Analysing Assistance Discourse Provided to Stakeholders to Utilize E-Learning in the Higher Education

تحليل خطاب الدعم الفني المقدم للمستفيدين في التعليم العالي لتفعيل التعليم الإلكتروني

Written by:
Yaser Mohammed Altameemi[144]
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6585-546X
Thamir Issa Alomaim[145]
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9195-9254

Abstract

This paper analyses how the E-Learning Unit at the university level (re)constructs instructions that facilitate the utilization of e-learning by stakeholders. More specifically, the paper presents an analysis of an assistance discourse during the University of Ha'il transition to distance learning that was prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The researchers suggest revising educational regulations for in-depth qualitative analysis of stakeholders' views on policy. In so doing, they conducted various levels of analyses using two sets of data: (1) two surveys (for students and academic staff); (2) and four interviews with the coordinators of the E-Learning Unit at the university. The surveys identify the institutional context during the transition period to distance learning. The interviews are also analysed using Fairclough and Fairclough's (2012) practical reasoning approach to clarify the strategies for supporting stakeholders. The main finding of the research is that the style of assistance discourse and the types of support should be stated clearly in university policy to enhance the effectiveness of the E-Learning Unit's support of stakeholders.

Keywords: E-learning Unit, Assistance Discourse, Distance Learning, Higher Education Policy.

المستخلص:

تحلل هذه الدراسة فترة تحول التعليم الجامعي من التعليم التقليدي إلى التعليم عن بعد كردة فعل لأزمة كورونا، وماهية دور وحدة التعليم الإلكتروني في توجيه المستفيدين لتسهيل العملية التعليمية. في هذه الدراسة يؤكد الباحثون على ضرورة التحليل النوعي لآراء المستفيدين من التعليم الجامعي عن السياسات في عملية مراجعة الأنظمة واللوائح التعليمية. وهذه الدراسة الحالية تحلل خطاب الدعم الفني والمقدم من وحدة التعليم الإلكتروني في الجامعة في السياق السعودي. خطاب الدعم الفني يُنظر إليه كممارسة اجتماعية وذلك من خلال دوره في بناء المعرفة للمستفيدين تجاه استخدام البلاك بورد خلال فترة حظر التجول لمنع تفشي فيروس كورونا. بيانات هذه الدراسة تتكون من استبانتين (واحدة للطلاب وأخرى للأساتذة)، وكذلك أربع مقابلات مع منسقي وحدة التعليم الإلكتروني. الاستبانات تسعى لتوضيح السياق المؤسسي للجامعات خلال فترة التحول للتعلم عن بعد. بينما المقابلات فقد تم تحليلها باستخدام نظرية فيركلاف و فيركلاف (٢٠١٢) لتوضيح كيف أن الدعم المقدم للمستفيدين قد تم عرضه. الحجة الرئيسية لمنسقي الدعم الفني والمكونة لبقية عناصر خطاب وحدة التعليم الإلكتروني هي أن وحدة التعليم الإلكتروني يقع على عاتقها تسهيل توظيف نظام البلاك بورد في التعليم بعد التحول الجامعي للتعليم عن بعد.

الكلمات المفتاحية:

وحدة التعليم الإلكتروني- خطاب الدعم الفني- التعليم عن بعد- سياسة التعليم العالي

[144] Assistant Professor, English Department, Faculty of Arts, University of Ha'il, Saudi Arabia.
[145] Assistant Professor, English Department, Faculty of Arts, University of Ha'il, Saudi Arabia.

Introduction

A part of Saudi Universities' policy is to develop the academic environment and encourage all academic staff to the Blackboard system.[146] One of these universities is the University of Ha'il. The University, represented by the Deanship of Information Technology and E-Learning, has established an E-learning Unit in every college. Each unit consists of a leader and coordinators who are academic staff. The coordinators of the unit are from various departments in each college, and they help the leader of the unit to assist academic staff and students in their departments.

The University had a strategic plan for utilizing Blackboard until the emergence of Coronavirus 2019 (henceforth, COVID-19). [147] The rapid spread and transmission of the virus among humans within China, and then globally affected the regular routines of daily life and human behaviour as governmental and nongovernmental sectors updated policies that aimed to eliminate the advancement of COVID-19. One of the affected sectors was that of the educational institutions in Saudi Arabia. On 8th March 2020, the Saudi Ministry of Education suspended the traditional process of education and transferred to distance learning within all educational institutions to protect students from being infected by COVID-19. At that time, the educational lockdown was unexpected, and Saudi universities turned to the use of e-learning tools (in this case the Blackboard system) in the learning process.

Although Blackboard had not been used as the main learning platform at the University, many stakeholders had become familiar with its use. According to Alzahrani and Sheirah (2021), many universities in Saudi Arabia use the Blackboard system for e-learning because it has a range of effective functions in educational processes. Before COVID-19, the central role of the E-learning Unit was to organise workshops on the utilization of Blackboard in the learning process for students and academic staff, and this focus had a positive impact on stakeholders in the early stages of the University's shift to distance learning. However, at that time, those stakeholders had not activated all features of Blackboard, such as virtual classes and exams.

This study focuses on the second semester of the academic year 2019/2020. The University of Ha'il switched to distance learning as its central approach to education between 8th March 2020 and the end of the semester (13th May 2020) as a reaction to the pandemic. During the early stages of the shift to distance learning, major concerns were raised by the University regarding how to minimize risks that may affect the educational process. As a result of this shift, the team of E-Learning Units had their own concerns. One of them was the high number of student enquiries about the use of distance learning tools. Another was how the units could ensure that all faculty members were able to use the tools to run their daily classes smoothly, as well as running activities that would help to achieve the proposed learning outcomes of the courses.

After the University locked down, the E-Learning Units at the colleges began to play several roles. First, transmitting the instructions of the Deanship of Information Technology and E-Learning to the academic staff. Second, the units had to assist stakeholders at the college level to overcome any technical issues with Blackboard. Third, the coordinators of the unit had to provide daily reports of lectures given on Blackboard. In these reports, the authors highlighted the significant issues that were encountered by both students and instructors. The final role was to contact instructors who had not managed to convert their lectures and to determine whether they had had problems. These reports were submitted to the Dean who provided a detailed report to the University on the progress of the learning process using Blackboard. In carrying out these tasks, the E-learning Units not only assisted the stakeholders, they also had to ensure that stakeholders applied their knowledge in an appropriate way to effectively utilize Blackboard in the learning process. From this perspective, this paper analyses the discursive strategies that the E-Learning Units used at the early stages of the University's switch to distance learning.

Theoretical Framework

Risk management in educational institutions

Organisations are exposed to several types of risk. Potential risks in every organisation should be identified, assessed and managed (Ruzic-Dimitrijevic and Dakic, 2014, p. 138).

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[146] Blackboard is a software-based learning management system that manages the virtual learning environment.

