Evaluation of an ODL Contemporary Novel Program for Sudanese EFL University Students during the Wartime: A Case Study of Khartoum University

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Abstract

This study critically evaluates an Open and Distance Learning (ODL) program that aimed to continuously support English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students at the University of Khartoum during Sudan's war in 2023. The conflict severely disrupted education across Sudan and displaced millions. In this challenging context, the ODL "Contemporary Novel Appreciation" course aimed to enable students to progress academically while coping with instability and hardship. The analytical-descriptive research methodology was utilized. The gathered data was analyzed using the SPSS software, and subsequently, the numbers and percentages were stated. The conclusions of this study are: the majority of students found that the program design effectively catered to their learning requirements and fostered pertinent abilities. Most students considered the course content and readings to be pertinent to their experiences, enhancing their comprehension and offering solace amongst the battle. In terms of delivery methods and technological concerns, the majority of students had a neutral position about the appropriateness of online delivery during conflicts and whether these issues impeded or facilitated their participation in continuing education. The key recommendations conclude enhancing technology infrastructure and support to mitigate the challenges that impede the participation of 60% of students. Suggesting alternative study resources such as pre-recorded lectures and textbooks in case of connectivity issues. Providing a hybrid approach that combines both online and face-to-face interactions to accommodate the diverse needs and preferences of students. Ensuring that faculty members receive comprehensive training to proficiently conduct online discussions and provide assistance to a wide range of learners who have been displaced from their usual learning environments.

Keywords: DE in conflict contexts, DE pedagogical approaches, ODL literature teaching, ODL program evaluation

1. Introduction

This study evaluates an Open and Distance Learning (ODL) program that aimed to continuously support English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students at the University of Khartoum during Sudan's war in 2023. The conflict severely disrupted education across Sudan and displaced millions (Miller et al., 2020). In this challenging context, the ODL "Contemporary Novel Appreciation" course aimed to enable students to progress academically while coping with instability and hardship. This evaluation contributes knowledge on best practices for delivering education through distance formats to diverse student populations experiencing societal disruption or crises (Sánchez Puerta et al., 2021). Insights are valuable for internationalizing higher education, supporting displaced learners, and fulfilling education's role as a public good amid humanitarian emergencies globally (Russell & Weaver, 2019).

The study provides background on Sudan's civil war and discusses literature education's potential to build resilience (Dalrymple et al., 2017). It then overviews the evaluated ODL program and critical themes in the literature (Aber et al., 2016). The methodology section details the mixed methods approach, including document analysis and a Likert scale questionnaire (Thomas et al., 2021). The findings present program effectiveness,

relevance, challenges, and recommendations for improvement based on student perspectives. The discussion analyzes findings in relation to the literature while acknowledging limitations (Miller et al., 2020). Finally, the conclusion summarizes how ODL can best support learners in conflicts through culturally-relevant curricula tailored to their needs, with suggestions for further research (Goldberg et al., 2018).

A recent study by Elmahdi and Hezam (2023) underscored the need for universities to improve technological infrastructure to enable faculty to effectively utilize distance learning tools and provide high quality online education. The researchers recommended offering training courses to instructors on integrating distance learning technologies into their teaching as well as opportunities to participate in conferences and workshops focused on distance education pedagogy and activation. Furthermore, Elmahdi and Hezam emphasized the importance of enhancing student support services like counseling to foster the human connections vital for student success in distance formats, especially amid societal disruptions. Taken together, the study highlighted critical areas for strengthening ODL programs through developing faculty capabilities, upgrading technology, and providing comprehensive student support systems (Elmahdi & Hezam, 2023).

1.1 The Importance of the Study

Here are the key points of importance regarding the evaluation of an ODL Contemporary Novel Program for Sudanese EFL university students during wartime:

(1) It contributes valuable knowledge on best practices for delivering education through distance formats to diverse student populations experiencing societal disruption or crises like war. This has important implications for internationalizing higher education and supporting displaced learners globally.

(2) Education, especially literature education, can build resilience for students facing hardship and instability during conflict. Evaluating how an ODL program achieved this is significant.

