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## **The role of Saudi universities in facing contemporary crises: COVID-19 as a model**

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**Abstract:**

Universities have a major role in managing and confronting crises, and in light of the outbreak of the new Corona virus, their responsibility increases in developing students' awareness of how to successfully deal with the effects of that virus spread. Hence, this descriptive study aimed to survey the academic experts' perspectives about the most important Saudi universities roles to deal with the emerging Corona 38 roles were listed under three sub-dimensions in a questionnaire in order to reveal the students' perspectives about the degree to which universities do their roles during the Corona epidemic according to the variables of gender, educational level, and specialization. Overall perspectives of students indicated that Saudi universities achieve their roles related to "the process of teaching" to a large extent, and the roles related to both "training and community service" and "students' activities" to a neutral extent. The results also showed that there were not statistically significant differences about Saudi universities roles during the Corona epidemic according to the variable of specialization, but there were differences about Saudi universities roles related to "the process of teaching" according to the variable of gender in the direction of female students, and their roles related to "training and community service" and "students' activities" according to the variable of educational level in the direction of postgraduate students. The study proposed future procedures to enhance the role of Saudi universities in dealing with the continuous Corona epidemic.

**Keywords:** Saudi Arabia; universities roles; crises; COVID-19; academic experts; students' perspectives

## دور الجامعات السعودية في مواجهة الأزمات المعاصرة: كوفيد-١٩ نموذجاً إعداد

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### المستخلص:

للجامعات دور كبير في إدارة الأزمات ومواجهتها، وفي ظل تفشي فيروس كورونا الجديد تزداد مسؤوليتها في تنمية وعي الطلاب بكيفية التعامل بنجاح مع آثار انتشار ذلك الفيروس. ومن هنا هدفت هذه الدراسة الوصفية إلى استطلاع آراء وتصورات الخبراء الأكاديميين حول أهم أدوار الجامعات السعودية للتعامل مع كورونا المستجد، وبعد موافقة الخبراء على أهمية (٣٨) دوراً للجامعة بدرجة كبيرة جداً، تم توجيه استبانة إلى طلاب الجامعات السعودية لسؤالهم عن درجة قيام جامعاتهم بتلك الأدوار خلال انتشار وباء كورونا، وذلك حسب متغيرات الجنس والمستوى التعليمي والتخصص. وقد أوضحت استجابات الطلاب أن الجامعات السعودية تحقق أدوارها المتعلقة بـ"عملية التدريس" بدرجة كبيرة، والأدوار المتعلقة بكل من "التدريب وخدمة المجتمع" و"الأنشطة الطلابية" بدرجة متوسطة. كما أظهرت النتائج عدم وجود فروق ذات دلالة إحصائية حول أدوار الجامعات السعودية خلال وباء كورونا حسب متغير التخصص، لكن كانت هناك فروق حول أدوار الجامعات السعودية المتعلقة بـ"عملية التدريس" حسب متغير الجنس في اتجاه الطالبات، وحول أدوارها المتعلقة بـ"التدريب وخدمة المجتمع" و"الأنشطة الطلابية" حسب متغير المستوى التعليمي في اتجاه طلبة الدراسات العليا. واقترحت الدراسة إجراءات مستقبلية لتعزيز دور الجامعات السعودية في التعامل مع وباء كورونا.

كلمات مفتاحية: أدوار الجامعات السعودية؛ الأزمات، كوفيد-١٩؛ الخبراء

الأكاديميون؛ الطلاب.

## **1. Review of literature**

For their progressive noticeable work that makes a difference outside the walls of the academy, universities have essential roles in enhancing different aspects of development in societies and in challenging their crises as well, which make them more permeable to the world around them.

Universities are central to developing several fields in societies. Depending on their well-prepared academic staff and the qualified scientific cadres and competencies, the KSA universities bear a great responsibility to achieve the K.S.A. Vision of 2030 (2016). The role of universities will not be limited to seeking to implement what is mentioned in the vision, but rather their role will go beyond that to share with all public and private sectors the responsibility of implementing the vision through their other functions including educational programs, scientific research and the community service.

The necessity to such responsibilities of universities increases during crises in order to develop community members' awareness of how to successfully and quickly deal with crises and reduce their future expected effects and losses.

The crises that occur within societies are obviously expressions of those unexpected fluctuations in the internal and external environment of those societies. In times of crises there are critical periods in which leaders and managers can hardly take appropriate decisions considering the limited time and lack of information. This causes great material and human losses that threaten the survival of the society later.

