

SRI LANKAN HIGHER EDUCATION IN A CRISIS CONTEXT: COVID-19 AS A CASE STUDY

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Abstract

Most countries worldwide temporarily closed the educational institutions and universities to contain the spread of the pandemic of COVID-19. University authorities and policymakers around the globe have struggled to keep their faces with this challenging crisis to ensure the fair continuity of academic activities. As a developing country, the Sri Lankan higher education system has also been facing many challenges. Identifying these challenges is an essential step towards setting goals for a better future in the higher education system of Sri Lanka. Accordingly, the current study has been undertaken in order to identify the challenges in the university education system due to the COVID 19 outbreak in the country. The education sector has faced a considerable drawback in the country since the possibility of opening universities and schools has become a question. The study carried out using thematic analysis with the selected literature and the published reports. Many scholars have found that the internet facilities, infrastructure facilities, and online teaching and language difficulties have become problematic for the students. Some subjects need practical and impossible to teach using online platforms.

Keywords:: COVID 19, Education Sector, University Education, Thematic Analysis

I. INTRODUCTION

Education is the backbone of a country in all aspects. The literacy rate needed to be higher, and the proper education that can improve theoretical and practical education is a must in every nation (Rakhimova & Usmanova, 2020). School education and higher education is available in almost all countries. University education is essential where many skills are developed with the interaction with society (Gil-Lacruz, et al., 2020). Education can be either offline or online. The advantages which can be gained from offline education is different from online education. Either way, student skill development is the most important phenomenon.

Sri Lanka can be identified as a country that is in the developing stage. At the same time, the current literacy rate in the country is 91.17 % which has been decreased for several reasons. The COVID 19 pandemic has impacted all over the process in all the nations. Sri Lanka also facing different difficulties as per the COVID 19 pandemic (Aristovnik, et al., 2020). Sri Lankan education is accepted as a quality education that is provided by the schools and the universities. This level of superiority of education is depending on different actions and the different levels of skills granted to the students. As per the pandemic spreading in the country, the impact in the education sector found to have at a higher level which caused the deficiency in the skill development and knowledge development of the students (Chandasiri, 2020; Hayashi, et al., 2020).

Schools were closed for an extended period on different occasions, whereas the universities were also closed for the same duration. This crisis has made the disturbance to develop the skills and the knowledge of the students and the undergraduates (Rameez, et al., 2020). University education is essential since the development of practical knowledge is granted in universities together with theoretical knowledge. As offline education is in the risk stage, online education has started in the country. Online education with Zoom technology and the WhatsApp, and other social media methods are undertaking currently which has produced many challenges for the students to fulfil their requirements in education (Silva, 2020). Sri Lanka consists of more than 95 % rural schools and the rural population with the lower facilities is very high. The facilities on the internet, Wi-Fi coverages, laptop computers, and other facilities are significantly less. These are the basics for digital learning (Rameez, et al., 2020). Thus, university students are facing different challenges to full fill their requirements in education.

Apart from the facilities requirements, social interaction and the practical applications of the knowledge is very important for university students to perform well in the job market. The pandemic has also been disturbed here. Offline education has become a risky solution to face a pandemic issue (Lucas, 2020). Thus, the undergraduates have faced numerous challenges in completing their education with the expected quality levels. It is essential the understanding the challenges that are mainly faced by the students and to take necessary strategic actions to overcome the obstacles and face the situation positively (Chandasiri, 2020). In accordance with this factor, the current study is undertaking to understand the challenges faced by higher education in Sri Lanka as per the COVID 19 outbreak.

Research Questions

- What is the influence of COVID 19 on the educational system in Sri Lanka?
- What are the challenges faced by the undergraduates due to COVID 19 pandemic in Sri Lanka?

