Online Learning Tools, Strategies, and Challenges during the third wave of the Covid-19 Pandemic in the Educational Institutions of Kabul, Afghanistan (Cross-sectional study)

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic challenged and disrupted both private and public sectors of Afghanistan's education and all learning institutions from kindergarten to higher education unanimously agreed to shift their services from face-to-face learning to an online learning format.

A self-administered questionnaire was developed by the author and 50 educational institutions were selected based on a particular assessment. All the questionnaires were responded by vice-chancellors, principals, or by the department of quality assurance of the relevant institution. The purpose of the study was to analyze different aspects of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic but it mainly focused on the adopted learning strategies, and tools, and the current challenges faced by the educational institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The findings of the study revealed that Zoom, Telegram, WhatsApp, and HLMS were the major tools of the institutions while making a daily schedule, choosing the right technology, and broadcasting on-air lessons through television and radio were the main strategies adopted by these institutions. The study also depicts the fact that students' motivation has increased in the institutions of Afghanistan in comparison to the first and second wave of COVID-19 but the research signals that students and families are still not satisfied with the current process of online learning.

The findings of the study also revealed that the outbreak of COVID-19 had negative economic impacts on the educational sector and almost none of the private educational centers had received any government financial support.

Finally, internet problems, the unwillingness of students to take part in online classes, and the inability to catch up well through online systems were considered major challenges by the institutions.

KEYWORDS: *Online Learning, Strategies, Tools, Afghanistan, Challenges*

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1. BACKGROUND:

Coronavirus (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered coronavirus. The virus experiences mild to moderate respiratory illness and recovers without requiring special treatment. Older people with medical problems like cardiovascular disease, and diabetes are more likely to develop serious illnesses [1].

The virus was first detected at the end of 2019 in the city of Wuhan, Hubei Province, China, and then spread rapidly worldwide [2].

The Covid-19 pandemic not only affected the health of the people, but it also badly affected the life, education, and overall social life of the people.

Besides other disruption, Covid-19 affected the education system and almost every student around the world have been affected. According to the reports of WHO, the Covid-10 nearly affecting 1.6 billion learners in more than 190 countries in all continents of the world. Closures of schools and other learning spaces have impacted 94 percent of the world's student population, up to 99 percent in low and lower-middle-income countries [3].

The first case of COVID-19 was detected on 24th February in Afghanistan in the province of Herat (4) and it spread quickly which badly affected the education sector of Afghanistan like other countries and all learning institutions were compelled to shift their services from face-to-face learning to an online learning format.

The online education process in Afghanistan, particularly, governmental institutions are mostly dependent on foreign aid as the USAID's Afghan Children Read project is working to reach populations without internet or television access by developing radio lessons based on the Ministry's reading program for Grades 1, 2, and 3 in both Dari and Pashto, which are the two most popular languages [5]. USAID's Afghan Children Read project is the leading project working to help students without internet or television access by developing radio lessons based on the Ministry's reading program for Grades 1, 2, and 3 in both Dari and Pashto, which are the two popular languages of Afghanistan [6].

There are 39 government universities and higher education Institutes [7]. And nearly 130 private universities and higher education institutions across the country [8]. According to the estimation of 2019, there are also nearly 18000 private and public schools (K-12) in Afghanistan [9].

To be clearer, the private education sector is the backbone of Afghanistan's education sector, but foreign aid is only supporting governmental institutions and the private sector has been deprived of foreign aid, therefore, Afghanistan's educational sector faced many challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, it was an urgent necessity to analyze the current strategies and tools of online learning in the country and address the prevailing challenges and obstacles of Afghanistan's online learning process.

The core objective of the study was to go through the strategies and tools used by educational institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic and determine the best tools and strategies adopted by different institutions and also find out the challenges faced by the online learning of Afghanistan's educational institutions and to spell out student satisfaction. In addition to that, the study aimed to present suggestions and recommendations for further functionality and effectiveness of the online learning process.

2. Study Results and Findings

Around 50 educational institutions based in Kabul were selected on the basis of a certain assessment for this study. 52% of the institutions were offering higher education with 44% private higher educational institutions and 8% government higher education. 48% of the institutions were offering secondary and higher secondary education with 20% private secondary education and 28% government secondary education respectively.