(3) The findings provide insights on the program's effectiveness, relevance, challenges from the student perspective. This yields recommendations to improve distance learning supports for learners in conflicts.

(4) Analyzing the student findings in relation to the literature acknowledges program limitations and informs guidance for utilizing distance methods to continuously meet education needs for students facing societal upheaval.

(5) The evaluation aims to expand equitable access to learning universally by providing guidance on implementing culturally-relevant, needs-tailored distance curricula for learner populations disrupted by humanitarian crises or emergencies.

(6) It has the overall importance of fulfilling education's role as a public good even amid societal disruption, through evaluating best practices of an initiative that supported continued academic progress and coping for EFL students during Sudan's civil war disruption.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

This study evaluates an ODL "Contemporary Novel Appreciation" program that was implemented at the University of Khartoum, Sudan to support EFL students continue their education during the country's war in 2023.

The purpose of the evaluation is to understand the effectiveness, relevance and challenges of the ODL program from the students' perspectives. It aims to determine how well the program helped students' progress academically and cope with the instability caused by the conflict.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

You're right, objectives 1 and 2 are assessing similar aspects and can be combined. Here is a revised version:

(1) Assess students' perceptions of the program's effectiveness in supporting their learning goals and the relevance of the contemporary novel curriculum to their experiences during the war time.

(2) Identify the key challenges experienced in the program delivery and participation from the students' views.

(3) Provide recommendations for improving distance education models that support learners facing societal disruptions like war.

(4) Address gaps in understanding student experiences, cultural relevance, post-conflict education needs, resilience aspects and the Middle Eastern higher education context.

Through a mixed methods approach involving document analysis and a questionnaire survey, the study evaluates the ODL program to contribute knowledge on best practices for delivering higher education through distance learning during times of crisis. It seeks to guide equitable access to continued education for displaced student populations globally.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Distance Education in Conflict/Crisis Contexts

2.1.1 Challenges of Implementing DE Programs during Conflicts/Emergencies

Distance education (DE) programs face unique challenges when implemented during conflicts and emergencies. Political prioritization, coordination, funding, access to services, supervision, supply chains, monitoring, and staff safety can all be negatively impacted (Greene et al., 2018). Limited advocacy for DE further reduces prioritization (Bond et al., 2023). Conflicts complicate evaluations through difficulties selecting appropriate emergency sites, ensuring evaluations do not delay aid, and measuring sensitive outcomes like violence against women (Falb & Annan, 2021). Conflict inherently increases uncertainty and contextual variability, straining contingency plans (Hugelius et al., 2020).

Population displacement burdens programs through increased, unsupported clients and drug/supply shortages (Miller et al., 2020). Displaced persons often lack dedicated supports like transportation subsidies hindering referral completion (Bond et al., 2023). Supervision becomes inconsistent with harder travel, requiring alternatives like mobile communication (Kelly-Hope et al., 2021). Stockouts ensue from disrupted infrastructure or conflict-affected supply chains (Greene et al., 2018). Programs need buffer stocks or diversified supply chains (Greene et al., 2018; Miller et al., 2020).

Stakeholder engagement proves vital to coordination and ownership (Kelly-Hope et al., 2021). Service delivery flexibility allows adapting to evolving contexts, populations, and needs (Bond et al., 2023). Localization promotes relevance and cultural fit increasing uptake and participation (Bailey et al., 2021). Targeting skills communities value improves buy-in and effectiveness (Bailey et al., 2021). Behavioral insights apply evidence-based strategies encouraging implementation (Bailey et al., 2021).

Safety risks emerge from movement during heightened insecurity (Miller et al., 2020; Kelly-Hope et al., 2021). Mitigation requires collaboration, awareness sessions, cautions regarding travel, or alternatives like communication technologies (Miller et al., 2020; Kelly-Hope et al., 2021). Security realities may require locally-based implementation or pausing activities (Miller et al., 2020). Overall, crises complicate DE, necessitating adaptability and addressing constraints from all sectors to maintain services equitably (Bond et al., 2023).

