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Arab Universities: Problems, COVID-19 and Efforts

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ABSTRACT

It is necessary to know the state of the Arab universities. In this paper the general objective was to determine the situation of Arab universities: Problems, COVID-19 & efforts. Methodology, in this research, 36 documents have been selected, carried out in the period 2016 - 2021; including: scientific articles, review articles and information from websites of recognized organizations. The keywords used in the searches were: Arab universities and COVID-19. Results. Arab universities have faced many problems during the pandemic, but they have struggled to overcome them and offer a virtual education to their students. Conclusions. Covid-19 forced the closure of Arab universities, affecting the education of students, who have problems accessing to the internet. Arab universities that used traditional education are gradually migrating to virtual education. King Abdulaziz University of Saudi Arabia ranks first in the Arab Universities Ranking 2021.

KEYWORDS: Arab universities, COVID-19, higher education, distance education.

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Universidades árabes: problemas, COVID-19 y esfuerzos

RESUMEN

Es necesario conocer el estado de las universidades árabes. En este documento, el objetivo general fue determinar la situación de las universidades árabes: problemas, COVID-19 y esfuerzos. Metodología, en esta investigación se han seleccionado 36 documentos, realizados en el periodo 2016 - 2021; incluyendo: artículos científicos, artículos de revisión e información de sitios web de organizaciones reconocidas. Las palabras clave utilizadas en las búsquedas fueron: universidades árabes y COVID-19. Resultados. Las universidades árabes se han enfrentado a muchos problemas durante la pandemia, pero han luchado para superarlo y ofrecer una educación virtual a sus estudiantes. Conclusiones. La Covid-19 obligó al cierre de las universidades árabes, afectando la educación de los estudiantes, quienes tienen problemas para acceder a internet. Las universidades árabes que utilizaban la educación tradicional están migrando gradualmente a la educación virtual. La Universidad Rey Abdulaziz de Arabia Saudita ocupa el primer lugar en el Ranking de Universidades Árabes 2021.

PALABRAS CLAVE: universidades árabes, COVID-19, educación superior, educación a distancia.

Introduction

In 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic spread across the globe, a majority of countries announced the temporary closure of schools, impacting more than 91 per cent of students worldwide...The global pandemic has far-reaching consequences that may endanger the reached achievements made in improving global education (UN, 2020).

Arabic is the principal language of Islamic civilization and the key to understand the modern Middle East. Various forms are spoken from North Africa to the borders of Iran, and as a literary language it is used throughout this area and far beyond. Due to its sacred status it has exerted an immense influence throughout the Islamic world. Arabic has a vast 'classical' literarture and a varied and vital modern literature (University of Oxford, 2021).

The Arabic language is one of the United Nations' six official languages, and the U.S. Government considers it one of the most critical languages for Americans to learn (DePaul University, 2021).

Learning Arabic, you gain access to a rich cultural tradition, as well as knowledge and insight into the contemporary Middle East and North Africa (Stockholm University (2021).

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In the Arab world, publically-owned IHLs are the norm although privately-owned IHLs are increasing rapidly. Private IHLs tend to enjoy greater degrees of administrative autonomy than public. They are accountable to the institution's specific boards of directors (Waterbury, 2018).

The Association of Arab Universities is a non-governmental organization that has an independent legal character. Its membership includes 280 Arab Universities at the present time. AARU's was established in 1964 upon a resolution issued by the Arab League. A temporary General Secretariat was formed in Cairo, Egypt. In 1969, permanent General Secretariat was designated. Its permanent headquarter has been in Amman since 1984, the capital of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan (The Association of Arab Universities (2021).

To help Arab students make better, more informed decisions when choosing a university or academic program, Al-Fanar Media has updated and relaunched its "Internationally Accredited Universities and Programs" resource: The first searchable database of all the Arab university programs and higher education institutions that are accredited by independent, international accreditation agencies (Zawk, 2021).

In this paper the general objective was to determine the situation of Arab universities: Problems, COVID-19 and efforts.

1. Methodology

The research presents a qualitative-interpretative design, of the documentary type, which specified the selection procedure and the data recording (Barrero y Rosero, 2018).

In this research, 36 documents have been selected, carried out in the period 2016 - 2021; including: scientific articles, review articles and information from websites of recognized organizations. The keywords used in the searches were: Arab universities and COVID-19. For the selection of the documents, the following criteria were used: the year of publication, belong to the research and be a reliable source of information. After reading each document, the data was entered into the bibliographic matrix, which is used to catalog the documents according to categories, which are presented in the chart 1.

