Shocks and aftershocks of the COVID-19 pandemic in Afghanistan higher education institutions

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Abstract: COVID-19 pandemic as an ugly phenomenon disrupted all educational sectors and Afghan higher education institutions in particular. The main purpose of this study was to investigate the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on Afghanistan higher education institutions. It also aimed to determine the effects of students learning practices before and after the pandemic. The impacts of virtual learning on students’ performance during the COVID-19 pandemic were investigated in this study as well. For collecting the data, a semi-structured interview was employed. After collecting the data, the data were transcribed verbatim and four major themes were constructed: (1) students’ perceptions of learning practices before the outbreak of COVID-19, (2) the impact of distance learning modality during the COVID-19 pandemic and its challenges on students’ learning, (3) students’ learning anxiety during COVID-19 pandemic, and (4) level of students’ satisfaction from face-to-face learning system after a decrease in the cases of COVID-19. The findings showed that students learning process across the higher education institutions of Afghanistan have been worst affected due to the outbreak of COVID-19. The results show that virtual learning is the most preferred way of learning. The findings showed that students learning process across the higher education institutions of Afghanistan have been worst affected due to the outbreak of COVID-19. The results show that virtual learning is the most preferred way of learning. The findings showed that students learning process across the higher education institutions of Afghanistan have been worst affected due to the outbreak of COVID-19. The results show that virtual learning is the most preferred way of learning.

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Public Interest Statement
COVID-19 as a dangerous disease disrupted all educational sectors across the globe, particularly Afghan institutions. The purpose of the study was to investigate the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on Afghanistan higher education institutions and to determine the effects of students learning practices before and after the pandemic. For collecting the data, a semi-structured interview was employed. After collecting the data, the data were transcribed verbatim and four major themes were constructed. The findings showed that students learning process across the higher education institutions of Afghanistan have been worst affected due to the outbreak of COVID-19. The results also revealed that virtual learning modality during the COVID-19 caused more anxiety in students learning practices and it led to more isolation in their learning process. Furthermore, the attitudes of Afghan EFL learners towards virtual learning in the presence of COVID-19 were more negative. Additionally, Afghan EFL learners showed a high rate satisfaction towards physical learning modality as they experienced it before the pandemic.
also revealed that virtual learning modality during the COVID-19 caused more anxiety in students learning practices and it led to more isolation in their learning process. Furthermore, the attitudes of Afghan EFL learners towards virtual learning in the presence of COVID-19 were more negative. Additionally, Afghan EFL learners showed a high rate satisfaction towards physical learning modality as they experienced before the pandemic.

**Subjects: Education - Social Sciences; Higher Education; Language Teaching & Learning**

**Keywords: COVID-19; Afghanistan; higher education; online learning; institution; pandemic**

1. Introduction

Universities, schools, teacher training colleges and other educational centres were fully open with some key measures taken by the ministries of Health, Education and Higher education before the pandemic. The measures were social distancing rules, creating smaller classes and mandatory mask-wearing (UNESCO, 2020a). Moreover, the school principals and chancellors of universities around the country were in charge of getting students aware of the pandemic and observing the necessary rules in order not to get infected with the virus. This is because of the risk of this dangerous disease, the majority of learners did not have enough information about COVID-19 and lacked the following key measures (Ministry of Health, 2020; MoE, 2020; MoHE, 2020; Orfan & Elmyar, 2020; UNESCO, 2020b; WHO, 2020a).

- Information and advice about COVID-19, hygiene and social distancing
- Emergency food supplies
- Hand washing stations
- Complete family hygiene kits
- Protective equipment

It was December 2019, the novel of coronavirus known as COVID-19 was detected in Wuhan city which is situated in China. Since its emerging, it has hurriedly been spread around the world (Dong et al., 2020; WHO, 2020b). Shereen et al. (2020) reported that COVID-19 pandemic caused a remarkable number of deaths around the globe. This pandemic was later named as global pandemic by World Health Organization (WHO) as every country was imposed with many challenges (Fauzi et al., 2020). That is, it affected life aspects, including education. In such critical condition, the role and position of education are so much significant (Bakhtiar, 2016). This pandemic has also made all countries shut down the factories, markets, public places, parks, particularly schools and universities for regular and normal teaching-learning activities (Contreras, 2020). It further resulted in many people around the world losing their jobs and staying at home. There was budget deficit in factories due to the long-time lockdown declared by the WHO in every country (Orfan & Elmyar, 2020; UNSECO, 2020a; World Bank, 2020).

In addition to facing financial difficulties, The COVID-19 pandemic created numerous challenges to the higher education community. More than 1.5 billion students in 190 countries including Afghanistan were not able to attend schools and universities physically (UNICEF, 2020a). Therefore, higher education policy makers took some steps to start transitioning the learning from traditional face-to-face learning to remote learning in a very short period of time (Kandri, 2020). Afghanistan as one of the developing countries, due to shortage of technological means, was not ready to start learning from home because it was a rush decision that the education from face-to-face system needed to be changed into an online environment in which the students could not interact with their instructors properly (MoHE, 2020; UNESCO, 2020a). Furthermore, it has been difficult to Afghanistan higher education institutions to welcome online learning environment. High quality in Internet, learning management systems and various online learning platforms were the
core issues that both Afghan teachers and students needed to access from home (Perrotta, 2020; UNICEF, 2019). By all means, MoHE forced both private and public universities to undergo various forms of changes in order to make adjustment to course delivery methods across the country (UNESCO, 2020b; World Bank, 2020).