Alhalabi & Abu-bakr (2014) stated that crises vary from time to time and from country to country. Crises are related to the main fields in societies i.e., they can be clearly seen in the fields of economy, education, policy, culture, family relations and health.

Literature related to crises proves that crisis is surprising, confusing, and threatening as it creates feelings of tension and anxiety in all people. It involves a high degree of complexity and overlap in elements and causes. During the crisis, the decision maker feels the lack of available time and information. Hence, it grasps the attention of institutions and individuals to the use of unusual means, in addition to the high degree of control over energies and capabilities (Abu Fara, 2009; Aldelimi, 2012; Almusaada, 2012; & Eleiwa, 2004).

Al. Qudah, et. al. (2021) noticed variations in individuals' responses to crises. Emotional responses include feelings of anger, fear, anxiety, sorrowness, helplessness or depression. Those who respond to the crisis

cognitively may suffer from lack of attention, confusion, lack of orientation and memory problems. Negative behavioral responses to the crisis can be represented in avoidance, alienation, social withdrawal, and lack of confidence in others.

Traditional methods of crisis management include denying the crisis, suppressing it, reducing its importance, and forming specialized committees to find out best solutions, while non-traditional methods of crisis management encompass crisis containment, democratic participation, escalation, and disintegration (Leyas, 2018). Rather, the scientific method is the best for confronting crises through performing initial study of their dimensions, accurate analytic study and planning to manage them (Hilal, 2004).

Among these current crises is Corona pandemic. Incredible effects of Corona pandemic are growing noticeably around the world, and at the same time concern is increasing as it resulted in large number of infected people and a lot of deaths. Global reports indicated that the virus spread in most countries of the world, where the number of confirmed cases is approaching 185 billion people and the deaths are more than 4 million people worldwide [WHO, 2020].

Coronaviruses (COVs) are a large family of RNA viruses that cause diseases ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases such as Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS-CoV) (Khalil, 2013; & Roser; Ritchie; & Ortiz-Ospina, 2020).

This kind of viruses causes respiratory infections in humans. It was first identified in 1968 by the International Committee of Classification of Viruses. Corona virus diseases largely infect domestic animals and bats, and the results of some surveys showed that bats host the greatest diversity of coronaviruses, indicating that they may be a natural host for this virus (Weiss & Navas-Martin, 2005).

Many indicators confirmed the possibility of animal coronavirus transmission across species and from person to person, and this drew the attention of researchers to the potential threat from animal coronavirus and the need to adopt strict infection control measures when such cases are found (European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, 2013).

Although many kinds of these infections cause acute and severe respiratory syndrome such as MERS-CoV and SARS-CoV (Al-Farm, 2016), they did not have the ability to cause a pandemic (Petrosillo, et. al., 2020) even if there are a lot of similarities such as the ability of these viruses to: survive in different temperatures and humidity, recover their

vitality even after 48 hours, transmit through contact with others or contact with an object carrying the virus (Memish & Al-Tawfiq, 2014).

The outbreak of the new Corona disease, COVID-19, was noted in the Chinese city of Wuhan. While the Chinese authorities discovered a group of severe pneumonia cases caused by the emerging Corona virus on the twenty-ninth of December 2019, the first cases of Corona COVID-19 appeared outside China on the thirteenth of January in Thailand, and then on the sixteenth of January in Japan (Roser, et. al., 2020).

WHO (2020) indicated that most people infected with the Covid-19 virus suffer from mild to moderate respiratory diseases without the need for special care. The elderly and those who suffer from medical problems such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, chronic respiratory disease, and cancer are likely to experience serious complications, and the Covid-19 virus is spread primarily through droplets of saliva or nasal secretions when an infected person coughs or sneezes, so it is important to take precautions when sneezing or coughing (for example, bending the elbow and using it when coughing or sneezing).

In many countries, infection with the Corona virus has turned into a stigma. At a time when every effort is required to combat the virus, stop its spread, and support and assist the infected, thousands of people - sometimes encouraged by their governments - have practiced bullying, hatred and racism against coronavirus carriers and their families, and even against suspected cases (The Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Monitor, 2020), Moreover, social distancing in times of Corona has caused great problems, i.e., boredom, suppression, tension, and an increase in domestic violence cases (Lutfi, 2020).

