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INVESTIGATING STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVE ON E-LEARNING- A QUALITATIVE APPROACH

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Abstract

The online learning trend started long before the Covid 19 pandemic. As a result of two years of strict online learning, education is nowadays seen differently, letting the door opened for researchers to investigate the advantages and disadvantages of this type of learning and its impact upon professional output for university students. The purpose of this research is to investigate students' opinion regarding the online learning process.

The objectives are: (1) to identify the perceived advantages of online learning; (2) to identify the perceived disadvantages of online learning; (3) to explore the role of online learning in students' professional life. In order to collect data, the in-depth interview qualitative method was used, based on the interview guide. The sample included 40 students with at least one year experience in online learning. Results reveal that the advantages of online learning are: flexibility, comfort, resources saving, improving professional skills, more access to information, responsibility and improving personal life while the disadvantages are social interaction issues, health problems, lower involvement, communication issues, technical problems, problems related to understanding information, online addiction and some evaluation problems.

Keywords: *online learning, Covid-19, advantages of online learning, disadvantages of online learning*

JEL Classification: M31; M39.

1. INTRODUCTION

The online learning trend started long before the Covid 19 pandemic (Karsenti, 2013, Terras and Ramsay, 2015; Pina and Steffens, 2015), due to its benefits such as low-cost or even free contents and / or easy access (Castillo *et al.*, 2015).

Researchers usually refer to online learning as MOOC, an acronym for massive open online course. The online learning increase, which is both an evolution and a fad on Karsenti (2013) opinion, was also approached in the literature (Al-Rahmi *et al.*, 2018; 2019, Gomez *et al.*, 2022, Pina and Steffens, 2015). Yet, the Covid 19 pandemic transformed the trend in regulation, given the distancing restrictions specified by governments in various countries (Purkayastha and Sinha, 2021; Hesen *et al.*, 2022; Bloomfield *et al.*, 2022; Thao *et al.*, 2023).

As a result of two years of strict online learning, education is nowadays seen differently (Gomez *et al.*, 2022; Deeva, 2022; Hesen *et al.*, 2022). This aspect gave researchers the opportunity to study the advantages and disadvantages of online learning, comparing to traditional, face to face learning, and its impact upon professional output for university students.

It is important to understand whether online learning is a positive movement, given the enlarged number of learning opportunities (Gomez *et al.*, 2022). Also, it is important to understand that the learning process is different for specific learning subjects. For example, researchers' interest in learning issues also investigated specific learning areas and specific learning methods that increase efficiency. Such an example is Alm *et al.* (2022) study, presenting how students may be motivated to learn on sustainability in higher education institutions. The results of Alm *et al.* (2022) study highlights that, at least for sustainability learning, involving students in projects and real-life experiences is a key factor to understand and integrate the concept in students' present and future life. In line with this idea, Hesen *et al.* (2022) highlight that other learning forms, such as arts, embodied or place-based type of learning may be not a well match with online learning.

Thus, online learning may be an impediment for teaching certain concepts that need more understanding than traditional information delivery.

This paper addresses the online learning debate, from the perspective of advantages and disadvantages of this type of learning.

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2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In Karsenti (2013) review of the history and issues of MOOC (massive open online course) in university education, we find out that the previous form of distance learning started in 1873, in Boston, when women had the opportunity to study at home based on correspondence instructions sent by mail. Officially, the first correspondence college was College of Liberal Arts in New York State, leading to what is now MOOC (massive open online course): a form of distance learning with the improve of extra video lessons and the appearance of the professor in the video multimedia presentation (Karsenti, 2013), creating an online video – education relationship (Pantò and Comas-Quinn, 2013).

The most important advantage of online learning is, by far, the comfort ability of the learner. The students may be at home or any other place and also be part of the learning process (“learning from any place, at any time”, Karsenti, 2013, p. 34), as courses are easy to access having the web access (Yeager, Hurley-Dasgupta, and Bliss, 2013). As such, this leads to another important advantage, as suggested by Karsenti (2013), of being innovative and revolutionary. Yeager, Hurley-Dasgupta, and Bliss (2013) consider that this type of learning helps on the twenty-first century necessary skills and literacy. Also, from the institution perspective, online learning gives the opportunity for large number of students to be present at the same time.

