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Communication Strategies Established By King Abdulaziz University between the Administrators and Students in Response of Covid-19 Crisis

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ABSTRACT

The widespread of COVID-19 around the globe has led to unusual measures by each country to limit the viral spread. Universities as a part of other institutions, took measures to ensure the safety of the students. While every university tried to take safety measures to overcome this problem, the decisions and the measures taken were different from one institution to another. As part of the measures, administrators provided different type of communication with students to instruct them to the appropriate ways to remain safe. In this study, the authors analyze how administrators communicated with students since the start of the crisis. This analysis was done by collecting all the official responses at King Abdulaziz University. Analyzing the administrative response to this crisis is important to understand which measures were more effective in overcoming this situation while ensuring satisfaction of students' learning objectives.

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Introduction

COVID-19 crisis has affected many sectors in all countries around the world. As a response to the crisis, governments and officials implemented several actions to overcome the crisis and save people's lives. Among those, the education sector in many countries took action to promote social distancing and to convert traditional education into online education. As we know, colleges and schools have a high risk of being points of transmission of the disease due to the number of students attending and interacting on a daily basis. As of the middle of March 2020, many countries closed their universities and schools in the response to governmental orders (UNESCO, 2020).

Saudi Arabia is one of the countries that had an early response plan for the crisis. In this study, we are analyzing and examining how Saudi institutions stood against COVID-19 by conducting a case study about King Abdulaziz University in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Specifically, we are examining the official statements from the administrators of the Saudi university to and examine how effective it has been on students' learning process.

Examining literature on the similar topic, we found that Crawford, Butler-Henderson, Rudolph, and Glowatz conducted a study that examined the responses of 20 countries [1]. They found that the response from higher education departments to the crisis was diverse and ranged from having no response to having a rapid response in the form of implementing social distancing and redeveloping courses

to replace the traditional ones [1]. In Australia, for instance, some universities paid attention to the students diagnosed with COVID-19 and pushed significant commentary about them in the media. China, as another example, postponed the start of the spring semester as a precautionary measure [2]. We can also see that standardized tests have been affected by the crisis, and many governments and universities canceled such requirements for admission as the test centers themselves have canceled their scheduled tests (Examples: TOEFL, ICEF, IELTS). In Egypt, the most populous country in the Arab world, private universities have canceled their face-to-face classes and used learning management systems to implement online education [3]. In Germany, universities canceled face-to-face classes but maintained home-based learning. They offered extensions to theses and dissertations, converted all the examinations to an online format, conducted oral exams via Skype, and electronic students' IDs were disabled.

Saudi Arabia has taken precautionary actions starting on February 1, 2020 to stand against the outbreak. All schools were suspended, and distance education for all K-12 schools and universities took place on March 8th (MOE report for Spring 2020). Three phases were implemented to fight COVID-19: coping, mitigation, and the aftermath. Several policies and legislations were also implemented to cope with the crisis. Important strategies were established during the crisis, mainly through distance education, health services, collaboration with other bodies and crisis management, media outlets, and pandemic research.

What we can see here as a tending term, is the term "Pandemic Pedagogy". There is a distinct difference between intentional

digitization of education, and unprecedented conversion of education into online format. Pandemic pedagogy aims to identify the characteristics of education, when a pandemic happens, and you are forced to move to the online education. The challenges could be technological, political, pedagogical, or emotional. Since the world is new to such term, models from educational institutions around the world would be useful in shaping the pandemic pedagogy. In this study, we present a model from King Abdulaziz University that we think will contribute to the idea of the pandemic pedagogy.

Before we go into details about KAU's actions towards pandemic pedagogy, examples from other studies could be useful to put us on same ground with the current literature review. One of the examples is a study conducted by Rippe C, Weusfeld-Spolter S, Yurova Y, which aimed to target one of the major issues in pandemic pedagogy, loneliness. The study hypothesized that student's isolation during the pandemic would increase loneliness. This loneliness could lead to a lack of perceived control, which will negatively affect student's intention to take more classes with the instructor. The study concluded that instructors could control the perceived control given to students despite the fact that they have no control over the pandemic education disruption.

In addition to us defining pandemic pedagogy, multiple theories could contribute to shaping our study. Chaos theory is definitely one of them. The theory states that every crisis is complicated, and unpredicted and could rise issues between standard actions and emergency needs within the organization [2]. This chaos could be alleviated by having internal changes to overcome the challenges [2]. In this study, we mention how KAU performed aggressive internal changes in order to alleviate the chaos that could happen in response to the pandemic.

