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Challenges faced by students in online learning

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Abstract

The COVID-19 epidemic compelled Albania's university system to use information and communication technology to conduct distant learning. This research aims to investigate how students perceive accessibility, learner goals, and social and pedagogical difficulties related to online learning. The research use the quantitative technique to accomplish its goal. Respondents fill out an online survey with closed-ended questions to provide the data. Students with bachelor's and master's degrees (N=236) from the teaching programs at the University of Tirana and the "Aleksander Moisiu" University of Durrës make up the sample for this research. The research highlights a few difficulties that students have while studying online, including issues with accessibility, low student motivation, and obstacles to their participation in online group projects. It was also said that lecturers have difficulties in the online setting, necessitating a greater level of digital competency from the academic staff. The purpose of this study's conclusions is to provide legislators, education executives, and academic staff with a better understanding of the issues and the means to address them in order to assist students overcome these obstacles to online learning.

Keywords: Students, technology, online learning, digital competence, challenges

Introduction

The COVID-19 epidemic compelled Albania's academic system to switch to information and communication technologies. Although Albanian students had taken information and communication technology courses and engaged in self-study, they were still faced with a number of challenges and requirements when pursuing an online education. Because of the epidemic, they had to adapt to a novel and experimental world while Albanian educational institutions implemented emergency protocols. It is also possible to identify distinctions between conventional and online learning with regard to the main information sources, evaluation, and educational quality. Alsaaty and colleagues conducted a comparison between traditional and online learning. The results of their study revealed that many students felt they had learned more in-person than online, but they also thought they had a better overall online experience, despite some technical difficulties with the e-learning platforms. Eight fundamental principles of effective online learning were identified and described by Cheung and Cable (2017) ^[17] in their study. These include: promoting communication between students and faculty; collaborative learning; prompt feedback; active learning; task time, which encourages students to set aside more time for tasks; high expectations, which emphasize the need for teachers to communicate their expectations to students in order to inspire and motivate them; diversified learning; and technology application. Considering the aforementioned points, it is evident that the implementation of fully online learning has an impact on the caliber of the learning process. This research aims to investigate how students perceive social, lecturing, accessibility, and learning intents in online learning. Because it offers information on the challenges students face throughout the learning process, this study aids in the advancement of online learning. The guidelines provided in this research are intended to assist academic staff, policymakers, and leaders in education in comprehending and implementing the required changes to address the difficulties that students have while studying online. Online learning has become a new trend in education system in many colleges and universities across the world. The factors that encouraged the demand for online learning include the wide spread of diseases that required serious mitigations, advancements in technological tools, increased demand for Information and Technology (IT) skills, etc. As far as many colleges and universities are concerned, online learning comes with a number of

benefits and challenges to both the school and learners. In this paper, only the challenges of online learning to university students are discussed. In doing this therefore, the paper begins with conceptual framework, where frequently used concepts are explained. What follows conceptual framework is the excessive review of related literature, and the last part of this paper is the conclusion and recommendations.

Literature Review

Prior research shown the several advantages that online learning provides for students, including student-centeredness, more flexibility in terms of time and place, and a broad selection of courses and material (Dhawan, 2020) ^[5]. According to Broadbent and Poon (2015) ^[18], students are given the opportunity to choose between part-time and external forms of study, which may enhance their choices for engagement, involvement, and degree program completion. Without a doubt, online learning may provide fresh contexts for instruction that encourage students' development of attitudes, abilities, and competences while also making learning more accessible.

However, the benefits of online learning that have been revealed by previous research seem to be outweighed by the drawbacks. According to Coman *et al.*'s (2020) ^[4] research, technological problems rank first, followed by instructors' inadequate technical proficiency and pedagogical approaches that are not suitable for the virtual learning environment. The lack of modern pedagogical knowledge, such as teaching strategies and methods used in technology-based learning, forms of technology-based assessment, and forms of collaboration and communication that aid teachers in managing online learning, is another issue noted by Tartari (2020) ^[19]. Other challenges encountered during distant learning included internal variables like time management and trouble focusing while studying online for extended periods of time, as well as external problems like inconsistent Internet connections and additional financial burdens for Internet quotas.

