**Palestinian University experiences of Emergency Remote Learning during Covid 19 in Light of the INEE Minimum Standards**

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# Abstract

The goal of this study was to analyze and interpret Palestinian university students' lived experiences while participating in emergency remote learning (ERL) during COVID-19. The study addressed the research issue with a qualitative phenomenological approach, in which 40 students from An-Najah National University were asked to write a reflection essay about their experiences. By examining how university students learnt during COVID-19, we can assist assure the success of ongoing ERL and better include similar programs in the future. The researcher employed thematic analysis in light of the five INEE emergency domains in education (Foundational standards, access and learning environment, teaching and learning, teachers and other educational personnel, and education policy). Among other categories, the study showed that access and learning environment, as well as teaching and learning domains, were the most prevalent. Online learning was a challenge for students due to the ongoing requirement for Internet connectivity; on the other hand, it supplied them with many sources of information. Students described their emergency remote learning experience as "interesting and exhausting."

**Key words**: emergency remote learning; higher education; COVID-19, INEE, minimum standards

# Introduction

The pandemic of COVID-19 has struck havoc on academia (Cahapay, 2020; Rahiem, 2020; Ismaili, 2021; Tulaskar & Turunen, 2022). According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the crisis has impacted more than 1.37 billion students (or 80% of the world's student population) (UNESCO, 2020). As a result of the COVID-19 threat, educational institutions declared an emergency and hastened to transition courses to virtual classrooms. Numerous schools have elected to cancel all face-to-face sessions, including laboratories and other learning activities (Rahiem, 2020), and have required teachers to transfer their courses online in order to aid in the prevention of the virus that causes COVID-19's spread (Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust, Bond, 2020).

As a result of this crisis, learning environments were often disorganized, with educators hurriedly shifting course content to an online environment via learning management systems (LMS). Faculty subsequently began recording entire lectures for student listening and viewing, as well as posting assignments online and digitally grading them rather than manually (Schultz and DeMers, 2020). This paradigm shift in online education is best described as Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) (Hodges et al., 2020) or, as others have coined the term, pandemic pedagogy (Millman, 2020).

Palestine was not an exception when it comes to implementing those measures. Since March 9th, Palestinian educational institutions have been closed. Higher education institutions were forced to adapt remote learning in higher education in order to meet student needs and compensate for academic semester losses. As a result of the rapid and extreme transformation, both teachers and pupils faced distinct obstacles. Teachers were required to undergo an overnight digital transformation, overcome technological anxiety, and work exceedingly hard for the benefit of their kids (Bordoloi et al., 2021; Serhan, 2020).

The remote learning shift in Palestinian higher education institutions was done using both synchronous and asynchronous learning approaches. When the teacher and students do not need to communicate in real time online, asynchronous learning occurs. They are segmented into distinct spaces and time. Moodle is the platform on which it is used for assessment. On the other hand, the synchronous mode requires the teacher and student to collaborate via online apps such as Zoom at a predetermined time. Synchronous learning is the closest thing to a live experience in the e-environment. Khan et al. (2021) assert that these sessions must be planned in such a way that students remain engaged at all times.

## Research Questions, Objectives and Significance

The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of Palestinian university students' experiences with emergency remote learning during the COVID-19 crisis by addressing the following primary question: "How did Palestinian university students experience emergency remote learning as a result of the COVID-19 crisis?" We could enhance current practice if we understood what university students learned during the COVID-19 emergency. Students' feedback is also critical for future improvement of the learning process if a similar situation occurs. Because it is unknown, how long ERL will persist or what additional issues may arise in the future, educational institutions and students must be better prepared. Additionally, this study addressed a practical gap in terms of implementing ERL successfully in higher education while meeting the demands of learners.