On the other hand, the shift happens in the pedagogical approaches due to the pandemic could lead to student's dissatisfaction, which is something needs to be avoided [4].

We conducted this study to provide a case study on how King Abdulaziz University responded to the crisis. We provide an analysis of whether this response is a country-wide measure or a sole university effort.

King Abdulaziz University (KAU) Profile

King Abdulaziz University (KAU) is one of the top public universities in Saudi Arabia. It is ranked the 109th in QS Global World Rankings 2022 and the 1st in the Arab region. The university is a well-funded, comprehensive university that offers Bachelor, Masters, and Doctoral programs in a wide range of areas in online, blended, and face-to-face format. Like the rest of Saudi public universities, students receive free education, housing and a stipend. KAU also has separate campuses for men and women. KAU is an institution that uses both quantitative and qualitative methods in the process of enrollment and diversity of academic programs, both in the social, and in the natural sciences. These programs include Marine Sciences, Meteorology, Earth Sciences, Nuclear Engineering, Mining, Medical Engineering and Aeronautical Engineering.

KAU offers great opportunities for those who are looking to be part of a dynamic, quality-oriented institution for research and personal growth. In recent years, KAU's high reputation across the globe is a main feature it has as a world-class institution

with an emphasis on high-quality education and well-integrity in academic and research initiatives. Today, KAU is characterized primarily for its high international standing in research, innovation, accreditations and rankings.

Materials and Methods

This study used qualitative thematic content analysis to analyze the data collected from King Abdulaziz University's communication with students and faculty regarding COVID-19 from March 9 to July 5, 2020. The data were collected through tracking all of the communication between the university's administration units and students and faculty members including social media posts, official announcements, emails, and posters. After collecting the data, a professional translation service was used to translate all of the data from the Arabic language to English.

Data analysis was done using NVivo software. We divided the data analysis process into multiple phases. Phase One included a deep understanding of the contents. The researchers spent a week reading the data several times to ensure including all the details. Phase two included the initial coding process where the researchers started putting all possible initial codes that could serve the purpose of the study. Data reduction was done during this process where the researchers changed data into labels to create categories. Phase three involved combining the codes into major themes.

Two sets of themes were identified during this process; the type of communication, and the purpose of communication. After doing this process, the research looked at the data that support both themes and if there is any missing information, the researchers went back and repeated phase one and two until they reached the saturation when there was no more new information that can come to life. The researchers also tracked the date of each content to determine the university's process to stand against the COVID-19 pandemic.

Results/Observations

The initial coding resulted in 22 codes: general announcements, contact information, COVID-19 closure policies, COVID-19 paperwork exchange policies, COVID-19 elevators use policies, COVID-19 masks wearing policies, fingerprint suspension, healthcare precautions, virtual classrooms, operational plans, events suspension, president's announcements, return to work policies, general support, faculty support, students support, internet issue support, studies suspension, technical support, virtual assessments, and online live lectures.

From the initial coding process, the researchers were able to come up with two sets of themes. The first theme is the type of communication, which included three major themes; academic support (7 references), administrative support (6 references), and healthcare support (7 references). The other set of themes pertains to the purpose of communication, which included three main themes; promoting health habits (4 references), promoting social distancing (7 references), and promoting virtual learning (5 references).

The researchers used these themes to describe how King Abdulaziz University reacted to the COVID-19 situation. The following analysis describes in detail the process King Abdulaziz University has gone through to fight the pandemic Tables.

APPENDIX NVivo Study's Codebook

Nodes\\Codes

Name	Description	Files	References
Announcements		1	6
Contact		1	2
COVID-19 policies - closure		1	2
COVID-19 policies - Paperwork exchange		1	1
COVID-19 policies - Using Elevators		1	1
COVID-19 Policies - Wearing a mask		1	1
eLearning lectures		1	3
fingerprint suspension		1	1
Healthcare Precautions announcements		1	1
Lecture Recording		1	1
Operational plans		1	1
Postpone events		1	2
President Announcements		1	3
Return to work		1	1
Support		1	4
Support to Faculty		1	2
Support for Students		1	3
Support-Internet Issue Addressing		1	1
Suspending studies		1	3
Technical Support		1	4
Virtual assessments		1	2
Virtual Classroom		1	2

Nodes\\Date and Time

Name	Description	Files	References
April 24 th 2020		1	1
July 5 th 2020		1	1
June 21 st 2020		1	1
June 25 th 2020		1	1
March 11 th 2020		1	2
March 15 th 2020		1	1
March 16 th 2020		1	1
March 20 th 2020		1	1
March 22 nd 2020		1	1
March 23 rd 2020		1	1
March 8 th 2020		1	2
March 9 th 2020		1	1
May 29 th 2020		1	1

