Różnorodność w edukacji DOROSŁYCH w XXI wieku

Redakcja naukowa

Jolanta Szada-Borzyszkowska

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Vincentas Lamanauskas, Rita Makarskaitė-Petkevičienė

Distance lectures in university studies: peculiarities of regular and distance study process

ABSTRACT: The process of distance learning and its evaluation during the COVID-19 pandemic is a particularly relevant object of scientific research. Analysing the accumulated experience, we can not only evaluate the situation of distance learning in Lithuanian higher institutions during the pandemic, but also by analysing the challenges posed by distance learning and opening new opportunities, to look for the directions for improving distance learning.

In January-February 2021, a qualitative study was conducted, in which 158 students from three Lithuanian universities participated. Most of the respondents were students of social and humanitarian study programmes. Qualitative data obtained on the basis of open-ended questions were analysed using the method of quantitative content analysis, i.e., semantic subcategories and categories according to two main variables were distinguished: similarities between regular and distance lectures, and the positive and negative aspects of distance lectures.

It was found that certain similarities were characteristic of regular and distance lectures, and the positive aspects significantly outweighed the negative ones.

KEYWORDS: content analysis, online learning, online lectures, qualitative research, university students.

Introduction

It is obvious that with the development of the internet and related technologies, the attitude towards teaching and learning, and studies has radically changed. The main principle of distance learning and/or university studies is the use of virtual space for the interaction of teachers and students (lecturers and students). At the same time, the basis of distance education is not one

hundred percent independent work, but close connection and communication with the education process participants. Thanks to modern digital communication tools, the learners in the learning process can receive not only the information provided by the programme, but also consultations, explanations, and the answers to the questions of interest, etc. Thus, one can reasonably assert that distance education has firmly occupied a place in the education market, and with the development of information transfer technologies, it becomes more efficient and in demand [8]. In addition, it is rapidly becoming pervasive in every aspect of education [11]. The results of various studies show that most students have a need for distance learning and this need will only grow in the future. It is actual for the students to combine work, family, and studies, to study at a convenient time, in a convenient place, in an individually acceptable way, to achieve the content of distance learning by various IT means and to use it in various forms [18]. Distance learning meets the needs of students, saves money and most importantly – responds to the principles of modern pedagogy [16]. It is especially suitable not only for the main study process, but also for the improvement of professional qualification [10]. On the other hand, with the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic, the adoption of e-learning models has grown exponentially in universities [7].

However, some researchers also notice problems with distance learning. One of them is – time management skills- an essential component of student success in distance learning [1]. Only part of the students are able to effectively plan distance work. The authors tested student time planning teaching interventions (with a particular focus on students with the least experience in managing their time). The study shows that the intervention had a positive effect on student achievement outcomes.

Tucker, [16] reminds the discussions of the late 20th century, whether distance learning is good enough to provide university education, and whether it is better than traditional studies, after all, the students learn less in the absence of a lecturer. The research conducted by the author showed that there was no significant difference between the achievement results of the two groups (one studied remotely, the other – traditionally). A very similar learning style was found for both groups of students. Students of both groups expected from the teacher to receive meaningful tasks, logical activities, wanted to study subjects better than average. Thus, this study did not identify, which

study method was superior, so it can be assumed that distance learning is not inferior to the traditional one.

However, distance learning places greater demands on lecturers [4]. According to them, lecturers should pay attention to the combination of different strategies. Teaching at a distance, lecturers should create such tasks that learners participate in discussions, use the advantages of the platform to perform the tasks, they should motivate learners to share the insights, reflect on learning. In the case of distance learning, it is especially important to constantly assess learners' achievements, and provide timely feedback. The authors ascertained that during distance learning, the social element acted as a mediator for the cognitive element. Lecturer needs to make it easier for students to communicate because it has influence on learning, achievements, and satisfaction with the course. In the case of distance learning, direct learning methods must also be used. The authors draw a conclusion that traditional and distance teaching methods need to merge; elements of different teaching methods need to be integrated.

In this case, however, we are talking about distance learning (lectures in the broadest sense) in the pandemic situation. The study process prior to the Covid-19 pandemic proceeded in a usual way (face-to-face study mode). Due to the pandemic, study activities were adapted to remote modality, conducting lectures at a distance. Obviously, as in other parts of the world, this was done to guarantee the continuity of studies. For this, it was inevitably necessary to adapt the study modules in a short period of time, which were initially transferred personally to the distance learning practice. It is completely understandable that there is a fundamental difference between the already well-established form of distance learning and the pandemic transition to emergency remote study modality. Conventional distance modality has its own organisational form, certain conditions of implementation and peculiarities, which is undoubtedly much more professional than the implementation of distance learning in the conditions of the pandemic applying certain improvisation (without proper preparation – both students and lecturers).