Another advantage is the possibility for large number of students to “meet” on specific online communication platforms in order to create their own learning community (Yeager, Hurley-Dasgupta, and Bliss, 2013; Wei, Saab and Admiraal, 2023), creating a “classroom-like atmosphere” (Karsenti, 2013, p. 29).

Yet, maybe the most important advantages of online learning, seen from a distant perspective, is the easy access to knowledge (Karsenti, 2013) and the passing to the process of free education (Karsenti, 2013; Pantò and Comas-Quinn, 2013).

It is important to understand that online learning requires for some specific skills, including motivation for this type of learning, digital literacy and self-regulation (Terras and Ramsay, 2015; Pina and Steffens, 2015; Pantò and Comas-Quinn, 2013; Wei, Saab and Admiraal, 2023). This leads to an important disadvantage from the institutional perspective, specifically learners high drop-out rate (Wei, Saab and Admiraal, 2023; Hesén, Wals and Tauritz, 2022), as only 10% average students finish all parts of their course (Liyanagunawardena *et al.*, 2014; Pina and Steffens, 2015). High dropouts are also a result of online information overload (Gomez *et al.*, 2022; Zhang *et al.*, 2018; Gütl *et al.* 2014) when it comes to choose a course that fits their preferences and be balanced for their needs. Gütl *et al.* (2014) conducted survey-based research of 134 students to identify the reasons why students give up finishing an online course. Their study identified that there may be various personal or academic reasons, such as

not having enough time, changes in their jobs, the course is either too difficult or not challenging enough.

Karsenti (2013) and Pantò and Comas-Quinn (2013) reviews debates upon other important issues and / or disadvantage of the online learning form, as stated by the literature. Such issues are the concern for being able to teach a large number of students at once, having only the online connection and not having a proper teacher-student interaction, aspect that convinced the author to call this phenomenon a “a huge knowledge marketplace” (Karsenti, 2013, p. 28). Also, as Karsenti (2013) observes, online learning offers interesting tools, that replace the chalk, the marker, the table or the teacher, that prove to be useless, as learners either don’t need or don’t know how to use.

As online learning involves large number of students, assessment of learners is done automatically, machine-based, leading to impossible individual feedback (Karsenti 2013). This leads to another important disadvantage of online learning.

Higher education institution cannot approach learning, may it be traditional or online learning, outside the University Social Responsibility, defined by Vasilescu *et al.* (2010), as “the need to strengthen civic commitment and active citizenship” (p. 4178) including actions such as volunteering, promoting ecological, environmental commitment, ethical approach (Vasilescu *et al.*, 2010). But, as highlighted above, certain complex concepts such as sustainability may be difficult or even impossible to integrate in daily life with distancing and online learning. Academic integrity actions, such as plagiarism or verifying the real identity of the person registered as a student are major issues in online learning systems (Gomez *et al.*, 2022).

As such, compared to online learning, an important advantage of face to face, traditional learning is the interaction with people associated with the teaching environment, such as teachers, peers and tutors and with learning objects are fostering the self-regulation learning (Pina and Steffens, 2015). Yet, the Covid 19 pandemic was an opportunity to prove that online learning can facilitate the sense of community, based on the efforts of educators and students within creative tasks such as both parts creating a safe environment and “fostering subjectification” (Hesen, Wals and Tauritz, 2022, p. 101).

Debating on the impact of online learning upon students’ preparation for their future career, Wei, Saab and Admiraal (2023) concluded that “being engaged in a MOOC is essential to understand knowledge and master skills” (p. 2).

3. METHOD

The purpose of this research is to investigate students’ opinion regarding the online learning process.

The objectives are: (1) to identify the perceived advantages of online learning; (2) to identify the perceived disadvantages of online learning; (3) to explore the role of online learning in students' professional life.

In order to collect data, the in-depth interview qualitative method was used, based on the interview guide.

The sample included 40 master students (26 women and 14 men) with at least one year experience in online learning.

