

The Obstacles Faced by Women Faculty in Higher Education during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic led to schools' and universities' closures worldwide between 2020-2021. This greatly impacted many aspects of the daily lives of individuals of different categories. The primary purpose of this study was to investigate the obstacles faced by women faculty members at Imam Abdulrahman bin Faisal University (IAU) in the Early Childhood (EC) department, College of Science and Humanities, Jubail city, during the COVID-19 pandemic (2020-2021). The study used a qualitative case study methodology. A total of 12 faculty members participated in the study. The focus was only on women faculty who have children. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect the data. The content analysis method was used to analyse the data. The findings showed that the most manifest obstacles identified by the participants were lots of stress and psychological pressure, physical stress, technical issues, lack of face-to-face contact with students, and missing the traditional environment of the university. Other benefits were reported, such as staying longer with their family members, taking several professional development courses in e-learning strategies, and using distance learning and technology professionally.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, challenges, women faculty, higher education, Saudi Arabia.

1. INTRODUCTION

Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is an epidemic disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus and has generated many difficulties worldwide (Karaoke, 2021). In February 2020, China was the first to close schools, and other countries shortly followed (Schleicher, 2020). The pandemic also severely impacted higher education as universities closed their campuses in response to the lockdown. The lockdowns have interrupted traditional education in most countries and prompted instructors at all educational levels to quickly move from in-person interaction to distance learning (Al-Rasheed, 2021, Al-Youbi, et. al. 2021; Karaoke, 2021; Khan, 2021; Schleicher, 2020).

Based on various studies covering topics about COVID-19's impact on educational sectors, several challenges were found among students during the pandemic, such as online-learning challenges, physical health, and psychosocial issues (Al-Rasheed, 2021;

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Ma, et. al., 2021; Khan, 2021, Plakhotnik, et. al., 2021; Kaur, et.al., 2020; Mann, et. al, 2020). However, a few studies have been conducted to examine the challenges faced by higher education faculty members during the pandemic (Al-Youbi, et. al., 2021; Pokhrel, & Chhetri, 2021; Khan, 2021). To the best of the researchers' knowledge, no study has been conducted to examine the actual obstacles that faculty women in higher education faced during the pandemic outbreak.

Undeniably, faculty women are having more responsibilities than their male counterparts, particularly when caring for their children, elderly, and spouses (Orser, Riding & Stanley, 2012). For that reason, the researcher of this study aims to investigate the obstacles faced by women faculty at Imam Abdulrahman bin Faisal University (IAU), in the Early Childhood (EC) department, during the COVID-19 pandemic (2020-2021). The focus was only on female faculty members that have children. The researchers had the literature justify, give grounds for the problem, and play a minor role.

The remainder of this study organizes as follows. Section two describes the purpose of the study and the research Question. Section three provides a literature review on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on teaching and learning. The researcher discusses in section four the interpretive framework used in this study. Section five presents the methodology of the research. Section six presents the research findings and discussion and links to previous studies. Section seven discloses the limitation of this study. Lastly, in section eight, the researcher displays the conclusion and presents recommendations for future research.

2. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY AND RESEARCH QUESTION.

The primary purpose of this study was to investigate the obstacles faced by women faculty members at Imam Abdulrahman bin Faisal University (IAU), in the Early Childhood (EC) department, during the COVID-19 pandemic (2020-2021). In response to this problem, the following question was asked to women faculty members: What challenges were faced by women faculty at the university during the COVID-19 pandemic? Exploring faculty perspectives and challenges they faced during the COVID-19 pandemic may reveal some knowledge for officials at the University and Ministry of Education to create a long-term plan to avoid any unexpected event that disrupts a quality and healthy learning environment.

3. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In Saudi Arabia, there is an increase in women working either in the field of education or any other working sector, which makes raising children a very challenging task for parents as most families need someone to care for their take children. Because of a growing female presence in the workplace, young children are more likely to be placed in childcare or preschool centres or left with nannies at home (Alqassem, Dashash & Alzahrani, 2016). The COVID-19 pandemic has severely impacted female instructors as their roles in assisting their children have changed considerably, and they play a more direct role as learning instructors for their children at home during online learning (Mann, et. al., 2020).

