Beyond the Common Issues: Students' Perspective on Participation in Online Education

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Abstract:

The recent outbreak of the Coronavirus pandemic has increased the gaps in the education sector globally, changing the common route of face-to-face education to a virtual one. While this model is not free of shortages and challenges, documenting the literature illustrated remarkable tangible obstacles. Unfortunately, there is little in-depth research on students' points of view on the intangible struggles of online education, while intangible issues have been overlooked in developing countries such as Iraq. Therefore, this study aims to understand the unspoken problems that challenge students' participation in online courses. This qualitative study provides in-depth interviews with university students, more specifically architectural students, who participated in the online classes from 2019 to 2021 that online teaching was compulsory at the beginning and blended education last year. Realizing the phenomenon of low performance or not participating in the online lectures from the active students' side. As a result, the respondents show that despite providing all access to online lectures in architectural education, many obstacles faced the students. This research, initially focused on the intricate dynamics of educational reform in the Middle-east, offers valuable insights for the global higher education community, shedding light on universal challenges and innovative solutions that are applicable across various educational landscapes.

Keyword: Pandemic, Online Learning, Architectural Education, Intangible Issues, Students' Perspectives.

INTRODUCTION

An epidemic of the coronavirus Covid-19 occurred around the end of 2019, and by the end of March 2020, it had become a worldwide pandemic (Ibrahim, Attia, Asma'M, & Ali, 2021). Many

nations, namely Iraq, were obliged to shut down with a whole or partial shutdown to stop the virus from spreading (Obla & Ukabi, 2021). Schools, and notable universities, were obliged to halt academic activity. As a result, the educational influence of Covid -19 should be investigated (Adebisi, Agboola, & Okereke, 2020; Hayter, 2020). Regarding the future of architectural education and its stability, it involves several issues that need to be addressed by scholars (Salama & Crosbie, 2020).

According to United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organizations (UNESCO) data, almost 1.2 billion students worldwide have abandoned face-to-face education (Khogali, 2020; Kristóf, 2020). Governments and various Ministries of education have supported remote learning using online digital tools (Setiawan, 2020), including Iraq. Nevertheless, many communities are unable to participate in online learning completely (Goswami, 2020; Ibrahim et al., 2021; Kristóf, 2020) because of inequitable distribution of resources, tactics, and poverty (Ceylan, Şahin, Seçmen, Somer, & Süher, 2020). The case for Iraq was even more challenging, which include uneven internet access, haphazard alternate learning methodologies, government inactivity, and interactive online tools (Varma & Jafri, 2020). Furthermore, according to Allu-Kangkum (2021) there is a significant divide in Nigeria between those who can afford and those who cannot afford to do online learning (Allu-Kangkum, 2021; Amorighoye, 2020). This research seeks to investigate the educational repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic, with a focus on architectural education, aiming to contribute valuable insights into ensuring its resilience and continuity in the face of future challenges.

Following the introduction, this part examines the theoretical foundations of covid-19 and the promise and problems provided by the new normal in architecture education throughout the world.

The current coronavirus epidemic and the demand for online or remote learning have sparked debate in architectural education worldwide. Because of the coronavirus pandemic, these talks are centered on the possibilities and new obstacles to learning (Ceylan et al., 2020; Gautam, 2020; Goswami, 2020; Ibrahim et al., 2021). Besides, according to Schwarz et al. (2020), online learning enhances educational sustainability. Therefore, education is the greatest way to pursue sustainable objectives (Allu, 2018). Earlier studies (Boarin, Martinez-Molina, & Juan-Ferruses, 2020; Donovan, 2018; Kowaltowski et al., 2020) have emphasized the relevance of sustainable education in architecture education.

In many nations, the design studio is the primary learning setting for architectural education (Brown, 2020; Rauf, Shareef, & Othman, 2021). This circumstance, however, has prompted calls for a more interconnected learning environment (McGrew, Schonauer, & Jamieson, 2019; Rauf & Shareef, 2019). Wright and Grover (2020) agreed with this viewpoint. They advocated a more adaptable and sustainable architecture education (Herrera-Limones, Rey-Pérez, Hernández-Valencia, & Roa-Fernández, 2020) learning environment to address the coronavirus epidemic.

