Remote Teaching for Higher Education: Opportunities and Challenges

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Abstract:

COVID-19 lockdown has necessitated the shift to E-learning and remote teaching in order to continue education programmers. Unlike the contexts where this shift was possible, in Libya, all schools and universities have been closed and their all education programmers have been completely interrupted. This happened because both e-learning and remote teaching were not officially recognized in the Libyan education system before the corona virus pandemic. This inspired the researcher to investigate the views of 82 Libyan higher education instructors about the opportunities and challenges of implementing remote teaching. This involves identifying their attitudes towards remote teaching, their online technical skills and abilities and their perspectives about the barriers they may face in this process. The data which was collected through a close-ended questionnaire revealed the participant instructors' positive attitudes towards remote teaching with good online and technical skills. Some contextual, technical and administrative barriers were reported. The ministry of education is recommended to start planning for official recognition and introduction of remote teaching in Libyan higher education institutions.

Key Words: COVID-19- Remote teaching-online teaching skills

Introduction:

The crisis of COVID-19 has revealed the weaknesses and defects of poor and undeveloped education systems in many courtiers. Certainly, COVID-19 closed down all doors of schools and universities all over the world, but the impact of this closure varied across countries. In countries with developed educational systems (e.g. UK, USA, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Italy, Germany) the process of teaching and learning was shortly interrupted before shifting to E-learning and remote teaching. This shift was possible because teachers, students, schools and universities in these contexts were ready for it. However, in countries with poor and undeveloped education systems, like Libya, closing the doors of schools and universities has led to complete interruption of the teaching and learning process for all levels of education from kindergarten to postgraduate. In a paper presented by Mehrotra et al. in (2001), distance education was described not as a future possibility for higher education institution but as a reality. Later, in 2011, Hanover research indicted the significant increase in the number of higher education institutions in the world which offer distance education programs. In 2013, I still remember that the statement 'Integrating technology in education has now become a must not an option'- was displayed on the first slide in the opening session of the ICERI-6th International Conference of Education, Research and Innovation-in Seville in Spain. More recent and rapid advances in technology and improvement in internet services has made E-learning and remote teaching more acceptable and accessible. It is believed that adoption and implementation of E-learning is necessary for developing education (Mustafa & Husin, 2017). Nevertheless, some contexts are still not ready for E-learning and remote teaching for a variety of reasons. Bary (2020) recommended these contexts to benefit from the opportunity brought by Covid-19 for introducing online learning into their higher education institutions.

E-Learning in Libya:

The literature provides a good number of works that addressed E-learning in Libya. However, it was difficult to find out how E-learning has been conceptualized in these works as the writers used different terms and definitions. This could be attributed to the lack of consensus about defining E-learning among writers and educationists worldwide. While reviewing the works about online learning and remote teaching, I have added to the list of terms outlined by (Yieke, 2005 & Abrahim, 2020) 'E-learning', 'web-facilitated learning', 'virtual learning', web-based learning', 'cyber learning', 'computer-based learning', distance learning', 'online learning', 'mobile learning', 'resource-based learning'; 'self-directed learning', and 'technology-based learning'. The number of terms is associated with different definitions and has resulted in some confusion around the concept and process. Recently, online learning is often linked with educational open resources like MOOCS. In this paper, E-learning refers to "the utilization of electric media and information and communication technologies (ICT) in learning" (Benghet & Helfert, 2014: 405). However, this has not to be confused with 'remote teaching'- the focus of this study.

In the report about Libya included in the survey of ICT and Education in Africa, Hamdy (2007) reported that the Libyan policy for integrating ICT in education was launched in 2005 by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Vocational Training in cooperation with the General Postal and Telecommunication and Libya Telecom and Technology companies. The 2005 policy aimed to enable the access to ICT through providing educational institutions with computers and internet and to overcome the existing challenges such as poor infrastructure and lack of skilled and trained teachers. Hamdy (2007) was optimistic about the implementation of the policy and referred to some signs of follow-up actions after 2 years of the launching year. However, local research review conducted by Kenan et al (2014) and Mustafa and Husin (2017) indicated that neither the government nor the universities have recognized e-learning as an accepted model of education and therefore degrees obtained through distance or E-learning are not endorsed in Libya. Sadly, it is now 2020 and integrating E-learning has not become a reality yet.