Previous research revealed a harmful impact of this shift in schooling to E-learning. According to Khan (2021), faculty members and students were compelled to fully use distance learning in a relatively short period of time, and students with learning difficulties had only one option as a learning choice. Also, there was a lack of student-teacher interaction in online learning environments that often led to poor teaching results, with some duplicating content and moving it online without following any structured or subjective direction (Khan, 2021). Further, several instructors raised concerns regarding

the efficacy of online teaching since some students had difficulty understanding the content, especially for classes that often depend on a face-to-face format, such as labs (Al-Rasheed, 202; Khan, 2021). Moreover, about 85% of students at university revealed that they had difficulties to continue using digital learning because of slow internet connection, technostress or inability to cope with new technologies, and the difficulty of computer maintenance during quarantine (Al-Rasheed, 2021).

Another problem regarding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is psychological and mental health issues (Al-Rasheed, 2021; Khan, 2021; Ma, et. al., 2021; Plakhotnik, et. al., 2021). The pandemic has created apprehension, stress, and psychological pressure in students and people in general (Al-Rasheed, 2021). It also has caused post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression symptoms among children aged 7-15 (Ma, et. al., 2021). Further, Plakhotnik, et. al. (2021, p. 1) found that “student well-being is decreased by their concerns for their degree completion but not by their concern for a future job prospect. In turn, concerns for future job prospects affect students’ well-being over time”. Although the COVID-19 pandemic’s impact on mental health has been remarkable, the evidence is still less clear in the literature reviewed (Khan, 2021). Thus, there is a need to investigate the impact of the pandemic on all parties involved, not only students but also faculty members. This can be examined by “engaging in activities that assist in alleviating anxieties caused by stoppage of ‘normal’ academic activity” (Khan, 2021, p. 8). Other studies have addressed the physical issues caused by the pandemic. For example, E-learning poses a risk of exposure to increased screen time for students. Thus, it has become essential for learners to engage in self-exploratory learning and offline activities (Pandya & Lodha, 2021; Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021)

Despite the obstacles posed to instructors and learners, online and distance learning have solved this unexpected global pandemic (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). Instructors in Saudi Arabia were more involved with information and communication technologies (ICT) than is usual across OECD countries as “they are more likely to engage with ICT within teacher training and professional development and more likely to make use of ICT within teaching and learning” (Mann, et. al., 2020, p. 7). Some of the online platforms were used during the pandemic in many countries such as Microsoft Teams, Blackboard, Google classrooms, and Zoom Meeting. These platforms allowed educators to create educational courses for their students and to provide training and development programs. Other educators used flipped classrooms, which is a strategy for providing learning courses such as pre-recorded videos, articles, and YouTube links before the class (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). In fact, faculty members’ technical skills have increased significantly due to using E-learning and information technology (Khan, 2021).

The gap in previous literature is that the researchers mostly investigated the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on students. However, more studies on faculty members in higher education are needed, specifically women who have children. The next two sections discuss the interruptive framework, the purpose of this study, and the research question.

4. INTERPRETIVE FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY.

The philosophical assumptions are often used within interpretive frameworks that investigators use when they carry out research. The philosophical assumption used in this study was the Social Constructivism paradigm or worldview. According to Creswell and Poth (2018, p. 24), “in social constructivism, individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work. They develop subjective meanings of their experiences—meanings directed toward certain objects or things”. In the social constructivist worldview, multiple realities are constructed through the researcher’s interactions with participants, and the goal is to rely as much as possible on the participants’ perspectives of the situations (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

5. METHODOLOGY

5.1. Study Design.

This study was based on a qualitative method and used the case study approach. Qualitative research was used in this study because of its naturalistic setting. It helped the researchers collect the data at the site where participants experienced the issue or the problem under study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A case study approach was used in this study as it is an empirical inquiry that investigates a current aspect within its real-life context (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A case study is a worthwhile method for understanding participants thinking, and it provides an in-depth investigation of one specific individual, group, time, or event (Hebert & Beardsley, 2001).

5.2. Setting and participants.

This study occurred at IAU, in the EC department, College of Science and Humanities in Jubail city, in the Eastern region. There are 20 faculty members in the EC department. During the time of conducting this study, four of them were on sabbatical. The researchers included only participants who had children. A total of 12 women faculty members participated in this study. This sample size is considered sufficient for qualitative research as it covered the participants' points of view and, most essentially, allowed the researcher to reach saturation point.

5.3. Sampling Techniques.

Participants were recruited using purposive sampling or a non-probability method, where the researchers used their expertise to select specific participants that could help the study meet its goals.

5.4. Data collection.

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews. This interview technique enables the researchers to ask open-ended questions and allows for a discussion with the interviewee rather than a straightforward question-and-answer format. The interview questions were emailed in Arabic to the participants and returned in about a week. Participants were informed that they would be given a follow-up interview if the researchers needed more clarification of their responses.