Around 86% of the private higher education institutions were offering online classes and 14% had almost closed their institutions without any activity. 100% of government higher education institutions were offering online classes to their students. The comparison of secondary private and government is disproportionate; almost 0% of the government secondary educational institutions were offering online regular classes to their students and they only relied on broadcasting some lessons through TV and Radio, but on the other hand, 80% of private secondary educational institutions were offering online classes to their students. Regarding government financial support, almost none of the private educational institutions received any government support during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Statistical information of the institutions (Table 1)

Number of Institutions	Educational level of Institution	Type of Institution	Number of Institutions offering Online classes	Number of Institutions received government financial support
22	Higher Education (Above 12th grade)	Private	19	0
10	Secondary & Higher Secondary (12th grade	Private	8	0
4	Higher Education (Above 12th grade)	Government	4	4
14	Secondary & Higher Secondary (12th grade	Government	0	14

2.1 Comparison of educational institutions' participation and the number of institutions that offered online classes. [Figure 1, 2]

 38% of private higher educational institutions, 8% of governmental, 16% of private secondary, and almost none of the government secondary educational institutions were offering online classes during the COVID-19 pandemic. The participation of the institutions is disproportionate because there are only four government higher educational institutions located in Kabul but there are tens of private higher educational institutions.
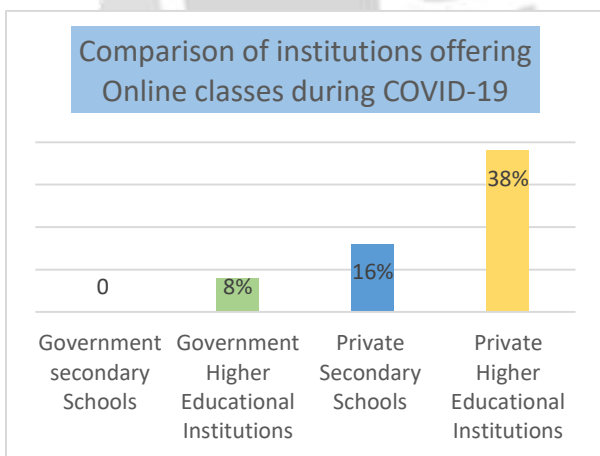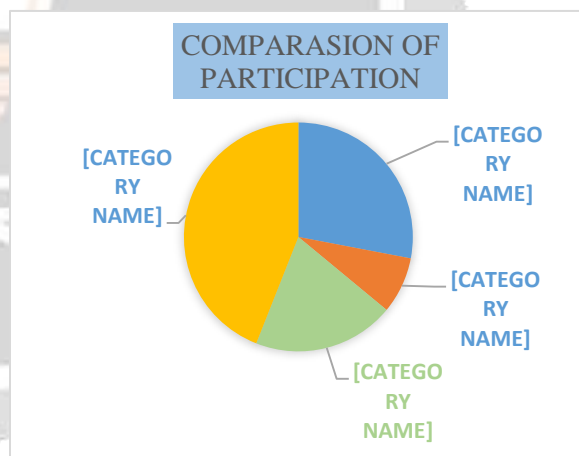

Figure 1

Figure 2

2.2 Level of learning disruption among institutions

According to the study, almost all the institutions have responded "Yes" to the disruption of learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Nearly 68% of the overall institutions' learning process was disrupted to a great extent while 30% was disrupted to some extent and only 2% disrupted very little. [Figure 3, 4]
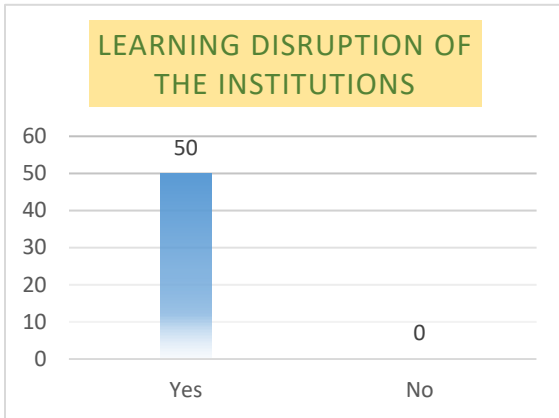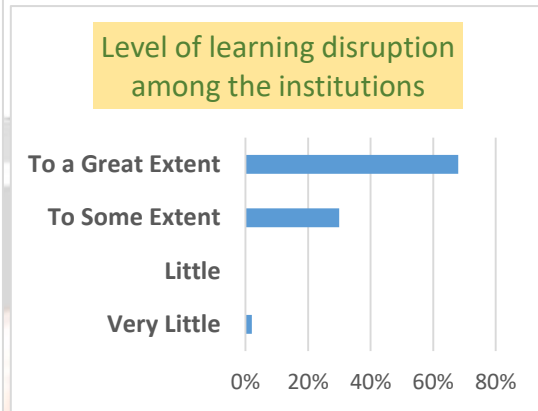

