| **RESEARCH ARTICLE**

Advantages and Disadvantages of Distance Learning During the Coronavirus Pandemic: Faculty of Arts and Humanities of Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah as Case Study

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| **ABSTRACT**

Due to the coronavirus pandemic, most educational institutions have shifted from onsite traditional learning to distance learning to ensure the continuity of education. In Morocco, adopting distance education as a medium of teaching and learning has raised several concerns about the advantages and disadvantages of implementing it during the quarantine. The current study aims to scrutinise Moroccan university students' opinions about the main pros and cons of distance learning during the pandemic. To accomplish the aim of the study, the researchers relied on an exploratory, descriptive method via a self-designed online questionnaire. Three hundred sixty-two students participated in the study. The results indicate that although distance learning has many advantages that enable the learners to achieve academic and knowledge development, it still has many disadvantages that hinder the adoption of this form of education as an adequate replacement for onsite traditional education.

1. Introduction

Distance learning is a type of education where the use of various technologies to enhance communication between students and teachers and between students themselves is one of its primary components. In the past, distance learning has catered chiefly to unconventional learners, such as full-time employees, members of the armed forces, nonresidents, and people living in remote areas who cannot attend lectures in a classroom. However, trends indicate that distance learning will continue to increase and is already a well-established component of the educational landscape. The transition from physical face-to-face teaching to distance learning during COVID-19 necessitates knowledge of technology tools, the application of adaptive pedagogical approaches, and a high degree of student autonomy. Modern ICT in education can boost face-to-face teaching and improve student-learning quality globally (Charlier, 2002; Raby, 2004).

In Morocco, the Ministry of Education has mobilised significant investments to facilitate this type of education and improve secondary school teachers' use of ICT, either in terms of equipment (Nafida2 project, "Telmidtice" platforms, TV broadcasting courses on television, tablet distribution) or training (pre-service and in-service training programs. Nevertheless, urban areas are the target of most of these investments and training initiatives. In reality, because of the socioeconomic disparities, there is a clear divide in internet use in Morocco between urban and rural areas. Morocco has the most significant disparity in internet use between urban and rural areas compared to other Euro-Mediterranean nations. (El Kadi, 2020).

According to Marin (2020), the pandemic experience and its consequences (for example, fear of the epidemic and imprisonment) have a damaging potential on all levels (psychic, moral, social, economic, and political). They dismantle society's underpinnings

and the norms that govern it. According to historian Françoise Hildesheimer (2020), Pandemics have significantly influenced societal, political, economic, and sociological changes throughout history.

According to Hafa et al. (2023), Moroccan university students were only moderately prepared for online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. They preferred face-to-face to distance learning and wanted to improve their remote learning experience. During the pandemic, primary challenges to remote learning included a lack of prior experience with distance learning, a lack of necessary technology, and an insufficient internet connection. Students were also concerned about their motivation, interaction, and technical skills.

According to Kaid and Tahiri (2023), even before the COVID-19 epidemic, the Moroccan education system prioritised the integration of information and communication technologies and tools(ICT) in education, particularly distance education (DE) and learning. The government has created and sponsored several programmes and efforts to increase the use of ICT in schools. During the COVID-19 issue, Moroccan teachers resorted to self-training and used accessible social media technologies to assist students. Videoconferencing systems such as Zoom and Teams aided in resolving the pedagogical continuity problem, yielding encouraging outcomes in student participation, interactivity, resource sharing, and a positive classroom climate. However, further work at the pedagogical and didactic levels is required to maximise the potential of this technology properly.

This study aims to investigate the pros and cons of distance learning during Covid 19 pandemic by conducting a questionnaire as a data tool to generate objective findings about the subject matter. The current research took Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University (USMBA), specifically the faculty of Arts and Humanities, as a case study to detect students' perspectives about the pros and cons of taking lectures from a distance during the Coronavirus pandemic in 2020.

This study aims to answer the following research questions:

➢ What are the main advantages of distance learning during the coronavirus pandemic from the students' perspectives?
➢ What are the main disadvantages of distance learning during the coronavirus pandemic from the students' perspectives?