Other studies have underlined the importance of connecting theory, application, and practical training in architecture education (Kalantzis & Cope, 2020; Piplani & Brar, 2020a; Piplani & Brar, 2020b) and sustainability (Allu, 2018; Milovanovi, et al., 2020). Many academics have endorsed online learning as a viable alternative to the new normal in education.

Despite the apparent growth of online learning (Brown, 2020; Friedman, 2020), the physical dimension of the studio learning environment remains vital to architectural education (Jones, Lotz, & Holden, 2021). In support of this, Jones et al. (2021) have determined that online formal learning

systems must be upgraded to accommodate the unique nature of architectural education. MAYUK and COŞGUN (2020) findings with student workshops demonstrated that students prefer to learn by doing rather than hearing, supporting this viewpoint again. The trends and challenges identified in the Middle Eastern countries mirror broader, global issues in higher education, emphasizing the need for adaptable, innovative approaches that can be implemented in diverse academic settings around the world.

METHOD

This qualitative study has been conducted to understand intangible issues in online education in architectural design studios. Qualitative research investigates and comprehends the meaning that individuals or groups attribute to a social or human issue (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). This study takes the phenomenon of low performance and low participation in the online lectures by the high-performing students in the on-campus courses. For this reason, the in-depth interview was provided as a data collection tool with the students who experienced this phenomenon (Giorgi, 2009; Ortiz & Greene, 2007). Although the methodology of this study was specifically designed to address the unique educational context of the Midwest United States, it establishes a comparative framework that invites further research in different geographical settings, thereby enhancing our collective understanding of global educational strategies and outcomes.

The procedure of the study

The phenomenon was realized at the beginning of the pandemic and quarantine period, when, through the Ministry of Higher Education-KRG, Iraq, the online platform had been provided for university practical courses. In the territory of Sulaymaniyah Province, three universities have Architecture Departments. However, one of the departments postponed its education to post-pandemic time. The second department provided e-learning education by postponing its practical courses to post-quarantine time. At the same time, Tishk International University-Sulaimani provided online lectures for the practical courses. So, the latter department has been taken as a case for this study. Students' names were noted after perceiving the phenomenon of low participation and low-performance students in their online design studio courses. After the end of the online courses and returning to campus, the selected students were observed again to understand their performance. By this, the confirmation of the selected students' low performances was only obtained during online lectures. Previous literature was documented to understand a pandemic's influences, opportunities, and challenges on architectural education. However, the current literature addressed common issues such as the internet or/and electricity, whereas this study attempts to understand unspoken problems deeply. Therefore, an in-depth interview was conducted with the selected students. The open-ended interview questions gave respondents more freedom to explain their life stories at that time. The students from S1 to S12 have been given the codes for policy matters.

Sample of the Study

Despite the number of seventy-five students, twelve (10+2 for confidence interval to face the minimum error) students have been taken into consideration in the in-depth interviews (Boddy, 2016; Malterud, Siersma, & Guassora, 2016; Marshall, Cardon, Poddar, & Fontenot, 2013; Sandelowski, 1995). Those students had a high performance in the pre-pandemic and post-pandemic on-campus lectures. In contrast, those with low performance decided to provide all the necessary equipment for an online course. Among the interviewed students, five are males, and seven are females.

