

Investigating Challenges Facing Afghan University Students During Covid-19 Outbreak

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Abstract

This study aimed to examine the challenges students experienced during the lockdowns imposed by the government to contain the spread of the novel coronavirus outbreak in Afghanistan. A qualitative study with a phenomenological research design was employed in this study. Eight university students, including five males and three females, enrolled at different universities participated in the study. Six of them studied at Afghan universities, and two studied abroad but perused their education from Afghanistan due to lockdowns. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analysed using a thematic analysis method. The interview data showed that Afghan university students experienced many challenges and hardships in their education process when all educational institutions were closed once the coronavirus began spreading in the country and the world. Students expressed dissatisfaction due to many technical and practical issues that minimised the effectiveness of online learning. Most of these challenges stemmed from inadequate technological infrastructure, poor course delivery, unavailability of educational materials, poor communication, and other similar factors.

Keyword: Afghan higher education, Covid-19 outbreak, Distance education, Online learning, e-learning

Introduction

The recent Covid-19 outbreak has become an unprecedented global trauma for humanity. It has adversely affected most countries, including Afghanistan, by hitting hard the social and economic life of individuals and all levels of education. Most countries have taken measures by going for full or semi-lockdowns, self-isolation, and social distancing (Bozkurt, 2020; Padilla Rodriguez et al., 2021). To minimise infection rates and to contain the pandemic, high-risk environments like schools, universities, and businesses where human contraction with the coronavirus is inevitable were shut down within this scope. Shutting educational institutions and suspending face-to-face education during the pandemic have forced millions of students in the world to stay home. Meanwhile, responses of countries to Covid-19 have been different in terms of their institutional decisions on keeping the education system active through online classes, a combination of online and face-to-face classes, and fully campus-based face-to-face classes by imposing strict rules such as wearing face masks, social distancing, and avoiding mass gatherings (Lederer et al., 2021).

Yet, these decisions were prone to swift changes and fluctuations considering the course of the pandemic that often resulted in switching back to only online education.

Although online teaching-learning approaches have long been used, they have gained more prevalence and utility in education worldwide during this pandemic. Nonetheless, shifting to online education all of a sudden also has brought about many hardships and challenges to both students and teachers (McQuirter, 2020; Peimani & Kamalipour, 2021). Teachers' lack of prior experience and self-efficacy in using the educational technology, unfamiliarity with relevant pedagogical knowledge and skills, and inadequacy of technological infrastructure, especially in underdeveloped countries, are the major problems that complicate course delivery through online platforms evermore. Besides, many families may not have access to and afford purchasing technological tools for their kids to have them pursue uninterruptedly their online classes. In a similar vein, college students financially relying on their families may also experience similar challenges and live in a state of uncertainty concerning their future. Limited access to digital technology and unstable connectivity to the internet could even worsen the already unresolved equity and equality dilemma in education, especially in developing countries. Peimani and Kamalipour (2021) argue that all individual students may not be able to "equally and effectively benefit from synchronous teaching and learning due to limited access to adequate infrastructure, software and hardware" (p. 13). Hence, differences and inequalities in access to face-to-face and online learning are still a source of concern that needs consideration.

Moreover, scholars argue that the sudden transition from in-person education to distance education has been a daunting and unprecedented experience for most stakeholders of education (McQuirter, 2020; Dolighan & Owen, 2021). Teachers had little opportunity to develop pedagogical skills required for online instruction when they were rushed into moving from physical classroom to virtual environment, especially in rural areas (Padilla Rodriguez et al., 2021). Padilla Rodriguez et al. (2021) argue that nationwide lockdowns and

restrictions have worsened the existing poor access of rural communities to education and have limited students' participation in online classes throughout the world.