Numerous scholars from all around the world have already undertaken studies on higher education in the aftermath of the COVID-19 disaster. However, practically all of them relied on quantitative data analysis to get their results. Few research have examined more authentic findings gleaned from qualitative methodologies in this singular setting. In the Palestinian context, little research on home learning during COVID 19 used the term “emergency remote learning” (Khlaif, Salha, Kouraichi, 2021; Khlaif, Salha, Affouneh, Rashed, ElKimishy, 2021; Khlaif, Salha, 2020), and none of those papers referred to the INEE minimum standards as emergency remote learning.

These research findings addressed a knowledge (theoretical) gap in ERT and emergency education at the university level, as well as a practical gap in implementing ERT successfully in higher education to fulfill the needs of learners.

## Conceptualizing Remote Teaching

Over the years, educational technology researchers and practitioners have coined terminology to describe the widely varied design solutions produced and implemented: distance learning, distributed learning, blended learning, online learning, mobile learning, and e-learning (Hodges et al., 2020). The researcher in this study used the term "Emergency Remote Learning (ERL)" to refer to the pressing need to transition from face-to-face course delivery to an online hybrid approach (Lorenza & Carter, 2021). The ERL is sometimes used to refer to education that occurs during the shutdown of academic institutions, rather than to online or virtual learning, because well-planned online learning experiences are qualitatively different from those offered online in reaction to a crisis or disaster (Rahiem, 2020).

Hodges et al. (2020) distinguished between Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) and online learning; they defined ERT as a temporarily shift away from traditional instruction delivery in response to crisis conditions. It necessitates the employment of totally remote teaching methodologies that take little time to convert to remote learning, lack of preparation, and students' and instructors' unfamiliarity with new online resources, and that will return to that model once the crisis or emergency has passed. The major goal in this context is not to recreate a stable educational environment, but rather to give quick access to education and training in an easily developed and immediately accessible way during an emergency or crisis (Rahiem, 2020). It is not the case with well-planned and structured online education, which many have spent years mastering (Millman, 2020).

## Conceptual Framework

The Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) defines Education in Emergencies (EiE) as "qualitative learning opportunities for all ages in crisis situations, including early childhood development, primary, secondary, non-formal, technical, vocational, higher, and adult education." It provides physical, psychosocial, and cognitive protection that can both sustain and save lives (INEE 2010, 117). Education in times of crisis not only provides a safe haven for children and their communities, but also psychosocial help.

In 2010, the United Nations General Assembly issued a resolution recognizing the right to education in times of emergency and urging member nations to adhere to the INEE's minimal requirements (UN General Assembly 2010). While the primary focus of EiE is on post-conflict rehabilitation (Versmesse et al. 2017), research indicates that the targeted outcomes are applicable to the majority, if not all, emergency circumstances. This includes enhanced education response quality, strengthened educational sector resilience, greater educational sector contribution to improved emergency prediction, preparedness, and prevention, and creation of evidence-based policies and efficient operational procedures (UNICEF 2011, 7).

The INEE Minimal Standards for Education assure education readiness, response, and recovery; they are the only global tool that articulates the minimum level of educational quality and access during emergencies, as well as during recovery and development. The INEE Minimum Standards seek to improve the quality of educational preparedness, response, and recovery; to increase equitable access to safe and relevant learning opportunities for all learners, regardless of age, gender, or ability; and to ensure accountability and strong coordination in the provision of education in emergencies and during recovery (INEE, 2013).

As depicted in Figure 1, the INEE minimum requirements encompass 19 domains: Foundational Standards, Access and Learning Environment, Teaching and Learning, Teachers and Other Education Personnel, and Education Policy. The guidelines are intended to "provide guidance on how to prepare for and respond to acute events in ways that minimize risk, promote future preparation, and lay the groundwork for a high-quality education" (INEE 2010, 5).

