

### Introduction

In Eisenstadt, the focus group with academic staff took place for 90 minutes on 22 June 2022. Two researchers from the University of St. Kliment Ohridski (UKLO) and the University of Applied Sciences Burgenland (UASB) guided the discussion as moderators in relation to the defined research questions to determine the effects of the implementation of blended learning in the process of teaching and learning during and after Covid-19. Each participant was active during the discussion and contributed with their experience, challenges and obstacles. One researcher from UKLO observed the discussion behind the one-way-mirror to document the emotional impact and reactions of utterances which gave insight into the most prevalent topics. The focus group was recorded and transcribed via an electronic tool, the researcher from UASB matched the transcript with the recording to eliminate errors. Additionally, one moderator noted down in a so called “memory protocol” the most important statements of the participants during the focus group, having an additional proof of the results.

### Question 1: Did you have online experience before Covid-19?

Seven lecturers/professors from the Department of Business Studies attended the staff focus group. The teaching subjects of the participants covered empirical research methods (ITA 1), project management (ITA 2), human resources (ITA 3), international business (ITA 4), law (ITA 5) and English language instruction (ITA 6 and 7). Six participants had experience in online teaching before COVID 19 of around 20%, one (ITA 2) did not give lectures online before and another out of the seven (ITA 7) had experiences from both sides, as a lecturer and as a student. [ITA: interviewed teacher Austria]

ITA 1: 20% experience before Covid-19, teaching marketing via WebEx

ITA 2: business trainings in the field of consultancy via Teams and Skype as an external lecturer

ITA 3: 15% to 20% experience in online teaching

ITA 4: 20% to 30% experience in synchronous and asynchronous online teaching

ITA 5: 20% experience in online teaching

ITA 6: 30% experience in online teaching

ITA 7: experience in online teaching, both from a perspective as a student and a lecturer

## Question 2: Was it more time consuming to prepare for online teaching?

**Interactivity and feedback.** It turned out that it was challenging to engage the students to motivate them, ITA 6 stated that online teaching was much more time-consuming as she had to readjust the classes to make them work. Moreover, it was hard to engage students as they did not talk in the online classes and the teacher could not see the interaction between them. ITA 7 remarked that this depended on the course which had been taught. It was easier to give lectures than teaching languages - as both sides, teachers and students, did not know how to interact at the start of online teaching. ITA 1 referred to this no-interaction with students. She remarked that she acted as an entertainer, staging the lecture, by requesting students to give feedback and to share experiences, so to say, to express emotions. This was a game changer to her.

**Emotions and energy.** Hence, how to deal with low energy and how to manage emotions was a current topic in the focus group; both for students and lecturers after having taught or listened a long time online. ITA 3 argued that it was not more time-consuming and that it was easier to work in groups because the breakout rooms were created by the system randomly. But she as well stated that after the lectures she had been exhausted as she gave all her energy, but the students did not. As interactivity and the perception of emotions were missing, she got no energy back and was unsure about her role as an online lecturer. For keeping up the energy it was especially important to apply new tools and to stimulate discussion, group work and community building online. ITA 2 remarked that he invented students for tutorials online on a voluntary basis and this gave him a lot of energy back. ITA 5 mentioned that sometimes she got the impression that negative feelings from students (for diverse reasons) were transferred to the lecturers as during Covid-19 the margins between professional and private life merged.

**Technical issues.** Technical problems which arose at the beginning of the process also were an issue. Lecturers themselves had to learn a lot and were “2 days” ahead of the students. Hence, it had been a learning process for both groups, lecturers and students. Teachers experienced their helplessness related to technical problems – especially in Moodle tests. ITA 1 stated that technical issues were, at the start, the most challenging part, not knowing how to help students, which was confirmed by ITA 5, arguing that the management of all technical tools was hard at the beginning. ITA 4 struggled with the breakout sessions in the tool WebEx at the beginning. ITA 2 remarked that it was a permanent learning process, especially regarding Moodle and how to integrate these functions into the blended learning approach.

