

Higher Education Commission COVID Policy Guidelines and Online Readiness of Universities of Pakistan

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The COVID pandemic forced closure of academic institutions around the globe. E-teaching pedagogy changed traditional modes of teaching and learning which is very popular among teachers and learners. The goal of this research was to gauge Higher Education Commission (HEC) COVID policy guidelines for the wellbeing of students, faculty and staff and E-teaching readiness of universities of Pakistan for commencing E-classes. Empirical mixed methods were employed. COVID policy guideline documents displayed on Higher Education Commission (HEC) website were reviewed in depth to draw outcomes. Moreover, Higher Education Data Repository (HEDR) quantitative data was used assessing online readiness of universities of Pakistan. Data revealed student concerns about E-teaching barriers e.g. connectivity problems, faculty concerns, quality instruction, evaluation quality, and fee concerns. Faculty concerns showed that teachers were unwilling to visit universities for delivering online lectures and preparation of tutorials. Results further revealed that public and private sector universities implemented an E-Teaching roadmap given by HEC successfully except for a few who lagged behind in this dimension. Surprisingly, universities that enjoyed good academic and research track record failed in adopting E-Teaching pedagogy. This study proposes that the Higher Education Commission (HEC) of Pakistan should facilitate universities of Pakistan to receive benefit from E-Teaching practices which is an indispensable part of academics in this modern age of information technology. Case to case studies of universities have been made resolving E-Teaching problems confronting them. Findings would assist and guide Vice-



Chancellors/Rectors of Universities and policy makers working in Higher Education Commission of Pakistan for framing future effective policies for developing sound E- teaching mechanisms comparable to advanced universities of the world.

Key words: *COVID, Online Readiness, Public, Private Universities, Policy Guidelines*

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic affected human life globally and still it lingers on the horizon. It halted system of education in Pakistan and still the closure of academic institutions goes on. The government of Pakistan announced closure of schools, colleges, and universities on 13th March, 2020. It was extended further to the end of May, 2020. The physical presence of faculty and associated staff was abridged to overcome speedy spread of this deadly virus. The Higher Education Commission (HEC) of Pakistan realizing the enormity of the problem issued advisory guidelines for universities that they should switch to online classes. Online classes although flexible in nature are full of challenges (Gillett-Swan, 2017) problems and issues. Universities that had strong Information Technology (IT) mechanism started classes promptly while others who lagged in this potential merely engaged in discussions at institutional level. The Higher Education Commission of Pakistan demanded universities provide technical assistance to faculty, facilitating them with computers and laptops along with internet bandwidth. The Higher Education Commission earmarked a handsome amount of funds for universities to equip themselves with robust systems of IT infrastructure to meet embryonic challenges. Universities that had good governance system established international standard Information Technology (IT) centers whereas universities that had bad governance systems lagged behind in developing the technological dimension. Resultantly, students and faculty suffered during this global catastrophe.

2. Literature Review

The Covid-19 pandemic endangered the entire system of education in Pakistan from primary, secondary, college and universities level. Universities had no option but to commence online classes to save the academic loss of students. Thus, academicians and administrators started looking towards technology to get advantage from it for teaching. Many terms emerged such as computer assisted learning, blended learning, online learning, e-learning, e-teaching, virtual learning and web-based learning. Broadly, they all have the same meaning and they all need internet connection or Wi-Fi to work. Unfortunately, it is a developed perception in Pakistan that government organizations possess poor human capital in terms of skilled manpower or trained staff. There are numerous reasons for it but lack of training is one of the factors. Thus, governments give priority to privatize government organizations or run them under public private partnership. It has been witnessed that government organizations become productive



when they come under control of the private sector. E- Classes set up was a giant task for various public sector universities, because they were not practically prepared for it. After discussion with multiple partners' universities decided that online classes would utilize Google classroom, Gmail, Microsoft Teams, and YouTube as these technologies were considered alternatives for physical classes. Few universities surveyed faculty and students to ensure they possess personal computers, laptops and mobile phones with internet connections. Moreover, few trainings were arranged for faculty to guide them in the use of Microsoft Teams and other computer software used for online teaching. Faculty considered the sudden decision of E-teaching as premature since universities lacked IT infrastructure that can facilitate faculty and students. Students were left to the mercy of technology and in this digital age, students learnt to attend online classes without any formal training. Teachers completed classes as part of formality in certain instances.

2.1 COVID-19 Guidelines for Universities and DAIs

The COVID-19 guidelines contained primary information about COVID and its precautionary measures to be adopted by Universities and DAIs. It suggested that panic should be avoided, COVID awareness guidelines should be made available in offices, entrance gates should be sign posted about hygiene measures, awareness about the virus should be generated for faculty, students and visitors. If any staff member feels symptoms of the virus they should be provided with work relief, face to face meetings should be avoided, appropriate work modalities be framed, staff were assured not to worry, help desks should be set up, information about COVID prevention measures be displayed on university websites, helpline contact numbers be displayed on university or HEIs website, and FAQs need to be available on university websites for information of all stakeholders of universities and DAIs (Comprehensive HEC Policy/Guidelines for Universities and DAIs on COVID-19).

2.2 COVID-19 Guidelines for Universities and HEIs Faculty/Staff

This guideline focused on the safety and security of faculty and staff serving at universities and HEIs. Faculty was advised to return to universities and HEIs only for online lectures and preparation of handouts. Moreover, it was advised that if they consider that the university environment is friendlier compared to their home they can visit university. It was further suggested that participation in faculty meetings/trainings should be limited to 20. Distance SOPs and preventive measures should be observed in meetings or training sessions. Information be exhibited on notice boards, entry gates, university websites, and universities and HEIs social media pages that external visitors are discouraged to visit universities. Faculty/staff above 50 years of age were exempt from job duties. Pregnant female faculty/staff be made free from duty. Faculty/staff showing symptoms of illness, travel history of a country/area where local transmission of COVID cases prevail be exempt from duty or given



access of work from home stations (HEC Guidelines for Faculty and Staff COVID-19 outbreak).

2.3 Policy Guidance on E-Teaching Complaints

HEC received many complaints from students regarding internet problems, faculty concerns, quality instruction, evaluation quality, and fee concerns. Pakistan is an agricultural country thus; its major population live in rural areas. The people experience poor and low socio economic status. Students of rural areas were confronted with internet problem, recharging of SIM cards, paying exorbitant internet package amounts, recharging balances and difficulty in understanding lectures because of poor quality of teaching. Teachers seemed reluctant to visit universities and HEIs to deliver online lectures and prepare lectures. Quality instruction issues ranged from that online classes are not effective, students do not understand lectures correctly, they cannot question, and faculty is untrained, and poor lecture delivery were impediments for online teaching. Quality of evaluation encompassed results are discouraging due to poor lecturing and examination mode. As a result, CGPA is affected. Fee concerns included universities and HEIs charging heavy fees even in online teaching and students are away from universities and hostels. It was demanded that universities should relax fees because the pandemic has affected every business of society (HEC Policy Guidance Series on COVID-19).

