

The Perceptions of Undergraduate Libyan Students about E-Learning Experiences

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on learning experiences of undergraduate Libyan students at a Libyan university during the era of the COVID-19. It aims to explore the challenges that they face and to suggest possible solutions. It is a qualitative study to explore their perceptions and perspectives. Semi-structured interview is the main method of data collection. The results reveal that weak internet connection and an unstable electricity are the main challenges that students face, and these challenges are before the coronavirus, but the pandemic has exacerbated the problems. The findings also indicate that all participants are unprepared to turn to e-learning because they are familiar with traditional education and they are untrained. Furthermore, poor economic condition that some participants live owing to the pandemic has adversely affected their learning experiences. Moreover, the findings indicate that e-learning is more effective in Social Science than in Applied Science.

المخلص

تركز هذه الدراسة على خبرات الطلبة الليبيين في التعليم الإلكتروني في الجامعة الليبية خلال فترة كورونا. تهدف إلى إكتشاف الصعوبات التي يواجهها الطلبة خلال تلك فترة وإقتراح الحلول. الاداة الرئيسية المستخدمة في تجميع البيانات هي المقابلة. النتائج اظهرت أن معظم الطلبة غير جاهزين للإستخدام التعليم الإلكتروني لأنهم متعودين على طرق التدريس التقليدية. وكذلك هم غير متدربين للإنتقال إلى التعليم الإلكتروني. النتائج أشارت إلى أن النت الضعيف وأنقطاع التيار الكهربائي هما من الصعوبات الرئيسية التي يواجهها الطلبة. هذه الصعوبات قبل الكورونا لكن الوباء زاد المشكلة. كذلك أثرت حالة الفقر التي يعيشها بعض الطلبة بسبب الوباء سلبيا على تعليمهم .

KEYWORDS ; e-learning, pandemic, challenges, and Libyan students

Introduction

The out breaking of corona virus has become the concern of all people around the world and it has affected many African countries including Libya (Bashir, 2021). Despite the quarantine and other preventive measures, there is a significant increase in the number of infected cases in Libya with the COVID-19, and, according to the World Health Organization (WHO)(2020), Libya has been classified as one of the highest risk countries. The National Centre For Preventing Diseases (2020) reported that “the cases reached to more than 3,017 people across the country and this number will be increased every single day”. Currently, none can predict how long the corona virus will last and how many people will be infected with the COVID-19 in Libya. Therefore, like many governments, the Libyan government takes rapid actions such as lockdown and closing schools and educational institutions in order to secure well-being of the citizens, to reduce contact among students, and to minimise infection rates (Alsoud and Harasis, 2021). This is likely to affect the Libyan education system adversely because since 2011, Libya faces many challenges in all sectors, particularly the education system. The closure of educational institutions stimulate the urgent need to use e-learning in order to avoid interruption, and this is a challenge for the Libyan education system to deal with the current situation and to ensure the continuity of studying (Zalat, Hamed, Bolbol, 2021). Most of the countries have been converted from traditional teaching and learning to e-learning and distances learning (Alsoud and Harasis, 2021).

To date, there have not been many comprehensive studies about the effect of the COVID-19 on the learning experiences of students in Libya. Conducting research about the impact of the COVID-19 is an important and a new area for research because many African countries including Libyan is vulnerable to face the outbreak of corona virus. Therefore, this study focuses on the learning experience of undergraduate Libyan students during the era of COVID-19 pandemic. The aims are to identify the learning experience of undergraduate Libyan student; to explore the challenges that Libyan university students face owing to the lockdown of educational institutions and the ongoing spreading of coronavirus across the country, and it also aims to suggest solutions. This paper answers the following research question: What are the main challenges that Libyan undergraduate students face in the use of e-learning?

