

## **Persevering in the Pandemic: AIUB, from Digital to Virtual**

It is a hard fact that some of the high-risk sites for the spread of the COVID-19 are school, college and university campuses. This evolving situation will not only be vastly disruptive but may also be the driving force for an unprecedented paradigm shift in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The virus seems to be increasingly fatal for the aged with underlying health medical issues – quite an apt analogy for the metamorphosis brought on by the pandemic on the HEIs around world.

COVID-19 has become more of a catalyst for online education, along with numerous other sectors like healthcare, commerce, ICT, etc., that were curve, the lack of medical test kits, and the elusive breakthrough for the vaccine, sending students home ensured their safety. But enabling them to finish off their academic term online ensured that no one fell behind. This was of critical importance in order to safeguard the youth of our nation, not only in terms of their health but also the continuity of their pursuit to realize their dreams. It is a light of hope amidst the chaotic darkness that engulfs the world today.

‘Physical distancing’ being a temporary new norm, HEIs are now developing more pedagogical and administrative tools so as to enable operations as a distributed organization. In the long run, this will not only work towards enriching education as we know it but enhancing the learning experience altogether. Unfortunately, in the developing countries like Bangladesh, most HEIs have struggled to adopt into the change brought about by the pandemic. Many faced challenges with ensuring an adept remote workforce for the duration of the lockdown. The means for implementing virtual classes was not something they were prepared for. Unlike the tech sector, HEIs are not exactly built for remote operations, having little or no prior experience in managing such radical shifts.

There is also a financial backlash on this, obviously. Students may not be in the classroom, but some have either typically welcomed the respite or may have actively resisted it. But they are still getting the same curriculum, courses, teachers and administrative staffs, they had initially signed up for. The only thing is, the cost of making the shift to online delivery and augmenting the requisite supports, that undoubtedly adds value to their educational experience under the current circumstances, adds to the overall cost as well. Contradictorily, one that goes unaccounted for.

No one wants to consider a scenario where this perplexing situation persists well into the next semester, rendering universities unable to reopen. It may not be a likely scenario, but it is definitely a possible one. But that very notion raises difficult questions. Would it be an affordable alternative? A feasible option? A sustainable one? Given the ambiguity we all face now, sadly, we can only prepare for the worst and hope for the best.

As the global events unfolded, the pandemic looming closer, prompted the American International University – Bangladesh (AIUB) to transition online. Since its inception, AIUB, as an institution, had always strived to be digital, but now it had to go virtual as well.

From the 20<sup>th</sup> of March 2020, AIUB has successfully shifted all the classes of all 4 Faculties, for both undergraduate and graduate programs, onto the virtual platform of Microsoft Teams Application. Initiating one of the very first efforts of HEIs in Bangladesh going online, AIUB enabled students and teachers to conduct and undertake their lectures and assessments within the safety of their homes. Since 2008, AIUB has been affiliated with Microsoft Live@Edu, currently known as Microsoft Office 365 for Education, making it one of most long-standing and constructive collaborations with the technology giant in the country till date.

As a result of this partnership, AIUB students, faculty members, and officials get unlimited user access to many of its applications, including the Microsoft Teams. It is a unified platform for communication and collaboration that combines persistent workplace chat, video meetings, file storage, and application integration. Being one of the first private universities in Bangladesh to make the move within days of the initial outbreak in the country, AIUB has now gone fully virtual with its classes with the licensed MS Teams App that everyone can access using their own university email IDs. With its dynamic interface and diverse features, students and faculties can now participate in a unique teaching-learning experience, MS Teams enables an interactive and versatile system that not only ensures the health and welfare of its students, faculty, and administration, but also encourages the continuity of academic activities even in these difficult times.

Adapting to this new normal was not easy. Integrating Microsoft Solutions together with the pre-existing infrastructure, AIUB was able to make the remarkable transition from on-campus to online with over 10,000 active student users, faculty members, and administrative staff onboard within 4 days! Users have been accessing the online platform, utilizing it to its full capacity for real-time online class lectures and team-based work projects. Faculty members are delivering lectures through video conferencing with embedded PowerPoint presentations, Microsoft Learn, Microsoft Stream, Microsoft Administration, Microsoft Forms for quizzes, Gradebook, Assignments, whiteboard incorporations, attendance monitoring and desktop sharing options. Students can communicate with them through video, audio, or message boards for queries, clarifications, and class participation, as required and appropriate. They can also undertake various means of assessments like quizzes and assignments online on MS Teams.

The Microsoft 365 Education has amplified the efficiency and productivity, which in retrospect of the lockdown is an incredible feat in itself. The institution has been able to re-create the physical classroom learning experience for the students and teachers, improving the collaboration in the pandemic. This unanticipated shift as expanded horizons, to a phase where we are now considering a hybrid approach to education, with lectures being engaged in both virtual and physical classrooms, post-pandemic.