[147] COVID-19 is an infectious virus that was first discovered in Wuhan, China (by the end of 2019).

According to Berg (2010), risk assessment in an institution involves the identification of values that indicate the level of risk.

Gasmi et al. (2020, p. 142), and Ruzic-Dimitrijevic and Dakic (2014, p. 142) suggest that risk management in any system requires a clear identification of all elements and processes of the system in question. They argue that any institution has external risk parameters based on social, economic, legal, cultural, and natural perspectives. There are also other internal parameters such as organizational structure, information systems, and policies. The University of Ha'il has a general risk management system for possible risks, but there was no specific risk management policy in place for events such as the COVID-19 pandemic. As this crisis had not been anticipated by many educational institutions, the University decided to identify and classify the potential level of risk related to COVID-19. This study focuses on how Ha'il University's risk management helped stakeholders to use Blackboard during the lockdown due to COVID-19. Thus, not only does this paper look at the identification and classification of risk, it also investigates how policies and instructions for utilizing Blackboard in the learning process have been introduced to stakeholders of the University.

Stakeholders' attitudes towards educational policies

The attitudes of stakeholders at a university should also be considered as a significant challenge in the reconstruction of instructions. A question that might be raised is how we can identify the level of awareness of stakeholders of the new policies. Stakeholders at universities have different values, interests, and perceptions of their responsibilities (East, 2010; Yakovchuk, Badge and Scott, 2011).

Bretag et al. (2014) highlighted the significance of considering stakeholders' attitudes towards the reconstruction of higher education policy in their institutions. They suggested that students are not equal in their understanding of university policy and instructions, and this understanding depends on their various experiences. Bretag et al. (2014) discuss, in their study, students' understanding of the university's policy (in their case: academic integrity) and ideal strategies for informing and supporting students in avoiding breaches in academic integrity. They conducted

a three-stage study to gain an in-depth understanding of how plagiarism discourse should be (re)constructed at the university level. The data in their study included academic integrity policies of Australian universities (Stage 1), input from an online survey (Stage 2), and material from focus groups and interviews with academic integrity stakeholders (Stage 3). Their central finding is that universities need to apply various means, such as a "range of hands-on, engaging activities, repeated and reconfigured in various media and forums throughout the student program" (Bretag et al., 2014, p. 1167) to enhance students' awareness of academic integrity. Thus, educational policies should be discursively represented through various means to enhance stakeholder awareness regarding the policy.

The degree to which stakeholders follow university policy should be investigated in relation to their understanding of the provided guidelines, and how they obtain and deal with the ideas documented in the university policy. Many studies have mainly conducted questionnaire or survey data to clarify the connections between institutional policies and students' understanding of plagiarism (e.g., Gullifer and Tyson, 2010). Adam et al. (2017) not only investigate students' understanding of university plagiarism policy through surveys, but also look at students' discursive constructions of plagiarism policy. They explored students' discursive constructions of plagiarism based on the institutional plagiarism policy discourse. They implemented Foucault's (1980) theoretical perspective by showing how plagiarism discourses reveal the knowledge of stakeholders concerning the implementation of plagiarism policy in relation to academic integrity. This orientation suggests the importance of activating students' experience in the procedure of constructing instructions. Thus, it is appropriate to look at how clearly these policies are delivered to stakeholders, and how students act depending on the instructions provided by the institution.

Responses to problems within institutional context

Analysing discursive practices in educational discourse is a central concern of Critical Discourse Studies (CDS)[148] (e.g., Rogers, 2008; Rogers et al., 2005). Flowerdew and Richardson (2018); Reisigl, M. and Wodak, R. (2009); and van Dijk (2009;92) argue that CDA has various

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[148] Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) is traditionally known as Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA).

philosophical, theoretical, methodological and practical elements. Thus, they suggest the change of designation of CDA to CDS because CDS considers the historical background as well as social and cognitive contexts within the analysis of language use. In this section, we discuss the institutional context and how leaders construct their arguments in response to a crisis.

Contextualising and constructing discourse is also linked to the exploration of dimensions of knowledge that a community or society share (van Dijk, 2003). According to van Dijk (2006, 2008), analyst has to bridge the gap of understanding the relationship between macro-dimensions (such as the use of power) and micro-dimensions (such as language use) by investigating the mental representations that members of a community share based on their personal experience. Van Dijk (2003, p. 95) defines knowledge as "the beliefs shared by competent members of epistemic communities […] which have been 'certified' as such based on the knowledge criteria of an epistemic community". Epistemic communities refer to the consideration of communities of practice, thought, and discourse. For example, in the case of the current paper, the epistemic community consists of the coordinators of the E-Learning Unit. However, researchers in this research apply van Dijk's approach to show how the coordinators of the E-Learning Unit use shared knowledge in their particular societies (i.e., in the educational institution) within their construction of ideal strategies to support stakeholders at the University of Ha'il.

Regarding the textual analysis of discourse, Fairclough and Fairclough's (2012) practical reasoning approach is designed as a means of analysing responses to crises/problems in the institutional context. Although the main objective of Fairclough and Fairclough's framework is to analyse political speech, they assert that their approach considers various contexts within the social sciences (e.g., media texts and policy texts).

Fairclough and Fairclough (2012) propose two characteristics of critical social analysis: normative and explanatory. The former evaluates the usefulness pf social practices and beliefs and their effects on society, and the latter investigates "why social realities are as they are, and how they are sustained or changed" (Fairclough and Fairclough, 2012, p. 79). They argue that analysts should combine CDS and argumentation theory to allow researchers in the social sciences to investigate the normative and explanatory critique. However, Altameemi and Bartlett (2017, p. 70) elaborate the practical reasoning approach, but with the purpose of determining why a specific performance might have been effective at a particular time. Thus, for the purposes of the current study, the practical reasoning approach is applied for performative purposes rather than for normative perspective (i.e., evaluating what is good or bad, Altameemi and Bartlett (2017)).

By applying the approach of Fairclough and Fairclough (2012), we will investigate how coordinators of the E-Learning Unit constructed arguments concerning ideal strategies for dealing with stakeholders' problems during the critical phase of the University's shift to distance learning. Figure 1 shows the meaning and hypothetical structure of the core elements of a logically valid argument as considered from the perspective of practical reasoning (Fairclough and Fairclough, 2012: 44). These can be summarised as:

Action A might enable the agent to reach his goal (G), starting from his circumstances (C), and in accordance with certain values (V), leads to the presumptive claim that he ought to do A. Fairclough & Fairclough (2012:44-48).

