# Changes in education due to COVID-19 Pandemic in Saudi Arabia

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## Abstract

In response to the COVID- 19 pandemic, many schools have had to shift from the physical classroom to distance learning via digital media. While this mode of learning has allowed students to continue with their studies, it has also introduced a number of changes to their routine. At the same time, it is expected that education during this period has had to adapt to the Saudi culture in some respects. To determine ways in which learning during the COVID-19 pandemic has adopted to the Saudi culture, data for thematic analysis was collected from a sample of 601 participants through interviews, focus groups, and observations. The sample was selected using maximum variation sampling technique which allows for the exploration of different viewpoints and experiences. Results of the study reveal that while there are a number of changes, aspects that are strongly tied to the Saudi culture such as praying and participation in Ramadan remained the same during this period. These findings are important in that they reflect how much certain aspects of the Saudi culture are entrenched in the education system. Here, the fact that these aspects did not change shows their significance and implies that they are deemed valuable in the lives of students.

**Keywords: Culture, COVID-19, distance learning, Single-sex schools, distance education.**

**التغييرات في التعليم بسبب جائحة كورونا في المملكة العربية السعودية**

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**المستخلص**

استجابة لوباء كوفيد –19، اضطرت العديد من المدارس إلى التحول من الفصول الدراسية الحضورية إلى التعليم عن بعد عبر الوسائط الرقمية. في حين أن هذا النمط من التعليم سمح للطلاب بمواصلة دراستهم ، فقد أدخل أيضًا عددًا من التغييرات على روتينهم. في الوقت نفسه ، من المتوقع أن يتكيف التعليم خلال هذه الفترة مع الثقافة السعودية في بعض النواحي. ولتحديد الطرق التي اعتمد عليها التعليم أثناء جائحة كوفيد –19 في الثقافة العربية، تم جمع بيانات للتحليل الموضوعي من عينة من 601 مشاركًا من خلال المقابلات ومجموعات التركيز والملاحظات. تم اختيار العينة بأقصى قدر من التباين الذي يسمح باستكشاف وجهات النظر والتجارب المختلفة. تكشف نتائج الدراسة أنه في حين أن هناك عددًا من التغييرات ، إلا أن الجوانب المرتبطة ارتباطًا وثيقًا بالثقافة السعودية مثل الصلاة والمشاركة في رمضان ظلت كما هي خلال هذه الفترة. هذه النتائج مهمة لأنها تعكس مدى ترسيخ جوانب معينة من الثقافة السعودية في نظام التعليم. هنا، تظهر حقيقة أن هذه الجوانب لم تتغير أهميتها وتعني أنها تعتبر ذات قيمة في حياة الطلاب.

**الكلمات المفتاحية : التعليم عن بعد، المدارس أحادية الجنس، كوفيد– 19، الثقافة، التعلم عن بعد**

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## Introduction

While education in Saudi Arabia has gone through many phases, it is still heavily influenced by culture and traditions (Shah, Ghazi, Din, Shahzad, and Ullah, 2015). Because reform in this field has been the sole responsibility of politicians and government officials, Saudi culture continues to have a strong influence on the education system (Akkary & Rizk, 2014).

According to Alasmrai (2016) "To comprehend Saudi political and social structures, it is important to know Islam, which manages and stimulates every phase of a Muslim's life". (p 5). With the culture and traditions, as influenced by religion, overseeing such customs as maintaining the veil and segregating men and women at the work place, these practices have also been instituted in the education sector (Alasmrai, 2016). "Article 155 of the Saudi Arabia Education Policy requires a strict separation of males and females at all levels of education" (p 6). Here, however, it is worth noting that over the years, the country has made strides to continue improving education and ensure that males and females receive the same quality of education. That said, the culture and traditions continue to influence how this is the students are educated, how educators conduct themselves, and what is expected of all students.

In the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, conventional schooling throughout the world was significantly affected. To minimize the spread of the virus, institutions had to adapt to new methods of teaching that would allow students to learn remotely (Schleicher, 2020). Essentially, many counties across the world had to embrace changes that would allow students to continue learning during this period. The current study seeks to determine how the learning system during the Covid-19 pandemic adopted with the Saudi culture. As mentioned, the education system in Saudi Arabia is heavily influenced by Saudi culture and traditions.

**Review of existing literature**

Education in Saudi culture before Covid-19

**School uniforms**

In Saudi Arabia, students have to wear school uniform or at least adhere to given dress codes. In this country, all students, from

elementary to high schools, are expected to wear uniform for school. Therefore, school uniforms are very common in much of the Saudi cities. In a report that was published in the Saudi Gazette in 2015, the writer noted that girls in public schools were expected to start wearing unified uniform in all public schools. These consisted of long-sleeved white blouse and long sleeveless dress. In Junior high, the dress code consisted of long dark green skirts and long-sleeved white blouses (Al-Ghamdi, 2014).

