The Shift to Online Learning Amidst The Covid-19 Pandemic: Students' Perspectives

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Abstract:

On January 30th 2020, Coronavirus (COVID-19) was declared a world pandemic, a decision that would lead to a series of radical changes to our lifestyle. The most important was the suspension of formal education at universities and schools and the use of e-learning models instead as a means of learning. Prompted by these changes, this research paper aims to review the students' perceptions of their e-learning experience in Blida 2 university during the pandemic. The study reports on students' perceptions of e-learning, its benefits, drawbacks and challenges. To this end, the researcher used a mixed-method approach, which included an online questionnaire with a large sample of students from different faculties of Blida 2 university, to unravel their e-learning experience. The findings of this study proved that the implementation of e-learning in this university faced several challenges which prevented it from delivering as expected. Based on these findings some recommendations are put forward to improve the effectiveness of online learning in the Algerian higher education institutions.

Keywords: e-learning, online learning, coronavirus pandemic, Algerian higher education.

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- INTRODUCTION

The year 2020 marked unprecedented changes to many aspects of our livelihood. With the onslaught of COVID-19 everyone's lives have changed drastically. In order to control the contagion, many countries implemented restrictive measures to reduce gathering and formations of crowds. This change happened so fast that the conventional form of learning was put on hold and later online form of learning seemed to be the only solution as everyone had to self-isolate in their homes. The traditional classroom setting, sadly, has become a thing of the past and out of sheer necessity.

The disruptive effects of the COVID-19 outbreak have impacted almost all sectors of our society. The Algerian higher education is no exception. All forms of education and at all levels were stopped for several months. Fortunately, the closing of schools did not entirely and permanently stop education as the local authorities, as well as many others around the world, have been looking for alternative ways to provide access to education and the solution was found in the use of e-learning models. Nevertheless, major issues are expected to be faced by learners, teachers and faculty members to adapt the online form of education because until the COVID-19 crisis, online learning comprised a relatively small share of the Algerian higher education. Therefore, the present research attempts to explore the perception of students, belonging to various faculties within the university of Blida 2, regarding the use of the different forms of E-learning which are provided for them by the University and its faculties and the main challenges that they had to deal with in order to pursue their educational career.

1. Literature Review

1.1. ICT in the Algerian Educational System: An Overview

In a world where technological advancement has reached new levels of development never dreamt of before across all fields and domains, keeping education separate from this revolution is simply impossible. The last decade witnessed multiple initiatives made by the successive Algerian governments towards a full integration of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in education. In 2002, educational reform resulted in the formal inclusion of ICTs into education as an integral part of country's ICT policy[1].

This move was translated into the equipment of all secondary schools and, at a later stage, middle schools with a computer laboratory connected to the internet in addition to the introduction of computing as a course for learners.

At tertiary level, all universities were allotted the needed budget for the establishment of laboratories and the provision of a permanent internet connection. Additionally, universities are autonomous when it comes to their ICT policy and have no restrictions imposed on them concerning the creation of virtual classes, virtual libraries, and delivery learning materials through the internet. This was reinforced by the introduction of Academic Research Network which connects all the universities across the national territory allowing by the establishment of virtual libraries and the delivery of lessons via video conferencing technology[2].

In order to enhance the incorporation of ICTs, the successive Algerian governments cooperated with a number of organizations and countries. In 2006, a collaboration with "Thomson" and "Microsoft" corporations resulted in the project of "eLearning", which aimed at providing 4000 lessons designed to promote the use of computers and communication technologies in teaching[3]. In the same year, the government launched the "e-link" project which connected Algerian

students with their American peers and it was planned to be generalized to include several educational institutions. Other collaborative projects include "Med-Twinning", a network that serves as a virtual bridge that connects Algerian educational institutions with their Italian counterparts [4]. In addition, cooperation with the UNESCO helped in the planning of ICT integration process in the schools and universities. Finally, countries like Japan participated in the effort to generalize the use of ICT technologies and the teacher-training programs on ICT by offering a grant of USD 750,000 [5].