Many studies have addressed the challenges and promises of paradigm shift from face-to-face and virtual learning experiences at different levels of education during the pandemic. Hebebcı et al. (2020) studied teacher and student views on the benefits of distance education provided through TV and an official e-learning platform in Turkey. Students believed that school-based education is more useful than distance education through a virtual environment. However, most students stated that distance education is "better than nothing" during the time (Hebebcı et al., 2020, p. 271). While some students were happy following short lessons delivered through TV and the e-learning platform from the comfort of their homes, some others had problems with understanding teachers and contents and complained about the inadequacy of lessons and the insufficiency of the time allocated for each lesson. Teachers were also of similar opinions. They believed that although distance education is not comparatively more useful than face-to-face education, it has been quite successful and a better alternative during the pandemic. However, they believed that it limited student interaction and productivity and negatively affected their bond with the school. Mahyoub (2020) also explored challenges and obstacles that 118 undergraduate English learners affiliated with a Saudi Arabian University faced during this health crisis. Challenges ranged from poor interaction, communication, internet connectivity, technical issues to accessibility and missing classes and tasks. Only 42.9% of students showed satisfaction with online learning, while others showed little or no satisfaction. Likewise, Lassoued et al. (2020) studied obstacles in distance learning during the Covid-19 outbreak based on the questionnaire data from 300 university students and 100 lecturers from different Arab countries. Their study participants demonstrated resistance to distance education and reported tackling pedagogical and technical obstacles that limited their social interaction and communication which ultimately affected achieving quality in education. Lack of readiness to distance

education and similar challenges discussed above were also reported by Russian university lecturers (Almazova et al., 2020). However, they also saw the transition to virtual learning as an advantage and opportunity for professional development and new technologies.

Afghanistan has not been an exception during the global health crises and has suffered severely due to the lack of adequate technological infrastructure in education, poor economy, cultural barriers, and insecurity (Khlaif et al., 2020). When the coronavirus outbreak began to flare up from March 2020, the Afghan government decided to close all educational institutions, including schools and universities, like many other countries did throughout the world (Mohammadi et al., 2021). The Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) pushed the “universities to deliver the educational material through online platforms” such as “Google classroom, WhatsApp, Facebook, and Telegram” (Mohmmadi et al., 2021, p. 2). Later, on May 6, 2020, an official e-learning platform was launched for public and private universities called the Higher Education Learning Management System (HELMS) to facilitate uninterrupted enactment of educational activities during quarantines in Afghanistan (MoHE, 2020). However, there were several challenges that universities, lecturers, and students had to tackle and make effective use of this e-learning platform.

Little empirical research has been conducted in the context of Afghanistan regarding e-learning and distance education. Mohammadi et al. (2021) conducted a comprehensive study of challenges facing universities, lecturers, and students concerning the practicability and use of HELMS and factors affecting its adaptation through a qualitative study with a sample group of 100 participants from four Afghan universities. They addressed challenges and hardships experienced in using HELMS under six major themes relating to the problems originating from lack of policy, organisational culture, technical support, skilled trainers, governance system, and service quality. Absence of a clear guideline and policy relating to the practical knowledge and know-how of using this platform effectively concerned all stakeholders interviewed. The low level of interest and organisational commitment of the administrative

staff in terms of monitoring educational and technical issues demotivated most students and lecturers. Lack of teaching-learning skills through HELMS, technical support, plus the low quality of digital content and teaching were among the other challenges.

Given that e-learning was new to most stakeholders and it was also their first experience using this newly developed platform, the problems experienced seemed to be inevitable. Aside from these challenges, students and lecturers alike lacked computer literacy and know-how of using digital technology. Accessibility and affordability of the internet, hardware and electricity were among other substantial factors which limited students’ reach to online learning. A study conducted in four other Afghan universities in Kabul reported a lack of ICT literacy among students and lecturers, inaccessibility to technological infrastructure for students, and inadequate technical training for lecturers even before the coronavirus outbreak (Waseel and Yusof, 2019).

There was a limited number of studies regarding the challenges and obstacles faced by university students and their lived experiences during the outbreak in Afghanistan. Therefore, we thought that this study would add some more knowledge to better identification of emergent problems and relevant solutions. Hence, this study aimed to examine the lived experiences of Afghan university students during the outbreak by seeking answers to the following two research questions:

- What are the experiences of university students in Afghanistan regarding the problems they faced in the education process during the Covid-19 pandemic?
- What are the suggestions of university students in Afghanistan for solving the problems faced during the Covid-19 pandemic?

Method

This qualitative study employed a phenomenological research design to investigate university students’ experiences during the coronavirus pandemic in Afghanistan. Phenomenological research “involves the description of an individual’s, or group of individuals, conscious

experience of a phenomenon” and “to see how they experience things” (Christensen et al., 2015, p. 370). In phenomenological research, the data are usually collected through in-depth interviews and open-ended questionnaires.

Participants

Eight students of age 18-35 from different universities participated in the study. Five of them were males and three were females. Most of these students followed their education through online platforms. Six of them studied in Afghan universities, and two others originally studied abroad but had returned to Afghanistan due to lockdowns and followed their education through the internet. Of these students, six were undergraduate students, one was a master’s student, and one was a doctoral student. They studied different fields such as education, agriculture, medicine, and computer science.