As they (2012:44) go on to say, "It is often the case that the context of an action is seen as a 'problem' (and is negatively evaluated in view of the agent's existing values or concerns), and the action is seen as the solution that will solve the problem."
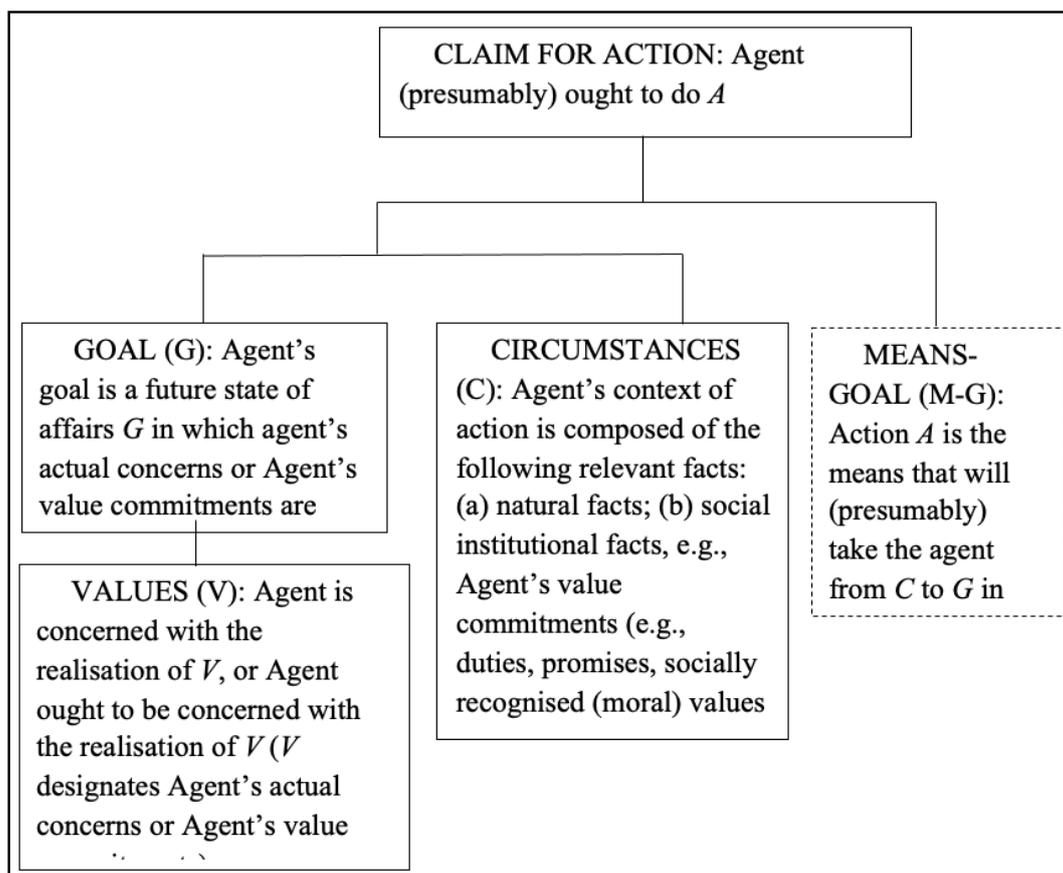
Figure 1. Fairclough and Fairclough's (2012) proposal of the structure of practical arguments.

As Fairclough and Fairclough's (2012) approach discusses the argumentation structure of the discourse, we need to consider a deep context of the assistance discourse produced by the E-Learning Unit.

Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) provides analysts practical aspects for considering the context of a discourse. DHA refers to the external features of the text, comprising four levels that must be provided before analysing the discourse:

- The intertextual and interdiscursive relationships between utterance, texts, genres, and discourse.
- The extra-linguistc variables.
- The history and archaeology of texts and organisations.
- The instiocional frames of the specific context of a situation. (Wodak, 2009, 318)

In this study we consider the detailed institutional context of stakeholders in the period of the university shift to distance learning before we analyse the discursive strategies of the E-Leaning Unit. Thus, we first survey the stakeholders' experience about the support of the E-Learning Unit.

Then, we analyse the various solutions that the E-Learning Unit would propose to stakeholders whenever they encounter problems with using Blackboard. The main question of this research is:

- How is the assistance discourse provided by the E-Learning Unit (re)constructed for solving the problems that stakeholders encountered during their use of Blackboard instead of traditional education as a response to COVID-19 pandemic?

In order to answer this question, three sub-questions have to be answered:

1. What was students' perspective towards the provided assistance by the E-Learning Unit during the early stages of switching to distance learning?
2. What was faculty members' perspective towards the provided assistance by the E-Learning Unit during the early stages of switching to distance learning?

3. How do members of E-Learning Unit construct the ideal ways of supporting stakeholders in their use of distance learning tools?

Methodology

It has been suggested in the previous section that investigation of the assistance discourse of the E-Learning Unit should consider a detailed institutional context and the argumentation structure of the E-Learning Unit members. There will be two stages in the analysis of this study: (1) surveys of the stakeholders' experience of assistance provided by the E-Learning Unit, (2) interviews with the coordinators of the E-Learning Unit.

In the first step, the general perspective of stakeholders on the role of the E-Learning Unit was surveyed. The aim of this step was to investigate communication between the E-Learning Unit and stakeholders inside the institution. There were two surveys: one for students and the other for academic staff. The participants were from various academic departments at the University of Ha'il. In the surveys, 331 students and 67 academic staff participated. The purpose of this step was to investigate the experience of stakeholders regarding the support strategies that the E-Learning Unit implemented during the second semester of 2019/2020. To this end, the surveys were designed using 4-likert scales to reveal the stakeholders' perspectives on the support provided by the E-Learning Unit, and both students and academic staff were asked the same seven questions. The surveys were distributed using an online form, and the participants were asked to read and sign a consent form before they started the survey.

The second step of the analysis involved the interviews that were conducted with the coordinators of the E-Learning Unit. Each program at the University has a coordinator who provides support to stakeholders of the department. There were four participants in this study from various departments. All participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identities. Semi-structured interviews were adopted to provide an opportunity for the researchers to design flexible open-ended questions. Furthermore, this type of interview makes it possible to design questions according to the practical reasoning structure of Fairclough and Fairclough's (2012) approach. Moreover, structuring the questions according to the main elements of argument decreases the blurred area between the various elements of the argument, such as between circumstantial values and values, as will be seen below.

We conducted four interviews with the coordinators from the E-Learning Unit. Each interview lasted between 40 and 50 minutes. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, all interviews were arranged and held online. Although the socially distanced interviews may have been subject to issues such as internet connection interruptions, this was the only way to conduct the interviews within the timeframe and to meet the stipulations of the ethical approval committee. All participants were requested to sign a consent form before beginning their interview. Each interview was analysed separately, in accordance with Fairclough and Fairclough's (2012) approach. Then, we applied van Dijk's "shared knowledge" approach by looking at the shared ideas and elements of the various arguments in the interviews to understand the overriding argument within the whole E-Learning Unit.

