

The Emotional Impact of COVID-19 on Undergrads

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Abstract

In the pursuit of keeping Kuwait's education active during unfortunate times, it is essential to turn to non-conventional learning methods such as Virtual Learning Environments (VLE). The tools and expertise are readily available at first glance; however, it is important that we further examine the primary roll-out of this framework and monitor its' overall impact on the primary stakeholders—the students, who are often left out of the conversation. In this paper, we reached out to students in higher education universities in Kuwait, in order to gain insight on their perspectives in terms of emotional and social impact of COVID-19 on online education, and their overall sentiment regarding the roll out of VLE in their institutes. We investigated the sentiments of 309 students from three private universities in Kuwait currently undergoing VLE models and platforms as mediums of study for the first time. This insight from a first-person point of view will give feedback on the emotional and social implications of online learning as experienced by the students, the future expectations of the students involved, and how they felt about the way their respective institutes implemented VLE's for the first time. A questionnaire was used to examine the how the mentioned impacts sentiments of their first-hand experiences. It was found that, due to the emotional and social impact of COVID-19, virtual learning was deemed less efficient than in-class learning as currently experienced by the mentioned students. Also, the majority agreed that despite the emotional stress experienced during the pandemic, most respondents reported having a positive outlook towards the future of their higher education careers. The findings are significant as they provide insightful observations on the need for psychosis s they shine the light on the need for prioritizing mental awareness during stressful times. As well, they give way to further analysis of psycho-related studies to investigate the impacts of involuntary online education.

Keywords: Virtual learning environments • Online education • Higher education • COVID-19

Introduction

Though relatively young in its years of experience, VLE's are an active resource of learning in higher educational institutes around the world. However, it seems to have conflicted sentiments among relevant stakeholders when compared to conventional classroom teaching methods. In this paper, we will explore the pros and cons of delivering education through VLE's and aim to provide a model of our own, tailored to our local needs. Our aim is to find the least resistance path while ensuring that the academic integrity will not be compromised. In addition, Kuwait's education sector could use a push into the expectations of the future knowledge economy as anticipated in the 'New Kuwait 2035' vision. We have long hesitated with the acceptance of the uncertain future, which has occurred on several occasions, and can benefit from a more modern perspective for Kuwait's education. With God's grace, we will get out of this predicament with an elevated system of flexibility and compromise.

Currently, there is no specific study that has sought to investigate how VLE influence the process of education in Kuwait. While the concept is crucial in promoting learning, understanding how VLE within higher education in Kuwait has proven to be an important issue to research and discover. This study will thus be crucial, as it will create new knowledge relating to how VLEs influence students on multiple levels, and also help us in identifying the pros and cons of using VLE in Kuwait's education sector. It can lead us further into identifying a potential framework to be adopted by universities/schools. Undertaking this study is equally important aiding the government, universities, schools, teachers, students, as well as parents, and all relating stakeholders understand how VLE can impact, either positively or negatively, the students. Although new, these newly implemented mediums of education may open new doors for some as we experience the elimination of the brick-and-mortar method of teaching.

In this study, we reach out to students in higher education universities in Kuwait, both private and public, in order to gain insight on their perspectives

in terms of emotional impact, social impact, and overall sentiment regarding VLE. This insight from a first-person point of view will give feedback on the current efficiency and short-comings of the educational system and the anticipated needs of the students involved as they are the primary stakeholders. We aim to further use this information to develop a policy that takes into account all mentioned elements. The idea is to evaluate and possibly reassessed higher educational goals and delivery techniques to benefit the students, who are often left out of the conversation. Their perspectives in terms of emotional impact, social impact, and overall sentiment regarding the subject should be of primary concern as this new form of delivering higher education unveils for the first time.

Literature Review

In the year 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a pandemic of a new virus known as Corona virus (COVID-19) that was spreading rapidly worldwide. Once exposed in Kuwait, the pandemic has created unprecedented pressure on all sectors causing banks temporarily closing, organizations working from home, limiting access to grocery stores, closing all shopping centers and declaring quarantine with a curfew from 4 am-5 pm every day. However, one major sector that is viewed with great importance that has been greatly impacted in Kuwait is the education sector.

The search for a better education has always been a major concern for almost all countries. In that sense, educators in Kuwait are having difficulties delivering their curriculum across to students due to the announcement of temporarily closing schools/universities until August 2020. A country as rich as Kuwait which has access to major resources, could have been able to avoid such closure by investing in distance learning. Distance learning is not a new concept in the education sector. In fact, with the growth of the Information and Communications Technology (ICT), many universities and schools worldwide, such as the UAE, have already deployed and implemented ICT technologies in their own strategies by using one of ICT's offered resources, which is the Online Learning Platforms (OLPs) also

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known as virtual learning environments [1,2]. By doing so, such countries continued promoting and improving their teaching and learning within schools and higher institutions, even with self-and distance learning.

