



Vol.5 No.2 (2022)

Journal of Applied Learning & Teaching

ISSN : 2591-801X

Content Available at : <http://journals.sfu.ca/jalt/index.php/jalt/index>

Distance teaching in media departments in times of the COVID-19 pandemic. Experiences from six Arab countries

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Keywords

Arab countries;
distance teaching;
media studies;
online teaching;
pandemic.

Abstract

The present study describes, assesses, and compares the experiences of distance teaching in media and communication departments in six Arab countries, including Egypt, Tunisia, Iraq, Yemen, Oman, and Qatar, during the early phase of the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020. Three research questions were answered through a cross-country comparison. 1) Which organizational steps and arrangements had to be taken by the administration and teaching staff to transition to distance teaching? 2) How was distance teaching perceived by students in the six countries? 3) How was the transition evaluated by the teaching staff, and which suggestions can be made for the future? To answer the questions, we collected empirical data from different groups involved in the teaching process, including teachers, administration, and students, through interviews, focus groups and a questionnaire. Results show that the necessity of teaching online from a distance took most Arab universities by surprise. A lack of infrastructure and financial means proved to be the most relevant problem in conflict-ridden countries like Iraq and Yemen, but also in Egypt and Tunisia. Given their low expectations, students were generally satisfied with the digital tools used in their institution, even though in some countries, the skills of the teachers were underdeveloped, and the infrastructure was lacking. The teaching staff, however, highlighted that they saw these changes as a move toward the modernization of their teaching.

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Article Info

Received 2 June 2022

Received in revised form 16 August 2022

Accepted 24 August 2022

Available online 29 August 2022

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37074/jalt.2022.5.2.5>

Introduction

Mass media and communication studies is a unique field of interest for learning more about the strategies and perceptions related to distance teaching during the pandemic. This is because, first, communication and media studies students can be considered particularly open to new technologies and means of communication, as they have to adopt them in their future careers. Thus, their adaptation to and evaluation of online teaching during the pandemic is of particular interest. Second, teaching communication studies and journalism includes many practical aspects, and teachers need to instruct undergraduate students to develop their practical skills. A transition of these techniques to the online realm is especially challenging.

In previous decades, teaching communication studies and journalism in the Arab world focused mainly on face-to-face methods and rarely adopted online or distance learning methods (Arafat, 2017; Alseady, 2019; Helmy, 2020). Thus, mass media departments and journalism schools in the Arab world faced a real challenge once the COVID-19 pandemic broke out in early 2020. Although journalism schools all over the Arab world faced the same challenges, they varied in their responses depending on the country-wide regulations imposed, their resources and technical capabilities, and their previous experiences with online learning and infrastructure. The present study aims to describe, assess, and compare the experiences of distance teaching in the media and communication departments in six Arab countries, including Egypt, Tunisia, Iraq, Yemen, Oman, and Qatar, during the early phase of the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020. We formulated three research questions that will be answered through a cross-country comparison. We rely on the empirical data of different groups involved in the teaching process, including teachers, administration, and students:

RQ1: Which organizational steps and arrangements had to be taken by the administration and teaching staff to transition to distance teaching?

RQ2: How was distance teaching perceived by students in the six countries?

RQ3: How was the transition evaluated by the teaching staff, and which suggestions can be made for the future?

After briefly introducing a theoretical framework and reviewing the literature on the status quo of online teaching in the Arab region, we will then answer the three research questions consecutively. To do this, a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods for data collection was chosen, including interviews, focus group discussions, and a questionnaire. The results will be presented in a comparative way with the six country cases.

Literature review and conceptual framework

Although the transition to distance teaching was a harsh and massive change in early 2020, distance and online learning

are not completely new to Arab countries. For example, Arab countries with large populations and high enrollment rates in their universities consider online learning to be a solution to prevent overcrowded classes. Yet, based on higher education laws and regulations in many Arab countries, pre-COVID 19 online education was not recognized as an official teaching method.

In contrast, the economically better-off Arab Gulf countries perceive online learning as a way to strengthen their competitive advantages, yet only used certain tools such as Blackboard as additional means in the pre-COVID era. Many Arab countries had thus already tried to adopt online means of education even before the pandemic, either in their open education programs or in their undergraduate programs, but very cautiously and never with full force (Arafat, 2017; Alseady, 2019; Helmy, 2020).

However, we also need to be clear on how we define "distance teaching." We support a definition of distance teaching that refers to a form of education in which the main elements include the physical separation of teachers and students during instruction and the use of various technologies to facilitate student-teacher and student-student communication (Saykılı, 2018). Distance teaching is broader than "e-teaching" or "e-learning," which refers to students educating themselves remotely (Tophat, n.d.) in a process that is usually completed on an online platform, with the possibility of returning to the instructor whenever needed and not on a scheduled basis. Blended e-learning combines forms of remote learning and contact with a teacher. In the literature before the pandemic, the focus was mainly on e-learning and blended learning. In our study, we emphasize the notion of "distance teaching," which could include e-learning and blended forms, but strongly refers to the usage of digital tools.