Higher education institutions along with the state of COVID-19 pandemic suggested a possible learning model which is learning through the network systems (i.e. e-learning through the websites, the universities self-developed applications and social media groups) in order to keep teaching-learning practices going forward in their educational context (Sintema, 2020). To add more, it is sort of an integrated instructional learning design based on a constructivist approach, which is possibly done by employing online social networks, such as WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, Video sharing, social networking sites, google document to let students submit their written assignments and other social networking sites to which teachers and students access (Saekhow, 2015). Applying domestic-distance learning, Suyanto (2005) stated that learning from home fosters students’ independence in learning and gives them the chance to decide about their learning and take more responsibilities. Moreover, students have more opportunities to play an active role in learning. For example, students wait for messages they expect from their teachers and reply to. They can also submit assignments on time although student–student and student–teacher interaction is very rare in the remote learning.

The main purpose of this qualitative study is to examine the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on higher education institutions. It also attempts to determine the effects of students learning practices before and after the pandemic. Moreover, it investigates the effects of virtual learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Literature review

2.1. The world of education before COVID-19

Education around the world was already facing formidable challenges before the pandemic. Covering the challenges and suggesting useful and helpful solutions was also the promise of education as a basic human right (UNESCO, 2020a). Despite the works have done to bring forms in education, a remarkable number of children more than 250 million were out of school and about 800 million people remained illiterate. Moreover, it was also estimated that 56% of children in primary schools lacked basic reading skills (UNICEF, 2020b; United Nations, 2020).

Financially, the challenge was already intimidating before COVID-19. The early 2020 decision of the financing gap to reach Sustainable Development Goal 4—quality education (SDG4) in low-income countries was an astounding $148 billion annually (World Bank, 2020). According to UNICEF (2020a), the COVID-19 crisis around the world will make this financing gap double in the low and lower-middle-income countries. For instance, in Sahel which is in Africa a large number of schools were closed for several months due to insecurity, strikes or climate hazards. When COVID-19 came to that region, the challenges doubled and were out of the Africa government’s control. That is, COVID-19 resulted in worsening the situation of education in Sub-Saharan Africa. Students could not go to schools or universities for continuing their education. The government was too weak to start transitioning learning from physical learning system to virtual or distancing learning modality.

Afghanistan as one of the very low low-income countries also faced such challenges in its education system. For instance, the schools and universities were only open in big cities of Afghanistan. A large number of educational centres were close in areas which were under control of Taliban, insurgents and those who were fighting against government. The marginalized citizens, who were out of schools and universities, were mostly children. These children were composed of boys and girls. When COVID-19 entered Afghanistan, the Ministry of Health in an association with Ministries of Education and Higher Education declared in a press conference that all educational centres across the country should be closed for a long and unknown time. The COVID-19 pandemic...
as a dangerous disease was a big risk in the world of education, particularly for Afghanistan because this country was already fighting the pre-existing challenges in all educational sectors and this pandemic doubled these challenges (Ministry of Health, 2020; MoE, 2020; MoHE, 2020; Save the Children, 2020; UNESCO, 2020b).

In addition to pre-existing challenges in education, UNESCO (2020b) reported that 40% of the poorest countries including Afghanistan failed to support learners at risk during the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, past experiences have shown that both education and gender inequalities may be overlooked in responses to disease outbreaks. House work, chores that only girls are in charge of doing and any other activities including farming will prevent children from coming to schools and getting their learning time. Children with disabilities who were always excluded from education will not find the chance of getting sufficient learning. These types of learners are always vulnerable and have poor digital skills. They have also the least access to technological tools required for distance learning. The government and the charity organizations cannot help them when they are in such critical condition. They cannot go to the insecure places to support them as well (Save the Children, 2020; UNICEF, 2020a; United Nations, 2020).

| Participants (Pseudonym) | Gender | Class  | Age |
|--------------------------|--------|--------|-----|
| Ahmad                   | Male   | Sophomore | 18  |
| Wali                    | Male   | Sophomore | 19  |
| Shabnam                 | Female | Sophomore | 22  |
| Sara                    | Female | Sophomore | 18  |
| Mahsa                   | Female | Sophomore | 18  |
| Massoud                 | Male   | Sophomore | 21  |
| Amin                    | Male   | Junior   | 22  |
| Ali                     | Male   | Junior   | 20  |
| Zahra                   | Female | Junior   | 22  |
| Mariam                  | Female | Junior   | 22  |
| Basit                   | Male   | Junior   | 23  |
| Laila                   | Female | Junior   | 22  |
| Rafi                    | Male   | Junior   | 21  |
| Safi                    | Male   | Junior   | 20  |
| Shafi                   | Male   | Senior   | 23  |
| Shreen                  | Female | Senior   | 24  |
| Vida                    | Female | Senior   | 22  |
| Bariz                   | Male   | Senior   | 24  |
| Hameed                  | Male   | Senior   | 21  |
| Hassan                  | Male   | Senior   | 22  |
| Nawid                   | Male   | Senior   | 23  |
| Aysha                   | Female | Senior   | 23  |
| Mohammad                | Male   | Senior   | 24  |
| Husna                   | Female | Senior   | 24  |
Distance learning during the COVID-19 was a priority for governments around the world to ensure learning continuity. Unlike the physical learning system, many of the learners in all countries, particularly in high income countries turned to Information and Communication Technology (ICT). This decision which was held by the world community required teachers to move to online delivery of lessons (UNESCO, 2020a). That is, it was reported that some modalities have widely been used depending on education level. In some middle-income countries, traditional distance learning modalities were often used by both teachers and learners. For example, students continued their learning from home through educational television and radio programming, and the distribution of print materials. Considerably, few countries were successfully monitoring the effective reach and use of distance learning modalities. It was estimated that 80–85% of the distance learning had been covered by high-income countries (UNICEF, 2020b; World Bank, 2020). In the low income countries, distance learning was no longer available and useable due to the disadvantaged and limited access to basic household services such as electricity, shortage of technology infrastructure and low levels of digital literacy among learners, parents, and teachers. This led to a serious disruption in all education levels in the low-income countries, including Afghanistan. Moreover, the progressive and final achievement tests in schools and universities have also been cancelled (United Nations, 2020).

