A Comparative Study into the Major Problems with Online Learning at International Balkan University (North Macedonia) and Gazi University (Turkey)

Full professor Zühal Topçu; Associate professor Ana Kechan
Gazi University; International Balkan University
ztopcu06@gmail.com; a.kechan@ibu.edu.mk
Turkey; North Macedonia

ABSTRACT

Much of the world changed with the outbreak of the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic and education was no exception. The transition from the traditional classroom and model of learning to the online one was a challenge for both students and teachers, at all levels of education. The survey we conducted aimed at answering two research questions, the first one investigating the main problems with online learning from the students' perspective, and the second was trying to get feedback from the students on how some of these issues (and which) might have been/be overcome with the help of the professors and the university as a whole. The research also presents a comparative study between two universities from two different countries – International Balkan University from Skopje (North Macedonia) and Gazi University from Ankara (Turkey). An online questionnaire was administered to undergraduate and postgraduate students at these universities, and the results were surprising in the fact that all students, regardless of location or age, had exactly the same problems. Suggestions on overcoming the problems varied, but conclusions could be made to address and tackle the difficulties for the upcoming semester/s of online learning.

Keywords: E-education, online education, online learning, traditional classroom.

1. INTRODUCTION

As the world, in all its segments, was struck by the pandemic in early 2020, one of the areas most heavily affected by change was education. The first quarter of 2021 sees the third semester of online teaching for universities around the world. Both professors and students are growing accustomed and more comfortable with online teaching/learning, yet questions remain as to how the students are coping with problems brought on by this transition and how we, the professors and universities, can help alleviate some of those problems, if they are within our scope and abilities for amendment.

The research we conducted in the winter of 2020 aims at specifically answering those two questions – what are the top problems the students are faced with and how we can help. The research also presents a comparative look at the students of two universities, from two different countries – North Macedonia and Turkey. This paper is going to give a brief overview of online learning, followed by the individual results from the two universities and then a comparison of the same.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The terms commonly used for online learning are varied, thus disabling any kind of generic definition. According to Anderson (2008, 16), those terms include e-learning, Internet learning, distributed leaning, networked learning, tele-learning, virtual learning, computer-assisted learning, web-based learning, and distance learning. What they have in common is that the learner is at a distance from the instructor and that he/she uses some form of technology to gain access to the learning materials.

Furthermore, when it comes to the term e-learning, some specialists, as cited in Brandabur (2011, 1) feel that it is misused and misguiding as the e-learning systems provide services for both students and teachers and we should therefore use the more appropriate term *e-education* which can be defined by a simple equation: e-education= e-learning + e-teaching.
Learning from a distance or without physical presence is not a recent invention. At the turn of the millennium, with the advance of technology, universities started embracing distance learning, yet, as it is widely recognized historically, universities have designed and built pedagogies, reward systems, organizational structures, procedures, and policies to facilitate face-to-face modes of education (Howard et al. 2004, vi). This is very slow to change and continues even now, in the third decade of the new millennium, as the belief that face-to-face instruction or tutoring is the most effective way to teach is still the accepted tenet of quality education at most institutions (Lynch 2012, 2).

The critical fact, therefore, is that in the past two decades, (and more prominently since 2010) what was evident in was a surge in distance learning, where the majority of online courses still continued behaviors desirable in traditional forms of education, thus often diminish[ing] the potential educational advantages brought by the technologies used for distance education [ibid.].
This is further supported by findings of various research from the previous century that learning is influenced more by the content and instructional strategy in the learning materials than by the type of technology used to deliver instruction (2008, 15).
According to Bonk and Reynolds, as cited in Anderson (16) online learning must create challenging activities that enable learners to link new information to old; acquire meaningful knowledge; and use their metacognitive abilities. This appear to be the major issue with online learning – the adaptation of materials for this kind of learning and the rising to the challenges of online learning by the professors/educators/instructors.

Should these two areas be successfully addressed, online learning can provide a multitude of benefits for both the students and the professors, some of which include access to learning and professionals at any time, from any location, while the students are on their jobs or in their homes. Learning is better contextualized and contemporized and these are two crucial conditions for successful learning. Furthermore, in many instances, online learning offers the potential of individualizing the learner's experience so that he/she is always dealing with material at the right level of difficulty (Means et al. 2014, 5).
If we add to these advantages those of entertainment, publishing learner work, creating community, as well as easier management and organization of learning, online or e-learning can be a tremendous asset in the learning process. And this is not limited to only the use of Internet, although the variety of Internet sources to be used is plentiful (translators, blogs, news websites, games, podcasts, poster websites, wikis), but to the use of different software (apps, e-books, electronic dictionaries, interactive fiction, mind-mapping software, presentation software, quiz-making software, to name but a few) and hardware (DVDs, interactive whiteboards, voice recorders, webcams, etc.) (Stanley 2013, 148).