Table 1: The Population of the Students with the Number of Sample Sizes for the In-Depth Interview

#		Population	Sample Size	
1	Second Stage	15	There is a homogeneous variety with a specific phenomenon, so the minimum sample size is 10 students (Boddy, 2016; Sandelowski, 1995)	The sample size of this study is 12 (10+2) for a Confidence Interval to face the minimum error (Malterud et al., 2016; Marshall et al., 2013)
2	Third Stage	33		
3	Fourth Stage	9		
4	Fifth Stage	18		

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the in-depth interview, five open-ended questions were asked. The participants have a response for each of them. The explanations and interpretations of respondents' answers are illustrated below:

Q1: ***Do you prefer on-campus education or online education? Can you tell me your reason?***

According to the answer to this question, approximately most of them, 10 students, mentioned that on-campus classes are more impressive. The eye contact, student-instructor interaction, and student-student interactions are stronger for them. At the same time, they pointed out that they cannot understand online classes well for many reasons, such as internet interaction and lack of information about using online platforms by their instructors. Furthermore, one of the students said that online classes are more joyful when other students have no interruptions. Surprisingly, despite his high performance in the campus classes, one of the students mentioned that "architecture education is nothing for me when my mind is with another department, so I hate both campus and online classes" (S4).
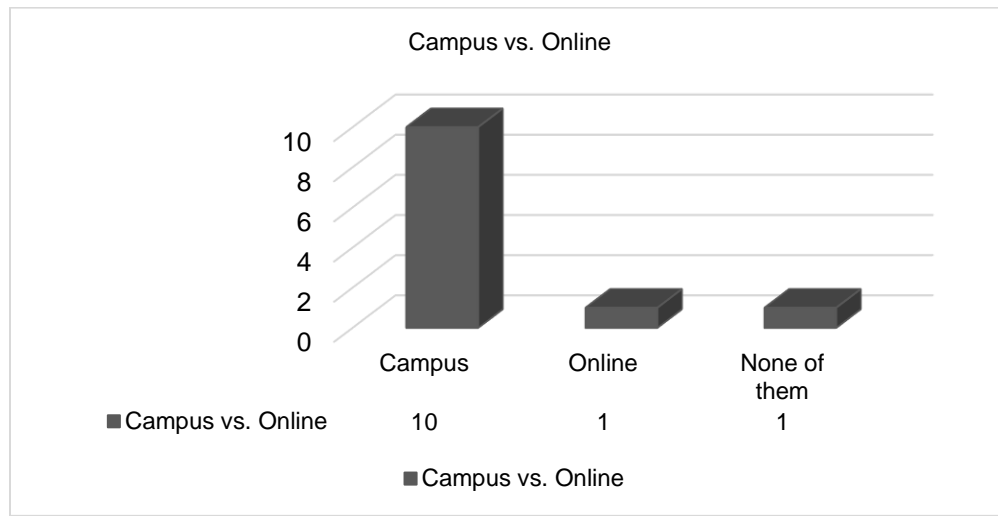
Figure 1: Findings of the Students' Response to their chosen Campus vs. Online Courses

So, it is obvious that 83.34% of the interviewed students preferred on-campus learning. In contrast, only 8.34% of them chose online learning.

Q2: ***Can you tell me a good memory of your online lectures?***
In response to this question, many answers have been emphasized. So, for more understanding, the answers are interpreted in six main points:

Have fun during the class: one of the most repeated answers by four students out of 12 was "having fun, it was fun, we had a fun time". For instance, S6 mentioned that "during an online session, a funny thing happened: our instructor became angry, and that time, the grocery man outside our lecturer's home shouting for fresh tomatoes to sell". Also, S11 said, "I had much chocolate, snacks, video gaming, and my amazing, comfortable bed, without letting my instructor feel them, hahaha".

No Need for Preparation: three interviewed students pointed out that coming to the campus takes too much time for preparation; what made a good memory for them as they did not need to prepare themselves for class because they closed the camera and no one saw them. S5 declared, "Every day I need 1 to 1.5 hours to prepare and do my makeup, but in online classes, I was sometimes in my bed and sleepy my class started".

Sleeping during the class: Two respondents mentioned that they had a chance to sleep during class time because other students took critiques.

