

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF ONLINE LEARNING DURING THE PANDEMICS; IMPRESSIONS ON THIS EXPERIENCE OF SUT STUDENTS

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Abstract

The pandemics forced the adaptation of teaching and learning in all educational institutions by shifting this process from auditoriums / physical classes to online platforms. Given that online learning was hardly used in Albania, the academic staff and students were unprepared to adapt to the apt technology in order to fulfill their mission.

This study, through a tailored online questionnaire sent through the Teams platform to Bachelor and Professional Master students at SUT / FMS, aimed to identify students' perception and opinions on online learning during this period on several aspects , such as: general feeling about online learning and its effectiveness; comparing physical learning with online learning; difficulties and advantages of online learning; evaluation of some effective elements used; acquiring knowledge / knowledge assessment; professor-student and student-student interaction and socio-health status, effects on everyday life and the level of motivation and stress. Moreover, it required from students to express their opinions on the advantages and disadvantages of online learning.

The answers received mainly indicate that students have a positive impression of online learning and appreciate the support they have had from professors and the institution. Teaching materials have been clear and helpful, accessible and sufficient in most cases. The problems encountered were mainly technical, appropriate equipment and internet connection, as well as psychological issues increased level of stress and lower motivation and lack of direct contact with the professors and students. Students admit that online learning has been a good solution and that some of its elements can be used alongside traditional teaching-learning process with some adaptations.

Keywords: online learning, pandemics, SUT, students' perceptions, advantages and disadvantages.

1. Introduction

Technology has evolved a lot in all walks of life and this is also noticed even in education to facilitate and improve teaching and learning. There are many universities that have initiated and have been using online platforms to provide distance and e-learning for many years now (Mishra et al., 2020). However, it gained an impetus and became widespread; better say the only educational medium, during the pandemics of COVID19. Given the fact that online learning had been complementary to traditional classes before the pandemics, some of the effects of it, being positive but as well as intimidating, had not emerged or were not studied earlier. Beside the benefits of online classes, especially during the pandemics that is staying safe and protecting our own health and that of people around us, there are some aspects of this isolation and completely new and forced way of schooling that needed to be identified through students' feedback in order to reflect in our teaching and improve the learning outcomes of students. Students' feedback on this matter is also crucial as their psychological and social wellbeing was as well as important and impactful.

The pandemics forced the adaptation of teaching and learning in all educational institutions by shifting this process from auditoriums / physical classes to online platforms. Given that online learning was hardly used in Albania, the academic staff and students were unprepared to adapt to the apt technology in order to fulfill their mission in the midst of this atypical situation. The main online platforms used were initially Google Classroom and later on during the second online learning academic year it was Microsoft Teams as well as WhatsApp

and for pre-university school system it was created Academia.al.

During this period, several studies have been carried out regarding the sudden transition from physical to online teaching; initially, understand and reflect on the teaching and learning process, various aspects that affect this process such as; social, health and academic aspects. Secondly, to use these findings to improve digital skills in order to teach and learn as efficiently as possible along the pandemics if it would last longer as well as to consider the combination of some elements of online learning into traditional and in class learning.

These studies (Bojovic et al., 2020) have confirmed that students think that teaching in physical settings is more effective and that they learn better.

Moreover, the studies have identified that students feel the lack of direct contact and support they receive from professors and other students, as well as the lack of use of laboratories, library or other facilities (Patricia, 2020). Recent studies have shown that students are suffering from stress and anxiety during this pandemic (Arora, Chakraborty, Bhatia, & Mittal, 2020; Islam et al., 2020).

However, students generally agree that in the pandemic situation online learning has given them the opportunity not to interrupt their studies (Mishra et al., 2020).

