ABSTRACT

The Republic of Serbia has undergone several transformations within its educational system, which resulted in significant improvements over time. The current study investigates Serbian BA students’ perceptions of distance education at the University of Belgrade and their attitudes towards their teachers during online classes. Quantitative and qualitative research designs have been relied on, hence using a questionnaire and an interview to collect data. Furthermore, findings highlight how students view distance learning positively and how a good student-teacher relationship affects learning outcomes. These results provide valuable insights for policymakers, educators and educational institutions seeking to reinvent Serbia’s online learning experience.

Keywords: Distance education, motivation, online learning, student-teacher relationship.

1. Introduction

A 2002 study on education in the Republic of Serbia found that curricula and teaching methods should be updated to match the era. Too much focus was put on theoretical knowledge, while field practice and the overwhelmingly numerous exams did not have their fair share from the previous reforms (Alessandro, 2018). A year passes, and the Republic of Serbia joins the European Higher Education Area by participating in the Bologna Process. The country officially started following the Bologna declaration during the 2006/2007 school year. As a result, universities designed and provided study programs aligned with the international agreement and introduced the private sector into higher education, providing much-needed competition and the first of its kind (Rava, 2010).

Government reforms after the year 2000 ensured political pluralism, bringing peace and stability within the country. Similar to politics, the Republic of Serbia has meticulously provided universities with more autonomy. Therefore, reforms were made to contribute to modern Serbian higher education (Macura-Milovanovic et al., 2010).

2. Review of the Literature

2.1. An All-Inclusive Education

An equally important topic mentioned whenever autonomous educational entities are brought up is equal and all-inclusive education. The Republic of Serbia, after a period of inactivity that lasted four years (2004–2008), has started at the end of 2009 as a part of a long-lasting process of implementing a package of new laws and legislations constituting an even broader policy package in favour of inclusive education by promoting equity, equality, justice, and efficiency within educational ecosystems (Macura-Milovanovic et al., 2010). Several legislative reforms supported social inclusion and non-discrimination laws among many ethnicities and human rights protection. Nonetheless, this project has faced many obstacles at different legislative levels: Institutional barriers, psychological barriers in the academic environment like discrimination, prejudice, and stereotypes in all forms and shapes, and teachers’ inability to teach in a diversified environment. All the previously mentioned hurdles represented real-life hindrances in the implementation of inclusive educational practice (UNESCO, 2009).

From a teacher’s point of view, a classroom is always mono-ethnic and undiversified, which brings about a more inclusive curriculum at the higher education level. All
these items speak of unpreparedness in training teachers. However, several procedures have been taken to overcome these challenges. The Teacher Training faculty of the University of Belgrade has developed a mandatory subject for training future teachers on working with disabled students. In addition, a unique course has been developed in which students can choose to work with students with special needs, all stemming from the fact that students with special needs should be recognized as such and should be given the support they need (Macura-Milovanovic et al., 2010).

Policy-making is among the most critical phases in any new law or legislation package. For this reason, many recommendations from a 2010 report (Macura-Milovanovic et al., 2012) fell into the category of disseminating relevant information about the importance of an all-accepting and all-inclusive learning environment under the authority of “The Law on the Foundations of the Education System” shortened to LoF (Macura-Milovanovic et al., 2010).

Among other recommendations, the report suggested (Pantic, 2008):

- Creating a positive workflow among stakeholders to help implement the LoF through public media and associations,
- Fund and financially support the completion of the national competence chart,
- Supporting establishments of practice for still-under-training teachers,
- Creating a specialized facility to increase the number of teachers through various programs such as affirmative action and special training programs.

According to a 2009 law under the title of “Law of the fundamentals,” children who seem to need more support and attention for any given reason are given the right to attend classes following the (IEP) Individual Educational Plan based on the extra classes on their classroom performance and individual profiles (MoESTD, 2018). The previously mentioned inclusion framework plan includes and is not limited to expanding the breadth and width of diversity literature in Serbia and developing ideas related to teachers’ personal experiences in Serbian schools. Inclusion education has drawn lawmakers’ attention, making it a pillar of modern education. Experts coming together with collective experiences, knowledge, and man-force can achieve a successful inclusive education. Thus, all the involved parties in education should be prepared for a challenging, highly demanding, and changing landscape in the education scene (UNESCO, 2021).

2.2. The 2020 Strategy for the Development of Education in Serbia

However, a study by Vučković concluded that teachers have different backgrounds and attitudes toward inclusion. Therefore, many other measures were proposed in the 2020 strategic vision action plan memorandum for Education in Serbia (Vučković et al., 2019), including the involvement of pedagogical assistants collaborating with teachers and professors to improve the quality of inclusive education.