VLE is simply a platform that allows students and teachers to interact, present and share resources/activities with one another to complete an entire online course or have been used as a supporting feature in traditional teaching courses [2]. VLE's main goal is to manage, motivate and ease the learning experience of students [3]. According to Morais, et al. "The main potentiality of VLEs is the provision of a set of tools aim to support the production and distribution of contents, communication, and the assessment of the teaching and learning process" [4]. In addition, authors like Barker, et al. also claimed that "VLEs boast a wide spectrum of research showing positive impacts across different contexts" [5]. To support the above statement, Dahlstrom, et al. research showed that VLEs produce positive change in the learning experience within higher education [6], which is also supported by Morais, et al. By concluding in their research that student's performance was quite positive with accessing and using VLEs platforms within their education [4]. Other advantages of using VLE.

Platforms include

Flexibility: With the assistance of VLE, the educational procedure turns out to be increasingly flexible, particularly as far as time. Having lasting and free access to all the learning materials, students can undoubtedly adjust their studies with different plans and exercises. Thus, it gets less difficult to proceed with studying in any event, even with full-time jobs or a child requesting a lot of time and consideration. Notwithstanding that students are allowed to work at their own pace since all students can access PowerPoints and watch the recordings number of times as needed without distractions.

Accessibility: Since learning can be accessible online, it makes education available for disabled individuals just as for those living in remote areas or even in different countries. The virtual learning framework additionally encourages a relentless educational procedure as one can proceed with studying even while on vacations, on work excursions or being sick at home [7].

Engagement: VLEs have the ability to support various learning styles [8]. It offers educational guidance to online tests and exams, voice and video recordings. Blending various exercises permits better students' commitment, engagement and further adds to the vitalization of the learning procedure.

Nevertheless, a coin has two sides and so does VLE. Alongside the advantages, there is a rundown of disadvantages to consider while representing a VLE platform.

Slow connection and network: Students have difficulties when they need to upload their tasks or while taking a test. The issue with the connection regularly makes students incapable to complete tests on time, and thus stress over the outcome [9].

Lack of staff and student experience: An examination directed by Razak, et al. has recognized few challenges in VLE usage such as the expertise of teachers as few instructors may have issues with absence of available time and specialized competency to utilize the technology [10]. Then again, Rashid expressed that students were also not properly introduced to the usage of VLE platforms during traditional based teaching [11].

Limitations: Not all learning exercises can be done online, for instance students cannot perform a complex substance experiment in their rooms or train dental specialist skills without special equipment. This makes few courses and degrees either unreasonably hypothetical for additional use or only accessible in traditional learning framework. Another limitation includes delayed answers from teachers. For instance, when studying in a conventional classroom, students can ask any questions and get prompt answers, as opposed to online learning that infers time flexibility for everyone, including educators.

Hence, many scholars only focused on the positive and negative impact of using VLE within an educational setting, disregarding the emotional and social implications that it might cause to students, especially in the Middle East. Crook, Seabolt and Arends, Muirhead expressed their opinions that online learning do not consider the social and emotional interactions that happen in a conventional classroom [12-14]. In 2001, Piccoli, et al. revealed that students still favour traditional teaching, as opposed to online learning, even though there was no significant difference between both learning performance [15]. Robertson, et al. also supports the above statement by indicating that online learning lacks the benefits and opportunities of a structured dialogue as well as lacking networking opportunities the could be created in a conventional educational setting [16]. Below further explains the possible social and emotional implications that could be caused by adopting VLE platforms in higher educational institutions.

Emotional Implications

Stress and anxiety

Stress and anxiety among students have been researched since centuries. Students are known to develop stress from people around them, when they do not feel comfortable, when they do not know the answer for a question, during quizzes and exams and so on. Thus, by using VLE in universities for the first time in Kuwait, the researchers question how students feel when they are not able to physically see their teachers and ask them questions in person.

In spite of being a technological era, many students might still feel challenged using some types of educational technology, especially those who are not updated with technology [2]. In addition, in Simsek's study, students expressed their inclination for pencil and paper tests versus online tests [17]. They contended that online tests caused them more anxiety tensions, were progressively more difficult and they did not receive much feedback from their teachers. In the case of Kuwaiti students who study English as a second language, by having online tests, it will also be difficult for them due to language barriers or not understanding which could pose as an implication for online testing using conventional techniques. Similarly, in Ushida's investigation, students indicated a significant level of anxiety during their online courses [18], due to the absence of formality with the use of some online learning features, which thus affected their motivation level. Not to mention, teachers may also exhibit some type of stress and fear of showing their technological weaknesses when using the VLE platform for the first time in front of their well-advanced tech-savvy students "because of age differences, most university lecturers, like most school teachers, are 'digital immigrants' and most students are 'digital natives' [19]. Therefore, that leaves the question of whether Kuwaiti students are ready for online learning in comparison to the universal educational trends.