**Figure 1**

INEE Minimum standards



Note. This diagram adapted from Minimum Educational Standards in Palestine's Occupied Territories. (INEE, 2010, P.25)

Numerous countries have used the INEE's minimum guidelines to address specific concerns during pandemics. Uganda, for example, established an education consortium and laid out a plan of action based on the perceived measures necessary to continue studying during the COVID 19 outbreak (Corbishley 2020). The European Commission (2020a; 2020b) conducted a survey to ascertain problems and potential solutions for ensuring learning continuity during the COVID-19 emergency, with a particular emphasis on technical vocational programs. According to the findings, the majority of respondents called for the establishment of a centralized platform for online education that would enable the access and exchange of free educational resources prepared by experts and available in a variety of languages. Fontanos, Gonzales, Lucasan, and Ocampo (2021) analyzed the Philippine education policy framework using INEE minimum standards domains.

# Methodology:

The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of Palestinian university students' experiences with Emergency Remote Leaching (ERL) during COVID19 by comparing their experiences to INEE's minimum standards. The research used a qualitative phenomenological approach. The objective of this phenomenological analysis is to gather and examine the lived experiences of university students who were obliged to learn from home because of the COVID-19 epidemic. These experiences provided a fresh light on the implementation of ERL following the aftermath of COVID-19 epidemic (Alase, 2017; Rahiem, 2020).

In phenomenology research, the researcher seeks to present a direct description of an individual's experience regardless of the individual's psychological background or the causal explanations that the scientist may be able to supply (Alase, 2017). According to Rahiem (2020), phenomenology is capable of comprehending participants' subjective interpretations of the study's central object by shedding light on the significance assigned to their lived experience and delving into the specific meanings underlying the empiric variants of a given phenomenon, rather than simply applying the technique.

## The research Participants:

This study enrolled forty undergraduate students from An-Najah National University, each of whom is pursuing a unique major and academic year. Additional information on their demographics is found in the table 1 below.

**Table 1**

Participants’ demographic information

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Gender | Male | 2 | 40 |
| Female | 38 |
| Major | English Methodology | 19 | 40 |
| English Literature | 2 |
| Chemistry | 4 |
| Elementary Teacher | 10 |
| Physics | 3 |
| Math | 2 |
| Year of Study | Senior | 5 | 40 |
| Junior | 3 |
| Sophomore | 12 |
| Freshman | 20 |

## Data collection

The researcher employed a purposive sampling technique, selecting individuals depending on their accessibility. Participants were informed of the study's scope and purpose, and they were free to leave at any moment if they were dissatisfied. The data collection method was novel: participants were asked to write a reflection essay about their experience with ERL at COVID 19. The researcher instructed them and encouraged them to comment on their experiences. The questions were on their reactions to the rapid adoption of remote learning, their preparedness and motivation for this new mode of instruction, as well as their access to the Internet, hardware, electricity, and instructional materials. Additionally, the researcher questioned participants regarding instructor-student and student-student relationships and exchanges in distance education. Finally, participants were asked to select their favorite mode of learning once the pandemic was over.

Prior to completing the actual study, the researcher piloted the research instrument with ten non-participants. Participants were given one week to complete their reflection essays, which they submitted electronically via email and other forms of social media. Each reflective essay has a word count of around 1000 words.

## Data analysis

To make sense of the data, the researcher used thematic analysis. It is a technique for categorizing, assessing, and comprehending patterns, which are frequently referred to as themes (Clarke & Braun, 2016). Thematic analysis (TA) is frequently employed in qualitative research due to its adaptability. The researcher adhered to Braun and Clarke's six phases of thematic analysis (2006). To begin, (1) familiarize and acquaint yourself with the facts. Following that, (2) writing codes and (3) investigating possible themes while adhering to INEE's fundamental principles. Following that, (4) go over them and (5) give them names and definitions. Finally, we explore the findings in (6).

# Results and Discussions

The purpose of this study is to examine how university students perceived ERL during the COVID-19 crisis. The data indicated those students' experiences were paradoxical, "both engaging and challenging." The following paragraphs will address each of the students' arguments regarding the benefits and drawbacks of online learning.