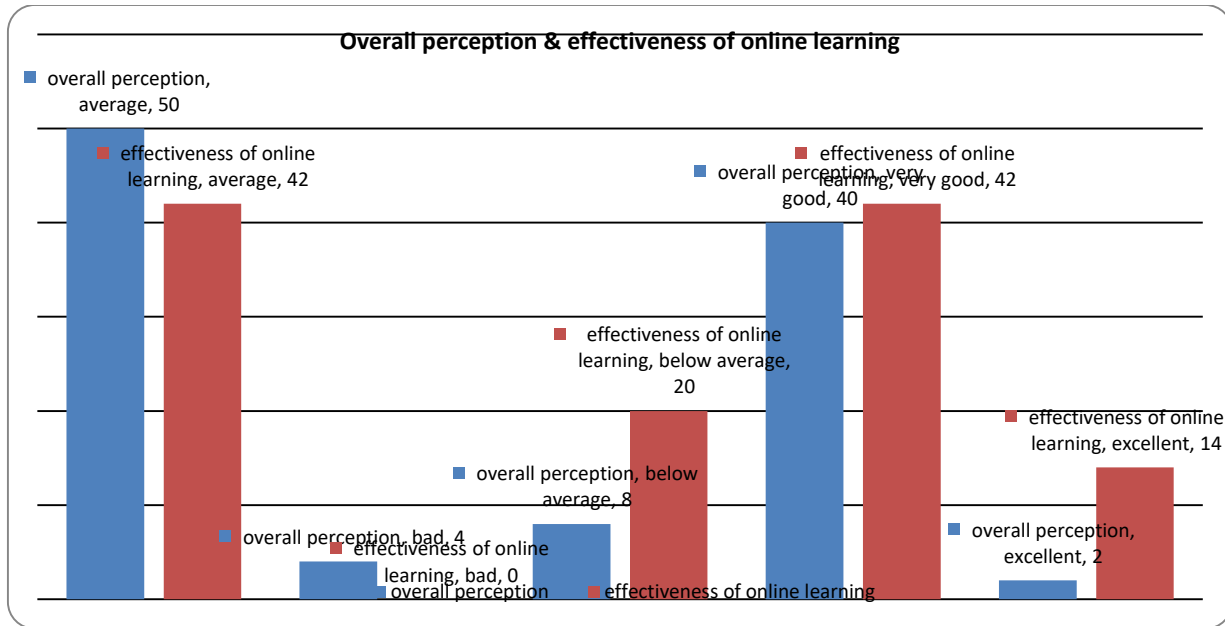
2. Methodology

This study, through a tailored questionnaire and which was sent through the Teams platform to Bachelor and Professional Master students at Sports University of Tirana (SUT) / Faculty of Movement Sciences (FMS), seeks to identify students' perception and opinion about online learning during the pandemics of COVID-19 on several aspects. The aspects under consideration were: overall perception and effectiveness of online learning; difficulties, obstacles for online classes participation and advantages of online learning; comparison between traditional and online learning; their perception on the level of stress, anxiety and motivation and some other negative psychological effects they have felt during the online classes; evaluation of some effective elements of the online platforms used by their professors.

The questionnaire was drafted on the bases of some other related studies as well as the lecturers' perspective on what was helping and affecting our online classes. The questions and statements were of different nature some were answered in a Likert scale and some others just stating/choosing the true option for them and some were open questions mainly for the students to express freely their opinions and perceptions on the advantages and disadvantages of the online classes. It was prepared in Goggle forms and distributed via their Microsoft Teams account, which they used to log in for the e-classes/lectures, to Sports University students, Faculty of Movement Sciences of both study programs i.e. Bachelor and Master's program students. The answers received are 104 in total: 54 -Bachelor students and 50 - the Professional Master students. Their responses and feedback were processed simply by using Excel Pivot tables.