Much research in the Libyan context has addressed issues related to Integrating ICT and E-learning in Libyan higher education (Hamdy, 2007; Rhema & Miliszewska, 2010; Kenan & islaru,2012; Kenan et al., 2012; Kenan er al.,2014, Elgatait, 2015; Almansuri & Elmansuri, 2015; Mustafa & Hussin, 2017; Saleh, 2018). The results of these studies generally indicated the positive attitudes of Libyan school and university teachers for integrating ICT in education and for implementing E-learning (Almansuri & Elmansuri, 2015; Mustafa & Hussin, 2017). However, these studies reported the existence of many barriers (technological, technical, social, administrative and economical) for adopting E-learning. In this regard, Sebha University has recently conducted the 1st Virtual International E-learning conference (link to the conference website https://sebhau.edu.ly/el2020/) with the title 'E-learning during the Corona Virus: Challenges and Solutions on 23/o4/2020. Among the 69 papers which were virtually presented during the conference, 45 research papers addressed the issue of E-learning in Libyan higher education institutions. Generally, the results of these papers indicate the motivation and interest of staff members and students in adopting and using E-learning but they emphasized the role of the ministry of education in issuing the regulations, providing fund and developing programmes for introducing E-learning into the Libyan education system.

Regarding the debatable issue for assessing students' learning through applying online exams, Amer et al. (2020) have recently published a report about an online trial (mock) exam they have applied in the College of Education at Tripoli University. Before conducting the online exam, they investigated the views of 10 teaching staff members and 157 of students about their interest in the exam. only 13 students were not interested. The results indicate that 52.2% of the teachers and 53% of the students rejected the idea of conducting online

exams whereas 45.8% of the teachers and 47% of the students accepted it. Only 29 students from different departments participated in the online exam and (68.97%) of them were positive about the experience and emphasized the possibility of conducting formal online exams for their courses whereas 31.03% rejected this idea. Among the proposed online platforms, Microsoft Skype and Zoom were found easier and practical by the staff and the students. The experiment team concluded by highlighting the need for postponing the project of conducting online exams as it requires good planning and sufficient preparations. They also highlighted the major barriers faced this project and offered some recommendations for overcoming them.

Although remote teaching was indirectly implied in some of these works, it has not been thoroughly investigated and discussed. Nevertheless, lack of qualified and well trained teachers was pointed out by Hamdy (2007) as a barrier for integrating ICT in Libyan higher education. This paper therefore focuses on examining the extent of Libyan university instructors' attitudes and readiness for adopting and implementing remote teaching. It has been set to answer this question:

- Are Libyan university instructors technically and pedagogically ready for adopting and implementing remote teaching?

Remote Teaching:

Stanley (2019:8) believes that remote teaching "occurs when teachers are brought into the classroom virtually, using videoconferencing technology….". In other words, remote teaching means teaching from distance when instructors and students meet online, not in classrooms. The need for remote teaching has recently increased as a response to the interest and high enrolment numbers for online language learning courses. Compton (2009) claims that due to the improvement in internet services and the proliferation of computers at home and in educational institutions, online language learning has steadily increased in popularity during the last decade. It is obvious when you review the literature about distance education, you find much is written about distance learning, E. learning and online learning but only little about remote teaching. In some papers, the concepts of distance or online learning and remote (online) teaching are used interchangeably ignoring the fundamental distinction between them in terms of the role of instructor and learner. In remote teaching, the instructor maintains his main role in making decisions about course content, mode and pace of delivery, and assessment whereas in distance learning learners are often more autonomous in making such decisions with a diminishing role for instructors.

Remote Teaching Skills:

Remote teaching is more demanding than classroom teaching and it requires more and different skills and competencies. Online teaching varies from classroom teaching in all aspects including materials preparation, methods of instruction and delivery, assessment and teacher and learner roles. Online teachers therefore need to develop technological, pedagogical and evaluation skills in order to be able to perform their new tasks and responsibilities (Compton, 2009; Whyte & Gijsen, 2016). The literature provides different frameworks for developing online teaching skills and competencies (Chapelle & Hegelheimer,2004; Hampel & Stickler, 2005). Albrahim, for example, (2020:17) classified the online teaching skills and competencies into "(a) pedagogical skills, (b) content skills, (c) design skills, (d) technological skills, (e) management and institutional skills, and (f) social and communication skills". Losadaa, etal. (2010) described the necessary ICT competencies for E-learning. Teachers have to develop a good understanding of the functions of both personal computers and IT networks, using web search engines, using collaborative tools (chat, forums, blogs, platforms), and building multimedia (interactive & non-interactive) web tools. It is possible to use these sets of skills and competencies for

measuring teachers' abilities for implementing remote teaching and for identifying their training needs.