2. Literature Review

Diverse partakers in education have always questioned the effectiveness of distance learning as a mode of teaching and learning. Most discussions that bring distance learning as a main topic are based on the pros and cons of this teaching mode. Numerous studies have shown that distance learning has various benefits and shortcomings; some studies concluded that the drawbacks outweigh the benefits and should be used only in times of crisis (e.g. COVID-19). Others suggested that the mode of education, offsite or onsite, can be decided based on the subject or the discipline we teach. Furthermore, researchers such as (Zeitoun, 2008) claim that a "mixed or blended" form of education can be adapted to benefit from the advantages of distance learning and onsite education and simultaneously avoid both drawbacks.

The inclusion of modern technological development in education has facilitated the adoption of distance learning in the form of e-learning by several, if not all, educational institutions, as Wang et al. (2003) mentioned. Educational authorities claim that distance learning is implemented because it emphasises the learners' needs and wants regarding the time and place of delivering a course rather than limiting the learners to a specific schedule that can hinder their learning advancement, an idea confirmed by (Algahtani, 2011). It enables the learners to choose the circumstances that suit their daily life.

Distance learning also provides solid grounds for practising communication and enabling learners to talk to each other. Distance learning, for example, in the case of online classrooms, provides learners who need help interacting in onsite classrooms with opportunities to express themselves through instant messages and forums. To put it differently, distance learning has eradicated impediments such as the phobia of talking inside the class that obstructs active communication between learners and learners and between learners and teachers. Hence, as Wagner et al. (2008) stated, this leads to a give-and-take of thoughts and perspectives between learners, making the learning process more effective and enjoyable.

Another significant advantage of distance learning is that it is cost-effective and can help resolve many issues. In offline classes, educational institutions need to provide learners with buildings, classrooms, and labs, but with distance learning, these are optional. Hence eliminating an obstacle that can hinder or delay the education process. Furthermore, as Arkorful and Abaidoo (2015) noted, we can accommodate a large number of learners in distance learning compared to onsite learning, in which the number of learners is usually limited. Moreover, distance learning as a teaching mode can help solve the shortage of academic staff such as teachers (Algahtani, 2011), lecturers, and instructors since, as stated above, it can accommodate many learners. It is also cost-effective for learners since they can save both the cost and the time of travel to and from the educational institution.

Distance learning has the advantage of aiding the teachers and the students in achieving challenging tasks in short periods and less struggles. Onsite learning is time and energy-consuming because it requires the learners to travel and prepare for the lessons; it also reinforces the idea that the teacher is the primary source of knowledge. This issue is nowhere to be found in distance learning as the students can access knowledge anywhere and whenever needed. Rabah (2005) suggested that students save time and effort in distance learning since they can finish sophisticated tasks quickly and independently. Furthermore, it teaches the learners to be independent and partake in the education process by self-educating themselves through accessing all the technological advancements that e-learning provides.

Distance learning focuses on the learner's benefit and active participation in knowledge-making. In distance education, the instructors are no longer the sole source of information, as the students can find the needed data themselves (Alsalem, 2004). Hence, the role of the teacher becomes only a guide that facilitates the journey of education to the learners. It teaches the students to be responsible and learn to organise their schedule since they will be self-motivated.

Distance learning has many advantages that enable it to be an accredited mode of education. Because of the advantages mentioned above, educational institutions have adopted e-learning as a form of distance learning and used it to provide lectures and lessons. However, it still needs to be fixed and has no disadvantages.

Many studies and researchers have mentioned that distance learning has outstanding drawbacks that threaten its efficacy in education. Feedback is one of the pillars of any lesson and examination; this later is one of the significant disadvantages of distance learning. The issue of giving students constructive feedback that helps them stay on track and be more motivated is quickly resolved in regular onsite classes through a face-to-face encounter between the learners and the teacher or between the learners and their classmates. However, as Martinez-Argüelles et al. (2010) suggested, this problem is a real obstacle in distance learning. It lacks the personal touch of the instructor who can satisfy and convince the students of their advance in studies or results in examinations since the online (in the case of e-learning, emails) feedback is not enough to motivate the students and clarify all points that a learner may find them ambiguous in a lesson.