Being a corner stone in the implementation of ICT in the Algerian educational system, teacher training was given a considerable attention from the authorities. First, teacher training programs adopted the ICT as an integral facet of their curricula. All newly recruited teachers must receive an average of 30 to 60 hours of basic training on ICT [6]. Furthermore, in order to produce and supply the Algerian universities with qualified teachers, who are able to incorporate ICT into their practice and enable the planning and implementation of ICT at the level of universities, the ministry of higher education launched the "Tempus-MedaIde@" project in cooperation with European Universities including those of Strasbourg (France) and TECFA (Switzerland). This project was first implemented at the universities of Blida, Mostaganem, Annaba, Bouzaréah, and ENS of Constantine[7] and helped in the training of many teachers and university engineers in the field of ICT.

As seen before, the successive Algerian governments seem to be aware of the importance of ICT in education, and that can be inferred from the multiple attempts and initiatives launched throughout, the large budget allocated for this purpose and the employment of foreign expertise and world leading corporations. Therefore, with the spread of the corona virus and closure of the educational institutions it was doomed necessary to harvest the fruits of these efforts and easily

switch to an online model of learning. However, the application of this model of learning face several challenges which may reveal the real progress made in this field.

1.2. The Challenges of E-learning System in The Algerian Higher Education.

Being one of the major features of integrating ICT in the educational system, online learning refers to "learning through educational material that is presented on a computer connected to the internet" [8]. This type of learning makes use of the internet to enable the interaction between the learner, the instructor, the content, and other learners. Furthermore, thanks to the use of the Web as medium, online learning may be used within the confines of one classroom or to reach learners virtually anytime and anywhere in the world [9].Though, some tend to use the terms online learning and e-learning interchangeably, Seljan (2006) confirmed that e-learning is more of a generic term that encompasses not only the use of the internet but also other technological tools as the " 'e' stands for electronic, which embraces all aspects of ICT from using a word processor for producing printed hand-outs to a full blown online course wrapped up in a virtual learning environment"[10]. For example, e-learning could comprise online Learning Management Systems (LMSs) such as WebCT, Blackboard and Moodle; videoconferencing tools such as Skype and Zoom; Mobile applications such as Telegram and WhatsApp; and Social Media sites such as Facebook, Blogs, Wikis and Google Docs. These technologies include both means of communication: synchronous (i.e., chatrooms, Listservs) and asynchronous (i.e., e-mails, discussion boards) for educational purposes. Therefore, it is safe to say that the term e-learning is an umbrella term that encompasses any use of technology for teaching and learning.

Several studies have shown that implementing e-learning systems in higher education institutions in under-developed and developing countries has not always been successful [11] [12] [13] [14] [15]. These challenges must be addressed in order to ensure the success of this form of learning. First, the most obvious and frequent cause is the lack of access to this technology. In Algeria, as well as many other counties, ICT infrastructure in universities is poorly developed and inequitably accessed due to the absence of a firm and systemic approach to ICT implementation. Also, the budget allotted to ICT integration is not properly supervised. Thus, despite government's emphasis on the outfit of universities with computer laboratories and video conferencing equipment, there are still a considerable number of departments that lack this type of facilities. As a result of this immaturity of e-learning systems, teachers and learners often lack the incentives that motivate them to adopt this method of learning as well as engage in appropriate trainings to enable them to use it [16] [17]Furthermore, other factors that impede the effective implementation of e-learning include the lack of e-learning policies, the inconsistent and unreliable Internet connection, lack of flexible and easy-to-use e-learning applications, lack of administrative and technical support, the poor computer skills among learners, their instructors and the staff, just to mention a few [18].

ICT has a huge potential in improving the provision and acquisition of education and learning and the Algerian government's desire to integrate it in education is far from being questionable. Nevertheless, in order to ensure its success major improvement must be done and understanding students' learning conditions and their experiences of online learning during the COVID pandemic becomes imperative. To this end, the finding of this study will shed light on the shortcomings that inhibit them from harvesting the full benefits of this medium of learning especially and report on their perception of this

learning experience as a whole especially during the era of covid-19 pandemic.

2. Research Methodology and Design

2.1.1. Research Design

With the aim of achieving a reliable piece of research, any investigator needs to choose an adequate research method, which purposefully denotes plausible data and pivotal results. According to Parahoo a research design is "a plan that describes how, when and where data are to be collected and analyzed" [19]. As far as the present research is concerned, a mixed method research design is believed to be the most suitable to serve the objectives set in this study. The researcher opts to use both qualitative and quantitative data to provide a better understanding of the research problems. The mixed method research design involves the collection and the analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data within a single investigation at roughly the same time. This design has great potential to strengthen the rigor and enrich the analysis and findings. The use of this approach in generating multiple perspectives on a single phenomenon would yield positive results [20] In other words, the results generated through this research allow the researcher to have the reliability of data collection needed and contributes to the objectivity of the conclusions found.