Figure 3

Figure 4

2.3 Students' Participation in Online Classes

Around 18% of the institutions had able to motivate more than 50% of their students to participate in online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. 14% of the institutions were only able to motivate 41-50% of their students to participate. 10% and 14% of the institutions convinced 21-30% and 11-20% of their students respectively, while 38% of the overall institutions failed to convince any of their students to participate in online classes.[Figure5]
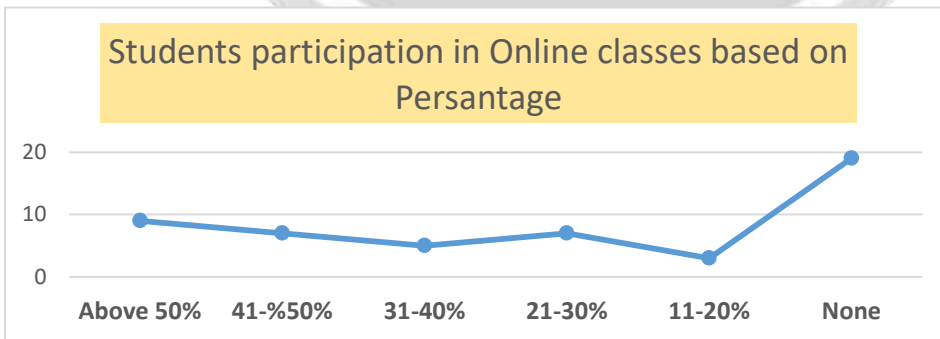

Figure 5

2.4 Students' satisfaction and families' trust in online learning

According to the research findings, most of the students are very little or, to some extent satisfied with online learning and from the tools and strategies adopted by these educational institutions.
The study shows that nearly 42% percent of the students are satisfied to some extent and 40% are very little satisfied and only 10% are satisfied to a great extent while 64% of the families have shown their trust to some extent in online learning and 24% of them have shown very little confidence on the current online learning process. [Figure 6, 7].
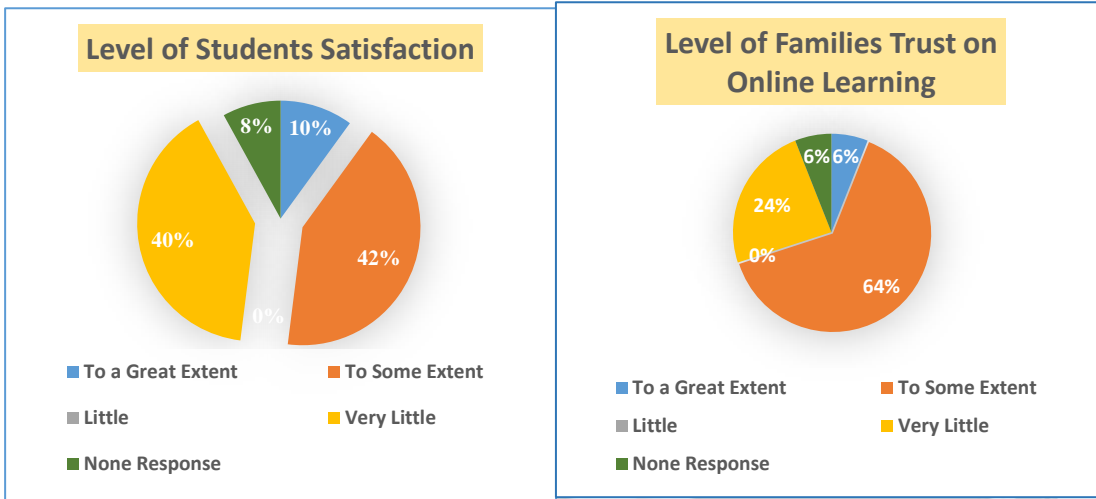