5.5. Data Analysis.

After translating the collected data into English, Stringer's qualitative content analysis technique (2007) was used to analyse the data. The researchers first read the collected data deeply to identify details or any information related to the research questions. Second, the researchers highlighted crucial statements from each transcript, including phrases that are repetitive in each transcript. Third, the researchers classified the data by selecting and constructing important statements into several headings. Fourth, the researchers identified themes that were common across participants. Fifth, the researchers organized themes and provided an overall picture of information relevant to the studied topic. Last, the researcher wrote each theme's details and created a theme mapping.

5.6. Establishing Trustworthiness.

To ensure the trustworthiness of this qualitative research, four special considerations were addressed: credibility; transferability; dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Krefting, 1991; Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). To establish credibility, member checking and peer review techniques were used. The researchers asked the participants to review their responses and interpretation of data to check for precision with their experiences (member checking). Besides, the researchers asked an experienced researcher in qualitative research to review and assess the worth of the findings (peer review). In addition, the triangulation method was used to increase the credibility of the research findings. Transferability is concerned with how much the findings of a study can be

applied to other cases. The findings of this study could be applied to other departments at IAU. To establish dependability, the procedures used in the study were reported in detail, which enables future researchers to repeat the work. Also, the researchers of this study asked another qualitative researcher to examine the process of data collection, data analysis, and the study results to confirm the accuracy of the research findings. Last, confirmability or reflexivity is related to the objectivity of the qualitative researcher. To establish confirmability, the interpretations of findings were derived from the data and shaped by participants more than by the researchers.

5.7. Ethical Considerations.

Consents forms were obtained from participants prior to conducting the study. Privacy and confidentiality procedures were maintained during data collection, analysis, and reporting of the study findings.

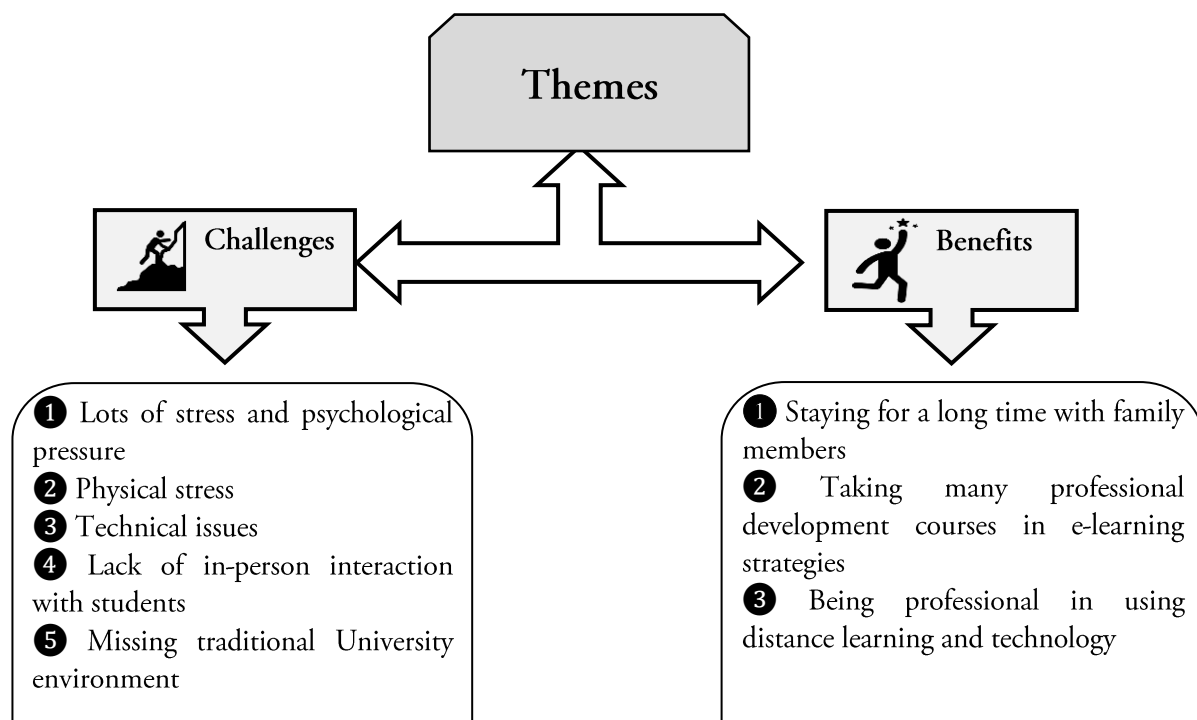
5.8. The Role of the researcher.

