European Journal of Open Education and E-learning Studies
ISSN: 2501-9120
ISSN-L: 2501-9120
Available on-line at: www.oapub.org/edu

DOI: 10.46827/ejoe.v6i1.3529 Volume 6 | Issue 1 | 2021

GREEK UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' ATTITUDES ABOUT DISTANCE EDUCATION DUE TO EMERGENCY CIRCUMSTANCES

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Abstract:
Emergencies like Covid-19 brought distance education to the fore, as countries were forced to close the campuses and initiate online teaching. Many universities in the country supported a distance education program aimed at students who had experienced an unprecedented experience. Thus, 155 students from the Greek department of Early Years Learning & Care participated in the present study, which aimed to investigate the factors that influence learners' perceptions and attitudes during distance learning. The survey was conducted through online distribution of questionnaires and investigated hypotheses about obstacles and changes in students' perceptions of distance learning. The results of the descriptive statistical analysis showed that the role of the educator in this process, combined with the technical support of the courses, is extremely important. Also, educators' presence is related to students' anxiety.

Keywords: distance education; early years education; emergency circumstances; students' attitudes

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1. Introduction

Face-to-face teaching was not sufficient, as it seemed to meet the needs of the students regardless of the country and their level of development. Although the practices of face-to-face teaching have been updated and developed since the introduction of education, distance education was still the one that directly applied what we know about best practices in education (Simonson, Zvacek, and Smaldino, 2019). There are different ways of using distance learning and there are some studies based on the scope of its educational results. There are, of course, many obstacles that students encounter in distance learning, and many researchers have identified some shortcomings and defective points, starting with the need to establish high-quality interactions during distance learning.

2. Literature Review

According to Salam, Maimoona and Farooq (2020), who studied undergraduate students in an e-learning course, stressed the positive impact of the quality of social interaction on the use of the web-based collaborative learning information system (WBCLIS) and the relationship with user satisfaction. Other researchers also defined human interaction as a high factor in the perceived satisfaction of participants with online learning environments (Huss, Sela, and Eastep, 2015). They also pointed out the importance of collaboration and context in the creation of online courses. Adnan and Anwar (2020) emphasized that online learning cannot have positive educational outcomes for university students in countries with technical and access problems. They also discussed the lack of personal interaction with the teacher, reaction time and the lack of traditional classroom socialization.

Adams et al. (2018) indicated in their study that there are differences in students' readiness for blended learning based on gender, age, ethnicity, field of study, and level of education. In addition, students at Accounting Distance Education Program in Turkey also pointed out the importance of interaction opportunities for other students or lecturers, but they were satisfied with the great convenience in time and cost that this educational system provides (Kutluk and Gulmez, 2012).

In China, factors such as socialization, instructional design and information provision, educator support and contingency planning were highlighted as the five most important principles for online education (Bao, 2020). Finally, in Langford and Damşa (2020) a significantly high level of interaction is associated with better learning outcomes. The present study aims to examine the factors that affect students' beliefs for online education as well as the relationship between students' emotions of anxiety and reservedness and instructors' support in online teaching.

3. Material and Methods

3.1. Research Questions

This study was guided by the following research questions:

Q1: To what extent do factors such as educators' presence (including visual contact, response rate, technical support) affect students' beliefs for distance education?

Q2: What is the relationship between students' emotions of anxiety and reservedness with instructors' support in distance teaching?

Q3: To what extent do factors such as system quality, poor connection, technical support, money savings and travel costs influence students' emotions of anxiety and reservedness during distance teaching?

3.2. Participants

The target population of this study was Greek universities students. One hundred fifty-five students (96.8% were women) currently studying in Early Years Learning and Care Department in the University of Ioannina, Greece answered the questionnaire. Specifically, 55.5% were under 21 years old (n = 86) and 37.4% were between 21-24 years old (n = 58). A few of them were over 25 years old (25-39 n=7 and over 40 n=4). The majority of the youngest groups spent 6-10 hours per week online for educational purposes (51.1%, n=86 and 39.6%, n=58), while the older groups spent 1-5 hours per week online (42.8%, n=7 and 50%, n=4). The data collected for gender and age of participants compared to time spent for educational or social purposes are described in Table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of demographic (gender and age) of participants (frequencies and percentages)