According to World Bank reports highlighting Corona pandemic effects, 49 million people may be drawn into extreme poverty, especially in countries with fragile economies. Confidence in technology, digital transformation, and opportunities for changing the consumer behavior will increase, which necessarily lead to a significant shortage of job opportunities (Ghanaïem, 2020).

The crisis is exacerbating pre-existing education disparities by reducing the opportunities for many of the most vulnerable children, youth, and adults – those living in poor or rural areas, girls, refugees, persons with disabilities and forcibly displaced persons – to continue their learning. Learning losses also threaten to extend beyond this generation and erase decades of progress, not least in support of girls and young women’s educational access and retention. Some 23.8 million

additional children and youth (from pre-primary to tertiary) may drop out or not have access to school due to the pandemic's economic impact alone (United Nations, 2020).

Based on the above, it became clear that all countries around the world have experienced this serious pandemic. Likewise, Saudi Arabia has also been affected by the pandemic. By 7 July 2020, 214,000 confirmed coronavirus cases and 1968 deaths had occurred (Al. Qudah, et. al., 2021). This urgently requires intervention and integration between various agencies of society, the most important of which is undoubtedly university institutions.

The role of universities in combating crises, especially COVID-19, extends far beyond raising the awareness of the members of the community concerning the pandemic. Universities are also placed to drive the recovery effort at both the national and international levels. There are a lot of examples of the ways that the community benefits from universities as it makes use of the expert knowledge of the researchers in their laboratories, the teachers in their classrooms and the professionals in their clinical settings (Dewar, 2020).

Eldahshan (2020) summarized the role of the educational institutions in planning for new educational disciplines to match the tremendous changes caused by the pandemic. Universities should support innovation and continuous partnership in transferring knowledge with the local community and non-governmental organizations, giving more attention to students' scientific projects, and promoting adult education in universities, which contribute to adapting to the new situation.

Universities are central to sustaining the health policy as they teach the next generation of decision-makers and health professionals. Further, they have capacity to teach, research and ensure the uptake of findings into policy and practice (Mirzoev, et. al., 2014). Universities are working as hard as they can to contribute directly to COVID-19 responses, including helping with the development and delivery of therapeutic treatments. The University has also made its clinical training buildings available to the local hospital to help in managing COVID-19 across a catchment covering a quarter of the state (Dewar, 2020).

Covid-19 for several reasons may have long-lasting effects on the economy. Among these effects are the economic impacts of campus closures or the drop in international students' numbers (Patterson, 2021). Universities play an important part in contributing to the economic recovery from COVID-19. In addition to generating economic activity

and employment, universities produce graduates with the skills that employers need in today's fast-changing economy (Dewar, 2020).

The role of the university as an educational and research institution in cases of disasters of all kinds is clear. The university necessarily participates in all stages of disasters because it is charged with the task of serving the community on a large scale. However, it is noted in some universities that their role is limited to mobilizing funds and voluntary support in emergency situations, while the university should offer help in other aspects, especially regarding academic contributions such doing action research in time of disasters, proposing policies, and participating in the rehabilitation phase of individuals in community, and sending volunteers (Ahmad, 2007).

Through a cross-sectional survey conducted on 28 countries, Habibov & Cheong (2017) concluded that universities have a positive effect on developing their students during the crises through enriching them with strategies that enable them to cope with those crises effectively.

In the light of global health crises, Mirzoev, et. al. (2014) pointed out that one of the main roles of universities is to sponsor, support and analyze health systems research and policies to organize communities and achieve collective goal. While Pariyo, et. al. (2011) explained that the role of universities in strengthening health systems are not limited to the production of knowledge through scientific research, but also includes preparing the next generation of decision-makers, health professionals and researchers.

In addition, because of the fear of infection and death, avoiding receiving medical treatment at health facilities, fearing the loss of relatives, and fearing isolation during quarantine, which causes psychological disorders (Al. Qudah, et. al., 2021), Hussein & Swaidan (2019) indicated that the university can develop the mental health of its members, and provide its services to the local community in the areas of advisory, guidance and direction through the planning and implementation of many educational programs.

Ahmad (2007) summarized the roles that universities can play in times of various disasters in developing strategies and policies to reduce these disasters, anticipate their effects, plan response actions considering these expected effects, and educate society through general preparation and training in disaster medicine. Emergency medical services and emergency medical education programs, and doing research on disasters



are among the most important vital functions that can be performed by the faculty participants.

