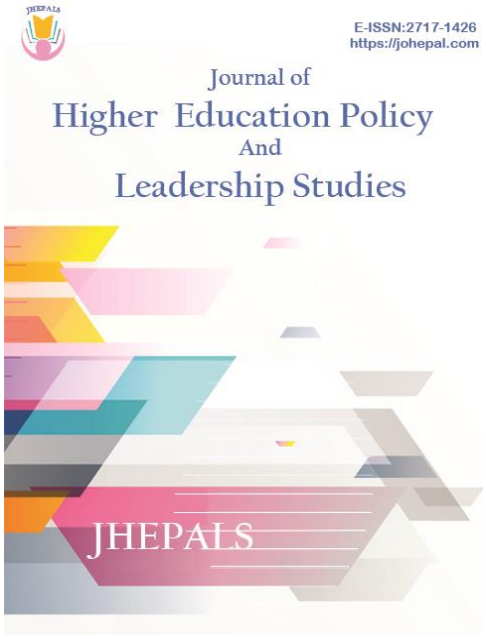
Journal of
Higher Education Policy
And
Leadership Studies

JHEPALS (E-ISSN: 2717-1426)

https://johepal.com



Student Teachers' Experiences of Online Education During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Challenges and Opportunities

Seyed Hedayat Davarpanah *
Email: h.davarpanah@edu.ui.ac.ir
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8497-4931

Negin Barat Dastjerdi *
Email: n.dastjerdi@edu.ui.ac.ir
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9978-5765

Zeinab Shirzad *
Email: ze.shirzad@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0009-0007-6483-7765

* *Department of Education, University of Isfahan, IRAN*

Colloquium Received **2022/07/26** | Colloquium Accepted **2023/05/18** | Published Online **2023/06/30**

Cite colloquium as:

Davarpanah, S. H., Barat Dastjerdi, N., & Shirzad, Z. (2023). Student teachers' experiences of online education during the COVID-19 pandemic: Challenges and opportunities. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Leadership Studies, 4*(2), 129-135. https://dx.doi.org/10.61186/johepal.4.2.129

[Downloaded from www.johepal.com on 2026-11-08]

[DOI: 10.61186/johepal.4.2.129]

"Colloquium"

Journal of Higher Education Policy And Leadership Studies (JHEPALS)

E-ISSN: 2717-1426
Volume: 4 Issue: 2
pp. 129-135
DOI:
10.61186/johepal.4.2.129

Student Teachers' Experiences of Online Education During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Challenges and Opportunities

Seyed Hedayat Davarpanah
Negin Barat Dastjerdi *
Zeinab Shirzad

Highlights

- With the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, universities were obliged to shift from in-person to online education to continue educational activities. This mandatory migration from face-to-face to online structures has been accompanied by challenges and opportunities.
- Our study found that challenges of online education from the perspective of student teachers included challenges related to the LMS (high cost of the internet, lack of adequate network coverage in rural areas, weak servers), faculty (teachers' weakness in online teaching, refusing to use all of the LMS facilities, a large amount of assignments), and student (family environment, hardware equipment, enhancing cheating motivation, unfair competition, vision problems). In addition, according to student teachers, opportunities for online education included flipped teaching, evaluation with a feed-forward approach, mastery learning, strengthened self-confidence in shy learners, and easy access to faculty members.
- Overall, the results indicate that online education, despite all the challenges, provides opportunities which can be effective if used appropriately.

Keywords: Lived Experiences; Student Teachers; Online Education; COVID-19 Pandemic; Challenges & Opportunities in HE

* **Corresponding author's email:** n.dastjerdi@edu.ui.ac.ir

[Downloaded from www.johepal.com on 2026-11-08]

[DOI: 10.61186/johepal.4.2.129]

Introduction

In late February 2020, upon the outbreak of Coronavirus in Iran, the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology (MSRT) ordered the closure of all educational institutions and universities. These restrictions led to the expansion of online learning and virtual classrooms. Up to now, universities have been experiencing a widespread and unprecedented transformation from traditional classroom to online education. This transformation provided an online and virtual version of all instructional activities.