The interview guide used with open-ended questions and included projective techniques, especially the collages. The students were asked, during the interview, to select 3-4 images that better express their thoughts and feelings about online learning experience.

The main topics addressed with the interview guide are: general thoughts and feelings about online learning, advantages and disadvantages of online learning, online learning and professional aspects, image descriptions and the collages. The content analysis was used and categories and codes were identified.

4. RESULTS

The first objective of the research is **to identify the perceived advantages of online learning**. The answers of the respondents were processed and the results (presented in Table 1) were completed by the images' analysis.

Table 1. Advantages of online learning

Categories	Sub-categories (codes)	Frequency
Flexibility (86 mentions)	Location	18
	-connect from anywhere	18
	Multi-tasking	49
	-online learning during a trip	6
	- online learning during job schedule	22
	-doing more things in the same time	21
	Time management	19
	-easier to organize the schedule	10
	-more freedom	9
Comfort (75 mentions)	Place	25
	- listen to the courses from the comfort of the house	17
	-stay comfortable, as you like	8
	Outfit	14
	-casual, even pajama	11
	-less attention to makeup	3

Categories	Sub-categories (codes)	Frequency
	Facilities	17
	-prepare/drink a coffee	9
	-eat	8
	More relaxing, less stress	19
Resources saving (36 mentions)	Time (not going to school, preparing for school, printing the projects)	21
	Money (rent, transport)	12
	Other resources (printed paper, offline books)	3
Improving professional skills (30 mentions)	Critical thinking	2
	Fast adaptability to something new	8
	Technical skills	20
	-experience in using more platforms/programs	10
	-online presentations skills	6
Access to information (26 mentions)	-skills for an online job	4
	Easier access	12
	Faster access	10
Responsibility (20 mentions)	More interactive information	4
	More responsible	10
	Individual working abilities	4
	More efforts to stand up/be noticed	3
Personal life (20 mentions)	Self-discipline	3
	More time for personal life	12
	-for a hobby	5
	-for the family	7
	More time to think	4
	Self-awareness/self- knowledge	4

Source: research data

The most important advantage of e-learning is the flexibility of this process (with 86 mentions). In this category, we identified three sub-categories, related to the location, the opportunity of multi-tasking and better time management. Most of the participants mention more than one the advantage of multi-tasking (focusing on the opportunity to do more things in the same time: travelling, working on their job or eating) while for almost half of the respondents it is important that they can access the classes from anywhere (“I appreciate the ability to attend classes regardless of location, it doesn't matter where you are, it's important to have an internet connection and pay attention to classes, which I think is extremely convenient for all students”) and the possibility to better organize their time (“It is easier to organize my schedule”).

The next important advantage for the students who studied in the online environment is the comfort they experienced. The main source of the comfort is the place they stay in while listening the classes, in their house (“If one day I

want to be more comfortable, I can sit quietly in bed, but at the same time I can also pay attention to classes”, “I’m glad that when I’m having a day when I’m feeling down or low on energy, I can sit in bed and listen to the class, comparing to the traditional situation where it might have been difficult for me to come to school”). During the interviews, 75 mentions referred to this advantage. Their outfit can be casual and, during a class, they can prepare and drink a coffee or even eat (“Another advantage that I see is the fact that I can have a small snack during the classes, without disturbing anyone, I save time”, “when online class doesn’t require us to open the web camera, I totally relax in my pajamas”). These facilities make them feel relaxed and less stressed, compared with the traditional learning (“I am no longer afraid to respond to the debates we have on each topic”).

Online learning facilitates are related also to resources savings (36 mentions), the students referring mostly to time and money. For 21 participants, saving time is an opportunity when they study in the online environment (“I save time instead of traveling to school or finding the location where classes are held”, “I no longer waste 30-60 min in traffic going and 30-60 min coming back from college, that is, it saves me at least an hour of sitting without doing anything productive”) mostly because they can invest more in doing other activities (“in the remaining time I also do various activities that help me to develop my skills”). Almost half of the respondents appreciate not going to school because this allows them to save money with transport or printing their projects (“I don’t spent money for gas or transport tickets”).

