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The challenges of distance learning in countries undergoing transition during the COVID-19 pandemic - case study

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Abstract. Virtual learning, also known as online learning or distance learning has transformed the face of the education system for quite some time. Now, it is rapidly becoming an integral aspect and a common tool, in the broader aspect of higher education, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to providing an alternative method of learning in the digital age, online learning offers students the opportunity to learn new skills or improve existing ones. On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. Following the speed with which COVID-19 spread to all parts of the world and to curb the spread of the disease, most governments around the world, including the Republic of Kosovo, authorized unprecedented social control measures to stop this disease unknown. These measures, among others, required social distancing and temporary physical closure of educational institutions. The first case of COVID 19 in Kosovo was identified on March 13, 2020, social distancing - full closure came into force on March 15, while UBT Higher Education Institution started online learning on March 16, 2020, the first in Kosovo and possibly in the Western Balkans. This teaching-learning process was a novelty for Kosovo and was applied for the first time. Objective: The main objective of the current survey was to study the impact of E-learning on students' academic performance and their evaluations of this form of teaching in general. The purpose of this paper is to reflect as professionally as possible the organization of distance learning, the effects on the teaching and learning process as well as the form and level of communication and teacher-student relations in this process which was a novelty for Kosovo and UBT as one of the largest Private Colleges in the region.

Keywords. Distance learning, Interactivity, Pandemic, Social distance, Lessons

Introduction

Online learning continues to be a topic of debate in terms of the teaching and learning process, methodological and pedagogical aspects, achievement of objectives and other dilemmas related to this form of knowledge transmission by teachers. These debates are ongoing in countries still in transitional state, who have not had any tradition in applying this form of teaching. Even in Kosovo as a new country and in transition there are different opinions and assessments, especially since March last year that the education system was not at its usual three levels of education and was forced to move to an online learning opportunity. Learning is the act or process of developing skills or knowledge. Modern, web-based learning and computing provides the tools for radically changing the way in which students are taught (Arsham,2002).

The COVID 19 pandemic has changed many people not only in themselves but also in an approach to problems and finding alternatives. For Kosovo, it was a challenge to start distance learning, a specialty for university education, especially for the specific direction that is characterized by practical work and laboratory work. Previous work on faculty preparation to teach online does not recognize that before changing practices, it is necessary to examine the values and belief systems that underlie those practices (Simon, 2012). At UBT College the online teaching started as a first time, but with a lot faith and trust, learning throughout the way, which is also the objective of this paper. Educational systems are under increasing pressure to reduce costs while maintaining or improving outcomes for students. To improve educational productivity many school districts and states are turning to online learning (U.S. Department of Education Office of Educational Technology, 2012), which in the case of Kosovo and our study, it is not related to this aspect it was imposed as a choice. Apart from the new experience as a teaching method in Kosovo, we have focused on how students have evaluated this teaching method. There are different assessments regarding this issue of efficiency and student engagement in online classes. Barriers to achieving learning objectives have been various, from the most basic to adequate training and a part of the staff who have been more "non-social" with IT or for other reasons. Even more developed countries than Kosovo have had challenges of this nature. Research on online teaching and learning shows that they are effective only if students have constant access to the Internet and computers and if teachers have received targeted training and support for online learning. Because these necessary requirements for effectiveness have been largely lacking for many people, distance education during the pandemic has hampered learning and teaching (Garcia & Weiss, 2020). This aspect and the evaluation by the students themselves is addressed in this paper.

The aspect of the quality of teaching and learning between online and traditional teaching continues to be a topic of debate. Although advocates of traditional approaches to higher education may argue that courses should be taught in fixed locations using somewhat rigid organizational structures, the opinions of many writers suggest that eLearning methods will greatly change future higher educational systems (Singh et al. 2005), which I estimate that this change has occurred during this period of time and which is also expressed in the evaluations of the students of our College. The interactivity and efficiency of teaching has also been a topic addressed in this paper as well as the need for advancement in this regard. Lecturers in networked learning environments modify their courses as they move forward, which means that the longer a course is taught in a particular format the more effective it is (Volery, 2000). Social distancing, limited mobility and the "new way of life" have also affected students and their engagement in online learning during the COVID 19 period. Another issue is keeping students interested. It's always a challenge for academics to maintain students' attention in face-to-face classes. Numerous studies suggest it is even harder with distance students, (Khan, 2020), so these factors and a few others were part of the questionnaire we developed.

Methodology

In this paper we have used the qualitative and quantitative method, seeing as the nature of the problem we have elaborated has forced us to use mixed methods in order to realize the purpose of this scientific paper.

