**Starting a PhD in the Pandemic: Challenges and Benefits**

Scholars who embark on their journey towards earning a doctorate know that they are about to undertake a mammoth task. At the best of times, starting a PhD can be quite a demanding and, at times, overwhelming academic commitment. However, when a pandemic is added to the equation, things undeniably get even more difficult.

The experience of starting or pursuing a PhD in the pandemic is largely unprecedented, although it can be safely stated that it affects scholars and their daily lives in many disruptive ways. Apart from causing emotional stress and anxiety, the COVID situation can also throw up other challenges for PhD scholars such as technological and logistical troubles.

In order to deal with these negative effects, one needs to understand them properly first. So, let’s take a look at some of the major challenges faced by research scholars who are starting a PhD during the pandemic.

**Challenges of Staring a PhD in the Pandemic**

* **A sense of isolation**

Loneliness has always been one of the most common problems faced by research scholars. Since preparing for a PhD often entails working alone on projects, the situation predictably leads to an overbearing sense of isolation at times. As a result of the COVID situation, the overwhelming task of starting a PhD has been made even more difficult. PhD scholars looking to pursue a doctorate are being made to contend with lockdowns and social isolation, which is invariably leading to fear and confusion.

With almost all educational institutions remaining closed down, isolated scholars are left longing for any form of institutional support. While some universities are better than others at providing academic assistance to PhD scholars, the ongoing pandemic restrictions are not enabling even these universities to offer scholars any relevant form of support. For instance, mentorship programs, workshops or social events for new PhD scholars have become nearly inexistent due to the pandemic. Consequently, a sense of isolation is proving to be a huge detriment for some scholars looking to start a PhD in the pandemic.

* **Lack of peer support**

Starting a PhD is such a daunting task because research scholars can face many uncertainties and doubts. At a time when many important choices need to be made, peer support is immensely helpful. Friends and family can be immensely supportive when starting a PhD, but the kind of support you can get from fellow PhD scholars just cannot be replicated. The shared commonalities, interests and experiences can help many a PhD aspirant make better sense of their bearings.

The ongoing pandemic has made it difficult to meet and interact with peers and one can often experience a general lack of motivation because of the same. Where once it would be easy to sit down with a peer to share ideas and suggestions, the pandemic has made this day-to-day task very difficult now. With social restrictions in full effect, the only viable recourse for PhD scholars is to maintain their peer network virtually, over the internet. After all, online meetings can go a long way in helping one ascertain what they want from their impending PhD course.

* **Stress and Anxiety**

The pandemic has caused a considerable spike in the stress and anxiety levels of all kinds of people around the world, and when it comes to PhD scholars, the increase in these levels is even more pronounced. Starting a PhD, even without a pandemic in their midst, is quite a stressful task for most. With COVID wreaking havoc everywhere, the uncertainty of an upcoming lockdown, or a piece of disturbing COVID-related news, can often prove to be even more taxing for scholars.

Furthermore, with the pandemic in full swing, many PhD scholars are also left wondering about the uncertainty that the future holds for them, both in terms of their academic life as well as their distant career prospects. Scholars looking to start a PhD in the pandemic are being burdened by all kinds of COVID-related inconveniences. From uncertain filing dates of PhD applications and deferred entrance examination dates to delayed Research Degree Committee (RDC) meetings for initial interviews – problems are aplenty, and PhD scholars are having to deal with the stress and anxiety involved therein.

**Benefits of Starting a PhD in the Pandemic**

Now, although some would argue that there cannot be any actual and relevant benefits of starting a PhD in the pandemic, the reality, thankfully, is different. There is always a silver lining present if one looks hard enough. Let’s see how new PhD scholars can make the best of the situation through the following benefits:

* **Support groups and community coming together**

Research scholars all over the world are gradually, albeit grudgingly, settling down into their altered routines. The internet, as ever, is proving to be an immense boon as individuals are banding together online to form virtual classrooms, support groups and the like. With social distancing becoming the norm everywhere, online communities are coming to the rescue of many individuals seeking academic or social guidance.

When starting a PhD during these uncertain times, scholars should make it a point to harness the power of this virtual community that is available to them. A lot of confusion can be cleared just by talking to like-minded individuals in a supportive environment. For new PhD scholars, speaking to their supervisor often is also highly advisable. Besides reaching out for guidance and feedback, keeping one’s supervisor in the loop and communicating with them freely is always a good idea.

* **More time to spare**

With social restrictions and lockdowns in place, many PhD aspirants are left with more time on their hands. This time should be used constructively – by reading and researching about one’s field, or maintaining a diary of your academic activities that will come in handy later, or even by pursuing a new hobby or interest. Not only can such activities positively distract a PhD scholar and keep them busy, but also help them make more informed choices during the course of their lives, academic or otherwise.

**Conclusion**

With the challenges and benefits of starting a PhD in the pandemic out of the way, the next question is, ‘What is the way forward?’ Well, even in such a strange time where very few have an understanding of what the future holds, the most important thing is to stay positive and upbeat.

Starting a PhD during a pandemic is obviously accompanied by a huge set of problems. However, with the right frame of mind, coupled with the right kind of support, even these problems can be overcome one step at a time.