The category improving professional skills was identified in 30 students’ mentions. Half of the students appreciate that they can improve the technical skills, very useful for a potential online job (gaining experience in using more programs and platforms, such as Teams, Zoom, Moodle or Google meet or improving their online presentation skills): “improving technological skills, which is extremely important at the professional level”, “I didn’t know about these applications until I switched to the online environment”. Only 8 participants highlighted the opportunity to quickly adapt to a new context or new information but also to develop their critical thinking ability: “the practice of verifying information using several sources, which will later develop the ability to think critically and independently solve a problem”.

Another important advantage of e-learning is the access to online information (26 mentions). Students appreciate the easier (12 out of 40 answers) and the faster access (10 out of 40 answers) to online information: “The information is on different platforms, there is more online available information and I search for online information while the teacher is talking”, “availability of learning materials in a very short time”, „the didactic materials are distributed quickly, being available for all students to access as soon as they were posted, which streamlines the process of learning and going through the materials”, „the

information remains in the online environment, so I can access it when I want". Also, a few respondents consider the information to be more interactive in the online environment, compared to the traditional learning: „the lesson is more interactive, for example, we can access a site/program given by the teacher and understand the course better", „online learning has a number of tools such as presentations, videos, PDFs, podcasts and teachers can use all these tools as part of their lesson plans. By expanding the lesson plan beyond traditional textbooks to include online resources, teachers can become more effective educators".

Studying online helped students becoming more responsible (20 mentions), developing their individual working abilities and making more efforts to stand up during the class, in the context of lower interactivity with the colleagues and the teachers: "I learned to solve a problem autonomously", "It was like a self-discipline that I hardly accepted", "You must concentrate on what is being taught, pay attention to information and take notes".

The time saving generates another relevant advantage of online learning, improving personal life (20 mentions). Less time for going to school and staying in traffic means more time for personal activities (hobbies and family) and for meditating to different issues: "I had to get to learn to organize my mind and priorities, figure out what I like or what I don't like", "I had the opportunity to spend more time among my thoughts, to put them in order", "The online environment gives me more free time to focus on my hobbies, more precisely cooking", "more time for loved ones".

The second objective of the research is **to identify the perceived disadvantages of online learning**. The main categories were identified and described. The results of the content analysis are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Disadvantages of online learning

Categories	Sub-categories (codes)	Frequency
Social interaction issues (85 mentions)	Lower quality interaction	66
	-no face to face interaction with colleagues	37
	-no face to face interaction with professors	19
	-less team work	10
	Loosing student life experience	19
Health problems (75 mentions)	Emotional problems	34
	-intellectual fatigue	7
	-feeling of isolation	9
	-burn out	5
	-anxiety	13
	Physical problems	41
	-back problems	10
-eyes problems	13	

Categories	Sub-categories (codes)	Frequency
	-physical fatigue	14
	-headache	4
Lower involvement (59 mentions)	Less attention on the classes	37
	-difficulty to focus	17
	-lack of visual contact	5
	-less responsibility	3
	-boredom	10
	-easiness to refuse to answer	2
	More distractions	12
	-other activities	10
	-more people in the house, making noise	2
	Lack of motivation for study	10
Communication issues (56 mentions)	No face to face communication in classes	25
	No real connection	17
	Loosing communication skills	9
	No/less feedback for homework	2
	More students speaking in the same time	2
	Easier to ignore an online message	1
Technical problems (43 mentions)	No Internet/ Weak WIFI connection	27
	Laptop problems	12
	Problems with the webcam/ the microphone	4
Problems related to understanding information (21 mentions)	Difficult to understand the lesson	16
	Less practical work (the business cases were less discussed)	4
	Teachers less prepared for online lessons	1
Online addiction (16 mentions)	Encourage online information addiction	8
	Information access easier and faster	2
	Less desire to socialize	6
Evaluation problems (7 mentions)	Lack of time to better know the students	1
	Less time for students to stand out	3
	Easier to cheat at the exams	3