2.4 Online Readiness Guidance Policy

HEC emphasized universities that online education mechanism be implemented in universities and HEIs with standardized SOPs. In this dimension, HEC issued 8 guidelines i.e. 'university, course, faculty, library, technology, student, evaluation and assessment, laboratory and practical instruction'. (1) University: approval of courses, developing Learning Management System (LMS) and developing mechanism for quick resolve of complaints (2) Course: providing information to students about course introduction, learning objectives, grading policy, course requirement, textbooks, lesson plan, assignments, and course handouts (3) Faculty: teachers should be conversant about E-teaching challenges, opportunities, techniques, and ancillary sources (4) Library: universities and HEIs should provide students complete access to course material, course topics, readings, audiovisual materials, and related literature (5) Technology: E-teaching requires technological tools such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Google Classroom, Moodle and examination system. Universities provide easy access of computer and software help to faculty and students (6) Students: communication with students is compulsory to be well abreast about student problems relating to internet, load shedding of electricity and unaffordability of internet packages (7) Evaluation and assessment: assessment mode comprise examinations, assignments, class activities, self-assessments, peer assessments and interviews (8) Laboratory and practical instruction: practical instruction e.g. project works and thesis/ research projects require physical presence of students. HEC allowed universities to skip laboratory work during the -19 COVID pandemic (HEC Policy Guidance Note 5:



Online Readiness). Practical and laboratory education through e-teaching is impossible (Zhai et al., 2012).

2.5 Assessment and Examination Policy Guidance

HEC advised universities to formulate effective institutional assessment and examination policies. These policies should be based on certain yardsticks, and no student should be promoted without assessment and examination. Since evaluation of students' performance is difficult during COVID-19 thus; it surfaced that students be given choice of pass/fail instead of giving ABC grade. In this mode the GPA of a passing student shall not be affected. Students who desire to obtain a letter grade e.g. ABC should never be compelled to opt pass/ fail grade. They need to be passed through rigorous process of tests acquiring letter grade. Approaches to assessment may include 10 minutes course presentation followed by viva-voce, oral examination of 15-20 minutes, audio video presentations, multiple choice questions, writing of research paper from the subject, and open book examination of 2-3 hours (HEC Guidance on Assessments and Examinations).

2.6 HEC Second Wave COVID-19 Policy Guidance

HEC issued the second wave COVID-19 policy guidance for Universities and HEIs following the Government of Pakistan directives. It said that all academic institutions across the country shall remain closed from 26th November to 24th December, 2020 and universities and HEIs shall continue online education. If students face internet problems, they should be given homework. Winter holidays shall be from 25th December, to 10th January 2021. Few students should be allowed on campuses e.g. students who come from low socio economic families and face internet problems at home, foreign students, MPhil and PhD students, final year students or medical students who need laboratory or clinical training can come on campus. The number of students should never cross the limit of 30% of total enrollment. Moreover, faculty should be allowed to prepare online tutorials. No examinations should be conducted except entrance tests for new admissions. For establishing robust mechanism of E-education system in universities, HEC released Rupees 10 Million to each public sector university. Universities were allowed to recruit technically sound senior students to help faculty in E-teaching technology assistance (HEC Policy Guidance Note 8; Further Guidance 26th November, 2020).

2.7 Online Readiness of Universities of Pakistan

Anwar Muhammad et. al, (2020) conducted a study on 'the barriers and challenges faced by students in online education during covid-19 pandemic in Pakistan'. Findings revealed that technology problems, lack of training, low motivation, financial constraints, and poor computer literacy were potential barriers for online education in Pakistan. Farooq Fareeha et. al, (2020) conducted a study on 'challenges of online medical education in Pakistan During COVID-19 Pandemic'. Findings indicated that poor faculty training, institutional support, internet



connectivity issues, maintaining student engagement, online support, use of free online training resources, and out of the box thinking were challenges for online medical education in Pakistan. Akhter Nasreen et. al, (2015) study revealed that students do not get study packages, examination information, e.g. Roll number, slips, examination schedules, result cards, teachers contact numbers, assignments after marking, inadequate physical facilities at examination centers, unfair marking, and errors in result cards. Said Fareyha et. Al, (2021) study found that infrastructural problems, students' behavioural issues, and problems in assessment of students' performance were challenges for university teachers in Pakistan. Sarwar Huma et. al, (2020) study explored that poor learning management system (LMS), quality of learning resources, and poor training of teachers were challenges for online learning in Pakistan. Khuwaja HMA et. al, (2020) study exposed that Higher Education Commission (HEC), Pakistan Medical & Dental Council (PMDC) and Pakistan Nursing Council (PNC) should understand scope of digital learning, and improve infrastructure and capacity building for digital learning in health sciences profession of Pakistan. Aziz Anbreen et. al, (2020) studied 'A Bumpy Road to Online Teaching: Impact of COVID-19 on Medical Education'. Results reveal that transition from face-to-face to online teaching, rudimentary system, inefficient internet, lack of previous experience, non-serious attitude of students, and uncertainty about online assessments are barriers in medical profession of Pakistan.

3. Methodology

The study employed empirical mixed methods research where extensive literature related with HEC COVID-19 policy guidelines and online readiness of universities of Pakistan was examined in wake of a roadmap provided by Higher Education Commission (HEC) of Pakistan. First, ten (10) HEC guideline documents available on Higher Education Commission (HEC) website were evaluated drawing outcomes. Second, data pertaining to online readiness of public and private universities was evaluated in terms of percentages drawn by Higher Education Data Repository (HEDR). Secondary data was used and it was analyzed whether universities of Pakistan implemented online teaching guidelines practically. If they adopted, then to what extent they remained successful in implementing E-teaching. The parameter for success of any university was fixed minimum 50%. Universities that fall below 50% were considered to have failed to achieve E-teaching targets successfully. The scope of this research was limited only to public and private sector universities of Pakistan. The total number of universities included in the research were one hundred thirty (130) only.

4. Findings

4.1 Qualitative Findings

The results of the Qualitative findings about Higher Education Commission (HEC) COVID-19 Policy guidelines for Universities and degree awarding institutions (DAIs) are summarized in table 1 as under:

Table 1. HEC COVID Guidelines Analysis

S#	HEC COVID Guidelines	Description
1	Student Concerns	Students complained to Higher Education Commission (HEC) about connectivity problems, faculty concerns, quality instruction, evaluation quality, and fee concerns.
2	Faculty Concerns	Teachers show unwilling to visit universities during pandemic for delivering online lectures and tutorial preparation.
3	Precautionary Measures	Panic should be avoided, COVID awareness guidelines should be available in offices, awareness about the virus should be generated for faculty, students and visitors
4	COVID SOPs	Distance SOPs and preventive measures should be observed in meetings or training sessions. participation in faculty meetings/trainings should be limited to 20.
5	Laboratory Work	HEC allowed universities to skip laboratory work during the -19 COVID pandemic
6	Assessment & Examination Policy	Students be given choice of pass/fail instead of giving ABC grade. Students who desire to obtain letter grade (ABC) never be compelled to opt pass/ fail grade.
7	Consideration for Foreign Final/MPhil/PhD/Medical Students	Foreign, MPhil, PhD, final year, and medical students who need laboratory or clinical training can come on campus. Students who face internet problems may also be allowed on need basis. The number of students should never cross 30% of total enrollment.

