

Case Study: The Potential Socio-Economic Impacts of Covid-19 on the Mauritian Educational System

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Abstract

In order to curtail the spread of the virus and to prevent the health system from collapsing under the pressure of an increase in the number of cases of the virus, the only solution is to prevent any form of human interaction and to maintain laws pertaining to social distancing; therefore, confinement was identified as being the surest method even if it entailed the disruption of the economy and the landscape of learning. This paper analyses the socio-economic impact of Covid-19 on the Mauritian Educational system. The recognition that there should be some form of educational continuity led to the emergence of online courses for students, including the broadcast of lessons on television. Nevertheless, the study shows that the methods employed widens the gap between the haves and have not and it is a luxury for well-off and educated parents to shape the educational paths of their children through the means and platforms to which they have access as compared to parents from the lower social background who may neither have the knowledge nor the means to educate their children successfully. Given also that the government is spending massively in the educational system of Mauritius, any budget cuts may have a significant impact on the quality of education, further disadvantaging the lower social class students, pushing them to the margins of society and, further entrapping them in poverty.

Keywords: Socio-economic impacts, Covid-19, Educational system

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I. Introduction

The outbreak of the Corona Virus in the Chinese city of Wuhan was identified as a major cause of concern, only when a sharp rise in the number of deaths was observed. As China deployed medical regime to treat the high number of exponential cases being detected each day, yet it failed to contain the virus within the provinces of Wuhan and the outbreak was soon considered to be a global pandemic when within the period of a few months, countries around the world all stood for a common cause: to fight the virus and to curb its growth in the midst of extensive human trials of vaccines at breakneck speed. The health systems of all affected countries are being challenged, and while the virus is crippling and paralyzing the economy of many countries, forecasting a recession-like situation, major disruptions were also observed in the daily life of individuals, especially those of students.

At the time of writing, according to UNESCO, statistics with reference to education were as follows:

- **1,058,547,236** of affected learners
- **60.5%** of total enrolled learners
- **105** country-wide closures

The educational system, alongside the health system, was immediately struck by the identification of 3 first local cases of the virus and an immediate lockdown was ordered by the Mauritian Government on the 20th March 2020, as the number of hosts of the virus was expected to climb quickly in paradise island. In fact, Mauritius is one of the few countries which provides free education to its citizens from pre-primary to tertiary level; and for the Financial year 2019/2020 alone, Rs 19,013 million which represent 10.6% of total government expenditure has been allocated to education and training (Statistics Mauritius, 2019), excluding the expenses borne by the government to provide free transportation services to students to commute from home to school and back in an attempt to stimulate a high number of entries in the educational system.

As students of primary and secondary levels were preparing themselves for their first term exams and students at the tertiary level in public universities for their second-semester exams, a state of emergency was declared, followed by a total lockdown, causing significant disruption in the conventional school terms and examinations. The prime focus was to equip medical staffs with the necessary amenities to help fight the virus and to prevent the health system from collapsing under the pressure of an exponentially growing number of cases; the educational system was therefore treated as a secondary concern. Lessons were broadcasted on TV

and online platforms were created to counteract any forms of disorganization in the academic milieu; discontinuation would affect the educational attainment of students and would substantially widen the gap between students from lower social backgrounds and higher social backgrounds. Continuous assessments, assessments in lieu of exams, and even exams were shifted online. The Government had to act promptly in a situation reckoned as ‘race against time’ and quick fixes were sought as temporary relief. However, even if on a transient basis, these instantaneous fixes evidenced to causing long term damages, especially to marginalised students as well as students with learning difficulties.

Therefore, the identified quick fixes may act as stumbling blocks to the government’s attempt to maximize the number of students in higher education given that while a majority of students may have access to the internet, a minority of them, especially those facing the predicaments of relative and extreme poverty may lag behind due to inaccessibility to online educational platforms, the internet and in some cases, television. The Priority Education Zones (ZEP) in Mauritius are expected to be the most affected as a result of the pandemic and the protracted period of confinement. Also, a high number of dropouts, academic failures, and wastage of public funds is anticipated to eventuate in the near future. Students from poor localities are presumed to be deprived of all social engagement, warm meals, pedagogical innovations, and assistance, and obliterated from the novel educational mechanisms put in place by the government during the confinement period. Consequently, this paper seeks to provide an analysis of the socio-economic impacts of Covid-19 on the educational system in Mauritius.