Throughout the pandemic period, quite a variety of studies have been conducted, showing both the advantages and disadvantages of distance learning. Researchers assert the COVID-19 pandemic introduced large scale changes in our social life and provoked consequences, which are difficult to

foresee and control [13]. The study conducted in Mozambique showed that DE is seen as an important and relevant educational modality that contributes for the provision of educational opportunities for many youths and adults, especially in higher education [12]. The study conducted in Ecuador showed that students perceived that the educational online platforms were very flexible in their planning. At the evaluative level, the results before and during the Covid-19 pandemic were positive [3]. It is also stated that because of proper organisation of distance learning during the pandemic, its quality started to improve because exchanging information and performing the tasks, students and lecturers involve in the process more actively than communicating only in auditoriums. On the other hand, it is thought that such organisation of university studies not only does not require high material costs, but also can ensure greater transparency of the process, better availability of material and variety. All this requires detailed research, seeking to justify the organisation of distance studies and their optimisation in any extreme conditions, when the study process cannot be carried out in a regular format.

Research Context, Aim, Questions

However, the global pandemic caused by COVID-19 created fundamentally different conditions and opportunities. In practice, the global transition to distance learning has become a serious challenge for university lecturers and students. In a relatively short time, the content of lecturers, practical and laboratory work had to be adapted to work at a distance, various emerging technological challenges had to be addressed and the quality of lectures had to be ensured in the changed conditions. In other words, the pandemic forced all educational institutions to switch to distance learning [17], which in turn became a certain catalyst for rapid change in university studies.

This study was conducted in a pandemic environment when the study process in universities was transferred to an online format. The term "distance lectures" used in the research basically covers the whole study process – lectures, discussions, seminars, practical work, consultations, colloquia, exams, and other activities, which are conducted online. This is a common term from an organisational – management point of view, when we talk about

the organisation of the study process (e.g., a schedule of lectures is created and so on.).

Thus, the aim of the research was – to ascertain basic distance learning advantages and disadvantages and improvement possibilities. There are very few studies in Lithuania dealing with these issues. On the other hand, students' preferences and positions in the learning process, their teaching and information processing methods are important for achieving quality in the study process [2].

It was sought to answer such research questions:

- What are the similarities between distance lectures and regular lectures?
- What are the positive and negative aspects of distance learning?

Research methodology

General Characteristics

A qualitative study was performed. The study was conducted in January-February 2021. Qualitative research aims to investigate the problem, to understand the underlying phenomenon in detail and to focus on relatively smaller samples, compared to quantitative research. Qualitative research tends to be associated with small-scale studies [6].

Research Sample

The study involved 158 students from three universities. Evaluating Morse's [4] recommendations, the sample of 30-50 participants is suitable for such kind of research. Assessing the position of Creswell [5], a range of 20-30 participants is acceptable for qualitative samples. In addition, the study analysed a small number of variables, the study population was essentially homogenous, and such a sample size was considered appropriate [15].

The key demographic information about the respondents is presented in Table 1.

Gender	Female					Male	
Geridei	151 (95.6)					7 (4.4)	
Study	Bachelor					Master	
level	138 (87.3)					20 (12.7)	
Study year	B1	B2	В3	B4	B5	M1	M2
	13 (8.2)	56 (35.4)	24 (15.2)	17 (10.8)	28 (17.7)	11 (7.0)	9 (5.7)

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the Lithuanian sample (n/%)

According to the study programmes, most of the respondents were students in the field of social sciences: education management (17.1%), primary and pre-school education (38.0%), childhood pedagogy (34.2%) and subject pedagogy, geography, English philology, chemistry study programme students (1.9% each), (12 students). The other 5 respondents (0.6% each) represented German philology, mathematics, physics, Russian philology, and history study programmes.

Due to the fact that it is a small-scale qualitative study, the research sample was formed in incomplete adherence to the principle of randomness. Students from three Lithuanian universities were included in the research sample: Šiauliai university (n=50), Klaipėda university (n=12), Vilnius university (n=96). Thus, the researchers were of the opinion that, in principle, the sample of 158 students surveyed was appropriate, seeking to formulate reasonable conclusions.

Respondents were communicated by e-mail. The conducted research aim was explained to the respondents, the respondents were informed about the expediency of using the collected information. Participation in the study was completely voluntary.

Instrument

The respondents were presented with five open questions-tasks [9], however, this article analyses and presents the results according to two questions:

- Mention and explain the similarities between distance and regular lectures:
- Give some examples when you are convinced that distance lectures really make sense.

The questions presented were prepared exclusively for this study, were analysed separately, and do not constitute a separate measurement scale.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analysed using the content analysis method. Multiple reading and analysis were applied, seeking to distinguish semantically different statements. The latter were later grouped into subcategories and categories. The analysis was performed simultaneously by two independent researchers. Later, the divergent positions were reconciled in search of consensus. Thus, applying content analysis, thematic/semantic categories were identified, on the basis of which a systematic assessment of the researched phenomenon was presented.

