# PADILEIA Rapid Evaluation: Community Report

## February 2021

In partnership with:

# Introduction

PADILEIA (Partnership for Digital Learning and Increased Access) is a project consortium that produces and delivers blended higher education programmes to Syrian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon and to local Jordanian and Lebanese students. Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, facilitated courses were delivered in physical study spaces in Mafraq, Jordan and the Bekka Valley, Lebanon, where students could access resources such as laptops and Wifi, as well as receive face-to-face support and teaching from facilitators, instructors and other student support staff. In the early months of 2020, PADILEIA had to adapt its courses to enable fully-remote, online course delivery in response to national lockdowns and the related closure of universities in Lebanon and Jordan due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Jigsaw Consult was commissioned by PADILEIA to conduct a rapid research study to capture learning from this period. This report summarises the findings of the study.

# Summary of data collection

The evaluation sought to answer the following research questions:

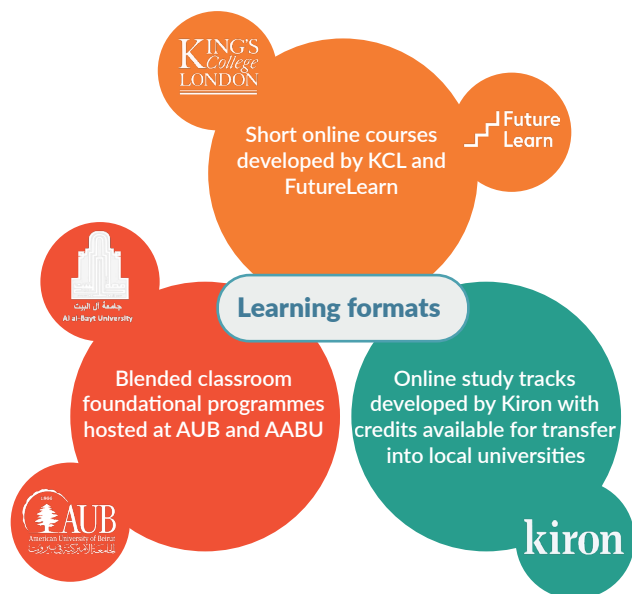| Research questions |
| --- |
| How has PADILEIA's learning environment changed and how was this transition managed? |
| How has this changed the student learning experience, and student education access? And for whom? |
| How effective are the new student support structures in supporting continued learning? |
| How have the students' learning behaviours and methods changed in the new environment? |
| How have facilitators and instructors adapted to teaching in these new learning environments? What are the key lessons learnt from their perspective? |
| What further adaptations could be made to the learning environment to improve access and student experience? |
| What lessons can be drawn from the changes to the learning environment and the transition to distance learning for future connected learning in crisis context initiatives? |

The evaluation used the following methods to collect data:

- 9 interviews with students
- 2 focus group discussions with students
- 7 interviews with delivery staff
- 3 focus group discussions with delivery staff
- 4 digital day case study interviews
- 6 interviews with project management staff
- 97 digital student surveys
- Existing project data relating to the transition

Students were interviewed from the following courses: the AUB Year 3 foundation course, the AABU Year 3 foundation course, a PADILEIA cohort based in Jordan studying a graphic design course on the Kiron Platform recruited in partnership with JRS, and a PADILEIA cohort based in Lebanon studying a Python course on the Kiron Platform. The student survey was distributed to the two foundation course cohorts, and to the Kiron Graphic Design cohort. From the delivery team, seven instructors, three facilitators and two student support officers (SSOs) took part in interviews, as well as one participant who had worked as both a facilitator and an instructor.

# Changes to course delivery

PADILEIA includes three learning formats:

KING'S College LONDON

Short online courses developed by KCL and FutureLearn

Future Learn

**Learning formats**

Al al-Bayt University

Blended classroom foundational programmes hosted at AUB and AABU

Online study tracks developed by Kiron with credits available for transfer into local universities

AUB American University of Beirut

kiron

There were four key adaptations during the transition to remote online delivery:

Lessons and facilitated sessions moved online and delivered live using Zoom & GoogleMeet. Many foundation course lessons were recorded & uploaded.

Ongoing student technical and learning support was mainly provided via WhatsApp.

Data cards were provided to support students where needed on all facilitated courses to support remote online learning.