The Policy for Education Development in Serbia started on October 25, 2012, and was published in the official newspaper on November 9, 2012. The main goals set by the strategy are to develop the following (MoESTD, 2018):

1. Increasing the quality of education by applying scientific knowledge and sound educational practices;
2. To increase the number of students in all educational levels in the Republic of Serbia, starting from preschool, primary, secondary, high school, and higher education;
3. Embedding immediate developmental resources within the educational system structure to fulfil economic, cultural, and educational needs in order to achieve and maintain education that receives its funds from public sources;
4. Maximizing the efficiency of educational resources, including completion rates.

In addition to the previously stated objectives, different objectives are related to the development of the educational system. Therefore, defining objectives to have clear future goals has also been part of the 2020 strategy, such as strategic policies, precise measurements, and actions to achieve the planned objectives.

The Ministry of Education in the Republic of Serbia has decided to adopt an action plan on February 1, 2015. The latter has marked the beginning of a five-year long-term strategy to implement a plan for education development. Furthermore, the Ministry of Education came out with a report in 2018 to update the public about what has been achieved and what is yet to be achieved. Many goals were met during the period of three years, like having equal chances to access education for minorities and social inclusion for Romani in Serbia. The previously mentioned report also covered some goals and results achieved by education lawmakers with a socio-economic dimension (MoESTD, 2018).

2.3. Educational Reforms in the Republic of Serbia

New reforms were applied to education under “The package of educational laws.” This package took place in Serbia from 2017 till the present day. These laws include but are not limited to regulating pre-school, primary, secondary, and higher education. The changes have been enacted to reinforce the Strategy of Education Development in Serbia (SEDS) (Pešikan & Ivić, 2021).
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- Determining how to improve the quality of education among different levels, standards and achievements among teachers, and general competencies standards among teachers and educational staff,
- Adopting the essentials of education programs, general art education, and the early child development and care program.

2.5. Online Learning in the Republic of Serbia

2.5.1. E-learning and Entrepreneurship

E-learning has been trendy for many years because of its advantages over traditional education. Accordingly, many universities have implemented it to reinforce their program or provide an alternative for students to study from the comfort of their homes. This has also allowed educational institutions to target a wide range of learners and enabled new forms of education, such as lifelong learning and autonomous learning (Radovic Markovic et al., 2012). However, the correlation between using e-learning and entrepreneurial leadership is high. Therefore, it could increase individual entrepreneurs’ knowledge and competencies.

Consequently, e-learning helps individuals establish themselves as entrepreneurs on a large scale. Therefore, it was found that students recognize the importance of e-learning programs in fostering their soft skills. Moreover, by relying on modern-day technologies, the whole learning process becomes more accessible. Implementing e-learning could also mean students do not have to be in a physical environment, which gives them more room to practice their knowledge (Vučeković et al., 2020).

Digital education in Serbia started in 2004 as a “Creative school.” This program has been the fruit of a collaboration between Microsoft and the Institute for Education Improvement. Moreover, it has developed a repository of teaching and learning materials, tests, and tasks to practice the learned theory. In addition, teachers shared their PowerPoint presentations along with embedded links to refer learners to other knowledge sources. Henceforth, the initiative started in mid-2004 with 25,000 teachers at the primary and secondary schools, and it came to an end in 2014 (Alessandro, 2018).

After having mentioned social inclusion in a previous chapter, it is time to talk about digital inclusion, its importance, and how the Republic of Serbia is taking that road. Digital inclusion aims to bridge the knowledge gap and set the bar for how learning should be. Digital inclusion is not about having the technological tools and instruments or having internet access. Instead, it is about the overall political and social inclusion and employment opportunities paving the way for autonomous individuals in the future. The digital inclusion initiative has benefited the education sector in many ways. Several laws were passed from 2014 to 2018, enabling the design and creation of digital resources, including textbooks and classroom materials; furthermore, teaching general computer literacy and informatics became mandatory for eighth graders in 2015. While homeschooling for primary education has also been legalized since 2018, giving the child’s legal guardian a choice to opt for homeschooling with a distance learning option (Ozegovic, 2019).

Another example to further demonstrate the willingness to include distance learning across the Republic of Serbia is through the implementation of the “Education for all” website, which functions as a platform teachers can upload their materials; thereupon, it could be accessed by students from more than 78 primary and secondary education institution. The service is free of charge and open to all Abacus members. One of the schools that relies on this platform, Dr Draga Hercog Primary School, has not only been successful in implementing the new platform to its system but also manages to deliver online classes to students in-hospital treatment and others with disabilities.

