

Chapter 2

Challenges of Distance Learning Adoption by Students During the COVID–19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the challenges encountered by Tunisian higher education students during the sudden shift to distance learning amid the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic in 2020. A qualitative research is conducted to collect and analyze data. The findings highlight that a majority of the interviewed students have reservations about distance learning. Lack of internet facilities, inaccessibility of technological infrastructure, costs, lack of interaction with instructors, of motivation, as well as of understanding were among the major reported challenges. Moreover, results have shown that shifting to distance learning under the COVID-19 pandemic is perceived to be incongruent with the values of equity, equality of chances, and gratuity of education. These values are defended by all stakeholders in the education process. Due to above-mentioned challenges and solidarity values between students, distance learning was negatively perceived. These findings improve understanding regarding the challenges of distance learning particularly under crisis.

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INTRODUCTION

In late December 2019, Chinese authorities reported to the World Health Organization, the presence of numerous cases of an unknown pneumonia-like disease in Wuhan City (Armstrong, 2020). After diagnosis of infected patients, a novel Coronavirus named Coronavirus 2 or SARS-CoV-2 was identified and subsequently named COVID-19 by the World Health Organization. Since that time, the global incidence of COVID-19 disease has increased dramatically. Following the speed with which COVID-19 spread to all countries in the world; it was declared, by the World Health Organization, to be a global pandemic in March 2020. To contain the spread of the pandemic, most governments around the world established social containment measures, which caused the temporary closure of educational institutions amidst other establishments. To reduce the negative impacts of education interruption and successfully end up the academic year, governments have stressed on the necessary adoption of distance learning, which has become an obligation as soon as most countries have stopped face-to-face teaching.

Just as almost all countries around the world, the Tunisian ministry of higher education has approved the accreditation of education institutions, teachers and students for distance learning through the Moodle Distance Learning Platform of Virtual University of Tunis, proper institutional platforms, or any online learning tool (Google classrooms, Microsoft teams, Google meets, Zoom, etc.). Distance learning is considered as a solution to maintain teaching continuity and keep in touch with students during the temporary period of containment. It is worth noting that in Tunisia, the commitment to use distance learning as well as information and communication technologies (ICTs) in education started in 2002 with the creation of the Virtual University of Tunis. This commitment was renewed, in 2006 with a decision to increase online courses up to 20% of the courses' volume, and in 2010 with the development of a national strategy of online learning (Ben Romdhane, 2013). However, despite these efforts, shortcomings and failures have been reported (Ben Romdhane, 2013). Zitouni and Ezzina (2007) highlighted that the distance learning platform was underused by the majority of the investigated students. Moreover, Karamti (2016) revealed that both students and teachers are not adequately integrating ICTs for learning purposes due to a shortage of the appropriate equipment and a lack of the ICTs skills.

It is also the case of distance learning under the COVID-19 pandemic since, during the period March-May 2020, the decision to shift to distance learning was not widely accepted by teachers and students alike. On the contrary, hesitation has accompanied the decision to switch to distance learning for a temporary period during the confinement, and finally, it was agreed that the exams would focus only on the courses' parts taught in face-to-face according to the traditional learning model.

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