**School hours**

Typically, classes in Saudi Arabia start at 7:30 in the morning and end at 2:00 pm. However, in some schools, classes may start at 7 in the morning and end at 3:30 PM. A good example of this is in Saudi Arabia. As Salama explains in an article published in the Gulf News, "School hours in Saudi government and international schools are usually from 7am to 3.30pm" (Salama, 2020).

**Roles of Parents**

During school days, most of the responsibility lies with mothers more than fathers. For the most part, fathers are responsible for dropping off and picking up their children from school while mothers are mostly responsible for waking them up, preparing their meals, as well as caring for them.

**National Anthem**

In Saudi Arabia's schools, the National anthem is usually played before starting any other activity. According to Mesbah (2019), the National anthems are influenced by similar historic experiences and represent the beliefs and heritage of the people in these countries. Because of their significance, students are encouraged to sing the National anthem every morning before normal class lessons start. According to Kerry Dalton from the School of Nad Al Sheba, the reason for playing the National anthem is "In appreciation, gratitude and utmost respect for all that our national communities are doing to protect and keep our loved ones and families safe, we felt that the words of the national anthem encompass all that we are doing to work together" (Gillett, 2020, par 5)

**Praying and Ramadan**

As mentioned, Islam is the big part of the Saudi culture, and prayer is obligatory and one of the pillars of Islam. In schools, an

average of 30 minutes is dedicated for prayers during school time. Because Prayer is obligatory, students, both boys and girls, are taught to pray about five times a day (Debnam, 1990). Ramadan also is obligatory and one of the pillars of Islam. During Ramadan Muslim people usually sleep late to have time to eat Suhoor meal. And for this reason, school time changes during Ramadan from the usual 7:30 am to 2:00 pm to 9:00 am to 3:00 pm. In some schools, classes may be delayed to 10 Am in the morning (Bahammam & Pirzada, 2020). Because observing Ramadan also involves fasting, cafeteria have to be closed down in Secondary schools and colleges in order to allow students to fast without being distracted.

**Charity**

In many schools in Saudi Arabia, donations are usually given to support the poor students and their families. Some of the most common donations include clothes, school uniforms, and food items for lunch. This is an important gesture that not only serves to support those from poor households but also help students from these families so that they can get an education.

**Respect for teachers**

Respect for teachers is paramount in schools within the Arabic world. This is in line with the religious beliefs. A show of respect may involve speaking politely to the teachers, showing humility when interacting with the teachers and obeying them, etc. Showing respect to teachers also means being attentive and not engaging in activities that disrupt learning. For this reason, students are prohibited from using technological devices like smartphones in class which might be interpreted as rude behavior. Moreover, many schools did not have online classes and students learned in class.

**Single-sex schools**

Schools in Saudi Arabia are characterized by a single-sex education system (Atia, 2019). Some of the reasons for the single-sex type of education system were that boys and girls have different psychologies, biology, and style of learning. Because of the many changes that have occurred in the education system of Saudi Arabia, girls are not only allowed to get an education but are also perceived the same as boys and are allowed similar education opportunities. However, the reason for this form of segregation is also based on

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some cultural and religious beliefs. For instance ,as Roula (2004) explains, "Wahabism, in its strict orthodoxy, interpreted the Qur'an's warning about the mixing of sexes by tightly restricting any type of interaction among unmarried and unrelated men and women" (p. 2). Roula goes on to explain that "One way in which education is being used to preserve Wahabi Saudi society and culture is through segregation of the sexes. The education system treats the sexes differently due to their different societal expectations." (p 3). Therefore, while girls now receive an education, they are separated from their male counterparts based on religious beliefs that have for a long time influenced various aspects of this society.

According to Alharbi (2014), "girls are perceived in the same manner that boys are. For example, now girls are allowed to play sports in some of their schools, which was impossible ten years ago. The quality of curriculum that boys were given is the same for girls right now. This improvement is not only at the K-12 level but also at the higher education level" (p 2025). However, male and female students are still taught in separate schools by male and female teachers respectively. This, according to Ghalib (2017), is influenced by the Arabian culture which is in turn grounded in religious beliefs. Teachers in training are also prepared to teach students of the same gender. Here, women who were taught in women's teaching colleges gained education that they could then pass onto female students (Alharbi, 2014, p 2023). Given that male and female students are educated by teachers of their respective genders, some researchers have suggested that this may affect the quality of education, performance and career choices that students ultimately pursue (Alhammadi, 2019).