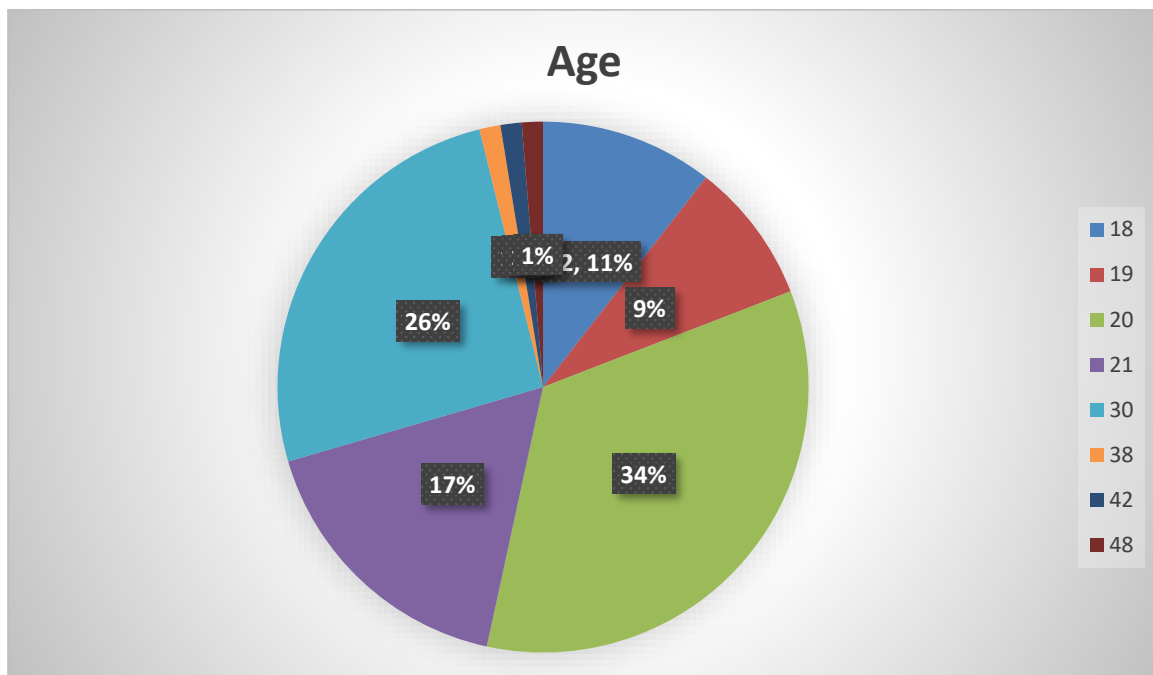
Through the questionnaire consisting of 22 questions, we gathered data from 111 students from the three faculties of UBT College and the following: 69 students from the Faculty of Nursing, 27 students from the Faculty of Dentistry and 15 students from the Faculty of Communication Sciences. The target focus groups were deliberately selected in order to analyze from different perspectives their evaluation of online learning as a process. Of the

surveyed students 66.7% are female and 33.3% male, while their age varies from 18 to 48 years. Distance learning at UBT College is developed on the Moodle platform.

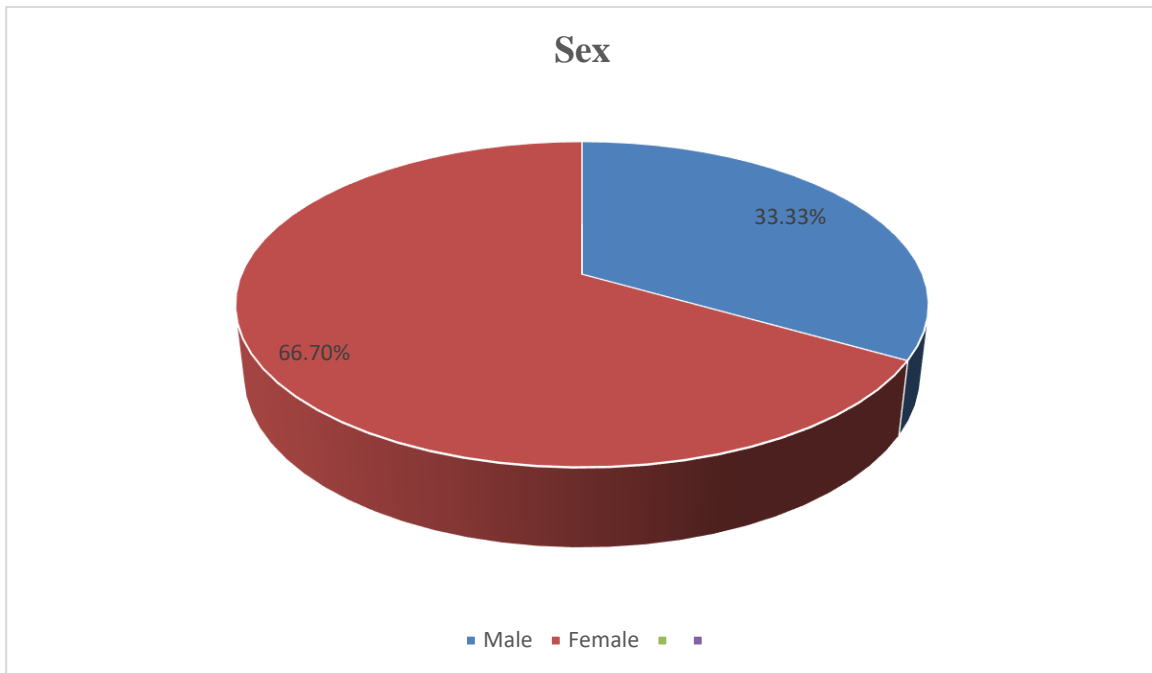
Of the 22 questions in the questionnaire, we focused on 11 questions that we considered important for the purpose of our study.

