

Strategy for Gradual Reopening of HEIs

1 Introduction

1. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the National Security Committee (NSC) decided to close educational institutions including universities from March 16, 2020 onwards, initially first up to 5th April 2020, later extended by the National Coordination Committee, (NCC) in its fifth meeting dated 26th March 2020, until May 31, 2020, then up to July 15, 2020 (Nation 2020, Times 2020, Tribune 2020), and finally till September 15, 2020 on July 09, 2020. These decisions were needed to control the pandemic in line with WHO guidelines (Organization 2020).
2. *HEC Guidance Notes:* In follow up, the HEC has, until now, issued 7 guidance notes for the smooth functioning of educational activities during the pandemic (Commission 2020). HEC has allowed universities to continue teaching and learning during the interrupted Spring Semester 2020 by using a variety of distance-learning options. The objective is to ensure that teaching continues wherever possible, and that the impact of the disruption on students' learning is minimized. About half of the HEIs have improved their online learning systems while the preparedness of other HEIs is still at very initial stage.
3. *Challenges:* However, critics have expressed growing concerns about the issue of connectivity, unavailability of digital gadgets with the students, and quality and capacity challenges at universities. Final year students, especially in professional programs, are required to complete practical training, lab work, or final juries, while MS/PhD programs have to complete and defend their theses. Students Fee particularly if HEIs continue to remain close is another challenge (Nation 2020, Times 2020). Many of these issues are ubiquitous across countries, including China, India, and the US (Brookings 2020, Times 2020), although the intensity may be higher in Pakistan because of severe connectivity issues, electricity breakdowns, and lack of experience among faculty and students.
4. *Reopening:* With easing of lockdowns around the world and, opening of international routes, the government, following the NCOC (National Command and Control Center) meeting dated July 9, 2020, and on the recommendation of Inter Provincial Education Minister's Conference, has allowed the re-opening of educational institutions from September 15, 2020, subject to the review of health indicators in the first and third week of August and in September before the reopening. Furthermore, universities were permitted to allow the return of faculty and certain categories of students to resume academic and research work on campus, and to hold assessments and admission tests w.e.f. July 15, 2020. These were communicated to the universities on July 21, 2020. Finally, the reopening is contingent upon the adoption and announcement of clear and detailed Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) by universities.
5. *Content:* The document outlines a reopening plan, and involves five components:
 - a. Minimum Preparedness Conditions

- b. Stepwise Reopening of Institutions
 - c. Steps to be Taken by Universities and Returnees Before Reopening
 - d. SOPs: Monitoring and Control Measures
 - e. Teaching Plan
6. *Best Practice*: The proposed plans draws upon the strategies adopted by universities around the world. These strategies around the globe differ from place to place, but the majority of universities are planning to go into a blended or hybrid mode of education, e.g., give selected students a choice between returning to campus and continuing with online instruction. A summary of the policies of some of the best-known international universities is in Annex 1.

2 Minimum Preparedness Conditions

7. *Safety*: The first step is for the government to lay down the conditions under which it would be safe for a specific university to allow students and faculty members back on campus.
- a. *Ensuring Health and Safety Protocols*: Universities should disinfect and should sterilize the campus before the opening. They also need to circulate and implement all of the basic precautionary measures advised by the Government of Pakistan.
 - b. *Designated Authority*: Universities should designate a senior official in charge of the return process. No one should be allowed to return to campus, without the authorization by the Designated Authority. He/She would be responsible for the implementation of these protocols, including the preparation of policy documents set out in Section 4 below (i.e., arrival protocols, SOPs/ Campus Safety Protocols).
 - c. *Useful Contact Information*: A separate document will contain a list of all useful contacts, including the Designated Authority, the Designated Hospital, and other officials responsible for various Covid-related duties.
 - d. *Contact Tracing*: Universities should set up a system for contact tracing of symptomatic individuals.

