

Online Learning for Higher Education Continuity (during COVID-19 Pandemic)

The challenges, advantages, disadvantages and how to overcome: A Literature review

Talal A. Abdulkareem

E-mail: drtalalabdulkareem2013@gmail.com

Sajeda M. Eidan

E-mail: sajedaaidan2006@gmail.com

College of Agricultural Engineering Sciences
University of Baghdad, Iraq

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Abstracts

The Covid-19 pandemic has undoubtedly disrupted the higher education sector worldwide leading to the near-total closures of universities and colleges. Almost universities shifted face-to-face education to remote or online learning. These have created significant challenges for the global higher education community. This literature review focus on the challenges that faced higher education sector in many countries worldwide during covid-19 pandemic and how the remote learning and related techniques, platforms and other online implications were supporting the continuity of this utmost important sector during new normal era. Challenges, advantages and disadvantages of applying of these technologies by instructors and students and how to overcome these negatives will also discuss herein.

KeyWords; Covid-19, online learning, higher education, challenges, advantages, disadvantages.

1.0 Introduction

The covid-19 pandemic that has shuttered economies around the world and battered education systems in developing and developed countries. This situation creates a series of challenges that can deepen inequalities across societies which now forced move into the online realm. Many universities rushed to convert curriculum to an online environment, mindful technologies, platforms and websites (Crawford *et al.*, 2020). The impact has been dramatic and transformative as educators scrambled to put in place workable short-term solutions for remote learning, where students faced additional challenges related to financing and available infrastructure (Kandri, 2020).

Many institutions have become interested in how to best deliver course content online, engage learners and conduct assessments. Thus, COVID-19 while being a hazard to humanity has evolved institutions to invest in online learning (Mukhtar *et al.*, 2020). Electronic learning systems are web-based software for distributing, tracking, and managing courses over the Internet (Keis *et al.*, 2017). Many platforms like Google classroom, Blackboard, Moodle and Edmodo as well as meeting programs like google meet and free conference call long with their applications for video conferencing were applied during the institutions closure period for substituting the face to face traditional education system (Taylor and Mumtahina, 2017; Gay and Sofyan, 2017; Keller, 2018). Other commonly used video conferencing solutions include Zoom, Skype for business, WebEx and Adobe connect etc. (Buheji and Ahmed, 2020; Mukhtar *et al.*, 2020). These collectively can offer productive and convenient ways to achieve learning goals.

With the increase of using of online technologies during COVID-19, it is necessary to assess their effectiveness concerning advantages and disadvantages with regards to teaching and learning from various stakeholders (Shwartz *et al.*, 2020). The objective of this literature review is to explore the challenges, advantages and disadvantages of online learning system and related tools and applications with the perception of faculty members and students at universities and how to overcome these negatives.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Challenges

The challenges of online education are well documented including the inability to instantly ask questions, to discuss, to highlight, to confer with classmates—and they all contribute to a somewhat static experience. This adds to the loss of a quiet and stable work environment, with a desk, a proper chair, a laptop, and working internet. And even then, as many are experiencing during this pandemic, it's harder than usual for students to focus and remain disciplined (Feller, 2020).

Modern digital technologies are an integral part of young people's activities around the world and these are under unprecedented challenge (Koze and Koze, 2020). Millions of students in Turkey are facing these same challenges. The government closed all schools and universities on March 16, and they will remain closed until at least April 30 and probably longer. All classes, the Turkish government announced, would from that moment on be given online. The same has happened in other countries in the region, with Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq all closing down their schools in March as well. These countries all also

have large numbers of (primarily Syrian) refugees—a group that was already severely disadvantaged when it comes to education. In obtaining education, refugee youth must face language barriers, high (tuition) fees, and often are not able to utilize their previous diplomas and certificates (many were lost or destroyed in the Syrian civil war ; Buheji, 2020). Must be more than 2 references from the Journal

Most institutions are shifting courses to virtual learning platforms and all operations to remote work; limited IT resources and faculty experience with these modalities will create challenges. Some institutions will face the need to rapidly reexamine and potentially restructure operations and evaluate liquidity to ensure short term continuity.