Results

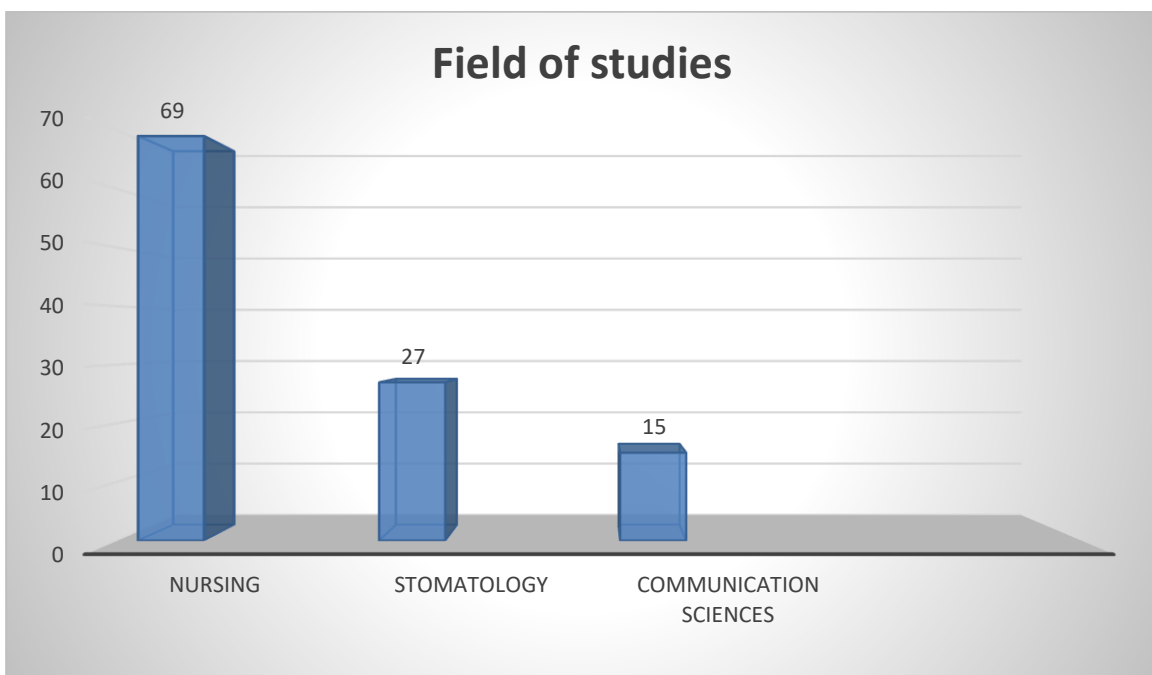
Of the 111 students surveyed for the purpose of our paper, 66.77% were female and 33.33% were male. We focused on half of the questionnaire questions which are the purpose of this paper including the age, gender and direction of studies of the surveyed students. In the following graphs and tables we have reflected the evaluations and answers of students of the three faculties who we surveyed. From the analysis we have made of the responses of the respondents we have noticed that we have differences in evaluation and depending on the field of the studies but also by gender we have diversity of answers in terms of the issue we have addressed in this paper.



