Student Points of View – Pedagogical, Psychological, Social and Technical Issues

ONLINE EDUCATION DURING PANDEMIC, ACCORDING TO STUDENTS FROM TWO BULGARIAN UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract. From April to May 2020, in the midst of the COVID-19 Pandemic, a team of researchers from the National Sports Academy "Vassil Levski", Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", the University of National and World Economy and Bulgarian Academy of Science conducted a pilot study among students from Sofia University and the National Sports Academy whose aim was to understand the main characteristics of online education, its pros and cons. This article aims to present the results of this research in the context of the technical issues that have significant impact on the educational process during the online distance learning. 261 students from Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" and 166 students from the National Sports Academy "Vassil Levski" are surveyed. The research methods are survey and comparative analysis of data. The results show how students from different universities and specialties perceive online education, how they evaluate it, and what risks it poses for university education in general.

Keywords: distance learning; higher school; attitude; online survey; learning platform

Introduction

Distance learning/distance education has a nearly hundred-year history. It has evolved from correspondence learning in the UK, going through the open universities in the USA to transform into its modern online form of education.

The modern concepts of distance learning connect it with the development and introduction of various communication and technical means in the online environment, as mediators of interaction between teacher and students (Yovkova, 2016; Lazarova & Lazarov, 2020; Raycheva, 2011; Slavova, 2017).

There are many definitions of distance learning/distance education, but it is most often defined as "a form of learning/education in which there is a spatial distance

between teacher and learners and the interaction between them is realized by the media" (Raycheva, 2011).

In analyzing distance learning, we will refer to the characteristics of one of the pioneers of this type of education Desmond Keegan (1996):

– separation in terms of time and place of the teacher and the student almost throughout the learning process (this distinguishes distance learning from traditional face-to-face instruction);

– participation of an educational organization in the process of planning and preparation of training materials, as well as in providing services that support the student (this distinguishes distance education from education through private lessons and traditional self-study programs);

– use of technical means to establish a connection between the teacher and the student to present the learning content;

– providing a two-way connection from which the student can make the most of and even have the opportunity to start a dialogue with the teacher.

It should be emphasized that distance learning, in contrast to traditional learning, takes greater account of the individual characteristics of the students and the characteristics of the specific educational environment (Petrov & Atanasova, 1999).

In the last two decades, higher education institutions in Bulgaria have gained significant experience in developing and organizing various courses and programs for distance learning. "Blended learning" has also become increasingly relevant and popular, which can be seen as a continuation of distance learning (Krause, 2008; Lazarova & Lazarov, 2019; Neykova, 2019; Slavova, 2017).

This process is largely supported by the adoption of official regulations in the country. The goals and priorities of the educational policy for expanding the access to higher education by introducing electronic forms for distance learning are set out in the National Strategy for Development of Higher Education in the Republic of Bulgaria for the period 2014 – 2020, adopted in 2015.

A key document for the establishment of the distance learning in the system of higher education in Bulgaria is the Regulation on the State Requirements for Organizing Distance Learning in Higher Education (2004). According to article 1, paragraph 2, "distance learning is an organization of the learning process in which the student and the teacher are separated by location, but not necessarily by time, and the created distance is compensated by technological means". The distance form of education is "equal to the regular form of education in terms of the content of the curriculum, the required number of credits for the respective specialty, the diploma for completed educational qualification degree and the professional qualification" (article 4).

For its part, the National Agency for Assessment and Accreditation has developed and approved Guidelines and Criteria for Assessment of Distance Learning in the Professional Field, adopted in March 2017.

These key documents confirm research that compares distance learning with traditional learning and shows that "distance learning can be just as effective as traditional learning, if appropriate technologies and methods are used, to have interaction between learners, and to have feedback between teachers and students" (Moore & Kearsley, 1996).

