Students' Challenges and Experiences with Digital Teaching and Learning During COVID-19 Pandemic: A Case of Albania

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Abstract

COVID-19 pandemic unexpectedly forced universities to implement digital teaching and learning toward students from Spring 2020 onwards. Many of the higher education institutions were unprepared to foster such forms of teaching and learning thus exposing both teachers and students toward many challenges with digital education. The aim of this study was to examine students' experiences and challenges with online teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Next, this work also aimed at exploring gender differences on these challenges with digital teaching and learning among university students. Using a quantitative research design, an online questionnaire was distributed among 458 students (19.2% males, 80.8% females) studying in different universities in Albania. The results showed that students ($N = 451$) have experienced challenges at a moderate level not encountering many technical issues or distractors during their online learning. However, the majority of respondents, around 60%, reported that they did not have a very good experience with digital teaching and learning. They encountered above-average difficulties, particularly with course instructors not staying in regular contact with students ($N = 226$, 50.1%) and not providing adequate support ($N = 202$, 44.8%). The results also revealed significant gender differences in students' experiences with digital teaching and learning ($p = .037$), with female students experiencing more challenges than their male counterparts. In conclusion, this study indicates that students faced numerous challenges with online learning during the pandemic, which adversely affected their academic performance.

Keywords: higher education, difficulties, online learning, lockdown

1. Introduction

In March 2020, the previously unknown coronavirus (COVID-19) was declared as a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO 2020). Apart from different measures, in July 2020, the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2020a) claimed that around 111 countries were forced to close the schools, thus leaving more than 1 billion

students and millions of teachers shift into online learning and teaching process. The entire global education system was detrimentally affected by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

Especially, the traditional schools had to adjust their education process transforming them into full-time virtual schools. Therefore, both students and teachers had to be faced with many challenges due to the shift from face-to-face learning and teaching to online or digital learning and teaching (Yan et al., 2020). Not only the K-12 students, but also the University students lacked prior online learning experience, thus exposing them towards several vulnerabilities such as a decrease in their academic achievement (Omar et al., 2021), lack of self-regulated learning skills (Pelikan et al., 2021) and low motivation (Maatuk et al., 2022, Uka, 2023).

Online learning has been adopted as an alternative way of learning by higher education institutions all around the world to keep students engaged with the ongoing education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Even though many studies have been conducted to reveal about students' experiences with online learning, still few studies exist and report about their experiences with digital learning (i.e., K-12 student population, professional education), especially when focusing to university students (i.e., undergraduate and graduate students). The Albanian teachers and students were faced for the first time with this mode of teaching and learning in the Albanian education system. Many of the higher education institutions were unprepared to foster such forms of teaching and learning thus exposing both teachers and students toward many challenges with digital education.

This study explores university students' reactions to the compulsory fulltime online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study relied on "Learning under COVID-19 conditions" conducted in Albania during the COVID-19 pandemic. For this purpose, a survey study at a national level was conducted to better understand the online learning experience and their challenges with this form of learning among 458 university students in Albania. The primary purpose of this study was to investigate students' experiences and challenges with online teaching and learning during COVID-19 pandemic. Next, this work also aimed at exploring gender differences on these challenges with digital teaching and learning among university students.

More specifically, this study aimed to test the following hypotheses: 1) There is a significant negative correlation between university students' challenges with learning from home and their experiences with digital teaching and learning during COVID-19 pandemic; 2) There are significant gender differences on students' challenges with digital teaching and learning during COVID-19 pandemic; 3) There are significant gender differences on students' experiences with digital teaching and learning during COVID-19 pandemic. Though many studies have been conducted to investigate lecturers' and students' experiences with online teaching and learning during the pandemic, very few of them go in more depth of understanding such experiences and associated challenges during COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Academicians' and students' experiences with digital teaching and learning during COVID-19 pandemic

Studies show that the implementation of national lockdown during COVID-19 pandemic brought about a number of challenges for higher education institutions (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2023; Toquero, 2020; Zalat, Hamed & Bolbol, 2021). During this unprecedented time of the pandemic, universities were forced to transition from traditional teaching and learning to online education. University professors and students are typically accustomed to the class-

based teaching and learning and transitioning to this mode of education led to several challenges for both academics and students (Tesar, 2020). Often, they doubt and feel concerned whether online teaching and learning is as effective as class-based education though they already know that face to face teaching and learning is mostly preferred by both professors and students. Such challenges kept increasing especially among low-income countries such as Albania whose universities were unprepared to offer this way of teaching and learning for academics and students.

The gap in having access to e-learning and e-resources was more likely to increase especially between advantaged and disadvantaged students coming from different socio-economic background. Disadvantaged students experienced more lack of resources such as lack of digital devices, internet connection, limited physical space for learning, and difficulties to adjust to the new mode of learning leading to more mental health problems among students when compared to more advantaged students (Mseleku, 2020). A study conducted with a sample of 108 educators and 386 students in Indonesia showed that students struggled to establish a study discipline, stay motivated to accomplish their online assignments and projects, stay connected to the internet and have access to the use of digital tools. This study concluded that students' success was highly related to some key elements such as their educators, learning materials and access to technology. Therefore, students feel the need to stay physically in contact with both peers and instructors. It is well-established that educators play a crucial role during students' learning process which often cannot be replaced by technology (Hermanto & Srimulyani, 2021).