Learners and educators can communicate in distance learning through the camera, forums or text messages; however, they still suffer from social isolation. Some studies have mentioned that learners and teachers whose lessons are entirely distant or online and not blended can experience a sense of remoteness. Contemplation and lack of interaction, as noted by Arkorful and Abaidoo (2015), can lead to severe psychological problems if we consider that e-learning is also the human characteristic of personal and social face-to-face meetings.

Another drawback of distance learning is that students must be highly interested and have excellent time management skills. Unlike traditional classrooms, in which many factors aid the learners in advancing in their lessons, such as peer evaluation and actual personal communication with educators, distance learning lacks all of these aspects, which puts all the stress on the individual learner. Learners who are slow or lack the necessary time management skills can quickly get depressed and eventually fail. Furthermore, distance learning does not progress learners' communication skills due to the absence of face-to-face encounters, marginalising the idea of developing communication skills, and the need for more teamwork in distance learning (Etherington, 2017; Tamm, 2022). Hence, the outcomes of this mode of education will be some people with accredited certificates and diplomas that do not enable them to transfer their knowledge to others due to the problem of underdeveloped communication skills.

Distance learning in the case of e-learning means that a learner is going to learn from a place that he/she can choose with his/her material (books, course books, or any printed material) or devices; this idea has given birth to one of the most catastrophic drawbacks of distance learning which is cheating. Using personal devices enables the learners to cheat during examinations in numerous ways that can range from using mobile phones or other electronics, using textbooks, asking someone else to take the exam in their place, or even using the recorded lessons of their teachers as a source (Newton, D. 2020). Moreover, the online examination is unsupervised, mainly if there is no video recording. Thus leading to unauthentic assessment results.

Distance learning is centred on theory at the expanse of practice, which is another disadvantage of this mode of teaching. Many educational scholars have suggested that distance learning is more suitable for disciplines such as social sciences and humanities, and it cannot replace the traditional mode of learning in scientific disciplines. Most of the educators in distance learning focus on theory and neglect practice because, on the one hand, such a mode of learning lacks face-to-face interaction, which is essential when it comes to disciplines that have a practical part which takes place for instance, in laboratories or workshops, such as medicine or engineering (Arkorful & Abaidoo,2015; Algahtani, 2011). On the other hand, distance learning has yet to develop to use techniques like 3D virtual reality experiences to substitute for actual practice.

Overall, distance learning in all its forms is far from being used as the primary mode of teaching and learning if we consider all its disadvantages. This mode of education has many drawbacks, which have been mentioned and discussed. In contrast, many others should have been discussed, such as computer illiteracy, Internet glitches associated with e-learning, and the issue of accreditation, which is linked to all other forms of distance learning. However, it has some advantages that push higher education institutions to use it to deliver lectures and provide lessons. Hence, the only way to benefit from the advantages and avoid the drawbacks is to adopt a system that gathers both modes offsite/onsite in the blended learning mode, in which the learners get the theory distantly or online and the practice onsite. This enables the learners to interact face-to-face with the teachers and other learners to develop their communication skills and get feedback from the educators personally after assessing them onsite, which is how to ensure the educational operation's success.

3. Methodology

The current study employed quantitative research by designing a questionnaire that investigates the perspectives of Moroccan English students at the Faculty of Arts and Humanities in the University of Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah, Fez (FLDM-USMBA) about the pros and cons of implementing distance learning during the quarantine. The participants of this study belong to different departments at the Faculty of Art and Humanities. Three hundred sixty-two students participated in this research study.

Based on the study's objective, the researchers depend on a self-developed questionnaire based on a careful literature review. The questionnaire used in the current study consists of two major sections. The first section dealt with basic demographic information such as age and gender. The second section of the questionnaire dealt with the pros and cons of distance learning from the students' perspectives. The items included in the questionnaire were reviewed carefully for relevance, reliability and clarity. The data-gathering procedure was done via Google Forms. Hence, the link to the online questionnaire was sent to the students through an online group on WhatsApp composed of only the Faculty of Art and Humanities students.