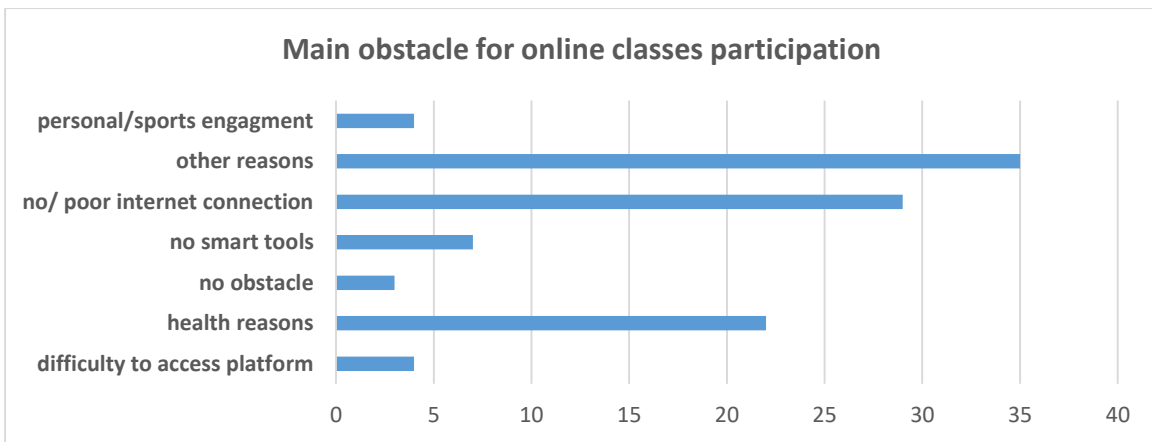
3. Results and discussions

The majority of the respondents, i.e. 79% confirmed that online learning was used for the first time during the pandemics. Confirming the primary hypotheses that online learning was introduced during the pandemics. Even though the rest of the respondents seem to have been familiar with online classes or trainings earlier. Another question for the students was about their participation of all, a part or none of the online classes and their answers show that the majority of them, 62% have attended all the classes, 36% only some the classes and 2% of them have not attended any online classes for reasons given further here.



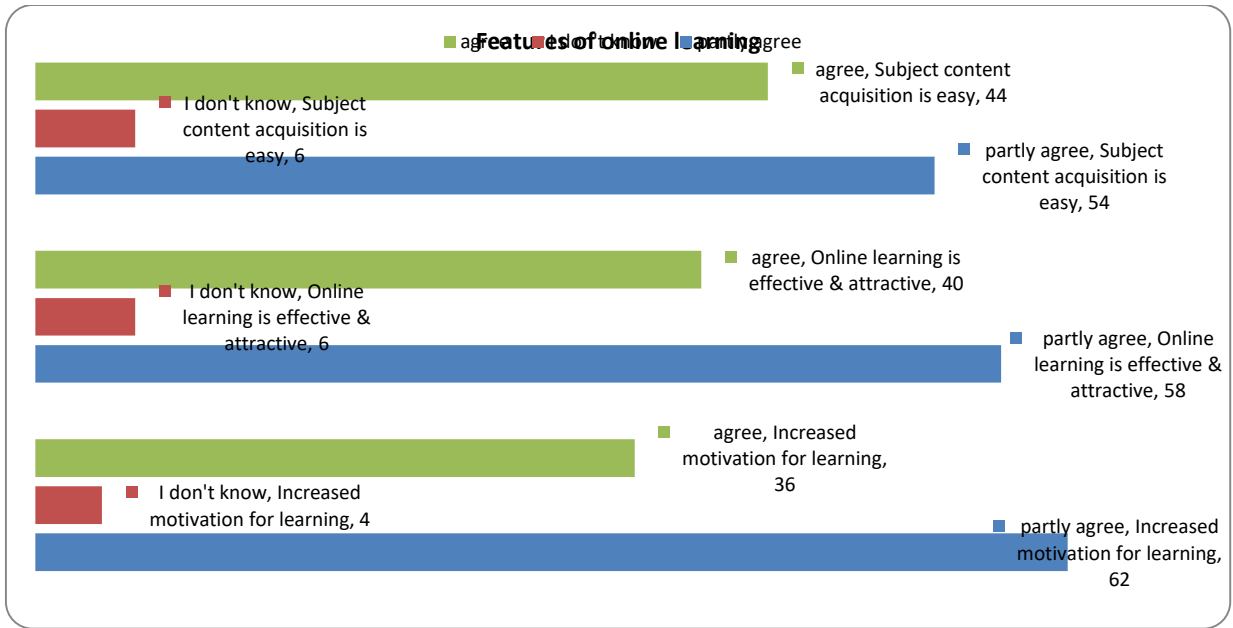
Graph 1: The overall perception and effectiveness of online learning

The overall perception and effectiveness of online learning (Graph 1) have been mostly very good, as 40 and 42 out of the 104 respondents have chosen this scale; and 50 and 42 of the respondents think it was at average level. However, there is also a small number of students who hold the opinion that these two aspects were below average or bad.