Results and Discussion

Analysing the institutional context

In this study, context has been viewed as the institutional frames of the specific situation. This consideration is adopted to survey the stakeholders' attitudes to provide deep consideration about the institutional context at the time of the university shift to distance learning. The questionnaires are designed to present two themes: stakeholders' experience of utilizing Blackboard and communication style.

First Theme: Stakeholders' experience of utilizing Blackboard

In this theme, statements 1-3 were designed to look at the stakeholders' experience regarding the use of Blackboard, specifically at the early stages of the University shift to distance learning. These questions present the stakeholders' context in the specific situation of their ability to apply the knowledge of using Blackboard in the learning process. Figures 1-3 below show the results for this theme.
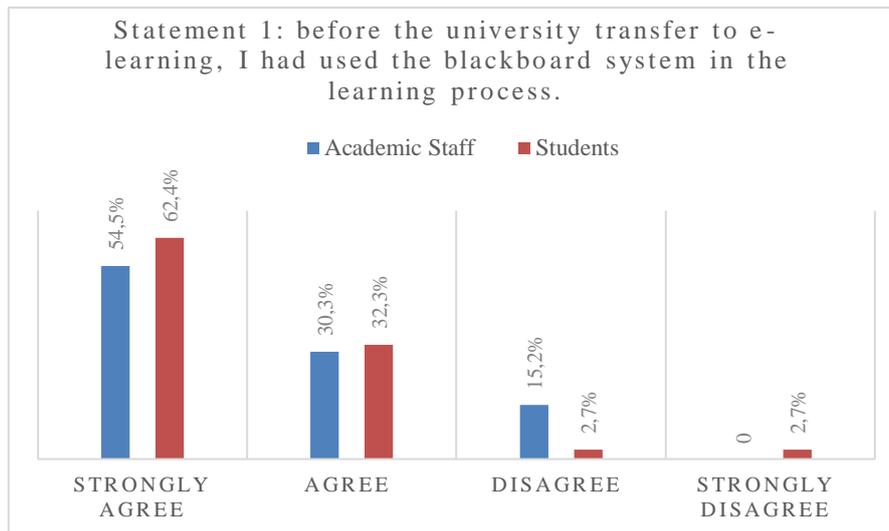
Figure 2. Before the university transfer to e-learning, I had used the blackboard system in the learning process. (own author)
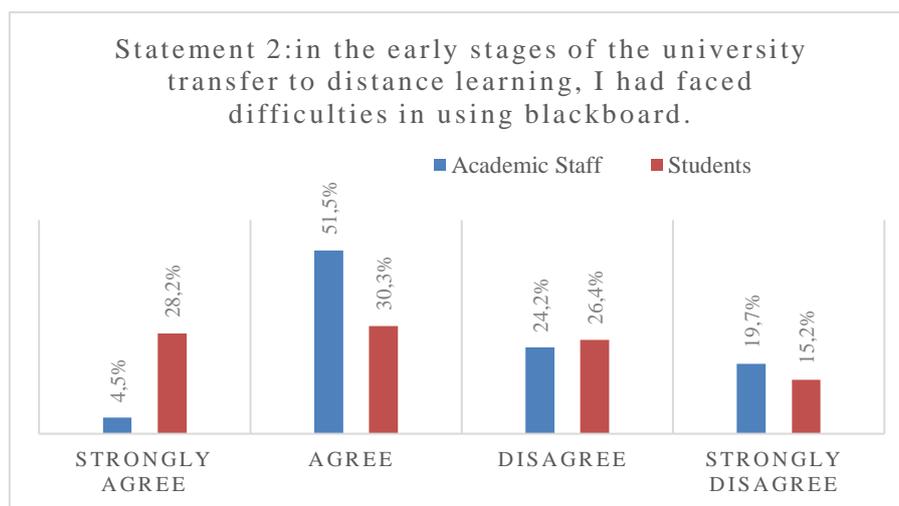

Figure 3. In the early stages of the university transfer to distance learning, I had faced difficulties in using blackboard. (own author)
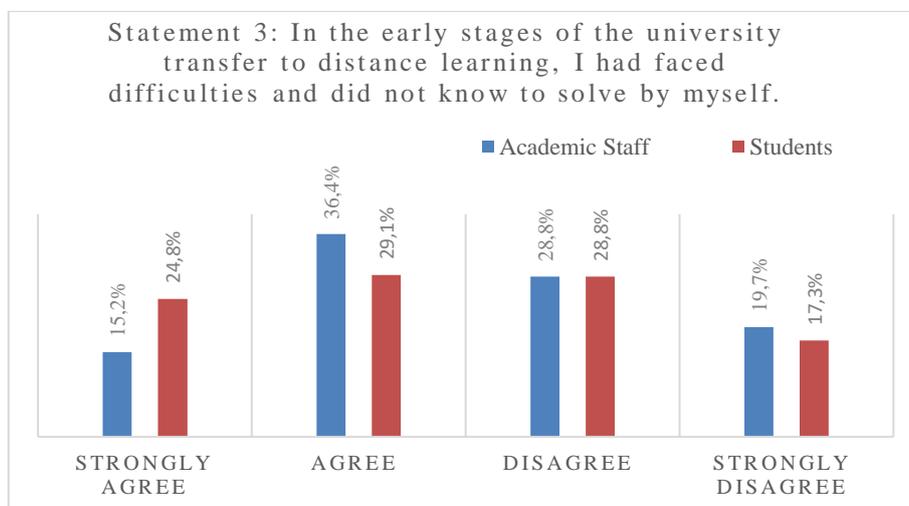

Figure 4. In the early stages of the university transfer to distance learning, I had faced difficulties and did not know to solve by myself. (own author)

The figures above illustrate contrasting answers regarding the experience of utilizing Blackboard in the early stages of the University shift to distance learning following lockdown. In response to the first question, the majority of stakeholders were familiar with using Blackboard. This high level of awareness might be attributed to the University's encouragement of stakeholders to use Blackboard as a teaching tool two years prior to the pandemic in order to implement the university's strategic plan for developing its quality of education. However, stakeholders did face some difficulties when the University turned to distance learning as shown by question two. From this perspective, the first two questions emphasise that stakeholders had general knowledge of how to utilize Blackboard in teaching. However, around half faced problems that required assistance from the E-Learning Unit (question 3). Thus, after lockdown, stakeholders were not professional in applying all features of Blackboard, and they needed support from the E-Learning Unit in many cases.

