

Iraqi University Students' Emergency Remote Learning Experiences During Covid-19

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Abstract—University students' experience with Covid-19 emergency remote learning in Iraq - a country facing political instability, poor Internet infrastructure, and limited access to technology - remains understudied. We surveyed 323 university students attending two of the leading Iraqi universities - Baghdad University and Al-Iraqia University - about their experience of Covid-19 emergency remote learning. Unsurprisingly, over half of the participants evaluated their experience as “negative” and expressed a preference for returning to face-to-face learning after the pandemic had ended; and nearly half of the participants were dissatisfied with Covid-19 emergency remote learning. Surprisingly, Internet connectivity issues - which regularly emerged as the leading challenge in past research - were only the second most-pressing challenge for our participants who identified participation as the main challenge. We argue that this area therefore needs the urgent attention of Iraqi educators.

Keywords—Covid-19, emergency remote learning, face-to-face learning, Iraq, university students, online survey

1 Introduction

The recent Covid-19 pandemic prompted an unprecedented worldwide move away from face-to-face learning towards emergency remote learning across different levels of education [1], [2]. Some Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) were better prepared to deal with the crisis, as online learning had been employed - with many universities in the West offering distance learning degrees prior to Covid-19 [3]. In the Arab region, teaching was entirely suspended at most HEIs for varying periods of time as the region implemented some of the world's most stringent Covid-19 mitigation measures [4]. The option to continue providing education through an emergency switch to online learning was further complicated by the more limited experience of HEIs in the Arab region with online teaching in pre-pandemic times and the considerable discrepancies in experience that exist between individual countries [5] as well as the less reliable Internet infrastructure and more limited access to information and communication technologies (ICTs) [2], [6].

Researchers swiftly recognized the need to better understand both the challenges and opportunities presented by the switch to emergency remote learning and the number of studies examining the experiences of university students has been growing [7], [8]. This research though continues to be somewhat limited geographically by focusing on Europe, Asia, and North America [4], [8], and the number of studies exploring the emergency remote learning experiences of university students from the Arab region is comparatively low. While many researchers have found that students from different parts of the world have been overall less satisfied with their Covid-19 emergency remote learning experience compared to their face-to-face pre-pandemic learning experience [9], [10], other studies have discovered that students can have positive experiences of emergency remote learning as more relaxed and flexible [11], [12]. There is, however, agreement that successful online learning is contingent on reliable Internet connection and access to ICTs [13].

In this exploratory study, we surveyed 323 students from two of the oldest, most renowned universities in Iraq - Baghdad University and Al-Iraqia University. To the best of our knowledge this is the first exploratory study to shed light on Iraqi students' perceptions of emergency remote education. The following section summarizes the key findings from existing research on university students' emergency remote learning experience and gives background on the education system in Iraq. Next, we describe the methods of data collection and analysis and the analyzed sample of university students. In the following section, we report our findings and discuss their possible explanations, implications, and relations to existing research. We conclude with a summary of the key findings, limitations, and directions for future research.

2 Literature review

While prior instances of moving education from face-to-face to online have been regional responses to local events (e.g., Hurricane Katrina in the US in 2005), the Covid-19 pandemic caused a sudden, timebound, worldwide move to online education [10]. The term 'emergency remote learning' was coined out to differentiate this temporary and unplanned shift to online learning from other forms of more permanent and planned forms of online education such as 'distance learning' where materials are designed for online learning from the outset [10]. Studies of university students' experiences of emergency remote learning during Covid-19 have been growing and, in what follows, we highlight some of the key findings without aiming to be exhaustive (for more extensive reviews see [8]).

2.1 University students' experiences of emergency remote learning

Many studies have identified lower levels of satisfaction with emergency remote learning compared to pre-pandemic face-to-face learning. Gonzalez-Ramirez et al. [9] who surveyed US students found that most participants considered face-to-face learning more effective than remote learning; and identified Internet connectivity issues and finding a quiet place to study as the top challenges of emergency remote learning.