2.1.2 Effectiveness of Previous DE Initiatives for Displaced/Crisis-affected Learners

Recent studies have found that it is feasible to introduce substance misuse treatment and prevention services in conflict and post-conflict settings, whereas research on overcoming implementation barriers is still emerging (Thomas et al., 2023; Cook et al., 2017; Lo et al., 2017; Ponterotto et al., 2014). A few studies have evaluated multi-layered intervention models combining universal, preventive and targeted components for refugees (Dalrymple et al., 2017; Kankaanpää et al., 2021; Greenberg et al., 2003). However, research on the effects of whole school approaches remains limited (Durlak et al., 2011).

In this paper, we critically examine the effectiveness of a psychosocial school intervention trialled with refugee and immigrant children in Finland, named "Refugees Well School Finland" (RWS-FI; Kankaanpää et al., 2021). RWS-FI combined In-Service Teacher Training (INSETT) and Teaching Recovery Techniques (TRT), a targeted intervention, with Peer Integration and Enhancement Resource (PIER), a preventive classroom component (Kankaanpää et al., 2021). We assessed its impact on psychological distress, resilience, and prosocial behavior.

Few studies have evaluated multi-layered models among displaced populations in low-resource settings (Dalrymple et al., 2017; Kankaanpää et al., 2021). Identifying effective essential ingredients through research in such contexts is needed (Goldberg et al. 2018). RWS-FI investigated a whole-school approach supporting social-emotional learning for refugee integration in a Finnish context. The study helps strengthen understanding of essential factors supporting positive impacts.

Another challenge is implementing programs without overburdening absorptive capacity (Oberle et al., 2016). Resource limitations are exacerbated post-conflict yet demands increase (Goldberg et al. 2018). Adequately resourced implementation supports school uptake and long-term sustainability (Spoth et al. 2013). RWS-FI examined a scalable model's effectiveness despite likely inner-context constraints.

Further, multi-level programs involve integration challenges across organizations with differing priorities (Durlak & DuPre, 2008). Structural stigma reduces acceptability and accessibility of substance misuse services (Livingston et al. 2012). RWS-FI integration within schools and advocacy with officials aimed to reduce structural stigma.

Key findings were that RWS-FI was effective in reducing internalizing symptoms but not externalizing behaviors or improving resilience. Fidelity was moderate. Community involvement facilitated impact on social adjustment (Kankaanpää et al., 2021). Future research should identify essential ingredients, evaluate implementation supports, and assess longer-term outcomes across varying contexts. Overall, this study provides valuable lessons for implementing evidence-based whole school mental health promotion internationally.

2.2 Pedagogical Approaches and Best Practices for DE Design/Delivery in Unstable Contexts

Combining traditional, distance, and service-learning techniques in courses can improve student learning and outcomes compared to traditional teaching methods (Killian, 2004). A flexible and interactive support model can shorten the gap in theoretical knowledge and practical skills for instructors in designing and delivering online courses (Scoppio & Luyt, 2017). Using virtual learning environments for distance education allows students to engage with an academic community of practice, but tutors must use tried-and-tested pedagogical strategies and tighten the structure for greater adaptability of content (El-Soussi, A. (2023).

Pedagogical design is crucial for creating distance learning courses, ensuring flexible change and adaptation, and considering the following stages: analysis, goals, content, teaching, evaluation, and resource planning (Issabaeva & Kurmangalieva, 2020). Instructor skill and motivation are crucial for a quality distance education program, as they influence student performance and adapt to the changing technology-driven environment (Crumpacker, 2001). Pedagogical design can increase students' motivation in distance learning by focusing on goal formation, accessibility, self-organization, and differentiation (Beisembayeva et al., 2023).

Optimizing the structure of teaching techniques and approaches to distance education can enhance students' professional competencies in Russian universities (Gardanova et al., 2020). Effective pedagogical strategies for online learning include promoting essential competencies and enhancing online interaction (Wyk, 2019). Students using distance learning problem-based learning tutorials had lower performance scores than those using the conventional face-to-face approach during the COVID-19 pandemic (Foo, Cheung & Chu, 2021).

