CHALLENGES IN ONLINE EDUCATION IN IRAN

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Challenges in Online Education in Iran

İran'da Uzaktan Eğitimde Yaşanan Zorluklar

چالش های آموزش آنلاین در ایران

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Abbreviations

IPRC	: Islamic Parliament Research Center
ISPA	: Iranian Students Polling Agency
IT	: Information Technology
MCLSW	: Ministry of Cooperatives, Labour and Social Welfare of Iran
US	: United States

SUMMARY

- Since the outbreak of COVID-19, the online education process in Iran has faced various challenges and problems. The lack of necessary infrastructure for online education, as well as the high costs of required tools, have made it impossible for a high percentage of students to attend online courses on a regular basis.

- These challenges, including the provision of online education tools such as laptops, smartphones, Wi-Fi and the Internet, have made online education impossible in many remote areas (less developed regions) in Iran.

- The comparison of the cost of providing online education tools shows that the average price of a middle-price laptop in Iran was about five times the average income of households in the first decile and the average price of a middle-price smartphone was higher than the wage of a simple worker in this country.

- In many cases, the high costs of online education and its inaccessibility to many students have dire consequences, such as the suicide of children.

Keywords: Coronavirus Outbreak, Education Infrastructure, Iran, Online Education

ÖZET

- Koronavirüs salgının ortaya çıkmasıyla birlikte İran'da uzaktan eğitim süreci, çeşitli sıkıntılar ve sorunlarla karşı karşıya kalmıştır. Uzaktan eğitim için gerekli altyapının eksik olmasının yanı sıra ihtiyaç duyulan ekipmanların maliyetlerinin de yüksek olması, çok sayıda öğrencinin uzaktan derslere düzenli bir şekilde katılmasını imkânsız kılmıştır.

- Dizüstü bilgisayar, akıllı telefon, kablolu ve kablosuz internet gibi uzaktan eğitim araçlarının sağlanması da dâhil olmak üzere bu zorluklar, İran'da merkezden uzak birçok bölgede (daha az gelişmiş bölgeler) uzaktan eğitimi imkânsız hâle getirmiştir.

- Uzaktan eğitim araçlarına erişim maliyetlerinin kıyaslanması ile orta düzey bir akıllı telefon fiyatının, ülkedeki ortalama bir işçinin aylık gelirinden fazla olduğu ve orta düzey bir dizüstü bilgisayarın ortalama fiyatının, ilk %10'luk gelir dilimindeki hane halklarının ortalama gelirlerinin 5 katı olduğu tespit edilmiştir.

- Pek çok durumda uzaktan eğitimin aşırı maliyetli ve pek çok kesim için erişilmez olması, ülkede çocuk intiharları gibi korkunç sonuçlar doğurmuştur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Eğitim Altyapısı, İran, Koronavirüs Salgını, Uzaktan Eğitim

چکیده

- از زمان شیوع همه گیری کرونا تاکنون، روند آموزش آنلاین در ایران با چالشها ومشکلات گوناگونی روبرو بوده است. نبود زیرساختهای لازم برای آموزش آنلاین وهزینه های بالای این پروسه، باعث شده است تا تعداد قابل توجهی از دانش آموزان ودانشجویان این کشور از شرکت در کلاسهای آنلاین باز بمانند.

- این چالشها شامل تهیه ابزار مورد نیاز آموزش آنلاین مانند لپ تاپ، گوشی هوشمند، وای-فای واینترنت می شود که آموزش آنلاین در بسیاری از مناطق دورافتاده و به عبارتی مناطق کمتر توسعه یافته در این کشور را دشوار و چه بسا غیرممکن ساخته است.

- مقایسه هزینه تهیه ابزارهای مورد نیاز برای آموزش آنلاین نشان می دهد که قیمت متوسط یک لپ تاپ معمولی در این کشور حدود پنج برابر میانگین درآمد خانوارهای دهک اول (کم درآمدترین)، ومتوسط قیمت یک گوشی هوشمند با قیمت متوسط نیز بالاتر از دستمزد یک کارگر ساده است.