Graph 1. The age groups of the participants

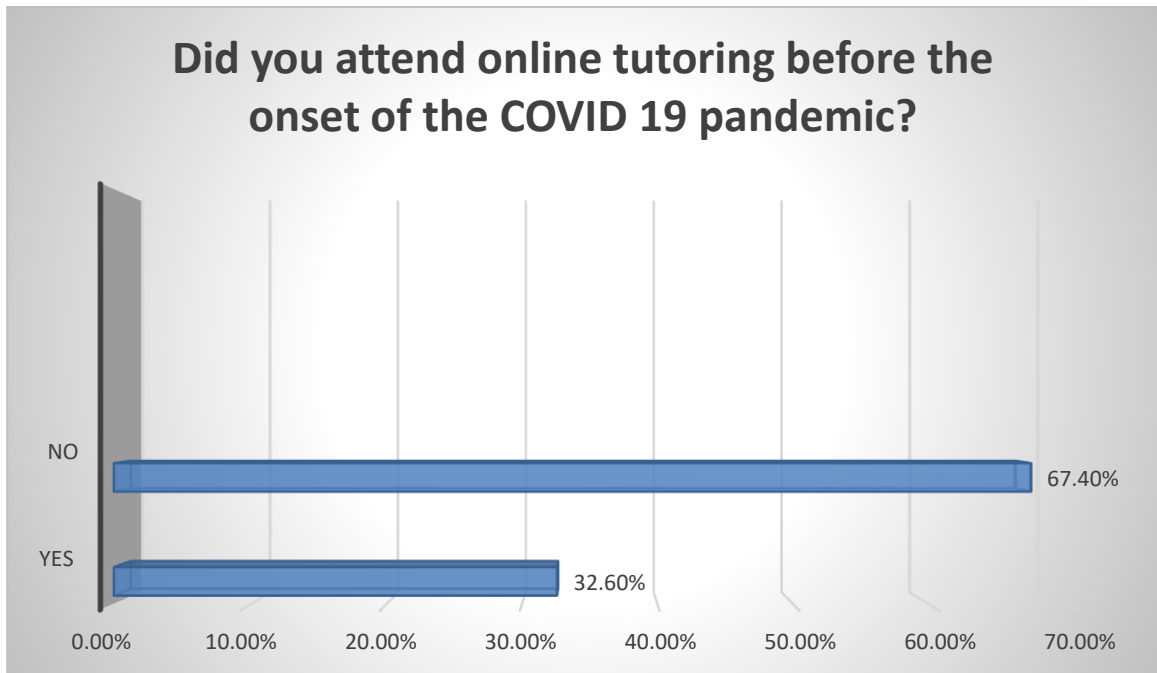


Graph 2. The ratio of male to female participants



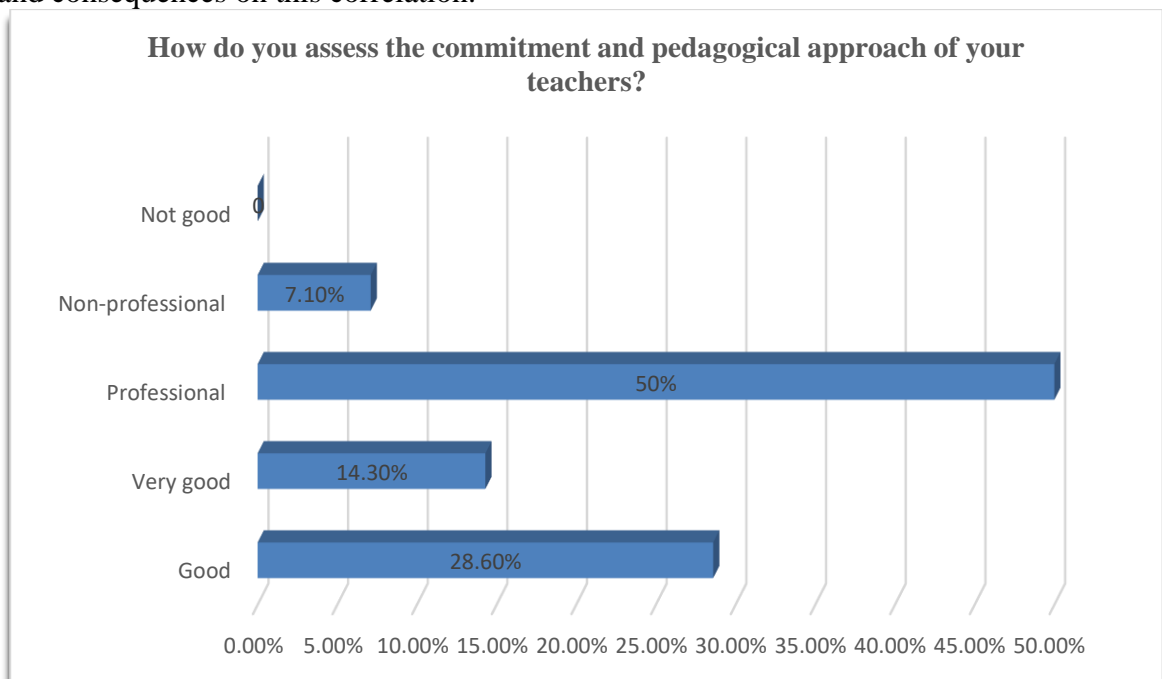
Graph 3. Field of study of the participants

When asked “Did you ever attend online tutoring before the onset of COVID-19?”, 67,40% of the students who participated in the study answered with “NO”, and 32,60% with “YES”. These results show that online learning was a relatively new method of teaching and learning.



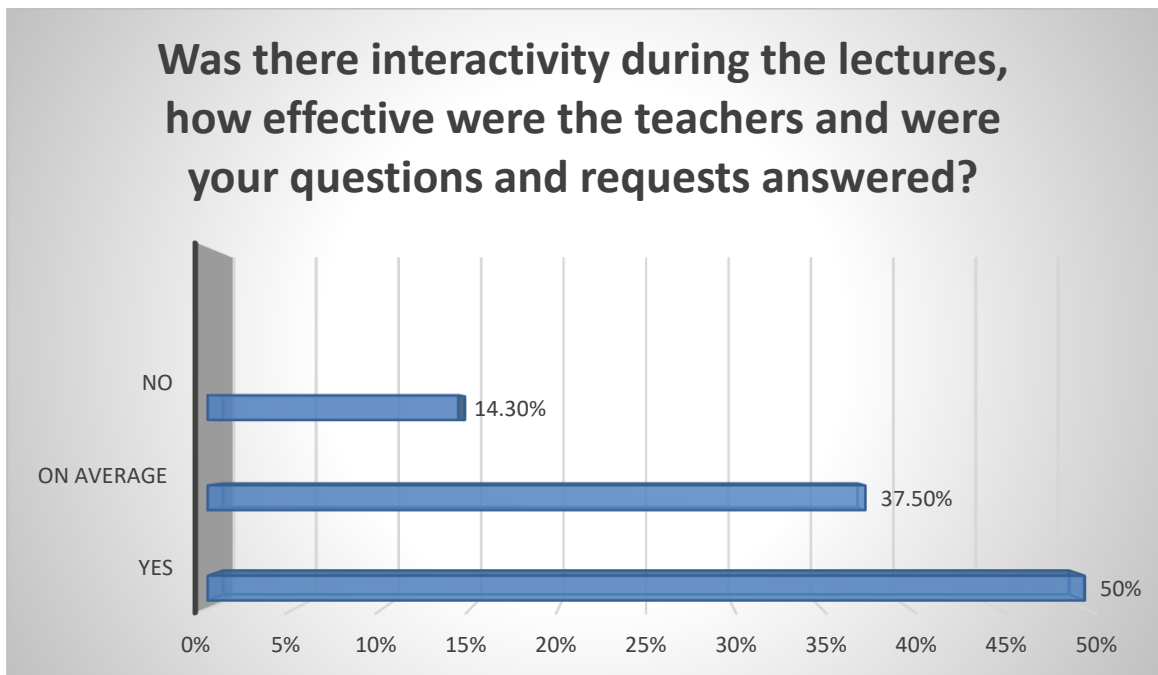
Graph 4. Results of question no. 1 of the questionnaire.