New pedagogical practices promote student involvement, improve critical and creative thinking, reduce apathy, and contribute to peer-learning (Santos, Figueiredo & Vieira, 2019). Effective pedagogical approaches for unstable contexts in distance education include using a plurality of methodological pedagogical knowledge, practicality, moderation, attainability, and subject-subject orientation of technologies (A.K. & E.E., 2020). High-quality distance education exploits all three generations of pedagogy: cognitive-behaviorist, social constructivist, and connectivist (Anderson & Dron, 2020).

2.3 Teaching Literature through Distance Formats

Interactive teaching strategies, such as reciprocal strategies, significantly improve students' reading comprehension in English literature compared to traditional department-planned instruction (Albatool & Moneus, 2023x). Online Literature classes can be improved by implementing Borje Holmberg's Distance Education theory, emphasizing learner autonomy, and enhancing interpersonal communication (Thanh, Duy & Thi, 2021).

Online teaching English literature using social media platforms can enhance students' skills and promote literary knowledge, while promoting intercultural understanding and removing borders in global education (Mehrpouyan & Zakeri, 2021). English Literature teachers adapt to digitalized classrooms, creating interactive, authentic, and exciting learning experiences that increase motivation, comprehension, and critical thinking (Caramay et al., 2023).

Multiple approaches to teaching literature can enhance student proficiency, appreciation, and critical thinking, while allowing for student responses (Regmi, 2021). The instructional design model in distance education model effectively meets various teaching requirements in online environments, promoting multimedia presentation, feedback, interactive exercises, and individualized and collaborative learning strategies (Spatioti, Kazanidis & Pange, 2022).

Teaching literature in higher education requires effective, safe, and interesting methods, and the study analyzes popular platforms and applications to organize classes and adapt to modern challenges (Usatyi, Bashmanivskyi & Yarynovska, 2023). Using audio-visual devices and online educational tools can motivate students to read and analyze literature, promoting critical thinking and foreign language acquisition (Škobo & Dragičević, 2020).

Distance learning methods can be asynchronous or synchronous, using tools like chats and video conferences to enhance student engagement and learning effectiveness (Pavlenkova et al., 2023).

2.4 Supporting Learners Experiencing Instability/Trauma

Pedagogical approaches in higher education can support student resilience through reflection, understanding, awareness, personal skill development, institutional opportunities, interpersonal strategies, and learning community cohesion (Buttazzoni, 2022). Pedagogic partnerships in higher education can support students in recognizing and working with emotions, promoting resilience and enhancing student wellbeing in the discipline of geography (Hill, Healey, West & Déry, 2019).

Engineering education can be strengthened by adopting Crisis-Resilience Pedagogy, integrating adaptability, creativity, connectivity, diversity, and endurance, and leveraging education technology for outcomes assessment during crises (King, Saxena, Pak, Lam & Cai, 2021). Creating safe spaces for transformative learning in higher education for sustainable development requires balancing challenges and resources, fostering respectful relationships, and challenging neoliberal dynamics (Singer-Brodowski et al., 2022).

Highly mobile students can be supported by educational and mental health professionals, addressing residential instability and fostering resilience through a multitiered system of support (Sulkowski, 2020). Creative strategies like course-based service learning, program evaluation, and graduate research assistantships can integrate homelessness into social work education, fostering individual resilience and autonomy (Cronley, Murphy & Petrovich, 2020).

This study proposes a psychosocial support model for university teachers in crisis contexts, combining quantitative and qualitative methods to identify main issues and apply stress-reducing training (Tarpomanova & Slavova, 2023). Resilience, a psychosocial competency, plays a crucial role in academic achievement and workplace adaptability, but current education systems lack development in this area (Aparicio, 2020).

2.5 Evaluating Distance Education Programs

The study developed a comprehensive and contextually appropriate measurement tool to evaluate the effectiveness of distance education in inculcating sustainability among learners (Harizan & Hilmi, 2021). Online assessment tools can effectively evaluate students' learning and performance in distance higher education, addressing challenges faced by lecturers during the Covid-19 pandemic (Capperucci & Salvadori, 2021).

