

Lecturers' and Students' Viewpoints of Distance Education During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Education is an essential component in maximizing the world's long-term competitiveness and social stability capacity. COVID-19 is now a major international public health crisis for our people, communities, and economies. It has infections and deaths reported worldwide. Learning through distance education is no longer optional; it is now a requirement. The goal of this study is to figure out the lecturers' and learners' perspectives on distance education, including their views on the benefits, drawbacks, and ways to strengthen the programs used throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. The study was carried out in a qualitative manner. To obtain in-depth information, data was obtained from open-ended questions, interview google forms. In Northern Cyprus, this google form was distributed to students and lecturers. The results obtained show that the advantages of distance education learning outnumbered the disadvantages during this pandemic. Proposals were also made by the participants on how distance education learning can be enhanced.

Keywords: COVID-19, Pandemic, Students, Lecturers, Distance Education.

INTRODUCTION

An overwhelming majority of the educational population has moved to distance learning as a consequence of the pandemic of Covid-19. SARS-CoV-2 virus caused the COVID-19 pandemic. This virus was first discovered in December 2019 in Wuhan, China. On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization classified this virus as a pandemic. after it quickly spread across the world and killed a significant number of people (WHO, 2020). Because successful treatments and vaccines have yet to be discovered, many scientists are still working against the clock to discover these (Adnan et al., 2020). So far, the main focus has been on preventing the virus from spreading. Physical and social isolation policies, as well as the provisional closure of campuses, are among COVID-19's security measures (Tian et al., 2020). Amongst the most efficient methods for preventing epidemics from spreading, particularly among students, is to close schools (Jackson et al., 2013).

This COVID-19 epidemic has forced 72 percent of the world's school population to close their doors (UNESCO, 2020a). Governments all over the world commanded that schools should be closed in an attempt to combat the global pandemic. Distance education through online learning is rapidly gaining traction around the world. Higher education is a field that should not be overlooked in the face of the present health malice. Many higher institutions of might see this health problem as an opportunity to try out Distance Education.

Distance education (DE) is not a new concept; it has evolved over several stages as a result of technological advancements over the years. The advent of television in the 1950s and 1960s, computer-based education in the 1970s and 1980s, digital in the 1980s and 1990s, and video conferencing in the 1990s were all phases DE had gone through (Bernard et al., 2004; Kereri, Kennedy & Kereri, 2022).

DE has long been thought of as a supplement to conventional classroom learning. DE used telecommunications to provide information for education (Sun et al., 2008). Thanks to advancements in information and communication technology, DE is now recognized as a new paradigm of modern education. Under the global epidemic of 2020, distance education has emerged as the main educational method. Nonetheless, a number of experts have expressed concerns about DE. Zhong et al. (2020) questioned whether distance education is feasible, comparable to conventional schooling, would dramatically alter the nature of schooling, and would vanish after the pandemic.

Many countries face various obstacles when it comes to distance education (Favale et al., 2020). DE, on the other hand, is needed to make sure that students keep learning throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, many governments are collaborating with their education departments to make standardized home-based learning and instruction accessible (Cao et al., 2020;).

Many colleges integrate online education into their programs with little to no planning, but it was originally

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introduced to help faculty members develop (Abhinandan, 2018). As a result, the skill of the lecturer in Distance Education Learning has become a critical feature of this global epidemic (Alexander et al., 2020). The Internet has rendered it easier to give training less expensive than traditional face-to-face classroom, allowing students to take part in more courses (Murday et al., 2008). Also, students' apprehensions about taking DE courses may be due to perceived needs. In order to promote this method of teaching, IHEs should respond to students' concerns (Mahlangu, 2018). Various studies have been carried out to investigate student and instructor experience with online courses.