2.6. Distance Learning in the Republic of Serbia: The Experience of Higher Education

Today’s learners’ demands are different from that of the previous learners. Technology-enabled learning has unlocked new horizons in the sky of education. Therefore, modern higher education institutions have tried to adjust to the new age changes and challenges by implementing and respecting new quality assurance criteria for developing distance education. Growth in distance education has led to massively massive growth in higher education. Using technology in education could solve many problems, such as enlarging universities’ courses, importing and exporting education programs and services, and providing international degrees for distant learners (Ruso et al., 2015).

Distance e-learning at the higher education level in the Republic of Serbia was essential to ensure that learners were given the same level of knowledge as traditional education (Milićević et al., 2021).

2.7. Students’ Perception of Distance Education at the University of Belgrade, Serbia

The end of 2019 and the beginning of 2020 have marked a new era. Everything has changed ever since COVID-19 was discovered, even the way we perceive life around us. As protective measures to decrease the number of cases, governments have forced a lockdown on the public in order to be able to control the spread of the pandemic. However, other vivid sectors like education must continue functioning while maintaining social distancing rules and obligations. As a result, most education facilities have switched to distance education during that critical period. In Serbia, the first significant lockdown lasted for 52 days, and then the state of emergency was lifted, but students still relied heavily on distance learning (Radovic Markovic et al., 2012).

This act of turning into online education is still applicable in 2022, and teachers are still relying on distance education to reinforce traditional education and replace physical classes with virtual ones. This article investigates students’ perception of distance education at the University of Belgrade, Serbia.
3. Method

This chapter provides the rationale and methodological details for this study. This inquiry aims to highlight students' perceptions of online learning. For this purpose, a mixed-methods design was chosen; a questionnaire and a structured interview were used as instruments. These methods are presented in the following sections:

3.1. Mixed Methods

3.1.1. Types of Questions in the Questionnaire

There are multiple question types in the questionnaire. They are dichotomous questions, multiple-choice questions, and scaling questions.

3.1.2. Structured Interviews

In a structured interview, the interviewer has specific guidelines, restrictions, predetermined questions, and a list of options. The interviewer asks specific questions to engage the respondent in the discussion. The interviewer also probes further questions to gather more in-depth information. Structured interviews are beneficial for getting in-depth stories about respondents' experiences or when there is little information about a topic—The exploratory method.

3.2. Participants

This study was conducted on 80 participants who are learners of different affiliations at the University of Belgrade. The participants were chosen randomly from a larger population, and the two criteria for choosing them were simply accessibility and their tendency to cooperate.

3.3. Research Questions and Hypotheses

Research questions are crucial for the research process, to which all parts are attached; however, research questions represent the pillar stones of this article and the first step to addressing the research objectives.

3.4. Research Questions

1. How do students perceive distance education at the University of Belgrade, Serbia?
2. How could e-learning at the University of Belgrade be enhanced according to students?
3. Do students have attitudes toward their teachers during online classes?

3.5. Research Hypotheses

(H0a) Students from the University of Belgrade have no preferred way of learning between distance and traditional education.

(H1a) Students from the University of Belgrade prefer online education over traditional education.

(H0b) e-learning cannot be enhanced according to students.

(H1b) There are many ways to enhance e-learning according to students.

(H0c) Students have no attitudes towards their teachers during online classes.

(H1c) Students’ learning experience is enhanced when they have a good relationship with their teachers.

3.6. Data Collection

Before distributing the questionnaire to the total number of participants, it seemed essential to pilot it first on ten students to discover discrepancies by filling in the questionnaire and providing comments and feedback about the components of the questionnaire. In addition, piloting was used to ensure that the questionnaire components were clear in size and meaning.

3.7. Data Analysis

The present study relied on SPSS to perform statistical conclusions and complete a data visualization task. Quantitative data obtained through distributed questionnaires are analyzed, further processed and presented in a readable format using tables.

4. Results

Several statistical reliability tests were applied to the questionnaire to test its reliability (see Table I). The results obtained are as follows: 0.603 in the Cronbach’s alpha test and 0.626 in the standard Alpha test, which translates to the data being quite reliable.

KMO and Bartlett tests were applied for the factor analysis test (see Table II), and the measure of sampling came as 0.603, proving that the data found is quite reliable.

4.1. Devices Used in Online Learning

As for the first question, it was asked to explore students’ preferred learning method among three options, and the results came as follows. Table III shows that the majority of students (52.5%) prefer to use computers and laptops for studying, (41.1%) prefer to study using smartphones, and just a small minority (6.4%) use tablets for their learning.

4.2. Platforms Used for E-Learning

As for the platforms used in synchronous distance learning, results in Table IV indicate that the majority of students rely on three platforms for online learning. The most used one is Moodle (32.9%), followed by Zoom (31.4%), and finally, Google Classroom (22.9%).
4.3. Types of Courses During Online Classes

Concerning the types of courses students received in an online classroom, the results indicated in Table V show that nearly a quarter of the population (28.9%) received courses in a live format, being able to communicate with the teachers and colleagues in real-time. In comparison, another nearly quarter of the population (27.6%) received courses in PowerPoint slides. Additionally, (23.1%) of respondents received PowerPoint slides with embedded recordings (either video or audio), while the rest received PDF files (15.1%), voice recordings (4.0%) and video recordings (1.3%).

