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Remote learning and online teaching in Fiji during COVID-19: The challenges and opportunities

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ABSTRACT

Fiji is a small Pacific Island Country with a population of around 902,536 people. The current pandemic of COVID-19 is impacting the well-being, social life, and economic status of the country. Besides, the well-known health difficulties caused by this virus, education is another crucial sector that has been crippled. To prevent the local transmission of such deadly virus the common exercises used globally are lockdowns (stay-in), social distancing, and use of PPEs (facemask, hand glove, and face shield). As a result, students, and teachers at all levels of school have been obliged to quickly adapt to online learning. Therefore, in the paper, an outlook of COVID-19 and its impact on the educational system is discussed.

1. What we already known

- The novel coronavirus is SARS-CoV-2 and the disease is COVID-19.
- The first cases were confirmed in Wuhan, China.
- COVID-19 transmits from person to person via droplet transmission.
- Social distancing and wearing a mask helps slow the spread of infection.
- COVID-19 symptoms range from mild to severe and it can be fatal.

2. What this article adds?

- Overview of COVID-19 in Fiji.
- Impact of COVID-19 on educational system in Fiji.
- Challenges faced during remote and online teaching.

3. Overview

A novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) first infected humans in December 2019. It is a viral infectious disease that is spread from person to person [1]. Most of the people infected with the COVID-19 virus have mild to moderate respiratory symptoms and recover without needing any specific therapy. Adults and elderly people, as well as those with underlying medical conditions such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, chronic respiratory disease, and cancer, are more prone to get severe symptoms [2,3]. Being thoroughly informed on the SARS-CoV-2 virus, the disease it causes, and how it transmits is the greatest strategy to avoid and slow down transmission. Washing hands frequently or using an alcohol-based hand sanitizer to protect yourself and others from the spread of the virus, and avoid touching your face [4]. When an infected individual coughs or sneezes, the COVID-19 virus transmits predominantly through droplets of saliva or discharge from the nose, therefore respiratory etiquette is particularly vital.

4. Fiji as a Country with COVID-19

COVID-19 was first detected in Fiji on 19th March, 2020 [5,6]. Sadly,

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a second wave of deadly virus is impacting the people of Fiji as of April 2021. As confirmed by the world health organization (WHO), countries are being urged to step up regional and country-level travel restriction. In the unavailability of a vaccine or licensed medications to combat COVID-19, social isolation is the only option for halting the virus's spread [7]. Fiji's early lockdown efforts were aggressive, and the following step were taken to combat this virus:

- Schools were closed.
- Sporting events were cancelled.
- Public gatherings banned and a range of non-essential businesses shuttered indefinitely.
- Universities and research hubs were closed, and remote learning was promoted.

The education ministry has responded with resilience, adaptation, and innovation to the difficulties posed by these unusual conditions. High Schools and universities are assisting employees by allowing flexible work-at-home alternatives for those who will be responsible for additional caregiving tasks, as well as paid leave for custodial workers and others who may be unable to complete their customary activities. Socially distant students are seeking opportunity to connect and communicate.

5. Virtual education and the COVID-19 pandemic in Fiji

COVID-19 has an impact on all levels of education recipients and delivery, but it has had a greater impact on students' life. To halt the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, educational institutions in Fiji have chosen to temporarily cease face-to-face classes in favor of a remote learning style of lecture delivery. The following actions were taken to halt the pandemic:

- During COVID-19 virtual and remote learning has become a trend.
- Students who require additional learning assistance, those who live in poverty, and those who speak English as a second language have

all suffered disproportionately as a result of the educational changes that have swept the country.

- Virtual learning has proven to be beneficial for children with attention deficit disorder (ADD) who do not have any co-morbidities.
- Changes during the pandemic are more likely to affect Math learning scores than language arts results.
- With the closure of in-person schools, students have lost access to school meals, classmates, and planned activities.

Educational institutions in Fiji has changed the way classes were usually held. The common methods that were adopted by the University levels are:

- Lecture recording (pre-recorded lectures) were introduced to students as well as tutorials and quizzes were prepared online which can be accessed by their student account.
- Web conferencing software and video communication services were highly utilized such as BigBlueBotton, Google Meet, and Zoom to conduct online virtual teaching.
- Different teaching styles were adopted, for instance, essays were replaced with multiple choice problems, short test and final examination was online to reduce crowded classrooms.