The history of virtual and online education in public and private higher education institutions in Iran dates back to the year 2000 (Saberi & Sharifzadeh, 2019). It was not until then that some of the leading universities in Iran, including Shiraz University, University of Isfahan, Iran University of Science and Technology, Khajeh Nasir Toosi University of Technology, University of Tehran, and The University of Quran and Hadith were forerunners in beginning and providing online courses and virtual classrooms (Kian et al, 2011). However, despite the two-decade presence of online education in Iran's academia, by the time of COVID-19, the development of technological infrastructures for efficient online education in Iranian universities was a slow-growing phenomenon. Even the Iranian-leading universities, which had been providing e-learning courses for more than a decade, encountered fundamental challenges in developing technological infrastructure for online learning systems (Darab & Montazer, 2011).

In harmony with the global inclination towards online education, different branches of Farhangian University provided online teacher education programs. These programs address the professional development of student teachers and fellow school teachers and a university supervisor assesses their teaching skills and abilities. Farhangian University develops and provides specialized training courses to prepare future teachers. This university also trains and fulfills the required human resources of the Iranian Ministry of Education. Farhangian University was grounded upon the heresy of the 100-year history of teacher education centers in Iran. It was established in 2011 with the integration of all teacher education centers across the country. Given the fact that online education in Iran suffered from lack of appropriate and efficient software and hardware, the present study aims to explore the performance of Farhangian University concerning the management of online education during the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the opportunities and challenges of online education in this university. The results of the present study can contribute to the management of the current challenges to make online education more effective. Further, in alignment with other research studies worldwide, the present study helps to map the status of online education in universities across the world during the COVID-19 pandemic as it presents reliable information on the status of online education in Iran.

Research Methodology

The present study is a qualitative, phenomenological research that builds on thematic analysis to analyze the data. We selected twenty-six undergraduate male student teachers from Farhangian University - Bahonar branch* through purposive sampling. Data collection was through semi-structured interviews until we obtained theoretical saturation. We opted

* It should be noted that Shahid Bahonar branch is for males.

[Downloaded from www.johepal.com on 2026-11-08]

[DOI: 10.61186/johepal.4.2.129]

for the participants who have been educated at least two semesters via online classes during the COVID-19 pandemic. We conducted interviews from April 17, 2021, to June 05, 2021. Each interview lasted between 25 to 60 minutes. The interview protocol included the introduction of the researchers, research objectives, and a leading two-part question: Given the experience of attending online classes for at least two semesters during the COVID-19 pandemic, what do you consider to be the most important challenges and opportunities of online education at Bahonar branch? Due to the COVID-19 pandemic-related limitations, interviews were conducted via Skype and four interviewees over the telephone calls simply because they did not have access to proper internet connection. We got their permission to record the interviews (in Persian). Then, we carefully transcribed the interviews for analysis purposes.

We employed thematic analysis to analyze our data. Thematic analysis is a method to identify, analyze, and report patterns in qualitative data. This method goes beyond counting explicit words, and phrases, and renders scattered and varied data as rich and detailed data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes are "recurrent and distinctive features of participations accounts, characterizing particular perceptions and/or experiences, which the researcher sees as relevant to the research question" (King et al., 2019, p. 200). In other words, "[a] theme is a pattern found in the information that, at minimum, describes and organizes the possible observations and, at maximum, interprets aspects of the phenomenon " (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 4 as cited in Davarpanah et al., 2021) Owing to the variety of methods used in thematic analysis and the diversity of experts' views, there are different headings and classifications for themes. In this study, thematic analysis follows Attride-Stirling's (2001) three levels of basic themes (codes and key points in the text), organizing themes (categories obtained from the combination and summarization of basic themes), and global themes (high-level themes containing the principles governing the text as a whole) (Davarpanah et al., 2021). To ensure the validity of the data, we used member checks, peer checks and an external observer.

Research Findings

We categorized the findings from the interviews under two global themes (Table 1.).

Challenges of Online Education

The *challenges of online education* theme comprised three organizing themes, namely, challenges related to the Learning Management System (LMS) and infrastructure, faculty-related challenges, and student-related challenges.