2.2. Initial responses of higher education institutions to COVID-19

Due to the unprecedented disruption in higher education institutions, the scale, scope and speed of the ensuing transition of learning from face-to-face system to online were more difficult to plan by the universities around the world (MoHE, 2020). Moreover, Day et al. (2021) stated that the universities in coordination with higher education stakeholders had to take constant steps to better observe and deliver learning from home through the following key measurements in all education institutions:

2.2.1. Faculty preparations

A study was recently conducted by Day et al. (2021) in England and they found that all the faculties in a particular institution were responsible to rework their existing teaching materials for online lessons delivery, but this was a very tough experience to some of the instructors. Relating this to the Afghan context, instructors were not ready enough to teach their learners virtually because they lacked some basic skills of technology and connectivity to the Internet. Teachers had to be first trained before moving their teaching-learning to online modality (United Nations, 2020). That is, it was mandatory for all the faculties’ members to get acquainted with the ICT and start transitioning their teaching-learning activities to online modality which was new for almost poor countries. A study conducted by Noori (2021), who reported distance learning or learning from home did not work during the COVID-19. He further highlighted in his study that teachers were lack of electricity, good quality in Internet, and some applications (i.e. WhatsApp, Viber, Facebook groups, HELMS a website designed by MoHE) required for learning and teaching. Teachers’ isolation from such new learning modality caused that learning and teaching stopped in many private and public institutions of Afghanistan until the COVID-19 cases decreased.

2.2.2. Students consultations

Teachers had not sufficient time to consult with students properly to meet their needs before the emergence of the pandemic. They were not also informed of the COVID-19 to take decision to get online learning transition started. According to Day et al. (2021), some universities and colleges conducted some survey students to realize and understand the students’ needs. For example, Sinclair students were encouraged to participate in a survey to express and highlight their technical problems. Their participation in the survey was a big help to the teachers, administrators and staff in order to provide their learners assistance where needed. In Macalester College, the administrators sent students emails and requested them to write their concerns and challenges they have had towards distance learning (Bhagat & Kim, 2020). Another study conducted by Mailizar et al. (2020) which revealed that students worried about Zoom security issues by which they continue their learning in Indonesia. In the low income countries, five to six students from
each class had access to Internet and it was difficult to gather students and provide them workshops regarding the distance learning. The big problem in the low-income countries is low-quality Internet and its highest price. It is hard to teachers and students to move their learning to online learning modality (Noori, 2021).

MoHE (2020) reported that public universities in Afghanistan used an application known as (HELMS) which has already developed by the Ministry of Higher Education of Afghanistan for continuing their education through distance learning modality. Due to the low quality in the Internet, the application was not helpful and it did not work properly. This is because staff and teachers of the universities were not given training on how to open and start online learning through that application. Moreover, some of the teachers used WhatsApp for uploading some PDF files pertaining to their lessons and requested students to download the files and study without any aims and objectives. As Akramy (2021) highlighted that both teachers and students cannot reach what they already set as outcomes for their learning. It means online learning affects the outcome of students’ learning and cannot reach what they expect at the end of a session or a course. The reason for not reaching the outcomes in a particular session is that teacher and students cannot interact with each other in a proper manner, participate in classroom activities properly, and respond to the problems and questions raised in virtual classroom.

2.2.3. Teaching
Faculties made course formats, assignments, instructional issues and students’ assessment suitable for a new set of conditions. Related to the point, Day et al. (2021) asserted that faculties need to adjust their course materials, assignments and everything related to the lessons of students as to encourage the use of a limited range of technological means to keep learning moving forward through online learning system. Furthermore, the faculties expressed their concerns regarding fulfilling requirements of their courses based on the curriculum which already developed and designed by higher education policy makers. That means based on the point of view of the faculties, it is hard to replicate the face-to-face experience through online learning. However, faculties around the world did their best to produce helpful online lectures to students from home. As a result, some of the countries could succeed to deliver the lessons online but the majority of the countries could not fulfil their jobs successfully and properly because of the tangible challenges they had with their pre-existing teaching and learning activities (Radha et al., 2020).

2.2.4. Assignment, evaluations, and assessment techniques
As lesson delivery was over, assessment was another important issue which had to be taken serious by the faculties in online learning system. In online learning modality, assessment is often carried out online whereby teachers may face difficulties while controlling and monitoring their students or they are even to a proxy supervision of learners which is impossible to do so (Arkorful & Abaidoo, 2015). It is unimaginable in some cases to claim that students will achieve the same learning results through assessing students’ performance in the remote learning and during the pandemic, the thorough assessment is not performed or it is sort of complicated which results in failing students (Flaherty, 2020). A study conducted by Daniel (2020), who reported that learning from home affected the students’ performances badly and the staff and instructors the university of Ascenda in the city of Vancouver in Canada postponed the final achievement tests of the students and started after the COVID-19 pandemic. The study further highlighted that students during the COVID-19 did not fulfill the requirement of the university criteria and started assessing students’ performances and their learning practices after there has been a decrease in the positive cases of COVID-19.