According to surveys, students' primary reasons for taking an online course were "self-control" and "flexibility" within the educational environment, as well as the perception that online courses would be a more effective way of learning than conventional educational settings. The terms "self-directed learning" and "price" provide comfort in this situation (Armstrong, 2011). Traditional learners had mixed feelings about the social aspects of online education, but online learners have had more pleasant technical experiences. Despite the fact that online lessons have failed to meet their learning objectives, both students consider online education to be simple but not necessarily beneficial to their education. Since online courses are such an important part of the learning process, educational institutions must acknowledge their significance (Burns, 2013).

Although students are the most enthusiastic about online learning, other stakeholders, such as educators, have conflicting opinions. To ensure a full understanding of a topic, teaching staff can look at "Faculty insights," "mentoring," "training," and "best practices" to see what is actually being discussed and which is a better way of addressing the subject (Agustina and Cahyono, 2017). Many educators believe that by completing a training program, someone can become a professional online instructor and build the best career path as a coach and educator (Billings and Kowalski, 2008). Emphasized the necessity of helping society through online teaching from the teacher's perspective (Conard and Donaldson, 2004). When it comes to successfully managing an online class, there is indeed a huge amount of evidence that supports the idea of "development and training" (DiPietro et al., 2008). Seventy-four percent of online K-12 teachers believe that a promotion enhancement process should be incorporated into the instructional program to help instructors develop their teaching abilities (Ballew 2017).

Several studies have been published that discuss the disadvantages of online learning, arguing that online degree programs are easier, less expensive, and more accessible. As a result, many competitive students in traditional classes have gaps in face-to-face and online lessons, and some learners aren't as good in an online class as they are in a traditional setting (Kebritchi et al., 2017). Learners with a GPA of just

around 2.9 outperformed learners with a GPA of more than 2.9 in online lessons (Sugilar, 2017). Many learners thought that diplomas earned by online courses were inferior to certificates earned by traditional classroom programs. This may have an effect on students' ability to take online courses.

Based on all of these reports, as well as the global outbreak of Covid-19, which compelled academic establishments to provide online courses, it should be obvious that further study into the views of instructors and learners in online lessons is needed. As a result, a study of instructors and students about online courses, also known as distance learning or distance education, is needed. This will pave the way for the advancement of distance education, especially in this era of social distancing and sloganeering in the face of COVID-19.

As a result, the *raison d'être* of this initiative is to determine the lecturers' and educators' perspectives on distance education, including their perspectives on the benefits, drawbacks, and how the program can be strengthened during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Research Questions. The paper intends to respond to the following research question so as to meet the study's objectives:

1. What are the views of lecturers and Learners on Distance Education in the midst of Covid-19?
2. What are the downsides and benefits of DE during this pandemic? And;
3. What should be done to improve on DE?

METHODOLOGY

Research Model

The research was done in a qualitative manner. Qualitative research methodologies were chosen for this analysis because, they are exclusively suited to realizing the value that respondents assign to situations that they encounter (Merriam, 1998).

Universe and Sampling

The participants of this study consist of lecturers and students of higher institutes who are currently taking part in Distance or Online Education during this pandemic. The universe of this research is confined to the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. Near East University, Girne American University, Cyprus International University, European University of Lefke, and Final International University, were among the universities represented.

The interview google form was filled out freely by the participants. The demographic variables obtained are listed in the table 1.

The bulk of the interviewees were students, according to the demographic characteristics. 29 students participated. Majority of the students who participated were master's