Being a teacher at this university, it was important to evaluate the students in the question of how they evaluated the commitment and pedagogical approach of their teachers. The result of the evaluation by the students was: As professional 50%, very good 14.30%, good 28.60%, non-professional 7.10% and not good 0%. From this assessment of the surveyed students we estimate that the teaching and learning process as the first of its kind in our institution had been developed in optimal frameworks that can be considered encouraging as the first experience of online learning development and the socio-emotional aspect of students and teachers during a period of closure and social distance that undoubtedly had a negative impact and consequences on this correlation.



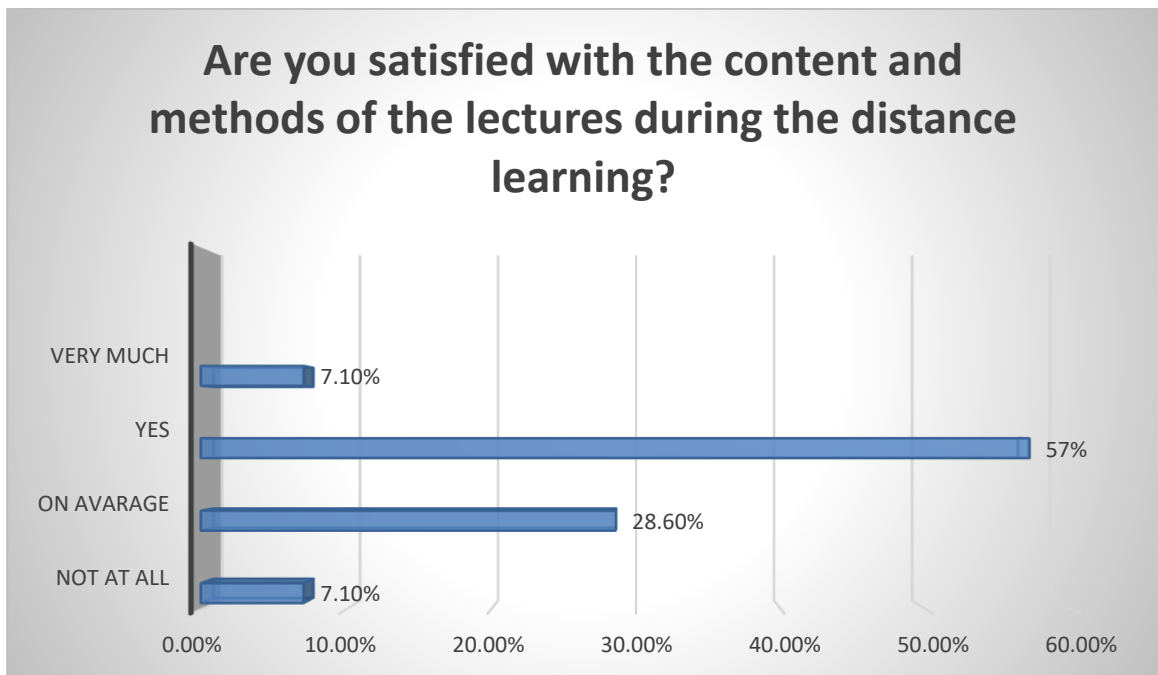
Graph 5. Results of question no. 13 of the questionnaire.

When asked if there was interactivity during the lectures, how effective the teachers were and if the students' questions and requests were answered and fulfilled, we received the following assessments from the students: Yes 50%, on average 37.50% and No 14.50%, which we also estimate that based on the time, the general atmosphere, the uncertainty and panic that prevailed in that time period, these are responses and estimates that exceed the optimum expectations.



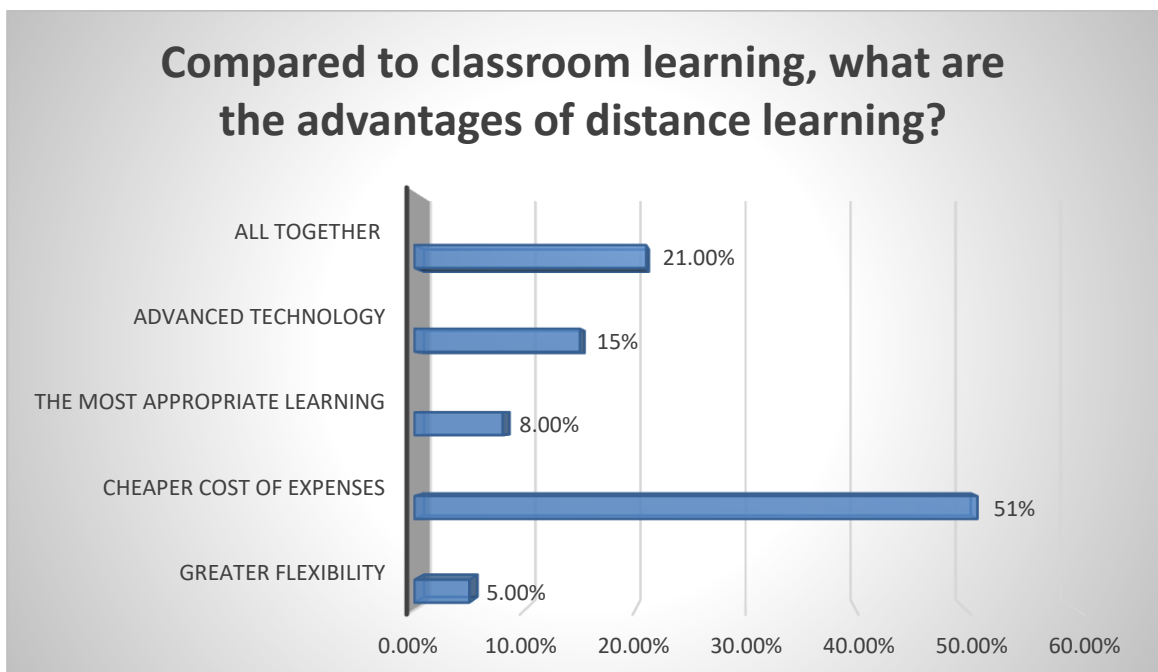
Graph 6. The results of question no. 14 of the questionnaire.