In the light of the above-mentioned, the purpose of this study is to survey the perspectives of academic experts about the most important roles of Saudi universities to deal with the emerging Corona epidemic. After that, Saudi universities students' perspectives are revealed about the degree to which universities do their roles towards dealing with the Corona epidemic.

University students – as Al-Feki & Abul-Fotoh (2020) said - are the most affected by the social mobility and economic, cultural and political events that society is going through. Accordingly, the main research questions are:

- 1) What are the most important roles of Saudi universities to deal with the Corona epidemic from the experts' perspectives?
- 2) To which extent do Saudi universities achieve their roles in dealing with the Corona epidemic from the students' perspectives?
- 3) What are the proposed procedures to enhance the role of Saudi universities in dealing with the Corona epidemic?

## **2. Method**

### *2.1. Participants*

Participants in this study included:

- 52 of academic experts working at Saudi Universities and doing research on Corona epidemic. These experts were purposively selected as the following table (1) shows:

**Table 1**  
Characteristics of the opinionnaire respondents.

	<b>Variables</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Academic Rank	Professor	10	19.23
	Associate Professor	22	42.31
	Assistant Professor	20	38.46
Specialization	Theoretical	36	69.23
	Applied Sciences	16	30.77
University	King Khaled	14	26.92
	Tabuk	18	34.62
	Um AlQuraa	12	23.08
	Others	8	15.38
Total		52	100

- 379 of Saudi Universities students. The following table (2) shows the characteristics of this accidentally selected sample and its distribution according to the variables of the study; gender, educational level and specialization:

**Table 2**  
Characteristics of the questionnaire respondents.

	<b>Variables</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Gender	Male	146	38.52
	Female	233	61.48
Educational level	Postgraduate	171	45.12
	Undergraduate	208	54.88
Specialization	Theoretical	303	79.95
	Applied Sciences	76	20.05
Total		379	100

## 2.2. Instruments

### 2.2.1. The academic experts' opinionnaire

To achieve the purpose of this descriptive study, an electronic opinionnaire, containing 63 items designed in the light of reviewing literature, was applied on 52 of academic experts working at Saudi Universities and doing research on Corona epidemic.

The opinionnaire aimed to determine the most important roles of Saudi universities to deal with the Corona epidemic from the experts' perspectives. The responses of the opinionnaire ranged from strongly

unimportant to strongly important, and the final opinionnaire was only limited to strongly important 38 items that experts emphasized their importance in a percentage ranging from 84% to 100%.

**2.2.2. The students' questionnaire**

The 38 items or roles, that Saudi academic experts agreed their importance strongly, were listed under three sub-dimensions in a questionnaire in order to reveal the students’ perspectives about the degree to which universities achieve their roles during the Corona epidemic.

Psychometric properties of this questionnaire have been verified. Internal consistency has been assured through conducting the questionnaire to a pilot sample of 50 university students. Pearson correlation has been checked and its values were significant at level of (0.01). Reliability has been checked through Cronbach’s Alpha. Table (3) shows Pearson Correlation for validity and Cronbach’s Alpha for reliability:

**Table 3**

Pearson Correlation and Cronbach’s Alpha.

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Items</b>	<b>Pearson Correlation</b>	<b>Cronbach’s Alpha</b>
University teaching	16	0.909**	0.942
Training & community service	11	0.951**	0.965
Students' activities	11	0.926**	0.963
Total	38	---	0.979

Both the academic experts' opinionnaire and the students' questionnaire were corrected according to the five-response Likert scale as table (4) shows:

**Table 4.**

The extent of Means and Percentages of the Five-Response Likert Scale.

<b>Five-Response Likert Scale</b>	<b>Extent of Means</b>	<b>Extent of Percentages</b>
<b>SD</b> = Strongly Disagree	1.00 to less than 1.80	less than 36%
<b>D</b> = Disagree	1.80 to less than 2.60	20% to less than 52%
<b>N</b> = Neutral	2.60 to less than 3.40	52% to less than 68%
<b>A</b> = Agree	3.40 to less than 4.20	68% to less than 84%
<b>SA</b> = Strongly Agree	4.20 to less than 5.00	84% to 100%

### 2.3. Procedures

After calculating the validity and reliability of the questionnaire, it was electronically applied on all Saudi Universities students via their formal e-mails with the help of Deanship of Student Affairs in the Saudi Universities. Completion of the questionnaire took more than three months (from the middle of March until the end of June 2021). The questionnaire included demographic data and instructions for its voluntary completion, and that data collected from the completed questionnaires would only be used for research purposes. Following this, received completed questionnaires were scored, codified, and categorized according to the study variables as shown in table (2).