Research results

The similarities between regular and distance lectures were analysed. Two categories were distinguished: *Similarities in content and organisation* and *Similarities in student involvement and participation*. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Similarities between regular and distance lectures

Categories	Subcategories	Statements	N (%)
Similarities in content and organisation 110 (72.4)	Content similarities 48 (31.6)	All necessary material is laid out	14 (9.2)
		The principle of work is similar – theories are presented, individual – group work is organised	9 (6.0)
		Same participants, same topics are covered	6 (4.0)
		All the material taught, reaches the student, regardless of the lectures- regular or distance	5 (3.3)
		Similar topic explanations of a regular and distance lecture	5 (3.3)
		Receive the same information	5 (3.3)
		Almost the same tasks are given	2 (1.3)
		The content of all subjects both remotely and in a regular way is arranged almost identically	2 (1.3)
	Organisation similarities 46 (30.3)	Lectures take place at normal times; the duration is the same	10 (6.6)
		Both distance and regular lectures are similar in their presentation	9 (6.0)
		In most cases, the teaching methods remain the same, only their presentation changes	8 (5.3)
		Learning programme is completed during both regular and distance lectures	5 (3.3)
		The structure of lectures remains the same – introduction, teaching, generalisation	5 (3.3)
		In both formats dominate lecturers	5 (3.3)
		Possible consultations with lecturers	4 (2.6)
	Similarity of the transferred knowledge 16 (10.5)	Transfer of experience and knowledge	12 (7.8)
		In both cases, the knowledge provided by lecturers is comprehensive and useful	2 (1.3)
		Just like in the classroom, so remotely, you see the teacher, you can understand a lot from body language	1 (0.6)
		Students consider the lecturer a priority and expect him/her to explain, share knowledge, teach	1 (0.6)
Similarities of student involve- ment and partici- pation	Similarities of communication and collaboration 21 (13.8)	Communicating and collaborating with lecturers and students	10 (6.6)
		Contact takes place between lecturers and students	4 (2.6)
42 (27.6)		Communicating with the lecturer	4 (2.6)

		The relationship between lecturer and students is quite similar	2 (1.3)
		Expanding the circle of like-minded people	1 (0.6)
	Similarities of active participation 16 (10.5)	In any case, it is necessary to study and learn, still, you study yourself, no one will learn for you	6 (4.0)
		It is possible to perform certain group tasks, present works	4 (2.6)
		Both regular and distance lectures require not only listening, but active work	3 (2.0)
		It is convenient and possible to participate in discussions in lectures just as during normal studies	2 (1.3)
		You can learn and express your opinion both during regular lectures and at distance	1 (0.6)
	Similarities of emerging problems 5 (3.3)	We are equally passive in both distance and regular lectures	2 (1.3)
		Similarity – Lots of work to be performed, too much work	2 (1.3)
		During both types of lectures there are problems of attendance, being late, attentiveness	1 (0.6)

Note: Totally 152 semantic units were extracted

Table 2 shows that the category *Content and organisation similarities* has the highest weight (72.4%), while – *Student involvement and participation similarities* have a much lower weight (27.6%). In both the first and the second cases, three subcategories were distinguished. We will discuss the first category. *Content similarities* and *Organisation similarities* account for nearly a third of all significant statements received on this issue. When discussing *the similarities of the content* we will mention that students notice that the same material is presented during both distance and contact lectures, the same tasks are performed, and the same participants participate. The principles of the work would be similar: a similar focus on theory and practice. The statements attributed to the *Organisation similarities*: both distance and contact lectures take place according to a schedule, in real time, of the same duration. In addition, in both cases, the study programme is carried out, the same methods are used, the lectures are dominated by the lecturer and so on. The third category is *the similarity of the knowledge transferred*. Students

think that the lecturer shares his/her knowledge and experience during both distance and contact lectures. And that knowledge is useful.

As already mentioned, three subcategories have also been identified in the category *Student involvement and participation*. The first is *communication and collaboration similarities*. Students acknowledge that in both cases, it is necessary to maintain contact and relationship with the lecturer and the colleagues. The second is *the similarities of active participation*. You must show the initiative, you learn yourself, you learn for yourself and there will not be otherwise. It does not matter at all whether these are distance or contact studies. After all, in the studies of any format the student must show perseverance in performing tasks, achieving results. There must be enough challenges for the student for the studies to have sense. However, managing the workload during distance learning is essential. The third is *the similarity of emerging problems*. Among the problems perceived by students for distance and contact learning, some are directed towards students. These are their passivity, poor attendance, being late. The others – towards lecturers, e.g., too many tasks.

