

Section 2. Pedagogy

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ONLINE TEACHING DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC PERIOD, A CASE STUDY: DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY AND GEOGRAPHY, “FAN S. NOLI” UNIVERSITY OF ALBANIA

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted education at all levels, necessitating urgent solutions to reconfigure traditional educational programs for distance learning. In Albania, a developing country, educators faced unique challenges due to limited technological infrastructure, low Internet access, and insufficient teacher and parent preparation for technology use. This study focuses on the Department of History-Geography at the University of Korce, Albania, during the pandemic period. Through surveys with students and professors of this program study we identified problems and innovations related to online learning. Despite the challenges, the pandemic prompted improvements in computer teaching skills and communication with students through various interactive applications.

Keywords: *Pandemic COVID-19, education, online platforms, Department of History and Geography, Albania*

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted all aspects of life, including health, economy, social fields, and politics (Wang, 2023; Kucuk, 2023). This pandemic affected the education system worldwide. (Winwarta, 2023). To cope with this crisis, the education system at all levels adopted ‘Emergency Education’ (Cenk Temel Ç.G., 2023), utilizing various online learning platforms (Topal, 2021; Fernando Ferri, 2020). School closures and

changes in curricula had significant consequences for the education system. According to UNESCO data (2020), 1.5 billion learners and students across 165 countries suspended classes. COVID-19 originated in China, where the first case was confirmed in Wuhan on December 31, 2019 (Jelena Zvekic-Svorcan, 2023; Chhetri, 2021; Topal, 2021). Within three months, it spread to 114 countries, affecting 118.000 people. In Albania, the first case was reported on March 8, 2020,

leading to a two-week closure of public and private schools and universities. One day later, on March 10, entry restrictions were imposed for travelers from certain European countries. On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared a Global pandemic (Jelena Zvekic- Svorcan, 2023). Over time, many countries implemented quarantine measures.” “Albania remained in total quarantine for about a month, while the partial quarantine situation continued until the beginning of June 2020. The effects of the quarantine were diverse: a decline in Gross Domestic Product (GDP), increased unemployment, rising poverty, psychological consequences, and various issues in the education system. Albanian education faced numerous challenges, including problems with internet access, lack of technological resources, and unfamiliarity with online communication platforms. The organization of online learning, the platforms used, identification, study, and assessment of problems, as well as innovations in online teaching within the History-Geography program at the University ‘Fan S. Noli’ in Korçë, will be some of the main topics of this study.

Methodology

The study was conducted during the period of November-December 2021. For the implementation of this work, were created two questionnaires via Google Forms, one for students and one for the professors each containing 22 questions. The questions were related to the knowledge that lecturers and students had about online communication platforms, the progress of online learning, student participation and assessment, as well as the strengths and weaknesses of online learning from the perspective of both parties. It was completed by all full-time and part-time lecturers (a total of 16 lecturers) who teaching at this department during the study period, as well as by 80 students in the Bachelor’s and Professional Master’s program in History-Geography. The study also used methods of analysis, comparison, and evaluation. In addition to various challenges, online learning also brought innovations. It opened doors to a new communication approach between students and lecturers, serving the achievement of educational objectives in different disciplines within this program.

Realization of online learning

Online learning in Albania was conducted from March 9, 2020, until June 2020. During this period, high school graduates and some graduating students returned to classrooms and school benches. According to IN-STAT (2020), online learning involved over 130.000 students, more than 430.000 pupils, 33.027 teachers, and hundreds of professors, all part of the Albanian education system. Online learning continued partially from September 2020 until July 2021. The Department of History and Geography during the 2019–2020 academic year consisted of 9 full-time and 6 part-time faculty members. The student body during this academic year included 81 students in the Bachelor’s program and 71 students in the Professional Master’s program for History and Geography lecturers. In the 2020–2021 academic year, the department had 9 full-time and 7 part-time faculty members, along with 47 Bachelor’s program students and 57 Professional Master’s program students for History and Geography lecturers. At the “Fan S. Noli” University, online learning continued from March 9, 2020, until early June, with students returning to classrooms only in late June for a two-week period, limited to third-year Bachelor’s students and second-year Professional Master’s students. All exams were conducted in person in the auditorium. At September 2020, all students returned to the auditorium for consultations on subjects developed online. Autumn exams were also held in the auditorium. The academic year began in November 2020, and the entire first semester, which lasted until February 2021, was conducted online. Exams took place in the auditorium. The second semester was held in the auditorium from March to July 2021.