So far, only a few studies on e-learning and distance teaching have been conducted on the Arab region when it comes to media and communication studies. In the field of media studies, some scholars have been interested in exploring, assessing, and experimenting with how e-learning methods would positively affect media education quality. Alseady (2019), for example, examined the effectiveness of a blended e-learning program in developing the cognitive and practical skills of mass communication students in journalism photography. Helmy (2020) designed an online curriculum for a "Writing for the Radio" course. Another objective was to measure media students' attitudes toward e-learning compared to traditional learning (Arafat, 2017). Others have looked to determine how online learning can help in building skills of self-learning (Salem, 2016) and increase learning motivation (Abdel & Helmy, 2018) and even self-determination among female students in Saudi Arabia (Alkahky, 2016). Most results have revealed the privileges of online learning, but the experiences described were measured on small-scale samples in Arab countries pre-COVID-19.

The massive breakout of the COVID-19 pandemic and the announcements of lockdowns all over the world resulted in prohibiting more than 1.5 billion persons from accessing educational institutions (UNESCO, 2020). All higher

education institutions had no choice but to transition to distance education as the only available alternative.

Shortly after the lockdowns, several scholars tried to document the process of transformation in teaching and the procedures implemented in different universities. Through a desktop review analysis, Crawford et al. (2020) provided a timely map of the higher education responses to COVID-19 across 20 countries, which included the three Arab countries of Egypt, Jordan, and the United Arab Emirates. They concluded that Egyptian universities utilized various tools to deliver online classes, including Blackboard, Moodle, e-mail, and Zoom. Jordanian institutions used e-mail, videoconferencing, high-speed internet access, and online legal libraries. Higher education institutions in the United Arab Emirates utilized Adobe Connect, Blackboard, and a virtual learning tool called Vision. In a related study, Alterri et al. (2020) explored how five higher education institutions in the UAE faced the challenges of this transformation. In addition, a total of 15 media faculties in Egyptian universities documented their experiences through separate reports, highlighting the opportunities and challenges they faced at the beginning of the transition period (Al-Samir et al., 2020). In another vein, qualitative research employing a phenomenological approach was used to study the lived experiences of three university teachers using e-learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, including two in Bangladesh and one in Saudi Arabia (Islam et al., 2021). The teachers reported acceptance, struggles, and negotiations at both the macro-level of policy decision-making (institutional) and the micro-level of online classroom practices (individual).

When reviewing media studies literature focusing on the experience of transitioning to distance teaching during the COVID-19 imposed lockdowns, one can conclude that scholars were mainly interested in assessing and measuring professors' and students' attitudes toward the transformation process (Salem, 2020; Darweesh, 2021; Gameel, 2021; Gabr, 2020; Lily et al., 2020). Gameel (2021), for example, measured Egyptian staff's attitudes toward using digital communication technologies. The results indicated partial satisfaction with distance learning.

Concerning the future of distance teaching post-COVID-19 in the Arab world, the results have pointed to the need to set up an educational strategy that includes distance teaching (Badr & Elmaghraby, 2020), designing online curricula (Mohamed, 2020), and enacting continuous training for both professors and students (Badr, 2020). At the same time, certain challenges have been found to be related to the lack of technological and organizational infrastructures (Younis, 2020), social and psychological pressures due to confinement regulations (Ahmed, 2021), and the diverse cultural predispositions of distance learning in Arab countries.

Our research has taken this as a starting point for further investigation. We rely on the socio-cultural analysis model to explain adaptation processes. This model is mainly concerned with social structures in the context of multiple changes. The focus on social structures helps highlight existing contradictions between various principles of structuration and organization, as well as existing gaps

between the "official" features of society and social behavior (Balandier, 1985). This approach allows us to understand how dynamic factors within media schools shaped the transition from one teaching model to another. It can help explain how professors perceive their roles and the relationships between different generations of media professors, and it can explain how professors and faculty administrators have cooperated or not, and how well students and professors adapted to this period of massive changes.

Status quo of online teaching in six Arab countries before the pandemic

While reviewing the literature, one has to be clear that we cannot draw a homogeneous picture of the "Arab world" as a whole. Instead, we need to differentiate between different countries and their preconditions. The ways in which distance teaching has been adopted differ from one Arab country to another. All the selected Arab countries in this study operate governmental and private universities, yet they all function under the umbrella of the executive authority represented by either the Ministry of Higher Education or the Ministry of Education. Thus, our sample reflects the specific national and political-economic characteristics of different Arab countries that shape the modes and perceptions of distance teaching.

