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Online learning in higher education: perceptions and dificulties

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Abstract

The pandemic period brought major changes in terms of the teaching-learning process in the university education system and represented an experience both for teachers and students. This study investigates the views, difficulties faced by students while attending online courses and seminars, but also disadvantages and benefits. In order to carry out the study, a questionnaire with several items aimed at achieving clear objectives was applied. The study was attended by 70 students from the PIPP specialization, bachelor's cycle, who attended the online courses in a percentage of over 50%. The analysis captured various results regarding the way of teaching-learning in the online system, which indicates that most of the students in the research lean towards learning in a physical format, and only in exceptional cases online, among the causes or difficulties identified being the weak Internet connection, lack of concentration and focus of attention in classes caused by various disturbing factors in the home environment, difficulties in understanding the classes, the impossibility of physical participation in practice activities.

Keywords: online learning, higher education, students.

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Introduction

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, from March 2020 until February 2022, all educational units from both pre-university and university environments, including those in Romania, had to move with their teaching activities -face-to-face learning in the online environment, using various platforms and applications to conduct them. The online environment has allowed educational activities to be conducted either synchronously or asynchronously.
Synchronous learning allows teachers and students to be together at the same time and place directly, which is simular to face-to-face learning (Chaeruman, 2017, apud Achmad Syam and Achmad, 2022). Synchronous learning allows students to interact with teachers, creating discussions and debates. Synchronous learning is carried out on platforms such as Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Webex. Asynchronous learning allows individual learning, by accessing, at any moment, by each student the courses and materials posted by teachers on platforms such as Google Classroom or Moodle.
During the pandemic, online courses represented the only solution to continue the education process. Over the past two years, various studies have emerged regarding online learning and the difficulties encountered by students in learning in such an environment. For example, as several authors state, the difficulties consisted of psychological unpreparedness for online learning, problems with connecting to the Internet, lack of preparation for online exams (Dhiman, 2020; Hebebci et al., 2020, in. Churi, Mistry, Asad et al., 2022, Anghel, Dogaru, 2021). Yeung and Yau (2021) identified in their study difficulties created by the socio-economic environment of the students, so they had difficulties regarding their learning environment, access to equipment. Students were emotionally disturbed, especially by the quality of the feedback and the clarity of the lectures.

Research methodology

This research aims to identify students' opinions regarding online learning, identify the difficulties they faced during online learning, but also some possible benefits of this system, from the pandemic period.

Objectives of the Research

The research was based on the following objectives:

O1: identification of the platforms used to carry out activities in online format, both synchronously and asynchronously;

O2: identifying the difficulties encountered by students during online activities;

O3: identifying students' opinions regarding certain aspects related to the manner and quality of activities in the online environment;

O4: identification of skills acquired during participation in courses in the online system;

O5: identifying the advantages/benefits of conducting the course hours in the online period.

Sample of Research

The research was addressed to students from the Faculty of Orthodox Theology and Educational Sciences, majoring in Pedagogy of primary and preschool education, from the "Valahia" University in Târgoviște. 70 undergraduate students participated in the study, of which 69 were female students and only one male student. Most of the students participating in the research (50) are between the ages of 18 and 15 and only 2 students are over 45 years of age. The research was conducted in March-April 2022.

