A Silver Lining of Coronavirus:
Jordanian Universities Turn to Distance Education

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ABSTRACT

Jordan, like other countries in the world, is facing the Coronavirus pandemic and is making a great effort to continue education in Jordanian schools and universities through distance education. To evaluate this novel experience, this study aimed at investigating the effectiveness of distance education in Jordanian universities in light of the Coronavirus pandemic and identifying the obstacles faced by university students. To reach the research objectives, a questionnaire was developed by the researchers followed by semi-structured interviews. A sample of 1000 students was selected randomly from public and private universities. The results revealed that the majority of the Jordanian university students are not pleased with this distance learning experience as most of the students encountered some obstacles such as internet speed, technological difficulties, and online content design.

KEYWORDS

Coronavirus, Distance Education, Effectiveness, Jordan, Obstacles

INTRODUCTION

The world was attached by the Coronavirus pandemic which has been forcing the world into a series of changes in many fields such as economy, medicine and education. This pandemic has imposed new educational methods such as distance learning in schools, colleges and universities. This new method is considered the sole method to ensure continuity of education in the educational institutions during this pandemic. Despite the partial utilization of e-learning and distance learning in some Arabic and Jordanian universities, it was a surprise to many lecturers and students as well as students' parents. Distance education requires exceptional arrangements, abilities and IT skills in addition to smart devices and applications that enable the videoconferencing communication.

In this respect, the responsibilities of both lecturers and students are numerous and challenging in this unexpected teaching and learning process. This process is a complicated practice that needs considerable efforts to successfully engage students in the classes and achieve the educational objectives. Thus, in distance classes, students should be effectively engaged and

evaluated precisely. This necessitates a well-qualified lecturer who can cope with this new method perfectly; and well-motivated and skilled students who can also deal with this new method right (Albashtawi, A., & Al Bataineh, K. 2020).

Like all universities of the world, Jordanian universities have shifted to distance education using different online platforms, applications and tools. They have leading roles in turning to distance education utilizing Moodle as a learning management system (LMS) and different online tools such as Zoom application, Microsoft teams, Easyclass, Google classroom for virtual classrooms as well as Facebook and Whatsapp applications to communicate with students and inform them about the latest developments related to the course. Yet, both lecturers and students have been facing some issues adapting the new method. Moreover, the online infrastructure is considered one of the highest barriers that hinder the adaption of online learning (Aljaraideh & Al Bataineh, 2019). This has driven His Majesty King Abdullah II to argue improving the infrastructure and content of the distance education for undergraduate students so Jordanian students can easily access their virtual classes through reliable Internet coverage. Evidently, the distance learning and e-learning, in general, will remain a top priority for all educational institutions in the future.

Consequently, this study is attempting to examine the effectiveness of distance education in Jordanian universities and identify the obstacles faced by university students in light of the Coronavirus pandemic. The study aims at answering the following questions:

RQ1: What is the effectiveness of distance education in Jordanian universities in light of the Coronavirus pandemic?
RQ2: What are the distance education obstacles faced by university students?

The researchers studied these obstacles so as to provide authentic insights in this critical change to distance education. It is worth noting that this study is considered among the first studies that investigate this Jordanian new experience of distance education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Distance education, initiated in the 1850s, is a learning method that enables communication between teacher and his students remotely without being in traditional classroom. This learning method requires Internet network as well as compatible devices like laptop and cell phone. It facilitates remote teaching and learning, effective engagement, attractive educational content and evaluation. However, many learning management system (LMS), such as Moodle, OpenEdX and Easy LMS, may lend a hand for delivering an educational course effectively. Moodle, the Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment, is utilized by many Jordanian universities (Al Bataineh et al., 2019). Although, there exists a culture of conservatism in Jordanian higher education, e-learning platforms, tools, applications, and lecturers play key roles in distance education and boosting the students' satisfaction level (Al Bataineh et al., 2019; Aljaraideh & Al Bataineh, 2019; Ali, 2011).

Distance education and e-learning are debatable matter for the researchers; many of them Al Bataineh et al. (2019), Traxler (2018), Wu et al. (2011), Chen (2010), and Smart and Capple (2006) stated that e-learning and distance learning are advantageous as it is time and money saving, student-pace learning, free-accessible and many more. In his study, Traxler (2018) maintained that distance learning can extend the access to higher institutions and boost the variety of student population as distance education grants great occasions to study anywhere, anytime from anyone. In addition, Chen (2010) argued the importance of distance learning where students can obtain resources of texts, figures, audio and video, and mutual contact all through online inquiries and hyperlinks.

On the other hand, other researchers Freeman and Capper (1999) and Arbaugh (2000) declared that distance learning can be a challenge if it is not applied accurately. They highlighted the disadvantages

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