Characteristics (N=155)	**Gender**		**Age**			
	Male (n=5)	**Female (n=150)**	**<21 (n=86)**	**21-24 (n=58)**	**25-39 (n=7)**	**> 40 (n=4)**
Time spent per week on educational purposes						
<1	0 (0%)	8 (5.3%)	4 (4.6%)	4 (6.8%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
1-5	0 (0%)	52 (34.6%)	24 (27.9%)	24 (41.3%)	3 (42.8%)	2 (50%)
6-10	1 (20%)	70 (46.6%)	44 (51.1%)	23 (39.6%)	3 (42.8%)	1 (25%)
>10	4 (80%)	19 (12.6%)	14 (16.2%)	7 (12%)	1 (14.2%)	1 (25%)
Time spent per week online for mails, social media etc.						
<1	0 (0%)	7 (4.6%)	2 (2.3%)	5 (8.6%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
1-5	0 (0%)	40 (26.6%)	21 (24.4%)	14 (24.1%)	4 (%)	2 (50%)
6-10	1 (20%)	49 (32.6%)	28 (32.5%)	20 (34.4%)	1 (14.2%)	1 (25%)
>10	4 (80%)	53 (35.3%)	35 (40.6%)	19 (32.7%)	2 (28.5%)	1 (25%)

Descriptive statistics of characteristics of participants (frequencies and percentages) are also shown in Table 2. Options that did not earn a percentage were excluded. As the vast majority of respondents have a high school degree or equivalent, the answers of graduates and PhD students (n=5 and n=1) were not included in Table 2.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of demographic characteristics of participants (frequencies and percentages)

Characteristics N=155	**Time spent on educational purposes**				**Time spent online for mails, social media etc.**			
Former education	**<1**	**1-5**	**6-10**	**>10**	**<1**	**1-5**	**6-10**	**>10**
High school degree or equivalent *(n=149)	8 (5.3%)	53 (35.5%)	66 (44.2%)	22 (14.7%)	7 (4.6%)	38 (25.5%)	50 (33.5%)	54 (36.2%)
Place of residence								
Village (n= 43)	3 (6.9%)	12 (27.9%)	22 (51.1%)	6 (13.9%)	4 (9.3%)	8 (18.6%)	16 (37.2%)	15 (34.8%)
Town (n= 28)	3 (10.7%)	9 (32.1%)	13 (46.4%)	3 (10.7%)	3 (10.7%)	6 (21.4%)	12 (42.8%)	7 (25%)
City (n= 84)	2 (2.3%)	32 (38%)	36 (42.8%)	14 (16.6%)	0 (0%)	27 (32.1%)	22 (26.1%)	35 (41.6%)
Year of studies								
1st year (n= 52)	1 (1.9%)	14 (26.9%)	23 (44.2%)	14 (26.9%)	2 (3.8%)	11 (21.1%)	15 (28.8%)	24 (46.1%)
2nd year (n= 52)	2 (3.8%)	17 (32.6%)	28 (53.8%)	5 (9.6%)	2 (3.8%)	16 (30.7%)	17 (32.6%)	17 (32.6%)
3rd year (n= 19)	2 (10.5%)	7 (36.8%)	8 (42.1%)	2 (10.5%)	1 (5.2%)	2 (10.5%)	8 (42.1%)	8 (42.1%)
4th year (n= 9)	2 (22.2%)	4 (44.4%)	3 (33.3%)	0 (0%)	1 (11.1%)	5 (55.5%)	2 (22.2%)	1 (11.1%)
Year of graduation (n= 23)	1 (4.3%)	11 (47.8%)	9 (39.1%)	2 (8.6%)	1 (4.3%)	7 (30.4%)	8 (34.7%)	7 (30.4%)

3.3. Measures

This study is structured in two sections, the first of which consists of ten questions with multiple answers on the demographic characteristics of the participants (gender, age, marital status, educational level, level of education in new technologies, access to the Internet, etc.). The second section contains thirty-three closed and open questions and discusses themes for the advantages and disadvantages of distance learning. In addition, a scale was used for some questions to directly measure the attitudes and emotions that students had towards distance learning. Descriptive statistics (percentages, means, standard deviations and frequencies) were used to present the results.