### 2.4. Data Analysis

After applying the questionnaire, its data analysis, through SPSS version 25, relied on the arithmetic mean, standard deviation, and quartiles to arrange roles of Saudi universities, and the t-test to measure the differences between the variables of the study sample.

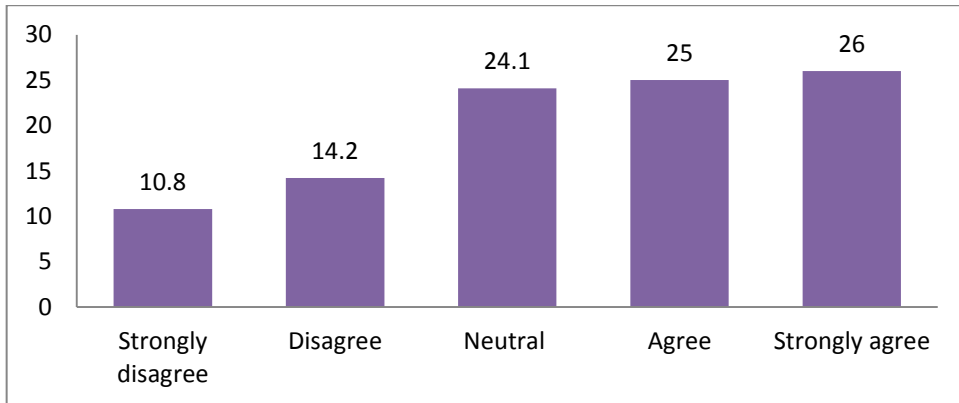
## 3. Results

The statistical analysis of students' perspectives indicated that the Saudi universities achieve their roles during the Corona epidemic to a neutral extent ( $M=3.32$ ) and ( $S.D.=0.96$ ). Percentage of responses indicated the agreement of the majority of respondents (51%), while disagreement percentage was (25%) and (24%) were neutral. Table (5) shows the frequencies, Means and Standard Deviations of responses on the whole questionnaire.

**Table 5**

Frequencies, Means and Standard Deviations of responses on the questionnaire.

No. of Items	Frequencies					Mean	S. D.	
	SD	D	N	A	SA			
38	Frequency	1508	1992	3374	3505	3644	3.32	0.96
	%	10.8	14.2	24.1	25.0	26.0		



This section of the questionnaire asked respondents to give information on the status of the roles of Saudi universities in the time of Covid-19. The analysis of the responses on the three sub-dimensions of the questionnaire was as follows:

### 3.1. Dim.1: University teaching:

The statistical analysis of students' perspectives about the first dimension of the questionnaire revealed that the Saudi universities achieve their roles related to the process of teaching during the Corona epidemic to a large extent ( $M.=3.61/S.D.=0.94$ ).

The results, as shown in Table 6, indicated that respondents agreed upon 13 items which came in the range of the response "agree". These items revealed that: *universities provide alternative strategies for teaching during the Corona crisis, faculty members and students are committed to the preventive precautions during crises, universities provide the necessary technical support for the success of the educational process, various teaching methods were utilized to enhance skills of dealing with crises and solving problems, the alternatives provided by the university for the conduct of the educational process during the Corona crisis were of not only novelty and quality, but appropriate to the nature of scientific disciplines as well, faculty members utilize instructional technologies in teaching to stimulate students' potentials for awareness of the expected crises as well as utilizing academic assignments to enhance the prior anticipation of crises and planning to deal with, universities provide alternatives for the conduct of the educational process during the Corona crisis to meet the needs of students and the requirements of the high-quality educational process, faculty members provide students with the skills of dealing with various crises, they connect academic curricula with contemporary*

*Corona crisis, and they involve students in planning lessons to enhance their future foresight skills.*

The other three items came in the range of the response “neutral”. These items revealed that: universities should create planned teaching situations that reinforce the behaviors of conscious dealing with crises, implement academic courses with some topics on crisis management and future foresight, link the course with the various crises (Corona crisis) through students' assignments.

**Table 6**

Means and Standard Deviations of responses on the Dim.1: University teaching.