When asked if they are satisfied with the content and methodology of distance learning lectures, we received the following evaluations from the respondents: “Yes” (57%), “Average” 28.60%, “Very much” (7.10%), “not at all” (7.10%), which we evaluate as realistic assessments and that exceeds our expectations in the positive aspect compared to the psycho-emotional situation and the general situation created in the general aspect in the plans by COVID 19.



Graph 7. The results of question no. 15 of the questionnaire.

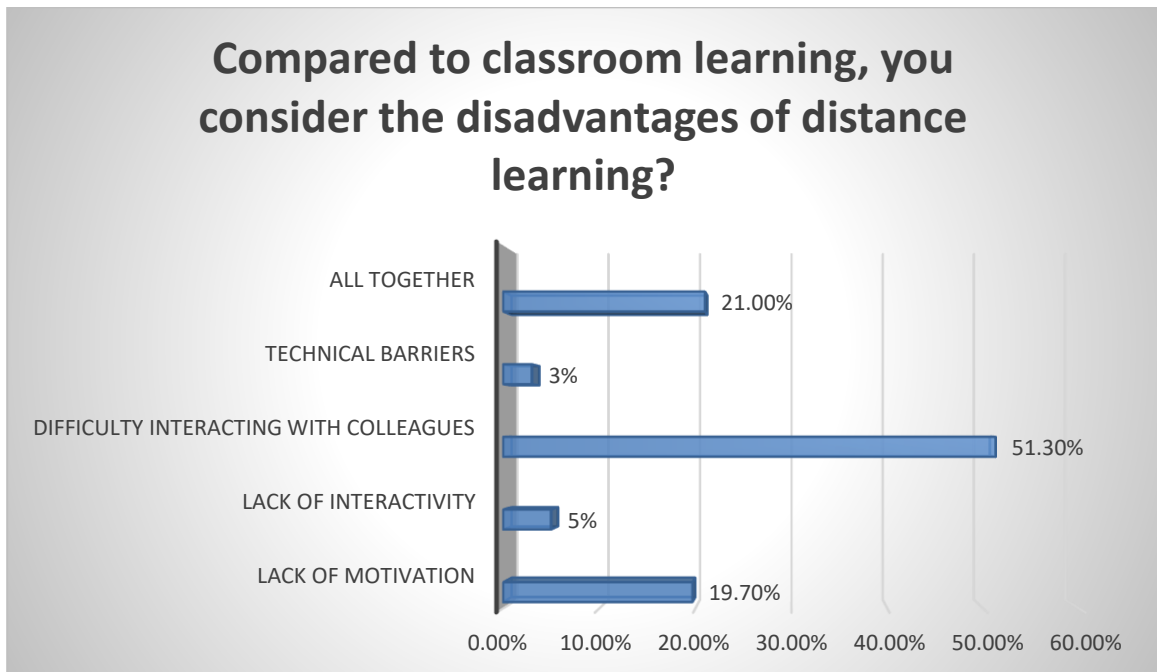
When asked what are the advantages of distance learning compared to classroom learning, we received the following estimates: “Cheaper cost” (51%), “advanced technology” (15%), “more convenient learning” (8%), “greater flexibility” (5%) and “all these factors together” (21%).



Graph 8. The results of question no. 19 of the questionnaire.