4. Data and results analysis

4.1 Demographic variable

Demographics	Gender		Age Category		
Specifications	Female	Male	18-24	25-29	30-35
Frequency	187	175	300	53	9
Percentages	51.7%	48.3%	82.88%	14.64%	2.48%
Total	362				

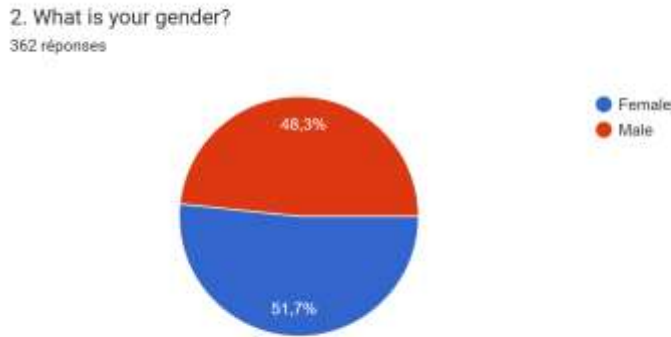**Table 1: Participants by gender and age**

The research data were gathered from different departments in the faculty of art and humanities at Sidi Mohammed Ben Abdellah University, Fes, Morocco. Three hundred sixty-two students from different age categories and academic backgrounds participated in the study. The link of the questionnaire was sent to different WhatsApp groups of the faculty; some of these groups are for master's and PhD students, which explains the diversified age categories, as can be noticed in the table above and the diagram below.
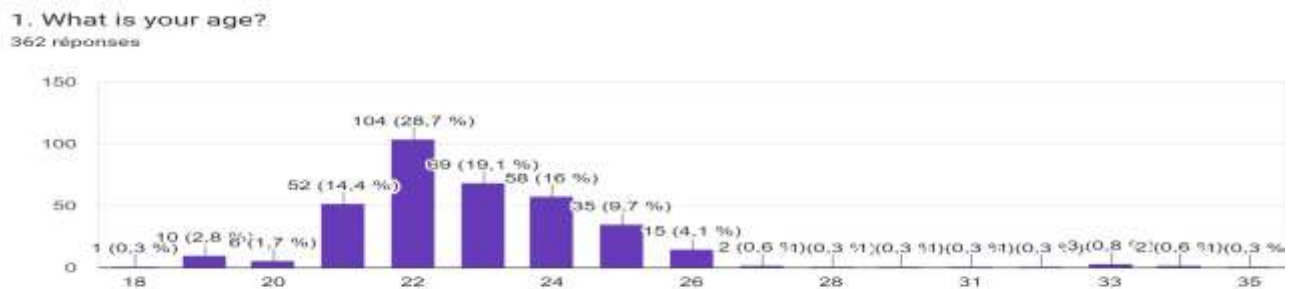
F. 1 Participants by age

The idea behind making the questionnaire available for all age categories is to get the point of view of students who were still in the undergraduate program during the pandemic and are now M.A. students or PhD researchers. Getting these students' viewpoints about distance learning during a crisis is a crucial constituent for this research, as they help get authentic standpoints of a category of people who have experienced distance learning at a very critical period.

As mentioned before, 362 students participated in the study. The majority of those students are aged between 18 and 24, with a percentage of 82.88% and a frequency of 300 students; the next most important category is the one aged between 25 and 29, with a total number of participants of 53 and a percentage of 14.64%, the last category is aged between 30 and 35 with 9 participants standing for 2.48%.

F. 2 Participants by Gender

The majority of the participants in the study were female, considering that women make up more than 50% of the Moroccan population. Morocco is a developing country where a noticeable number of young people, specifically males, decide to emigrate to Europe or other countries early or join the workforce to help their families, resulting in fewer males joining higher education than females. The participants in this study also reflect this fact. In this study, the female participants count for 187 out of 362, that is, 51.7%, while the male participants represent 48.3% with a total of 175.

