THE STATES OF DISTANCE TRAINING IN THE UNIVERSITY EDUCATION SYSTEM

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ABSTRACT

Today's education faces modern challenges in the context of profound methodological and content changes in the world. Global realities have a fundamental impact on education processes, research and projected outcomes. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and thanks to the development of information technologies, the learning process of higher education is currently organized in a hybrid manner, with combination of face-to-face and distance learning modalities. We were somewhat prepared for it, because yet in 2010, the Government of Armenia had adopted a decision to approve the procedure for distance learning of Higher, Postgraduate and Vocational education specialties (Government of the RA – Hayastani Hanrapetutyun karavarutyan voroshumy. 2010).

In order to understand the current issues of distance education and aiming to help to improve the process in the context of hybrid education, we conducted research and explored the process of organization of distance learning from different perspectives, tested its effectiveness and identified various problems at Khachatur Abovian Armenian State Pedagogical University .

Keywords: education challenges, research, distance learning, hybrid education, advantages of distance education, disadvantages of distance education, conceptual approach, e-course, media platform, e-learning technologies.

INTRODUCTION

The objective of our current research was to study the state of distance learning in the context of hybrid education at higher educational system and particularly:

- to determine the positive or negative phenomena recorded during the distance learning;
- to identify the main difficulties faced by the teachers and students;
- to identify the problems that arise during the online classes;
- to evaluate the opportunities of the media platform operating today;
- to determine in which cases, it may be preferable to live meetings;
- to point out sensible ways of organizing online learning and media tools;
- to develop practical suggestions.

We were also interested in the views of the research participants on the effectiveness of education due to distance work.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Now there are various theoretical and conceptual approaches discussing distance learning, its challenges and opportunities. Some of the most pressing issues in online education were published back in 2008 in the collection of essays, edited by Terry Anderson "The Theory of Practice for Online Education". *In the essay* "Understanding e-Learning Technologies-in-Practice through Philosophies-in-Practice" *Heather Kanuka*, the academic director of the University Teaching Services at the University of Alberta, lists a number of issues related to the effectiveness of distance education. E-learning technologies can effectively respond to accelerating global competition (Daniel, 2000), increase the quality of learning experiences remove situational barriers and be more cost effective (Twigg, 2003). Based on these investigations, commonly cited advantages of e-learning technologies include an ability to provide just-in-time learning; increased access; elimination of time constrains, locational and situational barriers; cost effectiveness; greater accountability; increased interaction; provision of future employment skills for students and effective support for lifelong learning (Garrison, D. R., 2003).

D. Garrison's comprehensive research "E-learning in the 21st Century" (2003) provides practical models for educators to use the full potential of e-learning (Simpson O. 2003). A unique feature of the book is that the authors focus less on the ever-evolving technologies and

more on the search for an understanding of these technologies from an educational perspective. In Pascal Roubides's research, a broader view of distance learning is offered, allowing perspectives about distance learning, its potential, challenges, and specific outcomes of some distance learning implementation to be voiced (Roubides P., 2017). Ormond Simpson in his book "Student Retention in Online, Open and Distance Learning" reveals the organizational problems of distance education and outlines strategies for increasing student retention, providing useful case studies and examples to illustrate how these strategies can change institutional policy and practice (Sarkisyan, A.T., 2016).

In November 2015 Armenian State Pedagogical University after Kh. Abovian signed an agreement with Google to use the classroom platform of the "Google for Education" application in the e-learning courses for all educational programs. Today, thanks to the electronic platform, all students of the existing system of ASPU have the opportunity:

• to receive all educational materials in advance in electronic format.

• to communicate with the lecturer directly through e-mail.

• to complete part of the current tasks through the e-course.

• to have an unlimited amount of virtual space on google drive to store educational materials. 5. to receive interactive additional electronic materials about the lesson in the form of links, videos and slideshows.

• to have a personal email address on google mail platform in a common **aspu.am** domain,

• to participate in online social surveys in order to improve the quality of education. (Anderson T., 2008).