2.3. Expected implications of distance learning during COVID-19
Virtual learning before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic could be a complex phenomenon by which teachers and students encounter a wide range difficulties and challenges. That is to say, distance learning will probably affect both teaching and learning practices and it is an obstacle for
keeping learning-teaching going forward (Schoepf, 2005). Assareh and Bidokht (2011) in their study classified the negative implications on learning online based on four areas that learning-teaching practices will be affected, i.e. teachers, learners, curriculum, and schools or universities. Various aspects like, knowledge limitations and assessment are the challenges and implications the teachers may face. The learners challenges during the distance learning include financial problems, motivation which is a dire need for students' learning, assessment which measures students' performances in a particular activity, separation from peers, lack of distance learning skills and experience and many other elements of the challenges which show the students affective and cognitive domains for their learning. The third distance learning implication is the curriculum which is focusing more on the quality of resources, ambiguity of the contents given to students for studying, teaching process, and their evaluation from teachers. The last distance learning implication in terms of school or university is organizational and structural factors that the programs and lessons delivery are planned by them. Besides, Putra (2020) asserted that distance learning is very hard to implement in Indonesia because there are a couple of problems need to be taken into consideration by the stakeholders and administrators and these problems are cost, learning motivation, providing feedback on students performances, teachers' and students' lack of online learning skills and experiences. All these problems may result in that learning from home will not go well and the students will express their highest dissatisfaction from e-learning.

Moreover, the current health crisis known as COVID-19 is still having a major impact on students globally. During the COVID-19 pandemic, there are some expected implications of distance learning which prevent students from getting education. Students are physically not active enough to continue their education through social distance learning. Consequently, the students are expected to spend much longer time on the screen which itself has no positive impact on learning outcomes of the learners (Tuac, 2020). Moreover, the United Nations (2020) and WHO (2020a) asserted that students were emotionally affected by the ongoing health crisis. That is, when students were ordered to start their education through distance learning during a health crisis, they will be affected and their anxiety towards the virtual or remote learning will go up. Although the students' well-being is a priority during the COVID-19, students encounter an exceptional uncertainty. Related to the point, a study revealed that students while getting their education during the COVID-19 through distance learning were not the same. It means their capabilities and confidence levels varied and it caused that the learning did not go well because the majority of learners got frustrated and confused. The study further reported that inadequate compatibility and customization of learning processes could damage the teaching process and created an imbalance between learning and teaching practices (Dhawan, 2020).

Unlike the negative expected implications of distance learning during COVID-19, several studied conducted around the globe and the findings of these studies showed that distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic provided more opportunities for both teachers and students. They will also test a new modality for their teaching and learning in their own context. Favale et al. (2020) for example, reported that, distance learning as a new learning model enhanced problem-solving skills and critical thinking abilities of students. Their study also showed that after a few weeks of using the distance learning, the students were requested to fill in a questionnaire which was about the level of their satisfaction from virtual learning. The result of the survey showed that students had more favorable preferences to learning from home and they were happy for the activities and teaching materials uploaded by their teachers in order to let students study by their own pace. Besides, a study’s finding clarified that after the COVID-19 pandemic spread around the globe, the students of this university stayed at home and started getting their education through e-learning. At the result, they expressed their high willingness to the online learning. It means around 82.86% of the students have reported that since using the online learning modality, they could improve their self-study skills. It also caused that students besides their studying needed to seek for more new information pertaining to their lesson on the Internet. Overall, a maximum number of students supported that distance learning is a great option during
the COVID-19 and it should continue up to when this pandemic eradicated across the globe (Radha et al., 2020).

2.4. Immediate effects on higher education institutions in the presence of COVID-19
In Afghanistan, universities were the only educational centres to be shut in order to stay away from the COVID-19 pandemic. When some cases of COVID-19 identified in Herat province of Afghanistan, face-to-face teaching-learning processes was cancelled. This decision to delay all teaching and learning activities was taken by Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE). Consequently, the schools were the second decision to be closed down not to allow children to attend. Afterwards, all places whereby the services delivery were going on, such as libraries, teaching and educational services, events which going to be held concerning learning and teaching, conferences, teacher training colleges and language learning centres were closed as well (MoE, 2020; MoHE, 2020).

After holding heavy quarantine measures on higher education institutions, the stakeholders, policy makers and administrators in the MoHE decided to bring an alternative concerning remote learning and teaching activities. Learning through online system was the only option by which the teachers of universities teach their students accordingly. Moreover, for keeping the online system going well, MoHE in coordination with Ministry of Telecommunication agreed on developing a learning and teaching application in the name of Higher Education Learning Management System (HELMS) in which both teachers and learners enter the application through a specific user account and continue their learning-teaching processes (MoHE, 2020).

The application was created like an online classroom that students had the option to share their ideas concerning the topic and then given feedback by their teachers. At the same time, hundreds of students could come live and continue their learning. At the end of the session, the Ministry of Higher Education could supervise how much the teachers continue their teaching practices. HELMS as an online learning application for students of both public and private universities worked just for a few weeks, then due to the low quality of Internet and highest prices, both teachers and students faced challenges and stopped learning and teaching. The students were not able to pay a big amount of money for their Internet. The teachers had also the same problems. This is because Internet does not work well as the quality is very low. Furthermore, the government did not help and support teachers to teach their students online. Likewise, teachers needed computers for online teaching, technological means in terms of Internet until they could empower their students in a proper manner. Finally, the COVID-19 not only affected the teaching and learning activities but it also caused that students isolated from getting education for a long period of time (Ministry of Telecommunication, 2020; MoHE, 2020; United Nations, 2020).