We can group the six countries into three different categories. The first category includes schools from Egypt and Tunisia. Despite their long history of teaching media studies, both countries are unable to provide the most recent software and hardware applied in media studies teaching methods. Also, Egypt has lagged behind in adopting a legal framework for online teaching.

Egypt was the first Arab country to establish a journalism and media studies department in 1939. The mass communication faculty of Cairo University was considered for decades to be the "mother faculty" in most Arab countries (Richter & Badr, 2017). Nevertheless, it was not until 2005 that an e-learning unit opened in one of the regional universities in Egypt. The mass communication faculty at Cairo University began its complete online master's program in 2008, though the faculty board refused to consider it a master's degree that qualifies graduates to apply for a PhD. It was not until March 2020 that the Minister of Higher Education agreed to embed distance learning as a recognized method of education and encouraged universities to adopt a hybrid teaching methodology.

The Tunisian experience differs from Egypt with regard to the legal framework for e-learning, but not regarding practice. Regulations existed well before the pandemic. In 2008, the law of higher education no. 19 was issued, including e-learning, among other educational methods (Virtual University of Tunis, n.d.). Even before that regulation, a virtual university was launched in Tunis in 2002 to enhance distance learning. However, because of financial and technical challenges among the diverse body of students, distance teaching was not fully activated until the pandemic crisis.

The second category includes Arab media schools' experiences in conflict zones, which are represented by Iraq and Yemen. These countries are not only suffering from a lack of infrastructure, but also from long-term political conflicts and armed disputes, which add more challenges to establishing distance teaching programs. Sana'a University in Yemen adopted e-learning as a method in 2004, and the council of ministers agreed to establish the public administration of e-learning in 2012 (Al-Qobati, 2014). However, distance teaching was not activated until the pandemic in mid-2020. In Iraq, there was no training in any online methods prior to the pandemic (Taher, 2020).

The third category includes media schools in stable Arab countries with a generally good technical infrastructure; these include Qatar and Oman. The two cases reflect typical examples of Gulf media schools that have achieved much technical and program development. Nevertheless, they still mainly depend on professors from many countries who often rely on the methods they were trained in abroad. For example, at the Mass Communication department at Qatar university, there are only six professors of Qatari origin, while 22 come from many different Arab countries (Mass Communication Department at Qatar University official website, 2022).

In the Gulf area, e-learning platforms already existed before the pandemic. The selected university in Qatar used the Blackboard platform (Qatar University, n.d.). In Oman, Al-Bayan College used the Canvas platform (Al-Bayan University, n.d.). The second university in Oman used the Blackboard platform (University of Technology and Applied Science Nizwa, n.d.). Before the crisis, these platforms were mainly utilized as an assisting teaching tool to upload course materials, reports, projects, and assignments and to post announcements to students, but not as the main tool in the learning process. The platforms were not used in delivering lectures, quizzes, or exams.

Data collection and methods of analysis

The study employed both qualitative and quantitative tools and methods of analysis to collect data and used questionnaires, interviews, and focus groups to address the three RQs. Our sample consisted of 11 universities from six Arab countries, including Egypt, Tunisia, Iraq, Yemen, Oman, and Qatar. Sample selection methods varied, reflecting the complex situation in each country. In Tunisia and Qatar, for example, only one university in each country was selected due to the concentration of media and journalism education in these institutions (Institute of News and Journalism at Manouba University and Faculty of Arts and Science at Qatar University). In Egypt, two universities, one public and one private institution, were chosen (mass communication faculties at Cairo University and Ahran Canadian University). In Iraq, two public universities were selected because there is no private mass communication department in Baghdad. Due to restrictions of movement, we focused the sample on Baghdad (mass communication faculties at Al-Iraqia University and Baghdad University). In Oman, two private universities under the supervision of the Ministry of Higher Education were selected (mass communication department

at Al-Bayan College and the Faculty of Applied Science at Nizwa University) because of restricted access to students and staff in the public university. In Yemen, major problems with the internet and political instability required that the Yemeni researcher applied both online and face-to-face interviews in media departments in different universities, including Sana'a University, University of Modern Science, and the University of Science and Technology.

To answer RQ1 (Which organizational steps and arrangements had to be taken by the administration and teaching staff to transition to distance teaching?), we conducted between four and 13 qualitative interviews in each country with academic staff (assistant professors and above) who were involved in teaching during the pandemic. The interviews focused on their description and evaluation of the transition to distance teaching during the first lockdowns, including the organizational arrangements, technological competencies, teaching methods, and strategies. With this qualitative tool, we were able to get first-hand information and personal evaluation from those strongly involved in planning and conducting the teaching under pandemic conditions. In addition, some of the information gathered in the focus groups for RQ3 also helped to answer RQ1.