Second theme: communication style

This theme presents questions four, five, six, and seven that address the communication style that stakeholders applied when they faced difficulties using Blackboard. Figures 2-7 below show the questions of this theme.
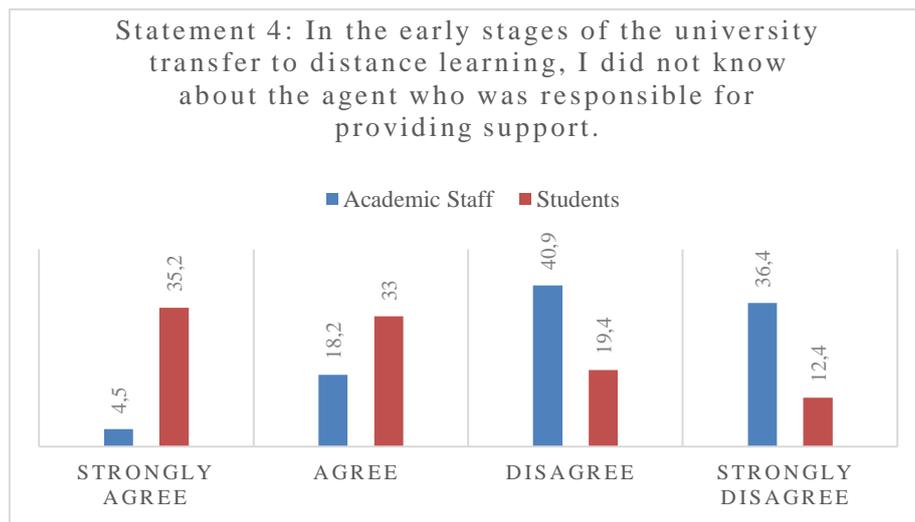

Figure 5. In the early stages of the university transfer to distance learning, I did not know about the agent who was responsible for providing support. (own author)
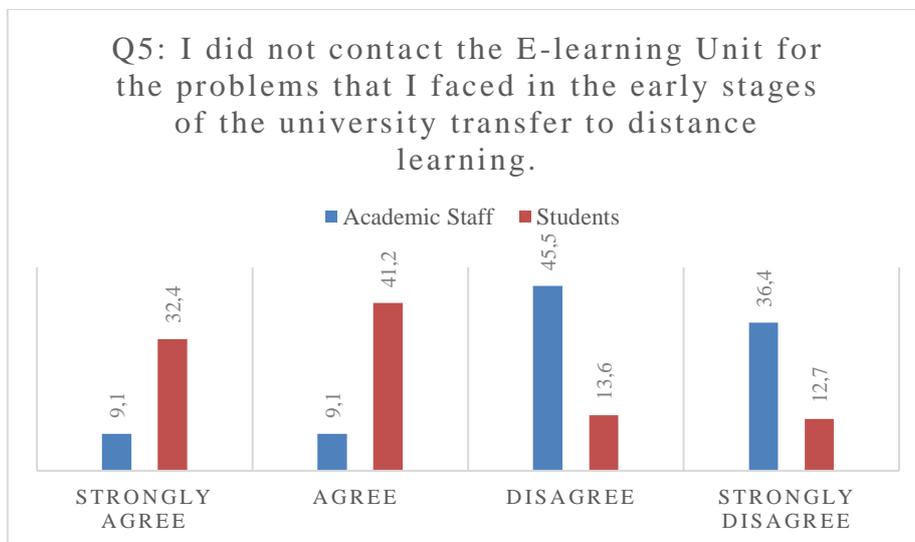

Figure 6. I did not contact the E-learning Unit for the problems that I faced in the early stages of the university transfer to distance learning. (own author)
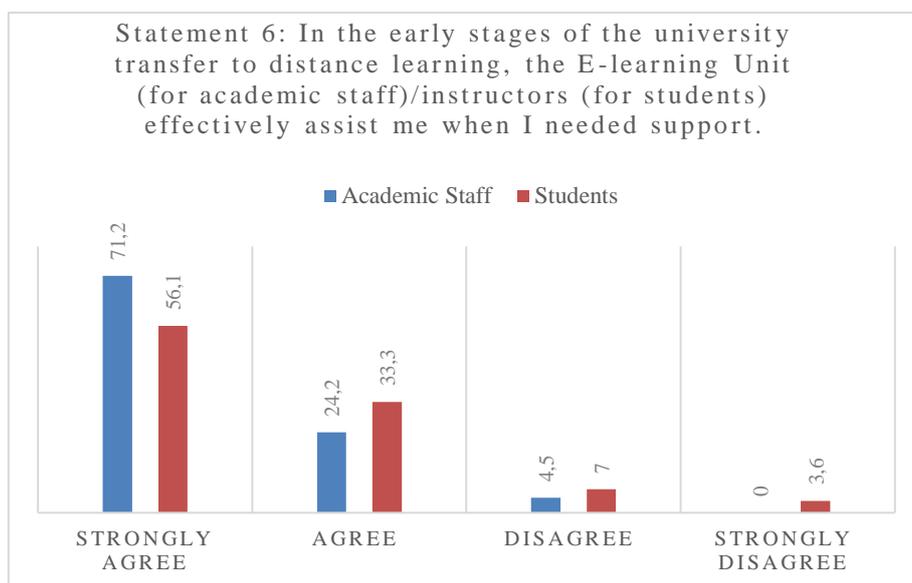
Figure 7. In the early stages of the university transfer to distance learning, the E-learning Unit (for academic staff)/instructors (for students) effectively assist me when I needed support. (own author)
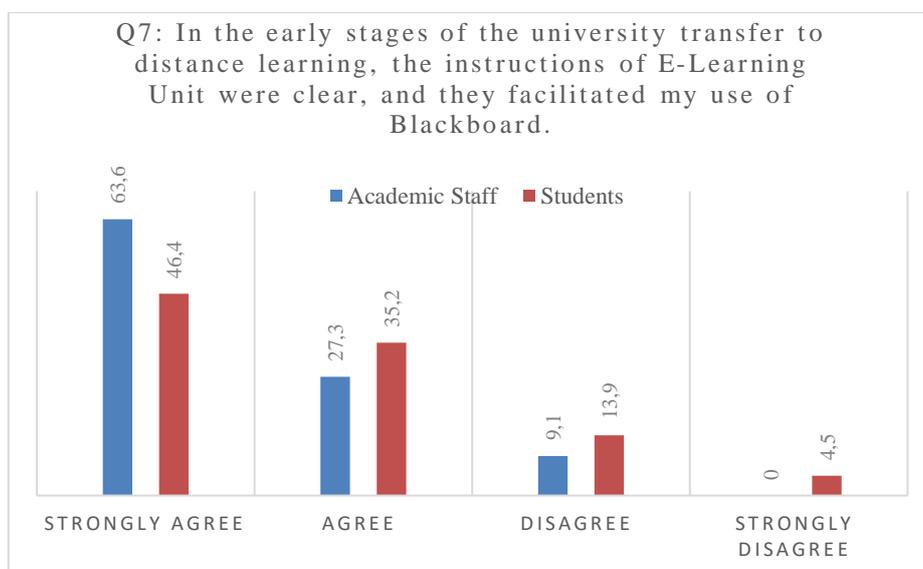

Figure 8. In the early stages of the university transfer to distance learning, the instructions of E-Learning Unit were clear, and they facilitated my use of Blackboard. (own author)

Statement four revealed that the academic staff were more aware than the students of the agent who was responsible for assisting them with and supporting their utilization of Blackboard. This result is consistent with the results from statements 1-3, showing that the E-learning Unit had more direct contact with academic staff than with students. Statement five shows that more than 80% of academic staff contacted the E-learning Unit when they faced problems. On the other hand, more than 70% of students did not contact the E-learning Unit. However, students contacted their instructors more than the E-Learning Unit whenever they faced problems with Blackboard (statement six). Statement seven considers the clarity of the instructions

provided by the university concerning the use of Blackboard. Most stakeholders agreed about the effectiveness of the instructions that help to achieve the goals of the intended learning outcomes. Statements 4-7 show that teachers not only gained support from the E-Learning Unit, but also acted as mediators between their students and the E-learning Unit by transferring the knowledge they gained to their students.