**Face-to-face learning**

While some institutions have implemented technology for online education, face-to-face education was very popular in Saudi Arabia pre-Covid 19. In a study conducted in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the researchers reported that the traditional, face-to-face form of education is the most popular mode of learning in the country (Abedalla, Pinchot, Samrgandi, & Al-Masri, 2014). Here, students received instructions directly from their teachers in a classroom

setting. As the researchers explain, "Saudi learners are used to on-ground education where the teacher is always physically present" (3).

## Purpose of the study

The advent of Covid-19 significantly disrupted many aspects of life. With respect to education, many schools had to close down as a measure of controlling the spread of the disease. This, according to Duraku and Hoxha (2020) meant that many of these students had to switch from the traditional face-to-face learning in a classroom to distant learning through various digital media. Considering the heavy influence of culture and traditions in Saudi Arabia (Shah, Ghazi, Din, Shahzad, and Ullah, 2015), the current study seeks to not only determine the impact of Covid-19 on education in the country, but also some of the ways learning adopted to the process. While there is vast literature on how culture and religion has influenced the education in various Arab countries, the current pandemic has introduced a unique situation worth exploring. The study therefore seeks to contribute to existing literature by investigating how learning has adopted to the culture during this unique period.

## Research question

The main question:
1. What changes occurred in the Saudi Arabia education during Covid-19?
   The sub questions:
   a. What is the effect of Covid-19 on Saudi Arabia education?
   b. What style of education adopted during Covid-19 to align with the Saudi culture?

## Methodology
## Data collection

As a result of the Covid-19 Pandemic, education has been transferred from the traditional classroom setting in school to remote learning via digital technologies at home. Essentially, the teaching and learning process now moved from schools to homes of both teachers and students. For this reason, researchers are forced to invade these private spheres in order to carry out cultural research on education. Data was collected between February to April 2021 from researchers

and from those close to them. Through this approach, vast amounts of data were collected through observations, interviews, and focus groups. The sample size was calculated to be 601 according to the z-score equation, representing the size of the population (7,000,000 students), with a confidence level of 95% and a margin of error of 4%. These included 246 observations of the participants' lives in their private spheres, 246 observations of their online lives, 246 one-on-one interviews, as well as 102 focus groups. Aside from these data, the researchers also recorded 60 initiatives intended to enhance the learning process during this period.

**Sampling**

This study employs maximum variation sampling technique. The approach is especially appropriate for the task in that it allows for an exploration of many view points and experiences that will serve to create a conceptual premise of the learning process during the Covid-19 Pandemic. In order to ensure a good mix/variation of the dataset, some of the stakeholders approached by the researchers included learners and educators from adult, special, university, primary, middle, secondary and international education institutions. Some of the other variations taken into account include differences in economic, nationality, ages and social background, level of education as well as their academic performance.

**Data Analysis**

**Thematic analysis**

The data is analyzed using thematic analysis. This is an effective qualitative method of data analysis that is particularly effective for identifying patterns in qualitative data. Before analysis, researchers had to familiarize themselves with the transcribed data. This step allows the researcher to take initial notes and get a general understanding of the data. The second step involved highlighting given sentences/phrases of the data to produce codes that would help describe the content. This is an important part of analysis that made it possible to collate data into groups that were identified by codes. In the third step of analysis, themes were generated by identifying patterns between the codes. Here, some of the codes with similar patterns were combined into specific themes while irrelevant ones were discarded. These themes were compared to the general data to

ensure that they were a true representation of the data set. During this step, a few changes were making the themes a proper representation of the data. The reviewed themes served as the notional concept informing some of the changes that have occurred during the pandemic and how education has adopted the Saudi culture during this period. Fig. 1 illustrates this thematic process. Only marks relevant to the study topic are included in this figure.