Table 1, speaks that Higher Education Commission of Pakistan conveyed COVID-19 Policy guidelines to Universities and Degree Awarding Institutions (DAIs) from time to time. Students and faculty concerns were also communicated to Universities and degree awarding institutions (DAIs). Moreover, Universities and degree awarding institutions were guided to observe strictly COVID SOPs during office hours at the workplace.

4.2 Quantitative Findings

The quantitative finding of the study in terms of percentages for online readiness of Public and Private Sector Universities of Pakistan are produced as under for easy understanding of the readers.

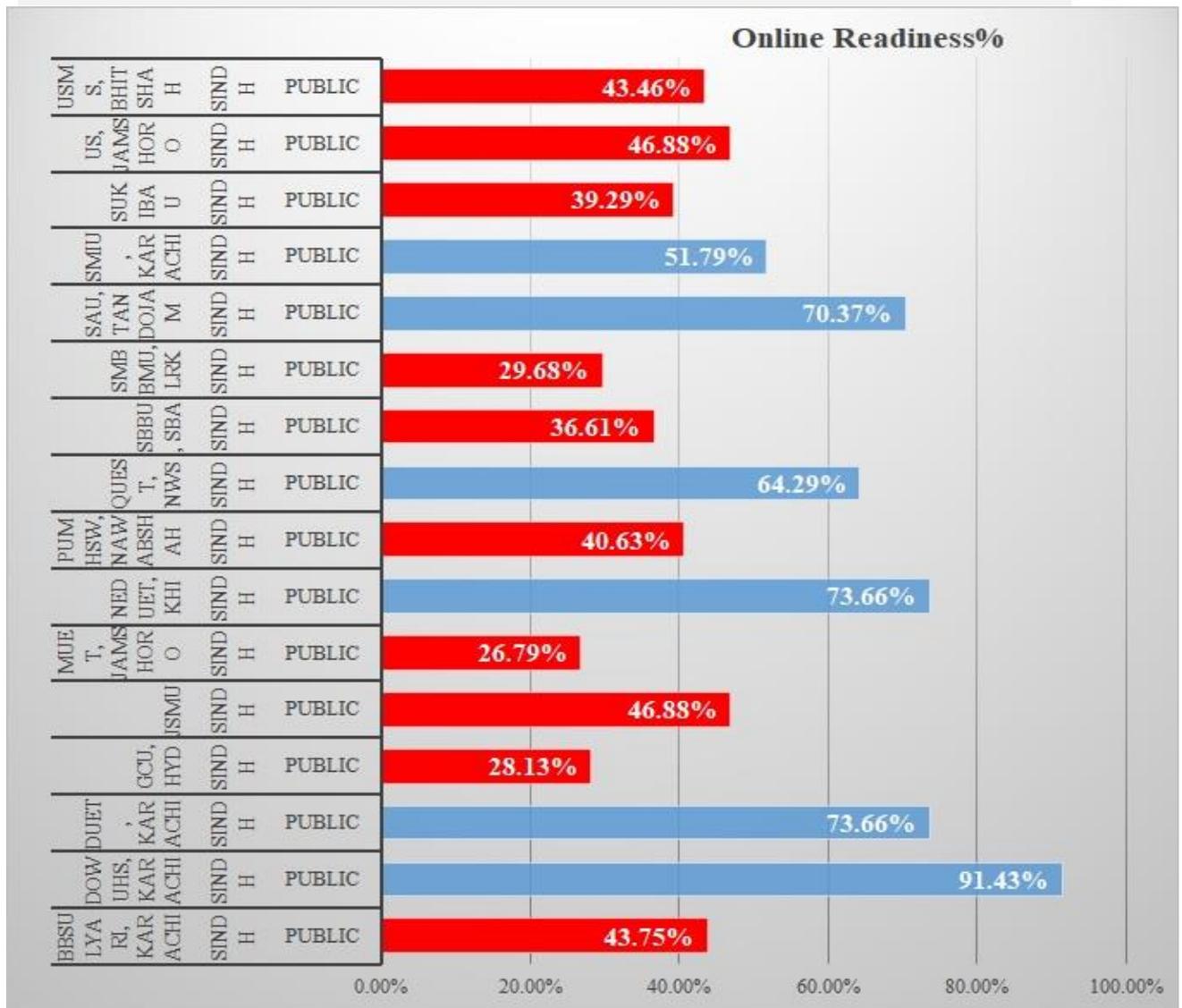


Figure 1. Public Sector Universities Province of Sindh

Source: Higher Education Data Repository (HEDR)

Figure 1, indicates that there are sixteen (16) public sector universities in the province of Sindh. Out of sixteen (16), eleven (11) universities fall below the percentage of 50%.