Research Objectives

- To identify the impact of COVID 19 on the educational system of Sri Lanka
- To determine the challenges faced by the undergraduates due to COVID 19 pandemic in Sri Lanka

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The COVID 19 outbreak is highly impacting all the process in the whole world. It has been nearly one year since the pandemic and still going on with rapid spreading. The functions of the world education system have been impacted highly by the outbreak (Dwivedi, et al., 2020). Thus, the strategic implementation of the different actions in the education sector for better development with facing the COVID 19 is a must. Therefore, many countries are practising digital learning and e-learning practices in schools and university premises (Aristovnik, et al., 2020). The application of digital learning has both pros and cons. When it comes to the university education system, applying strategic plans in learning is crucial. Some actions can be done with digital applications, and at the same time, there are some educational categories in which digital education is not successful (Toquero, 2020).

Strategic Planning

Strategic planning is a process that gives the direction of the business. This is providing the best planning actions as per the prevailing situations. In this regard, strategic planning is essential to overcome unexpected challenges and problems (Tsiakkiros & Pashiardis, 2012). The uncertainty is there in every business action. Therefore, it is a must to make sure that the proper plans are plying to overcome the sudden challenges in the business environment (Chang, 2008). The contingency plans are a part of the strategic planning actions. The success of strategic management and planning is the implementation of the planned strategies with the support of managers, administrators, employees, and their organisations' or institutions' culture (Hu, et al., 2018).

Risk management is another factor that is applicable in the strategic planning actions. To ensure the success is there in the institutions, it is a must to define the strategy as a fundamental element in the institution to have the relationship between the planning, managing, and implementing (Dunn, et al., 2017). The open system theory explains that the survival of the organisations depends on their relationship with the external environment and the external environment greatly influences them. As per Amrollahi & Rowlands (2017), the application of the strategic actions relevant to the organisations' open systems results in achieving the best results. Considering all the above factors, strategic planning and strategic thinking are crucial to overcome the obstacles in the education system as per the COVID 19 pandemic (Shammi, et al., 2020).

Digital Learning

The limited mobility is there in the functions as per the COVID 19 pandemic. Therefore the education system has faced a considerable drawback in every country with no difference in Sri Lanka. School education and university education have faced disadvantages and challenges in the current era (Chen, et al., 2020). Digital learning and e-learning actions are highly applicable in every country and even in Sri Lanka in order to provide the education of the students with the pandemic. The pandemic is lasting for a longer time duration and as per the requirements in mobility avoidance, the best method to learn has been decided as digital learning (Jena, 2020).

Digital learning is a method of learning with the use of technological applications rather than physical applications. The practical usage of technology for a better outcome can be seen in digital learning practices (Sousa & Rocha, 2019). This is a virtual learning method and the facilities that can be provided by digital learning spread over a wider spectrum. There are several applications in digital learning such as blended learning, flipped learning, virtual learning, and personalised learning (Blayone, et al., 2017). Different tools and applications such as the ZOOM application can be seen high in the digital learning platforms.

Challenges of Digital Learning

There are many challenges in digital learning practices. The challenges are different from country to country and region to region. The developed countries are facing less burden from digital learning applications as these countries are familiar with the technology applications (Blundell, et al., 2016). The



industrialised countries have more room for the facilities in digital learning. On the other hand, the countries like Sri Lanka are in the developing stage and each and every part of the country is not developed to have technological applications. The university systems have been adapted the digital learning applications in Sri Lanka where the mobility of the students has been limited (Karunanayaka, et al., 2019). The students are facing numerous challenges and difficulties due to this fact.

One of the main difficulties is the technological facilities. Many low-income families in Sri Lanka have no facilities on Laptops, computers, internet, and mobile technology. At the same time, the reluctance the adaptation of e-learning methods is a huge challenge faced by the education sector (Karunanayaka, 2019). The students have less contact with society which is a huge drawback for their future actions. At the same time, poor connection with the teacher and students, poor management of time, and the reduction of interest in learning can be challenges in the digital learning practices (Premawardhena, 2018). Sri Lanka is a country with less interaction with the technological facilities by most citizens (Irsad, et al., 2019; Karunanayaka, et al., 2019). Thus, the application of digital learning in the country has faced these challenges and difficulties in implementing the e-learning practices.

Impact of COVID 19 on Education

The global impact of COVID 19 in the education system is significant. The report produced by UNESCO indicates that more than 1.5 billion students in more than 165 nations have impacted by the world pandemic (Franchi, 2020). Many schools and universities have moved the online learning and e-learning practices rather than onsite teaching to avoid the impact of COVID 19. The following figure provides the data until March 2020, showing how the impacted number of students has increased in the world (UNESCO, 2020).

