

Tourism and Hotel Management Faculty Members' Perception of Using Microsoft Teams as an Alternative Educational Tool during COVID-19: Challenges and Opportunities

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Abstract

Due to COVID-19 pandemic, universities have been enforced to use other educational tools in order to deal with the crisis and keep academic activities going. The Egyptian Supreme Council of Universities (SCU) chose implementing online learning using Microsoft (MS) Teams during the second wave of the pandemic. This research examines the challenges faced by tourism and hotel management faculty members in determining their preparation for online learning using MS Teams and the opportunities to overcome these challenges during this time. To achieve this aim, in-depth online interviews with Tourism and Hotel Management Faculty members were conducted. The findings of the research revealed that online learning via MS Teams has the following challenges: the lack of faculty electronic environment, assistance, and academic staff readiness. As a result, technological, methodological, professional development programs for faculty members are critical to minimize the negative effects of rapid educational changes and ensure effective online education. However, e-learning support and flexibility were the key opportunities. Due to COVID-19, online learning using MS Teams can be used as a temporary substitute, but it cannot replace traditional face-to-face learning especially for practical modules. Research implications for higher education decision-makers and academics are provided.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, Microsoft teams, Faculty members, Online education, Challenges, Opportunities

1- Introduction

Traditional education has been severely disrupted by the global epidemic of coronavirus (COVID-19). Countries have tried different strategies to prevent virus outbreaks, including limiting big gatherings and maintaining physical social distance. As a result, policymakers have moved away from traditional education “face-to-face” and toward online learning (Hsieh, 2020; Sobaih *et al.*, 2020). Most of public universities specially in developing countries, such as Egypt, are affected by lacking of digital platforms and digital learning management systems (DLMS) to interact with students like Blackboard. Consequently, Egyptian public universities are unable to provide the help and support for the online learning experience (Sobaih *et al.*, 2021).

The first wave of the COVID-19 outbreak, which occurred at the end of December 2019 and the first quarter of 2020, higher education decision-makers and public universities were forced to look for fast substitutions to the traditional classroom-based learning system. Most of Egyptian universities have pushed their faculty staff members to apply free interactive online platforms including “Zoom Meeting and Google Classroom” (Sobaih *et al.*, 2020; Sobaih *et al.*, 2021). Moreover, social media sites, e.g. “WhatsApp, Facebook” were approved by universities and their staff members to interact with students (Jacques *et al.*, 2020) Nevertheless, Jacques *et al.* (2021) mentioned some issues concerning the quality of e-learning, the process during this pivotal phase, and attaining the intended learning

outcomes (ILOs) of courses (i.e., attitude, skills, and knowledge) have emerged.

COVID-19 had such a long-term influence that governments were forced to continue with online education. Consequently, institutions began using online learning in 2020 and have continued to use a fully or partially functional blended online system since then. On this basis, the Egyptian SCU has implemented e-learning in governmental universities for the academic year 2019–2020 (Sobaih *et al.*, 2020). Universities embraced social media sites as formal and only online learning platforms in the second semester of 2019–2020. From the academic year 2020–2021 onwards, blended learning has been used. Egyptian policymakers collaborated with Microsoft Corporation to modify MS Teams for educational purposes, particularly as an official e-learning tool (Sobaih *et al.*, 2021).

The readiness of faculty members to use a virtual learning environment is linked to the adoption of e-learning. The technological quality of faculty members has been proven to have a considerable impact on students' satisfaction with an e-learning system. Due to the extensive usage information and communication technologies (ICTs) in education, faculty members' lack of training on utilizing the new digital learning environment is a significant issue (Basilaia & Kvavadze, 2020). Several studies (i.e., Abbasi *et al.*, 2020; Porter & Grippa, 2020; Sukendro *et al.*, 2020) indicated that there is a lack of pedagogical digital competence, which is known as the capability to effectively support students' learning by consistently implementing skills and knowledge in designing and implementing ICT reinforced learning based on theory and greatest practices. However, in the

current conditions, faculty members should be able to plan their own teaching activities through the effective utilizing of the new technology, such as comprehending the pedagogical challenges of preparing an online lecture, interactions during a webinar etc... For this reason, studying faculty members' competence to practice in a digital educational environment is critical (Sukendro *et al.*, 2020).

The aim of this study is to investigate the challenges that face tourism and hotel management faculty members through the implementation of online teaching and learning during the COVID-19 epidemic in the Egyptian context of higher education. The guiding research questions for this research were:

1. To what extent do tourism and hotel management faculty members in public higher education institutions use MS Teams for sustaining formal academic communication after the COVID-19 epidemic?
2. What challenges are faced by tourism and hotel management faculty members in MS Teams usage for sustaining formal academic communication?
3. How could these challenges be overwhelmed for the appropriate use of MS Teams for sustaining official educational interaction?

