

Toward culturally responsive E-learning in post-COVID-19 higher education: Perspectives from the United Arab Emirates

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Summary

Purpose and importance of study for the UAE

In the Gulf states, cultural, religious, and sociolinguistic dynamics can present challenges for teaching and learning online. Such challenges became especially apparent during the Covid-19 pandemic period of emergency remote teaching and learning (ERT&L). The purpose of this study is to gain the perspectives of Emirati university students on E-learning experiences with the aim of tailoring online and blended learning to the specific context through a focus on culturally and linguistically responsive educational policies and pedagogy.

Methods

This paper presents empirical data from a qualitative phenomenological case study investigating both male and female Emirati university students' (n=107) perspectives on access, interaction, and engagement during Zoom classes in Fall 2020 and Spring 2021. The data collection tools included students' reflective essays and researcher observations. Data were analyzed thematically drawing on the analytical tool of intersectionality through which complexities of learner identities were explored.

Study key points

- Intersecting factors, such as gender, religion, culture, linguistic challenges in English-medium universities and fear of judgement, affected participants reluctance to use video

cameras for online learning as well as comfort levels and learning effectiveness in online classes.

- As the pandemic enters its third year, education in the UAE has moved toward more online and blended classes. Such a reality means that the context-specific challenges reflected upon by students in the study remain relevant even in a post-pandemic period.

Findings

The findings show how multiple overlapping and inter-connected social identities shape educational experiences, equity, and access in the context of UAE higher education. While individual students may be privileged in some ways, there are other identity factors which are marginalizing. Reasons students did not want to use video cameras included poor internet connection and access, noisy home environments, cultural and religious taboos around showing female faces online, E-safety, home as a gendered space, performance anxiety and fear of judgement. At the same time, students recognized the drawbacks of camera-less and microphone-less learning such as lack of social connection, lack of rapport, loss of focus, lack of academic integrity and accountability.

Recommendations

For optimizing E-learning effectiveness without compromising cultural and religious beliefs, comfort, E-safety, and privacy in post-pandemic education, three recommendations are made based on the concepts of 'innovation, flexibility, and collaboration' (IFC) for E-learning. Firstly, the use of movement-responsive avatars is recommended. If universities make such software available and provide training sessions, female students are provided with a way of actively engaging online without revealing their faces. Secondly, greater flexibility around accessing materials is needed. Finally, collaboration on many levels is necessary to ensure more culturally responsive and linguistically responsive pedagogy.