Nodes\\Themes

Name	Description	Files	References
Promoting Safe Health Habits		1	4
Promoting Social Distancing		1	7
Promoting Virtual Learning		1	5

Nodes\\Type of communication

Name	Description	Files	References
Academic Support		1	7
Administrative Support		1	6
Healthcare Support		1	7

Discussion

Major Themes Extracted from KAU's Action Plan against COVID-19 Situation

Type of Communication

Three types of communication KAU has used to reach out to the University personnel. The first type is the academic support. KAU communicated different policies to students and faculty to support academic progress. KAU communicated their technical/administrative support contact methods to all of the university personnel. We can see that from the university's announcements: Dear students, you can contact us by e-mail dsag.ssc@kau.edu.sa if you have questions, suggestions, or comments.

And from the Technical Support Communication

Technical support from 9 am to 4.30 pm, to send a technical support ticket through the blackboard (24 hours): 1- Sign-in Blackboard 2- Click on Technical Support 3- Send a technical support request.

We can also see that at the time when the COVID-19 started in March, the university took immediate early actions to stand against the crisis. The earliest communication was on March 9th where the university suspended all face-to-face classes and started directing students to virtual learning.

King Abdul-Aziz University is keen on the progress of the educational process and the continuation of the education service through the virtual classes for our male and female students. His Excellency the University Rector directed to record all educational lectures, so the students can return to them in case that the internet service is weak or not available (source?). To make virtual learning more efficient, the university supported also mobile learning for those who are more comfortable using smartphones over computers. Live lectures were supported on mobile devices, and instructions were given to direct students:

To attend live lectures from mobile, please follow the instructions below: 1- Download the (Blackboard Collaborate) application from your mobile store (just download it without changing its settings. 2- Open the Blackboard through Safari or Chrome browser on your mobile phone, not from the Blackboard application. 3- Blackboard link of King Abdul-Aziz University lms.kau.edu.sa After entering

the course and choosing (join the session) the browser will ask you about the possibility of opening the link through the application, please click on the Yes option.) (source?)

Exams were part of the action plan since KAU converted all the exams to virtual ones as we see in two announcements to students regarding the exams during the semester and for the final exams: Based on the directives of His Excellency the Minister of Education and informed by the speech of His Excellency the Deputy Minister of Education for Universities, Research and Innovation No. 82530, dated 23/7/1441 AH, referred to the guide for arrangements for tests, evaluation, and semester work for universities during the study suspension period for the prevention of the new Coronavirus, which includes recommendations and alternatives (Source??).

The second type of communication was about administrative support. By administrative support, we mean any supportive communication to the university employees. We found that KAU instructed faculty members on how to create virtual classrooms via step-by-step communication:

Steps to create a virtual classroom 1- Sign-in the course from the list of courses. 2- Click on (Virtual Classes). 3- Click on (Create Session) option, a new page will appear. 4- After the new page appears, enter the session name (please do not change the name). 5- After that, please specify the day and time of the session. 6- Then click Submit) (Source).

The administrative process at the beginning of the crisis directed university employees to cancel any unnecessary events and gatherings as per this communication, "The University President, Prof. Abdul Rahman Al-Youbi directed to postpone unnecessary events and gatherings, based on the high directives and precautionary recommendations taken by the kingdom and relevant ministries in the current period. We ask the Almighty to protect our dear homeland" (source?).

For safety measures, KAU took action even for paperwork exchange and enacted policies to practice healthy habits while exchanging papers and ways to dispose them properly: Precautions when exchanging paperwork 1- Reduce paperwork and try to use electronic deals as much as possible. 2- Wear masks and gloves especially for Communications and Correspondence Officers. 3- Place the envelope inside a pocket / plastic bag for one-time usage. 4- Dispose of the pocket/bag after emptying it from the envelope. 5- Get rid of or sterilize the pocket/bag after completing the delivery of the envelope. 6- Wash and sterilize hands before and after handing the envelope).

Another administrative support happened to put an operational plan to return to campus. KAU divided the employees into three groups to support social distancing habits. They directed employees not to use fingerprint devices to limit any unnecessary contact.

The third type of communication was about healthcare support. This was obvious through requiring wearing masks (How to safely wear a non-medical mask made of fabric?), using elevators (When using elevators...), exchanging paperwork (Precautions when exchanging paperwork...), and having a proper operational plan for returning to the campus. They used visuals to make communication easier (show some of these visuals).