Therefore, distance learning/distance education is not a new phenomenon. It has gone through various stages of development to impose itself in the current complex socio-economic situation of emergency during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Moreover, distance learning in the COVID-19 situation failed to replace mobility. Modern education presupposes that students should specialize in different countries, participate in inter-university exchanges, and carry out intercultural dialogue, which they cannot achieve online. For many students coming from developing countries, this is the only opportunity to have equal conditions with their colleagues. The weak internet connection or the lack of it altogether has led many students to change their student plans. A survey conducted by QS Quacquarelli Symonds in March 2020 among international students, shows that 46% of students have changed their plans to study abroad, and 25% have no idea what awaits them in the coming months (QS, 2020).

Aim of study

The idea of the study is to examine the major problems and challenges for the participants in the process of distance learning during the Pandemic of COVID-19, as well as to outline the main directions in which it could be improved. It is interesting to outline to what extent students benefit or are disadvantaged by distance learning.

This paper focuses exclusively on the technical aspects of the distance learning during the pandemic and their influence on the educational process. The main hypothesis here is that the technical aspects of the distance learning, mostly the functionality of platforms, their advantages and disadvantages, have an impact over the educational process as such.

Methods of study

The research methods are online survey and comparative analysis of data. In the period April to May 2020, in the midst of the COVID-19 Pandemic, a team of researchers from the National Sports Academy "Vassil Levski", Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", the University of National and World Economy and Bulgarian Academy of Science conducted a pilot study among students.

261 students from different faculties of the Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" (Faculty of Philosophy, Faculty of Biology and others) and 166 students from the Faculty of Sport and the Faculty of Pedagogy at the National Sports Academy "Vassil Levski" are surveyed.

Results and analysis

The analysis represents the indicators connected exclusively to the technical aspects of the distance learning as they are crucial for the educational process realized though distance learning. The first indicator refers to the type of online distance learning platform used by the respondents in both universities (Figure 1).

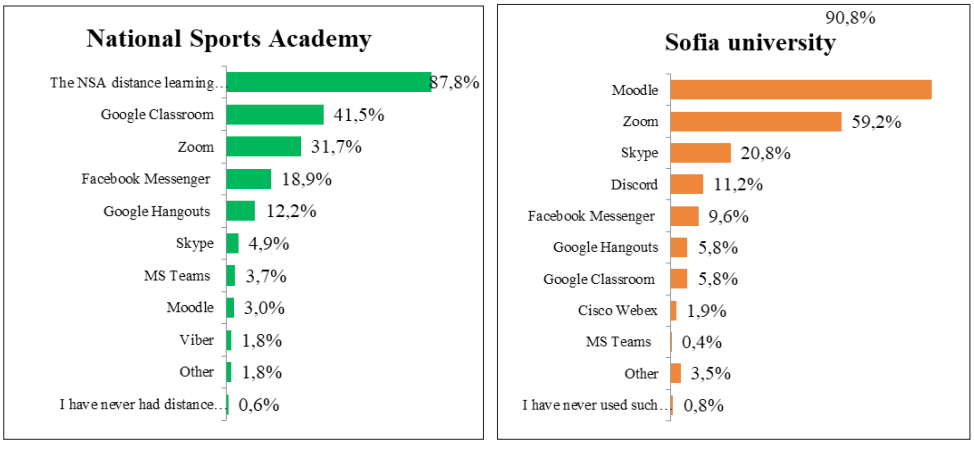

Figure 1. Platforms used for distance learning

As it can be seen on the Figure 1, the most popular platform used by the surveyed students from both universities is the "official" one, i.e. the one that is supported by the university. In Sofia University (SU) is Moodle, an open source free platform; installed in the university servers, at the National Sports Academy (NSA) is its own platform, developed especially for the needs of the university distance learning.

Apart from these platforms another popular ones are used in the respective university although it can be seen that platforms that are popular in the National Sports Academy are not popular in Sofia University and vice versa. The reasons behind this are beyond the limits of this survey, however, it should be also clarified that the students are practically "the passive" side in this process: the type of platform used is decided mostly by the lecturers.