2- Literature Review

2.1 Microsoft Teams in Higher Education

Universities were obliged to interact formally online for educational purposes in recent years as a result of COVID-19 (Stoian *et al.*, 2022). Meanwhile, in the academic year 2020/2021 policymakers have made several decisions to ensure that the educational process continues

considering the lack of Digital Learning Management System (DLMS) i.e. Blackboard. Consequently, higher education Policymakers in most of developing countries, e.g. Egypt, are applying various means of communication to reopen their colleges. Therefore, the Egyptian SCU has collaborated with Microsoft Corporation to apply MS Teams as an e-learning tool (Sobaih *et al.*, 2021). According to Hubbard and Bailey (2018), MS Teams is an integrated collaboration platform which meet the functionality, video conferencing, file storage, and quick access for its users. The end-users can build virtual courses and manage them in the same way they would a real class, allowing students to connect with their classmates and teachers in a virtual environment. Online class sessions, chats, posts, and online examinations can all be used to facilitate this engagement. MS Teams also ensures that application user data is kept safe (Henderson *et al.*, 2020; Ismail & Ismail, 2021). MS Teams' capabilities and benefits make it an excellent choice for use as a platform for online learning (Poston *et al.*, 2020).

2.2 Faculty member's perception of using Microsoft Teams as an official learning tool during COVID-19

Previous studies have been conducted to study lecturers' perceptions of using MS Teams application in online learning (Lin & Jou, 2013; Jan *et al.*, 2019; Alameri *et al.*, 2020; Al-Balas *et al.*, 2020; Dhawan, 2020; Ja'ashan, 2020; Nikdel Teymori *et al.*, 2020; Todd, 2020). Recent studies by Todd (2020), DeCoito and Estaiteyeh (2022) investigated faculty members' perspectives of moving from classroom to online instruction (i.e., MS Teams) as a response to Covid-19 in Thai higher education. The major findings found some obstacles faced

by faculty members i.e., internet bandwidth, device concerns, planning online examinations, module activities and evaluation students virtually. Furthermore, several studies added some technical and administrative concerns of using MS Teams in higher education, e.g., lack of internet access, lack of training sessions on using MS Teams, inadequate for practical syllabus and lack of administrative support (Alameri *et al.*, 2020; Al-Balas *et al.*, 2020; Dhawan, 2020; Ja'ashan, 2020; Nikdel *et al.*, 2020).

3- Methodology

3.1 Research Population and Sample

This research was directed to governmental universities in developing countries. The study was directed to nine Egyptian public universities which provide degrees of bachelor in tourism and hotel management. Prior to COVID-19, these universities relied primarily on traditional physical learning interaction with students. They now have around 500 standing faculty members of various positions (e.g., professors, associate professors, lecturers, and teaching assistants) as well as over 10000 undergraduate students (Sobaih *et al.*, 2020). The number of tourism and hotel management faculty members who took part in the interviews was selected whenever data saturation was attained (Ivankova *et al.*, 2006). As a consequence, thirty tourism and hotel management faculty members were considered adequate for collecting data.

3.2. Data collection Methods and Procedures

In-depth online interviews with faculty members were utilizing MS Teams for answering the research questions and fulfil the research aim. Most of interviewees preferred Zoom Meeting in their interviews, while others chose WhatsApp. The main theme highlighted with respondents was the obstacles faced them when using MS Teams as an official educational tool. All of the interviews were privately and lasted around an hour. All interviews ethical conditions were followed.

4- Interview Analysis

Faculty members noted a lot of barriers when applying MS Teams for educational purposes that should be addressed properly. The findings of interviews revealed five obstacles faced by tourism and hotel management faculty members while using MS Teams. Universities faced three challenges: awareness, management support, and IT infrastructure. In terms of faculty members' awareness about MS Teams usage, several faculty members (17 out of 30) mentioned a lack of awareness of the majority of tourism and hotel management faculty members about all MS Teams services that support official educational interaction, while all tourism and hotel management faculty members agreed that there was lack of clear published toolkit on how to appropriately implement this platform for educational purposes. Moreover, they added that there was poor information technology (IT) infrastructure and a lack of proficient IT assistance. These findings authenticate the results of recent studies, which explained that teachers recognized difficulties in settling a range of technology issues throughout the online learning implementation. This included a

shortage of equipment that required teachers to buy for themselves and a lack of high-speed Internet for either themselves or students, which made it difficult to offer synchronous education. Teachers also obligated to help families with IT since students were having trouble logging into the online learning environment. Another issue was insufficient internet coverage and connectivity issues, particularly in rural areas. (Bdair, 2021; DeCoito & Estaiteyeh, 2022)

