HIGHER SECONDARY EDUCATION
IN THE WAKE OF A PANDEMIC

ISSUES FACED BY STUDENTS IN KERALA

an All India Students' Association Document

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Study Conducted by

All India Students' Association

Kerala - July 2021

Questions of Concern

➢ How has the transition from offline to online mode of education affected the higher secondary students?

➢ Consequences of covering Plus One syllabus through unscientific study plans

➢ What are the measures taken to manage the digital-divide, and how much of it is resolved?

➢ Health issues faced by Plus One students due to online mode of education.

➢ Does the Plus-One final year examination really necessary?

BACKGROUND

Kerala state unit of All India Students' Association (AISA) started to study the issues related to the school syllabus in the time of Covid-19 pandemic as early as March, 2021 when a number of students reached out to us about the rising stress levels and other difficulties in studying associated with online / digital education. The concerns raised to us back then was primarily about the lack of quality of digital classes as it hardly followed any interactive learning methods. Further, a few of them were concerned of the burden of pre-pandemic academic syllabus being imposed in pandemic period conditions.

A report released by *Kerala Shastra Sahitya Parishad* had made several critical observations about the Victors channel based techno-pedagogic solutions adopted by the Kerala government after Lockdown was imposed. The report itself assessed that around 40 percent of students are not able to effectively participate in online classes due to various reasons. These include the unavailability of mobile phones, laptops or other necessary equipment and poor internet connectivity.

In a response by the Minister of Education in the state legislative assembly during an adjournment motion held on 3 June 2021, this data was not accepted while maintaining that the number of children who were outside the digital coverage in 2020 was only 2.5 lakh which has been reduced to 49000 later.

However, this assessment is problematic for two reasons. By the admission of the Education Minister V. Shivankutti, this assessment of digital divide in 2021 being just about 49000 students is itself not based on adequate government data. Education minister explained how region-wise data on students who lack digital equipment or internet connection can be explored through school level committees which consists of alumni, Parent Teacher Associations (PTA), local self-government representatives and Kudumbashree members. But any such data collection is yet to happen. In such a scenario, he has opted to rely on a past study conducted by the *Kerala Shasthra Sahithya Parishad* (KSSP) itself which relies on sampling-based research methodology. It raises concerns that a new report which showed that almost 40 percent of students are not able to participate in the digital classes has not been adequately acknowledged.

The minister, however, maintained that the lack of internet connectivity and lack of availability of digital tools will be resolved soon. But the exact data on how much has been already done to materialise this was not provided.

While this debate was ongoing, All India Students' Association started receiving correspondence from students from different parts of the state seeking-out intervention for the cancellation of Plus One examination that was scheduled for September 2021 by the board of Higher Secondary Education (HSE) Kerala. A *prima facie* enquiry revealed to us that the issue of digital divide and the inefficacy of the techno-pedagogies were more severe than what the state government had acknowledged. As more and more students started reaching out to us, AISA decided to further go into the issue by investigating it on school level. This report is an outcome of that investigation.

CONTENTS

A WORD ABOUT THIS STUDY

AISA has picked its 11 school units for conducting this study. Schools were decided based on the outreach of students and are spread across in 7 districts of Kerala. All schools are Government schools. The following are the list of schools we studied.

1. Dr. AGHSS Kodoth, Kasargod

2. GHSS Attenganam, Kasaragod

3. RGM HSS Mokeri, Panoor, Kannur

4. GHSS Tharuvana, Wayanad

5. GVHSS Mananthavady, Wayanad

6. GHSS Feroke, Kozhikode

7. UHHSS Chaliyam, Kozhikode

8. GRFT HSS Fisheries Tanur, Malappuram

9. SNM HSS Parappanangadi, Malappuram

10. SMM HSS Rayirimangalam, Malappuram

11. SNDP HSS Pallissery, Thrissur

After talking to the students in these schools, our team tried to make the sample size larger through snowball method. This was extremely difficult due to the fact that most of the students did not know their own classmates for the schools had not conducted any 'ice breaking' orientation events online or offline. After making possible-enough contacts, *Google Meet* sessions were organised with the student community in these schools. At various times, more than one such sessions were conducted and extensive interviews were taken. The Questionnaire used for data collection is attached as annexure in the end of this report. In each meeting, an average of 20 percent of the school students were participated. This was further expanded by distributing the drafts of reports of each interview sessions within school level WhatsApp groups for 11th Standard (Plus One) students. Coordinators were assigned to make contact with students from schools who did not participate in the sessions, face other difficulties and their observations were further added into the report after individual consultations.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