Participants cited the simplicity and adaptability of online education as the most frequently expressed positive attributes. The participants discussed the numerous benefits that online education has brought them in this broad sense.

One of the main advantages of distance learning is that it allows the student to choose the time, place, and manner of learning. This implies that the student can choose the approach that best suits her. (Asma)

Students may communicate with teachers via social media platforms easily. Since the beginning of electronic instruction, this has been recognized and popular. We (students and instructor) agree on a specific time to meet electronically and take the lesson, which is impossible to do in a traditional classroom setting. (Haitham)

The student attends her lectures from home in a comfortable environment, as this may be encouraging and have a positive impact on the student's motivation to focus and learn (Basima)

*Many students were aided by the availability of the instructional materials 24 hours and on all days of the week. It allowed them to do other things besides study, so anyone who wants to work or join training classes or sports clubs can do so without interfering with their studies. (Mohamad)*

In comparison to the degree of flexibility, participants said that instructors overburdened them with work, making time management difficult.

E-learning doubles the amount of work; it creates physical, psychological, social, and intellectual issues for both student and teacher. The teacher must first prepare the information, then load it onto PowerPoint slides, record it (audio or video), and share it with the students via social media. You can only imagine how long these procedures take!!!!! E-learning required students to rely more on themselves, look for more material, and complete more assignments, just as it did for students. (Manal)

Additionally, numerous participants expressed mental exhaustion from being overburdened with multiple academic duties for their online classes. These students reported considerable dissatisfaction with the kinds and methods of online education currently available. "I feel drained. The workload of my lecturers is too great for me to endure" (Lana). Students are unhappy and upset mostly because their academic workload has increased significantly and their Internet access has become inconsistent, preventing them from participating in online classes.

Along with quarantining, the extreme strain that students endured in on-line learning under COVID 19 had a substantial influence on their mental health. In their current circumstances, the majority of students reported feeling pressured, anxious, frustrated, and depressed. "I felt isolated during online learning since I spent hours sitting in my bed, starring at my laptop screen, or completing exercises and homework prescribed by our professors" (Shahd).

The second most often reported favorable attitude by our participants was the absence of transportation expenditures and traffic delays associated with learning. Because online education does not require students to travel to their respective institutions, they do not have to consider or worry about transportation costs or traffic delays during their daily learning; they do not have to travel to their universities to study and can avoid being late for their classes. "The advantage is that you are not required to travel to school, pay for transportation, or exhaust yourself in traffic." (Hala). Bayan concurred with Hala, noting, "e-learning is ideal for a low-income student due to the cost savings on books and transportation." As she elaborated, Inas concurs with Hala and Bayan:

Distance education saves both students and teachers time and effort. They are not concerned with making it to class on time or with determining the best method of transportation to take to attend lectures, which saves them time, effort, and money.

At this point, the dilemma resurfaces; while online education saves time and money, financial constraints have resulted in a shortage of resources (e.g., updated software, mobile phones, personal computers, teaching materials, and audio equipment) required for online education. Tasneem added the following to this notion:

While the idea of e learning seems accessible to everyone, many people lack smartphones, laptops, or internet access. We found ourselves because our family consisted of six brothers and sisters and we occasionally lacked technical equipment and couldn’t afford to purchase six machines in this situation.

E-learning requires the student to use technology to follow along with the lessons; as a result, the student must have a computer and a stable internet connection, which are not always available to all students. Some children with several siblings will struggle to organize their computer usage in such a way that each of them attends his classes. (Zainab)

According to student response, recording lectures has also resulted in a paradoxical experience; as Iman put it, "lectures are recorded, which means learning is not limited to sync class." Iman continued, "although this has a number of benefits for children, particularly those with certain disabilities," it demotivated students to attend sync classes and offered them an excuse to rebel and neglect their academics.

