



Distance learning as it is experienced by its users

Executive summary

Based on 6¹ countries reports² (including desk research, focus groups and mobile ethnography)

In recent years, education has seen a shift from physical spaces to online learning, or e-learning. While this new type of learning comes with its own set of benefits, there are also some disadvantages. On the one hand, e-learning is more flexible than traditional learning because it can be done from anywhere in the world and at any time of the day. This is ideal for students who have busy schedules or who live in rural areas where schools are not easily accessible. Additionally, e-learning can be tailored specifically to each individual student's needs and interests through things like adaptive course content and personalized feedback loops. On the other hand, there are also some drawbacks to consider when it comes to e-learning. One such drawback is that students may feel isolated and disconnected from their peers when they are not physically present in a classroom together. Additionally, without face-to-face interaction, it can be difficult for instructors to gauge how well their students understand the teaching material. Asynchronous communication (communication that does not happen in real time) can also make it challenging for instructors and students alike to get timely feedback on questions or concerns.

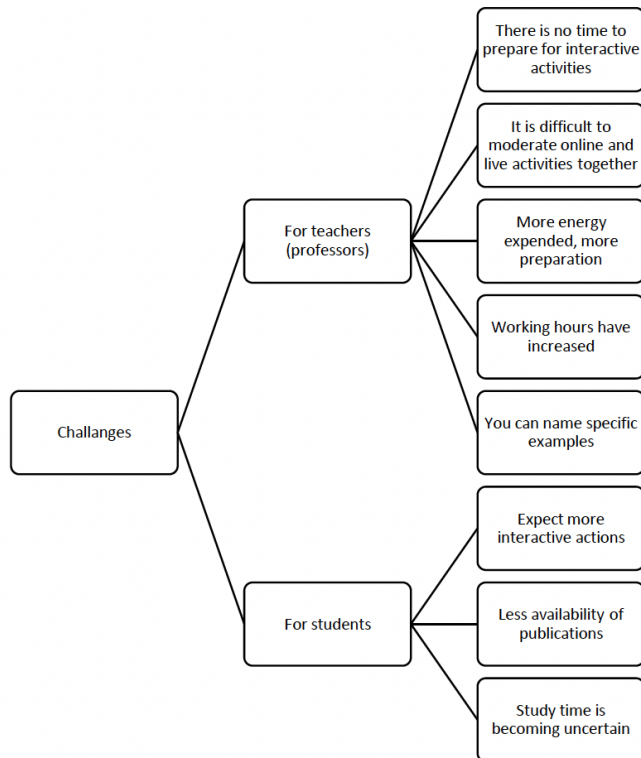
Nonetheless, e-learning was quite positively met by the academic community until the time when most of the world had to turn to distance learning due to the global pandemic of COVID-19. During the crisis, many academic institutions, students and teachers went through a turbulent experience switching fully to online education. It became clear that not everyone was ready to convey teaching in new settings for various reasons, be it **technical infrastructure, technical competencies, peculiarity of the teaching subject, etc. At the same time this switch caused a strong impact on the academic community itself leaving people feeling socially isolated, losing motivation, lacking time management and communication skills, etc.**

Students admit doing parallel activities while attending courses, both teachers and students note lack of suitable adapted educational materials and inability to make interpersonal contact. Some students also did not avoid internet connection problems and found online lessons to be lifeless and not so interesting on the other side of the screen, which might have happened due to the lack of teachers' online teaching skills. Students also expressed a **sense of irrelevance** which could be linked to the lack of interaction during online learning. As already mentioned before, this mirrored some teachers' inability to manage introducing both quality and interactive content.

PLACEDU explored the impact of online learning in 6 different countries and all of them confirmed some drawbacks that have been indicated in scientific literature. We have come across the following challenges indicated by teachers and students:

¹ Lithuania, Slovenia, Cyprus, Belgium, Iceland, Greece.

² Different country reports can be reached on our platform



However, one of the most repetitive issues mentioned by our research participants was **unwillingness to turn on cameras**. While it may seem like a minor drawback, phenomenologically, it might be quite significant since it embraces many challenges within, i.e. unwillingness to turn on the camera due to the background (social stigma) or demotivation regarding the subject taught. This seems to cause much discomfort for all participants and provoke stress to the learning process itself. Other studies³ have highlighted that proper use of video cameras in synchronous distant learning provides room for intimacy and immediacy, leading to higher teacher–learner social presence and proper dialogue. This situation creates demotivation for teachers, feeling like they are “speaking to nobody” (cameras turned off, no questions, no comments from the students).