Repeating Lectures: During online lectures, the sessions were recorded and uploaded to the university's platform so that the students could listen to their critiques more than once. S1 mentioned that "during on-campus lectures, I forgot what my instructors said to me most of the time, but I could listen to my project critiques ten times".
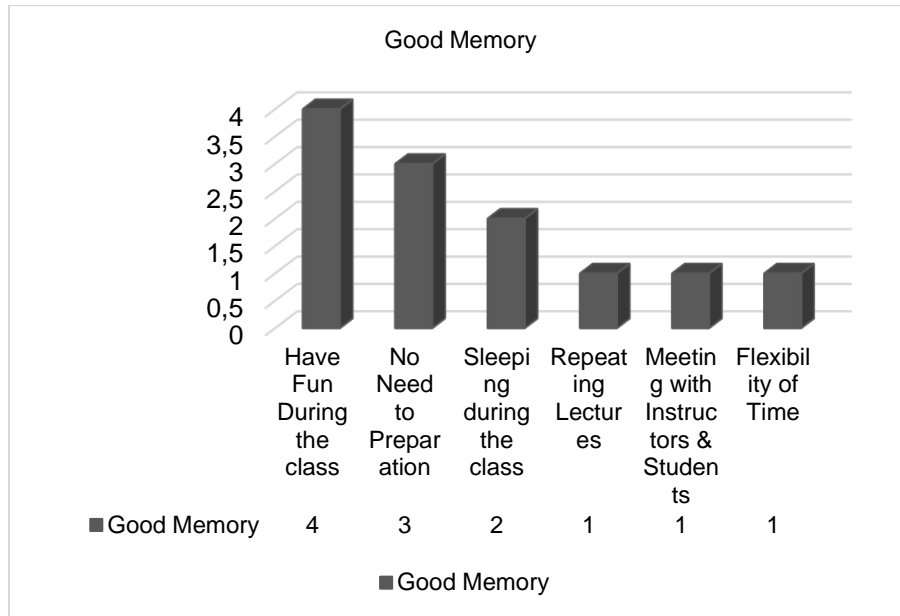
Figure 2: Students' explanations of their good memories during online lectures

Meeting with Instructors & Students: one of the students (S5) illustrated that "do not forget, our online lectures were in quarantine time, so it was a good opportunity to meet our instructors and my lovely friend, even though the meeting was virtual".

The flexibility of time: another student (S7) stated that "in on-campus classes after 15 mins. if we do not enter the class, the instructor writes us as absent, but in online lectures, we agreed to have our lecture according to our appropriate time."

Therefore, the percentage of recorded good memories by the participants was 33.3% of the students had fun during the class, and 25.0% believed there was no need to prepare. Also, 16.67% of the participants mentioned their sleep during the class without letting their instructors feel it. At the same time, 8.33% of the students demonstrated repeating lectures at another time, another 8.33% said meeting the instructors and students was a good memory, and the last 8.33% mentioned time flexibility was a good memory.

Q3: ***What was/were your worse experience/s during your online courses?***
Throughout asking this question, the participants' answers had classified into three classifications.
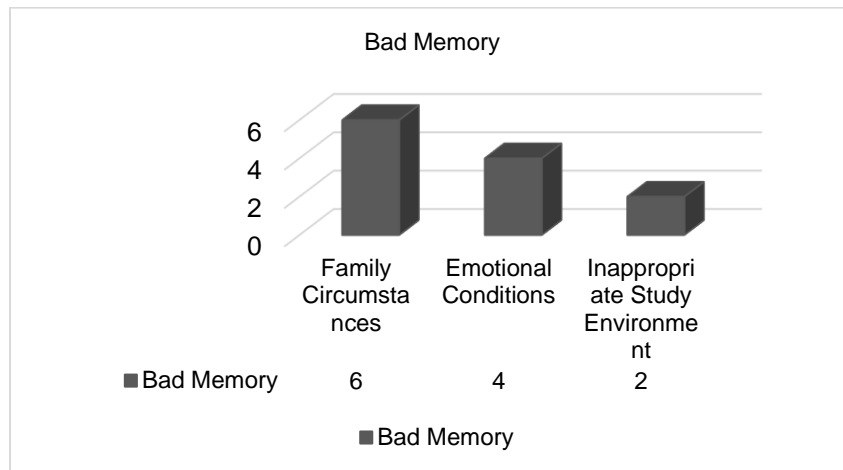
Figure 3:Students' Explanations of Their Bad memories During Online Lectures