To answer RQ2 (How was distance teaching perceived by students in the six countries?), we developed an online questionnaire that was distributed to the students of the respective universities in the sample. The online survey was divided into three parts. The first part investigated the learning tools and methods used by the students in the six countries. The second part was to measure students' satisfaction with distance learning experience during the first wave of the pandemic. The third part was devoted to future suggestions and their potential support to the use of online educational methods in the future even after the pandemic. In Iraq and Yemen, face-to-face interviews using the questionnaire were also conducted, as the researchers recognized difficulties related to internet access among many students. The respondents amounted to 1,063 students, including 68 students in Tunisia, 84 students in Qatar, 161 students in Oman, 184 students in Yemen, 265 students in Egypt, and 301 students in Iraq.

To answer RQ3 (How was the transition evaluated by the teaching staff, and which suggestions can be made for the future?), we aimed to organize at least one focus group in each country, including the deans and vice deans of the departments, heads of committees, and professors who were part of the distance teaching process to incorporate different perspectives. In some cases, focus groups could not be organized, so more individual interviews were conducted. Evaluations from the individual interviews in RQ1 thus also informed parts of the results in RQ3.

Table 1: Overview of sample distribution.

Country	Universities	Student sample	Staff Sample
Egypt	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cairo University (state) Ahram Canadian (private) 	Survey: 265	Interviews: 7 Focus group: 9
Tunisia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Manouba University – (state) 	Survey: 68	Interviews: 4 Focus group: 4
Iraq	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Baghdad University (state) Al-Iraqia University (state) 	Survey: 301	Interviews: 4 Focus group: 5
Yemen	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sana'a University (state) University of Modern Sciences (private) University of Science and Technology (private) 	Survey: 184	Interviews: 13
Oman	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bayan College – (private) The College of Applied Sciences Nizwa (CAS Nizwa) – (state) 	Survey: 161	Interviews: 6
Qatar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Qatar University – (state) 	Survey: 84	Interviews: 6
Total	11 Universities (7 State - 4 private)	1063 students	58 interviewees

Results

1) Which organizational steps and arrangements had to be taken by the administration and teaching staff to transition to distance teaching?

The core question in our interviews concerned how the various faculties managed to technically, administratively, and educationally adjust to the transition.

In Egypt, both Cairo University and Ahram Canadian University adopted open source software on the internet as quickly and freely available tools. Neither department had any online learning management system (LMS) at hand, such as Blackboard. Although both departments shared the same vision, they took different paths of implementation.

The mass communication faculty at Cairo University gave staff members the freedom to choose whatever tools were suitable for them. As the dean justified, "We did not want to panic the staff by imposing a specific online source on them" (Mustafa, 2020). The first steps included recording videos of lectures and uploading them on YouTube. "This was the most efficient and quickest way, since our studios are available and professors from any age range can come and record their lectures, then younger generations of assistant professors would upload the material on YouTube" (Awadely, 2020). Interactive methods differed among the staff, who mainly selected WhatsApp and Facebook groups to communicate with the students. As the dean reported, "They preferred to choose tools they are familiar with." (Mustafa, 2020). Younger generations of professors used Zoom and Schoology because "they can easily master these applications", explained one assistant professor (Zaki, 2020); others refused to use any direct communication methods and relied on video and audio recordings of the lectures. "As the oldest school of media in the Arab world, we have especially older generation professors who were not convinced at all of distance learning as an educational method", added the vice dean (Awadely, 2020).

In contrast, Ahram Canadian University's department adopted one method to be applied by the entire faculty. They used Google Classroom for uploading lectures, assignments, and evaluations and utilized Zoom as an interactive tool to meet students in synchronous lectures mirroring the old face-to-face schedule. As the dean explained, "We were able to transition to Google Classroom the next day. The decision was made because we had experience using Google Drive to upload materials and lectures for students, so somehow

our students were familiar with the platform" (Abou Youssef, 2020). The vice dean added, "Several training sessions were given to full-time professors, teaching assistants, and part-time professors. It took one-to-one training on how to use Zoom and Google classroom" (Khoraby, 2020).

In Tunisia, Google Classroom and Google Meet were selected as open source tools on the internet to be used as an alternative to face-to-face courses. Yet, professors and students preferred to use WhatsApp and Facebook groups as an easier method, even though these are not considered educational platforms. Professors were used to Facebook groups, so they interacted with their students in these groups; others continued using e-mails as a method of communication.

