

HEC Policy Guidance Series on COVID-19

COVID-19 Policy Guidance no. 4, dated 28 March 2020

Subject: Government Directive of 26 March 2020

In wake of the COVID-19 Pandemic, the Government has announced the closure of all academic institution (schools, colleges, universities, and madaris) in the country until May 31, 2020. The period of break will be treated as summer vacations. In this backdrop, and considering that a number of universities have already commenced, or are ready to commence online teaching, it has become essential to clarify as under:

1. *Advanced Universities:* Universities and Degree Awarding Institutions (DAI's) that have well-instituted and operational LMS, and have commenced or are prepared to begin online lectures, may continue to do so during the extended Spring Semester 2020. There is agreement between the HEC and Federal Education Ministry in this regard.
 - a. *Complaints about Quality:* However, it is essential that the quality of learning is not compromised. HEC has received many complaints from students, both directly, and through the Prime Minister's Complaints Portal (please see Annex 1), about the quality of instruction as well as the quality of digital readiness of the instructors.
 - b. *Response Measures:* A number of measures have been instituted, or are being instituted to address these concerns, and are listed at Annex 2. Universities have been requested to submit real time data on syllabuses, reading materials, lesson plans, PPTs, video lectures, and exams and quizzes, in order to substantiate details (at program level) of courses uploaded and being delivered online. Similarly, data is needed on faculty and students registered on LMS, faculty trained on online teaching and assessment practices, and other requirements prescribed by HEC to safeguard the quality of learning.
2. *Lagging Universities:* Universities that are not yet ready for online instructions, on account of different limitations (technological, technical or spatial) may choose to remain closed for all formal academic processes until May 31, 2020, and treat the break period as summer vacation. Such universities shall plan, acquire, train, and shall be able to execute LMS from June 01, 2020, so that ongoing semester could resume even in an eventuality of extended closure of universities.
3. *Scenarios:* In this regard, the universities are requested to prepare themselves for all probable scenarios (Annex 3). A separate Guidance Note will be issued to support planning for multiple scenarios.
 - a. In Scenario A, all restrictions are lifted as scheduled on 1st June, allowing subsequent instruction to revert to normal face-to-face mode.
 - b. In Scenario B, if restrictions are extended into the summer months, all instruction will continue to be in the online mode. Other changes (e.g., in admissions) will also be needed.

- c. In the pessimistic Scenario C, if the restrictions have to be extended even beyond August, significant additional changes will be needed.
4. *Technical Support*: HEC has established a Technical Support Committee (TSC) to extend all necessary support for the transition to online or hybrid mode of learning. The TSC has already issued the "COVID-19 Technology Support document", identifying requirements and process for the establishment of LMS. Universities/DAI's can approach the TSC at covid19-tsc@hec.gov.pk for acquiring the LMS.
5. *Capacity Building*: The work on online content development and capacity building is in process, and will become available for use very soon to supplement resources already available with different universities.
 - a. In particular, HEC is establishing a National Knowledge Bank (NKB) to provide online access to a range of academic materials, including curriculums, syllabuses, lists of textbooks, links to digital libraries, lesson plans, video lectures, PPTs, exam questions, quizzes, and assignments. A guidance note will be issued separately on the use of the NKB.
 - b. Likewise, the National Academy for Higher Education (NAHE) has been tasked inter alia with arranging or recommending online tutorials on skills and competencies needed for good quality online education. NAHE has been requested to prepare a guidance note on accessing capacity modules on urgently needed skills.
6. *Objectives*: The underlying guidance is based on a number of objectives over which there is already a significant consensus among academic leaders at HEC and the universities:
 - a. *Protect Health and Lives of all stakeholders*: including students, faculty members, and staff employed in universities as well as the HEC; and
 - b. *Protect Students*: Ensure that the students do not lose the semester. If any students lose the semester, they will lose a precious six months of their lives, some may fall behind others, and many will need an extra effort to get back into regular academic habits.
 - c. *Protect Universities*: The loss of a full semester will also be a loss for the universities. The lost semester will have to be substituted for later, without receipt of additional tuition fees, thus imposing an unaffordable financial burden on universities, especially problematic for public sector universities, given the current financial straits created by past budget cuts.
 - d. *Prepare for the Future*: It is not clear whether and how frequently such crises may re-emerge, but we should look beyond this period and try to establish policies, processes, systems, infrastructure, and institutions that can protect us in the future. We should also try to identify areas where our work can benefit other countries and institutions.
7. *Calendar*: An important issue is the planning of the academic calendar in this uncertain situation, including the timing of the admissions and start of the Fall Semester 2020. The Government has directed the Boards of Intermediate and Secondary Education to conduct the examinations in June and declare the results by the third week of August. Whether or not this will be possible will depend on the particular scenario (please see Annex 3) that emerges after the current lockdown.