Figure 6

Figure 7

3.5 Students' motivation changes from the first wave of COVID-19 to the third wave

Almost 80% of the respondents expressed that students' motivation has changed in comparison to the first wave of COVID-19. Nearly 60% of the institutions agreed that themotivation of students in online learning has increased to some extent and 12% have agreed that students' motivation increased to a great extent.
It also suggests the fact that students in the educational institutions of Afghanistan have not been accustomed to E-learning, but it's a positive signal that their inclination has changed over the last few months. [Figure 8]
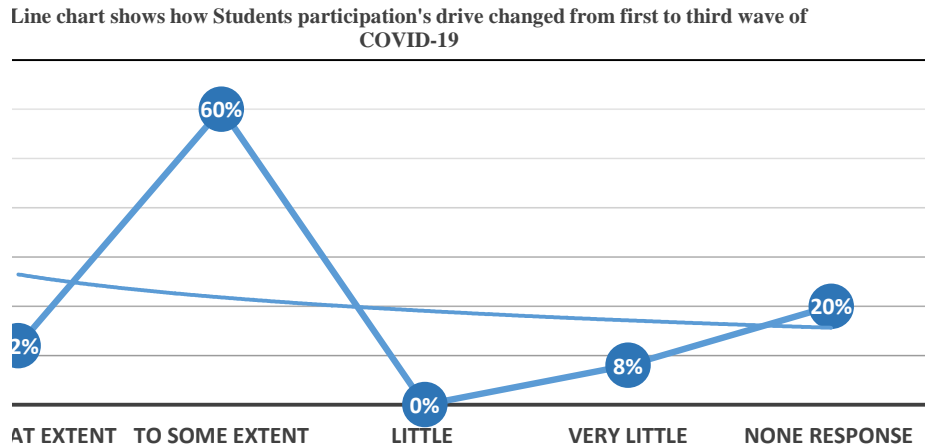
Line chart shows how Students participation's drive changed from first to third wave of COVID-19

60%

2%

0%

8%

20%

AT EXTENT   TO SOME EXTENT   LITTLE   VERY LITTLE   NONE RESPONSE

Figure 8

2.6 Major challenges faced by educational institutions during online learning

Challenges faced by educational institutions were another center-of-attention of the study. General problems were included in the questionnaire to understand exactly where the problems and obstacles exist. Around 44% of the institutions have agreed that the students were not willing to attend online classes, other 30% of the respondents have asserted that internet problems were their main concerns and obstacles during online learning. 22% more institutions have stated that students of their institutions could not learn well through online learning systems while 14% and 4% have expressed that high expenses and lack of digital equipment were their major challenges respectively. [Figure 9]

Figure 9

2.7 Educational strategies adopted by the institutions

Major strategies adopted by the institutions were; making daily schedules, choosing the right technology, broadcasting lessons through television and radio, designing clear and independent learning where students can learn without the support of family, and distributing textbooks & chapters. 30% of the institutions have focused more on the strategy of making daily schedules for the students for the reason of making log-in and check-in times clear. 28% of the institutions, mostly governmental secondary and higher secondary institutions were concentrating only to broadcast lessons through television and radio. 26% of the institutions responded that they focused on the strategy of choosing the right technology, they almost do whatever they think can solve students' questions and make learning easier and comfortable.
Around 6% of the institutions have tried to design clear and independent learning where students can learn without the support of family and equally other 6% of the institutions were focusing on the strategy of distributing text books & chapters. [Figure 10]
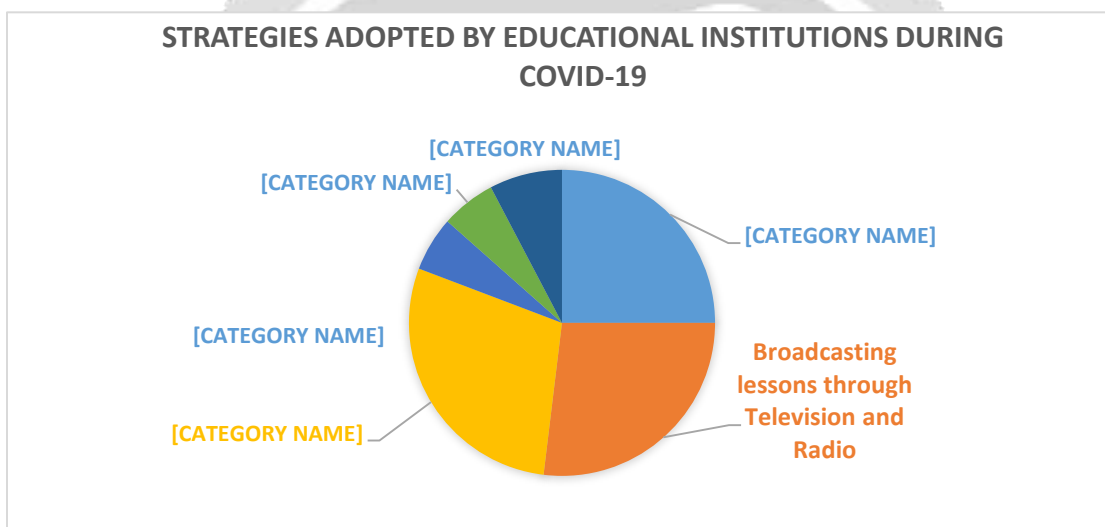

