Hybrid Teaching during Covid-19—A Case Study of Public Universities in Kosovo

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Abstract

Hybrid teaching is a complex approach of teaching and learning, which is a combination of both face-to-face and virtual classes held simultaneously. This approach began to be used massively during the global pandemic Covid-19 throughout the world, which since March has become indispensable in Kosovo as well. More focus was of course given to virtual classes, as people were not allowed to go out due to Covid-19 restrictions. These distance classes created a situation that was not stable for the education system in Kosovo and demonstrated major educational challenges for lecturers and students. The purpose of this paper is to analyse how higher education lecturers managed the situation with hybrid teaching, how it was perceived by both lecturers and students, and which teaching approach was more preferable by both parties. We have used the qualitative method to retrieve data, and this was done by using a questionnaire as a tool of gathering information. The questionnaires were distributed to a number of 348 English majors, and 40 professors and teaching assistants from three public universities in Kosovo.

Keywords

Hybrid Teaching and Learning, Covid-19, Public University, Kosovo, Case Study

1. Introduction

Moving from the winter to the summer semester was seen as an exciting time for students during 2020, however the outbreak of the pandemic Covid-19 made this transmission impossible. This outbreak caused turbulence in the education system worldwide and it emphasised all the weaknesses of the education system (Meinck et al., 2022). However, the pandemic also shone a light upon the changes that needed to be implemented in education and the benefits that would

derive from it.

It was in the beginning of 2020 when pre and higher education institutions in Kosovo decided to switch to virtual classes, or a combination of both methods, virtual and physical. This combination of teaching and learning methods is referred to as hybrid teaching and learning.

This transition, however, was challenging since educational institutions lack technological equipment in classrooms, which made it difficult for teachers and students to fully grasp the approach of hybrid teaching and learning (Beka et al., 2011).

According to UNESCO (2020), hybrid teaching is defined as a learning and teaching method that is a mixture of both remote and physical learning and teaching. This method is particularly important to give education institutions an advantage when faced with potential pandemic and epidemic resurgence. UNESCO (2020) also added in their study that hybrid teaching and learning is developed in three stages: understand and envision, decide and design, and enable and execute. These three stages help educators develop successful and effective hybrid teaching. In addition, they help students adapt easier by understanding that there is a process to follow for hybrid learning.

Similarly in Kosovo, the Ministry of Education and Science, from here on after MES, had already prepared plans for lower education institutions and had issued an online channel called e-learning. This channel served as a classroom where teachers of the basic courses such as Albanian language, maths, and science were taught by teachers.

Higher education institutions, on the other hand, were not provided with a plan to follow for distance learning during Covid-19. Therefore, MES gave lecturers the liberty to plan classes and lectures up to students' needs. This freedom to design their own lesson plans and choose the appropriate platforms to use has been seen as a challenge by many educators worldwide, not only in Kosovo (Zhang et al., 2020). The authors also state that this rapid transition from physical to virtual classes, and vice-versa, has been a challenge to both lecturers and students.

Hence, this article seeks to analyse how lecturers have managed the situation of transition from physical to virtual and the opposite, how students have perceived these changes, and which approach they believe is more suitable and academically appropriate and effective.

The statistics shared by MES (2020) entail that a total of 50,593 students in public universities, 5245 students in private universities were influenced by the pandemic and the changes in teaching and learning approaches. This denotes that these students were all participating in virtual classes during March, 2020 when the pandemic spread in Kosovo as well. On the other hand, a number of 1,500 academic staff members in public universities, and 961 members of the academic staff in private universities were also impacted by virtual teaching (MES, 2020).

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Because of the short period of time to prepare for virtual classes, and the lack of prior training on various online platforms, both lecturers and students faced a number of challenges that they have yet to overcome.

Consequently, the main purpose and aim of this article is to tackle hybrid teaching, and the periodic transition between teaching and learning approaches. In addition, we would like to examine how lecturers and students dealt with this transition and how the latter saw it while having a primary role in this process.

