Priorities for reorienting traditional institutions of higher education toward online teaching and learning: Thinking beyond the COVID-19 experience

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Abstract
The purpose of this study is to suggest priorities for reorienting traditional institutions of higher education (IHE) toward online teaching and learning beyond the COVID-19 experience. This research applied the qualitative research method. Data collection sources included both a systematic literature review relating to how COVID-19 informed online distance learning across the globe and an analysis of circulars germane to the pandemic that were issued by the Ministry of Education (MOE) in Saudi Arabia and by Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University (PSAU). Guided by those two types of data, that is, review of the literature in general and the MOE and PSAU circulars in particular, and also illuminated by their own experiences of online teaching during the lockdown, the researchers were able to put forward those priorities. For the systematic review of the literature, five steps were performed: (1) identifying search terms and developing and applying a search strategy; (2) screening the obtained research papers, removing duplicates and papers outside the focal point, and establishing inclusion/exclusion criteria; (3) assessing the research papers against the inclusion/exclusion criteria; (4) data extraction; and (5) data synthesis. Although this article does not suggest traditional IHE should go entirely digital, it highlights the need for IHE to ensure access to online learning content, develop more partnerships with community, develop online self-study skills, get students to shift from passive to active learning, and a need to reconsider current e-assessment. Additionally, the study emphasizes the need to provide additional support for faculty members, how university buildings should be gradually reopened, controlling factors influencing online learning outcomes, and addressing the issue of dropouts in IHE. Finally, the study underlines the need for IHE to ensure access to online learning content, develop more partnerships with community, develop online self-study skills, get students to shift from passive to active learning, and a need to reconsider current e-assessment.
the need to add further emphasis to the importance of integrating blended learning in the university curriculum and navigating toward developing global distance learning programs.

**Keywords**
COVID-19 pandemic, lockdown, online distance learning, online education, remote learning, traditional institutions of higher education

**Introduction**
The world is currently experiencing a major event that may threaten education with a grave crisis, the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Most authorities worldwide have ordered a temporary closure of educational institutions, for the purpose of stopping the disease from spreading. At the time of conducting this research, the pandemic had been severely obstructing life events in different ways in many corners of the world. Presently, the virus continues to spread, causing panic coupled with economic disruption. As a result, the world has taken some emergency procedures. For example, many countries have ordered the closure of all educational institutions in compliance with rules of social distancing, and they have replaced traditional learning in classrooms by online distance learning (ODL). This abrupt shift from physical, offline learning to virtual learning happened near the middle of the second semester of the academic year 2019/2020. The Ministry of Education (MOE) in Saudi Arabia, as in most other countries, aimed to make sure that education would proceed uninterrupted notwithstanding the lockdown. The MOE urged all educational institutions to adopt whatever measures they esteemed tenable and practical to proceed with learning online and gave those institutions a free hand to choose any available technological amenities for this purpose.

Traditional IHE are required to think beyond the COVID-19 phase in order to fight off the short-to long-term challenges and to deliver ODL in creative and interactive ways. That phase, which will witness the reopening of schools after months of enforced closure, should come with careful arrangements of various measures to keep educators and students safe amid the uncertainties that characterize the epidemic (Cahapay, 2020). Understanding how to deal with that phase can help traditional IHE better improve their teaching practices and tackle the aftermath of the disruption. Understandably, there is an urgent need for traditional IHE to begin planning for extensive remedial measures, including the assessment of students’ post-closure educational attainment, the prioritization of essential teaching skills, and the training of educators (Kaffenberger, 2020).

The issue of ODL during the COVID-19 pandemic is of outstanding significance to diverse stakeholders for multiple reasons. First, there is still a shortage of studies in how traditional IHE will effectively deal with the recent challenges. Therefore, this study will present priorities for the delivery of e-learning in traditional IHE, and it will contribute to the most recent literature on this topic, which in turn could be utilized by traditional IHE in their endeavor to improve their e-learning experience. Second, the uncertainty inherent in the pandemic situation highlights the importance of undertaking studies to pinpoint the best possible practices that can contribute to the safe return of students and faculty. Third, according to Basilaia and Kvavadze (2020), further research is needed to fill the gaps in ODL. The findings of this study will be of immense significance to faculty members as they are in constant contact with the students, and they urgently need to be able to handle the ODL issues. Finally, the findings will help decision-makers to revisit their educational practices during the pandemic and will enable them to incorporate novel pedagogical reforms in ODL when institutions reopen.
IHE are soon going to begin the first semester of 2021/2022, and their reopening is contingent upon how the pandemic evolves. This study aims to lay out priorities suggested by the researchers for reorienting traditional IHE toward online teaching and learning beyond the COVID-19 experience. For this, the researchers have both conducted a systematic review of the literature relating to COVID-19 and ODL in the global educational arena and analyzed circulars related to the pandemic that were issued by the MOE and PSAU, and they have also provided suggestions from their experiences of teaching remotely over two semesters during the lockdown. Considering this purpose, this research was guided by the following question:

RQ: In light of a systematic literature review, analysis of official documents, and the authors’ experience of teaching remotely over two semesters, what are the priorities for reorienting traditional IHE toward online teaching and learning beyond the COVID-19 experience?

It should be noted that the more “tech-savvy” universities had been implementing e-learning besides their traditional in-class learning well before COVID-19 hit, and so when the lockdown was imposed, those universities shifted from partially online to totally online learning with a modicum of effort. This straightforward shift gave those universities a huge advantage. Traditional IHE had hitherto had little experience with e-learning, and their transition was sluggish and arduous; for those institutions, it was a period defined by precarious measures and considerable uncertainty. The researchers confined the scope of this research to traditional IHE because those institutions were more likely to struggle and stumble as they strove to cope with the demands of education in a virtual learning environment (VLE). One of the main aims of this study is to shed light on priorities for online learning that can help and enlighten policy makers in the more traditional IHE.

**Literature review**

ODL is not a new concept. “However, only now has it become a unique resource to satisfy the educational needs” (Mukan and Lavrysh, 2020, p. 109). It was not included under the frame of formal education until the spread of COVID-19 (Harizan et al., 2016) because of manifold problems that need fixing (Gabelaia, 2019). Those problems include isolation, limited interaction, technological limitations (Nenko et al., 2020), the need to cater for an effective learning environment (Boelens et al., 2017), high chances of distraction, lack of motivation (Abbasi et al., 2020), inadequate digital fluency (Agnoletto and Queiroz, 2020), and lack of validity and reliability demands associated with online-only assessment (Kearns, 2012; Oncu and Cakir, 2011).

Some research indicated that what we saw in many cases was not necessarily an ODL but simply a delivery of the same traditional content across a virtual platform. According to Lee (2020), many educators responded to this unprecedented pandemic by recording their lectures or doing live teaching using the same material from face-to-face interactions, and this simple process will not yield a positive experience. Agnoletto and Queiroz (2020) insist that distance education is a complex effort and that the way it is being implemented as a solution is actually not that easy. Pace et al. (2020) confirm that the current conditions are exceptional; unlike normal online learning circumstances, what educational institutions are doing now is precisely “crisis learning.” Similarly, Azevedo et al. (2020) debate that while educational practices during COVID-19 are commonly singled out as ODL, they are in reality no more than “emergency response teaching.” Zhang et al. (2020) affirm that suspending classes and switching to VLEs “did not follow a normal policy-making process” (p. 1).
It is widely feared that the closure of educational institutions will cause considerable losses in the educational process (Kuhfeld et al., 2020). It is important to note that the genuine worry is not simply that “a few months of learning will be lost in the short run, but that these losses will accumulate into large and permanent learning losses” (Kaffenberger, 2020, p. 1). Azevedo et al. (2020) note that “the long-term effects of COVID-19 are unknown, but past disruptions suggest they will be large and lasting” (p. 7). For example, Meyers and Thomasson (2017) state that the closures of schools after the outbreak of the 1916 polio epidemic in the United States had a long-running impact on students (e.g., families were not sure whether it was safe for their children to start going to school again, and a lot of students were absent for several weeks after schools had reopened).

Studies dealing with ODL-related issues during the pandemic are growing. These issues include some students’ inability to access educational content (Adnan and Anwar, 2020), lack of devices to cope with learning material to be downloaded (Omodan, 2020), lack of self-learning material and specific learning steps of self-study (Zhang et al., 2020), challenges for educators to prevent passive learning in online education (Malhotra, 2020), lack of reasonable e-assessment mechanisms (Sharadgah and Sa’di, 2020), the need to provide support for faculty members to prepare them for teaching in a VLE (Sangster et al., 2020), integrating blended learning in the curriculum (Kozubai and Shemet, 2020), and the issue of dropouts in IHE resulting from transition to ODL (Bariham et al., 2020).

