

THE BRIGHT SIDE OF COVID-19: IMPLICATIONS OF THE PANDEMIC ON E-LEARNING AND THE EDUCATIONAL SECTOR- A DEEP LOOK INTO THE ACTION PLAN OF THE JORDANIAN MINISTRY OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

A plethora of research have been published on COVID-19 focusing only on its negative impact on every aspect of our lives. Undoubtedly, COVID-19 has been one of the worst health emergencies that caused millions of deaths around the world and disastrous effects on economies and various sectors. However, research so far has completely ignored the other part of the story. Therefore, this study turns the scales upside down and focuses on the bright side of COVID-19 by exploring its positive impact on e-learning and the educational sector in Jordan. This study discusses the action plan for e-learning set by the Jordanian Ministry of Higher Education for the period 2021-2023. The results demonstrate that COVID-19 has done to e-learning more than any strategy or plan by the Jordanian Ministry of Higher Education and all higher education institutions. It has opened the eyes on the potential and promises of e-learning for the higher education sector in Jordan.

Keywords: E-learning, Covid-19, Education, Jordan, Higher education

INTRODUCTION

The outbreak of COVID-19 at the end of 2019, has been considered one of the most severe global health emergencies (Abdellatif & Shahroury, 2021). By 11th March 2020, the WHO declared it as a pandemic. With over 196 million confirmed cases and over 4.2 confirmed deaths globally as announced by WHO in 30th July 2021. This virus is highly infectious were patients experience various symptoms ranging from flu-like to life-threatening (Basheti et al., 2020). Until now there is no specific treatment for this virus. Therefore, countries all over the world have taken very strict procedures for the aim of controlling the spread of this virus. These procedures vary widely between countries and range from social distancing, to quarantine and complete lock down (Abdellatif & Shahroury, 2021). Face-to-face activities were prohibited including all forms of education at all levels (Iivari et al., 2020). By 13th March 2020, over 60 countries in Europe, Asia, Africa, South America, North America and the Middle East, have announced university closures as reported by the UNISCO. Thus, more than 1.725 billion learners all over the world were affected by this emergency (Abdellatif & Shahroury, 2021). Nevertheless, the teaching process continued were all types of educational institutions converted to e-learning to be able to deliver educational materials during the dramatic circumstances caused by the COVID-19 (Bao, 2020; Nogales et al., 2020; Lepp et al., 2021).

E-learning has its roots in distance learning which has been around for more than a hundred years during which the teaching process has moved from traditional face-to-face, chalk-and-talk classes into synchronous and asynchronous online sessions (Abdellatif & Shahroury,

2021; Dietrich et al., 2020). Historically, distance learning was offered to students with special conditions; for instance those who do not have access to educational institutions, or have health or psychological conditions that hinder their ability to attend the conventional educational environment (Casanova et al., 2006 & Moore, 1973). E-learning has been transformed over the past few years due to the vast advancements in technology such as; smartphones, portable devices, internet connection, videoconferencing and most recently social media (Abdellatif & Shahroury, 2021; Choudhury & Pattnaik, 2019; Barakat, 2016). In the last decade, many educators have introduced many innovative tools to the field of e-learning to create an interactive, collaborative and engaging learning atmosphere such as; the use of videos, simulation, real-time experiments, games with educational objectives, virtual reality and augmented reality (Belton, 2016; Jordan et al., 2016; Dietrich, 2019; Miller et al., 2019; Bib et al., 2019).

Some researchers claim that in e-learning environment, students retain 25-60% of the course material compared to 8%-10% in the traditional classroom environment and require approximately 40%-60% less time to learn (Gutierrez, 2021; Chernev, 2019). These astonishing percentages could be explained by the fact that “students can learn at their own pace, when they want, going back and rereading, skipping, or accelerating” (Dietrich, 2019). Despite these promising numbers, this method of learning comes with its own challenges; as the roles of tutors and learners differ from those in the traditional learning settings. Tutors are now seen as facilitators who support students during the learning process instead of being the sole owners of knowledge and providers of learning material, while, learners are now required to develop their collaborative efforts (Dietrich, 2019). Thus, designing, delivering and assessing the learning material become a major issue especially in developing countries which lack the knowledge, experience and infrastructure to implement e-learning (Almajali, 2021).