In general, seeing the high number of students and lecturers affected by hybrid teaching, we think it is crucial to analyse the following:

- How higher education lecturers managed the situation with hybrid teaching?
- How did students perceive hybrid teaching?
- How prepared were higher education lecturers for hybrid teaching?
- Which teaching approach is more preferable for lecturers?
- Which teaching approach is more academically effective for students?

Inevitably, Covid-19 also impacted the education system. The advantage of the pandemic was the fast adoption to remote teaching and learning and for the education system to basically move forward years in growth in a vast amount of time (Daniel, 2020). Nonetheless, with this quick adoption came also a number of drawbacks. To begin with, teachers had to work with platforms they had not encountered or had not been extensively using before. This was seen as a primary challenge as teachers did not obtain the necessary professional development and training for distance teaching. Furthermore, teachers had to consider their well-being and how to manage the situation with remote and distance learning and teaching.

Students, on the other hand, had to think of finding the right technology devices to follow classes and not to miss assignments. This was a challenge particularly evident for developing countries due to their financial situation (Uzorka & Makeri, 2020). Questionnaires were distributed to 120 students and lecturers from Ugandan universities. Hence, challenges such as lack of digital literacy and equipment, economic obstacles, stress and anxiety, and lack of teacher training.

A similar study (Azorín, 2020) contributing to the challenges that education faced during Covid-19 highlighted the education system of Spain. Although the poorest parts of Malag, Spain were provided with the necessary equipment within a week, they still faced various challenges that came after the equipment was distributed. Thus, some of the reasons why the Spanish education system will still feel the consequences of Covid-19 are the socio-economic situation in the country, school drop-out levels which is the highest in the EU, lack of cooperation among lecturers, and lack of networking with the appropriate lecturers or educators. In addition, the author further provides challenges that the education system in Spain faced during the pandemic. Reasons such as large classes and the student-teacher ratio, the classroom space, the curriculum and syllabus, the continuous reformation of the education system which inevitably imposes new policies and regulations, the implementation of hybrid teaching, and the

professional development of lecturers were mentioned by the author as main drawbacks of education during Covid-19.

Kosovo went through similar stages of adapting its education system to Covid-19 as well. It was on March 11, 2020 when it was advised that schools move to remote classes in order to avoid the spread of Covid-19. Lower level education institutions were already given three possible scenarios for distance learning, for traditional face-to-face classes, and for hybrid teaching.

Higher education, in contrast, was not given any plans for distance learning, thus leaving lecturers to work and plan their lessons on their own. This situation brought a number of challenges to universities since the number of lecturers and students was high, and thus having classes online had to be planned thoroughly. The purpose of distance learning was not only to put a tick to the syllabi and curriculum, rather it was to accommodate student and teachers' needs and plan effective lessons. The summer semester of 2019-2020, as well as both semesters of 2020-2021 was fully remote, whereas the winter semester of 2021-2022 implemented hybrid teaching. Half of the students were required to attend lectures online, and the other half had to join physically. This situation brought a number of challenges.

In a study conducted by Krasniqi (2021), findings suggest that challenges faced by lecturers included students' access to technology, creating lesson plans that would be suitable for both the virtual and the physical context, and the workload they had during hybrid teaching.

Lack of investment in digital technology and the lack of teacher training sessions on digital literacy were seen as the biggest obstacles that the education system in Kosovo faced during Covid-19 (Beka, 2021). This study was supported by findings of Duraku and Hoxha (2020), who through semi-structured interviews with thirteen parents and eleven teachers highlighted the following findings. The results of the study state that Covid-19 was accompanied with great concern regarding evaluation and student workload.

2. Methodology

This article focuses on examining the questions: how did higher education lecturers manage the situation with hybrid teaching during Covid-19, how did both students and lecturers perceive this transition between teaching approaches, and what approach is more suitable and academically effective for students'.

