EMERGENCY REMOTE TEACHING OR ONLINE LEARNING?

Arab Students' Experiences during Covid-19

NOV 2020

POLICY BRIEF NO.2

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Covid-19 pandemic has disrupted the lives of billions of people around the globe. In an attempt to contain the spread of the pandemic, governments implemented a series of unprecedented measures, including the temporary closure of educational institutions. Overnight, billions of students, including more than 13 million Arab university students, transitioned from face-to-face to online instruction. This experience can best be described as Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT). This policy brief examines the implications of the Covid-19 pandemic on over 400 beneficiaries of the Abdulla Al Ghurair Foundation for Education's (AGFE) two scholarship programs from a survey administered in late April.

KEY FINDINGS

1. Over 60% of scholars rate their experience studying online as average, with similar percentages reporting that they learnt more face-to-face before the pandemic.

2. Scholars cite lack of peer interaction, motivation, and weak internet connection as their biggest challenges to studying online. Yet, most scholars report high levels of understanding from their lectures online and feeling adequately supported by their professors.

3. The Covid-19 pandemic has affected scholars' mental health, with over a quarter of students feeling more anxious than before.

4. Over one in three employed scholars has undergone a change in their employment status since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. This includes losing jobs, being put on unpaid leave or reduced pay.

5. More than half of surveyed scholars are open to studying online in the future, with almost half of them intending to work and pursue lifelong learning opportunities at the same time.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The scholars feedback suggests some key recommendations for universities and regulatory authorities:

Universities need to:

1. Learn from ERT while recognizing it is a unique experience.
2. Support faculty to (re)design and develop quality online courses
3. Closely monitor access to and engagement in online learning
4. Provide comprehensive student support

Regulatory authorities need to:

1. Accredit high quality online learning programs
2. Include comprehensive student support as part of the quality assurance standards

BACKGROUND

Over the past six months, the Covid-19 pandemic caused the most significant and sudden shift that the education systems in the Arab region, and perhaps globally, have experienced in history. Before March 2020, most universities in the region did not offer any online courses or programs, and governments hesitated to fully accredit this model of learning. Moreover, most students expressed a strong preference for physical classroom learning or a blended model.[1]

Since 2012, the Arab region has seen a rise in popularity of global online education platforms as well as the launch of new home-grown platforms that offer substantial open online courses (MOOCs) in English and Arabic.[2][3][4] Regional platforms have attracted millions of students, searching for culturally relevant content in Arabic. And yet, despite increasing enrollment rates in short courses, online learners in the Arab region still lag behind their global counterparts in terms of participation and completion rates.[5]

Starting early March 13 million university Emirati and Arab students across 22 Arab states, like billions of others around the world, shifted to online learning. Students suddenly found that they were in a position of having to apply the skills that experts have repeatedly insisted are needed to succeed in the future – adaptability and resilience.[6] Students quickly adjusted to a wide range of new course structures and assessments, as well as unfamiliar modes of communication with faculty, university staff, and classmates. Following the campus closures, most students returned home to welcoming and worried families, which also meant greater technical and personal disruptions as well as significant changes to daily routines. Finally, the wider health and economic contexts of the pandemic placed additional stress on students and their communities, further testing coping skills.

Many referred to the rapid transition that occurred from face-to-face to online instruction

as online learning. However, it lacked the fundamental components of *effective* online learning. Universities responded quickly to provide a "temporary solution to an immediate problem"[7], but it was more of a short-term fix. It is better to describe what the faculty and students have experienced since the sudden closure of schools and universities as Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT).[8]

SCHOLARS' ONLINE LEARNING EXPERIENCES

AGFE has two need and merit-based scholarship programs. There are 806 Arab youth that benefit from the Al Ghurair STEM Scholars Program and Open Learning Scholars Program (OLSP). The former supports high-achieving disadvantaged Arab youth enrolled in STEM undergraduate and Master's degrees at one of the Foundation's 15 partner universities. The latter serves similar students pursuing Master's degrees online at Arizona State University. Both programs are comprehensive, offering both financial and non-financial support to scholars.