(i)   BREAKDOWN OF INTERACTIVE LEARNING IN ONLINE MODE OF EDUCATION

During the Adjournment motion presented in the Kerala Legislative Assembly on 03-06-2021, Education Minister V. Shivankutti acknowledged that the social consequences faced by students due to lack of Interaction between teachers and students was noted in a study conducted by Education department. However, no further details regarding the same was provided. We couldn't find it in the education department website either. An official from Education department on the condition of anonymity informed that the report was not released in public domain and that it was meant only for Internal circulation. However, this issue is of high importance.

The batch of +1 students who will be writing examination in September has never attended offline classes due to the ongoing covid Pandemic. The shift from offline to online education has come with a number of problems for students which has not been addressed properly since the Pandemic began. Students from a large number of schools have expressed sharp drop in learning outcomes due to online education. Everywhere we have engaged, the desperation in this matter is clear.

A student from UHHSS Chaliyam who has one of the highest past academic record from their school and who had been actively participated in online classes since the beginning told the AISA team that there is a complete breakdown of Interactive learning under the online mode. The teacher would rush through the classes and read out aloud the content of the book with unsatisfactory explanation of the concepts. In RGM HSS Mokeri, Panoor, Kannur, students explained how the breakdown of Interactive learning has particularly affected subjects like Math which was taught to them primarily through Victers channel, WhatsApp voice messages and YouTube videos.

Except in SNDP HSS Pallissery, Thrissur where *Google Meet* sessions are regularly conducted, in every other school, *Google Meet* sessions were conducted sparingly and a majority of portions were covered through watsapp messages.

In SNM HSS Parappanangadi in Malappuram, students from Malayalam medium background are struggling with the new curriculum which is taught in English. A new language cannot be perfected without nuanced academic Interaction. The lack of any kind of academic interaction has left the students of Malayalam medium background particularly vulnerable to the online education.

They are forced to take matters into their own hands and read for themselves from the materials on which they have no prior academic grounding in languages that they are not exposes to in the past.

Considering that Malayalam medium schools are established by government policy, isn't the responsibility of this new form of exclusion on the government itself, where the students find themselves transplanted into a new academic terrain with no active guidance?

The fall in learning outcomes disproportionately affects deprived, marginalised and vulnerable social sections. A sharp contradiction is forming between the various classes of students. Students from Dalit, Adivasi backgrounds are severely hit by the current structure of digital education. Students having ADHD, neurodivergence and other mental health issues are highly vulnerable to the difficulties of Online education. Children who belong to households with a single digital tool and households with multiple siblings with inadequate digital tools have been made particularly vulnerable in this regard. Students who have no social capital, with no college educated parents, with no academic background in English are further made vulnerable due to this drop in learning outcomes.

(ii)   DECLINE IN PRODUCTIVE ATTENDANCE

In all schools except GHSS Feroke, Kozhikode and RGM HSS Mokeri, Panoor, Kannur class attendance in the other schools was never above 50 percentage.

While the Kerala Shastra Sahitya parishad report showed that around 40 percent did not attend the classes regularly and effectively, the numbers that we received was further low.

In GHSS Attenganam, Kasaragod, only 25 people in a classroom of 60 attended class regularly. In SMM HSS Parappanangadi, Malappuram, an average of 15 students out of its 60 students

attend the class. Similarly, in UHHSS Chaliyam, Kozhikode, students estimate that less than 3-5 people are active in a class of 60 when Google Meet classes are conducted. While the attendance itself is abysmally low (around 10 students) a majority of those who attend do so solely for attendance.