In the question there are also options that are not exactly specialized platforms for distance learning but for online live communication as Skype or Facebook Messenger. We put these options deliberately in the questionnaire, because as the distance learning was so urgently introduced it was possible that in some cases no specialized platform would be used but exactly any popular applications for online communication. While not widely used among the interviewed students, there are also such "models" of distance learning interactions. The results from the study cannot be surprising as in both cases the platforms are integrated with the other university digital systems.

As the students are the passive side of the process, there is also a possibility that practically every lecturer would use their own platform. Of course, that would be one of the worst scenarios, but fortunately, only a small group of students mark this answer in the next question that refers to the main platform used in their learning.

In the questionnaire was also included a question if some system for additional exchange of resources is used: as is the email or the shared online drives. The goal behind this question is to find out if the platform is "facilitated" by more conventional modes of exchanging information online or there is no need of such additional source of resources. As we suggested, relatively small part of the students (14% in SU and 19% in NSA) responded that there is no need of additional system of exchange of resources. In both universities the email is the most popular way to exchange additional resources (76% and 74% from SU and NSA respectively).

These results are not surprising either. The email is widely used channel of online communication even during the "standard" process of university education and is even natural that the email is not fully replaced by the functionalities of the platforms for distance learning.

The next questions are those for the advantages and disadvantages of the main platform used which was confirmed by the students in both universities as the one offered by the respective university. It could be said that the general opinion about this basic platform in both universities is more positive than negative: only 12% from the surveyed students in SU and less than 10% from those in NSA answered that there are no advantages in using the respective main platform.

While both platforms have different characteristics, the main advantages of the platforms, confirmed by the both groups of students are similar (Table 1): that the platform is in Bulgarian and is easy to download resources. Relatively popular is also the answer that is easy to login and register, but it could be concluded that the first two advantages are seen as the most important for the respective platforms.

Table 1. Main advantages of Moodle and the NSA platform for distance learning

Main advantages of the basic platform used	in SU	in NSA
Is easy to download resources	56.7%	53.8%
It is in Bulgarian	48.1%	58.0%
The registration/login are easy and simple	35.2%	42.7%
It gives access to already recorded lections	34.8%	23.8%
Is user friendly/The orientation in the learning materials is easy	31,8%	40.6%
There are no advantages	12.0%	9.8%

These should be considered not only as advantages of the both systems but as important characteristics that obviously should have any platform for distance learning, at least according to these students because big part of the students recognize them as

advantages. However, the characteristics marked as advantages that are preferred by smaller share of respondents could not be considered automatically as unimportant to them. It is possible still that these are important advantages for the platforms for distance learning in general, but these platforms just do not possess them.

The hypothesis that there is another type of advantages that are appreciated by the students, could be tested trough the question for the platform's disadvantages. This question shows what the respective platform lacks of, but the students expect to have. In both universities the main disadvantage is that the platforms work slowly/ crash frequently (Table 2). This is indeed serious disadvantage as it practically does not allow the system to work properly. That is why is not surprising that this is defined as the worst disadvantage in both universities. On the other side, this disadvantage is not an essential characteristic of the respective platform, but is caused by problems with the technical support, i.e. can be easily fixed.

Table 2. Main disadvantages of Moodle and the NSA platform for distance learning

Main disadvantages of the basic platform used	in SU	in NSA
It works slowly/crashes frequently	56.8%	81.1%
The access to the system is uneasy		45.5%
The communication with lecturers is uneasy	35.6%	28.0%
The communication with other students is uneasy	34.3%	
There are no disadvantages	14.4%	7.0%

The other potential disadvantages are connected to the characteristics of the platforms as such but are chosen by relatively smaller number of students. Some of these disadvantages could be seen as such for the mere reason that the students do not know the full functionality of the system. Such example could be the disadvantage "the communication with lecturers/other students is uneasy", chosen by 35.6% and 34.3% of SU students respectively. The SU platform, Moodle, gives at least two options for chat (group and personal) that can be initialized by the part of the student, not to mention the options for communication during the live sessions of the virtual classroom. It is very probable that the students just do not know about them, so they consider them as absent. In this aspect, a very important recommendation should be the potential training for students and possibly lecturers to work with the respective platform so they can use all their functions properly.