II. Review of Literature

Dawadi, Giri and Simkhada (2020) state that it is primordial to understand the differences that exist between the ‘normalised’ education provided to students within the school compound and the newly developed socially/physically distanced education. The former has been identified as being community divorced, as compared to the later which is termed as community embedded (Mahboob 2020). The understanding of such differences helps to lay down the basis in understanding the impacts of school closures and technolised education which becomes the resultant effect of closure of schools.

2.1 Further impoverishment

Writers studying the socio-economic impacts of the global pandemic have substantially highlighted the aggressive health policies adopted by many countries throughout the world, and the channelization of resources to meticulously reduce the number of infected cases. Other writers have been more concerned about the emerging occurrences of poverty, translated into a lack of basic capacity to participate in society in an effective way and living in marginalised and fragile environments (Buheji et al, 2020). Students deprived of the basic minimum requirements for survival and life necessities may consider dropping out of school given the amplification of challenges that they will be facing due to the pandemic: the combat extends to acquiring the basic materials deemed necessary for schooling, to commute from home to school and back and warm meals and nutrition to prevent impaired growth.

Students, therefore, become further entrapped into a vicious circle of poverty. In a highly modernised context where education is considered as a fundamental right and as a means to escape poverty, a lack of education or disruptions in the educational system may further encumber the challenge of coming out of an impoverished situation. Furthermore, OECD (2020) also points out to the relationship between loss of income and demographics, as single parents, less educated individuals with children and female-headed households may be more vulnerable when it comes to assisting children during their education at home. Obiakor and Adeniran (2020), point out to how Nigeria’s educational crisis may further be accentuated by the Corona Virus pandemic and whether Nigeria’s educational system is adapting to the changing world remains largely questionable. The socio-economic impacts of the virus are foreseeable to be borne by students enrolled in publicly funded schools than privately-funded schools. The international community is much affiliated with privately funded schools and may assist those particular schools to take advantage of the myriad of ICT learning opportunities as compared to public schools which run on Government funds and therefore any change in the economy may result in drastic cuts in expenditures which are channelled towards publicly funded schools.

2.2 Physical and emotional well-being of students

UNESCO (2020) emphasizes on the socio-emotional imbalance that has been observed among individuals who were socially isolated during the confinement period, especially those students who were studying abroad and were away from their respective families due to airport and border closures. TUAC (2020) proposes a series of measures that need to be put in place to counteract the socio-economic effect of Covid-19 on students. According to the report, the emotional well-being and health needs of students should be prioritised.

2.3 e-Learning

It was widely recognised that by no means should the schooling of students come to a halt during the long period of lockdown imposed by Governments throughout the world. The traditional method of teaching is being switched to e-Learning. According to TUAC (2020), e-Learning entails the need for appropriate hardware, software, and high-speed internet connection. Moreover, the concept of e-Learning needs to be further refined and it also becomes imperative to resort to new ways of including effective interaction and communication during the process. Over 95% of students in Denmark, Slovenia, Norway, Poland, Lithuania, Iceland, Austria, Switzerland and the Netherlands have reported that they have access to a computer to work at home as compared to only 34% of students in Indonesia (OECD, 2020). Bao's study (2020) showcases how faculties have less control over students and the development of ability is largely restricted due to the passivity of online learning. Students are more likely to skip online classes and those with low levels of learning outside the classroom may further be penalized. They may even miss out on body language and facial expressions, and voice becomes the only sensory stimulator. Online learning, therefore, depends on a myriad of factors, including the online learning capacities of students, the delivery of courses, and the appropriate tools to enable an uninterrupted flow of academic teaching programmes.

