Distance Learning in the Time of Corona: A Study of University Professors Experiences in the UAE

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore faculty members' readiness to cope in a distance learning and the challenges they face. The study was conducted at a private university in the United Arab Emirates and employed a focus group qualitative design. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews during 18 focus groups with university professor. Findings revealed that some staff were not ready to switch from conventional teaching in classes to distance learning, and revealed some obstacles they face to adjust to the new learning environment such as proper training, administrative barriers, and interaction between instructors and students. The study recommends conducting frequent training on using modern technology to improve the quality and efficiency of distance learning. The study provides techniques to improve faculty staff training and quality of teaching methods, which may provide more insights about necessary training instructors' needs and expectations to increase student's engagement.

Keywords: Coronavirus, distance learning, experiences, faculty members

1. Introduction

The new pandemic wildly known as Coronavirus or COVID-19 has influenced all life sectors, economy, health, and education all over the world. The pandemic that originated from a laboratory in Wuhan China affected more than 210 different countries causing increasing death cases (World Health Organization, 2020). To eliminate more spread of the disease, many governments locked down several vital sectors including education putting safety as first priority for students at schools and universities, and all associated workers in this sector including teachers, instructors, administrators (Burgess & Sievertsen, 2020). As a result, teaching has shifted from traditional face to face classrooms to a virtual environment without careful planning or previous practice (Burgess & Sievertsen, 2020).

To ensure the continuity of education for more than 1.5 billion students around the world who were affected during this unprecedented disruption, the UNESCO initiated digital platforms for students to take classes via distance learning (UNESCO, 2020). The new condition invited higher education institutions to equip faculty staff with necessary training to cope with the new virtual environment (Nuere & de Miguel, 2020). Universities with previous experience in some online courses presented before the current pandemic faced less obstacles in teaching because their instructors possessed necessary knowledge and received good training compared to other universities with no previous experience in distance learning (Nuere & de Miguel, 2020).

The higher education environment has become competitive to attract more students. Modern technology and widespread of the internet services provided many educational institutions with alternative means to increase the number of students enrolled from different community slices through distance learning. This type of education has become an essential component of higher education's organization for many universities around the world (Croxton, 2014; Hakim, 2021; Kauffman, 2015; Mapulanga, 2019; Prihantoro, 2021; Yener, 2013) and more academic leaders reported their faculty staff acknowledging the importance of distance learning.

Responding to the tremendous advancement in using communication technology and the internet, distance learning reinforced the popularity of education in the market for more potential students. Those students who did not have access to higher education institutions due to the traditional obstacles preventing them from pursuing their studies. Those obstacles include far distances between place of living and educational institutions, travel, financial issues, age,

social and family requirements, work, etc. As a result, many universities increased the online courses they offer (Al-Azawei & Lundqvist, 2015; Yeomans & Reich, 2017).

Distance learning started as a fad but quickly spread among students to be a prevailing trend in many universities. Almost, 35% of student population in the US registered for online courses (Seaman, Allen, & Seaman, 2018). For example, the number of students who studies as a minimum of one online course was six million in the 2015 academic year. The number of students enrolled in online courses continued to grow in the following years to be around 6.3 million students in the 2016 academic year (Seaman et al., 2018).

1.1 Distance Learning in the Middle East

Conventional education is the most trusted educational system by parents and students in the Middle East. Many institutions are still hesitant about offering online courses (Robertson & Al-Zahrani, 2012). They initiated their first steps to offer partial distance learning to their students recently (Al-Azawei & Lundqvist, 2015). This might be attributed to the late adoption of internet services in the Middle East where they had some concerns about the political impact that might negatively influence their citizens. Besides, there were further worries about the moral influence and the content that might hurt the social and religious moral values among their youth (Quadri, Muhammed, Sanober, Qureshi, & Shah, 2017). Consequently, there were some doubts associated with the effectiveness of virtual courses compared to the traditional education methods which rely heavily on the face to face interaction to achieve the quality expected from higher institutions systems (Alarifi, 2020; Alharthi, 2020; Chepsiror, 2021; Eunice & Cosmas, 2019; Kinyaduka, Kalimasi, & Heikkinen, 2019; Masa & Suyatno, 2020; Ng, 2017; NGO, 2021; Rasheed & Guo, 2020; Rohmawati, Wiryokusumo, & Leksono, 2019).

