Challenges And Practices of Distance Learning in Higher Education

Kyvete Shatri¹, Kastriot Buza² and Krenare Pireva Nuçi³

Abstract

The closure of educational institutions due to the Covid 19 pandemic and transition from in person classroom to distance learning through various electronic platforms, confronted the educational community with new challenges and practices. In this context, the aim of this research is to identify challenges and practices that teachers and students faced during the distance teaching and learning process. More specifically, in identifying the challenges and practices in lesson planning, access to online lectures, developing student interaction, developing group work, addressing student critical thinking and student motivation. The research was carried in Higher Education Institutions in Kosovo, whereas the sample of this research were 155 students of University for Business and Technology (UBT), who fulfilled an online survey and 7 teachers of the Higher Education Institutions in Kosovo with whom a direct interview was carried. The results obtained from this research indicate two main perspectives: didactical and infrastructural aspects. Concerning the didactic aspect the difficulties faced are in implementing syllabuses during the online lessons and that there should be modifications in planning the online lessons. Student engagement, increase of the interactivity and motivation requires proper planning. Whereas, as far as the infrastructural aspect is concerned, the lack of an adequate Learning Management System (LMS) equipped with technological tools that enables interactivity and group work, is seen as a hindrance for realizing successfully the distance learning and teaching.

Keywords: Challenges, Practices, Distancelearning, Applications, Interaction

INTRODUCTION

COVID 19 Pandemic impacted all aspects of human life, in this sense also the manner in which the educational process was implemented. The major challenge during the total lockdown for many countries was the organizing of distance learning. In case of Kosovo, the Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Innovation (MESTI) during mid-march of 2020 took the decision to organize the distance learning for all the levels of education system (MESTI, 2020a). Regarding the pre-university system, MESTI used public television channel RTK and its official YouTube channel to broadcast video-recordings of the lessons produced immediately after the lockdown for all the levels of pre-university education. In cooperation with UNICEF office in Kosovo and “Save the Children”, MESTI similarly has introduced the platform “Inclusive Education” (“Arsimigjithëpërfshirës”) for the inclusion of children with special needs in the educational process, as well as the platform “Distance Learning- Care, Development and Education in early childhood for ages 0-6”. Whereas, regarding the organization of the learning process in Higher Education Institutions in Kosovo, it was in their discretion to choose between various platforms and LMSs in organizing their distance learning process. This new method of implementing the educational process presented a challenge on its own, both in the didactic and infrastructural aspects.

Higher Education Institutions joined forced to transition from classroom to virutal learning, where challenges are far greater (Bryson, J. R. & Andres, L., 2020). The Institutions individually decided upon choosing platforms, LMSs, and various educational technologies to enable online learning, respectively the syncron and asyncron communication between teachers and students.

¹ University of Prishtina “Hasan Prishtina”, Faculty of Education, st.”Agim Ramadani” no.350, 10000, Prishtina, Kosova; Email: kyvete.shatri@uni.pr.edu
² University of Prishtina “Hasan Prishtina”, Faculty of Education, st.”Agim Ramadani” no.350, 10000, Prishtina, Kosova; Email: kastriot.buza@uni.pr.edu (Corresponding Author)
³ University of Prishtina “Hasan Prishtina”, Faculty of Education, st.”Agim Ramadani” no.350, 10000, Prishtina, Kosova; Email: krenare.nuci@uni.pr.edu
Therefore, we have conducted this research to look into the challenges and practices that accompanied teachers and students while applying these technologies, platforms, and LMSs in the online teaching and learning processes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The aggravation situation with Covid 19 pandemic led many world countries to apply total lockdown, whereas according to UNESCO by the end of April 2020, the number of countries that applied the total lockdown reached 186 (UNESCO, 2020). This resulted also for many educational institutions to close down in the context of offering the teaching/learning from in person to online distance learning, with the intention of avoiding potential infection with the virus (Uscher-Pines, et al 2018). Distance learning represents an educational approach based on the sophisticated nowadays technology which enables the participants to ‘watch’ and ‘listen’ each other as if being in the same room. Recent technologies that enable these “rooms”, became known particularly during the COVID 19 pandemic, which compelled the educational institutions worldwide to apply the distance learning (Todri et al, 2021).

Experiences and practices were of many varieties, which in itself encountered various challenges that accompanied this transition. Integration of the tools to enable synchronous/assynchronous learning, selection of the technologies by the faculties and teachers, teachers and students’ digital competencies in using these technologies, privacy and confidentiality, were some of the challenges that almost all educational institutions faced (Turnbull et al, 2021). For most of the teachers, the transition process in implementing the teaching from in person classroom learning to distance learning, was difficult for several reasons such as: the unequal level of IT infrastructure development in universities, absence or reduced provision of educational resources and courses in electronic format, lack of knowledge in using technological devices in solving problems that arise during teaching/learning activities, stress from working in an unknown environment, psychological fear from this environment, anxiety caused by the need to communicate through internet etc. (Vlasova et al., 2020).