The strategies mentioned above, had the most significant impact on students learning system. It was a double-edged sword to change the way classes were held. As students adapted to distant learning, some of which was prerecorded and available at their convenience, their schedules became more flexible. While the high schools made the following changes in their teaching styles:

- Face-to-Face teaching were changed to remote learning.
- Worksheets were prepared for each level and posted on Ministry of Education webpage where parents and students were able to access it.
- For primary school, student's literacy and numeracy classes were broadcasted on the television.

However, high school education had its weaknesses as it does not have a digital platform to reach its students.

6. Challenge of online learning during COVID-19

In such global crisis, there are few common challenges on online learning in Fiji as given in Fig. 1.

7. Opportunities of online learning during COVID-19

Universities have rapidly digitized their educational operations in response to the pandemic. Remote learning on its own has advantages, such as:

- Flexibility
- Interactivity
- Self-pacing
- Research & technological innovations

It is evident that technology integration for online learning, has played a critical role in mitigating the impact of the pandemic on educational activities by serving itself as a sole platform for instructional design, delivery, and assessment. However, thoughts and considerations must be given to unprivileged students who do not have continuous and uninterrupted access to the internet or do not have personal electronic devices such as laptops, desktop, tablets and smartphones to access the course materials and carry out the required assignments.

Finally, COVID-19 has had a significant impact on Fijian students, particularly in terms of maintaining social distance, tracking health issues, and adapting to virtual classes. The skills students developed to adjust to these changes, can be both essential and beneficial in averting future breakouts. These measures, though, are not infallible, and there is always a potential for improvement. As a result, students must reflect on their personal experiences and voice their thoughts appropriately.

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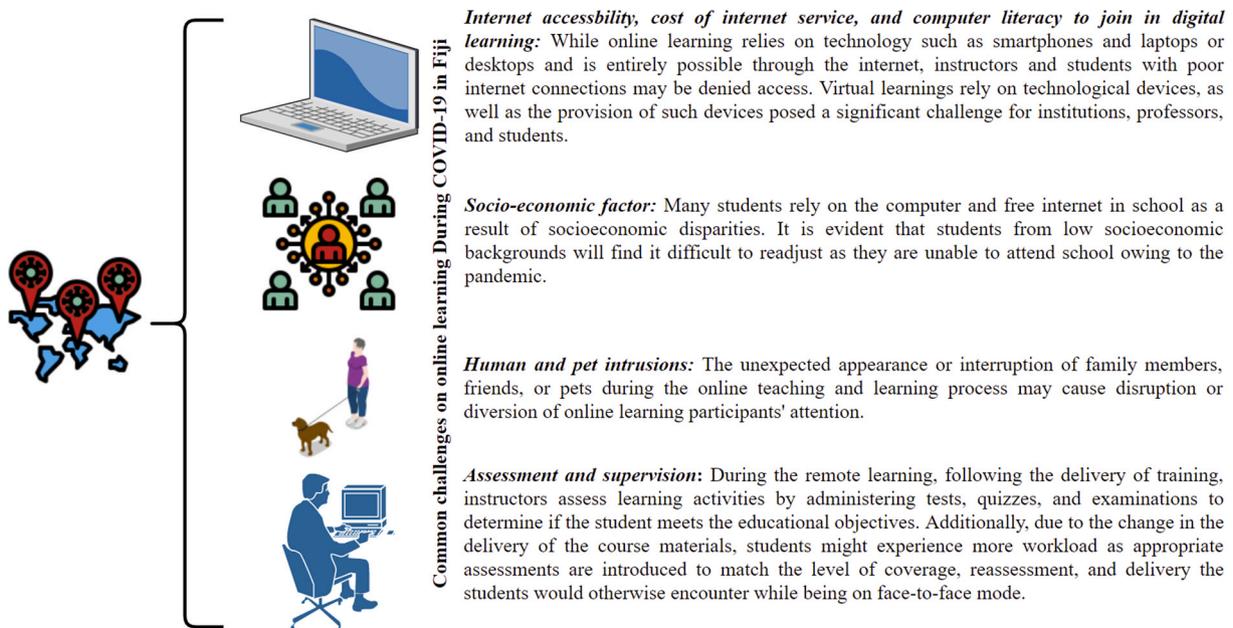


Fig. 1. Common challenges on online learning During COVID-19 in Fiji.

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Declaration of competing interest

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