However, the new pandemic associated with the emerging Coronavirus forced the majority of infected countries to suspend their classes without well-prepared plans to substitute conventional teaching either at schools, colleges, or universities. Thus, distance learning was the first and the most effective alternative for the educational institutions to deliver education to their students through the Spring semester 2019/2020. The new situation required new modifications in the methods of teaching for both faculty and students, who have not experienced distance learning before (Nuere & de Miguel, 2020).

1.2 Conventional Vs. Distance Learning

Conventional education refers to a campus-based system where teachers meet physically with their students to deliver certain educational content (Qayyum & Zawacki-Richter, 2019). Distance learning, on the other hand, represents different forms of learning in which the teacher and students are not restricted to the same time or place. Distance learning came as a result of teacher attrition and sometimes to compensate for a lack of qualified teachers. It allows students to interact with different activities anytime and anywhere. The distance learning idea stemmed from the notion of providing equal opportunities for learners who could not attend classes on university campuses taking into consideration their diverse backgrounds and preferred learning styles. Unlike conventional learning, students can study and do their academic work based on their free time away from the physical classroom. The cost of distance learning can be less compared to conventional learning since it does not require books and can be substituted with soft copies and online study materials (Henaku & Pobbi, 2017).

1.3 Asynchronous Communication vs. Synchronous Communication

In asynchronous communication, students and teachers do not communicate with each other in real-time. The attendance of students in an asynchronous communication model is not a must. Their engagement is minor or absent in some cases when instructors read or lecture without receiving feedback from students. To facilitate interaction between students and instructors, different channels are utilized such as discussion boards, emails, shared videos, audios, etc. Many students prefer asynchronous communication since they have more time to interact, think, and reflect on their ideas. This also prepares students in their local communities to interconnect with the big universal community (Comas-Quinn, de los Arcos, & Mardomingo, 2012; Moore, 2013).

The Synchronous model relatively resembles face to face educational environment; students and instructors communicate with each other in real-time, which is usually the class time agreed on by both parties or set in advance by university academic schedules. They usually have virtual conferences that allow them to interact with each other through instant messaging, video and/or audio conferences. Thus, they will need camera and microphone to make this type of communication work best (Lervik, Vold, & Holen, 2018).

Usually, the two types of internet-based courses begin with mandatory face to face meetings at the beginning of the academic semester through classes on campus. The purpose of obligatory meetings is to give students an orientation about the nature of the course and how things will work for the rest of the academic semester. These meetings which

usually extend up to five days also aim to equip students with the necessary training they need before starting this type of internet-based course. Besides, it is a good opportunity for students and instructors to know each other (Watts, 2016). However, many instructors seemed not to have the basics to deal with the distance learning and are not ready to shift to the distance learning (Alamri & Tyler-Wood, 2017).

1.4 Faculty Training and Readiness

Faculty training on technology and distance learning is an essential requirement to achieve aspired success. Without becoming proficient at these technical skills and being familiar with using , it will be challenging to provide students with meaningful educational experience (Arinto, 2013; Kuo, Walker, Belland, & Schroder, 2013). The rapid changes in technology and its various uses in education make it inevitable for faculty to receive the necessary training to keep themselves updated with the 21st century requirements.

Addressing faculty training needs on information and communication technologies is an essential factor to ensure the success of the distance learning experience. In his study, Al-Zahrani (2015) found a gap between the expectations of Saudi higher education to use modern methods of teaching by employing more technology, the results showed that traditional methods of teaching are widely used compared to the new methods that rely heavily on technology. He attributed that to self-learning strategies instructors used instead of receiving professional training at work. Thus the researcher recommended more professional training to faulty on regular bases to achieve meaningful education.

Instructors have to take into consideration some drawbacks that might influence their experiences with distance learning. In their study, Markova, Glazkova, and Zaborova (2017) found that instructors had limited control over the class activities and faced some complications including problems with organization. Accordingly, instructors were not satisfied with their distance learning experience. Thus professional development is important and it behooves administrative staff at universities to pave the way for instructors and to provide a supportive environment through frequent training to cope well with the dramatic changes in technology (Al-Zahrani, 2015; Arinto, 2013). Besides, Online training faculty staff received during the first weeks of the Coronavirus lockdown seemed to work well for the professors without taking into consideration the state of anxiety they could suffer from, being sick, or influenced by other conditions associated with other issues beyond university fences (Nuere & de Miguel, 2020).