Additionally, other applications as helpful platforms for online teaching were proposed to let teachers continue learning-teaching activities such as Zoom, Google Classroom, and WhatsApp. Receiving no support from Ministry of Higher Education, teachers’ lack of skills how to use these applications, and providing no opportunities like supporting and encouraging learners and giving them half price of Internet to the students, both teachers and students were not ready to welcome online learning modality. The people who lived in Afghanistan are really suffering from poverty. They could not afford to continue their teaching and learning process online (Noori, 2021). None of the above suggested applications worked well to online learning and teaching delivery. Both teachers and students stayed away from education up to the quarantine measures terminated and students got back to their universities.

2.5. Problem statement
Using distance learning during COVID-19 is a new learning modality in Afghanistan and it will play a key role on both students’ and teachers’ performances if applied properly. When Afghanistan Ministry of Higher Education put some heavy quarantine measurements in all education institutions, using the online learning platform through a wide range of applications was the only option
by which students were getting education sufficiently. Other studies conducted in Afghanistan to explore the attitudes of students towards COVID-19 and its effects on their education, but this study is different from those studies carried out about higher education institutions in Afghanistan. This study explores the perceptions of students towards challenges which were already in Afghanistan education institutes. It also attempts to determine how much satisfaction students show towards learning from home by a number of applications along with HEMLS created by MoHE during COVID-19 pandemic. Shocks and aftershocks of COVID-19 in Afghanistan universities selected to conduct a qualitative study as to raise the voices of students who had challenges in their education before the pandemic and still suffering those challenges doubly in the presence of COVID-19 in their community. This study is also crucial to the teachers to have chances of realizing the perceptions of their students concerning distance learning challenges and to renew their teaching practices through a wide range of helpful e-learning tools till they let the needs of their students are met.

2.6. Purpose of the study

The main purpose of this qualitative study is to examine the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on higher education institutions. It also attempts to determine the effects of students learning practices before, during, and after the pandemic. Moreover, it investigates the effects of virtual learning during the COVID-19 pandemic in Afghanistan universities. The research study addresses the following questions.

1. What challenges did Afghan university students face in face-to-face learning system before COVID-19?
2. To what extent do Afghan university students use the online learning modality during COVID-19 pandemic?
3. To what extent do Afghan university students agree to get education through virtual learning modality during COVID-19?
4. What are the effects of COVID-19 pandemic on participants' learning practices?
5. How much satisfaction do Afghan university students show towards face-to-face learning system after COVID-19 pandemic?

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

This qualitative study recruited 24 participants who were all Afghan EFL learners from English Department of Language and Literature Faculty at Takhar University. In Table 1, the participants were composed of 10 females and 14 males from sophomore, junior and senior classes. Six students were from sophomore class and eight students were from Junior while the rest (ten) were from senior class of English Language and Literature. Their ages ranged from 18 to 24. The table below is the demographic information of the participants from English Department of Takhar University:

3.2. Data collection instrument

The questions were set in five main sections to conduct a semi-structured interview from participants. The interview questions were adapted after going through a wide range of studies carried out by (Bhagat & Kim, 2020; Day et al., 2021; Dong et al., 2020; Fauzi et al., 2020; Noori, 2021; Mailizar et al., 2020; Shereen et al., 2020; Sintema, 2020).

The first part of the interview was related to participants' profile and their learning experience. The second part was about exploring the reported experiences of participants on their learning experiences before COVID-19 while the third part focused on the challenges and problems students imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, this study attempted to determine the level of satisfaction students had towards distance learning modality during COVID-19. Finally,
the last part expected to have the participants’ comments, concerns, and recommendations on the topic they discussed with the researcher on the day of the interview.

   The semi-structured interview was selected in this qualitative study because there were some follow-up questions and the researcher needed to find out more about participants’ experiences concerning the shocks and aftershocks of COVID-19 on Afghanistan higher education institutions and how they could incorporate the distance learning modality in their learning affairs.

3.3. Data collection procedure
The author conducted the semi-structured interview within four weeks. Each week, six participants were interviewed. Before the interview, the researcher conducted a pilot study whether he could collect the same data as he collected from the interview. Participants who participated in the pilot interview were only five students. Furthermore, he sent a consent form to the participants before taking part in the interview in order to have their confirmation of participation in the study. He also explained the purpose of the study and the time and days to taking the interview from them in the letter. Fortunately, among 36 students 24 of them expressed their willingness and confirmed to be the participants of this study and have their ideas and experiences towards the shocks and aftershocks of the COVID-19 pandemic on Afghanistan higher education institutions. The answers of some questions were incomplete. The researcher probed to find out more about the questions by encouraging the participations to deeply think about the issue. The interview took 20–25 mins each participant to answer all the questions items.

3.4. Data analysis
The author gathered the data from participants through a semi-structured interview. This research study attempted to explore the perceptions of Afghan EFL learners towards the effects of their learning practices before, during, and after COVID-19 pandemic. After the author coded the data, the codes were analyzed and divided into four major themes: (a) students’ perceptions of learning practices before the outbreak of COVID-19, (b) the impact of distance learning modality during the COVID-19 pandemic and its challenges on students’ learning, (c) students’ learning anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic and (d) level of students’ satisfaction from face-to-face learning system after a decrease in the cases of COVID-19. These major themes were discussed in the results and discussion section in detail.