Dawadi, Giri and Simkhada (2020) show how Nepal is deprived of e-learning and e-resources given that it is a relatively poor country. The consequences expected are an increase in the inequality gap between the haves and have not. The attainment of Sustainable Development Goal 4 which is "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote life-long learning opportunities for all, and Sustainable Development Goal 10 which goes as follows: Reduced Inequalities, to be achieved by signatory countries by 2030 seems to be more difficult to attain according to UNESCO (2020).

China and India have resorted to e-learning portals with India providing online classes in a myriad of languages given the ethnic diversity of the country. Flexible online teaching methodologies coupled with online security adopted by China "ensure learning is undisrupted when classes are disrupted" (Azzi-Huck & Shmis 2020). While technologically advanced countries have actually focused on improving their e-learning platforms to upraise the quality of education being provided to students, on the other hand, countries which find themselves at the bottom of the pyramid and without any adequate infrastructure are resorting to media platforms such as TVs and radios, for instance, Pakistan. Other countries, including Indonesia, Malaysia, Argentina, Chile and Brazil are combining traditional and new technologies for the effective delivery of lessons; the Latin American countries mentioned are congested with considerable pockets of poverty and it becomes important to ensure that the learning portals set up by the relevant authorities reach those parts of the countries.

2.4 Homeschooling

Mandated countrywide closure and even localized closure has affected at least 70% of students from the pre-primary to the upper secondary level (UNESCO). Drastic measures had to be taken to flatten the curve of the number of infected cases. The amplification of homeschooling, as the media would call it, was sought as the only appropriate learning method that would be in norms laid by states to prevent the further spread of the virus in addition to inhibiting any form of interruption in the schooling of students. However, according to the report, even if parents are in charge of supervising their children at home, nevertheless, teachers and schools remain the prime determinants of the educational success as well as the labour market outcome of students.

The report also points out to the learning difficulties faced by students when they are at home, particularly with respect to parent's assistance which not always be up to the required level in supporting the child for home-schooling. Parents, especially those employed at the frontline in combatting the virus may be taken up by their jobs during the crisis and therefore are not able to provide the necessary support to their children. Others, working from home may find themselves experiencing similar circumstances and therefore home schooling may be affected by the present labour market conditions. The OECD (2020) highlights how home-schooling may be ineffective: "*important factors include home educational resources, availability of space, parental level education, parents' fluency in language of school instruction, and parents' digital competencies, but also parents' engagement with schools. In general, children from low socio-economic households are at a disadvantage for continuing their study and learning at home*".

2.5 The services provided by schools beyond education

Obiakor and Adeniran (2020) further explain how students may lag behind on the essential school provided services other than education, especially in cases where the school cater for meals for students, particularly those from the poorest section, with the authors citing the World Food Programme which claim that in 2019, Nigeria's Homegrown Schools Feeding Initiative was actively involved in providing daily meals to over 9 million children in over 40 000 publicly funded schools. The benefits of providing meals to students do

not only act as a medium to eradicate poverty, but an impressive number of students may be withheld within the educational system for a longer period of time, decreasing the rate of dropout and equipping students with at least the basics of education in terms of literacy, numeracy and linguistic development.

The educational system of certain countries, including Mauritius also envelops the provision of basic health care to students and these range from frequent check-ups, including dental check-ups and vaccinations. Many countries of the African continent are also actively involved in providing deworming and immunization programs to students. A collapsing health system and educational system which is being compromised may neglect these certain health facilities which were being provided to students before the pandemic. The above-mentioned facilities enable families of students who are marginalised due to their socio-economic status to invest the money in other spheres in order to improve their quality of living; therefore, schools are portrayed as acting as safety nets.

2.6 The disturbances in the development of social skills and skill growth

Burgess and Sievertsen (2020) have highlighted how schools help to develop social skills and social awareness of individuals during a relatively short time spent at school. Skill growth may consequentially be affected even if students miss a relatively short period of schooling. Carlsson, Dahl, Öckert and Roothet (2015) initial study on Sweden backs up the claim of the above-mentioned authors whereby “an extra ten days of school instruction raises scores on crystallized intelligence tests (synonyms and technical comprehension tests) by approximately 1% of a standard deviation, whereas extra non-school days have almost no effect.” (p. 533). Dawadi, Giri and Simkhada (2020) therefore worry about the prolonged effect of the confinement period on students’ learning in Nepal.