1.5 Cultural Issues

Learning in a multi-cultural environment is of a distinctive nature due to bringing teachers and learners of different cultures together (Damary, Markova, & Pryadilina, 2017). However, the impact of cultural diversity in online learning has not been widely researched (Kreijns, Kirschner, & Jochems, 2003). In spite of the unlimited opportunities, learning in a multi-cultural environment may have its own challenges for teachers as well as students (Damary et al., 2017). For example, teachers may sometimes have a challenge getting male and female students to cooperate and work together. It may take time and effort to convince them that participation in collaborative work is an integral part of university education (Damary & Pryadilina, 2014). This may negatively affect participation in online courses proposing that the significance of effective teaching extends beyond learning and development to engagement also (Hu & Kuh, 2001).

In their study, Damary et al. (2017), encountered an obstacle with some students, specially from certain cultural backgrounds, who had great difficulty participating in group activities. The researchers attributed the reason to the fact that some students may feel uncomfortable due to change from conventional learning in classroom to distance learning online. The researchers recommended that teachers "need training in recognizing their own cultural biases and tolerance of the cultures of their students" (p.88). This would assist teachers in convincing students that "they have to make the greater effort in adjusting their culture to that of the online educational institute" (p.88).

1.6 Administrative Work

According to Allen and Seaman (2013), online courses require more time from teachers, which may be perceived to be an obstacle or a challenge as faculty time requirements. University teachers who are teaching their courses online find themselves spending more time performing administrative and logistical tasks such as collecting course resources, integrating technology, preparing ppt slides and writing course assignments in order to adapt their courses for the online environment. This extra time commitment means that teachers "do not have time to concentrate on improving their teaching or trying different techniques, and instead simply do what they can to get through the course" (Dumford & Miller, 2018). In addition to their teaching commitments, teachers are likely to have other full-time or part-time responsibilities. This may affect teachers' experiences of online learning due to time constraints.

Van de Vord and Pogue (2012) investigated faculty staff's concerns of online learning in terms of time-consuming

compared to old-fashioned face-to-face education. The findings revealed that online learning takes more time in and out of the classroom for teachers and that "certain aspects of online teaching take considerably more time per student than in the face-to-face classroom" (p.1). Similarly, Lloyd, Byrne, and McCoy (2012) explored the barriers of online learning as perceived by faculty staff. They found that some of the main barriers that affect faculty engagement negatively are "increased workload; increased time commitment; inadequate time for student/assignment grading and feedback; and inadequate compensation for instruction" (p.6).

1.7 Interaction with Students

Creating interactive classroom environment through distance learning is challenging for instructors when communicating with their students (Zaheer & Munir, 2020). The absence of university professors' nonverbal communications, body language, and non-facial expressions besides challenges associated with socialization makes students at the asynchronous distance learning less connected with their instructors due to limited engagement (Alexiou-Ray & Bentley, 2015; Swanson et al., 2015). Besides, Instructors perceived a sort of anxiety since they were working in isolation away from their colleagues and students who were not physically attending their classes which limited effective collaboration between instructors and their students in the virtual environment (Savitsky, Findling, Ereli, & Hendel, 2020).

Even when students possess good academic proficiency, they might not master the necessary skills to keep up with their colleagues. Some researchers pointed out some unwanted practices that take place in distance learning. For example, students who are skillful in monitoring their progress in conventional learning may feel lost in the new environment. As a result, their academic achievement will be influenced negatively away from their instructor's direct supervision (Kanadlı, 2016).

While traditional learning is closely supervised by instructors, it is hard to control some undesirable practices of students such as cheating and inappropriate use of copy and paste. Distance learning works well for some subjects such as social sciences but does not achieve its best goals with subjects that require developing practical skills in the field of engineering for instance (Henaku & Pobbi, 2017).

1.8 Students with Disabilities

In the 2015-2016 academic year, roughly more than 19% of the undergraduate students in the US is classified as having one or more disabilities (McFarland et al., 2019). Distance learning provides students with disabilities better opportunities to pursue their education. With all its tools, distance learning made education accessible for everyone anywhere. However, this goal cannot be realized as long as it does not include all prospective students including those with special needs.