Family Circumstances: Half (six Students) have mentioned their family circumstances during online lectures. Despite S7 mentioning flexibility of time as a good memory, S3, S5, and S9 demonstrated a change of time as bad memory when their parents or at least one of them were at home and did not accept their children to talk to their instructors. For instance, S3 said, " My dad told me, shame on you… in front of me you are laughing and talking very comfortably with X instructor!" when X was Mr and S3 was female.

Emotional Conditions: Four students believed that having no opportunity to hug, kiss, and touch their friends and that they could not see their instructors' language, bodies, and faces were the worst experiences of online lectures. S 11 mentioned, "I used to hug and kiss my friends every day, but because of quarantine, I could not do… when in the online lectures I heard their voice, I sometimes cried a lot". At the same time, S12 stated, "How much was nice when I had campus Lectures. I saw my teacher's face, from his/her smile or aggressiveness, I understood how much s/he was happy or upset about my works".

Inappropriate Study Environment: Two students pointed out the importance of the study environment. As S4 said, "when I was at my home and my teacher at his home, we did not see each other in reality, getting distracted easily and not concentrating on what the teacher says was so normal!". Also, S2 mentioned, "too many temptations at home. Students will always struggle to focus during online lessons".
So, this question can be concluded as 50% of the students had family circumstances, 33.3% had emotional conditions, and 16.67% had an inappropriate study environment during online lectures.

Q4: ***In your opinion, what was/were the struggles to participate in online courses?***
By asking this question, each respondent could choose multiple answers to figure out the aspects of their struggles during the pandemic. All students agreed that electricity and the internet were the common problems. In addition, the participants illustrated other issues such as lack of dialogue,

cultural-educational shock, lack of motivation, and lack of group work participation. These points are explained in the following sections.
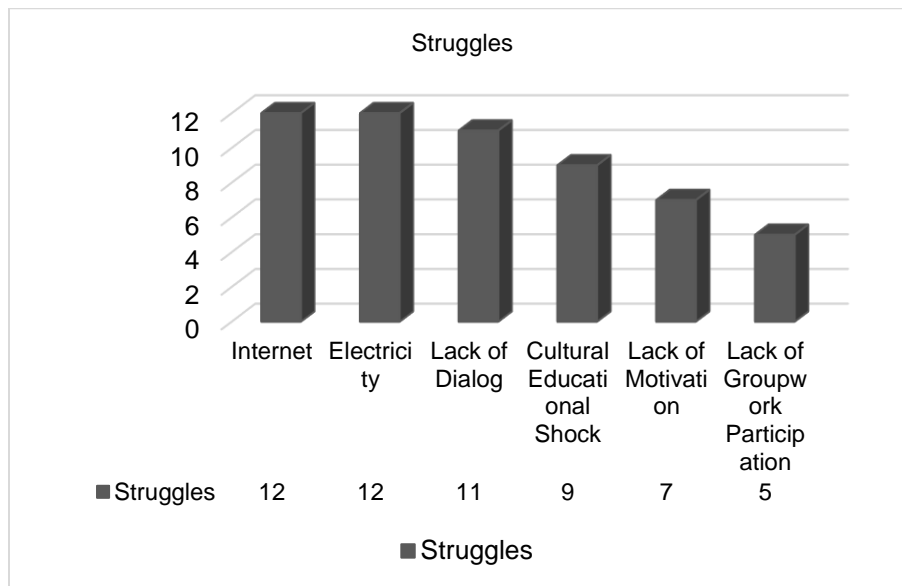

Figure 4:Students' Demonstration of Struggles in Online Education

Lack of Dialogue: through answering this question, eleven students mentioned 'that lack of dialogue' was one of the most obvious obstacles for them when the instructor muted their mics; as S7 stated, "it made me so nerves when my teacher muted all of us and didn't allow us to talk or to ask, sometimes I raised my hand, but he didn't see my request, I was so upset".