2.7 Assessment of students

Dawadi (2018) explores the importance of assessment on students and the postponement of external exams may have considerable impacts on the educational and occupational future of students. Observations also point out to the disbalance that the pandemic creates in the future educational endeavours of students given that internal exams may come too late and students who want to study abroad may miss out on the academic year if the university they have chosen have already worked on the intake of students, as Dawadi, Giri and Simkhada (2020) argue, would be the case for Nepal. Buckler et al (2020) place focus on the increasing pressure that teachers will be facing once classes resume, where priority will be shifted to completing syllabuses instead of developing the social skills and abilities of students. This also implies that extra-curricular activities, which have been identified by a large body of literature to have a positive repercussion on students (Massoni, 2011; Buckley and Lee, 2018) will have to be forsaken to make time for completing courses. The emphasis is also placed on a fair outcome when it comes to assessments and exams. According to TUAC (2020), overall performance needs to be considered when it comes right down to assessing students for more equity.

2.8 Social mobility and social isolation

Nicola et al (2020) subsequently emphasize how social mobility is affected by the novel Corona Virus; some countries such as Germany and Italy had imposed complete closures, while on the other hand, targeted closure had been emphasized in the United Kingdom for all students, excluding those children whose parents are employed in the key industries. They also highlight how social mobility and social isolation have been the major consequences of the pandemic, increasing the childcare costs for families with younger children.

2.9 Research Community

The tertiary educational sector too has considerably been touched by the pandemic. The postgraduate research community is increasingly diverting its resources to studying topics related to the Covid-19 pandemic thereby placing non-Covid research work on hold. Clinically trained staff in the United Kingdom have reportedly been placed at the frontline in battling the virus by the national funding body for health research, neglecting all research pertaining to the wide array of problems that necessitated immediate solution with the ultimate outcome being the closure of all laboratories found within the faculty of Arts and Sciences at the Oxford University. The dissemination of research work too has been put on hold given the large number of scientific conferences that had to be cancelled or postponed. The provision of networking opportunities as well as job-seeking opportunities had to be forsaken and is not promising in virtual online conferences.

2.10 Students as victims of domestic violence

Radwan and Radwan, (2020) analyse the impact of school closure on children, pointing to the surge in the number of cases of domestic violence that may increase in intensity and frequency. The World Health Organization stated that with women and children being the principal victims of domestic violence, it may become difficult for them to cope with additional stress and potential economic conflict.

2.11 School Dropout

According to the Western Balkans Regular Economic Report (2020), the pandemic will cause the faltering of economic gains, as well as a significant decline or standstill in human capital growth will be observed. Functional illiteracy and potential dropouts have further been projected. The consequences of staggered and partial school reopenings will further highlight the localized disruptions already being observed. Dropout rates will more likely be observed among students nearing educational transition points. Students who struggle academically or have personal conflicts at home may fear not being able to catch up intellectually and giving up will be an immediate option. As a rise in school fees may be noted, severe cuts in income and unemployment may make it more difficult for struggling households to settle those fees. From a gendered perspective, girls are projected to be more affected given that they will be pulled towards care-related work and a certain level of disengagement from schooling may be observed. However, in more traditional societies, where men are expected to be breadwinners, the pressure to earn an income to sustain the family may force boys to drop out of school earlier than expected or permanently, to fulfil their roles as breadwinners.