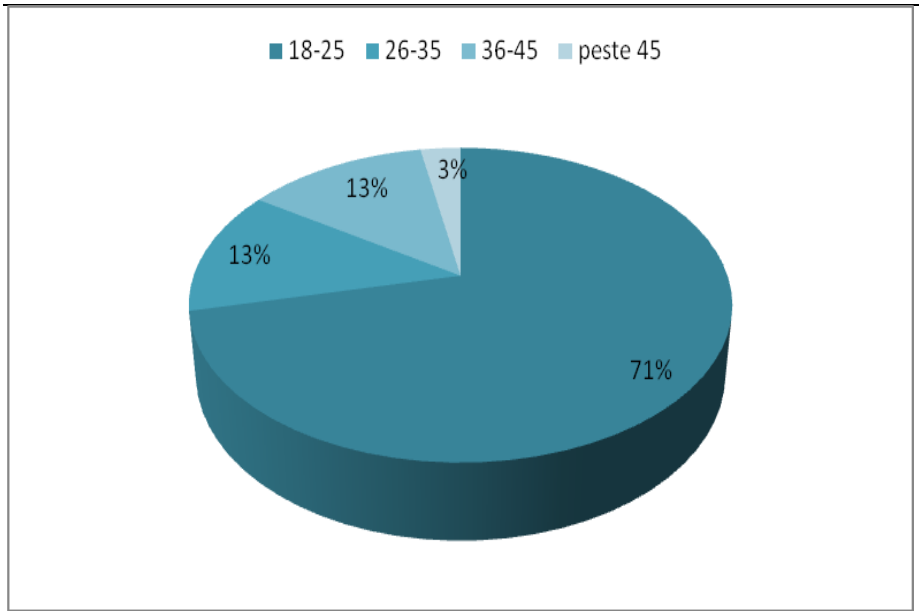


Figure no.1. *Percentage of students by age range*

Of the total student respondents, the most are students in the 1st year of study (35), and the fewest are students in the 3rd year of study (11) and 22 students in the 2nd year of study.

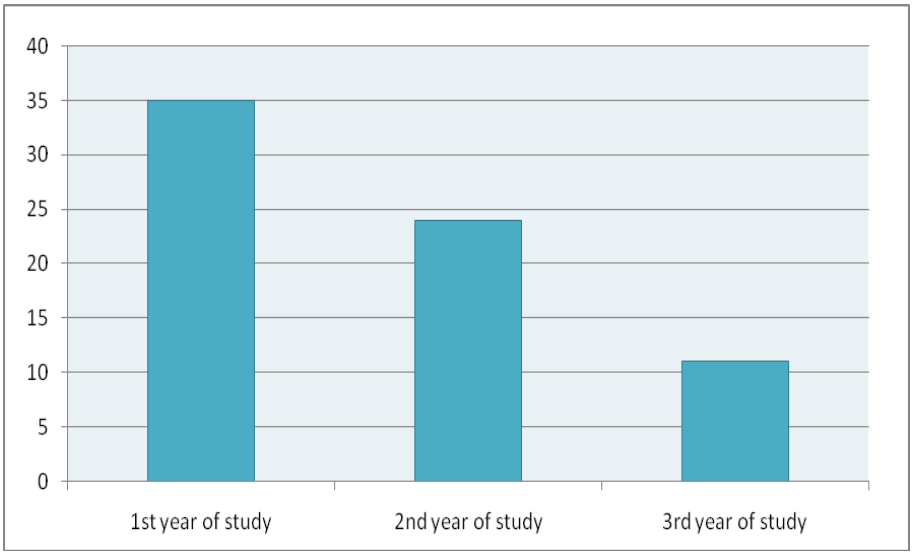


Figure no. 2. *Number of students per year of study*

Method and Research Tool

The method used in this research was the survey-based method. The instrument used to collect the research data was the questionnaire. A questionnaire containing 24 items was used, with 6 items of the questionnaire using a five-point Likert scale (not at all, to a small extent, to some extent, to a large extent, and to a very large extent). The questionnaire was applied online, through Google Forms.

Analysis and interpretation of the research data

The analysis of the data obtained following the application of the research questionnaire among students from the PIPP specialization, undergraduate cycle, was carried out on 3 dimensions, namely: involvement in online activities and platforms used for both synchronous and asynchronous learning, difficulties encountered on during the activities in online format, the extent to which certain aspects related to the manner and quality of carrying out activities in the online environment are appreciated by the students, as well as the acquisition of certain skills.

Regarding the participation of the student respondents in the online activities, it was found that all the student respondents participated in the online activities, but in different percentages. 80% of them participated in a percentage of over 75%, 17% participated in a percentage between 50% and 75% and only 3% participated in a percentage between 25% and 50%.