And the pursuit of technological development is not one that was just catalyzed by the pandemic. AIUB has long been working towards continuous improvement through digitalization, not only in academia but throughout its operations. The institution has adopted technological innovation, in terms of digitizing infrastructure, student services, and administrative processes. The online portals and database management systems, like the 'Virtual University Expert System (VUES)', which is the central hub that operates the 'University Management System (UMS)', along with the AIUB Web Portal, have all been designed and developed in-house by the university's own graduates, integrated into the

university's integral operations for more than 20 years. The systems enable students and staff to manage their academic or administrative tasks remotely, anytime, anywhere. From admission, registration, lecture notes, class schedules, grades to library access, payroll, attendance, leave applications, convocation applications, etc., updated in real-time for all 10,000+ students and 25000 alumni, with a steady growth in intake every semester, experiencing and improvising an automated streamlined process. And that in itself, has been the foundation that has aided in making the transformative shift from digital to virtual within 4 days! In its strive to innovate, AIUB has always put in the effort to simplify every aspect of its educational services and make it as seamless as possible.

And AIUB did not just digitalize its academics, but even took its co-curriculars online as well. All the student clubs and organizations of AIUB are amongst some of the prominent student organizations at the university. Even in the current pandemic, under lockdown, the student clubs have kept the streak alive of continuously striving for enhancing and enriching the club community and the student body at AIUB. Proactive since the beginning of the lockdown, there have been over 43 competitions, 101 webinars, 143 workshops, and 187 interactive development meetings held by the student clubs during the pandemic, using numerous virtual platforms like Facebook, Messenger, Google Meet, Zoom, Cisco WebEx, Jitsi, Discord, etc. In addition, there were also several national conferences, alumni sessions, cultural programs as well as international participations, collaborations, features, and recognitions amongst the student organizations.

AIUB commemorated the International Mother Language Day through a unique initiative that showcased amazing musical performances that honored the heritage of folk music across borders – “Folklore 2021: Resonating through the Lockdown”. The virtual international celebration paid tribute to native languages, cultures, and traditions from 10 different countries around the world through 30 musical performances by students of 17 higher education institutions. The program brought together the incredible rhythms of young talents, emphasizing diversity that does not divide, but unites. Keeping with that very notion, amidst the unprecedented uncertainty that we are going through today, AIUB organized “Stories of Pandemic – Resonance Beyond the Horizon”, a virtual international collective showcase of incredible stories from around the globe amidst the pandemic. The program brought together over 100 awe-inspiring short stories, poetry, short films, artwork, photography, and musical performances of 19 esteemed institutions from 10 different countries around the world. These numerous remarkable moments, from amazing milestones to grievous losses & suffering to life lessons of that have left a mark on the young lives, here and abroad, commemorated with the global higher education community joining in to be a part of the event. The program shared the numerous remarkable moments, from amazing milestones to grievous losses & suffering to life lessons of that have left a mark on the young lives, here and abroad, with the global higher education community joining in to be a part of the event.

To date, around 75 academic webinars were organized by the various departments at AIUB since the beginning of the pandemic, along with the “International Webinar on Higher Education in the New Normal”, co-organized with the Mykolas Romeris University of Lithuania, as well as the “International Conference on Robotics, Electrical & Signal Processing Techniques (ICREST 2021)”, arranged by the Faculty of Engineering at AIUB. And in light of the ever-evolving changes in the global landscape of higher education, AIUB took another step towards as a signatory of the Magna Charta Universitatum 2020, an initiative by the Magna Charta Observatory marking its 900<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. This made it one of the 4 major affiliations AIUB has with esteemed

international associations of higher education. With over 50 academic and corporate strategic collaborations, which is growing each year, AIUB continues to pursue constant development through its internationalization efforts.

Nearly 449 research and article publications were made between 2020-2021 (till date) by numerous faculty members on a wide range of topics relevant to the pandemic and higher education. This has been a steady increase following the 53% increase in 2020 compared to the regular average in the pre-pandemic. Several online meetings of the Vice Chancellor with the academic and administrative-support staffs are held regularly. The Academic Council, Syndicate and Board of Trustees meetings are held either in MS Teams or Zoom. The MS Teams platform has unlocked a dynamic set-up as an alternate medium to the conventional in-class teaching and learning environments, augmenting another layer of advanced digitized education in the modern world today. The initiative safeguarded the students from incurring the loss of the semester, giving them the leverage and flexibility to pursue their degrees and achieve their goals, while giving their parents and guardians a peace of mind in these precarious times. To date, positive feedbacks are relayed by the teachers, along with the enthusiasm shown by the students, to continue improving the education experience, prioritizing the learning objectives, teaching methods, and student outcomes with the utmost attention and consideration.

With dedicated leadership from the people who truly make the institution come to life, technology can indeed revolutionize the curriculum and better prepare students for the new world of work. Unleashing their full potentials and harnessing their talents, such radical changes can catalyze and catapult them into greater heights even in this challenging landscape. It is now a tried and tested fact today, that digital transformation of institutions has the capability to provide equality, accessibility, and empowerment to all, making the previously impossible, possible.

Agility, resilience, and adaptability aren't just fundamental skills for the 21<sup>st</sup> century students. They're imperative skills for the 21<sup>st</sup> century educational institutions as well — especially in an era when disruptive pathogens and natural calamities are predicted to become all the more common. Whether or not COVID-19 subsides quickly, the life as we knew it, has been irrevocably altered. Tumultuous times have a way of reordering reality and, in the process, opening doors to new opportunities and mind-sets. At the end of the day, every cloud, no matter how stormy, may have a silver lining. It all depends on how we look at its perspective.