4.2 Advantages and Disadvantages of Distance Education
As discussed previously in the literature review, there is a plethora of benefits and shortcomings of offsite education. The questionnaire was organised to enable the researchers to confirm or undermine some of the most relevant and commonly discussed. The participants had to choose what they see as advantages and disadvantages of this mode of education, and they were given five common advantages and four disadvantages, namely:
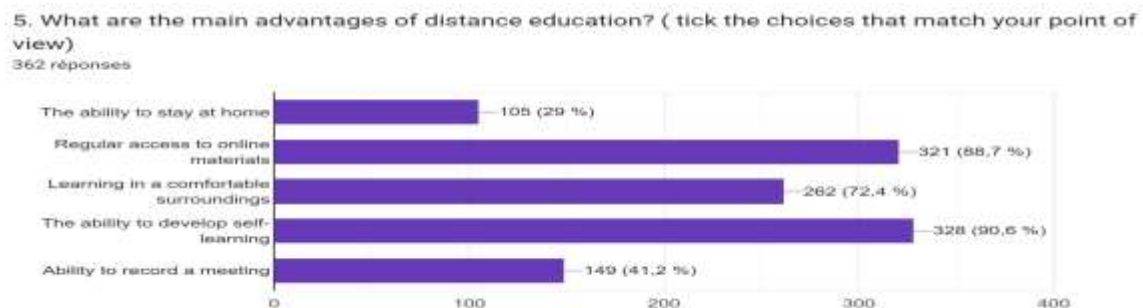
Advantages	Disadvantages
The ability to stay at home	Lack of interaction with the tutor
Regular access to online materials	Technical issues
Learning in comfortable surroundings	Social isolation
The ability to develop self-learning	Poor learning conditions at home
The ability to record a meeting	

4.2.1 Advantages of distance learning

F.3 Main advantages of distance learning

The questionnaire results confirm what has been mentioned in the literature review. The participants were given the freedom in the questionnaire to choose any item they think is an intrinsic advantage of distance learning and disqualify any item they perceive as not a distinctive feature. Hence, most participants selected certain items as an advantage, while few participants held the opposite point of view. The majority of the participants stated that the ability to develop self-learning is the chief advantage of distance learning; 90.6% of the students participating in the study, which count for 328, believe that this is a real advantage of distance learning since during the pandemic the students were able to discover that they can still learn and develop their knowledge and academic level without the need to travel to the university daily. Furthermore, we can understand from this that students in distance learning altered their perception of education and learning; in other words, they discovered that they could teach themselves by doing research as active participants in knowledge-making rather than passive recipients of ideas and information from the instructors.
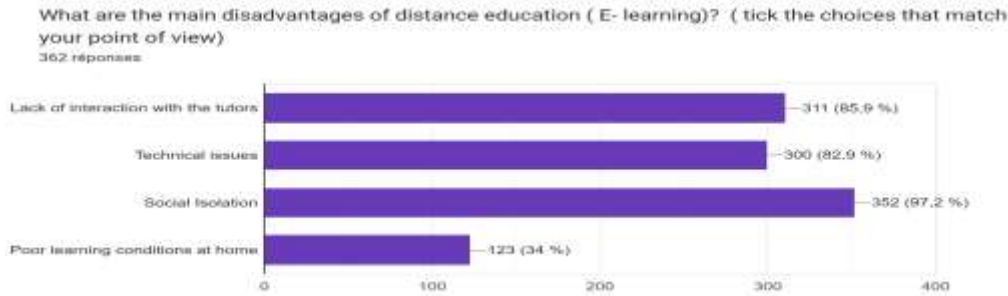
Many participants hold that regular access to online materials is the second most prominent advantage of distance learning. The total number of participants favouring this item as an advantage is 321, 88.7%. Students started to look at distance learning as a tool that facilitates the process of getting the necessary material needed for their studies and not as a medium of teaching and learning since, as mentioned in the previous item, the students learned that they could count on self-learning in their studies. Moreover, university students need help to acquire material for the lectures in onsite learning, mainly in hard copy that they need to copy and carry. In contrast, in distance learning, this process is ultimately cancelled. In distance learning, the material is prepared by the instructor and uploaded to the platform that is used as a medium of instruction, and all that the students need to do is download it on their devices.