3.4. Procedure and Ethical Considerations

Students were asked to fill in the online questionnaire voluntarily and anonymously via the link on Google Docs. Privacy and confidentiality of the answers were guaranteed and they were given information about the purpose of the survey using the convenience sampling technique. A paragraph on the first page contained information about the purpose of the study, namely to investigate the likely impact of the unexpected transition to digital courses on the educational outcomes for students who learn online. The researchers explained in private who had asked for more information about the study.

3.5. Data analysis

Quantitative research methods (percentage, average, mean) were used to report on the results and to analyse the factors that affected students the most during the Covid-19 emergency period in Greece. First, socio-demographic characteristics were presented in comparison with the time spent online for different purposes. In addition, descriptive statistics, means and standard deviations were used to analyse the data collected from the responses of students and to investigate the aspects that influence the attitudes and beliefs of academic students towards distance education. Finally, the relationship between the emotions of anxiety and caution with the support of educators in distance education was investigated.

4. Results and Discussion

The first step was to gather information about the participants' beliefs about distance learning before and after the online courses. Previous experience with the use of specific digital tools and certification in new technologies was taken into account to examine how participants' beliefs change or are maintained (Table 3 & Table 4). The assessment of the self-efficacy of distance learning by non-certified educators in the run-up to the consultation was given a five-point scale, with choices ranging from 1 = very poor to 5 = excellent. Participants without an Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) diploma reported on average their knowledge (mean = 2.92 ± 0.91), while students with an ICT diploma reported high self-efficacy in terms of ICT skills (mean = 4.02 ± 0.76).

Table 3: Students' evaluation of learning process in distance education **before** online courses

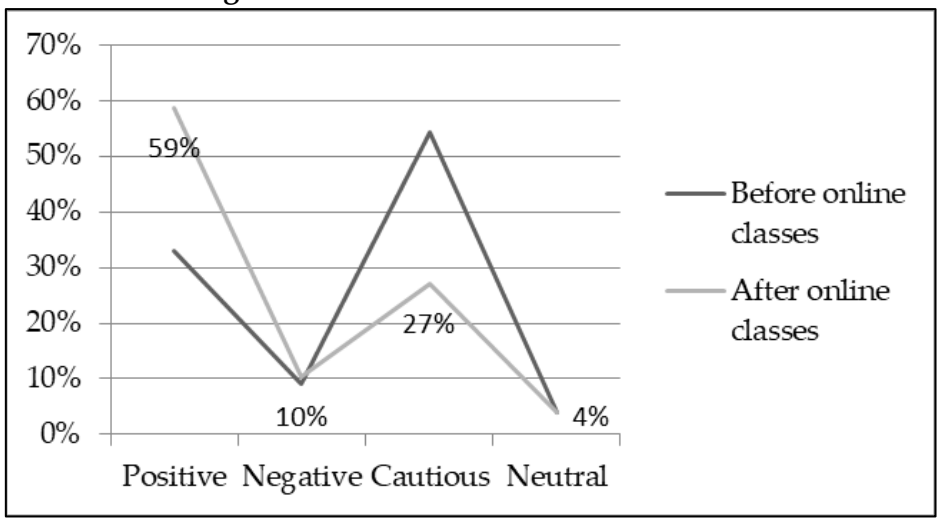
	Used Moodle and E-learning before (n=132)	**Never used Moodle and E-learning before (n=23)**	**Taken online course before (n=17)**	**Never took online course before (n=138)**
	Frequencies /%	Frequencies /%	Frequencies /%	Frequencies /%
Positive	42 (31.8%)	9 (39.1%)	7 (41.1%)	44 (31.8%)
Negative	10 (7.5%)	4 (17.3%)	1 (5.8%)	13 (9.4%)
Cautious	76 (57.5%)	8 (34.7%)	9 (52.9%)	75 (54.3%)
Neutral	4 (3%)	2 (8.6%)	0 (0%)	6 (4.3%)

Table 4: Students' evaluation of learning process in distance education **after** online courses