Other factors, such as students' decreased motivation, teachers' unavailability when they need help, or feelings of isolation from their peers' absence, may also be obstacles to students' learning when they use e-learning platforms. Although the online environment offers flexibility in how education is given and accessible by students, the range and modalities of assessment procedures in the online environment are often restricted. Even still, it doesn't seem that online group presentation exams are often used. This might be because employing an online delivery platform can be challenging for both academics and students. Students, however, also had to deal with some difficulties. According to research on students' perspectives on e-learning, accessibility, connectivity, a shortage of suitable devices, and social issues exemplified by a lack of engagement and communication with peers and teachers were among the major difficulties that students faced. Al-Hujran *et al.* (2013) ^[20] found that there are a number of obstacles standing in the way of successful e-learning, such as raising awareness and comprehension of e-learning, overcoming reluctance to try new learning techniques, ensuring that the e-learning system is always available, and placing more emphasis on the institution's and educators' roles in encouraging students to use e-learning. The lack of student engagement and motivation in relation to the societal issue

of the decline in human contact between instructors and students as well as among students themselves, are the other issues. Though most research shows that students have positive attitudes toward online learning, other studies found that students believed that online courses were not as valuable as those taught in a classroom (Galy, Downey, & Johnson, 2011) ^[21] and that they would prefer to accept blended learning—a mix of online and in-person instruction—rather than solely online learning.

Methodology

Prior to the epidemic, Albania's academic system did not use internet instruction. Very few teachers have access to any kind of electronic platform for uploading course materials. However, pupils were also unfamiliar with electronic platforms, so they had to quickly adjust to studying online as opposed to in a classroom. To accomplish the study's goal, a number of research questions were posed. What difficulties do pupils run across while studying online?

How do students feel about studying online? What kind of collaborative environment does online learning foster among students? Because there is an unanswered issue, the methodological approach used in this research is mostly quantitative but also includes a qualitative component. A questionnaire that included both open-ended and mostly structured questions related to the three research issues was used to gather the study's data. There are three parts to the instrument. The first part gathers demographic information. The Aboagye, Yawson, and Appiah (2020) ^[22] research served as the foundation for the second phase. In this area, information is gathered about five questions measuring accessibility difficulties, six questions measuring learning intents, four questions measuring social issues, and four questions measuring lecturing issues. An open-ended question in the third part gathers information on the difficulties pupils have while studying online.

Students make up the study population; 236 of them were chosen to be the sample for this investigation (N = 236). These students are enrolled in the teaching programs at the "Aleksandër Moisiu" University of Durrës (110 students) and the University of Tirana (126 students). Within these programs, pupils have been chosen at random. The IBM SPSS Statistics software was used to process the data after the questionnaire was distributed online. The gathered data has been subjected to statistical and descriptive analysis.

Results

The questionnaire was completed by 212 female students and 24 male students. Referring to this indicator, we are able to point out that in the teaching programs there is a dominance of students of the female gender. 58.1% of these students belong to the bachelor programs and 41.9% to the master program.

Challenges That Students Face While Studying Online With Respect To Accessibility

The primary goal of the first study question is to gauge the challenges that students had with accessibility concerns while pursuing an online education. The information demonstrated that many platforms were used to conduct online instruction. Just 0.4% of students reported using Google Meet, 11.9% using Zoom, 9.3% using Moodle, and 78.4% using the MS Teams platform for their online

learning.

One significant factor influencing learning quality is accessibility. In order to gauge this element, a few questions were posed. The results indicated that 86% of the students accessed their online courses via phones, 14% via laptops, and none at all using PCs. With reference to this data, we can see that the phone device has the greatest accessible density for online learning. Despite its high pedagogical potential, the phone device is not the best instrument for participation in online learning in this particular context because of the lengthy online sessions and tiny screen size. Students should use a laptop or computer to access online lectures for these reasons. It is recommended that students who own a PC or laptop be trained to use it for online learning purposes.

