A Qualitative Case Study of How College Students Regard Distance Education during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Saudi Arabia

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ABSTRACT The purpose of this study was to assess e-learning during the coronavirus pandemic regarding advantages, limitations and their recommendations for managing learning during the pandemic. This study employed a qualitative research based on the case study. Sixteen students from the College of Education, King Saud University, were invited to participate. These students use the 'Zoom' application for receiving their online lectures. Additionally, a WhatsApp one-on-one semi-structured interview for 20 minutes was employed. The application, iCloud was used to record meetings and interviews for direct transcription to ensure trustworthiness (transferability, dependability, confirmability and credibility). Results were presented in three themes that is, advantages of employing distance education, limitations of usages, and recommendations for improvements. Analysing the feedbacks collected from students by the four interviewers, important characteristics of distance education emerged. They were student-centred learning, which included comfortable, self-directed learning, asynchronous learning, and flexibility. The most common limitations associated with distance education in general included the inefficiency that is, lack of student feedback, and lack of attentiveness. As for recommendations for improvements the most obvious characteristics that became evident in students' responses were teaching and assessment and quality enhancement.

INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of 2020, the world has witnessed exceptional circumstances associated with the spread of the new coronavirus or COVID-19 (Lee 2020; Mpungose 2020; Ipsos 2021; OECD 2021; Altun et al. 2021; Bilgin and Erhan 2021), and educational institutions have been affected by these decisions. It is no longer possible to continue the educational process in its traditional form, and millions of students and their teachers at all educational stages have been kept in their homes. The form of the spread of this virus or the pandemic is a major crisis that all countries of the world faced without exception, and the countries of the world rushed to search for alternative methods to prevent the educational process from stopping. During this, not all countries were at the same level in facing this emergency situation, and different experiences emerged to deal with this emergency. This was followed by the emergence of the term

'emergency remote education' along with the term 'open learning', and UN institutions such as UNESCO (UNESCO 2020) and other institutions have intervened to follow this emergency matter by providing a helping hand to various countries of the world, given that this pandemic has formed a common denominator for the suffering of millions of people around the world. Part of that suffering is due to the fears associated with the spread of the pandemic and the numbers of daily deaths, and the denial of the practice of normal humanitarian activity.

Saudi Arabia Experiences in Applying E-learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has a rich experience in managing crises facing the educational process. This appeared at the southern border. In 2016, an open learning program was signed, in cooperation between the Ministry of Education and the Education Development Company.

It is a duty to enable students to continue their learning under any circumstances, and that the Education Development Company has prepared for this program and has the capabilities

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to fully implement it to help provide education and service at this time, especially for those affected by crises (Mahrous 2020).

E-learning Platforms

According to the Saudi Ministry of Education, open learning platforms have been activated for public education and private education, in addition to taking many urgent measures as follows.

- Completion of the virtual school building in one week, during which the school headquarters were furnished, and satellite broadcasting and 20 smart boards were supplied and installed, and the teaching staff was trained to photograph educational clips.
- Daily lessons were prepared to explain the curriculum, with the participation of 276 teachers and 73 supervisors. 3,368 lessons were explained, and the number of teaching hours reached 1,684 hours.
- In addition to lessons for curriculum review, with the participation of 123 teachers, and 73 supervisors. 1,107 lessons were reviewed, and the number of teaching hours reached 554 hours.

The National Education Portal (Ain) provides digital content that contains more than 45,000 virtual educational materials and more than 2,000 digital books.

Virtual Kindergarten is an integrated educational system for early childhood stage.

The unified education system contains digital educational lessons and activities in an interactive educational environment between the teacher and the student, and the Ain platform provides daily explanations of the curricula for all educational stages, and the Kingdom's decision to activate the "Blackboard" system came after the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the system provides many advantages for teachers, including:

- Recording the attendance and absence of students
- Add assignments, tests and courses for students
- Set up virtual lessons
- Set up educational paths for a dedicated group of students
- Answer student inquiries sent via teacher rooms

Ministry of Education's Initiative

The Saudi Ministry of Education's initiative to deal with the pandemic and the threat it poses to the educational process can be explained in light of the Kingdom's previous experience in managing educational crises, as the Saudi Ministry of Education had previous rich experience in providing open learning services to male and female students on the southern borders of the Kingdom. The plan preserved the student's basic rights in obtaining education through direct contact with their teachers through the school-twinning project. Other electronic educational alternatives were also activated, such as the "lessons" educational channels and the "Aali" satellite channel, and benefiting from the platforms of open learning.

