

THE IMPACT OF DISTANCE LEARNING ON YOUNG PEOPLE'S SKILLS ACQUISITION

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Abstract: Various factors influence the success of distance education. One of these factors is student satisfaction with distance education, so the authors focused on distance education to analyse the negative impacts on young people's skills. The research was conducted among 202 students, random sampling method was used in the study. Descriptive statistics was used to analyze the research data. As a result of the research, it was found that the school system in Slovakia was not sufficiently prepared for distance learning. The quality of distance education in Slovakia has not reached the same level as the face-to-face form of education. Students see disadvantages in low social contact, communication skills, but see an advantage in the flexibility of education.

Keywords: social contact, communication skills, distance learning, young people, students.

1 Introduction

The functioning of society and its very principles are changing significantly with the evolution of humanity, especially in the field of science and technology. However, the most significant impact on society in recent years has not been caused by the mentioned development of science and technology, but by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has affected all spheres and areas in the everyday lives of people and human society. As a result of the pandemic, both economic and social aspects have changed, and all those involved in these spheres have had to adapt to the new realities brought about by the pandemic in a very short period of time. The use of telecommunications technology, particularly conference calls, has accelerated. The homeoffice in conjunction with video-calling has been used in the workplace, and schools in the educational process have likewise moved to distance learning (Savas, 2021; Green, 2022). Where possible, work activities are becoming increasingly flexible for employees, reducing not only the time in the workplace but also the overall working hours or the working week.

Also within the recruitment processes, job interviews have moved into the online world. Thus, in addition to the negative impacts, the pandemic has also brought with it a speeding up of processes that would normally take significantly longer in terms of timescales. The pandemic has negatively affected economies in all countries around the world and in conjunction with another global crisis which is the war in Ukraine has caused huge price increases, especially in the energy sector but also in groceries (Jagtap, 2022). For this reason, inflation is rising at a very fast rate and some businesses are preparing for a global recession across all economies, which will significantly affect the labour market itself both in the world and in Slovakia. The lives of individuals, households, businesses and the state have been affected. Within individuals, there has been a significant reduction in social interactions and, overall, 'normal' social life has been limited. From the perspective of businesses and especially the state, the whole situation associated with the pandemic is a major challenge (Marchenko, 2021). Businesses face several problems such as employee sick leave and the associated drop in production, dealing with state-mandated measures and the threat of various restrictions that would have the impact of halting production or service provision, i.e. on business activity itself. From the point of view of the state, the importance is placed on protecting the health of its citizens, which means that through various measures and prohibitions, it has tried to restrict social life as much as possible and generally the contact between the people, that we have taken for granted up to now. Within these restrictions, wherever possible, both

private and professional life has gone online. Within the labour market, businesses have moved to homeoffice and recruitment interviews were all done online. These options were also used before the pandemic, but not to such a large extent. The educational process for young people, was also significantly affected and was also conducted online. Practical classes have been cancelled or significantly reduced, as have for example, the school-leaving examinations themselves. Theoretical teaching may not be sufficient together with the acquisition of new knowledge in the form of video interviews. Self-study instead of collective learning becomes important and the actual learning and evaluation by teachers is very difficult. There are a number of problems, the biggest of which are the lack of practical as well as theoretical training, the loss of social habits, the change in behaviour and the overall impact on social skills.

2 Literature Review

Based on the information available from statistical data, the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly affected the employment of young people. We can say that the employment of young people (aged between 15 and 29 years) decreased during the pandemic. When we compare the years 2019 and 2020, where 2019 was the last non-pandemic year and 2020 was the year when COVID-19 started to spread globally, there was a 2.8% decline in youth employment. However, this decrease was not yet due to the impact of restrictions on job preparation, but probably due to restrictions in closures and bans, especially in services (European Commission, 2022). The pandemic had a clear impact on young people (Shields, 2022; Rotar, 2022). A study conducted by the International Labour Organization (ILO) found that the impact of the pandemic on young people was systematic and disproportionate. Based on the findings, up to 23% of young people (aged 18 to 24 years) who were working lost their jobs. Students who are yet to enter the labour market, according to the aforementioned research, have a rather negative and gloomy perception of their working career. Up to 40 percent reportedly perceive their future as uncertain and 14 percent view it with fear. According to interviews linked to the research, changes in the areas of education are particularly emphasised for improving the competitiveness of young people's labour supply. Education should focus more on information technology and be in line with the technological progress and science so it can be more attractive from the employers' point of view. Further, the article states that young people will have a significantly more difficult time entering the labour market after the pandemic and some advantage could be gained from higher education (UN, 2020). A study conducted in Korea in February 2022 in relation to the issue, says that young people may be medically "invulnerable" to COVID-19, but their vulnerability will be the labour market. The results suggest that the restrictions may put young people at higher risk of becoming economically inactive as unemployed, by restricting their social habits, in the form of, for example, regular school attendance, practical training, or restriction of work activities in the context of student work. The study looked at statistical data within Korea, looking at the employment and unemployment rates before and after the pandemic. The analyses were also analysed in terms of the gradual introduction of restrictions, in conjunction with the graphical representation of the aforementioned indicators at the time of the pandemic outbreak. The study concludes that young people were significantly more likely to become economically inactive or less likely to be in demand as jobseekers after the pandemic compared them to other age groups. The problem that the authors conclude by describing as needing to be addressed is that there is a need to rethink and change the social safety net system that focuses on fully employed individuals, as young people do not yet have the same rights as people active in the labour market for longer periods of time. For this reason, state social welfare assistance should be more targeted and adapted to the current situation in order to help young people in the period between leaving school in preparation for a career and becoming employed. (Saejung, Joonmo, 2022; Adnan&Anwar, 2020.)