The present study aims to answer the following main questions:

1) To what extent are learners of Blida 2 University satisfied of their e-learning experience?
2) What are the main challenges that face learners of Blida 2 University when using e-learning form of education?

The questionnaire is the main research tool in this study. It is composed of 22 open-ended items, split into four areas: accessibility

to e-learning platforms (questions 1-5); contents (6-8); technical and pedagogical support (9-14); problems met (15-23). Most of the items in the 3 first sections of this questionnaire are of the type of Likert scale items, ranging from strongly agree (SA) to strongly disagree (SD). The last section of this questionnaire is composed of a few open-ended questions which allow the participants of this study to express themselves freely about the challenges that they faced when engaging in the online form of education at Blida 2 university.

The items of the questionnaires were developed following the experience of offering e-learning classes in different countries that proceeded Algeria in this field. The electronic form of the questionnaire was sent to the students of the various departments of Blida 2 university using different means that the internet and the social media provide. After analyzing the data gathered from the respondents, the researcher was able to report the main findings and answer the research questions.

2.1.2. Participants of The Study

It is eventually acknowledged that the sample is a major tenet in any given research. The informants composing the sample of the present study are 428 learners. The respondents are students belonging to various faculties within Blida 2 University, namely The Faculty of Letters and Languages, The Faculty of Social and Human Sciences, The Faculty of Economics Commerce and Management Sciences, The Faculty of Law and Political Science. The sample is composed of participants aged from 17 to 35 years old. All of them were contacted after a few months of the formal adoption of the e-learning form of education in Blida 2 university during the academic years of 2019/2020 and 2020/2021.

A questionnaire in three languages (Arabic- French and English) was prepared on Google forms platform and a link to it was made

available to students online through their Facebook pages and groups between December 2nd, 2020 and March 22nd, 2021. Furthermore, out of a total of 35000 students registered in Blida 2 university during, 428 students successfully completed the questionnaire.

As shown in table 1, the participants' age ranges from 18 to 29, with an average age of 21 years; with a majority of female presence, which is not uncommon in most educational institutions across the country. 29% of them were in their first year, 21% in the second year, 25% in the third year, 15% in Master 1 and 10% in master 2 of their degree programs. 91% of the participants were enrolled at the university between one and five years while the other 9% were studying for more than five years.

Table 1. The distribution of the participants across the levels.

Year of Study	Respondents	Mean N (%)	Mean Age	Gender	
				Male	female
First-year Licence	71	16.5%	18	15%	85%
Second-year Licence	81	18.9%	19	9%	91%
Third-year Licence	107	25%	20	12%	88%
First-year Master	53	12.4%	22	5%	95%
Second-year Master	80	18.7%	23	11%	89%
Doctoral students	36	8.4%	29	7%	93%

After a few months of adopting the e-learning platforms as a formal form of education, the participants of this study were asked to fill out the questionnaire and provide feedback regarding their perceptions and experiences of learning through the e-learning platform provided by the different faculties of the university. The study was conducted anonymously over the Internet during several months and it focused on learners' perceptions and views rather than the ones of teachers or stakeholders. The researcher chose this period because it corresponds to a time after which most learners of Blida 2 University have had an experience using the e-learning form of

learning available even for those who are not familiar with it and never used it before.

3. The Results and Discussion

In this section of the article, the results of the most important items in the questionnaire are presented then analyzed in order to draw the conclusion and answer the research questions.

3.1.1. Accessibility to e-learning content

To begin with, the first section of the questionnaire, entitled "**accessibility to the e-learning content**", has seven items. Table 2 below shows the results of some of the most important items. The first item asks the learners to respond to the following statement "***Finding the content of the e-learning platform is easy".*** The finding provided evidence that almost half of the respondents (49%) agreed that they were able to access the e-learning content from their computers or smartphones with relative ease. i.e. without the need to install any special software. However, the other half (45%) stated that they disagree with this statement which indicates that they failed to reach the targeted content using the tools they have. These results are not surprising because with the start of something new there will always be a number of learners who feel lost and need assistance to find the content that he or she is looking for.