Chart 1. Bibliographic matrix

Name	Type	Objectives	Conclusions

Source: Adapted from Barrero & Rosero (2018)

2. Results

2.1. Problems

However, digital access is not always available and the gap is too wide. In MENA, 10 countries have internet insertion of less than 70 per cent. In Sudan and Yemen, access levels are even lower, with internet insertion of only 30 per cent (Chaiban, 2021).

One-by-one interviews with the participants revealed multiple factors obstructed Arab international students' academic success and limited their socialization within the context of their postsecondary institution, their host community, and their host nation. Several prevailing themes were discovered among the participants, including culture shock, language barrier, cultural differences, and isolation (Abu, 2017).

The results of empirical research suggest that young people in the UAE rank entrepreneurship as their first employment choice. Neverthless, most of them have not attended any formal entrepreneurship-related course in school or in college (Jabeen, Faisal & Katsioloudes, 2017).

As a result, the universities are full of students from the richest strata of society. In other words, free higher education confers a huge rent to those who have access to it. And the rich are better placed to take advantage those rents than the poor (Devarajan, 2016).

Our findings suggest that universities should focus on the two most critical issues over which they have some control: ensuring safety for the faculty and creating an effective research infrastructure (Almansour & Kempner, 2017).

It seems that a reasonable balance between culture and online learning is a major concern while implementing blended learning. Decision-makers should initially consider the compatibility between the conservative Saudi culture and providing appropriate online materials (Sheerah & Goodwyn, 2016).

2.2. COVID-19

Coronaviruses are a type of virus. There are many different kinds, and some cause diseases. A coronavirus identified in 2019, SARS-CoV-2, called COVID-19 has caused a pandemic of respiratory illness. COVID-19 is the disease caused by SARS-CoV-2, the coronavirus that emerged in December 2019 (Johns Hopkins Medicine, 2021).

The Arab region, where 13 million children and young people are already out-of-school

due to conflict, has been additionally challenged with more than 100 million affected learners across the region, according to the Global monitoring of school closures caused by COVID-19 (UNESCO, 2020).

The riots in Lebanon, the uprising in Iraq, the restrictions imposed on Syria, and the economic difficulties in Palestine are all examples of determinants affecting pandemic management. Jordan, on the contrary, is a good example of a stable state, able to implement appropriate measures (Bizri, Alam, Mobayed, Tamim, Makki & Mushrrafieh, 2021).

As the novel coronavirus sweeps through the Arab region, Al-Fanar Media is monitoring how it is affecting those facets of the Arab world that we focus on: higher education, research, and arts and culture. The Covid-19 pandemic has blocked students' education, shuttered the art world, and revealed how badly the Arab region needs its own public health and research infrastructure (Al-Fanar Media, 2021).

Chart 2. Total Cases per Million Population as of January 25, 2021.

Country	Cases/Million	Cumulative Cases	Cases Last Week	% change in new cases relative to last week
Bahrain	57,549	99,817	1,877	-21%
Qatar	53,073	149,019	1,515	-8%
Lebanon	41,069	279,597	23,641	-36%
Kuwait	37,454	161,285	3,041	-23%
Jordan	31,232	320,453	4,909	-41%
West Bank and Gaza	30,073	155,414	2,859	-45%
United Arab Emirates	27,913	277,955	21,223	-19%
Oman	25,688	133,044	1,033	-26%
Tunisia	16,602	197,373	15,488	-31%
Libya	16,419	113,688	3,819	-25%
Iran, Islamic Rep.	16,229	1,372,977	36,760	-26%
Iraq	15,070	613,763	4,734	-22%
Morocco	12,549	466,289	6,145	-19%
Saudi Arabia	10,432	366,371	1,272	-1%
Djibouti	5,942	5,919	13	-63%
Algeria	2,384	105,596	1,504	-23%
Egypt, Arab Rep.	1,565	161,817	4,542	-39%
Syrian Arab Republic	768	13,628	496	-35%
Yemen, Rep.	70	2,118	5	-44%
MENA Region		4,996,123	134,876	-28%

Source: World Bank (2021)

This study reports the psychological impact of COVID-19 among adults and children in the UAE and highlights the significant association between parental and child anxiety. Findings suggest the urgency for policy makers to develop effective screening and coping strategies for parents and especially children (Saddik, Hussein, Albanna et al., 2021).