Furthermore, tourism and hotel management faculty members were also affected by two additional challenges: assessing students and teaching practical modules. 100% of the sample agreed that MS Teams could not be applied for assessing and grading students, such as quizzes, assignments, mid-year exams and final exams. Furthermore, the majority of tourism and hotel management faculty members (23 out of 30) found that it's hard to teach practical modules (e.g. cooking, foodservice, housekeeping, Travel agencies, Ticketing) applying MS Teams, which regularly required face-to-face interaction with students. These findings validated the results of another study which conducted that faculty members highlighted that there was a lack of authoritative student assessment instruments, in conjunction with, it is improper to teach practical capabilities and hands-on skills through online learning. (Bdair, 2021; Kunaviktikul *et al.*, 2022)

5- Discussions

There is a vast number of academic researches on the usage of MS Teams in higher education for various educational purposes, such as enhancing the learning process, student support and engagement and interaction (Alameri *et al.*, 2020; Al-Balas *et al.*, 2020; Dhawan, 2020;

Ja'ashan, 2020; Nikdel et al., 2020; Sobaih et al., 2021). However, several research has concentrated on MS Teams as an alternative tool to traditional classroom education. This study is the first attempt to examine challenges faced by tourism and hotel management faculty members of using MS Teams as an official educational and interacting platform in the nine universities which provide bachelor degrees in hospitality and tourism after the epidemic of COVID-19. The findings of interviews with tourism and hotel management faculty members revealed five major barriers to using MS Teams for official educational interaction. Some of these barriers were caused by policymakers (Alameri et al., 2020; Nikdel et al., 2020; Todd, 2020; Sobaih et al., 2021), while others were caused by senior management (Dhawan, 2020; Ja'ashan, 2020). Faculty members felt that handling these obstacles would improve and facilitate the use of MS Teams in official educational interaction. Consequently, various suggestions were made to overcome these issues for proper usage of MS Teams (See Table 1).

Table 1. Tourism and hotel Management faculty members' perceptions regarding challenges and suggestions for MS Teams as an educational tool in higher education.

Challenges	Examples	Suggestions
Awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Faculty members' lack of awareness on how to use MS Teams for educational interaction purposes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Academic training sessions and workshops for faculty members on how to use MS Teams effectively for proper academic interaction. The IT support team should provide continuous instructions and technical assistance to academics.
Management Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of follow-up 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Senior management should be regular follow-up with faculty members to overcome any challenges facing them
IT Infrastructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> IT support Poor internet services Internet cost 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create an IT support unit to provide counselling and technical assistance to faculty members as needed. Policymakers of higher education should cooperate with the policymakers of Telecommunication to enhance the quality of university servers and provide free access platforms for educational purposes only.
Assessing Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> MS Teams is unsuitable tool for formal quizzes and exams 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use several types and techniques for student evaluations (e.g., projects and assignments). In collaboration with Microsoft corporation, policymakers of higher education can adopt new tool on MS Teams for students' assessment.
Practical Modules	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> MS Teams is unsuitable tool for practical courses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engage students in the practical modules via simulating videos. Senior management should provide additional assistance and tools to faculty members for improving high-quality videos for this purpose

6- Research Implications

This research has a number of implications for policymakers, Institutional senior management and researchers in public higher education, particularly in developing nations. Higher education policymakers in most of developing countries complied quickly and effectively to the second wave of COVID-19 epidemic by embracing a new e-learning tool based on free access platforms i.e. MS Teams. Therefore, they have to take the initiative and adopt a strategy that supports sustained e-learning. Furthermore, a toolkit and action plan on utilizing tourism and hotel management faculty members MS Teams for official educational interaction should be reinforced by the policy. Policymakers in public universities particularly in undeveloped countries, must work with the telecommunications authorities to ensure that faculty members have accessible internet connections to support e-learning process.

Tourism and hotel management senior management play a critical role in strategy accomplishment and providing sufficient support to their faculty members. They should, for example, create an IT support unit to provide counselling and technical assistance to faculty members as needed. This unit might provide online training sessions and workshops for faculty members to ensure that they are using MS Teams appropriately. It's also crucial to follow-up with faculty members to overcome any challenges facing them as well as keep the right track of MS Teams usage.

The current study sends an urgent message to academics that further research into the MS Teams as an official educational tool is needed.

It establishes the groundwork of faculty members' perception for using MS Teams as an official platform for educational interaction. Nevertheless, future research might discourse the impact of MS Teams as an official educational interaction instrument on students' satisfaction, and academic performance. Scholars should explore a comparative study between faculty members and their students' needs and handling of MS Teams for educational interaction. This study observed that the usage of MS Teams as a formal educational interaction tool in tourism and hotel management public institutions needs some adaptations to facilitate, support, and encourage the learning process.

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