Instrument

The data were collected through a semi-structured interview after revising and refining the interview questions based on the feedback received from two experts in education. Seven questions reflecting the research questions were directed to the students with some follow-up questions to get a clear picture of their experiences during this health crisis. These questions addressed the challenges and experiences of students regarding the educational programs, technical issues, communication, assessment and evaluation, and their suggestive solutions. The interviews were conducted through a one-to-one meeting, telephone, and WhatsApp. Interview sessions were all recorded after securing student consent.

Analysis

A content analysis method was employed in analysing the qualitative data collected through interviews. First, the data were transcribed verbatim and imported into Nvivo 12 (a software for qualitative analysis) for coding and identifying descriptive themes. Two researchers coded the data independently, compared the codes, and created themes responding to the research questions. A final set of codes and themes were created after the

researchers reached a hundred percent consensus. Disagreements were resolved through negotiation. When interpreting and reporting the findings, sample statements from students were quoted to show how a particular conclusion was drawn.

Findings

Two main descriptive themes were identified from the thematic analysis of the interview data, which related to challenges arising from the teaching-learning process and students’ suggestions for improvement. Additionally, theme one consisted of five sub-themes, including course delivery, availability of educational materials, technical challenges, communication, and assessment and evaluation.

Teaching-Learning Process

Students faced many challenges when the government shut educational institutions to contain the spread of the coronavirus in Afghanistan. The novelty of the virtual teaching-learning experience for students and lecturers disrupted the education process to a considerable degree. Although switching to online education was challenging for many countries, it was more tangible at all levels of education in Afghanistan, especially in higher education. Distance education was something new, and neither schools nor universities were ready for such an unexpected change from the physical environment to a virtual space. Confronted challenges and lived experiences of college students in their education are discussed under five themes as in the following.

Course Delivery

Students showed dissatisfaction with online learning due to poor course delivery. Instead, they preferred in-person classroom instruction for effective learning. They thought that *“online classes are not helpful and the slides presented are imperfect... only the lectures themselves know what they are saying”* (A Fifth Year Medical Student). Challenges faced in online learning were more tangible for first-year students. For instance, one of the students stated, *“We faced many problems, as it was our first semester and we have just started*

this field" (computer science student). This same student also added, *"Online education is good due to insecurity but I am not much familiar with this field. Therefore, in-person instruction would have been better for getting correct answers to our questions."* Learning through distance education was minimal for some students, especially when courses required practical activities. A senior computer science student stated, *"In face-to-face, we would understand 70-80% but in this [distance education], we couldn't learn even 5% because most our courses were practical."* Therefore, the learning outcomes were unlikely to achieve.

The number of courses delivered online was limited and varied in terms of how they were delivered. While some students participated in the course via Zoom, Google Classroom, and WhatsApp, others only watched recorded video lectures provided for them. Participation in online classes was low, and attendance was not compulsory. Students often missed attending live stream lectures and watching video lectures regularly. A medical student's comment reflects the seriousness of problems arising from the inaccessibility to online education among Afghan college students:

Initially, our lecturers tried making our classes online. However, of around 250-300 students, only less than half could participate in the lessons. Therefore, our lecturers decided to put the lessons in the system, but the system had limited space. Then, they decided to continue the classes through Zoom and Google Classroom.

Moreover, some students had difficulties understanding video lectures, and many questions remained unanswered due to the lack of lecturer support. One of the students stated, *"Sometimes, when we watched [the video lectures] we were unable to understand. Then, we went to the university, but the lecturers were unavailable"* (A computer science student). Some students also lost motivation and felt under mental pressure due to the state of uncertainty they were experiencing during the pandemic and distance education.

Availability of Educational Materials

Students followed their university courses by downloading and watching video lectures uploaded

onto the online platforms of universities and YouTube or received them in pen drives and hard disks from their respective departments. Some comments from students are quoted below to highlight students' struggles in terms of accessing their courses:

Our friends in the provinces were unable to establish a remote connection and study with us. Eventually, it was decided that lecturers put the lessons on the website so the students could watch or download or go to university to get them in flash desks... and watch them on a computer (senior computer science students).

They would upload the lessons on YouTube for us to watch. Internet is not that fast in Afghanistan. So, we had to go to the university to get them [the video lectures] in flash desks... lecturers submitted them to the dean of faculty. We had to go to the university to receive them in flash disks (Second-year law students).