A sample of 334 STEM scholars and 93 OLSP scholars representing a 68% and 59% response rate, respectively, completed online surveys. Figure 1 and 2 below present the sample demographics for the two surveys.

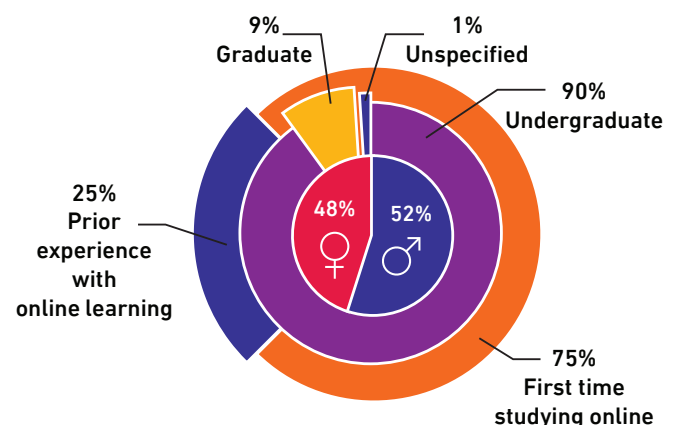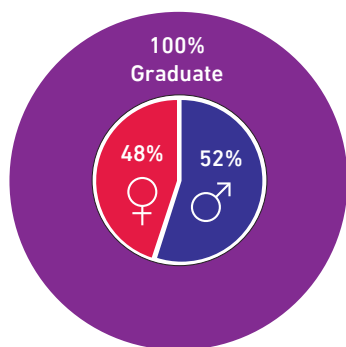**Figure 1. Sample Demographics – Al Ghurair STEM Scholars Survey**

- 9% Graduate
- 1% Unspecified
- 90% Undergraduate
- 25% Prior experience with online learning
- 48% ♀
- 52% ♂
- 75% First time studying online

Figure 2. Sample Demographics – Al Ghurair
Open Learning Scholars Survey

Figure 2. Sample Demographics – Al Ghurair Open Learning Scholars Survey

This policy brief examines the experience of STEM scholars[i] who had to transition to online learning because of the Covid-19 pandemic and compares it to those of the OLSP scholars, who were studying online prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. The OLSP scholars have also been affected by the current crisis even though the modality of their education was not altered due to the pandemic.

The three key questions addressed in the survey are:

1. What are the scholars' experiences in online learning since the start of the pandemic?
2. How are scholars coping mentally?
3. To what extent does this experience influence their perception of online learning and their openness to study online in the future?
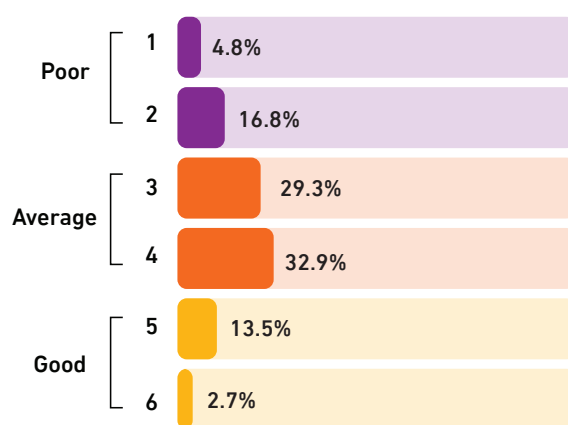
FINDINGS

1. Scholars rate their experience in online learning as average and report learning more face-to-face prior to the pandemic.

When asked to rate their current online learning experience, most STEM scholars (62.2%) rated it as average, with females reporting a more positive experience overall. This result is compared

to 21.6% of scholars who rated it as poor and 16.2% who rated it as good, as shown in Figure 3 below.