Purpose of the Communication

After we analyzed the type of communication, we highlighted the purpose of the communication. The researcher analyzed the codes and came up with three main purposes from the given data, the

first one is promoting safe health habits. This was obvious through making sure university employees and students understand how to practice healthy habits. We see KAU targeted four main risky situations

1. Using the elevators,
2. Wearing masks,
3. Paperwork exchange, and
4. Returning to campus.

To mitigate these risks, KAU used posters to limit the number of people inside the elevators, keeping a safe distance, encouraging people to use the stairs, avoid frequent touches of buttons and hand sanitizing at the elevators exits as per this communication:

Going to the Workplace when using Elevators

- Use the stairs and reduce the use of the elevator, especially in close floors.
- Keep standing in front of the elevator, taking into consideration to leaving a safe distance between you and others.
- Stick to the elevator capacity Avoid frequent touches of buttons before and when entering the elevator
- Use hand sanitizer at the exit).

For Wearing Masks, KAU communicated that in the form of Dos and Don'ts, Which is Obviously Clearer to the Readers as in the Following Example

Do: 1- Clean your hands before touching the mask 2- Check the mask for damage or dirt 3- Adjust the mask on your face without leaving blanks 4- Ensure that the mask is covered in the mouth, nose, and chin 5- Avoid touching the mask 6- Clean your hands before removing the mask 7- Remove the mask by straps behind the ears or the head 8- Remove the mask from your face 9- Place the mask in a sealable bag if you plan to reuse it if it is not dirty or damp 10- Remove it from the bag through its side strips 11- Wash the mask with soap or detergent, preferring hot water, at least once a day 12- Clean your hands after removing the mask
Do not do: 1- Do not use a mask that appears damaged 2- Do not use an incoherent mask 3- Do not share your mask 4- Do not wear the mask and place it under your nose 5- Do not remove the mask since there are people within one meter 6- Do not use a mask that is difficult to breathe through 7- Do not wear a dirty or wet mask).

KAU also put a step by step instructions on exchanging papers; encouraging reducing paperwork, wearing masks and gloves, placing them in a one-time use plastic bag, correct disposing habits, and washing/sterilizing hands. The operation plan of KAU for returning to work included healthy actions such as avoiding fingerprint devices.

The second purpose of KAU communications was for promoting social distancing. This was obvious through multiple presidential messages such as postponing events, as in the following communication.

The University President, Prof. Abdul Rahman Al-Youbi directed to postpone unnecessary events and gatherings, based on the high directives and precautionary recommendations taken by the kingdom and relevant ministries in the current period. We ask the Almighty to protect our dear homeland.)

This included instructions on using elevators as previously mentioned, suspending studies at the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis (it was decided to suspend the study temporarily in all regions and governorates of the Kingdom from Monday 7/14/1441 AH until further notice.), dividing employees into three groups as a

part of the operational plan to return to work (Work regulations The first group starts work at 7.30 am. The second group begins work at 8:30 am. The third group starts work 9:30 am), and cancellation of face-to-face exams (1- Cancellation of all final exams previously determined according to the academic schedule of all university programs).

The third purpose of the communication was to promote virtual learning. KAU has gone through several steps to promote virtual learning and support it. This was obvious through recording all lectures as per the following communication.

King Abdul-Aziz University is keen on the progress of the educational process and the continuation of the education service through the virtual classes for our male and female students. His Excellency the University Rector directed to record all educational lectures, so the students can return to them in case that the internet service is weak or not available), instructions to faculty on how to create virtual classrooms, using Blackboard efficiently during the crisis, maintaining continuous technical support, mobile lecture support, and virtual examinations.

Conclusion

Analyzing the response of King Abdulaziz University to COVID-19 pandemic, two themes to communicate its actions to the employees and the students emerged. The first theme is the type of communication, and it included academic support, administrative support, and healthcare support. The second theme was the purpose of communication, and it included promoting safe health habits, promoting social distancing, and promoting virtual learning. This case study aimed to present how KAU acted during the COVID-19 crisis to provide an example of how Saudi academic institutions reacted to the pandemic. It is important to replicate this study on other institutions to see if this was a common theme across the Kingdom. It is also essential to do more case studies on academic institutions in other countries and compare it with the Saudi institution and see how effective their measures are to fight the crisis.

The crisis management KAU used falls in line with the Ministry of Education's vision and strategies to fight the disease. The MOE implemented some strategies to fight the disease through closing the schools, establishing satellite educational channels to all students around the Kingdom, distributing tablets and technical tools to students, motivating faculty members to use the technologies provided to promote distance education and conduct online evaluations for students, building their skills and support their needs during the crisis.

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