Analysing the argumentation structure of the E-Learning Unit regarding the ideal strategies of supporting stakeholders

In this section, we examine how the discourse of assistance is reconstructed by the coordinators in

light of Wodak's (2009) consideration of levels of context in addition to Fairclough and Fairclough's (2012) approach. We also consider van Dijk's approach of shared knowledge by dealing with the coordinators as members of the same community, and how they strategically represented their assistance discourse to encounter the problems that faced the stakeholders in using Blackboard. In conducting this approach, we analyse each interview separately. Then, we look at the shared ideas among the coordinators to reconstruct the shared argumentation structure of the E-Learning Unit. Figure 9 below shows the shared argumentation structure of the E-Learning Unit coordinators,

and their claim regarding the ideal actions when stakeholders faced problems with using Blackboard. The argumentation structure is constructed from the shared ideas and elements of various arguments presented by the members of the E-learning Unit. In other words, each interview has been argumentatively constructed, and the following argumentation is structured from the various coordinators' arguments. The following figure shows the elements of the argument that support the main claim which is "the E-Learning Unit ought to facilitate utilizing Blackboard system in education after the university shift to distance learning".
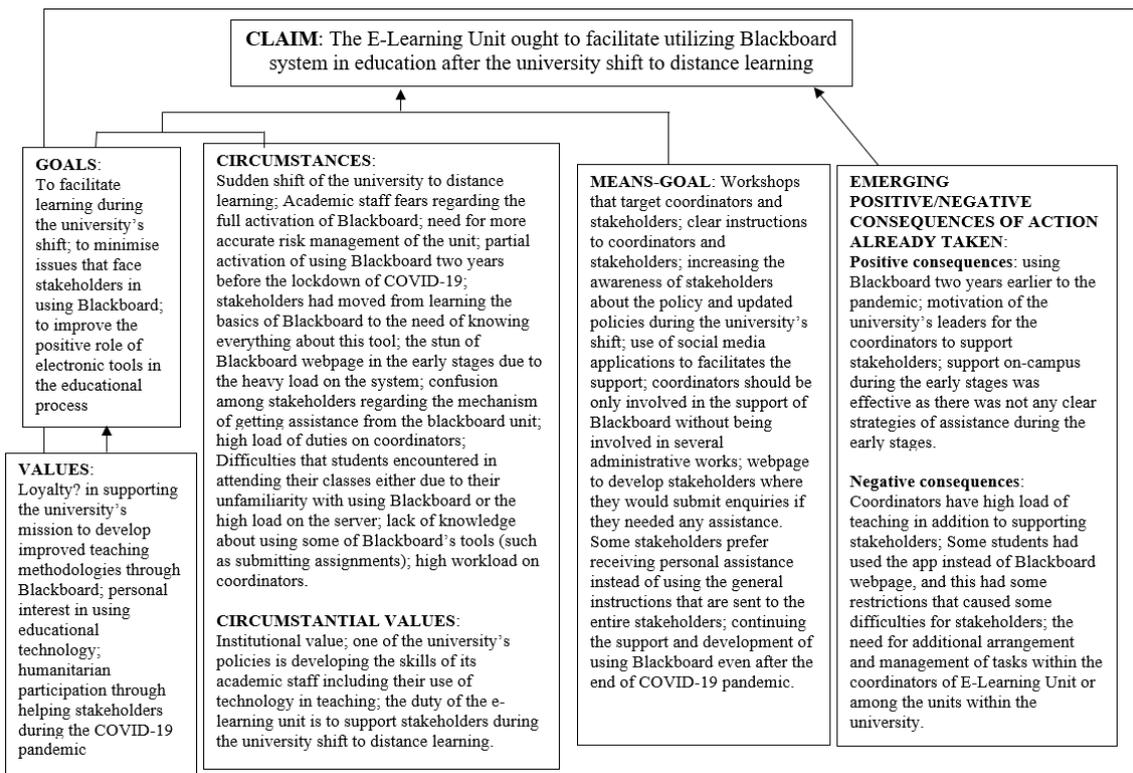

Figure 9. The argumentation structure the E-Learning Unit.

Circumstances

The first element in the argumentation structure is the *circumstances*. In this element, an arguer provides the context of the situation and the problems. Within this element is the *circumstantial values* which is another element, and it is defined by Fairclough and Fairclough (2012) as the duties, obligations and institutional values. This categorization of *circumstantial values* raises concerns regarding differentiating this element with the *values*. Fairclough and Fairclough (2012) argue that *circumstantial values* are the external values and reasons that exist in an institution, and an arguer applies them strategically to support the claim such as the

manager's duty to distribute tasks among workers. However, according to Fairclough and Fairclough (2012), if the fairness among the workers is applied as the personal preference of the manager, this idea should be labeled as a pure *value* rather than *circumstantial value*. Although there is a blurred area between these two elements, categorizing elements is dependent on the context and the way the ideas represented by the arguer. In the *circumstances*, the coordinators of E-Learning Unit (i.e., respondents) provide overall context of the unit's work before and after the university shift to distance learning during the university's lockdown. *Circumstances* are important because arguers choose actions among others in *circumstances* as they find themselves

in particular situations (Fairclough and Fairclough, 2012, p. 47). In Circumstances, the respondents do not only show stakeholders' use of Blackboard, but they also highlight the potential level of knowledge that stakeholders had about implementing Blackboard as a teaching tool.

At the beginning of the interviews, the respondents describe the situation of education during the university's shifting to distance learning. For example, Hamad supported the results of the survey by suggesting that:

stakeholders already had general knowledge in utilizing Blackboard because they had been using some features of it in teaching two years earlier to the university's lockdown.