Source: research data

The most important disadvantage of online learning is related with the social interaction issues (85 mentions). The lack of face to face interaction with the colleagues and the teachers and also less team work activities led to lower quality interactions, in general (66 mentions): “Interaction with colleagues and teachers would bring me more ideas and experience exchanges because it is well known that relationships between people decisively determine the quality of our lives more than any other factor”, “teamwork is less efficient and harder to achieve”, “we are somehow closed in our own house, alone, without making contact with colleagues”. Also, half of the participants talked about the student’

life experience that dramatically has changed in the online environment. They feel this is a huge loss for them: “when we are in class, we feel that we are students, that with the passing of the years we remember the funniest events that happened in the classroom”, “my college years are wasted and my studentship loses its value”.

All the students mention at least one health problem caused by online learning in the pandemic context (75 mentions). In this category, we identified two sub-categories: emotional (34 mentions) and physical problems (41 mentions). All the students complained about at least one physical health problem: physical fatigue (14 mentions), eyes (13 mentions) and back problems (10 mentions) or headaches (4 mentions): “because of the long working hours, problems began to appear both psychologically (depression, anxiety) and physically (headaches, eyes problems, backaches)”, “due to the excessive exposure to the computer, I started to have more problems with migraines and my eyes, which affects my mood a lot”. The most frequent emotional issues are: the anxiety (13 mentions), the feeling of isolation (9 mentions), the intellectual fatigue (7 mentions) and burn out (5 mentions). Spending a lot of time alone, in front of the computer, without the physical presence of their colleagues, the students experienced a lot of emotional challenges (“I found it very difficult to face so many problems by myself, a lot of stress and fatigue comes into play”, “Online learning practically isolates you from the rest of the world, deprives you of many activities, which you can do when you study face to face”), that impacted the quality of their social life (“online learning made me more anti-social and introverted, which sometimes gave me trouble when trying to meet other people”).

An important disadvantage of online learning is the lower involvement of the students in the educational process. Three main factors influence this behavior: the lack of attention on the classes (37 mentions), the existence of more distractions sources (12 mentions) and a lower motivation for study, in general (10 mentions). The students also explain the causes that led to the decrease in the level of attention, in the online study compared to the face-to-face one: the difficulty to focus on the information (“online learning decreases concentration”, “therefore, it is imperative that teachers keep their online courses clear, engaging and interactive to help students stay focused on the lesson”), the lack of visual contact (“my participation is more passive, probably influenced by the lack of eye contact”), the boredom (“I don't always listen to the classes with great interest and I get bored quite quickly”) and even the easiness to refuse the involvement (“You can leave the course, leave the computer or use the excuse that the microphone/web camera doesn't work ”). The lack of involvement is caused also by the distractions (other activities, Social Media, people in the house) (12 mentions) that are more present in the online environment: “sometimes we get distracted by other things and maybe don't absorb as much

information and knowledge”, “a greater possibility of students being easily distracted by social media or other sites”. In this context, the motivation to study in lower (10 mentions): “online learning is so flexible, sometimes I lose my motivation to work on the classes”.

Communication issues are a reason why students disliked online learning (56 mentions). The biggest dissatisfaction is the lack of face to face communication during the classes, the more so as many students attended the classes without the webcam (“lack of real communication changes our behavior, human relationships”). In this context, they missed the real connection between them and their colleagues or their teachers (17 mentions). A participant suggestively described this disadvantage, saying: “I often feel alone in front of a device, trying to keep up with teaching”. A significant consequence is that the students feel their communication skills are negatively influenced (9 mentions): “when people meet they no longer know how to communicate”. Also, the offering a feedback became difficult in the online environment (“It is simply not possible for a teacher to provide specific and prompt feedback”).

Studying in the online environment, students faced a lot of technical problems (43 mentions), the most common (27 mentions) being related to the Internet access (“I feel frustrated because of technical problems, especially when the Internet does not work”). Also, devices problems (laptop, webcam or microphone) were challenges for the respondents.