	Used Moodle and E-learning before n=132	**Never used Moodle and E-learning before n=23**	**Taken online course before n=17**	**Never took online course before n=138**
	Frequencies / %	**Frequencies / %**	**Frequencies / %**	**Frequencies / %**
Positive	79 (59.8%)	12 (52.1%)	10 (58.8%)	81 (58.6%)
Negative	14 (10.6%)	2 (8.6%)	1 (5.8%)	15 (10.8%)
Cautious	5 (3.7%)	1 (4.3%)	0 (0%)	6 (4.3%)
Neutral	34 (25.7%)	8 (34.7%)	6 (35.2%)	36 (26%)

The results showed that in all cases the beliefs of the participants changed positively after the end of the online courses (mean 1.76 ± 0.97), regardless of the certification in the use of the new technologies or their previous experience in their use.

Figure 1: Evaluation of distance education



Regarding the disadvantages of distance learning, students indicated that the lack of interaction was generally a significant loss (53.5%). Moreover, the impersonal teaching made them to be distracted and not to show the same attention in the online course as in the traditional course (42.6%). The lack of technical support from the university and the inability to connect also played a key role in the negative evaluation of distance learning methods. Finally, the lack of socialization (such as the dialogue with students and educators in the same environment) was considered extremely important for the delivery of pleasant and interesting lessons (Table 5).

Table 5: Difficulties in using ICT

Difficulties in using ICT	**Frequencies / %**
Restricted access to computers, tablets, telephones, etc.	54 (44.3%)
Restricted Internet access (poor connection, application sticking, etc.)	69 (56.6%)
Limited technical support from the university	24 (19.7%)
Lack of personal interaction with the instructor	83 (53.5%)
Insufficient training in ICT	71 (45.8%)
Distraction	66 (42.6%)
Lack of interpersonal contact with fellow students	64 (41.3%)
Lack of eye contact with the instructor	50 (32.3%)

In a separate question on the importance of the lack of eye contact with the educator, 31.6% of the participants answered that this affects their ability to attend lessons online. Adding the above to the answers to the questions on the main disadvantages of online courses, but also on the explanation of the preference for traditional learning or distance learning, it is concluded that the interaction of educators with students is of the utmost importance, which is defined here not only as a standard tradition of the course, but in combination with everything that accompanies their visual presence (contagion, grimaces, gestures, etc.). Also, when asked "What did you miss most in distance learning?", the 32.9% replied that the most important was the lack of interpersonal contact with the educator, immediately followed by the 29% of those who reported the lack of interpersonal contact with fellow students. Lastly, the 61.9% stated emotions of anxiety coming up from distance learning.

We collected data from closed questions (yes/no) and participated in order to compare students' behaviour in traditional and virtual classes. The results presented in Table 6 indicate that students would prefer to conduct the semester with physical presence, while they indicated that they felt less distracted from the traditional classroom on campus. In addition, working with their classmates is the missing piece to make students feel complete in online courses. On the other hand, it seems that educators played an important role in the students' beliefs. Students believe that they can ask questions and get immediate answers from the educators (73.5%). They were also able to use their time better and more efficiently through distance learning (67.1%). Finally, the 68.4% believe that distance learning will be useful for the rest of their studies as these processes have enriched their knowledge of online education.

Table 6: Comparing students behaviour in traditional and virtual classes through personal considerations

Positive answers	**Frequencies / %**
Would you rather have conducted this semester in the traditional way, on campus, if that were possible?	122 (78.7%)
Do you think that you can work in groups with your classmates during the distance education?	37 (23.9%)
Do you think that you can show the same attention during the online lesson?	66 (42.6%)
Do you believe that it is possible to get a complete education via the Internet?	60 (38.7%)
Do you believe that it is possible to ask questions from a distance and get immediate answers from the educators?	114 (73.5%)
Do you believe that you can manage your time in distance learning better and more efficiently?	104 (67.1%)
Do you believe that distance learning will be useful for the rest of your studies?	104 (68.4%)

Among other, students believe that some of the most important benefits of distance learning are the time savings (76.8%) and the travel costs they have avoided when studying online (71%). In addition, some of them reported that the flexibility of this type of learning makes the learning process more interesting, as do the different pedagogical tools and resources used in virtual classes (Table 7).