Thus, Sri Lanka is no exception. The impact of the pandemic in the education system has been recorded as higher and the application of different learning methods can be seen in the present time. The impact on school education is very high (Aristovnik, et al., 2020). The schools were planned to reopening in December 2020, and still, the present rate of the students was showing very less number. The impact on higher education also significant where the application of several alternative methods in education can be seen (Chandasiri, 2020). Sri Lanka consists of many rural people and students from rural areas with a lack of technical facilities. This has been providing a huge drawback in the education system to face the digital learning methods adopted in the education system (Chandasiri, 2020).

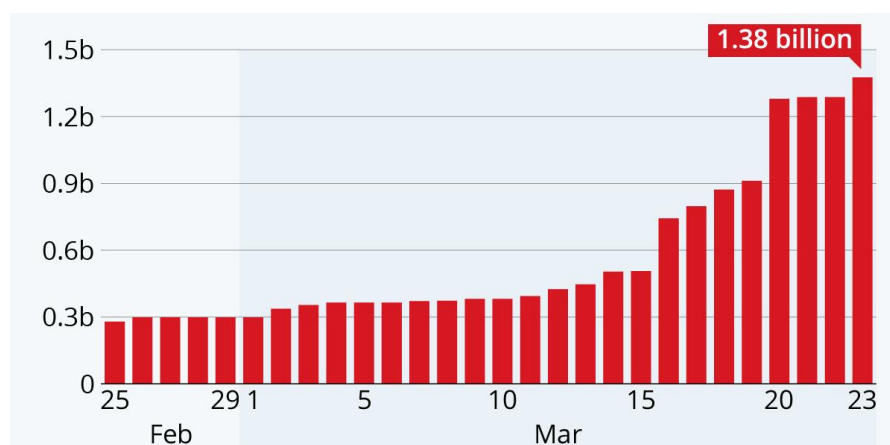


Figure 1 Impact of COVID 19 on global education

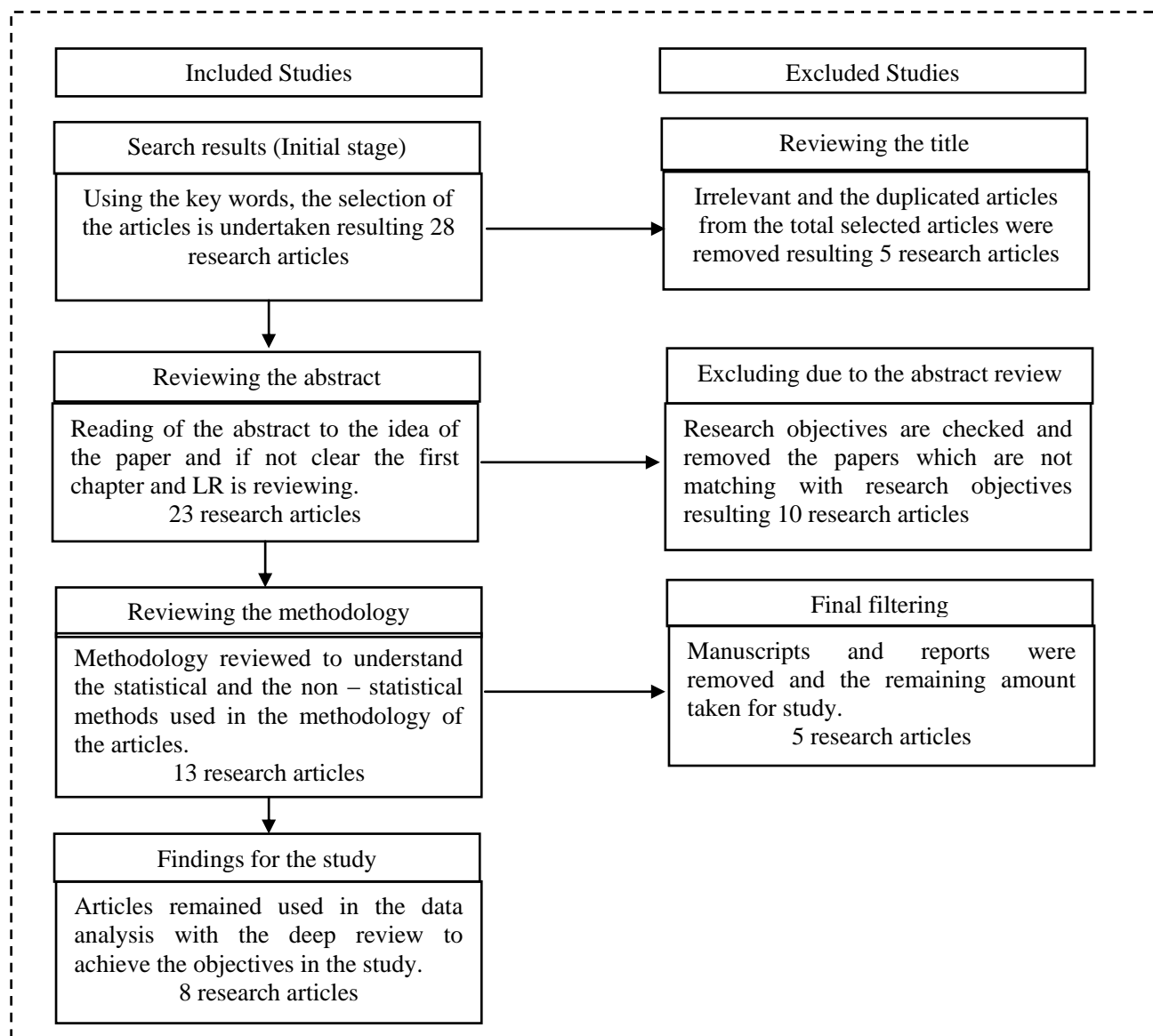
III. METHODOLOGY

The study carried out using thematic analysis with the selected literature and the published reports. The study uses manuscripts, research papers, and the published articles in the generation of the data (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). The most matching research articles were only considered in this study from all these research articles available in the literature. The selection of the research articles is undertaking with the searching of the keywords. The most relevant research article and reports were used in the research study to identify the best matching research articles. The selected papers and the reports are subjective to the