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Adult E-Learning in the Middle East Educational Organizations during COVID-19 Pandemic: Challenges and Suggestions

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Abstract

This literature review study examines the critical issues and challenges adult e-learning faces in the Middle East due to the COVID-19 pandemic and suggests implications to overcome.

Keywords: Adult learning, E-learning, Middle East, COVID-19

Due to the pandemic, instructors and learners were not allowed to choose whether they wanted to transition to distance learning. This situation accelerated the adoption of a newer instructional method and a massive shift toward online learning (Kaiser et al., 2022). This shift has dramatically expanded access to education for adult learners, providing them with flexibility and convenience. Online programs allow learners to log in at times that suit their schedules and complete their learning in a way that fits their other life requirements. This flexibility increases motivation and helps meet learners' personal needs (Peters et al., 2022). Online learning also allows learners to stay with their families, have a work-life balance, and reduce travel costs (Boeren et al., 2020).

The quality and effectiveness of online learning formats compared to traditional formats depend on the educational content. For example, while some programs may work well online, others that require more hands-on learning may be better suited to traditional face-to-face learning (Vernon et al., 2009). Additionally, many other academic, communication, professional, and technical difficulties can arise in online learning, impacting the quality and effectiveness of the online learning experience (Hoq, 2020). As such, carefully examining the lessons learned from this experience is crucial, especially during the pandemic. However, not many studies have paid attention to these significant issues in the Middle East area and their educational organizations during the pandemic.

Therefore, this study aims to examine how educational organizations in the Middle East could overcome the issues of adult e-learning they may encounter due to the pandemic. For this, it addresses two research questions: (1) What are the critical issues in e-learning during the pandemic? (2) What interventions can practitioners make to overcome the challenges?

Literature Review

Several studies found how e-learning could be affected by the pandemic. Ali et al. (2021) argue that online learning hurts student engagement. This study also provides reflections on technological uses and platforms such as Zoom. Another case study engaged 18 teachers in Indonesia through surveys and interviews to explore online engagement during COVID-19. However, it is an insufficient sample to generalize e-learning during the pandemic (Tamah et al., 2020). Mahyoob (2000) also highlights the challenges of online learning during the pandemic experienced by English language learners (EFL) in Saudi Arabia.

Meanwhile, (Adeshola & Agoyi, 2022) examined the factors influencing university students' e-learning engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study finds that perceived usefulness, ease of use, and self-efficacy positively affect e-learning engagement. The study also

suggests that “learning persistence” mediates the relationship between these factors and e-learning engagement, meaning that students who are more persistent in their learning are more likely to engage in e-learning. In addition, (Lassoued et al., 2020) explored the obstacles that hinder achieving quality in distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study identifies several factors that contribute to the obstacles, including the lack of adequate technical infrastructure, the limited access to resources and materials, the lack of teacher training and support, and the difficulties in student motivation and engagement.

The findings section will present the existing studies’ findings above.

Methods

For this scoping literature review study focusing on the research questions (Peters et al., 2015), a literature search on online learning issues during the pandemic was conducted using multiple databases such as google scholar, ERIC, EBSCO, ProQuest, and JSTOR. We focused on scholarly journals and their articles published after the period of the pandemic began. We initially used the discovery service to browse articles across all databases and conducted over 20 searches using relevant phrases and key terms. We finally selected 18 articles relevant to two research questions to examine the critical issues of adult e-learning in the Middle East and to address =interventions to overcome post-pandemic developmental challenges.

Findings

The challenge of the COVID -19 pandemic has led to several other challenges, whereby we acknowledge that online educational programs, although they are much more common now, are not well suited for everyone.

Challenges

Technology

Technology was the most significant obstacle for all learning participants. In Saudi Arabia, the EFL learners reported technical issues as the most significant issue because they could not access their assignments exam, reported technical issues as the most significant issue. The internet speed issue is where students, instructors, and employees come from remote areas where the network is experiencing pressure due to COVID-19 (Mahyoob, 2020). Internet is especially a big issue in developing countries where internet connection is very costly and unstable internet connection capacity (Newlin & Grasia, 2021). Educational organizations have recognized the need for technology access. They are now prioritizing building basic technology skills for program administrators and instructors and funding laptops, tablets, computers, and Wi-Fi hotspots to connect stakeholders such as students, instructors, and staff (Chiu et al., 2021).

Engagement

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted students’ routines and learning habits due to the sudden shift from traditional in-person to online learning, potentially affecting their engagement in online learning (Ali et al., 2021). Furthermore, as virtual learning experienced higher distractions than face-to-face classrooms in Saudi Arabia, the lack of direct interaction with instructors and peers negatively impacts students’ motivation and involvement in learning (Al Zahrani et al., 2021).