Literature Review

.E-Learning

Since 15 March, 2020, Libya's Ministry of Higher Education has taken the decision to suspend the teaching and learning on campus and to move to e-learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, this can be a challenge because not all learners are able to get access to this mode of education. The most common terms of online learning are e-learning and blended learning, and many authors suggest definitions to online learning. For instance, Dhawan defines online learning as a "tool that can make the teaching-learning process more student-centered, more innovative, and even more flexible" (Dhawan, 2020, p. 223). Shahzad, Hassan, Aremu, Hussain, and

Lodhi (2020) have used the term “e-learning” and they defined it as teachers’ delivery of teaching materials to their students via internet. Online learning is also defined as “learning experiences using various electronic devices (e.g. computers, laptops, smartphones) with internet availability” (Zalat, Hamed, Bolbol, 2021). It is obvious that online learning is the use of technological devices and the internet for educational purposes.

There are two types of e- learning, and, according to Dhawan (2020), they are as follow: synchronous environment and asynchronous environment. In synchronous learning environment, students attend live lectures, interact with their tutors, and receive feedback, whereas in asynchronous learning environments, there is no live lectures, no immediate feedback, lectures are recorded and students can watch them (Dhawan, 2020). The concern is about the quality of online teaching and learning (Carey, 2020). Thus, Google offers many products that can be useful and an alternative for face-to-face classes such as Gmail, Google Forms, and Google Classroom.

Many researchers have studied the impact of e-learning on education and they have found that there are benefits and drawbacks of e-learning, for example, Dhawan (2020) states that e-learning is student-centered and it has the potential to offer flexibility since students can learn at anytime and anywhere, and this gives rise to developing their skills that can lead to life-long learning.

Furthermore, educators can use videos and texts to maintain a human touch to their lectures, and this can contribute to creating an interactive learning environment where immediate feedback can be given, questions can be asked, and students can learn effectively. Alsoud and Harasis (2021) state

that the main advantage of distance learning is ensuring continuity of education and lifelong learning. However, e-learning is not without limitation, for instance, e-learning can prevent direct communication and human touch owing to lack of on-campus socialisation (Sadeghi, 2019).

Furthermore, Favale, Soro, Trevisan, Drago, and Mellia (2020) highlight that the users of e-learning face many technical problems that can slow-down the teaching and learning processes. They also state that students are quite likely to vary in terms of their understanding and comprehension, and some students may feel uncomfortable, and this can lead to frustration. Students are unable to get access to textbooks and resources due to the lack of copyright exceptions and limitations (Alsoud and Harasis, 2021). However, the use of e-learning can be challenge for many developed countries, particularly Libya because of the number of power outages since the beginning of the conflict. Therefore, this study aims to explore e-learning experiences of undergraduate Libyan students in the era of the pandemic.

E-learning is considered as an essential tool to complete the course and to keep in touch with the learners. Kantipudi, Moses, Aluvalu, and Goud. (2021) indicate that many schools and universities have conducted e-learning to enhance teaching and learning processes. Tutors have been encouraged to use technology in order to complete their teaching tasks and to be connected with their students. However, e-learning can be a new model of learning for tutors and students in developed countries like Libya.

The Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on education

The pandemic has an impact on the education system; however, most of studies focus on the negative effect of the pandemic. Kantipudi et al (2021) indicate that the negative impact of the pandemic is lack of face-face learning, lack of conventional teaching, and growing uncertainty and anxiety among teachers and students. According to the UNESCO (2020b), the closure of educational institutions and the quarantine have adversely affected students. El Gimati, Alrasheed, and Bashir (2021) highlight that many people experience psychological problems such as depression, fear of death, anxiety, loneliness, and posttraumatic stress disorder.

Methodology

It is a qualitative study that aims to explore the perceptions and perspectives of undergraduate Libyan students' e-learning experiences. Online semi-structured interviews were conducted through Zoom owing to the pandemic situation. Semi-structured interviews were the main source of significant data. Semi-structured interview was selected because it allows the researcher to follow up the interviewees' answers and provides an opportunity to probe unexpected responses and to ask for clarification (Kvale, 2007). The interview consisted of core and supporting questions in order to gain in depth data. The questions were designed to address the research aims and question. The interviews lasted approximately half an hour. All the interviews were

recorded and notes were taken during the interviews in order to fill in any missing details.

