

The Effectiveness of Distance Learning (BlackBoard) in Pursuing the Educational Process at Taif University During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is facing the COVID-19 pandemic as it is trying with all its efforts to pursue higher education in its universities and schools through distance learning. The current research tried to investigate Taif University experience in distance learning and the effectiveness of BlackBoard in pursuing education in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic from the viewpoints of teachers and students. To achieve this goal, the descriptive survey approach was used. Two questionnaires were designed. A random sample was chosen from all colleges of the university. The sample consisted of 240 faculty members and 804 students. The results showed great effectiveness of BlackBoard in pursuing education from the viewpoints of faculty members and to a very great degree from the students' point of view. No impact of the two variables (gender, rank) appeared in the viewpoints of faculty members in that effectiveness. Male students' viewpoints were higher than those of females, and the viewpoints of Master's students were higher than those of undergraduate students on this effectiveness.

KEYWORDS

Blackboard, COVID-19 Pandemic, Distance Learning, Taif University

INTRODUCTION

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, like other countries of the world, is going through an emergency represented in the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, which affected all sectors of society. The Kingdom exerted all possible means to fight it, reduce the effects of the virus, and protect the sectors of society.

The education sector – both public and university – was and still is – one of the most affected by the pandemic. As a result, classes all over schools and universities of the Kingdom were suspended resorting to distance learning as the Ministry of Education's belief of the importance of continuing

DOI: 10.4018/IJICTE.293234

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the educational process during the pandemic without any slight thought in canceling or stopping this process and to ensure that the virus will not be allowed to spread through the society and eventually fight and eliminate it, God willing. Although this type of education is applied for the first time - due to the pandemic crisis - in the general education system in the Kingdom, it is almost known in university teaching, but it is not fully implemented as it is in the current situation.

Razik and Swanson (2017) define distance learning as a modern and advanced technology that engages students in independent learning. Students and their teachers who are in separate places and far from each other communicate through electronic techniques. It is also defined as any educational process in which there is no direct contact between the student and the teacher. They are separated chronologically and spatially, and communication between them occurs through educational media (Amer, 2014). Thus, it can be said that distance learning is based on the presence of the teacher and students in different places, and communication among them is done through various communication techniques, including BlackBoard technology. The Learning Management System (LMS) (BlackBoard) is defined as an alternative electronic learning environment to the regular learning environment based on building synchronous and asynchronous interactive methods among students and their teachers and students with each other through the Internet (Al-Obaid & Al-Shaya, 2020). This system allows universities to provide electronic courses on the network as a supplement to traditional education, in which a faculty member can add academic content, assignments, and tests, use discussion forums and attach various types of multimedia files in order to develop and improve the learning process (AbuJabal, 2019).

Distance learning in general and the learning management system (LMS) BlackBoard in particular is characterized by providing appropriate learning techniques for both the teacher and the student. It is flexible in that it gives the student a choice to participate based on his desire in terms of time and place; it also does not cost a lot of money and allows interaction between the student and the teacher, specifically students who are shy to ask questions or participate (Al-Bitar, 2016; Bervell & Umar, 2017). Furthermore, it makes learning more enjoyable and exciting for students and helps them in self-learning and learning for life (Malkawi et al., 2015). However, employing distance learning is not only about having students deal with technology and technical issues but also, importantly, is about pedagogical challenges and the way they adopt to the online mode (Ali, 2020).

Several studies have shown that distance learning via the Internet needs unique teaching strategies and skills that are different from the strategies and skills found in regular education (Ali, 2020; Hardy & Bower, 2004; Ghazala & Al-Sayed, 2019; Al-Ghunaim, 2016; Al-Randi & Aba Al-Khail, 2016; Al-Dasmani & Al-Amer, 2017; Al-Sadhan, 2015; Tiwari et al, 2021). But even so, and prior to the Corona pandemic, training faculty members in universities in these skills and strategies was not as desired and hoped (Moller et al., 2008; Desai et al., 2008; Al-Qahtani, 2018; Al-Zahrani, 2020).

However, when the Corona pandemic and the suspension of classes have started in schools and universities in most countries of the world, including the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, regular learning has eventually shifted from regular to distance learning, which has become the only way to ensure the continuation of the educational process (Adnan & Anwar, 2020; Bataineh et al., 2020 ; Daniel, 2020; Patricia, 2020; Iglesias-Pradas et al, 2021; Cich et al, 2021; Tiwari et al, 2021). The Kingdom and its educational institutions took upon themselves the responsibility for the success of this experience, so it seriously began developing the infrastructure and creating the appropriate circumstances and environments for distance learning, as the Al-Zahrani study (2020) has shown that the Kingdom's universities during the pandemic have significantly developed a learning management system (BlackBoard). However, it faced some challenges during the second semester of the school year 2019/2020 (the beginning of the pandemic) as the experience took place suddenly. Looking at the continuing experience in those universities, especially at Taif University, during the first semester of 2020/2021, a qualitative move in implementing this system was noticed. The university has been actively involved in training faculty members on the learning management system (BlackBoard),

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