However, ASPU does not stop at these achievements and continues to work on ensuring the content and quality of course materials on the electronic platform. This innovative platform for e-courses provide students and professors of ASPU with new opportunities to make courses more interactive and accessible.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

With a view to explore the process of organization of distance learning from different perspectives, to test its effectiveness and to identify various problems, and to help improve the process in the context of hybrid education at the University, we conducted research, with using 2 types of methodological tools: focus group interview and questionnaire. We invited different representatives of the field of education to the Focus group interview: 7 lecturers teaching at different faculties of the ASPU, 2 educational experts and 3 teachers from different schools (12 specialists in total).

Following the Focus group interview, a questionnaire was developed consisting of 10 questions, to which 62 undergraduate and graduate students from 10 faculties of the university were asked to answer. The obtained data was analysed and its results were evaluated, generating constructive conclusions and recommendations. Now let's analyse and represent some interesting answers of the students:

The novelty of our research is the following: For the first time we have analysed and presented the experience of distance education in the university education system and as a result of the obtained research data, were revealed the achievements and gaps in the organization of that process. Improvement suggestions were also made.

All of the Focus group representatives, due to their work experience, knew the topic under discussion and could represent competent opinions, contributing to the implementation of the research and the solution of the given problem. We didn't seek to reach an agreement through this discussion, the aim was to get information from different respondents about the various aspects of distance education. The participants commented on the registered advantages and disadvantages of distance education. Their answers revealed to what extent the duration of the classes is sufficient to learn new educational material, and especially which methodological tools are making the classes more effective. The interview pointed out what is particularly harmful to the effectiveness of education due to distance learning, identified the main difficulties and problems that the teachers and students had faced during the online classes, assessed the opportunities of the media platforms operating in the ASPU and generally in the educational system of Armenia today.

Different opinions were raised regarding to cases, when distance learning may be preferred to face-to-face meetings. In order to organize online classes more effectively, the professors suggested organizing seminars, courses and trainings, inter-university thematic discussions for improving one's own knowledge in the field of mastering media tools, etc. In the concluding part of the focus group interview, education experts pointed out reasonable ways of organizing online learning and media tools, which we will represent you in our conclusions.

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To the 1-st question "What are the advantages of organizing distance learning at the university?", the majority of students (56 %) stated, that thanks to online classes,

accessibility of time and place is ensured and they are able to combine learning with other types of activities, mainly work. Most of them find that regardless of their location, joining a class is an advantage and it helps them to save time. However, our observations allow us to state that either work or education can suffer in this case.

As a significant advantage of online learning 32% of students pointed the reduction in financial costs. Online education is much more accessible than face-to-face education, as it eliminates the problem of student transportation, food and rent for students from the the regions. In addition to these, teachers send the study materials by e-mail, so there is no need to buy books or print them. 12 % of students highlighted the expansion of opportunities for students with disabilities as an advantage, which, in our opinion, is due to the fact that the students of this university have a Special Education faculty, therefore, they are more concerned about the problems of students with disabilities, realizing that distance education allows students with special needs to overcome a number of physical difficulties.