This study seeks to systematically review the literature related to the various measures taken by traditional IHE around the world in responding to the pandemic as to how they provide ODL to students. Also, references will be made to the measures taken by IHE in Saudi Arabia, which could contribute to the most recent literature on this topic.

**Method**

This study was conducted during the academic year 2019/2020 in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. This research uses the qualitative research method to describe in depth the possible priorities for reorienting traditional IHE toward online teaching and learning beyond the COVID-19 experience. In the data analysis, the deductive approach was used, meaning that the researchers had pre-determined themes and ideas and were looking for evidence that those ideas held true. Before embarking on the study, the researchers contacted the research ethics board in the Deanship of Scientific Research at PSAU, and the ethics approval was procured. This study maximizes its validity and reliability through triangulation methods of data collection and analysis. First, it provides a systematic review of high-quality literature related to COVID-19 and ODL published in peer-reviewed journals. Second, validity and reliability were improved by analyzing official documents relating to the pandemic that were issued by the MOE and PSAU. Third, knowledge gained from the two researchers’ experiences of online teaching over two semesters due to the lockdown has much to offer to the quality of the data analysis and therefore to the improvement of the validity and reliability of the research.

**Systematic review of the literature**

A systematic review was undertaken to spot data sources that tackle online education during COVID-19. Five steps were followed to steer this systematic review of the literature: (1) identifying search terms and developing and applying a search strategy; (2) screening the obtained research papers, removing duplicates and papers outside the focal point, and establishing inclusion/exclusion criteria; (3) assessing the research papers against the inclusion/exclusion criteria; (4) data extraction; and (5) data synthesis (Figure 1).
Step 1: Search terms, search strategy, and inclusion/exclusion criteria. The first step of the systematic review was to adopt a plausible search strategy in order to identify research papers to be included in the study. This involved using three of the most well-known electronic databases: Scopus, Web of Science (WOS), and Google Scholar. To filter search results, the researchers used the advanced search function and set the following search options: find articles with all of the words; with the exact phrases; occurrence anywhere in the article; and no time period specified, assuming the novelty of the topic. The databases were searched using the keywords of the study, including “Higher education” AND “Covid-19” AND “Online.” The above three terms were present in every search, and in each search attempt, one of the following terms was added to them: “online learning content,” “partnerships with community,” “online self-learning/self-learning skills,” “passive learning” AND “active learning,” “online assessment,” “support for faculty” AND “online teaching,” “gradually reopen universities” “integrating blended learning,” “university dropouts,” “distance learning programs,” and “online vs. face-to-face learning outcomes.” In this step, 507 articles were found.

Step 2: Screening the potential articles. The abstracts of the 507 articles were screened. Duplicates and papers outside the focal point of the present study were excluded. During this examination, a set of inclusion/exclusion criteria were established and applied (Table 1). The researchers included 132; before screening the full texts of those articles, the researchers randomly selected six articles and discussed them together with an expert assistant to ensure inter-rater consistency for inclusion/exclusion decisions.

Step 3: Assess the articles against the inclusion/exclusion criteria. The full texts of the 132 articles were read independently by the two researchers and the expert assistant and were assessed against the
inclusion/exclusion criteria. Any discrepancy between the evaluators regarding the inclusion or exclusion of an article was then discussed and resolved. 45 articles met the purpose of the study.

**Step 4: Data extraction.** This involved identifying and classifying the data obtained from the articles by making reference lists of all topics retrieved from the articles and then turning them into categories. Data from the 45 articles were classified into eleven methodological categories: online learning content, community partnerships, online self-study skills, passive learning and active learning, online assessment, support for faculty and online teaching, gradually reopening universities, integrating blended learning, university dropouts, distance learning programs, and online learning outcomes.

**Step 5: Data synthesis.** The researchers and the expert assistant went through the information, comparing the topics extracted under the categories, and they unanimously synthesized the results across the articles to create a coherent literature summary. This allowed the researchers to make judgments on similarities and differences and the strengths and weaknesses of each topic included (Table 2).

**Official documents and the researchers’ experiences**

Second data sources for this research included official documents produced by the MOE and PSAU between 8 March 2020 and 13 September 2020, as shown in Table 3. The focus was based on collecting and analyzing all documents germane to the pandemic and linking them with the future priorities that are presented in the discussion. The review of official documents included the screening of circulars relevant to the second and summer semesters of 2019/2020 and the first semester of 2020/2021. In addition, the priorities for reorienting traditional IHE toward online teaching and learning were outlined based on the researchers’ experiences of online teaching over two semesters.