The efficiency of an online learning process is dependant on three factors: infrastructure, teachers and students. Teachers and students’ preceptions, appropriate technological infrastructure and the assistance provided in using this infrastructure, are directly correlated in ensuring successful online teaching and learning (Gautam et al, 2021). Weak and unstable internet connection appered to be the biggest challenge for most of the teachers and students. Furthermore, the economical and social aspect has affected educational institution during the pandemic. Students with poor economical status have not been able to access technological infrastructure, which has prevented them from accessing or engaging in the online learning process (Crawford, et al., 2020). Whereas, students who had access to the appropriate infrastructure and possessed the right digital competence to apply different education technologies, online learning has been an attractive form of learning. Online teaching and learning by this group of students is seen as a way of carrying out the learning process even after the end of the COVID 19 pandemic (Muthuprasad, et al., 2020). Similarly, younger teachers have accepted better online teaching (Zalat, et al., 2021). Nevertheless, it can be easily said that online learning at the time of the pandemic was a hurried and unplanned solution with the sole intention of not interrupting the learning process. Many researches on the distance learning suggest that a well planned approach in using digital technologies can be very efficient in overcoming traditional obstacles of space and time (Murray, et al., 2020). Moreover, the application of distance learning has changed the learning styles from a behaviorist approach to a more constructivist approach (Lockey, Conaghan, Bland, & Astina, 2021). Distance learning has helped students who were timid in classroom in becoming more active during distance learning (Bissy, 2021). Students are required to have a more active role in the learning process during the distance learning, since the environment of distance learning is the student-centered (Susila & Thompson, 2020). On the other hand, the fact that teachers have little control over online teaching, a considerable number of students may not act seriously when carrying out the activities they are required to perform (Koirala, Silwal, Gurung, Bhattacharai, & Kumar KC, 2020). In this context, students should be prepared and motivated for the lessons of distance learning, which are very prevalent and designed in various models (Bertiz & Karoğlu, 2020).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY
The purpose of this research is to identify the challenges and practices that teachers and students have faced during the implementation of the online learning process. With the aim of conducting this research we have selected the mixed methodology for identifying challenges and practices in lesson planning, access to online lectures, developing interaction between students, developing group work, addressing students’ critical thinking and motivating students.

In order for the objectives of the research to be met, we have raised these questions and research hypotheses which encounter two topics as problem areas. The first addresses students’ attitudes or perceptions towards distance learning, and the second area focused on the challenges of teaching and learning in distance learning.

What are the students' attitudes towards online learning?

Which are the challenges faced by students and teachers during the learning and teaching process in distance learning?

What platforms are used for distance learning?

**HYPOTHESIS**

H1: The developing of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic period has made teachers aware of the importance of using digital platforms in the learning process.

H2: Students and teachers did not have many challenges in the course of the learning process during distance learning, as they had the skills and abilities to use digital learning tools.

**POPULATION AND SAMPLES**

The population in this study includes all students of Higher Education Institutions in Kosovo, while the research sample consists of about 155 students of UBT College and 7 teachers of Higher Education Institutions in Kosovo. Referring to the conditions with the COVID 19 pandemic, data collection was performed online. The quantitative data were collected through a questionnaire conducted with Google Form whereas, the interview was conducted through Google Meet. The demographic data for student participants are presented in Tab.1.

**Table 1. Gender distribution of student participants in the research**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>31.0</td>
<td>31.0</td>
<td>31.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>69.0</td>
<td>69.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2. Age distribution of student participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18-25</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>98.0</td>
<td>98.0</td>
<td>98.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26-30</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;30</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**STUDENTS’ PRACTICES AND CHALLENGES DURING ONLINE LEARNING**

With the intention of observing students’ practices and challenges during online learning, both in terms of technical aspect and in terms of the impact that online teaching had on their learning, the questionnaire queries were categorized into 3 categories:

The technical aspect of utilizing the applications
Evaluating the effectiveness of online teaching
Evaluating the functionality of online learning applications.

**THE TECHNICAL ASPECT OF UTILIZING THE APPLICATIONS**

Based on the research results, the most utilized applications in applying online teaching and learning process were: Zoom and Moodle.

![Graph of Utilized Applications](image1)

Conversely, from the data published by the University of Pristina on their website, it appears that the most used applications by this institution are: Google Classroom and Google meet (UP, 2020).

As far as the technical problems in using the applications are concerned, such as having access to Internet, according to the respondents there were no such hindrances.

