Research Article

Challenges and Problems of Online Learning - Case Study of Albanian Students

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Abstract

Since the beginning of first quarantine on March 2020 and until today, the universities in Albania have remained closed, as they are considered a major threat of spreading coronavirus infection. Online learning has been associated with many challenges and difficulties for both students and professors. The purpose of this study is to identify and analyze the main problems that students have encountered during online learning. We designed a questionnaire which contains 21 questions, through the QuestionPro program. The questionnaire was sent to all students of the Agricultural University of Tirana and was completed by 687 students. Data were collected via email through a period of time of two weeks. The research methodology is descriptive analysis. The results showed that 71% of students use a smartphone to attend classes. 28% of students have problems with the electronic device they use and 9% of them share it with other family members. 66% of students have often technical problems during e-learning. 55% of them have complained about the uncomfortable and noisy environment at home. Students complain as well about low technical support from university. Online learning has also been associated with limitations in terms of interactivity. 46% of students indicated that they rarely or never talk to classmates and 75% rarely or never talk to professors during e-classes. In addition, a major part of the students has expressed that they have problems with internet bill payments and health problems, mainly headaches and eye problems. Uncertain about the next academic year, this study will help us to understand and improve the effectiveness of online teaching.

Keywords: COVID-19, e-learning, challenges of online learning, student

JEL Codes: A2, A20

Introduction

March 2021 marked one year into the pandemic caused by Coronavirus, which collapsed the whole world since the beginning of March 2020. The fast spreading of Covid-19 impacted all schools and universities in almost every country, forcing them to stay closed and switch to remote learning. Lockdown created a catastrophic education emergency worldwide. Major changes were caused to students' life affecting them financially, mentally and academically.

Globally, 214 million students from pre-primary to upper secondary education in 23 countries have missed at least three-quarters of classroom instruction time at the pre-primary to upper secondary level since March 2020. Schools for more than 168 million children globally have been completely closed for almost an entire year due to COVID-19 lockdowns, according to data released by UNICEF. Furthermore, around 214 million children globally – or 1 in 7 – have missed more than three-quarters of their in-person learning. (UNICEF, March 2021). Universities shifted as well to distance classroom and the majority of them are still closed.

In Albania, schools from primary to high school (K-1 to K-12) were partially closed and combined online learning with reduced face to face learning. Regarding universities in Albania, they were totally shut down and until today they continue to remain closed. All college students are out of classroom right now. Distance learning was accompanied with lot of problems, discontents and difficulties.

Theoritical background

Some organization and universities have actually implemented online learning during the last decades. Online learning refers to a learning environment that uses the Internet and other technological devices and tools for synchronous and asynchronous instructional delivery and management of academic programs (Usher & Barak, 2020; Huang, 2019). Some previous studies show that on average, students retain 25-60% more material when learning online compared to only 8-10% in a classroom. Other studies show that online learning requires 40-60% less time to learn than in a traditional classroom due to the fact that students can learn at their own pace, going back and re-reading, skipping, or accelerating through concepts as they choose. A considerable number of studies were immediately conducted to analyze the problems and challenges of e-learning after the total shut down of universities. Copeland et al. (2021) and Fawaz et al. (2021) examined the impact of COVID-19 on college students' mental health and their coping mechanisms. Copeland et al. (2021) reported that the pandemic adversely affected students' behavioral and emotional functioning, particularly attention and externalizing problems (i.e., mood and wellness behavior), which were caused by isolation, economic/health effects, and uncertainties. In Fawaz et al.'s (2021) study, students raised their concerns on learning and evaluation methods, overwhelming task load, technical difficulties, and confinement. Tang et al. (2020) examined the efficiency of different online teaching modes among engineering

students. The results revealed that students were dissatisfied with online learning in general, particularly in the aspect of communication and question-and-answer modes. Suryaman et al. (2020) looked into how learning occurred at home during the pandemic. Their findings showed that students faced many obstacles in a home learning environment, such as lack of mastery of technology, high Internet cost, and limited interaction/socialization between and among students. We could not find any research regarding the Albanian students to compare the results with.

The purpose of this study is to:

-        Identify and analyze the challenges and difficulties that Albanian students are facing during online learning,

-        To give recommendation to overcome these challenges in the future.

Methode and procedures

The research methodology of this study is descriptive analysis. Data were collected via email through a period of time of two weeks during May 2021. We designed a questionnaire which contains 21 questions, through QuestionPro program. The questionnaire was sent to all students of the Agricultural University of Tirana and was completed by 687 students from a total of 14 000. We noticed a low interest of students to complete the questionnaire, especially by students of third year of Bachelor and second year of Master.

