

International Conference on

**Virtual Academic Collaborations in COVID-19 Times: Leveraging Digitization and Internationalization for Excellence in Teaching-Learning, Research and Community Engagement**

**03- 04.12.2021**

**Concept Note**

Covid-19 has affected individuals, communities and states all over the world with great severity in multiple waves. As on the 27<sup>th</sup> August 2021, the World Health Organisation [WHO] reported over 213 million confirmed cases of COVID-19, including fatalities close to 4.5 million.<sup>1</sup> Recently, the infection rates across different regions of the world once again are showing increasing trends. Till the time, over 4.9 billion vaccine doses were administered with the majority of the world yet to be vaccinated.

The Covid-19 pandemic has been costly in terms of the loss of lives and it has adversely affected key aspects of human society and economy. With grief, fear, uncertainties and loss of pay, jobs and closure of enterprises, it has been heavy on the livelihood means and mental health of people. It was seen that physical distancing, recommended as one of the Covid 19 Appropriate Behaviours (CAB) , could not be possible when people dwelled in overcrowded dwellings in urban settlement areas. Washing of hands was impossible in places where people did not have access to running water.<sup>2</sup> Adding to this, unplanned lockdowns led to mass movement of migrant labourers back to their homes without any possibility of following CAB: many succumbing to fatigue and illnesses other than the virus itself. Studies have documented that the long-term impact of the pandemic could push large numbers of people to experience greater hunger, poverty, injustices, racial discrimination and social exclusion. In addition, the pandemic has also contributed to a culture of distrust and the rise of conspiracy theories. The infiltration of this movement by extremist groups and a lack of trust in experts, educational institutions, and political authorities threatens to challenge and weaken democracies.

The pandemic exposed the limitations of existing healthcare systems in dealing with a pandemic. It revealed social and economic faultlines in terms of people's access to information, education and livelihood options. Millions of children in Africa and Asia could not access education services delivered through online and digital technologies, although these were being celebrated as the appropriate medium in the "new normal". This applied also in the case of youths from least developed countries and developing economies as they faced considerable financial, educational and technological uncertainties. Even in economically strong countries, affecting vulnerable groups including unemployed and low earners the most, Corona has deepened already existing inequalities and pushed citizens into poverty. Globally, Elderly persons, children, persons with disability, women, indigenous/tribal peoples, blacks, dalits, sexual minorities, refugees, internally displaced persons and other marginalised and discriminated groups are feared to have been further pushed to the

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<sup>1</sup> WHO (2021). WHO Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard. Retrieved from <https://covid19.who.int/> on 27 August 2021

<sup>2</sup> United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (n.d.). Everyone Included: Social Impact of COVID-19. Retrieved from: <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/everyone-included-covid-19.html>

periphery of things in terms of access to services and information and their greater impoverishment: thus jeopardising the march towards achievement of key SDGs.

In the midst of this, the prevailing pandemic has shown that there are possibilities of reassembling a “new normal” that include putting in place equitable social policies, programmes and measures that build the capacities of “...disadvantaged groups to fight against the pandemics of health, economic exploitation and socio-structural racism, and all sorts of discrimination...”<sup>3</sup> It has provided us with an opportunity to reorganise our society in a just manner where it is possible for every individual to live with human rights and dignity.

This pandemic has also shown that there is a possibility of reigning in greater people-to-people cooperation, partnerships and solidarity. While the world has seen despair and suffering, unheard of in recent memory, there have been numerous avenues for showcasing and expression of human resilience through strengthened ties and relationships. There has been no dearth of individuals, groups, institutions, agencies and states that have stood strong in solidarity in the face of calamity: preventing, treating and mitigating the effects of the deadly coronavirus.

### **Leveraging Digitization and Internationalization for Excellence in Teaching-Learning, Research and Community Engagement**

With the above as the backdrop, this International Conference on Virtual Academic Collaborations in COVID-19 Times: Leveraging Digitization and Internationalization for Excellence in Teaching-Learning, Research and Community Engagement, seeks to revisit, document and promote good practices, models and perspectives that have the potential for assuaging the sorrowful impacts of the Covid 19 pandemic. It aims at celebrating the key and timely responses of governments, NGOs, institutions and individuals, across different sectors, who have contributed significantly in the fight against the coronavirus. More specifically, it aims at pooling in the experiences of universities, practitioners, academics and scholars to understand and assess how they were able to leverage digitization and internationalization through national and international academic collaborations for continued delivery of educational services.