The pandemic has raised many questions in the world, which needed to be answered very quickly. This was also the case in the educational process, where within a few days all educational activities moved online. In more than 85% of all countries, schools have been closed completely or gradually, which means that schools are no longer accessible to more than 1.6 billion students (10 April 2020). According to a study conducted with secondary school principals in 82 countries participating in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), the rate of students and teachers using these platforms is between 35 and 70% even in schools with effective online learning platforms (The World Global Practice of Banking Education, 2020a, b).

While distance education brings with it some benefits, there are also some limitations (Anderson & Dron, 2017; Crawford *et al.*, 2020). Distance education offers students flexible learning options in terms of time, place and speed of learning, which is valued among students. However, it also brings with it the need for self-direction, technical equipment and independence (Shearer & Park, 2018; Barnard *et al.*, 2009; Firat, 2016).

Many experts have questioned whether higher education is ready for the coming digital era of learning (Houlden & Veletsianos, 2020). Distance education offers teachers and students flexible learning options in terms of time, place and speed of learning through internet technologies. One of the critical indicators of a distance education environment where effective learning processes take place is student satisfaction (Moore, 2005).

Various factors influence the success of distance education. One of these factors is student satisfaction with distance education. In line with this, many studies in the literature report that satisfaction is one of the critical factors determining the success of online courses and is linked to many other factors (Hamdan *et al.*, 2021; Wei & Chou, 2020).

3 Methodology

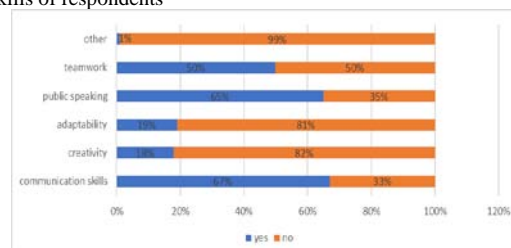
The education of young people raises many questions. We know that many jobs as we know them today will disappear or be redesigned, many new jobs will be created, but we do not know the content of these jobs and therefore education in these contexts is complicated. The aim of the present study was to analyse the negative impacts of online education on the skills of young people. Our research sample consists of students who study in different secondary and higher secondary schools. The questionnaire survey designed by us was filled by students in Slovak secondary and higher secondary schools in the month of May 2022. The responses of the students were first processed using mathematical and statistical methods and the results of the survey were evaluated using a contingency table.

The questionnaire survey was conducted anonymously through an online-questionnaire. We were able to collect 202 questionnaires and based on the responses, we were able to tabulate the data, which allowed us to process a detailed description of the findings. Since we did the questionnaire online, it was made available on a social networking site - Facebook. It was posted in several groups. For the purpose of our study, we are publishing selected questions.

4 Research Results

From the analysis of the respondents' answers, we found that among the negative aspects of distance education can be considered the fact that the teaching is not always concentrated on the student. We investigated which soft skills of the respondents were negatively impacted by distance education. In this case, the variation in the respondents' answers was not investigated. Therefore, Figure 1 represents the subjective opinion of all respondents.

Figure 1 Negative impact of distance learning on selected soft skills of respondents



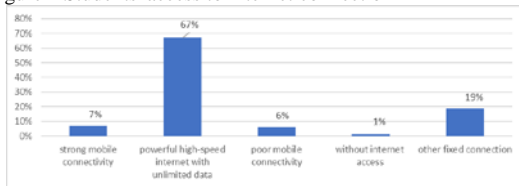
Source: own elaboration

Soft skills are those skills that a student acquires during the learning process and which, unlike hard skills, are more difficult to quantify. Students acquire certain knowledge and skills during their studies for which they are evaluated. These can be classified as hard skills. In contrast, soft skills are those that are acquired, understood and used in a student's career during their studies. Soft skills can include e.g. communication skills, creativity, adaptability, public speaking, teamwork, etc.