- در بسیاری از موارد، هزینه های بالای آموزش آنلاین وعدم دسترسی به آن، برای بسیاری از دانش آموزان، عواقب ناگواری از جمله خودکشی کودکان را در پی داشته است.

کلیدواژه ها: آموزش آنلاین، زیرساختهای آموزشی، همه گیری کرونا، ایران

1. Introduction

Education, along with the right to life, the right to choose, the right to health, the right to food and housing, is one of the fundamental human rights. This phenomenon, in addition to its fundamental importance, has a secondary impact on the social and economic benefits of individuals, and its benefits are recognized as the basis of theories of human development (Alcott et al., 2018, p. 11). In Iran, according to Article 30 of the Constitution, the government is obliged to "provide all citizens with free education up to secondary school and must expand free higher education to the extent required by the country for attaining self-sufficiency" (The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 1980). According to the result of this article, approximately 80% of public education costs are paid by the government and the ratio of the education budget to the total budget has been about 10 percent in recent years (MCLSW, 2020, pp. 59-60).

Analysis of the state of education in Iran shows that the country as a whole has grown significantly in reducing educational poverty, especially after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, and has been able to significantly increase the level of educational coverage. Although Iran has succeeded in reducing the illiteracy rate, the process has faced serious developments and challenges during the last decades, the outbreak of COVID-19 at the end of 2019 is one of those challenges.

The Coronavirus outbreak heralded the beginning of a major shift in teaching tools and methods and the transition to an online education paradigm. The extent of the changes resulting from this historical event is still unknown (even after nearly two years), but the importance of access to online education is in the spotlight. This access includes components such as digital access, high-speed Internet access, access to online classrooms, and digital literacy. In other words, following the Coronavirus outbreak, access to online education has also become a fundamental right of the human being. In many countries, however, students have not been able to enjoy this fundamental right due to financial troubles and lack of necessary infrastructure. As in many countries, in Iran also, due to the spread of the pandemic, the state of education has faced serious challenges and difficulties. Although there is no accurate information in this regard, this paper has attempted to examine the general situation of education in Iran, as well as the challenges and consequences of education since the Coronavirus outbreak.

2. General State of Education in Iran

In Iran, as in many other countries, primary and secondary school is considered as a necessary course of education. Iran has grown significantly in this regard over the past four decades, and its net education coverage rate has grown from 41% in the 1960s to 92% in the 2010s (MCLSW, 2020, pp. 62-63). In this regard, the coverage rate of primary schools in the whole country is 98.71% (98.80% in urban areas and 98.49% in rural areas) (MCLSW, 2020, pp. 24-25). Over the past four decades, Iran has also been able to significantly reduce the illiteracy rate in the country. The nationwide literacy rate has risen from 15 percent in the 1960s to 87.5 percent in the 2010s, and the gap between men and women has approached about 8 percent (Table 1). In other words, the illiteracy rate in Iran has dropped considerably over the past four decades, reaching approximately 12.4% in 2016 (MCLSW, 2020, p. 20). In addition, according to the plan of the Literacy Movement Organization, illiteracy among the population aged 10 to 49 years in Iran

Table 1: Literacy Rate in Iran (1397*)

|	Total (%)	Men (%)	Women (%)	The gap between men and women (%)
Country	87.53	91.38	83.67	7.71
Urban areas	90.75	93.75	87.74	6.01
Rural areas	77.69	84.08	71.4	12.68

Source: Statistical Center of Iran, 2018, Cited in MCLSW, 2020, p. 20
*1397 = 2018-2019

was to be eradicated by the end of 2020, but nevertheless, statistics in this regard show that there are nearly 3 million illiterates in this age group in the country (IPRC, 2011, p. 25 & MCLSW, 2020, pp. 19-20,69). Over the past two years, with the outbreak of COVID-19 and growing problems in education, this figure is probably to have increased.

It is worthnoting that although the country has made substantial gains in reducing illiteracy rates, actual education coverage remains an unresolved issue in disadvantaged, border, and bilingual regions such as Sistan and Baluchestan, Kurdistan, and West Azerbaijan and recent years, these provinces have had about 90% of approximate coverage (MCLSW, 2020, pp. 24-25). In terms of literacy rate also, underprivileged and relatively poor provinces such as Sistan and Baluchistan, Kurdistan, South Khorasan, Ardabil, Zanjan, West Azerbaijan and Gilan are significantly behind the average literacy rate in the country (Graph 1) (MCLSW, 2020, p. 21).