Online learning that is supposed to make learning easier for students with disabilities might unintentionally work in the other direction causing more obstacles for them. For example, blind students will find it irrelevant to include images and graphs. Discussions and audio chats are not suitable for deaf ones. Instructors dealing with students with disabilities and special needs can create more barriers unintentionally, which may result in complicating things. They might create web pages using texts, or hyperlinks resulting in confusing students with cognitive or visual issues (Griful-Freixenet, Struyven, Verstichele, & Andries, 2017).

Traditional classes allow students to interact with their instructors and colleagues regardless of the disabilities they deal with. For example, students with vision issues might ask help from colleagues sitting around them to take notes. According to Mutanga (2017), a student with disabilities have different learning styles compared to their colleagues without disabilities. For instance, students with disabilities like visual methods and oral discussions, unlike their peers who have no disabilities who prefer written material and explanations (Kimball, Wells, Ostiguy, Manly, & Lauterbach, 2016; Zongozzi, 2020).

1.9 Problem Statement

Similar to many universities in the United Arab Emirates which suspended their classes after the spread of Coronavirus in the region, faculty staff at the New Century University had to switch their classes from conventional teaching to distance learning within two weeks. Thus, distance learning is no more an option, it is rather a reality that all have to deal with and to do whatever it takes to ensure the success of this new experience. Thus, it is important to know more about the experiences of university professors and discuss some potential challenges they may encounter. Many studies addressed types of distance learning focusing on students' perspectives and the challenges they face, but there is lack of studies on the perspectives of faculty staff, which the current study intends to address.

1.10 Purpose of the Study

The current study was designed to explore some challenges university professors encounter with distance learning. Thus, the questions leading this study were:

1. What are the perceptions of faculty staff about the distance learning training they received?

2. What are the challenges faculty staff face when switching from conventional teaching to distance learning?

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

To understand the experiences of New Century University faculty members with distance learning, this study used a qualitative research design. A qualitative research design helps to understand the knowledge different entities shape about the phenomenon of study from their unique point of view (Merriam, 2009). It also makes it easier to explore phenomenon in its natural boundaries (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The qualitative design explores the day to day interaction to comprehend how individuals analyze the world around them based on their attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions toward a certain phenomenon.

2.2 Research Participants and Selection Process

In qualitative research, participants are selected purposefully based on their knowledge and relevancy to the topic of the study. Purposeful sampling helps researchers "to learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry" (Patton, 2002). Because this study focused on how faculty staff at the chosen university describe their experiences with distance learning for the first time, data were collected from 18 university professors at a private university in the United Arab Emirates. To understand the different perspectives about the study topic, focus group interview consisted of four to six participants from each college. All participants hold a Ph.D. degree and had at least two years of teaching experience. Participants ages ranged between 38 to 65 years old, 8 of them were female professors and 10 were male professors.

2.3 Data Collection

The primary data source used in this study was focus groups, which began by informing the participants about the purpose of the study and filling a consent form to ensure the anonymity and privacy of their information and opinions. This allows participants to express their perceptions freely and honestly and can be meaningful as a part of the group narrative (Patton, 2002). They share their perceptions on the study topic but are guided by a set of questions designed to guide the discussion. Compared to interviews, focus groups are more spontaneous and participants could influence each other (Krueger, 2009). Focus groups can provide the researchers with effective findings when participants share a similar background and share the same vocabulary, feel relaxed, regarded, and allowed to offer their input without being judged (Creswell, 2013), especially when discussing new, sensitive, and argumentative topics. Once participants feel comfortable and one breaks the ice, the rest will be encouraged to get engaged in the discussion. Besides, it will give the researchers a good position to observe and compare participants' interactions when they agree or disagree on certain parts of the discussion

In focus groups, interviewing tends to be semi-formal than asking sequential questions and allows exploration of untouched fields. Semi-structured interviews, give researchers more flexibility in forming questions and allow interviewees to elaborate on their answers and illustrations (Creswell, 2013). Thus, the focus group included an 8-10 open-ended questions. The university professors in this study, represent a good source of information and would provide a rich description of their experience with distance learning. The study sample represents professors who teach a large population of students from different academic backgrounds in scientific and social studies departments such as education, business, law, communication and media, engineering, and medicine. At the time of meeting focus groups, the researchers listened carefully to their words without interrupting them, keep the same distance from different perspectives, give the participants freedom to switch between different topics and follow up on related participant interpretations (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2012). Each focus group was conducted in a place and a time agreed upon by participants and the researches. All focus group discussions were digitally recorded and transcribed later. This strategy would save time during interviews to stay focused on participants' responses, capture interviewees' exact words, and to ask follow-up questioned when needed (Patton, 1990).

