

## Original Paper

# Students' Challenges and Their Professional Development during Online Teaching Process in Albania

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### Abstract

*Global pandemic situation caused of COVID-19 brought challenges in every aspect of our lives. One of the greatest challenges in our country was educational institutions closure. Aleksandër Moisiu University-Durrës in Albania was one of the first higher education institutions that implemented online teaching through different platforms such as "Google Classroom", "Google Meet", and "Zoom". Even though it was an unusual situation, both lecturers and students had to adapt these new but not easy conditions. The purpose of this research was to gather data from students' opinions regarding the ability of Aleksandër Moisiu University to provide knowledge in the context of online learning and to examine students' attitude towards exclusively online learning. This research was conducted using a qualitative methodology collecting data through focus groups held in Google Meet with 45 students studying in Bachelor and Master Degree programme, in the department of foreign languages at Aleksandër Moisiu University. Findings of the research will serve universities and policy makers when predicting improvements in educational system.*

### Keywords

*professional development, online teaching, Albania, challenges*

## 1. Introduction

Albania is a European country with about 2.8 million inhabitants, with a total of 139,043 students in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and the majority of which are enrolled in public HEIs (<https://supporthere.org/news/influence-covid-19-teaching-albanian>).

As many other countries in the world, Albania today is facing the Covid-19 pandemic situation. It has forced the ministry responsible for health to close all HEIs, initially for a period of 2 weeks starting from March 3<sup>rd</sup> 2020 and then later extended.

Considering and analysing the Covid-19 situation, the Ministry of Education, Sports and Youth (MASR), suggested to HEIs to consider online learning and teaching as an alternative. MASR proposed to each HEI to set up a working group of lecturers that piloted and tested different platforms that could be used by each institution. Academic senates, after having evaluated the situation, decided to switch to online learning and teaching as fast as possible. There were some difficulties during the preparatory phase, such as IT infrastructure preparation, student database development and the preliminary assessment of how to prepare didactic materials which were quickly overcome. In a relatively short period of time and with great motivation, the academic staff, the governing bodies and the administrative staff of the Albanian HEIs created online platforms for the students using Google classroom (mostly in public universities), Moodle, Zoom, Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, etc. Moreover, UNESCO provided a list of free educational platforms and resources that can be used for online learning according to the needs of each educational institution, providing social care and interaction during school closures (UNESCO. Distance Learning Solutions, 2020) that helped so much Albanian Higher Education Institutions.

Google Classroom is the platform used by Aleksandër Moisiu University, through which, lectures performed in “Google Meet” and other elements of the platform are used to enable students to access written materials, presentations, books or articles, or assignments that students can download.

This process has entailed some difficulties during the first week, such as missing digital equipment or faulty internet connection. The HEIs assisted the staff and students by making available manuals and video tutorials for the use of digital platforms. It is hoped that online teaching in Albania will continue to improve.

The Rectorate of Aleksandër Moisiu University decided that:

- In terms of teaching activities that are not taking place: they should be conducted through compact courses (at least four weeks) as soon as the students return back to normal teaching activities.

- The assessment of students in each subject will be based on the result of the final exam 900 points and only 100 points on the performance of the course assignment.

As mentioned in Roseni (2020) article, research has shown that scholars strongly believe that ICT will make learning process more interesting, but the problem is that many teachers should struggle to integrate it as they do not have time to implement, do not have enough experience with technology, or they have no idea on using technology in classroom as far as they are in the verge of retirement. Moreover, Cox (2009) states that implementing technology in classroom is needed because it can help students to prepare for their future career. Based on Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 93% of teachers already use digital tools in classroom which means there are still teachers who do not use digital tools. Thus, a conclusion can be drawn that technology is useful for learning process.

Internet-based learning is considered an option worldwide, so an alternative to traditional learning

(Abou El-Seoud et al., 2014) but in Albanian Curriculum it was never considered as an alternative option. In addition, in March 2020, it became a necessity during the global pandemic in order to maintain educational activity alive.

It is obvious and definitely a necessity that online learning as Eyles and other authors suggest (2020) is becoming more and more important for education during the time of the worldwide health emergency, offering the opportunity to remain in touch, even if remotely, with classmates and teachers and to follow lessons.

Previous studies show that E-learning offers many benefits for students because this type of learning involves student-centeredness, it is more flexible (Dhawan, 2020), and it can also improve interaction with students by providing asynchronous and synchronous tools such as e-mail, forums, chats, videoconferences (Marinoni et al., 2020). Results of other studies of distance learning courses indicate that interactive qualities appear to be a major factor in determining course quality as reflected in student performance, grades, and course satisfaction.