This study forms a case study because it focuses on 10 Libyan students: 5 males and 5 females who were studying in different departments and different semesters to allow comparisons to be made across the case. Case study is a good approach when the researcher aims to get an in-depth data (Creswell, 2007). The researcher intends to represent the different perspectives of the participants and the richness of their experiences.

The participants were selected deliberately or “hand-picked for purpose” (Denscombe, 2010, p. 34) according to the following criteria: they are all Libyans, studying at university of Al-Manar (pseudonym), they are aged from 19 to 21, but they are studying in different semesters and departments. Although there are many universities in Libya, only one was chosen. Informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity were taken into consideration. The data from interviews was collected in Arabic language. Then, the data was transcribed and translated. Data analysis was done manually and undertaken through identification of codes and themes.

Results and discussion

Challenges

Weak internet connection, particularly in rural areas

The results indicate that the majority of the participants reported that weak internet connection and electricity outage were the main challenges because they affected their learning experiences negatively. For instance, Aisha said that:

I didn't have access to electronic resources. I wanted to read references about "Methods of Enquiry" module, but most of the time there was no internet connection. This is the situation before the pandemic, but the COVID-19 made matters worse due to the lockdown of the internet company and quarantine (silence).

The above quotation revealed that Aisha was enthusiastic to learn, but limited access to the internet and the impact of the pandemic prevented her online learning.

The data also show that the participants from rural areas such as Alaa and Najmia faced enormous challenges such as technological accessibility, poor internet connectivity, and harsh study environments. For instance, Alaa stated that:

I live in Majer, I can't attend online lectures because the internet in our area is weak and no coverage at all for a month. There is no power for 72 hours, none can fix the problem because most workers in the electric company are in quarantine. However, when there is power, I can attend recorded lectures. Sometimes I have questions about the lecture and need more explanation, unfortunately, no one can help me immediately.

It was clear that weak internet connection and long hours of electricity cut off were the main challenges for Alaa's e-learning because she lived in a rural area. In Libya, it is common to find that cities and urban areas are better than villages and rural areas in terms of facilities and infrastructure. This was the situation since the conflict, but the COVID-19 and the lockdown had

exacerbated the problem. Although asynchronous e-learning was beneficial for Alaa, it had limitations.

Poor economic condition

Some participants like Shahd, Muman, Osama, Lamar, and Rahf reported that the pandemic affected their educational experiences adversely, and this was due to the low income of their families. For example, Shahd said that:

We moved from Tripoli to Zliten since the war, we rented a house with two bedroom. We used to have a small food store, but it had been closed after the COVID-19 break (silence). I have no private room to study in, I have no computer, I have no mobile to attend online lectures, my mobile is out-dated. I have no broadband connection. I feel fear of my study because we do not complete the semester and we know nothing about the time that we can back to university (tears).

The above comment showed the poverty situation that Shahd lived because of the lockdown. She indicated that she was lack of privacy and lack of essential devices such as computer and smart phone to attend online lectures, and this negatively affected her educational experience. It is clear that shahd was thinking about future as she felt fear of losing the whole ongoing semester, and this was due to the closure of universities because of the coronavirus. Her comment revealed that she was a member of displaced family as her family escaped from the capital since the conflict.

Thus, the lockdown owing to the COVID-19 was the main reason behind her difficulties.

Lack of sufficient awareness of the pandemic

The results showed that almost half of the participants like Ashraf, Emad, Hala, Eman, Samia, and Aisha had no sufficient awareness of the pandemic and its consequences. They knew about the COVID-19 outbreak after February 2020, but they did not expect the significant

transfer from traditional learning to e-learning. For instance, Ashraf stated:

I didn't expect the move to online learning. The transfer has a negative impact on my study. I heard about the COVID-19 from social media. I and my colleagues were not prepared for that move. For example, the social distance and quarantine made me suffering from loneliness and confusion. Since the COVID-19 outbreak and the beginning of e-learning, I had no desire to attend online lectures.