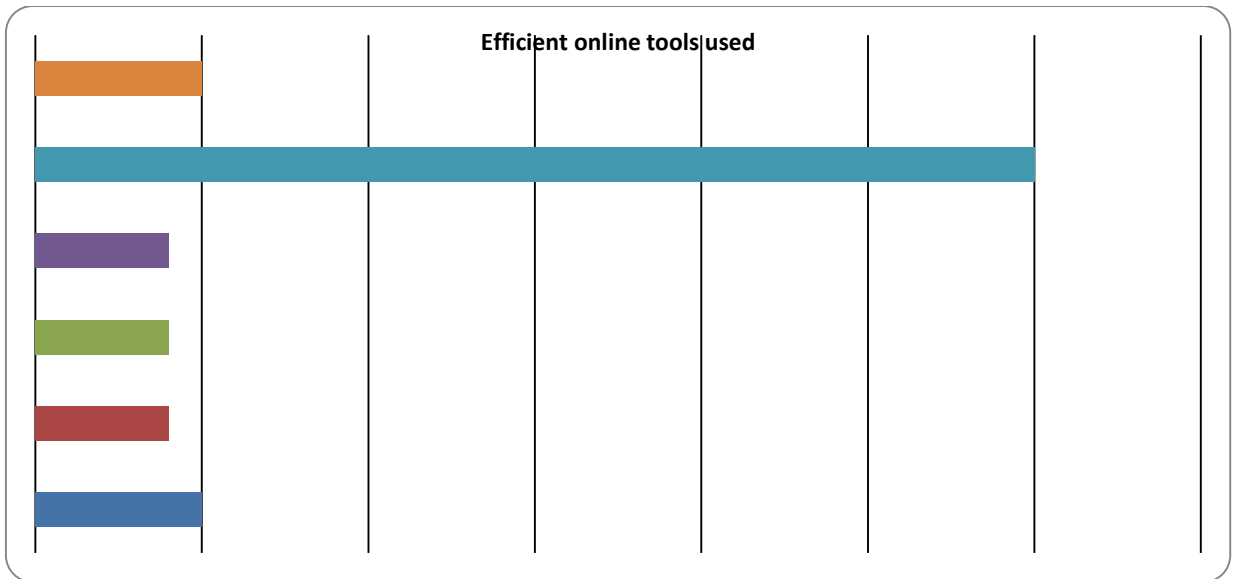
Graph 2: The main obstacles for online classes

The majority of students, i.e. 88 out of 104 respondents have used smart-phones to participate the online classes, which also explains their high percentage of participation but also some issues, felt by the lectures and teachers, especially in carrying out class assignments or tasks properly & actively during the classes. The main obstacle to actively participate and perform well during online classes seemed to have been unspecified reasons and poor or no internet coverage but also some of them have admitted of not having the tools to participate in the classes and health issues have also been a reason of participation in the classes (see Graph 2 above).



