

# Student Experience and Communication during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Subjects: Social Issues

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The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 prompted higher education institutions in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to switch to online learning for the safety of their citizens.

Keywords: distance learning ; online learning ; university ; higher education ; students ; digital

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## 1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic led to a widespread shift toward online learning globally, including in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). With a population of 10 million in 2022, the UAE is located in Southeast Asia and Eastern Arabia <sup>[1]</sup> and is one of the wealthiest and most prosperous Arab nations, having rapidly developed since the discovery of oil in the 1960s. To compete globally and establish a knowledge-based economy, the UAE places a strong emphasis on providing high-quality education and developing innovative programmes in higher education <sup>[2][3]</sup>.

Before the COVID-19 epidemic, higher education (HE) institutions in the UAE had made substantial investments in e-learning technologies and curricular integration <sup>[4][5]</sup>. E-learning is the dissemination of instructional content using digital means. Colleges and universities faced the challenge of incorporating online learning into their curriculums to equip their students with the skills needed for a tech-driven future. Although a lot of resources have been invested into edtech, advancements in e-learning have been slow and insubstantial <sup>[4]</sup>. However, only a few UAE higher education institutions have adopted entirely online courses or hybrid e-learning models <sup>[4][6][7]</sup>. Despite this, prior research indicates that students prefer face-to-face learning over blended learning methods <sup>[8][9]</sup>. Previous studies on the challenges and opportunities of online learning in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic recommended more research to examine the impact of the pandemic on the higher education system <sup>[8][10]</sup>.

## 2. University Student Experience and Challenges with Distance and Online Learning: Global Perspective

Previous studies have highlighted that the most significant challenges during the transition to remote learning were the availability and quality of the Internet, the availability of appropriate software, the quality of the e-learning system, hardware and other resources, and the digital proficiency of both educators and learners <sup>[11][12][13]</sup>. HEIs with a long history of online teaching and learning tend to receive positive evaluation from university students regarding online courses compared to those with less of a tradition in online learning <sup>[14]</sup>. Similarly, a study during the COVID-19 pandemic showed that e-learning aided in the learning process of students; however, it placed a greater burden on them <sup>[15]</sup>. Therefore, student digital information and ICT skills may play a role in their adaptation to online learning. The results of a study that examined the relationship between student digital competence and academic engagement during the COVID-19 crisis and whether informal digital learning plays a mediating role in this relationship indicated that there was a positive and significant correlation between student digital competence and academic engagement <sup>[16]</sup>. In addition, informal digital learning played a mediating role in the relationship between students' digital competence and academic engagement.

More importantly, university students reported a lack of engagement and communication with instructors and classmates, difficulties in seeking help through online channels, and distractions in their learning environments <sup>[17]</sup>. However, some students reported that online learning benefited from the flexibility to learn at any place and time, saved time, and facilitated easy communication with instructors and students (such as breakout room discussion and private Zoom chat) <sup>[17]</sup>. Furthermore, one of the primary concerns raised by students at different universities in EU countries during online learning was socialisation issues, including a lack of flexibility and inadequate feedback from instructors <sup>[14]</sup>. Therefore, the attractiveness of online courses depended greatly on engaging and stimulating materials, and the interactive content of the courses was an important factor in how students assessed the effectiveness of their instructors. In synchronous

online learning, students felt significantly more connected to each other, experienced a stronger sense of instructor presence, and scored higher on self-evaluation performance <sup>[18]</sup>. Furthermore, the degree of social presence in synchronous online courses was a significant predictor of student self-evaluation, academic performance, and students' sense of belonging to the university. On the contrary, in asynchronous learning mode, social presence had a weaker effect on predicting student learning outcomes.

### **3. University Students' Experience and Challenges with Distance and Online Learning in the UAE**

The literature review showed a good number of studies that examined the transition to online learning during the pandemic in the UAE context. University students experienced higher-than-average information quality and system quality when moving to remote learning <sup>[19]</sup>. Additionally, students who were familiar with using technology for educational purposes viewed e-learning as helpful during the COVID-19 pandemic. They recognised its usefulness in times of crisis and when dealing with personal and external pressures during the pandemic. The research showed that students who were satisfied with the e-learning system had a desire to continue using it post-pandemic, especially those who were working. This indicates a positive attitude towards the e-learning method implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Another study explored the perspectives of students at Al Ain University toward remote teaching and learning <sup>[5]</sup>. The study found that the participants had attitudes toward remote learning tools and technology. The university had already adopted these tools and online exams for some courses prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, allowing a smoother transition to distance learning during the pandemic. Students were satisfied with this new mode of learning as they viewed it as an opportunity to improve their ICT skills and the quality of their education. They also noted benefits such as COVID-19 safety, flexibility, and access to recorded sessions. However, the study also highlighted some challenges faced by students with online learning, such as unequal access to technology, a focus on improving ICT skills instead of subject matter, technical and internet connectivity issues, lack of hands-on experiences, and reduced interaction with instructors. In addition, students in the humanities and social sciences had more positive perceptions of online learning compared to those in scientific fields such as engineering and pharmacy. Overall, the research showed that students were generally satisfied with the university's readiness for distance learning.

Likewise, a study examined the effect of e-learning on student academic achievement at the University of Science and Technology of Fujairah in the UAE <sup>[20]</sup>. It was found that students' academic success was positively related to e-learning, e-learning adoption, and instructors' attitudes towards e-learning. The study also showed that student engagement mediates the relationship between student attitudes and academic achievement, as well as the relationship between student digital readiness and academic achievement. This suggests that incorporating engaging content into online learning can influence student engagement and success.

In particular, first-year students had limited experience with a blended learning system, while fourth-year students were more familiar with it at the College of Fine Arts and Design in the UAE <sup>[21]</sup>. Despite this, both groups of students still found full-time distance learning to be a new experience. Both groups reported high levels of stress and anxiety while working on design projects during the quarantine period.

Another study examined the attitudes of Al Ain University students towards remote learning during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic <sup>[22]</sup>. The students cited time and cost efficiency, safety, flexibility, and increased participation as the biggest advantages of online learning. However, they also reported distractions, a heavy workload, technical issues, and a lack of support from instructors and peers as the main drawbacks. The study highlights that the COVID-19 pandemic gave students and educators their first experience with online learning, emphasising the importance of investing in preparation and quality e-learning to ensure positive educational outcomes in the event of future disruptions.

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