Although the partial use of Blackboard might be seen as a positive consequence of actions that already had been taken, the shift in *circumstances* (i.e., university's lockdown) required the academic staff to shift all their courses to e-learning. However, the knowledge that stakeholders had was not enough to apply all the features of Blackboard after the unforeseen lockdown. The academic staff needed to know everything about Blackboard as they were required to teach, monitor students, create activities and test students using Blackboard. However, the coordinators expanded this situation when Fahad suggested:

A central issue that faced stakeholders is the technical problems such as the system lockdown.

Then, he goes to say:

This issue has a negative impact on the Unit as this was happening frequently in the early stages of the university shift. In addition to the high requests of stakeholders, the members of the E-Learning Unit had their full load of teaching that had increased the difficulties in solving all stakeholders' problems.

We can notice here, how Fahad provided specific details and *circumstances* about the E-Learning Unit. Here, Fahad raises concerns about the pressure that faced the members of the unit as a part of the central circumstance (i.e., solving issues that faced stakeholders).

A further central idea in the *circumstances* is the availability of risk management policy specifically regarding how the members of the unit should deliver their lectures and support stakeholders in utilizing Blackboard. For

example, the randomization of the E-Learning Unit's role and other units like the registration and academic affairs in the university was stated by Saleh:

Instructions regarding the use of Blackboard come from the E-Learning Unit. However, some stakeholders keep asking the unit about administrative stuff. For example, many questions have been raised to the unit were about the updates of final exam's policy.

This quote highlights that stakeholders were not fully aware about labelling the issues either to the E-Learning Unit or other units. Thus, stakeholders did not only need to enhance their knowledge about the use of Blackboard, but they also needed to be aware of the mechanism of raising enquiries to the E-learning Unit.

Another argumentation part of *circumstances* is the *circumstantial values* that is attached to the duties and obligations of the coordinators of the E-learning Unit. The interviews reveal two types of *circumstantial values*: duties related to applying the university's policy and humanitarian values. First, the coordinators highlight that the university had a policy that aimed to develop the tools of teaching and encouraging e-learning through Blackboard. In this regard, Ali sets out the *circumstantial values* by highlighting that:

the coordinators of the E-Learning Unit had taken the responsibility to enhance the awareness of using Blackboard around two years before COVID-19. When the lockdown had been announced, the coordinators took the duty to support stakeholders in utilizing Blackboard in the learning process.

Ali highlights that utilizing Blackboard was a part of the university's policy, and he suggested that the members took the obligation of reflecting the university's policy in practice. Ali expands this *institutional value* to suggest that:

Helping stakeholders during the university shift is a humanitarian responsibility upon the E-Learning Unit specifically after the university lockdown.

Here the coordinators act as the agent that has the knowledge, and it is their duties to participate in facilitating the learning process. They linked the general *circumstance* of the university's lockdown to their duties and obligations as they took the role of supporting stakeholders in utilizing Blackboard. Within these

circumstantial values, the members emphasise the *value* element, which is a separate element in the argumentation structure as shown in the following section.

Goals and values

Goals and *values* are two central elements of the argumentation structure. According to Fairclough and Fairclough (2012: 48), an arguer strategically constructs *goals* and *values* to restrict the main *claim* and highlight the central *means* of the *claim*. The general *goal* of the E-Learning Unit before the pandemic and even during the lockdown has enhanced the utilization of Blackboard in the educational process. After the university's lockdown, this *goal* had been specified and linked to the *circumstances* during the crisis:

to be mainly solving any issues that may face stakeholders within their usage of the Blackboard as well as preventing technical issues that may negatively affect students' education. (Saleh).

From this statement, we can see how solving the problems that stakeholders may encounter during using Blackboard has been the E-Learning Unit 's priority. Fahad expanded this goal to suggest that:

Solving the technical issues has facilitated the achievement of long-term goals such as enhancing the use of Blackboard features in education at the University of Hail.

Fahad links the *circumstances* of the university's lockdown to the *goals* by suggesting that enhancing stakeholders' understanding towards the features of Blackboard became an obligation after the university lockdown.

With regard to the pure *values*, there are two types of *values* highlighted by the unit: general *values* and specific *values*. In the general *values*, the coordinators state the loyalty of supporting the university's mission towards the development of the e-learning in education. On the other hand, the coordinators highlight the specific *value* as:

A humanitarian responsibility of helping students and academic staff during the difficult time of the university lockdown. (Ali).

The *values* and the *goals* mentioned above determine the possible actions (i.e., *means-goal*) needed in which they in turn support the main

claim. By applying this *value*, the argument of the E-Learning Unit has not become only a logic through the usefulness of using Blackboard in education, but a shared *value* in the institutional community. Therefore, the coordinators of the E-Learning Unit view themselves as having a crucial role in the educational process during the university's lockdown.

Means-Goal

As proposed by Altameemi and Bartlett (2017), *means-goal* is not only applied by arguers to propose one action that can achieve the *goal*, but any further possible action that may lead to the goals. The *means-goals* are represented in two central ways: short-term actions and long-term actions.

First, the short-term *means-goals* are central actions that should be applied at the early stages of the university's shift to distance learning. One of the proposed actions is the workshops for stakeholders that would participate in enhancing stakeholders' awareness. Although several workshops have been conducted before the pandemic, Saleh suggests:

The need for comprehensive workshops as well as repeating some previous workshops because many stakeholders had not expected that they may need to shift all their classes online via Blackboard.

Ali adds:

At the beginning of the university lockdown, face to face support and workshops were needed because the academic staff were available in the campus. This way was more flexible than providing support through telephone or WhatsApp

He suggests the face-to-face support as the academic staff were allowed to present their lectures in the campus to get benefit from the internet specifically those who did not have high-speed internet in their homes. By doing this, the coordinators would let the instructor repeats the steps of solving the problem in practice to avoid reoccurrence of the same issue again. This strategy shows how coordinators of the E-Learning Unit considered various styles of communication in the early stages of the university shift to distance learning. Thus, the style of communication has an impact on building the stakeholders' knowledge of utilizing Blackboard.

Another short-term *means-goal* is classifying the areas of the E-Learning Unit support. As mentioned in the *circumstances* ((Fairclough and Fairclough, 2012, p.19), the university updated the mode of students' exams. In this case, many academic staff asked the unit coordinators about every single point of the policy.

However, Ali argues that announcing the policy is not part of their duties, and the academic staff should raise any academic concern with the Academic Affairs Authority. He argues that the role of the unit is supporting the stakeholders with any issue facing them rather than being involved in any changes in the university's policy. This *means-goal* is also highlighted by Saleh who argued that:

The coordinators of the E-Learning Unit should not be involved in the administrative works such as providing reports about the attendance.

Based on this, one can see how *circumstances* and *means-goal* are strongly interconnected, and how the proposed *means-goals* are reconstructed depending on changes in the context. The *means-goal* here is not applied directly to support the *main claim*, but it is strategically used to prevent the obstacles that may affect achieving the *goals*.

