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PHARMACY STUDENTS' ATTITUDES AND EXPERIENCES IN ONLINE LEARNING DURING GLOBAL PANDEMIC

Andi Xhaferi

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Abstract: Due to the COVID-19 pandemic many universities in the world shifted their traditional teaching towards online teaching learning using different platforms. For the developed countries, these imposed changes might not cause any difficulties, but for some poor countries this might have negative consequences because the learners are not prepared to meet these challenges. Several studies have found that students feel isolated and stressed by online learning during the Global pandemic and are worried that the quality of post-secondary education has deteriorated. Therefore, the present study aims to add some additional results on pharmacy students' attitudes and their online learning experiences during this time. The participants of the study were 93 pharmacy students at the State University of Tetovo (SUT) in Macedonia. The research method used was a 4-domain survey which includes: Technology access of the students, Online skills, Motivation, and Online versus face-to face learning with 26 items. The survey was sent to them online and participants' responses were analysed and discussed thoroughly. The results of this research revealed that the participants do not have positive experiences during online classes even though, majority of them do have access to laptop or a mobile phone. One thing that was attractive for them was the online exams because they were less stressful than in-class exams. Generally, students prefer to be in class listening to the lectures and doing in-class tasks and socializing with their peers.

Keywords: *global pandemic; pharmacy students; online learning; experiences; attitudes.*

1. Introduction

COVID 19 or Global pandemic outbreak in the world in 2019 forced the governments of many countries to declare national lockdown in order to prevent the spread of the virus. The pandemic impacted all segments of life including education. In Macedonia, Universities used three main teaching platforms: ZOOM, Google Classroom and Google Meet, and Teams to deliver their teaching online during this period of time. For many professors and students this was very challenging because there was not enough preparation to deal with the newly created situations caused by the COVID –19 pandemic despite the facts that technology was used in education before Global pandemic. For many courses, the teachers had to change the syllabus course assessment and adapt to an online

teaching mode. It is believed that the digital platforms will remain an integral part of teaching after the pandemic is over. The Pharmacy Study program (BA) at University of Tetovo (UT) was greatly affected because this branch of Medicine heavily relies on different traditional teaching methodologies involving didactic lectures and seminars, experiential and practical training, laboratory sessions and team work. As a result, learning outcomes and the quality of teaching are expected to be unalterable. Therefore, being aware of many advantages and disadvantages of online learning for pharmacy students, this study aimed to investigate students' attitudes, the level of their motivation to study and barriers they encountered during online teaching at University level. There have not been many studies conducted in this field, especially in Macedonia including pharmacy students. Therefore, this study will shed light on this issue and the results of the study will serve teachers and students to improve the online teaching/learning.

2. Literature review

Online teaching and learning has become inseparable part of the educational process in all parts of the world, especially with the appearance of the global pandemic, COVID-19. There was a big dilemma for the management on how and which tools to use for teaching. For teachers, on the other hand, this was a very challenging process because they had to transform the teaching and assessment in order to suit the online learners better. "It is often argued that the progress and delivery of good online courses depends on how traditional pedagogy is transferred to online environment" (Sloboda, as cited in Xhaferi and Xhaferi, 2020, p. 86). The Covid-19 crisis has brought forth a plethora of advice aimed at teachers (Bates, cited in Rapanta, C., Botturi, L., Goodyear, P. *et al.* para. 3). Furthermore, the authors state that "much of this advice focuses on tools and materials that teachers can use to replace their face-to-face classes. In addition, teachers have been offered hundreds of 'tips and tricks', mostly without the contextualizing knowledge needed to judge which teaching tactic is likely to work where" (ibid., para. 5). The same situation applies to teachers in Macedonia. One of the studies which analyzed the students' barriers and attitudes of online learning was conducted at the College of Pharmacy at KSAU-HS, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia during the academic year 2019/2020. During the period of the research all lectures, seminars, and examination were conducted online using different virtual platforms (Blackboard, Blackboard Collaborate and ZOOM). The survey was distributed to 414 pharmacy students, 318 students in the 4 professional years of the program and 96 students in the second pre-professional year. Regarding the participants' attitudes toward online learning, the same attitude was found between males and females while for the preparedness of the participants, the second year students were less prepared than the fourth year students and there was no association between total scores of barriers and years of program. It suggested a need for training on how to attend online courses. In conclusion, this research was among the first ones which evaluated the perception of pharmacy students toward the college's and their own preparedness for distance learning