Greek university students surveyed by Alexiou and Michalopoulou [14] were overall dissatisfied with their emergency remote learning experience and the longer hours spent studying along with Internet connectivity issues were the most frequently cited challenges. Resch et al. [15] surveyed Austrian students and found that level of satisfaction was correlated with feelings of social and academic integration (referring to peer and tutor interactions respectively) and students reported decreased levels of both types of integration in comparison to pre-pandemic face-to-face learning.

While South Korean students surveyed by Shim & Lee [11] mentioned Internet connectivity issues as the key challenge, they were overall satisfied with their emergency remote learning experience. The most cited advantages of emergency remote learning were the flexibility, convenience, and comfort of being able to study in one's own time and from any location as well as the time saved by not having to commute to attend taught sessions. Mexican students surveyed by Balderas-Solís et al. [16] were also overall satisfied with their emergency remote learning experience but identified Internet connectivity issues and eyestrain due to continuous use of electronic devices as the greatest challenges.

Studies which focused solely on the perceived advantages and disadvantages of emergency remote learning compared to pre-pandemic face-to-face learning have identified similar challenges and benefits. Rotas and Cahapay [17] who surveyed students from the Philippines identified Internet connectivity issues and electric power disruptions as the main challenges of emergency remote learning. Uusni Rahiem [18] who conducted focus group discussions with Indonesian students found that flexibility and efficiency were the main advantages of emergency remote learning, while Internet connectivity issues and accessing ICTs were the major challenges. Chinese university students surveyed by Huang et al. [19] identified the flexibility of when and where to study as the key advantages of emergency remote learning, and Internet connectivity issues as a main challenge. Dost et al. [20] who surveyed UK students found that the greatest perceived advantage of emergency remote learning was its flexibility, whereas family distraction and poor Internet connection were the leading challenges. Similar conclusions were reached by Karakose et al. [21] though they examined K-12 students.

2.2 Arab university students' experiences of emergency remote learning

In a study of university students from the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Hussein et al. [22] asked participants to identify the most positive aspects and greatest challenges of emergency remote learning. Convenience, time effectiveness and improved participation were the most frequently identified positive aspects, while problems with Internet connectivity, access to ICTs, and insufficient levels of university support were the main challenges. In another study of the experiences of UAE university students, El-Sakran et al. [23] found that certain groups of students were significantly more likely to experience heightened stress during emergency remote learning including female students.

Meccawy et al. [24] who surveyed students and faculty in Saudi Arabia found that students had a more positive perception of emergency remote learning compared to faculty. But, overall, both groups experienced Covid-19 emergency remote learning

positively which can be explained with the pre-pandemic experience of the HEI with online education. Although both students and faculty experienced Covid-19 emergency remote learning overall positively, Internet connectivity and the reduced ability to build a sense of community were cited as key challenges. Another study by Hopkyns [25] which focused exclusively on the experience of Saudi Arabian female students found that discomfort using video cameras (due to cultural beliefs relating to modesty) was a major challenge.

Al-Tammemi et al. [26] who interviewed Jordanian students concluded that they experienced emergency remote learning overall negatively, and the most reported challenges were Internet connectivity problems, access to ICTs, and finding a quiet place to study. In another survey of Jordanian students, Al-Salman and Haider [27] found that students expressed a moderate level of satisfaction with Covid-19 emergency remote learning, but they noted considerable differences in the levels of satisfaction between Arts & Humanities versus Science students, with Arts and Humanities students having experienced the switch more positively than Science students.

While we are not aware of other studies which focused exclusively on the experiences of Iraqi students, Lassoued et al. [28] surveyed university educators and students from Algeria, Egypt, Palestine, and Iraq to understand their perceptions of emergency remote learning. The study found that, for students, the key challenges were the difficulty to understand some subjects in the absence of face-to-face interaction; followed by Internet connectivity issues; and finally, the limited access to ICTs. Although this study analyzed the experiences of Iraqi university faculty and students, the results were reported for all countries overall and data per country was not provided.