Results

Agricultural University of Tirana has 6 faculties. The biggest one is the Faculty of Economy and Agribusiness, therefore the highest number of responses (67%) came from this faculty. As mentioned before, students of the first and second year of Bachelor were the most interested on fulfilling the questionary (73% of responses come from this category) comparing to the students of the third year of Bachelor and Master students. Below we have listed the main questions that clearly help us to identify the main problems that students are facing during e-learning.

1. **Do you have access to at least one device to attend online learning?**

Since lot of families lack electronic devices, we asked students if they have access to at least one device to attend online learning. 9% of students share the device with other family members. This makes it difficult for them to reconciliate with their family members and participate in class all the time. 28% of students are using devices that technically do not work well and due to low incomes, they cannot afford buying new ones.
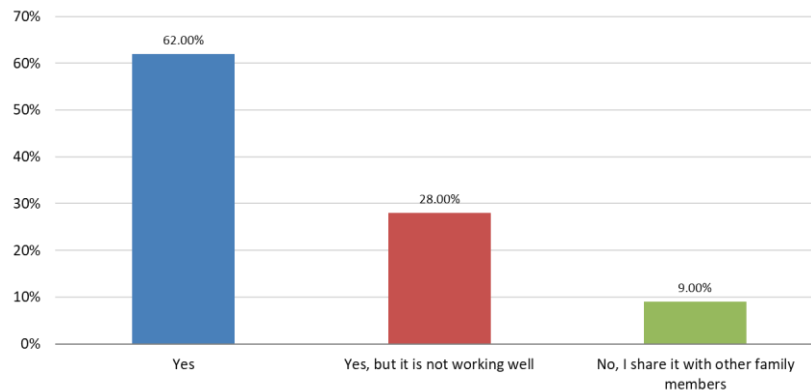
Figure 1. Access to device

Source: Authors

2. What device do you use to attend online learning?

Because of several reasons, most students (71%) use smartphones to attend online learning. The first reason is that they do not own another electronic device. Also, the smartphone is simpler and more practical to use, especially if students are not home while attending classes.

The second most used device is laptop (27%) and a small percentage of students use desktop and tablet.
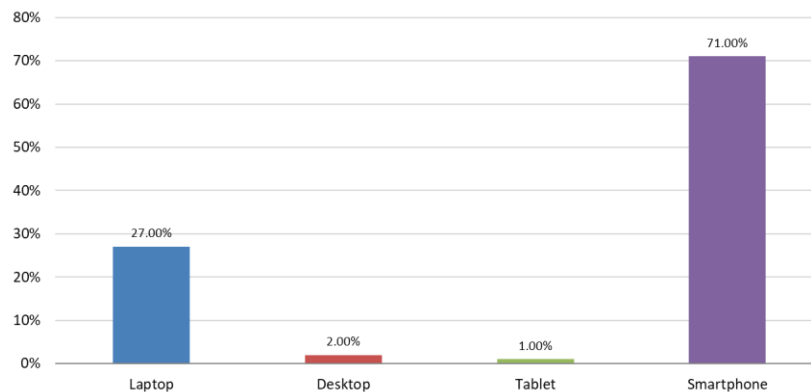

Figure 2. Use of online learning

Source. Authors

3. Do you have technical problems with your internet connection while learning online? (1- Always, 2- Very Often, 3- Often, 4- Rarely, 5- Never)

Switching to online learning has led to an increase in the demand for internet service at home because it is very essential to attend classes. Unfortunately, internet infrastructure in Albania is still not fully developed all over the country, especially in rural areas. Results of the questionnaire showed that 27% of the

students live in rural areas. They have no to limited access to the internet. Even on urban areas, students repeatedly have no high-speed connection and not everyone can keep connected to learning platforms. It is very concerning the fact that 66% of the students have technical problems with the internet connection during online learning.
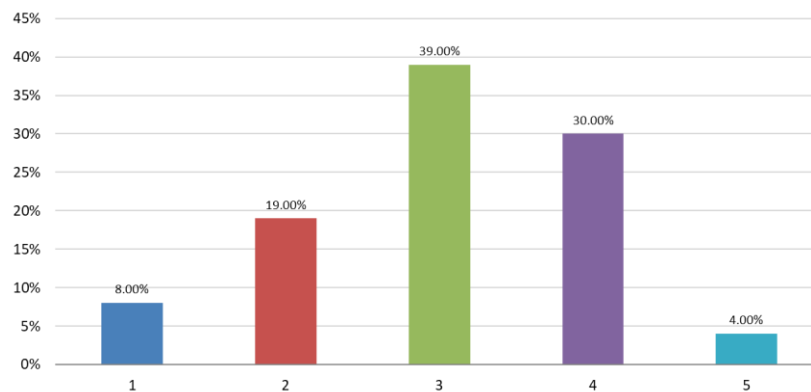