The above results show that both of these Arab countries that resemble each other in their economic problems and educational experiences took similar paths, which can be described as a laissez-faire attitude that allowed for a quick and unregulated transition to distance teaching. This shift relied heavily on self-organization and personal commitment, while it lacked a systematic pedagogical approach and a long-term strategy.

In Iraq, university staff were not ready for the transition process and were taken by surprise. The universities never had previous training in distance learning. As the dean of Baghdad University explained, "We did not have enough time to transition to distance learning. It was a method we had never applied in our universities before" (Taher, 2020). Communication and media faculties and departments faced "a real obstacle teaching practical courses on the Internet, like editing and videography, especially professors who were not familiar with these methods", recalled a professor for journalism (Sobeih, 2020). The Iraqi Higher Education Ministry suggested utilizing Google Classroom or Edmodo as free resources on the Internet, but then allowed the universities to choose whatever suited them. This situation led to great confusion among universities, "especially after the ministry obliged all faculties to grant 50% of the grades to all students despite the average of their attendance, which led to weakening the outcome of the educational process during this semester," said a member of the exams committee (Abd Elgabar, 2020).

In Yemen, the transition to distance teaching was disrupted by unforeseeable political decisions and technological problems, although many attempts were made to provide suitable infrastructure. Sana'a University began the transition to distance learning by mid-March 2020, utilizing the Zoom application on the Sana'a University platform. Sana'a University has had previous agreements with Google since 2019 to provide the university with 80,000 free accounts for professors, students and employees and many other free services (Sana'a University Website, n.d.). The university tried to benefit from this agreement when the decision to transition online was made. The first measure taken was creating official e-mail accounts for the staff, administrators, researchers, and students through the IT department, which amounted to 45,000 accounts. The second measure was to introduce training sessions organized by IT employees for 40 staff members and upload electronic brochures to raise

awareness among students. Faculty staff were advised to upload their materials and lectures online and send their official e-mail addresses to the students (Sana'a University Website, n.d.).

The University of Science and Technology had its own open education program that was used as an LMS, and they also employed Google Classroom and Zoom as interactive tools. Unfortunately, the program was suspended for political reasons after Ansar Allah, a militant group, took control of the region. The decision to transition was only made after 80% of the semester was over; the situation encouraged many faculty members to end their classes rather than experiment with online platforms.

The University of Modern Science is a private university in Yemen that had already utilized an LMS until the Higher Education Ministry suspended all online programs in private universities. The university took advantage of the pandemic and retrieved its program, creating official e-mail accounts for professors and students to communicate through their LMS. Prerecorded video lectures were designed and uploaded, but no online lectures were given. Professors and students communicated through WhatsApp and Facebook. Yet, a professor explained the confusion when "the faculty insisted that students should attend classes with practical journalism training along with taking all necessary precautions" (Howdy, 2020).

One can conclude that Arab countries in conflict zones, even though there were, even though there were some technical capabilities, did not benefit from them because of problems concerning infrastructure and the lack of training of staff and students, and in particular in Yemen from political confusion. The Gulf countries' transition experiences were smoother because universities in both Oman and Qatar had operated LMS technology before the pandemic. In Oman, the two departments adopted the same track, although they had different learning platforms. At Al-Bayan College, the administration organized training workshops to evaluate the best options for transitioning to online teaching and assessment. The faculty uploaded videos explaining how to attend online lectures. The transition was easy because the students were used to the Canvas platform for uploading their assignments and projects and accessing class material. Having partially used Canvas before, it was not difficult to fully operate in this way during the pandemic. The staff, however, had to modify their teaching methods and used PowerPoint presentations, smart boards, and displayed videos to explain parts of topics, such as camera usage or online editing. In Nizwa, the faculty tried to find supporting tools for the Blackboard platform. Staff began using Google Classroom, Google Meet, and Google Hangouts to cover some features not included in Blackboard. They also utilized new teaching methods, such as combining live and recorded lectures, uploading videos, and enriching their material with online activities and exercises.

In Qatar, the interviewees reported some confusion at the beginning, as the professors were not used to that type of teaching. However, as time passed, the professors began to gain more control and become more familiar with online tools. The reasons behind this enhancement were continuous

training sessions conducted by the university and peer training among professors. The university was also keen to update its staff with new methods to enhance their online teaching. The easy transition for students and professors was also due to the university's use of the Blackboard platform. The last reason, from the faculty's point of view, was that workshops were conducted by IT experts to resolve any problems that might occur so that they could move along with the educational process. Longer experiences with some e-learning tools and continuous support and training thus allowed for the smoothest transition to online teaching in the two Gulf countries.

2) How was distance teaching perceived by the students in the six countries?

