

STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS ONLINE LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

The study aimed to describe students' attitudes towards online learning and the pros and cons. A total of 328 took part in the survey on the positive and negative components of online learning compared to traditional learning. The researchers draft the article as a resume of student's attitudes and a review of the focus groups and gathered data. The results showed that students lack familiarity with the online learning concept and are not used to such online activities. Considering that the Internet plays a significant role in students' everyday lives, online learning needs to be considered an educational tool combined with traditional learning.

Keywords: student's perception, online learning, advantages, disadvantages

JEL classification: I21, I23

1. Introduction

Online learning is a concept operationalized by web technologies and the Internet. It is similar to the concept of distance learning. In today's digital age, terms like "online learning" and "distance learning" are increasingly used, but it is often difficult to distinguish them. Distance learning or distance education is used for courses held without physical attendance at school, college, or university. All distance learning courses have an online learning component with online learning materials. As the name indicates, distance learning is about remote learning. This learning model is sometimes referred to as online learning or e-learning. Distance learning or online study is one of the rapidly expanding branches of education today (Purcell, K., Rainie, L., Heaps, A., Buchanan, J., Friedrich, L., Jacklin, A., & Zickuhr, K. (2012)). The significant difference is that they sometimes involve face-to-face learning as part of the study.

On the contrary, online learning courses are entirely online and have considerable flexibility. Students choose where, when, and how they learn. Thus, students are provided with additional support or academic help to complete the degree. Lectures can have live internet meetings but never face to face. Online learning requires an innovation of the teaching and learning process, issuing new technologies, higher academic norms and deeper understanding of knowledge acquiery. The question that arises to adopt this learning concept is: what are its pros and cons? While the concept of online education is not novel, digital technology and online learning are. The concept is over 170 years old and has its source in a correspondence course offered in Great Britain, wherein the lecturer dispatched lessons and received students' finished assignments by post mail. These were the beginnings of distance learning, and today's online courses are modern versions of their humble beginnings. Modern online education began in the 1960s when the University of Illinois established an intranet. It presented a model of connected computer terminals where students could access class materials and watch prerecorded lectures (Maxwell-Lefroy, H., & Ghosh, C.C., 1912).

However, the University of London affirms to be the first university which provided distance learning diplomas to establish an outdoor program in 1858 (Bušelić, 2012). In the context of the U.S., the first president of the University of Chicago, William Rainer Harper, widen the concept of comprehensive education by establishing satellite colleges of education for the research university in the broader perspective. In 1892 he also suggested that correspondence courses improve continuing education, a concept implemented by Columbia University (Levinson, R. 2005). In India, Indira Gandhi National Open University, known as IGNOU, is the first distance learning National University at Maidan Garhi, New Delhi. IGNOU launched the first virtual campus in India in 1999 (Sharma, 2001). The courses held online were the courses in Computer and Information Sciences . IGNOU has over three million students, twenty-one schools of studies, sixty-seven regional centres, 2,667 learner support centres, and twenty-nine overseas partner institutions. Technology, not size, is a crucial factor in developing distance learning.

2. Why study online?

Nowadays, online learning is a frequent form of learning in most of Europe. Over five million students worldwide use some form of such learning. The European Association of Distance Learning Universities (EADTU), composed of over 300 universities and approximately three million students, exemplify the extent and scale of present-day e-learning. There have been dramatic advances in this learning area over the last few decades. In Europe alone, up to 5.2 million students are enrolled in at least one online form of VET, and the number of university administrators that consider this form of education vital to their progress has boost to 70%. As a result, online learning is expected to become more popular than conventional learning (Horton, 2000., Valentine, 2002.). Certain authors predict that traditional learning will completely vanish (Shah, V., & Jain, U. J., 2016). This growing trend in online course enrollment, which is expected to maintain the same growth rate after the 1960s., poses numerous challenges to the academic community (Allen & Seaman, 2008). Anderson (2001) studied internet usage amongst college students and noticed that college students' normally spent on the internet approximately hundred minutes in just one day. Today, that average is expected to be even higher.

3. Online learning in the Republic of Croatia

Online learning is in its nascent stages in Croatia relative to the other parts of the world. Until 2010 there was no legal framework for such a form of higher education, so such a form of higher education could not be implemented. The proposed new higher education law offers the possibility of establishing distance learning and sets out the relevant conditions that higher education institutions must meet in this respect. The National Council for Science, Higher Education and Technological Development has approved six courses that can be completed entirely or partially. While online studying in Croatia is significantly different from the global trend and e-education consciousness, some universities have begun offering courses with online instructions. For instance, the University of Zagreb, the Croatian Heritage Foundation & the University Computing Centre offer Croatian language e-learning courses for beginners. There is still a small number of distance learning degrees available in Croatia (www.distancelearningportal.com). In the new global (Internet) economy, many universities are expected to offer online study programs in Croatia.

4. Methodology

The research was conducted just before the COVID-19 pandemic. Three hundred twenty-eight participants from four courses at the University Department of Professional Studies were interviewed. Students were divided into focus groups composed of ten students. Focus groups were held using the zoom platform.

The main idea was to stimulate in-depth analyses that will explore respondents' values and attitudes on certain issues or understand and explain the meaning, beliefs, and culture that influence people's feelings (Skoko & Beneković, 2009). While quantitative methods of surveying large numbers of respondents indicate the correspondence frequency, focus groups provide us essential information about why someone supports or is against a certain topic. The focus group uses the group interviews method to interact with the group members and helps reveal information and insights about carefully designed questions at the group level. The focus groups are unique in generating data based on cooperation during the group interaction. Field notes were collected at each interview. The authors then likened the assembled data to the research topic. The critical topics synthesized from the research results helped relieve the two research queries: students' attitudes towards online learning and their pros and cons compared to traditional learning.