Graph 1: Percentage of Provincial Literacy Rate in Iran (1397)
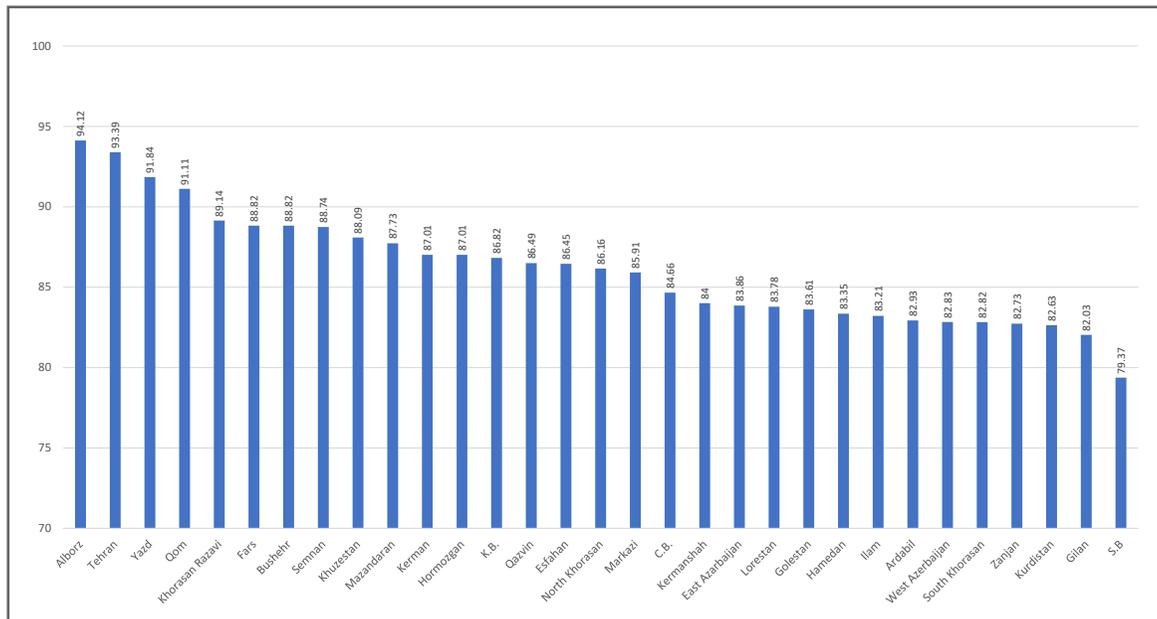
Source: Statistical Center of Iran, 2018, Cited in MCLSW, 2020, p. 21
Notes:
- K.B. = Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad
- C.B. = Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari
- S.B. = Sistan and Baluchestan
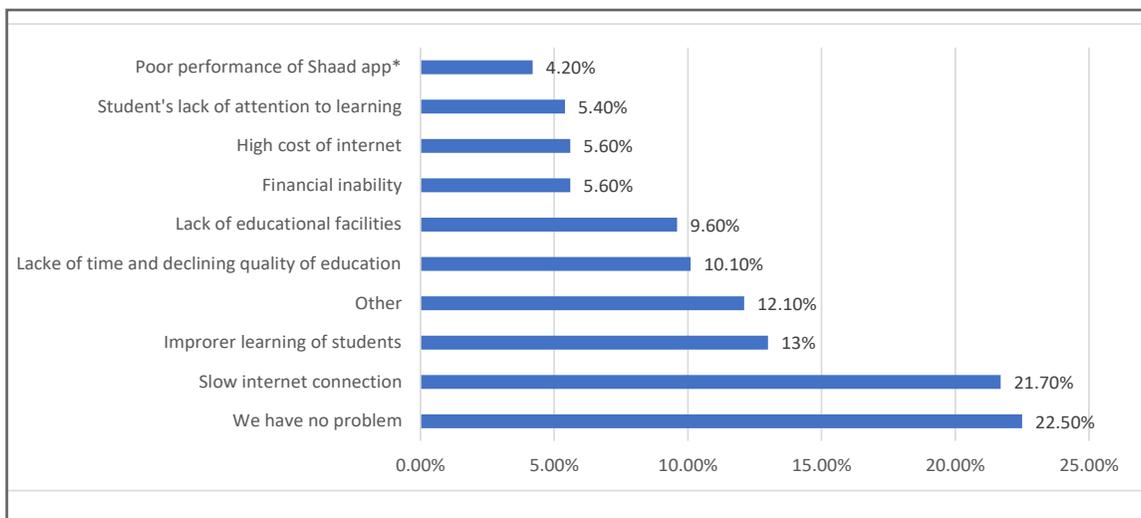
3. Online Education in Iran