**Results**

The main aim of the present study was to suggest priorities for reorienting traditional IHE toward online teaching and learning beyond the coronavirus experience. To be able to make such suggestions, the researchers collected two types of data: they conducted a review of the literature in general at the global level and of the MOE and PSAU circulars in particular.

In the literature review, the initial search yielded 507 articles relating to the search terms used. Most of these articles were published in 2020. After screening the abstracts of the articles relying on eleven themes, 132 potential articles were shortlisted based on their titles and abstracts. Ultimately,

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**Table 1. Inclusion/exclusion criteria.**

| Inclusion                                      | Exclusion                                      |
|------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|
| 1. Must include “Higher education”, “Covid-19”, and “online” as primary components | 1. Articles which did not use a vigorous methodology or were written in an ambiguous way |
| 2. Must be mainly about online teaching and learning | 2. Not being in the context of higher education |
| 3. Must be written in English                  | 3. Non-English articles                        |
| 4. Must be published in a peer-reviewed journal or conference papers and proceedings | 4. Book reviews, book chapters, thesis, editorial materials, letters blogs, magazines were excluded |
|                                                | 5. For duplicates, only one article was included in the analysis |
after screening the full text of those 132 articles, 45 articles were retained in this systematic review. Table 2 shows a summary of the total of articles in the initial search, potential articles, and articles that met the purpose of the study.

With regard to official documents produced by the MOE and PSAU in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic, the search yielded 13 potential documents. Out of those, seven documents were found...
relevant to the purpose of this study. Three documents were issued by the MOE, and four were issued by PSAU as internal regulations. Table 3 shows the nature of these documents and their content.

Discussion

Based on a systematic review of the literature relating to teaching online during the lockdown worldwide and of circulars produced by the Saudi MOE and PSAU, as well as the authors’ experience, the primary focus of this article was to discuss priorities for reorienting traditional IHE both in KSA and further afield toward online teaching and learning beyond the COVID-19 experience. This study suggests the following practices and priorities to achieve a smooth transition to online education and to meet the needs of each individual learner beyond the COVID-19 experience.

Ensure access to educational content

One of the most important current educational challenges to existing responses to COVID-19 is that some students are still unable to access educational content. This is mainly because of problems of Internet access or monetary issues (Adnan and Anwar, 2020), lack of devices “sophisticated enough to cope with numerous materials to be downloaded” (Omodan, 2020, p. 12) or because of other domestic challenges they may face as they work from home. Moreover, because there is uncertainty about the resumption of in-class teaching (Cahapay, 2020), it is an essential priority to ensure that all students have opportunities to access educational content. When feasible, teaching and learning should draw on online activities (Reimers and Schleicher, 2020). Reaching this involves ensuring accessibility and availability of quality online connectivity, especially for learners who need additional support to access the content. The authors of the current research are impressed by the measures taken by some colleges at State University of New York College to assist students during the pandemic, which communicated with students and “provid[ed] them with loaner laptops at no cost, as needed” (Neuwirth et al., 2020).

The Saudi MOE’s circular that announced the shift from face-to-face classes to e-classes coincided with the release of free educational online platforms such as Blackboard, Zoom, iEN National Education Portal, iEN TV Network, and Future Gate. Also, PSAU issued two circulars that encouraged lenient measures due to the exceptional circumstances, stating that students who had been deprived due to absence were now allowed to return and gave the free hand to faculty and students to agree on e-class timing. However, in contexts that do not allow learners to access internet-based content, other solutions are needed. In this study, the researchers suggest that in the second priority level, traditional IHE should consider adopting other low-tech modalities such as television, radio, and email, or even some that do not rely solely upon Internet access, such as the distribution of educational materials in print, videocassettes, and DVDs.