Aim of the Study

The aim of this study was to assess open learning during with respect to advantages, limitations and their recommendations for managing learning during the pandemic.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research method was employed. A WhatsApp one-on-one semi-structured interview for 20 minutes was employed. Three themes were proposed, that is, advantages of employing open learning, limitations of usages, and recommendations for improvements. Data were collected during the academic year 2020-2021.

Study Group and Procedure

Sixteen students from the College of Education, King Saud University, were invited to participate. Those students use the 'Zoom' application for receiving their online lectures. Four interviewers comprising the author besides three other lecturers conducted the interviews. The data were thematically analysed by compiling, disassembling, reassembling and interpretation by all the interviewers each on their own, and then the data were corroborated to ensure analytical accuracy (Creswell and Poth 2018).

Design

This study employed a qualitative research based on the case study (Creswell and Poth 2018).

RESULTS

Presentation of Findings

Results were presented in three themes, that is, advantages of employing distance education, limitations of usages, and recommendations for improvements.

Theme 1: Advantages of Employing Open Learning

Analysing the feedbacks collected from students by the four interviewers, an important characteristic of distance education emerged. It is student-centred learning, which includes comfortable, self-directed learning, asynchronous learning, and flexibility. For instance, most of the students agreed with Student 18 who posited, *"It is easy and more comfortable for me now to listen to the lecture while sitting in my bedroom, Or anywhere that I get used to and feel comfortable"*. In other words, according to Tao et al. (2006) and Borstorff and Lowe (2007), this new environment for learning that is centred on electronic networks has allowed learners in universities to receive individualised support and also to have learning schedules that are more suitable to them as well as separate from other learners.

As for self-directed learning, most of the students agreed with Student 3 who posited, *"I think Distance Education is making good students more active and self-learner, that is, it helps them to get engaged in the learning processes, such as acquiring information, planning and evaluating the learning activities"*. In other words, self-directed learners are usually more actively participative in learning tasks such as reading online learning material, completing classroom tasks, planning and evaluating milestones of learning (Yilmaz 2016; Geng et al. 2019).

Concerning asynchronous learning, most of the students agreed with Student 7 who posited, *"One can download lectures at any time. It is easy for us to go back and go through the whole video for revision"*. In other words, asynchronous learning helps make learning self-paced, independent and most importantly, student-centred (Murphy et al. 2011). Therefore, this type of learning is likely to scaffold students' previous knowledge with new concepts (Lin et al. 2012; Shuang et al.2019). It opens the opportunity for discussions with peer groups and helps build critical thinking and deep learning (Huang and Hsiao 2012).

As for flexibility, most of the students agreed with Student 18 who posited, *"Although we are away from our university, and cannot attend lectures, distant learning during COVID-19 enables us to continue our education and have all our lectures without discontinuity"*. In other words, in the online learning scenarios, students have more flexibility in deciding when, how and with what content and activities they engage (Milligan and Littlejohn 2014). This flexibility requires students to monitor and adjust their behaviour and actions concerning the specific learning context (Zimmerman 2000; Eissa 2015; Kuuk and Ali 2020).

Theme 2: Limitations of Usages

Analysing the feedbacks collected from students by the four interviewers, students reported some limitations of usages, concerning distance learning. The most obvious characteristic that became evident in students responses was inefficiency, which included, lack of student feedback, and Lack of attentiveness. Concerning lack of student feedback, most of the students agreed with Student 2 who posited, *"The professor does not know for sure whether his students are getting the point or not. That is, he does not care much of getting students' feedback. He only gives the lecture as if it were a chore to do"*. In other words, due to the pandemic, higher institutions in every corner of the world, including this country as well, are forced to suspend face-to-face classes. That is, they have rushed to remote teaching and online classes, which creates unprecedented challenges in terms of getting used to the technologies and in accessing essential facilities such as laboratories (Cooper and Tschobotko 2020).