After learning about the different experiences of transitioning to distance teaching from a faculty point of view, we surveyed 1,063 students from six Arab countries to explore their evaluations of distance teaching strategies and platforms. A cross-country comparison is provided below regarding the digital tools they relied upon in their learning activities. We were also interested in their satisfaction with, and assessment of, the different distance teaching strategies. We further asked whether they would like to continue with distance learning post-COVID-19 and inquired about future suggestions to improve the distance learning experience in their countries.

The first question on the use of different digital tools revealed a diversity of preferences in the different countries that reflect the above-described strategies taken by the various universities (Table 2).

Table 2: Digital tools used in distance teaching according to students (multiple answers possible).

Country	Video conference systems (such as Zoom/ WebEx/ MS Teams)		Google Classroom		Facebook		Google Drive		LMS (such as Blackboard)		Instant messaging service (such as WhatsApp and Telegram)		YouTube	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Egypt	183	69.1%	149	56.2%	94	35.5%	172	64.9%	19	7.2%	65	24.5%	63	23.8%
Tunisia	49	72.0%	28	41.2%	43	63.2%	11	16.2%	7	10.3%	1	1.4%	5	7.3%
Iraq	15	4.8%	292	97.0%	45	14.9%	32	10.6%	9	2.9%	116	38.5%	25	8.3%
Yemen	31	16.7%	107	58.1%	36	19.3%	26	14.1%	30	16.3%	133	72.2%	46	25.0%
Oman	28	17.4%	12	7.5%	3	1.9%	20	12.4%	133	82.6%	97	60.2%	23	14.3%
Qatar	70	83.3%	3	3.6%	0	0	2	2.4%	83	99.0%	7	8.3%	7	8.3%

The usage of video conference systems, with their ability to allow for direct and synchronous interaction, was particularly strong in Qatar, but also in Egypt and Tunisia. In those countries with rather low bandwidth capacities (i.e., Iraq and Yemen), Google Classroom was used as an asynchronous alternative (as mentioned by 97% of the interviewed students in Iraq and by 58% in Yemen). As the two Gulf countries had already established LMS such as Blackboard, these LMS were used by the students intensely (more than 82% of the interviewed students in Oman and 99% in Qatar mentioned this). An interesting observation is that in both Yemen and Oman, instant messaging services such as WhatsApp and Telegram (as mentioned by more than 72% of the interviewed students in Yemen and more than 60% in

Oman) were used as the main communication tools among students and teachers, according to the students.

Very low levels of social media use, such as Facebook, in some countries (i.e., Oman and Qatar) or instant messaging services in others (i.e., Qatar and Tunisia) indicate that certain communication routines had already been established during the early days of the pandemic. At the same time, it is notable that social media networks, such as Facebook and YouTube, which were not mainly designed for educational purposes, were utilized in many countries by students and instructors as a quick, easy-to-use, and familiar tool. This was observed especially in countries with large numbers of students, where it seemed risky to many to use unfamiliar platforms in uncertain times, and where instructors had never experienced online teaching before, such as Egypt.

We also asked the students to choose those distance teaching-related features where the digital tools used proved most effective (Table 3).

Table 3: Most effective teaching-related features according to students (multiple answers possible).

Country	Providing recorded videos		Managing online meetings		Sharing resources		Providing audio recordings		Managing virtual classes		Providing e-libraries and databases	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Egypt	117	44.2%	114	43.0%	60	22.6%	37	14.0%	49	18.5%	14	5.3%
Tunisia	18	26.4%	46	67.6%	7	10.7%	10	14.7%	21	30.8%	2	2.9%
Iraq	75	24.9%	37	12.3%	70	23.3%	79	26.2%	167	55.5%	9	3.0%
Yemen	81	44.0%	55	29.8%	43	23.3%	62	33.6%	64	34.7%	26	14.0%
Oman	103	64.0%	70	43.5%	20	12.4%	17	10.6%	24	14.9%	11	6.8%
Qatar	73	86.9%	50	59.5%	2	2.4%	6	7.1%	2	2.4%	4	4.8%

According to the students, the digital tools used by the teachers were most helpful by providing recorded videos. The reasons behind this are user control over retrievable content as well as the effectiveness of video tutorials as suitable alternatives to practical training in studios and labs. Also, students acknowledged, to some extent, the effectiveness of managing meetings. In most cases (except in Iraq and Yemen), students found the digital tools used by the teachers to be more effective in managing meetings than actually conducting virtual classes. Here, more inquiry needs to be made regarding how effective the digital tools are being used not to simply meet the students' needs, but also to engage them and provide interactive features.