For almost two years, the outbreak of Corona-virus has affected most social activities and face-to-face education. Therefore, most of the educational activities in almost all countries, including Iran, have inevitably continued online and in absentia. In this period, education, although not closed, but analysts are concerned about the results. Analysts expressed concern that many students living in remote villages and areas do not have access to the internet and online education. There are many families who are unable to provide the tools needed for online education (such as computers, smartphones, Wi-Fi and the Internet) to their children. The challenges and problems of online education are not limited to Iran. However, it is important because, in Iran, some elites think that these problems, to a greater extent, are linked to the economic hardship caused by the US sanctions. According to their view, the costs of online education have caused a further strain on the budget of low-income families. To be more exact, for example, according to some statistics, the pov-

erty line for a household with four reached about 10 million Tomans, where the minimum wage in the country is less than one-fifth of this figure. This, along with the additional cost's items stemming from preventive gears households have to purchase to protect themselves from the COVID-19, has left families in the lower and middle deciles facing more economical and social difficulties.

3.1. Financial problems of online education in Iran

Since the outbreak of COVID-19, there have been many problems and challenges in the online education process in Iran (Graph 2). The most important of them is the cost of providing the equipment needed for online education and training, which was faced by Iranian families during the spread of Coronavirus. In this regard, tools such as laptops, tablets and smartphones are elements that play a key role in the online education process. Studies, however, show that the price of these devices in Iran has increased dramatically. For example, studies of the prices of the three best-sell-

Graph 2: Main Problems of Online Education from the Perspective of Iranian Citizens (%)

| Category	%
Poor performance of Shaad app*	4.20%
Student's lack of attention to learning	5.40%
High cost of internet	5.60%
Financial inability	5.60%
Lack of educational facilities	9.60%
Lacke of time and declining quality of education	10.10%
Other	12.10%
Improrer learning of students	13%
Slow internet connection	21.70%
We have no problem	22.50%

Source: ISPA, 2020
* Shaad app - the Student Educational Network – is a platform for online education launched by Iran's Ministry of Education.
Note: Since the respondents could point to several options, the percentage sum is more than 100%.