The steps for implementing online learning at ‘Fan S. Noli’ University began with the purchase of Microsoft software and the creation of a server. IT staff at the university opened official accounts for all professors and students. On July 8, 2020, training was conducted for administrative staff and teaching assistants on using the ‘Office 365 for Education’ suite. From July 14 to 17, 2020, training continued for academic staff, introducing them to the ‘Office 365’ for Education package. Throughout September and Oc-

tober 2020, academic staff received department-specific training on using ‘Office 365.’ In October 2020, training was also provided to students based on their respective departments. Ongoing guidance from the university’s IT department addressed challenges encountered during online learning.

Discussions and results

The Department of History and Geography was established in September 2010. In its first year, it had three in-house lecturers in History (2) and Geography (1), along with four external faculty members. Over the subsequent years, the number of faculty increased, primarily consisting of young academics with master’s degrees and enrollment in doctoral programs. As time passed, all in-house lecturers in the department obtained their Doctor of Science degrees, and currently, some are in the process

of acquiring the title of Associate Professor. During the study period (December 2021), all full-time faculty members in the Department of History and Geography held the academic rank of “Doctor of Science.” Meanwhile, external faculty members held titles such as Professor, Associate Professor, Doctor, and Master of Science. The survey questions aimed to highlight the situation regarding online teaching during and after the pandemic. When asked whether they had used online communication platforms before the pandemic, 45% of students responded affirmatively, while 55% had not. Among the faculty, 53% had utilized online communication platforms, while 47% had not. Overall, both students and faculty members demonstrated some level of familiarity with online communication platforms.

1. Did you use online communication platforms before the pandemic?

Figure 1. Student responses

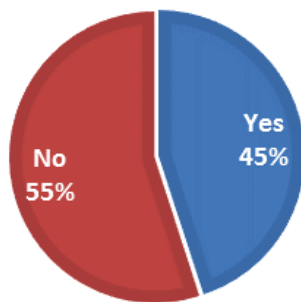
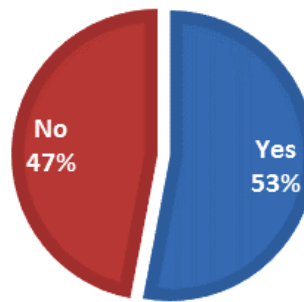


Figure 2. Lectors responses



Source: From the processing of the questionnaire data

To the question “what were the forms of online communication”? Students and lecturers have mentioned email as the most used for communications, especially in relation to the delivery of projects carried out to fulfill obligations during the development

of various subjects, Whats’up and viber are mainly used for various notifications, which is confirmed by both parties both lecturers and students.

2. Which platform did you use the most during online learning?

Figure 3. Responses of professors

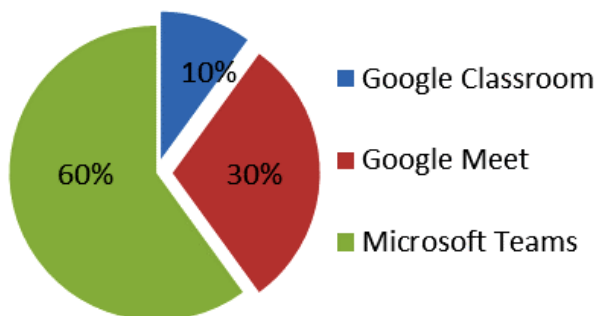
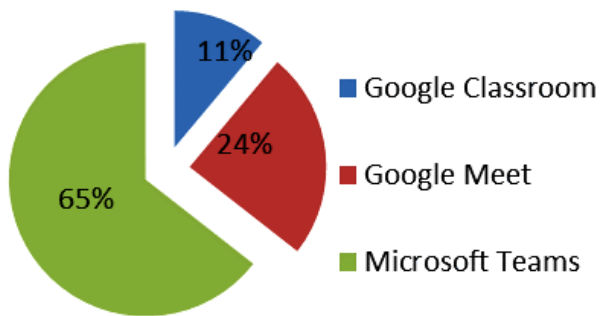


Figure 4. Student responses



Source: From the processing of the questionnaire data

Regarding to the question of the use of platforms during online learning, the lecturers say that they have used all three platforms (Google Classroom, Google Meet and Microsoft Teams), but more than 60% of them have used Microsoft Teams, and this as it was simpler to use and in addition, the university offered opportunities and facilities for use by both the lecturers and the

students. After it there is Google Meet at the rate of 30% and less Google Classroom. Students have also used the Microsoft Teams platform more widely at 65%, followed by Google Meet (24%) and Google Classroom (11%) of them.

