

## **Student Voices about Distance Education during the Pandemic**

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### **Abstract**

Research about student opinions regarding Distance Education (DE) during the pandemic was conducted in Portugal, Ukraine and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). A 12-item survey was e-mailed to participants in institutions of higher education (IHE). Almost 1000 students responded. There were 400 responses to an open-ended item where students could share additional thoughts about DE. A qualitative analysis was performed on these comments. Results showed that Portuguese students were more positive about DE, and Emirati students were the ones with a less favorable opinion. In addition, students' most prevalent positive comments focused on the subcategory of the usefulness of DE. The most common negative comments focused on the inadequacy of DE to deliver some content and distractions. This study addresses the differences between the three countries. Examples of students' observations are shared.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, Distance Education, Higher Education, Portugal, Qualitative Study, Student Attitudes, Ukraine, United Arab Emirates

### **Literature Review**

Many research studies have been conducted regarding DE during the COVID-19 pandemic. Challenges and benefits for the post-pandemic context were suggested. Remote learning has been used to address the disruption caused by the pandemic. However, pre-pandemic literature advocated that IHE should include the DE model even though student enrollment was lower than in the on-campus format (Xiao, 2018).

When comparing research done about DE prior to and during the pandemic, many similarities regarding the challenges and benefits are found. Among the benefits are student self-efficacy, flexibility, and learning new skills. The challenges include limited technical support, communication issues, unanticipated pedagogical changes, and a digital divide between faculty and students (Qamar et al., 2021; Bawa'aneh, 2021). Kamble et al. (2021) found additional challenges to DE, which were interaction between faculty and students, isolation, and course content. Regarding course content, Baczek et al. (2020) reported DE to be less effective in learning procedural skills and social abilities.

A meta-analysis conducted by Vasilev & Krastev (2020) reported that almost 40% of the participants in a study found DE ineffective during the pandemic. In another study, also mentioned by Vasilev, 50% of the participants

indicated lack of interaction and workload as issues in online learning. Additional research found that many students reported the workload for online courses should be decreased (Puljak et al., 2020).

Based on many of these studies, it is essential to continuously address student satisfaction with their DE experience to improve instructional quality. This includes students' needs, interests and expectations (Kotova & Hasanova, 2016; Razinkina et al., 2018). Student feedback can help IHE expand their online offerings (Puljak et al., 2020). Research conducted in the UAE indicated that online courses should address student diversity (Malkawi et al., 2021, p. 7). Some studies about educational approaches used during the pandemic highlighted the need to improve the digital literacy skills of both instructors and students (Sánchez-Cruzado et al., 2021; Puljak et al., 2020; Tejedor et al., 2020).

The results presented are part of a more extensive study on students' opinions about DE and their willingness to take online courses after the pandemic. Participants responded to a survey that included an open-ended question where they could express their views about DE. This article presents the analysis of students' unrestricted responses regarding DE.

### **Methodology**

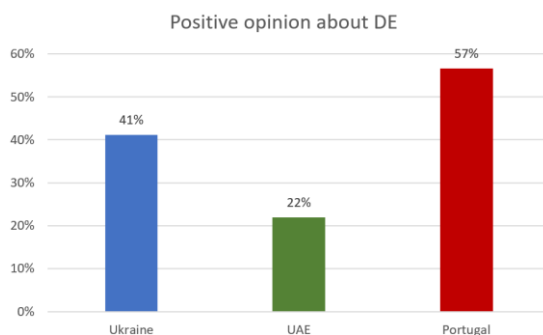
Undergraduate and graduate students from the UAE, Ukraine and Portugal were surveyed by e-mail in the first semester of the academic year of 2020-21. A convenience sample of two universities in the UAE, four in Ukraine and five in Portugal who accepted to participate was used in this study.

Nine hundred and eighty students replied to the survey, which led to a self-selected convenience sample. The online survey had 12 questions that addressed students' opinions about online courses. A total of 437 students from the three countries completed the optional open-ended item of the survey. This study focuses on the survey's only open-ended item, which asked students to share their thoughts about DE.

A qualitative data analysis using webQDA software was performed on the students' comments. The types of analysis performed were code, text and word search. In addition, matrix analysis was used to compare student comments between the three countries. An inductive coding process was performed from the participants' responses. The analysis focused on the categories and subcategories with the most comments from the participants.

### **Results**

Students in Portugal made more positive comments about their DE experience, followed by Ukraine and the UAE (Fig 1). One student commented, "This is definitely a positive experience, I liked the distance learning at the university because of the convenient location for me and significant time savings!" Another student wrote, "Mental and physical load is reduced, the skill of self-education is instilled, a unique opportunity to adjust the pace of learning for yourself."



*Figure 1 Positive opinions about DE from the participants of the three countries*

Negative remarks about DE were made most frequently by UAE students. Portuguese and Ukrainian students made fewer of these remarks (Fig. 2). The following are two examples of students' negative feelings towards DE. "Its extremely hard to stay motivated and keep up with lessons with distance learning." and "There is no clear concentration online. It gets boring. It is much better to conduct classes in person."