2.12 Disruption in the demand and supply mechanism of the job market

Considerable disruptions in the functioning of Higher Education Institutions are being observed all around the world according to UNESCO (2020), both in terms of their inability to maintain their activities related to academy as well as their financial sustainability. Furthermore, UNESCO is predicting a sharp spike in the number of school enrolments in the next academic year, following a decline in demand in the short term during the initial stages. The phenomenon of the 2008 financial crisis is expected to be repeating itself with major cuts to be observed in public investments in education and the definitive closure of institutions of higher education that are not able to maintain their financial sustainability. UNESCO further adds that unemployment will be worse than the years 2008-2009 and that graduates will be suffering long bouts of unemployment and a significant decline in income (Sanz, Sáinz, &Capilla, 2020) while the recovery time is not yet known.

III. Methodology

3.1 The Integrative Review Method-An Introduction

The Integrative Review method is widely exploited in evidence-based practice. This particular method distils into the development of new theories and usually brings a systematic method ensuring “the required rigour scientific research” (Crossetti, 2012). The writing of literature reviews satisfies several goals (Torraco, 2016). The Integrative Review method involves retrieving the necessary information pertaining to the phenomenon under study through a meticulous focus on systematic literature reviews and the production of critical summaries of studies related to the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on the educational system. General conclusions about the research problem can be drawn and the response to specific questions is found, at the same time, producing an assessment of the knowledge that has already been generated. Broome (1993) saw the Integrative Review method as providing a past summary of empirical or theoretical literature, resulting in a more comprehensive understanding of a particular problem. As the state of the Science is well presented through the Integrative Review method, results can be directly applied to practice and policy after the development of theories.

According to Annual Reviews (2016), literature reviews have been identified as being the type of research article that is mostly cited by scholars across many disciplinary fields. Furthermore, Torraco (2016) argues that there are five main reasons why literature reviews have gained so much importance in the academic world and these are because of (a) to review, update, and critique the literature, (b) to conduct meta-analysis of the literature, (c) to review, critique and synthesize the literature, (d) to reconceptualize the topic reviewed in the literature, and (e) to answer specific research questions about the topic reviewed in the literature.

The Integrative Review Method is seen to be the most appropriate research method in this case given the constraints that have been imposed as sanitary measures to prevent a second wave of the outbreak in Mauritius, and therefore, the consideration of other methods is largely left questionable. The need for this approach arises given that covid-19 pandemic is well present in the society and is a recent phenomenon in addition to being an emerging new topic; therefore, there is practically no literature on the impacts of the disease in the Mauritian context.

3.2 Problem identification stage

The first stage involves identifying the problem. Educational systems throughout the world have encountered major upheavals due to the covid-19 pandemic and Mauritius has not been spared even if the disease was introduced into the country by the end of March, nearly four months after the first outbreak was reported. Given that Mauritius does not have any natural resources and is aiming to transit to a knowledge economy, considerable focus is placed on the education of individuals. The immediate lockdown translated into

major disruptions in the education of students of the island. Therefore, the main query of the study remains: “What are the socio-economic impacts of Covid-19 on the educational system in Mauritius?”

3.3 Designing a strategic research

Data was collected from articles that dealt specifically with the socio-economic impact of Covid-19 on the educational system. The documents published by OECD and UNESCO proved to be helpful given the wide array of information made available as per studies and observations carried out throughout the world. Studies that did not meet the objectives set were excluded.

The literature was then extracted and was made adaptable to the Mauritian context. The data extracted was assessed and any links to or similarities to the Mauritian context were considered. However, given that all the information published was of the personal opinion of authors, there was no means of assessing the validity of those studies.

IV. Findings and Analysis

4.1 Disruption in the academic year

Given the imposed lockdown which took effect as from Friday 20th March in Mauritius, significant disruptions were already observed when the decisions taken by the Government reflected uncertainty with regards to the diffusion of educational courses online and on television, the postponement of examinations, the breaking down of long-established school terms and the reopening of schools. The gradual deconfinement led to the opening of schools in the first week of July; therefore, students were away from school premises for nearly 4 months. As a result of the pandemic, exams were cancelled or postponed, and new school terms were scheduled for students.

Students do not have the same recess time at school post the deconfinement. The peer group and the educational system as important socialization agencies are trivialized. Students locked during the confinement may be distanced from their peers for longer periods of time and the educational system may be more inclined towards completing syllabuses rather than acting as a secondary agent of socialization. The delivery of lessons becomes therefore questionable.