Another interesting conclusion from the reflective essays of the participants concerns the learning environment and being at home. While the participants indicated that online education enables them to spend more time at home with their families and study in a comfortable and calm setting, they also stated that they were distracted by their siblings and household noise. "With all family members at home, all rooms are crammed with people, noises, and talk, and resolving this issue proved incredibly tough." (Zain). "When the microphone is turned on, our families' shouts and the screaming of street vendors, combined with some sibling clashes, cause us to feel quite embarrassed by our colleagues and teachers." (Rania)

Tasneem also shared her story with us during one of the COVID sync seminars, stating:

My younger sister listened to music on her phone throughout one of the lectures, while the professor and students debated a topic and I interacted with them while my microphone remained turned on. I grew terrified and was unable to swiftly switch off the microphone, and the professor overheard the songs and reprimanded me for not paying attention. I attempted to describe the circumstance to him multiple times, but he refused to believe me. He didn't believe me for a variety of reasons he had heard from pupils. He pleaded with me to exit the lecture. Your teacher did not believe you because it was such a horrible sensation. I am certain that if this scenario occurred during face-to-face education, the teacher's conduct would have been significantly different.

Tasneem's story invites us to explore one of the most critical themes raised in practically every participant's reflection writing. It is about social relationships, interactions between students and teachers, and relationships between students.

According to participants, students and professors do not turn their cameras on during sync classes for a variety of reasons, which negatively affects social relationships. Dana emphasized the critical nature of visual connection between teacher and pupils when she stated:

Visual contact between teachers and students contributes to the strengthening of their bond. Additionally, it enables the teacher to ascertain the extent to which the students comprehend her explanation. Unfortunately, this component is missing from e-learning, which has resulted in some students departing the class and becoming preoccupied with other matters. Due to the increased distance between students and teachers, e-learning may result in a deterioration of classroom interactions.

The downsides of distance education including attending lectures using Zoom software, on the other hand, include a lack of social interaction, opportunities for students to meet and exchange personal experiences, and a sense of isolation. (Rama)

Students enrolled in online education do not have access to the educational process's social components, as students' inability to see their colleagues and faculty members causes fear, tension, anxiety, and lack of attention, all of which can result in poor academic performance, and as the social environment of the university or school stimulates students to participate and do better. (Zainab)

One of the obstacles that students encountered was a lack of Internet access and technological difficulties. Not all students have reliable Internet access at home, and not all students have the necessary devices. According to Wafa:

A computer, an Internet connection, and, in some situations, the availability of a camera are required for distance learning. Because these technologies are important to the distant learning process, without which information cannot be transmitted and learning cannot be completed.

Certain complications developed, such as audio interruptions and, on rare occasions, complete outages caused by power or Internet outages. Due to these complications, instructors were forced to resume the course and reclaim students' attention. Naturally, all of this is done during class time. (Leena)

Once, the Internet was down during an exam and before I could turn it in, and I was forced to call the instructor and explain the issue. This entire exercise undermined my instructor's trust and credibility until he was convinced of my point of view (Dana)

# Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine students' experiences using emergency remote learning during Palestine's COVID-19 pandemic. The findings indicated that participants encountered paradoxical experiences and emotions when engaging in online education. Despite the numerous benefits of e-learning, everything has a dark side, and it is practically hard to solve all of the concerns, such as electrical issues in addition to the Internet's speed. This has happened to both students and teachers several times. We cannot ignore the financial inequalities between students, as well as their ability to provide an adequate environment for e-learning, from gadgets to energy and the Internet...and so on.

There have been several arguments and discussions in the Palestinian context about the nature and viability of online learning. Numerous people's dire economic circumstances had a significant influence in this discourse. To accomplish its objectives, e-learning must first be well organized in terms of teacher and student training. We should give material resources such as devices and communication networks, as well as emphasize the need of adhering to time restrictions, conducting dialogues and discussions during meetings, and allowing students to share their opinions and thoughts.

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