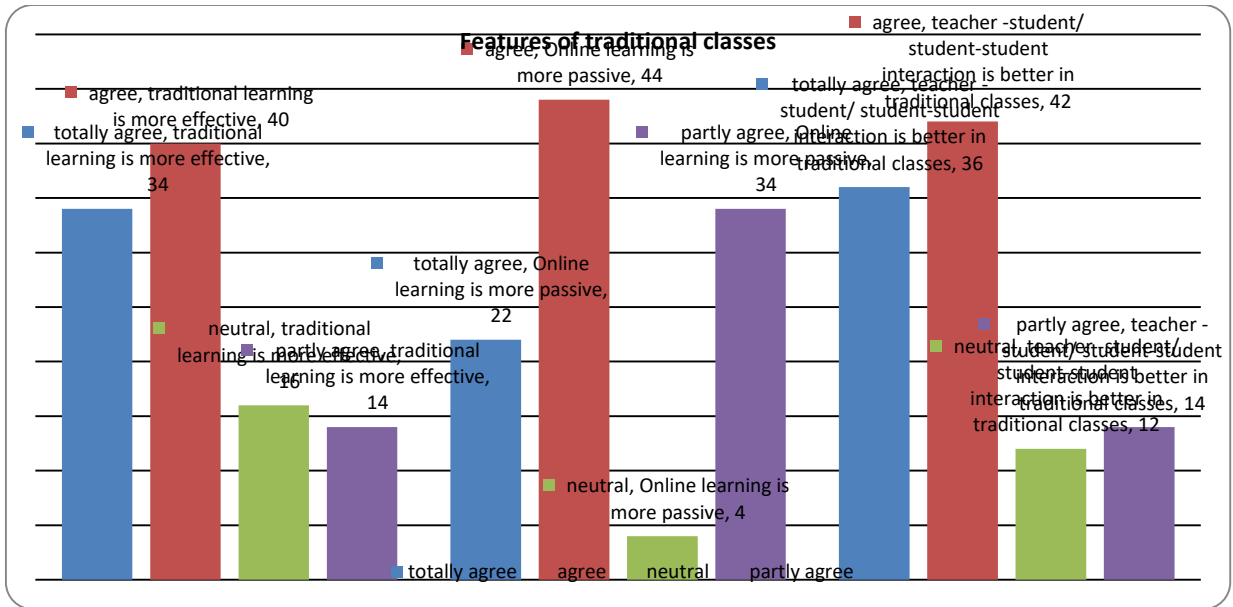
Graph 3: Positive features of online learning

The aim of this group of statements is to identify their motivation for learning as well as how efficient and attractive did the students find it and if subject content comprehension was easy for them. These three aspects have received a fairly positive assessment as the majority of students partly agree (no.62; 58; 54) and agree (no.36; 40; 44) that they have had increased level of motivation for learning, that online learning has been effective and attractive as well as subject content acquisition has been easy.



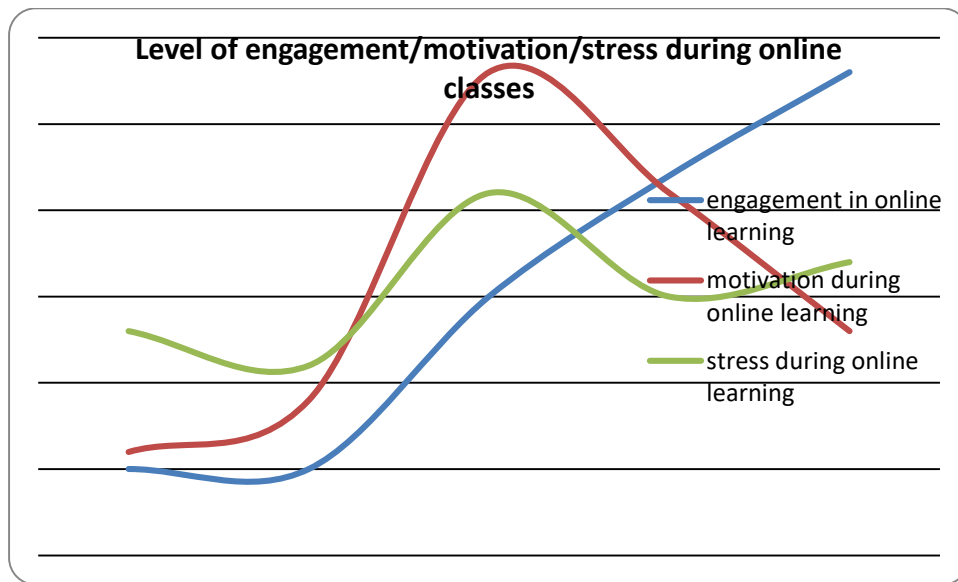
Graph 4: Efficient online/platform tools

As shown in Graph no.4, PowerPoint lectures and presentations were the main elements which have facilitated their learning besides attached class resources and recorded lectures at a lesser extent according to students.