Table 1: Participants' Demographic Variables

	<i>Lecturer</i>		<i>Student</i>	
	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>
The Participants Position	24	45.3	29	54.7
Professional Title				
Prof.	3	12.5	-	-
Assoc. Prof. Dr.	3	12.5	-	-
Assist. Prof. Dr.	6	25	-	-
Doctorate	2	8.3	4	13.8
Masters	7	29.2	21	72.4
Others	3	12.5	4	13.8
Age				
20 - 30	1	4.2	23	79.3
31 - 40	9	37.5	4	13.8
41 - 50	8	33.3	2	6.9
51 and over	6	25	-	-
Gender				
Female	14	58.3	15	51.7
Male	10	41.7	14	48.3
Institution				
Near East University	11	45.8	10	34.5
Cyprus International University	6	25	5	17.2
Girne American University	2	8.3	9	31
Final International University	1	4.2	2	6.9
European University of Lefke	4	16.7	3	10.4
Nationality				
Turkish Cypriot	15	62.4	2	6.9
Turkish	7	29.2	-	-
Cameroonian	-	-	20	69
Somali	1	4.2	1	3.4
Iraq	-	-	1	3.4
Zimbabwean	-	-	2	6.9
Nigerian	1	4.2	3	10.4

students between the age range of 20 to 30. Most of them were from Near East University and female participants were slightly higher than the male participants with 15 to 14 female participants to male participants respectively. Most participants came from Cameroon.

The lecturer's participants, were master's students as well from the age range of 31 to 40. Most of them were lecturers from Near East University with Turkish Cypriot nationality.

Data Collection Tools

In this research open-ended interview google forms were used to obtain in-depth information. The initial element of the interview google form requested questions to determine the participants' demographic factors. The second section contained five open-ended questions aimed at gathering feedback from lecturers and students on DE in the face of

Covid-19. These concerns arose from the three key research questions that this study is based on.

Data Collection Methods and Process

These interview google forms were sent to students and lecturers via WhatsApp groups, personal WhatsApp, and emails for the collection of data. The data was collected between March 15 and April 30, 2021. Participants' views on DE during this pandemic were obtained.

The researcher finished receiving the responses on April 30 and started the analysis.

Validity and Reliability

To guarantee the study's validity and reliability, the researcher secured the participants and their data during the data collection and analysis. Personal information such as names

and dates of birth were not sought. The researcher took some important steps to ensure the research's validity. The validity of a qualitative study relates to how reliable the data interpretation is. (Eisenhart & Howe, 1992; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Data Analysis

Using a descriptive research approach, the information was written and analyzed. This approach is among the approaches of qualitative data analysis. When using the descriptive-analytical model, the statements from the Interviews were employed in a certain way. The views of the participants were coded into similar themes for each question in the interview form. Findings can be obtained by reviewing data only within the specified theme and considering the cause-and-effect relationship (Yldrm and imşek, 2013). Answers were verbatim transcribed, and the authors came to an agreement on the patterns that could be deduced from the responses.

FINDINGS AND COMMENTS.

This section of the analysis provides frequency and percentage values for each theme.

Table 2 shows that the motivation of both lecturers and students to pursue Distance education during this pandemic is to have a direct and fluid interaction between themselves. Even Though it is done at a distance, the lecturers and the students could still have a direct flow of interaction online.

"When distance learning was integrated into our learning and teaching environment so that my students can access the class easily, this increased my students' motivation. Having high motivation, brings them success in a learning environment (L:4)."

"Get a planner and make sure I give myself clear goals, targets, and deadlines for the day. This way I will manage my work effectively and make sure I get everything done (S:19)."

Table 3 analysed the benefits of Distance Education during the pandemic. Both lecturers and students had the view of flexible learning. According to them, flexibility of learning is very beneficial. To add to that, they also believe that it eases time management and gives them the opportunity to do other things.

Table 2: The Participant's Views on The Things That Motivated Them to Pursue Distance Learning During this Pandemic

<i>Things that motivate the participant's. To Pursue Distance Learning</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>
Direct and fluid interaction between student and lecturer	22	38
Accelerates learning easily	14	24.1
Technology and finance	12	20.7
Safety and time gaining	10	17.2
Total	58	100

"I strongly believe that distance education allows both the lecturers and the learners flexible learning. Especially, there is a high opportunity for learners since all the live lectures are recorded so that they can watch the recorded lectures anytime or anywhere they want (L: 19)."

"According to me, there are several benefits of distance education. These are; time management, concentration in the study program and meeting up with other activities (S:20)."