Having said that, no one could discard the **problem of invasion of privacy** if a camera is required to be switched on.

Even though in-depth desk research supports some trending attitudes, such as teachers’ **expectations that all the students should turn their cameras on** during online classes, some teachers may feel pressured by it too. Therefore, it is important to remember that when considering major guidelines for online education there should always be room for a variety of solutions to choose from.

Country specific context

While all countries share quite similar challenges and possibilities related to distance learning, there are also some unique features that could be perceived country-specific:

Lithuania:

³ Sederevičiūtė-Pačiauskienė, Z., Valantinaite, I., Asakavičiūtė (2022). Should I Turn On My Video Camera? The Students’ Perceptions of the Use of Video Cameras in Synchronous Distant Learning. *Electronics* 2022 11, 813, 1-12.



The National Education Agency (NEA) of Lithuania has classified some digital tools meant for primary, secondary and higher education in order to make the transition smoother. Various universities adopted measures to cope with this transition, however, students expressed a **sense of irrelevance** which could be linked to the lack of interaction during online learning. This mirrored some **teachers' inability to manage introducing both quality and interactive content**.

It is worth noting that research has demonstrated that **hybrid teaching is the most challenging** in comparison with face-to-face and remote education.

Slovenia:

E-education during the pandemic seems to have revealed a major shortcoming in higher education that had easily been overlooked during face-to-face teaching: the fact that a classic model of teaching (teachers speaking and students listening) is an obsolete form that fails to attract and engage students. Distance learning highlighted the lack of interactive teaching methods. Teachers noticed this and started to **question their teaching methods**. It can be assumed that (digital) tools that stimulate interactive teaching and learning experience will play an increasingly important role in the future of education.

Cyprus:

The Ministry of Education, Sport and Youth – the responsible authority for education matters **created a new webpage⁴ to support both students and teachers with distance learning⁵**. Similarly, the Cyprus Pedagogical Institute (CPI) offered intensive online teacher training courses, while a new section created on its official website provided supporting material for distance teaching and learning. Training and workshops, which are still offered today, are delivered by ad hoc committees, and cover a wide range of tools, platforms and software, as well as sessions on hybrid teaching and teaching methodologies. Although support was available, gradually students were becoming all the **more demotivated, lost focus and concentration** easily, and were **unwilling to participate** in online activities during the lockdown.

Belgium:

During distance teaching, higher education institutions (**HEIs**) in Belgium developed well-being policies⁶. The stay-at-home order implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic has increased academic demand and decreased peer support among HEIs students. This situation was strongly linked with the occurrence of depressive symptoms⁷.

Cooperation and synergies between the three language-based communities is needed to allow for the exchange of good practices. The three communities in Belgium are likely facing the same challenges. Regarding educational reforms, the Flemish community is the one leading the way. Through the exchange of best practices, the other language-based communities could potentially benefit from knowledge spillovers.

Iceland:

Hybrid setting of the classroom has been experienced as a challenge: teachers who offered both face-to-face and distant learning were feeling they were not serving both groups well enough, they were having difficulties letting the discussions flow, they also did not feel content about their delivery of teaching materials to students and so on. Teachers who taught fully online seemed to have had more positive feelings and better awareness of the need to offer students activities enabling them to get to know each other.

⁴ <https://elearning.schools.ac.cy/index.php/el/>

⁵ Korelli, Y., Kyriacou-Liveri, C. (2022). Teachers and trainers in a changing world – Cyprus: Building up competences for inclusive, green and digitalised vocational education and training (VET). Cedefop ReferNet thematic perspectives series. http://libserver.cedefop.europa.eu/vetelib/2022/teachers_and_trainers_in_a_changing_world_Cyprus_Cedefop_ReferNet.pdf

⁶ Education and Training Monitor 2021, Belgium; (23.06.2022) <https://op.europa.eu/webpub/eac/education-and-training-monitor-2021/en/belgium.html>

⁷ DE MAN, J., BUFFEL, V., VAN DE VELDE, S. et al. (2021) Disentangling depression in Belgian higher education students amidst the first COVID-19 lockdown (April-May 2020). Arch Public Health 79, 3. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13690-020-00522-y>



It seems that there are many interactive methods, like using break-out rooms, different tools such as Teams, Padlet, Mentimeter and more.

