

## **Introduction**

Ten business students with work experience from the Department of Business Studies took part in the 90-minute focus group in Eisenstadt on 21 June 2023. 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: In which field do/did you work / do you have work experience?**

Six students (ISA 1, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10) were at the end of their studies in semester 6 within the BA “International Business Relations” with work experience due to their compulsory work placement in semester 5, four students from Georgia (Ilia State University Tiflis, ISA 2, 3, 4, 5) attended the Double Degree program within the MA “International Business Relations” with study and work experience in their home country. The range of work covered tourism and catering (ISA 1, 6, 8), accounting and customer service (ISA 2), general management (ISA 3 and 4), telecommunication and IT (ISA 5), medical services (ISA 7) and work in procurement departments (ISA 9 and 10). [ISA: interviewed student Austria]

- ISA 1: student from Austria, working in business development (promotion, catering).
- ISA 2: student from Georgia, working in the field of accounting and customer service.
- ISA 3: student from Georgia, work experience mostly connected with the Master studies.
- ISA 4: student from Georgia, work experience mostly connected with the Master studies.
- ISA 5: student from Georgia, work experience in banking industry and telecommunications
- ISA 6: student from Austria, working in the tourism industry within an internship in Croatia; at the reception/front desk, and before working in several restaurants as a waitress.
- ISA 7: student from Austria, work experience at the end of the pandemic in HR in an oncological rehabilitation site
- ISA 8: student from Austria, work experience in the field of tourism
- ISA 9: student from Austria, working in a Hotel in Upper Austria in the procurement. department, now working within a marketing department.
- ISA 10: student from Austria with work experience in automobile industry for six months (internship) in the procurement department.

## **Question 1: Do you feel satisfied with the quality of education delivered online regarding your professional knowledge?**

**Perceptions of online learning were different.** Most of the students, but not all, especially those from Georgia, did not feel that satisfied with online learning. All students agreed that they missed out the comparison with on-campus studies, so they could not evaluate the quality of the education they received online. ISA 8 argued that students started their education in 2020 and so they could not estimate the quality of professional knowledge in comparison to face-to-face instruction. But she felt satisfied with the contents delivered by the teachers. ISA 10 stated that he did not feel more advanced in his studies due to online teaching. Although there had been improvements, teachers could have done better in this regard. On the contrary, for ISA 5 it was more convenient to learn online as he remarked that from online session to session the teachers tried out new approaches which he liked a lot.

**Online learning depends on the topic.** All students agreed that the success of online learning strongly depended on the topic of a subject (some topics require face-to-face teaching and learning). ISA 3 argued that “there should be some specific subjects (...) especially face to face rather than online because you can understand them better there”. ISA 7 remarked that the pandemic situation had been very spontaneous, so it was hard to teach some topics online, like language or communication skills. She stated that with the experience in online instruction, both sides, students and teachers, improved.

**Online learning lacks interaction.** All students stated that online learning was hard at the beginning; even when working in breakout rooms. It was also difficult to address or contact people during the pandemic, so interaction was missing. ISA 6 remarked that some teachers did not know how to handle the situation so there was silence in the breakout rooms then. ISA 4 supported this argument; although the internet offers flexible opportunities for learning, it was hard during the pandemic to contact people and to communicate face-to-face. ISA 9 stated that she felt well prepared for the job because she acquired communication skills in the job and before, not in her studies. ISA 3 argued that she was not satisfied as online learning is not her preferred learning style which is to interact with the classmates. Especially concentration was hard at the beginning but by the time she got used to the online learning environment.

## **Question 2: Do you have the impression that you were better /worse / equally prepared for your professional career due to online learning?**

**Equally prepared.** Regarding the preparation for work, the answers were quite multifaceted. ISA 10 mentioned that the studies, whether online or on campus, did not help him for his work experience and that he had to learn everything by himself because it depends on the company's structure. As well for ISA 8 there had been no difference regarding her preparation for work, “because I didn't have enough or a lot to do with online meetings or something else because I was always having contact with the guests. And that was it. And I had experience before in tourism. So, for me it was no difference.” ISA 7, working in HR and recruiting, took on the same approach. She did not lack skills due to the online sessions as she always had been in contact with people – “because my work placement was so heavily

based on speaking and interacting with different kinds of people, and I feel like that studying online didn't benefit this kind of soft skills.”