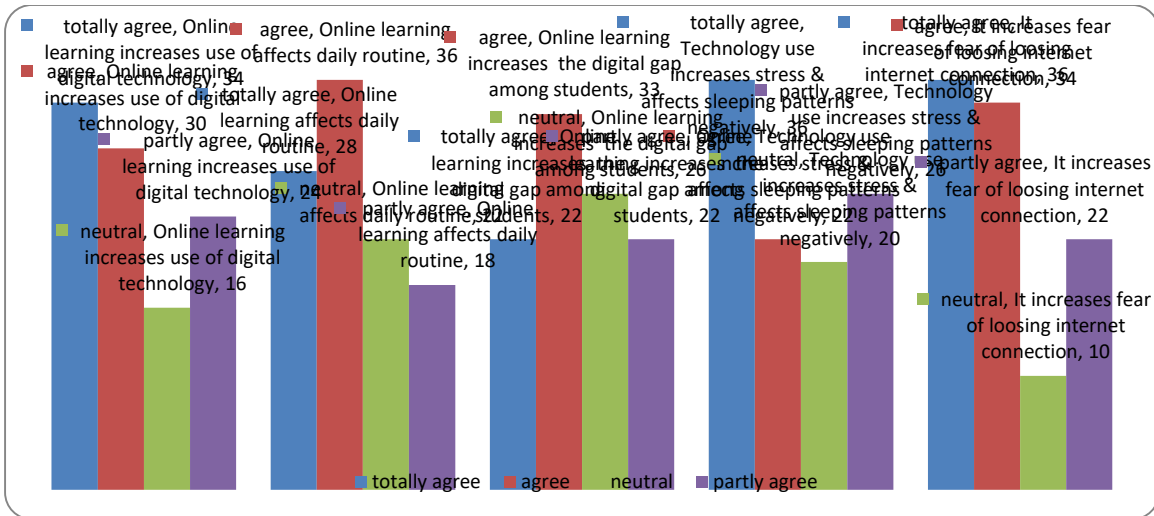
Graph 5: Features of traditional classes

When comparing traditional classes to online ones, most students, no= 40, agree - or totally agree no= 34 that traditional learning is more effective; the passivity of online learning is higher no = 44; and interaction between teacher-student & student-student is better, no= 36 & 42, in traditional classes.



Graph 6: Students' engagement, motivation and stress during online learning

When assessing some other aspects of online learning (Graph 6) it is noticed that motivation and stress have been mostly at average level while engagement mostly high and maximal. These findings confirm the initial hypotheses that stress has been felt during this period that might have also affected students' engagement as well as their motivation for learning and studying.



Graph 7: Negative effects of online learning

Most students have totally agreed (no=34-36) or agreed (no = 22 -36) that all five aspects, oo some negative effects, of online learning have been perceived during this period.

Thus, it is evident that students think that online learning has increased the use of digital technology, has increased the digital gap, increased stress and affected sleep as well as it has increased the fear of losing internet connection.

Some of the comments given by students about the disadvantages and obstacles of online learning it is evident that most of them have restated that internet connection and not owning computers and laptops and even technology skills in some cases hindered full and apt participation and performance. Another shortcoming mentioned, earlier identified even in the questions above were lack of social and direct contact with professors and classmates, which created more stress and affected their motivation and attention for longer periods as well as made them more passive and more dependent on technology and in some cases.

The students' comments about the positive aspects and advantages of online classes were mainly focused around the following: health protection and safety, the resources were accessible at any time, lecture presentation was affective and helped them acquire the subject content, flexibility to attend the classes, the availability of academic and university staff to offer assistance, etc.

4. Conclusions

The processing of the responses show that students have a positive impression of online learning and appreciate the support they have had from professors and the institution. Some other main findings to conclude are as below:

- The students have an overall positive impression of online learning.
- The majority of students have used smart-phones to participate the online classes.
- The main specific obstacle was poor or no internet coverage and health reasons.
- Students think that online learning has been effective and attractive as well as subject content acquisition has been easy.
- PowerPoint lectures and video presentations & open cameras were the main elements that have facilitated their learning.
- Motivation and stress have been mostly at average level while engagement mostly high and maximal.
- Students think that online learning has had some negative impacts in their lives such increased the

use of digital technology, has increased the digital gap, increased stress and affected sleep as well as it has increased the fear of losing internet connection.

In conclusion, we might say that besides all the negative impacts that students have experienced and expressed in this survey their evaluation of online learning has been generally positive. We as lecturers and academic staff or higher education institution can make use more of the platforms and technology tools used during the pandemics and combine some effective aspects to provide flexible classes in terms of time and place.

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