Figure 1
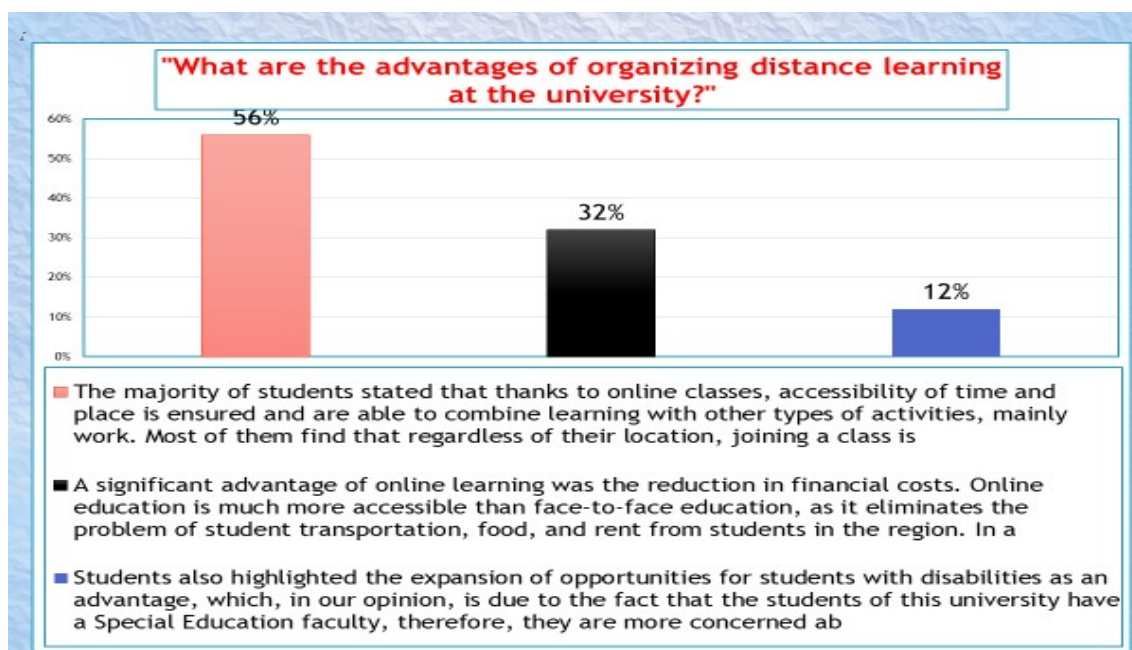
The 2-nd question was**: "According to you, what are the disadvantages of distance learning organization in the university and what were your main difficulties?"**

Since the students greatly value live contact with lecturers and classmates, 42% of them noted that distance education does not contribute to the formation of educational motivation, therefore, the activity of participation in the class decreases. In general, it can be concluded from the answers of the majority, that students consider the lack of live contact as one of the obvious disadvantages of the online learning method, and consider direct communication as a guarantee of increasing the effectiveness of educational activities. During the distance

learning, what is said "Eye to eye" contact is missing, that is, if in the classroom they could understand what the lecturer explained even from his movement, look and half a word, it is more difficult to establish contact in the online domain.

It is interesting that Lilit Endeman, who lives in USA and is currently studying online at the university's Faculty of Art Education, answered that while many might argue that online learning does not provide enough opportunity for student interaction, online learning actually invites in a variety of collaborative social opportunities: **«**From my own personal experience, I can to announce, that I've had more meaningful interaction through my online learning experience than I ever could do in face to face classroom settings. I know all of my classmates by name, we talked on several occasions, and provide support to one another when it was needed. Online learning provides a community atmosphere that adds a key social element into the learning experience**»**.

Another major problem of online classes 24 percent of students noted «the lack of internet access». Although it operates perfect mainly in the capital, it often causes problems in the regions due to power outages.

In some answers the difficulty of self-learning the theoretical material from the textbook and understanding the lecture explained by the teacher online, was mentioned as a disadvantage (18%).

We also found out that a small number of students (16%) do not agree with the grade they received during distance learning, as they noted the decrease in the objectivity of the grade as a drawback.

With the next question we asked the students to **suggest effective ways of organizing distance learning and media tools.**

A part of the students offered providing them with appropriate technical means, because a number of problems arise regularly due to their lack (15%).

It was also suggested using the wide range of opportunities provided by media tools, as to use Microsoft Word, Microsoft Power Point, Crossword Labs platforms and to do more group work so that everyone could be involved in the class process and to conduct the class process in groups of a maximum of 10-12 people (22 %).

Some students considered mastering the skills of using various ICT tools as a way to solve the problems, both by students and professors (23%).

