

## COVID-19: Remapping the Way: Optimizing High Education while Decreasing Exposure and Viral Transmission

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### **Abstract:**

COVID-19 pandemic has promptly led to the lockdown of high education institutions including different universities around the world, hoping that the recommendations of global health ministries and organizations, primarily social distancing, could help in decreasing viral transmission, flattening contagion curve and reducing expected death rates. Drawing on the situation in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and analyzing the different declarations of emergent precautionary procedures at Saudi universities, this paper argues that in addition to being globally framed as a health intimidation, COVID-19 can also be presented as a new normal through which high education policy reinvented itself. The paper also argues that digitalization and distance learning proves to be a crucial tool for different universities around the world not only for continuing education as a potential emergency solution within the worst scenarios under the intimidation of the pandemic, but also for advocating a prospective renovation after the COVID-19 crisis passes through genuine online and blended education.

**Key Words:** Digitalization - COVID-19 – e-learning - hybrid Learning – pedagogies

### INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 pandemic has left no aspect of human life untouched, and high education is no exception. **The cosmopolitan scenery of high education has been radically changed in the past few months due to the spread of COVID-19 (commonly known as Coronavirus).** According to UNESCO, about 75% of the world's student population has been affected by campus closures due to COVID-19 pandemic. In their response to this global health emergency, **Saudi Ministry of Education has established ongoing efforts to take the pulse of potential tribulations for students and high education institutions throughout the crisis.** By monitoring the disruption that Coronavirus is causing to worldwide institutions of high education, Saudi government encourages such urgent studies for clearer planning of the next academic year during such uncertain time. The Ministry of Education has a priority to provide high education institutions with the most up-to-date possible information as the situation evolves. We, as faculty members, also continue intensifying our own roles as a reliable partner within the sector of high education saving no effort to help universities to alleviate the worst impacts of the virus on students and the educational process as a whole.

This paper proceeds into four main aspects. This first outlines the current position all over the word reflecting on the global decision of the closure of university campuses within the framework of the strict precautions against the epidemic virus. The second section turns to the

unprecedented experience of the Saudi sector of high education and its unhesitant transformation from traditional face-to-face educational system into distance learning; providing a background on the impact of the pandemic upon high education institutions and the relationship of the measures of social distancing and the use of digitalization within the pedagogical community. The third section frames a hypothesis that COVID-19 educational model in KSA- popup as a result of the worst-case scenario - is meant to present such good chances to leverage digitalization as a way to optimize high education while decreasing exposure and viral transmission. The last section supports online and hybrid learning as a potential credential post-pandemic pedagogy in the kingdom. The paper paid a considered attention to the new challenges that face online learning in the age of Coronavirus; ending with considerable recommendations in numerous high educational contexts.

### RECENT SITUATION AND E-LEARNING IN SAUDI ARABIA

With the rapid evolution of technology and the imperative requirement to keep the sector of education up to date, e-learning is not something new. E-learning was first widely adopted in Saudi Arabia in the early 1990s and was further developed with the expansion of the age of digitalization (Al-Masaud and Gawad, 2014). The kingdom of Saudi Arabia gained the leadership through the appliance of the closed-circuit television as a mode of e-learning to address the problem of insufficient instructors and/or majors between male and female sections in high education institutions. (Aljaber, 2018) E-learning has been there, in KSA, for a rationale; to broaden the sources of learning for students and deliver lifelong learning, however, the current situation compels a different need as the disruption of COVID-19 has created new *raison d'être* that validates e-learning to be the nucleus of the continuity of educational process in different universities. E-learning can save high education from being at the front lines of the economic fallout and be the engine of digital educational revolution; for instance, converting physical classrooms into digital ones will prevent a possibility of longer-term inevitable troubles, including public disinvestment in private colleges.

The unfolding of the crisis has raised questions in terms of its expected impact on learning outcomes of high education. Thus, this paper reexamines the rationale for e-learning in light of the closure of physical campuses of universities, reflecting on the major implications of the crisis and the multilateral response towards making high education in Saudi Arabia more responsive and relevant for all during such critical time. Current situation proves a clear reality finding online environment as a space of spontaneous routine in critical times and thus a turn into digital educational forms might emerge as a reliable wing of educational system in the future.