The quality of the Internet is another element thought to be required for the fulfillment of online learning. When it came to their online learning experience, 2.6% of respondents said the Internet connection was poor, 27.5% said it was weak, 60.6% said it was of medium quality, and just 9.3% said it was fast. According to data analysis, 30% of research participants had trouble accessing online courses because of poor connection quality. In order to provide their customers with the desired service, mobile phone carriers must in certain locations improve the caliber and speed of the Internet connection.

Apart from the challenges indicated by the structured questions, the students also mentioned other issues concerning the accessibility of online learning, like the expensive nature of the Internet, the absence of a PC or

other modern technology, the need to take breaks from online learning and unwind after spending extended periods of time in front of a screen, and the disruptions caused by their noisy and unsuitable home environment, which interfered with conducting online courses during all hours.

The Way That Students See Online Learning

Two aspects of students' perceptions of online learning are assessed. Students' challenges with regard to learning goals are highlighted in the first dimension, while their challenges with regard to lecturing concerns are highlighted in the second.

One factor that significantly influences the quality of learning is learning intentions.

The statements shown in the image below were used to assess this study's dimension. The majority of students (60.2%) did not like online learning, according to an analysis of the responses they provided for each of the items. 58.9% of respondents said they agreed, strongly agreeing, that this kind of instruction did not assist them in meeting their learning goals. Of those surveyed, 53% said online learning was unappealing. Of the pupils, 62.3% said they were unmotivated. 68.6% of the students who participated in the survey said they lost focus easily, and 65.2% verified that there was a lack of passion in online learning. Based on this study, we conclude that the majority of students had trouble focusing, being motivated, being enthusiastic, feeling accepted, and having the expectations they had to meet in order to meet the learning objectives.