During virtual sessions, learners have the option to turn off their video and microphone for some reasons, including poor internet connectivity and privacy concerns (Singh et al., 2021). As a result, the teachers feel a sense of losing control of their students as they cannot effectively communicate. It became challenging to monitor students’ commitment levels (Bawaneh, 2021).

Although assignments may still be completed in remote learning environments, there is no proven way to ensure that students devote their full attention and effort to their tasks. Thus, it can be difficult for the instructor to track students' learning efficiency (Scheffel et al., 2019).

On the other hand, Tamah et al. (2020) conducted a case study that did not find a correlation between teachers and online engagement in online learning during the pandemic. The study suggests that some teachers may have struggled with online learning due to their lack of technological knowledge or fear of technology, even if they were engaging in traditional classroom interactions. Allowing students to study independently at home without sufficient interaction with teachers, such as through assignments sent via WhatsApp or email, can lead to negative impacts such as missed assignments and due dates (Tamah et al., 2020).

Anxiety

The unexpected change to remote learning caused anxiety among students, as the university's curriculum was initially designed for in-person classes (Maphosa, 2021). First, the negative impact of e-learning on the emotional well-being of students in Saudi Arabia was mainly due to the prolonged period of e-learning implemented to prevent the spread of the virus. It shows that more than one-third of students in the sample reported that the lack of routine life, increased screen time, and reduced social interactions have contributed to distress among students (Hassan et al., 2022). The prolonged use of e-learning digital tools during the pandemic turned into Jordanian university students' sleeping habits change, who experienced boredom, distraction, increased stress, anxiety, frustration, and depression (Al-Salman et al., 2022). These negative psychological factors hindered the students' ability to focus, significantly declining their academic performance.

Interventions to Overcome Challenges

Technology

Distance learning should be accessible to all students, regardless of socioeconomic status or geographic location. Therefore, institutions should invest in technical infrastructure (e.g., high-speed internet) to ensure students can access the tools they need to succeed in a distance learning environment. This approach also gives students better access to necessary resources and materials (e.g., laptops and textbooks). These all can guarantee that students have the tools they need to learn and provide teachers with ongoing professional development and support to enable them to adapt new teaching strategies to a distance learning context (Lassoued et al., 2020).

Engagement

Online learning involvement enhances the learner's psychological engagement through active participation, sharing knowledge and feedback, and efficiently providing emotional support (Noe et al., 2010). In addition, several factors positively affect e-learning engagement, such as self-efficacy and perceived usefulness. Namely, learners are likelier to engage with the e-learning platform and complete the required tasks and assignments when they believe they can learn and perform well in an online learning environment (Adeshola & Agoyi, 2022).

Anxiety

The increase in the self-consciousness of virtual settings and low face-to-face interaction can cause fear of public speaking, known as speech anxiety. Prentiss (2021), however, suggests several strategies to overcome speech anxiety; clear communication and expectations, including outlining requirements of virtual speeches, providing detailed instructions on technology use, and offering practice and feedback, can enhance students' confidence. Also, peer support opportunities, such as peer evaluations or mentoring, can foster a sense of community. Finally,

incorporating mindfulness techniques, relaxation exercises, or offering counseling services can help students manage stress and anxiety, promoting their overall well-being (Prentiss, 2021).

Discussions and Conclusion

This study intended to better understand how the pandemic could affect learning in the Middle East and evaluate the learner's new experiences in online learning. The findings show that online learning during the pandemic was necessary but posed challenges such as technological obstacles and ineffective engagement that prevented improving the quality of distance learning. They also highlight the importance of investing in technical infrastructure, providing adequate resources and materials, and offering training and support for teachers and students to overcome these challenges.

In particular, the findings shed light on the need for strategies to promote students' mental health and mitigate the negative psychological impact of online learning environments. For instance, good student training that teaches to use digital tools effectively and navigate the issues regarding technology access and internet connectivity can foster social interaction, engagement in online learning environments, and better academic performance.

Based on the findings, we argue that online educational practices should be aligned with educational entities' strategies and integrated across learning and development activities (Garavan, 2007). During the era of remote learning, E-learning has become increasingly important and prevalent as the pandemic has driven significant changes in the field of education. However, to effectively address the needs of educators and learners, it is now necessary to understand factors that influence e-learning effectiveness among adult learners during the COVID-19 pandemic. This approach can help to ensure that all individuals have access to the learning opportunities that best meet their needs.

Finally, we emphasize the importance of using the e-learning experiences and lessons learned from the Covid-19 pandemic. These prepare Middle East educational organizations better for future challenges in an emergency.

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