**Table 1**
**Results and discussion**

| Things have been changed during Covid-19 | |
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| **School hours** | The school day starts late than it did before the pandemic. For preschools and elementary schools, the school day starts from 3pm to 7:30 pm, and the reason for this change is to allow the parents to help their children during attending online class. For secondary and high schools, school day starts at 9:00am to 3:00pm because the students are able to be independent. As a results for the changing in schools time, some of the students have reported getting enough time to sleep allowing them to feel more comfortable and balanced (Al Lily et al., 2020; Khalil et al., 2020). Because students no longer need to wake up to prepare and then walk or ride a bus to school, they can sleep a little longer than usual and wake up later for their online classes. Apart from sleeping a little longer, they can also stay up later than usual. As Al Lily et al., explains "the late start of the covidian school day has encouraged students to stay up late" (p. 4). |
| **Roles of Parents** | Given that students now learn from home, parents now have to be more involved in the children's learning. This means being more involved to ensure that students actually participate in the learning process and not wasting time engaging in other activities (Al Lily et al., 2020, pp. 5-6). This point is emphasized by Mann et al., (2020) who notes that "parents become a key resource for education provision as both |

| | |
|---|---|
| | motivators of student engagement and facilitators of student learning" (p. 17). However, this has also resulted in increased cases of cheating with some parents helping their children with their school tasks (Al Lily et al., 2020). |
| **Respect for teachers** | Students have become more comfortable and confident when talking to their teachers. For female students, in particular, AL Lily et al., (2020) notes that "Some female students highlighted that Crisis distance education CDE has allowed them to participate more freely in classes through the writing feature of online communication, making them less shy and less nervous" (6). This may be attributed to the fact that learning remotely creates some distance between students and the teachers and thus room for comfort. |
| **Face-to-face learning** | As with many other countries across the world, Saudi Arabia had to switch to distance learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. To ensure continued learning during this period, a variety of technologies were adopted. These include the use of Zoom, Skype, Google Classroom, and Teams among others (UNESCO, 2020, p. 6). Though physical presence is very important for a typical Saudian, Al Lily, et al., and (2020) notes that all forms of learning, from normal to vocational training had to be moved online (4). For this reason, students also have to study from home. This has forced parents to rearrange their homes in order to create a proper learning environment for their students. According to Al Lily et al., (2020), this meant changing the room configuration to look like the classroom that students are used to. On the other hand, teachers have also had to receive training that would equip them with the skills they need to educate students remotely (UNESCO, 2020). |

**Table 2**

| Things have not been changed during Covid-19 | |
| --- | --- |
| **School uniforms** | The schools' uniforms are still required in some schools to feel they are in the school and to show respect of learning. |
| **National Anthem** | During Covid-19, some schools still playing National Anthem in the first period of online class. |
| **Praying and Ramadan** | The other aspect of culture that was not affected is prayer breaks for students. Like the pre-Covid period, students are still allowed some time to pray. The learning during the pandemic period has also had to adopt with the Saudi culture. Like the pre-pandemic period, time for learning had to change to accommodate student fasting and prayers. |
| **Charity** | Though students could not physically go to school, charities have continued through digital equipment and financial, cognitive, emotional suppotrs. According to studies, philanthropists have taken advantage of devices used for distance learning (crisis distance education) to make donations in order to support those in need (AL Lily et al., 2020, p. 7). During this period, some companies have even allowed needy students free access to various educational sites and channels with some of the students receiving free equipment for their learning. Therefore, charity projects continued during this period. |
| **Single-sex schools** | Male and female students are still taught in separate schools by male and female teachers respectively |

## Conclusion

Based on the findings, the only things that did not change significantly during Covid-19 pandemic period are those closely associated with the culture and religious beliefs of the Saudis. For instance, while praying and Ramadan, as well as the separation of students based on their respective genders continued, there were changes in school hours and the style of learning. These are important findings that indicate the extent to which culture and religion is entrenched in the lives of the people in the country. Rather than these practices changing to accommodate the new mode of learning, it is the style of learning that had to adopt and align with the Saudi culture. On the other hand, the fact that education did not cease during the pandemic is an indication that education for young people in the country is valued. This then goes to show that like prayers and Ramadan, education is also part of the Saudi culture that continues to be upheld despite the emergence of challenges such as those posed by Covid-19.

## Limitation of the study

While a sample size of 601 is a good representation of the students' population in the country, this is also one of the main limitations of the study. By using data only collected from Saudi Arabia, the results only reflect the perspective and position of students on this country. Therefore, future studies can include stakeholders from different country in the study in order to draw different perspectives and make conclusions based on a wider pool of views and perspectives.

## Importance of the study

This study was conducted in order to determine some of the changes that occurred in education as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Specifically, it sought to report some of the ways in which learning adopted to the Saudi culture during this period. This is particularly important in that it not only reveal important aspects of society that remain unchanged despite the current circumstances (due to the Covid-19 pandemic) but also how learning adopts to these aspects. Through the results obtained, it is clear that culture and Islam

are important aspects of the Saudi Arabia. At the same time, this culture has accommodated education for both male and female students which is an indication that the culture itself supports knowledge among young people. The study is there important and contributes to existing literature on the relationship between culture and religious beliefs and education in Saudi Arabia.

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