The universities in Albania had not planned to provide any logistical support to students who were from low socio-economic background. Therefore, access to education via online teaching and learning was unevenly distributed among university students. Though online teaching and learning might be considered as an alternative to traditional learning, universities should consider that they will be faced with a lot of challenges. For the academics, the situation was even worse where they had insufficient knowledge and resources about technology as they had no previous experience with online teaching (Chen et al., 2020).

The classes had to be postponed by the professors until they managed to figure out which platform and how they were to conduct the teaching plan online. Additionally, since there was no training provided previously for the academics, they found themselves unprepared to evaluate students' performance online as well as ensure the quality of online teaching, thus, leading to a decrease of student satisfaction (Teräs et al., 2020).

Educational institutions such as universities should be able to provide full access for all by developing online courses and materials tailored according to the educators and students' needs. While aiming at designing strategies for effective learning and teaching, universities should also aim to provide equal opportunities for all students and offer affordable and sustainable programs (Hermanto & Srimulyani, 2021).

3. Methods

3.1. Sample and data collection procedure

This study was conducted as part of the project "Learning during COVID-19" (Pelikan et al., 2021) which included several countries and was led by the University of Vienna. The sample consisted of Albanian university students following a total of 458 students (19.2% males, 80.8% females) with a mean age of 3.71 years. The subjects recruited for the aim of this

study were undergraduate and graduate students studying at both private and public universities in Albania.

The data were collected by means of online questionnaires via Google forms during April-May 2020. Due to the pandemic and the fact that the university buildings were closed-down, the participants were recruited online by distributing the link of the online survey through the student registrar's office of universities in Albania. Participants were informed about the study aims, inclusion criteria for participation, i.e., university students studying at undergraduate and graduate levels in universities in Albania, and they were assured about the confidentiality of their data. Participants were notified that they could withdraw from the study at any time. So, only those who provided a consent to participate in the study were included in the sample.

3.2. Design /Approach

To address the research questions, this study used a quantitative research design that included developing of hypotheses, gathering data, analyzing the data, confirming findings, and drawing conclusions.

3.3. Measurement tool

To address the aim of this study, an online questionnaire was designed on Google forms and it was distributed to the participants via the link. The aim of this survey was to collect information about the participants' challenges and experiences with online teaching and learning in higher education institutions during COVID-19 pandemic in Albania. The information obtained by the respondents relied on self-reported data. The first part of the questionnaire consisted of socio-demographic information about the participants. The second part included mainly single choice questions, with a rating scale from (1) strongly agree to (5) strongly disagree. Some questions included short answers such as those with "Yes or No". As the survey was administered online, the participants were allowed to take more time to fill it in and submit it.

3.4. Measures

Challenges. This variable was measured with quantitative questions including 5 items. The participants reported on their challenges related to (1) how they plan their day, (2) how they need to handle so much else, challenges with technical constraints (e.g., slow internet, lack of appropriate tools for work, ...), (3) not having a workspace where they can work without any interruptions and (4) challenges with so many things distracting them. A 5-point response Likert scale was used to answer these questions (1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = somewhat agree, 4 = disagree, 5 = strongly disagree).

Digital teaching and learning. Four items were used to measure this variable. The respondents reported about their experiences regarding the forms of online teaching and learning currently being used in terms of the statement such as (1) I am able to work well with the forms of digital teaching and learning currently being used; (2) most of my instructors are familiar with digital teaching; (3) I feel well-supported by my course instructors in the current situation; (4) Most of my course instructors keep in regular contact with their students. A 5-point response Likert scale was used to answer these questions (1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = somewhat agree, 4 = disagree, 5 = strongly disagree).

Demographics. The demographic data used in this study included those related to age and gender. The age was provided as information by the participants, whereas the gender was measured by a single choice answer including options as: (1) male; (2) female; (3) and other.

4. Results

4.1. Statistical analysis

To analyze the data, this study used IBM-SPSS statistics version 22. Initially, the data were examined to identify any missing values, outliers, computing scales, checking scale reliability, checking violations of the assumptions for multivariate analyses, transforming the variables of interest, and creating an inter-correlation matrix for all study variables.

Next, correlation analysis (Pearson correlation) was conducted to investigate associations between students' challenges with their learning from home and their experiences with digital teaching and learning during the pandemic.

Finally, an Independent Samples *T*-test was conducted to find out whether there were gender differences on student's challenges with learning from home and their experiences with online teaching and learning during COVID-19 pandemic.

4.2. Descriptive statistics

This work was developed as part of a broader study on "Learning during COVID-19" (Schober et al., 2020) where Albania was a representative country included in this study conducted by the University of Vienna. The sample included Albanian university students with a total of N = 451 students (4% males, 96% females) as indicated in Table1. The sample was representative of undergraduate and graduate students studying at both private (19%) and public (81%) universities in Albania as shown in Tab. 2.