<b>Items</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>S.D.</b>
11- The university provides alternative strategies for teaching during the Corona crisis	4.12	1.06
10- The commitment of faculty members and students to the preventive precautions during crises	3.96	1.14
16- The university provides the necessary technical support for the success of the educational process during the crisis	3.81	1.28
1- Using teaching methods that enhance skills of dealing with crises and solving problems	3.80	1.09
12- The alternatives provided by the university for the conduct of the educational process during the Corona crisis are of novelty and quality	3.78	1.30
13- The alternatives provided by the university for the conduct of the educational process during the Corona crisis are appropriate to the nature of scientific disciplines	3.72	1.25
4- Utilizing instructional technologies in teaching to stimulate students' potentials for awareness of the expected crises	3.66	1.14
6- Utilizing academic assignments to enhance the prior anticipation of crises and planning to deal with	3.65	1.24
14- The alternatives provided by the university for the conduct of the educational process during the Corona crisis meet the needs of students	3.65	1.31
15- The alternatives provided by the university for the conduct of the educational process during the Corona crisis meet the requirements of the high-quality educational process	3.58	1.33
5- Utilizing teaching to provide students with the skills of dealing with various crises	3.52	1.13
8- Connecting academic curricula with contemporary crises (Corona crisis)	3.47	1.29
2- Involving students in planning lessons to enhance their	3.40	1.34

Items	Mean	S.D.
future foresight skills		
3- Creating planned teaching situations that reinforce the behaviors of conscious dealing with crises	3.37	1.23
7- Including academic courses some topics on crisis management and future foresight	3.16	1.25
9- linking the course with the various crises (Corona crisis) through students' assignments.	3.09	1.32
Total	3.61	0.94

The statistical analysis of data revealed no statistically significant differences in the responses on this dimension according to the variables of educational level and Specialization, However, statistically significant differences were found according to the variable of gender as proved by T-test ( $T=19.87$ ,  $Sig=0.00$ ). The differences were in the direction of female respondents.

### 3.2. Dim.2: Training and community service:

The statistical analysis of students' perspectives about the second dimension of the questionnaire revealed that the Saudi universities achieve their roles related to training and community service during the Corona epidemic to a neutral extent ( $M.=3.3/S.D.=1.09$ ).

The results, as shown in Table 7, indicated that respondents agreed upon only three items which came in the range of the response "agree". These items assured that *universities use their official accounts on social networks to publish training programs to deal with the Corona crisis, they encourage students to take advantage of the training programs available on the electronic platforms, and also produce educational clips to deal with the Corona crisis and publish them among employees and students.*

The results also indicated that seven items were in the range of the response "neutral". These items assured that: universities help local community institutions to deal with Corona crisis through: participation in training programs, providing channels to respond to student questions, participation in volunteer activities, providing training courses, establishing partnerships with community institutions, and supporting students to attend training programs.

Only the item: "The university financially supports its students to attend training programs to deal with the crises" came in the range of the response "disagree".

**Table 7**

Means and Standard Deviations of responses on the Dim.2: Training and community service.

Items	Mean	S.D.
4- The university uses its official accounts on social networks to publish training programs to deal with the Corona crisis	3.64	1.18
3- The university encourages its male and female students to take advantage of the training programs available on the electronic platforms to deal with the Corona crisis	3.63	1.32
2- The university produces educational clips to deal with the Corona crisis and publishes them among its employees and students	3.58	1.25
10 - The university meets the invitations of local community institutions to participate in training programs and awareness activities to deal with the crisis	3.35	1.21
8- The university provides channels to respond to student questions to deal with the Corona crisis	3.34	1.31
1- The university provides training programs to deal with crises (the Corona crisis as a model)	3.31	1.27
9- The university urges its employees to participate in community volunteer activities to deal with the Corona crisis	3.29	1.24
7 - The university employs its faculty members to provide training courses to deal with the crisis and its consequences	3.26	1.29
11- The university establishes partnerships with community institutions to overcome the negative effects of the Corona crisis	3.16	1.28
6- The university morally supports its students to attend training programs to deal with crises (Corona crisis as a model)	3.13	1.34
5- The university financially supports its students to attend training programs to deal with crises (Corona crisis as a model)	2.59	1.35
Total	3.30	1.09

The statistical analysis of data revealed no statistically significant differences in the responses on this dimension according to the variables of gender and specialization. However, statistically significant differences were found according to the variable of educational level as proved by T-test ( $T=16.977$ ,  $Sig=0.00$ ). The differences were in the direction of postgraduate students.



