

# ASSESSING DISTANCE EDUCATION AND ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

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In the current situation of a global Covid epidemic, many universities have either completely or partially switched to distance education. Most universities in Bulgaria have now spent a total of 9 months (three in summer 2020, three in winter 2020, three in summer 2021 and counting) in distance education classes. Under the terms of distance education, regular scheduled classes and regular scheduled examinations were adapted to take place online. After an initial adaptation period (during which instructors chose their own means of conducting online education) at the author's affiliated university, a centralized online platform (Blackboard) was set up for those instructors who wished to use it; instructors were still free in their choice of online platform as the use of Blackboard is not mandatory. After the first lockdown, both students and instructors seemed to have settled in a routine.

It was the perfect situation (the pandemic notwithstanding) to finally rush higher education in Bulgaria into the post-digital age (after Negroponte, 1998): after all, troves of Google Gen students already went through higher education and early educators considered the traditional educational setting ill-adapted for them (e.g. Prensky, 2001). Finally, higher education instructors had to move instruction into a more natural environment for the students. Surely, the effects on students and the learning outcomes should correspondingly improve...

My unwavering interest for multimedia-environment-aided learning and instruction (Chankova 2020a), and its effects on students' attitude towards cheating (Chankova 2017) has led to an investigation of online instruction in order to elicit its effects on the students' learning process, their motivation to attend classes, their involvement in online evaluations.

Data was collected, first, through two online questionnaires, one conducted in June 2020 and

one in January 2021, targeting questions about the quality of the online classes, the students' perceptions about the advantages and disadvantages of online classes, as well as an assessment of their learning and motivation. Second, I took extensive notes on students' participation in online classes and have conducted semi-structured interviews with a number of them. Third, online assessment tests and written assignments were used to gather additional information about the students' results and their attitudes towards testing and knowledge. In all three methods of data collection, the data were collected after the express consent of the participants.

One important aspect of academic integrity is discussed in this contribution. Stepping on the students' evaluation of their own learning process, I look into problems related to academic integrity. The proposition under scrutiny is that while online education does not allow for a dramatic increase in cheating or otherwise dishonest behavior (I am excluding here cases of 'phantom students' – those who log in and do not manifest themselves vocally or by writing in the chat session – those cases might be difficult to ascertain) in accordance with earlier research (e.g. Watson and Sottile 2010, Grijalva et al. 2006), it creates a different frame of expectations in students. This altered frame of expectations leads to assuming that online access to a vast quantity of materials directly translates as having the corresponding knowledge and skills.

The results of the questionnaire analysis demonstrate that online classes have a mild positive influence on attendance, do not really act as an interest boost for students, are a source of conflicting emotions in students and affirm the students' need of face-to-face interaction and personal socialization of the kind provided by on-site classes. Students tend to be less interested by the quality of their learning process, tend to list "comfort" as the one

important thing they like about online classes (eating and drinking coffee during class, being in PJs, multitasking and “doing other things while listening to the instructor”) and tend to assess the workload as definitely increased in comparison to on-site classes. The major negative aspect about online classes listed after the lack of face-to-face interaction is the technical aspect: bad connectivity, poor or inexistent connection, platform saturation, delays in speech and video, power outages, battery malfunctions and other technical problems.

There is a substantial difference between the results between the two questionnaires, which could

be accounted for at least in part by the experience accumulated by both instructors and students alike in dealing with online instruction. Cheating is seldom directly named as an issue (consistent with my earlier findings, Chankova 2020b); students will talk instead of “less stress at exams”, and of “less pressure”; they tend to assume that they will be able to do better at the exam because they are at home and can “check stuff up” as they go. It is noted when it plays onto the hand of the cheater. The students expect credit merely for logging in the virtual classroom (as opposed to class participation).

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