3 Stage Wise Re-Opening of Institutions:

8. *Needs Based Plan*: The reopening plan for universities will follow from the above directives, especially the density thresholds relative to campus infrastructure, and success in implementing the safety protocols. If only a subset of students can be accommodated on campus because of safety considerations, the universities will prepare a needs-based "merit list", which enables those who are most in need to return earlier than others.
9. *Priority Considerations*: The following is a proposed priority list of campus personnel ranked in accordance with the urgency of their return to the campus:
- a. **Priority 1**: All university staff, Deans, HoDs, teaching faculty, and essential staff who have not resumed work from university/office may return to campus.

- b. **Priority 2:** Students of far-flung areas who cannot access online education because connectivity problems, affordability of data packages, or affordability of devices.
 - c. **Priority 3:** Students in programs that have to be taught or demonstrated on campus, e.g., laboratory work, PhD research scholars, technical and training institutions students, etc.
 - d. **Priority 4:** Students in programs who could be taught through blended learning, including some students on campus.
 - e. **Priority 5:** Students in programs that can be taught online without a compromise in quality.
10. **Schedule:** Based on the government directives, each university would determine and plan how many students can return by which date, and proceeds to inform students, in order of their priority levels, of the specific dates on which they should return. Box 1 provides an example of such a return schedule.
11. No one is allowed to return without a written notification from the designated authority.

4 Steps by University before Reopening

12. **Groundwork:** The Designated Authority is responsible for laying the necessary groundwork, for an orderly and safe return of the students to campus in accordance with the Section-3. This groundwork includes the preparation and dissemination of a return package of essential documents and the planning for orientation sessions for returnees.
13. **Return Package:** The **Return Package** consists of the following 8 documents:
- a. **Draft Invitation Letter:** the invitation letters will be numbered, to ensure that no unauthorized person is allowed on campus, and that authorized persons are allowed only when it is their turn. The letters will be dated and signed by the

Box 1: Illustrative Reopening Schedule

- **Priority 1, 2, & 3:** Premises can be opened for all those in Priorities 1, 2, & 3, w.e.f. September 15, 2020. HEIs will use the interim period to plan and attain complete preparedness, including policies and all requirements listed in Section 2 & 3 above.
- **Priority 4:** Attendance of students in Priority-4 could be delayed and staggered if necessary. Components requiring online learning should be taught online while those requiring physical presence may be planned in the light of the evolving situation and NOCO guidance.
- **Priority 5:** This group may continue with online learning for the entire Fall Semester without quality compromise.
- Hostel accommodation may be managed in accordance with the NCOC guidelines. Expected students' density may range from 30%-50% of the designed capacity. Hostel students may be asked to undergo Covid-19 testing from government-authorized facilities (not older than 07 days of the joining date), and once in hostel may not be allowed to return to home without permission. Fulfillment of three important criteria; masks, physical distancing of 6 feet, and adequate ventilation may be ensured at all times.

Designated Authority. They will include or refer to all necessary attachments, as listed below. The attachments will also be placed on the university website. The invitation letter should clearly state that those who have any of the symptoms of Covid-19 should stay at home or seek medical attention, and inform the Designated Authority accordingly, by email, WhatsApp, or text.

- b. *Affidavit*: All returning personnel will be asked to sign an affidavit that they have been given an option to not return, and have chosen to return, that they will adhere by all safety protocols and other instructions in this regard, and that they will not hold the university liable if they contract the virus in spite of the safety protocols. In case of students, their Parents/ Guardians should also signed the form.
- c. *Health Declaration*: All those planning to return should submit a health declaration, which states that they are in good health (or, whether they have any health condition), and whether they have undergone under any Covid testing and/or treatment during the closure period. In case of students, their Parents/ Guardians should also sign the declaration.
- d. *Arrival Procedure*: an arrival protocol should be attached to the invitation letter. It should clarify the procedure to be followed before they are allowed to enter the campus, place of arrival, and the time and venue of the orientation session. Special rules may be established for particular buildings (e.g., hostels), including a rota system of scheduled arrival/departure times in order for mandatory social distancing.
- e. *Guidelines to Returnees for Preparation*: All those intending to return to campus should follow the instructions below:
 - i. *Follow Instructions*: Read all instructions carefully, enter the contact information of key individuals in your phone's database, and sign the Affidavit and Health Declaration.
 - ii. *In Case of Symptoms*: Anyone who may be experiencing Covid-19 symptoms, or a member of whose household develops these symptoms, or if they have been in a contact with a Covid-19 infected person should not return to campus and should share with University.
- f. *SOPs (or Safety Protocols)*: All members of the campus community, including faculty, staff, and students, are expected to adhere to the following guidelines in order to protect the health of its students, faculty, and staff, and the procedure to be followed in case of Covid-related symptoms.
 - i. Wear a mask at all times when in a public space on campus.
 - ii. Maintain social/ physical distancing of 6 feet in classrooms, laboratories, libraries, cafeterias, offices, corridors, staircases, and lifts.
 - iii. Maintain good hygiene practices. Wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water or use a hand sanitizer, dry the hands before leaving the bathroom. Use a tissue (and dispose it properly) or the crook of your elbow when coughing or sneezing.
 - iv. Use only the designated entrances and exits.