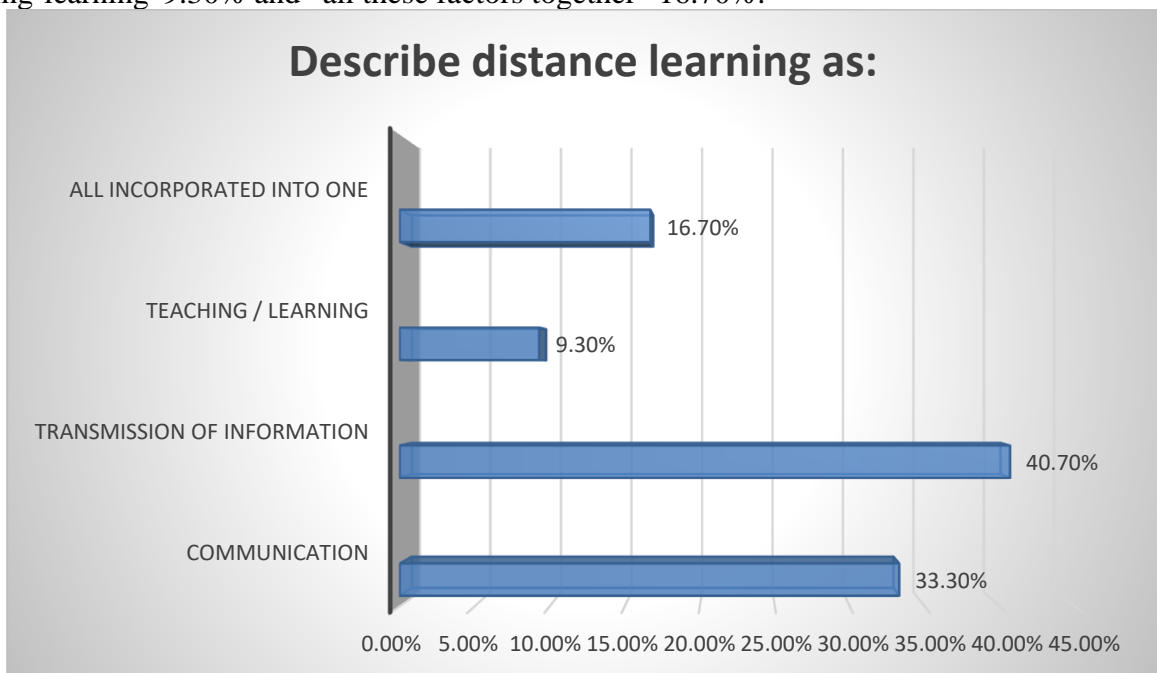
On the other hand, on the question regarding the disadvantages of distance learning we have the following assessments from students: “Difficulty to cooperate with colleagues”

(51.30%), “technical barriers” (3%), “lack of motivation” (19.70%), “lack of interactivity” (5%), “all together” (21%).



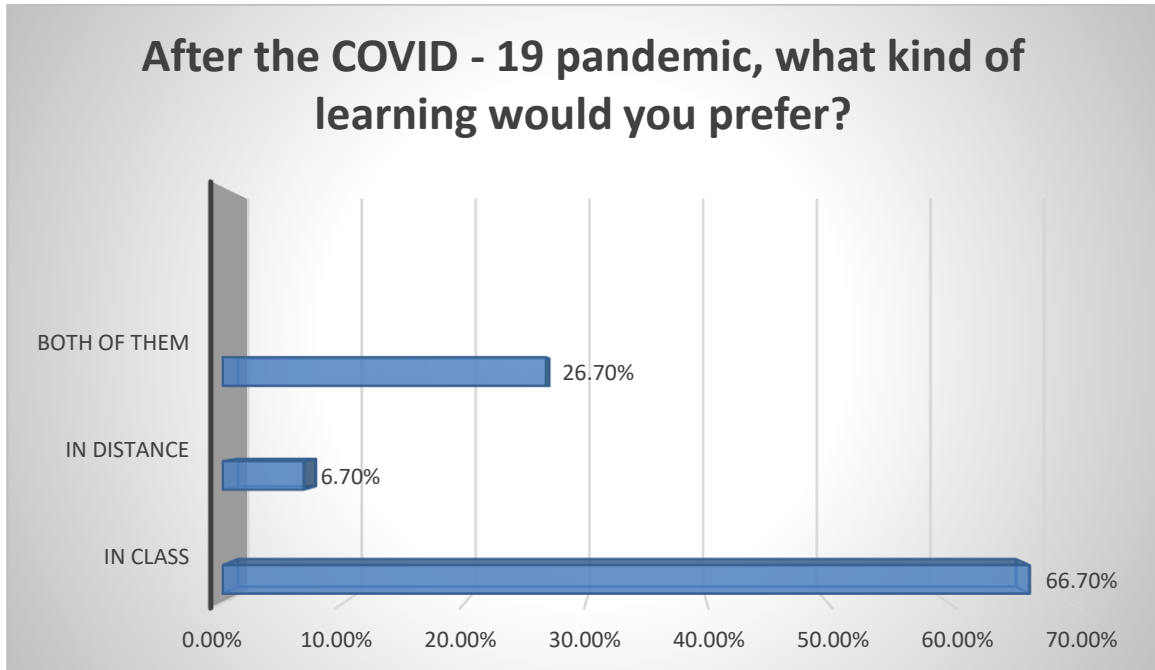
Graph 9. The results of question no. 20 of the questionnaire.

When asked how would you describe distance learning, we received the following assessments from students: “Information transmission” 40.70%, “communication” 33.30%, “teaching-learning” 9.30% and “all these factors together” 16.70%.



Graph 10. The results of question no. 21 of the questionnaire.

When asked what kind of learning you would prefer after the end of the COVID 19 pandemic, we have the following assessments from the surveyed students: “In person” 66.70%, “distance learning” 6.70%, “I would combine both forms” 26.70%. We evaluate these answers from the surveyed students as real, expected from the observation and analysis of this process, taking into account the many factors that have influenced the evaluation of respondents during this unusual time for all of us.



Graph 11. The results of question no. 22 of the questionnaire.

Results

From the analysis we have made of the responses, we have noticed that we have differences in evaluation and depending on the direction of the studies but also based on gender we have diversity of answers in terms of the issue we have addressed in this paper.

To the question whether you attended online learning before the start of COVID 19, 67.40% of the surveyed students answered no and 32.60 answered yes. Being a teacher at this university, it was important to evaluate the students in the question of how they evaluated the commitment and pedagogical approach of their teachers. The result of the evaluation by the students was: As professional 50%, very good 14.30 %, good 28.60%, non-professional 7.10% and not good 0%. From this assessment of the surveyed students we estimate that the teaching and learning process as the first of its kind in our institution had been developed in optimal frameworks that can be considered encouraging as the first experience of online learning development and the socio-emotional aspect of students and teachers during a period of closure and social distance that undoubtedly had a negative impact and consequences on this correlation.