4.1.1 Assessment of students

The postponement or cancellation of assessments and exams implies that there is no proper system of assessment which projects an idea on the present educational status of children. The School Certificate and Higher School Certificate exams under the aegis of Cambridge Assessment International Examination have been postponed for the year 2021. No attempt was made on the part of the Government to bridge the growing inequality between students from the higher socio-economic background and those from the lower socio-economic background as quick fixes were sought even if the pandemic was foreseeably seen coming and that the borders were not closed on time; therefore no necessary precautions were taken as control measures at the harbour and the airport for the effective screening of the virus.

4.2 Unemployment, underemployment and labour market outcome

According to the Labour Force, Employment and Unemployment (Based on Continuous Multipurpose Household Survey-CMPHS), produced in the 1st quarter of year 2020, the employment of Mauritians is estimated to be at 549,900 at the first quarter of 2020, and 557,200 at the fourth quarter of 2019, with a decline of 1.33%. Furthermore, unemployment rate in the first quarter of 2020 is estimated at 7.1%, compared to the rate of 6.9% at first quarter 2019 and the rate of 6.4% at the fourth quarter of 2019.

Due to major amendments in the school calendar, the academic period has been extended and therefore students will be spending a longer period in the educational system, and consequently, graduates will be entering the labour market at a later stage. According to the Tertiary Education Commission's (TEC) graduate tracer study released in 2012, graduates take roughly 2 years to be employed in their first job in the labour market, but due to the pandemic, the waiting time may be prolonged to longer periods of unemployment. The covid-19 pandemic may therefore pose as a significant hurdle in the creation of a knowledge economy, until herd immunity is not established, the educational system and the labour market, in all likelihood, will be suffering.

What follows next is the labour market outcome of students. The issue of overqualification may occur due to the fact that students will have a higher tendency to go for additional levels of education in an attempt to cover up for the period of unemployment that they will be facing, with no prior job experience. It is to be highlighted that this situation again will apply to students coming from higher social class backgrounds where affording additional years of schooling does not pose as a financial burden.

The covid-19 pandemic has significantly affected certain sectors in Mauritius, including the tourism sector and the financial sector. The ICT sector as well as the agricultural sector were the least affected. Given

the recession-like situation that is prevailing, the economy of the country is on its knees and a second wave of the virus may irreversibly damage the economical prospects of the island. The rate of unemployment in sectors that have been the most affected may be on the rise and students graduating in those specific fields may face long periods of unemployment in the labour market or may even settle for jobs that are not related to the field studied. They may even settle for jobs for which they are overqualified and subsequently reap a lower rate of return to schooling, as opposed to their investments in the form of human capital. An increase in the displacement of non-graduates by graduates in certain jobs, in the long run, contribute to the blurring of boundaries between graduate and non-graduate jobs. Because of some sectors being mostly affected, some faculties may not register a sufficient number of students as the students will be more readily geared towards choosing job sectors that have been the least affected. The supply will therefore shift towards the ICT and agricultural sectors instead of the traditional job positions. Some universities may also completely remove a course from the respective faculty if the number of students drops or the job prospects in that particular field remain particularly low.

While for some students, the confinement period may pose as a difficult situation, especially those from the primary, lower secondary and upper secondary education, on the contrary, students enrolled in part-time courses and who are employed in full-time jobs, may report a higher time for their studies, rather than being distracted by their job duties. Therefore, in both cases, more time could have been allocated to studies, given that students did not spend time committing to school and back, while facing the daily challenges of traffic congestion.

4.3 The Victimization of the most vulnerable

Students expected to be the most affected are those who are in transition from a lower level of education to a higher level, more specifically, transiting from lower secondary to upper secondary and from upper secondary to tertiary education. By the time students will be sitting for their upper secondary exams, which in this case is the Higher School Certificate exams, they may lose on one academic year if the particular university which they intend to attend has already recruited students and completed the enrolment process. Missing out on an academic year may generate the same emotions as a student repeating a certain level of education. The emotions developed may range from failure to depression and the wish to drop out. The uncertainty and the possibility of a second wave of the pandemic create further frustration when a decision is ought to be made with regards to the field of study and university chosen for further studies, especially when it comes to studying abroad.