- v. Review latest updates and general guidance provided by the University on the web portal to be designed specifically for updating Covid related information.
- vi. Use communal facilities, e.g., kitchens, canteens, meeting rooms, printers and photocopiers only in accordance with the designated protocols, as it may be necessary to stagger usage or to continue to hold remote meetings so as to maintain social distancing;
- vii. Maintain and update a Daily Contacts Diary: you must keep a record of where you go, when, and who you see while on campus. Some public spaces on campus may ask you to provide this information.
- viii. Limit your movements. Try not to move around the campus too much. Stick to your own space as much as possible.
- g. *Facilitation Provided by the University:* This document will inform returnees of the steps taken by the university to facilitate the observance of the guidelines.
 - i. Placement of "distancing marks" in all public spaces, including classrooms, auditoriums, laboratories, libraries, cafeterias, dining halls, canteens, mosques, and play grounds.
 - ii. Obtain the services of a medical professional on campus.
 - iii. Policy for allocation of hostel rooms on the basis of social distancing. Students should be directed to not leave the campus in any case.
 - iv. Resource persons to be contacted in case of questions about safety or in emergencies.
 - v. Awareness messages posted and updated regularly to reinforce social distancing, wearing of masks, and hand washing.
- h. Guidance and contact options for those who continue to work remotely.
- i. *Orientation Sessions:* This document will provide information about the orientation sessions to be arranged for all individuals returning to campus. These sessions will explain the mandatory safety protocols and procedures as well as the penalties for violating any of the protocols. The orientation sessions might be arranged in two parts, including an online briefing in advance, and a face-to-face session when people return on campus. Please see Box 2.

Box 2: Contents of Orientation Session

1. *Awareness:* Basic information about Covid-19, and about health, safety and wellbeing, including risk assessment(s) for each role;
2. *Change:* a reminder of changes that will be needed in the ways of working, e.g., online meetings, online files, hybrid teaching, social distancing, changes in work hours, staggering of classes, or other changes that may happened since the closure,
3. *Support:* ongoing support that may be required by individuals, and is available to returnees;
4. *Contact:* who should be contacted if someone becomes ill while at work or at home, in particular with Covid-19 symptoms;
5. *Questions:* an opportunity for returnees to raise any questions or concerns.

- j. *Penalties:* Anyone who commits a minor or inadvertent breach may be reminded of the violation and supported in observing the rules. Repeated violations may incur higher penalties, including being sent back to work from home. Deliberate refusal or failure to follow the instructions would be a disciplinary offence.
14. *Strict Enforcement:* All HEIs will ensure the strict implementation of SOPs in consultation and coordination with provincial and area Governments. Any institute found violating the SOPs shall be closed down.