![Graph of Internet Connection](image2)

As presented in the above the figure, 96% of the respondents stated that the connection or access to the Internet was good and/or stable, while only 4% of the respondents stated that they had a problem with access to Internet.
Whereas, concerning the operation of the application, 82% of the respondents stated that the application operated very fast and/or fast, 12% stated medium or average, while 6% of the respondents stated that the application operated slowly and/or very slowly.

![WAS THE APP RUNNING FAST?](image)

Fig. 3. Respondents’ answers related to the application operation speed

Regarding the question on the devices that students used to access the application, 92% of the respondents stated that they used a PC, while 3% used a laptop, 3% used a tablet and 1% of the respondents stated that they used a phone.

![WHAT EQUIPMENT DID YOU USE TO JOIN THE LECTURES?](image)

Fig. 4. Respondents’ answers related to devices used to access the lecture application

It can be concluded from the above gathered and presented data that from a technical point of view, students generally did not have problems of a technical matter.

**STUDENTS’ EVALUATION ON THE EFFECTIVENESS OF ONLINE TEACHING**

The implementation of the distance learning was a new experience for almost all the students of the higher educational system at the national level. The way of attending online lectures was the only manner of not missing the lectures during the pandemic. Therefore, in this context students were faced with something new. Concerning the question: What was your first impression when you heard that you would start learning online? Most students had expressed similar opinions that it was a good and an appropriate decision because there would be no loss in the learning process. Some had stated that they were curious about how the online learning
would take place. However, there were also students who stated that they had not received the news well because it was something new for them and they foresaw facing a lot of technical problems. In addition, students’ opinions in open-ended questions concerning general impressions of online learning, are presented in the following table.

**Table 3. Students’ opinions for the online learning**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What do you currently think about online learning?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It is a good method of learning, an excellent and very efficient experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is especially suitable for students who travel. It has to be adaptable with our perspective. Lack of contact and socialization.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What did you like the most?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The most common answers to this question were: the quality of the application, the convenience of attending the lectures, the clarity of the lecture.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What did you like the least?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Limitation of the number of participants during the lecture determined by the application. Lack of an opportunity for greater interactivity between teachers and students. Public chat for all.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As the effectiveness of the online learning concerns, students stated the following:

![WAS ONLINE LEARNING EFFECTIVE?](image)

Fig. 5. Respondents’ answers for the online learning effectiveness

73% of the respondents stated that online learning was effective and 6% stated that it was not, however, a large percentage (21%) stated that they were neutral concerning this question. As concerns the clarity and comprehensibility of the lectures, more than half of the students stated that the lectures were very clear. From Fig. 7 we can perceive that only 2% of the respondents stated that the lectures were not clear and understandable.
Throughout online learning, student-teacher interactivity was another challenge in itself. However, as far as students’ opinion concerns, they stated that the application has enabled them to have interactivity with the teacher and students among themselves. On the question of whether they had interaction with the lecturers, judging from the obtained results we can notice that 79% of the students stated they had the opportunity to interact, while 11% stated that they had little or no interaction with the lecturers, while 10% stated neutral in this matter.

In terms of interaction between students, 80% of students stated that they interacted with other students, 10% had no interaction with others, and 10% were neutral.

Regarding the effectiveness of online teaching, from all the above presented results it can be stated that students’ perceptions about online teaching were very good. Moreover, the results from the correlation made regarding the students’ learning experience in higher educational institutions and the efficiency of the online learning process during the pandemic, it seemed like there was a positive correlation between the two.

Table 4. Correlation between effectiveness and experience during the online learning.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Was online learning effective?</th>
<th>Did you have a good experience using the application?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Was online learning effective?</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.430**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>learning Sig.(2-tailed)</td>
<td></td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>effective? N</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did you have a good experience using the application? Sig.(2-tailed)</td>
<td>.430**</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This obtained result confirms also the raised hypothesis, that students and teachers along the course of distance learning did not have many challenges during the learning process, since they had the skills and the abilities to utilize the digital learning tools.

Whereas, on the question of whether you would like to continue with the online learning, 88% of the students said yes, 9% said no and 3% said yes, if teaching was to be held in smaller groups. Referring to these results it can be observed that students have a good experience with the online learning.

**Evaluation of the functionality of the online learning applications**
Regarding the evaluation and the usability of the application utilized for the implementation of the distance learning,

![Graph showing respondents' answers regarding whether the application was pleasant to use](image)

as presented in the fig.7, 81% of the respondents stated that the application was very good or good to be used, 12% of them stated neutral and 10% stated that the application was not good to be used. Whereas on the question whether the application was easy to be used, 90% of the respondents stated that the application was easy to be used and only 2% stated that it was difficult to be used and 8% stated neutral. While, regarding whether the application was suitable or not for the realization of the online learning, 90% of the students considered that the application was very suitable or suitable, 4% considered that the application was not suitable and 6% of them declared neutral.