Table 4 stipulates that, to enhance Distance Education Learning process, crowdedness of classrooms should be addressed. Lessons in crowded classrooms are not so effective. To add to that, some participants said that communication should be good.

"One of the most important things is communication. This era of distance education allows both the lecturers and learners to develop their communication since they can use most of the online tools to communicate. Such as, they can communicate through social media channels, e-mails and e- platforms. Also, they should be aware to use different teaching methods. Since diversity is important. Besides these, different tools should be used to support effective teaching (L: 21)."

"Make compulsory for everyone to possess a laptop and teach them how to use the school website, also ensure all the teachers are teaching. And every new info has been sent to every student's mail (S:12)."

Table 5 indicates that to boost learners' assessment in distance education learning, formative assessment should be used to assess the students. This will also be giving the students and the lecturers feedback on how to improve on their learning and teaching skills respectively.

"As it is known, the goal of formative assessment is to monitor learners' learning while discussing in the lesson hour. Besides this, it provides both lecturers and learners ongoing feedback and, in this way, the lecturers can also have a chance to improve their teaching methods (L:13)."

"Feedback and finding a means to compare them to learning during class (S:10)."

Table 6 shows that the instructors and learners stipulated that the lack of DE can be due to the misuse of technology. Participants may not be able to use the equipment properly

Table 3: The Participants' Perceptions on the Benefits of Distance Education During the Pandemic.

<i>Benefits of Distance Education</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>
Flexible Learning	20	31.7
Time Management	11	17.5
Give you the opportunity to pursue other things	11	17.5
Get a degree from anywhere in the world	9	14.3
Cost less than full-time degrees	7	11.1
Learners to depend on themselves	5	7.9
Total	63	100

or they may have issues like internet failure and laptops or smartphones breakdown that can limit them to distance education classrooms. Notwithstanding, most students advocate that it is the best method of studying during this pandemic to prevent the flow of coronavirus.

“Actually, when problems with equipment occur, the learning environment is interrupted and if the lecturer’s connection is interrupted, the lesson stops until the problem recovers. Moreover, with highly crowded classes, not too many students attend the class (L: 8).”

“Normally this will make work difficult for 70 percent of students who meet in class and share their understanding of lecturers. Distance learning will cause poor socialization. But due to the present pandemic, it is the best way of studying (S:21).”

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The objective of the study was to identify the instructors’ and learners’ perspectives on distance education with respect to their views on the advantages, disadvantages, and how the program can be improved during this pandemic. The three main research questions guided these studies and seeking detailed answers to these main questions led to the development of six interview questions. Responses to these interview questions from the participants brought forth the results obtained above that shall be discussed in this section.

Table 4: The Participants’ Views on How to Enhance Distance Education Learning Process

<i>The distance education learning process</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>
Getting away from the crowdedness of classroom	21	33.9
Good communication	15	24.2
Improve learning methods	12	19.4
Diversity	11	17.7
No idea	3	4.8
Total	62	100

Table 5: The Participants’ Views on How to Boost Learners’ Assessment

<i>How to Boost Learners’ Assessment</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>
Formative Assessment	45	84.9
Summative Assessment	8	15.1
Total	53	100

Table 6: The Participants’ Views on The Implications of a Lack of Distance Education

<i>The Implication of a lack of distance education</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>
Misuse of Technology	15	28.3
Low participation	11	20.8
Poor Socialization	10	18.9
Limited knowledge	9	17
Problems with equipment	8	15
Total	53	100

During the Covid-19 pandemic, both instructors and learners confirmed that distance education is the only method of instruction that allows learners and instructors to communicate directly. As a response to school closures caused by the COVID-19 outbreak, instructors all around the world are being forced to move their face-to-face teachings to online lessons (Moorhouse, 2020). Distance learning provides the means of interacting minimizing the risk of being infected with the coronavirus which has been declared airborne. The rapid rise in affected individuals has developed a sense of fear and dread about what will occur next (Tiruneh, 2020). It also accelerates learning easily, improves the technological skills of both lecturers and students, and also minimizes their finances.