It is interesting to note that almost 16% of STEM scholars with prior experience studying online, mostly through MOOCs pursued in parallel, have reported having a good experience, and 9% have reported having a bad experience. In addition, most STEM scholars (61%) reported that they "used to learn more in face-to-face courses".

Figure 3. How scholars rated their current online learning experiences

As most universities in the region transitioned to this model of learning overnight, with few having had any experience offering online courses or programs, these findings are not surprising. The absence of instructional design and planning preparedness - which are the building blocks of quality online learning - in ERT may reduce the quality of the delivered content. As stated by Hodges et al. (2020),[9] "typical planning, preparation, and development time for a fully online university course is six to nine months before the course is delivered", with faculty usually needing two or three demonstrations of their online courses before being ready to deliver them online.[10]

The difference in student experiences in studying online versus in the current ERT model is significant. In the survey of the OLSP scholars – those who had been studying online before the pandemic - more than 9 in 10 (94%), rated their online learning experience prior to the pandemic

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as "very good" or "extraordinary". After the pandemic, that rate fell to 69%. Despite the 25% fall, caused by external factors (unrelated to their academics), scholars' self-reported educational experience is far superior to that reported by the STEM scholars.

OLSP scholars are enrolled in programs that were purposefully and carefully designed for online delivery. They benefit from a wide range of support, such as access to a success coach, 24-hour tutoring and career services. In fact, OLSP scholars reported feeling supported by their university (52%) and reported having "… access to the support services that [they] need" (58%).

2. Scholars cite lack of peer interaction, motivation, and weak internet connection as biggest challenges to learning online.

Despite rating the online learning experience as average, most STEM scholars reported fully "understanding the content from [their] lectures online" (68%) and "feeling adequately supported by their professors" (60%). Scholars studying in universities based in the Arab region were more likely to struggle understanding lectures online compared to their peers studying abroad. Around 34% of them reported not fully understanding lectures online compared to 20% of scholars studying in partner universities in the United States, Canada, and Turkey.

However, with almost half (48%) of the scholars returning to family homes since the campus closures, access to the interactions, facilities, and resources that would typically enable learning was lost. As shown in Figure 4, the scholars cited three top challenges when studying online: a lack of interaction with classmates (57%), a lack of motivation to study online (56%), and a weak internet connection (52%). It is understandable that scholars coming from economically disadvantaged families may face difficulties studying from home, where they may not always have access to an adequate internet connection, a suitable and quiet place to study, or access to

certain resources (i.e. a well-functioning computer). In addition, as with many individuals across the globe trying to understand this new and rapidly changing context, it is difficult for the students to maintain their enthusiasm and focus on academics with elevated anxieties and fears generated by the pandemic and lockdown. As for the lack of interactions with classmates, this may be explained by the structure of the courses with almost 80% of STEM scholars reporting that only some or none of online courses included group activities. Again, these are online courses that were shifted from being originally planned to be delivered in a classroom.

Figure 4. Top three challenges scholars faced when studying online

4.8%	
16.8%	
29.3%	
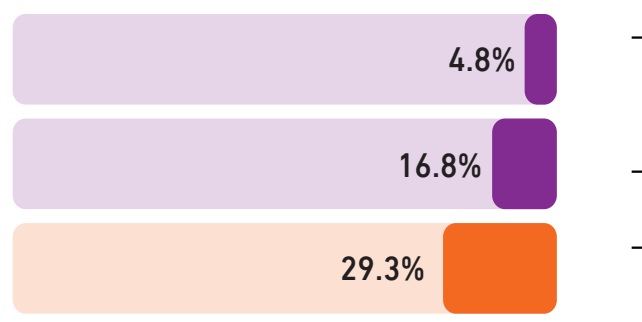
These challenges are not unique to AGFE scholars. Studies from the United States (U.S.) found that university students there too had trouble focusing on their studies and work, and that they missed socializing with others.[11][12] A survey conducted by SPARK, a non-governmental Dutch organization, similarly found that more than one third of respondents (35%) do not have a suitable place to study now. Given that the primary objective of ERT is "not to re-create a robust educational ecosystem, but rather to provide temporary access to instruction and instructional supports in a manner that is quick to set up and is reliably available during an emergency or crisis",[13] the current type of teaching is not ideal for a thriving and sustainable learning environment.