5. Results

Overall, 328 students of different ages (from twenty-one to thirty-two years) participated in the focus groups. 101 male (31%) and 227 (69%) female students. In addition, 98% of the students informed having Internet service at their homes, and 100% reported having a smartphone and using it daily. The majority of students (88%) think that they cannot find a good job and expect a better future without having a university diploma. This is the main reason why most of them (78%) continued their education at the faculty. This study found that students knew little or very little about online and distance learning. None of the students could name any institution providing distance education. This is not surprising considering that the students were never presented the opportunity and never encountered anyone using this learning method. The students also stated that their teachers have never introduced them to this alternative to conventional learning. The students believed that high school teachers should first learn about online learning opportunities.

Moreover, they stated they would enthusiastically adopt the opportunity for using more newfangled technology in their education process. Based on their fresh experience with online learning in higher education, their modern technology application was scattered and they often did not receive concise instructions on how to apply it properly, although students were expected to anticipate in technology usage outside the classroom. Interesting, students reported feeling more burdened in online classes. Research has also confirmed that teachers are not really "technophobic" (Lam, Y., 2000), which the authors believe reflected their standpoints upon online learning where technological equipment and knowledge is crucial. The research established that most students schedule to move on their learning through online tools such as various online platforms for online learning (MOOC, Udemy, Campster and EdX). A significant difference was also found in respondents' attitudes towards online and traditional learning. Respondents positively perceive the conventional learning and studying grade in higher education in the Republic of Croatia.

5.1. The advantages of online learning

Unlike conventional learning, respondents perceived online learning to be unrelated to a particular location, which they found its most significant preference (96%). As many as 77% of them find learning without leaving the house, bearing travelling costs, and paying for lodging as particular advantages of this type of learning. The majority of students believe that the "online learning" concept is ideal for working students or those who want to progress in their careers. They observe this learning as adaptable to different ways of life. The majority of students state that the best thing about online learning is that they can listen to the lectures from the comfort of their homes. Even when their schedule is overbooked, they can always take the time to attend courses. Thus their attendance is better in percentages compared to live classes. Respondents find it simple to approach materials for studying at a time that suits them, regardless of their location. They do not even have to be by the computer or at their homes. They can listen to the lectures on their mobile phones.

Most participants like that all the needed materials and lectures are available within a second and at hand reach. They found learning online as a time-saving.

5.2. The disadvantages of online learning

Most of the respondents (71%) find having no time management skills crucial for regular online learning. They perceive online learning as highly flexible, which is not a familiar feature of conventional schooling. They found online learning is primarily for those who have the skills to establish strict goals and discipline to follow them. They consider that the lectures can be easily missed without being accused of being irresponsible as one of the most significant disadvantages (59%). For participating in this type of learning, strong motivation and self-discipline are required (89%). As many as 81% of them have doubts about their collaboration with their peers and teachers. There are a very high number of those who are worried that employers will not appreciate their online diplomas enough. Maybe it is because cheating is easier online (100%). The most significant student's concern about online learning is group seminars, case studies, and teamwork. They think that they would not be able to master some material without the help and support of a professor. Finally, the little fact is that majority of the respondents (88%) find time spent studying as the best year of their lives. Moreover, that is the most significant thing they miss in online learning.

6. Discussion

The research findings have implications for future students, their parents, high school teachers, deans, university professors and university leaders. The research results elaborated the students' viewpoint of online learning possibilities and their future actions. This means online learning could be used as a different learning approach and thus enrich existing learning. They are manifold implications for all stakeholders. University leaders' deans obtain specific insight into how this type of learning is required. Online learning in higher education in Croatia has ample room for growth. Using online learning in teaching makes the lecturer a leader and not just a teacher and transmitter of knowledge. He becomes a mentor who develops the organizational and creative skills needed to follow the lessons in students. This prepares students for the future work environment and independent performance of tasks. The crucial concern is related to the prevention of cheating.

7. Conclusion

Awareness of the importance of online learning still has not evolved in Croatia. Students in Croatia are yet sceptical about online learning. Although the Internet presents a considerable role in students' lives, it should be used for educational purposes. However, data indicate that this form of learning is growing in Croatia. Thus, online learning has definite room for development within high schools and universities in the Republic of Croatia. Universities should continuously monitor and research students' attitudes towards online learning to adapt to new needs in time. A dominant source of learning will be the Internet. Combining conventional and online learning might be the best approach in inducing this type of learning. Universities that have not yet introduced online learning, even in a small percentage of their courses, now is the high time to do so. Online learning appears attractive among students, primarily from distant areas, saving resources such as money and time. Not to mention it saves the planet and reduces waste production and gas emissions. The significant students' concerns that have to be considered are lack of motivation for learning and perception of online learning as the easiest way of cheating on exams. The findings anticipate access to the topic of online learning and its comprehension. The results can be used to build a research question that would be examined through a qualitative study. The findings may reveal new research areas and help design the structural survey or redefine unclear questions. The tomorrow of online learning and teaching at all contemporary universities lies in online learning or the combination or the right proportion of online and traditional learning, so-called hybrid learning.

Since the research was conducted just prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, it would be interesting to find out if pandemic has changed the students' attitudes toward online learning.

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