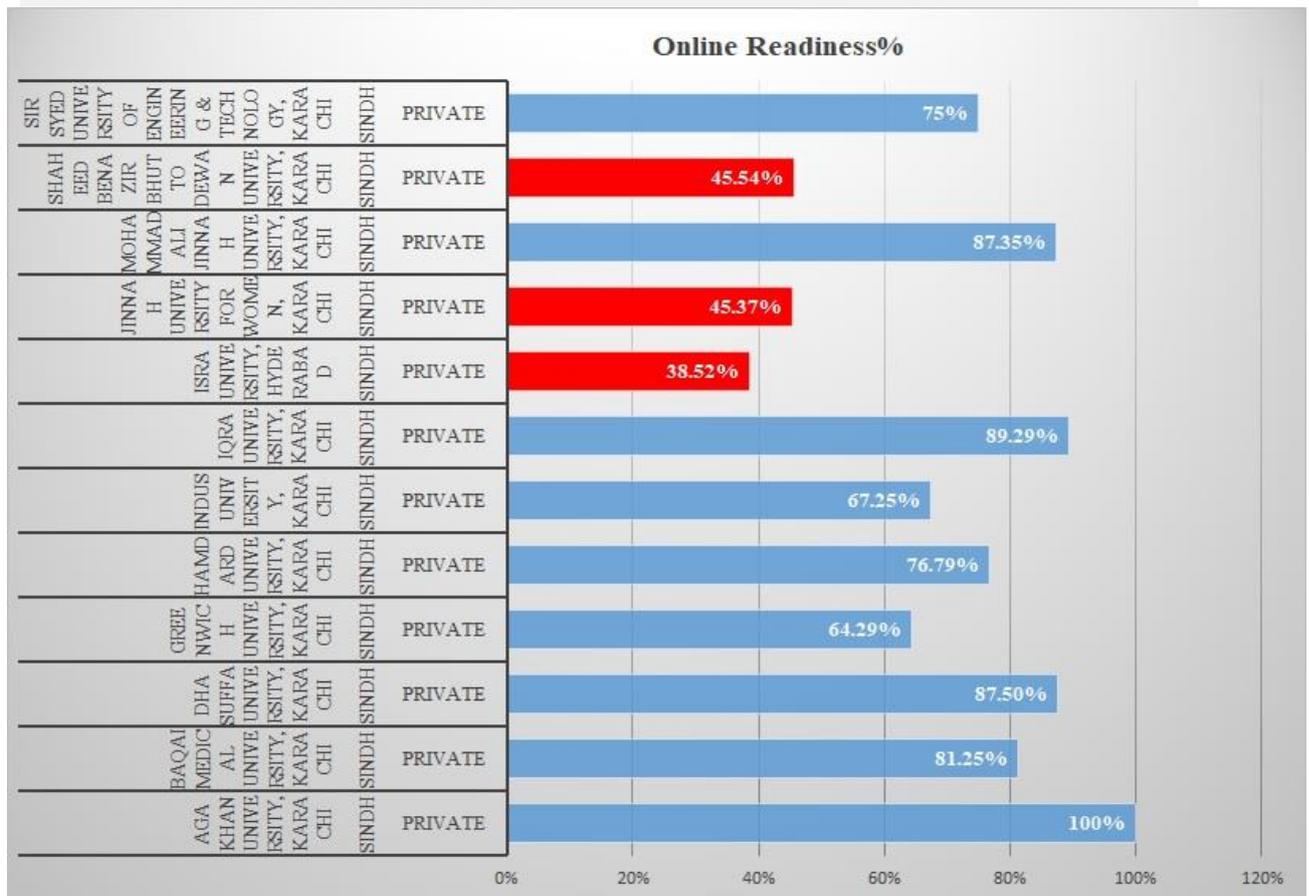


Figure 2. Private Sector Universities Province of Sindh

Source: Higher Education Data Repository (HEDR)

Figure 2, shows there are twelve (12) private sector universities in the province of Sindh. Out of twelve (12), three (3) private sector universities fall below the percentage of 50%.

Figure 3, shows there are forty-seven (47) public sector universities in the province of Punjab. Out of forty-seven (47), seventeen (17) universities fall below the percentage of 50%.

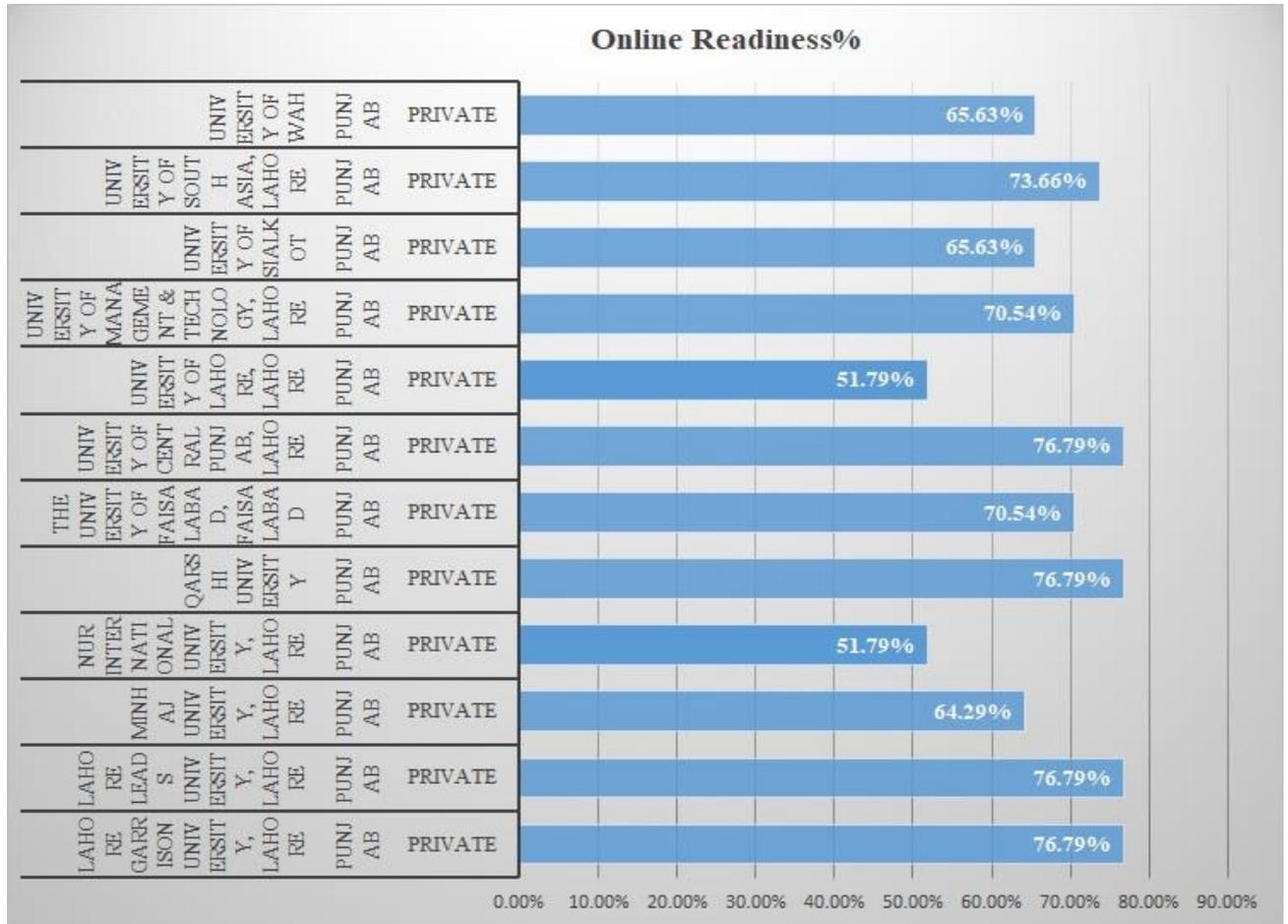


Figure 4. Private Sector Universities of Punjab Province

Source: Higher Education Data Repository (HEDR)

Figure 4, display that there are twelve (12) private sector universities in the province of Punjab. It is matter of satisfaction that all Universities meet 50% criteria set for online readiness of Universities of Pakistan.