The scholars showed commitment to their education in the face of all the challenges. When asked if any of these challenges prevented them from attending one or more of their online

classes, 58% reported that it either never happened or happened only once. A little more than one third (35%) said that it happened a few times and only 6% said that it happened often.

## 3. The Covid-19 pandemic has affected scholars' mental health

The survey also inquired about how scholars coped during this crisis. Less than one third of STEM scholars (27%) reported feeling more anxious since the start of the pandemic, as shown in Figure 5. When asked to what extent their Covid-19-related anxiety caused them trouble to concentrate on their studies, 43% of scholars answered "to a large" or "to a very large extent." More than half of them (52%) are feeling moderately well and around 21% of scholars reported not feeling anxious.

Figure 5. Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on surveyed scholars' mental health

52%
Average

27%
Anxious

21%
Not anxious
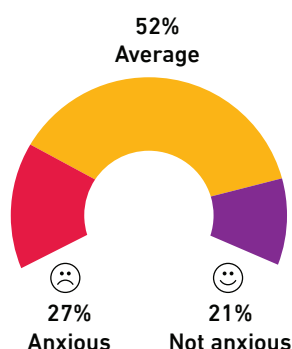
When asked what could help enhance their online learning experience, "mental health support" was the second most cited option (60%). The first was "technical support" (64%), while the third was "more interactions with professors" (53%), as shown in Figure 6 below. This is in line with the survey results for OLSP scholars who reported that two out of the four most cited support services requested were related to mental health and well-being.

Figure 6. Top three most cited support services that scholars need

1 Technical support   64%
2 Mental health support   60%
3 Interactions with professors   53%
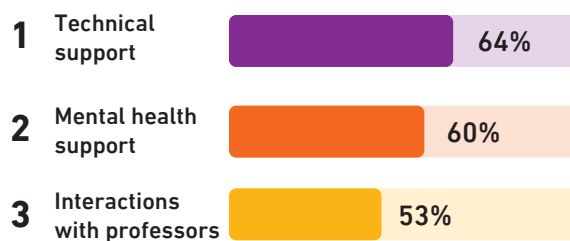
These findings reinforce results from other studies, in which university students reported that the "pandemic negatively affected their mental health," that they feel anxious, and that they need psychosocial support.[14]

Although there is not enough data available on the prevalence of mental health issues among Arab students before the pandemic, numerous regional scholarship providers reported it as a serious concern that had an impact on their academic success and well-being in general.[ii] It is possible that the ongoing pandemic has worsened those issues and increased the likelihood of affecting more students.

4. More than one in three employed scholars has had a change in their employment status

There is strong evidence that the current pandemic caused anxiety and concerns about finances.[15][16] For students, it has also stirred up concerns about the future, whether it is related to pursuing education or employment prospects.

Although the STEM scholars survey did not consider the impact of Covid-19 on their financial status, the survey results found that the pandemic has severely impacted OLSP scholars and families financially. Unlike the STEM scholars, OLSP scholars are postgraduate students; they are largely working, older, married and have dependents. For many, earning an income while studying is critical to ensure that they can support themselves and their families. It is often the primary reason why they enrolled in the program.

ii. These results were collected through a series of interviews with regional scholarship providers for an upcoming study conducted by AGFE.

The survey revealed that almost 39% of employed respondents lost their jobs, are on unpaid leave or on reduced pay because of the Covid-19 pandemic. The remaining scholars who reported still being employed, are also almost 12% more likely to report having more work responsibilities since the start of the Covid-19 crisis.