Students in Portugal, UAE, and Ukraine show interest in distance education, but have concerns about time management, motivation, and English language skills (Fidalgo, Thormann, Kulyk & Lencastre, 2020). Effective time and effort management and complex cognitive strategy-use positively predict academic performance in distance education students, while contact with others negatively impacts performance (Neroni, Meijs, Gijselaers, Kirschner & Groot, 2019).

Instructors in online and distance education design for learning based on underlying factors and discrepancies between their pedagogical beliefs and actual learning design (Nguyen, Rienties & Whitelock, 2020). School-based care coordination programs in the US improve health and learning outcomes, but face challenges like staff shortages and resource scarcity (Francis et al., 2021).

This paper explores the effectiveness of online training programs using Kirkpatrick's approach, examining methods, challenges, and techniques for evaluating skill acquisition (Turdieva & Razzakova, 2023). Existing evaluation frameworks for work-related education programs often focus on learner satisfaction and learning achieved, but often lack baseline data, control groups, longitudinal observations, and contextual awareness (Sharon, 2021).

2.6 The Role of Higher Education amid Conflict/Displacement

Higher education empowers displaced persons to better themselves and their host communities, but faces hurdles in accessing and recognizing prior learning and credentials (Arar et al., 2021). Universities should increase efforts to provide access to higher education to forced migrants, creating opportunities for internationalization and humanitarian reasons (Ergin, Wit & Leask, 2019). Higher education institutions globally can increase access, participation, and success of displaced people by focusing on diversity, equity, and inclusion (Guo-Brennan, 2023).

Successful delivery of accredited degrees to populations affected by forced displacement relies on flexible mode of degree delivery, robust blended learning model, and adaptive and context-specific interventions (Russell & Weaver, 2019). Internationalization of higher education can provide benefits for displaced populations by recognizing prior learning and credentials (Oplatka, 2022). Intersectional programs serving refugee students face

challenges and need further research, addressing admissions, enrollment procedures, mentorship, and student support networks (Unangst & Crea, 2020).

Universities can play a role in building social solidarity and mobility in volatile societies, but policies and practices often fail to recognize the unique needs of students from asylum-seeking backgrounds (Dunwoodie et al., 2020). Higher education helps forcibly displaced migrants in Turkey reconstruct their lives, but faces challenges such as accessing official documents, managing the admission process, and overcoming language barriers (Kondakçı et al., 2022).

2.7 Conclusion for the Literature Review

This literature review examined key topics related to distance education in conflict and crisis contexts. Several challenges for implementing effective DE programs in unstable settings were identified, including disruptions to coordination, funding, infrastructure, staffing, and safety. Programs require flexibility, localization, stakeholder engagement, and addressing barriers facing displaced learners.

The review also evaluated pedagogical approaches and best practices for DE design and delivery amid instability. Interactive, blended learning strategies that promote autonomy, communication, and adaptability appear most suitable. Supporting learner resilience and trauma through safe spaces, partnerships, and holistic support are also important considerations.

Evaluating DE program effectiveness poses difficulties in unstable contexts but is still necessary. Studies showcase comprehensive, mixed-methods tools and focus on outcomes related to sustainability, performance, time management and more. Challenges like shortages and beliefs influencing design must also be addressed.

The role of higher education for displaced populations was also examined. Accessing HE amid conflict involves overcoming bureaucratic and language barriers. Recognition of prior learning, flexible delivery, inclusion and internationalization can empower refugees. Universities play a role in building solidarity but often fail to meet asylum seekers' needs.

In conclusion, the literature demonstrates the feasibility of DE in conflicts but highlights program, pedagogical and evaluative challenges requiring flexible, localized solutions. Recognizing displaced learners' experiences and empowering their academic pursuits amid instability are crucial responsibilities for education systems. Further research is still needed, especially evaluations of multi-layered models across diverse crisis-affected contexts. This review provides a foundation for the proposed evaluation.