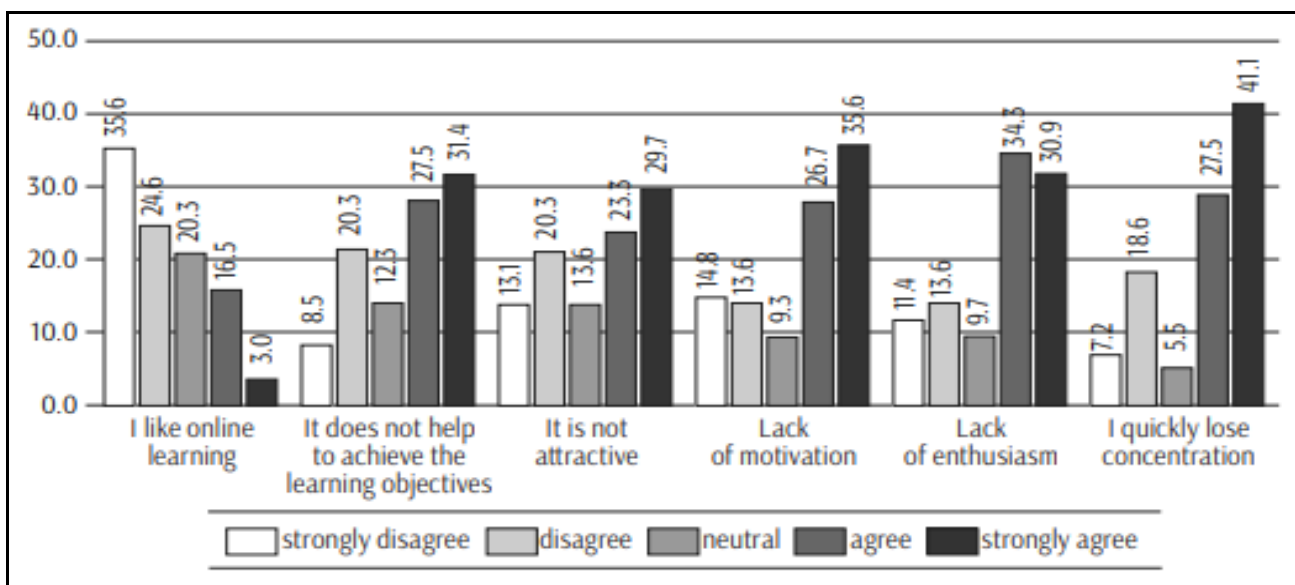


Fig 1: Learning Intentions for Online Learning

The problem of lecturing is another crucial factor influencing how well online learning is done. The challenges that students can face with online instruction were brought to light by the remarks shown in Figure 2. The online teaching resources were one of the issues that students saw as a challenge.

Regarding the efficacy of internet resources, 57.2% of them expressed dissatisfaction. 61.5% of students said that online instruction was excellent, yet they still had trouble understanding the content that was offered online. Out of the pupils, 37.3% claimed to have grasped the information provided online, 19.5% took a neutral position, and 43.2%

said they had trouble comprehending the explanations. 33.9% believed that instructors had received training in online instruction.

Using this research as a guide, we can see that problems with teaching led to challenges for students on many levels. It is recommended that professors improve the way they convey the course information. In order to stimulate students' interest, passion, attention, and motivation in online learning, they need also use efficient strategies and tactics. Although they should become more knowledgeable about the platforms, they should also make good use of all the services that are offered.

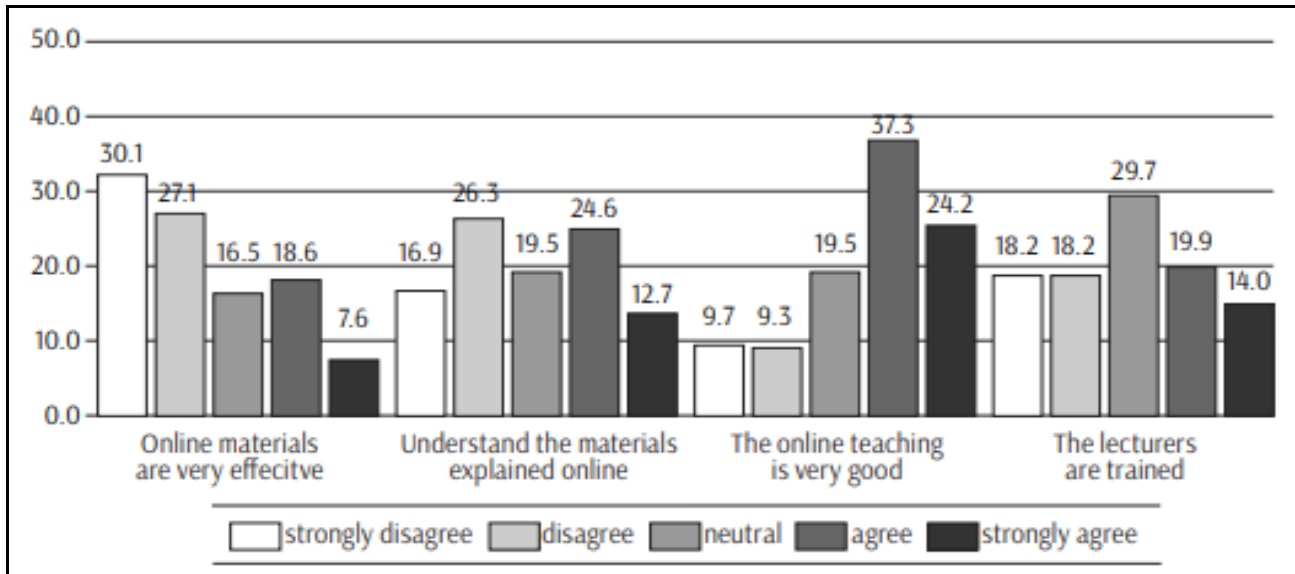


Fig 2: Students' Perception of Online Teaching

To determine if there was a connection between online teaching resources and focus, a correlation was developed. Based on the correlation between these factors, a statistically significant negative correlation ($r=-.41, p<.01$) was found.