The effectiveness of providing e-libraries and databases was hardly indicated in the six countries, which may reveal the poor availability of online sources in Arabic and in Arab countries and the students' need to be trained on using international databases and employing them in learning activities. We also asked the students to determine the suitability of the e-resources used to substitute for typical teaching strategies they knew from the classroom. A five-point Likert scale was designed, with responses ranging from strongly suitable to strongly unsuitable. The relative weights were calculated to identify the attributed degree of suitability in general and for each teaching strategy separately (Table 4).

Table 4: Suitability of digital tools for certain teaching strategies according to students (multiple answers possible).

Country	Information & knowledge	Practical training	Projects	Self-learning	Team work	Participation and discussion	Overall suitability
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Egypt	70.0%	48.4%	57.2%	67.6%	61.0%	61.2%	60.6%
Tunisia	65.0%	47.6%	55.8%	70.6%	52.4%	61.8%	59.7%
Iraq	68.0%	56.0%	64.0%	68.0%	70.0%	68.0%	66.8%
Yemen	62.2%	50.0%	54.2%	69.8%	57.4%	62.0%	59.7%
Oman	72.0%	61.4%	66.2%	74.6%	62.8%	69.8%	68.6%
Qatar	78.0%	64.0%	64.0%	80.4%	62.0%	70.0%	71.4%

In general, a substantial percentage (between 59.7% to 71.4%) of students acknowledged that e-resources seem to be suitable for transitioning typical teaching strategies to distance teaching. In particular, receiving theoretical knowledge and information from the teachers and self-learning were found to be done well online. Teamwork and project work, however, were rated less positively, indicating that this seems to be more difficult to do online. The most problematic item, according to the students, was practical training. This was found to be least suitable in all six countries, indicating the difficulty of implementing distance teaching strategies to compensate for studio training, using cameras, editing, creating animation, and developing graphs, because such skills require practice on the ground. Nevertheless, on average, for half of the students it seemed to be suitable to conduct practical training online.

Finally, we asked students whether they would like to continue distance online learning in the future after returning to normal life (Table 5).

Table 5: Students' acceptance of the continuity of distance teaching post-pandemic.

Country	Yes		Maybe		No	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Egypt	51	19.2%	74	27.9%	140	52.8%
Tunisia	20	29.4%	23	33.8%	25	36.8%
Iraq	71	23.6%	93	30.9%	137	45.5%
Yemen	18	9.8%	51	27.7%	115	62.5%
Oman	53	32.9%	35	21.7%	73	45.3%
Qatar	29	34.5%	15	17.6%	40	47.6%
Total	242	22.8%	291	27.4%	530	49.9%

The results indicated that 49.9% of all students would have preferred not to continue distance learning in the future after the pandemic was over, compared to 22.8% who answered with a clear yes, and 27.4% who were undecided. Given their experiences with a poor and unreliable technological infrastructure, Yemeni students were the least interested in continuing distance teaching (62.5%), before Egyptian students (52.8%). Omani students (45.3% said no, while 32.9% said yes) and Qatari students (47.6% while 34.5% said yes) were torn between continuing and abolishing distance teaching. In both countries, the best technical infrastructure

among the six was found, and the relevant resources were widely available. Iraqi students (45.5% said no) and Tunisian students (36.8% said no) were the most undecided. One can argue that insufficient training of the professors and technical difficulties were not the only reasons for students disliking distance teaching, since they also missed the faculty and student life, as well as face-to-face communication with their fellow students and professors.

When asked about suggestions for improvement, the students focused, in particular, on the administrative and technical aspects. They demanded that the government secure high-speed internet and improve the infrastructure to enable students not living in big cities to have access to the Internet. In addition, students asked for improvements to the departments' online sites, and in Egypt and Iraq in particular, students demanded the establishment of an LMS. Finally, they also suggested that more training be provided to the teaching staff on new applications so that they could adopt more interactive teaching strategies, such as chat rooms and quizzes, to enrich online learning.

3) How was the transition evaluated by the teaching staff, and which suggestions can be made for the future?

In the focus groups and the individual interviews with staff and teaching faculty, many of the concerns of the students were mirrored, especially the necessity of getting cheaper and more stable internet connections and a better infrastructure. These concerns were mainly raised in Yemen, Iraq, and Egypt. Our respondents affirmed that measures should be taken to renew and strengthen the infrastructure. Concrete suggestions were to prepare a central site through which universities could access the Internet free of charge and through which free or discounted internet accounts for students could be provided. In addition, it was suggested that the necessary devices such as laptops or computers for low-income students or those living in remote areas should be provided.

At the same time, ministries and decision-makers were also addressed regarding the legal problems of online teaching. Respondents demanded that colleges' bylaws be updated to provide a legal framework for distance education and its procedures. During the pandemic, the existing regulations of many media schools conflicted with distance education. For example, in Egypt, up until the pandemic, students were required to attend 75% of classes and were obliged to complete final exams face-to-face. Also, issues of plagiarism or problems with unstable connections during online exams need to be taken care of by providing a legal framework, according to our interviewees. The ad hoc decisions and exceptions made during the pandemic were considered insufficient.