Develop more community partnerships

Partnerships with community sectors can be used to respond through a number of implementations to obstacles that hinder access to online education. These implementations include helping to provide a digital infrastructure such as reliable Internet access (Malkus and Christensen, 2020), produce educational content (Munro, 2018), provide free learning materials (Azzahra, 2020), and training programs on how to access and use various platforms. In addition, partnerships with universities and other IHE with proven experience in ODL would help traditional IHE to transfer courses online, secure resources (Reimers and Schleicher, 2020), improve services, provide
solutions to challenges, provide quality online course design, etc. Unfortunately, based on the researchers’ experiences of teaching during the pandemic, it seems that traditional IHE have placed the greatest burden of ODL on faculty members because they simply presumed it was the same as classroom-based education; thus, faculty members found themselves struggling to deal with the multifarious online responsibilities. In practice, developing online courses entails a body of specialists involving academics, instructional designers, programmers, and illustrators who follow a systematic design process (Lee, 2020).

**Develop self-study skills**

During the lockdown, most of the existing educational materials that were used for independent learning were “mechanically copying the textbooks”; therefore, due to the lack of targeted self-learning materials, students lacked the goals and specific learning steps of self-study (Zhang et al., 2020, p. 538). Students simply watched instructional videos, listened to lectures, and completed assignments, which never ensured the learning effect (Zhang, ibid). The researchers believe that in ODL, it is a necessary priority to put emphasis on developing self-learning skills through the integration of formal and informal education to promote active learning that can guarantee the achievement of educational goals and ensure life-long learning. Faculty members’ priority should be to develop online learning material that fosters the development of self-study skills through diverse approaches such as problem solving, inquiry-based learning, discovery activities, creative thinking, and group activities (Abbas and Al-Ani, 2016). According to the researchers’ experiences during the pandemic, it is a beneficial priority for educators to raise students’ awareness of their new roles in the online modality, which demands that students take responsibility for their study and be able to actively develop self-study skills including time management, goal setting, study habits, self-assessment, self-initiative, and be able to highlight own strengths and weaknesses, search for information, etc.

**Shift students from passive learning to active learning**

Bennett and Raymond (2019) defined active learning as “any approach to instruction in which all students are required to be involved in the learning process” (p. 456), while passive learning is defined as “traditional lectures…and activities where the teacher facilitates the transfer of knowledge” (p. 89). ODL is a new mode for traditional IHE, and the greatest challenge for educators is how to prevent passive learning in online education; and when the curriculum has not been designed for this mode (Malhotra, 2020), the authors think that this could increase the risk that students may lose interest in the content. Van Klaveren et al. (2020) found that the majority of online delivery modes during the COVID-19 pandemic focused on passive learning. Passive learning “may limit students’ thinking, problem solving abilities, and motivation for learning” (Healy and Smyth, 2017, p. 44). Simple steps can be taken gradually in each lesson to enable more interaction and to expedite the transition toward active learning in a VLE where learners and educators are not physically together in a classroom. These steps could involve “students in active learning through individual and group problem solving, demonstrations, hands-on activities” (Yelamarthi and Drake, 2014, p. 181).

**Reconsider e-assessment mechanisms**

Universities which have largely carried out only traditional education may be unable to meet the requirements for reasonable assessment within a VLE (Aboagye, 2020). This may have adverse
effects on their assessments as it mars their security, academic integrity, reliability, and validity (Onco and Cakir, 2011). In addition, faculty members are facing new challenges as they try to conduct online assessments that can meet the needs of different learners (Xiong and Suen, 2018). Although the MOE issued a circular on arrangements for e-assessments stipulating that online assessment be used for the remaining internal marks and that the internal assessment grades be increased “to become 80%, with only 20% for the final assessment,” this did not prevent 75% of faculty members from confirming that students’ grades were unreliable (Sharadgah & Sa’di, 2020, p. 761). Should the governments carry on with the lockdown in the coming semesters, it is incumbent upon traditional IHE to take action and make certain that proper e-assessment methods are implemented. Some priorities and solutions that can be suggested include: (a) set a contingency plan capable of dealing with any sudden lockdowns in the future; (b) provide sufficient training aimed at enabling faculty members to carry out e-assessments; (c) make certain that the learners’ performance in e-assessment is more or less the same as their performance in face-to-face assessment; and (d) preclude cheating, by using invigilation software which prevents lockdown browsing and all software on the device during a test (Khan and Jawaid, 2020), or by using biometric software that recognizes the face/voice of the test-taker (Tereseviciene et al., 2020), or by creating a different test for every individual test-taker (Palloff and Pratt, 2008), or by holding exam sessions at physical locations on campus that can cater for social-distancing requirements; (e) use a dedicated server for online tests, in order to avoid heavy online traffic that may hinder a smooth test experience; (f) disperse the test sessions over various time slots in order to avoid too many tests happening simultaneously; and (g) set up a specialized e-assessment committee in each academic program that monitors e-assessments and gives immediate help when needed.