However, no additional materials were provided or suggested by lecturers. *"They did not provide anything for studying other than their lessons"* (A third-year medical student), and students had to engage in self-study. Likewise, one of the first-year computer science students complained about the scarcity of books and educational materials and the lack of support from the university in this regard. She expressed her frustration as follows,

They gave us the recorded lessons and told us that each of them has textbooks. After a while, when we went [to the university] to get our books, most of them were unavailable. We heard they were available in Jalalabad (a neighbouring city of Kabul)..., but our classmates could not find them even there.

By contrast, three students did not experience serious problems in terms of online course delivery and achievement of learning objectives. Two of them were graduate students studying abroad but had returned to Afghanistan during the coronavirus outbreak and pursued their education through online platforms introduced by their universities. They were already familiar with online learning. The third student who did not experience any problem received family support. Her family made the educational materials and internet connection available for her to follow her classes uninterruptedly from home comfort.

Technical Challenges

All students complained about the low speed and unstable internet connectivity. Participating in live-stream lectures or playing and downloading video lectures were problematic for them. Unstable internet connection or lack of internet access prevented students from following their education regularly. A law student stated, *"We were unable to participate in our online classes for having slow internet speed and received them in flash desks after several weeks."* Another student also said, *"Internet is not always available for us to use. Even in the case of availability, it is not that fast to fulfil our needs. When I asked some of my classmates, they did not have any access to the internet."* Security problems also added to these problems. One of the students who studied agriculture overseas had to follow some of his online classes during the night, whereas one of the warring sides always cut the internet at night. When the internet was available during the day, it was of a very low speed. In this regard, he stated,

There is a lot of war in our area. We don't have internet during the night, as our sim cards are off. Two out of five of our courses are delivered during the night but we don't have any internet.

Moreover, in addition to the unstable internet connection, some students also complained about the unstable electricity. One of the students stated,

One of the major problems we had was the lack of electricity. Throughout recent months, that is, after the corona outbreak, we didn't have electricity round the clock to charge our mobiles. When our mobile was fully charged, the internet was down, and we couldn't follow our classes properly.

Lack of access to the required hardware and unfamiliarity with online platforms were among other challenges students faced during the lockdowns and thus lagged in their education. These and many other problems may have made education inaccessible to many students at all levels of education in Afghanistan.

Communication

Communication between students and lecturers occurred through email, WhatsApp, and the learning management system (LMS) of universities. Students usually texted their questions to the lecturers to

respond through WhatsApp or in their next video lectures. However, communication with classmates and lecturers was limited in general. Sometimes, questions asked through WhatsApp or LMS were not read or responded to by lecturers, and students had to struggle to find answers to their questions on their own. One of the students highlighted these issues as in the following:

When we texted our questions, they were not sometimes read by the lecturers, or we did not want to bother them.... So, we had to convince ourselves and read more and more to understand a topic or find answers to our questions.

Technical problems such as having no connection to stable internet and inability to purchase necessary internet packets due to economic problems also prevented communication for some students. Some courses required face-to-face communication and practical work. In this sense, the inability to keep in touch or come together with classmates failed students to complete joint projects or practical activities in some fields of education such as computer science, agriculture, and the like. For example, one of the students expressed his concerns as in the following,

If everything continues like this, we will lose a lot. We all know that agriculture is a field that requires practical work. We studied theoretically in the first semester, and the second and fourth semesters are practical. One of our subjects is called cultivation in which we have to do practical works. Another subject that we have is called the operation of trees, and we should be present there in person... (A master's student in agriculture).

Assessment and Evaluation

According to some students, no online assessment or examination was conducted during distance education. One of them stated that examination might take place only when the face-to-face education commences. At the same time, another was uncertain about whether they will be able to take the exam considering the poor course delivery they are experiencing. When asked whether they have taken any online exam or whether they feel ready to take an online exam, one of the students stated, *"No, I am not that ready because I am lagged far*

behind in my lessons and if everything goes this way, I will not be able to take the exams” (A sophomore computer science student). She also stated that they had not taken any online examination yet but received homework to complete. Some other students also mentioned that lecturers used homework as assessment tools. However, lecturers did not assess or provide feedback on the assignments or homework submitted by students. Again, two students studying abroad from Afghanistan took their exams through online platforms and did not experience tangible problems in this regard.