Table 7: Benefits of distance learning

Advantages of distance learning	**Frequencies / %**
Save time when traveling	119 (76.8%)
Economy in terms of travel costs	110 (71%)
Flexibility in learning (e.g. in terms of time organization, use of space, media, materials, resources, etc.)	55 (35.5%)
Use of various educational resources and aids in virtual class (e.g. optics, headphones, etc.)	38 (24.5%)

Table 8 illustrate the relationship between the quality of students' attitudes in distance learning and the feelings of stress that students are likely to experience. Specifically, their responses seem to indicate that 31.6% described the impersonal teaching of online courses as a disadvantage, while 32.3% described the lack of visual contact with the educator as something particularly annoying. Moreover, 38.1% felt comfortable asking the educator questions during class, while the extremely low 6.5% of students indicated that they had no immediate answers to the questions they asked after class. The latter, together with the 25.8% who indicated that the lack of socialization with both their classmates and the educators was a significant obstacle, completes the picture of the main obstacles in distance learning as formed by the students who indicated that they developed feelings of anxiety during distance learning.

Table 8: The relationship between feelings of anxiety and educators' attitude towards online courses

Feeling of anxiety	**Frequencies / %**
Q20: Obstacles related to distance education - inability to have interpersonal contact with the educator	49 (31.6%)
Q26: Do you think that you can ask questions and get immediate answers from educators during distance education?	59 (38.1%)
Q41: Biggest disadvantage of online education - impersonal teaching.	43 (27.7%)
Q41: Biggest disadvantage of online education - Lack of educator support for questions.	10 (6.5%)
Q41: Lack of socialization -dialogue with students and educators in the same environment.	40 (25.8%)

5. Discussion

The development of information technologies is a fact of life today, and the lockdowns caused by Covid-19 forced us to introduce new processes in education faster than expected. The results of this study show that students at the Greek Department of Early Years Learning and Care have generally had positive experiences in the run-up to new online learning environments. In a recent Greek study, the findings showed that the students were urged to have an immediate and quick response to the implications of the current situation due to its novel and intense character (Charissi, Tympa, and Karavida, 2020). Apart from resources, the willingness of staff and accessibility for students, socialization was one of the most important factors influencing students' attitudes towards distance learning. As Arkorful and Abaidoo (2015, 402) stated "*the most noticeable condemnation of e-Learning is the complete absence of vital personal interactions, not only between learners and instructors, but also among colleague learners*". It is clear that educator support for students' efforts in this transition can lead to students adapting more quickly and positively to new educational processes in order to improve learning. The above is confirmed by many questions in the present survey, in which the students demonstrated the great importance of the educator's presence in shaping their perception of online lessons. Moreover, emotions of anxiety were reported among students regarding the transition to online education. The students stated that the uncertainty about the teaching process of the exam, the fear of missing the semester, but also the ignorance of the new educational procedures they had to follow, caused them a high level of stress and anxiety. This was indirectly related to the quality of the support provided by the educators, because among the questions the students made it clear that they expected the educators to answer the above questions and to ensure the smooth running of the semester courses. For example, staff were expected to use technology and technological gadgets to improve learning (Ali, 2020), but also had the opportunity to give students a sense of security in this time of need by supporting them in these various virtual sessions (Shenoy, Mahendra, and Vijay 2020), as well as to provide opportunities for relations between learners and instructors. In relation to the last research question, the results suggest that

students believe that distance learning has been flexible in terms of time and place. System quality, poor connection and technical support were also highlighted by the participants because of their importance in the transition, but this has nothing to do with anxiety. The obstacles mentioned above led to students being exposed to online teaching in a negative rather than anxious way.

6. Conclusion

Many participants reported poor Internet connections and system failures. Therefore, it can be assumed that this online survey required connectivity and access to computers, causing many students of the Greek academic population to drop out, since they had fewer resources available for participation. During this study, it was also observed that many students had difficulties in fully understanding the content of all the questions, while only a few of them asked for more details. For this reason, it may be better to reformulate some of the questions, as indicated by the answers. Finally, the proposed framework of this study can be extended to better investigate the quality and degree of relationship between the emotions of students' emotions and the support of the instructors.

Disclosure Statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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