5 Teaching

15. *Options:* Covid-19 has changed how students are educated around the world. Online education has become a central component of the pedagogic process. However, it has also led to the emergence of major difficulties including connectivity issues on behalf of students, and preparedness issues on behalf of faculty and universities.
16. *Sustaining the Momentum:* Nevertheless, it has also made clear that online education is here to stay. It has the major advantage of flexibility. If a Covid type situation reoccurs in the future, the countries with greater facility in online education would have a tremendous advantage over those who still struggle with it.
17. *Addressing Challenges:* In Pakistan, the urgent challenge is to overcome the connectivity issue, both with longer-term investments in coverage, and through targeted investments in problem solving. A second major challenge pertains to the preparedness of universities as well as faculty members. Some progress has been made in this regard, but much more needs to be done.
18. *Multiple Approaches:* In looking at the immediate challenge, universities across the world have turned to a multiplicity of approaches to the delivery of education to students. These include various combinations of face-to-face and distance learning, including **Blended and Hybrid learning is in Annex- 2**. The choice of options depends on three major considerations:
- a. Some programs can be taught online without a compromise in quality.
 - b. Some programs need blended learning, including some students on campus.
 - c. Some programs have to be taught or demonstrated on campus, e.g., laboratory work.
19. *Staggering:* In Pakistan, since it is likely that most universities will have to stagger the return of students to campus, they will have to experiment with innovative combinations of teaching methodologies. The key issues to be considered are:
- a. *Class Composition:* Whether all members of a particular class have been allowed to return to campus. If so, subject to the next paragraph, the classes could be held face-to-face, as in the past. If not, it would be necessary to experiment with blended learning in which some students will be sitting in class while others will be following the class through an online platform.
 - b. *Class Size:* Social distancing requirements have implications for the physical space needed to run a face-to-face class. This will mean taking a number of actions, which might include the reallocation of classrooms to various classes (i.e., assigning larger rooms for the same classes), splitting classes into smaller

sections, requiring on-campus students to participate remotely, and staggering the schedule of classes to make better use of the available facilities.

20. *Practical Handling*: The upshot is that we are not out of the woods yet as far as reliance on online education is concerned. If all students cannot be allowed back on campus simultaneously, some will continue to have to follow classes online. This may represent a more complex scheduling challenge than in recent months. It may also generate some opposition by vested interest groups bent upon derailing the educational process.
21. *Action Items*: Depending on their situation, universities will need to take all or some of the following **actions**:
 - a. Create a full time position to support hybrid, blended, and online instruction
 - b. Provide training to faculty members in the use of these options
 - c. Allocate classrooms after considering social distancing requirements
 - d. Split classes into sections to ensure observance of social distancing rules
 - e. Stagger classes throughout the day (i.e., from 8 am to 8 pm) in order to accommodate the same number of students in smaller cohorts in the same facilities.
 - f. Stagger the use of labs in the same way.
 - g. Conduct exams and tests mainly through online means even for students who might be on campus.
 - h. Arrange face-to-face tests or exams, when unavoidable, in a different manner, e.g., by staggering, splitting, and sequencing.

6 References

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Annex 1: Practices around the Globe

The approach of Universities/Degree Awarding Institutions and Colleges across the globe differs for addressing the current phase and post corona phase. The existing analysis of such Universities indicate there is no standard guidelines/policy which could be implemented. However, majority of the Universities are planning to go under blended mode/hybrid mode of education. The key Institutions practices are listed below;

- **Harvard University- Blended Mode-** The University would be open in the fall of 2020, but emphasized that each School would determine its own approach to courses, programs, and activities for the academic term (Harvard 2020).
- **Cambridge University - Moves All Lectures Online Until 2021.** However, delivering small group teaching, lab work and practical's will be **on campus** (Cambridge 2020).
- **Oxford University - Blended Learning** - distinctive focus on face to face small-group teaching, laboratory practical work and supervision, with access to world-class facilities and resources, supplemented by high quality digital materials. We will work flexibly to maintain suitable levels of contact time for students. All our colleges will be open, with accommodation available for students (Oxford 2020).
- **MIT - Blended Learning** - At least for the fall, we can only bring some of our undergraduates back to campus. Everything that can be taught effectively online will be taught online (MIT 2020).
- **Australian National University in Canberra - Face to face** for smaller lecture classes. The larger classes would still follow online mode (Guardians 2020).
- **University of Newcastle Australia - Face to face** for smaller lecture classes. The larger classes would still follow online mode (Guardians 2020).
- **The University of Melbourne - Face to face** for smaller lecture classes. The larger classes would still follow online mode (Guardians 2020).
- **The University of New South Wales- Australia - Face to face** for smaller lecture classes. The larger classes would still follow online mode (Guardians 2020).
- **Canterbury Christchurch University UK - Blended Mode-** The exact mix will depend on the course (UK 2020).
- **Birmingham University UK - Face to face** for smaller lecture classes. The larger classes would still follow online mode (Birmingham 2020)
- **76 UK universities** would be starting through **Blended** mode of education and 28 have yet nor decided. Annexure at **Annex 3 and 4.**
- **7 Universities New Zealand - Face to face**
- **Iranian President Hassan Rouhani** has announced that schools and universities in the country would **re-open** on **September 5**, following a quarantine period related to COVID-19, Trend reports via IRNA (MENAFN - Trend News Agency) TEHRAN, Iran, June. (Agency 2020)
- **Dhaka, Bangladesh- Extended closure** of educational Institutions till August 6, 2020 started from March 16, 2020.
- **Ghana's** - Universities and schools are to **reopen on 15 June** to allow for final-year university, senior high and junior high school learners to resume classes which will lead to their respective exit examinations (News 2020).