Cultural-Educational shock: attending a physical class environment is one of the most crucial requirements in Iraq. Yet, during quarantine time, the students experienced virtual classes for the first time, so somehow it was difficult for them to adapt to using their laptops and participating in the class from home. S3 mentioned that "when they told me we would have design lecture from home, I socked; I remember shaking for more than 20mins. I got critiques in the first lecture when I realised I was at home. I have design lectures without any access to draw on my drawing papers. I do not think I will forget that shock still in my mind, and every day I remember". Some other students, such as S6 and S12, believed that even their instructor's voice differed in the online classes.

Lack of Motivation: seven students demonstrated that lack of motivation was one of the struggles in front of their online lectures. S2 stated, "Online learning requires motivation to complete tasks, stay engaged, and make progress. But we could not get it well from our instructors, even from administrations of department or university". At the same time, S5 mentioned, "there was not any motivation to go with the project. I think in that time, our instructors even needed to be motivated, we all were in a big shock, and there was no one to motivate us".

Lack of Groupwork Participation: in the pandemic, everyone is obliged to stay home. The students lost the opportunity to work as teams. Although most students usually prefer working as individuals, five participants mentioned that working as an individual and not participating in a group was another struggle for online education. S1 said:

You might prefer to join a study group or go hang out with classmates as part of your college experience, but we didn't have this chance, sometimes with my friends, we study in a group, even if we have an exam which needs to study individually, but to understand more and to motivate each other to study, we gathered to study... but in online classes, we didn't have this, I was sometimes crying because I could not study alone.

Therefore, many remarkable obstacles have been demonstrated by the respondents' replies. The obvious problems such as electricity and the internet had mentioned by all interviewed students. Yet many unspoken issues include lack of dialogue, cultural-educational shock, lack of motivation, and lack of group work participation.

Q5: ***Due to online education, do you prefer theoretical or practical courses with online participation?***