In relation to the infrastructural and LMS problems and challenges, the participants noted several issues such as high cost and slow speed of the Internet, lack of network coverage in rural areas, and weak servers as well as system disruptions which were among the most crucial challenges of online education. Moreover, faculty-related challenges concerning online education were categorized under three themes: teachers' weakness in online teaching, refusing to use all of the LMS facilities, and a large amount of assignments. Furthermore, according to the participants, student-related challenges in online education can be categorized into five themes: family environment, hardware equipment, enhancing cheating motivation and novel approaches, vision problems, and unfair competition.

[Downloaded from www.johepal.com on 2026-11-08]

[DOI: 10.61186/johepal.4.2.129]

Online Education Opportunities

The global outspread of the COVID-19 imposed online version of education on the traditional educational systems and, consequently, enforced many universities and education centers to form online classrooms without appropriate previous planning to cope with the new situation. Nonetheless, our participants believed that despite the existing challenges and loopholes, the new situation had its own advantages and has provided significant opportunities for both students and educational system, including the possibility of flipped teaching, evaluation with a feed-forward approach, mastery learning, strengthened self-confidence in shy learners, and easy access to faculty members.

Table 1.
Challenges and Opportunities of Online Education

Global-Theme	Organizing Themes	Basic Themes
Challenges of online education	Infrastructure and LMS-related Challenges	High cost and slow speed of the Internet
		Lack of adequate network coverage in rural areas
		Weak servers and LMS disruptions
	Faculty-related challenges	Teachers' weakness in online teaching
		Refusing to use all of the LMS facilities
		Large amount of assignments
	Student-related challenges	Family environment
		Hardware equipment
		Enhancing Cheating motivation and novel approaches
		Unfair competition
		Vision Problems
Online education opportunities	The possibility of flipped teaching	Presenting the course content before the class time
		Awareness of the content and plans of the upcoming session
		The possibility of pre-reading course materials
		More mental preparation
		Better and more effective participation in class
	Evaluation with a feed-forward approach	Possible to revise and re-do homework
		Possible to fix bugs
		Considering the portfolio and doing small scale projects during the semester
		Appropriate and timely feedback and understanding of taught concepts and topics
		Considering less score for the final exam and reducing the stress and anxiety of students
	Mastery learning	Possible to listen to recorded files again at any time
		Fix bugs by watching class videos
		Browsing and taking notes on recorded files
		Students' mastery of the taught content
	Strengthened self-confidence in shy learners	Possible to speak without feeling the physical presence of others
		Expressing your opinions and views without stress and anxiety
		Acquiring the skill of speaking in public slowly and strengthening it
	Easy access to faculty members	Access to professors without time and place restrictions
		Increasing professors' accountability

[Downloaded from www.johepal.com on 2026-11-08]

[DOI: 10.61186/johepal.4.2.129]

Conclusion

Our study depicted the picture of online teaching in Farhangian University - Bahonar branch, as a representation of the educational activities during the COVID-19 pandemic in Iran. The widespread prevalence of COVID-19 has been associated with the forced migration of educational systems and changes in teaching and learning processes from traditional, face-to-face structures to virtual and online ones. According to the lived experiences of student teachers, the online teaching-learning process during the COVID-19 pandemic is associated with numerous challenges and opportunities for education systems and all stakeholders (especially faculty and students). These challenges prevail not only in developing countries but also in developed ones (Assapari, 2021). Nevertheless, this historical crisis highlights the need for adaptation of educational systems to increase learning flexibility to gain the maximum benefit from the opportunities that have arisen.

Research Limitations

Since higher education institutions are different in terms of funding, structure, and mission (see Ameri, 2015) and since only a selected number of students from one of the branches of Farhangian University were interviewed in this study, the findings can be generalized to other branches of Farhangian University and other higher education institutions in Iran with caution.

Suggestions for Further Research

Crises are inevitable; therefore, it is vital to develop a sustainable and feasible education program in the face of a crisis recurrence. In this study, students reported that they are supposed to do heavy loads of activity and that online education has increased possibility and motivation for cheating in online courses. It is suggested that future research investigates the appropriateness of students' homework in online courses, the ways to encourage and motivate students to do homework more efficiently, and ways to persuade students to abstain from cheating. Besides, considering that the findings of this study were based on the perceptions of student teachers concerning the challenges and opportunities of online education, we suggest researchers to study and compare the perceptions of faculty members with the findings of the present study. In addition, because of the differences between universities and higher education institutions in terms of facilities and financial resources, we suggest to study the challenges and opportunities of online education in universities and higher education institutions in Iran and other countries and compare the findings with those of the present study.