With the magnitude of the crisis overwhelming global educational fabric, digitalization is playing a crucial role in enlightening and even directing decision makers in the sector of high education all over the world. **Coronavirus deemphasizes the significance of top-down dissemination of incorporated knowledge, standardized before the age of corona, through digitalization.** *Educators go from disseminating knowledge directly and traditionally, via face-to-face education, to transmitting it online in a variety of forms, an act that even provides students with considered opportunity engaging them more to think, analyze, discuss, and even innovate.* This proves an effective key to deal with the trauma of the students who have been

dramatically influenced by the spread of Coronavirus suffering many forms of anxieties as social distancing, quarantine, isolation procedures, campus closure...etc.

#### MEASURES OF HIGH EDUCATION SECTOR IN KSA

Saudi Ministry of Education has issued a number of imperative precautionary instructions relating to high education continuation of the past semester directly affected by COVID-19 lockdown of universities and other analogous institutions. These decisions involved suspending all university activities until further notice amid Coronavirus concerns while accrediting a quick transformation into distance learning while giving students the option to withdraw or postpone semesters to assure students that their option is not to negatively affect their grade point averages (GPA) during the period of the pandemic. Considering the students psychological state being unstable and hesitant as a result of the current situation, the Ministry of Education has also predetermined that a student's GPA should be calculated if it exceeds the one of the previous academic year and is not counted if it were otherwise. The Ministry found it mandatory to shift its priorities and come up with innovative ways to deal with the challenges posed by the pandemic. Such efforts have made use of distance learning during the coronavirus crisis and have achieved extraordinary success confirming the implication of education to sustain development and stability in Saudi renaissance.

#### REFLECTING ON IMPLICATIONS FOR SAUDI HIGH EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE

The rise of viral transmission has created capacity pressure on decision making all over the world. Consequently, the Saudi Ministry of Education has wisely adopted the activation of information and communication technologies in education. This has led to a complete dependence on e-learning as a complementary and alternative system of traditional education for the past semester. Considerable long-term consequences are inevitable as the crisis continues; however, it is too early to accurately predict the broader implications of the Coronavirus pandemic for high education or for society in general. This stimulates the implication that high education has to remain fundamentally stable as it is one of the main engines of economical and social mobility and a tool to expand the country's horizons.

COVID-19 is a battle with an untraceable enemy and ostensibly ubiquitous, but it has exposed a persistent perspective to future learning improvements. This pandemic has been forcing us to rethink current educational scheme proving that traditional education has been over-standardized and e-learning is reliable and authorized and its tools are indispensable to make the educational experience valuable. COVID-19 has overturned the configuration of high education virtually overnight, and will further step up a number of longer-term inclinations breaking the conventional patterns, standards, and practices of universities across KSA. Actually, institutions of high education in KSA proved to be reasonably primed to adapt to this new reality.

#### PEDAGOGIES OF E-LEARNING

Holmes and Gardner define e-learning to be "the use of new multimedia technologies and the Internet to improve the quality of learning by facilitating access to resources and services as

well as remote exchanges and collaboration” (2006). E-learning means the adoption of a learning design that enhances education effectiveness and quality by incorporating technology which improves teaching and assessment and the learning process as a whole (Amador et al. 2016). In KSA, high education Sector has been maintaining an integration of e-learning pedagogy to accommodate with meticulous requirements like nowadays emergency of Coronavirus. Projects are continuously developed to provide adequate IT infrastructure as well as content development for high education students. (Troudi, 2010)

This proves that it is not hard to incorporate technology into traditional learning through hybrid learning to enhance the quality of universities learning outcomes. At such an emergent time, the Saudi experience proves no tension using technology in distance learning. This requires a call for developing digital curriculums to enhance e-learning that might involve a comprehensive change in regular curriculums to adhere with the transformation from the traditional content customized in face-to-face education. Such new factors of pedagogical approaches of hybrid learning inevitably enhance the educational process to be even more effective than the pure approach of traditional learning methods.

#### A NEW CHALLENGE IN THE STORM

With the escalating online engagement, the risk of cyber-bullying and fake info- sharing through the various channels of social media increases. Misbehavior, personal offences, mocking unusual teaching methods, defamation, and infliction of damage are all social spywares that have lately appeared with the increasing use of electronic means of communication. The Coronavirus and the digital shift in the different aspects of life, and consequently online learning, have brought hackings and cybercrimes on an undeniable increase. Phishing harassment by emails of extortion and donation requests that appear to be sent from original sources, in addition to zoomboomers’ attacks on video teleconference platforms, are considered to be time bombs that threaten the success of electronic education.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

There are numerous opportunities not only to mitigate the harm that COVID-19 might cause high education, but also to renovate digitalization to optimize high education in post-corona age epitomized the following points:

##### Quality Standards and Capacity Building

Trust should be sustained in digital learning outcomes through authenticated quality assurance standards including accredited procedures so that online education, that has taken place everywhere, is well-recognized. This requires high education sector to allot exceptional fund to allow digitalized knowledge to be institutionalized as a cost-effective method that supports pioneers and provided trainings for trainers in novel high-quality educational configuration.