Figure 2. Technical Problems

Source: Authors

4. **Is your home environment noisy when you attend online learning? (1-Always, 2- Very Often, 3- Often, 4- Rarely, 5- Never)**

Learning environment plays a crucial role in students understanding and performance while online learning. Another problem that we identified during this study is that 55% of students are learning in poor environment that are uncomfortable, loud, or full of distractions, which makes it more difficult to absorb information and stay engaged in class.
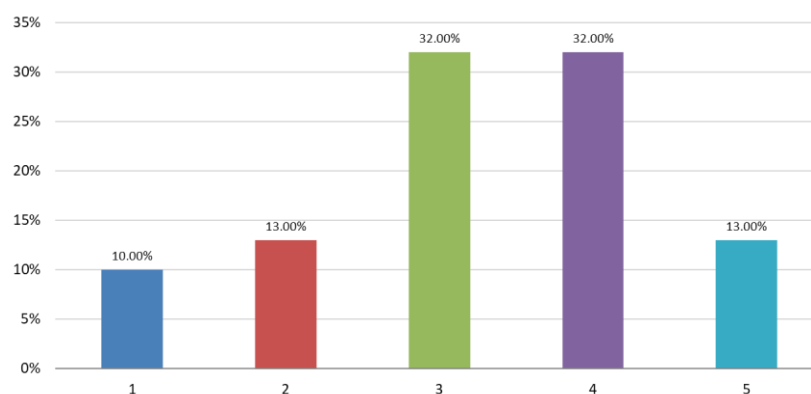

Figure 3. Learning environement

Source: Authors

5. **To what extent do you rate the technical support that the university has provided to you during online learning? (1- Very low, 2- Low, 3- Medium, 4- High, 5- Very high)**

Pandemic has been a very difficult time for both universities and students. Students were asked to rate the (technical) support that university and professors have provided to them during distance learning. 40% of students said that the support provided by university is low. Majority of students expressed that university should had provided laptops to those who do not own one or at least lower the annual fee in order for them to afford buying laptops and paying increasing internet bills. However, the IT team continues to improve the systems and assist campus members and students with their technological and virtual needs.
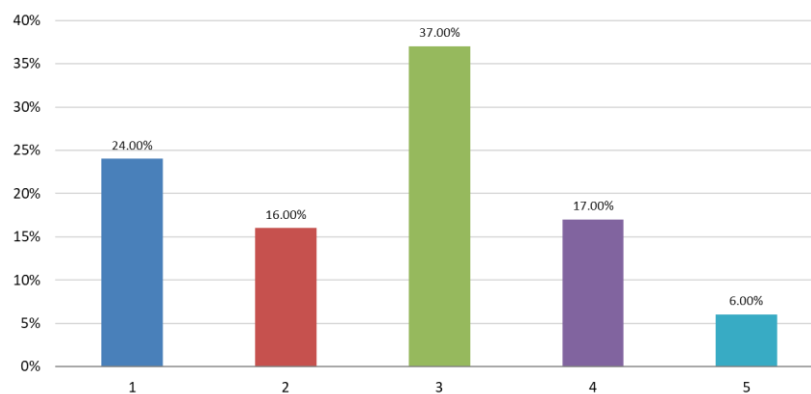

Figure 4. Technical support

Source: Authors

6. **To what extent do you rate the support that professors have provided to you during online learning? (1- Very low, 2- Low, 3- Medium, 4- High, 5- Very high)**