In most schools, teachers forwarded the attendance report to a PTA WhatsApp group directly to parents. In RGM HSS Mokeri, Panoor in Kannur District, teachers occasionally conducted Motivation classes to encourage the students to be inside the loop and not drop out. The motivation classes were found to be somewhat helpful to the students who were active on classes to keep faith and carry on. However, this does barely anything for students who are already excluded.

In most schools, PTA meeting that review the activity and attendance of students was conducted once at the beginning of the academic year. And no follow up PTA meetings were conducted. In most schools, teachers followed up with parents over phone. But it was noted that it was done mostly in proportion to the classroom participation of the students. Consequently, a well performing student who come from a family with relatively comfortable socio-economic background is likely to get more follow ups. Stakeholder consultation involving Parents-Teachers- Students are likely to be stronger there

This benefit students from families with parents who are college graduates themselves, or are in relative economic stability and are in a better position to influence and guide the student.

Whereas families who experience socio-economic marginalisation is likely to be unable to guide the children in their education. This adversely affects families of poor, socio-economically marginalised, working class sections who do not get adequate inclusion from the school. In UHHSS Chaliyam, GRFT HSS Fisheries Tanur, Malappuram and SMM HSS Parappanangadi, Malappuram, students from working class families and students who themselves go to work spoke extensively about the issues they face along the same line.

In such cases, families are not able to provide basic digital equipment and Internet connectivity. In families with one digital equipment or in families with one digital equipment with more than one school going siblings, the students cannot practically access classes. In a number of

schools, students informed us that various students' helped parents with household work and worked for livelihood. While the household work affected girl students, work for livelihood mostly affected boys.

In these social sections, it wouldn't matter whether or not PTA meetings are conducted regularly. What should be done in this situation is the timely government Intervention for bridging the digital divide and strengthening social security of marginalised families.

In Schools like RGM HSS Mokeri, GHSS Feroke with good attendance, teachers regularly followed up with parents and students on the issue of attendance. Regular PTA meetings were conducted. It is to be noted that most of the students in these two schools has access to basic digital infrastructure even though they frequently face Internet connectivity issues and lack of storage capacity.

This is not to say that attendance equals classroom learning quality. Even in the schools with relatively high attendance, a significant portion of students attended classes without reaching a satisfactory learning output. This can be said for both RGM HSS Mokeri and GHSS Feroke where a good number of students admit that their attendance does not translate into the desired learning outcomes.

   (iii)   CONSEQUENCES OF COVERING PLUS ONE SYLLABUS THROUGH UNSCIENTIFIC
            STUDY PLANS

It was in the end of June that AISA had started its school level study. The focus area for plus one exam was already released in the beginning of June, 2021. In most schools, the period after releasing focus area is marked by utter chaos and Academic mismanagement.

A student in SMM HSS Rayirimangalam, Malappuram pointed out that after the release of focus area, the teachers started to rush the syllabus for timely completion before the Board examination. In this school, teachers of various subjects have started to engage in a disturbing trend of covering merely those parts of the chapters which features in the focus area. And it is seen that focus area is often concentrated in the final pages of each chapter which is heavy in concepts. As many students pointed out, how can they understand the subject if the basics of a chapter is not covered?

Various other schools expressed their concern on how teachers structured their teaching plan to simply cover the focus area. This has led to an unscientific teaching plan whereby the teachers left out the basics and fundamentals of a chapter altogether as it wouldn't get featured in the exam anyway.

This is accompanied by mandatory CE marks implementation for which class notes have to be taken down by students.

With the exception of GHSS Feroke, Kozhikode where classes began in a relatively systematic manner months before the focus area was released, teachers of all other schools follow the former strategy of squeezing Academic activity worth 10 months into less than 6-7 months. This include not only learning, but also taking down notes and writing school level exams.

A huge percentage of portions remains to be covered in these schools. And a huge quantity of academic activity is overdue. This will be concentrated into rushed-up and erratic study plans for the students in the coming months, stopping short just before the exam in September.

A student from UHHSS Chaliyam, Kozhikode remarked that 99 percent of their classmates will fail in the upcoming examination. And everyone readily agreed.