With regard to the long-term *means-goal*, the coordinators suggest the actions that should be applied to achieve the general goal of enhancing the stakeholders' knowledge towards all the features and updates of Blackboard. A proposed action is:

developing a webpage that provides videos of workshops and submitting enquiries when the stakeholders face direct issue. However, some academic staff may not use the webpage while they directly contact the unit (Saleh)

Given this, the coordinators suggest that the webpage should be activated to decrease the pressure on them. In addition, the webpage will give coordinators the opportunity to transfer stakeholders to get benefit from the electronic platform. This *means-goal* is represented as a supplementary style of communication in supporting stakeholders. By adding this *means-goal*, the E-Learning Unit constructs their central claim to be not only a response to the crisis of COVID-19, but also an essential provider of knowledge about the use of Blackboard after the end of the pandemic.

Emerging positive/negative consequences of actions already taken

Emerging negative/positive consequences of actions already taken is the last element in the argument structure. Fairclough and Fairclough {Formatting Citation} indicate that this strategy is an extra element to the practical reasoning approach. In this element, the arguers apply actions that have been taken before the university's lockdown or even during the early stages of the lockdown, and the potential positive/negative consequences of those actions. Here we discuss how the members of the E-Learning Unit classified the actions as having either positive or negative consequences.

As the coordinators of the E-Learning Unit had been involved in spreading the culture of utilizing Blackboard in the educational process. This action has a positive consequence, as many stakeholders were familiar at least with the main features of Blackboard. Saleh suggests:

The experience of the stakeholders in utilizing Blackboard has helped the coordinators to solve the technical issues that face stakeholders rather than explaining the features of Blackboard from scratch.

This element reflects the encouragement of the university's policy-makers to use Blackboard, so this interest has effectively enhanced the importance of using Blackboard as an important tool in education. The coordinators used this element in the argument to highlight how the knowledge of stakeholders should be labelled into levels in order to define the type of support. Another salient action that had positive consequences is the on-campus support at the beginning of the lockdown. The academic staff were allowed to physically enter the campus. Fahad suggests that:

In the early stages, the coordinators provided the direct support on-campus that has a positive impact on delivering the knowledge and information regarding the use of Blackboard. Further, short workshops were held to solve the repeated problems that face the stakeholders.

The coordinators then moved to distance support after the lockdown of the whole university. In this case, the coordinators not only discussed building the knowledge of the stakeholders, but they also considered the cognitive aspect through raising confidence about using Blackboard. The different forms of communication reflect various

platforms of support to construct the knowledge of using Blackboard.

Regarding the negative consequences, the coordinators suggested that the university had its overall risk management, but this risk management did not consider distance learning in response to the unexpected university's lockdown. This experience is represented in two central actions: high load on the coordinators of the unit, and students' use of the Blackboard mobile application. First, Hamad raised the concerns of:

The high load on the coordinators as they have the same load of other instructors. This load was manageable before the pandemic. However, after the lockdown, the load had negative consequences upon the coordinators' support.

The high load of teaching hours in addition to providing technical support to the stakeholders had affected the efficiency to serve all the stakeholders. Another action which has negative consequences is the deactivation of the Blackboard's application by the Deanship of Information Technology.

The E-Learning Deanship deactivated the Blackboard's application due to various technical difficulties with the application. Many students faced problems when they turned to use the Blackboard webpage because they were more familiar with Blackboard's mobile application. (Ali).

Given this, these negative consequences required to use the proposed *means-goals* above not only to build new knowledge for those who were not familiar with Blackboard, but also to refine the knowledge towards effective utilization of Blackboard. The coordinators needed to familiarize the stakeholders to shift their use of Blackboard's application to the Blackboard webpage.

Overall, the coordinators strategically construct the elements of their arguments to justify the importance of applying all proposed actions that would facilitate the use of Blackboard during the early stages of the university's lockdown.

Argumentation structure and institutional context

In this section, we discuss how the coordinators consider the institutional context that has been shown in the findings of the surveys to build their arguments (i.e., linking the findings from the survey with the findings from the interviews). The coordinators brought the elements of their discourse to identify the boundaries of strategies that constructed the knowledge of stakeholders' use of Blackboard.

Regarding the first theme of the survey's findings, the stakeholders have the general knowledge of using Blackboard, but they do not know all the features of this tool. The coordinators have addressed this issue in their *circumstances*, *goals* and the *positive/negative consequences of actions already taken*. The coordinators expanded the *circumstance* of the stakeholders' knowledge to highlight the pressure on them, and the policy of risk management such as duties assigned to the unit. This is explicitly expressed by the coordinators in the *circumstances* when they highlight their teaching load in addition to their technical support to the stakeholders. Therefore, the general context of the institution is developed by the coordinators in their arguments to highlight the issues that faced them during the early stages of the university's shift to distance learning.

The second theme of the survey's findings shows how the majority of instructors acted as mediators between the E-Learning Unit and their students. However, the coordinators in their *means-goal* represent students and instructors by referring to them as stakeholders without differentiation between them. The coordinators refer to the style of communication in their *means-goal* and *circumstances* in a different way. In the *circumstances*, the coordinators highlight the lack of a specific risk management policy for the E-Learning Unit. Then, this idea is developed in the *means-goal* to suggest the importance of identifying the areas that the unit could help the stakeholders with. The coordinators apply their *means-goal* to represent technical actions rather than the style of communication through long-term and short-term actions. At this stage, it becomes clear that the coordinators implement the proposed actions (*means-goal*) in their argumentation structure to stakeholders in general (including instructors and students). This method might be one of the reasons that increased the pressure on the unit during the early stages of the university's lockdown as they did not have a clear strategy of how to support stakeholders. Therefore, the coordinators need to identify a clear strategy of their communication with stakeholders such as activating the role of instructors to transfer the knowledge of using Blackboard to their students.

Conclusions

This study explored means of assistance discourse of the E-Learning Unit during the early stages of the university's shift to distance learning as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings showed that the unexpected lockdown had an impact on the communication strategies and styles of the E-Learning Unit with stakeholders. Although the unit has solved many issues of stakeholders, the approach of supporting stakeholders has led to high pressure on the coordinators. Consequently, the coordinators have shared elements in their arguments that highlight central ideas such as identifying the role of the unit in an explicit policy, the need for specific risk management policy, and development of webpage that would contain videos and workshops in e-learning. The coordinators apply various *means-goals* including short-term actions and long-term actions that help in enhancing stakeholders' utilization of Blackboard. The findings showed that the coordinators focused on the technical issues more than the various methods of communication with stakeholders. Based on this, the E-Learning Unit may need to include members who are responsible of technical issues, administrative works and webpage. Therefore, we can see how styles of communication should be identified by the E-Learning Unit in order to specify the type and amount of knowledge that is needed by stakeholders at specific situations.

Acknowledgments

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