Opportunities and Challenges of Virtual Education for Seminaries during the COVID-19 Era

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Abstract

This research aimed to explore the opportunities and challenges of virtual education for seminaries during the era of the COVID-19 pandemic. A descriptive-analytical method was employed for this study. The findings revealed that virtual education during the pandemic presented several positive aspects, including network-based learning, flexibility in selecting study time and location, cost and time savings, elimination of the need for physical presence, and the removal of restrictions on student recruitment. However, it also encountered several issues and limitations. These included the absence of face-to-face interactions between professors and students, excessive reliance on technology, insufficient availability of qualified staff, social isolation, reduced sense of competition, elimination of educational programs, and a lack of control and supervision over student interactions and programs. To mitigate potential damages and minimize the consequences in the post-pandemic era, it is recommended to address these challenges proactively.

Keywords: Virtual education, seminaries, opportunities, challenges

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Introduction and statement of the problem

The outbreak of the COVID-19 virus resulted in a crisis for higher education institutions as classrooms were forced to close. As the crisis expanded, various learning policies utilizing communication technologies gained significant attention from educational managers and planners across the country. However, the onset of the coronavirus in Iran revealed a lack of preparedness within the Ministry of Science, leading academic and seminary educational centers to rely on hardware and software capacities for virtual education.

In a circular issued on February 29, 2020, the Ministry of Science established a specialized working group for electronic education. This group was tasked with planning, guiding, and overseeing universities and higher education institutions as the central authority for non-attendance education. The formation of this working group served as an immediate solution, indicating that there was no pre-existing department responsible for virtual education within the ministry's structure. Consequently, a portion of the aforementioned letter referred any queries, concerns, or uncertainties regarding the implementation of this educational model to an academic staff member at the universities (source: The website of the Deputy Education Ministry of Science, Research and Technology, February 29, 2020).

Furthermore, the Higher Education Planning Council had previously approved a resolution allowing universities to offer up to ten percent of the course units for their associate and bachelor's programs in a virtual format. Priority was given to basic and general courses, excluding Islamic and general Persian studies. However, universities were required to obtain permission from the Ministry's Planning Council to conduct these virtual courses (source: Ministry of Science, Research and Technology Deputy Education website, April 29, 2014).

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Ministry of Science issued a letter on March 14, 2020, removing the ten percent restriction and urging higher education centers to incorporate virtual education into their plans. Additionally, the Ministry of Science announced a policy shift, advocating for electronic education as a replacement for face-to-face instruction in the higher education system. To facilitate coordination between universities and higher

education institutions nationwide, a specialized working group on electronic education was established.

Subsequently, each university made varying efforts to implement virtual education based on their infrastructure and capacity (Moradi 1399 Sh, p. 353).

Similar processes were implemented in seminaries during the COVID-19 pandemic. The closure of classrooms, the implementation of social distancing measures, and the adoption of various virtual education methods were among the crucial strategies employed by most seminary centers to prevent the spread of the disease while ensuring continuity in the educational process. However, it is important to note that seminary educational centers faced more significant challenges compared to universities, as they lacked the necessary infrastructure and technical staff. Consequently, uncertainties surrounding virtual education arose.

Numerous questions emerged from the outset, highlighting the lack of familiarity among professors, seminary students, and even education department personnel regarding these systems. How could virtual space be effectively utilized for teaching seminary courses? Which software would be most suitable? Was it possible for a teacher to engage with multiple seminary students simultaneously? To what extent could educational files be uploaded onto the system? Were these systems exclusively for university courses, or could they also accommodate field courses? These questions underscored the limited knowledge and experience within seminaries, with some individuals still struggling to acquire the necessary skills and utilize virtual training correctly. This situation highlighted the insufficient knowledge, weak infrastructure, and lack of necessary experience within the seminary context.

The COVID-19 crisis swiftly propelled theological centers towards the adoption of virtual education, similar to their university counterparts, inadvertently entering a domain for which seminaries were ill-prepared. This circumstance emphasized the need for seminary centers to acquaint themselves with this type of education while raising questions for seminary officials and trustees about the opportunities and challenges associated with virtual education. Over the past two years, the

focus has primarily been on the technological aspects of virtual education, neglecting its educational and training functions, which are equally significant. This research aims to explore the positive and negative aspects of virtual education in the fields of education and training within seminaries.