Figure 10

2.8 Learning tools and systems used by educational institutions

Major tools and systems used by the institutions included; LMS, HELMS, Zoom, WhatsApp and Telegram. WhatsApp which is not a good option for learning, but it is at the top of the tool's list used by the institutions and nearly 28% of the institutions used WhatsApp during the COVID-19 pandemic to deliver lessons to their students and is considered to be the top connection between the institution and their students. Zoom was another tool that attracted the attention of the institutions and nearly 20% of the respondents preferred Zoom for offering online classes to their students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Telegram, LMS, and HELMS were other tools used by 18%, 12%, and 10% of the institutions respectively. HELMS is a Higher Education Learning Management system designed by the Higher Education Ministry of Afghanistan during the COVID-19 pandemic with the help of foreign aid to deal with the prevailing challenges faced by the educational institutions of Afghanistan. [Figure 11]
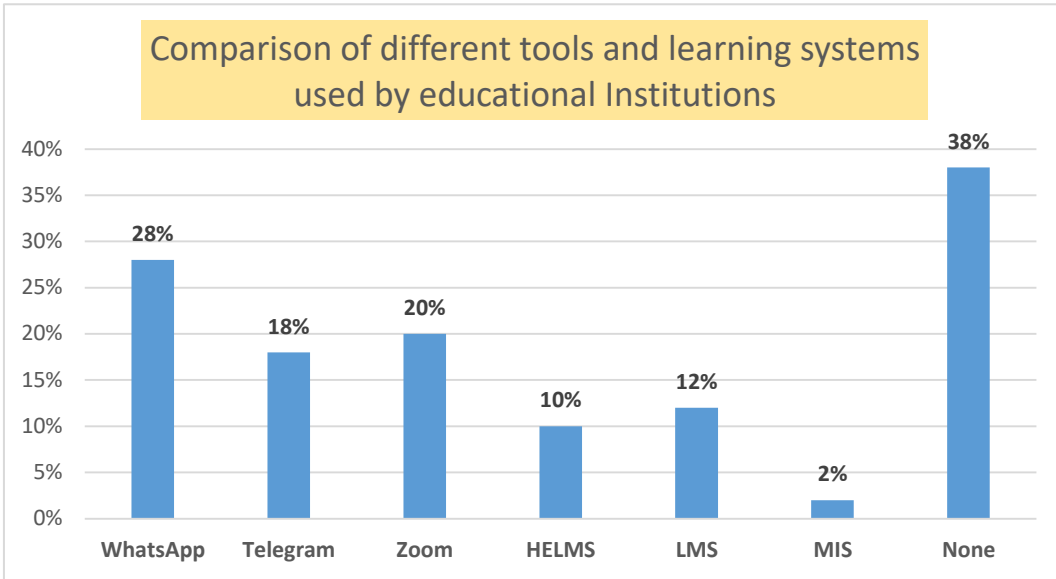
Figure 11