It is however to be noted that the teachers have been reported to have a positive attitude and are helpful when doubts are asked. In *Kerala Shashtra Sahitya Parishad* report, it was noted that only 23 percent of the students sought help after preliminary classes were held in Victers channel and WhatsApp groups. However, an overwhelming majority of students in these schools categorically maintain that without allotting adequate time for covering the syllabus and without increased engagement and Interaction, the positive attitude of teachers has barely any effect on the learning outcomes of the students.

A student who was struggling with their transition from Malayalam medium to English syllabus in SNM HSS Parappanangadi put it rather eloquently;

"To ask a doubt, one must have a basic idea as to what they are going to question. Without it, my question will inevitably be to request that the teacher explain again, whatever they just taught. To which the teacher simply paraphrases whatever they have read out previously.

Naturally, I would ask again, this time with a hint of helplessness. And this cycle continues until one of us is tired and decide to defer or my network coverage fails or my Internet data has expired. I am simply back to square one."

There is an implosion of stress and fall in learning quality of students associated with this study plan. The same student would later reveal to the Interviewers in confidence that his friend had attempted suicide after being unable to cope with this stress.

(iv)   PLUS 2 CLASSES HAVE BEGUN WHILE PLUS 1 IS ONGOING

Shortly after the focus area was declared, a number of schools began plus 2 classes alongside Plus one classes. Even after the plus one examination exam was declared, the plus two classes are ongoing. The students are expected to prepare for an already unfair plus one exam while preparing the Notes and assignments for plus two. Preparing notes is essential for CE marks. And when Plus one classes and plus two classes are held in tandem, a student is pushed to a position where they have to prepare weeks' worth of written materials in a few days. This is bound to increase the stress of students.

Thus, an Ironic situation has reached, where by focusing on plus one examination, the students will have to ignore the Plus two classes until September, thereby starting their plus two with an inherent Academic disadvantage. This is true for almost every school in which we undertook study.

(v)   DIGITAL DIVIDE

It is no doubt that in, Kerala digital inclusion has been far better than the other states. The state has made committed efforts to expand basic digital facilities. However, a lot of their claims do not hold firm in ground reality.

The KSSP report had estimated around 40 percent of students are affected by digital divide in some manner. In a response given by the state government in the legislative assembly during an Adjournment motion held on 3 June, 2021, the state government did not accept this data and maintained that the number of children who were outside the digital divide' in 2020 was 2.5 lakh which has been reduced to 49000.

As we had detailed in the beginning of this report, this was a problematic calculation for a number of reasons.

As far as the schools we studied are concerned, large number of students continue to face crippling range issues on the ground. Range issues and lack of equipments and its consequences were cited as the main reason behind the low attendance of the schools we studied.

In every school we studied, digital divide persists along class, regional, socio-economic, caste and gender lines.

For example, in SNDP HSS Pallissery, Annamanada, Thrissur, there is a fair mix of middle class, upper-middle class and marginalised social sections among their student community. While a majority of students have range related issue, marginalised sections face the additional weight of Digital divide. There are students who do not have their own phone or any other digital equipment and have to rely on that of the parents. In this school, a student joked that he and his friends had adequate Internet connection that he could even play online games with heavy data consumption during classes if he wished to do so. When asked about his socio-economic background, it became clear that there is a stark class divide among the students who attended this school. This class divide existed in a good number of schools where we conducted our study where a visible minority suffered no significant digital divide.

In GRFT HSS Fisheries and UHHSS Chaliyam, there both students with comfortable socio-economic background who could access digital tools whereas students from working class families who lived in socio-economic marginalisation who had barely any access to digital infrastructure. In GHSS Attenganam, Kasaragod, a student explained that he attended classes while helping his father in their small grocery shop and had to study while attending to customers. In GHSS Tharuvana, Wayanad, a majority of students simply did not have reliable Internet connectivity and had to wait diligently throughout the day for Internet so that they can access classes and materials and link shared in Whatsapp groups as and when the connectivity comes.

A common theme among students at the receiving end of digital divide is that they do not have enough data capacity. That they have the capacity to download only limited quantity which dries up by noon or evening. This is a problem for most students who are not able to download all the materials that teachers share in WhatsApp.