The researchers are a faculty member at IAU, and to keep the study's objectivity, she used several techniques. First, the researchers were reflexive, which means that they spent enough time considering how their own beliefs and values would affect the study. Also, the researchers developed the interview questions, gathered, analysed data, reported the findings, and created a Theme Mapping. Moreover, the researchers only described the gathering data as it was shown in the interview responses, without critiquing what participants said (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). Finally, the interview questions and responses were translated into English.

6. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The primary purpose of this study was to investigate the obstacles faced by women faculty members at IAU in the EC department during the COVID-19 pandemic. The researchers reported the findings under five themes: (1) lots of stress and psychological pressure, (2) physical stress, (3) technical issues, (4) lack of in-person interaction with students, and (5) missing traditional university environment. Also, the participants revealed three benefits they gained during this pandemic, which are (1) staying for a long time with their family members, (2) taking many professional development courses in e-learning strategies and flipped classes, and (3) finally being professional in using distance learning and technology. These benefits emerged during participants' responses (emerging perspective). Figure 1 shows the Theme Mapping of the findings designed by the researcher. The following part answers the research question and discusses the findings.

Figure 1. Theme Mapping



6.1. What challenges were faced by women faculty at IAU University during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Theme 1: Lots of stress and psychological pressure.

The faculty members who participated in this study stated they had a workload as they had to work on many administrative roles and teach their students. Because of distance learning and working online, faculty members felt that they were working from morning to evening. Children at home formed another problem for all faculty members who participated in this study. They had to teach their students online and stayed and followed up with their elementary or preschool children who studied online. They teach online university students from 8:00 am to 3:00 pm, attend meetings through zoom, or work on other administrative things. From 3:00 pm to 7:00 pm, faculty members with kindergarten or elementary school children also had to stay and help their children with online learning because the elementary schools in Saudi Arabia started by 3:00 pm during the pandemic. At night, faculty women have to cook, prepare children for sleep, prepare their courses for the next day, or grade their university students' assignments. Some faculty members had to hire a part-time teacher to help them teach and stay with their children. Faculty members were generally on their nerves and worried all the time during the pandemic.

The findings showed that not only students had mental health issues, but also women faculty faced the same problem. Results from previous studies indicated that the pandemic has created feelings of anxiety, stress, and psychological pressure in students and people in general (Al-Rasheed, 2021; Khan, 2021). Since a few research have been conducted to examine the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health, there is a need to examine this issue for both learners and academic staff (Khan, 2021).

Theme 2: Physical stress.

Some faculty members who participated in this study stated that they were so tired because of staying most of the time on the computer, and because of increasing screen time, they had some physical issues such as the stiff neck, backache, pain in body

muscles, eye strain, and dry eyes. The decreased level of physical health during the COVID-19 pandemic was associated with decreased physical exercise and movement. These results align with previous studies by Pandya and Lodha (2021) and Pokhrel and Chhetri (2021), who found that online learning poses a risk to physical health due to the increase in using screen time.

Theme 3: Technical issues.

At the beginning of the university closure, faculty women who participated in this study revealed that they faced many difficulties in understanding the new university system for online teaching and adapting to unfamiliar technology. There was limited availability of digital devices and the internet for some students, which made faculty members do not rely too heavily on synchronous video conferencing and recording some of their lectures. Faculty members stated that Blackboard helped gather students' assignments, run tests, upload course content, communicate with students, and evaluate students' projects. However, during the pandemic, the academic staff had to learn more about using technology and new teaching strategies regarding distance learning, attending tens of meetings and workshops, which put them under stress and pressure.

The previous findings showed that faculty members faced the same or more technical issues during the pandemic as their students. Khan (2021) and Al-Rasheed (2021) discussed several technical issues students faced during the pandemic. Those issues can be applied to academic staff as well. However, faculty members in this study had more workload regarding using technology as they had to record their lectures for students who could not attend online classes because of technical problems. Our participants clearly stated that they "do not rely too heavily on synchronous video conferencing", where all learners share the same time slot.

Theme 4: Lack of in-person interaction with students.