These findings are similar to a survey carried out among disadvantaged university students in the United Kingdom, which found that over a third of students (34%) have lost a job, had reduced hours, or "not been paid for work completed due to the current crisis". In addition, the survey found that more than a quarter of respondents expected to experience financial difficulties in the coming months.[17]

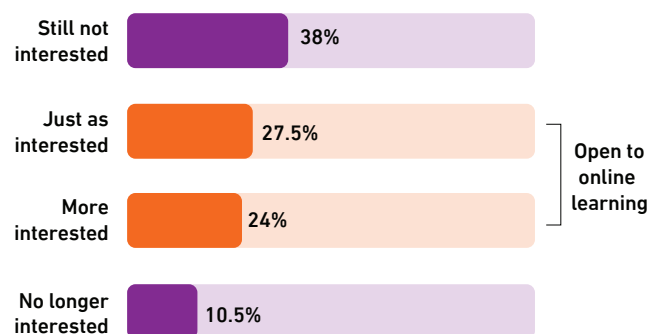## 5. More than half of surveyed scholars are open to pursuing online learning in the future

When asked whether this experience has changed their perception of online learning in general, 35% of STEM scholars said that it has become more negative, whereas 27% of scholars stated it has become more positive, as shown in Figure 8. Interestingly, students with prior experience of online learning (before the Covid-19 pandemic) were 18% more likely to report that their "perception has not changed, is still positive." These students may have been less likely to be negatively influenced by the current experience, presumably because they had other more favorable experiences, potentially more reflective of higher quality online learning. However, those who studied online for the first time during the crisis were likely to have a more negative perception influenced by their experience of ERT.

Figure 7. Change in scholars' perceptions of online learning since studying online

	My perception is more	My perception is still
Positive	20.7%	27.5%
Negative	35%	16.8%
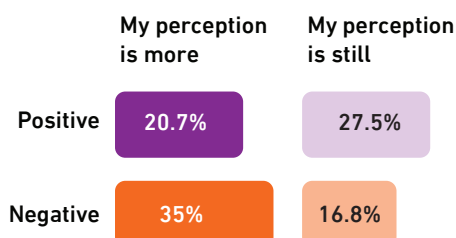
Despite the negative change in perception and the various challenges faced while studying online, more than half of the scholars (53%) reported still being open to online learning in the future, as shown in Figure 9 below. Those scholars that were not open to the idea of pursuing online education before the pandemic did not change their minds.

Figure 8. Surveyed scholars' openness to pursue online learning in the future

Still not interested	38%
Just as interested	27.5%
More interested	24%
No longer interested	10.5%

Open to online learning

It can be concluded that these results are largely positive, particularly given the difficult circumstances in which students were expected to transition to online learning - without planning or preparation for the students or the universities. They seemed aware that the current arrangement was an emergency response, rather than a reflection of what online learning typically looks like. This is illustrated in a number of open-ended comments.

> " I feel online learning is much better than [this experience]... Professors were rushed [into] this mode with little preparation "
>
> *STEM scholar 1*

Another added, "This experience has shown me that online learning can be quite successful under correct assessment criteria, clear communication channels and a well distributed workload".

Finally, when asked about their post-graduation plans, 45% of scholars said that they intend to "work and pursue lifelong learning opportunities at the same time". Many scholars want to combine work with pursuing their studies.

CONCLUSION

Few, if any, higher education institutions in the Arab region were prepared to cope with the disruptions brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic. Although many universities largely managed to reduce the disruption to learning by introducing ERT, their next challenge will be to find sustainable solutions that ensure quality teaching and learning online within an uncertain global environment.

AGFE's initial findings indicated that its scholars coped relatively well in an ERT context, and more than half are open to online learning in the future. Yet, there are question marks as to what this experience will mean for online learning more broadly. Will the model become normalized in universities? Will educational technology be integrated in traditional classrooms? Will this experience transform the quality of teaching and learning on campuses?