Ashraf's perception indicated the psychological impact of the COVID-19. His comment revealed that students were unprepared to e-learning, and this negatively affected their learning experiences. During the interview, Ashraf told the researcher's that his father passed away because of the pandemic. Clearly, the death of Ashraf's father affected his motivation to attend virtual lectures adversely.

Unfamiliarity with e-learning

The findings revealed that all participants indicate that they were unfamiliar with the technology and had never attended online classes before. They also state that they were familiar with traditional methods of teaching and learning. Yusef, for instance, reported that:

We used to face to face lectures. We memorise the sheets, and, then, we are evaluated by the exam. We listen to our tutors during the lectures. Using Google Classroom in teaching and learning are new things. We need time to practise that.

The above comment showed that the Libyan education system is teacher-centred and students are rote-learners. Lack of sufficient knowledge and skills in computer sciences, information system, and communication technology was challenge for Yusef. Yusef highlighted the significance of practice in e-learning in terms of developing students' skills and performance. It is obvious that it is challenge to engage students in learning process and to move from traditional teaching and learning to online mode. Similarly, Khauwla reported that:

We used to face-face teaching. After the COVID-19 outbreak, we are required to move to virtual lectures via Zoom and Google Classroom. Login, error in connection, outdated device, it is a hard mission to attend a lecture online. I feel stressed because I want to work with my colleagues in groups.

Khauwl's comment revealed that she was familiar with traditional methods of teaching. It appears that she was not prepared to transfer to online

classes. It is clear that she was struggling to learn online because online learning is a new experience for her. Lack of the social side and engagement in shared activities (i.e. learning as social participation) affected her psychological state and learning negatively.

The participants also highlighted that lack of training was the main reason. For instance, Samia said that:

I' m not familiar with using the internet and Applications. Most of our tutors didn't have an idea about the use of the applications such as Zoom. They are struggling to give virtual classes. The power outage and the internet connectivity didn't help tutors to teach and students to learn. It took an hour to download an article or a book. Using devices in learning is a new experience.

Samia's perception is similar to Aish and Alaa with regard to cut off of the electricity and weak internet connection. She highlighted that her tutors were unable to deliver lectures via Google Classroom since they are untrained to use e-learning applications and tools in teaching. The reality is that the Libyan education system is in the reform and rebuilding stage after the Libyan conflict that enforced Libya and Libyans to start from scratch.

Compatibility

The results of this study revealed that online learning proved to be effective with the participants who were studying in social science and humanities. In contrast, the data showed that online learning could not be applied in disciplines such as Engineering and Medical Sciences in which laboratories

and practical experiences are essential. For instance, Eman who was studying in Pharmacology department reported that:

Our study depends on conducting scientific experiments on laboratories. A big part of our study focused on practical side rather than theoretical one. Therefore, online learning was not helpful even with artificial labs.

Suggested solutions

Proper training courses on e-learning and the use of up to date applications have the potential to assist tutors and students to develop their knowledge and skills, and to improve the quality of higher education. Collaborative actions between two or three higher educational institutions can also be helpful. Furthermore, the Libyan Ministry of Higher Education should improve infrastructure and internet speed, provide proper internet access, support the use of e-learning, and create an adequate online environment in order to enhance the education system.

Conclusion

The results show that the main challenges are weak internet connection, particularly in rural areas and electricity outage, and these challenges affect the learning experiences of the participants adversely. Poor economic condition because of the negative impact of the pandemic and the lockdown, and lack of sufficient awareness of the pandemic. The results also indicate that unfamiliarity with e-learning for two main reasons : traditional methods of teaching and learning and lack of training.

The findings highlight that online learning is more convenient in social science and humanities rather than Applied sciences.

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