Faculty members stated that they had difficulty in eye contact with their students. The camera was off; students were not allowed to open their cameras because of some traditional reasons. The first reason is that most Saudis live with extended families beyond the nuclear family, including grandparents, aunts, uncles, and other relatives. Also, there are more than three siblings in the same room. So, the camera should be off to respect the privacy of others at the same home. The second reason is wearing hijab by women (all Muslim women should cover their heads). So, for some religious reasons and to respect the privacy of women at home, the camera should be switched off. Because of switching off cameras, faculty members said they did not know if their students were listening to the lecture or away. Some students open the zoom meeting class and run away. Therefore, some faculty members sometimes had to ask surprising questions to ensure that students were listening to them.

The previous interesting findings displayed a real problem of student-teacher interaction in online learning environments. Earlier research found that students missed having in-class discussions, meeting their instructors and peers face-to-face, asking questions, and getting direct instructor feedback (Al-Rasheed, 2021). Faculty members had the same things in addition to following up with some students who run away from the lecture. Since the camera was off during teaching online, women faculty had to find another way to engage students in the learning process.

Theme 5: Missing the traditional environment of the university.

Faculty members who participated in this study revealed that they missed having discussions in class with their students and providing immediate feedback. They also missed interacting with their students and fellow workers. They feel depressed during quarantine without meeting people. Keeping social distance was necessary for public safety to stop the spread of COVID-19. The study conducted by Al-Rasheed (2021) with undergraduate women during the pandemic showed that students missed real life on

campus and meeting peers. Our study showed that students and faculty members valued life at the university campus very much, but unfortunately, they had no alternatives during quarantine.

6.2. The benefits of online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This emergent perspective was not part of the researcher's interview questions. The participants revealed three benefits they gained during this pandemic, which were (1) staying for a long time with their family members, (2) taking many professional development courses in e-learning strategies and flipped classes, and (3) finally being professional in using distance learning and technology. Previous studies shared almost the same advantages regarding increased knowledge in using technology (Khan, 2021; Mann et al., 2020; Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). Overall, the Covid-19 pandemic has changed the way how we teach our students. Recognizing the benefit of using technology in education made most stakeholders want to fully leverage the features of using technology after the pandemic was over.

6.3. Research Triangulation

Triangulation is the use of multiple approaches in a qualitative study to develop a complete understanding of the research question (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The researchers distributed a questionnaire to about 70 faculty members from the same study community, where the interviews were conducted to refute or support interview answers. Faculty members were asked questions about the difficulties and problems they faced during the Covid-19 pandemic. Also, they asked about the benefits they gained during the pandemic period. Only 40 responses were returned to the researchers. The percentages of participants were distributed as follows; 5% of respondents were professors, 10% were associate professors, 37.5 % were assistant professors, 42.5% were lecturers, and 5% were demonstrators. About 88 % of the faculty members had a complete teaching quorum during the pandemic. More than 75% of responses had children.

Regarding challenges faculty members faced during the pandemic, the results showed that 75% of participants said they lacked in-person interaction with students. Physical and mental health recorded an average percentage as 68% revealed that they faced excessive tension and psychological pressure, and 57% had physical stress and eye strain because of using screens most of the time. Further, more than half of faculty members disclose their missing to the university environment and campus. Technical problems and other IT issues recorded 45% of the challenges. All the above challenges were reported in the research conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic by Al-Rasheed (2021), Khan (2021), Pandya and Lodha (2021), and Pokhrel and Chhetri (2021). Figure 2 displays the bar chart that represents the percentages for each challenge faced by women faculty members during the pandemic. Table 1 shows the summary of the challenges percentages.

Figure 2. Challenges Faced during the Pandemic Period.

