



Online learning - Global Challenges and Opportunities for Students in Higher Education amid the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Libyan Context

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Abstract: *The spread of COVID-19 has had psychological effects on higher education students globally reflected in high level of anxiety associated with worries of failing to complete their studies (Holmes et al., 2020; Sawahhel, 2020). Due to COVID-19 all universities in Libya were closed for ten months causing a massive impact and leaving about quarter a million students without education. However, during this period some universities took preventive measures and maintained functioning from a distance. An attempt was made in this study to explore higher education students' attitudes toward online learning and appreciate more the advantages and challenges associated with online learning. Of the 100 questionnaires sent out to university students, 58 responded back of whom 40 undergraduate and the remaining postgraduate students. The results of this study suggested that students are more interested in conventional way of learning in favour of face-to-face communication with tutors and peers as opposed to remote learning. For online learning to be successful in Libya, universities ought to upgrade their educational mode of delivery making the learning contents and assessment more desirable and responsive to the needs of the changing times. Furthermore, students must be technically and financially supported with unlimited access to internet.*

Keywords: *students; online learning; university; COVID-19 pandemic*

I. Introduction

The outbreak of COVID -19 has increased tension and anxiety amongst students in higher education globally. For a number of years higher education students in Libya have been studying under stressful circumstances and environments due to civil wars and conflicts with militias, causing increased insecurity and financial crises (Gadour, 2019; Zeiton, 2011) and this situation has gotten worse amid COVID-19. In fact, the lockdown of universities and disruption of students' education in Libya was not the first; this also happen during the 2011 uprising against Qaddafi's regime, all of which have placed an increased pressure on higher education students and reduced the ability of universities to meet the learning needs of students (Elhadi and Msherghi, 2020). Due to COVID-19 and the vulnerability of all educational institutions and universities in Libya were closed for ten months causing a massive impact and consequently over a quarter of a million students without education. However, during this period some universities took preventive measures and maintained functioning from a distance. The spread of this unprecedented pandemic has had psychological effects on

on higher education students which is reflected in the high level of anxiety associated with worries of failing to complete their studies (Holmes et al., 2020; Sawahhel, 2020).

However, despite these difficulties, countermeasures were taken by the educational authorities in Libya and globally to ensure students continue learning, beyond the conventional university setting. All universities and high educational institutions in Libya were instructed to start preparing for distance learning programmes to support students' learning, for example by using: national T.V. Channels, online classes/courses, rescheduling exams and assisting their students by virtual means (UNESCO Report, 2020). A step that is considered by many Libyan educators to be a very promising move away from traditional learning/teaching practices and toward a more digital and virtual one (Sawahel, 2020). Whilst everyone believes that this is the future of education, it should be noted that this could not happen in a society like Libya overnight. In attempt to support higher education students, some academic staff recorded and uploaded their lessons online for their students to access and some were even more creative using Zoom and other online sites, yet it appears that the greater majority of tutors are not prepared to deal with online learning. In truth, despite the efforts made by individual tutors to help students, universities in Libya are not prepared to successfully implement digital learning. There are indeed various obstacles and challenges that both students and tutors face within higher education (see for instance, Crawford, Butler-Henderson, Rudolph, & Glowatz, 2020). Although a great deal of the responsibility falls on the tutors and universities shoulders, to use the already available technical resources to create online learning material for students and ensure learning continues, many students found it difficult to cope without personal and face to face interaction (Kaur, 2020).

In contrast with other developing countries, Libya has done very little to meet students' needs in higher education during this epidemic. There is a growing need for more sufficient internet access and availability of the latest technology, in order to provide students with effective digital learning/teaching experience. An effective participation in digital learning environment requires universities and high educational institutions in Libya to focus more on teaching and delivery methods rather than on educational content. In line with this, Britt (2006) highlighted the needs for students to communicate with their partners and tutors digitally sharing ideas, knowledge and information. Whilst this led us to rethink traditional ways of learning in Libya in general, we certainly need to start considering online learning as a feasible option encouraging more effective digital learning/teaching. Perhaps educational stakeholders and particularly universities need to seize the opportunity to upgrade their educational mode of delivery, to make the curriculum responsive to the needs of the changing times and transfer its attention to emerging technologies.

Generally, there is a growing interest in exploring online learning and how such learning/teaching can be successful within undeveloped and developing countries alike. It is evident from the literature that online education can be effective in digitally advanced countries (Basilaia & Kvavadze, 2020), however, the same cannot be said for underdeveloped/less advanced countries e.g. Libya and hence can prove ineffective. It should be noted that almost all learning, teaching and resources available in Libyan universities and higher educational institutions are all done manually i.e. in person at university campuses (Sawahel, 2020). It is also widely known that not all students in Libya can afford access to the internet or the technology needed particularly those who are living in rural and marginalised communities, nor can those with smartphones in the major cities of Libya access online learning, because a significant amount of online content is not accessible via smartphones. Ali and Ahmad (2011) found very little evidence suggesting satisfactory interaction in distance

learning between learners and tutors within underdeveloped countries. Researchers underline the need to explore the advantages and challenges of recent online learning initiatives from the perspective of various stakeholders (Mailizar et al., 2020); equally the quest for well-designed and up-to-date content throughout all universities is still a priority, besides the need to prepare students and equip them with the required knowledge, technology and skills. Thus, it is the aim of this study to explore the attitudes of Libyan students in higher education toward online learning and the challenges experienced.