With the current global economic downturn, at least 8.3 million people in the Arab region are expected to fall into poverty.[18] This downturn is going to further threaten access to traditional full-time higher education for millions of students across the region. If we are truly committed to ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong

learning opportunities for all (SDG4),[19] universities will need to look for more innovative solutions to help disadvantaged youth access their institutions. Providing high quality online learning could be one long term solution to the problem as it will surely positively impact higher education in the Arab region.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In the short and medium terms, there are a number of concrete activities that universities and regulatory authorities can introduce to prepare for the uncertainty of the upcoming academic year(s). These activities consist of building up the key components, including the support systems, needed to transition from the temporary phase of ERT to quality online learning in the long-term.

For universities:

1. **Learn from ERT while recognizing that it is a unique experience.** Understanding and learning from ERT for all stakeholders involved by conducting an evaluation is critical. Universities may be tempted to compare student outcomes in ERT to those of face-to-face teaching and learning. However, there are multiple factors that make the ERT experience different, including context, inputs and processes. It is important to remain cautious when drawing conclusions about the value of teaching and learning online based on this unique experience.

2. **Support faculty to (re)design and develop quality online courses**

   A. **Engage instructional designers in (re) designing course content for the online learner.** Instructional design, which involves the design, development, and delivery of content to improve learning, is an expertise that is largely lacking in

the Arab region. In collaboration with faculty, these specialists ensure that instruction is student-centered, outcome-based, and engaging.

B. **Provide specialized training to faculty.** Most faculty in the region have limited prior experience in online learning. As with most universities globally, many also do not have training in pedagogy. Universities should develop and offer practical and workplace training programs that teach faculty to redesign their courses and avoid making basic adaptations to their face-to-face courses to fit an online environment.

3. **Closely monitor access to and engagement in online learning.** Technology, reliable access to internet, and lack of student interaction are key barriers to student access and success in an online environment, particularly among disadvantaged populations. Universities should introduce solutions to reduce the digital divide, including providing better technical support for all, making course content available offline and identifying low-tech tools for student engagement.

4. **Provide comprehensive student support.** All successful online programs are rooted in strong student support (academic, technical, personal, and mental health). It will become critical to transition these services online and ensure their effectiveness. In the case of mental health, a service that is lacking even on campuses, it is especially important to identify students at risk, increase help seeking behaviors, promote social connectedness, and support the development of life skills.[20]

For regulatory authorities:

1. **Accredit high quality online learning programs**. Regulatory authorities should capitalize on the current opportunity to recognize online learning as an equivalent educational model to the face-to-face experience. The lack of accreditation policies for online learning has perhaps been one of the biggest factors holding back universities from offering online degree programs in the Arab region. This is an opportunity to assure that online learning in the region will be of high quality by developing clear guidelines and frameworks for accrediting online programs that, like traditional accreditation guidelines, are focused on learning outcomes rather than the modality.

2. **Include comprehensive student support as part of quality assurance standards**. Quality assurance standards should include a requirement that universities provide their students enrolled in online programs access not only to technical support, but to the whole spectrum of services that are found on campus and that are central to students' success. Students who study online should have access to the same essential support services as students in face-to-face academic programs. The range of support services that facilitate success include careers and employability, mentoring, and mental health.

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GET IN TOUCH WITH US TO CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION.

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About the Abdulla Al Ghurair Foundation for Education

AGFE aims to empower Emirati and Arab youth to thrive and contribute to the sustainable development of the region, through innovative education solutions and authentic partnerships. As one of the largest privately-funded philanthropic foundations in the Arab region, AGFE supports the provision of high-quality technology-based education opportunities, as well as the development of relevant skills for a successful transition into higher education and the labor market. Founded in 2015, the Foundation is dedicated to the realization of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals 4 and 8, calling for inclusive and equitable quality education that leads to improved standards of living for all.