A noticeable number of participants agree that learning in comfortable surroundings is a crucial advantage of distance learning. 72.4% of the participants, with 262 students, perceive this item as an essential advantage of distance learning. It can be understood from this that students look at distance learning as a mode of education that enables them to enjoy the experience of learning in a manner that is convenient to the personal preferences of each student. As mentioned in the literature review and confirmed by this item, distance learning eases learning by saving the students time and energy. To put it differently, in distance learning, students are no longer required to endure the daily trip to the educational institutions; this alone enables the students to save valuable time and energy that they can invest in other areas of self-development and academic achievements. Additionally, distance learning solved a problem that many students previously suffered from. Physical attendance was a critical issue for students with part-time jobs, mothers, fathers, and students with special needs; distance learning allows them to pursue their studies without creating personal or professional problems.

The ability to record a meeting with the instructor or a lecture is another item that students at the Faculty of Art and Humanities, Sidi Mohammed Ben Abdellah University, Fes, Morocco, see as an advantage. A total of 149 students, representing 41.2% of the participants, share a common belief that recording sessions is an instrumental advantage of distance learning. It can be understood from the result of this item that students may need to re-attend a session or a lecture for many reasons. Students may re-play a session in distance learning as a form of preparation for exams, understanding unclear concepts and lessons or inability to attend the lecture in the first place. Furthermore, distance learning about this item allows the students to benefit from the lecture as much as possible with no need to take notes and preserve them as the knowledge clarified during the lecture is always there, online, ready to be downloaded whenever they want and wherever they are.

Almost a third of the participants selected the ability to stay home as a valuable advantage of distance learning. A percentage of 29% of the participants in this study, which stands for 105 students, agreed that staying home can be perceived as an advantage. This item is to be taken as a positive side of distance learning, especially if we take into consideration the fact that nearly half of the students enrolled in Sidi Mohammed Ben Abdellah University in general and the Faculty of Art and Humanities, in particular, are originally coming from remote places and rural areas. In this case, distance learning enables them to save money they would spend on renting in the college surroundings and other expenses. Additionally, as explained before in the literature review and confirmed in the analysis of the second item of this discussion, distance learning aids students in saving time and energy.

4.2.2 Disadvantages of distance learning

What are the main disadvantages of distance education (E- learning)? (tick the choices that match your point of view)

362 réponses

Lack of interaction with the tutors	311 (85.9 %)
Technical Issues	300 (82.9 %)
Social Isolation	352 (97.2 %)
Poor learning conditions at home	123 (34 %)

(bar chart with horizontal axis: 0, 100, 200, 300, 400)

F.4 Main disadvantages of distance learning

The results generated from the questionnaire have confirmed most of the points discussed in the literature review regarding the disadvantages of distance learning. More than 80% stated that lack of interaction with the tutor, social isolation, and technical issues are the most common disadvantages of distance learning. At the same time, only 34% of the respondents mentioned that poor learning conditions at home are a disadvantage.

Most respondents (97.2%) confirmed that social isolation is one of the significant disadvantages of distance learning. Social distancing was necessary during the quarantine to prevent the COVID-19 pandemic from spreading. However, that led to elevated levels of social isolation and loneliness that were associated with increased anxiety and depression among the students. The COVID-19 pandemic forced the closure of schools and universities and dictated the shift from face-to-face education to a distanced one. As a result, students were obliged to stay at home, pursuing their studies from a distance and being isolated.

Lack of interaction with instructors is another main drawback of distance learning. 85.9% of participants indicated that the absence of contact and interaction with tutors is another disadvantage of distance learning. The online learning and teaching systems offer means that allow teachers and students to communicate and exchange ideas effectively. Nevertheless, face-to-face interaction and discussions are more effective than electronic tools, as social presence can help students develop their cognitive skills and enhance their critical thinking abilities. Interaction between students and teachers is significant in traditional classrooms as it positively impacts students' academic outcomes. Interaction with teachers can allow students to gain motivation, content understanding, and self-esteem through their teachers' regular feedback. However, the shift to remote teaching challenged students' and teachers' effective interactions.