deeper review by the authors, and the generation of the research outcomes, which are compatible with the research objectives and the research questions is undertaking in the research. The systematic review that comes with the thematic analysis method is used in the current research to analyses the research objectives and answer the research objectives (Nowell, et al., 2017).

Table: 1 Research Article and Newspapers Searching Criteria

Criteria	Description		Criteria	Description
Research databases	Google Scholar Research Gate Wiley Online Library Elsevier		Newspaper name	Daily Mirror and Daily fit
Database search service that has been used	Google scholar database Research Gate database Wiley Online Library Elsevier database		Type of the report	Reports on university education
Type of the source	Academic journals only		Time duration	2020 January to December
Terms used in search – keywords	University Education COVID 19 impact Online Education Online Education Challenges		Terms used in search	University education Online Education Zoom Technology in Education
Search expanders	Papers which are published in 2020			
Search limiters	Only Peer-reviewed articles			

Figure : 2 Article selection process and criteria based on PRISMA model



Number	News sources	Learning
01	Daily Mirror	We are Lacking in Digital resources
02	Daily Fit	Inadequate Digital Resources: Mobile and Laptop facility
03	Daily News	Data Coverage: Internet Facility and accessibility
04	Daily Fit	Change: Adaptation issues toward E learning and Modern method
05	Daily News	Inequality in Rich and Poor
06	Daily Fit	Re Thinking Toward education system

