

Introduction

A focus group with 10 academic members from the UKLO - Faculty of tourism and hospitality in Ohrid was conducted on September 29nd, 2022. The participants were from different fields of teaching: business communication, German language, English language, marketing, travel agencies, banking and insurance, law in tourism, in hospitality and in insurance, risk management, gastronomy, tourism geography, international transport and logistics. Following the structure of the prepared groups of questions for discussion (start, interim, end), two moderators (one from UKLO and one from UAS Burgenland) guided the discussion with the focus group in relation to the defined main aim of the project' research to determine the effects of the implementation of BL in the process of teaching and learning during and after Covid-19 pandemic. One researcher from UKLO observed the discussion to document the emotional reactions of the participants to different topics. Each of the participants was active during the work and contributed with their experience, challenges and obstacles they faced.

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

After the introduction with presentation of the field of teaching, the discussion began about **the experience of the online teaching before and during Covid-19**. *Only two teachers had experience with online teaching before Covid-19 but not synchronous*. It was an experience with Google Classroom and some assignments online and the problem was the action-oriented approach and the methods to do it online and to find appropriate approach (ITM2-Interviewed Professor Macedonia). Also, Facebook was used as a communication platform with students through closed groups for group discussions, exchange questions about the subjects, providing additional materials about the subjects that enabled better communication with students (ITM10).

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

All agreed that *online teaching was a challenge and they needed time to adjust to the new format of teaching as same as the students did*. It was a challenge for everyone, not only for

elderly, experienced professionals in teaching, but also for young teaching staff (ITM3) how to engage and motivate students to be active on classes.

As for **managing to maintain the quality of online teaching and the specifics of subjects when teaching blended or online**, for some (ITM1), **online teaching has two main issues: technological preparation of the professors (how to use the tools for online teaching to have good feedback from students) and how to animate students to be attentive and active in class.** Some of the colleagues (ITM5) were practicing between each other: “Can you see me, can you hear me, where is switch off on the camera?” They *did not feel comfortable because they didn’t have experience with online classes and weren’t prepared with knowledge how to deliver them the best, and to convert the didactics into the technique.* Some problems occurred with practical learning in laboratories (particularly for subjects taught on Gastronomy study program). And maybe in the future it should be considered as an option to deliver hybrid format of teaching when there are some situations the students can’t be physically present on campus.

According to ITM6 Covid-19 has facilitated and increased the use of online teaching and it should be considered as good opportunity to communicate with students in the future, particularly having in mind the possibilities for them to reduce living expenses for those who are from other places or areas. He has valuable experience with online teaching and found that the results are like onsite learning. Problems might occur with practical learning in laboratories. And maybe in the future it should be considered as an option to deliver hybrid format of teaching when there are some situations the students cannot be physically present on campus.

After a relatively brief period (most of ITM’s needed approximately two weeks to adjust to the new tools for online teaching) **teachers get used to online teaching and some because to specifics of classes to blended teaching.** There were no difficulties for delivering the content during online classes, but the main problem compared to on site teaching was the inability to monitor what the students are doing, i.e. how careful they are, what is the level of attention when following the teaching (ITM7; ITM9), what is their reaction to some parts of the lectures, or their body language (ITM4). That kind of communication was missing, and *it was a challenge to maintain the quality during online teaching.*

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

Most of the professors applied similar interactive tools and exercises to those applied before Covid19 (case studies, problem solving, group discussions, quiz, videos). But it was easier to communicate and monitor students in smaller groups during online classes, because sometimes