Graph 3: Average Price Increase for Laptops in Iran (April-September 2020)
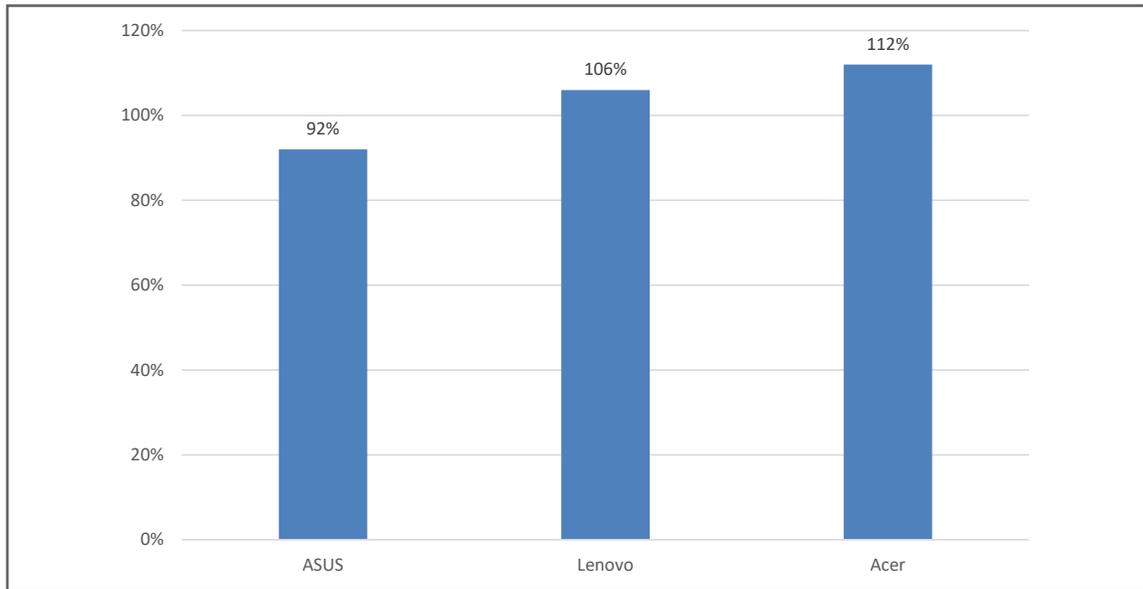
Source: (Tejarat News, 2020)
Note: Excluding luxury items, the average price is considered for 65 items of ASUS brand, 32 items of Acer brand and 63 items of Lenovo brand.

ing laptop brands in Iran show that during the months of April to September 2020 (in the mid to third peak of Coronavirus in Iran)[1], prices have increased by more than 100% on average (Graph 3). For example, Asus, Lenovo and Acer laptops have risen in price by an average of 92%, 106% and 112%, respectively (Tejarat News, 2020). Three brands ASUS, Acer and Lenovo, are the best sellers in the Iranian digital market.

In addition to laptops, smartphones are another tool needed in online education, the price of which has also increased dramatically in the Iranian market. For example, a review of the prices of three phone models from three different brands (Xiaomi Redmi Note 8 Pro, Samsung Galaxy A51, Nokia 3.2) shows that their prices increased by 45%, 43.4% and 60%, respectively, during the same period (Mobile.ir, 2020). Xiaomi, Samsung and Nokia are popular brands among smartphones in

Iran. In addition to laptops and smartphones, tablet prices have also seen significant growth rates. For instance, the Samsung Galaxy Tab A 10.1 2019 and Tab 4 and 8 tablets have seen price increases of 83% and 19%, respectively, over the same period (Mobile.ir, 2020).

In this regard, studies show that in the mentioned period, the minimum price of a normal laptop that could afford the projects and normal assignments of students (not students of IT and technology) was about 10 million Tomans. This figure was between 14 to 17 million Tomans for students studying in IT and technical fields (Tejarat News, 2020). If we consider 10 million Tomans as the average price of laptops, this figure (10 million Tomans) is about five times the average income of households in the first decile (lowest income), 3.5 times the monthly income of a household in the second decile and between two and 2.2 times the average Household income in the fifth and sixth

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[1]   The second peak of Coronavirus in Iran was in July-September 2020