The participants advocate that distance learning is beneficial during this pandemic. Most of them said it provides flexible Learning and improves their time management by giving them the opportunity to do other things. Some of them said that even though there are some restrictions to traveling, distance education learning provides them with the opportunity to get a degree anywhere in the world. Some of them said it is low cost compared to full-time degrees where they have to move, pay for flights, rent rooms, spend some time adapting to the new environment, and so on. To both the teachers and the students, distance education learning is beneficial.

Even Though distance education learning is beneficial according to the results, the participants still propagated that there is a need for distance education learning to be improved. They suggested that getting away from the crowdedness of the classroom in distance education learning can best improve the system. Just like in a face-to-face classroom where crowded classrooms hamper the quality of a lesson, crowded classrooms in distance education learning do the same. Thus reducing a classroom in distance education learning and improving the method of communication will enhance distance education learning. Improve learning methods interactive videos can also be of use as it can improve on the skills of the students.

However, the participants were not just concerned with improving distance education learning. They were also concerned about how assessments should be conducted, as it is difficult to track students’ online course participation and to ensure students do not manipulate during online tests (Basilaia & Kvavadze, 2020). Majority of them stipulated that formative assessment should be the method of assessment in distance education as it gives frequent feedback to both teachers and students. This will improve on the skills of teaching and learning that will finally bring out good results at the end of the course.

Since this study was done during the coronavirus pandemic, the lack of Distance education sounded awful to the

participants. Both lecturers and students stated that this can be a result of technology being misused. So to them, the skills of technology are very important as they can contribute to the level of participation in distance education learning. Due to a lack of funding, capabilities, Infrastructure facilities, internet connection, and educational services, trainers, learners, families, and the government are struggling to transition from face-to-face to online lectures (Basilaia & Kvavadze, 2020).

CONCLUSION

The participants stipulated that, during this covid-19 pandemic, distance education learning is the only means of learning that can permit teachers and students to have a direct flow of interaction. They continued by saying that it is flexible, improves their time management by giving them the opportunity to do other things, permits them to get a degree in desired countries without necessarily traveling, and most of all it keeps the participants free from contracting the virus. From their point of view, distance education learning is so advantageous during this pandemic period.

Some participants brought up the disadvantages of distance education learning in the sense that most classrooms were overcrowded, some lecturers and students lack the skills of technology and good communication. This led to some proposals on how distance education learning can be improved in the face of covid-19.

In this light, most participants in this study suggested that to enhance DE learning, classrooms should be reduced, technological and communication skills of both lecturers and students should be improved. They also stipulated that a formative method of assessment should be used in distance education as it produces constant feedback to both lecturers and students for a quality end course result. To conclude this concept of formative assessment which seems to be limited in distance education needs some improvement.

The lack of distance education sounded dreadful to the participants because this study was conducted during the coronavirus outbreak. Teachers and students switched to distanced learning without acquiring adequate skills of technology. To conclude on the issue, adequate and timely training to improve the knowledge of technology is absolutely needed.

The study did not go through without some limitations. We can say it was limited to its context because it was carried out in only one country; the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. The TRNC is just a dot among all the countries in the world. The second limitation is that, due to the necessity for its publication on time, the time factor was limited. The reason why the total of participants was 53 compared to the thousands of students and lecturers who are currently carrying out distance education caused by the covid-19 .

RECOMMENDATIONS

For a better understanding of this research topic, the researcher recommends the following;

1. Similar studies should be conducted in other countries to better understand lecturers' and students' perspectives on distance learning during the coronavirus pandemic.
2. If repeated in the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, a greater number of participants should be targeted likewise the number of universities to best understand the research's topic.
3. Quantitative research methods should be used to either confirm the same results or bring to light some lap holes.

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