The MOE has learned lessons from previous semesters (second and summer, 2019/2020) and issued a circular on continuation of remote study for the first semester of 2020/2021, but left the decision to individual universities with regard to assessments and practical courses. PSAU has issued some circulars in this regard, most important of which was a circular stating that the University was going to adopt online learning but offline assessment, so that all classes—except practical ones—are taught online, but since e-assessment last semester encountered serious issues, it was decided that all tests be held on campus. Another important circular was one on procedures for offline testing, which provides that classes be split into groups of no more than 15 students each, and those groups would be tested at different venues.

Provide additional support for faculty members

Sangster et al. (2020) expect that online learning will continue to gain momentum in the future, so traditional IHE need to establish ways to provide ongoing support for faculty members in order to help them get prepared for teaching in VLEs. Based on the researchers’ experiences in online teaching over two semesters during the pandemic, several issues should be given priority in order to support faculty members. For example, traditional IHE have offered webinars aimed at promoting faculty’s online teaching, but those were not inclusive of all aspects of online teaching. This is in agreement with Leitner et al. (2019), who state that much of the institutions’ focus was “on technical aspects rather than issues related to educational aspects.” Moreover, since ODL was quickly implemented without much prior planning, it may be followed by a complete abandonment of this type of education immediately after the end of the pandemic.

Martin et al. (2019) propose four areas of support to achieve highly effective online education: (a) administrative support (i.e., the need for greater time to get ready for online courses, having reduced class size, additional financial support for teaching online, reduction of teaching load, fewer
administrative barriers); (b) personnel support (e.g., provide instructional designers, technicians, multimedia designers; collaborate with experienced staff, specifically for media production); (c) pedagogical support (i.e., guidance on novel teaching strategies for online courses, implementing project-based and problem-based learning and active learning techniques, understanding the difference between online and offline courses, a robust training plan to teach online); and (d) technological support (e.g., the need for hardware and software tools, the need for just-in-time technical support, training on creating animation, videos, mini lectures, and narrative PowerPoints).

Gradually reopen university buildings and classrooms

To date, in the current condition, traditional IHE are not ready to reopen in the first semester/fall 2020/2021 as COVID-19 continues to be a threat. The literature suggests four scenarios for the reopening of colleges and schools. The first is to continue college and school shutdown until a vaccine is developed (Honavar, 2020). The second is a full reopening of educational institutions wherever it is possible to apply principles of social distancing (Di Domenico et al., 2020). The third is a partial reopening, so that “50% of students return to school, envisioning for example a rotation of students every half of the week or every week, or considering 50% attending in the morning and 50% in the afternoon” (Di Domenico et al., 2020, p. 5). The fourth is the hybrid reopening, combining in-classroom instruction with online remote learning (Gagnon et al., 2020).

Integrate blended learning in the university curriculum

The gradual reopening of IHE entails a thoughtful integration of both ODL and face-to-face learning to overcome the challenges to education dictated by the pandemic. This integration leads to a pedagogical delivery mode commonly called blended learning. Prior to the pandemic, blended learning was already in use at PSAU, but it was practiced only by some faculty members who were interested in integrating technology in their teaching. Amid the exigent COVID-19 frenzy, IHE can benefit from blended learning for the purpose of lessening classroom meetings. Also, it allows constant access to learning materials, combined with the possibility of face-to-face interactions (Kozubai and Shemet, 2020), and it is essential in “maximizing interpersonal contact as permitted by social distancing regulations” (Skulmowski and Rey, 2020, p. 3).

Blended learning was implemented in PSAU in a narrow framework for the second/fall semester 2020/2021. This was carried out through the return of students to campus for practical courses and exams. The University also stressed that faculty members should not compel any student with symptoms of coronavirus infection to attend in-person classes and instead provide online alternatives for them to thwart the spread of the virus.

