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The Perception and Preference for Online Education among Final Year Undergraduates during Covid-19 Pandemic in Selected State Universities in Western Province, Sri Lanka

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Background: The educational institutes across the world have closed due to the Covid-19 pandemic jeopardizing the academic schedules. Most of educational institutes have shifted to online learning platforms to continue academic activities.

Objectives: To describe the perception and preference for online education and to identify failures and benefits of online learning experienced by final year undergraduates during Covid-19 pandemic in selected state universities in western province, Sri Lanka.

Methods: A descriptive cross-sectional study was conducted. Final year students in all faculties from the University of Sri Jayewardenepura, University of Colombo, University of Kelaniya, University of Moratuwa, and University of Visual & Performing Arts were selected. Data collection was carried out through an online survey using a structured self-administered questionnaire with close ended questions. SPSS software version 26.0 was used to analyze data using descriptive statistics and Chi-square test.

Results: Among 535 undergraduates, 69.7% were females. Significant number of respondents (91.2%) have used online learning for the first-time during lockdown. Majority of the respondents (83.9%) has used smart phones for attending sessions and 75.1% said that using WhatsApp was the best way to communicate class updates. Most of the respondents (60.7%) said they preferred to use a mobile data pack as the source of the internet. Majority of respondents (51.4%) had good perception towards online learning. Students in the University of Visual and Performing Arts (75%), University of Kelaniya (69.2%), and University of Moratuwa (56.7%) have a good perception towards online learning. Students at the University of Sri Jayewardenepura (63.4%) and University of Colombo (51.4%) have poor perceptions towards online learning. The present study found that there is a significant relationship between University and students' perception on online learning ($p < 0.05$). Results of the study indicate that more comfortable environment (80.1%) was ranked as the major benefit. Data speed (75.8%) was identified as the main bottleneck factor in online learning. The student readiness (84.6%) was the major determinant for smooth conduct of online classes. Many participants (78.1%) in this research study reported that technological constraints were the main challenge in their online learning experience.

Conclusions: Majority of the students evinced a positive attitude towards online classes in the wake of Covid-19. The online learning was found to be advantageous as it provided more comfortable environment for the learners. Students preferred to use smart phones for attending sessions, which clearly suggests that if any organization which wants to develop an application for the online learning, it has to ensure that the platform is compatible with smartphones. The findings highlighted that Sri Lanka wants to move towards online education and internet facilities as a pre-requisite. The online classes will succeed only if all the students have access to internet.

Keywords: Covid-19, Online education, Perception, Preference