Most of these elements, however, need either training to use or time to learn. The pandemic, needless to say, threw many higher education institutions into the fire without much or any preparation at all, and juggling the adaptation of not just the educational institutions we belong to, but to a drastically different mode of existence, was bound to create many issues. Online education is less problematic when it is made as a conscious choice on the part of the participants in it. In this case, however, this mode of learning was imposed by the pandemic, making the adaptation and transition very abrupt.

Our research aimed at precisely pinpointing the issues our students had in the past two semesters of online learning, and getting their perspective as to how we, the professors/educators[1] and higher educational institutions can help alleviate some of those problems.

3. METHODOLOGY

The aim of our survey was to examine what the students' perceptions are concerning the major problems with online learning and suggesting possible solutions to, at least, some of those problems. The survey focuses on two countries currently offering university classes online. By comparing these two countries, many similarities arose.

Research questions

1. What are the top three problems university students have with online learning?
2. What solutions to they propose to these problems?

Data collection

The survey was conducted online and the following were different problem areas presented to the students. The same were created with the help of the students themselves, prior to the survey, to ensure that no issue or concern was overlooked.

Table 1: Problems with online learning

1. Electricity availability (periods of electricity outage during times when you had lessons)
2. Internet connection (unstable connection, no connection)
3. Hardware availability (laptop, Personal Computer, functioning camera & microphone)
4. Privacy (not having your own room, having to be with other people in a room)
5. Professor availability (not being able to get in touch with your teacher/professor)
6. Missing your colleagues and the social interactions with them
7. Missing the support from your professors
8. Feeling generally demotivated to study
9. Finding it hard to stay focused on the online lectures
10. Not feeling comfortable talking to a screen or turning on the camera
11. Having a lot more assignments compared to the traditional way of teaching

Several general problem areas were thus covered:
a) external factors which have no relation to the learning process, such as electricity and internet availability.
b) internal factors, such as motivation, focus and adapting (or struggling to adapt) to the online mode of learning,
c) factors related to the physical, face-to-face, mode of learning, such as direct contact with both professors and colleagues.

The survey was conducted using Google forms and the students were asked to identify their 3 (three) biggest problems with online learning in the past two semesters. As the other focus of the survey was to also get students' perspective on possible solutions to these problems, for us, the researchers, a point of great interest

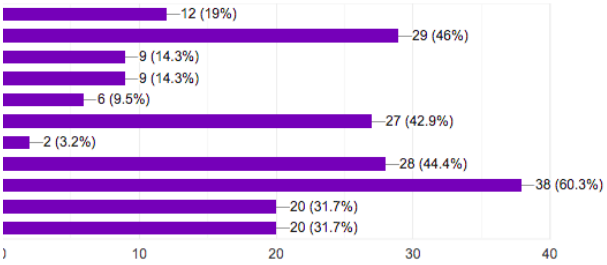
[1] Throughout the text, the terms *professor* and *educator* are used as a single compound, to suggest that our role as professors at a higher education institution should be regarded as a much more general role, that of educators.

was the question in which of the three afore-mentioned areas (a, b, c) lay the biggest problems. The reason behind our interest in this was rather obvious – if the majority of the problems lay in the area of external factors, we are helpless in our efforts to make the learning experience for the students more enjoyable. However, if the majority of the problems lay in the areas of internal factors and particularly in the areas of teacher availability and contact, there is a lot we, as professors/educators, can do to help our students.

4. RESULTS – PROBLEMS WITH ONLINE LEARNING

4.1 Findings at International Balkan University

The participants from North Macedonia included 63 students from the International Balkan University in Skopje, from both undergraduate (2nd, 3rd and 4th year students) and graduate levels (MA students).

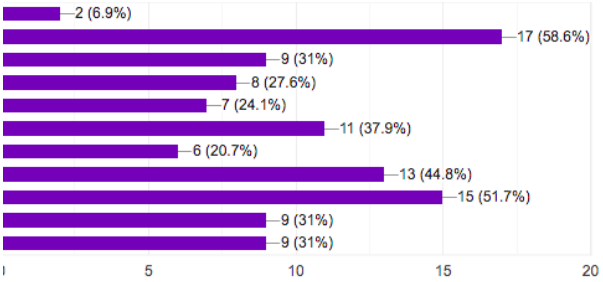


Graph 1: Problems by IBU students

As can be seen from the graph above, the problem areas for these students are very evident and they include not three, but four specific problems. The major problem by far is problem no. 9 – finding it hard to stay focused on the online lectures. The second biggest problem is problem no. 2 – Internet connection. The third major problem is almost a tie with the fourth and those are problems no. 8 and 6 – feeling generally demotivated to study and missing colleagues and social interactions with them.