Number	Articles Title	III	Methodology	Key Findings
01	Challenges and Opportunities for Higher Education amid the COVID19 Pandemic: The Philippine Context	III	Secondary data were used to understand the challenges faced by higher education institutes in the Philippine context. The review on the researchers which has done so far has been used in the analysing and recommending the solutions for the challenges	Found the need to develop the facilities in the Philippine context for the influential learning culture. Integration of environment and health courses in the education syllabus, environmental rules and policies in hygiene need to improve, incorporation of online mental and health corporation and making the feasible facilities for the online learning are some of the main findings
02	Covid-19 pandemic and online learning: the challenges and opportunities	III	This article examined the emergency reaction movement strategies for higher foundations of learning, understudies and employees into internet learning, the chances and difficulties concerning Covid-19.	Creation of the remote teaching facility is more suitable for the situations like COVID. Online learning is the best option which many are facing the difficulties due to the unavailability of the facilities. Adaptation of the crisis-response migration methods
03	Impact of Covid-19 on Higher Education Sectors in Sri Lanka: A Study based on South Eastern University of Sri Lanka	III	Study covered with the qualitative analysis with limited quantitative data gathered through the questionnaire survey, interview and informal and formal talks with the lectures, administrators and the students. Data analysed with the software to provide the charts and bar graphs explaining the situation	Many challenges and the remedies has been identified by the authors. The reluctant of the administrative and academic staff, practical classes cannot be conducted via online, less facilities in the universities, less facilities for the students are main problems
04	Online Learning in Sri Lanka's Higher Education Institutions during the COVID-19 Pandemic	III	The online surveys has been conducted during 17–29 June 2020 on both state and the private universities. The survey was with the students of the universities and another survey done with the faculty members. Third survey is with the vice chancellors, department heads and the higher administrative positions. Quantitative analysis has done with the percentage of responses	Lack of the experience and the training on the online education has identified as the main problem. The lack of the facilities in the universities and the students' homes becoming a huge impact for the online learning. Internet availability is another factor which needed to be considered in the higher range and remedies needed to be undertaken to overcome the difficulties



05	Students' Perception of Online Learning during COVID-19 Pandemic: A Survey Study of IT Students	///	After learning online, the questionnaire has been distributed among the IT students in the SLIATE Sri Lanka. SPSS statistical software has been used in the	The results were found that the students have the knowledge and the likeness in the online education. Still the level of he challenges are very higher. The facilities are less in many of the students those who are from the rural areas. Overcoming the challenges is necessary to overcome the difficulties and promote the online education
06	An Investigation Of Sri Lankan University Undergraduates' Perception About Online Learning During COVID-19: With Superior References To South Eastern University	///	Explanatory survey design has been undertaken with both the qualitative and the quantitative methods in the analysis. 400 questionnaires has been distributed through online social media and the collected data were analysed using the SPSS statistical software. In the same time, the inferential statistics and the Chi-square statistics have been used	The results show that the students are getting enough support from the staff to conduct the online classes. The practical classes has become difficult with the online media and the challenges faced during the online education also found in the study. Facilities is the main factor. The facilities in the students and the facilities in the universities are not enough to provide the services. Proper actions are needed to be included in the universities
07	Impact on Online Teaching Learning Process during COVID-19: with Reference to Faculty of Education, The Open University of Sri Lanka	///	Data has bene collected with the survey method with 117 undergraduates on their perception on the online education. The qualitative and descriptive analysis is undertaking in the study.	Results show that the knowledge on the IT and the English is very week in most undergraduates. Majority were satisfied with the online lectures where the internet connectivity has become the most important challenge that many face. The speed of the connectivity and the cost for the internet is another factor
08	Undergraduates' Perception on E-learning Readiness during COVID-19: A case of a Selected University in Sri Lanka	///	Data collection has been done with the online questionnaire distribution and collected from the March 2020 to July 2020. The cross sectional survey of the undergraduate in four years has been used in here. Data were analysed using the SPSS statistical software	It has been found that the factors in the technology acceptance model has impacted on the perceived behaviour on using the online learning or the e-learning process. Further, the connectivity problems and the facility issues with the practical lessons unavailability are main issues which the students are facing