Tablets were provided to Foundation Course students who did not have access to an internet-enabled device.

# Students: key findings

This section outlines the main evaluation findings relating to students' access to education, learning experiences, and psychosocial and technical support.

# Student access to education

Student access to education during the transition to remote online learning varied by course. The majority of Year Three foundation course students were able to complete their studies after the move to remote learning. Attendance rates for facilitated online courses remained high, with drop-out rates varying by course. Factors influencing student drop-out included: lack of time to study due to additional responsibilities, changes to class schedule, economic pressure and unclear communication from the course. Difficulty accessing course lessons and resources online varied among students, but was more of an issue amongst AABU students living in Zaatari camp. The majority of student survey respondents (78%) agreed or strongly agreed that they were able to engage with their course as much as they wanted to after the Covid-19 adaptations, and the majority of foundation course students were able to spend at least an equal amount of time studying during the lockdown as prior to the lockdown. Some students who previously faced barriers to attending the facilitated courses in person, such as living too far away, were able to access the courses after the transition to remote learning.

## Digital day case study

Hassan* is a 30 year old Syrian refugee who has lived in Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan since 2013. He is married with three children, and previously studied Physical Education at Damascus University. Hassan is a recent graduate of the AABU Foundation Certificate Programme. During the national lockdown, Hassan completed modules in Databases, PHP, Computer Networks and Ethics for the second semester of the course. While studying on the course, Hassan was not employed but had domestic responsibilities of at least 3-4 hours a day.

During the national lockdown, Hassan attended classes five days a week from 8am to 2pm. Hassan used his mobile phone to attend classes on Zoom and his tablet to access the materials on Google Classroom. Hassan spent 20 JOD per month on mobile data to have enough 3G or 4G data to study. In the evening, Hassan dedicated two hours before he went to bed to study using his tablet.

For Hassan it was easier to study before the national lockdown, as he had access to computers at the university. He used applications like ECLIPSE to program directly, but during the lockdown Hassan had to write the code in a document using his tablet, search for a compiler online to compile it, before submitting it on Google Classroom. Another challenge Hassan faced during the lockdown was that the internet in the camp was slow and intermittent, and there were regular power outages, which disturbed studying and took a long time to download lessons and course materials. For example, it would often take Hassan over an hour to share files and videos showing how he had completed tasks, and he would not be able to use the internet while uploading. However, Hassan found his teachers friendly and was able to easily contact them through WhatsApp if he had any issues.
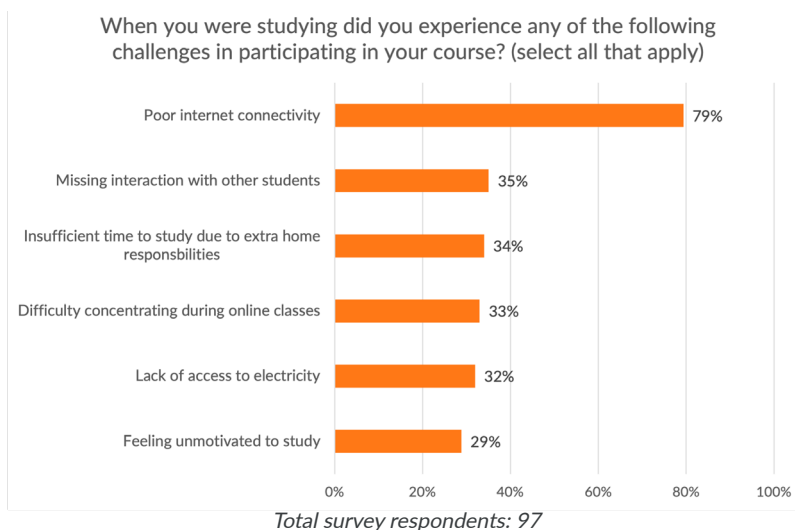
*Names have been changed to protect the participant's identity

# Learning experiences: challenges

The main and overarching challenge to online learning for the students interviewed and surveyed was poor internet connectivity. 79% of students surveyed reported that internet connectivity was a challenge they faced to participating in their course. Students located in Zaatari Camp were at a particular disadvantage in this regard, as they faced systemically poor internet infrastructure inside the camp. The inadequacy of smartphones as the sole device students use to access PADILEIA courses was also exposed through this study. Sixty per cent of students surveyed used a smartphone to study, and both students and delivery team members reported difficulties in navigating the required online tools using smartphones. Some students in the study also struggled with the lack of social interaction, and felt unmotivated and bored by online learning. 35% of students surveyed reported missing interactions with other students and 29% feeling unmotivated as challenges to participating in their course.