Greece:

The transition from traditional learning to e-learning in Greek universities took place in an abrupt and sudden way due to the lockdowns of the pandemic. The serious technological problems due to a **lack of accessibility, poor connectivity** and - for the first few weeks – inadequate infrastructure was in line with the European Commission data for the year 2019 according to which Greece was ranked 27th out of 28 EU Member States according to the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) which includes five components: connectivity, human capital, use of online services, digital technology integration and digital public services.⁸

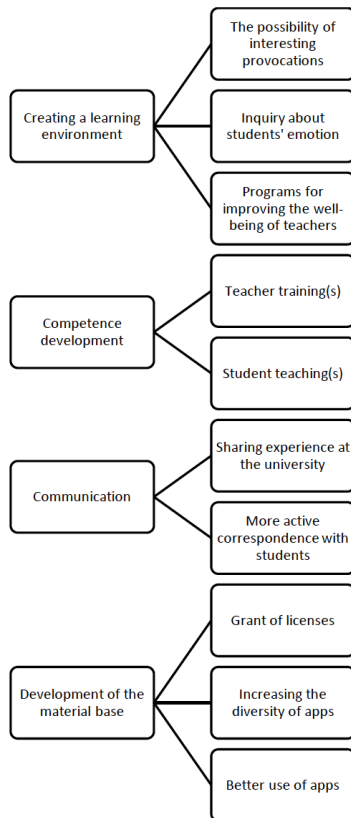
Both teachers and students note a **lack of suitable adapted educational materials** and inability to make interpersonal contact.

Solutions to be proposed

Our research participants have addressed distance learning challenges by suggesting rethinking 4 areas:

- creation of a proper learning environment;
- competence development;
- communication;
- development of the material base.
- e-learning pedagogy handbook for teachers

⁸ Dadou, A. (2022). The difficulties, challenges and prospects of distance education in higher education and post-secondary education. Case study school and university students. p. 23. Retrieved from <http://repository.library.teimes.gr/xmlui/bitstream/handle/123456789/10003/%ce%94%ce%ab9%cf%80%ce%bb%cf%89%ce%bc%ce%b1%cf%84%ce%ab9%ce%ba%ce%ae%20%ce%9d%ce%a4%ce%91%ce%9d%ce%a4%ce%9f%ce%a5%20%ce%91%ce%9d%ce%91%ce%a3%ce%a4%ce%91%ce%a3%ce%99%ce%91%20final%20%281%29.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>



PLACEDU will form a platform where these matters will be addressed. Additionally, training will be created in order to enhance competencies.

- Although there are some measures that have been taken, it is obvious that teachers need more training for e-teaching and students need more training for e-learning.
- It is important to rethink classes in a new setting and understand that some features that have been working during face-to-face classes, may not work in a virtual environment.
- Inevitably, one should strive for all classes (if this is possible) to be more interactive and encourage active student participation. Online classrooms should not be used only as a repository for materials and as support but also as an interactive learning environment.

While infrastructure problems are still clearly present today, PLACEDU is not focusing on improving the access to a reliable and affordable internet connection and adequate technological equipment to **narrow the digital divide**. However, we will seek solutions on how to create a better environment so that lower-income students and minorities, who experience larger negative impacts on academic outcomes, would be assisted properly during distance learning.

PLACEDU will **strengthen digital skills** as a transversal topic of the curriculum. The switch to online learning has exacerbated existing educational inequalities resulting both in learning losses and in educational disengagement. Support is needed for academic and administrative staff at education institutions on how to replace on-site teaching with online delivery. Teaching methods, textbooks, etc. need to be adapted for distance education, and a qualitative upgrade at many levels of teaching, use of technology, etc. is needed.

However, **the focus will be on teachers and students' physical and mental well-being**. As regular contact between students and teachers can help improve motivation and engagement in the learning process, it is key to foster a more direct exchange between educators and learners.



So what will be the next normal in education? How will it look and feel like?

Are demotivated students and teachers staring at a black screen the NEXT NORMAL in education?

PLACEDU will do its best to tackle the drawbacks of distance learning.