Emotion and motivation

The adaptability of a VLE can end up being an issue for individuals with absence of self-control or weak motivation. From previous studies by Buck, et al. and more recently by Reeve, there is a clear positive correlation between motivation and emotion [20-22]. It is, in the case of a pandemic, appropriate to extrapolate conclusions which state that negative emotions area a cause for lack of motivation. It is safe to assume that isolation impacts emotions, leading one to conclude that it may therefore effect motivation. Also, without strict control and deadlines, it is difficult for students to remain focused and concentrate viably. Furthermore, VLE opens more chances to cheating since no one checks whether students are utilizing another advice while having an online test or is really doing everything alone. In this way, self-restraint and high motivation is vital.

Psychological Contract Theory

The psychological contract is an exchange between students, instructors, and the college. Student's psychological contract alludes to

individual considerations of the reciprocal exchanges between students, their instructors and their learning foundations. It is comprised of promissory (value-based) and non-promissory (social and ideological) desires that are not written in any formal agreement; yet, they work as a determinant of behavioral and performance conduct [23]. Promissory desires were viewed as being mandatory and eluded to unequivocal expectations of what the college and teachers should or should not provide; whereas, non-promissory desires alluded to what students implicitly expect to experience from being students. According to Weilin-Cao, student satisfaction is positively correlated with the educators' performance level that is associated with the psychological contract [24]. Liao supports the above findings by indicating that when teacher fulfil all of their term obligations, including keeping communication with students, addressing inquiries when possible [25], taking part in the conversation with students and remark on the schoolwork in time, students demonstrated enthusiastic learning behavior by completing all assignments independently and completely. However, when the teacher does not fulfil all their term obligations, but completes regular teaching tasks, student's demonstrated reduced learning eagerness and all students copied each other's assignments.

Thus, the psychological contract between teachers and students will be shaped if their conduct is in accordance with their desires. At this point, teachers are liable for educating and students are required to comply with classroom discipline. One of the clearest contrasts between online learning and traditional learning is the absence/lack of face to face communication among teachers and students [25]. While, in some situation online learning will be beneficial to the teachers-students relationship, it is clear that teachers performance influences students motive and performance level to study. For instance, if the teacher fulfilled their duties in an excellent matter, students will perform better and vice versa.

Social Implications

Family obligations

Before exploring home situations and family obligations in Kuwait, which is the case study of this research, it is important to briefly mention Kuwait's cultural traditions. As known, Kuwaiti families are commonly closed and private. Individuals within a family help and support each other, unite when needed, and are frequently considered as a pool of resources for business enterprises [26]. Viewing Kuwaiti society through Hofstede theory [27], one can argue that, first, it is a collectivist society where goals are set with major consideration of others, and the culture is tightly united. Second, Kuwait is relatively a feminine society where quality of life is the sign of success [28]. Therefore, Kuwaitis work for a living, problems are solved through negotiations, and individuals focus on the welfare of others. Third, Kuwaiti society is significantly high-power distance culture [29]. Youths, for instance, are expected to be obedient towards their parents and respect those who are in power. Fourth, Kuwaitis also avoid uncertain situations [29]. Therefore, the Kuwaiti society is classified as a collectivist, relatively feminine society that stresses high power distance and high uncertainty avoidance. That said, being in collective society, students are obligated to fulfil any family obligations; let alone, those who are parents and studying at the same time. Hence, finding the time to balance between being parents and studying or finishing certain tasks on time is quite difficult. In addition, teachers do not know every students home situation, as some students might feel uncomfortable talking about them online with their teachers, as it is not as easy or as simple in doing it *via* face to face, thus some teachers might think that those students are lazy or simply not serious about their education. Furthermore, in some cases where the government is financially supporting and paying students' fees, some students might have financial difficulties in buying a laptop or having internet connection problems in order to finish their studies online and do not know what to do about it. As witnessed in Mosquera research [2], some students showed dissatisfaction with using VLE due to slow connection problems and insufficient resources, which caused frustration, stress and thinking it is a waste of time doing things online. In this case, how are teachers supposed to respond to such

situations? The only solution is to keep VLE as an option for students to choose from either wanting to continue their studies online or through traditional learning without jeopardizing their future.