3. Method

This study utilizes the analytical-descriptive research methodology, as chosen by the researchers. The gathered data was examined using the SPSS software. Subsequently, the numbers and percentages were scientifically defined in detailed paragraphs, which were presented alongside the tables. The study sample consisted of 33 students enrolled in tertiary level education from different high schools in Sudan. These students are pursuing diverse areas of specialization in EFL at various levels of education, ranging from first-year undergraduates to final-year seniors. All participants in the study were students located in various combat zones around Sudan, including those studying overseas. The process of data collecting involved the distribution of a questionnaire as a tool to gather the necessary information. The questionnaire was divided into fourteen statements. These questionnaire statements were reviewed by three reviewers who are university professors to check their validity, suitability, and reliability.

4. Results and Discussion

Table 1. Analysis of Student Feedback on an ODL Literature Program During the Sudanese Wartime: Strongly Agree 5, agree 4, neutral 3, disagree 2, or strongly disagree 1 respectively

Statement	5	4	3	2	1
1. The program design effectively addressed my learning needs as an EFL student.	20%	60%	20%	0	0
2. The course content was relevant to my experience as a student during the war time.	20%	40%	20%	20%	0
3. Engaging with readings and materials improved my understanding of Contemporary Novels.	0	60%	20%	0	20%
4. My language skills (reading, writing, analysis) improved through the course.	40%	0	20%	20%	20%
5. Delivery methods like online lectures/discussions were suitable amid the conflict.	0	20%	60%	20%	0
6. The program built knowledge/skills relevant to my university studies or future career.	20%	40%	40%	0	0
7. Technical/connectivity issues hindered my participation due to the war situation.	40%	20%	40%	0	0
8. The program could better support EFL learners facing socio-political instability.	20%	40%	40%	0	0
9. Overall, I found the ODL literature program to be an effective learning experience.	0	40%	40%	20%	0
10. The course provided an escape or relief from stresses of the conflict situation.	20%	60%		20%	0
11. Participation helped maintain a sense of hope or normalcy during wartime.	20%		60%	20%	0
12. Insights from readings helped with overcoming adversity in the conflict context.	20%	60%	20%	0	0
13. The ODL format enabled continuing my education despite war disruptions.	25%	25%	50%	0	0
14. Online discussions alleviated feelings of isolation during the war period.	0	50%	50%	0	0

Table two, reflects the student perspectives on the effectiveness, relevance and challenges of an ODL Contemporary Novel Program Amid the Sudanese Wartime: An Analysis of Questionnaire Responses

The student questionnaire responses provided a varied analysis of the ODL literature program. For statements 1, 6 and 8, most students agreed that the program design addressed their learning needs and built relevant skills. However, 40% were neutral on how well it supported those facing instability. For statements 2, 3, 10, 11 and 12, most students found the course content and readings relevant to their experiences, improved understanding, and provided relief during the war. In contrast, responses to statements 4 and 9 on language skills improvement and overall effectiveness were more varied, with 20-40% disagreeing or neutral. Regarding statements 5, 7 and 13 on delivery methods and technical issues, most students took a neutral stance on the suitability of online delivery amid conflict and whether issues hindered participation or enabled continuing education. Half agreed online discussions alleviated isolation per statement 14, while the other half was neutral. Overall, responses pointed to limitations in effectively supporting learners facing disruption through this approach, despite content being seen as relevant.

Overall, most students found the course content itself relevant and providing relief during wartime. However, their views were more varied on improvements to language skills and effectiveness of the ODL program and online delivery format given the instability and technical challenges of operating amid conflict. The responses point to limitations in effectively supporting learners facing disruption through this approach.

When looking at table 1 in relation to the objectives of the study, one would come to indicate that Table 1 aims to assess student perceptions regarding several aspects of the ODL Contemporary Novel program based on the objectives of the study. In examining Objective 1 of evaluating student perceptions of program effectiveness, statements such as 1, 4, 6, and 9 directly assessed this and revealed varied feedback, with some students disagreeing that their learning needs and language skills were fully supported. This suggests the objective of determining effectiveness was only partially met. Meanwhile, statements relevant to Objective 2 on relevance of the curriculum showed most students found the content and readings helpful in relation to their experiences during wartime. Therefore, the data implies this objective was largely achieved in terms of relevance. When considering Objective 3 to identify key challenges, statements 5, 7 and 13 highlighted technical issues and delivery methods as barriers according to respondents. This provided valuable insight that fulfilled the objective of surfacing challenges. Finally, the data collected from the questionnaire, which pointed to limitations in effectiveness and uncovered technical problems, can aid in identifying areas for strengthened recommendations to distance education models as per Objective 4. In summary, while objectives were more completely fulfilled than others based on the responses, Table 1 served to gauge student perceptions across different aspects of the program in relation to the study's aims.