*"When the pandemic started, we had to stay at home, and studying online was new for me; it was challenging. And I always had problems with the internet connection; it was slow and intermittent."*

(Male AUB Foundation Course student, Lebanon)

When you were studying did you experience any of the following challenges in participating in your course? (select all that apply)

| | |
|---|---|
| Poor internet connectivity | 79% |
| Missing interaction with other students | 35% |
| Insufficient time to study due to extra home responsbilities | 34% |
| Difficulty concentrating during online classes | 33% |
| Lack of access to electricity | 32% |
| Feeling unmotivated to study | 29% |

*Total survey respondents: 97*

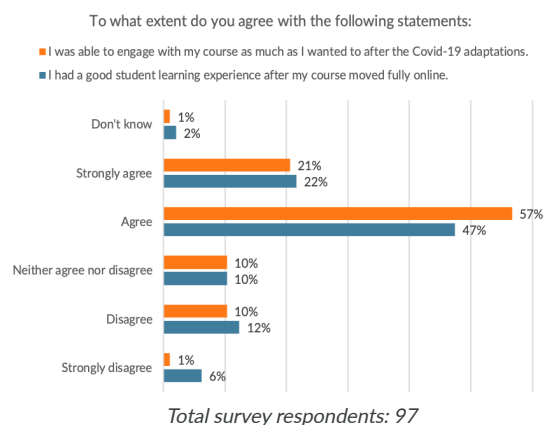# Learning experiences: benefits

*"I think the pandemic gave me more time to study... When you study at home you save transportation time, and you can study at any time you wish"*

(Female AABU Foundation Course student, Jordan)

The most common benefits survey respondents reported experiencing when their course moved online was having a greater flexibility to study when they wanted (56%), followed by having more time to study as there is less travel time (33%). Some of the students interviewed also reported that the time they saved on travelling to and from class resulted in more study time. However, 20% of survey respondents reported experiencing no benefits when their course moved online.

# Student satisfaction

Overall satisfaction remained high following the transition to remote online learning, and students generally reported positive experiences of learning during this time. The majority of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they were able to engage with their course as much as they wanted to after the Covid-19 adaptations. Moreover, the majority of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they had a good student learning experience after their course moved fully online. 69% of foundation course students reported that the quality of the course delivery was either the same or better during the lockdown as prior to the lockdown. However there was also evidence, particularly from the qualitative interviews, that students faced a number of important challenges following the transition to remote facilitated delivery that made learning more difficult compared with face-to-face blended learning.

To what extent do you agree with the following statements:

■ I was able to engage with my course as much as I wanted to after the Covid-19 adaptations.
■ I had a good student learning experience after my course moved fully online.

| | |
|---|---|
| Don't know | 1% / 2% |
| Strongly agree | 21% / 22% |
| Agree | 57% / 47% |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 10% / 10% |
| Disagree | 10% / 12% |
| Strongly disagree | 1% / 6% |

*Total survey respondents: 97*

# Student support services

Student opinions of the online technical and learning support provided for their courses were very positive according to the student interviews, but were more mixed in the student survey, with some aspects perceived more highly amongst students than others. Approximately half of student survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the student support services for technical issues offered during the lockdown were sufficient. The majority (96%) of student survey respondents reported that they found the WhatsApp groups beneficial (useful or very useful) for supporting their learning and many students interviewed reported that contact with teachers increased through online learning.

*"I had a problem with an illustrator tool, and I shared my screen with the facilitator who helped me resolve the issue... We can contact the facilitators via WhatsApp if we have any problems.*

**(Male Kiron Graphic Design student, Jordan)**

Among student survey respondents, the majority agreed or strongly agreed that their course gave them sufficient support to access the internet so that they could participate in online classes and access resources. Relatedly, 76% of students surveyed reported receiving data cards from the project to enable them to study from home. Among foundation course survey respondents, there was a mixed perception of whether student support services were better or worse than before the lockdown, with most reporting that there was no change in the quality of the services provided.