Among the materials, teachers of various subjects share lengthy audio materials everyday through WhatsApp voice messages which consumes a large quantity of data.

The teachers themselves regularly delete the data in their mobile devices to make space for new materials. As a result, the material is already gone by the time the students try to download data the next day.

Further, the nature in which the state government defines digital divide is also a problem. In the sense that for now, they consider bridging the digital divide as making digital tools and digital infrastructure available for everyone. However, digital divide is a bigger problem.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development defined digital divide as the

"The gap between individuals, households, businesses and geographic areas at different socioeconomic levels with regard both to their opportunities to access ICTs and to their use of the Internet for a wide variety of activities"

On an overall sense, this means that the issue of digital divide should not be looked at simply from the point of view of whether the individuals have access to an equipment. It should also contain the ability of an individual and their socio-economic group to effectively utilise digital resources and tools for their upliftment. Dalit students, Adivasi students and girl students belonging to marginalised identities who have responded to our study were seen to use digital resources only for its most basic functions. This include downloading the material sent by teachers and reading them and responding to it.

Whereas children belonging to privileged class- caste sections with social capital and educated parents used digital resource for a wider range of learning functions.

- Finding new apps for helping them with learning. Apps like teach mints were used by students when the teachers adequately guided them towards these resources.

- Making digital schedules. The skill required for making digital schedules were totally in marginalised sections, who could at best use phones for basic functions.

- Having the skill to use digital dictionaries and browsing features to its full potential etc.

This shows that to bridge digital divide, it is not enough to create digital infrastructure that will plug children into Internet.

The responsibility of government will extend to:

- Maintaining a robust digital infrastructure that reaches to everyone

- Creating digital learning tools and resources that consolidate educational resources and best learning practices and strategies in platforms that every child can easily access navigate.

- Kite, Victers channel is one such example which made learning resources available for everyone, but is extremely inadequate in fostering Interactive learning and for raising the quality of classroom learning.

- Equip, train and skill children for using digital tools and resources to its full potential.

(vi)   HEALTH ISSUES

A vast majority of students who participated in the study faces health issues due to the online education. Almost everybody experiences headache, increased exhaustion, backpain and numbness.

A few students have developed eye sight related issue due to the optical strain associated with watching the screen for online education.

Further, students have reported mental health issues like depression, self-harm and dysfunction. Students who reported these health issues point out that these issues either came into existence after the beginning of online classes and particularly after the focus area was decided after which school activities started getting more and more stressful.

A number of students have responded that both them and their classmates would need help with mental health and other physical health related issues once the exam is finished.

In our observation, this is disturbing. We feel that the health issues faced by students is not isolated, but a widespread one. A wider study has to be conducted to adequately assess its extent and steps will have to be taken immediately to assuage the stress and mental strain of the students.

    (vii)   MISCELLANEOUS

In addition to the above-mentioned issues, a host of other issues were also noted which we provide herein.

- Textbooks has only been partially delivered and the rest is given in PDF format.
- Lack of consistent and permanent teaching staff in various schools: In some schools like GHSS Tharuvana, Wayanad, permanent teachers were appointed late. This issue is spread across over a number of schools where a number of subjects have no permanent teachers at a time when the role of teachers and individual attention are crucial. In some schools, a subject is taught by two teachers. The difference in style and pace of teaching causes dissonance in students.
- Improvement examination has been scrapped which offers significant challenge to students from marginalised backgrounds who, by virtue of all reasons discussed above is in an extremely precarious position.
- At the time of preparing this report, Grace marks was rescinded which has affected a number of students. NSS students specifically had been active with extra-curricular, social work for which they are entitled to their grace marks.
- Plus One students are below 18 years and are not included in the vaccination efforts. With covid pandemic still looming large and new variants being reported, students are concerned about the dangers of writing examination. The concerns associated with it needs to be adequately addressed.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Plus One Exam should be cancelled immediately and be replaced with a school wise assessment exam be devised and students be evaluated on that basis. The marks of this internal assessment should not affect the board examination marks.

   Failing at this, the government should consider a combination of alternate steps such as giving minimum guaranteed pass mark for students and cutting down of syllabus for students to study for examination along with liberal valuation.