Graph 4: Average Price Increase of Smartphones and Tablets in Iran (April-September 2020)
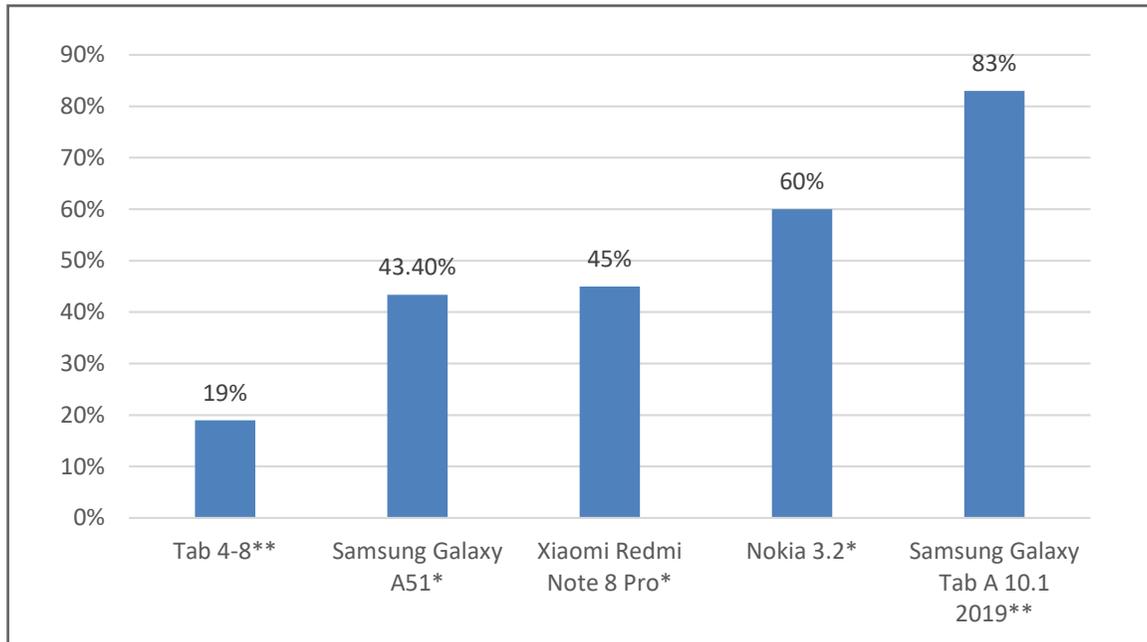
deciles. Also, the most common price of a quality smartphone in Iran was about 6-7 million Tomans in the period of April to September 2020. If we compare this price with the wage of a simple worker at that time, it can be seen that the price of many phones and tablets was higher than the wage of a worker. The salary of a simple worker (construction worker) in Iran at that time was about 4-6 million Tomans monthly. It should be noted that the offer prices are not fixed. Because all these brands are imported, their prices are directly related to currency prices and dollar fluctuations in the Iranian market. In other words, as the price of the dollar rises, so does the price of laptops, phones, and tablets.

On the basis of the received information from the markets in Tehran and other cities, chip computers with a price tag of around 2 million Tomans as well as smartphones could be found in the market, these devices were generally products of China and they are shabby with hardly compatible with educational system requirements. In other words,

these products did not have the necessary quality to support online educational programs.

Moreover, in addition to the cost of providing online education tools, financing the internet was also the most important concern of teachers and students who were involved in online education these days. In this regard, a family who has two student children told us that "they have paid more than 100,000 Tomans a month just for the internet package for online education of their children (only for children). This package was not enough to download videos and educational content for children. But more than that, they did not have the financial means and money to buy extra internet packages".

It is noteworthy that internet cost problems were more common among families with multiple children. For example, if a family has four student children, there were many problems in providing online education tools, coordinating children's lessons, etc.

3.2. Consequences of the financial problems of online education in Iran

Since the outbreak of the Coronavirus in Iran, the Shaad network (Student Educational Network) has provided digital distance education platforms along with several private systems. The exact number of students who have been able to access the system has not yet been announced. Estimates and statistics in this regard show that about 78% of high school students have been able to use the Shaad network (Serat News, 2020). However, there is no accurate information on the effectiveness of this system for students.

Problems with internet infrastructure in remote areas of Iran are one of the biggest challenges that have had dire consequences. The problem of the Internet has made it impossible for a high percentage of students to attend online courses on a regular basis. In this regard, Mohammad Mehdi Tehranchi, rector of the Islamic Azad University, has said that "in the last semester (with the outbreak of the Coronavirus and the beginning of virtual education), only about 54% of students were able to attend online classes. The rest could not attend university courses. The main reason is the lack of proper internet infrastructure in all parts of the country" (SCCR, 2020).

Regarding school students, Mehdi Ismaili, a member of the Education and Research Commission of the Iranian parliament, said that with the surveys done, about 3.5 million school students do not have the necessary facilities for online education (Eghtesad News, 2020). In addition, Edris Gahramzehi, a teacher from Sistan and Baluchestan, said in a television program that out of 700,000 students in the province, only 200,000 have access to online education facilities. The rest do not have enough access to be able to normally access the courses that are done through the Shaad network (Abas Mosa, 2020). Shaad is a platform for online education launched by Iran's Ministry of Education.