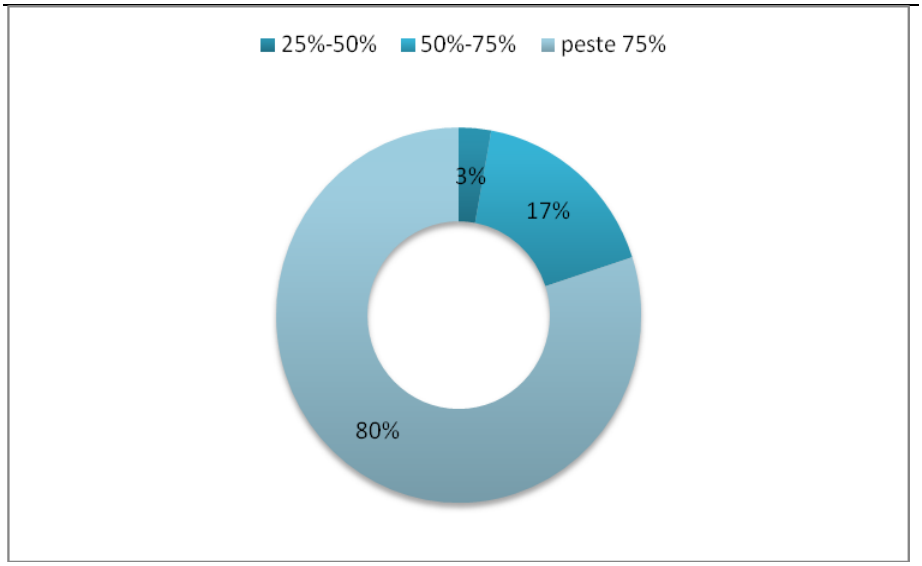


Figure no. 3. *Percentage of participation in online activities by percentage category*

In order to identify the platform used most often in carrying out synchronous activities, from the analysis of the graph below, it appears that the platform used to a large and very large extent for carrying out synchronous activities is Microsoft Teams, followed to a certain and large extent by Zoom.

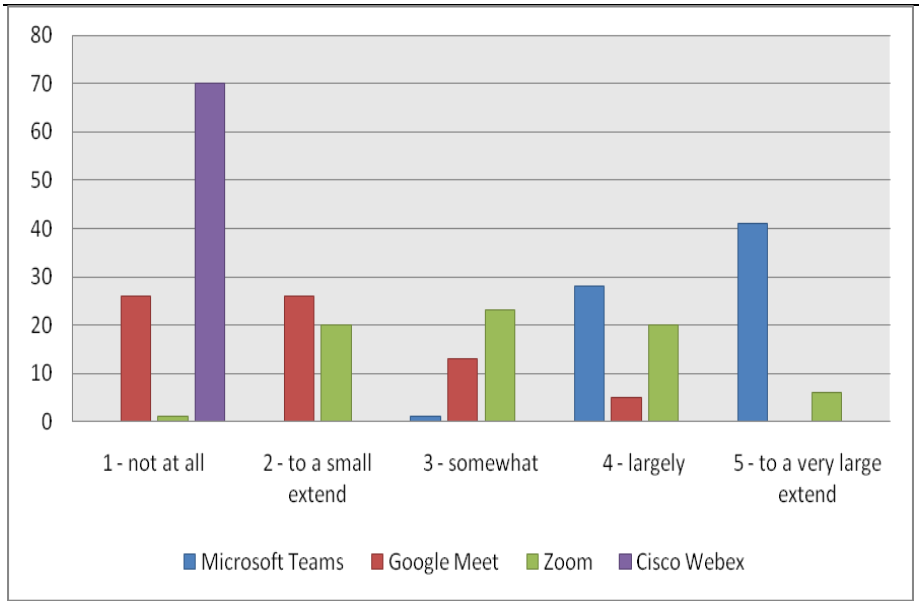


Figure no. 4. *Platform usage measure in synchronous activities*

To identify the platform most often used by students in the asynchronous activities, we can analyze the graph below, where we find that the most used platform in this case was the Moodle platform, as shown in the graph below.

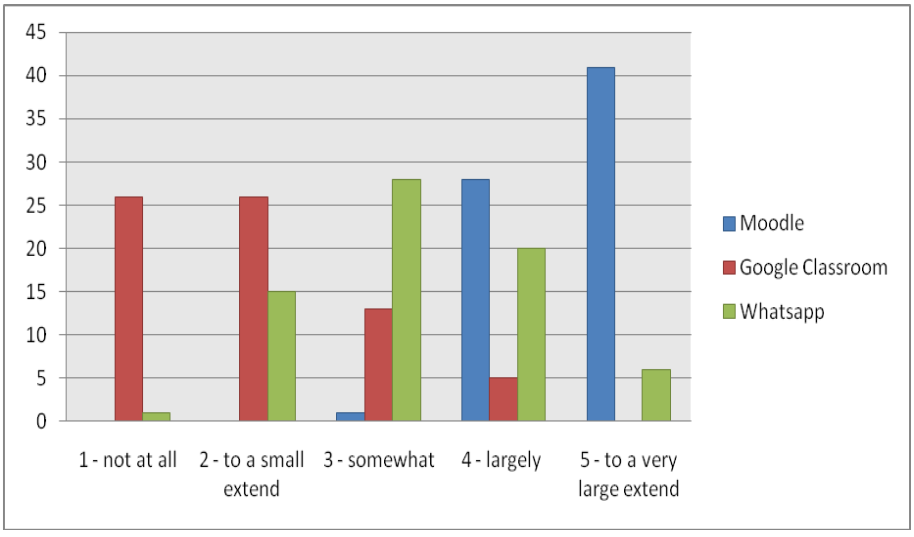


Figure no. 5. *Measure the use of platforms in asynchronous activities*

From the examples of difficulties illustrated in figure no. 6 (poorly developed digital skills, lack of a high-performance computer, low motivation, service, disorganization in own schedule, interest in other activities during courses, participation in other courses outside the faculty), we find that none of these represented a difficulty with which the responding students have to face to a great or very great extent during the course and seminar activities in the online system. For each difficulty illustrated in the graph below, it is noted that the student respondents leaned more toward the small steps of the likert scale, which demonstrates that they encountered these difficulties during online courses to a small extent and to some extent or not at all.