The outbreak of COVID-19 have massively promoted the application of e-learning all over the world. Some educators claimed that “The coronavirus will have done more for e-learning and online training than all the plans and strategies of states and institutions of higher education” (Dietrich, 2019). Another commented that “without the outbreak of the pandemic, our schools and universities would not have practiced distance learning in such a fluent way” (Oraif & Elyas (2021). However, it has also presented colossal challenges to educators to urgently adapt their course materials into distance learning to ensure the continuity of the teaching process at the same quality level. The Ministry of Higher Education in Jordan launched an action plan for higher education institutions to ensure the continuity of the education process, guaranteeing that all institutions are offering their courses online and setting guidelines for e-learning in all Jordanian higher education institutions for the period of 2021-2023. This paper explores the action plan of e-learning of the Jordanian Ministry of Higher Education and discusses its implications on the education and recruitment process in the higher education sector in Jordan.

The Action Plan of E-learning of the Jordanian Ministry of Higher Education

This action plan was developed by the Jordanian Ministry of Higher Education as a response to the emergency situation caused by the outbreak of COVID-19 and in light of the vision of his Majesty King Abdullah II bin Al Hussein to incorporate technological tools into the traditional higher education system to transform it into full e-learning system or blended learning system. Thus, improve the level of higher education and upgrade it to match the best practices used in the most prestigious international universities. It was available online on 5th January 2021. The aim of the plan was to incorporate technology into the traditional education system, to shift systematically from instructor-centric to interactive student-centric education system to achieve better learning outcomes, to overcome the challenges of the traditional education system which hinder the ability of disabled students or those who live in rural areas to continue their

higher education and to ensure the continuity of the education process during exceptional circumstances that could prevent students from reaching the university campus.

The plan discussed the experience of Jordanian universities in e-learning prior and during the COVID-19. It highlighted that prior COVID-19, e-learning in Jordanian higher education institutions was practiced in varying degrees but mostly unregulated and did not rise to the practical and scientific standards required for e-learning. Most of it were left to faculty members to practice as they wished without agreed pedagogical references, without standard criteria, without a unified format and without a clear structure. It was mostly activities, tasks, scattered videos, PDF texts and slides used to reinforce or enrich the course material but in an unattractive manner and were not essential to the course. Moreover, some universities have introduced one or more e-learning courses, with a focus on the asynchronous part, but it was closer to e-learning in its general sense than to interactive e-learning. As for blended learning, it was not familiar to a large number of universities and was implemented in an unstructured and immature manner. In short, prior COVID-19, traditional face-to-face education was dominant and entirely favoured and e-learning was partially, irregularly, immaturity practiced.

With the advent of the COVID-19, all higher education institutions were forced to suddenly switch to full e-learning, which surprised most of them and caused confusion and disruption for many of them in addition to educational losses in varying degrees. However, most of them quickly adapted to the new situation, especially those that had a fairly mature experience in blended learning and those who were more successful in applying different forms of e-learning. Moreover, the plan emphasized that most of the institutions still practicing e-learning in its general and loose sense and lack a clear structure and methodology for e-learning despite practicing it for five semesters since the outbreak of COVID-19. Therefore, the plan came into existence to regulate e-learning in the Jordanian higher education institutions and to set a clear and organized format for e-learning to link accurately and professionally between the two main dimensions of successful e-learning: the educational dimension (pedagogical) and the technical dimension, which was almost absent so far.

The plan suggested the use of two e-learning formats; full e-learning or blended learning. As for full e-learning, the entire course is taught completely online with the use of virtual learning platform used by the university without any face-to-face activities. This form of e-learning could be administrated synchronously or asynchronously either (2:1, 1:2 or 1:1) (synchronous, asynchronous) based on the nature and requirement of the course. As for blended learning it includes both online and face-to-face sessions to enhance the engagement and interactivity in the course. This form of e-learning could be administrated either (2:1, 1:2 or 1:1) (face-to-face, asynchronous) based on the nature and requirement of the course. Moreover, the plan has set the following timeframe for all higher education institutions:

1. Second and Summer Semester 2020/2021
 - a) High-risk epidemiological situation: full e-learning (synchronous, asynchronous) for all courses and all exams to be conducted online.
 - b) Medium-risk epidemiological situation: full e-learning (synchronous, asynchronous) for limited number of courses and blended learning (face-to-face, asynchronous) for the majority of the courses. All exams to be conducted on campus unless the epidemiological situation worsen.
 - c) Low-risk epidemiological situation: blended learning (face-to-face, asynchronous) for the majority of courses and full e-learning (synchronous, asynchronous) for limited number of course upon the decision of the institution. All exams to be conducted on campus taking all health and safety procedures.
2. First and second semester 2021/2022:
 - a) Acceptable epidemiological situation: Hybrid education system for all degrees and programs; full e-learning (synchronous, asynchronous) for 10% of the program, blended learning (face-to-face, asynchronous) for 10%-20% of the program and traditional face-to-face learning for the rest of the program. All exams to be conducted on campus.
3. First and second semester 2022/2023:

- a) Normal life: Hybrid education system for all degrees and programs; full e-learning (synchronous, asynchronous) for 20% of the program, blended learning (face-to-face, asynchronous) for 30%-40% of the program and traditional face-to-face learning for the rest of the program. Exams for full e-learning courses to be conducted online and all other exams will be conducted on campus.
4. After 2023:
- a) Hybrid education system for all degrees and programs; full e-learning (synchronous, asynchronous) for 20%-25% of the program, blended learning (face-to-face, asynchronous) for the rest of the program with the possibility of traditional face-to-face learning for less than 20% of the program. Exams for full e-learning courses to be conducted online and all other exams will be conducted on campus.

Further, the plan suggest that based on the success and excellence of the institution in implementing full e-learning and blended learning system within the timeframe set in the plan, it can start offering one or more complete programs on the principle of full e-learning or one or more programs on the principle of blended learning after obtaining the necessary approvals.

Implications of the Action Plan

The plan pears several practical implications on both the education process and the recruitment process in the higher education sector. As for the education process, first, all higher education institutions are required to restructure all their academic plans to suit the requirements of incorporating e-learning into programs and to develop measurement tools of the learning outcomes and aligning them with the requirements of the labour market. Second, all higher education institutions are required to design all their educational course pages and asynchronous interactive activities between the student and the content on e-learning platforms for both full e-learning and blended learning courses. Third, all higher education institutions are required to provide their academic staff with the appropriate training to equip them with sufficient skills for e-learning in its synchronous and asynchronous format and introduce them to various tools such as; flipped learning, project-based learning, connected learning and others. Fourth, all higher education institutions are required to form technical support teams with expertise in e-learning and management of e-learning platforms to be able to provide support to academic and administrative staff when needed. Fifth, all higher education institutions are required to provide extra support and training to all students to be able to cope with the changes associated with the new e-learning system to maintain the continuity of the education process and achieve the desired learning outcomes.

As for the recruitment process, the action plan will have a massive impact on the job description and requirements for both academic and administrative staff. Currently, anyone who wishes to join any higher education institution is required to show excellent knowledge and skills in computing, learning management system, e-learning platforms and e-learning content management. In addition to capability and willingness to learn about new technologies and improve their skills. It is unsurprising that all higher education institutions will be thriving to search for those instructors who demonstrate excellence in their technical and cognitive abilities in the field of e-learning. Any previous experience in preparing synchronous and asynchronous educational content would be an added advantage over other candidates. Moreover, the action plan has opened a new horizon for potential jobs in the higher education sector such as; programming, security, databases, content management, mobile applications, animation and montage, filming and technical support. These jobs will flourish and enrich the higher educational sector.

CONCLUSION

This research discussed the action plan for e-learning set by the Jordanian Ministry of Higher Education for the period 2021-2023 and its implications on the education and recruitment

process in the higher education sector in Jordan. It has demonstrated that Jordan is walking forward with steady steps in incorporating e-learning into all higher education programs and degrees. It has also suggested that all higher education institutions are required to restructure its programs to fit with the new requirements of e-learning in its two formats full e-learning and blended learning. Further, it has shed the light for the promises that e-learning holds for the higher education sector in Jordan in opening a new horizon of potential jobs that could enrich this sector.

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