When asked if there was interactivity during the lectures, how effective the teachers were and if the students’ questions and requests were answered and fulfilled, we received the following assessments from the students: Yes 50%, on average 37.50% and No 14.50%, which we also estimate that based on the time, the general atmosphere, the uncertainty and panic that prevailed in that time period, these are responses and estimates that exceed the optimum expectations.

When asked if they are satisfied with the content and methodology of distance learning lectures, we received the following evaluations from the respondents: “Yes” (57%), “Average” 28.60%, “Very much” (7.10%), “not at all” (7.10%), which we evaluate as realistic assessments and that exceeds our expectations in the positive aspect compared to the psycho-emotional situation and the general situation created in the general aspect in the plans by COVID 19.

When asked what are the advantages of distance learning compared to classroom learning, we received the following estimates: “Cheaper cost” (51%), “advanced technology” (15%), “more convenient learning” (8%), “greater flexibility” (5%) and “all these factors together” (21%).

On the other hand, on the question regarding the disadvantages of distance learning we have the following assessments from students: “Difficulty to cooperate with colleagues” (51.30%), “technical barriers” (3%), “lack of motivation” (19.70%), “lack of interactivity” (5%), “all together” (21%).

Regarding the advantages and disadvantages of distance learning, we consider the evaluations by the respondents as normal and expected, the port and the qualification of online learning is for discussion and deeper evaluation evaluation that only 9% have qualified as a teaching-learning process.

When asked what kind of learning you would prefer after the end of the COVID 19 pandemic, we have the following assessments from the surveyed students: “In person” 66.70%, “distance learning” 6.70%, “I would combine both forms” 26.70%. We evaluate these answers from the surveyed students as real, expected from the observation and analysis of this process, taking into account the many factors that have influenced the evaluation of respondents during this unusual time for all of us.

Discussion

The Internet is a major technological advancement that reshapes not only our society but also that of universities around the world. In light of this, universities should take advantage of the Internet for teaching, (Volery & Lord 2015), this trend of digitalization of educational processes in university education is advancing in Kosovo and especially in UBT College as a leader of university education institutions in this field. Therefore, the focus of our study and surveys we conducted with the student was to get the opinion, but also the students’ evaluations of online learning which was organized for the first time in Kosovo, the satisfaction of the students’ and the expectations as well as the comparison of this teaching method with the more traditional teaching method in the classroom. Furthermore, we strived to measure the interactivity and sense of the online environment in an “unexpected” situation rooting from a global pandemic, their approach and readiness to this new teaching method and if they preferred to continue the teaching method - learning this way or in person. Despite the positive evaluation of this method, with greater concentration, in the analysis of questionnaires, however, there is a percentage of skepticism, uncertainty and maybe even hesitation from a part of students about the distance learning methods. Not coincidentally, the last question had to do with the ending of the COVID 19 pandemic, asking the students how they would prefer to learn, where 66.70% preferred traditional learning - in person, 26.70% preferred the combination of these teaching formats, and only 6.70% preferred online lessons,. We believe that these results from the survey and our students should guide us towards the most serious commitments in organizing, foreseen - technological techniques, training and academic staff in order for this to learn in Kosovo to reach the optimal standards required by this teaching and the lessons that argue researchers in this field as well (Volery, 2001) who had identified three critical success factors associated with the effectiveness of teaching in online delivery - technology, pedagogy, and previous use of

technology by students. Technology, the characteristics of the instructor-teacher but also the characteristics of the student (Olson, 2005) are extremely important in the efficient realization of this form of learning that continues to be a challenge for governments of countries not only in transition such as Kosovo but also for countries

Conclusions

The Internet presents a great technological advancement, affecting not only society in general, but also modern education. Universities need to use the internet for teaching and developing methods of providing online learning opportunities for the many reasons that are now being demanded by contemporary global trends.

Social distancing and the COVID pandemic 19 challenged countries still in transition such as Kosovo, that forced the government to start distance learning “compulsorily”, which in such a situation was organized relatively well, although with many challenges, such as barriers of technological nature and IT, barriers of the experience of organizing teaching in this form from the side of the academic staff, but also the lack of experience of students. All in all, we managed to organize online teaching relatively well, especially in a university.

From the main focus of our work which was the evaluation by the students themselves regarding this form of teaching and learning as a new experience for Kosovo and UBT College where their satisfaction, methodology and pedagogical aspect, interactivity, advantages and disadvantages, technical training of the College, their motivation during this period of teaching organization and up to the preferred form of teaching was measured, we can conclude that a satisfactory acceptance of online learning has been achieved, there has been interactivity and correlation in the method and content of the teaching process, but at the same time there were doses of hesitation, confusion and other barriers that in the last question students from all three directions that were surveyed prefer to return to classroom teaching - traditional with 66.70% of the 111 students surveyed.

We believe that the period when Kosovo was forced to apply distance learning at the three levels of the education system is a step forward and the authorities need to do more in the preparation of invasive infrastructure, technological devices of modern trends, specific staff training and preparation of students for this form of learning to be applied even in normal conditions for many reasons such as: economic, practical, functional and for the inclusion of all social focus groups.

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