![Graph showing respondents' answers regarding the suitability of the application](image)

In general students had positive evaluations of the functionality of the applications used to deliver online learning.

**FINDINGS FROM THE INTERVIEWS WITH TEACHERS OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS**

In order to observe what were the practices and challenges of teachers of Higher Education Institutions during the implementation of the teaching process through online classes during the pandemic period, an interview was conducted with 7 teachers of different institutions within Higher Education in Kosovo.

**Table 5. Descriptive statistics related to the sample (n = 7)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Frequencies</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institution</td>
<td>Pristina University “Hasan Prishtina”</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>University “Ukshin Hoti” Prizren</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The interview was focused on identifying challenges and practices for these thematic areas:

Lesson planning
Teacher-student interaction development
Development of group work
Addressing students’ critical learning
Students’ evaluation
Students’ motivation

Another context included in the research areas of interest, was the adaptation of the teaching methodology in the context of the platform used for the implementation of the teaching process.

**Table 6. Teacher respondent answers regarding the adaptation of the teaching methodology**

| Lesson planning | Higher Education Institutions in Kosovo, faced with an unforeseen situation, mobilized to find ad hoc solutions to carry out the distance learning process utilizing various platforms. Teachers found themselves in a situation of conducting online teaching, unprepared and without prior experience. Difficulties in implementing syllabi along with changing teaching context. Altering syllabi in terms of assessment, participation and student activities. The lack of LMSs poses difficulties for the proper realization of the teaching and learning process in online learning. Organizing lab exercises is another challenge that arises when conducting online learning. |
| Teacher-student interaction development | The lack of teacher-student interaction at the desired level. The need to plan additional activities to ensure a comprehensive activation through the selection of adequate software to accomplish the appropriate interaction. Identifying mechanisms to alter student passivity in order to change teachers’ experience on the presumption as to "talking to ourselves" and the isolated monologue during the distance learning. The lack of interaction is seen as a factor that consequences weak learning results. In this context continuous presentation of work with colleagues is seen as an opportunity to encourage students to comment, discuss and collaborate. Moreover, the application of systematic tests is seen also as a mechanism that increases students’ interactivity during online learning. The use of recorded lectures posted and uploaded on platforms used as virtual classrooms (Google Classroom) has reduced interactivity, causing students to listen to those lectures just before the exam. |
| Development of group work | Working with large student groups was reported as a challenge by all the interviewed teachers. The impossibility to create virtual classrooms in the utilized platforms such as Google Classroom, has not offered the prospect of dividing students into groups and accomplish group work in smaller groups within the same class schedule. |
Addressing students' critical learning

The development of critical thinking and critical approach to a learning content during distance learning is seen as the biggest challenge for all participants of the research. The use of different visualization tools in order to realize student-centred teaching is seen as an opportunity in developing critical thinking.

Students' evaluation

Evaluating the students online by utilizing technology in compiling tests is seen as a challenging element. The lack of adequate software that would restrict the student from browsing the materials or navigating through other Internet sites, according to the respondents has presented difficulties in carrying out an evaluation process where evaluation could be considered genuine.

Students' motivation

According to teachers, students' motivation or keeping them motivated to commit to learning at a satisfactory level during distance learning was a little difficult. Given the fact that the period of the pandemic was associated also with psychological constrains caused by the total closure, it affected also students' behaviour and perception about learning. Furthermore, the fact that for most students this form of organizing the learning process, was new and a bit stressful owed to several factors such as: access from family premises, infrastructure, and unstable network connection. All of these are seen as factors that have influenced the level of students' motivation during distance learning.

CONCLUSION

Referring to the research results and the literature reviewed, it can be concluded that students' attitudes towards online learning are positive. Online learning is considered a new experience and a very effective method of learning.

Utilized applications like Zoom and Google Meet were considered for online lectures as convenient, easy to use, user-friendly, and well-functioning. As a challenge that has emerged from using these applications has been the limited access number of participants and the lack of tools within these applications that would enable various ways of achieving interactivity between teachers and students as well as between students themselves.

Another noticed challenge was the adaptation of course syllabi with the distance learning methodology, because in addition to the didactic aspect the technical (infrastructural) aspect has to be foreseen also. Student engagement and increasing of the interactivity require an in-depth planning and analysis related to transition and adaptability to online learning. This novel experience has made teachers aware on the need in applying technology in the teaching and learning process as a highly functional and multi-dimensional element in the context of access to learning from anywhere and anytime, and to the personalized learning pace. The online learning must be assumed as an added value and should be planned for the future considering the possibility of implementing hybrid learning within the Higher Education Institutions in Kosovo.

REFERENCES