Furthermore, internet technologies facilitate the distribution of content at the same time, to a large number of users; E-learning platforms offer many advantages to learners such as control over the content, control over the time spent learning, and thus the process can be adapted according to the learner needs and objectives of learning (Suresh et al., 2018). This might contribute to better communication with the students and in spite of some inherent challenges brought by this time of crisis, E-learning might enhance the learning process for students.

There were identified and described eight principles that stand at the core of effective online teaching by Cheung and Cable (2017), such as: encouraging contact between students and faculty, collaborative learning, quick feedback, active learning, task time—encouraging students to allocate more time for completing tasks, high-expectations—the teacher should communicate their expectations in order to encourage and motivate students, diversified learning, and technology application.

In addition, many studies highlight positive attitudes towards E-learning. They mention as benefits the fact that online learning is faster, it saves time and money because it does not involve traveling (Cantoni et al., 2004), and the uploaded content is consistent and can be easily updated (Sadeghi, 2019).

At national level, the student participation rate varied at the beginning of the lock-down but has been growing during the last weeks. Since April 20<sup>th</sup>, 2020, the total number of online regular Albanian students during the current semester, as reported by all HEIs, is about 65.000. HEIs have identified cases where students have faced difficulties (mainly internet access and performance, home conditions etc.) and staff is working to guarantee the due support. A special financial contribution is being paid to the academic staffs who have served as a reference point for identifying and solving all the problems observed (Support and Promotion for Higher Education Reform Experts 2020).

Being aware of the situation of Covid-19 crisis, but also in compliance with academic standards of teaching, HEI's governing bodies are monitoring the development of the teaching process over the

respective online platforms. The main purpose of this monitoring process is to guarantee access to all students and make the improvements needed to the relevant infrastructure.

The implementation of digital teaching in Albania following the Covid-19 situation shows that academic staff have been adapting quickly to this new mode of teaching, although some shortcomings needing to be addressed. This new experience for HEIs has led the academic staff to face not only barriers, but also to identify the need for better digital skills and competencies by introducing new methodologies and technologies in teaching and learning.

This experience is expected to affect a large number of HEIs, especially public ones, and encourage increasing, in the future, not only investments in the area of ICT in teaching and learning, but also to strengthen the professional development of staff through training related to digital technology and teaching methods (Support and Promotion for Higher Education Reform Experts 2020)..

According to a research (Aboagye et al., 2020), students had to face challenges and a study focusing on students' perspective on E-learning identified that among the main challenges that students encountered were accessibility, connectivity, lack of appropriate devices, social issues represented by the lack of communication and interaction with teachers and peers.

The purpose of this research was to gather data from students' opinions regarding the ability of Aleksandër Moisiu University to provide knowledge in the context of online learning and to examine students' attitude towards exclusively online learning. Furthermore, the researcher is also interested in identifying the main difficulties that students faced up during online learning. Thus, findings of this research will serve universities and policy makers when predicting improvements in educational system.

## 2. Method

There are only a few studies that mention the exclusive use of E-learning platforms, as it happened during the pandemic when universities were forced to use it and implement it as a main tool in the educational process. This study aims to show students' attitudes regarding university management of online learning through the E-learning platforms (Zoom and Google Classroom) in Albania that had little or no experience in this process before the pandemic. The global pandemic found university lecturers and students unprepared to use online platforms and making them to overpass a tremendous change from auditorium learning to online learning. The researcher conducted a qualitative methodology collecting data through focus groups held in Google Meet. According to Matthews and Ross (2010, p. 235) "Basically, the focus group is a method for collecting qualitative data, which is an adaptation of the interview technique. The difference between them lies in the fact that the interview is not face to face but it's an interview within a group". The purpose of this research was to gather students' opinions regarding the ability of Aleksandër Moisiu University to provide knowledge in the context of online learning and to examine students' attitude towards exclusively online learning.

The population in this research is composed of university students studying in Bachelor and Master

Degree programme in Aleksandër Moisiu University, Durrës. The selected sample was random and included 45 students in two cycles of study. Focus groups with students were conducted through the Google Meet and Zoom platform. In the 9 focus groups, were taken notes during the conversations and were recorded as well, an aspect that had been previously agreed with each of the teachers. Also at the beginning of each focus group, participants were re-affirmed their anonymity both during the discussions and during the data analysis process. Focus group participants did not respond in a certain order, but for each question asked by the researcher, it was taken care that everyone expressed his/her own opinion. All questions had place for discussion. There was no hesitation on the participants' side and the discussion in all three focus groups continued naturally. The duration of the focus groups was different, ranging from 30 to 35 minutes. All three of these focus groups were organized during the second semester of the academic year 2019 - 2020.