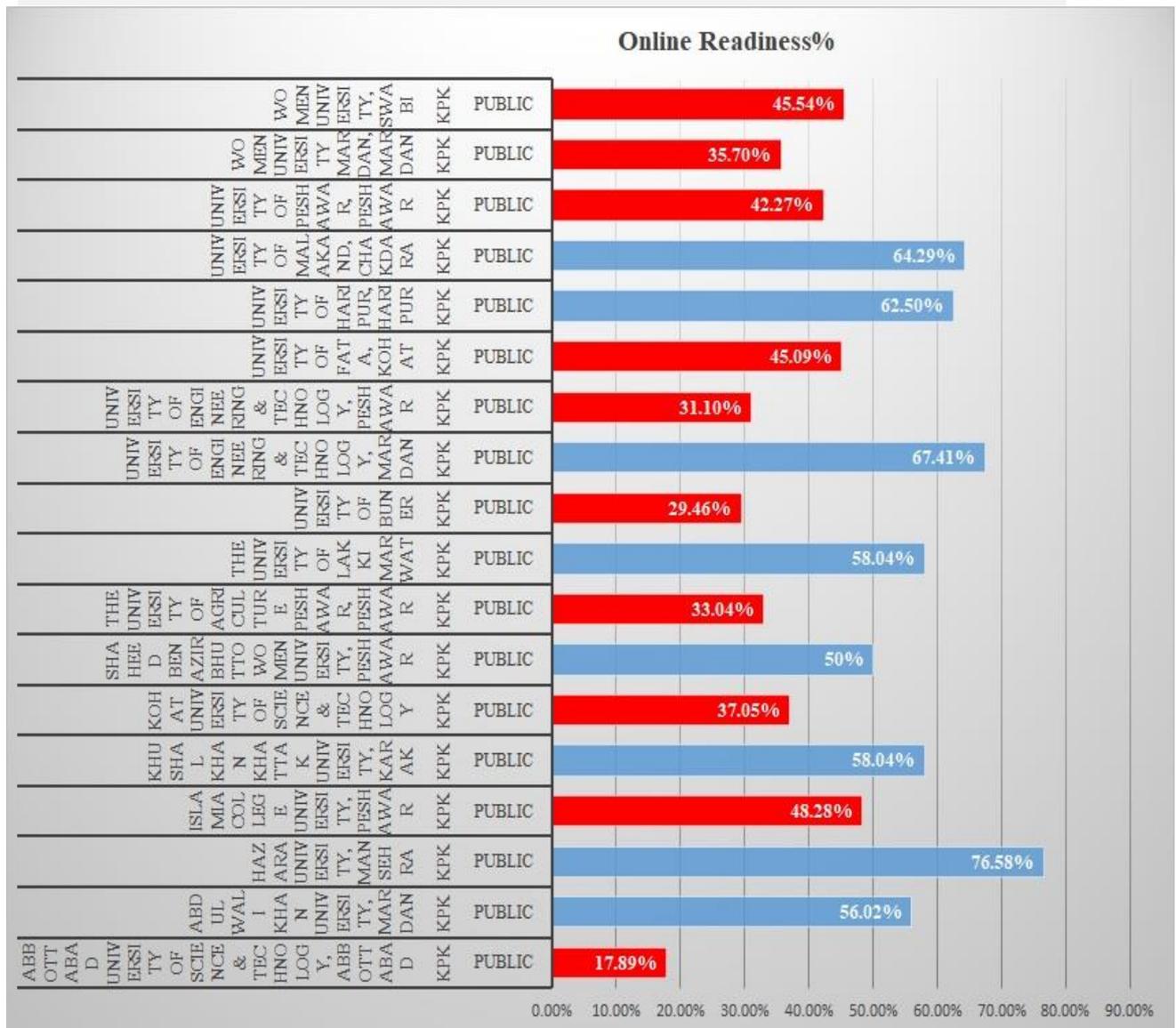


Figure 5. Public Sector Universities of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) Province

Source: Higher Education Data Repository (HEDR)

Figure 5, indicates that there are eighteen (18) Public Sector Universities in the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Out of eighteen (18), nine (9) public sector universities fall below the percentage of 50%.

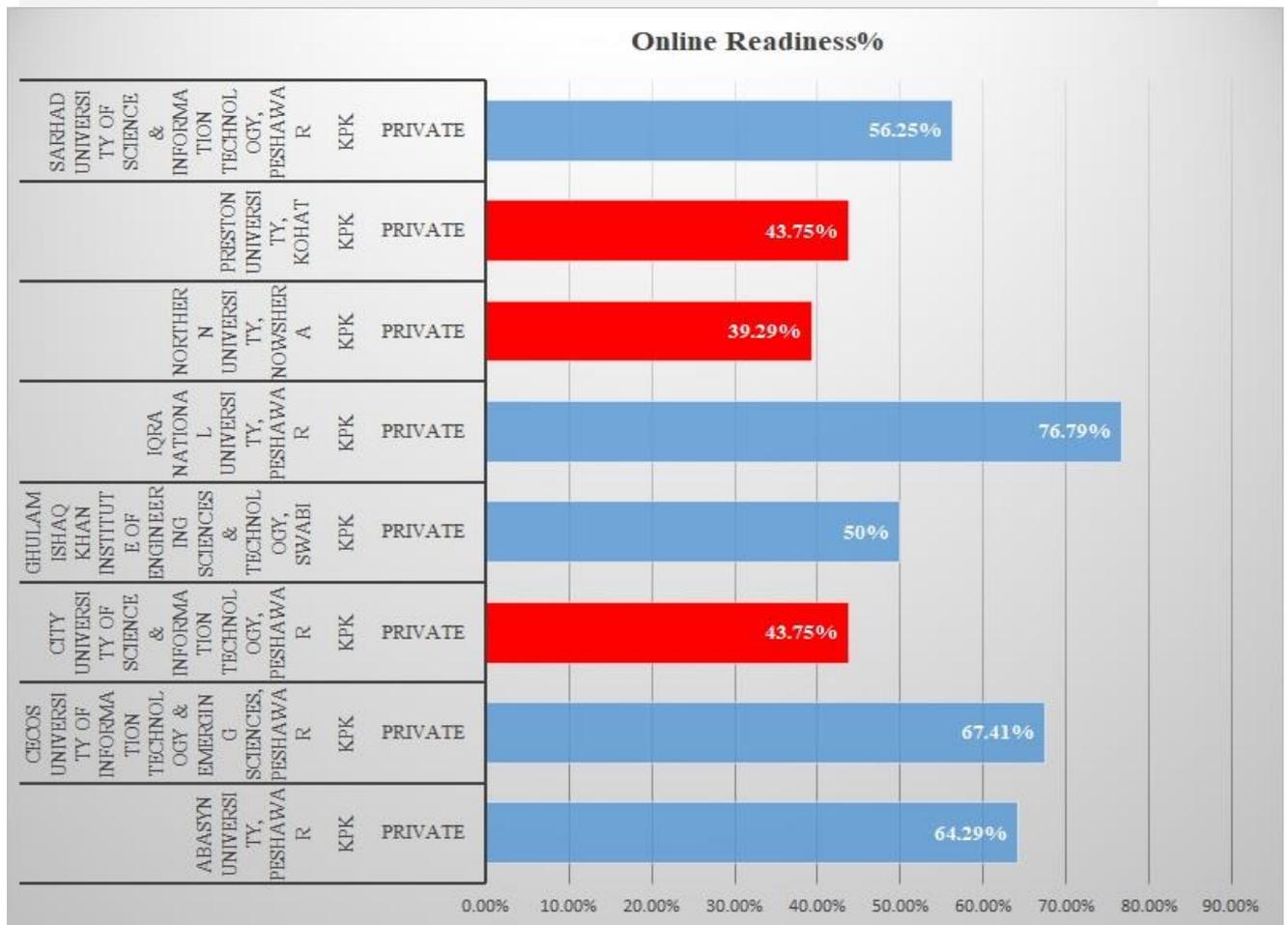


Figure 6. Private Sector Universities of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) Province

Source: Higher Education Data Repository (HEDR)

Figure 6, shows that there are eight (8) Private Sector Universities in the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Among eight (8) three (3) universities fall below the percentage of 50%.