The lack of the necessary infrastructure for online education has, in many cases, led to the closure of schools in some parts of Iran. In this regard, Massoud Shah Nematollahi, a resident of Fuji village in Khoshab city, Razavi Khorasan Province, said that "with the closure of schools, education has been practically shut down and many families have been deprived of education due to the problem of the Internet and the lack of facilities such as tablets and mobile phones." Maryam Zarghi, a resident of Zarghi village in the same city, also said, "We have neither internet nor access to the Khorasan Razavi Broadcasting Channel that provides education afar. My son is a fourth-grader who is currently out of school and staying at home" (Iran International, 2020). Photos and videos on social media also show that a significant number of students have dropped out of school due to internet infrastructure problems.

Regarding the inadequacy of the necessary Internet infrastructure, photos and videos that are shared on social networks indicate the poor state of online education in rural and remote areas of Iran. For example, due to the lack of necessary internet infrastructure (internet coverage and telephone antennas, etc.), the children of a high school in North Khorasan have to go up a hill with their phones every day to connect to the Internet and be able to download their lessons in cyberspace. This situation has been observed in several other provinces too. Such a situation has sometimes led to tragic events for students (especially school students). In one case, for example, a child-student from the village of Noghab in Hajiabad Ghaen (South Khoras-

an) was forced to climb a mountain and was injured on the way back. The students climb mountains to be able to find an internet connection so that they can follow lessons from the Shaad program.

In addition to the above, the results of the ISPA survey show that 48.6% of parents of Iranian students believe that online education has caused psychological harm to their children (ISPA, 2020). In other words, it can be said that online education has caused serious psychological damage to Iranian students (Graph 5). Although the psychological damage of online education, like its challenges, is not unique to Iran, it is important because the challenges of online education and the living conditions of Iranian people are intertwined. Psychological trauma combined with economic hardship has, in many cases, led to students committing suicide. The suicide of Mohammad Mousavizadeh, an 11-year-old student from Bandar Dayyer in Bushehr province, and Parastoo Jalili Azar, a 13-year-old student from Urmia in West Azerbaijan, are examples of child suicide due to financial difficulties and lack of a smartphone to access online lessons. Mohammad Mousavizadeh committed suicide on September 23 and Parastoo Jalili Azar committed suicide on October 21 (İRAM, 2020). In addition, local media in the city of Ramhormoz, Khuzestan, reported that six suicides occurred among Ramhormoz students in October and November this year (BBC Persian, 2020). The main reason for the suicide attempt is financial problems and lack of facilities to participate in online classes. The student suicide attempt is one of the worst consequences of online education in Iran, which is mostly related to deprived areas in the western and eastern regions of Iran, which is due to the poor economic situation of the people in these areas. It is noteworthy that there are different statistics of student suicides in Iran in the new educational year, however, it is not possible to confirm or deny them.

Graph 5: The Effect of Distance Education on Students' Psychology in Iran
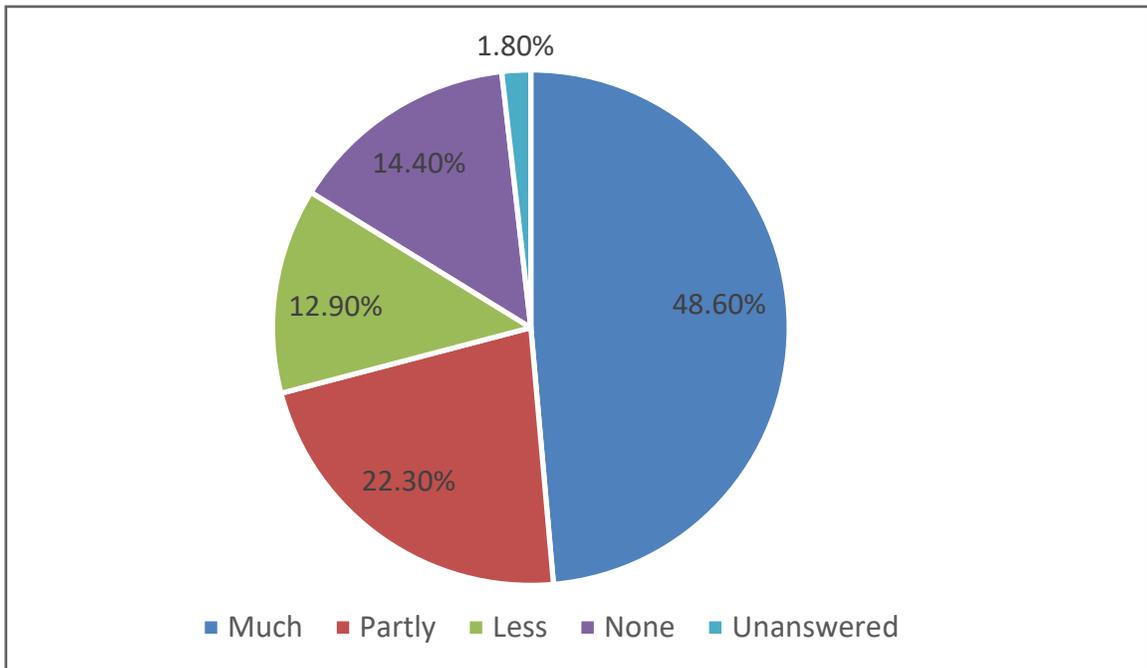
Source: ISPA, 2020