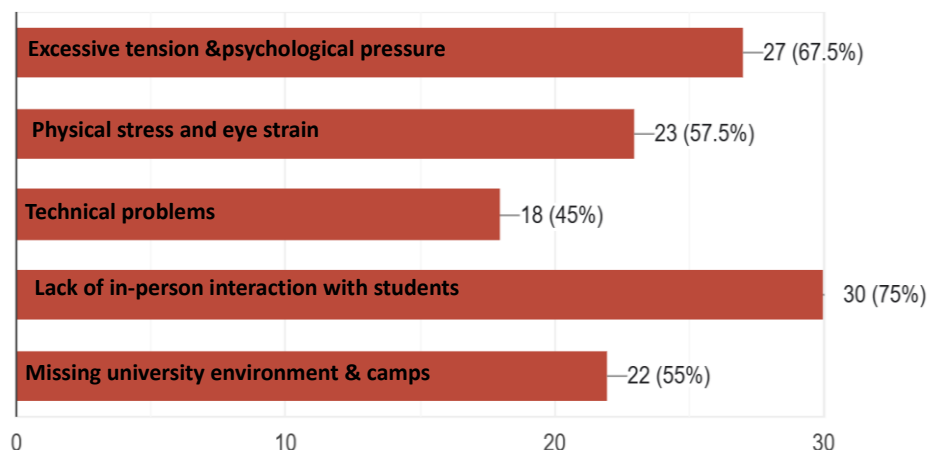


Table 1: Summary of the Challenges Percentages

#	Challenges	Percentages %
1	Excessive tension & psychological pressure.	75
2	Lack of in-person interaction with students.	57.5
3	Physical stress and eye strain.	57
4	Missing university environment & camps.	55
5	Technical problems.	45

On the other hand, the survey presented five benefits gained by participants during that crisis period. For example, more than 82% reported that they learned how to use the distance learning and technology effectively, and more than 62 % took a variety of courses in e-learning. Further, staying for a long time with family members recorded 80%, saving time and effort in education got 47%, and maintaining a healthy lifestyle represented only 27%. All the above benefits were reported in the research carried out during the Covid-19 pandemic by (Khan, 2021), and Mann et al. (2020), and Pokhrel and Chhetri (2021). Figure 3 displays the bar chart that represents the percentages for each benefit gained by women faculty members during the pandemic. Table 2 shows the summary of the benefits percentages.

Figure 3. Benefits Gained during the Pandemic Period.

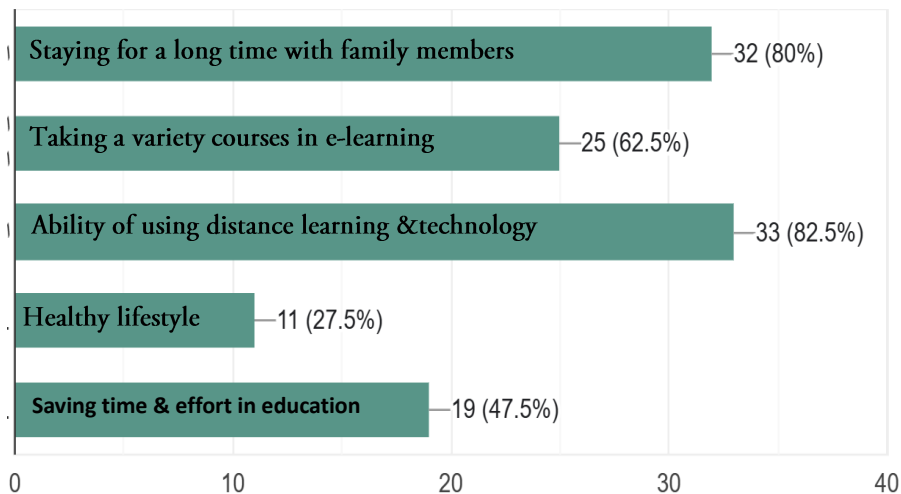


Table 2: Summary of the Benefits Percentages

#	Benefits	Percentages %
1	Ability of using distance learning & technology	82.5
2	Staying for a long time with family members	80
3	Taking a variety course in e-learning	62
4	Saving time & effort in education	47.5
5	Maintaining a healthy lifestyle	27.5

Overall, triangulation helped researchers of this study enhance the validity and reliability of the interviews conducted with participants about the topic. Also, it helps the researchers glean a more realistic picture of the results than looking at findings from a

single tool. The interviews with female faculty members and the questionnaire's results showed that the research findings were credible, and no new findings were created.

7. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS TO IMPROVE THE STUDY

The findings of this study revealed five obstacles faced by the participants during the COVID-19 pandemic: lots of stress and psychological pressure, physical stress, technical issues, lack of in-person interaction with students, and finally, missing the traditional environment of the university. Other benefits were also reported under an emerging perspective, such as staying for a long time with their family members and taking several professional development courses in e-learning strategies. This study highlights the need to create a 'Crisis Management Plan' in educational institutions to overcome any sudden disaster in the future during the school year and leverage these obstacles to create a quality learning environment and eliminate the pressure on faculty and students. Future researchers may conduct studies and interview those in charge of higher education to determine how they would respond if any crisis occurred.

Limitations

This study presented perspectives of women faculty at the EC department only at IAU, College of Science and Humanities in Jubail city. More voices from other departments are needed in future studies to enrich the research findings.

Disclosure statement

The authors reported no potential conflict of interest.

This work is authentic and original. It is not previously published, wholly or partially, in any journal or language.

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