there was connection problem with bigger groups (over 40 participants) when a teacher asks to turn cameras on. On other side, participants discussed (ITM1; ITM4; ITM7; ITM8; ITM9; ITM10) that the application of tools and technics within online classes differed, and it depended not only on the size of the group, but more on the courses and the specifics of the subjects when teaching blended or online. ITM7 stated that because she did not have idea who is listening to the lectures she gave online, she asked questions more frequently with intention to ensure they follow the teaching. At the beginning they were not so comfortable to speak online but in time it has been changed. She also implemented more group discussion that led to better interaction between students although they were online and some of them did not know each other. Although many of the teachers did not have previous knowledge or training how to organize online classes, from technical view, they are satisfied with the outcomes (ITM2). For some, online teaching is very difficult for delivering courses with specific study program, as Gastronomy, because such courses demand the students to use all their sensors for which it is very difficult to do it (ITM8). There is very small opportunity, and it is very difficult to do it online, and the teaching can go simultaneously only if each student has an appropriately equipped kitchenette. For others who teach foreign languages (ITM2; ITM3) presentations, quizzes, dialogues and group discussions were very helpful tools to gain knowledge.

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

Teachers observed the **reaction of the students how they perceive online teaching compared to face to face teaching** in different ways (ITM1-online questionnaires; ITM2 – online questionnaires; ITM3 – online discussion ; ITM5 - online and onsite questionnaires; ITM6 - online discussion; ITM8 - online and onsite discussion; ITM10 - online and onsite discussion) and they found the following:

- the concentration was lower because of the lack of face-to-face interaction on site, both with teachers and colleagues.
- active engagement in class and collaborative planning should be more implemented, and most of the students identified that lack of interaction with peers, lack of active class engagement and collaborative learning were important aspects to consider.
- those who did not have experience with on-site teaching at the faculty prefer remote blended learning.
- those students who experienced onsite and online teaching (mostly at 4-th year of study) shared that on site lectures and the knowledge they were gaining were more inspirational and more better for them, and If they had a chance to choose between online or on site

they prefer physical presence in classes due to communication with colleagues and socialization.

- more convenient for adjusting other obligations with classes.

Participants have agreed that there are **no huge differences regarding the part-time and full-time students in perceiving the online teaching**. Online teaching was very useful for the current situation because they were able to continue with their education during the pandemic and it should be considered as option after Covid-19 because it's more convenient particularly for those who work or live in other cities than Ohrid (economic aspects).

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

The situation that made the teachers turn to new learning techniques for the online classes, and use of different platforms and communicational audio-visual tools, contributed to broadening their knowledge in the use of such aids for classes. This, on the other hand, contributed to the improvement of the quality of teaching and transferring knowledge to students. Although most of the participants argued that physical presence has more positive aspects than online teaching (ITM5; ITM2; ITM1; ITM8), yet they agreed that a hybrid way of teaching should be considered for the future. On site teaching with the use of the technology and technological achievements can really enhance the quality of teaching. According to ITM6 and ITM7 it is opportunity for the University to increase the number of foreign students and engaging more professors from other universities to give lectures and vice versa. Also using the technology to do simultaneously teaching in real time with teachers and students from different Universities and different countries is another excellent option to increase the quality of teaching and learning (ITM8) in the future.

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

The integration of all the opportunities that were used during the Covid 19 crisis allowed students and teachers to be in constant communication. Such practice is continuing even after Covid 19 because it proved to be more effective. Teachers must adjust to the new era with all the inventions in education and new generation of students that are much more digitally

educated (ITM2; ITM6). In this situation teachers were motivators for students particularly during the outbreak of the pandemic when they were trying to set up the “new normal” learning environment for students. Although it was a strange situation it was also an opportunity, task and obligation to continue with such situation (ITM6). Use of electronic devices or platforms in teaching such as social media, multimedia or even mobile phones has been proved as very helpful tools. ITM8 stated that technology can enrich certain points such as easier way to invite colleagues from other universities from abroad to give lectures to the students. Students can follow other classes and they can follow other students from abroad which is opportunity for networking. ITM5 explained that the increased experience in using digital tools helped in explaining of concepts, providing examples, case studies, stimulating curiosity and motivating students to more active participation in classes. All participants agreed that their positive experience and improved knowledge of using such tools not only helped but it will help in the future as well in creating engaging contents for the students by using videos, podcasts, animations, games, quizzes and interactive presentations.