and learning experience during the quarantine period of COVID-19 outbreak and rapid adoption of fully online instruction in Saudi Arabia. The main benefit of this research was to help quality improvement continuously. Another relevant study was conducted across 40 UK Medical schools in 2020. The main objective of this research was to investigate perceptions of medical students on the role of online teaching in facilitating medical education during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research method used with the participants was a cross-sectional, online national survey which contained 15 questions. Since this study focused on medical students only, patients and other health care providers were not included at all. Generally, the results of the study showed that the participants did not find online teaching to be engaging or enjoyable, and its main weakness was limited opportunities to ask questions. It seems that the main strength of this study is its large sample size of 2792 medical students across all preclinical and clinical years and the recruitment of a variety of medical students for survey distribution via a range of methods minimized potential response bias. To conclude, during the COVID-19 alarming situation, the whole system of education including teachers and students, had to change overnight and to adapt themselves with tools hardly known before. This research paper sheds some light on students' level of preparedness and attitudes towards online learning in order to design appropriate learning activities, increase student interaction and help them prosper in unknown learning environment. For teachers, the results of this study can help them to clarify some aspects of the online teaching and in adapting their methodology and creating a more successful strategy for the future.

3. Methodology

3.1. Questionnaire design and distribution

The research was conducted in the academic year 2020/2021 at the University of Tetovo, Macedonia. The instrument used was adapted from the survey used by Alghamdi and Ali in their study conducted in 2021 with students of the School of Life and Medical Sciences, University of Hertfordshire in Cairo. The questionnaire contains 4 domains: Technology access, Online skills, Motivation and Online versus face-to-face learning with 26 items and one open-ended question. It was sent through Google Forms to the participants and the responses were received within 10 days. The questions explored the main variables of the study, attitudes and experiences of the students during the online classes, and the results are presented visually and analysed very carefully.

3.2. Research questions

The research aims to answer the following questions:

1. What is the level of access and the use of technology during global pandemic by pharmacy students?
2. What is the level of student motivation for attending online classes?
3. Which are the attitudes of pharmacy students towards face-to-face and online learning?

3.3. Participants

The participants included in this research are 93 pharmacy students at the University of Tetovo in Macedonia. They were from both genders and they were students from North Macedonia, Kosova and Preshevo Valley. The study was conducted in the academic year 2021/2022. The survey questionnaire was sent to the students through Google Forms and the responses were analysed and discussed in detail.

3.4. Results

The detailed results of this study obtained from the students' survey conducted with pharmacy students at the University of Tetovo are presented in Figures and Tables. In total there were 93 participants of the BA cycles of study at UT. The first part of the survey (Table 1) shows the background information of the participants.

Table 1: Participants' background information

| | | |
|---------|-----------------|--------------|
| Gender: | Male (35%) | Female (65%) |
| GPA: | 6.5-9.10 | |
| Age: | 19-22 years old | |

With regard to the gender of the participants, the majority of them (65%) of the total population are females while 35% are male students. While participants' GP ranges from 6.5-9.00 and their age is from 19-22 years old.

Domain one: Technology access results

The first domain of the survey contains questions related to students' access to technology. There are 4 questions with five options to select: No Access at All, Very Difficult, Difficult, Easy and Very Easy as follows:

1. A fairly new computer (with high speed, large memory, speakers and webcam)
2. A computer with adequate software (latest version of Microsoft office, adobe acrobat, real player, internet explorer).
3. A fast internet connection at home.
4. Mobile technology (iPhone, iPad, smartphone).