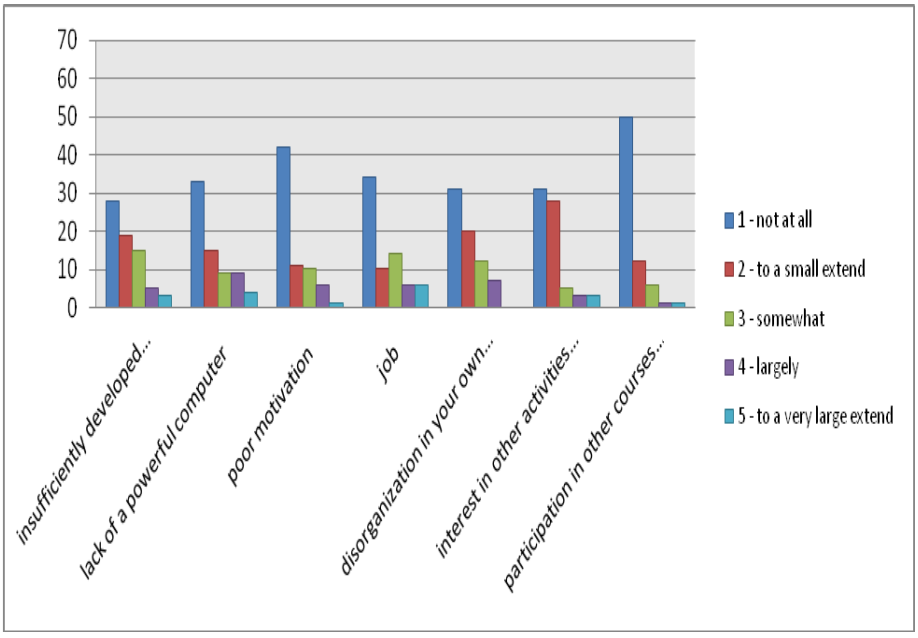


Figure no. 7. *The measure of the difficulties encountered in conducting the course hours in the online system*

Apart from the examples of difficulties from the previous item, the students mentioned other difficulties that they faced throughout the period in which the courses were held online, difficulties that can be

seen in the figure below and that can be considered as disadvantages of the online system. We noticed, in their answers, in various percentages, difficulties such as weak internet connection (42%), difficulty that prevents or complicates the process of participating in online activities; technical failures (14%); difficult understanding of courses (13%); lower degree of concentration (11%); difficult accommodation with the platforms (11%), in this case students requesting the help of either the professors of each discipline, or the year advisor, IT persons from the faculty or the department director; power failure (9%).

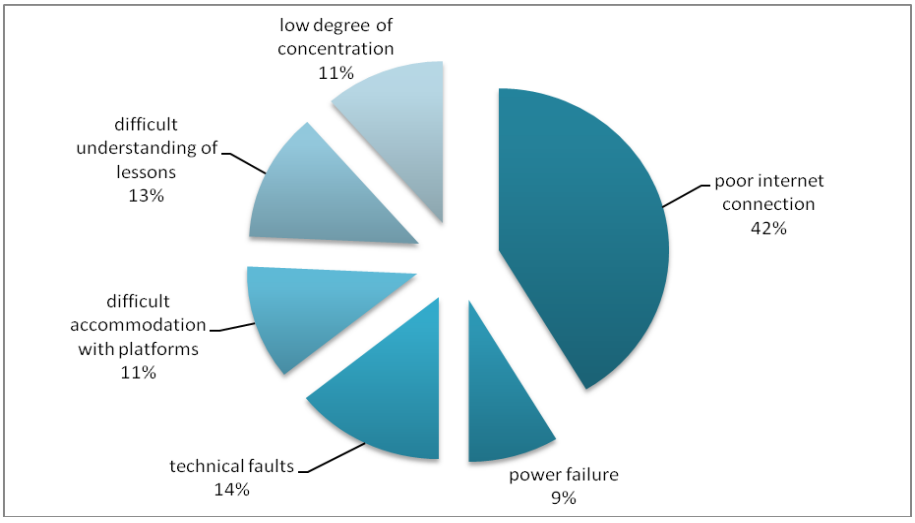


Figure no.8. *Percentage of other difficulties experienced by students in online courses*