It is worrisome the fact that many people found it difficult to make any suggestion, from which we can assume that students either do not know media tools or do not give them of necessary size importance (8%).

10 % of students are willing to participate in open discussions to find ways to solve
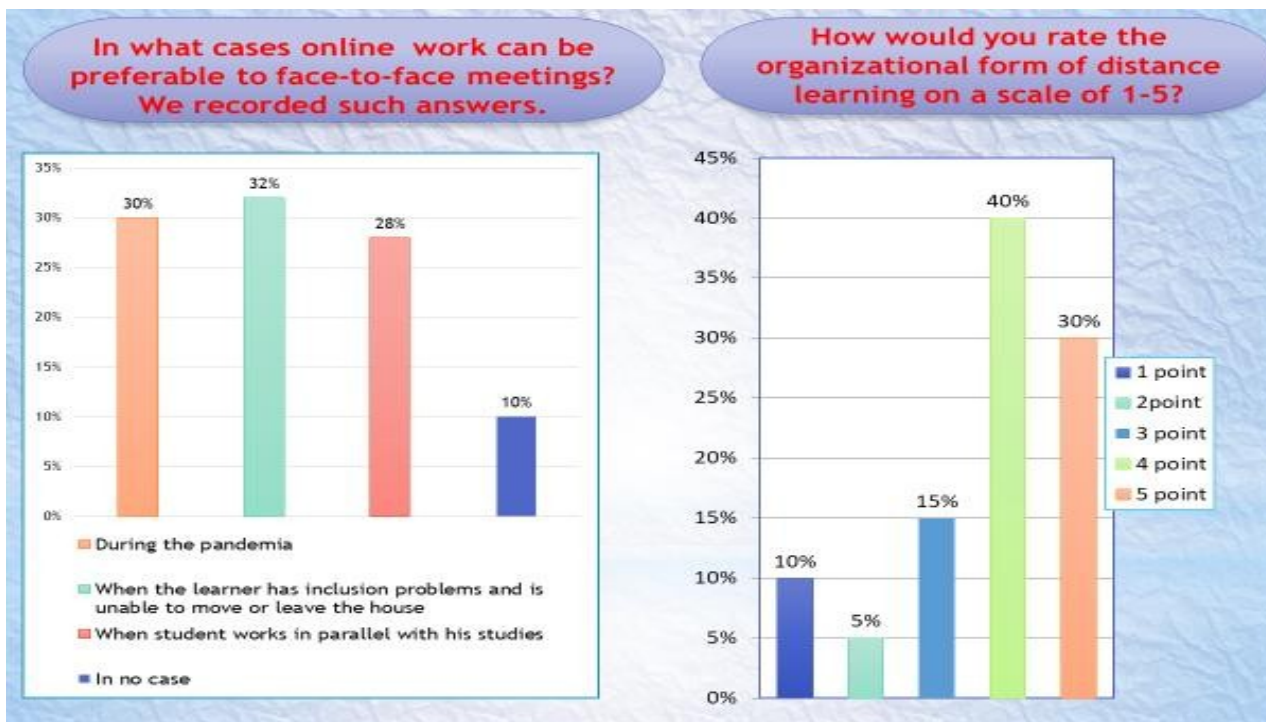
problems, which according to them, will create ways to solve some issues. It was also suggested that the cameras of both students and professors would be turned on (22%).

4. In what cases online work can be preferable to face-to-face meetings?

We recorded such answers.

Figure 2   **Figure 3**

➢   during the pandemic /30%/

➢   when the learner has inclusion problems and is unable to move or leave the house/32%/

➢   when student works in parallel with his studies /28%/

➢   in no case/10%/.

5. **The next question was: "How would you rate the organizational form of distance learning on a scale of 1-5 points".**

40% of survey participants rated 4 points, 30% rated 5 points,15% - 3 points, 10% - 1 point, 5% of participants - 2 points.

In general, it can be stated, that the effectiveness of distance learning is above average.