Table 2. students' attitudes towards the accessibility of the e-learning content

	Items	SD	D	N	A	SA
1.	**Finding the content of the e-learning platform is easy**	18%	31 %	6%	40 %	5%
2.	**I have a suitable Internet connection speed and ICT tools to use the e-learning contents**	51%	17 %	9%	19	4%
3.	**It is easy to get in touch with the teachers through the e-learning platforms**	53%	38 %	1%	6%	2%

In addition, concerning item 2 of the questionnaire, which states " ***I have a suitable Internet connection speed and ICT tools to use the e-learning contents"*** 51% of the respondents strongly disagreed with this statement and another 17% of them expressed their disagreement. Only 23% of the informants indicated that they agree or strongly agree with it. Furthermore, item 3 of the questionnaire aims to gather data about the difficulty that Blida 2 university students find to get in touch with their teachers throughout the e-learning platform. Based on the findings, there is a major difficulty for the respondents to contact their teachers in the e-learning form. The majority of the respondents 91% expressed their disagreement or strong disagreement to the statement whereas only 8% of them reported that they either agree or strongly agree with the statement.

3.1.2. The Content

For the second section of the questionnaire, entitled "**the content**", the researcher asked the respondents about their opinion of the type, quality and the availability of the teaching materials on the e-learning platforms. Table 3 below summaries the findings of some of the most important items.

Table 3. Students' attitudes towards the e-learning content

	Item	SD	D	N	A	SA
6.	**E-learning content is provided in written and audio-visual forms**	26%	46%	4%	22%	3%
7.	**The lessons on the e-learning platforms are detailed and well-explained**	28%	47%	5%	15%	5%
8.	**I can understand the lesson thoroughly using only the e-learning content and no need for the teacher.**	61%	32%	0%	5%	2%

One of these items is item 6. It is formulated as follows **"*E-learning content is provided in written and audio-visual forms*"**. According to the table, the majority of the participants 72% expressed

their disagreement or strong disagreement whereas only 25% expressed their agreement or strong agreement. The rest of the responses chose the neutral response. In addition, item 7 of the questionnaire asks the respondents to express their degree of agreement or disagreement to the following statement: **"*The lessons on the e-learning platforms are detailed and well-explained"*.** The vast majority of the respondents proved to be unsatisfied with quality of the lessons provided for them. For example, 47% of them selected disagree; another 28% expressed their strong disagreement to the statement leaving less than 20% of the respondents agreeing with the statement as the table above demonstrates. Finally, when asked if the e-learning materials provided in the platform make teachers disposal (item 8:" ***I can understand the lesson thoroughly using only the e-learning content and no need for the teacher***"), learners' responses were not surprising. The results of this item prove that there is a significant portion of learners who are strongly in disagreement with the statement (61%) and another (32%) expressed their disagreement. Only 5% of the informants agreed with statement. These results provide evidence to the extent to which learners are dependent on the teachers. This fact is not found unusual at the onset of the implementation of the e-learning form of education in the Algerian higher education. The next section will explore the findings of the third section of the questionnaire.

3.1.3. Technical and pedagogical support

The third section of the questionnaire, entitled **Technical and pedagogical support,** aims at gathering data from the learners about their opinion of the availability and the quality of the technical and pedagogical support when using the e-learning platform. Table 4 illustrates the results after the analysis of the data gathered.

Table 4. Students' attitudes towards the technical and pedagogical support

Item	SD	D	N	A	SA
10. I can find assistance (a guide) in case I failed to reach or open the e-learning contents	69%	20%	0%	10%	1%
11. Teachers are available online if I have question to ask	51%	26%	8%	6%	9%
12. Teachers provide me with feedback about my learning progress	35%	33%	5%	15%	12%