Annex 2: Learning Strategies

An important concept is that of **Blended learning**. It is an approach to systematically mix face-to-face teaching with online learning, where the online component can be delivered through both synchronous and asynchronous modes, where people learn in different locations at different times. Blending can also happen at three levels – at institutional, program, and course levels. Ideally, some of the courses (those with practical and skills components) can only be taught or demonstrated only through face-to-face interaction, while others can be delivered either in blended or completely online mode (News 2020).

Blended learning is often confused with **Hybrid Learning**, but the two are very different concepts. Blended learning caters to the different needs and locations of different students, some of whom may participate face-to-face, while others do so online. Hybrid learning refers to the different tools and technologies that the teacher may use to deliver the information to the student. An example is the flipped classroom, in which the formal lecture is pre-recorded and distributed as homework, i.e., for students to listen to at home, while the class time is allocated to group exercises or discussions, activities that used to be part of traditional homework assignments.

Another strategy is collaboration between universities and other educational institutions for specific purposes, e.g., examinations, submission of assignments, or use of labs. For example, if a student of University A resides somewhere near University B, they could arrange for him/her to fulfill part of their requirement by using B's facilities.

Annex 3: UK- Teaching Mode: Blended Learning

No.	Universities	No.	Universities
1	Abertay University (Dundee)	21	London South Bank University
2	Aberystwyth University	22	Loughborough University
3	Anglia Ruskin University	23	Manchester Metropolitan University
4	Arts University Bournemouth	24	Middlesex University
5	Aston University	25	Newcastle University
6	Bangor University	26	Norwich University of the Arts
7	Bath Spa University	27	Nottingham Trent University
8	Birkbeck, University of London	28	Plymouth Marjon University
9	Birmingham City University	29	Queen Margaret University
10	Bishop Grosseteste University	30	Queen Mary University of London
11	Bournemouth University	31	Queen's University Belfast
12	BPP	32	Regents University London
13	Brunel University London	33	Richmond American International University- London
14	Buckinghamshire New University	34	Robert Gordon University
15	Canterbury Christ Church University	35	Royal Conservatoire of Scotland
16	Cardiff Metropolitan University	36	School of Oriental and African Studies
17	Cardiff University	37	Sheffield Hallam University
18	City, University of London	38	Solent University
19	Courtauld Institute of Art	39	St Mary's University, Twickenham
20	Durham University	40	Staffordshire University

Reference: (Bena 2020)

Annex 4: UK- Teaching Mode: Blended Learning

No.	Universities	No.	Universities
1	Bradford College	15	Ravensbourne
2	Colchester Institute	16	Royal Holloway, University of London
3	Coventry University	17	St Mary's University College
4	De Montfort University (DMU)	18	The Open University
5	Edge Hill University	19	University for the Creative Arts (UCA)
6	Glasgow Caledonian University	20	University of Birmingham
7	Glyndwr University	21	University of Exeter
8	Guildhall School of Music & Drama	22	University of Law
9	Leeds Arts University	23	University of Leicester
10	Leeds Beckett University	24	University of Nottingham
11	Leeds City College	25	University of Plymouth
12	Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU)	26	Ravensbourne
13	London School of Commerce	27	University of West London (UWL)
14	Bradford College	28	University of Westminster

Reference: (Bena 2020)