A qualified online teacher should be aware about the differences between face-to-face classroom and remote teaching. They should employ this awareness in facilitating interaction and communication, collaboration, and engagement. They should be highly motivated, supportive, flexible, approachable, resourceful, responsive, open, honest and compassionate (Keengwe et al., 2014). Development of these traits and skills can be challenging for some teachers who may feel uncomfortable with remote teaching. Abdous (2011) developed a 'Process-Oriented Framework for acquiring online teaching competencies' involves planning, preparing and designing, facilitating, interacting, providing and seeking feedback and reflecting and drawing lessons learned. This framework can be a good foundation for training teachers to teach remotely. It is important during training to develop teachers' positive attitudes and beliefs towards integrating technology and adopting E-learning as negative attitudes or beliefs can lead to the failure of the whole process as happened in other educational contexts (Niederhauser & Stoddart, 2001, p. 25). It is necessary to enhance instructors' awareness about the advantages of remote teaching. Remote teaching offers more flexibility in time and location, more relevance to context, more information sharing, access to online resources, rich and diverse experiences, equal opportunities, development of digital literacy skills and more flexible administrative aspects. However, it comes with its own drawbacks such as lack of immediate feedback, cost, more time, effort and skills, limited opportunities for developing students' communication skills and social isolation (McIntyre et al. ,2017).

Remote Teaching Challenges in Libya:

Remote teaching is very demanding and teachers often face challenges in implementing it. A research review indicated that adopting E-learning and remote teaching in Libya is faced with many challenges such as poor technological infrastructure, inadequate network facilities, limited educational software and lack of technical support, limited institutional interest and support; Kenan, et al., 2012; lack of qualified and well trained teachers (Hamdy, 2007; Rhema & Miliszewska ,2010; Kenan & Pislaru, 2014; Mustafa & Husin, 2017). Kenan et al (2012) divided these challenges into 'technological resistance', 'cultural resistance' and 'other issues'. The technological resistance involves: 1)- Poor network and infrastructure. 2)- Poor developments of E-learning in HE institutions. 3)-Challenges in taking the taking the implementation first steps. 4)-Difficulties in using technology. 5)-Not providing internet access for students and staff. 6)- Poor service of ICT units in HE institutions. The cultural resistance includes: 1)-underestimating the value and benefits of E-learning; 2)-rejection of adopting the necessary educational changes for successful E-learning implementation. Other issues will be referred to here as administrative issues: 1)-lack of general policy and plan for introducing E-learning into educational institutions. 2)-lack of defined regulations and standards. 3)-official disapprovals for E-learning courses and degrees.4)-no accreditation collaboration. 5)-poor and very limited cross-institutional collaboration. Later, the barriers identified in the study of Benghet and Helfert (2014) were classified into organizational, technical and social barriers. Assessment of online learning represents a serious challenging for teachers (Barbosa & Garcia, 2005; Kearns,2012). The complexity of online learning assessment lies in the need for developing reliable criteria for assessing online tasks such as 'written assignments', 'online discussion', 'fieldwork', 'tests/quizzes/exams' and 'presentations' (Kearns,2012). The assessment rubric offered by Conrad and Openo (2018) seems to be a good model to follow for assessing students' online learning. Shank (2014) pointed out four common mistakes in online learning assessment including: 'expecting a bell curve', 'the wrong type of assessment', 'not valid(enough) assessment' and 'poorly written multiple-choice test'.