[Downloaded from www.johepal.com on 2026-11-08]

[DOI: 10.61186/johepal.4.2.129]

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Human Participants

The authors confirm that ethical considerations and guidelines concerning the privacy of individuals were carefully considered during the research process. When participants were provided with information about the objectives of the research and asked to give their permission to make audio recordings of the interviews, they were assured that the information gathered would remain confidential.

References

Ameri, R. (2015). Higher education and quality assurance in Iran: A brief survey: Available online at https://www2.mqa.gov.my/aqaaiw/Country%20Report/Iran/QA-Malysia-final3.pdf

Assapari, M. M. (2021). The challenges of teaching efl for adult learners: online learning during the covid-19 pandemic *Jurnal Ilmiah STBA, 7*(1). https://doi.org/10.47255/spectral.v7i1.64

Attride-Stirling, J. (2001). Thematic networks: an analytic tool for qualitative research. *Qualitative research, 1*(3), 385-405. https://doi.org/10.1177/146879410100100307

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative research in psychology, 3*(2), 77-101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Darab, B., & Montazer, G. A. (2011). An eclectic model for assessing e-learning readiness in the Iranian universities. *Computers & Education, 56*(3), 900-910. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2010.11.002

Davarpanah, S. H., Hoveida, R., Barnett, R., Javdani, H., & Jamshidian, A. (2021). Ritualism as a Form of Academic Malfunctioning: Iranian Higher Education as a Case Study. *Journal of Higher Education Policy And Leadership Studies, 2*(3), 30-56. http://dx.doi.org/10.52547/johepal.2.3.30

Kian, M., Attaran, M., & Fazeli, N. (2011). A Study of E-learning culture in Universities of Iran: A grounded theory research. *Quarterly of Cultural Studies & Communication, 7*(24), 95-128. https://www.sid.ir/en/Journal/ViewPaper.aspx?ID=501200

King, N., Horrocks, C., & Brooks, J. (2019). *Interviews in Qualitative Research* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications Ltd.

Saberi, R., & Sharifzadeh, M. (2019). Evaluation of the curriculum implemented in E-Learning of Farhangian University: the position of needs, content and method in E-Learning. *Journal of New Strategies For Teacher Education, 5*(8), 11-28. https://www.sid.ir/paper/366681/en

[Downloaded from www.johepal.com on 2026-11-08]

[DOI: 10.61186/johepal.4.2.129]

Dr. Seyed Hedayat Davarpanah received his bachelor's degree in Educational Technology in 2014 from the University of Isfahan, Iran. He, then, received his master's degree in Educational Management from the University of Isfahan in 2016. His thesis addressed the "Relationships between organizational structure and organizational learning capabilities with organizational indifference employees at the University of Isfahan". He also received his Ph.D in Higher Education Management from the same university in 2020. His doctoral thesis was about ritualism and creativity in the Iranian higher education system. He is currently an Assistant Professor member at the Department of Education, University of Isfahan, Iran. His research interests include higher education, leadership, e-learning, human resource development, mentoring and qualitative research.

Dr. Negin Barat Dastjerdi is an Assistant Professor and faculty member at the Department of Education, University of Isfahan, Iran. Her research interests are social networks, virtual education, online learning, e-learning, mobile learning , gams and simulation, multimedia.

Dr. Zeinab Shirzad studied Higher Education Management at the Department of Education, University of Isfahan, Iran. Her research interests include higher education, e-learning, research spirit, teaching quality, globalization and internationalization of higher education. Her doctoral dissertation was about Identifying strategies of facing globalization challenges and presenting a suitable model for Iranian Higher Education System utilizing composed model of SWOT and QSPM.

[Downloaded from www.johepal.com on 2026-11-08]

[DOI: 10.61186/johepal.4.2.129]

This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0) which allows reusers to distribute, remix, adapt, and build upon the material in any medium or format for noncommercial purposes only, and only so long as attribution is given to the creator.