4.2 Findings at Gazi University

The participants from Turkey included 30 students from Gazi University in Ankara, also from undergraduate and graduate levels.



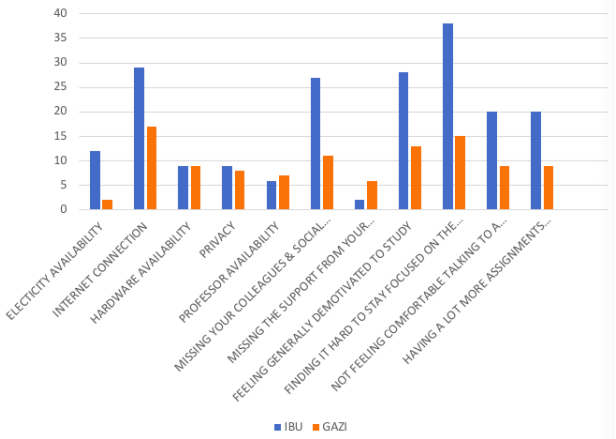
Graph 1: Problems by Gazi University students

The graph above shows the three (or, to be more precise, four) biggest problems by the students at Gazi University are identical to those of the students at International Balkan University.

Namely, the major problem students at Gazi University had with online learning is problem no. 2 – Internet connection, followed by problem no. 9 - finding it hard to stay focused on the online lectures in the second position. The third major problem is problem no. 8 – feeling generally demotivated to study, followed closely by problem no. 6 – missing colleagues and social interactions with them.

4.3 Discussion

The findings of our research were both eye-opening and surprising, in that all students, regardless of level of study or country of origin, had identical problems with online learning.
The first and the second major problem were identical, with the only difference being that Gazi University students having problem no. 2 as their biggest problem and IBU students having problem no. 9 as their biggest problem, with no. 2 following as the second major problem.
Another interesting finding was that both problems no. 8 and 6 came in as third and fourth major problems, with only a slight preference for no. 8 by both groups of students.
Even though our focus was on the biggest problems, it is worth noting that problem no. 7 – missing the support from your professors – came in last and second to last, respectively, showing encouraging information that the professors did their best to support the students through the transition.

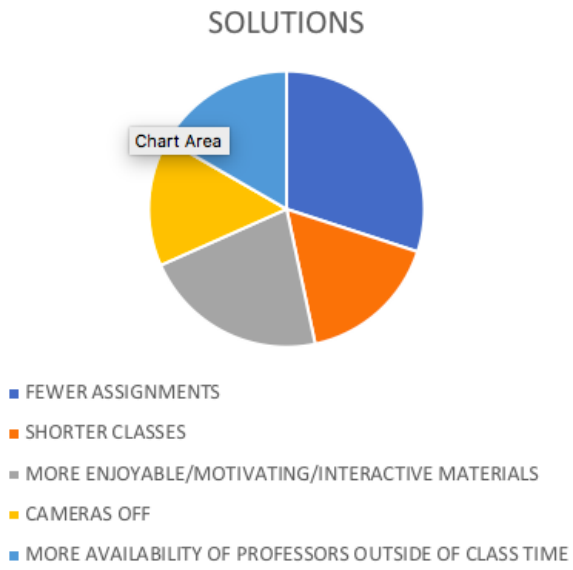


4.4 A conclusion about the problems with online learning

As stated previously, the problem areas of both groups of students, coming from two different universities and two different countries, turned out to be exactly the same. They also happen to belong to all three of the problem areas stated in the beginning of this article. The major problems are internet availability (external factor) and finding it hard to focus on online lectures (internal factor).
The two second major problems – the feeling of general demotivation to study and missing the social interaction with their colleagues are a combination of internal factors and inability to adapt to the lack of direct contact with colleagues.
Whereas one of these – Internet availability - is beyond our control as professors/educators, the issues with focus on the online lectures and demotivation are definitely something we can help our students with. This is encouraging, because each of us can help students overcome at least half of the major issue with online learning. What is also interesting is the fact that many of these issues experienced by the students who were involved in our study, are also the same or very similar to the problems experienced in general by students in an online learning university setting, as presented in Mahlangu (2018).