2. Holding of +2 classes simultaneously while +1 classes and exams are yet to be completed, is a cause of concern for students already burdened with online education. Plus 2 classes for the plus one students should be stopped and the focus of teachers should be brought towards completing the Plus one syllabus.

   Alternatives to ease the pressure and find a suitable way out should be designed, so that students are not burdened with studying both class syllabus at same time.

3. Conduct a detailed and school wise study on how the shift to online education has affected the learning outputs. The study should reflect the challenges faced by various marginalised social groups and should account for how various layers of social-economic deprivation has affected the learning outputs of children. It should also adequately assess digital divide between various strata of our society and should make adequate changes to the syllabus, teaching methods and education system based on this study.

4. Resolve the equipment and internet connectivity issues faced by students of all region, social strata, gender, class and caste locations

5. Creating digital learning tools and resources that consolidate educational resources and best learning practices and strategies in platforms that every child can easily access navigate.

Kite Victers channel is one such example which made learning resources available for everyone, but is extremely inadequate in fostering Interactive learning and for raising the quality of classroom learning. Equip, train and skill children for using digital tools and resources to its full potential

CONCLUSION

An entire year has passed since covid pandemic has hit us. Yet, no detailed study has been conducted which is available in the public domain which assess the impact of the online education on students. And the impact of online education among various social groups. This should have been undertaken for the past one year and concrete changes should have been made to the syllabus, teaching plan and methods of education.

Not having done this is a failure of public policy and adequate steps needs to be taken to address it adequately.

It can be positively said that conducting plus one examination when the above issues have not been satisfactorily resolved will contribute to further marginalisation and exclusion of socio-economically deprived children from education system.

It is wholly unnecessary at this point of time when CBSE, ICSE and even state boards of various states itself have given significant concessions to students.

While Kerala has made notable strides in digital inclusion, fundamental issues that concern children with regard to the plus one education remain which has not been resolved equitably. AISA request the government to pay heed to the issue that we have raised and take necessary action to resolve the issues of students.

REFERENCES

Kerala Shasthra Sahithya Parishath. 2020. *Digital Class Oru Padanam*. KSSP: Oct 2020

Kerala Legislative Assembly. 2021. *Adjournment Motion (9.00am – 9.36am)*. 03-06-2021

ANNEXURE

QUESTIONNAIRE

<u>Declaration</u>

Dear Respondent, this questionnaire intent to study the challenges faced by Plus One students due to the online/digital mode of education carried out in the schools of Kerala on the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. Please respond to the questions freely and correct to your knowledge. This questionnaire does not collect any personal data of the respondents and nor would it share the inputs with a third party.

1. Do you understand the subjects taught in the class? If not, please explain why.
2. What is the attitude of teachers in giving you academic support and clearing doubts?
3. On an average. how many students participate in your online classes?
4. What is the reason behind your absence from the online classes?
5. How much portions are covered through Google Meet / Victers TV / WhatsApp group materials?
6. Are these classes interactive?
7. If the classes were held in Google Meet, would you have been interested to participate further?
8. Do you experience Internet connectivity issues? If yes, what kind of issues and how often?
9. Have you received textbooks? if no, what has the school done so far to provide you with it.
10. Do you experience any particular difficulty in your transition from Malayalam to English medium?
11. Does your school conduct plus one and plus two classes simultaneously? If yes, since when and what are its consequences on your learning?
12. Do you have physical and mental health issues associated with the online classes?

13. When did your classes began? How has the release of focus area affected your classes?

14. Are you familiar with your classmates / batchmates? How often would you interact with any of them?

15. Do you have a fixed time table?

16. How often do you have PTA meetings in your school?

17. How much hours of class do the school schedule for a day?

18. How has online education effected your learning outputs?

19. How has the cancellation of grace marks affected you?

20. Do you have shortage of digital equipment?

21. Do your school have covid cases?

GENERAL QUESTIONS FOR INTERNAL CIRCULATION AMONG SCHOOL STUDENTS

A. Do you work and earn along with your studies?

B. Does your family experience economic hardships due to the pandemic and how has it affected your online education?

C. What are the additional issues that you face? Please explain in detail.