In general, the demand was strong to integrate distance education into future development plans for higher education. It turned out that the crisis had accelerated a transformation process that many had been waiting for. Participants highlighted that going (more) online was a goal that many universities in the Arab world were trying to approach but had hesitated with and were now forced to

act upon. A proposal that seemed most applicable among faculty staff in the six Arab countries was adopting a hybrid system by merging face-to-face education (50–60%) and e-learning (40–50%). This would also help to solve long-lasting problems, such as dealing with the ever-increasing student numbers, particularly in Egypt and Iraq. It could also help the departments gain more international recognition by organizing joint educational programs in cooperation with other universities or international bodies that can be implemented remotely. This would require a comprehensive framework to redesign courses, adopt new learning strategies and evaluation tools, and strengthen the administrative and technical units in the respective universities. One small step that Cairo University has taken is the inclusion of Blackboard into regular teaching and its recognition as an examination tool.

The participants in the focus groups highlighted that these changes would have to be accompanied by continuous staff training and peer-to-peer learning. When reflecting on their experiences during the pandemic, the staff interviewed in the focus groups concluded that the experience of applying online teaching had forced them to overcome obstacles and find immediate and practical solutions. In the end, this gave them more confidence to adapt to online teaching. They also admitted that the experience proved that the younger staff is more ready to transition to online education. The pandemic had fostered cooperation among staff members, as some had previous experience utilizing digital tools in teaching or uploading videos or e-books and took over these tasks to train their colleagues who were unfamiliar with those tools. Peer-to-peer training thus became a new asset that, at some points, also helped overcome generational hierarchies.

At the same time, a new communication and work culture needs to be established when continuing with distance online teaching. Since communication between students and teachers was often transitioned to social media like Facebook or instant messaging services like WhatsApp, students used these tools in the same manner as with their peers. They felt free to contact their professors 24/7, ignoring their right to personal life. This disrespect of boundaries was also one argument that older professors used to make their stand in resisting the change of methods. At the same time, Facebook and WhatsApp might not be the right tools for educational purposes in which assignments need to be submitted and graded, and feedback needs to be given. A dream of many participants in the focus groups was, therefore, to develop (or adapt) a nationwide online system for managing the educational process, which would include space for sharing scientific material, as well as channels for communication between students and faculty members, calendars, broadcasted lectures, and other activities related to the educational process. This might also help to address the problem of faculty members' intellectual property rights being violated when scientific material is being shared for free on social media networks.

Finally, the need for cooperation between different media schools, including those in the same country but also internationally, was highlighted. Only through cooperation can a meaningful, comprehensive strategy be found that does justice to the needs of the students, administration,

and teachers with regard to distance teaching.

Conclusion

The necessity of teaching online from a distance took most Arab universities by surprise. In most cases, neither the infrastructure nor the legal framework was prepared. In our study, we observed, however, great flexibility and willingness to make distance teaching work, even without the proper frameworks. A lack of infrastructure and financial means proved to be the most relevant problem in conflict-ridden countries like Iraq and Yemen, but also in Egypt and Tunisia. Nevertheless, in these four countries, creative ideas were used by the staff to overcome this problem to some extent. From a socio-cultural point of view, it became clear that, in particular, the older generation of teachers needed a push to accept new forms of teaching as appropriate methods. In all cases, peer training and consultations helped to transfer skills, albeit this seemed to be an ad hoc measurement and has so far not been institutionalized by the universities. Students were generally satisfied with the digital tools used in their institution, even though in some countries, the skills of the teachers were premature, and the infrastructure was lacking. Most likely, this general satisfaction reflects the different expectations the students had initially given their knowledge about the conditions and infrastructure available in their countries.

While the students were undecided about whether they would like to continue with distance teaching, the staff seemed to be more inclined to push it to the next level. In our focus group discussions, the participants highlighted that they saw these changes as a move toward the modernization of their teaching. They also expected a further change in the internal communication culture and the inclusion of peer training among staff.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Prof. Dr. Abdulrahman Al-Shami from Qatar University, Prof. Dr. Sahar Khalifa Salim from Al-Iraqia University, Prof. Dr. Hamida El Bour from Manouba University, Dr. Nawal Abdullah Ali from Sana'a University, Dr. Fatma Alzahraa Abdelfatah from Ahram Canadian University and Hana Al-Suleimi from Bayan College for facilitating the data collection and conducting interviews.

This research was made possible through funding from the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) within its funding scheme "Higher Education Dialogue with the Islamic World".

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