4. Results and discussion
4.1. Students’ perceptions of learning practices before the outbreak of COVID-19
All participants who participated in this qualitative study reported that the learning process was going well when there was not any virus or disease treating them. For example, Ahmad, Sara, and Bariz stated, “irrespective of the challenges being in Afghanistan like, insecurity, lack of equipment in universities, lack of trained teachers, we were continuing the lessons normally.” They further reported if there were any classroom activities, the majority of students were involved in the activity. During the lesson, if they faced any problems, they quickly cornered their teacher and asked what their problems were. The teacher then tried to solve what the students expected. United Nations (2020) argued that educational centres had more problems in terms of enrolling students in schools, universities, and any other educational centres before COVID-19 pandemic. The report further showed that the students who were getting education were not enough because learning for about 800 million adults were not paved and far from guaranteed.

   Like many studies conducted on face-to-face learning modality, the participants in this study confessed that problems in the lessons are happening naturally (Bahasoan et al., 2020; Simamora, 2020). They highlighted getting education through face-to-face learning modality is helpful, but there are some problems that teachers and those who are making higher education policies need to take the problems serious. For instance, each class is full of students. That is, each class is consisting of 70–80 students and the teacher cannot deliver a helpful lesson. The students needed
help, but the teacher could not monitor them well or because of the shortage of teachers, the needs of each student were not addressed properly. Similarly, Daniel (2020) defined the needs of the majority of students are not met in a small class having a large number of students. That is to say, the teacher does not meet all students in a short period of time in one setting when the student consultation phases are being started by the faculty. The students were reluctant to share their problems with their teachers. In a class consisting 70 students, the assessment techniques cannot be implemented properly. The lessons are not going smoothly since most of the students do not have chairs to have seats. In the long run, the session is not done properly to be satisfactory for students. This is because teachers cannot achieve what he or she has already set as learning outcomes for their students (Donitsa-Schmidt & Ramot, 2020).

However, according to the participants’ perceived reported experiences from learning through face-to-face system, the needs of students were not met in terms of supervising the projects that students working on by their teachers, not fixing the problem of small-sized classes full of students, meeting no students individually in a few scheduled phases like, pre-conference, post-conference during and after a semester to see what problems and challenges are felt in their language classrooms. The problems and challenges mentioned above negatively affected the students’ language learning process. Except Basit and Hameed, participants of the study, reported that they were happy to feel those problems in their language learning process. This is because the problems were pushing students to work harder than expected. In the same vein, Yandell (2020) found that the majority of students have to do more practices to be proactive in learning. This indicated that they have to be given importance and counted as part of the learning. For each problem, the students may have to follow some specific strategies with the help of their teachers to fill those gaps they have in their language learning process.

The participants expressed their positive attitudes towards face-to-face learning modality before the pandemic emerged. For example, Mariam, Shreen and Nawid reported that they were busy in class getting education before COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, Mariam specifically noted that delivering a task (i.e. seminar, presentation, situational conversation in pairs, discussion and role plays) in front of a big number of students could be challenging. She usually, due to lack of low confidence, could not present her task properly. She acknowledged that the teachers helped her in case of need. While feeling problems, she cornered her teachers to talk until she could receive tangible solutions for the problems raised. Nawid, one of the participants, postulated that he could fix some problems like, speaking anxiety, low self-confidence and lack of communication skills through participating in some community volunteer activities. Moreover, he believed that it was very simple to solve the problems in the face-to-face learning modality as the pandemic was not around. He further said that if students faced any challenges; they could meet dear teachers and share the learning challenges with them.

The same like Mariam’s, Shreen’s and Nawid’s positive attitudes towards face-to-face learning modality, other participants like Wali, Husna, Shafi and Laila showed a positive attitude towards physical learning before the pandemic came to their university. The study showed that they were happy when they got education through face-to-face learning modality. They could have more opportunities not only to learn language but they could also participate in conferences, seminars, and associations held by the faculty members. To add more, they could refer to libraries and computer labs for more information because of their projects and assignments. To prove this, a study conducted by Jena (2020), who found out that students had more opportunities for learning when they were getting education in a friendly and comfortable learning environment. For example, they could go to library and Internet club while carrying out research papers or any sort of assignment given by teachers. Furthermore, they could improve student–student and student–teacher interaction which is the main part of learning. Therefore, it can be concluded that getting education through physical learning system before COVID-19 was very good although there were some shortages in students’ learning process (i.e. technological devices in learning, students’
access to the Internet, no assessment practices in small-sized classes with large number of students, and lack of some soft skills).

4.2. The impact of virtual learning during COVID-19 and its challenges on students’ performance
All the participants in this study, except Shreen and Behroz, argued that virtual learning during COVID-19 has had a negative effect on their language learning process. According to Shreen and Behroz, virtual learning modality as a new phenomenon in Afghanistan universities caused them to focus not only on their learning, but also some of the skills to using technology in learning were needed to concentrate on. On the one hand, one of the important findings of the current study is exploring the negative impact of virtual learning in the time of critical crisis, particularly COVID-19 pandemic. This is corroborated by Jeno’s (2020) findings in her study. According to her, COVID-19 has negatively affected the students’ performance in educational settings, particularly in universities. Her findings further highlighted that students showed a very high level of dissatisfaction with the virtual teaching modality at this critical moment. In addition, Noori (2021) found that lack of pedagogical training in employing different technological tools and learning-teaching applications, the high cost of Wi-Fi and shortage of electricity increased the negative impact of virtual learning modality in all students. It not only helped learners learn something but it also caused that students faced a lot of learning barriers towards online education during the COVID-19 pandemic. On the other hand, this study found that except Aysha, all other participants reported that virtual learning caused them to have access to a couple of e-learning tools and applications with which they were not familiar before because they had the chance of watching their teachers and classmates virtually and not a in real-world situation.