The truth is that students are in a crisis. They all need support from families and professors. Now more than ever, teachers and professors are an important part of facilitating student learning, well-being and growth. 84% of students reported that the level of support that professors has given to them is moderate to high.
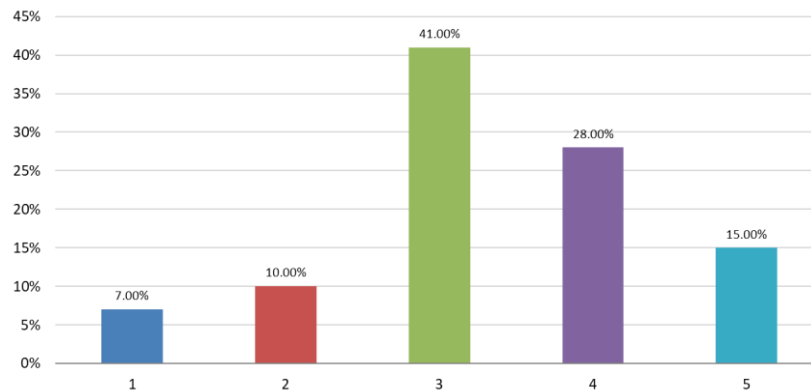
Figure 5.Support from professors

Source: Authors

Beside the above, other challenges of online learning are:

-        **Lack of interactivity:** Face to face communication is gone. Students cannot easily ask a question to their teachers as they do in class and for teachers is very difficult to get a feedback from the students. Almost 100% of students keep their camera closed which worsen the situation. There are also limited to no social interaction with their classmates. Studies have showed that lack of interaction can seriously affect the mental and emotional health and bring the feeling of loneliness for both students and teachers. 46% of students said that they talk rarely to never with their classmates during online learning and 75% of them talk rarely to never to their teacher.

-        **Effectiveness of learning:** 51% of students said that online learning is not effective. For many students, it is only a formality and cannot substitute the regular learning. They expressed that some teachers only share material to students without teaching it, which makes it very difficult for students to understand the lessons. Students were also asked if they were comfortable with the platforms / applications that their professors use for online learning and 79% of them responded 'Yes'. The most used and preferred platforms are Zoom and Google meet/classroom (80%).

-        **Level of stress:** Covid-19 has made life and school more stressful for students. The sense of isolation when they cannot go outside performing their favorite hobbies and activities as much as before and not being able to be around their classmates and friends has impacted student's mental health. 63% of the students have reported high level of stress during online learning. They feel less motivated, concentrated and complain about homework load.

-        **Health problems:** 71% of the students spend on average 3-6 hours per day on online learning. Beside stress, a high number of students reported to increasing health problems such as headache and problems with the eyes.

-        One of the positive sides of online learning, according to 55% of students, is the fact that they were able to **save money** on accommodation, food and

transportation to the university and being able to work and generate incomes for themselves and their families while attending online classes at the same time.

Conclusions

As the results showed, education has changed drastically and its transformation from traditional to online learning is accompanied with lot of difficulties and challenges for Albanian students and not only. The main challenge is the lack of electronic means and limited to no access to the internet because of the poor internet infrastructure and expensive internet service.

Finding reliable internet may be the least of a student's worries if they don't have a device to connect with in the first place. Even if they do, they may have to share with other family members who are also attending school online or who have been forced to start working from home. 71% of students use smartphones to attend classes, instead of more adequate devices such as laptop. 28% of students reported that their device has technical problems and 9% of students who participated on the study share the device with their family members.

On the other hand, 55% of students are learning in uncomfortable and loud environment at home which makes them struggle to participate and engage in digital learning.

Even though their university is using the best platforms to perform online learning like Zoom or Google meet, it is still not considered effective for 51% of students.

Students find Zoom lessons hard to get into with the distraction of smartphones and televisions in the same room. They also find it hard to concentrate and do not feel motivated during online learning. Online learning does not only limit the social interaction of students, it also leads to an increased risk of loneliness and isolation. Numerous students find online learning significantly more difficult. A high number of students reported a worsening in their mental health and stress level, as well health complications such as headaches and eye problems. If the next academic year continues online, 58% of students would expect bad this decision. As we are not confident to say if it will continue in distance or in class, we asked students to give *recommendation* that will help improving the effectiveness of online learning. Some recommendations are as below:

- Students, with low incomes families, are struggling with poor functioning devices and internet bills; therefore, government and university should assist a part of their expenses.
- Cameras play an important role in interactivity so it is advisable that students and professors keep them open during online classes.
- Subjects of applied sciences should consider video-recording lessons or using platforms as Whiteboard, as a high number of students often lose attention (because of poor internet service or cut of electricity) and it becomes very difficult for them to understand the lessons.
- Professors should find ways to encourage and motivate students to engage and participate actively during online classes.

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- Staying in front of devices for up to six hours is very exhausting, worsening concentration and causing health problems. For that reason, the average daily load should be maximum 4 hours.

On the other side, as students return to their classrooms, university will need support and lot of efforts to readjust and catch up on their learning. School reopening plans must incorporate efforts to recover students' lost education.

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