Regarding to the design of the focus group card, it was decided to divide the questions into three main blocks where the first block contains three questions related to technical difficulties; the second block has got 8 questions responding to clearance and understand ability of speeches provided by lecturers and the third block consists of 3 questions aiming to gather information about students' assessment and their collaboration with colleagues.

### 3. Result

A total of 45 students in two cycles of study from the Faculty of Education, Department of Foreign Languages, Aleksandër Moisiu University-Durrës, Albania participated in this research. The majority of respondents were females (86%) and males (14%), due to the fact that it is the tendency of females to study foreign languages in Albania. The following table presents the percentage of students from urban areas 41% and rural areas 59%, from Bachelor Degree programs 29% and Master Degree programs 71%.

**Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Participants**

Variable	Category	Percentage
<b>Gender</b>	Female	86%
	Male	14%
<b>Residence</b>	Rural	59%
	Urban	41%
<b>Degree</b>	Bachelor	29%
	Master	71%

Aleksandër Moisiu University-Durrës in Albania was the first higher education institution that implemented online teaching through different platforms such as "Google Classroom", "Google Meet",

and “Zoom”. Even though it was an unusual situation, both lecturers and students had to adapt these new but not easy conditions. Access to those platforms was sometimes poor, and there were connection problems, especially when the number of students connected was high. Moreover, students’ lack of adequate technologies for participating in online learning has overlapped with these issues (poor internet connection, lack of laptops/computers, the mobile connection that partially offers access to resources provided by teachers and platforms). Challenges have been observed not only in Albania which is a country not developed technologically and it has been observed that socially disadvantaged groups have faced difficulties in meeting the basic conditions required by online learning.

It was impressive due the different perspectives that students had about the way Aleksandër Moisiu University managed to provide knowledge during online learning. They are aware that online learning is gaining more and more popularity nowadays. It should be noted that as traditional learning it has its own advantages and disadvantages. They consider themselves as students of traditional system and as such they encountered several obstacles with online classes. 72% of them think that online learning is theoretically based learning and put less emphasis on practice. For example it is a useful tool for learning the teaching methods, strategies, ways of assessment etc. but “for us that are going to teach little kids tomorrow, mentions one of the students (student 31), it is not an effective way for transferring practical knowledge”. Thus, “it is impossible for us to practice what we have learned theoretically (student 24)”. It is indicated from the responses that during this period of online learning students have decreased the level of motivation as there is lack of face to face communication and peer interaction that pushes them to engage actively in the learning process. In addition, the ministry of education in Spain and Italy have announced that, due to COVID-19, students will not have to repeat the school year regardless of their performance while studying remotely. France has forbidden to use student assessment results in the formal evaluation of the “Brevet” (lower secondary school exam) and of the “Baccalaureat” (upper secondary school exam). Although this could be a fair decision (Sonnemann 2020), several studies suggest that students may be more externally motivated to learn if they know that their learning will be assessed. For instance, Elikai and Schuhmann (2010) conclude that grades can motivate students to learn. Austin (1978) finds that homework that was assigned and checked turns out to be more effective in improving students’ achievement than homework that was assigned, but not checked.

Moreover, 76% of the participants, that took part in the study, experienced a lot of technical problems during online learning beginning with poor quality of video and audio and too many internet problems etc. “I live in the mountain says student 11, so the internet barely reaches in our the area, despite all the mobilization of the university I study in, this semester I have had tremendous challenges”.

The most necessary and useful equipment to fulfill online teaching were mainly desktop computers (17%), smartphones (54%), laptops (29%) and stable internet connection (38%). Students (79%) claim that these are the reasons why there is a low participation in online learning.

This transition from traditional to online learning affected not only students’ perceptions but also

teachers' perceptions. Both of the parties have worked hard in order to adopt new ways of teaching/learning methods to the new situation and needs. Students in the master degree program (65%) state that the teaching schedule did not match their needs due to the fact that they work, whereas this problem does not find place with students of the Bachelor degree program (35%). "We discussed with some of the lecturers and agreed on a common and suitable schedule for both of us" says student 19. Most of the students (88%) state that it was undoubtedly wonderful the fact that lecturers adapted their teaching styles in a short time in the online environment and had high standards of the teaching process. In addition, 53% of students mentioned that the main issue they encountered was the lack of adaptation of the teaching style to the online environment, this having a negative impact on their ability to assimilate and understand the subjects taught during the courses.

It emerges clearly from the analysis of the focus groups responses concerning the second research question that most of students (65%) had used different digital platforms in trainings but still they consider online environment not very suitable for learning.