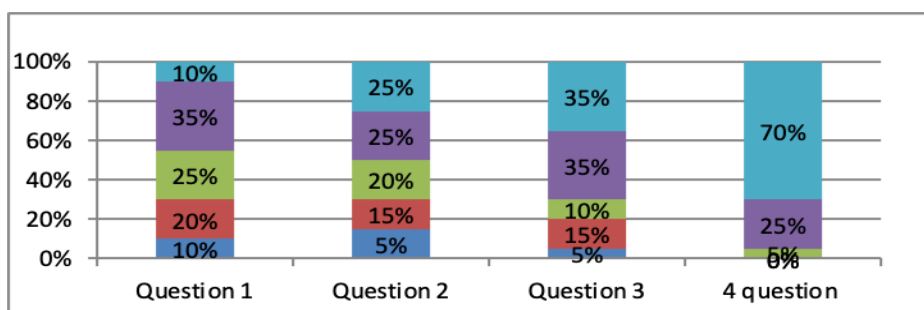


Figure 1: Domain 1 results

Analyzing the results presented in Figure 1 related to the technology access of the students, it can be seen that the results for the three statements are more or less similar while for the fourth question shows different results. When it comes to statement 1 - if the students have a fairly new computer (with high speed, large memory, speakers and webcam), majority of them have an access to the compute but for 20% the access is very difficult and for 10% there is no access at all. This fact should be taken into account by the institution because all students should have access to a computer so they do not miss classes. Similarly, majority of them have access to a computer with adequate software but for 5% this is not possible. The participants also pointed out the problem of internet connection as an issue in online learning, where 10% do not have access at all. In fact, the responses show that they most relied on their phones, as 95% of the participant own one and have conditions to learn.

Domain 2: Online skills results

The second domain of the survey contained questions related to students' online skills and their experiences with ZOOM platform. There are a total of 11 statements with options: did not use it, always face a problem, often, few times and never faced a problem.

Table 2: Domain 2 results

| | Did Not Use It % | Always Face a Problem % | Often % | Few times % | Never Faced a Problem % |
|---|------------------|-------------------------|---------|-------------|-------------------------|
| 5. Finding information on the internet (using search engines, web surfing). | 5% | 10% | 10% | 30% | 45% |
| 6. Sending and receiving emails (announcement) with its file attachments | 5% | 5% | 15% | 25% | 55% |
| 7. Downloading and/or uploading files to and from the website | 10% | 5% | 10% | 30% | 45% |
| 8. Asking questions and making comments in online discussion or chat | 20% | 15% | 15% | 10% | 40% |
| 9. Posting materials online such as texts or PowerPoint presentations | 5% | 15% | 10% | 15% | 55% |
| 10. Participating in an online voice conversation | 25% | 30% | 15% | 15% | 15% |
| 11. Scheduling time to take timely online activity | 10% | 10% | 15% | 25% | 40% |

| | | | | | |
|---|----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| 12. English is a barrier to me when participating online through emails or discussions. | - | - | 4% | 26% | 60% |
| 13. Participating in an online lecture via ZOOM | 8% | 12% | 9% | 11% | 70% |
| 14. Participating in an online practical lecture via ZOOM | 3% | 7% | 10% | 15% | 65% |
| 15. Attempting an online exam through ZOOM | 2% | 21% | 9% | 15% | 53% |

Table 2 present the results for the statements related to students’ online skills and their experiences with ZOOM platform which they used for online classes during Global Pandemic. Questions 5, 6 and 7 asked the students about their IT skills such as: finding information on the internet; receiving and sending emails and announcements; as well as downloading and uploading files. The results showed that around half of the participants never faced a problem with this and 25%-30% of them had a problem few times. When speaking about different online activities such as: making comments in online discussion (Q.8); posting materials online and voice conversation, they rarely had difficulties but there is also a group of them (20%) who never did these activities. Perhaps, teachers should spend some time helping learners with the above mentioned activities. When analysing question 11 results about the scheduling time to take timely online activity, it can be stated that 40% of the participants never faced a problem with it, and finally, the results for the last three questions related to the use of ZOOM either to participate in online or practical part and attempts to take online, a high percentage (70%, 65% and 53) of the participants reported that they never faced a problem on these issues. To sum up, the participants are good with using ZOOM but there are some areas where the students should work harder.

Domain 3: Motivation results

The third domain of the survey contained questions related to students’ level of motivation. There are total 6 statements with options: Strongly disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree and Strongly agree.