3. Did you have prior knowledge of the platforms used when conducting online learning?

Figure 5. Student responses

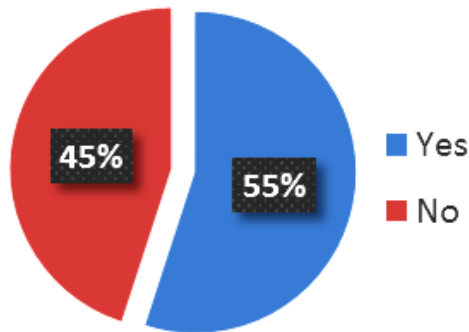
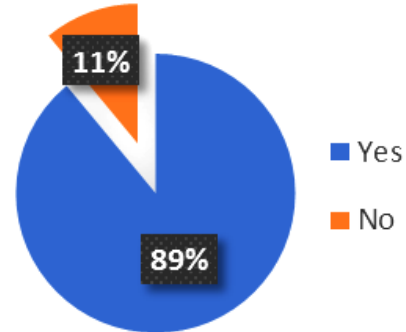


Figure 6. Answers of professors



Source: From the processing of the questionnaire data

Asked if they had prior knowledge about these platforms, 55% of students answered yes, they had knowledge before the development of online learning, while 45% of them did not have knowledge about these platforms, lecturers have been more informed

about these platforms, where 89% of them answered that they had knowledge about them and only 11% did not have knowledge about these platforms.

4. Did you receive training regarding the platforms used during online learning?

Figure 7. Responses of professors

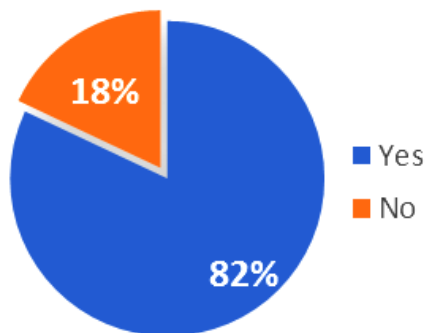
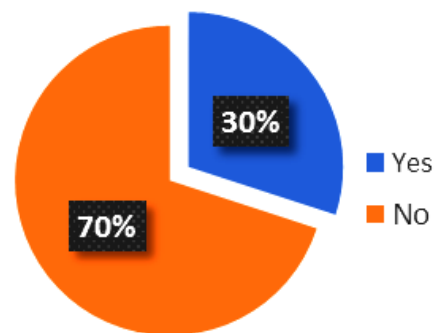


Figure 8. Student responses

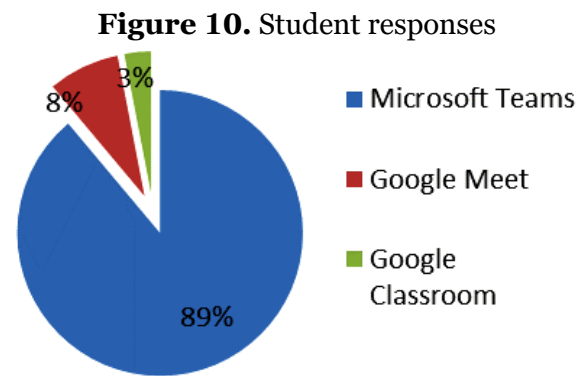
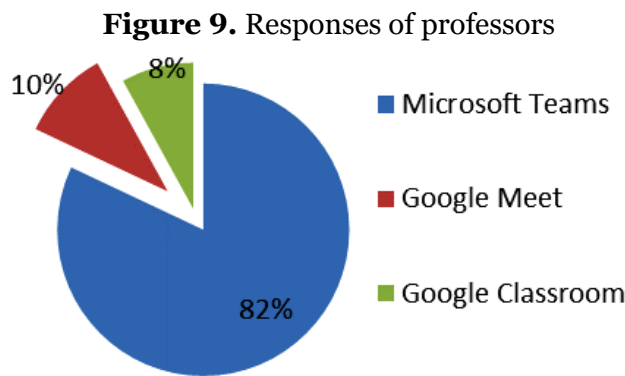


Source: From the processing of the questionnaire data

Regarding the question of whether they were trained for the use of platforms, 82% of lecturers responded that they were trained, while 18% were not. This is related to external lecturers who did not have the opportunity to participate in the trainings organized by the University. The majority of students (70% of them) express that they were not trained for the use of platforms for online learning, while 30% of them were trained.