2.3 Education in Iraq

Iraq is an important regional center of learning with some of the oldest and most renowned universities [29]. It is the second largest country for quality education in the Arab world after Egypt [30]. The modern education system in Iraq was established in 1921, but it was not until the early 1970s that education became public and free at all levels. Iraq's first and largest university – Baghdad University – was founded in 1957 and is listed as the top university in Iraq in the Times Higher Education World University Rankings [31]. Al-Iraqia University is another of the oldest universities established in 1989. More universities have appeared recently encouraged by a policy of establishing a university in each governorate, but the oldest ones remain the largest and most renowned [29].

The challenges that Iraqi universities face are many as only few countries in the world have been more severely affected by war over the past decades than Iraq - from the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s to the Gulf war in 1991, and the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq that was followed by civil war and conflicts until today. Iraq has faced a series of conflicts which have left the HEIs sector among those that have sustained the highest levels of destruction of infrastructure [32].

The uptake of online learning across the Arab region has been influenced by the general availability of ICTs and Internet connectivity in each country. The UAE and Saudi Arabia, for example, have been among the leaders in ICTs and Internet access in

the region, placing HEIs in these countries in a leadership position in comparison to countries such as Iraq where the number of individuals using the Internet as a percentage of the population has been lower [33]. The number of individuals as a percentage of the population who use the Internet has been on the increase in Iraq [33], but access to reliable and affordable Internet connection remains a challenge and the country's Internet penetration rate is one of the lowest regionally [34]. Iraqi universities have thus typically practiced face-to-face teaching, but amidst the pandemic, some of the first online examinations were conducted [35].

3 Materials and methods

We studied undergraduate students from Baghdad University and Al-Iraqia University enrolled on a Media and Communications-related program (Journalism, Radio and TV Journalism, or Public Relations). Data collection was conducted via an online survey - the main method of data collection in similar existing research. Students were reached through their university emails between 1st November and 31st December 2020. Consent occurred prior to the beginning of the survey in accordance with the universities' ethical protocols. 330 students responded to the survey, but seven students did not complete all questions, reducing the sample to 323 responses which comprised the final analyzed sample.

The online survey was developed in Arabic and questions were informed by previous research. One of the authors pilot-tested the survey with 20 university students (10 from each university) to ascertain its reliability (reliability coefficient .78). The survey included two sets of questions. (1) Students answered four close-ended questions about their experience with emergency remote learning. First, students had to evaluate their experience of remote learning during Covid-19 (*evaluation*) as "positive", "negative" or "not sure". Second, students had to say whether they would prefer to return to face-to-face learning or continue studying remotely when the pandemic ends (*preference*) with the option to select "face-to-face", "remote" or "not sure". The third question measured the extent to which students were satisfied with (a) emergency remote education during the pandemic (*satisfaction*), (b) face-to-face education before the pandemic, and (c) university study support services during the pandemic. Students could rate level of satisfaction as "very satisfied", "satisfied", "dissatisfied" or "very dissatisfied". Fourth, students had to identify the main challenges they faced during emergency remote learning (*challenges*), and they could select all that applied from the following list: "access to online resources", "access to ICTs", "concentration", "hardware and software support", "Internet connectivity", "familiarity with the online format", "participation". As part of the second set of questions, demographic characteristics were collected (Table 1).