Remote study and ergonomics

Ergonomics is the study of making workplace occupations and conditions fit for any user. It is the study of planning a working environment that is concerned with the appropriate conditions for individuals and their technical tools, while conserving their abilities and constraints in guaranteeing that tasks are met and that the workplace setting suits the user [30]. Ergonomics working environment removes any risks that leads to musculoskeletal pains and takes into consideration factors that improves human performance and efficiency. Such improvements can be witnessed by students when they work from home. Students will usually find a comfortable setting space to finish their tasks. In addition, due to VLE, students will be more accessible to resources, and hence will finish their work at their own pace and time, which in some cases could result in delayed tasks and assignment submissions.

Mosquera demonstrated that students' enthusiasm for the innovative technological resources and exercises due to the intuitiveness and accessibility of learning resources [2], which means that students have unlimited access to them. Wernet, et al. research also inferred that the utilization of a VLE obliges the necessities of non-conventional students and that students' VLE fulfilment was reliant upon utility [31], introduction and access to materials, the usefulness of the technology and the devices utilized. In this manner, such independence in learning implies that students have the power over their own learning, which includes active learning procedures and responsibilities regarding its content. The virtual learning condition is really expected to make students experience more autonomy and self-governance in getting the hang of learning independently, implying that students should not rely upon the educator constantly. Rather, they must be dynamic either in looking through available resources and materials or expanding their insight through virtual research. In some cases, having the privacy working from home and being independently is not the right solution as some students, especially Kuwaitis with low English level, might have difficulties in understand the given tasks without having someone explaining it to them or having to wait to set an online meeting with their teachers, when/if available.

Institutional Response

Work load

When it comes to workload, students believe that online learning could be harder as more weights are being put on assignments and task submissions that might be confusing for Kuwait students to understand or needs more time to comprehend the written instructions. According to Risquez, et al. VLE should be used as a distribution platform for materials, instead of being used for complex activities such as online quizzes and homework [32]. Hence, being overloaded with tasks, students will believe that online learning could be useless, confusing and overwhelming, as opposed to traditional learning. In addition, in some cases, some students are given more work to compensate for the time being lost during the COVID-19 pandemic, making it harder for students to complete each course without having to worry about their grades, as some students may take more than one class during a course. Not to mention, in the work of Demian, et al. [33] the number of students who reported to visit VLE platform are 20 in total, suggesting that they do not rely on online learning as much as traditional learning. The lack of prior training of teachers for online methods could easily lead to a situation where VLE becomes a one-way channel of communication and students end up bearing most of the learning and teaching responsibility.

Idiosyncratic deals (I-deals)

Idiosyncratic deals (I-deals), normally seen only in organizations, is now being spilled over into the educational sector due to VLE platforms. Rousseau characterized ideals as voluntary, customized understandings

of a nonstandard category that individual's bargain with their managers/teachers in regards to course terms that advantage them both [34]. I-deals incorporate adaptable work routines that maintain a strategic distance from expected conflicts, exceptional assignments that coordinate employees or in this case student's qualities and interests that enhance students' potentials and satisfy their needs [35]. Simultaneously, teachers profit by offering I-deals in having increasingly dedicated and motivated students [36]. Therefore, by implementing VLE, teachers need to incorporate a curriculum that benefits the students as well as fulfilling their teaching tasks. However, due to no/lack of research, I-deals still needs to be further investigated with regards to its relations in the educational field. Thus, it is important that VLE works in synergy as the lack of face to face interaction and lack of online resources could hold back teachers from addressing individual needs of the students.

Methodology and Objective

It is important to assess the general sentiments of the students, who are the major stakeholders involved-and pin point their individual and collective needs and requirements. The equation has been long viewed as a one dimensional problem with the university being in the midst of the dilemma, primarily following government policies and further setting up their own. However, students are often ignored and their needs rarely assesses. Although in times of pandemics we rarely have time to pre-evaluate a roll-out plan, we can tune in to the current obstacles being faced by the students while we simultaneously roll out the plans. Now that Kuwait has initiated the first phase of VLE in its various forms, we can also post-evaluate and strive to continue to monitor the student's overall sentiments.

The methodology of this research will be quantitative in nature. The majority of the study will be conducted by questionnaire assessment which will be sent out to local higher education students who have been exposed to any degree of VLE in the past few months.