Table 1
Gender distribution (N = 451)

	Gender	**N**
ChallengesLearnHome	Female	431
	Male	20
DigTeachLearn	Female	431
	Male	20

Table 2
Distribution according to the type of university, public vs. private universities (N = 451)

	Type of university	**N**
ChallengesLearnHome	Public University	364
	Private University	87
DigTeachLearn	Public University	364
	Private University	87

4.3. Findings on correlation analysis

As indicated in Tab. 3, Pearson correlation analysis revealed that there is a statistically significant negative correlation between university students' challenges with learning from home and their experiences with digital teaching and learning during COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 3
Correlation between students' challenges with learning from home and experiences with digital teaching and learning during the pandemic

		ChallengesLearnHome	Dig Teach Learn
ChallengesLearnHome	Pearson Correlation	1	-.364**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000
	N	451	451
DigTeachLearn	Pearson Correlation	-.364**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	
	N	451	451

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

4.4. Findings on gender differences

As indicated in Tab. 4, the Independent Samples *T*-test analysis showed that there is a statistically difference among males and females on challenges with learning from home but it is not significant ($p = .7$).

The results also show that there are significant gender differences on students' experiences with digital teaching and learning ($p = .04$) such that females scored higher than males. The effect size *d is* approximately 0.75 which is according to Cohen (1988) large effect.

Table 4
Gender differences on students' experiences with digital teaching and learning

Variable	M(SD)	T	P
Challenges with learning from home		0.66	0.7
Female	3.72 (1.02)		
Male	3.57 (0.94)		
Experiences with digital teaching and learning		3.7	0.04
Female	3.94 (0.87)		
Male	3.19 (1.13)		

Statistical analyses conclude that there is a significant negative correlation between university students' challenges with learning from home and their experiences with digital teaching and learning during COVID-19 pandemic. There are indeed significant gender differences on students' experiences with digital teaching and learning such that females scored higher than males during the quarantine time-span. A statistical difference but not significant was found among males and females on challenges with learning from home.

5. Discussion

This study revealed that the more challenges students experienced during their digital learning, the worse their experience with this form of learning. Among the challenges encountered by the students, there can be mentioned those related to technical problems during online learning, such as slow internet connection and difficulties in setting up the learning platforms. These challenges with technology led to adverse experiences with online learning as indicated in previous studies (Kauffman, 2015; Muilenburg & Berge, 2005).

The challenges and negative experiences with online learning were encountered by both female and male students. This finding is in line with other studies which showed that students were faced with many challenges during their learning as the pandemic was ongoing (Hussein, Daoud, Alrabaiah & Badawi, 2020; Mahyoob, 2020). Therefore, the university authorities should always provide detailed manual or instructions and even technical support for students who are experiencing such problems with online learning platforms.

This study comes along with several limitations.

Firstly, due to the contact constraints during COVID-19 pandemic, this study collected self-reported data via an online survey distributed as Google forms. This method of data collection has its own disadvantages. However, as the participants were assured confidentiality of the data, and the questions did not include any sensitive information, we assume that respondents answered fairly.

Secondly, data collection via online surveys excludes some populations at risk (e.g., those lacking internet connection, or those who have learning difficulties). As this might be a problem encountered by many studies, it is of greater concern in this particular context (learning during COVID-19). However, we believe that considering the large sample size, the study has captured a diverse population of students.

Thirdly, the sample consisted of mainly female students and this is due to the fact that females are over-representative in higher education in Albania. Therefore, the results based on gender differences might have been biased.

The last but not the least, this study relied on quantitative data only, while it could have used qualitative data as well by conducting interviews or by asking more open-ended questions. This was not possible as students were devastated with learning and following their studies online. Therefore, we did not mean to overload or increase their burden of online learning.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings of this study found that students faced numerous challenges during their daily learning routine at home. They often reported struggling with planning their day and staying committed to both their studies and other responsibilities at home. They had very limited access to internet connections or lacked digital devices such as desktops or laptops, especially among students residing in disadvantaged rural areas. For future adoption of online learning, policymakers should especially consider supporting economically disadvantaged students and those living in rural areas.

Next, the educational institutions such as universities should be able to provide the local internet infrastructure. This recommendation needs to be prioritized especially for developing countries, like Albania, where the majority of students claimed that they lacked internet infrastructure.

Apart from technical issues, offering an appropriate online learning platform is also crucial for providing students with a better learning experience. Another recommendation for the governments and universities is to establish an online learning platform that is customized for smartphone-based learning, as the vast majority of students relied on using mainly smartphones for online learning during the pandemic. This recommendation should be considered particularly for students who are forced to stay committed to online learning, as they reported having no access to personal computers (Molnar et al., 2019).

Finally, of an urgent need is also the preparation of the academic staff who have no prior experience with online teaching by providing training sessions on how to use technology in

education. They were also faced with challenges of online teaching relying mainly on virtual connections with the students.

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