## Question 3: Which tools/techniques did you apply in your teaching, and did you change your teaching style?

**Interactive tools and exercises.** Case studies, quizzes, games, learning apps were applied but were not perceived as being that different from on-campus teaching (gamification of the teaching process already existed before). ITA 2 worked with tutorials on a voluntary basis and case studies to engage the students by applying interactive technical tools like Mentimeter or Padlet. ITA 7 adopted a 3-minute Moodle quiz at the start of each lecture as a

kind of language assessment for English to demonstrate the students their level of knowledge avoiding discussions on their language skills. It also motivated students to be prepared for the lectures, “because for a while I had the impression they came to their online classes and they switched on the computer, but not their brains.” ITA 5 said that she did a similar check at the end of the lectures (law subject). Students had to read a text and solve a task which related the topic of the lecture to the real world. There was a possibility for discussion in the next lecture which made the students engaged. ITA 6 mentioned that her online teaching was not so much different from her physical classroom teaching, so it was hard for her to develop new ways or keep the level of interactivity as high as in the physical classroom. Team building turned out to be a crucial issue - some teachers used WhatsApp groups to get in closer contact (ITA 1 and ITA 7). But as well privacy issues were mentioned here and the need for clear boundaries – otherwise students call teachers on private phones within their leisure time (ITA 5).

**Moodle tests.** ITA 5 brought up the topic of the Moodle tests; in law subjects the results were almost the same, online or on-site. But she perceived it as unfair that the questions online were the same to all students. On the contrary, in English language instruction ITA 6 had to create many questions to make sure that students did not get the same questions. Moreover, the tests caused frustration on both sides when they did not work well due to technical or application issues. ITA 6 got very emotional on that: “Panic, panic, panic!”

**Cheating.** Cheating was an important topic as well. Either the teachers “agreed” on the cheating – when students were “learning by cheating” or they used examination formats that did not focus on Moodle tests at all. ITA 3 argued that she did not pay that much attention to cheating, presuming that the students will learn from organizing their cheating, and used oral examination formats of 20 minutes as well. She argued that she applied personal interrogations for an exam to avoid cheating. It was important to get a personal impression online from the students. ITA 4 remarked that it was hard to prepare good multiple-choice tests and students asked if it was an open book test when coming back at the university after Covid-19 again. ITA 6 had the same experience. By the time, students have become accustomed to applying materials for an exam and were apparently astonished that they were not allowed to after Covid-19.

**Videos.** Teachers perceived videos as an extremely useful teaching instrument for online teaching and teaching on demand. ITA 1 recorded videos (on statistical methods) for the students, so they could work on the tasks by watching the videos at their own pace and addressing questions to the lecturer. She also created groups via WhatsApp for a more equal communication basis. ITA 3 took on the video topic. She mentioned that she recorded presentational videos for her students to introduce herself and to establish personal relations. ITA 7 highlighted the potential of videos, especially, when the students had to produce them for presentational reasons. She stated that this unlocked the creative potential and that students were engaged in the creation of videos as they knew that they were semi-public and could have been watched repeatedly.

#### **Question 4: How did/do you like the online/blended teaching regarding weaknesses, threats, positive and negative emotions?**

**Technical pitfalls.** Frustration was evident when technical problems arose. ITA 1 mentioned that she got very frustrated by technical pitfalls and that she felt powerless. It was essential for her to clarify the technical responsibilities on the teacher's and the student's side: "The universe just changed again to frustration if someone didn't take the responsibility for their communication." When working with Moodle tests, teachers did not see themselves in the role of a technical supporter – they could not help students and felt powerless. Moreover, some students used technical devices that were not supported by the university's technical system. If they did not pass an exam, they might have blamed the teacher who was not responsible for this situation. Teachers were declared scapegoats – a role they did not want to take on. For ITA 6 the exam situation was "super stressful" when pitfalls happened because it meant extra work to create tests for those students who could not open a listening file, for instance. Moreover, this situation was not perceived as fair in comparison to paper-pencil tests.

**Interactivity.** ITA 7 brought up the topic that students did not speak in online lectures and did not ask questions, neither to the teacher nor to themselves. As they experienced the negative impact of no feedback from their peers after a presentation, this changed over time. She pushed students to give each other feedback and to interact. Students became "much humbler over the course of these experiences and less critical of the lecturers when stuff doesn't always work." The students experienced how a lecturer felt when the group was silent, and this was an important insight for them. ITA 3 remarked that – regarding the emotional aspect – external lecturers from businesses stopped their teaching because they liked to meet people for networking reasons and hiring opportunities. They wanted to get "rewarded" for their efforts and in online teaching it was too much work for them and too less feedback, e.g. designing Moodle tests could not be required of them.

