

## **How Colleges and University Responded to the COVID-19 Pandemic—Vivekananda College, University of Delhi**

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### **VIVEKANADA COLLEGE AND COVID**

This essay delineates the experiences of students and faculty at Vivekananda College, University of Delhi (hereafter, the College) located in Delhi, India, during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. Current student enrollment is approximately 3,200. Students graduating from Vivekananda College are eligible for service in the Combined Defence Services; the Indian Army, Air Force, and Navy; the Central Industrial Security Force; the Indo-Tibetan Border Police; the Central Reserve Police Force; the Border Security Force; the Railway Protection Force; and all state police services.

### **JANUARY-MAY 2020 SEMESTER**

As the January–May 2020 semester approached its midway point and members of the College community were enjoying the traditional mid-semester break (March 9–15), the COVID-19 crisis emerged. Most students were off campus due to the much-celebrated Holi festival. On March 20, the Indian government issued a one-month nationwide lockdown, effectively quarantining India. All university and college campuses closed, and hostel students were instructed to vacate their rooms as soon as possible. What followed was several months-long quarantines as well as stay-at-home and social distancing mandates.

The Ministry of Education directed all universities and colleges to complete the January–May 2020 semester remotely through online (OL) platforms such as Google Classroom, Skype, Zoom, e-mail, and other applications (apps). All College festivals and off-campus activities were cancelled, and most internship programs were completed remotely. The last working day of the semester was extended from May 24 to June 12 to facilitate special needs and associated administrative matters.

Moving traditional face-to-face (F2F) courses to OL platforms proved to be challenging. Faculty, staff, and students were thrust into remote platforms with minimal guidance and resources. At the time, the College did not maintain a learning management system (LMS). Faculty and staff depended on publicly available OL platforms. Many students as well as faculty and particularly those living in remote rural areas had to deal with limited or, in the worst cases, no Wi-Fi access.

In addition, end-of-semester practical examinations, in most cases, would have to be administered remotely. The remedy for this vexing problem was a one-time Open Book Examination for all practical examinations. The Ministry of Education insisted that the College administer the practical examinations on July 31. Final-year students were especially impacted by the pandemic as many job offers were rescinded due to a rapidly declining economy.

Moreover, students who planned on applying to postgraduate programs had to contend with delayed practical examinations and their respective results, which would play a role in the application process. Normally, final grades from the May–June examinations would be available by June and in time for Fall 2020 programs worldwide. The examinations were administered in August and the grades were not available until the end of September.

### **JULY-DECEMBER 2020 SEMESTER**

The College celebrated its Golden Jubilee under the most unusual circumstances: a pandemic and its deadly consequences. Planning for the July-December Semester was a monumental undertaking. COVID-19 overwhelmed India and the world. By June, there were over six million confirmed cases and 70,000 fatalities in India. Indeed, we were afraid for our lives. Due to the late conclusion of the January–July semester, the commencement of the July-December semester was pushed back from July 20 to August 10. The University decided to start first-semester classes on November 18 OL using various platforms including SWAYAM PRABHA, the National Digital Library, e-PG Pathshala, Shodhganga, Vidwan, e-Shodh Sindhu, and various Consortium for Educational Communication apps.

Despite the many obstacles inherent to a hasty transition of such magnitude, the College was committed to delivering a first-rate education to all students including internal assessments, practical examinations, Viva-Voce projects, moot courts, apprenticeships, internships, and field work. Much of this was accomplished with the help of Skype, Google Meet, Zoom, and OL examination software. In addition, the College issued institutional email addresses to all faculty members to facilitate access to OL teaching platforms. In some cases, colleges and universities were provided free/discounted services by various internet and software vendors. The University leveraged the services of Google Classroom and many of its apps to deliver course material. Google Classroom and associated software provides data entry and analytics for attendance, subject matter, and assessments that support teaching and administrative needs.

### **SAFETY AND ADMINISTRATION**

To minimize student travel and the number of students on campus at the same time and the attendant outbreak risks, the July–December semester start date was staggered. In addition, the mid-semester break was omitted. Practical examinations were scheduled to be held on campus on December 12. All College and University cultural festivals were suspended, and social gatherings were not allowed on campus. The student’s election was suspended. Consequently, no new student officials assumed office this year.

### **TEACHING AND STUDENT ENGAGEMENT**

Student engagement proved to be difficult. Scheduling and administering Zoom and other teleconferencing platforms was time-consuming and wrought with subtle technical idiosyncrasies. Exacerbating the situation were Zoombuster antics that sometimes delayed and disrupted classes. Student participation and engagement proved to be the biggest challenge. Signs of social isolation were apparent. Student responses to instructor questions and prompts

noticeably decreased. Some students experienced technical issues such as inoperable cameras and microphones and Wi-Fi drop-offs. Others chose to disengage their cameras before or during class or to be disruptive. In the aggregate, optimal conditions for first-rate higher education did not exist. Consequently, many students complained that they were not grasping the material.

### **CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION**

Perhaps the biggest global challenge to higher education since World War II, COVID-19 has not deterred us from our primary mission: to prepare students for the challenges that lie ahead and, ultimately, to make the world a better place. Teaching and learning during a pandemic is rife with challenges and opportunities. Fortunately, resistance to remote teaching and learning has subsided significantly. Necessarily, higher education has embraced remote OL learning. But we are not there yet. Much needs to be done to effectively teach in OL platforms. Colleges and universities must provide faculty and students with necessary training and resources. This will require a significant commitment on the part of government and society.

On a personal level, COVID-19 was a major life-adjustment. Initially, I found the adjustment to be very difficult and stressing. Learning to teach remotely was very time-consuming and interfered with my research. My only benefit was the time I saved from not having to commute. I do, however, sense that as I adapt to OL teaching, my course preparation time will decrease. Yoga, I found, helps me keep my mind calm and to focus on my work. The COVID-19 crisis made me realize that I have the power to reach out to audiences beyond my College. In the larger society, I see myself in a leadership role. I am trying to capitalize on the opportunities inherent to the COVID-19 crisis: OL teaching platforms can provide worldwide exposure. Ready world, here I come.