4.3.1 Domestic Violence

Moreover, students who live in households where domestic violence prevails have greater chances of being the victims themselves. Students are spending most of their time at home and the presence of aggressive family members may further contribute to trauma associated with them being victims of domestic violence, resulting in poor performance. Studies have shown that children who experience or are the victims of domestic violence normalize the violent setting that they witness and have a higher likelihood of becoming perpetrators when they grow up.

4.4 Financial implications for students

Spending a longer period in the educational system has considerable financial implications. Even if the Mauritian Government invests massively in the educational system, from pre-primary school up to tertiary education, nevertheless, a recent phenomenon of overinvestment has been observed, especially among students from a higher socio-economic background. The costs associated are more related to the procurement of school materials and private tuition fees. Furthermore, with increasing cuts in salaries and loss of employment of parents, students may find it harder to meet the additional financial implications of an extended period in the educational system. It must be emphasized that students coming from the lower social class background may have a harder time in meeting the financial implications as their parents might not have any job security in the labour market given the nature of unskilled/manual jobs; or they may simply be unemployed. It all culminates into a higher chance of dropout or a substantial increase in the number of absences. As a matter of fact, students living in absolute or relative poverty are the ones who are strongly hit by the socio-economic impact of the virus largely because prior to the pandemic, they already were facing the challenges associated with living in a poor and deplorable setting. The priority of parents from poor households will shift from investing in their children's education to meeting basic needs such as food and shelter.

4.5 The Vicious Circle of Poverty

Furthermore, students from low social backgrounds may find themselves trapped in a vicious circle of poverty, with the pandemic making it more challenging for them to escape the poverty snare. Education is the

most promising way out of poverty and a large majority of students coming from lower social class backgrounds may be prone to dropout and not completing the required level of education which would enable them to get them out of poverty. Private companies, as part of their CSR schemes and the government used to provide scholarships to students from vulnerable households. However, due to the Covid-19 pandemic which left private companies with lower margins of profits, the number of scholarships and sponsorship of school materials have drastically reduced. Consequently, the inequality between the rich and the poor is further expected to increase. The aim of providing free education was to maximize the number of students in the educational system for the development of a knowledge economy, since Mauritius has no natural resources to sustain its economy. It therefore becomes imperative to enable even the lowest section of the population to climb the social ladder to eradicate poverty and to contribute towards the development of the economy. If we consider the case of ZEP schools, the government introduced the Warm Meal scheme to retain a higher number of students in at least the 6 years spent at the primary level. With the temporary closure of schools, students no longer had any access to free meals, but the government did cater for families falling under the Social Register of Mauritius by providing them with food supplies.

4.6 Homeschooling and parental assistance

During the confinement period, the government had to act promptly to sustain the education of students, defying the efficiency of measures implemented and decisions taken, as any gaps may cause a decrease in the attainment level, in addition to the overall knowledge development of children. If only for a short period of time, we returned to an era where schooling was largely home-based, alongside the involvement of parents in the education of their children. Students were no longer under the supervision of teachers but were monitored by family members. The absence of parents meant that students were left unsupervised and therefore may not have completed the work assigned to them. For instance, the inability to study may be observed among students whose parents are at the frontline battling the virus. The medical personnel is imperatively placed in quarantine for 2 weeks, away from their families, to prevent any form of contamination and further infection. Therefore, students who had both their parents by their side during home-based schooling had an upper hand over those students who live in single-parent families or who have parents who are on duty most of the time. The completion of homework and home-based schooling also depends on the ability of parents to use technology as a tool of learning.

Homebased schooling requires a certain level of parental literacy and knowledge as students are not under the supervision of teachers and therefore, they rely heavily on their parents for the difficulties encountered in the work assigned to them. Students whose parents do not possess the required fluency and the necessary literary skills may find themselves struggling and may abandon any attempts of completing their work.