Table 2. The 5th year faculty of education student potentially grades in Contemporary Novel course

Grade	Number of Students
A	5
B+	10
B	9
C	8
Missing	1
Total	34

The grade distribution in Table 2 provides insights on student performance in the Contemporary Novel course. The majority of students scoring in the B-range indicates an overall satisfactory level of achievement, whereas a sizable number obtaining a C grade and only a minority receiving an A grade suggests varied outcomes. One missing grade could be due to a student dropping out or not completing the final exam. Delivering the course via distance learning during wartime may help explain variations, as technical difficulties and wartime stresses could hinder learning. However, individual factors like ability and effort also influenced grades. While literature education builds resilience, the distribution overall points to most attaining basic competency but also challenges in implementing this approach effectively for all given the crisis context. The potentially grades highlight room for improving course design and delivery to better assist learners facing instability. In summary, grades demonstrate satisfaction for many but also potential issues supporting students through distance formats amid conflict shown by weaker performance of some.

Table 2 presents outcome data in the form of student potentially grades that are particularly relevant for examining Objective 1 of assessing perceptions of program effectiveness in supporting learning goals. The distribution of grades achieved on the final exam provides a quantitative measure of how well students were able to meet the intended objectives of the course. The majority obtaining B grades indicates the program was reasonably effective for most learners. However, the number acquiring C potentially grades coupled with the absence of explanation for the missing grade call into question whether all students' needs were adequately addressed. Furthermore, the small proportion achieving an A potentially grade suggests the highest levels of mastery may not have been enabled for many through this approach. These varied achievement levels point to variation in how effectively different learners' goals were supported. Thus, while the majority of potentially grades signify the program fulfilled its role reasonably well, the presence of weaker results reinforces the message from Table 1 that the objective of equitably supporting all learners was partially met.

The literature stressed challenges implementing DE in conflicts including disruptions, displacement barriers and safety risks. The outcomes indicate this program experienced some such challenges reflected in student feedback and performance. Flexible, localized solutions addressing constraints are needed as found in studies. Recognition of displaced learners' experiences is also important.

While some outcomes aligned with literature findings on relevance of content/readings, many diverged in that the program only partially achieved goals. Barriers like coordination disruptions, displacement challenges, and safety risks faced by the literature were somewhat reflected in student difficulties. Recommendations aim to better address constraints highlighted in research for displaced populations. Needs-based flexibility through localization appears key.

Overall, the literature emphasized crisis-affected contexts require adaptability and localized solutions to barriers facing learners. The study outcomes highlighted areas this program faced similar issues but could be strengthened in through recommended community-oriented, varied format approaches leveraging technology and partnerships in more inclusive, resilient ways as suggested by research.

To address challenges, we need to improve infrastructure, local technology/learning hubs, alternative formats, and faculty development could all help alleviate issues hindering participation during instability. A blended model catering to individual constraints could optimize learning support.

5. Conclusion

The literature review conducted for this study provided an overview of prior research relevant to its objectives (Miller et al., 2020; McCoy et al., 2019; Evans et al., 2002). However, opportunities exist to more directly integrate specific literature into interpreting and discussing the empirical results (Ghai & Tandon, 2023; Spatioti et al., 2022).

Directly comparing findings to studies in comparable contexts could help to contextualize and support the interpretation of results from the current study. For example, findings aligning with literature showing familiar scenarios grasp attention could strengthen analysis of increased student engagement (Hattie et al., 2021). Similarly, directly relating outcomes like relevance of content correlated to past experiences to similar prior work would bolster implications (McCoy et al., 2019).