Communication skills were the most common option mentioned by students, as 67% of respondents agree that distance learning has had a negative impact on this particular skill. Other skills most frequently identified by students were public speaking (65%) and teamwork (50%). From the above responses, it can be concluded that distance learning has affected interpersonal relationships the most due to the loss of social contacts. Communication skills are the basis for building interpersonal relationships. In fact, students develop their communication skills not only during classes but also when communicating with their classmates (Iksan, 2012). Similarly, public speaking has been limited by distance education. In classroom lessons, students have to overcome both fear and stage fright, e.g. in the case of independent answers in front of the blackboard, etc. Thus, it can be said that in the home environment they were freed from these stressful situations, which could be actually considered as a positive thing. On the other hand, it can be seen as a negative that students in the familiar and safe environment of home do not acquire the necessary skills to be able to overcome themselves and work with stress. But they will certainly need these skills as they move forward, especially in their careers. The third area affected was teamwork, which was also weakened during distance learning. Students were mostly assigned separate projects for homework, which resulted in a weakening of student collaboration. On the other hand, the soft skills on which distance education had the least negative impact from the respondents' perspective were creativity and adaptability. One can agree with the above, as neither the students nor the current school system was prepared for distance education. Both teachers and students had to adapt to this new system quite quickly, acquiring new knowledge in the field of information and communication technologies. The teaching of pupils and students had to go off the beaten track and also the teaching plan and student learning had to switch to a new, practically unknown form of teaching. From the respondents' answers we found that 19% of them found it more difficult to adapt to this system and for 18% of them distance learning had a negative impact on creative thinking.

When distance learning was introduced, it was often discussed that not all pupils and students have sufficient internet connection at home, which is one of the basic conditions for this form of teaching pupils and students. In addition to the lack of technical equipment in schools, as well as in pupils' and students' homes, the Internet connection was the second most discussed issue. Despite the fact that we live in the 21st century and for many people information and communication technologies and the Internet are a normal part of life, there are still those who do not own any technology and do not even have access to the Internet, as we have already pointed out in the theoretical part of the thesis. The following question focuses specifically on the students' technological capabilities. The results of the findings are represented in Figure 2.

Figure 2 Students' access to internet connection



Source: own elaboration

It is clear from the responses that more than half of them, namely 67% (135 respondents), have very good access to the internet with unlimited data and another 7% (14 respondents) have a strong mobile connection. On the other hand, out of 202 respondents, 6% (12 respondents) reported that they have a weak mobile connection and 1% (two respondents) reported that they have no internet access. In one case, it was a student who did not even participate in distance education as he/she continued to study full-time due to poor data connectivity. Finally, 19% (39 respondents) reported having another fixed connection. Distance education had an impact not only on students' learning but also on the teachers themselves, who had to adapt their teaching plans and methods to the new form of teaching.

In the following question, we sought the subjective opinion of all respondents on the teachers' approach to distance learning. Since even in this case it was not the object of the survey to compare the answers of the respondents according to the selected criteria, the overall results are presented in Figure 3, showing that not even half of the respondents were satisfied with the way the teachers handled distance education, as 31% (62 respondents) of them said they handled it fairly well and only 19% (41 respondents) agreed that they handled it excellently. In contrast, 43% (86 respondents) were not satisfied with some of the teachers. A further 6% (12 respondents) agreed that the teachers did not handle distance learning well and one respondent (1%) even indicated a total dissatisfaction.

Figure 3 Teachers' attitudes to distance learning

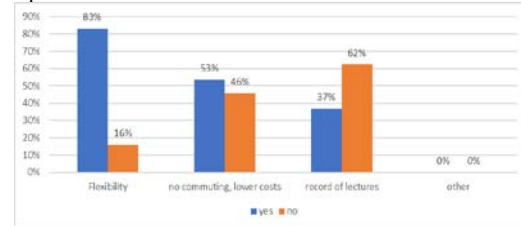


Source: own elaboration

From the above results, it can be concluded that some teachers were able to adapt to the new teaching system effectively and to take advantage of the opportunities that distance learning brings. In contrast, however, not every teacher was adaptable enough and was able to use the advantages of distance teaching to the benefit of the students.

The next two questions in the questionnaire focused on the main theme of the thesis, namely to find out the advantages and disadvantages of distance education from the respondents' perspectives. Respondents were given a choice of three options, which are currently considered to be the significant advantages and disadvantages, or strengths and weaknesses of distance education, and respondents were also given the opportunity to add another option.