### 3.3. Dim.3: Students' activities:

The statistical analysis of students' perspectives about the third dimension of the questionnaire revealed that the Saudi universities achieve their roles related to Students' activities during the Corona epidemic to a neutral extent (M.=3.23/S.D.=1.13).

The results, as shown in Table 8, indicated that respondents agreed upon only one item which came in the range of the response “agree”. This item assured that: *universities enhance students' participation in students' activities.*

The other ten items came in the range of the response “neutral”. These items revealed that: universities should support alternatives to implement online students' activities plans during the pandemic through: focusing on the current priorities of the Corona crisis, raising awareness of the risks of the crisis and the mechanisms for dealing with them, supporting initiatives to deal with the Corona pandemic, launching research competitions about the Corona crisis and its repercussions, and finally making use of virtual seminars and workshops, volunteer initiatives, advanced expertise, and joint activities with local universities to reduce the negative effects of the crisis.

**Table 8**

Means and Standard Deviations of responses on the Dim.3: Students' activities.

Items	Mean	S.D.
2- Urging to enhance students' participation in student activities	3.60	1.29
9- The university uses its social media sites to establish alternative student activities during the crisis	3.36	1.35
11- The university provides the necessary support to implement online student activity plans during the pandemic	3.31	1.30
1- Focusing student activities at the university on the current priorities of the Corona crisis	3.25	1.26
4- The university establishes student activities to raise awareness of the risks of the crisis and the mechanisms for dealing with them	3.25	1.28
6- The university supports student initiatives to deal with the Corona pandemic	3.22	1.27
3- The university launches research competitions for students about the Corona crisis and its repercussions	3.22	1.30
5- The university holds virtual seminars and	3.19	1.31

workshops for male and female students about the crisis and the effects that may result from it		
7- The university encourages its male and female students to participate in volunteer initiatives to raise awareness of the crisis and its risks	3.17	1.32
10- The university makes use of the expertise of advanced universities to support student activities during crises	3.16	1.34
8- The university establishes joint activities with other universities in the Kingdom to reduce the negative effects of the crisis	2.83	1.33
<b>Total</b>	<b>3.23</b>	<b>1.13</b>

The statistical analysis of data revealed no statistically significant differences in the responses on this dimension according to the variables of gender and specialization. However, statistically significant differences were found according to the variable of educational level as proved by T-test ( $T=13.05$ ,  $Sig=0.00$ ). The differences were in the direction of postgraduate students.

#### **4. Discussion**

The experts' perspectives confirmed that the most important roles of Saudi universities to deal with the Corona epidemic are 16 roles belonging to University teaching, 11 roles belonging to Training & community service, and 11 roles belonging to Students' activities. All these 38 roles are of very strong importance.

Overall perspectives of students indicated, on the other hand, that Saudi universities achieved these roles during the Corona epidemic to a neutral extent as a whole. In detail, Saudi universities achieved their roles related to the process of teaching to a large extent, but the roles related to "training and community service" and "students' activities" to a neutral extent.

This confirms what Alwatan Newspaper (2021) indicated that education sector in the K.S.A. made efforts and achievements to deal with the Corona virus. These efforts have been commended by many global and local organizations. UNESCO chose some educational platforms among four leading global models in e-learning and distance education, for example, Madrasati platform achieved more than 4 billion visits during the 2020-2021 academic year, serving more than five million students, in addition to implementing 153 million virtual classes with a daily average of between 1 and 1.1 million classes during the

study period, in addition to doing more than 4 billion assignments to students with a daily average of 75.7 million assignments, and more than 699 million tests in all academic levels with a daily average of 11.6 million tests.

Concerning the qualitative level; The Saudi model in e-learning and distance education was distinguished by the multiplicity of educational options, the flexibility of the tools used, the various training programs, and the professional empowerment tools, as well as the supervision and follow-up processes to provide synchronous and asynchronous interactive education in smooth ways and various enrichment tools, relying on educational and supervisory cadres, in addition to availability of lessons, assignments, enrichment and tests for all curricula.