2.2 Advantages of online learning system

Covid-19 may be the new beginning of the online learning capabilities of the higher education sector worldwide. It is no longer possible to reject the need for online learning options for the so-called “huge courses open online”. Online education may become a recognized alternative to traditional education. It is less capital intensive and fits in with the need to improve students' digital proficiency. Virtual education may revolutionize higher education because today's students have a higher ability to adapt to technology and electronic portals.

Moreover, online learning system may help in diversity of education curriculum and create an interaction that ensures attracting the interest of learners, providing immediate feedback, encouraging interaction with other learners and with the teacher, providing digital culture for learners, and contributes to enriching the learning process. Many students found in attending online courses the flexibility in afford them and the ability to learn in non-classroom environment that may be more suitable for some students who are not succeeding in face to face learning system. Buheji and Buheji (2020a).

According to the above benefits of online education, we expect that the Iraqi officials at the Ministry of Higher Education and universities will have to accept online learning as part of the teaching processes, and this in turn will lead to colleges, departments, and teachers having to think and consider which part of the educational curriculum will be presented through classroom lectures and any part that will be presented via the internet. In most Iraqi institutions, the online learning have many benefits following closure including the ability of complete the curriculum by using Google classroom (in most universities) and Moodle (in Kufa university) and not miss the academic year especially for the students at the last university levels.

2.2.1 Google classroom platform

As a free online learning platform, Google Classroom offers several benefits for students and instructors. For example but not limited to the easy to use and accessible from all devices, effective communication and sharing, speeds up the assignment process, effective feedback, no need for paper, clean and user-friendly interface and great commenting system.

Classroom provides students with exposure to an online learning system. Many college and university programs now require students to enroll in at least one online class. Exposure to Google Classroom may help students transition into other learning management systems used in higher education. Furthermore, Google classroom offers several ways for students to collaborate. Teachers can facilitate online discussions between students and create group projects within the Classroom. In addition, students can collaborate on Google documents which have been shared by the teacher.

Most digital natives are comfortable with technology and will be more apt to take ownership in their learning through use of technology. Classroom offers numerous ways to make learning interactive and collaborative. It offers teachers the ability to differentiate assignments, include videos and web pages into lessons, and create collaborative group assignments.

In most Arab countries including Iraq, Google classroom platform has succeeded because it contains a publicized version in the Arabic language and has an application in smart phones to facilitate access to students and instructors at faculties and universities (Ali and Ghazi, 2019). In Iraq where the online learning is limited before covid-19, it now be adopted by many instructors for giving their lectures to both undergraduate and graduate students easily. On the other hand, this platform has become easy to use for students after they found it difficult to use at the beginning. This platform was also used for many multi- disciplinary virtual workshops.

2.2.2 Zoom meeting application

The Zoom application is a free program used to organize meetings in high quality with the ability to share files with those present at the meeting, whether through the instructor or the student, provided that everyone has their own account. It has many advantages; 1) voice and video communication through the internet, 2) online learning by displaying the material to be taught via any program, whether it is an educational presentation via power point, word, video, or other training programs, or a screen such as a blackboard that is explained and written on, or a printed book in pdf, with the ability to specify any sentence or text. 3) The ability to enter the session via an internet link, with the ability to mute the participants during the speech, or allow some of them to speak. 4) The ability to record a video of what is being circulated through the session, and then display it via any social media means of attending it later.

During the past four months of the covid-19 pandemic in the world, Zoom application has been used extensively for holding virtual global meetings and conferences as well as to give scientific lectures at most universities successfully. This application was able to address the problems caused by social separation and create a safe means of communication to facilitate the work of scientific institutions in various parts of the world.