2.4 Data Analysis

Analysis of qualitative data is interactive and occurs simultaneously in and out of the field, and it is a continuous

process that takes place after conducting focus groups (Creswell, 2007). After each focus group discussion, the audio recording was transcribed into text. This step provided primary ideas and patterns (Maxwell, 2012). Once the transcription was done, data were classified into segments where each segment represents meaningful unit of information (Patton, 2002). The last step was developing a matrix of major and minor themes that characterized the headings of the findings section (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

3. Findings

This study was conducted at a university in the United Arab Emirates, hereafter referred to as the New Century University (NCU). Several topics were discussed to investigate more about faculty staff training they received to switch from conventional teaching in classes to distance learning and the challenges they face to deliver lessons to their students. Thus, the section includes the different results associated with each research question (RQ). Statements about the RQ are described as declare statements supported with direct quotations taken directly from the participants with the researcher's comments and discussions.

3.1 (RQ 1): What are the Perceptions of Faculty Staff about the Distance Learning Training They Received?

All staff received extensive training two-hours sessions for five days in either Arabic or English based on the Instructors' preferred language in order to ensure clarity of the content presented. When asked about their feedback about the training they received, many instructors said it was easy to deal with.

One instructor from engineering college described training as "a preliminary one. They tell you how to do basic things. Training added nothing new for us as staff in engineering". Another instructor from the same college added, "These scientific colleges know how to deal with things already, but I believe instructors from other colleges may have a different background".

Practical training on Microsoft Teams, the software used for distance learning at NCU was easy for some instructors. They attributed their ability to learn necessary skills quickly due to some factors associated with personal interests and prior experience depending on their specializations as well. One instructor explained, "I studied software engineering in my doctorate and I just use it. It is so easy for us [Engineering staff]".

The training was challenging for some instructors as they had modest skills in using computer programs. One instructor shared, "My computer skills are minimal", and he added that the training did not meet his expectations because it was "not planned well". Another instructor gave negative opinion on the IT trainer who "expected all to start directly without knowing the basics". Another instructor believed that using Microsoft Teams to teach students online was doable but he faced issues with the trainer who was "providing more and more details about uploading files and receiving assignments". So, he could not master these skills. Another instructor complained about the IT trainers: "Their support was not good enough. When you need them you cannot find them all the time. I am not satisfied with the IT services". The situation was more challenging for new faculty who did not receive any training when they joined the university. For example, one instructor commented, "I was supposed to do that without any previous training. I am a new faculty and they expect me to prepare an online exam by myself and with no training at all."

A few instructors were not satisfied with the duration of training sessions and used alternative support to help them understand the necessary skills to deal with distance learning software. One instructor commented, "I used self -learning and colleagues' support rather than the training. They are busy, the trainers." Another instructor explained that training was "supposed to be longer than that and ahead of time." He explained, "We didn't understand everything completely and it was natural for such situations."

For the majority of staff, it was their first time teaching courses via distance learning. Out of 18 participants, only two instructors indicated having previous experience in distance learning. Both taught online courses in Saudi Arabia; one taught a blended approach for teaching listening and speaking course at Hael university. The second instructor indicated having a good experience because the program was well designed and students knew in advance they will study online, so they were prepared. Two other instructors seemed to be more familiar with distance learning because they studied some courses online during their doctoral programs.

3.2 (RQ 2): What are the Challenges Faculty Staff Face When Switching from Conventional Teaching to Distance Learning?

Distance learning was a good learning experience for most faculty staff, but they raised some concerns associated with the new virtual environment of teaching. These issues include the following:

3.3 Technical Issues

Many instructors expressed their anxiety toward teaching students online. They were worried since it was a completely new experience. One instructor shared that it was "a vague experience and that [I] did not understand it." Another instructor explained his concerns: "This way of teaching requires certain technical skills we don't have."

According to some instructors, not all were ready to use distance learning. One instructor stated that "humanities and social sciences colleges staff should not be proficient in technology." He added, "You can take the exam from me and send it to a technician who can upload questions the way they like it.