In the last question, the participants were asked if they preferred theoretical or practical courses online. As a result, seven students (58.33%) preferred theoretical courses to be taught on online platforms. At the same time, three students (25%) did not accept theoretical and practical courses online. As S8 stated, "none of the theoretical and practical courses is good to be taught online... I hated bot". In contrast, only one of the students (8.33%) mentioned that practical courses are better to be taught online. Yet, one student (8.33%) believed that theoretical and practical courses could be taught online and are better than on-campus courses.
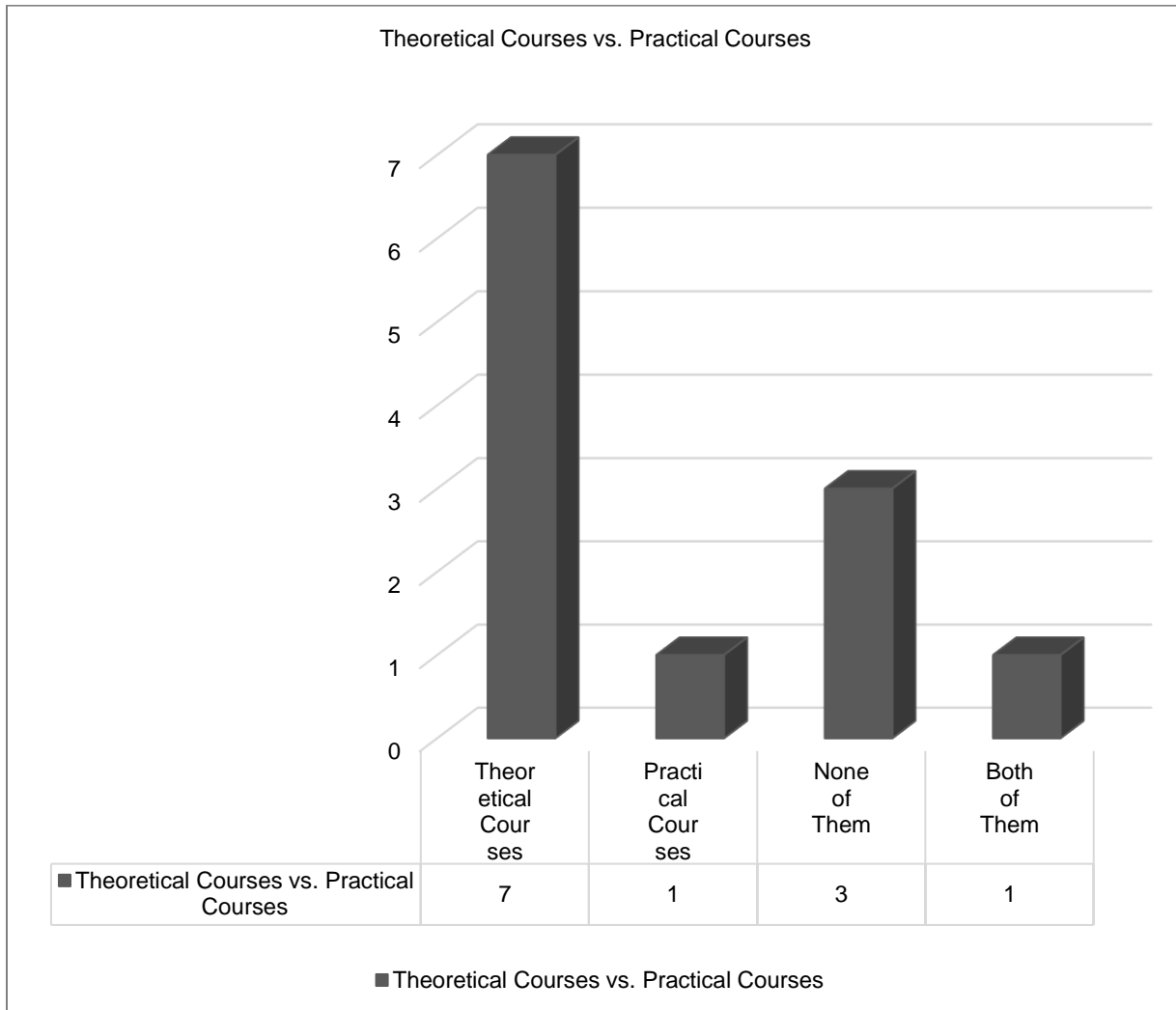
Figure 5: Students' response to preferring theoretical or practical courses by online platform

Discussion

An analysis of the findings shows that, generally, students are for on-campus courses, which is somehow predictable and shown in Figure 1. So, the students are expected to experience different subjects when involved in online education. Responding to the second question (Figure 2), most mentioned having fun during online classes as a good memory. This contradicts what they mentioned in the first question, as most were for on-campus classes. Considering this subject, we can understand that spending no time for preparations, flexibility for leaving anytime they wanted during the online sessions, and availability of the classes on the university's online platform could fill the gap in the students' desire for on-campus classes. Students could adapt themselves to the new education model (online education).

The students' obstacles during the online classes can be seen in Figure 3, listed as 'Family circumstances', 'Emotional conditions', and 'Inappropriate study environments'. So we can say these are the points that this study tried to find and understand.

Starting with the first point, the 'Family circumstances', students did not hide how they were under stress sometimes under these circumstances. This may open many discussions regarding gender issues and cultural beliefs. However, both genders experienced the same stress from their families and no suitable places to participate in online classes free from family interventions. Part of this may be because online learning is somehow new to the country in general and specifically to the families of these students.

This second point was 'Emotional conditions'. Students explained how they needed their friends to be around them and practice their emotional being with them. It seems that regardless of the virtual or online meetings, they still needed to mingle. So, it is human nature to meet and see their loved ones face-to-face, which makes them spiritually relaxed, and when this happens, they may better learn and be involved in the classes. Another point is instructor-student relations in online classes. Students reported that they lacked this important relationship in the online classes because they could have missed what the instructor said due to the lack of face-to-face meetings. Sometimes, in on-campus classes, instructors can observe if students get tired or busy with something else, while online, it is not possible. Some students may just open the meeting link and leave it open without listening to the instructor.