4.7 The penalty associated with an online learning system

The online learning system was implemented by the Government to facilitate the completion of syllabuses even during the lockdown period. In the years 2016 to 2018, the number of households that had access to the internet increased from 63% to 70% (Information and Communication Technologies Statistics, 2019). This implies that 30% of households are not equipped with internet facilities. The government might have invested heavily in providing free wifi spots across the island, but these remained highly inaccessible due to the imperative confinement and social distancing measures in the early stages of the infection. Therefore, only those who have access to the internet at home have been able to fully benefit from the online courses. Also, a majority of the lectures were diffused on television and radio and, it is also worthy to note that students living in absolute poverty, especially those squatting on state lands may not even have access to these facilities.

All courses held in universities throughout the island were carried online on platforms such as Google classroom. Thesis submission for final year students had to be postponed for a further date. Furthermore, major adjustments had to be made by students while completing their theses, principally because of the hindrances that accompanied the lockdown. Surveys had to be shifted online, and students had to face the reality of nonresponse, affecting the validity and reliability of their research. Assignments in lieu of exams were carried out to ensure continuity in the work of students and therefore students were assessed on unfair grounds given that there were more chances of trickery. The online learning system is therefore seen as a double-edged sword to impoverished students who may not have the necessary technological devices and who may also not be proficient in the use of the latest technologies; the online learning system works more in the benefit of students who are better equipped and who also have important social networks to help them in their studies during the confinement period.

Furthermore, online education platforms limit the interaction between students, which is otherwise in the classroom. While the educational system is gradually valuing and emphasizing the concepts of team building and teamwork, these are played down during online courses. Interactive learning is therefore limited.

4.8 Increased pressure on the educational system and teaching staff

The confinement period substantially increased the pressure on the educational system, and it has become a race against time to complete the syllabus instead of focusing on the overall development of students. Students may therefore suddenly become overburdened by the bulk of knowledge transfer at school. Extra-curricular activities are being forsaken for longer periods of lectures and an increase in the amount of homework. Students may also be encouraged to develop a certain level of independence from teachers were they to find themselves confined again. If we were to assess the impact of these drastic changes, results will point out to how students with higher ability will pull through the educational system easily as compared to students who are slow learners. Teachers remain an important element in the comprehensive study of lessons provided to students. In some cases, they may be the only support that students have during the schooling process.

V. Conclusion

The focus of the study was to provide a situational analysis of how the educational system of Mauritius has been affected during the lockdown of the Covid-19 pandemic and the long-lasting impact of the virus on the educational system. At the time of writing, post the confinement period, it seems like the government has maintained a firm grip on the economy of the island, the health system and the educational system to prevent any forms of collapse and to flatten the curve at the same time.

Even though many temporary actions have been sought and have successfully been implemented by the government and according to statistics, Mauritius has not recorded any local cases of the virus in the past few months; nevertheless, long term plans need to be devised in order to ensure continuity in the education of students in a world hit by a sanitary crisis. As the fear of a second wave still prevails, strong leadership needs to be coupled with a broad socio-economic development plan to reshuffle the aim and outcomes of the educational system of Mauritius. The government can make use of the time during which the borders have been closed to extend certain facilities to those students who do not have the means to participate in online educational lessons. The recommendations also extend to the creation of community schooling through the identification of certain centres that can accommodate a certain number of students while maintaining social distancing measures and other sanitary measures. The general idea behind is that the economic situation of the country may not permit another lockdown and therefore it becomes imperative to learn to live with the virus until herd immunity is achieved.

Staggered hours of learning can be implemented for the benefit of all students, with priority given to students who are about to transit from an educational level to another. A digitalised educational system needs to be put in place as a preparation means to face any eventualities in the future. It is important to identify the particular group of student who is more likely to drop out and a follow-up need to be carried out to prevent any form of premature dropout. The government needs to show its active status is upgrading the educational system to make it more adaptable to a modern world as well as to the needs of students.

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