Concerning lack of attentiveness most of the students agreed with Student 15 who posited, *"I think that the type to instruction has some limitations such as lacking students' attention. Why? Students know that they will get the recordings at any time, so they might not listen to the lecture properly"*. In other words, in a real-world classroom, a teacher easily captures the attention state of students and adapts lessons accordingly, in order to maximise the student's interest and participation (Narayanan et al. 2014). However, in distance education, students feel free to attend to or not attend to the lecturer, as they think they will get the recordings at any time.

Theme 3: Recommendations for Improvements

Analysing the feedbacks collected from students by the four interviewers, students reported some recommendations for improvements, concerning distance learning. The most obvious characteristics that became evident in students responses were teaching and assessment and quality enhancement. Teaching and assessment included online examination, as for online examination, most of the students agreed with Student 6 who posited, *"Online examination helps university teachers to reach remote students"*. Another student, Student 3, posited, *"The online examination may produce an equal level of students' performance"*. Student 17 posited, *"Online examination helps to boost the students' results"*. This goes in the same line with findings of Gilbert et al. (2011) and Eljinini and Alsamarai (2012).

As for quality enhancement, most of the students agreed with Student 1 who posited, *"Being out of sight of their instructors will allow students to collaborate together, thus writing the same assignments from the same source. I think there should be a plagiarism software to check assignments"*. Some researchers blame internet for the increased "opportunities" for cheating (Brace 2005) and others (that is, Marsh 2017) consider the increased incidence of cheating at least in part as a consequence of the use of internet.

DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to assess open learning during the coronavirus pandemic regarding advantages, limitations and their recommendations for managing learning during the pandemic. Results were presented in three themes of advantages of employing distance education, limitations of usages, and recommendations for improvements. Analysing the feedbacks collected from students by the four interviewers, important characteristics of open learning emerged. They were student-centred learning, which included comfortable, self-directed learning, asynchronous learning, and flexibility. This goes in the same line with Zayapragassarazan's findings (2020), which ascertained that flexible learning, which is described as a learner-centred approach to learning provided students with different learning choices. This in turn helps in making learning outcomes useful and exciting. During the pandemic, that is COVID-19, there is need for enough time to prolong and sustain the online education.

The most common limitations associated with open learning in general included the inefficiency that is, lack of student feedback, and lack of attentiveness (Peytcheva-Forsyth et al. 2018; Alshaibani 2020). In the traditional classroom, students meet with each other in the space, exchange ideas, information, and knowledge, ask the professor questions, interact with them, and receive feedback from colleagues and teachers. On the other hand, sharing ideas, knowledge and information in real time in the virtual environment that is in open learning is considered missing to a large extent. Concerning reported limitations, this result is in the same line with Lim's findings (2020), which indicated that it is absurd to teach students through open learning without preparing the climate, environment, and students for this type of learning. Teachers should be skilled on one hand (Tahoon 2021), and students should be prepared for this, on the other hand.

The advent of social media (Siemieniecka et al. 2017; Karaman et al. 2020), allow students to easily access a wealth of information in a matter of seconds. The results of internet searches (Demirdag 2016; Mallik and Lakshmi 2017; Kolan and Beste 2021) are also electronic, and students can quickly copy and paste the information directly into assignments, papers, and other documents (Jones et al. 2015).

CONCLUSION

This study points to assess open learning during the coronavirus pandemic regarding ad-

vantages, limitations and their recommendations for managing learning during the epidemic. Results were presented in three themes of advantages of employing open learning, limitations of usages, and recommendations for improvements. Analysing the feedbacks collected from students by the four interviewers, important characteristics of open learning emerged. They were student-centred learning, which included comfortable, self-directed learning, asynchronous learning, and flexibility, inefficiency, which included lack of student feedback, and lack of attentiveness, and teaching and assessment and quality enhancement, teaching and assessment included online examination, and quality enhancement.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Some recommendations are presented below. Out of being easy and more comfortable for students to listen to the lecture while sitting in their bedrooms, one should begin open learning during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. It is absurd to teach students through open learning without preparing the climate, environment, and students for this type of learning.

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