Analysis

The first objective is to identify COVID 19 impact on the higher education system in Sri Lanka. The COVID impact turned on in Sri Lanka in March 2020. From that time until the present date, the effect has not deviated. All the country's sectors affected during this crisis due to the COVID-19 for at more than one year. The same happened in the educational sector as well. Schools were closed for a long time (Karunanayaka, 2019). The universities have students who are learning in hostels and public apartments. At the same time, the universities have some faculties that are more into practical education than theoretical education (Nafrees, et al., 2020). These factors were highly impacted due to the COVID 19 impact. As per the details provided in the paper, it has been found that online education has grown up and promoted among university students in this era. The students are learning and covering the subject matters through the e-learning methods while the practical needed students are suffering due to the inability to go to the universities (Karunanayaka, et al., 2019). The educational system has been impacted heavily in the meantime and students are also facing huge drawback in their lives. These things need to be overcome soon since the COVID 19 pandemic is kept on going with new waves. Likewise, the current situation is well explained in the information found in the research study, and thus the first objective has been achieved successfully.

The second objective is to identify the challenges faced by the undergraduates due to COVID 19 pandemic in Sri Lanka. The papers selected and the chosen newspapers have clearly mentioned many challenges which has been faced by the undergraduates and the educational sector due to the COVID 19 pandemic prevailing currently in the country. Lack of technological infrastructure in the country has become another barrier for strategic implementation for Sri Lankan universities (Jesuiya & Priyadarshani, 2020). Due to the Corona Outbreak, universities don't have the possibility of holding lectures and classes for students. As a solution for this, foreign universities successfully adopt online learning methods through Zoom and Skype. Researchers have observed that some Sri Lankan universities also implement online learning methods for students (Akuratiya & Meddage, 2020). However, due to the lack of technological infrastructure of the country, this method was not much effective. Thus, the lack of technological infrastructure can be mentioned as a main barrier.

The free state-funded training framework is essentially acquainted with elevating the instructive chances and advantages for understudies from financially minimised families. These conventional study halls comprise understudies from various monetary and social foundations in a typical, shared space. The spread of Covid-19 all through the nation has restricted physical separating for quite a long time possibly months (Karunanayaka, et al., 2019). In such a manner, the public authority has limited homeroom instruction and present online schooling for understudies. The online education has been introduced in the education but the poor families cannot afford the cost of online classes (Hayashi, et al., 2020). The people are providing the basic needs for themselves in a complicated manner and in this case, providing such technological instruments is difficult for most ordinary people.

The researcher has concluded that they dislike online education by teachers and lecturers. The students have been aroused not to receive comprehensive quality education via online platforms (Rameez, et al., 2020). The undergraduates are learning many soft skills in the offline education system and in the hostel lives. These opportunities are not there now for the undergraduates. They don't have the time and space to enjoy university life and learnt maximum which is provided. These are challenges for them and the future as well (Akuratiya & Meddage, 2020). Accordingly, the researcher has identified many challenges where the second objective also achieved successfully.

IV. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

The environment is changing, and the situations of the people also evolving. In the same manner, strategic planning is essential for dynamic changes. However, the strategic planning methods are always not successful in the same way for every person. In this regard, it is vital to understand the challenges and the remedies which suit the situation. The COVID 19 pandemic also the same issue that has been impacted lately everywhere in the world. In Sri Lanka also the impact is significantly higher. The higher education sector has faced so many challenges due to the pandemic. It is essential to understand these challenges to make strategic planning to overcome the obstacles and face the future. Accordingly, the

study has undertaken secondary data to investigate the obstacles undergraduates can face in education due to COVID 19 pandemic issue. The thematic analysis has been implemented in the study with 8 research articles and a newspaper review. The studies have been in deep thought to understand the common factors which can face by the undergraduate students in the country. Availability of infrastructure facility is one of the main factors in the education system, as identified in the study. The study revealed that less availability of the internet connections, economic conditions of the people, difficulty to do the particles through online learning and the less impact in the soft skill development are primary challenges which every undergraduate mostly face due to the pandemic issue. Applying the remedies for these challenges has been identified as very important for the better implementation of the plans in the future.

There can be aids that can be gathered through the different societies and even from overseas, which can help in education and government plans. At the same time, training actions for both the teachers and the students to take satisfaction in the e-learning is another crucial factor. Further, the education method can be developed, such as the self-learning methods, which are highly acceptable in foreign countries. Moreover, the application of engaging activities is applicable in the study periods.

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