Data Collection

Survey

A close-ended questionnaire in the form of a survey will asses relevant topics about the issue being addressed. After constructing the anonymous survey questionnaire, the survey was distributed to undergraduate students in Kuwait currently experiencing online learning to self-administer. It was available in both languages; English and Arabic, as most students are speak English as a second language. The questions revolved around the three main components which may be influencing students while they experiment with online learning–Social Impact (SI), Emotional Impact (EI), Institutional Response (IR) regarding their university's response. The questionnaire consisted of ten questions consisting of three types-questions were either a forced two answer Agree or Disagree, Likert-style answers, and finally 'all that apply' boxes where applicable. The questions derived for this study have been broken down by categories in order to be able to compare the pre-COVID-19 experience given the dependent variable (undergraduate students in higher education) and their current experience given the independent variable (COVID-19 pandemic). In order to meet the demands of answering the research questions, the questions belonged to one of three categories as follows (Table 1).

Table 1. Survey questions explained.

	True or False (TF) or Likert-Style (LS) or All that Apply (AP) Answer	Relative survey questions
Emotional implications	LS and TF	4, 6
Social implications	LS and AP	3, 5, 7
Institutional response	TF and AP	1, 2

Analysis

After conducting quantitative research, data collection tools will then be reviewed to ensure that all questions have valid responses. Descriptive analysis will be conducted to narrate the results of the survey. Each segment will be thoroughly analyzed. With regards to the quantities research, the results of the analysis will then be interpreted and the findings will be presented using statistical graphs as instruments to ease the process of result interpretation.

Sample

The questionnaire was self-administered *via* online mediums to a non-probability sample of 300 undergraduates in three different universities in Kuwait. The survey was sent to 100 students from each university with a response rate of over 100% as we received 309 responses. This can be explained as the snowball sampling effect, in that some students took the liberty to forward the survey to others. This purposeful sampling technique was primarily used due to the given lockdown situation which restricted access to most students. Thus, only three offices of three local private universities cooperated and actually conducted VLE for the first time also, using a relatively more homogeneous group such as undergraduate students is particularly helpful to minimize random error that might occur by using a heterogeneous sample such as the general public [37]. This is because the likelihood of error within the measurement model being inflated by situational factors inherent in diverse samples (e.g. age, income and social class) is reduced when respondents are homogeneous across demographic and behavioral characteristics [38].

The group targeted to participate in this research are all students who study full-time or part-time in Kuwait. Currently, there are 3 private universities and two public ones run by the government. They should also be ones who are experiencing VLE as a mode of study in their current curriculum for the first time.

Research Objectives

The objective of this research is to give feedback from a first-person point of view. In line with ethics, best practice and value creation for the students, it is important to give them a voice especially during a stressful event like a pandemic. The primary objectives of this research include:

- Represent the voices of primary stakeholders during COVID-19 pandemic (Students)
- Review overall emotional impact of VLE on higher education students
- Review overall social impact of VLE on higher education students
- Review overall student's sentiments of their institution's VLE strategy and roll-out

Research questions

The research questions, in line with the research objectives, will be the basis for developing the questionnaire. They will focus predominantly on the social and emotional sentiments of using VLE's, and also give insight on the general consensus from the student's point of view. In precise, the research aims to answer the following questions:

1. How has the transition from in-class learning to VLE affected the emotional state of higher education students?
2. How have the new social factors/restrictions affected the delivery of education for higher education students?
3. What is the general consensus of sentiments as to how their respective institutes VLE roll-out strategy?

Anticipated research outcomes

We hope for several positive outcomes. One main outcome is to acknowledge stakeholders' perceptions with regards to implementing VLE

in the higher education sector. We anticipate that students will acknowledge the advantages and disadvantages of using such platforms in Kuwait and how they will further advance our education system. We also anticipate student's acceptance in using VLE as a teaching and learning software and that they will be motivated to engage in using it, especially during unforeseen circumstances. In fact, we highly anticipate that students will be in favor of such models to not only finish their education but also to allow much needed flexibility in modes of delivery.

Scientific Contribution

The importance of this research is to explore the efficiency of the long-awaited and much needed contingency plan for higher education purposes. It is necessary to have all the tools ready and in place ready to go once they are needed. Given the history and current situation of this country and the entire region, it is time that such emergency measures are considered and explored. The recommendations from this research will help:

- ✓ Provide evidence-based feedback for the current adoption of VLE in higher education
- ✓ Outline the expectations and struggles of VLE currently experienced by local students
- ✓ Highlight the individual needs of stakeholders and give optimal suggestions

It is not just Kuwait that is being affected and may change after COVID-19, education in many country might change forever, hopefully in a good way. Hence, Kuwait's government should be willing to consider studying and adopting VLEs platforms, which can be used towards distance and onsite learning in the education sector. As HH Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al Maktoum once told his nation, "Our education and learning drive will never stop, no matter the circumstances". This should also be the case in Kuwait, students should be able to have the choice to continue their education through self-and distance learning. Therefore, to overcome such dilemma, nowadays and in the future, this research aims to help the government and all related stakeholders reconsider their policies and the education system in Kuwait by developing a potential framework that would make some changes in introducing VLE to become a long-term strategy. Hearing feedback from students is standard best practice and crucial for success. Gaining insight on the matter will surely impact the society as a whole and possibly better the situation as it unfolds for all stakeholders alike.