82.9% of participants confirmed that the technical issues are another negative side of distance learning that hinders the success of remote learning. The primary concern of students during the pandemic is the technical difficulties they may face in their learning journey. Distance learning raises numerous social and academic limitations and poses technical difficulties such as connectivity issues, applications lagging, or computers running slowly. In addition, due to the increase of video conferencing applications during the pandemic, the Internet felt pressure. Thus, students suffered from issues related to connectivity. Students who live in rural areas are the ones who suffer from technical obstacles, as many of them may not have the economic ability to afford technological devices such as laptops, tablets or smartphones. Besides, living in remote and rural areas increased issues related to the low quality of the Internet.

Only 34% of respondents stated that poor learning conditions at home are one of the pros of remote learning. Covid 19 pandemic raised concerns about students' unequal access to technological resources as students from low-income families cannot afford the technological devices to help them pursue their learning practices. Moreover, students from low-income families may need help finding appropriate conditions in their homes. They may live in tiny houses or crowded apartments with minor siblings who may disturb the students and prevent them from adequately taking their online lectures.

The questionnaire's results confirm what has been said in the literature review about the effectiveness of distance learning regarding its disadvantages and advantages. Distance learning in the form of E-learning still cannot overcome some obstacles that hinder it from being influential and trustworthy by learners, which is clearly shown by the percentages and numbers of the participants who stated through the questionnaire that the already mentioned disadvantages are real and pose a problem in the path of the process of learning.

Although the participants agree on the advantages mentioned in the questionnaire as benefits of e-learning that facilitate the journey of learning for them, still the disadvantages are to be taken seriously since an issue like the lack of interaction with the tutor can create a problem of miscommunication between the student and the teacher when it comes to the feedback. Social

isolation is considered a real problem threatening the effectiveness of e-learning since most participants agree that studying offsite creates a feeling of alienation from society. Not all learners have the comfort of enjoying distance learning, as most of the participants have suggested through the questionnaire. Since some students may face technical issues or the inability to have suitable surroundings that would make the experience of distance learning enjoyable, some learners live in socioeconomic conditions that dictate that having access to technology is considered a luxury.

5. Conclusion

In short, Shifting to distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic was the only suitable choice to guarantee the continuity of the educational process in most Moroccan higher education institutions. The shift from regular and traditional classrooms has significant advantages, allowing learning in comfortable surroundings. In addition, it allows learners to develop self-learning, have regular access to online materials, and record lessons given by instructors. Nevertheless, most respondents reported facing several technical issues, as many may need more computing devices to engage in the distance learning journey efficiently. Other respondents confirmed that lack of interaction with the teachers is a fundamental disadvantage of distance learning as the learners could not receive proper instructor feedback. Therefore, the absence of interaction between students and teachers affects the development of students' cognitive skills.

Based on the findings retrieved from the questionnaire, the study suggests that higher education stakeholders should launch some comprehensive policies to prepare students to engage in distance learning effectively. Examples of policies can involve the following: 1). The government should launch many ICT projects to make computing devices available and accessible to all Moroccan students, especially those in rural areas or those in a problematic socioeconomic situation. 2) Universities should develop an online communication strategy, such as accessing platforms like Blackboard, to facilitate learning and encourage teacher and student interaction. 3). Training students and teachers on using various technological tools to simplify learning.

5.1 Research Limitations

The current study has some limitations. First, the number of participants who responded to the questionnaire is only 362 respondents, which is a number that cannot represent students from different universities all around Morocco. Hence, the findings of this study cannot be generalised. Second, shifting from traditional learning to distance learning is a critical issue. Thus, it should include the perspectives of academics and higher education stakeholders. Unfortunately, due to time constraints, the current study could not cover the issue from the perspectives of other agents, including teachers, deans, administrators, and higher education authorities.

5.2 Recommendations

The current study discusses the issue of distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic only from students' perspectives. Therefore, it is advisable to include teachers' views to have a comprehensive image of the topic. Furthermore, future research is recommended to tackle distance-learning issues from a psychological perspective to detect the degree of students' and teachers' satisfaction with distance learning classes.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.
Publisher's Note: All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers.

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