Research Method

The research employed a descriptive-analytical method, which aims to provide a detailed description and understanding of the phenomenon, variable, object, or subject under investigation (Hafeznia 1389 Sh, 71). This type of research focuses on examining the current situation and, when appropriate, describing and explaining favorable circumstances, as well as the underlying factors that contribute to their occurrence and understanding the how and why behind them.

Research Findings

Virtual education is an urgent and essential requirement for seminaries. The need for seminary fields of study and the limited access to physical seminaries, combined with economic constraints, lack of educational space, and high costs of traditional education, justify the necessity and importance of virtual education for seminaries. Additionally, virtual education serves as a suitable solution for individuals who cannot attend seminary in person due to factors such as time limitations, geographical distance, physical disabilities, work and family obligations, social issues, and more. Seminaries can efficiently educate a large population simultaneously through virtual education and information technology.

Virtual education holds significant potential, particularly for the international segment of seminaries. Certain sections of seminary centers have recognized the advantages of virtual education in previous years, leading to the establishment of Al-Mustafa Virtual University with the aim of achieving this objective. In other areas of seminaries, virtual education has sparked a notable transformation, and it is anticipated that we will witness a fresh outlook on seminaries in the post-coronavirus era.

The primary and crucial aspect of virtual education for seminaries is its ability to introduce innovative educational methods. Through

this approach, programs can be tailored to meet the specific needs of learners, allowing everyone to benefit from the seminary's educational offerings. The experience gained during the COVID-19 pandemic has facilitated a greater acceptance of virtual education within seminaries. It has rapidly gained traction as one of the primary educational methods employed during this period, experiencing significant growth in its relatively short history. The subsequent discussion will outline the positive and negative aspects of virtual education in seminaries.

A. Advantages and Capabilities of Virtual Education

1. Enhancing the Potential for Delivering Superior and Enhanced Information: Virtual education harnesses the full range of computer resources for educational purposes, with the only constraint being the bandwidth of users. Consequently, greater bandwidth enables the exchange of a larger volume of information, thereby ensuring higher quality outcomes.

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3. Unrestricted Freedom in Time and Location Selection for Education: Virtual education grants seminary students the freedom to access their desired course materials anytime and anywhere through online platforms. This flexibility allows individuals to study at their convenience, transcending time and geographical constraints. Whether its day or night, weekdays or holidays, people can engage in educational programs and classes from the comfort of their homes, workplaces, universities, or any location with internet access. By embracing virtual education, seminary students can allocate dedicated time for their studies while efficiently managing their remaining hours for other responsibilities. Unlike traditional face-to-face education in seminaries, virtual education eliminates age restrictions and removes specific conditions, particularly for applicants from abroad.

4. Catering to Individual Educational Needs: Virtual education places a strong emphasis on addressing the unique requirements

of learners. It offers audiences the opportunity to acquire essential knowledge and select educational topics based on their interests. Seminary educational centers can effectively fulfill people's needs by offering practical and short-term courses, a feature that is absent in traditional seminary education. This tailored approach ensures that learners can access relevant and specialized content that aligns with their specific educational goals.

5. Cost and Time Efficiency: Virtual education offers significant cost and time savings compared to traditional education methods. In conventional seminary education, both the institution and the individuals had to allocate substantial financial resources. This was primarily due to the fact that access to educational content was contingent upon specific time and location requirements. However, virtual education eliminates these constraints by providing learners with unrestricted access to course materials and content, regardless of their location or the time of day. Moreover, virtual education significantly reduces the overall costs associated with education, including expenses related to infrastructure, staffing, and administration. The need for students to commute back and forth also incurs additional expenses in traditional education, whereas virtual education minimizes these costs.

6. Eliminating the Requirement for Physical Attendance and Offering Flexible Schedules: Numerous individuals desire to pursue seminary courses; however, their work commitments, family responsibilities, geographical distance from seminary centers, or other obligations often hinder their ability to benefit from these courses. Virtual education within the seminary context provides a viable solution for such individuals, as it allows easy access and participation. Bocchi et al.'s research highlights the significance of virtual education's flexibility in course delivery, which has been a crucial factor contributing to learner satisfaction.