Table 2: Domain 3 results

| Items | SD | D | N | A | SA |
|--|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| 16.I am able to concentrate when reading long documents online | 15% | 21% | 20% | 25% | 29% |
| 17. I am willing to spend 10–15 h each week studying online | 10% | 30% | 18% | 22% | 20% |
| 18. I will take my friends’ advice regarding using online technology | 13% | 25% | 16% | 34% | 12% |

| | | | | | |
|--|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| 19. I will take my instructors' advice regarding using online technology | 5% | 9% | 12% | 27% | 47% |
| 20. Quick technology and support are important to my success in using online technology. | 5% | 5% | 10% | 40% | 40% |
| 21. The efforts of technical support provided by IT office at my Institution met my needs. | 14% | 15% | 16% | 22% | 34% |

The results presented in Table 2 reveal students' level of motivation in using online technology. Regarding question 16, if the students were able to concentrate when reading long documents online, around half of the students could focus without difficulty. Questions 18 and 19, asked the participants if they would take either friends or instructors' advice regarding the use of online technology. It seems that instructor's advice is appreciated more (47% strongly agreed) than their friend's advice (12% strongly agreed). This shows how much our students depend on their teachers' support and this is probably due to their previous high school education which was a teacher-centred classroom. The higher percentage goes for the need of the quick technology and technical support which students really need for online learning classes (40% strongly agreed and 40% agreed). This strengthens the claim that training is more than necessary to be successful in online learning and most importantly, the students' needs were met as supported by more than half of them.

Domain 4: Online versus Face-to-Face Learning

The fourth domain of the survey contained questions related to students' attitudes towards online learning. There are 5 statements with options: Strongly disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree and Strongly agree.

Table 4: Domain 4 results

| Items | SD | D | N | A | SA |
|--|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| 22. I think I learn more in online education than in face-to-face education | 35% | 30% | 11% | 6% | 18% |
| 23. Online education requires more study time than face-to-face education | 20% | 20% | 10% | 25% | 35% |
| 24. Online examinations reduce stress and exam anxiety | 10% | 12% | 10% | 28% | 40% |
| 25. I prefer online education to face-to-face education | 35% | 19% | 11% | 20% | 15% |
| 26. Online presentations are easier but lack eye contact with other students | 10% | 19% | 12% | 23% | 36% |

If we analyze the results in table 4, we can state that the results are not surprising at all. Our students come from teacher-centered classrooms, therefore they prefer to be in the class listening to lectures and doing in-class tasks. This is supported by question 22 where 65% (who strongly agreed and agreed) participants stated that they do not learn more in online classes than face-to-face education. Also, they believe that online education requires more study time than face-to-face education (question 23) and this was expressed by 35% who strongly agreed and 25% agreed. This is also a consequence of lacking training and knowledge in using technology for learning purposes. Despite this, 28% of the participants strongly agreed and 40% agreed that online exams are less stressful than in-class. Given the global pandemic experience, online exams are the new normal, and it seems that this might be the only element students prefer in online teaching. The same goes for online presentations where 36% of the participants strongly agreed and 23% agreed that online presentations are easily conducted online but there is one disadvantage, that is the lack of eye contact with the classmates. The last open-ended question was about the barriers students faced during online classes and they are listed as follow:

Table 5: Open-ended question responses

| |
|--|
| <i>-Slow or no internet connection at home</i> |
| <i>-Less interaction with teacher and students</i> |
| <i>-Not having a chance to work in groups</i> |
| <i>-Not sure if their presentation were followed by all classmates</i> |
| <i>-Not sufficient skills to work on different tasks</i> |
| <i>-Sometimes confused with ZOOM features</i> |
| <i>-Missing the classroom and their colleagues</i> |
| <i>-Teachers provide more explanations in the classroom</i> |
| <i>-Less concentration and distracted by family members</i> |
| <i>-Less socialization during online classes and not many chances to give feedback to the others</i> |

The responses given to the students’ survey for all 4 domains definitely have shed light on the importance and the impact of inquisitiveness of the Pharmacy students while being taught online during Covid-19 global pandemic. The results revealed that for this group of students it was the first time using the ZOOM platform for online learning.