Reflecting on the current situation in Libya, some of the above mentioned barriers are no longer existing. For example, internet service and access are now available with good connection across the country; though neither free nor cheap. Moreover, students and staff attitudes towards using internet and social media are now generally positive with decent skills. Most importantly, in April 2020, the Ministry of Education has declared the interest and determination for introducing E-learning and adopting remote teaching into higher educational institutions. By the time of writing this paper, some steps have been taken into this direction; even though they are not carefully planned or introduced. This seems to be promising and encouraging for a possible prosperous future for E-learning and remote teaching in Libyan higher institutions

Participants and Instrument:

82 staff members from different Libyan higher education institutions (university + High Institutions+ technical colleges) with MA or PhD qualifications participated in this study. A semi-structured questionnaire was designed through Google Drive and was uploaded on a Facebook group established for Libyan higher educational institutions staff members https://www.facebook.com/groups/178131036239060/. The statements of the questionnaire covered three main issues related to teachers' adoption and implementation of remote teaching including the establishment of online communication platforms, uploading course materials online and assessing students online. The analysis of the responses was based on frequency criterion which was considered as an indication of participants' positive attitudes or the extent of their readiness for implementing remote teaching.

Results:

This study was conducted to find out whether Libyan higher education institutions' instructors are ready for adopting and implementing remote teaching or not. The 82 participants were asked about their ability for performing the necessary online tasks and activities of remote teaching. For good internet access, 76. % of the participants were having reliable internet access but 23.8% of them were not. The technological skills of 55. % were good and the skills of 37. % were excellent. 82.% accepted the notion of online communicating with students whereas 17. % of them were not comfortable with it. 78% were able to design and establish online platforms but 21% were not. 78% of the participants were able to schedule their online lectures and sessions but 21% were not. Similarly, 76% were able to create opportunities for students' online communication and collaboration whereas 23% could not perform this task. 86% of the participants were ready for assigning online office hours for meeting students but 13% of them were not ready for this job. By the time of distributing this questionnaire, 68 % of the participants did not have online websites and only 31% of them already had their own websites. The distribution percentages of the participants use of the available online applications for online learning were as follows: Google Classroom application (50. %), Canavas (7%), Easy Class (6%), and Zoom (6 %). 82% were interested in making their course materials available for students but 17% did not like this idea. 87% were able for recording their lectures and sharing them online with students but 12% were not. 65% were able to deliver live lectures through Zoom but 37 % were not. 88% were able for sharing PowerPoint presentations online but 11% were not. 60% were able for creating online quizzes but 40% were not. 71% were able for collecting students' online assignments but 28% were not. 69% were able to facilitate students' online presentations but 30% were not. 59% were able to grade students' online exams but 41% were not. 66% recommended remote teaching for Libyan higher education institutions but 33% did not.

The difficulties reported by the participants are: poor internet infrastructure and service, student's response, unstable electricity supply, lack of experience, students' undeveloped online skills, cost, motivation, lack of training, no immediate feedback, validity

and reliability of online tests. The participants suggested different strategies for developing implementation of remote teaching in Libyan higher education institutions including Improving infrastructure, training for staff and students, free provision for internet access, launching online platforms for universities.

Discussion:

The advances in technology during the digital era makes online communication more accessible and more popular which has revolutionized all aspects of life including education. Now many education institutions from kindergarten to higher education offer online courses worldwide. Many terms are used to refer to online education such as distance learning, virtual learning, e. learning, self-directed learning, digital learning, computer-assisted language learning (CALL) and remote teaching. Recently, the closure of schools and universities all over the world due to Covid-19 pandemic has promoted the attention to the importance of developing online education as the contexts with undeveloped online education systems (e.g. Libya) have been seriously affected by Covid19 more than those with developed online education systems. The shift to online education in the later contexts has allowed for continuing the process of teaching and learning whereas it has been completely stopped in the former contexts.

This study focuses on remote teaching and investigates the extent of Libyan higher education institutions instructors' readiness for adopting and implementing it and the challenges they might face in this process. Remote teaching is different from and more demanding than in-classroom teaching in terms of methods of delivery, role of teacher and learner, assessment strategies, necessary technological facilities and hard and soft teaching skills.

The participants' general responses indicate their interest and readiness for teaching remotely. The majority of them (76.8%) have got reliable internet accessibility which is a fundamental requirement for implementing remote teaching. It is notable that internet services in Libya have witnessed considerable improvement during the last two decades (Hamdy, 2007; Almansuri & Almansuri, 2015; Saleh, 2018). However, the higher educational institutions in Libya are not provided with internet service and both teachers and students have to pay for this service. Therefore, this issue was raised by some of the participants as one of the challenges of implementing remote teaching. During the quarantine period of Covid-19 and as an urgent response action, the Libyan Ministry of Education has declared the decision of providing free internet access to higher education instructors and students to promote the initiative of online education. Unfortunately, this initiative was not successful due to lack of good planning and sufficient preparation and effective training. The need for training students and staff members on e-learning and remote teaching was emphasized by the participants of this study and by the participants of Mustafa and Hussin (2017) and by other researchers (Hamdy, 2007; Rhema & Miliszewska ,2010; Kenan et al (2012; Kenan & Pislaru, 2014). These issues were also identified in the SWOT model analysis conducted by Kenan et al. (2014) for evaluating e-learning initiatives in Libya.