Next, we identify the extent to which, during the online activities, aspects such as: well-prepared digital teaching staff, continuous collaboration with teaching staff, offering course/seminar support, facilitating the understanding of scientific content through practical activities, the quality of the materials were appreciated offered, the use of various applications in carrying out activities, support from teaching staff in online activities. As can be seen from the graph below, it is observed that most (62) of the student respondents appreciate the training of teachers from a digital point of view to a

great and very great extent, which demonstrates a good use of the platforms by them online in the didactic process during the pandemic period. The collaboration of teaching staff with students was achieved during the online activities to a large and very large extent as appreciated by most of the respondents (62) and as it appears from the illustration of the research data. It is found that the students had access to course/seminar materials during the activities carried out in the online system to a large and very large extent, being appreciated as qualitative materials, according to the results recorded on the large steps of the scale. Regarding the understanding of scientific content through applied activities, the assessments of the responding students are on the highest steps of the scale, to a large and very large extent, from the perspective of 53 students, and 17 of them choose to place their answer on the step between extremities, this aspect being appreciated to some extent. At the same time, it is found that various applications were used in the course and seminar activities to a large and very large extent, which gives the activities a more attractive character in such a format. Last but not least, it is noted that the teaching staff provided support to the students to a large and very large extent during the entire period in which the courses were held in the online system.

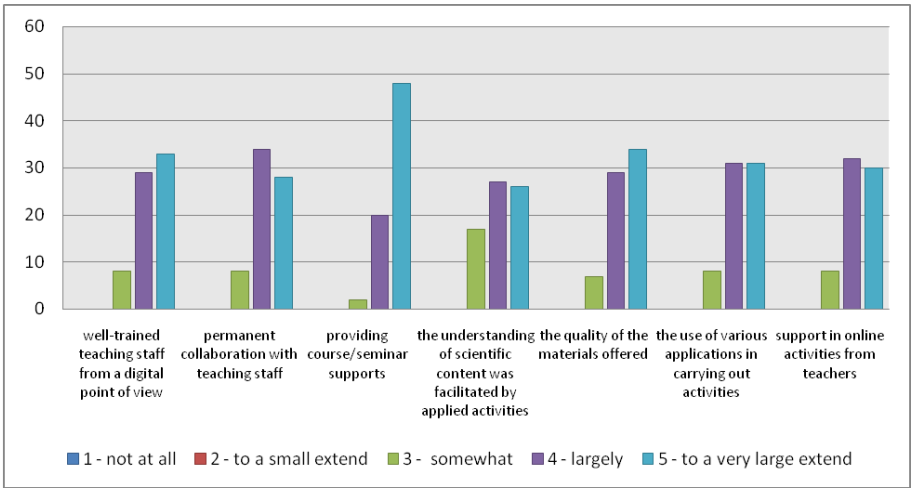


Figure no. 9. *The extent to which aspects of the activities carried out during the online period are valued*

However, the courses conducted in the online system also brought more knowledge among the students, the consolidation of skills such as digital ones, but also benefits such as the reduction of transport costs, which represented online advantages. Disadvantages include lack of socialization with colleagues, limited teacher-student interaction in the online environment, fatigue caused by prolonged time spent in front of the laptop, large amount of homework and projects, non-involvement of all students in seminar activities. The biggest dissatisfaction of the students and a big disadvantage of the online system was the impossibility of physical participation of the students in the practice activities, which affects the quality of the subsequent practice activities but also the quality of the didactic documents when they will teach. All these disadvantages join the difficulties illustrated in figure no. 8, which can also represent disadvantages.

Conclusions

Through the present study, an attempt was made to capture, to some extent, the opinions and difficulties encountered by the students of the Pedagogy of primary and preschool education specialization during the period when the courses were held in the online system. The most highlighted difficulty during the online period of the students of this specialization was represented by the impossibility of physically participating in the practical activities, followed by those presented in the content of the article. The results of the study help us to understand the less good effects of the online system in education and to be aware of the need to return to the physical environment, to a significant extent, of all activities, not only those activities that are carried out with difficulty in the online environment. A mixed system can also be agreed, in which part of the courses are in the online system (those that allow it to be conducted in such a manner) and another part in the physical system.

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