##### Hybrid Education

High education should not endeavor to be an entirely distance activity or a pure traditional learning, hybrid learning will certainly prove to be even much more adequate and effective in post-corona era.

### Funding

Emergency funding have to be customized for distressed universities. More investment should be directed to capacity building to adjust to new requirements of digitalized learning to strengthen high education systems and ensure the quality of its outcomes.

Governmental supplies should be directed as financial aids for students and research grants to guarantee an equal opportunity for all students from different economic and social ranks.

### Research Maturity through Internationalization and Transnationalism

Developing an institutional culture sustaining internationalization and transnationalism as dual partners can leverage each other's resources more than each could do on their own. Academia must contribute to developing the digital maturity of individuals and institutions via intensive communication and cooperation with international research networks.

Providing an open access to learning material and even publications to update and/or sufficiently embed content in the relevant context. Such a procedure definitely makes good use of digitalization that promotes an interconnected world so people know no more national borders when it comes to the field of research, this can strengthen diversity of perspectives to ensure impact.

### Digitalized Infrastructure and Cyber Security

Decision makers need to reshape digitalization with new policies, plans, and strategies for the sustaining high education in such critical times. They should invest in infrastructure for digitalization with regard to cyber security and data security to guarantee adequate and free access for both students and staff. Also, high education sector should reflect on digitalization and react to developments in society in their study programs.

Procedures should be taken to ensure appropriate security systems to guarantee the protection of students and teachers from the threat of cybercrimes. instructions on best practices avoiding clicking on suspicious links or providing information to unknown third parties should be a center of attention.

### Social Media and Criminalizing Defamation

Ministry of high education should design a strict program to protect both students and staff against any possible electronic misbehaviors and raise the institutional awareness with the legal and appropriate use of the internet and online education platforms. Digital defamation should be a criminal offence by the authority of law criminalizing cyber-bullying and digitalized violation.

### Public Awareness

Civil society Organizations should focus on the cultivation of the human spirit and foster global citizenship in terms of responsibility, awareness and innovation to address major challenges like recent COVID-19 and potential future pandemics.

### Curriculum Development

High education sector should utilize digitalization to generate innovative learning spaces and recover the accessibility and quality of online education didactics and also include proficient experts to contextualize digital curriculums and content.

### Monitoring the Educational Process and Data Collection

More laws of privacy and property rights should be issued to have institutional personal data protection law; that guarantee works of both staff members and students to be personal data of a special nature with an authorization that cannot be processed without consent.

## CONCLUSION

The current crisis of Coronavirus proves great potential in Saudi Arabia's high education and distance learning systems. Kingdom of Saudi Arabia glorifies the significance of education and its impact on social and economic prosperity for the whole nation. Through digitalization, distance learning and the utilization of technology in high education have made a miracle in confrontation of COVID-19. Through proactive precautionary procedures, the Saudi Ministry of Education and its high-level institutions have succeeded in continuing education under the emergency of the pandemic achieving considerable learning outcome according the standards of quality assurance system. Simultaneously, Saudi Arabia has a great deal to exchange its leading experience with other countries that have deep-rooted digitalized system in their high educational scheme. High education sector in Saudi Arabia is ultimately able to entirely automate their e-learning systems and reposition distance learning as principal education scheme, in an independent format or a hybrid one, in post-corona age.

In the light of 2030 vision and the country's remarkable progress, e-learning positively proves the most inclusive educational approach for ensuring that the Saudi Arabian high education sector can deal with the worst scenarios of probable second wave of the pandemic or even a genetic transformation of the virus in the future. Saudi Ministry of Education is highly praised for its intriguing steps towards studied appliance of e-learning system that enables universities to face the crisis spontaneously and successfully. E-learning and hybrid learning are expected to be the most schemes that may demonstrate the greatest adaptable potential to be applied in the sector of high education in post-corona era, offering expedient and flexible access to learning pedagogies and methodologies. Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has heavily invested in the ministerial portfolio of the sector of high education with special reference to distance learning and is now reaping the rewards through the universities' influential battle against the pandemic. Eventually, the probable future adoption of e-learning in Saudi Arabia can serve building a stable vital educational system in the country.

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