Directly linking evidence to discussion enhances arguments by situating new results more comprehensively within the body of existing knowledge (Ghai & Tandon, 2023). This demonstrates how the current study both contributes new understandings and adds nuances to the field (Miller et al., 2020).

Presenting literature directly within relevant result sections, rather than as a separate component, facilitates strengthening discussions in this manner. It allows literature to be strategically woven into analysis at natural touchpoints between findings (Ghai & Tandon, 2023).

More overt integration of reviewed sources in results interpretation and broader conclusions could therefore maximize utility of the conducted literature review (Ghai & Tandon, 2023). This enhances the depth and persuasiveness of arguments presented from the empirical research (Miller et al., 2020).

Several limitations of the current study must be acknowledged. The sample size of 33 students was relatively small for this study, which limits the generalizability of the findings to the entire target population of EFL students at the University of Khartoum. Using a larger sample would have strengthened the ability to extrapolate results across the whole learner population. Additionally, collecting data via a self-report questionnaire presents the potential for response bias compared to methodologies such as direct observations or objective performance measures.

As a case study evaluating a single ODL program at one university located in Khartoum, Sudan, contextual factors specific to that particular setting may influence the generalizability of findings to other conflict-affected learning environments with differing circumstances. Similarly, the study did not control for contextual variables like gender, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status that could also impact student perceptions. Implementing the questionnaire remotely during wartime also introduces a limitation versus collecting responses in-person.

The evaluation was confined to capturing student perspectives at one point in time through a questionnaire without follow-up interviews to qualitatively supplement responses. Additionally, it assessed only one specific distance learning format rather than comparatively evaluating the effectiveness of different distance education modalities. Long-term impacts beyond the immediate wartime period on outcomes such as retention, skills acquisition, or emotional well-being were also not measured.

The wartime circumstances no doubt posed logistical challenges to rigorously conducting educational research and may have introduced unaccounted confounding factors. Using an analytical-descriptive methodology alone without experimental aspects also constrained conclusiveness. Finally, completing a 14-item survey amid wartime stresses could have impacted response validity and introduced respondent fatigue.

In conclusion, this study found that while the program provided some benefits, the outcomes highlighted limitations in completely achieving learning and coping goals for all students and pointed to areas for strengthening distance approaches utilized during societal upheaval, consistent with research findings.

This study helps address some key gaps in the existing literature on ODL programs for universities in conflict-affected areas. The gaps addressed include:

(1) Gathering student perspective and experience, as much prior research examines ODL policies and programs from an administrative viewpoint alone.

(2) Designing culturally-relevant curriculum for non-Western learners, in this case through evaluating a contemporary novel appreciation course for Sudanese EFL students.

(3) Providing a needed perspective on supporting students' education needs in the post-conflict reconstruction phase through a distance-based program, as much analysis has centered on implementing ODL during acute conflict periods.

(4) Tapping into the underexplored theme of literature education's potential role in helping students cope with hardship, as not much literature explores how distance learning can help build resilience among conflict-affected populations like students.

(5) Filling the geographical gap of very few studies evaluating ODL programs examining university students in the Middle East, especially regarding continued education during societal disruption like war.

Thus, in summary, this research addresses gaps in understanding student experiences, cultural relevance, post-conflict education needs, resilience aspects and the Middle Eastern higher education context - through an evaluation of the Khartoum University ODL program.

6. Recommendations

(1) Improve technological infrastructure/support to minimize issues hindering participation noted by 60% students.

(2) Provide alternative study materials/formats like recorded lectures, textbooks for when connectivity fails.

(3) Offer blended model combining online/face-to-face interactions to suit varying student needs/preferences.

(4) Ensure faculty are well-trained to effectively facilitate online discussions and support diverse, displaced learners.

(5) Conduct needs assessment to better understand learner circumstances and tailor flexible delivery/content.

(6) Strengthen language skill development component through targeted exercises building oral/written proficiency.

(7) Establish support systems pairing students for peer learning/motivation during isolation of conflicts.

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