The other effect that the participants of this study stated due to learning from home through social networking sites during COVID-19 pandemic was low quality and high price of Internet. This happened at a time when such thing was not expected by anyone. Moreover, the participants could not share their ideas properly and clearly due to the low quality of Internet and the students also were not able to pay for their Internet because of the high cost to keep up their learning process. Bakalar (2018) and Ahmadi and Ilmiani (2020) described that various problems students faced while getting education through online learning modality in the time of COVID-19 pandemic. For example, one of the necessary infrastructure students may have to have is an Internet network because there were a large number of students in the villages who have not enjoyed Internet in their learning. They cannot purchase expensive data packages to continue their education. His study also revealed that the majority of students got isolated from education during COVID-19 because of accessing no Internet data bundles. Besides, the participants of this study confessed that they have experienced a couple of problems in virtual learning modality as they were obliged to go online at a specific time appointed by their teachers. The participants’ experiences corroborated with Noori’s (2021) findings, indicated that university students who were participants in his study did not have any positive impact during using and applying the distance learning approach through a wide range of social networking sites and applications. Likewise, when the learners got education through e-learning modality, they faced a new learning-teaching phenomenon in which no students were ready to welcome in their learning process. Moreover, it was a rapid and forced shift from face-to-face to online teaching by which students faced many obstacles in the application of some technological devices and learning applications, i.e. Google Classroom, Zoom, Moodle and learning applications (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; COL, 2020; OECD, 2020a). That is, it negatively affects their perceptions towards learning from home. This negative effect of distance learning may happen to all students as the majority of them have not access to Internet because of being a member of low income families. What is more, they live outside the city and have no access to some devices (i.e. computer, mobile, tablets or iPads) to get connected with their classes virtually.

4.3. Students’ learning anxiety during COVID-19 pandemic and reasons for their anxiety
A couple of research studies conducted on getting education during COVID-19 indicated that there are several factors affecting students’ learning process. For instance, staying at home may cause
the majority of students not to continue their learning systematically and they will not be provided numerous opportunities to practice their language. That is, staying away from the community and those who live around and being at home may isolate the students from getting education. They gradually get disappointed to continue their education. They also do not have the chance of taking part in educational activities as this affected their learning to increase anxiety and have negative perceptions towards education. Moreover, learning at home during critical moments is far more different what students used to be in a physical learning environment. It can also lead to more boredom for the students’ interest and learning motivation (Akramy, 2020; Purwanto et al., 2020; Simamora, 2020; Sutarto et al., 2020).

The findings of this qualitative study showed that the participants already experienced learning anxiety in the physical learning modality, but the COVID-19 pandemic caused that they have had anxiety towards many issues (i.e. being away from university and education, starting the virtual learning modality mandatorily, and not having access to hard textbooks) in their learning process. This is because the textbooks affect the learners’ and teachers’ attitudes towards learning and teaching (Orfan et al., 2021). These have been the major reasons behind their learning practices during the crisis. Some of the participants like Shafi, Amin, Mahsa, Shabnam, and Massoud reported it had been very difficult to start learning through virtual learning modality as they live in villages far from Internet. Furthermore, their low income in their families did not allow them to buy technological means to get education through. They also added that having no adequate knowledge and skills about an application which was designed and developed by Afghanistan Ministry of Higher Education in the name of HELMS had caused more anxiety in them, which is corroborated by Noori’s (2021). Besides, learning anxiety occurs because of having no specific time and appointment from their teachers on online learning during COVID-19 pandemic (Purwanto et al., 2020; Simamora, 2020).

Another factor which adds more to the students’ learning anxiety in a critical situation is not having access to authentic materials (Akramy, 2020). Some of the participants reported that being away from university and library where they get preparation for their learning made them reluctant to have a fruitful online classroom. The findings of Tuac (2020) and Khan et al. (2020) found that students’ worries and fears will be taken into account as this critical situation prevailed around the globe. The higher education institutions in the world community are suffering from. They are advised to stick to virtual learning although it is a new modality of learning from them in Afghan context. Irrespective of some shortages, three participants like Basit, Sara and Ahmad, claimed that students who had already experienced learning anxiety, when they were in the physical learning modality before COVID-19 may not be interested in distance learning and they get more anxious about their learning process. Moreover, Yalcin and Inecay (2014) asserted that learning anxiety is related to numerous challenges students deal with. Those challenges are having access no authentic teaching materials, experiencing a new learning strategy, and low self-confidence which play a key role in the learning process.