Student Suggestions

Students mostly suggested starting face-to-face education to get optimal benefit from learning and use university resources such as libraries, computer labs, and so forth by keeping social distance and abiding by hygienic rules. They thought that distance education is inefficient. When asked about their suggestions for improving their learning experience and minimising the challenges, one of the students stated,

We wish that face-to-face education starts and we receive in-person education at the university by keeping the social distance to have better access to education. Otherwise, all the semesters we studied will go in vain, and we will learn nothing.

In case of the continuance of online or distance education, students suggested providing educational support, conducting live stream lessons, keeping them active, giving projects, assessing their learning, and providing free or offering reduced internet prices. One of the students stated,

They (the lecturers) should tell us what problems we have with the assignments we submit. They should assess the lesson, give projects, and ask us to prepare presentations as we used to do during our in-person education for students to be active (A student of education faculty).

Students who studied at private universities suggested reducing their tuition fees to cover their expenditure on the internet and educational material to participate in their online education uninterruptedly. Private universities refused to give any discount for students despite not providing online education as desired and disregarded the technical and economic challenges they were facing.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore the lived experiences of college students during the Covid-19 outbreak in Afghanistan. Students were asked about the challenges they were facing in their education process when all the educational institutions were close and whether they had suggestive solutions in this regard. The interview data from eight university students revealed that students went through many difficulties in the teaching-learning process when the universities switched to online education at once. Online education was new in Afghan universities and lacked virtual platforms ready for students and lecturers' use. They were caught by surprise amid the Covid-19 crisis. Later, the MoHE introduced an online platform for public and private universities to use. Yet, the students and lecturers had to tackle many challenges, ranging from poor course delivery and unavailability of educational materials to hardships experienced due to technical issues, poor communication between students and lecturers, and lack of assessment. Most of these and similar challenges were not only experienced by Afghan students (Mohammadi et al., 2021) but also by students in many other developing and developed countries such as Russia (Almazova et al., 2020), Turkey (Hebecci et al., 2020), Mexico (Padilla Rodriguez et al., 2021), Arab countries (Mahyoob, 2020; Lassoued et al., 2020), and so forth. However, the severity of these challenges was sensed more in Afghanistan, given the inadequacy of technological pedagogical knowledge and skills, technology infrastructure, insecurity, and lack of readiness, considering the findings of the present and past studies conducted in Afghanistan (Mohammadi et al., 2021).

Afghan university students often complained about the poor delivery of courses that usually took place through video lectures and live stream lessons. Lecturers shared these lectures and textual materials through online platforms or pen drives. However, live stream lessons were limited and were provided only in some courses. Instead, they had to watch video lectures. Yet, video lectures had many drawbacks, as they limited comprehension and could not answer student questions.

Additionally, lack of social interaction and lack of lecturer support were other drawbacks experienced in online learning. Generally, learning through online platforms was minimal, and courses requiring practical work remained unlearned. Limited participation in online lectures and reluctance to watch video lectures were prevalent among students. The persistence of these problems and the state of uncertainty students were experiencing amid the Covid-19 pandemic resulted in losing motivation and suffering mental pressure. Almost all students found online learning less useful and preferred returning to campus-based face-to-face education. Other studies conducted with Afghan university students also confirmed the dissatisfaction students expressed with online learning in this study (Hashimi, 2021; Himat et al., 2021). Likewise, survey data from 878 higher education stakeholders, with 81.7% comprising university students from various discipline areas, in India showed that 86.3% of the respondents preferred face-to-face education over online education (Nail et al., 2021). As such, 70% of them expressed dissatisfaction with online learning. Almost all respondents (96.3%) expected revision and repetition of topics when the university reopened after the Covid-19 lockdowns. Out of 878 respondents, 800 disagreed with taking courses that required practical learning. Most of them (353), who studied medicine, engineering, agriculture, and the like, stated that online learning was not applicable in their classes. Many of them ($n = 316$) thought online learning is effective only in theoretical courses. In general, they believed that conventional in-person education provides many opportunities for student interaction, generates interest in learning, and facilitates effective learning. By contrast, 21 Afghan EFL university students interviewed by Rahim and Chandran (2021) considered e-learning a better alternative to conventional classroom teaching despite the technical and infrastructural challenges they experienced. They believed that e-learning provides invaluable opportunities for language learning, considering the abundance of available visual and auditory materials. However, a large-scale study conducted with 1231 Afghan students revealed that online education had a negative effect on student performance. Most students

demonstrated a high level of dissatisfaction and preferred face-to-face education instead (Hashimi, 2021). Underperformance in female students was a matter of concern because of their limited access to technological tools compared to their male counterparts.