Address the issue of dropouts in IHE

As a result of the swift transition to ODL, some students are now at risk of withdrawing from their program of study. That may be due to their inability to access educational content or because of digital illiteracy (Bariham et al., 2020), or because some students wanted to work and support their families during this crisis (Islam et al., 2020). The dropout of some students after the transfer to online education was evident in many courses at PSAU. In almost every course, one to three students were unable to continue studying, let alone the students who were attending only occasionally. The two main reasons mentioned by the students were having a large family that owned only one laptop, which they used in turns, and weak or unavailable internet connection. The
researchers believe that IHE need to work proactively to prevent dropouts by communicating with students at risk of withdrawing from study. If necessary, their colleges may provide them with grants or loans, learning materials, and laptops. The authors urge faculty members to prioritize maintaining positive connections with students, particularly those at risk of failure and to strive to enhance the students’ academic achievements and motivation. The authors also assume that cooperation with families would play a role in providing guidance on how best to support the at-risk students at home. It is not surprising in the digital age that digital illiteracy is a reason for students to drop out of study in third-world countries and even in some more affluent countries in disadvantaged rural areas where Internet access is still a luxury. In such places, IHE should establish effective mechanisms to overcome digital illiteracy and give opportunities for disadvantaged students.

Navigate toward developing global distance learning programs

The establishment of a global educational program has been a topic of discussion for many years (Gunawardena, 2014), but the researchers think the pandemic and its long-term consequences may pave the way for the idea to become a reality. In the wake of the pandemic, many traditional IHE struggled to quickly make decisions about how to deal with the problem (Sutton, 2020). Academics began to wonder if it is possible to develop global distance “learning programs fueled by the internationalization strategies of universities” (Beaman and Davidson, 2020, p. 2). In the current study, the researchers believe that there are several reasons and justifications for developing global distance learning programs. These include increasing opportunities for cooperation and distance learning projects between institutions, enriching the educational programs with variegated expertise from different international contexts, and providing students with common international requirements of skills, knowledge, and global shared customs. Global distance learning programs can be developed by forming a global body that represents IHE around the world. This body will invite IHE to send detailed information about their e-learning status. The body studies the status of the IHE and determines the extent to which it can join global distance learning programs. In the event that not all conditions are met, the body grants the institution a period of time to correct its conditions according to set standards. It is important to note that quality accreditation bodies in each country may play an important role in the facilitation and acceleration of their institutions recognizing the merits of the global distance learning programs.

Online versus face-to-face learning outcomes

As ODL has become widespread during the COVID-19 lockdown, many educators are asking: how do we compare learning outcomes in online environments with outcomes in traditional face-to-face environments? Fortunately, much research has concluded that the difference between learning outcomes in the two modalities is actually not significant (Cavus and Ibrahim, 2007; Damoense, 2003). Yet the systematic review of previous studies indicates that effective online learning requires control of some influencing factors for it to be consistent with the traditional education. These factors include the opportunity to share ideas with peers (Damoense, 2003), student satisfaction with online courses, students’ computer literacy, self-regulatory learning behavior that contribute to learner autonomy (Eom, 2011), reinforcing the course material with effective instructor feedback to engage students, the need for students’ self-motivation, catering for learning style differences when developing online instruction, enhancing interaction, offering different instructor facilitation strategies (Eom et al., 2006), ensuring system quality, information quality (Saba, 2012), and organizational readiness for ODL (Keramati et al., 2011).
Limitations and future research

This qualitative research has limitations that may affect its generalization. This research focuses on traditional IHE in Saudi Arabia. Similar work could be extended to IHE in other countries to obtain greater insights into their future priorities regarding ODL, and the findings can be compared. In addition, further studies are needed to better identify the appropriate future practices from the perspective of stakeholders (e.g., faculty members, students, administrators, and community partners). Moreover, the epidemiological situation in each country determines the type of future response, so what is believed to be appropriate for a particular context or time may yield different results in other countries or over time in the same context. Consequently, the analysis provided in this research should be regarded as a snapshot of the priorities that traditional IHE can take to respond to the crisis of COVID-19 according to current challenges and needs.

Conclusions

This study analyzed two types of sources. It reviewed the literature relating to how COVID-19 informed ODL across the globe, and it also reviewed circulars concerned with the pandemic that were issued by the Saudi MOE and by PSAU. Based on a thorough analysis of those two types of sources, as well as on the researchers’ own experience of online teaching, a number of suggestions and recommendations were put forward for priorities for reorienting traditional IHE toward online teaching and learning. This study attempted to suggest priorities for successful ODL including providing educational content to all students, developing more partnerships with community, developing self-study skills, shifting students from passive learning to active learning, reconsidering e-assessment mechanisms, and providing support for faculty members.

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