**Pros and cons.** Other students argued that the socializing aspects regarding the soft skills and language proficiency were missing due to online learning. In business, one needs interaction, teamwork, language and soft skills which should have been delivered face-to-face. ISA 7 remarked that she would have profited more from on-campus teaching regarding the communication skills. Some projects and courses needed to be in person. ISA 6 highlighted that she already had experience in online meetings, so she felt quite well prepared by using this technology but when it came to language learning she stated that this was quite difficult. ISA 4 argued that online learning had a positive effect on her work as she had been challenged by that; on the other hand, learning was not effective due to low concentration. ISA 1 argued that there were advantages as well as disadvantages. The advantages covered the technological and problem-solving skills gained, the disadvantages were the missing soft skills and how to connect with a group.

**Less prepared.** Moreover, the problems of concentrating on a topic, and easy cheating had been mentioned as well. The students considered that this problem not only derived from the teacher's ability of how to motivate students online but was connected to their own attitude towards online learning. ISA 3 felt disqualified for her work as she had the possibility for cheating which meant not being forced to learn the contents of a subject. She missed out the discussions and group work and could not concentrate in online lectures that intensively. She as well criticized that there had been a one-sided delivery of knowledge only (from the lecturer “down” to the student) and a possibility for easy cheating. ISA 2 supported ISA 3 as teamwork and mutual exchange on-campus are very important for learning and breakout rooms do not prepare for work at all by missing the “real experience”. “Face to face learning is better and I would say I feel less qualified in that case as well” (ISA 2). ISA 5 argued that he felt the pressure to adapt to the new situation and to intensify his efforts - as cheating was very easy.

### **Question 3: Do you miss out skills and competencies due to online learning that would have been useful at the workplace?**

**Communication skills and positioning within a group.** ISA 1 missed out communication skills, especially, how to know your position in a group and to strive for a common goal. ISA 10 confirmed this statement, especially by highlighting that *online* teaching and learning cannot prepare for work and positioning oneself in a team would have been much easier when involved in discussions face-to-face. On-campus teaching would have been better in this regard, incorporating body language. ISA 3 agreed with ISA 1 regarding the positioning within a group which is essential at the workplace. She argued that teamwork skills were missing, as well as the delivery/implementation of knowledge at work. ISA 2 as well missed out group work and communication with people. ISA 4 confirmed that communication had been very difficult while attending the online lectures. There was no possibility to get to know people – at least she contacted 20 people during the two online years.

**Self-responsibility and accountability.** ISA 2 focused on the self-responsibility for adapting to the new situation: “So studying like getting online knowledge at the university is never enough at least you still need to practice, doesn't matter if you are doing it online or offline.” ISA 5 mentioned that it depended on the character of the student how s/he was able to adapt to the new situation and to focus on the learning. Everyone had to find his own approach in this regard. ISA 7 argued that in online teaching she faced a lack of reality. You created your own personal space and if you felt uncomfortable, you could have turned off the video and micro. “Maybe we also lack some sense of accountability for some things” - an argument which was already mentioned by ISA 2 and ISA 5. ISA 3 confirmed the fact that during online learning she missed out the skill of being pushed and to stand in for own ideas which is essential at the workplace. ISA 1 confirmed these statements and argued that it was hard to push oneself due to the lack of self-responsibility. But on the contrary, in a group on-campus “you don't want to be the only loser” if you do not pass an exam. In online teaching, no one cares, but motivation and passion are essential for the studies.

**Applying knowledge and communication skills.** Regarding the knowledge acquisition, students stated that they had difficulties to transfer the knowledge delivered into “something useful” as they did not experience in a sensorial way how to apply this knowledge in practice and to the real world. Students said that it had been easy to “betray oneself” in online learning and regarding others, it would have been necessary to learn how to confront them, how to argue and how to persuade them – essential skills for the business world and for competitive reasons. One essential criterion for this was the gap between listening to the teacher and applying this knowledge in practice due to missed teamwork (including argumentation, feedback...). ISA 8 added that presentation skills lacked but it is a crucial skill at the workplace to know how to deal with angry clients or complaints - and vice versa - not to become upset and angry oneself (ISA 9). There was a lack of communication strategies how to “fight through” such kind of situations. ISA 2 agreed with ISA 8, as one was not learning online how to deal with people as you could turn off the camera online, not receiving feedback from the others. Coping strategies of no involvement were performed in uncomfortable situations.

Regarding the topic of missed competencies and skills the students strongly agreed that interactive group work and discussions could not be substituted by online learning. All skills and competencies related to communication lacked for several reasons.

- 1.) You did not know your own position within a group.
- 2.) You were not able to evaluate/assess the reactions of others (interpretation of body language and facial expressions were missing)
- 3.) All sensorial parts of a conversation were missing (“connection” was missing)
- 4.) You did not acquire presentation and feedback skills for the real world.
- 5.) Skills of being persuasive and influencing others could not have been delivered online.
- 6.) Students could not develop skills how to argue with other people, especially in demanding situations, but they are very essential at work (“I can turn off the micro, but I cannot turn off a dissatisfied client – how should I know the appropriate reaction on my side?”).
- 7.) Students missed out role plays and training on those issues during the pandemic.