Students' attention spans for online learning are shorter as the quality of instruction declines. A link between teaching, zeal, drive, and focus is also shown in Table 1. A

statistically significant negative association ($r=-.480, -.450, -.419, p<.01$) was found via correlation analysis. Thus, as the quality of the online instruction declines, so do the students' motivation, excitement, and focus. Despite the fact that excitement, motivation, and focus have a statistically significant strong positive association, the other elements also rise when one of them does.

Table 1: Correlation between Teaching, Motivation, Enthusiasm and Concentration

	Teaching	Enthusiasm	Motivation	Concentration
Teaching	1	-.480**	-.450**	-.419**
Enthusiasm	-.480**	1	.816**	.723**
Motivation	-.450**	.816**	1	.732**
Concentration	-.419**	.723**	.732**	1

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

The Climate of Cooperation of Students during the Online Learning

Students' learning process is greatly aided by the collaborative environment that is fostered in the classroom. The collaborative environment among students participating in online learning is shown in Figure 3. The student density that indicates "Agree" and "Strongly agree" is the greatest. This indicates that students understood how challenging it was to foster productive teamwork in an online learning environment.

The majority of them (70%) said that group work was not done in a timely manner in online learning, 53.8% said that group work was not done in online learning, 44.9% said that group work presentations were not done online, and 46.6% said they disagreed with the claim that group tasks were assessed.

With reference to this investigation, we comprehend that student collaboration during virtual learning was restricted.

Educators need to use strategies that generate chances for group work throughout instruction. In order to successfully integrate cooperation and take use of the possibilities provided by the platforms, they need also expand their understanding of the platforms they use.

Limitations

The study's weaknesses are all related to the small number of samples that were used in the investigation. Because of the isolation brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, the sample selection is likewise restricted to only two institutions rather than a large number of them. The sample is focused on Tirana and Durrës, and does not include all cities in the nation.

With reference to these restrictions, we may say that the results of this investigation cannot be regarded as conclusive.