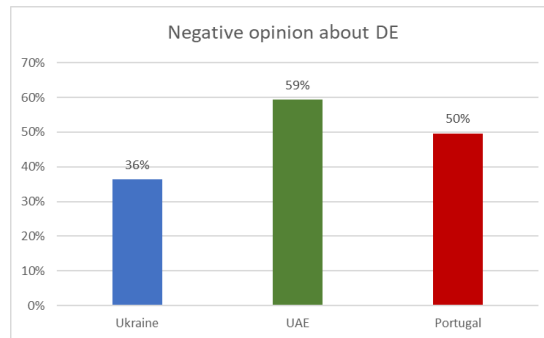


Figure 2 Negative opinion about DE from the participants of the three countries

In the subcategory of DE *Usefulness*, Ukrainian and Portuguese students commented the most (Fig. 3). Two participants mentioned the usefulness of DE. “In such a global pandemic, I believe that distance learning is the only solution to protect students and teachers.” and “The distance course is an innovation, it is convenient, even to say super !!!! You are always online and always in touch.”

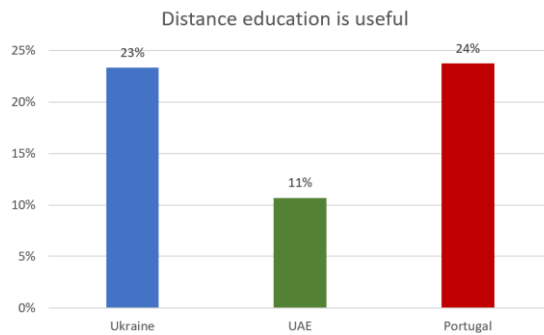


Figure 3 Usefulness of DE for the participants of the three countries

In the subcategory of *Distractions*, the participants from the three countries reported a similar percentage of comments (Fig. 4). Two comments illustrate distractions that students experienced. “It is extremely hard to focus on the course.” and “I get so distracted by random things which affects my studies.”

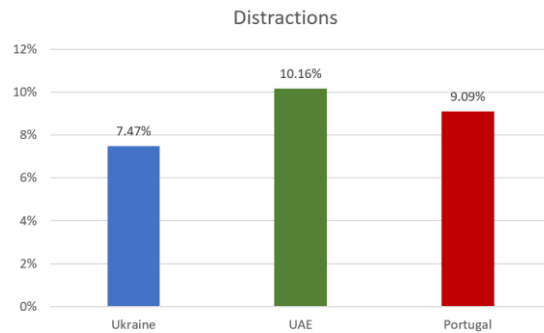


Figure 4 Opinion from the participants about distractions during DE

Regarding DE being *Inadequate to deliver some content*, UAE respondents shared more concern in their comments than the respondents from the other two countries (Fig. 5). In this subcategory the following two comments were made by participants. “I believe that distance education is good for those students who study in specialities that do not require a lot of practical skills (humanities).” and “Courses with labs have to be done on campus no compromise.”

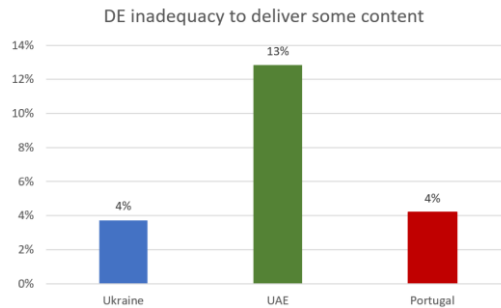


Figure 5 Participants' opinions on the inadequacy of DE to deliver some types of content

## Discussion and Conclusions

Results show that UAE participants had more negative opinions about DE and fewer comments regarding its usefulness. This may be due to less experience with this learning format. In a previous study by the authors, Ukrainian students reported more experience with DE, which was reflected in more favorable opinions (Fidalgo et al., 2020). DE was considered inadequate to deliver some content, mainly by UAE participants. In light of their higher overall negative opinion about DE, maybe these two factors interacted to form their opinions.

Portuguese students made more overall positive comments and have noted the usefulness of DE frequently. Many of the remarks were related to the ongoing pandemic. Explanations such as feeling more protected by studying from home, not having to commute to school, and managing their time and work were often mentioned. However, participants from Portugal also made a high percentage of negative remarks. This may be due to the ambivalence about the benefits versus disadvantages of DE. Negative responses by Portuguese participants focused on being unmotivated, distracted and isolated.

Several participants mentioned *Distractions* as a factor influencing their DE experience. The number of comments was similar in the three countries. A few reasons may help explain their observations. During the lockdown, all participants studied and possibly did their job from home. This meant that entire families shared their home space for long periods, which may not have allowed the students to concentrate on their studies. Also, family and related work commitments and interruptions may have contributed as a distracting factor. The lack of discipline may also have caused participants to get distracted by activities not related to their coursework.

Many of the comments in each country were similar. However, in some categories, students expressed a higher number of opinions. Comparing the three countries, Portuguese and Ukrainian participants' views align more often, and Emirati students position themselves differently.

IHE in each country, along with other educational stakeholders, can gain some insight into the impact of the DE experience on students. Among the benefits mentioned by the participants are self-paced learning, time-saving, protection from a pandemic, and the opportunity to always stay in touch through the online environment. Students commented on challenges such as the lack of motivation, difficulty concentrating, and inadequacy of DE to deliver some types of course content. If IHE want to continue offering DE courses, it is helpful to reinforce the positive aspects mentioned by the participants and address their concerns.

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