Student 30 declares "When we go to university we need a pen, books and notebooks whereas during the online teaching in addition to these elements, we need extra things such as digital means that for most of us becomes very expensive. Not all of us have the budget to afford digital tools". Another student states "E- learning depends not only in our skills but on internet access as well, which means that when we don't have access to it, a lot of gaps in knowledge might occur during the whole course". However, a considerable part of Bachelor students (35%) consider online teaching/learning more difficult than teaching/learning in the auditoriums. Student 40 states that "It should be noted that online classes are not as much attractive as traditional classes. Personally, I miss those lively and long discussions about several topics during the lesson. This reality doesn't offer us a real university experience".

In contrast, Master students were more satisfied (65%) to the use of online classes and had an exceptional experience. Student 27 argues that "I am satisfied with our experience with online teaching system because it taught me how to be flexible and manage my own learning better".

Moreover, students (59%) state that the ability to learn and assimilate information is more difficult in the context of online learning during pandemic COVID-19. In addition they state that, during online learning, there is more teacher-student interaction and less student-student interaction. It is noticed from the observation and analysis of the focus groups that there is lack of collaboration. The majority of students (78%) decide only to listen and not to engage actively in the learning process. 22% pretend to have valuable ideas to express but they are shy and feel uncomfortable with online teaching and prefer not to speak.

Students in seven focus groups think that lectures are well planned and easy to be understood. "At the end of the class lecturers give us time to ask questions if we don't understand a concept or an idea from the lesson".

Considering the challenges students faced up, the most appropriate way to continue with the

teaching-learning process is the traditional way for 56% of the students and blended learning for 44%. In the final analysis of the focus group responses results that students (89%) think that there are many reasons why online environments have become a popular form of distance learning in higher education today. The online environment offers unprecedented opportunities for students who would have limited access to education as they work. Student 1 says “As a student of Master program, I believe that online learning is useful for education as we study and work at the same time, so it is sometimes too busy to get to classes”. Another student states, “E-learning helps students attend the lessons wherever they are. It is also suitable for training. I have taken part in some online training programs and they have been very beneficial”.

From the detailed analysis made to each focus group questions, it is clearly seen that a considerable percentage, 73% of them think that they feel embarrassed when they provide an answer live during a videoconference and this fact makes them dissatisfied to the lecturers’ assessment in online classes. Student 37 mentions that “I feel, the lecturer has assessed me unfairly due to the fact I answered questions in a written form”.

In addition to the students’ perceptions concerning their assessment, 59% of them think that their project assessment is fair as there is the lecturer and the virtual classroom members as a jury. Student 42 says that “Our project presentations should be adapted to the environment of online learning. We receive peer and teacher assessment which is fair and reliable. It is based on our presentation skills and the content of the material”. Another student states “Due to the unusual situation, lecturers tend to be more tolerant during assessment process”.

#### **4. Discussion**

Emergency online teaching and learning has allowed universities and schools to provide virtual classes during educational institutions’ closure forced by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, there are several challenges that not only Albanian students are faced up but students all over the world as well.

The results of this research show that apart from the incredible efforts of lecturers and students toward online learning process, they have been facing up many challenges. It seems that the educational system in Albania has never been prepared for extraordinary situations like this. It is seen in the poor investment they have done in technological equipment, lecturers trainings and digital platforms. Global pandemic situation caused of COVID-19 made the Albanian universities to take serious steps regarding online learning and to prioritize digital platforms and tools as they had never done before.

Aleksandër Moisiu University, where this research took place, was vanguard to the mobilization and taking concrete measures of online teaching/learning. In this situation, lecturers and students were unprepared but fortunately willing to start online learning by using tutorials and university trainings to overcome the challenges both of the parties had with online teaching/learning.

However, in order for the Albanian education system to properly and successfully adapt to online teaching and learning, many actions that can stimulate and facilitate its adaptation to this new type of



teaching must be taken. In this regard, Aleksandër Moisiu University could develop more training sessions for lecturers and students or could develop programs the role of which would be to stimulate lecturers' and students' performance and implicitly the quality of the educational process.

This research provides, from the students' point of view, information regarding the way the educational process took place in one of the Albanian public higher education institutions in the context of the pandemic, information according to which the online teaching-learning process can be improved. However, this study also has some limitations. One limitation is represented by the fact that the research was conducted only on one of the Albanian universities, in Aleksander Moisiu. Thus, the results can not be generalized to the entire Albanian public and private universities. It would be useful that in the upcoming studies developed in the republic of Albania to broaden the sample to other universities, in order to generalize results but also to make comparisons according to universities, fields of study, previous experience of universities with online learning. Furthermore, it would be useful to conduct a broader study that would allow us to see how different Albanian universities adapted to online teaching and learning and either students' attitude towards online learning improved or not.

Online learning and emergency remote teaching should become a priority for Albanian policymakers. Lessons learned from this emergency enable us to indicate challenges and proposals for action to face these same challenges addressed to policymakers from different countries so that they can address some of the open challenges.

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