2.9 Negative economic impacts of COVID-19 on educational institutions and government support

COVID-19 had almost negative economic impacts upon all the educational institutions and none of the private institutions have received any government financial support but only government institutions have received financial support. 82% of the institutions have responded that their institutions impacted financially to a great extent while only 14% of the institutions were financially impacted negatively to some extent during COVID-19. [Figure 13, 14].
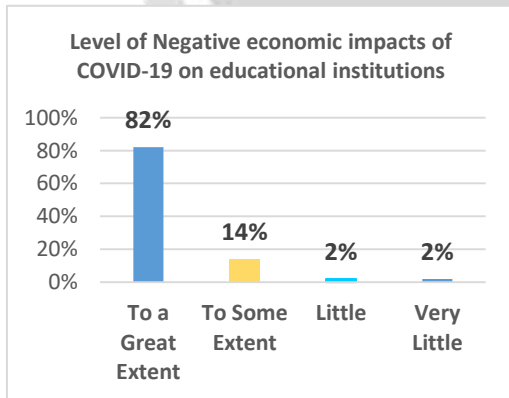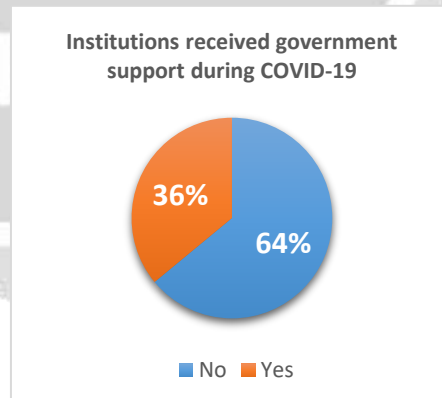

Figure 13

Figure 14

4. CONCLUSION

The study was conducted during a nationwide lockdown in Afghanistan and at a time when every educational institution was struggling to make online learning easier for its students. Both private and public educational institutions used different strategies and tools to satisfy students and their families in any

possible way. 50 educational institutions were selected based on a certain assessment and for a better result, all the questionnaires were responded by vice-chancellors, principals, or by the department of quality assurance of the relevant institution.

The research concluded that the educational sector of the country has been badly affected by COVID-19 pandemic and has been ignored by the government and received very little attention, particularly, private educational institutions have not received any support neither from government nor from any foreign NGOs, as we found out that nearly 70% of the overall institutions' learning process have disrupted to a great extent while 30% have disrupted to some extent and only 2% disrupted very little.

The study also depicts that students' satisfaction and family trust is also very low as more students were very little satisfied. The level of families' confidence level upon online learning is also very low as more than 60% of the families have trusted it to some extent on online learning and nearly 24% of them have shown very little contentment in online learning. This shows that the strategies and tools used by the educational institutions are either not effective or have not been pressed into services effectively.

WhatsApp was at the top of the learning tools used by educational institutions and it's not a good signal for the process of online learning in Afghanistan because it's not an all-purpose and useful selection for learning. On the other contrary, HELMS [Higher Education Learning Management System] has received very little attention, which was designed by the Higher Education Ministry of Afghanistan for a special purpose to tackle the existing challenges of online learning in the country.

The research also concluded that because of poor government planning and lack of support, the students and overall the institutions have faced many problems including internet problems, unwillingness of the students to take part in online learning, and inability of the students to catch well online through the existing tools.

Students' motivation has increased from the first and second wave of the pandemic and 80% of the institutions agreed upon the increase of students' online learning drive. This is a good signal for the future and could increase the expectation of the future of online learning in the country but it still needs lots of attention to increase the motivation of the students in the future.

The research accentuates the serious government support to make the future of online learning brighter as almost all the educational institutions have been financially impacted negatively and 82% of the institutions have been impacted to a great extent but the private sector has not received any penny from the government or any other international organization. Deprivation of the private educational sector from the government's funds will have serious consequences on the future of private education which is considered to be the backbone of Afghanistan's education system.

5. Recommendations

According to the findings of the study, several recommendations have been provided and can be taken into consideration to make online learning more constructive, accessible, and easier.

I. WhatsApp which is used by maximum institutions is not an academic learning tool therefore, government agencies particularly, the ministries of education and higher education need to take drastic measures and form new policies for all the government and private educational institutions to prefer advanced learning tools and system instead of WhatsApp and Telegram.

II. Choosing the right technologies, making daily schedules, and designing clear and independent learning where students can learn without the support of family are all positive and effective strategies, but only broadcasting lessons through television and radio is not a constructive strategy therefore, government and other International NGOs should invest on modern learning system more than they allocate their budget to broadcast through television and radio because the majority of the Afghans consider television only as a tool of fun and news updates.

III. Tele-communication authority needs to collaborate with education and higher education ministries to work on an effective mechanism to make sure the availability of the Internet for institutions and students.

IV. The government needs to allocate a specific portion of fun in the annual and strategic plans to support the private education sector to help them in critical situations such as pandemics or any other security-challenging situations. The pandemic is a good experience for us, it caused the closure of the institutions because they had nothing to pay for the rent of the building and their

staff and lecturers, and as a result, they lost the lecturers, and students which created considerable mistrust between students and institutions.

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