According to Putra (2020), some factors (i.e. lack of knowledge and skills of using social networking sites, pre-existing low self-confidence in some language skills, poor history of using technology for learning and instructional practice of learning tutors) are the reasons for learning anxiety in online learning approach. Also, the results of some studies conducted by Ahmodi and Ilmiani (2020), Azzaahra (2020), and Handayani (2020) revealed that fear of teachers’ negative feedback, weak performance in language classroom and being on the screen for a long time were the main causes of language learning anxiety. As an exception, three of the participants from this study, Vida, Mohammad, and Hassan claimed that teachers’ knowledge affected students’ level of anxiety as they are not equipped with some necessary language learning skills, they will get disappointed and worried about their language learning as they lose more opportunities to learn a wide range of techniques for keeping their language learning going on.
4.4. Students’ satisfaction from face-to-face learning system after a decrease in the cases of COVID-19

All the participants, except Rafi, reported that face-to-face learning system is helpful and impactful for students. Based on Rafi’s point of view, physical learning system cannot provide more opportunities for students to have access to technology. They further highlighted that using technology during a critical situation pushed many students to acquire knowledge and skills how to use different e-learning applications and websites. As it is clear, this current study attempted to determine the negative impact of physical learning modality on students’ learning practices. This is confirmed by United Nations (2020) and UNESCO (2020b) as they found out in their reports that students after experiencing a critical situation will be back to their schools facing a wide range of challenges (i.e. resuming lessons, welcoming a quick decision made by policy makers, boredom and speeding up the remaining sessions). The students will no longer feel comfortable when they are at universities or schools, particularly in the context of COVID-19. Moreover, OECD (2020b) reported that in any circumstances the teachers and students need to welcome positive and new changes in their learning although they learn through face-to-face modality. That is, testing different ways of learning (i.e. virtual learning vs physical learning) to have a better learning environment by which learners have access to a wide range of capabilities. Additionally, learning through face-to-face approach does not equip students with ICT skills as the virtual learning causes them to have not only changes in their learning but also to encourage them to learn a language with different technological devices and learning applications such as, WhatsApp, Facebook, Telegram, Google Classroom, Google Document and Zoom. Unlike, this qualitative study found that all the participants used physical learning modality widely and helpfully. In the presence of teachers, they could do a variety of activities in their learning context. For example, they participated in some conferences and associations which were held by the faculty and asked their teachers for help in case of need.

Another positive impact of face-to-face learning modality that participants of this qualitative study reported is visiting the advisors when they needed further feedback for their research papers, monographs, and project they were supposed to do during a semester. They further mentioned learning from home or virtual learning will not pave the way of reaching their teachers physically. They will not also receive any constructive feedback while they are live on online learning system. Learning from home provided an unequal access to online learning opportunities and it widened the pre-existing problems that students were already dealing with. The curriculum during the COVID-19 affected badly and the students could not learn their courses properly. In addition, the majority of students at the point of their graduation did not finish completing their monographs and dissertations in order to get their graduation certificates. During the pandemic, they needed to meet their teachers and have some constructive feedback, but they could not do that. Additionally, the participants who took part in this study acknowledged that they experienced some negative effects and challenges during COVID-19 when they were obliged to leave universities and continue their education through virtual learning modality which was no longer useful. They also mentioned that the problems they experienced in the physical learning system are not more than what they experienced in the online learning system (Azlan et al., 2020; ECLAC-UNESCO, 2020). Similarly, Noori’s (2021) finding pointed out that the participants who participated in his study were happy to get their education through physical learning modality because of having access to a wide range of opportunities (i.e. meeting the teachers physically, using the libraries, interacting with both teacher and students well, getting interested in the learning which has the aspects of affective domains as it is rare to see in the virtual learning) in their own learning context. Finally, getting education face-to-face caused that they desist from virtual learning because the number of students who access to the virtual learning are less (10–15), but in the physical learning system every single student benefits learning opportunities and facilities. None of them is excluded from classroom activities apparently. The level of satisfaction the participants of this study showed towards physical or face-to-face learning is a high rate.
5. Conclusion
The main purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on Afghanistan higher education institutions. It also aimed to determine the effects of students learning practices before and after the pandemic. The effects of virtual learning during the COVID-19 pandemic were investigated in this paper as well. The findings showed that students learning process across the institutions in Afghanistan have been disrupted due to the outbreak of the pandemic and it caused many damages in higher education of Afghanistan. However, the students were told to continue their education through virtual learning modality by having access to the Internet. Both teachers and students did not find learning through virtual system helpful and it not only caused disruption in education but it also caused more anxiety in students to get isolated from their learning. Furthermore, the attitudes of Afghan EFL learners towards virtual learning in the presence of COVID-19 were more negative. This is because they could not continue their education due to low quality of Internet, access to no technological devices (i.e. computer, tablet, smart phones and iPads) to get involved in learning. The findings also revealed that Afghan EFL learners showed a high rate satisfaction towards physical learning modality as they experienced before the pandemic and now after there has been a decrease in the cases of COVID-19 in Afghanistan.

The study has numerous implications for the Ministry of Higher Education and public universities of Afghanistan. Although there is shortage of facilities in all public universities of Afghanistan, the students held strong positive attitudes towards education, particularly learning English. As the study showed, getting education in any circumstances is a dire need of all participants. The Ministry of Higher Education of Afghanistan may have to give a helping hand to all public universities to rework their teaching materials and design curriculum to meet the needs of the community in order not to face challenges when a critical situation emerges as the COVID-19 disrupted the education system across the world and Afghanistan. Furthermore, the Ministry of Higher Education did not help both students and teachers to continue their education at the time of crisis in terms of providing computers, tablets, smart phones, incentives or any other types of technological means for them to comfortably continue learning through online learning modality as the majority of Afghan learners are from a very low-income families. The policy makers and planners should know that the destiny of a country is shaped and transformed in the presence of literate and educated people. It is these people who played a vital role in the community from universities to national and international sectors to government.

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