For the purpose of answering these research questions, and to examine hybrid teaching during Covid-19 in the context of public universities in Kosovo, we have decided to follow a descriptive research method. More specifically, a qualitative research method will be utilised to retrieve data. The purpose behind this method is to analyse student and teacher opinions and gain an insight into their thoughts, by using a strategy that helps collect quantitative numerical data (Dornyei, 2007).

The research tool that followed this paper and was used to collect information

regarding the topic and research questions was a survey. The instrument dedicated to this particular study was a questionnaire. However, considering that we dealt with two particular sets of participants, we developed two specific questionnaires. The first questionnaire was designed for the purpose of retrieving data from lecturers. Whereas, the second questionnaire focused on gathering information from the student perspective. The language of the questionnaire and the questions was designed and developed using the English language.

The questionnaire was divided into two parts: the first part included demographic questions, such as gender, work place, department, academic level of teaching (for lecturers), university year (for students), university, and department. The second part of the questionnaire included questions that were relevant to the topic, thus open ended and closed-ended questions about hybrid teaching, the experience with hybrid teaching, and their opinions on the most effective teaching approach.

The data was collected online during the summer of 2022, more specifically during July to August, since professors, teaching assistants, and students were on their summer break. The questionnaire was shared by using Google Form as a platform, it was anonymous and it took both parties about five to seven minutes to complete and answer the questions.

As for the participants, there were forty professors and teaching assistants who participated in the survey.

In general, there were 18 professors and teaching assistants from the University of Prishtina, 13 from the University of Prizren, and 9 from the University of Gjakova. As for the students, there were three-hundred and forty-eight students in total, the number of which varied among universities and departments. More specifically, there were two hundred and twelve students from the University of Prishtina, ninety four from the University of Prizren, and forty two from the University of Gjakova.

3. Results

Results show a reflection of the situation with hybrid teaching and learning in higher education. However, this reflection corresponds to a particular era, that of the Covid-19 pandemic, and not to hybrid teaching and learning from its early periods.

This section of the paper will be developed in two phases. The first one will be a discussion of the data from professors and teaching assistants while also considering the research questions posed in the beginning of the paper, whereas the second phase will focus on the students' survey.

Thus, beginning with the first survey provided to professors and teaching assistants, we could state that the results were expected.

The first research question we determined to use for this research was how higher education lecturers were coping with hybrid teaching. According to the results, it seems as though professors and teaching assistants did not have a hard

time trying to overcome the situation with both online and face-to-face classes during the pandemic. The results indicate that the majority of participants considered hybrid teaching as successful, with online classes having a 57.5% quote of success, and with face-to-face classes reaching a 70% result.

These outcomes may also be a result of the prior experience of professors and teaching assistants with hybrid teaching. Considering that the results to this question were with a majority of the participants answering with "sometimes" to whether they have tried hybrid teaching before, we may assume that the experience gained helped them with the new situation they faced while teaching during Covid-19.

Although they considered it as successful, having simultaneous classes, online and physical, made it difficult for professors and teaching assistants to develop their classes. Henceforth, they faced a number of challenges that could have easily been avoided. These challenges could have been avoided by planning training and workshops for professors and teaching assistants, and informing them on hybrid teaching, technology literacy, and dealing with large classes. A number of challenges they faced are related to technology, the number of students in classes, teacher and student motivation, resources, and the lack of support from the leadership of the university. Due to these challenges, the results of the survey also indicate that professors and teaching assistants consider face-to-face classes as having more advantages than online classes.

The study also shows a correlation between the results of advantageous classes, and preferable methods of teaching. To the question which method of teaching, online or face-to-face, the participants prefer, the results suggest that face-to-face classes will prevail online classes, as they are the participants' favourite. This can also be denoted from the last question on the survey, which requires participants to provide information as to which method they would choose to deliver lectures after the pandemic Covid-19 is no longer a threat to higher education. Although approximately close in percentage, face-to-face classes are the method of teaching that professors and teaching assistants will use in the future, if given the opportunity. Some of the main reasons why face-to-face classes are more preferred among professors and teaching assistants are that the latter are used to the physical presence of students, but they also benefit students as it helps them be healthier, enhances student's personality, and acts as a source of discipline (Nasir & Hasnul, 2022).