#### **Question 4: Did you acquire skills and competencies due to online learning that are of great use at your workplace - and would not have been developed without the COVID-19 experience?**

Regarding the skills and competences that had been acquired during the pandemic for work, students mentioned the three main topics of organizational skills, time management and computer skills.

**Organizational skills.** ISA 6 perceived on the positive side that she learned how to work under stress (“last minute”). This was confirmed by ISA 1 who added that he learned how to get things done fast and to escape problems easily. ISA 2 mentioned that she gained patience by working online in connection with flexibility and adaptability. ISA 6 stated that she learned to rely on herself and to organize her learning.

**Time management.** ISA 3 argued that she improved in time management and adaptability. ISA 5 as well highlighted time management and planning for improvement. Studying from home meant planning the schedule and the deadlines for the tasks very accurately. ISA 6 referred to the time management as well. She stated that she even worked more from home to maximize things.

**Computer skills.** The improvement in computer skills were a critical issue as well for ISA 3. ISA 10 mentioned the technical tools like WebEx and Microsoft Teams. ISA 6 improved in technical skills, like ISA 3 and 10, and in office applications. ISA 10 mentioned as a positive effect that he succeeded in graduating as the exams were half the usual time. In sum, the students stated that they had

- 1.) to organize themselves, not relying on someone else to help
- 2.) to learn how to work under stress
- 3.) to get things done fast and in the easiest way
- 4.) to escape problems fast
- 5.) to develop patience when working from home
- 6.) to be flexible by doing “useful” work from home
- 7.) to adapt quickly, especially regarding the technical skills

#### **Question 5: Does / Did the company you work for take/s into account your online learning experiences? In which way?**

**“You did not really study”.** As a general result students mentioned that the companies did not consider the online experience, rather on the contrary. ISA 6 mentioned that online education was never a topic at her workplace in Croatia as she was not sure if there had been online studies in Croatia as well. ISA 3 agreed to this. ISA 7 stated that in her company she had been even graded down as online studies were not perceived as full studies there. The company gave her the feedback that it “doesn't mean anything what you have done in the last years”, which seemed to her even “crazy” as the studies online were much more difficult. ISA 6 expanded this regarding the Matura. She had been confronted with statements like “You didn't make the real Matura because you were a covid child”, which

caused discomfort at her workplace between her and the manager who belittled her education. ISA 1 mentioned that even lecturers were critical towards students after the pandemic as they were “the Covid class”.

**“Make use of your online experience”** ISA 1 agreed with these experiences that the companies did not consider the online experience, on the contrary, they expected from the future employees to be able to deal with online and technical issues which turned from an add-on into an expectation. Students stated that it was harder to work after the pandemic as they were expected to know how to work online (technical skills are appreciated by the companies), how to plan and maximize things, being time efficient. So, the companies gave the impression that on the one hand online studies did not count that much and on the other hand expecting students to profit from this experience at work (time management, planning, technical skills, organizational management). As it is necessary to work online now, one should know how to use the tools. ISA 6 mentioned that companies have many standards towards the future employees, and she argued that it depended on the manager – one was putting her down while another was showing respect for her online skills.

**Formal education or work experience?** ISA 2 argued that in Georgia companies are not interested if one is good at IT skills acquired during Covid-19 or if someone has experience with online learning. ISA 5 confirmed this statement by mentioning that the companies in Georgia do not value academic titles but the full experience of their employees. ISA 7 stated that in Austria, still, academic titles are especially important and the more titles you hold the better it is. ISA 8 added that in very practical business fields not only formal education may be valued but as well work experiences.

### **Question 6: Due to your online experience, which suggestions and recommendations would you like to pass on to the next students, to teachers and universities?**

ISA 1: Normalizing hybrid lessons, but not letting go off the connection to other people: “So I feel like the hybrid concept is the best thing a university can do to exploit both ways.”

ISA 2: Nothing is for free in life, so turn on your camera. Don't cheat that much.

ISA 3: Speak up, speak louder, be competitive and express your ideas.

ISA 6: Stay connected. Try to communicate, even if everything is just online.

Try to discuss with colleagues and share your opinions or share your experiences or your feelings about certain topics or lectures or the exams.

ISA 7: Pull your stuff together in work and in studies, like you would really go to class, wearing something appropriate.

ISA 8: Don't forget to socialize and speak up in the online lessons!

ISA 9: Pay attention and do not procrastinate.

ISA 10: Find your personal motivation to get your work done.