Data Findings and Analysis

The findings of the individual question of the survey are portrayed below in their unique tables.

When asked about how well their university did as they rolled-out virtual learning (Figure 1).

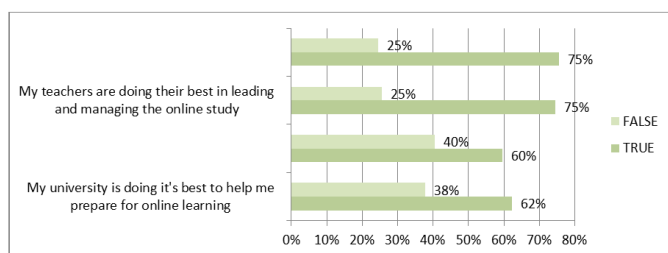


Figure 1. Overall university VLE roll-out.

Analysis

The results of Table 1 indicate that most respondents felt that their university did fairly well in response to their first time engaging in online learning. More than 60% of the respondents answered positively when

asked about the cooperativeness and engagement of their teachers in VLE.

When asked about how their university can further assist with online learning (Figure 2).

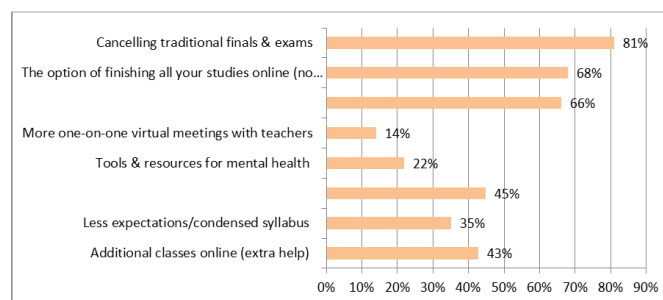


Figure 2. Additional student expectations.

Analysis

The majority of students expect their institutes to re-examine their policies and outlines and consider cancelling traditional formats of assessments like exams. The majority also want the option of having online classes well beyond the COVID-19 pandemic and encourage the notion of having a hybrid model of having some classes online while others on campus. About 45% of the students expect some form of assistance on awareness matters which deal with balancing the home-workload of online learning while 43% expect additional classes to be available during the crisis in case they have individual needs.

When asked about the efficiency of online learning in comparison to in-class teaching (Figure 3).

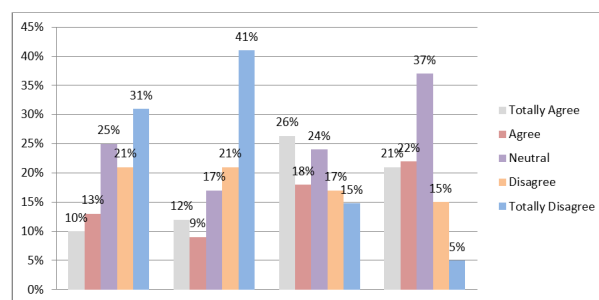


Figure 3. Online education 10th class teaching.

Analysis

Over 60% of students disagreed or totally disagreed that online learning is more effective than in-class learning and that online live classes were less effective than pre-recorded classes. This can be due to the fact that English is their second language and they rely heavily on translational tools and peer interaction, which can be limited online or during a live session. The majority of them also reported that they were happy with the online applications being used by their university, and were at least neutral or more towards the notion that online classes were interactive and dynamic, which could explain their participation and engagement.

When asked about their general sentiments regarding the impact of the pandemic on motivation (Figure 4).

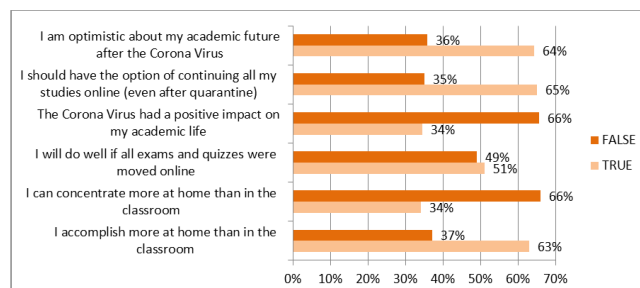


Figure 4. Motivation and optimism.

