

Introduction

As part of the second focus group with business students at UKLO -Faculty of tourism and hospitality in Ohrid the discussion was conducted on September 28, 2023. Students were highly active during the discussion contributing with their experience both from the classes and work. The discussion with the student focus group was guided by two moderators (one from UKLO and one from UAS Burgenland), and additionally one moderator from UKLO observed the emotional reactions of the participants to different topics. In the introductory part students were informed about the main aim of the project' research and its activities for determining the effects of the implementation of BL in the process of teaching and learning during and after Covid-19 pandemic

Question 1: In which fields do/did you work / do you have working experience?

This was the introductory question for the participants. All six students in the third and fourth year of their studies in the field of tourism, gastronomy, and management in service sector presented themselves:

- three BA students from "Management in service sector" program were on their last year (7th semester),
- two BA students from "Gastronomy" program (one in the 5th and one in the 7th semester), and
- one MA student from "Tourism" program in the 9th semester.

Their working fields mainly cover the service sector, hotel management, services in restaurants as a waiter/waitress, and work placement in a factory for bakeries and pastries. All students were from Macedonia.

Question 2: Do you feel satisfied with the quality of education delivered online regarding your professional knowledge?

Consequently, the satisfaction with the quality of education delivered online in regard to the professional knowledge was the next question to start the discussion. *Most of them expressed satisfaction from the quality of the online education during Covid-19.* The online teaching was prepared with additional internet resources and social media, but *the quality depended on the preparation of professors for online lectures* (ISM2; ISM5 (ISM-Interviewed Student Macedonia)). The possibility to explore more on internet (ISM2) was identified as positive thing. Although the approach was different, the quality of *delivered content was very good, but it was mentioned that as well the subject is decisive – when you have to see, to touch, to cook, it is difficult to do so online* (ISM3). IPM4 found that *the concentration to follow the classes was low when being online because of distraction with the same time use of media or mobile phone.* In addition to this ISM1 discussed that it was difficult to follow all the time the classes because sometimes there was no interaction between professor and students. It was brought up as an aspect of reduced concentration in learning by ISM5. But there was *disagreement on whether online learning is a profit for shy people (ISM5) or not (ISM1).* The argue was about the aspect of being socialized, get in touch with the clients and customers, talk to them and interpret their feelings. As ISM6 stated: *online teaching has good sides and bad sides, but the physical presence on classes is better. All students agreed that when it comes to communication and socializing aspects - which are dominant in the service sector - on-campus teaching is more effective.* These skills are difficult to acquire online although students needed to talk during online teaching as well (ISM2).

Question 3: Do you have the impression that you were better /worse / equally prepared for your professional career due to online learning?

Compared to on site, online teaching didn't affect a lot the learning process because *the quality of the preparation for future professional career due to online learning depends on the student. It was mainly defined as equally or worse experience,* apart from one (ISM5) that was defined as better because of improved technical skills as an advantage for future professional career. Those who felt that are equally prepared (ISM1; ISM2; ISM3) argued that *it depends on the subject, on one side, and on the professors and the students on other side, because they are together involved in a process of teaching and learning* (ISM2). Those who felt worse prepared (ISM4, ISM6) stated that the grades had not been "fair" due to the possibility of cheating and the difficulty to concentrate.

As missing part of teaching online was emotional learning from professors (ISM1) and the missing socializing aspects (ISM6).

Question 4: Do you miss out skills and competencies due to online learning that would have been useful at the workplace?

Discussion was continued about missing out the skills and competencies due to online learning that would have been useful at the workplace. **Students agreed that online classes have shortened opportunities to communication.** The main feeling was that *they didn't have possibilities to communicate in person* with different characters of people (ISM3) particularly having in mind that they are all students in service sector where being in person to person situation and talk to people, or dealing with different topics and to adjust to certain needs are very crucial.

It was mentioned again that *the socializing and teambuilding aspects were missing during the online learning* (ISM1; ISM4; ISM5). And after coming back to onsite classes, students did not know each other, and they needed time to reconnect again. They all agreed and identified that due to online learning and the low level of communication during the online period of learning they need to “upgrade” their communication skills after Covid-19 was necessary (ISM2; ISM6).

Question 5: Did you acquire skills and competencies due to online learning that are of significant use at your workplace - and would not have been developed without the COVID-19 experience?

When discussing about skills **and competences that had been acquired during the pandemic for work**, *students stated that they developed some which would not have been developed without the Covid-19 experience.* As one of the participants said: “It was a plus for students that were not familiar with I-tech because they have achieved better software and presentation skills” (ISM1).

Regarding the skills and competences that had been acquired during the pandemic, students stated that they had:

- to acquire computer/software skills (“You can learn everything from the internet”)
- apply tricks for solving (technical) problems
- to get used to digital learning
- to develop a mindset of permanent learning
- to apply a better time management
- to develop self-competence
- to prepare themselves for online learning (through social media and tutorial videos)

Question 6: Does / did the company you work for take/s into account your online learning experiences? In which way?

The students' views if **the company where they work for has considered their online learning experiences** depended on their workplace and work experience. As it was mentioned by ISM5 who has a work experience in the bakery industry it is important that all employees should be on the same level of digital knowledge, so a balancing is necessary. The *“new shift” to digitalization is serious challenge for the employees, especially for older who do not have online skills* and more people like to work from home. *But, as ISM1 stated: online teaching in this regard had not been satisfactory for improving managerial skills because they cannot be achieved online through online communication.* She felt that she had no experience in giving feedback to clients, convincing people or even having small talk with them.

For other businesses, as restaurants (ISM3) or hotels (ISM2), where the socializing aspect and face to face communication with clients is the most important to see the reactions of people as they are in the center of the service sector, online learning experience is not so relevant. Online teaching in this regard had not been always satisfactory as one of the students stated (ISM1) because she did not improve that much in managerial skills. She felt that she had no experience in giving feedback to clients, convincing people or even having small talk with them.

But it is relevant for the business communication because online communication and digitalization are more commonly used by employees and business partners in everyday communication. This argument had been confirmed by another student (ISM4) who mentioned that digitalization is a plus for future jobs (working with booking platforms, e.g.) and as well good for work-life balance. Online experience and digital knowledge prepared people to adjust if something similar like Covid-19 will happen in future.

Question 7: Due to your online experience, which suggestions and recommendations would you like to pass on to the next students, to teachers and universities?

Regarding the **suggestions and recommendations that students would you like to pass on to the next students, teachers or universities from their online learning experience** argues were mostly about the improvement of working environments, business, and teaching:

- Digital tools are confirmed as good tools for improving the working environment (ISM4) and to adjust to a new work environment (ISM6).
- Using platforms with data and information related to the work are identified as useful for enabling better time management (ISM2).
- Differences in the level of digital knowledge between employees from younger and older generation should be considered because it is reflecting to the efficiency of the working operations.

- Generational exchange of knowledge should be considered as opportunity that will be a benefit for improved working environment (ISM5).