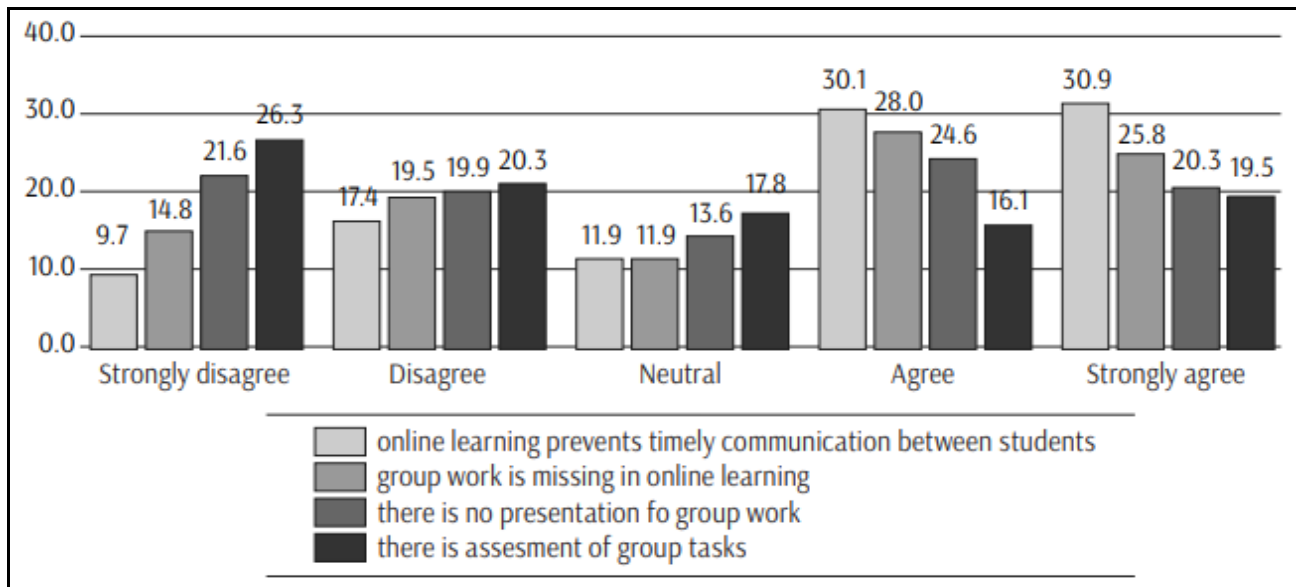


Fig 3: Cooperation of Students during the Online Learning

Conclusions and Recommendations

One of the key elements influencing the success of online learning is accessibility. According to the report, pupils used their phones to attend class. Online learning may be helpful for students who dislike conventional classroom settings, but it can also work against most students who want to get a top-notch education. High-quality education cannot be obtained via online learning. The manner that educational activities are conducted in many institutions' online learning environments has an impact on a large number of students, as this paper's body makes clear. The obstacles faced by university students include not having the necessary technology to finish their degree, not having internet connection because of financial constraints, experiencing technical issues when taking classes, etc. The issue becomes worse and the quality of university education is called into question as a result of the university administration's inability to resolve these conflicts. University students are required under the university's constitutional principles to abstain from all forms of test malpractice and plagiarism, therefore any work they turn in must be the product of their own original study. Students are encouraged to alter other people's writing, submit it as their own, and get away with it while they study online. Education ministries should step in to make online learning less difficult for the sake of the country's schools and students. This is a serious matter.

Despite having a tiny screen and being used for extended periods of time, the phone device was not the best tool for participating in online learning, even if it is thought to have enormous pedagogical potential. Students must use a laptop or PC to access the internet for these reasons. The quality of the Internet connection is another element thought to be essential for the success of online learning. In order for consumers to obtain the essential service, mobile phone carriers must improve the quality and speed of the Internet connection in certain places. The high expense of Internet connection, the dearth of other contemporary technologies, and the extended periods of time spent in front of screens necessitated that students periodically withdraw from online learning were additional issues that were found to be associated with the accessibility of online learning.

Students also had trouble paying attention in class. Most

students reported having trouble focusing, being motivated, being enthusiastic, giving their permission, and having high expectations in order to meet their learning objectives while studying online.

It also recognized the challenges brought about by problems with lecturing that impacted pupils' ability to pay attention in class. Because it impacts students' attention spans during learning, lecturers must stay current on the latest pedagogical approaches for online and remote learning.

Students' learning process is greatly aided by the collaborative environment that is fostered in the classroom. The research found that there is little effective student participation throughout the online learning process. Considering the difficulties that come with online education for college students, it's probable that these institutions will turn out learners who lack the skills necessary to function in the real world. The administrations of the universities and the relevant governments need to give the issues significant consideration. The study suggests that in order to address these prevalent issues with online learning, university administration should integrate conventional classroom instruction with online learning. This would assist in finding a middle ground between students who would choose to learn in a regular classroom and those who would prefer to study online. By doing this, the detrimental effects of online learning on the quality of university education will be reduced. If the administration of the institutions decides to go with online education alone, they should quit being afraid to bring in professional staff to assist them. It is necessary to appoint and teach the e-tutors on the efficient and productive use of academic online platforms. Prior to beginning the online program, training sessions must also be provided to the university students. Throughout the semester, periodic enforcement of this instruction is required.

In addition to altering their delivery method, educators should assign more group projects and cooperative learning tasks to their online students. They should also increase their familiarity with and proficiency with the platforms they utilize in order to successfully incorporate group projects into online education.

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