These results, however, are contradictory, which leaves space for interpretation. The authors believe that this contradiction comes due to the fact that students were mostly provided with assignments during the semesters, and online classes and tutorials served the purpose of instructions, besides being there to give information on topics relevant to their courses.

Hence, based on the nature of the course, students had multiple written assignments that had to be submitted online, and engagement in class was low since they worked more offline than online during classes.

In general, there is a discrepancy between the findings in the two surveys. This last section of the data discussion will discuss the similarities and the differences between the surveys of professors and teaching assistants, and students.

To begin with, there is a similarity in gender in both surveys. The majority of females in the studies indicate that the English departments of all three public universities in Kosovo are female-oriented and there are less males studying it. In addition, the majority of students and professors teach in the linguistics and literature department, a shared department among all three universities in the bachelor level.

The above mentioned details are generated from demographic responses of both surveys.

The questions related to the process of hybrid teaching and learning, and the Covid-19 situation in Kosovo has generated different results from both surveys however.

The first major difference in the results is for online and face-to-face classes. Although both target groups have attended hybrid classes, the professors and teaching assistants have stated that they would prefer face-to-face classes more than online classes. Students, on the other hand, have confirmed that they would have online classes compared to face-to-face classes. This difference may come due to the comfort of lecturers while dealing with face-to-face classes and their experience with physical teaching over the years, considering the fact that hybrid classes are not very utilised in the higher education system in the country.

Students' preferences, in contrast, may come due to the fact that technology is advancing daily and the accommodation made available online provides a safe and comforting space for students. This comfort zone also allows for additional engagements, besides lectures. Students often face long hours of breaks between lectures, thus the commodity of lectures at home has been seen as beneficial for the group. This also gives them more time to prepare for their assignments since they spend their time inside, rather than commuting to lectures.

This difference between preferences of hybrid teaching can be also noticed in the last question of the survey, where target groups had to decide which method of hybrid teaching they would go for in the post-covidera. The responses of the participants varied, since professors and teaching assistants confirmed their "loyalty" to traditional face-to-face classes, whereas students were more open to change and to going beyond their comfort zone by choosing online or virtual classes.

4. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to research hybrid teaching and learning during the times of the pandemic Covid-19. We aimed at analysing how satisfied were both target groups, professors and teaching assistants, and students of higher education, with the process of hybrid education taking place in three public universities of Kosovo from the outbreak of the pandemic in 2020 to recent times.

The participants came from the English language department of three universities in Kosovo: University of Prishtina, University of Prizren, and University of Gjakova. The reason for limiting the respondents to these three universities and to the English department was due to the fact that the research was to be done in the English language, and thus more resources should have been used if the research was to take place in Albanian.

Moreover, the research aims at becoming a threshold for future regional and international research studies, thus having it in English is much easier accessible.

The tool used for the purpose of this research was a questionnaire. However, since there were two target groups, there were also two questionnaires. The questionnaires contained questions with multiple-choice options, and likert-scale type of questions.

The participants in the first survey were professors and teaching assistants from the three universities mentioned above, and hence in total there were 40 staff members. They answered a number of demographic and hybrid teaching-related questions, relevant to the study.

Students, on the other hand, had a different survey that we used to retrieve data from. There were in total a number of 348 students from the three universities mentioned, and they too had to go through demographic and hybrid learning-related questions.

The results indicated that although professors and teaching assistants had prior experience with hybrid teaching, and expressed their satisfaction with online classes, they still preferred face-to-face or physical classes compared to virtual ones.

Students, however, considered online classes as satisfactory, and they also indicated that they prefer them over face-to-face classes.

These differences may come as a result of the difference between generations, the advancement of technology, and the space and time available to students when participating in online classes.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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