6. For the question "**Are the methods used during the distance learning effective and is the duration of the class sufficient to learn the new educational material provided?**" we offered 2 options:

75% of survey participants answered yes, 25% - no.

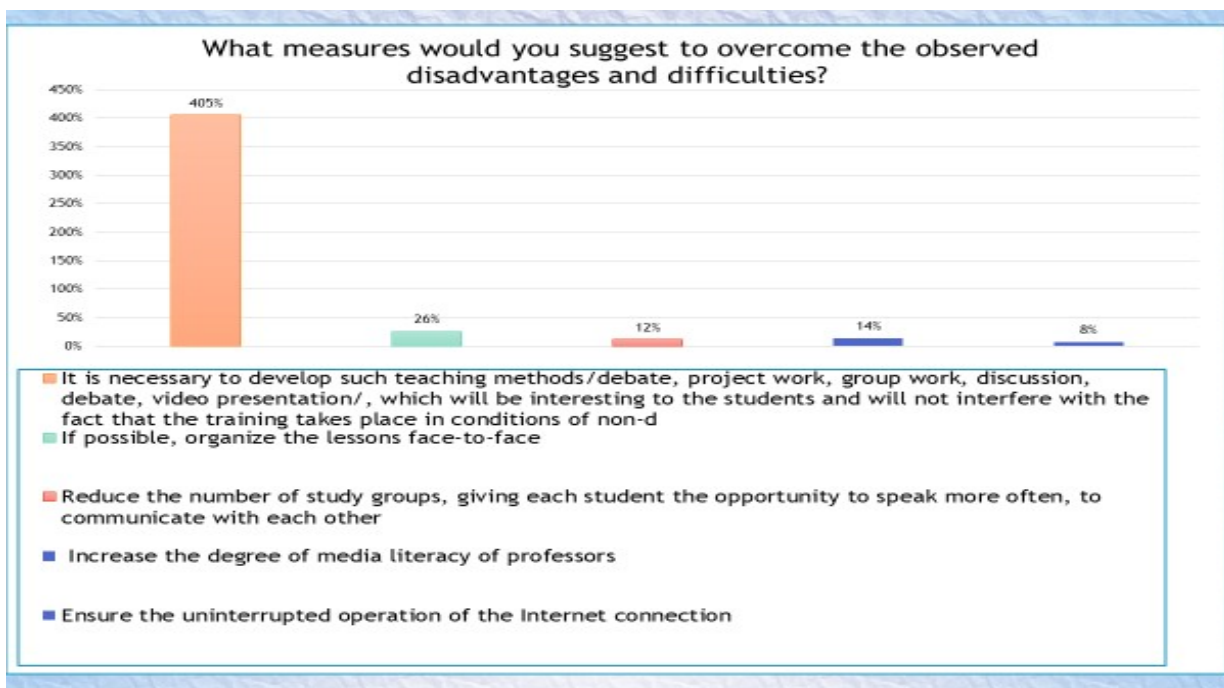The results revealed that students are satisfied with the acquisition of knowledge through online learning.