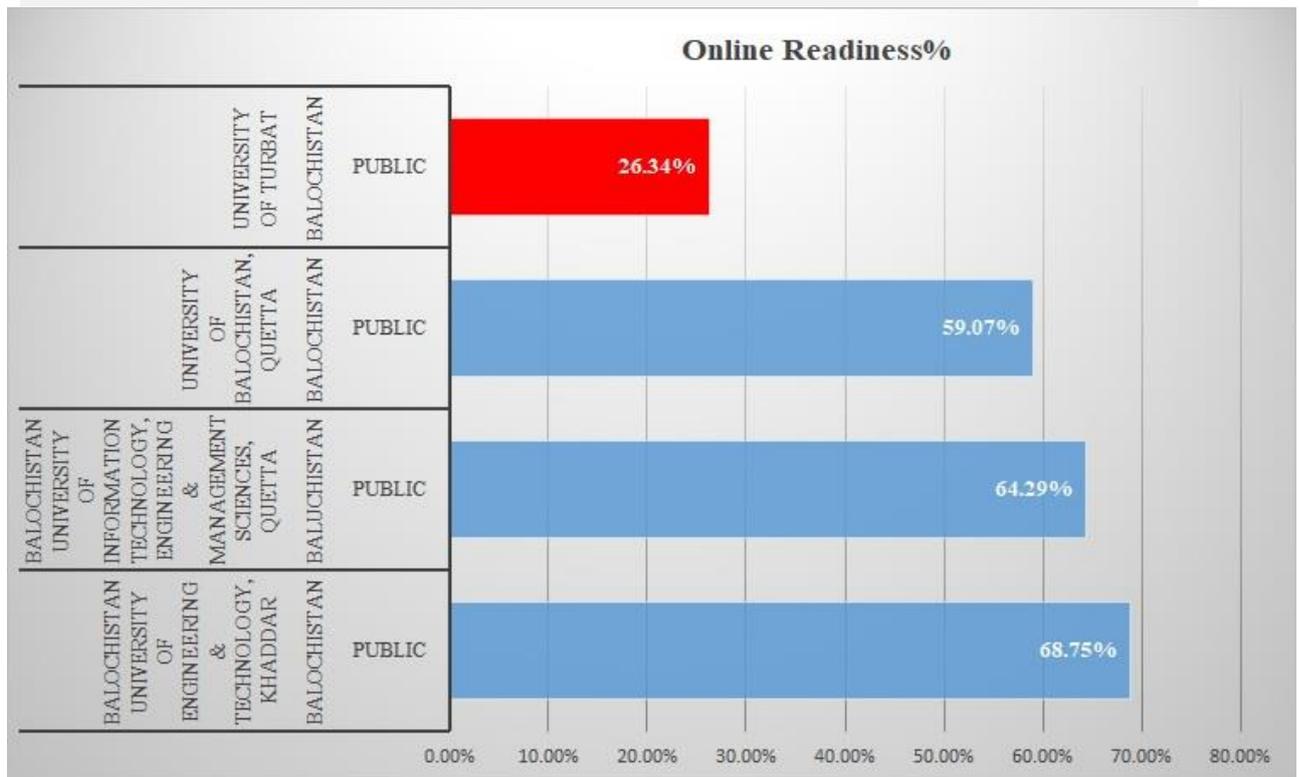


Figure 7. Public Sector Universities of Balochistan Province

Source: Higher Education Data Repository (HEDR)

Figure 7, exhibit that there are four (4) Public Sector Universities in the province of Balochistan. One (1) public sector university falls below the percentage of 50%.

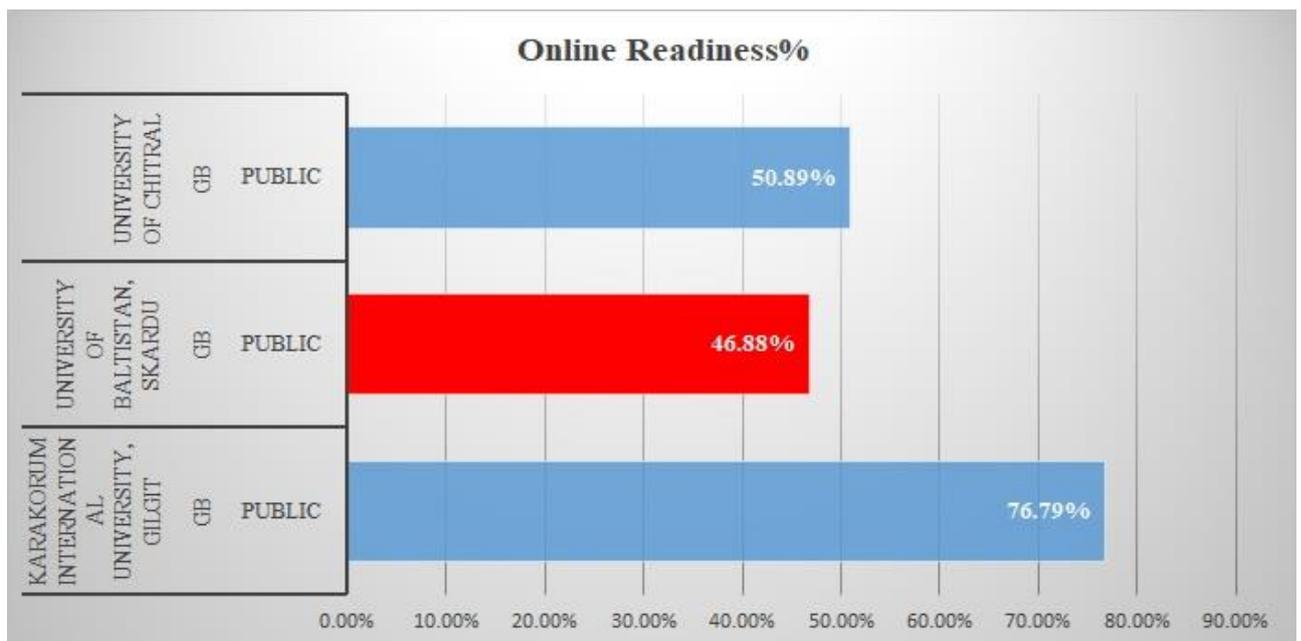


Figure 8. Public Sector Universities of Gilgit Baltistan

Source: Higher Education Data Repository (HEDR)

Figure 8, reveals that there are three (3) public sector universities in Gilgit Baltistan. One (1) public sector university falls below the percentage of 50%.