Table 1. Sample characteristics

Variable	Indicator	N = 323	%
Gender	Male	175	54.1
	Female	148	45.9
Age	18-23	232	71.8
	24-29	55	17.0
	30+	36	11.1
University	Baghdad University	176	54.4
	Al-Iraqia University	147	45.5
Year of study	1st year	32	9.9
	2nd year	110	34.1
	3rd year	93	28.8
	4th year	88	27.2
Program of study	Journalism	65	20.1
	Radio and TV Journalism	198	61.3
	Public Relations	60	18.6

4 Results and discussion

4.1 Evaluation of, satisfaction with, and preference for face-to-face and emergency remote learning

When asked to *evaluate* their experience with emergency remote learning during the pandemic, 59.4% of the students had a “negative” view, 22.4% a “positive” view and 18.2% were “not sure”. No significant differences were found by respondents’ gender, year of study, program of study or university. Those aged 24-29 and 30+ (80.0% and 63.9%, respectively) were more likely than younger respondents (aged 18-23, 43.9%) to have a “positive” view of emergency remote education ($\chi^2 (2, N = 323) = 14.298, p < .001$). Emergency remote learning might not be as easy for first-year undergraduate students to adapt to, as they have just started university and have more challenges to face. Another explanation could be that younger students’ social lives are more centered around the university campus.

In terms of *preference*, when asked whether they would prefer to return to face-to-face education or continue studying remotely when the pandemic ended, most students (66.9%) preferred to return to face-to-face education with only a small percentage saying they were “not sure” (3.1%). Those aged 18-23 (69.4%) were more likely than those aged 30+ and 24-29 (25.5% and 36.1%, respectively) to choose face-to-face education over remote education ($\chi^2 (2, N = 323) = 7.331, p < .026$) when the pandemic had ended. This *preference* of younger students for return to face-to-face education once the pandemic had ended is consistent with their overall “negative” *evaluation* of Covid-19 emergency remote learning.

Students were also asked to rate their *satisfaction* with (a) the more traditional face-to-face pre-pandemic learning, (b) emergency remote education during Covid-19 and

(c) university study support during the pandemic (Table 2). Over half of the surveyed students (56%) were “very satisfied” and another 31.6% were “satisfied” with the face-to-face education they had been receiving in pre-pandemic times. Only a small number of students were “dissatisfied” (8.7%) or “very dissatisfied” (3.7%) with pre-pandemic face-to-face education. In contrast, as many as 47.6% of the respondents were “dissatisfied” with emergency remote education during Covid-19 and another 17.3% were “very dissatisfied” compared to 23% reporting to be “very satisfied” with emergency remote learning and 12.1% saying they are “satisfied”.

One possible explanation for this level of dissatisfaction with emergency remote learning is suggested by the responses that participants gave when asked about the study support they had received during the pandemic from their university (e.g., from university IT services, general university updates and communication). Over half of the interviewed participants (66.3%) were either “very dissatisfied” or “dissatisfied” with university study support. It is also notable that female students (48.4%) were more satisfied with emergency remote learning than male students (22.9%). This can be tentatively linked to the greater flexibility of online learning which might make it a better fit for female students balancing other commitments (such as home, family, and other work). Those aged 24-29 and 30+ (58.2% and 52.8%, respectively) had higher satisfaction with remote education than those aged 18-23 (40.1%). This latter finding is consistent with the higher likelihood of younger students to both *evaluate* emergency remote learning negatively, and to *prefer* a return to face-to-face learning after the pandemic had ended.

Table 2. Reported respondents’ satisfaction with learning during the epidemic (n=323)

Satisfaction with:	Very dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Satisfied	Very satisfied
- face-to-face learning prior to Covid-19	3.7%	8.7%	31.6%	56.0%
- emergency remote learning during Covid-19	17.3%	47.6%	12.1%	23.0%
- university study support during Covid-19	40.2%	26.1%	21.7%	12.0%

4.2 Perceived challenges of emergency remote learning

Respondents were also asked to report the main *challenges* they faced with Covid-19 emergency remote learning (Table 3).

