

Higher Education in the Time of COVID-19: Challenges Facing Moroccan Undergraduate Students

Sarra Chahbane

Abstract

The COVID-19 epidemic has imposed radical and sudden shifts in the global higher education community. Millions of students and educators were forced to move their communication, courses, and assessment online, leading to unbearable psychological pressure and unprecedented E-learning challenges. This study aims at exploring the impact of COVID-19 on Moroccan undergraduate students' learning experiences. It specifically addresses the different challenges that have been facing Moroccan undergraduate students who belong to the English department at Cadi Ayyad University. To achieve this objective, the study uses open-ended questions in an unstructured questionnaire to which 169 Moroccan undergraduate students have responded. The findings of this study have revealed that the shift to virtual learning due to COVID-19 closures has presented a number of challenges that have negatively affected students' online learning experiences. Almost all respondents have agreed upon four major challenges: adaptability struggle, lack of communication, lack of motivation, and technical issues. Reflecting on these challenges and others has encouraged Moroccan undergraduate students to question long-standing assumptions and provide some suggestions and learning strategies that can build a better higher education system. Ensuring constant contact, adopting student-centered models, and shifting the focus of education from data transmission to skills acquisition are three major paradigm shifts that are needed for a better post-COVID 19 higher education.

Keywords: virtual learning, online learning challenges, Covid-19, higher education, Moroccan students

Introduction

On the 11th March 2020, the WHO declared the COVID-19 infection a global pandemic after it was originated from Wuhan, China in late December 2019 and then rapidly spread over the world (WHO, 2020). The COVID-19 outbreak has dramatically impacted the healthcare industry, the economic sector, and the education system as a whole (Kinsella, 2020). This has, therefore, impacted all individuals across the world, physically, psychologically, and financially.

The WHO declaration has led many countries to implement a state of emergency protocol to control the spread of the virus which has resulted in mass quarantines. Morocco is no exception. Due to the Coronavirus's severity, Morocco, with a total of 63 confirmed cases, declared a state of emergency on the 19th of March (Kasraoui, MWN, 2020). As a result, the Moroccan government took essential protective measures including the announcement of the compulsory closure of all schools and universities, hence, declaring that education will move online as an attempt to prevent the spread of COVID-19 (Kasraoui, 2020). With the rapid shift to remote learning, developing educational online platforms and working on existing ones have become vital to offer continuity in online learning (Malkus, Christensen, & Schurz, 2020). This paradigm shift from traditional in-person classroom education to distance learning where the teaching and learning processes are performed remotely on instructional digital platforms such as Zoom, Google Meet, and Blackboard has reflected the preparedness, academic qualifications, and creativity of both students and teachers around the world (Bonvillian & Singer, 2013).

For many educational institutions, the use of online learning was already a normative routine in students' learning experiences (Carr-Chellman, 2006; Chepesiuk & Gorman, 1998) while for many others, this has been the new normal of education that they have never experienced (Woytus, 2020; Farooq & Matteson, 2016) but are required to immediately adopt and adequately adapt to. However, in developing countries such as Morocco with an enormous discrepancy in the social, economic, and pedagogical backgrounds of students along with the educational quality of institutions, the shift to remote learning has been very challenging (Rashid & Ydav, 2020; Larreamendy-Joerns & Leinhardt, 2006).

Therefore, this study aims at exploring the impact of COVID-19 on Moroccan undergraduate students learning experiences. More specifically, it aims at describing the different challenges that have been facing Moroccan undergraduate students who belong to the English department at Cadi Ayyad University in Marrakech.

Method

Considering the general purpose of this study which investigates the experience of online learning challenges by Moroccan undergraduate students at Cadi Ayyad University in Marrakech, this research was carried out using a qualitative descriptive method.

The sample of this study comprises 169 Moroccan undergraduate students who belong to the English department at the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences, Cadi Ayyad University in Marrakech. The participants were both females and males, aged between 18 and 24 years old.

Data was collected through an unstructured questionnaire to which 169 participants responded. The unstructured questionnaire is formulated around open-ended questions where respondents are not restricted to a fixed choice. Rather, they have the ultimate freedom to openly express their opinions and concerns about the topic being examined.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the study was entirely conducted online. Using Google Forms, an unstructured questionnaire of five open-ended questions was formed. With the help of two university professors who belong to the English department at Cadi Ayyad University, I was able to reach a good number of respondents who showed a great interest in the study. In turn, this study follows ethical standards that guarantee the confidentiality of participants' personal data.