There is a mixed perception among student survey respondents of whether the psychosocial student support services provided during the lockdown were sufficient, with less than half of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that they were sufficient. In the interviews, no students specifically discussed the psychosocial support services provided by PADILEIA. However, there was evidence in the interviews with students that instructors and facilitators played an important pastoral support role for students, which included informal psychosocial support.

# Delivery team: key findings

This section outlines the key findings related to the delivery team, including how they adapted to remote delivery and the support available to facilitators and instructors.

## Adapting to remote delivery

Qualitative data collection with facilitators and instructors shed light on their experiences during the transition to remote course delivery. Facilitators and instructors were also impacted by the low connectivity levels of students, and had to remain flexible in order to maintain course delivery and provide adequate support to students during this time. Instructors and facilitators worked hard to solve and adapt to technical and connectivity-related issues that arose during the lockdown. Instructors and facilitators also expressed that they made themselves available to provide support and answer students' questions on WhatsApp throughout the day, and even during weekends and holidays in order to accommodate students struggling with intermittent internet access. This did, however, place an additional burden on facilitators and instructors working who were required to be available outside of normal working hours. Most facilitators and instructors indicated that they were happy to undertake this additional work, but some suggested that it had been difficult to balance work and home responsibilities during this time.

Several facilitators and instructors described ways in which they tried to make online lessons more engaging for students, using ice-breakers or getting students to do presentations online. However a couple of facilitators and instructors conceded that issues with interaction and student participation in lessons remained difficult and indeed facilitators and instructors indicated overall that face-to-face delivery was easier than remote online delivery. Several facilitators and instructors did express that as both students and instructors/facilitators got used to online learning/delivery, it became easier over time. Some instructors and facilitators indicated that they felt that because they already had experience working with online learning tools through the project, that the transition to remote delivery was easier than it otherwise would have been.

# Support to facilitators and instructors

There were plans for the PADILEIA project team in the UK to develop and conduct training with instructors and facilitators on remote teaching methods. However, due to delays this training did not take place until October. AUB and Kiron Lebanon both independently provided training for instructors and facilitators on how to deliver/facilitate online courses at the beginning of the lockdown.

Some delivery team members indicated that they would have benefitted from additional support from PADILEIA whilst adapting to remote course delivery during the pandemic. For example, two AABU instructors in an FGD agreed that they would have liked more guidance on online delivery. However, other delivery team members (e.g. facilitators in Lebanon and Jordan, instructors in Lebanon) did not express that they required any further teaching support from the project in order to adapt to remote delivery.

# Lessons learned

The main learning applicable to PADILEIA and its partners is as follows:

| | Existing digital scaffolding made for a smoother pivot to fully online delivery for facilitators, instructors and students. |
|---|---|
| | Limited student device access was an impediment to learning, specifically the difficulty to fully embrace with online learning using only their smartphones. |
| | Poor internet connectivity was another barrier to learning, especially for students resident in Zaatari Camp in Jordan. |
| | Material support was effective in enabling continued learning, in particular the provision of tablets and data cards. |
| | Use of an instand messaging platform with voice-note capability (in this instance WhatsApp) was also a vital cornerstone to the delivery of effective support to student in these low connectivity contexts |
| | Strong online student support structures were essential to successful remote delivery. |
| | Staff training, planning time and inter-partner communication are potential contributing factors to success in the AUB transition. |
| | Evidence-based decision making was effective when implemented but was lacking overall. |
| | PADILEIA has the ability to add value beyond its scope through knowledge sharing and transferable skills. |

# Conclusion

Findings from this study suggest that overall, and in a difficult set of circumstances, PADILEIA was able to successfully manage the transition to remote online delivery of its courses following the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic and related national lockdowns and university closures in Jordan and Lebanon. The majority of student learning experiences remained positive during this period for facilitated PADILEIA courses, though there were a number of important challenges that students faced in continuing to study during this time.  Lessons can be drawn from this study to improve any future remote delivery of PADILEIA courses, particularly as lockdowns and/or social distancing measures are likely to continue in some form for some time.

# Acknowledgements

Many thanks to all students and PADILEIA delivery team members who participated in this study. Thanks also to research consultant Amer Laham for his work on data collection and translation. And a final thank you to the project management staff at all PADILEIA partner organisations who assisted with the design and delivery of this research study.