Figure 4
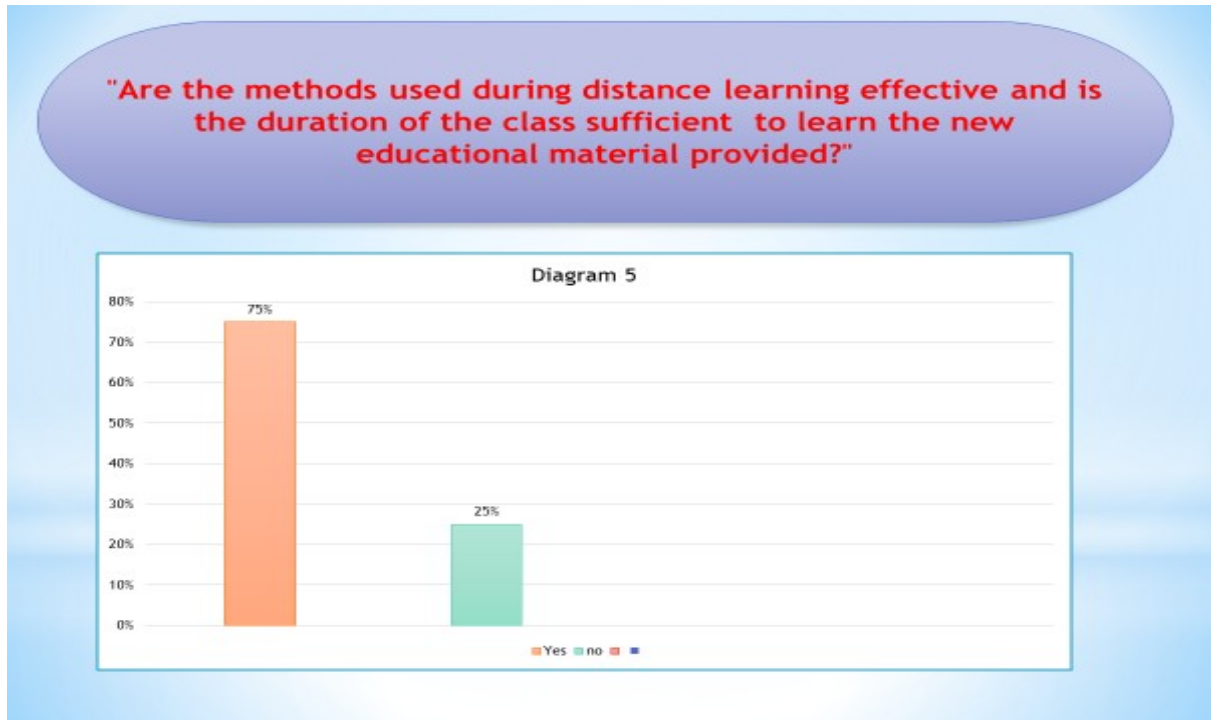
7. What measures would you suggest to overcome the observed disadvantages and difficulties?

The answers we got from this question are shown in the figure 5.

Figure 5

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of surveys on the research of distance training confirmed that the effectiveness of distance education is mainly conditioned by the development of lecturer-student cooperation, student-student interpersonal communication ethics, personal-professional value system and distance education culture.

It is a priority to develop students' subject-specific, personal, communicative, collaborative, cognitive, media literacy, critical thinking abilities and creative skills, which will help them work independently towards full self-realization in the conditions of distance learning during the University education. It was important for us that the respondents considered it sufficient the duration of the classes to perceive and master the new learning material and especially their views on which learning and methodological tools are making the classes more effective.

We consider it necessary to develop a concept and procedures for organization of distance education at the Universities, according to international Standards for Quality Assurance of Education, and ensure the normative regulation of distance education.

The research's discussion also confirms that currently Armenian universities mainly provide the social-cultural, material-technical, moral-psychological indispensable conditions, which contribute to the development of general and professional competencies necessary for the achievement of final educational results for a 21st century university graduate.

Developments in the field of distance learning create the need for continuous discussions by specialists of the educational community on various transformations of these processes and the joint development of methodological recommendations related to psychological, pedagogical, social, organizational-management, health and technological aspects.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of the survey data allows us to make the following conclusions:

At present, still there are some problems in this field of education, so higher education system officials need to do the following:

1.	To carry out regular monitoring of hybrid and distance education, control of the results and provision of feedback through utilization of modern effective tools in accordance with the student-centred principles at universities.

2.	To develop the media literacy of the teaching staff, the regular training of lecturers in accordance with the modern requirements of distance learning.

3.	To study more deeply the necessity of students' social needs and the availability of necessary information and educational resources during the organization of distance education.

4.   We consider it urgent to edit and complete the strategies for increasing student retention, providing useful case studies and examples to illustrate how these strategies can change institutional policy and practice.

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