5. RESULTS – SOLUTIONS TO PROBLEMS WITH ONLINE LEARNING

Next, we turned to the same students for their suggestions to how we, the professors/educators and the higher education institutions, can help alleviate some of their problems and make the experience of online learning more enjoyable.
Even though this was a single, open-ended question in which the students were asked to provide 3 specific solutions to their problems with online learning, similarities in their answers were obvious and thus their solutions could be categorized as follows:



Those proposed solutions that fall outside of the scope of the abilities or power of the professors and the universities, such as going back to face-to-face learning or at least blended learning, were not included in the analysis.
The large majority of students stated that in the given situation of learning from home, they were given a disproportionate amount of assignments and homework as compared to the traditional way of learning. Many stated that this was one of the reasons they felt unmotivated and more anxious. They, therefore, asked for fewer assignments to be given, along with more flexible deadlines.
Also, many students suggested a shortening of class time to an hour maximum, due to two reasons: one was the strain they felt from staring at a screen for extended periods of time. The second reason was that they felt the lectures were too unmotivating, uninteresting and not interactive enough, and suggested more enjoyable, motivating and interactive materials to be presented to them.

The issue with the cameras being turned on or off during lectures had mixed responses. Even though some students asked for the professors' cameras to be on all the time, they suggested that they, the students, should not be asked to turned theirs on, for different reasons (being shy, wanting to be more comfortable, not having privacy).
In addition, although professor availability was the least of their problems, the students did ask for scheduled consultations during the week in which they could address any issues with the assigned professor, as well as generally asking that the professors are more understanding, more empathetic and less demanding.

It is interesting to note that there were students who took this opportunity to share that they struggled quite a bit with the transition from traditional to online learning. Also, there were students who said that they felt the professors and the university did all in their power to help them make the transition less stressful.

Related to this, many of the students saw going back to face-to-face learning as the only solution to all of their problems, further supporting the idea presented at the beginning of this text.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Those of us involved in this research started off from a point of genuine interest and concern for our students' issues raised by online learning. We were also prepared to take into consideration their ideas for solutions and since this research was conducted, have tried our best to do so.
Several conclusions were of significant importance, the main one being that we, the professors and the institutions we belong to, can indeed alleviate not just some, but most of the problems our students are facing with online learning.

We can reconsider our teaching approaches, adapt them to the new reality of online learning and incorporate both more motivating and interactive materials, as well as try to be more flexible and understanding towards our students as they, too, struggle to adapt to this new reality.
When we adapt the materials, we should also keep in mind the focus of our students, as longer lectures – of over an hour – seem to be both difficult to focus on as well as overburdening and unmotivating. The same is true for the assignments and homework we assign. Adding more assignments and homework seems to have an opposite effect on the students and rather than helping them learn more, it actually frustrates them and further demotivates them.

While both the professors and the students would ideally be able to see each other during online lectures, the reality is that many, in both groups, simply do not have either the space, the privacy or the willingness to do so. However, whenever possible, we can add a bit of human touch of online lectures by turning the cameras on.
Finally, we as professors need to understand and empathize with our students and make ourselves more available by setting scheduled consultation hours, outside of class time, for group or individual meetings and consultations.

To conclude, our recommendations mirror Veletsianos' (2020, 2) - that everyone involved in online education, including instructors, researchers, administrators, instructional designers, directors of centers of teaching and learning, policymakers, entrepreneurs, technology developers, and higher education consultants, need to better understand the needs and experiences of our students. We also believe that our research is a good step in that direction, although much remains to be done.

REFERENCES

Anderson, T. (2008). The Theory and Practice of Online Learning. Edmonton, AU Press.
Brandabur, R.E. (2011). Perception of E-Learning Among University Teachers. Proceedings from the 7th International Scientific Conference "E-Learning and Software for Education", Bucharest.
Howard C., Schenk K., Discenza R. (2004). Distance Learning and University Effectiveness: Changing Educational Paradigms for Online Learning. London, Information Science Publishing.
Lynch, Maggie McVay (2004). A Guide to Success in the Virtual Classroom. London, RoutledgeFalmer.
Mahlangu, V.P. (2018). The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly of Distance Learning in Higher Education. DOI: 10.5772/intechopen.75702
Means B., Bakia M., Murphy R. (2014). Learning Online: What Research Tells us About Whether, When and How. New York, Routledge.
Stanley, G. (2013). Language Learning with Technology. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Veletsianos, G. (2020). Learning Online: The Student Experience. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press.