The last indicator that would be analyzed in this paper refers to that if the students would prefer the distance learning against the traditional educational process. As can be seen in the Figure 2 in both universities, the students who support the full conversion to distance learning are the minority. The majority however does not fully reject the distance learning but prefers a mixed variant: real educational process with the possibility to use

the resources online of the distance learning. This means again that the technical issues of distance learning are crucial for its choice/acceptance by the students.

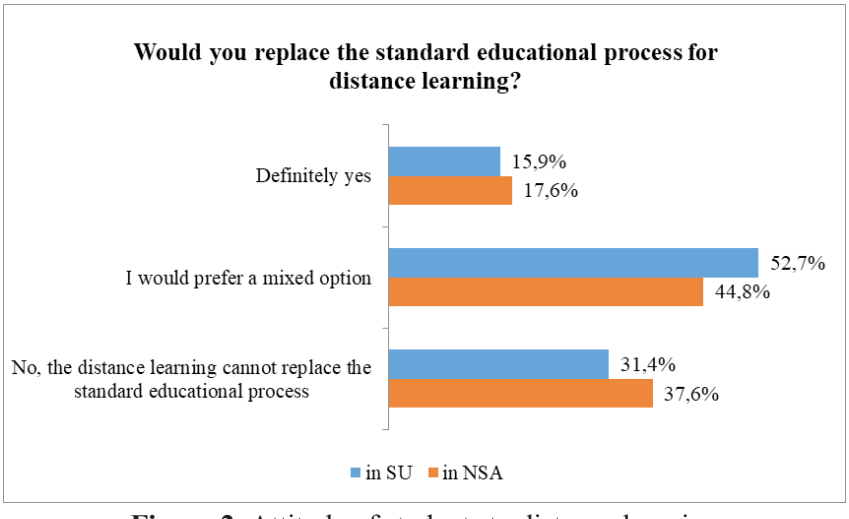

Figure 2. Attitude of students to distance learning

Discussion

Despite the experience gained, a large part of the higher education institutions in Bulgaria turned out to be unprepared for the mass development of distance learning. The adaptation of online learning to the needs of students and specific educational environments was accompanied by difficulties of various kinds. Some of them were related to the adaptation of curricula and the development of electronic learning materials of different type.

A serious problem of distance learning in the state of emergency was the technical provision of the types of online environments and electronic platforms used by the students. Many of them did not meet the quality criteria of online training and caused problems in the course of education. Another much worse scenario for the distance learning models would be if students have no distance learning at all. While some students indeed mentioned in the spontaneous answers that they still did not have any form of distance learning, most of them have it.

Also, according to the distribution of answers of the question for all the platforms used, the average number of answers per students is two, which means that most of the students have to use no more than two platforms.

Undoubtedly, the organization and conduction of distance learning during a pandemic is a challenge for both teachers and students in Bulgaria and worldwide. There are a number of positive and negative aspects of this type of training in the

specific social situation, which have to be analyzed and commented in the future. However, it is an indisputable fact that the realization of distance learning also has its moral aspects, which directly affect the thinking of students and teachers, forming certain attitudes and behavioral models.

Conclusions

– During the pandemic, the students of both universities used different types of specialized distance learning platforms and other applications for online communication and exchange of information.

– And as a consequence of this, it can be concluded that the distance learning during the quarantine differs from the traditional methods of distance learning where the courses generally are concentrated in one place (one platform) that is also basic channel of communication between lecturers and students. This variety of platforms and channels of communication is due the urgency of introduction of the distance learning during the pandemic.

– No matter the technical variety, the main platform used in both researched universities is the one supported by the university.

– The students' opinions about the advantages and disadvantages of the main platforms practically coincide. This means that the students in both universities appreciate and respectively do not approve identical characteristics of the platforms that are important to them in general as they have an impact on the educational process as such.

– Students do not prefer the form of distance learning to the standard classroom education.

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NOTES

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