An example of these important questionnaire items is item 10. It is formulated as follows: **"*I can find assistance (a guide) in case I failed to reach or open the e-learning contents*".** The respondents' feedback shows that only 10% of them either agree or strongly agree with this statement and that vast majorities of 89% of the respondents disagree or strongly disagree with it. Similar results are obtained concerning item while only 11% of the respondents reported the availability of a guide or any form of assistance in case of need in the online form of learning. The next important item of this questionnaire is item 11. It says: "***Teachers are available online if I have question to ask".*** According to the table above, the vast majority of the respondents (77%) disagreed with the statement and only a minority of 15% either agrees or strongly agrees with the statement. These results are consistent with the results of the following item (item 12) of the questionnaire. This item aims to obtain data from the learners about the following statement: ***"Teachers provide me with feedback about my learning progress"***. More than 68% of the informants reported their disagreement with this statement whereas less than 27% of them agreed with it. Therefore, it can be inferred that the majority of the learners do face technical and pedagogical issues and there is a lack of support either from the university management or the teachers, in both formal and online forms. The next section is devoted for the exploration of the main problems that the learners are facing with this e-learning form of education.

3.1.4. The Challenges

The last section of the questionnaire, entitled "**the challenges**" is composed of a set of open-ended questions. It aims to give the respondents the freedom and space to report the issues and obstacles that they face when using the e-learning form of education. Using this form of questions would yield more accurate information and actionable insight from the perspectives of the learners. To analyze the data the researcher employed thematic and content analysis to identify and categorize recurring themes and responses. An example of this type of open-ended question is item 15 of this questionnaire. It aims to collect data about the technical problems that faced you when using the e-learning platforms. The analysis of the respondents' feedback enabled the researcher to identify key technical issue hindering the implementation of the e-leaning at Blida2 University. To begin with, these findings revealed that more than 68% of the respondents reported internet related issues which often revolve around the availability or the reliability of the internet connection. 34% of the respondents declared that they do not have the necessary ICT equipment that enable them to engage in the e-learning program, namely, a computer, a modem, a smartphone with a reliable internet access…etc. Moreover, 79% of the learners who answered this questionnaire indicated that the internet speed in inconvenient to download course materials and participate in live group video discussions. The informants of this study highlighted that very often internet service is not available at all, although paid for, for unknown reasons. Other technical issues faced by learners include teachers' lack the necessary ICT skill to interact with them through the e-learning platforms. For instance, 39% of the respondents reported that some teachers do not provide any content in the e-learning platforms and do not participate in any online learning events because they do not know how to use these "modern technologies" or not having the necessary

means to engage in e-learning form of education. Several informants reported that, often, many instructors do not even respond to their emails. Finally, the lack of information technology (IT) support from the university was also reported as a technical issue that hinders the implementation of the e-learning in the premises of Blida 2 university. 26% of the students concerned with this study reported their failure to access the e-learning content for technical issues which they could not resolve themselves and failed to find technical support for them. In short, technology-related challenges seem to be the main source of learners' failure to effectively use and fruitfully engage in the e-learning form of education.

Besides the technical issues related to the implementation and the use of e-learning form of education in Blida 2 university, the current study allowed the researcher to reveal a number of pedagogical issued associated with this form of learning. The second open-ended question of this fourth and last section of this questionnaire aims to gather data from the respondents on the pedagogical issues that faced them when using e-leaning form of education. After analyzing the data, the findings were as follows. First, the most frequent pedagogical issue was found to be the lack of motivation and interest in using the e-learning platform as a replacement to the accustomed face to face and traditional classrooms. 54% of the respondents reported that they have difficulties keeping up with the progress in the syllabus, homework and assignments...etc. In addition, learners with other daily responsibilities were divided in their opinion. 27% of them reported that e-learning helped them to learn from the convenience of their own homes whereas 34% reported that studying from home, where other members of the family are in the same room, is a major hindrance and a source of distraction. Another pedagogical issue related to e-learning is the type and the quality of learning content. 55% of the respondents expressed their

dissatisfaction with the learning materials provided for them, which they claim to be mostly in the form of electronic documents (pdf) with no audio-visual aids. Finally, many informants (41%) highlighted the issue of lack of social presence and human touch in this form of teaching represent a barrier to effective learning. Contacting teachers by emails and waiting for days, if ever, to receive a reply does not cover the face-to-face experiences of a traditional classroom. All in all, the pedagogical issues that accompanied the implementation of the e-learning form of education at the level of Blida 2 university, which were reported in this questionnaire portray a bleak, yet factual landscape. Therefore, teacher, learners and stakeholders need to work collaboratively to change it for the better. The following discussion and interpretation of the results may provide additional support toward that objective.