Analysis

Most students were optimistic about their academic future and felt that they should have the option of continuing online studies beyond the pandemic. However, they felt that the COVID-19 pandemic did not have a positive impact on their academic life possibly due to the abrupt changes and elongating the time of finishing a typical semester. Moreover, they were almost evenly split as to how well they think they will do with online exams and quizzes as the time constraint and lack of face-to-face interaction with teachers is minimized. Finally, the majority found that they cannot concentrate more at home than in the classroom as expected with a full house on lockdown. Yet, they found that they can accomplish more at home than in the classroom possibly due to the fact that they can decide their own hours of learning.

When asked what obstacles they experienced during their first time trying online learning (Figure 5).

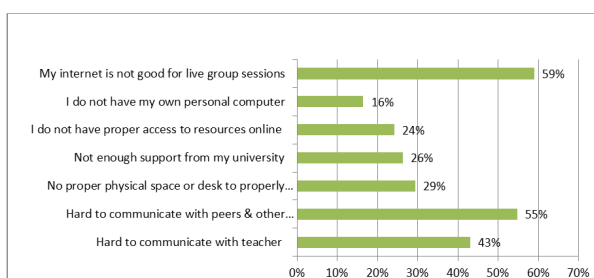


Figure 5. Obstacles faced while online learning.

Analysis

Most respondents did not have an ideal internet connection possibly due to the high usage of internet around the world. Also, the majority reported obstacles in not being able to communicate with their peers as that appears to be an integral part of their overall learning process.

When asked how they felt emotionally as they experimented with online learning (Figure 6).

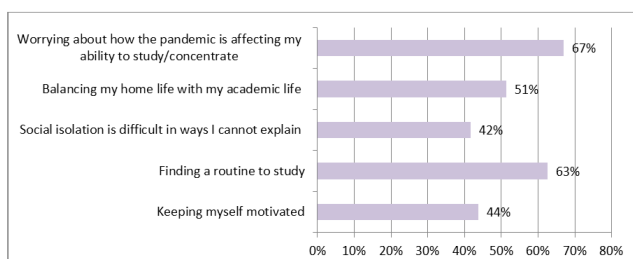


Figure 6. Emotional implications 10th online learning.

Analysis

The majority of students reported being worried about the pandemic and that it affected their ability to study, and well as having a hard time adjusting to the new home life-academic life balance. Also, 63% reported finding a routine to study while at home as they experience being primarily responsible for working out their own study schedules.

When asked how they personally dealt with the lockdown (Figure 7).

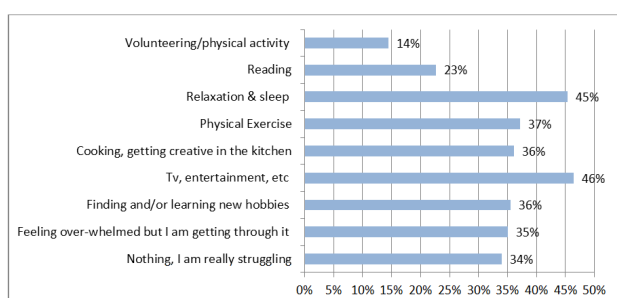


Figure 7. Dealing with lockdown.

Analysis

About 34% of the respondents reported really struggling with the current COVID-19 situation of lockdown. This is understandable as new norms are being established both physically and emotionally. Others reported relaxing and sleeping (45%) as well as resorting to TV and similar entertainments (46%). Only 14% of students volunteered or took up physical activity, which could suggest to institutes that they should include such aspects into their VLE frameworks.

Conclusion

In conclusion, as the world adjusts to the new norms of society and how it is run, it is important to involve the experiences of all stakeholders involved. Since this is the first time these students and organizations of higher education are experiencing and experimenting with VLE platforms, it is of utmost importance to proactively monitor their progress. In this study, as reported from student's first-person point of view through a self-administered survey questionnaire, it was found that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted higher education students both socially and emotionally, and that impact has in turn impacted their ability to learn virtually and find the new method efficient. Furthermore, the students reported their general sentiments as to their respective institutes' VLE strategy.

Limitations

In this study, only 3 out of the 7 local private and public institutes were included in the survey. Perhaps a bigger investigation can follow which can involve all local higher education institutes. Also, a bigger population sample will always yield more accurate results. Due to the findings of this survey, it is advised that all educational institutes alike should work on incorporating a reporting mechanism in times of crisis like the COVID-19. Moreover, the number of questions in the survey administered is limited to 7. This may not provide a comprehensive report as to what the students are feeling and experiencing at the time. Lastly, due to the lockdown situation, it was impossible to talk about the experience with the students face-to-face. Perhaps, in the future, a phenomenological approach could be incorporated in the design of such feedback surveys in way of virtual face-to-face meetings so as not to impose a certain bias of experience. In such an approach, students can report their experiences freely as experiences without any prejudice. This is necessary as the COVID-19 pandemic is a new experience with complex implications and should be examined from multiple angles.

