

Distance Learning from Higher Education Teachers' Perspective: Insights from Poland and Ukraine

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Abstract

Drawing from the higher education teachers experience from Poland and Ukraine, this qualitative study addresses key issues of distance learning and its future prospects. While it confirms other research in terms of the perceived flexibility of distance learning and issues related to the lack of suitability of some modules to be conducted in distance mode, as well as problems with keeping student engagement, it sheds a new perspective in relation to future possible perceptions of traditional education as more prestigious when conducted by renowned universities. Polish and Ukrainian respondents in general revealed similar concerns, e.g. in relation to blurring of personal and professional boundaries. However, Ukrainian respondents face some unique challenges related to the ongoing war, including mandatory implementation of distance education and more prominent difficulties in keeping students engaged.

Keywords: distance education, distance learning, academic staff.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic and geopolitical tensions have spurred the transition to distance learning (DL) in higher education, which has become a global phenomenon. Countries around the world have different perceptions of this transition, as it is influenced by many factors, such as regional, institutional and individual [8]. The experiences drawn from Poland and Ukraine, vividly illustrate how the pandemic has not just been a disruptive force but also a catalyst for educational innovation, pushing institutions towards embracing digital platforms and methodologies [4], [2]. Additionally, the ongoing war in Ukraine underscores the urgent need to adapt and refine DL practices, as educators there must navigate the dual challenges of maintaining academic continuity amid conflict [11]. In view of this, this paper's goal is to compare teachers' views on DL from Zhytomyr Polytechnic State University (ZP), Ukraine, and Krakow University of Economics (KUE), Poland. To this end, the study aims at answering the following research questions:

RQ1: How do higher education teachers perceive distance learning?

RQ2: What challenges do higher education teachers face in distance learning?

RQ3: What will be the future mode of education according to teachers?

To answer the research questions a qualitative research design centered on thematic analysis was employed that was based on semi-structured interviews with teachers at KUE and ZP.

2. Research background

The COVID-19 pandemic has pushed post-secondary educational institutions to adapt to remote learning, with students learning self-discipline and educators mastering new methodologies. This shift has prompted a reevaluation of strategies to foster collaboration and quick content updates for effective learning in virtual spaces [2], [4].

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the pros and cons of DL at universities. While benefits include timesaving, remote access, work-study balance, and enhanced IT infrastructure, drawbacks encompass reduced social interaction, tech fatigue, distractions, and socio-economic exclusion [9], [11].

The ongoing conflicts, particularly the Russian invasion of Ukraine, have intensified the shift towards online higher education, prompting institutions to develop resilient and adaptable frameworks. Amid these adversities, Ukrainian institutions have implemented blended/DL post-February 24, 2022, with a focus on improving educational processes and supporting students and teachers in conflict-affected regions [1], [5], [10].

The adoption of DL in Ukrainian higher education has allowed for the evolution of teaching content and methodologies, offering personalized learning experiences. However, it has also highlighted challenges such as technical issues, lack of real-time interaction, and insufficient digital literacy among students [6, 7].

3. Research methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design. For data gathering, semi-structured interviews were used as research tool, leveraging mainly Microsoft Teams for KUE and Zoom and Google Meet for ZP (see Annex for the list of questions that guided interviews). Purposive sampling combined with snowball sampling methods was used for respondents' selection. The study employed Braun & Clarke's six-phase (familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, generating themes, reviewing potential themes, defining and naming theme, producing the report) model of thematic analysis to interpret the interview data [3]. This approach facilitated a systematic extraction and examination of themes related to the research questions. Open coding was used to generate initial codes, which were then utilized to identify similarities and differences. To enhance the validity of the findings, axial coding (where categories and subcategories are reviewed based on open coding, verified and merged) was performed in several iterations to enhance the final list of topics [12].

The timing of the interviews reflected the unique circumstances affecting each country; interviews at KUE were conducted during the winter of 2021-2022 amidst the pandemic, while those at ZP were delayed to the spring of 2023 due to the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. Ten interviews were conducted at each university. The respondents were selected to represent various university faculties and backgrounds, including the Faculty of Computer Science, the Faculty of Management, and Languages. An average duration of interviews was approximately 23 minutes and followed a semi-structured format with guiding questions. All interviews were recorded with the participant's consent, transcribed, and anonymized to ensure confidentiality. The study acknowledges its limitations, primarily the focus on only two universities, one from Poland and one from Ukraine, which may affect the generalizability of the findings to broader contexts within or beyond these countries.

4. Results

4.1. General opinion

A thematic analysis of opinions on DL among university teachers from two different locations — Poland (KUE, 35 codes identified) and Ukraine (ZP, 28 codes identified) — allows for an examination of the complex landscape shaped both by challenges faced by educators (the need for innovation, adaptation issues) and new opportunities for them (Table 1).

Table 1. Teachers' general opinion on distance learning.

Feedback category	Feedback subcategory	KUE [%]	ZP [%]	KUE+ZP [%]
Reported facts with high approval in teachers feedback		51,4	74,1	61,3
	Personal Adaptation to Changes	8,6	29,6	17,7
	Flexibility	14,3		8,1
	Adequate Quality	5,7	7,4	6,5
	Efficiency in Certain Subjects	8,6	3,7	6,5
	University Adaptation to Changes	5,7	3,7	4,8
	Use of Technology		11,1	4,8
	Institutional Support	2,9	7,4	4,8
	Professional Development	2,9	3,7	3,2
	Learning Experience	2,9	3,7	3,2
	Perspective for future education		3,7	1,6
Reported problems in teachers feedback		48,6	25,9	38,7
	Limited Interaction	17,1		9,7
	Lower Quality of teaching/learning	8,6	11,1	9,7
	Efficiency in Certain Subjects	11,4		6,5
	Personal Adaptation to Changes	2,9	7,4	4,8
	University Adaptation to Changes	2,9	3,7	3,2
	Maturity of students and teachers	5,7		3,2
	Technical support		3,7	1,6

Note: The table shows the percentage of the mentions of each topic out of all identified topics for each respondent group.

