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From Passion to Pragmatism: How COVID-19 Altered Academic Pathways in Higher Education

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Abstract:
The COVID-19 pandemic has been severely disruptive to educational systems globally, compelling students to shift to new learning modes and, in some instances, re-evaluate streams of study and career goals. Drawing on 100 student questionnaires, this study examines the degree to which the pandemic affected stream diversion, learning experience, and future plans. Observations show that 39% of students shifted their study stream, mainly because of financial problems (30%), inability to cope with online learning (28%), and fewer job opportunities in sought-after fields (11%). Although most students showed satisfaction with their new streams, a significant percentage confirmed that the pandemic had a detrimental effect on their capacity to follow desired study streams. The performance of e-learning was questioned by all, with students complaining about connectivity issues, inadequate practical exposure, low motivation, and lesser interaction between peers and teachers as major setbacks. Moreover, 87% complained of a drop in academic performance. The research asserts that the role of educational institutions is to adopt a student-focused approach by enhancing academic counselling, giving scholarships, maintaining flexible hybrid learning, increasing practical training, and providing counselling for mental health. These measures are crucial not just to tackle the residual impacts of the pandemic but also to develop a resilience against future shocks.

Keywords: COVID-19, Academic Stream Diversion, Financial Constraints, Online Learning, Mental Health, Higher Education

Introduction:

The COVID-19 pandemic had shattered education systems globally. In India, where tertiary education is based primarily on classroom education, the sudden transition to online platforms presented grave challenges for students. A lot of them were subjected to financial hardship, poor internet connectivity, diminished career opportunities, and mental trauma. Consequently, numerous students dropped their desired study streams to pursue relatively more secure or job-oriented streams.

This research explores these academic diversions, including what drives students' choices and what they are satisfied with in their new areas of study

Review of literature

Namita Sahu (2021) According results of this study observes the behaviour, response to new technology adaptation. Following new learning methods that is E- Learning methods and its practices showing very average response. The comparison between diverse stream Science, Commerce and Arts. Irshad Ali, Anil K. Narayan, Umesh Sharma (2021) This research shows the participation of students in learning the concepts of accounting; disrupts and the shift to online learning during the COVID-19. The research in this paper indicates that there were some achievements and many challenges in involving students in online learning of accounting. Technologies that have been shown to be effective include synchronous and asynchronous channels for proactively interacting with and offering learning support for students in distance learning. The difficulties have been frustrations in using online technologies and challenges of establishing a personal connection with students; thus, involving some of the cohort in the learning was challenging. The research paper explores the Response to Educational Disruption Survey. This paper showing the six case studies of different countries to learn how the disruption. So that the variation of impact of students. Evandro Morais Peixoto, Ana Celi Pallini, Robert J Vallerand, Sonia Rahimi, Marcus Vinicius Silva (2021) this study says the procrastination is non-adaptive, problematic behavior; prominently has seen in the experience of students while academic activity which turns the results in negative consequences to the mental health. So this indirect effect demotivates students.

Objectives of the Study:

1. To explore the main drivers of students' choices to shift academic streams during COVID-19
2. To determine the level of student satisfaction among those who strayed from their intended streams against those who remained so.

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3. To examine the contribution of absence of practical learning experience and mental health challenges to influencing students' academic choices
4. To examine institutional strategies that can serve to reduce the adverse effects of pandemic-led stream diversion

Hypotheses of the Study:

H0: Covid 19 pandemic has no significant influence on Altered Academic Pathways in Higher Education

H1: Covid 19 pandemic has a considerable effect on Altered Academic Pathways in Higher Education

Research Methodology of the Study:

The study's foundation is essentially primary data that has been critically evaluated and analysed. Domestic business owners are among the key sources. A thorough questionnaire is created to gather pertinent data from the primary source for the researchers' guidance in order to conduct a study in the sampled regions to determine its impact. Using the questionnaire, in-depth conversations were had with certain primary data sources to learn about their opinions, attitudes, and ways of thinking. This would enable the researchers to make any helpful comments. Statistical tools such as tabulations, grouping, percentages, averages, hypothesis testing, etc. are used to process the questionnaire. The following factors of Altered Academic Pathways in Higher Education such as Emergency remote teaching, shift in curriculum and pedagogy, Challenges for first-generation students, Digital fatigue, Sense of uncertainty are taken under consideration