4. Conclusion

This research explored students’ attitudes and experiences in online classes during the global pandemic in Macedonia. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study that included pharmacy students and the difficulties they encountered during online teaching for the period of the COVID-19 global pandemic at the State University in Tetovo. Addressing the abovementioned variables will hopefully help instructors and students to cope better with online teaching and learning and

improve the quality of instruction. Regarding the first research question dealing with the level of access to technology during global pandemic, the results revealed that majority of the participants do have access to technology, laptop or computer, but for a small group this is problematic. Therefore, institutions should provide technology tools to these groups of students because "institutions that have adopted student success technologies early and deployed them widely have a significant advantage during COVID-19, when digital life is far less constrained than life in the physical world" (Grajek and Brooks, 2020, para. 15). The collected data also showed that majority of students have internet access at home, but 10% of the total number of the study participants do not have it. This is probably a case with students coming from the rural parts of the country where they face this difficulty. It seems that the students relied on their phones, as 95% of the participant own one and can use it as a learning tool. The advantages of the mobile device are that we can access it anywhere and anytime; students can follow the online classes; checking different information and improving vocabulary knowledge however, not many classroom activities can be done on it. Regarding the second research question, which dealt with students' level of motivation for attending online classes using the ZOOM platform, motivation is not very high due to technical difficulties students face. Therefore, there was a need for instructors advice in using online technology and this was expressed by 74% of the participants. Similarly, there is a strong need of the quick technology and technical support which students really need for online learning classes (80%). This strengthens the claim that training is more than necessary to be successful in online learning. Also, as the open-ended question results showed, the socialization and lack of interaction in online classes reduced their level of motivation. Since motivation is one of the key elements of successful learning, "little attention has been paid to how existing motivational theories can be adapted to understand how to optimize online learning or student engagement within technology infused learning contexts" (Hsu et al., cited in Chiu, Lin, & Lonka, 2021, p. 187). In fact, "this is a critical and urgent gap that cannot be ignored given the growing need for online learning in light of the pandemic. In addition, how student motivation can be build/leverage upon to sustain prolonged collaborative online meaning making is also an essential dimension that needs attention" (Chiu, Lin, & Lonka, 2021, pp. 187-188). Concerning the third research question on the attitudes of pharmacy students towards face-to-face and online learning, the results show that students do not have positive attitudes towards online learning. Generally, students prefer to be in class listening to the lectures and doing in-class tasks because this is easier for them. This collected data might be supported by the fact that students come from a traditional classroom and they need the teacher to be around them. Furthermore, due to the lack of appropriate training, they spend more time studying online. It is important to mention that the time students spend online is a concern for parents as well. First of all, online learning is a kind of personalized approach which, opposite to on-site learning where our students spend maximum 4-6 hours, online learning environment is very overwhelming for the students. However, when it comes to online exams, students have a positive attitude because this was less stressful for them as indicated by

68% of the participants. Given the global pandemic experience, online exams are the new normal, and it seems that this might be the only element students prefer in online teaching. Finally, analyzing and evaluating the answers to the open-ended questions, the main area of difficulty was poor or no access to internet in their homes, which made learning very difficult for the students. Another concern was the lack of interaction among them and not possessing adequate skills to use the ZOOM platform. As Turley and Graham (2019, p. 172) stated, "in the traditional classroom verbal and nonverbal communication can close the psychological distance between the teacher and student". Also, "online teachers are limited in many instances to written communications, which do not have the benefits of voice cues or body language (Murphy & Rodríguez-Manzanares, cited in Turley and Graham, 2019, p. 172). Similarly, the participants miss the socialization with their colleagues and believe that teachers give more effective explanation when they are in the classroom than during online classes. Obviously, the participants in this study did not have positive experiences with online teaching and learning, but they are aware of their lack in the use of technology and were able to identify the areas for improvement which will definitely help to focus on the most important things in this process. This study was focused on real-life experiences of the pharmacy students during the COVID -19 pandemic and we hope that results will help teachers to reflect on their teaching and in using digital education platforms in the future.

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