This is due to transportation difficulties and students' personal interest in participating in the trainings organized by the University. In general, subject lecturers were the ones guiding students in using online platforms for the teaching process.

5. Which of the platforms was the easiest to use?



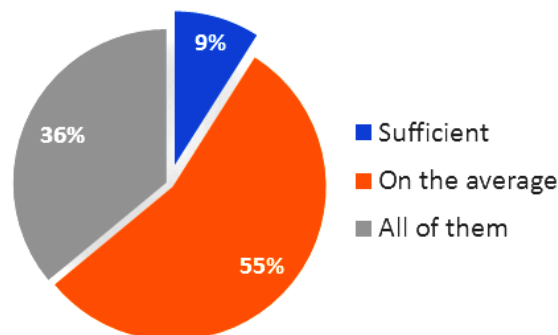
Source: From the processing of the questionnaire data

From the above graphs, we observe that both lecturers and students found it easier to use the Microsoft Teams program, possibly because the program was straightforward and accessible to everyone due to its organized implementation by the University of Korça. Following that, Google Meet is rated as the next easiest option by both lecturers (10%) and students (8%), while Google Classroom is considered the least user-friendly, despite being the

first program used during the initial transition to online learning. Regarding the question of whether they encountered difficulties in acquiring knowledge during online learning, 54% of students reported having difficulties, while approximately 46% did not face challenges. This discrepancy may be related to some students' lack of participation during online learning and the issues associated with this process.

6. Were the course objectives achieved?

Figure 11. Responses of the professors on achieving the objectives of the subject



Source: From the data processing of the questionnaire

Regarding the question posed about whether the learning objectives were achieved for professors: 55% of them responded that the objectives were achieved on average, 36% indicated that all objectives were met, and 9% stated that the objectives were sufficiently achieved. Asked for the difficulties encountered during online learning, professors highlighted the following main challenges: Lack of active participation from all students during online classes; Students' difficulties in utilizing literature; Challenges in conducting practical sessions etc. For students, the majority (75%) attributed problems to technical issues, while a smaller percentage (25%) mentioned material and other issues. The

difficulties faced by both professors and students during online learning included:

- Ensuring access to literature due to quarantine
- Internet connectivity and technical problems
- Lack of verbal communication
- Limited variety of teaching methods
- Restricted use of visual aids
- Low student participation during online classes
- Difficulties in knowledge acquisition due to personal or technical issues
- Lack of personal space in home environments

- Time constraints for active engagement during class hours
- Challenges in conducting practical sessions

- Psychological issues resulting from quarantine.
7. Do you still communicate on online platforms?

Figure 12. Answers of lecturers

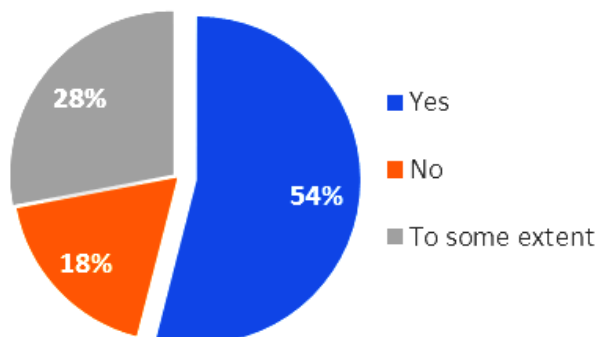
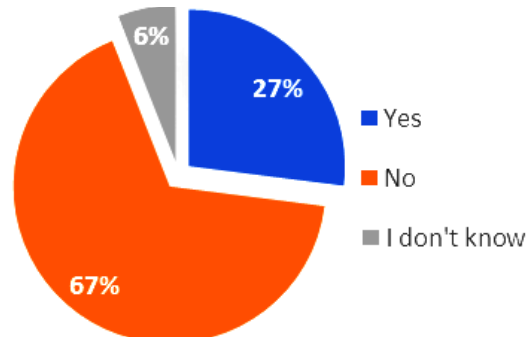


Figure 13. Student responses



Source: From the processing of the questionnaire data.