The third point was the 'Inappropriate study environment'. This may be because of the families' social network as in this city, and specifically, some families have strong family ties to their close ones and relatives, so when their relatives visit them, the parents might have felt online education of their sons or daughters hinder an appropriate gathering with them. This also may be different from one family to another related to the area of their homes and whether their sons/daughters have their own rooms. So, students could not have enough focus for their courses.

Answering their struggles during online classes, students pointed out several issues: the internet, electricity, lack of dialogue, cultural-educational shock, lack of motivation, and lack of group work. To summarize, issues like cut-offs and internet problems are omnipresent, and students from many countries might experience especially in developing countries. What was important was the rest of the problems. Not having enough dialogue can be linked to the previously mentioned 'Emotional conditions' issue. Students can be better involved in the classes if they keep a dialogue with their peers and instructors. In this way, they can construct a 'meaningful learning' that is unforgettable (Jonassen & Strobel, 2006).

The subject of 'cultural educational shock' is also essential to understand. Education in Iraq rarely allowed online learning to be practiced, but the overall system has been designed for a face-to-face situation, at least before the pandemic. This issue is bolder for architectural education due to its specific nature, especially in design and other practical courses requiring face-to-face interaction. That is why students felt this shock.

In some architectural courses and especially in the design studio, students can get motivation from their fellow students and instructors when they keep their discussions around their design projects (Shareef & Farivarsadri, 2020). Students showed that they lacked this motivation, resulting

in less performance in online classes. Another subject they have mentioned is the absence of group work. Students stated how they enjoyed working in groups when on-campus studying. At the same time, they missed this chance to gather in groups face-to-face, even if they had tasks in groups in online classes. Students can learn best from their peers in the social circumstances of the design studio or the courses alike. This can also go under the 'Emotional conditions' and link to students' social activities.

When students asked which one' theoretical or practical courses' to go online, most chose 'theoretical courses' to be on-campus. So this indicates that students were against having their core course (design) taught online.

CONCLUSION

The current Coronavirus epidemic has widened the gap in the worldwide education industry for transitioning from traditional face-to-face education to virtual education. As a result, during the Covid-19 epidemic, online schooling has been approved as an alternative. However, some believe that the unorganized and hasty transition to online learning – with no practice, insufficient bandwidth, and little grounding – will result in a poor user experience that will impede long-term development; others believe that the new blended educational model will emerge with significant benefits.

While this model has limitations and challenges, reporting the literature revealed notable tangible hurdles such as internet networks, electricity, technological instruments, and so on, while disrupting social interactions is also a problem when educational settings try to practice online education.

As a result, practically all prior research on the impact of the covid19 pandemic on schooling has identified similar issues. This study examined students' perspectives on intangible concerns often disregarded in developing countries like Iraq. First, qualitative research conducted in-depth interviews with university students, especially architecture students, who took online classes from 2019 to 2021, when online instruction became mandatory at the start, and blended education became mandatory last year. Recognizing the phenomena of low performance or non-participation in online lectures from the perspective of engaged students. The students' viewpoints on touchable concerns in their university lives were shown in the second part of this study by documenting literature. Based on past research, an in-depth interview was done to better understand students' intangible barriers when attending online courses. The study's methodological tools include interpreting the replies and assessing the outcomes.

Consequently, the answers reveal that, despite providing all students with free access to online courses in architectural education, students experienced several challenges. For example, both genders have had issues, but females have been coerced more than males. In addition, due to their online courses, the participants exhibited the key issues: emotion,

educational culture, family culture, and change resistance. Finally, this research highlights the unspoken issues surrounding online architectural education in cultures such as the Middle East, particularly Iraq. As a result, this study suggests that the solutions to the difficulties raised above be addressed while conducting online classes.

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