The current study concentrated on providing a number of insights and broader views into Blida 2 university students' experiences with e-learning form of education during the time of covid-19 pandemic. The respondents of this study provided rich data which were presented in the previous section. In this section, these results are interpreted to unravel the factors affecting this learning experience. To begin with, based on the informants' feedback, the absence of a clear learning structure seem to taken its toll on the learning process. In such difficult learning situation, undisciplined or unmotivated learners who do not have a regular and direct meeting time with their instructors often find extreme difficulties using the online form of learning. They need be encouraged to work harder and be reminded to do their assignments which were not the case in our case study. These findings are consistent with those of some other studies which highlight the importance of university management support for the success of the e-learning form [21].Furthermore, almost all learners refuse the idea that the use of e-learning in higher

education would make lecturers disposable. The materials provided on the platform cannot possibly substitute lecturers, classroom lectures, discussions and interaction. On the contrary, during its current condition, online form of learning can at best be used as an additional resource to enhance the learning experience of students and can only add value to existing teaching methods.

Also, the fact that the majority of the participants of this study (68%) reported having issues with the internet access or the availability of the necessary ICT tools to exploit the e-learning platform indicates that the success of this form of education goes beyond the premises of the university. Preparing a functional website is one thing while enabling all learners to use it is another. Students without a reliable internet access and/or technology tools to exploit it seem to be struggling to participate in this digital learning. This gap between those from privileged and disadvantaged backgrounds is seen between income brackets within the same classes and even across countries. It is obvious that the installation of an effective e-learning system, its ongoing maintenance, management and content development do not come in cheap price; nevertheless, unless these issues are effectively addressed, there will always be learners who are unable to actively engage in the e-learning form of education.

Furthermore, having the necessary material means to partake in the e-learning is not everything learners need. According to Munezero, having confidence in one's skills and ability to use e-learning contributes significantly to use of technology [22]. The fact that a large number of participants reported having difficulties accessing the e-learning content of the platform can be the outcome of the lack of proper training in the use of the ICT technologies. In addition, beside the basic training received in high school, most students at university do not receive any training in this field either in the graduate or the post-graduate phase. What confirms this theory is that many students

find the e-learning platform easy to use and they access its content without any troubles. Therefore, students' prior-knowledge and skill in the field of ICT can play a major role in success or the failure of the e-learning form of education at Blida 2 university.

One of the most frequently reported issues related to the introduction of the e-learning form of education to Blida 2 University is the quality of the content offered for the learners. Many respondents expressed their disappointment of the materials posted on the platform. They expected a detailed and sa well-explained lesson with audio-visual support, links to other websites, interesting activities to practice ...etc. However, most of the learning content was in the form of pdf files that provided basic theoretical knowledge. In addition, the technology-related challenges previously mentioned impair teachers-learner relationship. Interaction problems that are never witnessed in the normal classrooms, such as poor sound quality, poor image readability, long question-response lag time, question answer overlap, and the need for multiple repetitions before students or teachers make themselves understood, render the whole process of teaching and learning fruitless. In this kind of technological landscape, the researcher believes that learners' expectation resulted in observable signs of frustration if not exasperation which might explain the obtained results.

Gladly, there is silver lining to the adoption of e-learning form of education at Blida2 University. Many participants of this this study reported their comfort of learning at home and not having to commute to university especially during the pandemic era. Also, the economic side cannot be neglected. Many students ceased the opportunity of suspending classes to find jobs and improve their economic situation. This could have resulted in their loss of contact with their teachers and colleagues and their distance from the learning environment in general.

To conclude, the present study started with the objective of capturing and reporting Blida 2 University students' experience of using the e-learning form of education during the Covid-19 pandemic. After collecting, analyzing and interpreting the results, the researcher can report the following conclusions. First, a significant majority of the participants expressed unfavorable impressions about their experiences whereas only a minority seems to have had their expectation of this form of education met throughout the e-learning platform of Blida2 University. Second, the challenges that the participants faced when engaging in this form of education can be summarized in, primarily, the availability of an effective technological framework and the students' lack of training in this field. Secondly, the lack of quality pedagogical support provided to the learners from their instructors and the management and the poor quality of the course materials offered through the platform. These findings pave the way for the following set of recommendations that serve the aim of improving the e-learning experience at the Algerian higher education.