Saudi Arabia was considered as a case study for the effectiveness of distance learning during the 2020 spring semester, where 300 undergraduate students were surveyed on their opinions of distance learning. The responses to the survey indicated that distance learning was effective in providing the required knowledge to the students during the outbreak of COVID-19 (Alsmadi et.al, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on pharmaceutical education in Saudi Arabia. While all teaching processes were forced to be distant, the ministry of education has led educational institutions across the country to a successful completion of the semester (Alqurshi, 2020).

Moreover, during changing the mode of education into distance learning due to (COVID-19) pandemic, it did not help the emergence of Arabic chatbots in Saudi universities (Almurayh, 2021).

2.3. Efforts

University students represent a powerful human asset for development in the Arab region (Sweileh, 2021).

This study is one of the few studies that compare the synchronous and asynchronous aspects of BB in the Arabian contexts. It is expected that this study will help university authorities to set out more practical educational plans in the case of emergencies. Also, this study will inform the practices of university instructors and designers of professional development courses in the near future.

The results reveal that business students perceive the four entrepreneurial skills as key elements for starting their own business (Badawi, Reyad, Khamis, Hamdan & Alsartawi, 2019).

Chart 3. Top universities in the Arab World 2021

Arab University Rank 2021	University	Country
1	King Abdulaziz University	Saudi Arabia
2	Qatar University	Qatar
3	King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST)	Saudi Arabia
4	Prince Mohammad Bin Fahd University	Saudi Arabia
5	King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals	Saudi Arabia
6	Khalifa University	United Arab Emirates
7	United Arab Emirates University	United Arab Emirates
8	King Saud University	Saudi Arabia
9	American University of Beirut	Lebanon
10	Zewail City of Science and Technology	Egypt

Source: Times Higher Education (2021)

As the UAE is a dynamic, young country that is rapidly changing with a diverse residency population, it is necessary to frequently research how Emirate students currently perceive effective classroom practices in order to better support their needs (Singh, Bailey, Eppard & McKeown, 2021).

An online survey was conducted among researchers from three Arab universities in Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. In total, 337 participants filled out the questionnaire. The study shows that 97% of researchers were responsible for their research data, and 64.4% of researchers shared their data (Elsayed & Saleh, 2018).

E-learning is increasingly being embraced by the traditional academic institutions, hybrid educational organizations and newly established online organizations for teaching English and other subjects in universities in the Arab world (Zakarneh, 2018).

Distance education is one of several initiatives of social distancing, which Arabs have embraced despite their well-rooted social closeness, linking themselves to disengage with each other, forming unorthodox 'distanceship' (Abdulrahman Essa Al Lily, Abdelrahim Fathy Ismail, Fathi Mohammed Abunasser, Rafdan Hassan Alhajhoj Alqahtani, 2020).

Finally, this analysis explores the growth potential of e-learning and the efforts made to support Saudi Arabia's growing university student population. The article includes an exploration of the methods of evaluating, securing and modifying the current systems (Aljaber, 2018).

These conclusions involve specific challenges on the university level, related to the role of entrepreneurial education and at country level, in relation to the effectiveness of governmental programs to enhance entrepreneurial endeavours. Further research can explore and test these findings in a representative sample for the UAE, and for other countries (Pauceanu, Alpenidze, Edu & Zaharia, 2018).

Arab universities have faced many problems during the pandemic, but they have struggled to overcome it and offer a virtual education to their students.

3. Discussion

The results of this research coincide with the results of other important authors such as, Rahmawati & Febriani (2021) "the results ascertain that Arabic learning activities showed less effectiveness in COVID-19 situation"; Alshaikh, Maasher, Bayazed, Saleem, Badri, Fakieh (2021) "Saudi Arabia became a forerunner during COVID-19 by taking initial precautions of curfews and total restrictions...The Ministry of Education strived to cope with the consequences of these changes swiftly by shifting to online education" and Alvi, Bilal & Alvi (2021) "the suggested solutions are hoped to help providing successful standards for virtual ESP teaching and learning as per the constraints of quality modern education".

Conclusions

Covid-19 forced the closure of Arab universities, affecting the education of students, who have problems accessing the Internet. Arab universities that used traditional education are gradually migrating to virtual education. King Abdulaziz University of Saudi Arabia ranks first in the Arab Universities Ranking 2021.

Arab universities are making many efforts to overcome the difficulties presented during the pandemic, with virtual learning being an important alternative. In addition, they are improving their position in the international rankings. Young Arab students have their own educational requirements, which must be promptly analyzed and addressed.

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