM, 2020). The pandemic has caused job losses to many parents which have subsequently impacted the study of their children studying at universities who have had to drop out because they cannot pay the fees (Hossain et al., 2021; Faisal et al., 2021). Some students have even committed suicide. For example, a student of a renowned private Bangladeshi university committed suicide with his mother due to financial constraints and mental anguish (Dhaka Tribune, 2020b).

From the above, it is evident that mental agony along with other associated pressures of students in Bangladesh caused by this pandemic knows no bound. However, as long as the pandemic has prolonged, students of higher learning institutions have been searching for ways to relieve their depression, anxiety, and agony. Most of the tasks they are doing are mainly for lessening their loneliness that is the prime reason for creating mental agony. Many students have been engaged with different types of businesses run through virtual platforms. Many have started online tutoring. A good number of Bangladeshi tertiary level students are engaged with different types of voluntary and social activities like collecting donations from the rich and distributing among the needy, voluntary teaching to the poor students (through online), donating blood, and so on that all are rendered for the sake of social welfare and community development. Some students spend time playing online games like PUBG, Free Fire, etc. (Ela et al., 2021; Faisal et al., 2021). As said by Manna (his pseudonym), a BBA student at the University of Chattogram,

“I didn’t have any interest in online games. However, approximately six months after the lockdown, I became addicted to such games with the instigation of some of my friends who always spend their times in gaming. Moreover, I know many of my friends who spend their time in phoning with their girlfriends whom they convinced during this idle time.”

Besides, a portion of students have also opened small businesses like tea stall, grocery shops, and so on that require a relatively little amount. Through a telephone conversation, a student named

Ovi (his pseudonym) of the IBA (Institute of Business Administration), the University of Dhaka told us,

“At the very outset of the pandemic, it was very challenging for me to pass time as it badly affected our mental health. However, we, five friends studying in different universities, were looking for ways to engage us with any activities. Finally, we started accumulating a small amount and opened a tea stall. I also started online tutoring to IBA aspirants. These make me mentally strong and economically stable as I no longer need to ask money from my parents.”

Moreover, some students have left the capital city as they could not afford their living cost and took other alternatives to survive and make them engaged. For instance, Arif who is an undergrad student at the Asian University of Bangladesh, a renowned private university stated,

“At the beginning of the closure of their university, we thought it will reopen very shortly, but not like that. So, as a means of survival I started driving Uber car. My other two friends went back to their village and started vegetable business in their local markets. Now I feel both mentally and economically relieved.”

All these activities initiated and carried out by these young folks obviously have lessons for others about how to minimize anxiety at the time of uncertainty and crisis, and at the same time how to be self-reliant though some students have been engaged with few negative activities.

After all, the COVID-19 pandemic has economically and mentally affected university students in Bangladesh. Therefore, relevant and need-based initiatives are required from various government ministries, particularly the Ministry of Education. In light of the current situation in Bangladesh, we propose several initiatives that may be helpful to minimize mental health pressure and other associated depressions of the students in higher education institutions. First, an education loan (even for a short-term like that in other developed countries) by the Bangladesh government should be provided to students in need so that they can continue their studies. Secondly, universities (in particular, private universities) should not pressurize their students to pay their tuition fees during the pandemic. Rather they should seek financial assistance from the govt. or use alternative funding (e.g., an endowment fund) to ensure their financial viability as implemented by one of the private universities (i.e., Northern University of Bangladesh declared a BDT 180 million (around US\$ 2.10 million) stimulus package (in the form of full and partial tuition fee waiver, which is funded by International Business Agriculture & Technology Trust) for the welfare of the students (The Business Standard, 2020c). Other universities could initiate this type of stimulus package so that students' learning does not get hampered and provides relief from the psychological pressure and other despairs they face.

Third, university teachers and relevant sections/institutions should continuously monitor student mental health and provide adequate support to the students (Goothy et al., 2020). Fourth, internet service providers should come forward and provide affordable internet rates for students of higher learning institutions to ensure virtual teaching and learning activities seamlessly and efficiently (Ela et al., 2021). Fifth, in terms of the age limit for government jobs, the Ministry of Education should collaborate with other ministries to re-review the current age limit for government jobs providing a much-needed leeway to the affected students (Ela et al., 2021). If the age limit cannot be extended permanently, at least it should be considered for the next couple of years.

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