Strongly connected with communication issues, problems related to understanding information (21 mentions) represented a challenge for the students during the online classes. More specific, the respondents discussed about the difficulty to understand the lessons (16 mentions) and to work on practical case studies (“in some cases, we faced a difficulty to process the materials, which, in face to face classes, were easier to understand and go through”, “information is not clear every time, and teachers cannot be aware of this”).

Online addiction was an important disadvantage of the e-learning (16 mentions). Some students were aware that “the lack of real communication changes their behavior, the human relationships and leads to the "atrophy of their senses", becoming robots that have something to do and they do it”. This problem has long-term effects, leading to the low need to socialize: “because of online learning I think many have become more antisocial and would now prefer a remote job”.

The last issue identified in our study refers to some evaluation problems mentioned by a few participants. On one hand, teachers don’t have enough time to better know the students and to make an objective evaluation. On the other hand, students don’t have the proper context to stand out and sometimes, cheating at the exams is easier compared with the face-to-face classes.

The third objective of the research is **to explore the role of online learning in students' professional life.**

Two main directions were identified regarding the contribution of online learning on the professional life of the participants:

a. Work and study opportunities (20 mentions)

The students were excited by the possibility to keep their job while their study at the faculty. Some of them even said that they would quit school without the opportunity to study online.

More than that, e-learning offers the context where students can focus more on their job, advancing on their business positions, with the possibility to be promoted and still studying classes: “with the help of the online school I was able to focus on the professional side as well, managing to get promoted 2 times in the same year in a company where I enjoy working”. Improving the balance between school and work is a satisfying reason for students and an important advantage of e-learning: “the balance I managed to achieve, being able to work full-time at work, but at the same time managing to attend classes... this balance has helped me not to give up and move on”.

b. Improve professional skills (30 mentions)

Regarding the role of online learning in their professional life, the students appreciated new acquired or improved skills that will help them in the future. The main skills are: critical thinking, fast adaptability to something new and technical skills. The online learning helped students to be oriented more towards critical thinking, to analyze more the available information, to manage to highlight the essential. Flexibility and adaptability are skills with an important impact on their professional development: “without the online experience we would never have thought that we can adapt so easily and quickly to new conditions and that the actual learning can take place in a different way. If we had only learned face to face we would not have had this flexibility in actions”. Also, using different online platforms allowed students to be better prepared for their jobs, integrating technological skills in their behavior.

Besides the positive perspective on the role of e-learning on students' professional life, most of the participants admit that there were also some aspects that negatively influenced their learning process, such as the lack of attention, focus and persistence.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this research was to investigate students' opinion regarding the online learning process, following both positive and negative aspects of this challenge.

The main e-learning advantages identified in the research were: flexibility, comfort (Karsenti, 2013; Yeager *et al.*, 2013), resource-saving, improved professional skills, more access to information (Karsenti, 2013), and

improvement in students' personal lives. The online environment offers a wide range of learning opportunities (Gomez *et al.*, 2022) to develop and improve professional skills like critical thinking and adaptability.

On the other hand, the negative perspective on e-learning in students' lives is brought by disadvantages like: social interaction issues (Pantò and Comas-Quinn, 2013), health problems, lower involvement in classes, communication issues both with colleagues and teachers, technical problems, issues related to understanding information, online addiction, and some evaluation problems.

The research results indicate that online learning is always characterized with opposite words: advantages and disadvantages, opportunity and stress, hard but satisfying, sacrifice and benefits, challenge and comfort zone, comfortable environment but loneliness, good for professional life but bad for social life or, as metaphorical participants described this process, "a double-edged sword", "a maze". Also, the information is faster and easier to access but more difficult to understand. Time is saved by not going to school, but more time is consumed with lessons and homework. A participant says: "For me, online learning is like a mermaid from mythical stories, if initially, it seemed attractive, I realize along the way that it is actually a great challenge". In this context, the students feel there is a need to find a balance between work and personal life. One image included in some participants' collages represents a person walking on a string tied to the ends of two rocks (work and life).

The future research directions involve developing the questionnaire for the quantitative survey, based on the qualitative research, surveying to identify the factors defining the online learning experience, and comparing the online learning experience (bachelor versus master students, on different specializations).

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