II. Research Methods

This study explored the challenges and opportunities associated with online learning amid Coronavirus (COVID-19). An attempt to give higher education students in Libya a voice, this study was made to listen to their opinions concerning online learning and to investigate the challenges that hinder their learning and achieve their potential. An online questionnaire was constructed based on the literature available from the Libyan universities and online learning/teaching experience of the researcher, and subsequently a hundred questionnaires were sent out to undergraduate and postgraduate students at Tripoli University in Tripoli, Libya to appreciate their views of the effectiveness of online learning. Prior to the main study a pilot test of the questionnaire was administered to students at Omer Al-Mukhtar University, Al-Bayda, Libya . Based on the students' views in the pilot study, slight changes were made for the final version of the questionnaire. Three main questions were asked specifically to students to identify their attitudes toward learning online, the difficulties encountered in contrast with conventional learning and the possibility to complete studies online.

III. Results and Discussion

3.1 Results

The information gathered in this study was organised and analysed based on common views, similarities and differences among participants. Out of 100 questionnaires sent out, 58 were returned back of whom 40 undergraduate and the remaining 18 postgraduate students. All the respondents from postgraduate were male, while merely 25 of the undergraduate respondents were female. About two thirds of the participants 65% in this study reported that they have proper access to the internet, whilst 25% participants suggested that they don't have proper access to the internet, and only 10% of the participants reported that they have limited access to the internet (Pie Chart 1).

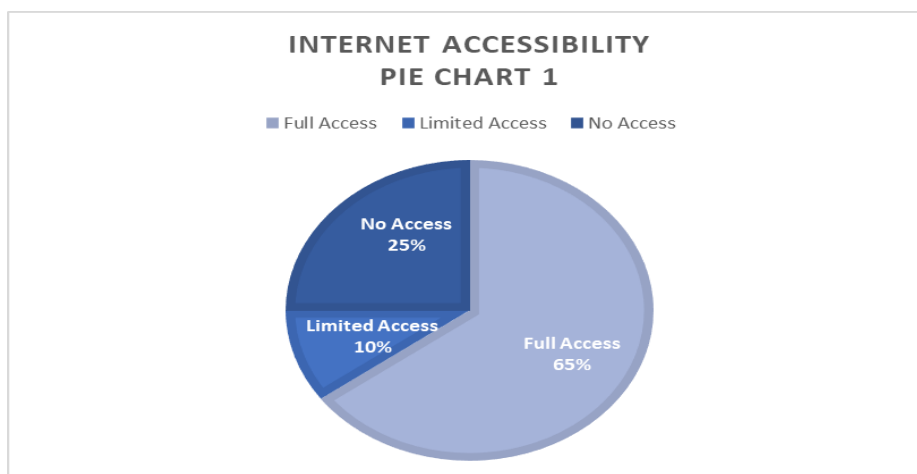


Figure 1. Internet Accessibility

Yet almost all participants 90% in this study referred to the lack of access to internet and regular cuts in the electricity power in Libya is responsible for the weak signals. Only 10% of the participants reported that they cannot afford internet services due to financial reasons. In exploring how university students in Libya are prepared to use computers from home for online learning, all students except three confirmed that they can use computer for online learning yet half of them revealed somehow discomfort to communicate digitally for online learning. In contrast between the conventional learning and online learning, more than two third of the participants 70% were in favour of conventional way of learning as it appears to motivate them more than online learning, while 30% did not see much difference between the two ways of learning though they showed more interest in online learning (Pie Chart 2).