7. Lifting Student Admission Restrictions: By leveraging computer networks, virtual education provides unrestricted access to electronic learning, eliminating any limitations on its usage for users, scholars, and other individuals. The sole requirement for engaging in this form of training is access to a computer. In contrast, traditional face-to-face education in seminary educational centers often faces constraints when it comes to accepting students. Virtual education breaks down these barriers,

offering an inclusive learning environment that transcends geographical boundaries and admission restrictions.

8. Enhancing Professor-Student Interaction: Virtual education strives to optimize the interaction between professors and students, similar to traditional seminary education. However, virtual education introduces a distinct advantage in this regard. During virtual discussions, when two individuals engage in a conversation, other class members can seamlessly continue their learning without being interrupted or feeling obliged to participate in the ongoing discussion. This unique feature allows for a more focused and efficient learning experience, as learners have the freedom to choose whether or not to engage in a particular discussion while still benefiting from the overall educational content (Soleimani and Asghari, 1400).

9. Facilitating Simulations of Diverse Seminary Subjects: Virtual education offers seminary educational centers the opportunity to simulate a wide range of subjects, including jurisprudential, historical, and related topics. Traditional education often presents challenges when it comes to comprehending and conveying certain seminary subjects, such as the teachings of rulings. However, virtual education leverages its available resources to simplify the process of simulating these subjects. Through virtual education facilities, individuals can easily engage in immersive learning experiences that enable them to grasp complex rules and concepts effectively.

10. Enhanced and Diverse Capabilities in Delivering Seminary Courses: Virtual education offers a multitude of advanced capabilities for providing seminary courses. Course materials are delivered to students through the utilization of multimedia tools, including sound, images, and animations. This characteristic aligns with the very definition of virtual education, which refers to an educational approach that leverages electronic tools such as audio, video, and computer networks (Aminpour 2007, 218). Numerous studies have highlighted the inclusion of multiple and advanced capabilities as key features of virtual education (Holmes and Gardner 2006). Virtual learning enables the integration of text, audio, still images, and moving visuals to effectively present course content.

11. Enhanced Appeal to Students: Virtual education holds a

unique appeal when compared to traditional education. It offers the advantage of accessing a wide array of information resources, including texts, educational slides enriched with moving images, videos, and more, all through the convenience of a computer (Miley and Lawler, 2000). The availability of such diverse and engaging learning resources undoubtedly serves as a catalyst for motivation among seminary students.

12. Interactivity with Course Content: Another notable advantage of virtual education is its capacity to enable individuals to interact with course content independently, without the immediate presence of a teacher. Through virtual education, learners can benefit from a wide range of electronically available materials, including texts, slides, videos, and files.

Benefits of Virtual Education during the COVID-19 Era: The mentioned advantages highlight some of the benefits that seminary students have experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic through virtual education. One significant and crucial aspect of virtual education, particularly for students of Al-Mustafa University, has been the ability to learn and attend classes without the need to be physically present in Iran. This aspect not only provides cost savings but also addresses various challenges that students have historically faced, such as being away from their families, feelings of loneliness, depression, and other related issues (Abedini, 2017).

B. Challenges and Harms of Virtual Education

Despite the numerous advantages of virtual education for seminaries, it is crucial not to overlook its disadvantages and limitations. The COVID-19 era served as an opportunity to recognize that virtual education, while offering positive aspects, can also have negative effects and consequences for seminaries. Although no specific research has been conducted on the effects and consequences of virtual education in seminaries, numerous studies have been carried out in academic institutions both within and outside Iran (Farsi et al., 1400). Researchers have explored the limitations and challenges of virtual education, highlighting issues such as a weak focus on the educational program, a lack of virtual education experts, technology implementation without a clear strategy, disregard for the unique characteristics of learning,

inadequate assessment and measurement methods, insufficient supervision, and inadequate financial support (Kurbakova et al., 2020; Reninger and Shumar, 2002).

Virtual education for seminaries has also encountered a range of problems and limitations, among which the following are particularly significant:

1. Limitations in face-to-face and direct interaction between teachers and students: One of the drawbacks of virtual education is the absence of direct and in-person communication. Although technological advancements have largely addressed this issue by providing options for face-to-face interaction in virtual education, professors often underutilize this feature. Even when virtual interaction is employed, it lacks the effectiveness of face-to-face engagement.