For publishing Corona research, the kingdom's universities ranked first in the Arab world, 14th globally, and 12th at the level of the G-20 countries according to the Web of Science database. Saudi universities published 84% of its production about Corona, where the number of Corona research reached 915 scientific research during the first year of the pandemic, and the Ministry of Education intensified its efforts to support scientists and researchers in Saudi universities and research centers, and the formation of several committees. Scientific studies in the health and technical fields to evaluate research efforts, activate a fast track to support research, organize specialized forums and workshops, as well as coordinate and integrate with national efforts in government sectors; With the aim of employing scientific research to confront the pandemic and highlight the Kingdom's efforts in this regard.

As for being the students' perceptions of the university's roles related to the teaching process higher than their perceptions of training, community service, and activities, this can be attributed to the Kingdom's rich experiences in managing crises facing the educational process, where the ability and speed in providing educational alternatives and distance education services, as happened with students in the southern region in 2016 due to the war, when the university developed its programs and broadcast them through television and electronic channels.

Likewise, after the emergence of the Corona virus, the Saudi Ministry of Education issued a decision to close various educational institutions on March 10, 2020, and after ten hours from suspending the study, and without stopping the educational process, e-learning platforms were activated on all Saudi universities, and the Blackboard system was activated, which provides all faculty members and students several advantages, including: recording the attendance and absence of students,

adding courses, assignments and tests, preparing virtual lessons, answering students' inquiries through professors' rooms, and allowing direct and indirect communication (Alshehri, et. al., 2020).

This result is consistent with both Al-Ahmari (2021) and Al-Iraqi, Al-Otaibi, & Al-Osaimi (2021) studies which showed that the educational role of King Khalid University and Bisha University during Corona had a positive and effective impact on students to a large extent, where the university used many online educational alternatives such as: Blackboard, Google app for education, virtual labs, electronic labs, and stimulation labs.

The results also showed that there were not statistically significant differences about Saudi universities roles during the Corona epidemic according to the variable of specialization. This indicates the consistency of the results of the study sample about the Saudi universities' practice of their roles in teaching, student activities, and community service.

On the other hand, there were differences about Saudi universities roles related to "the process of teaching" according to the variable of gender in the direction of female students. This result agrees to Al-Ahmari (2021) study which showed that female students were more responsive, effective, and satisfied than the male towards the electronic educational process alternatives during the Corona pandemic.

In addition, there were differences about Saudi universities roles related to "training and community service" and "students' activities" according to the variable of educational level in the direction of postgraduate students. This can be explained in light of the training and service needs of postgraduate students more than other students, and this is consistent with Al-Mohreg (2020) study which confirmed the increase in students' needs and problems as their degrees increased. That is to say that the needs of postgraduate students require the use of technologies and websites to complete their research assignments more than other students.

## **5. Conclusion**

In the light of overall perspectives of students towards Saudi universities roles during the Corona epidemic, some future procedures can be proposed or recommended to enhance the role of Saudi universities in dealing with the continuous Corona epidemic, like:

Transforming the university system into a smart system with the aim of providing integrated digital information services to students, faculty members, and community members.

Scheduling continuous workshops throughout the year that combine synchronous and asynchronous communication modes with the aim of enabling university members to employ the new tasks and technologies in all aspects of the e-learning system.

Using a wide variety of distance learning systems, methods, tools and applications that suit all classes, levels, and regions, such as: combining audio, visual and e-printed educational programming materials, synchronous and asynchronous blended learning, as well as home learning - as a partnership - with the Saudi universities.

Using educational platforms alternatives, such as: Edmodo, Moodle, Schoology learn together, Canvas, Desire2learn, Zoom, Cisco WebEx, Microsoft teams, and Telegram.

Adopting specific digital courses that the student will self-manage and self-evaluate according to accredited and predetermined standards of the Saudi universities.

Creating partnerships between the Saudi universities and the international educational institutions with the aims of exchanging and supporting: educational experiences, the latest developments in education and training, scientific visits, joint research, student visits, scholarships, and holding scientific events, conferences, and workshops.

Creating partnerships between educational and health organizations with the aim of exchanging data related to risks and crises and their impact on Saudi universities management systems, implementing policies, and developing programs to benefit from them in dealing with crises.

Creating partnerships between the Ministry of Education and economic institutions in order to achieve investment in the previous roles of the university, and in financing its development activities and events.

## **6. Limitations**

The quantitative results of this study are limited to the Saudi universities, experts, and students' sample obtained. Therefore, the results can't be generalized to the whole community in K.S.A. Future research might incorporate more variables and examine variance across different samples and learning systems.

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