Figure 4 Advantages of distance learning from the respondents' perspective

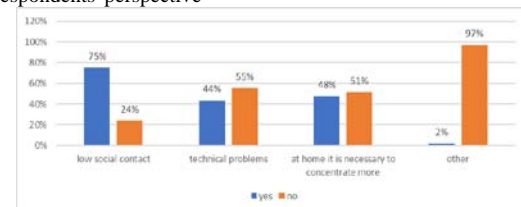


Source: own elaboration

The flexibility that distance learning brings was most appreciated by the students. This option was indicated by 83% of respondents. Flexibility in distance education is associated with the fact that the student chooses the place and sometimes even the time for the learning. This flexibility allows students to better organize their time for learning, allows them to concentrate better, they organize the lesson themselves, and most importantly the online space in a home environment offers a comfortable and quiet environment. Students mentioned as a second option that distance learning is less expensive, saves time and finances, and there is no need to travel to school. This option was identified by 53% of students. Finally, 37% of the students listed the recording of lectures as an advantage of distance education. This recording gives students the opportunity to revisit the lesson, which is a great advantage over the face-to-face form of teaching. Many students often have difficulty remembering the material presented by the teacher in class. The online space makes it possible to remove this "handicap" of traditional teaching. The student can simply replay the lecture recording and gain the necessary knowledge and understanding. This allows him/her to better prepare for the next lecture and achieve better learning results.

The following question focuses on the disadvantages or weaknesses of distance learning from the respondents' perspective. Here again, respondents were given a choice of three options, which we considered to be the weakest aspects of distance education.

Figure 5 Disadvantages of distance learning from the respondents' perspective



Source: own elaboration

From the answers of the respondents we found that students consider low social contact as the biggest disadvantage of distance learning, as 75% of respondents indicated this option. The loss of social contact and other related negative events such as reduced soft skills development, building friendships, etc. can also be ranked as the biggest disadvantage of distance education for students from our perspective. Yet, in the current technological age, it is the building of social contacts that is the most important. The current era allows people to communicate online and therefore often many people are only able to communicate online and, on the contrary, have difficulty communicating in the real non-virtual world. Locking students in a home environment has only encouraged this negative development. In addition to the loss of social contacts, 48% of students identified reduced attention span or having to concentrate more at home than at school as a negative of distance learning. This is mainly due to the fact that students in the home environment have to organise their own time for learning and relaxation and are largely dependent on self-study, which does not suit every student. Finally, 44% of students identified technical problems as a disadvantage of distance

learning. Technical problems are linked both to the low technical skills that some teachers or students possess, but also to the lack of technical and technological equipment in schools or at home. In this case, we would draw attention to the fact that some households do not have the conditions created for distance learning of pupils and students. During their studies, many households had to cope with the fact that they had, for example, only one computer available, while several pupils or students were studying at a distance. Furthermore, distance learning could not fully replace all subjects, especially technical and vocational subjects, which was also pointed out by two students who cited the lack of practice as a disadvantage of distance learning. This is because many households are not sufficiently equipped with technical subjects to adequately teach technical and vocational subjects.

5 Conclusion

In terms of the overall assessment of the survey results, we can conclude that the school system in Slovakia was not sufficiently prepared for distance learning. The quality of distance education in Slovakia has not reached the same level as the face-to-face form of education. In our opinion, this was due to the inexperience of teachers in preparing online lessons and to the low use of innovative forms of teaching methods in the education of pupils and students using information and communication technologies. We consider the lack of student activity during online lessons to be a significant negative of distance education. At the same time, distance education promotes the creation of discussion forums. It is an excellent tool to effectively engage students in discussions and motivate them to learn. However, from the respondents' answers, we found that most of them either did not participate in discussions at all or only to a limited extent. This suggests that distance learning was more theoretical in nature, where students were 'only' presented with the learning material without their direct participation. Distance education offers unlimited possibilities and forms of learning for pupils and students. It is suitable for project-based or problem-based learning for pupils and students. Furthermore, pupils can be involved in discussions through the EUR method, INSERT and many other educational methods that are oriented precisely towards the pupil and his activity. On the other hand, the overall improvement in the students' academic performance can be considered positive, with more than half of the students improving their grades during distance learning, despite the higher demands placed on the students. In our view, the improvement in learning outcomes is a result of students having more flexible study options, having a record of lectures to keep track of the necessary learning and generally organising their own study and relaxation time. From the survey results, we found that the above features, in addition to reduced transportation costs to school and relieving students of the burden of commuting to school, represent the greatest benefits of distance education. On the other hand, however, it should also be pointed out that distance education is not suitable for all pupils and students, as the survey results also showed. Not every pupil is able to concentrate sufficiently as they do at school. Also, many households do not have sufficient technical equipment, which creates technical problems during lessons.

The biggest negative of distance learning is the loss of social contacts and reduced flexibility. Social contacts are important for building partnerships, interpersonal relationships and for the future employment of pupils and students in private and working life. Employers are currently most demanding soft skills from new recruits. Distance learning, which has been one of the longest in the world, has thus significantly influenced two generations of the future workforce, namely Generation Z and Generation Alpha. Exploring the implications and suggesting recommendations for adoption will be the subject of further academic work.

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