2. Excessive reliance on technology: Virtual education exhibits a significant dependency on technology, a limitation inherent to its nature that continues to grow more pronounced with each passing day. The use of computers, proficiency in navigating the Internet, information retrieval abilities, and familiarity with web-based interactive tools such as online chat and video conferencing are essential components of virtual learning. However, many individuals may still lack the requisite skills in this domain. This aspect alone can pose a substantial limitation for seminary students.

3. Insufficient presence of skilled administrative personnel: Successful implementation of virtual education requires a diverse team of specialized administrative staff. Organizations and institutions can effectively utilize this educational approach if they possess an adequate number of technical personnel. However, seminaries and Al-Mustafa University, in particular, face a shortage of technical staff for virtual education. As a result, this issue has led to a sense of tedium and diminished motivation among professors and students alike.

4. Social isolation and diminished sense of competition: In virtual education, students utilize educational resources and programs individually from their homes or workplaces, thereby lacking the dynamic and vibrant interactions of a traditional classroom setting. Consequently, the opportunities for healthy competition within this type of training are significantly limited compared to conventional methods.

5. Lack of student engagement and motivation: Another

drawback and limitation of virtual education during the COVID-19 era is the prevalent lack of enthusiasm and weak motivation among students. Evidence indicates that despite the appeal of virtual education, many students do not approach it with the necessary seriousness and fail to exhibit sufficient motivation to actively participate in online classes. It appears that one significant factor contributing to this issue is the frequent disruptions and internet connectivity issues during lessons, which hinder effective communication. Additionally, the dismissive attitude and lack of seriousness displayed by some professors may also contribute to students' lack of motivation and disinterest.

6. Diminished spiritual growth in education: Prior to the COVID-19 era, the professor-student relationship in seminaries was characterized by intimacy, with students frequently engaging in personal interactions and building relationships with their professors. This dynamic allowed students to learn manners and ethics through observational learning, which was a fundamental aspect of the seminary experience. Face-to-face classes played a vital role in fostering the moral and spiritual development of students. However, with the advent of virtual education during the pandemic, the interaction between teachers and students has significantly decreased, reducing seminary education to a mere focus on completing coursework, grades, and exams. The lack of sufficient face-to-face communication, particularly for individuals solely reliant on virtual training, limits the professor's influence. Consequently, virtual education fails to capture the essence of the teacher's personal touch, leading to potential harm to the spiritual well-being of seminary students.

7. Elimination of educational experiences: Virtual platforms are incapable of fostering deep human connections among individuals. Numerous educational programs, such as prayer ceremonies, pilgrimages, celebrations, group camps, and lectures, which used to play a significant role in the past, have been discontinued in the current virtual landscape. Consequently, the educational objectives in virtual education are considerably weakened. As a result, some researchers identify the most significant drawback of virtual education as the erosion of educational goals.

8. Excessive student autonomy: In traditional education,

students' behavior was guided by specific principles and rules, with programs closely monitored. However, in virtual education, students and learners experience a significant degree of freedom. The COVID-19 era highlighted that it is challenging to control student performance during virtual exams and ensure their attendance and active participation in online classes. It becomes unclear whether the student themselves are the ones engaging in the system or if someone else is participating on their behalf. It should be noted that the essence and nature of virtual space can be elusive, particularly when the educational system of the seminary lacks appropriate educational and moral programs. This vulnerability of students is amplified in such circumstances. In essence, the normative system within virtual education is open and expansive. Therefore, one of the weaknesses of virtual education in seminaries lies in the absence of traditional structures in education and the diminishing of human relationships and educational mechanisms within the educational environment.

Discussion and Conclusion

COVID-19 crisis and online education have not only raised concerns regarding the standardization of educational programs but have also posed challenges to the educational and moral dimensions of the lessons being offered. While many seminary centers have swiftly adapted to the prevailing conditions and implemented online education, concerns persist regarding the effective transfer of knowledge to students and learners. The online teaching method encounters additional obstacles, particularly in seminary courses that rely on mutual discussions between professors and seminary students. Professors often express dissatisfaction with the outcomes of this mode of instruction.

In light of the experiences during the COVID-19 era, it becomes possible to assess the positive and negative aspects of virtual education and envision its future in seminaries and Al-Mustafa University. On the positive side, the pandemic offered a golden and unique opportunity for seminary administrators to establish the necessary infrastructure and identify deficiencies and weaknesses in the educational system. This experience enables the education department to proactively prepare for a potential widespread adoption of virtual education in the near future.