Moreover, studies in this regard show that many families (especially families with many children) are forced to take loans from banks to provide the necessary equipment to solve their children's educational problems, or they have bought the necessary equipment in the form of "loans" from the relevant stores. If the loan is not paid on time, the borrowed families may lose another valuable asset. This has caused many problems for the families of the lower deciles (low-income families).

In addition, studies show that a number of Iranian students have been forced to drop out of school, willingly or unwillingly. The reason for dropping out of school was the financial problems and expenses that Iranian families have not been able to provide for their children. Most dropouts are between the ages of 15-17 or in grades 10-12. That is the age at which they can afford to do physical work.

4. Conclusion

Online education could be an advantage in the future, though; but in the last two years, online education in Iran has become a public crisis. In fact, it is a crisis that has targeted a generation and threatens the future of the country. Studies regarding Online Education in Iran show that rural areas have more problems and challenges than urban areas and also, school students have more problems than university students. This is due to the better infrastructure that urban areas have than rural areas.

Also, according to statistics, Iran currently has approximately 15 million school students and about 3.5 million university students. If we assume that school students as loyal customers of mobile phones and tablets, university students are the potential customers of the laptop and home computer market for their homework, projects and researches. Certainly, not all of them had access to educational facilities. Lack of access to online education facilities and related costs had plagued Iranian families as inflation and commodity prices in Iran continued to rise. Therefore, as Tejarat-e-Farda weekly, one of Iran's most prestigious magazines, acknowledged in an editorial, the high cost and inability to provide online education tools will cause more children in low-income families to lag behind those of rich families. Continuation of this trend could weaken the scientific base of students and cause many of them to drop out in the coming years. Children who do not go to school are more likely to be abused, malnourished, have mental health problems and may even drop out of school forever.

Since about 60 to 85 percent of students have access to online education facilities, it can be estimated that about 25-30 percent of students have been out of school since the outbreak of Coronavirus. The report on "Poverty and Inequality in Education" of the MCLSW of Iran also expresses these concerns at the policy level.

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About İRAM

Due to its historical depth and material power, Iran is among the countries that have to be reckoned with in the domain of international relations. The deep-rooted historical relations between Iran and Turkey, border-sharing, and comprehensive business relations make it necessary for Turkey to understand Iran in a multitude of ways. Based on this necessity, the Center for Iranian Studies (İran Araştırmaları Merkezi, İRAM) was established as an independent think tank in Ankara with the purpose of informing the Turkish public and interested parties about Iran. With this in mind, not only does İRAM produce field research, reports, and analyses based on primary resources, it also provides language courses, internships/scholarship programs, support for projects and graduate theses, workshops, and expert seminars in order to meet the need for experts and researchers on Iran in various disciplines in Turkey. Offering a platform where academicians can share their research on Iran, İRAM also provides digital and printed publications on a wide variety of topics ranging from economy to domestic politics, international policy to security, and Shi'ism to society and culture.