2.2.3 Disadvantages of online learning system

Despite the many benefits of online learning, there are some disadvantages that must be taken into consideration. These include but no limited to lack of accreditation and low quality, little or no face to face interaction, intense requirement for self-discipline and even more intense requirement of self –direction.

In Iraq and other developing countries, the online learning is still not developed and has not been widely used due to four reasons: 1) weakening the experience and training necessary to perform this difficult technological mission. 2) Many students and instructors do not have e-mail accounts. 3) Weak or uninterrupted internet in many regions as well as electrical power outage. 4) The study necessitates the presence in the classes and depends in its essence on direct memorization in the presence of an instructor and a receiving student.

2.2.4 Google classroom platform

Google classroom has some limitations include difficult account management, limited integration options, no automated updates, difficult learner sharing, editing problems, no automated quizzes and tests as well as impersonal.

2.2.5 Zoom meeting application

As in many other applications, zoom meeting application has some disadvantages like 40 min limits for video meetings in the free version, Since you pay for Zoom by the host, it can get expensive for larger teams, Poor and unstable audio and video quality and Lack of security, non-encrypted communication, cloud vulnerabilities, possibility of hacking.

2.3 How to overcome the disadvantages of online learning in developed countries

Because humans are social creatures who generally love company, the solitary experience of online learning can be a major hurdle for some students. It can be lonely unless you have a friend who is taking the course with you. Many courses attempt to address this by encouraging discussions in course forums which can be general discussion forums where students can introduce themselves, as well as focused discussions on particular aspects of the course. Posting your comments and thoughts to the forums can be helpful to overcome these feelings of isolation, particularly in courses that use community mentors or teaching assistants to respond to student posts.

Moreover, enable thousands of instructors to use an online learning platforms and applications as well to provide direct teaching service, broadcasting the study topics on a specialized TV channel, support the Internet platform to enable its use by hundreds of thousands of students and the use of satellite broadcasting and make the Internet free for students may also help to overcome these advantages. Moreover, problem-based learning (PBL) programs would be the most suitable alternative that would help the workplace to adopt learner centered approach faster without undermining the educational and training requirement (Buheji and Buheji, 2020b).

In some courses, participation in discussions is sluggish. To stimulate some online social interaction, write plenty of comments in the student discussion forums. Fellow students are more likely to engage with you if you have comments in several threads. You may need to be patient, though, because it may take days for replies to be posted.

3.0 Discussion and Conclusion

Youths at higher education level at present are engulfed with complicated challenges more than ever before (Mpaata, 2017). This review article reported the challenges, advantages and disadvantages of online learning in higher education institutions due to covid-19 pandemic with special remarks to google classroom platform and zoom meeting application which are

the most widely used during this period. The article evolved that online learning still faced many challenges especially in developed countries. Dash (2019) stated that three aspects of online learning are often explored currently: the utility of tool, the cost effectiveness and satisfaction of learner. She also reported that important technological aspects of using of Google classroom on mobile phones were preferred over its use using laptops.

The impact of the covid-19 outbreak is being felt by millions of people across the world with industries disrupted and economies in turmoil. The higher education sector is certainly not exempt from this uncertainty, with universities forced to close their doors, transfer their operations online, and attempt to plan for an unknown future. There are five important lessons that the higher education community can learn from this global crisis including 1) the importance of online platforms. 2) The value of international mobility and partnerships within higher education. 3) The role nature can play in the higher education experience. 4) The importance of having up-to-date technology. 5) The value of community.

In conclusion, this article explained the importance of online learning system and its platforms and applications to hasten the international higher education during covid-19 pandemic. This type of learning faced many challenges in some Arab and developing countries and need to be solved. Moreover, these applications have some disadvantages and the software companies need to treat and solve these problems to enable more students and instructors to use it easily. Many other studies are warranted to investigate the percentage of university students who using the online learning in Arab and developing countries, what are the difficulties facing these students and how to treat them?

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