In precise, when asked about their general consensus of how they felt their respective institutes rolled out VLE, the results indicated that most respondents felt that their university did fairly well in response to their first time engaging in online learning. More than 60% of the respondents answered positively when asked about the cooperativeness and engagement of their teachers in VLE. Moreover, the majority of students expect their institutes to re-examine their policies and outlines and consider cancelling traditional formats of assessments like quizzes and final exams. The majority also hope that, in the future following the COVID-19 pandemic, they are able to have online classes and encourage the notion of the possibility having a hybrid model of having some classes online while others on campus. The majority of them also reported that they were happy with the online applications being used by their university, and were at least neutral or more towards the notion that online classes were interactive and dynamic, which could explain their participation and engagement.

When asked about the efficiency of online learning vs. In-class learning in relation to the current social restrictions, over 60% of students disagreed or totally disagreed that online learning is more effective than in-class learning. Furthermore, the majority felt that online live classes were less effective than pre-recorded classes, which could persuade institutes to incorporate both options in their online VLE models. This can be due to the fact that

English is their second language and they rely heavily on translational tools and peer interaction, which can be limited online or during a live session. Most respondents did not have an ideal internet connection possibly due to the high usage of internet around the world. Also, the majority reported obstacles in not being able to communicate with their peers as that appears to be an integral part of their overall learning process.

When it came to the emotional impact of the pandemic on motivation and future outlook of their educational journey and the use of new VLE models, most students were optimistic about their academic future and felt that they should have the option of continuing online studies beyond the pandemic. However, they felt that the COVID-19 pandemic did not have a positive impact on their general academic life possibly due to the abrupt changes and elongating the time of finishing a typical semester. Moreover, they were almost evenly split as to how well they think they will do with online exams and quizzes as the time constraint and lack of face-to-face interaction with teachers is minimized. Finally, the majority found that they cannot concentrate more at home than in the classroom as expected with a full house on lockdown. Yet, they found that they can accomplish more at home than in the classroom possibly due to the fact that they can decide their own hours of learning. The majority of students also reported being worried about the pandemic and that it affected their ability to study, and well as having a hard time adjusting to the new home life-academic life balance. Also, 63% reported finding a routine to study while at home as they experience being primarily responsible for working out their own study schedules.

Emotional well-being is an important aspect of staying motivated in times of isolation and about 34% of the respondents reported really struggling with the current COVID-19 lockdown. This is understandable as new norms are being established both physically and emotionally. Perhaps it is time for higher institutes to re-examine their linear models of studies and start to realize the importance of complimentary activities which can enhance the learning experience online. As students lose the all-important social interaction element of their educational journeys, it is the job of their superiors to promote engagement so as to keep motivation and optimism alive. More informal group sessions could be a possibility as well as competitive group play could be an option. Others reported relaxing and sleeping (45%) as well as resorting to TV and similar entertainments (46%). Only 14% of students volunteered or took up physical activity, which could suggest to institutes that they should include such aspects into their VLE frameworks.

Lastly, as VLE models are being experimented with for the first time in Kuwait's higher education sector, it is essential that a proactive monitoring process is in place which gives the students an opportunity to give feedback. This is integral to the success of the strategy of the institute as it unfolds VLE platforms for the first time and will very likely prevail as its most important element. From the survey, it is obvious that the social and emotional impact of the COVID-19 situation has affected efficiency elements of the now-online educational process. It is also important to pay attention to the way the institute and its teachers have cooperated with students as to not cause an overload of information and leaning responsibilities of students. As it stands, the pandemic is a stressful and confusing event for all alike and extra precaution must be taken when impressionable young adults are involved in order not to inflict more emotional and social pressures.

Future Research

It is certainly advisable to build upon this research and investigate the subject matter on a grand scale. Students, who are the primarily stakeholders, are experiencing VLE for the first time and could face a magnitude of challenges. Having their feedback is essential and integrating their needs into the VLE model can contribute to the sustainability of the model and the greater society as a whole. Research can include a wider scope, perhaps on K-12 education, and include institutes of both the public and private sector. Also, other stakeholders can be investigated like parents,

who are expected to participate in this new study mode especially those in younger grades. A look into gender implications regarding the subject and possible correlations could also prove purposeful. Governments and policy makers could use such research to come up with optimal solutions on a grand scale, and find ways to incorporate mechanisms for mental health maintenance and support during stressful times for students worldwide.

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