As can be seen, geographical distance is not important to students. They also do not notice a significant lack of social contact in distance learning, do not mention lack of motivation or apathy while studying. It can be assumed that the feeling of being together, working together was sufficient. However, it is mentioned about some students' lack of responsibilities and too many tasks. Studying at a distance, no limit remains between auditorium and independent work. And how to feel the symptoms of students' "burnout" in time, to coordinate and adjust tasks – a considerable challenge for a lecturer working at a distance.

Positive and negative aspects of distance lectures were analysed. The results obtained are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Positive and negative aspects of distance lectures

Category	Subcategory	Statements	N, %
	Causina estima	Saving time	15 (7.9)
	Saving time and money 51 (26.8)	Financial savings	14 (7.4)
		Possibility to record lectures	12 (6.3)
	31 (20.0)	It is possible to schedule time independently	10 (5.3)
	Greater opportunities to participate 43 (22.6)	Possibility to learn from any place	24 (12.6)
		Possibility to learn from home	8 (4.2)
		Possibility to combine studies with work	7 (3.7)
		Possibility not to deviate from the rhythm of studies in extreme conditions	4 (2.1)
	Information, new knowledge 38 (20.0)	Easily accessible information	14 (7.4)
Positive as- pects of dis-		The right knowledge baggage is obtained	10 (5.3)
		Systemised information is obtained	8 (4.2)
tance lectures		Effective presentation of information	6 (3.2)
178 (93.7)	Learning /study, skill development 29 (15.3)	Intensive involvement in the study process	8 (4.2)
		Possibility to learn, share information	7 (3.7)
		Computer skills are improving	7 (3.7)
		Possibility to try new teaching/learning methods	4 (2.1)
		Possibility to collaborate	3 (1.6)
	Better student well-being 17 (9.0)	Less stress	8 (4.2)
		Lecturers communicate in a friendly way	3 (1.6)
		Increased self-confidence	3 (1.6)
		Less interference	2 (1.1)
		Ability to concentrate	1 (0.5)
Negative		Not easy to combine with work	5 (2.6)
aspects of	Negative	Complex practical work	3 (1.6)
distance lec-	aspects	No contact with other lecturers and students	2 (1.1)
tures	12 (6.3)	Affects attention	1 (0.5)
12 (6.3)		Lack of individual consultations	1 (0.5)

Note: Totally 190 semantic units were extracted

A review of the table content shows that most of the statements (even 93.7 %) are positive aspects of distance learning. The first two subcategories could be related to multitasking, which is very acceptable for today's students. They are able to set priorities, concentrate on many activities, are able to distribute their efforts, have a quick reaction, so while studying at a distance, they combined it with other work, and it satisfied them. Of course, there are always doubts, as to whether quality does not suffer in terms of quantity. However, from the presented statements one can see students' satisfaction especially *saving time and money*. This is evidenced by a quarter of significant statements.

More than one-fifth of significant statements fall into another subcategory – *greater opportunities to participate*. Still, students even during distance learning remain active participants, apt to take part in the activities, wherever they are and whatever they do.

One-fifth of the statements are assigned to the subcategory *information*, *new knowledge*. Certainly, it is important that the subjects taught have some logic, help students to form a knowledge system. Switching on to distance learning, it is not easy to ensure this, as it is only partially possible to carry out practical activities. Students may lack information, because libraries, information centres did not work during the pandemic. There was a considerable challenge for the lecturer how to present the material. Nevertheless, during distance learning, the respondents did not face lack of information and new knowledge. They were happy to receive systemized information and it was easily accessible.

Learning/study, skill development combines the statements about students' involvement in distance learning process, possibilities to share, skills to be developed and so on.

The fifth subcategory of positive aspects of distance learning is *better student well-being*. Students participating in the study did not experience anxiety, confusion, which would affect their emotional state, motivation to act, behaviour, communication, learning and so on. In contrast, students experienced less stress, disruption, and more self-confidence.

Only 6.3 % of statements report negative aspects of distance learning. Only half of them are related to the experienced difficulties combining studies with work. It was not easy to carry out practical activities remotely and to collaborate with lecturers or course friends.

Conclusions and implications

It has been stated that certain similarities are characteristic of regular and distance lectures. First of all, these are content and organisation similarities (similar content, organisation, knowledge transferred and its scope). The weight of this category is almost 73%. The second category according to weight is *Similarities of student involvement and participation* (about 28%).

Understandably, the study also revealed positive and negative aspects of distance lectures. The positive aspects are significantly predominant compared to the negative ones. The most important positive aspects are the saving of time and financial resources, as well as greater opportunities for participation and involvement in the study process.

The study highlighted the directions for further research. Important aspects are the impact of quarantine on the coordination of studies and work activities, communication strategies in online/remote mode, new challenges for the whole study process, its applicability and optimisation in certain extreme conditions, etc.

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