4.2. Challenges of distance learning

Polish and Ukrainian teachers identified respectively 31 and 41 codes related to DL hinders. They are grouped into categories presented in Table 2. The most numerous category represents technical and organizational issues.

Table 2. Teachers' opinion on distance learning hinders.

Hinders category	Hinders subcategory	KUE [%]	ZP [%]	KUE+ZP [%]
Technical & Organizational Issues		16,1	34,1	26,4
	Technical problems	9,7	19,5	15,3
	Organizational problems	6,5	14,6	11,1
Communication & Interaction Issues		38,7	9,8	22,2
	Lack of interaction between teacher and students	19,4	4,9	11,1
	Lack of non-verbal communication	19,4	2,4	9,7
	Lack of interaction with peers		2,4	1,4
Engagement Issues		25,8	12,2	18,1
	Keeping engagement issue	6,5	9,8	8,3
	Lack of identity	16,1		6,9
	Lack of engagement control	3,2	2,4	2,8
Assessment & Teaching Concerns		12,9	19,5	16,7
	Lack of control	3,2	4,9	4,2
	Lack of students' feedback	3,2	4,9	4,2
	Lack of teachers' preparation		4,9	2,8
	Judging teaching effectiveness	3,2	2,4	2,8
	Tasks not possible in DL		2,4	1,4
	Difficulties with online grading	3,2		1,4
Personal Impacts		6,5	24,4	16,7
	Lack of student motivation		9,8	5,6
	Blurring of personal and professional boundaries	3,2	4,9	4,2
	Lack of student self-discipline		4,9	2,8
	Health issue	3,2		1,4
	Lack of teacher motivation		2,4	1,4
	Volunteer work because of war		2,4	1,4

Note: The table shows the percentage of the mentions of each topic out of all identified topics for each respondent group.

4.3. Future of distance learning

The thematic analysis (based on 31 identified codes from KUE respondents and 21 from ZP respondents) revealed three primary categories concerning the future utilization of DL: as a main form of delivery, as a supportive or supplementary form, and a non-preferred or hesitant stance towards its application (Table 3). Within these broad categories, sentiments were further dissected into positive, negative, and hesitant outlooks.

Table 3. Teachers' opinion on distance learning future.

Attitude to distance learning in the future category	Reasons to attitude explanation	KUE [%]	ZP [%]	KUE+ZP [%]
Distance learning as a main form		48,4	52,4	50,0
Hesitation		6,5		3,8
	Convenience and flexibility	3,2		1,9
	Innovation and adaptation	3,2		1,9
Negative		9,7	14,3	11,5
	Effectiveness and Efficiency	6,5	14,3	9,6
	Interaction	3,2		1,9
Positive		32,3	38,1	34,6
	Access to technology and resources	3,2		1,9
	Convenience and flexibility	9,7	23,8	15,4
	Effectiveness and Efficiency	6,5	4,8	5,8
	Financial benefit	6,5		3,8
	Innovation and adaptation	3,2	4,8	3,8
	Worldwide access	3,2	4,8	3,8
Distance learning as a supportive form		48,4	47,6	48,1
Hesitation		3,2		1,9
	Innovation and adaptation	3,2		1,9
Negative			4,8	1,9
	Effectiveness and Efficiency		4,8	1,9
Positive		45,2	42,9	44,2
	Convenience and flexibility	29,0	14,3	23,1
	Effectiveness and Efficiency	6,5	14,3	9,6
	Financial benefit	3,2		1,9
	Innovation and adaptation	6,5	14,3	9,6
Zero distance learning		3,2		1,9
Hesitation		3,2		1,9
	Prestige	3,2		1,9

Note: The table shows the percentage of the mentions of each topic out of all identified topics for each respondent group.

5. Analysis and discussion

The main concern of higher education teachers about DL is the decreased effectiveness and quality of teaching in subjects that require practical interaction, special equipment, or careful supervision. Despite the challenges, the study reveals positive responses to DL, emphasizing the resilience and adaptability of academic communities, and the potential of technologies in enhancing the accessibility and flexibility of education.

The experiences of the teaching staff at KUE and ZP provide insights into the evolution of higher education amidst challenges, with efforts being made to overcome issues like server accessibility. The analysis identifies both convergence and divergence in the views of Ukrainian and Polish teachers on distance education, with a shared recognition of the need for adaptive, hybrid educational models.

The majority of respondents believe that DL will continue to be a significant part of future education due to its convenience, flexibility, and inclusivity, particularly for individuals with disabilities.

6. Conclusion

In view of an increasing population of Ukrainian students at Polish Universities and the

belief that distance education should be taken into account as an important factor in shaping the future of education, this study tries to answer questions concerning the challenges of distance education and its place in future higher education environment. Apart from well-known pros and cons of DL discussed in the literature, the study reveals that distance education might be perceived as less valuable by renowned universities in the future. Due to the war, Ukrainian students and teachers are already engaged more in DL than Polish counterparts, and Ukrainian teachers have higher approval, however their expectations about DL future are quite similar to Polish teachers.

In future research we would like to develop a comprehensive framework concerning shaping the quality of DL at universities from the viewpoint of different stakeholders.

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Annex

Questions used in semi-structured interviews: (1) What are your thoughts on distance learning (including blended learning) that was conducted at the university? (2) In your opinion, what are the hindrances of distance learning? (3) What will be the future of distance learning in education?