In the light of the appropriate behavioural mandates imposed by the Covid 19 pandemic, digitization of teaching-learning, research and community engagement has been a phenomenon among higher education institutions worldwide. While it has been a welcome adaptation, experiences from across the world suggested the prevalence of disparity in access and resources available to different institutions and population groups. Digitization involved investments in terms of procurement of technologies, applications, and convenient infrastructure. It also required investing in capacity building of the teachers and students alike to adapt meaningfully to technological changes. In this regard, it has been stated that “... while pursuing the important potential of digital transformation to bridge divides in terms of access to knowledge and information, it is important to acknowledge that there is a high risk of exacerbating existing or creating new inequalities...”<sup>4</sup>. Thus, leveraging digitisation for excellence in academic practice during the pandemic has provided academic practitioners and institutions of higher education with the possibilities of addressing gaps, disparities

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<sup>3</sup> Pawar, M. (2020). The global impact of and responses to the covid-19 pandemic. *The International Journal of Community and Social Development*, 2(2), 111–120.

<sup>4</sup> IAU: Digital Transformation of Higher Education, <https://www.iau-aiu.net/technology?onglet=1>

and long-pending societal inequities with just distribution and access. It is important to address the needs of “digitally deprived population groups along with most vulnerable sections, which are doubly disadvantaged in coping with the lockdown measures and in participating in the post-pandemic recovery process.”<sup>5</sup>

Internationalization has been one of the important principles in higher education globally. It builds on the strengths of academic institutions through international collaboration, cooperation and partnerships in the multi-dimensional areas of academic practice. Mobility of students, teachers and administrators, a key aspect of internationalisation, has been hard hit by the restrictions imposed as a result of the Covid 19 pandemic. Notwithstanding this difficulty, several institutions of higher education have continued to engage and strengthen internationalisation through online and digitization. Continued internationalization has resulted in fruitful teaching-learning, research and online community engagement. It was possible to enhance the capacities of students, teachers and administrators in sharing and use of technologies for online academic practice. Virtual academic collaborations also enabled continued transnational academic cooperation, inter-cultural teamwork and exchange. In addition, more students could participate in exchange activities including those who are unable to gain cross-national experiences through physical mobility due to financial constraints and other reasons. Moreover, international academic corporations also enhanced solidarity among nations through spreading awareness for the most affected countries and needed solutions including vaccination opportunities.

### ***Broad objectives***

In this light, the unique experiences and ground realities of Virtual Academic Collaborations in COVID-19 Times that strengthened digitization and internationalization for excellence in teaching-learning, research and community engagement merit a just revisiting for purposeful deliberations. Within such a frame, it is proposed that we reflect and dwell upon —

- Theoretical and conceptual approaches to capture the experiences of digitization and internationalization in higher education academic collaborations
- Trajectory and trends of digitization and internationalization in higher education in the light of Covid 19 pandemic and diverse experiences of social groups, communities, agencies and states
- Appraising and capturing the unique intervention perspectives and practice models that would ensure just and equitable digitization and internationalization with respect to human rights for social development and achievement of SDGs.

The conference also seeks to highlight key issues and reflect on interdisciplinary theories, practice, skills and values pertaining to studying, understanding and programming for excellence in higher education via digitization and internationalization. It will be an opportune platform for academics, researchers, practitioners and educational institutions to share, deliberate and learn how it has been possible to augur academic resilience by leveraging digitization and internationalization. It is envisaged that through national and international academic collaborations, both digitization and

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<sup>5</sup> Pawar, M. (2020). The global impact of and responses to the covid-19 pandemic. *The International Journal of Community and Social Development*, 2(2), 111–120.

internationalization could contribute greatly towards continued delivery of educational services in spite of the disruptions due to Covid 19 pandemic.

***Call for papers***

The conference is meant to contribute to developing ideas for building sustainable international connections online and enhancing global solidarity through virtual academic collaboration. Papers that deal with the abovementioned themes aligning to one of the three areas: 'Teaching-Learning', 'Research', and 'Community Engagement' are invited. Please send your abstracts (300 words) by email along with your contact details (email, phone no, postal address) and current institutional affiliation to the **email ID**: [daisinlung.kamsuan@dbuniversity.ac.in](mailto:daisinlung.kamsuan@dbuniversity.ac.in)

If you are invited to write a whole paper, please do not exceed 3000 words.

**Details and updates also available**

at: <http://dbuniversity.ac.in> and <https://www.frankfurt-university.de/en/>

***Timeline***

- Last date for submitting abstracts: 17.10.2021
- Intimation regarding the acceptance of abstract: 24.10.2021
- Last date of submission of full paper: 26.11.2021
- Conference dates: 03.12.2021 & 04.12.2021 (9-1 am CET / 1:30-5:30 pm IST)

**Time Slot for presentations at the Conference: 10 min**