Additionally, online education has provided a platform for innovation among professors who have long sought creativity and novel approaches in the classroom. The era of virtual education during the pandemic has also prompted the modification and improvement of teaching methods among instructors who relied on a single approach across various classes for years. Assessing professors' ability to transition from traditional face-to-face teaching to effectively managing online classes with multiple participants is another result of virtual education during the COVID-19 era. Furthermore, this period has offered an opportunity for professors who may have had technophobia or apprehension about working in the field of electronic education to overcome their fears. The telework phenomenon experienced by faculty members during the pandemic has also opened new horizons in research activities, as knowledge production can now occur from both the researcher's home and workplace. Quality of research output, rather than working hours, has become the basis for evaluating and assessing faculty members, potentially fostering stronger mutual trust between faculty and management. The implementation of short courses on distance work at the Al-Mustafa International Research Institute has provided an opportunity to test the feasibility and identify the strengths and weaknesses of this work method for Al-Mustafa University.

After nearly two years of experiencing virtual education during the COVID-19 era, it is evident that virtual education is rapidly expanding. Regardless of personal opinions on the matter, this trend will continue even beyond the pandemic. It is important to acknowledge that virtual education has filled gaps, addressed educational needs, and provided convenience in the realm of learning. The seminary cannot prevent the integration of virtual education, and it should embrace this mode of education despite its limitations and challenges. However, it is crucial to take measures to mitigate any potential harm and problems that may arise from virtual education.

While seminaries and Al-Mustafa University are currently focusing on immediate issues, it is crucial not to halt progress at this stage. As an international part of the seminary, Al-Mustafa University requires a theoretical model and a mindset that views the Covid-19 crisis as an opportunity to reevaluate and rethink the

entire process of virtual education, spanning from admissions to content creation, teaching, curriculum implementation, graduation, and evaluation. The experience of the Corona era has demonstrated that online teaching and learning differ significantly from face-to-face classrooms. To effectively utilize virtual education in seminaries and Al-Mustafa University, it is essential to train skilled personnel and enhance the infrastructure of virtual education while considering the core elements of the seminary curriculum. Developing a tailored model of virtual education that aligns with these elements is crucial. It appears that both in the current situation and in the post-corona era, an education-oriented virtual model is required for seminaries and Al-Mustafa University. An initial plan, proposed by Shojaei (1396 Sh), for Al-Mustafa Virtual University outlines five key elements of education-oriented virtual education: goals, content, resources, learning activities, teaching strategies, evaluation, grouping, and time and place.

Education-oriented virtual education can be defined as a form of virtual education that prioritizes the development and enhancement of individuals' biological, psychological, emotional, political, social, cultural, economic, moral, religious, and spiritual aspects within the digital realm. It is designed by drawing upon the philosophy of education and the mission of Al-Mustafa University, while also aiming to promote the expansion and cultivation of the culture of Ahl al-Bayt (the Prophet's Household) within the virtual space in alignment with civilizational goals.

According to this model, the components and axes that should be the implementation of virtual education planning in seminaries and Al-Mustafa University inherently differs from the planning process in other universities and institutions. Moreover, even within the seminary, the educational planning for virtual education departments differs from other educational units. In an education-oriented program, it is crucial to consider the unique capabilities of virtual education in relation to the goals of the seminaries. It is essential to accurately identify the strengths and weaknesses of virtual education and develop strategies to enhance and improve the educational and technical skills of the faculty and staff involved in the virtual education department. This

254

comprehensive assessment will enable effective planning to optimize the potential of virtual education in alignment with the seminaries' objectives.

Education-oriented planning in virtual education at Al-Mustafa University should be influenced by the major policies and principles of the seminary, aligning with the objectives of Islamic education and training that are reflected in the formulation of goals, task descriptions, and educational programs of the institution. As the purpose of education-oriented training is to foster the development of individuals' abilities, beliefs, and values, virtual education at Al-Mustafa University should aim to strengthen and solidify religious knowledge, insight, and beliefs. It should be designed and implemented in a manner that considers the unique conditions and requirements of the virtual space. Following this model, virtual education in seminaries and Al-Mustafa University requires purposeful and organized planning and action. By leveraging the experiences gained during the Corona era, the education system can take substantial strides towards improving education in both current and post-corona circumstances.

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