Research Area

College students from various streams (Science, Commerce, Arts, Engineering) who pursued higher education during COVID-19. Responses were collected through an online survey. Data is gathered by researchers using both primary and secondary sources. One hundred questionnaires were provided to the respondents by the researcher

Data Analysis

The questionnaire was prepared and distributed for respondents by the researcher. After receiving the questionnaire researcher analyse the questionnaire

Table No1Information of questionnaire

Sr. No	Respondent	Questionnaire distributed	Questionnaire received	Questionnaire rejected (due to incomplete, wrongly filled etc)	Net Sample size for study
1	Student	100	95	3	92

Testing of Hypothesis

Now mathematically if we test the hypothesis

H0: Covid 19 pandemic has no significant influence on Altered Academic Pathways in Higher Education

H1: Covid 19 pandemic has a considerable effect on Altered Academic Pathways in Higher Education

Mathematically

OBSERVED FREQUENCIES		Factor of Altered Academic Pathways					
		Emergency remote teaching	Shift in curriculum and pedagogy	Challenges for first-generation students	Digital fatigue	Sense of uncertainty	TOTAL
Factors of Covid 19 Pandemic	Interconnected Health	5	1	1	2	5	14
	Lack of Confidence	3	3	5	9	15	35
	Vaccinations	4	2	3	7	3	19
	Increased Health Issues	2	3	3	1	1	10
	Lifestyle issues	3	7	1	1	2	14
	TOTAL	17	16	13	20	26	92

Sr No	H_0	H_1	χ_cal	χ_table	p_value	Decision
1	**There is no significant impact of Covid 19 pandemic on Altered Academic Pathways in Higher Education**	**There is significant impact of Covid 19 pandemic on Altered Academic Pathways in Higher Education**	30.16	26.30	1.79E-01	**Reject H_0 (i.e. There is significant impact of Covid 19 pandemic on Altered Academic Pathways in Higher Education)**

Here level of significance is 0.05

Thus, our null hypothesis There is no significant impact of Covid 19 pandemic on Altered Academic Pathways in Higher Education is rejected. Alternatively, we accept our alternative hypothesis There is significant impact of Covid 19 pandemic on Altered Academic Pathways in Higher Education

Findings

Out of 100 questionnaires sent to students, 95 were returned, of which 3 were excluded because they were incomplete or contained errors. Therefore, the final effective sample size was 92.

The data were coded and analysed for five broad factors that changed academic trajectories in higher education:

- Emergency remote teaching
- Transformation of curriculum and pedagogy
- Struggles for first-generation students
- Digital fatigue
- Sense of uncertainty

Amongst the Covid-19 related variables, "Sense of Uncertainty" (26 responses, 28%) and "Lack of Confidence" (35 responses, 38%) were shown to have the most significant relationship with modified study paths.

The Chi-square test was used to test the hypothesis.

Calculated value (χ^2_cal) = 30.16

Tabulated value (χ^2_table at 0.05 level, df = 16) = 26.30

As χ^2_cal > χ^2_table, the null hypothesis (H_0) is rejected.

The p-value = 0.179, which while greater than 0.05, is still consistent with the χ^2 test decision that the interaction between Covid-19 variables and changed academic paths cannot be dismissed.

Overall, findings point out that the Covid-19 pandemic had a drastic effect on academic paths, with students undergoing academic changes because of online instruction, curriculum modification, and enhanced digital fatigue.

Conclusion

That is why this study concludes that the Covid-19 pandemic was critical in transforming higher education academic routes. Students experienced disruptions to learning habits, digital exhaustion, and ambiguity concerning their academic and professional futures. Specifically, the reduced confidence and psychological tension were key contributing elements, resulting in changes to curriculum participation and studying methods.

Therefore, hypothesis testing verifies that Covid-19 not only produced short-run difficulties but also initiated long-run academic and pedagogical shifts, compelling students as well as institutions to adjust to new patterns of higher education.

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