4.4. Students' Satisfaction

Students’ satisfaction was measured using a scale of five items to determine how satisfied or unsatisfied students were about attending online classes. As Table VI demonstrates, most students (36.3%) were satisfied, (35.0%) were somewhat satisfied with the online learning experience. When students were asked to further elaborate on this question, one of the students said, “If the content has quality, you learn quicker”. A different student said, “I felt like my teachers were doing their best to deliver a good quality course for us,” a different student said, and I quote, “Teachers had to work harder than usual to make sure that we understand and that we finish the whole program”. Additionally, a minority of students (15.0%) chose neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, and a small minority chose somewhat dissatisfied (8.8%) and very dissatisfied (5.0%). Unsatisfied students claimed that their teachers rely more on asynchronous education, stating, “I feel like most of them just post pdfs and expect us to learn by ourselves”, while others were generally unsatisfied about education, stating, “I am very unsatisfied with the education system in general”.

5. Discussion

In the discussion part, results shall be discussed following the open-ended questions’ data received for the same sample of students.

- Students taking part in online education at the University of Belgrade were asked to provide feedback about their online study experience. Most students claimed that they were very satisfied with the experience in general and that nearly the majority of students who answered the question of whether learning outcomes are achievable or not redirected the question to how much effort one puts into learning. I quote, “Yes, all learning outcomes are achievable if I put enough effort at home,” another one said, “If I put more effort, then yes”, while another one said, “I feel like I learned a little more than half of the things I would learn normally.”

- Student-teacher relationships do affect the overall learning experience; hence, students suggested having more synchronous/live classes to create a bond with the teacher, while a student focused on the teacher’s working conditions while having students in the centre of the learning process. Additionally, when students were asked how important it is to
have a student-teacher relationship, most agreed that this relationship affects learning positively, given that you can feel the teachers on a human level. It also gives students an external motivation to focus more during online classes, while another student thought of this relationship as the cornerstone of the whole learning experience.

- When students were asked about ways to enhance e-learning, most of them suggested that the focus should be put on students, rendering them in the centre of the learning process. This suggestion only applies to many parameters and variables. Other students, however, suggested limiting the use of online learning to supplement traditional education only and not being used as a full-fledged learning system. Furthermore, a different student suggested creating one-to-one classes and hiring assistants for more engaging classes. Unifying learning platforms have also been mentioned as a top priority by stakeholders. According to one of the respondents, learning should occur in one program instead of being lost among learning platforms, which proved to be both stressful and a waste of time.

6. Recommendations

- The Ministry of Higher Education should focus on learners as the focal point of the educational system; hence, there should be a direct communication channel between students, teachers, and lawmakers to ensure that the learning system is compatible with students’ wants and needs.
- The universities should introduce the concept of gamifying courses, which makes learning fun and includes all learners in a positive and highly competitive learning environment.
- Workshops should be held to inform students about how fruitful using ICT tools is for academic and educational purposes.
- Teachers should provide students with more live courses and fewer files. Providing files should come secondary to having synchronous.

7. Limitations of Study

There are a number of limitations in the study at hand that should be taken into consideration. First, the sample size is not representative. Hence, more respondents would have enabled the generalization of the results over a larger population. In addition, access to respondents has proved to be a challenge as courses are held online, and they cannot access them easily.

8. Conclusion

A number of conclusions could be drawn Based on the results from the study at hand, which aims to investigate how students at the University Of Belgrade, Serbia, perceive distance education and their attitudes towards their teachers during online classes.

First, the study revealed that most students prefer studying online over traditional education because the latter restricts their freedom; hence, studying online gives them more freedom to study in the comfort of their homes. Some respondents even claimed that they learned online more than during regular classes and that online education makes all efforts achievable. In addition, one of the most noticeable ideas the respondents have repeated is making courses more fun and engaging.

Secondly, it was found that the student-teacher relationship is necessary for a better learning experience; furthermore, the majority of respondents evaluated their teachers as very satisfying and somewhat satisfying, whereas other respondents claimed that teachers had to work harder to achieve good results during online classes. Highlighting the fact that having a positive teacher-student relationship affects the overall learning experience.

Concisely, students perceive online learning positively at the University of Belgrade, Serbia, which positively affects the overall learning experience. Besides, the respondents expressed their awareness of the glaring differences between the two learning styles and that distance education may require more motivation and effort from teachers and students.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they do not have any conflict of interest.

References