- a. Under Scenario A the attempt should be made to adhere to the agreed calendar, i.e., complete the admissions in early September, and start classes by 15 September.
- b. Under Scenario B, if the exams get delayed, in order to save the Fall Semester, universities will need to provide provisional admissions. HEC is analyzing past admissions data in order to develop Admissions Guidelines aimed at utilizing past data for the formulation of transparent and merit-based admissions policies.
- c. Under Scenario C, i.e., where the crisis extends beyond the summer months, universities will have to continue in the online mode, and also adapt their admissions processes as mentioned above (to be sketched out in the HEC Admissions Guidelines).

Annex 1: Complaints About Online Teaching

The analysis of the complaints reveals that they fall into the following categories:

- Connectivity problems: About 30 per cent of the complaints pertain to connectivity issues faced by some students:
 - Some students live in areas where 3G is not available, e.g., erstwhile FATA, Balochistan, GB, and AJK
 - Due to current restrictions, students have difficulty in recharging their SIMs, getting Internet packages, or reloading balances
 - Some students are unable to understand lectures because of poor streaming
- Faculty Concerns: Slightly under a quarter of the complaints emanate from faculty members, who are afraid of visiting the campus even for preparing or delivering their courses for online delivery.
- Quality of Instruction: Slightly under a quarter of the complaints pertain to the perceived quality of the online instruction mode.
 - Online classes are not effective
 - We can't understand and ask any questions
 - There are audio lectures. They are not understandable
 - Teachers are not trained, and don't know how to deliver lecture
- Quality of Evaluation: About 13 per cent of the complaints pertain to the poor quality of evaluation systems in the online mode:
 - Papers are conducted and the result is zero as we don't get any affective knowledge
 - Quality to conduct paper is poor
 - CGPA is down
- Tuition-related Concerns: About 10 per cent of the complaints pertain to value for money:
 - We pay a lot of fees
 - We don't pay fees for virtual university
 - Freeze the current semester as we pay a lot of fees

Clearly, the universities will have to address these issues in order to build acceptability of the new delivery mode. While this might not be a preferred delivery mode, the current crisis leaves little choice of options for saving the semester. The problem is that continued poor quality of instruction and evaluation will force universities into canceling the semester, with both substantive and financial costs.

Annex 2: Actions Needed to Address Complaints

The following action matrix summarises the actions required with regard to the complaints (Annex 1):

#	Issue	HEC
1.	Connectivity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ HEC's Technology Support Committee (TSC) has been directed to assist universities by (a) preparing a connectivity map to identify problem areas, (b) collaborate with service providers to find solutions to connectivity challenges in remote areas, and (c) collaborate with service providers to arrange preferential access to educational websites and materials
2.	Faculty Concerns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Universities are requested to exempt faculty members from attendance except for essential tasks
3.	Quality of Instruction and Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ NAHE has been directed to identify and recommend online tutorials for faculty members on online teaching and evaluation. ➤ Faculty members are requested to select online tutorials from the recommended list. ➤ HEC has directed HEMIS to establish a monitoring framework on syllabus, teaching, and evaluation, in order to identify and trouble shoot quality challenges in online delivery ➤ QEC's at universities are requested to submit real time data on the online portal on courses as well as exams and quizzes, in order to obtain assistance on emerging challenges ➤ HEC is in the process of establishing the National Knowledge Bank (NKB), which will include databanks of curriculums, online materials (textual as well as audiovisual), and questions and problems ➤ Faculty members are requested to submit their own materials (syllabuses, PPTs, video lectures, and exam questions and quizzes) for incorporation into the NKB.
4.	Tuition-related	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ HEC has directed QAA to arrange regular performance evaluations to assess quality of curriculums, instruction, and evaluation in various institutions in order to protect students' interests

ANNEX 3: EMERGING SCENARIOS

The experience of other countries suggests that while the time needed for the complete elimination of the virus may vary, effective implementation of containment policies may take time to slow its spread and provides a space for action. Still, one must consider all possible scenarios, e.g.:

Scenario A: The virus is controlled/ eliminated by 31 May, life returns to normal (or as close to normal as possible), classes resume, exams are held

Scenario B: Remnants of the virus persist beyond 31 May, restrictions are extended into the summer months, exams are postponed further

Scenario C: Problems continue even beyond the summer months, and/or there is a recurrence of the disease in the Fall

Regardless of which scenario actually transpires, it is clear that we are in uncharted waters now, and that a full suite of actions will need to be undertaken. Building on the government's decision, and keeping all three scenarios in mind, here are a few issues and decisions. These were discussed in a meeting of a smaller group this morning.