Table 3. Challenges of emergency remote learning

Item	N	%
- Participation	90	18.4
- Internet connectivity	85	17.4
- Concentration	73	15.0
- Hardware and software support	70	14.3
- Access to online resources	69	14.1
- Familiarity with the online format	56	11.5
- Access to ICTs	45	9.2

Issues around participation emerged as the top challenge associated with emergency remote learning, followed closely by problems with Internet connectivity. While issues around Internet connectivity have regularly emerged as the top challenge (or one of the top challenges) associated with emergency remote learning in most existing research from across the world, it is slightly unexpected that participation was the leading challenge according to the students we surveyed. Other studies of students' experiences in the Arab region - particularly in the UAE [22] have found that, to the contrary, improved participation was among the most cited positive aspects of the emergency remote learning experience during Covid-19. Our findings suggest that developing approaches to encourage participation on a screen is one of the most urgent challenges for educators in Iraq in preparing for future crises that might require a sudden switch to remote learning. Based on our findings, educators are encouraged to develop more participatory approaches to education, for example, co-creation where students can become more involved and even participate in creating content for teaching sessions [36].

We also uncovered a few statistically significant differences. Those aged 18-23 (66.2%) were more likely to indicate that Internet connectivity issues were a challenge than those aged 24-29 (18.3%) and those aged 30+ (15.5%), possibly because older students are in a more advantageous financial situation and can afford better computers and better-quality Internet access. Students studying at Al-Iraqia University (55.8%) were more likely to nominate their ability to concentrate during remote learning teaching sessions as a key challenge compared to those studying at Baghdad University (44.2%). Those aged 18-23 (69.2%) were also more likely than those aged 24-29 (17.5%) and those aged (30+) (13.3%) to present concentration as a major challenge. Male students (78.4%) were more likely than female students (21.6%) to say that hardware and software program support was a key challenge.

5 Conclusion

While much research has already explored students' experiences with emergency remote learning during Covid-19 in different parts of the world [1], [12], the case of Iraq, a country facing political instability in addition to poor Internet infrastructure and limited access to technology, remains understudied. We surveyed 323 university students attending two of the leading Iraqi universities - Baghdad University and Al-Iraqia University - about their experience of emergency remote learning during Covid-19. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this study revealed that over half of the participants evaluated their experience as "negative" and expressed a preference for returning to face-to-face learning as soon as the pandemic had ended; and nearly half of the participants were dissatisfied with emergency remote learning. Surprisingly, Internet connectivity issues which have been regularly identified as the leading challenge in past research emerged as the second most-pressing challenge. Participation was the main challenge according to our participants suggesting that this area needs urgent attention by Iraqi educators in preparation for potential future crises which may require a sudden switch to remote learning. Considering that no research has been done with Iraqi

university students to understand their experiences of emergency remote learning during Covid-19, this study has offered valuable insights for university administrations and educators to consider as we move forward. Another contribution of this study is to serve as a historical documentation of this unprecedented situation.

6 Limitations and recommendations

This study does not come without limitations. Random sampling procedures were not employed in the recruitment of survey participants and thus, the generalization of the results is reduced. This study can therefore best be viewed as a baseline to have an initial understanding of Iraqi university students' learning experience during Covid-19. In the future, the survey can be used to investigate a larger, more diverse sample of students. A follow-up study could extend to other Iraqi universities, include students enrolled on other degree programs, and could collect data more recently to understand possible changes in perceptions over time, as well as to evaluate students' graded performance despite the overall negative evaluation of the remote learning experience. Another limitation of this study was that we did not ask participants to offer explanations for their responses. Follow-up research could include more qualitative analysis (for example, interviews and / or focus groups with students) to better understand why participants responded in certain ways. While the main goal of this study was to make a first step towards starting to understand Iraqi students' experiences of emergency remote learning, faculty and staff experiences also deserve research attention and should be studied if we are to become better prepared for future crises like Covid-19 which may require the implementation of emergency remote learning.

7 Declaration of interest

No conflicting interests to declare.

8 References

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