Going for online education during the Covid-19 crisis interrupted regular access to education and educational materials to many students in Afghanistan. Although live stream lessons, video lectures, and course material were available online to some extent, many students struggled with participating in live lectures, downloading these videos, and watching them online due to poor internet connection. Many students did not even have access to the internet. Therefore, they had to receive course materials from their respective departments in memory disks. However, lecturers did not suggest extra study materials. The scarcity of educational materials in the market and the lack of support frustrated them. Contrarily, some students had experienced little problem in online learning during the lockdowns. Technical challenges stemmed from the lack of access to and unstable internet connection that restricted participation in live-stream lessons and getting access to video lectures or course materials. Internet disconnection during nights in war zones and lack of electricity in some areas of the country made online learning impossible for some students. Some even had no technical knowledge and skills. These findings were consistent with recent studies on challenges students faced in e-learning during the Covid-19 lockdowns (Mohammadi et al., 2021; Rahim & Chandran, 2021). According to recent research, students had experienced similar challenges in other countries (Mahyoob, 2020; Nail et al., 2021; Padilla Rodriguez et al., 2021). As discussed previously, Mahyoob's (2020) study showed that Arab college English learners in Saudi Arabia encountered many challenges in online learning amid the pandemic. These challenges ranged from unstable internet connection and communication to low participation of students in online lessons due to technical issues. Most students were also unsatisfied with online learning.

Communication took place through email, WhatsApp, and online platforms. Students often

asked questions and clarification about ambiguous parts explained in video lectures using these tools. However, they did not always receive an answer and had to figure it out themselves. Inaccessibility and unaffordability of internet prevented communication with and between lecturers and classmates. Some courses which required in-person communication and completing joint projects had to be postponed. Recent studies also showed that lack of lecturer support and unresponsiveness in Afghan universities, technical challenges, poor internet connectivity, unaffordability of internet prices, and hardware costs were some drawbacks for students to tackle (Hashimi, 2021; Mohammadi et al., 2021). Similarly, Ariyanti (2020) studied challenges facing university students in Indonesia in online education during the pandemic and found that students confronted many challenges such as poor communication, unstable internet connectivity, and low comprehension. As such, 137 Namibian undergraduate students surveyed by Kaisara and Bwalya (2021) reported similar problems, including poor internet connection, internet costs, lack of technical skills, and uncondusive learning environments at home.

No online examination and evaluation took place during the lockdowns in Afghan universities that six study participants represented. Some lecturers gave homework or assignments but did not assess or provide feedback when students submitted them. Some were unsure whether they will participate in examinations given the poor course delivery or lack of regular participation in courses. Only two students who studied abroad from Afghanistan had taken online exams through online platforms facilitated by their universities. These findings were supported by recent studies conducted with Afghan students. Many students reported that online assessments conducted by their teachers were dissatisfying (Hashimi, 2021).

To improve the current condition of online education, students had many suggestions. One of these suggestions was starting campus-based instruction by considering sanitary principles, social distancing, and minimising contraction risks with the coronavirus. Students considered campus-based education more effective, as they could also benefit from the university resources. They suggested providing sufficient educational support, conducting

live-stream lessons, and conducting activities that grab student attention and make them active. Offering unpaid or cost-effective internet connectivity was also suggested.

Similarly, students from the private universities expected a reduction in tuition fees and had requested a discount, but their universities rejected their requests. However, research shows that only 13% of private universities conducted online teaching (Nemat et al., 2021). The majority (98%) did not receive any payment from students but did not report whether the payment was dispensed to help out students during this hard time.

Limitations and Implications

This study was limited to interview data from only eight Afghan university students. Besides, two of them studied abroad but were pursued their education from Afghanistan after their universities were closed amid lockdowns. This study attempted to shed some light on current challenges students were experiencing during distance education. Therefore, more studies with qualitative and quantitative research designs could be conducted by collecting data from a larger population representing various stakeholders from both schools and universities. In addition, future research could investigate whether shifting to online teaching-learning due to lockdowns has brought about any positive changes at administrative and practical levels and the way individuals think of online education. Longitudinal studies could be conducted to investigate whether the policymakers, curriculum developers, and lecturers bring any changes in the education system, integrate technology into education, and overcome physical, infrastructural, and pedagogical shortcomings, using the lessons learned during this health crisis in the long term.

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