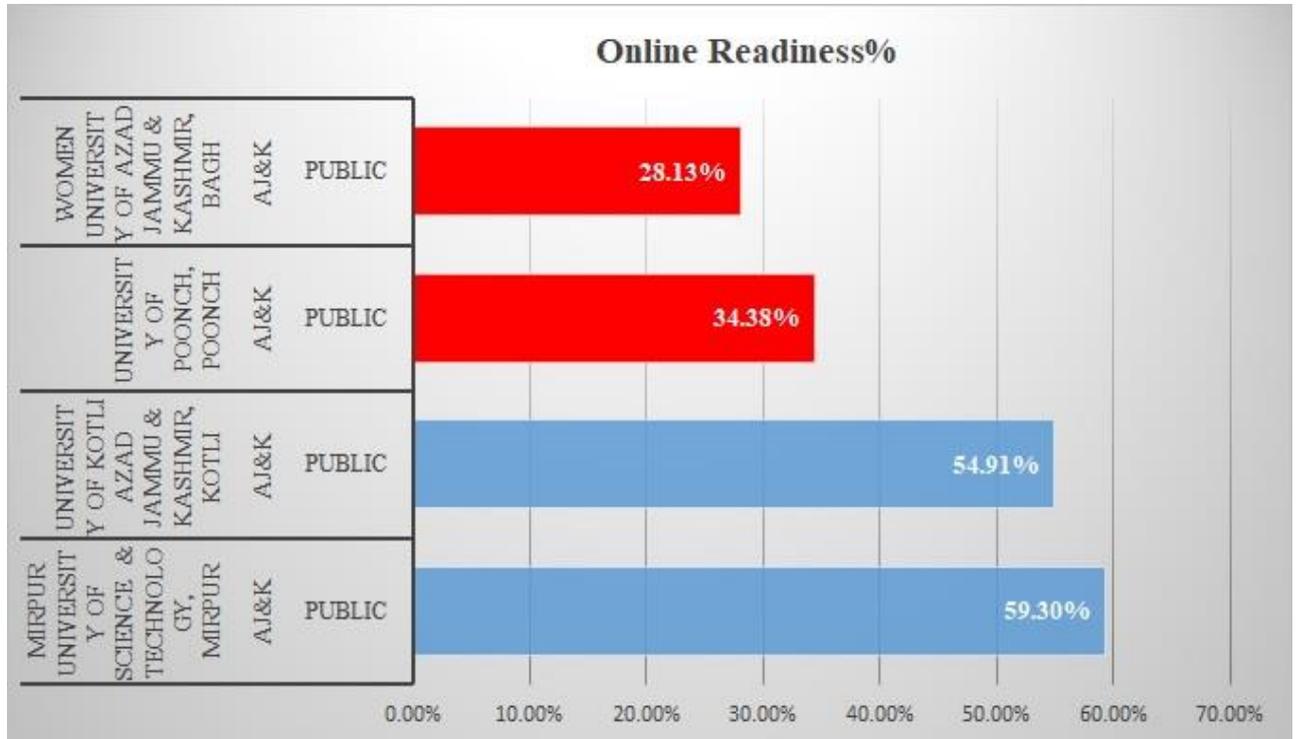


Figure 9. Public Universities of Azad Jammu & Kashmir

Source: Higher Education Data Repository (HEDR)

Figure 9, shows that there are four (4) public sector universities in Azad Jammu & Kashmir Pakistan. Two (2) public sector universities fall below the percentage of 50%.

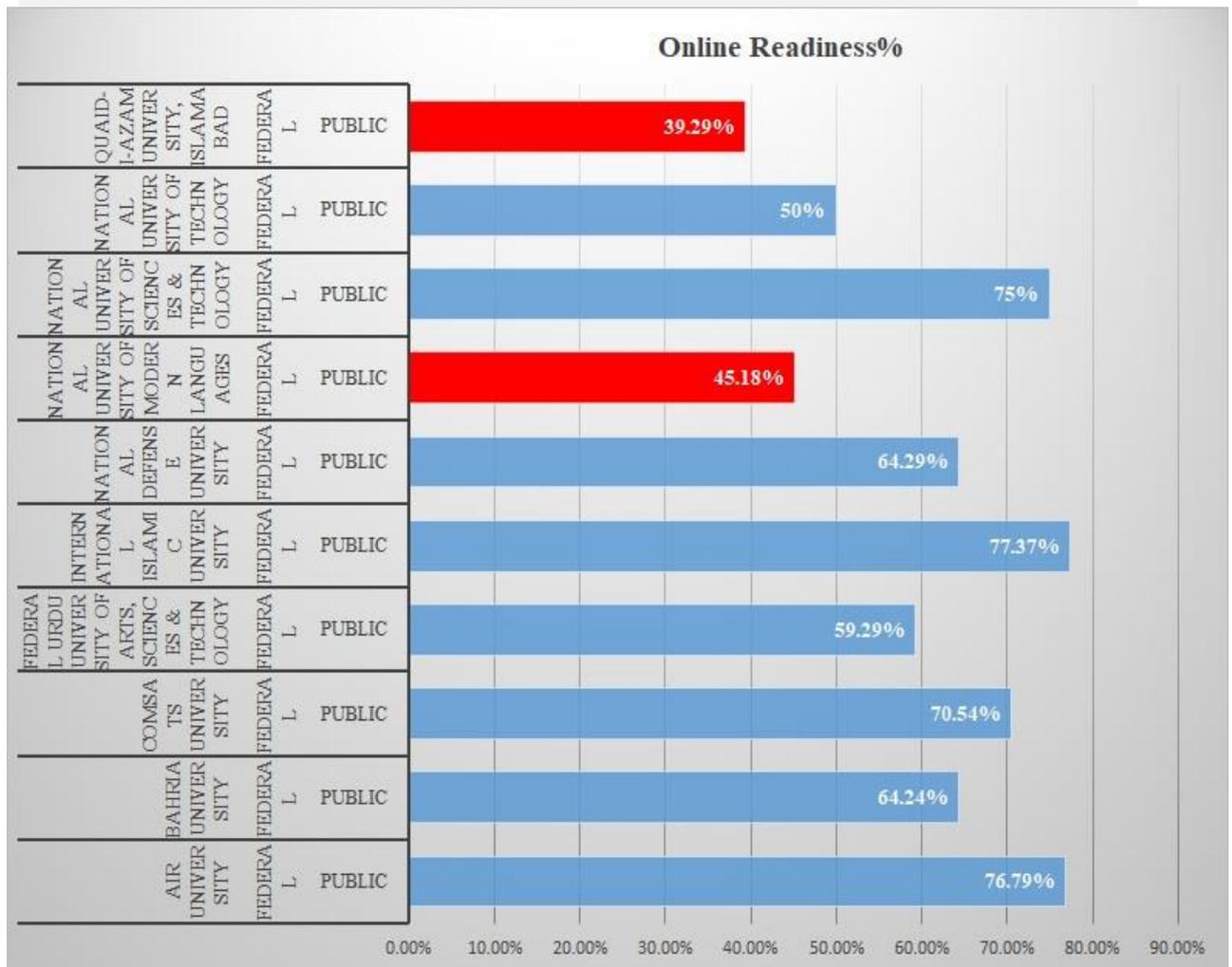


Figure 10. Public Sector Universities of Federal Capital Islamabad

Source: Higher Education Data Repository (HEDR)

Figure 10, indicates there are Ten (10) Public Sector universities in Federal Capital Islamabad. Among ten (10) only three (3) public sector universities fall below the percentage of 50%.