**Teamwork.** Community building turned out to be very essential as students did not know each other, especially part-time students needed to get in contact and being engaged for the teaching success. ITA 5 stated that it was a relief for this student group as they were able to finish their studies. On the negative side, she recognized that some students did not show solidarity toward their peers. Group work was missing, and energy declined. ITA 6 confirmed this experience; part time students did not feel connected to the academic community, they only wanted to finish their studies during the pandemic. ITA 2 added that it was as well a problem with full time students who did not know each other and did not create a community. It was essential for teachers to bring students together in a group, e.g., in a presentation where everyone had to present a topic. ITA 4 suggested virtual coffee breaks that students could get to know each other, ITA 1 argued for a buddy system as a solution for creating teams. Teachers at the beginning underestimated the need for breaks (ITA 7) as they supposed students could manage their individual breaks online. But it turned out to be essential together with virtual coffee breaks which brought students together.

## **Question 5: Coming back to campus – which experiences should stay after Covid-19?**

**Theater, TV and Netflix.** ITA 3 compared the diverse study formats with audiovisual media. On-campus studies would resemble a theater, online teaching is like a TV program (which is consumed) and online on demand is Netflix. She insisted that the future of teaching and learning will be online and on demand to attract students while the “theater” will die.

**Online or on-campus?** For ITA 3, it will be difficult to convince students to come to Eisenstadt after Covid-19. ITA 5 argued that the UASB had always been in competition with universities and even if there is no compulsory attendance there, universities have the same problem to attract students. ITA 3 and ITA 6 stated that the students did not want to return to campus because they had to commute and got used to the complacency of working from home and attending online tests only. ITA 2 added that it had been a convenience for students during the pandemic to work and study from home and coming back on campus would need an attractive program. In contrast, ITA 3 did not see the necessity of improving the teaching performance on-campus. It rather depends on the type of exercises - some can stay online as the experience online was not “that bad”. ITA 4 argued that she is not sure of having 100% online programs in her study degree program in future.

**Entertainment or learning experience?** ITA 1 suggested hybrid solutions to combine the best of the two worlds and to give students the possibility to socialize. She argued that students could come to campus when they like, which was contradicted by ITA 7. She found that too entertaining by arguing that it is a qualification UASB provides, and one must decide if he or she takes on the role as a customer or student. It makes a difference if a person is attending an online course (tons of MOOCs) or takes a conscious decision to engage in a study program. It is important to realize the benefits of a blended learning format then. It is a matter of the course type, the group size, the tasks, the different kind of learning methods, the learning purpose and the topic – some courses can be taught online easily, others live from interactivity on campus. ITA 7 drew a clear distinction between “mastering a content and actually having a learning experience” – as *social learning* is still essential. ITA 6 added that low level students can be better addressed in on-campus lectures; online they tend to hide themselves.

## **Question 6: Which methods and tools would you like to apply from this experience after COVID?**

The answers regarding the future methods and tools were widespread. ITA 3 once again referred to the “theatre, TV and Netflix” metaphor and argued that the theater is an old-fashioned community and 80% will disappear for this reason (except Oxford and Cambridge with nice facilities and great networking opportunities). ITA 2 asked for the possibility of hybrid lectures which was denied by ITA 3 who argued that it would be better to record the lecture for providing it on demand (Netflix); and ITA 7 argued that this form is extremely unfair due to the different attention span on-campus and online. Taking on this argument, ITA 5 declared that the hours of teaching will change as students are not willing to listen for

90 minutes in future, but for 15 minutes by watching a video, for instance. Videos will be essential for rewatching and using them on demand which will be the main development in future. ITA 7 also remarked that the type of task is essential, having different teaching methodologies at hand. This increases the quality of a study program. For her, self-recorded videos are an essential tool here as students put more effort in creating them, but face-to-face can help students to overcome stage fright. It really depends. ITA 4 decided for working only with small groups in online classes and giving coaching lessons. To conclude, ITA 2 assumed that regular study programs might be online while the excellent ones will be on-campus again, due to the importance of social learning and acquiring skills, not only contents. Motto: **Be excellent – come back to campus!**