Instead of having too many seminars that are hard for us [as instructors]."Internet connection was among the main obstacles faced by instructors when meeting virtually with their students. Some professors did not have good internet access. Besides, not all had the necessary technical equipment at home to keep good communication with their instructors "such as modern computers / laptops or cameras," explained one instructor.

Internet connection was weak for some instructors and sometimes their devices were disconnected either at home or at college. Even when they have cameras, they sometimes did not work properly if they wanted to share live videos for themselves with their students. "It did not work for me as a professor, cameras are incompatible with some apps," confirmed one instructor.

The situation was more complicated for new staff. They were not familiar with the new academic environment. They struggled with online courses. Another instructor reported technical issues with the Microsoft teams. He explained, "I tried to share my desktop with students 3 times but couldn't, so I sent them the material and asked to open it from their devices."

Instructors described similar technical issues that limited students' participation because they did not have mikes. "I can't tell them to buy a mike," explained one instructor. He asked them to type their participation instead, in the discussion. Other students missed two to three classes and when they joined the next class, their instructor asked them about the reason for their absence. The student response was: "I didn't have an internet connection at home." The instructor was confused because students registered courses on campus and were not ready to take them online.

Monitoring students' unwanted behavior during virtual classes was another obstacle some instructors could not have control over. The software was new for all and both students and instructors could control some settings such as muting and unmuting the microphones. One instructor was annoyed because a student was "muting microphones for the other students, many students complained about and I had no control over that." Instructors could mute all mikes, they can speak to them without any interruption, but once a student starts speaking, "all their mikes will be unmuted," which causes a lot of noise. To stop these practices, the instructor pretended to know who was doing this and promised to report them to the university. As a result, the student stopped playing with the sound. "I did not know him honestly," the instructor explained.

3.4 Health Issues

Over time, some instructors expressed a feeling of discomfort with the equipment they used to teach students online because that caused some health issues. One instructor shared that the headphone he used to communicate with his students "put much pressure on ears when you have 2 classes back to back. Putting headset 3-4 hours put a lot of pressure on your ears and looking at your monitor for a long time makes one feel uncomfortable." Another instructor confirmed that he felt pressure on his ears and was "sweating, my body temperature was going up." Another instructor added, "it is more exhausting and sound has an echo."

3.5 Cultural Issues

Even when technical issues are not a burden, unexpected unique cultural factors floated on the surface. Sometimes, there was an issue of trust for female students, who did not like to speak on the mikes with the attendance of strange males other than their colleagues and professors. One instructor recalled her experience with a female student who urged her not to push her (the student) to participate in class. The instructor justified that her female student "did not want any of her colleagues to hear her voice. She was not comfortable with that." When instructors were informed to tell their students to use the camera during their final exams, female students argued against that. "They cannot do it. It was not an option, even here, in Emirates, some conservative families do not allow that," said the same instructor.

Unlike the male students, females are sensitive. Some female students use chatting only and when some use the mike, "you feel shy to ask her to keep the mike unmuted because she is a female," commented an instructor. Privacy was a serious concern for female students, a situation instructor cannot deal with because of the "houses nature and the tools as well." Many NCU students are expatriates who live with their parents and other family members who might

have other online courses as well at the same time.

3.6 Administrative Work

Switching teaching to distance learning influenced instructors' focus from teaching the content they are expected to cover during each class to do some extra administrative work associated with distance learning. One instructor expressed his anxiety about distance learning because he had to record lectures, keep records of the time of classes, duration of each lecture, posting it on the Moodle for students who could not attend class. Another instructor added, "we have to send daily and weekly reports about our work besides putting [writing] exams online and correcting them later." All of these requirements added extra work for instructors and some felt the new burden "took them away from teaching to do administrative work."

3.7 Lack of Interaction

Lack of interaction was on the challenges university professors faced with distance learning compared to face-to-face interaction. Some instructors reported minimum interaction and preferred discussion in class more than in online courses. One participant indicated that students "surf different websites or get busy doing something else not following the class." He added that interaction inside the classroom enables instructors to "watch everything directly. And they [students] pay more attention."

It was not clear for instructors if students are silent because they understand the content taught through online courses or not. One instructor compared between traditional and online classes: "In class, you look at them, you have a glimpse if they understand or not." Instructors noticed that students had less interaction but there was more attendance. "It is fake attendance," commented one instructor because when students mute mike, they are typically off class.