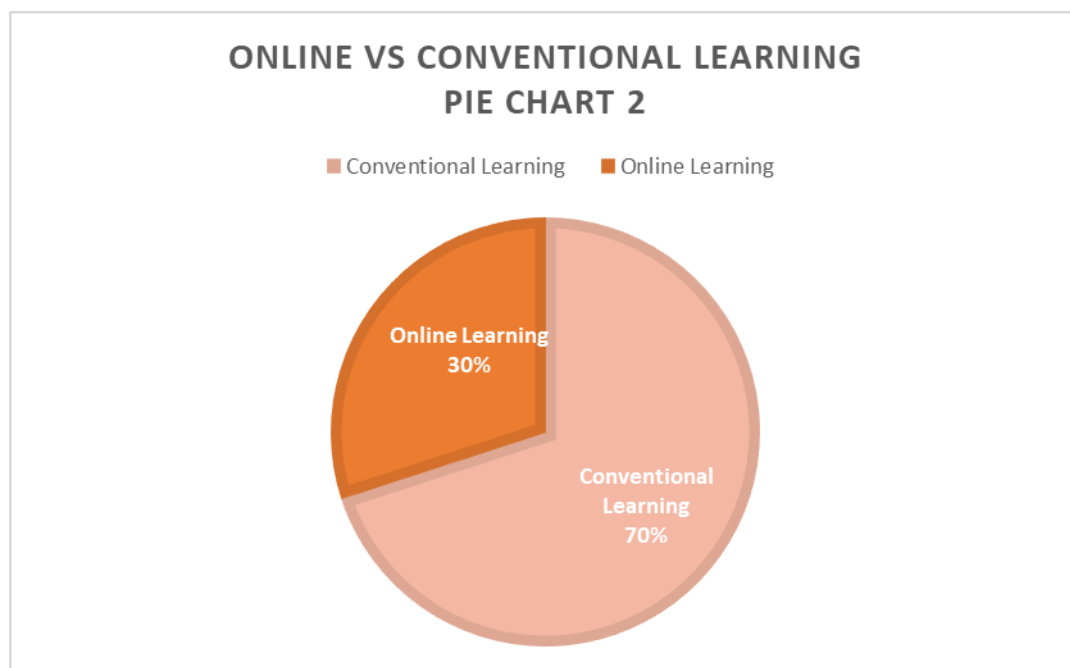


Figure 2. Online Vs Conventional Learning

In a similar way, the majority of students 80% reported in favour of face-to-face interaction with tutors for effective learning as opposed to remote learning. Only 20% of the students value less face-to-face interaction with tutors. Furthermore, students were asked whether they would be able to complete their studies successfully online. Only 25% of the students agreed that all university courses can be delivered and completed online effectively with the same content and mode of assessment. Whilst 70% of the students disagreed and believe they could not effectively complete their study remotely without changes in the current content of courses and assessment procedures, and the remaining 5% of the students were not sure.

3.2 Discussion

The results of this study suggested that online learning is not without problems in traditional societies like Libya. Indeed, the move from a conventional setting, where learning is done face-to-face, with tutors being the centre of the process of teaching/learning, to more digital online learning has posed many challenges for students. Most of the students in this study revealed concerns with online learning reflecting lack of access to internet and effective technology, besides lack of proper interaction and socialisation with tutors and classmates. The findings of this study fit very well with that of the literature (e.g. Ahmad, 2020; Elhadi and Msherghi, 2020; Zeiton, 2011) who found unreliable internet services is the main obstacle for successful online learning. In a similar way the participants expressed concerns pertained

to limited resources within their university and lack of tutors' preparation and training to respond to students' learning needs remotely. In fact, it is not surprising to see participants in this study think highly of conventional approach of learning as oppose to online learning. While this may reflect the difficulties encountered by Libyan students in higher education to move away from traditional approach of learning in which they take advantage of personal face-to-face interaction with their tutors and classmates to learn, there is a need to motivate students for effective online learning providing them with more internet services, resources, preparation and technical training. In line with previous findings (see for instance Reger et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020) this study reveals the need to change the content of courses and assessment procedures that currently taking place at Libyan universities to ensure more effective online learning, whilst at the same time to elevate the stress and psychological pressure on students as they are unable to complete their studies.

The implication of this study for the educational stakeholders in Libya and other developing countries is to rethink the approaches of learning beyond university and post COVID-19 era. Hence, encouraging a more self-dependent approach to learning, and learning how to learn and develop, as opposed to the traditional method which merely focus on passing academic exams at the end of each academic year and moving onto the next year of study or graduating. Furthermore, universities and tutors in underdeveloped countries need to reassess their approaches of teaching and learning programs to motivate students for more effective online learning.

IV. Conclusion

Students in higher education worldwide are affected due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to effectively respond to students' specific learning needs during this crisis, this study explored students' attitude toward online learning. Although all students in this study appear to agree that online learning is helpful and safe approach opening up an opportunity for them to carry on learning, this process prove challenging and beyond students' capability. Yet university students in Libya found themselves more interested in conventional learning approach as opposed to digital/online learning. This is because the former approach provides them with face-to-face interaction with tutors and classmates allowing classroom socialisation in group projects. The results of this study suggest higher education students in Libya need to be technically and finically supported to have proper access to internet services for effective online learning. In similar way Libyan universities need to transfer its attention to emerging technologies and upgrade its educational mode of delivery and make the learning contents and assessment more desirable and responsive to the needs of the changing times. Thus, it is hoped that this study shed a light on online learning challenges encountered by higher education students in Libya and serve as reference for future studies relative to the effective online learning/teaching in higher education. Further research is needed to explore the effectiveness of online learning across the country, generating more information from a lager random sample of students, universities and tutors to be contrasted.

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