4. Implications

Although the sudden shift to the e-learning form of education has come with a number of challenges, the following solutions can help Algerian higher education institutions make a smoother transition. First, one of the means of addressing the problem of inaccessibility of websites and e-learning materials, such as course notes and audio and video clips is through the training of instructors on how to integrate e-learning in teaching and on how to use specific e-learning tools such as the learning platforms. Also, it would be beneficial to sensitize faculty members on the importance of updating their knowledge and skills in the field of ICT. Similarly, to tackle learners' concerns about their lack of ICT knowledge on how to use e-learning platforms, training opportunities on how to navigate through the learning platforms and use the e-learning content should be promoted. Despite

the fact that many Algerian universities already offer such trainings, it is recommended that these training programs are revised and updated to suit the learning context and the type of teachers and learners who will use the platform.

In addition, as far as the content of the e-learning platform is concerned, there is an evident need to improve the quality and the type of the courses offered for the learners. A vast majority of the learners expressed unfavorable perceptions towards the materials provided for them. One way to address this issue is by adding materials that actively engage the learners in the lesson rather than just sitting back and passively absorbing it. Nothing is worse than reading e-learning course that is long, dense, monotonous and boring instead of being snappy and engaging. Teachers and platform managers should hone their online course creation skills and encourage the learners to provide their own thoughtful input through active online interaction. Furthermore, in order to cater for the different learning styles of the learners, lessons should be provided in different formats with links of further learning resources. This can also smoothen the transition from the traditional classroom education to the new e-learning form and increase the effectiveness of this learning method.

Despite all the efforts, some learners can still have difficulties accessing, exploiting and making educational progress through the e-learning platform. The main reasons are the availability and the reliability of the internet in the region. Thus, in order to make real improvement in the field of e-learning, decision makers and policymakers should consider the readiness of the local internet infrastructure and work to upgrade it. One way to do that is to collaborate with internet providers to issue data and bandwidth vouchers for students especially those facing financial hardships. Without reliable internet, online education may become infeasible, and alternative delivery method could be more appropriate.

Finally, teachers are vital agents in the online learning process. They directly and distantly organize students' learning experiences. The findings of this study provide evidence that improving students' online learning experience entails making improvements in teachers' enrolment in this form of learning. To this end, it is recommended that teachers, who face difficulties using modern educational technologies, receive specialized training and guidance to update their skills and knowledge. In addition, it is necessary to establish effective contact between teachers and learners in this form of learning especially those facing difficulties transitioning from the traditional to the online classrooms. Such contact should incorporate course content-related support and guidance as well as effective motivation for the learners to make efforts and continue learning. Teachers can fulfill this need by sharing useful learning resources, assignment and rewards. Such form of contact can be achieved through online screen chat, social media groups, zoom and other conferencing platforms and even through e-mails without neglecting to provide learners with sufficient access to paper-based learning materials, such as revision booklet and printed courses, so they remain familiar with paper-based examinations and provide a variety of learning options that serve all leaners.

To conclude, the future development of the COVID-19 pandemic is quite unknown but experts are concerned about a prolonged crisis that may extend the period of online learning. As a result, this study invites learners, instructors and decision makers to work on a roadmap that would reinforce the e-learning form of education and ensure that modern educational technologies continue to benefit rather than hamper students and that gain are maintained and built upon to reach a quality online learning in the Algerian higher education.

- **Conclusion**

Online learning is currently adopted by educational institutions worldwide to provide students with ongoing education during the COVID-19 pandemic. The present study started with the aim to uncover Blida 2 university students' perspectives of the online learning experience which they embarked on since the spread of the covid-19 pandemic. The analysis of the data collected provide evidence that the unplanned and hasty shift to online learning – with the lack of proper training, insufficient bandwidth, and little preparation – have resulted in a poor learning experience. In addition, the findings of this study demonstrate valuable insights on the issues that students experience through the online learning form of education. These issues include poor internet connection, problems with ICT equipment, limited collaborative learning opportunities, reduced learning motivation, and increased learning burdens. Finally, the findings of this study pave the way for some recommendations and implications to educational institutions and authorities which include the provision of sufficient technical support to help students overcome potential internet and accessibility issues, proper training for teachers to hone their skills and knowledge and improve their connectivity and contact with the learners. All in all, the shortcomings in the online learning form in some Algerian higher educational institutions can play a significant role in building an effective distant learning system in the future.

5. Endnotes

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