Results

After reading through the responses, categorizing them, and objectively analyzing the data, we obtained the following results and findings:

The first question asked the participants to describe and evaluate their online learning experience. 129 participants preferred to respond with one adjective that portrays the shift from Face-to-Face education to online learning as a negative experience. Their responses are: "disappointing", "poor", "failing", "awful", "worthless", "a waste of time", "bad", "weak", "negative", "terrible", "inconvenient", "awkward", "limited", and "unsatisfactory". 22 participants described their online learning experience as a "necessary alternative mode of education" that is not "as effective as face-to-face classroom learning" but at the same time, it is "helpful", "useful", "necessary", "valuable", "beneficial", and "manageable". 18 participants described their online learning experiences as "positive", "acceptable", "pleasant", "satisfying", and "adequate".

The second question asked the participants to list the main challenges of online learning that they have faced as undergraduate students during the COVID-19 pandemic. The answers varied from one person to another due to several social factors but still can be classified into six main divisions. The first main challenge that was identified by 123 participants is the lack and absence of communication and feedback, both from teachers and students themselves, which has negatively impacted their overall online learning experiences. The second main challenge that was marked by 119 participants is technical issues, as most students stated that they are not well-equipped with a high Internet connection that the most used online learning platforms require. The third main challenge that was classified by 87 participants is adaptability struggle which they have described as "one of the biggest challenges" that "shaped" their online learning experiences as it "paved the way for more difficulties". The fourth main challenge that was listed by 86 participants is the lack of self-motivation. With these challenges being identified, a category of respondents that comprise 17 participants answered this question with "there were no significant challenges", "I faced no problem at all", and "everything was as expected". Additionally, 5 participants answered with "the whole experience has been challenging".

The third question allowed participants to provide some suggestions and recommendations that can enhance the online learning process. Out of 169 participants, 131 have actively responded to the question while 38 respondents have stated that nothing can enhance the virtual approach of education, as no mode of learning can replace the traditional face-to-face classroom instruction. As for the 131 participants, they have highlighted the importance of ensuring constant contact and communication, focusing on skills acquisition rather than data transmission, and adopting student-centered models.

Discussion and Conclusions

The findings of this study have revealed that the shift to virtual learning due to COVID-19 closures has presented several challenges that have negatively affected most Moroccan undergraduate students' online learning experiences. Almost all respondents have agreed upon four major challenges of online learning: adaptability struggle, lack and absence of communication and feedback, lack of motivation, and technical issues.

The switch from traditional classroom instruction to virtual learning has made the entire learning experience unusual for Moroccan undergraduate students. Many of them have described themselves as having a traditional classroom mindset. Therefore, they find themselves unable to adapt to the new environment.

Furthermore, results have shown that some students have never received any course content from their professors which have led them to attend weekly online sessions delivered by other professors from the same or other universities while other respondents received every week a document that summarizes the whole course which has been described by most students as being "insufficient", particularly for linguistics courses that necessitate practical activities more than theoretical ones. Such courses include grammar, semantics and pragmatics, syntax, and phonology/morphology.

Equally important, most students are not well-equipped with a high Internet connection that is highly required for online learning. For this reason, they regularly face problems when trying to join online sessions, especially in video conferencing apps that necessitate a very high Internet connection to successfully attend the entire session.

Additionally, self-motivation is an E-learning essential requirement. However, most students, as results reveal, lack it. Facing difficulties in handling technological tools, receiving no feedback from professors, lacking communication and interaction between students and teachers have all contributed to a large extent to student demotivation.

Given this, the transition toward online learning has been very difficult for students all across the world, and this struggle has manifested itself in many different ways in Moroccan undergraduate students belonging to the English department at Cadi Ayyad University. For many, the new format for their classes has left them with a lack of motivation that has affected their academic performance throughout the term. For many others, there were other challenges that have negatively affected their overall online learning experiences such as adaptability struggle, lack of communication, and technical issues. Reflecting on these challenges and others has encouraged Moroccan students to question long-standing assumptions and provide some suggestions and learning strategies that can build a better higher education system. Ensuring constant contact, adopting student-centered models, and shifting the focus of education from data transmission to skills acquisition are three major paradigm shifts that are needed for a better post-COVID 19 higher education.

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