The participants emphasized their positive attitudes towards implementing remote teaching which contradicts with the findings of kenan and Pislaru (2012) who reported teachers' resistance to change as a main barrier for e-learning in Libya. These attitudes can predict these instructors' interest and enthusiasm for attending online training courses in order to develop their remote teaching skills. There are many online training frameworks available in the literature (Chapelle & Hegelheimer,2004; Hampel & Stickler, 2005; Losadaa, etal. ,2010; Abdous ,2011; Albrahim, 2020). Among these frameworks, the one developed by Abdous (2011) seems to be more comprehensive and practical. There were around 25% of the participants who were not positive towards remote teaching. Examining the 'no' responses for all the statements indicates that these percentages kept close to 25%

which can show the relationship between abilities and attitudes. This group of participants was not able to develop their online teaching skills or to try remote teaching in their institutions and therefore their attitudes were negative. It is expected that instructors with such negative attitudes may resist the shift to remote teaching as reported by the participants of kenan and Pislaru (2012).

Online learning assessment represents a critical issue of e-learning and remote teaching and therefore online courses certified degrees are sometimes not accredited (Barbosa & Garcia, 2005; Kearns,2012). Kearns (2012) explained that online learning assessment involves five categories of assessment: written assignments, online discussion, field work, test/quizzes/exams and presentations. Assessing students' online learning was a concern for 40% of the participants. The same concern was reported by the staff members who participated in the trial (mock) online exam conducted for a sample of students iin the College of Education of Tripoli University (Amer et al., 2020). It seems to be not possible to formally apply online assessment in Libyan higher institutions before setting relevant policies and regulations by the ministry of education. This should involve determining the quality assurance criteria for the official recognition of the qualifications and certificates offered through online learning.

Despite the fact that all the participant instructors were aware of the barriers which could limit the implementation of remote teaching in Libyan higher education institutions, 66.7% of them recommended adopting online learning in their institutions. This could be attributed to their positive beliefs and attitudes towards online learning and their successful personal experiences with remote teaching. They believe that the barriers can be overcome through reviewing the first trial of implementation as such a review can reveal what needs to be improved. The other 33.3% were less optimistic about the idea and therefore they did not recommend online learning. This rejection should be accounted for as other instructors may share the same belief However, the review of research about implementing remote teaching conducted in this study revealed its implementation in many EFL contexts, despite the existence of similar barriers (Barbosa & Garcia, 2005; Kearns,2012). It is also important to enhance these instructors' awareness about the advantages of remote teaching. Remote teaching offers the opportunity of benefiting from workshops, webinars and training programs offered through online platforms. It also promotes the possibility of establishing joint teaching and learning programs with international higher institutions which have already started their certified online teaching programs. This suggests that the reported barriers in this study should not hinder or delay the process of introducing and adopting remote teaching in Libyan higher education institutions. Of course, much work and effort are seriously needed from the ministry of education in order to prepare higher institutions and their staff members and students for implementing remote teaching.

Conclusion:

Remote teaching has become a feature of higher education in most international institutions during 21st century. Covid-19 lockdown closure of all educational institutions has led to the shift towards E-learning and remote teaching. This shift did not take place in contexts where remote teaching was not implemented before the pandemic including Libya which has resulted in a complete interruption of all education programs. This draws the attention towards this issue and necessitates the investigation of the opportunities and challenges of implementing remote teaching in these contexts. In Libya, this study has revealed the positive attitudes of the participant instructors towards adopting remote teaching and their having of the necessary online skills and abilities for this process. It is obvious that there are some contextual, technical and administrative barriers which can limit the effective implementation of remote teaching in Libyan higher education institutions. Nevertheless, it seems to be the right time for taking the first steps for this adventure without any delay in

order not to leave Libyan higher education system and institutions very far behind. Further research is suggested for investigating Libyan undergraduate and postgraduate students' abilities, beliefs and attitudes towards E-learning and remote teaching.

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