In relation to the question of whether you continue communication through online platforms, 54% of professors responded that they continue to use online communication, 28% use these platforms to some extent, and 18% do not use online communication. Students, in the majority (67%), have responded that they no longer use online communication platforms, 27% of students still use online communication platforms, and only 6% are unsure whether online communication platforms are used during the teaching process. When asked about the program of study with the highest student participation during

online teaching hours, professors observed that 64% of students in master's programs had the highest participation, while 36% noted the participation of Bachelor's students. This is related to the older age and greater responsibility of master's students compared to Bachelor's students. Additionally, it's important to consider the students' country of origin and their economic opportunities for accessing the internet or necessary tools for online communication. Another reason was the lack of private space to be present during online learning.

Table 1. Online learning innovations for lecturers and students

Professors	Students
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the possibility of transmitting knowledge at a distance • freedom in communication • recognition and acquisition of new online learning platforms • development of digital competence • new approach that can be used in the future • presentation of course projects and assignments • developing new communication skills through technology 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • use and acquisition of digital competence • ease of communication • flexibility with the lecture • time for studies and for work • tolerant approach to tests, colloquiums, course assignments • new experience

Source: Author, from respondents' responses

If we refer to the table, we see that both lecturers and students have identified almost the same advantages during online learning.

The development of digital competence and freedom in communication are the key points to mention. Students view online learning as

a good opportunity for employment during their schooling, and they have also listed the development of digital competence as an

other advantage, additionally this has been a new experience.

8. Will you choose online learning?

Figure 14. Professors responses

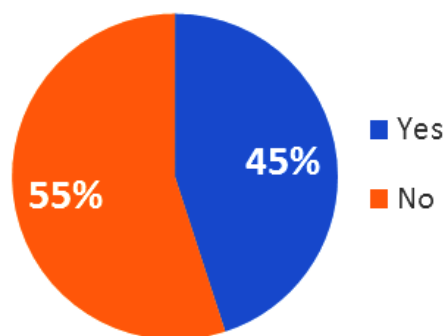
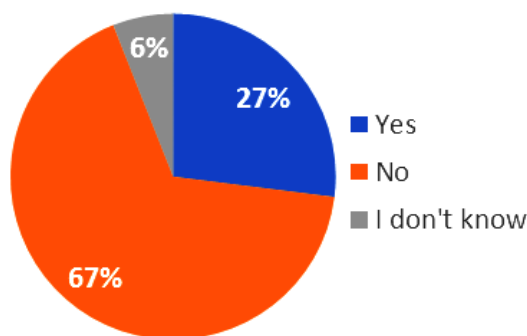


Figure 15. Students responses



Source: By Data Processing of Questionnaire

Regarding to the question about the possibilities of choosing online learning willingly, 45% of lecturers responded that they would choose online learning willingly, while only 19% of students would do so. The majority of students (75%) and lecturers (55%) would not be optimistic for online education which is related to various challenges associated with online learning.

Conclusion

Online teaching in the Department of History-Geography took place from March 2020 to March 2021. Only third-year Bachelor students and second-year Master students returned to in-person classes for a 2-week period before their final consultations. All exams were conducted in person. Students and faculty were trained in using online platforms by IT specialists at the University. The platforms used included Microsoft Office, Google Classroom, and Microsoft Teams. Overall, they were user-friendly, with Microsoft Teams being the most widely used. Over 60% of stu-

dents participated in online learning, with technical issues being the main challenge. Other problems identified by students included lack of personal space, limited time, difficulties in accessing literature, absence of debate, and limitations in practical sessions. The benefits of online learning included communication flexibility for most students, acquisition of technological knowledge, and digital competence development. Students continue to communicate online regarding various aspects of the teaching process. While most students would not choose online learning under normal conditions, faculty members are more optimistic about the use of online platforms. The COVID-19 pandemic paved the way for the adoption of various platforms in online communication between faculty and students. A practice that continues today is the creation and correction of tests using online platforms. Ongoing training on online teaching and infrastructure improvement would enable its application in specific modules of the History-Geography program.

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