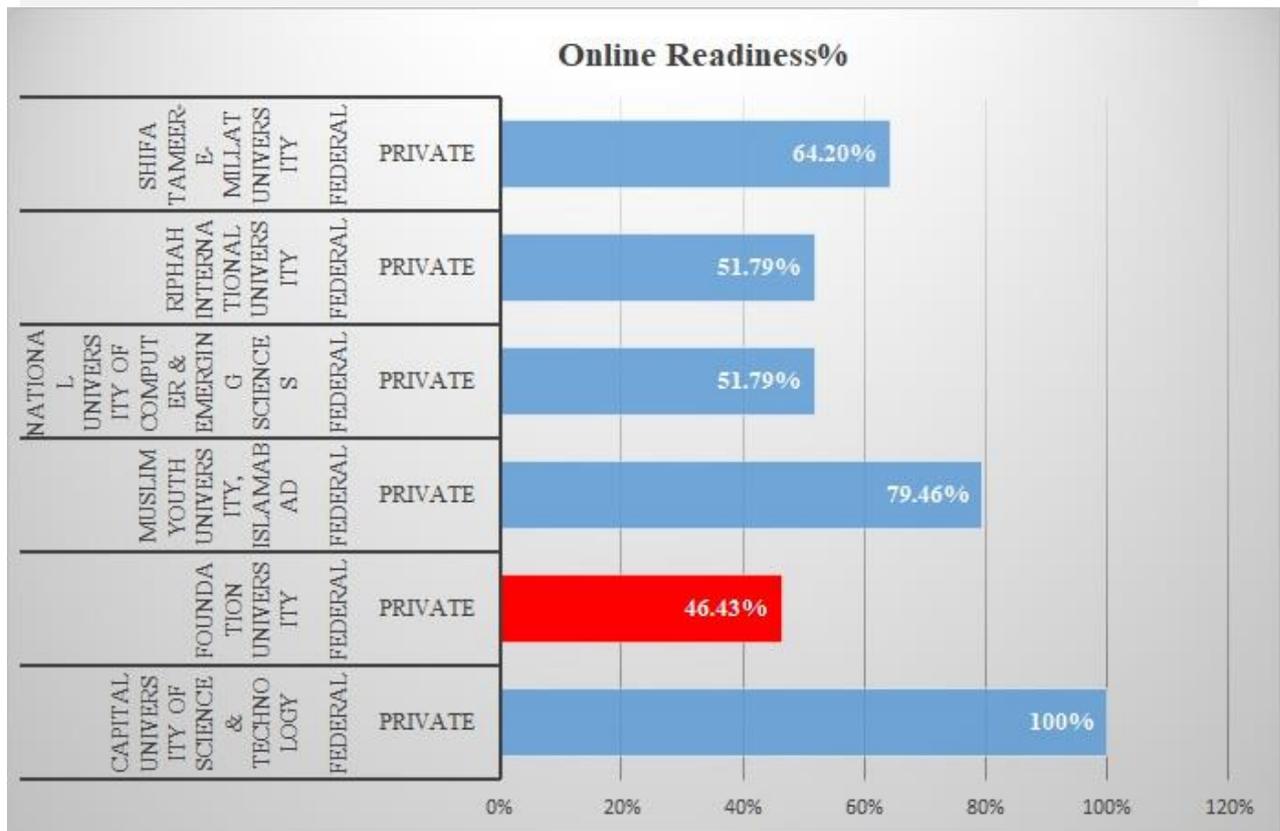


Figure 11. Private Sector Universities of Federal Capital Islamabad

Source: Higher Education Data Repository (HEDR)

Figure 11, indicates there are six (6) Private Sector Universities in Federal Capital Islamabad. Out of six (6) only one (1) private sector university falls below the percentage of 50%.

5. Discussion

The COVID-19 virus affected every profession globally. It halted every business adversely including teaching and learning in higher education. Sensing the gravity of the problem, the Government of Pakistan closed institutions from primary, secondary, colleges, universities and seminaries. In such a scenario, the Higher Education Commission (HEC) of Pakistan issued an advisory for universities to switch from traditional classroom teaching to online teaching to save the loss of students over the semester. Universities researched multiple choices e.g. Google classroom, Gmail, Microsoft Teams and YouTube for starting online classes. Moreover, the Higher Education Commission issued a series of COVID-19 guidelines for universities and HEIs. The focus of these guidelines revolved round the axis of observing strict SOPs to safeguard students, faculty and staff from physical and psychological harm. Additionally, Higher Education Commission communicated student and faculty concerns to universities for timely compensation. The concerns were internet problems, poor lecture quality, poor evaluation that affected student grades, and fee issues including that universities still charged fees in the pandemic although students were away from the campus. Faculty were

unwilling to visit universities for online lectures and handout preparation. Mehmood Samreen (2020), Adnan Muhammad, Anwar Kainat (2020), Niwaz Asaf, Waqas Qazi Ahmed, Kamran Sohail (2019), Farooq Fareeha, Azam Farooq, Mansoor Nasir (2020), Akhter Nasreen, Akbar Razaqat Ali (2015) studies found internet-related issues, teacher related issues, assessment and evaluation issues, lack of faculty training, institutional support, online support, absence of study packages for students, lack of examination related information, e.g. examination roll number, examination slips, examination schedules, result cards, lack of communication between teachers and students, return of assignments after marking, and unfair marking.

The second part of this research is related to online readiness of universities for imparting online education to students. The universities were divided into two groups; the public and private sector. The universities of four provinces Sindh, Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), and Balochistan were included in online readiness. Moreover, universities of Gilgit Baltistan, Azad Jammu & Kashmir, and Federal Capital Islamabad were also included for robust results. There are sixteen (16) public and twelve (12) private sector universities in the province of Sindh. Nine (9) public and three (3) private sector universities of Sindh fall below the percentage of 50%. It indicates that these universities were not well prepared for online education due to certain barriers. There are thirty-three (33) public and twelve (12) private sector universities in the province of Punjab. Interestingly, seventeen (17) public sector universities were below the percentage of 50%. On the other hand, all private sector universities attained more than 50%. It indicated that private sector universities were better prepared for online teaching compared to public sector universities of the province. As far as, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is concerned, there are eighteen (18) public and eight (8) private sector universities. Out of twenty-six (26), ten (10) public and three (3) private sector universities failed to meet the required percentage of 50%. It shows that 13 universities of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa were not well prepared for online education. There are four (4) public and one (1) private sector University in Balochistan. Among the five (5) one (1) public sector university fall below 50%. It shows that one public sector university of Balochistan was not ready for online education. There are only three (3) public sector universities in Gilgit Baltistan. One (1) public sector university fall below 50%. It indicates that one public sector university of Gilgit Baltistan was not ready for online education. There are four (4) public and one (01) private sector University in Azad Jammu & Kashmir. Two (2) public sector universities could not meet the required 50% It speaks that 2 public sector universities of Azad Jammu & Kashmir were not ready for online education. Islamabad is the Federal Capital of Pakistan. There are ten (10) public and six (6) private sector universities in Federal Capital of Pakistan. Two (2) public and one (1) private sector University of federal capital could not achieve the required 50%. The findings are very interesting since there are good research universities in federal capital of Pakistan which offer MPhil and PhD programs over the years in various fields of education. They also failed in achieving the required target as set for this study.



6. Conclusion

HEC COVID policy guideline data was drawn from the website of Higher Education Commission (HEC) of Pakistan. Moreover, online readiness data was used from Higher Education Data Repository (HEDR). Results depict a picture that public and private sector universities endeavored to adopt Higher Education Commission COVID guideless for the safety and security of students, faculty and other staff. They swiftly switched from traditional modes of classroom teaching to online teaching which is full of challenges and issues for them. However, they secured the academic loss of students. On the other hand, certain academic, computer, internet, fees and infrastructure barriers pertaining to online teaching surfaced from different areas. Universities and the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan should address them through a joint venture prior to the start of the forthcoming online semester since a second and third wave of COVID has already started in the country. Universities should focus professional development for faculty training in online teaching, assessment and evaluation of answer scripts, and preparation of results. A strong mechanism should be introduced which is teacher-student friendly. Students should never suffer from a grading point of view. Long term policies should be framed which promote online education in Pakistan. Universities should focus on improvement of IT infrastructures, motivation of students, training of teachers, and provision of computer accessories to students and faculty. According to the World Health Organization (WHO) COVID-19 can linger for years thus, online education can play an important role as a knowledge-sharing platform for students and institutions.

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