Unlike traditional classes, instructors do not have breaks to hold their breath because students are silent most of the time listening to their instructors. One instructor explained, "In class, I can take a breath when students start a discussion, online I have to keep talking, I will need to drink more water." Instructors felt classes were longer because discussions online rely heavily on them. They have to speak most of the time. On the other hand, students keep their mikes muted and listen without interruption, which leaves the instructor unsure about their reactions or understanding.

The majority of instructors could not deny that their classes tended to be more formal. Classes were recorded and people other than students are listening such as their siblings, parents, and sometimes their children. The instructor felt they were not spontaneous in online courses. They tended to be more formal and accurate when talking to their students because all classes were recorded and another administrative staff has access to these classes. "You cannot make jokes or laugh with your students during classes. You are not comfortable."

They also compared their flexibility and freedom in regular classes compared to online ones. Some expressed a feeling of being worried even though they have a long experience. They attributed this anxiety to administrative regulations where mostly all administrative staff have direct access to their lectures watching them. On instructor expressed his worries, "When I see 10 people added as administrators to my class. I am not independent in my classes. Every time, one enters my meeting from the administrative staff, the vice president, the dean. Why is that, no trust."

3.8 Practical Courses

Practical courses were another modification instructor had to deal with, mainly in the colleges of engineering and nursing. Some instructors stated that three-quarters of their courses are practical ones. In some cases, students can do computer simulations to understand certain topics but they "lose the living experience with hands. What remains in their memory is what they learn by doing," commented one instructor.

Another instructor explained the two types of labs students have in nursing: the dry lab which includes role-play and case studies for example and can be compensated through distance learning due to its nature. The other type of labs is the "wet lab" or the practical part of learning, where students have to put different ingredients together to get certain outcomes.

Videos can give students a hint about the experience, but "they do not feel the process. I want them to learn the technique. I want them to use their hands because they will go to the field after graduation to work for labs or clinics," explained one instructor. So, the essence behind the practical courses was not there anymore.

3.9 Students with Special Needs

Some colleges have students with special needs enrolled in separate sections. This allows the university to provide a translator to facilitate communication between these students and their instructors. There were around 40 students who were either deaf or blind.

Another obstacle reported by the participants was inequality of sign language among students with special needs, meaning to say that their proficiency in the sign language was not the same; most of them were beginners and their linguistic inventory was limited, while a few had an advanced level. According to the instructors, the sign language translator had his camera on to explain the instructor's words, but he was not sure "if all are getting the same idea with the same understanding" and this created an obstacle to the instructor. Usually, the translator's communication is via individual chatting to understand their question and then transfer it to their instructor. In class, it was easy for instructors and the translator to check students understanding directly from their facial expressions and body language. One of the instructor said, "I cannot tell if they understand my lessons and how they will do their assignment".

4. Discussion

This study sought to answer the following questions: (1) what are the perceptions of faculty staff about the distance learning training they received? And (2) what are the challenges faculty staff face when switching from conventional teaching to distance learning? That said, the results of the data analysis helped in understanding faculty experiences with distance learning, the positive outcomes, and the challenges.

Faculty Perceptions

Most faculty members were not ready to teach via distance learning since it was their first time to go through this experience. The training they received on using Microsoft Teams and its different tools was extensive and worked well for the majority, especially for those with the scientific background from engineering and nursing colleges; some did not need to take more than one session. The case was different for other faculty members who were more pleased with conventional teaching methods. Al-Zahrani (2015) reported a similar finding and noticed the tendency of faculty members to use conventional methods of teaching instead of making use of modern technology. For some, it was not easy to deal with the basics of technology in terms of teaching, mainly those who joined work recently at the NCU. They did not receive any training about how to use the university website including the Moodle to communicate with their students. Things were more complicated when they found themselves under high pressure to master more skills associated with distance learning in a short time. Without sufficient training and mastering necessary skills, it will be challenging to provide students with meaningful educational experiences (Lareki, de Morentin, & Amenabar, 2010).

When received their extensive training, staff from different colleges joined the same sessions together without taking into consideration the individual differences of faculty members, their background, and proficiency in using technology. Because of the limited time and pressure trainers form the IT department faced to present orientations to all faculty members at the NCU university, they felt they had to cover all possible details about using distance learning software features at the same time. Consequently, some faculty members felt lost because they received many details in a short time without applying these new skills. To fill the gap, they used alternative support from their colleagues and friends to cope with the new work environment.

4.1 Unexpected Challenges

Technical issues were not the only a challenge faculty members faced with distance learning. They had to deal with a unique cultural issue associated with the privacy of female students in the Middle East, who preferred not to participate during classes or switch their cameras on during the final exams. This finding is supported by Markova et al. (2017) where many students were not convinced with their distance learning because they faced some complications. University professors noticed that female students felt shy to speak assuming there were other males outside their class circle who might listen to them such as other student's family members or friends. Another reason might be attributed to the nature of small houses expatriates live in, in Emirates with good opportunities of having children and other siblings who had online courses at the same time, either at the university or schools. To avoid this embarrassment, faculty staff believed some female students preferred to mute their mikes all the time and use chat discussions instead.

4.2 Longing to Traditional Teaching

When discussing distance learning with faculty members, comparison with conventional teaching was always there. Student interaction was minimum in distance learning. Students were not ready to distance learning; some did not have

mikes to speak with, cameras to share pictures, good devices i.e. computers, laptops, or tablets to use, and sometimes they did not have a good internet connection. All of these factors left some instructors helpless and were obliged to speak more than usual. Students were silent most of the time to make sure they are following their instructors, who could not decide if students were there listening and understanding them or not. As a result, teaching was teacher-centered (Slagter van Tryon & Bishop, 2012).

Most faculty members expressed a feeling of anxiety due to the formal nature of distance learning (Nuere & de Miguel, 2020). All lectures were recorded to give students an alternative opportunity to check missing lectures later. Instructors were not spontaneous as they used to be in conventional classes and had to be more careful when selecting their words because they are recorded. Besides, much administrative staff was added to each meeting session, sometimes the number reached 10 administrative staff. For instructors, there was no privacy, and felt all were watching them when joining their classes: IT members, head of the department, the dean, the president of the university, were among the ones added to each classroom. Those members were probably added to ensure things will work as expected in terms of attending lectures on time and to provide assistance when necessary. For faculty members, it was a sign of mistrust and a violation of their classroom privacy. All of these factors shaped the formal nature of teaching for instructors.

4.3 Students with Special Needs

Teaching students with special needs in class was not easy for the majority of instructors and communication with them via distance learning was more challenging (Mutanga, 2017). Unlike conventional teaching, the translator is not with students and instructors at the same place. Consequently, it was a longer circle between instructors and translators who will translate the content. When receiving questions from students, translators had to communicate with instructors separately and then go back to explain their responses to the students. Chat discussions were the main channel of communication. A student with disabilities has different learning styles compared to their peers without disabilities (Kimball et al., 2016). As a result, students with special needs felt like working in isolation away from their colleagues, translator, and their instructor. When asking instructors about the possibility of students with special needs to register for summer courses, the answer was with "No" as long as it is via distance learning.

4.4 Practical Courses

Unlike the social sciences and theoretical courses, practical courses in the scientific colleges, nursing, and engineering, represented a missing opportunity to gain experience. Students could learn some practical skills through computer simulation and watching videos for some topics. On the other hand, without including all senses, they lost a genuine component of working on the living experience through the use of hands and feeling the different ingredients. This finding is consistent with Henaku and Pobbi (2017), who found that distance learning does not achieve its best goals with subjects that require developing practical skills in some scientific colleges.

5. Conclusion

University professors at NCU are somehow getting used to the distance learning environment; however, they face some difficulties to cope with the new learning environment. Besides the traditional challenges associated with the limited knowledge of using distance learning applications for some instructors, unique challenges were more challenging and required extra work to ensure the success of the new learning experience. Taking all these factors into consideration, university professors are convinced additional work is needed to improve the smoothness and flow of teaching through distance learning. The current situation of the Coronavirus pandemic is subject to extend for a longer time. Even when the pandemic disappears, universities in the Middle East might consider applying this experience soon to attract potential candidates who cannot attend face-to-face classes. Thus, academicians had better invest more time and effort to optimize the distance learning experience.

5.1 Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This study was conducted at one university in the United Arab Emirates and included 18 participants, which limits the generalizability of the findings. It would be interesting to include more faculty members from different universities to check if similar results emerge. Another limitation is that; the experiences of faculty members might not reflect the actual situation after spending one semester or two in teaching via distance learning. Conducting similar studies in the future might reflect different perspectives for the same instructors and other faculty members in different institutions.

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