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Adult Students' Attitudes Towards Distance Learning During the SARS-Co-V-2 Virus Pandemic

Abstract

The article is a study report on distance learning during the SARS-Co-V-2 virus pandemic, conducted among postsecondary school students. The subject of the study was the opinions of postsecondary school students about distance learning. The research was diagnostic in nature, and the method of a diagnostic poll with survey technique was used. The author's survey was sent to 85 students of post-secondary schools in the Opole voivodship (Poland). As a result of the study, an average level of satisfaction, degree of motivation and involvement in self-learning by the respondents was determined, as well as an average evaluation of the level of effectiveness of learning conducted in that form. The respondents indicated both the positive and negative aspects of distance learning. The first group comprised mainly aspects related to saving time, money and the flexibility of this form of learning, while the other group included aspects of a social and health nature, related to shortcomings in self-study and evaluation of the learning process.

K e y w o r d s: distance learning, adult education, SARS-Co-V-2 virus pandemic

Introduction

Education is the key to personal development and the future of societies. The Constitution of the Republic of Poland guarantees everyone the right to education. The manner of exercising this right is specified in the Act (the Act of 14 December 2016 Education Law, Journal of Laws of 2020, items 910 and 1378 and of 2021, items 4, 619 and 762). The Sejm/national legislature decides on the organization of the education system, and it is the task of the government and local authorities to implement the provisions and enforce those provisions to fulfil the promise of compulsory education. At the same time, the legislature enables the executive branch to introduce temporary restrictions in traditional forms of education.

In cases justified by extraordinary circumstances that threaten the life or health of children and youth, the minister responsible for education and upbringing, by means of an ordinance, may temporarily limit or temporarily suspend the functioning of educational system units in the territory of the country or part of it. The suspension of schools' activity, which translates into the implementation of rights and obligations in the field of education, is transitional. Its duration is left to the discretion of the minister, and so is the decision to restore the normal functioning of schools. The outbreak of the pandemic triggered by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, which causes the COVID-19 disease, in March 2020 led to the closure of schools. Never before have we had such great confusion in the field of education as we do during the COVID-19 pandemic. Overnight, everyone involved in the education process: students, parents, teachers, school principals and educational authorities, found themselves in an unprecedented situation. Suddenly, it turned out that the process of institutional education, from educational institutions of various types, somehow moved to the virtual reality of the Internet. The "era" of distance learning, which, just a few weeks earlier, was only an option that teachers could use in the scope of their choice, have become and suddenly turned out to be a necessity and is now the dominant/only available method of conducting educational activities. Jacek Pyżalski rightly noticed that in the "new" conditions, distance learning became a kind of compulsion, which meant that regardless of the possibilities, competences and willingness, this solution must be used by everyone, not only by those who want to and can (Pyżalski, 2020, p. 2 and 9). Distance learning is a challenge for most students, but also for teachers, especially since not everyone feels sufficiently prepared for this form of education.

This article is part of the increasingly heated discussion about distance learning during the pandemic. The research on this topic seems to be a priority in the face of the change that has been and still is total.

The article consists of three integrally related parts: a methodological one, presenting the results of research aimed at identifying the opinions of students of postsecondary schools on distance learning and a conclusion in which the author shows the conclusions and postulates, formulated on the basis of the results obtained during the research.

Author's research methodology

The research presented in this article is a part of a broader comparative study covering different age groups in the Silesian, Opole and Lesser Poland Voivodeships. This article covers a strand concerning the opinions expressed by postsecondary school students on distance learning. It attempts to answer the main question: *What are the opinions of postsecondary school students on distance education?*, as well as the corresponding specific questions, such as:

1. *How satisfied do postsecondary students feel with distance learning?*
2. *What is the degree of motivation for distance learning in the respondents' self-assessment?*
3. *How do respondents assess their own level of involvement in distance learning?*
4. *What opinions do respondents have on the level of effectiveness of distance learning?*
5. *What are the positive and negative aspects of distance learning in the light of the opinions expressed by respondents?*

The research was quantitative and diagnostic in nature and was conducted in February and March 2021. The research used the survey method (Palka, 2006, p. 49), within which the author constructed the survey questionnaire, which consisted of two main parts. The first part included questions on the sense of satisfaction, motivation and involvement in the learning process and the effectiveness of learning in a distance form. The questions had the form of a five-point adjectival scale, where 1 meant very low, 2 – low, 3 – medium, 4 – high, 5 – a very high level of intensity of the given characteristic. In the second part of the survey, the author asked three open questions about the positive and negative aspects of distance learning, and respondents were asked to provide some data about themselves.

The survey was addressed to 85 people, who are students of four postsecondary schools: Vademecum Postsecondary School for Adults and Pascal Postsecondary Schools Complex in Nysa, Medical Schools Complex in Brzeg and Medical Schools Complex in Prudnik.

The respondents' group was mostly composed of women (89.4%), while men accounted for 10.6% of the examined population. Most of the respondents had a secondary education background (79%), whereas 21% of them had a university degree. The presented structure of the respondents' group results from the specificity of the Polish post-secondary education system. It is classified as secondary education and it may be conducted by central administration units, local government units, social, and religious organisations, associations and natural persons. The condition of admission to a post-secondary school is to have a secondary education (the *Matura*, i.e., the secondary school exit exam diploma, is not required).

Post-secondary schools allow persons with at least a secondary education background to obtain a diploma confirming their professional qualifications after passing the relevant examinations before district examination boards.

Education in post-secondary schools lasts from 1 to 2.5 years.

Post-secondary schools in Poland provide education in over twenty fields, and the most popular ones are economics, administration, medical, communal and IT services, e.g., a healthcare assistant, an occupational therapist, a dental assistant, a medical sterilisation technician, an administration technician, or an occupational health and safety technician.

Women account for the majority of post-secondary school students, which is also reflected in the examined population.

Education in a post-secondary school does not rule out professional activity, therefore the vast majority of the respondents' group were professionally active persons (66% of all respondents).

The majority of respondents live in urban areas and are in relationships (marriage or in a partnership) and have children (51% of the total surveyed population), mostly of school age.

Let us now proceed to present – by necessity in a synthetic manner – the results obtained in the research.

Opinions expressed by students of postsecondary schools on distance learning Presentation of research results

In the first part of the study, an attempt was made to determine the respondents' level of satisfaction with distance learning, their level of motivation to learn, their level of involvement in the learning process carried out online, as well as to find

out the respondents' opinions on the degree of effectiveness of distance learning. For this purpose, a survey questionnaire was used, which, as already mentioned, contained questions in the form of a five-point adjective scale. Using quantification methods, namely scoring, the essence of which is to subjectively assign an appropriate number of points to each category, the points (or scale grades) were added up separately for each question. A maximum of 5 points could be obtained for each question. Taking into account a different method of quantification: ordinal evaluation, point ranges were established for the three levels of the diagnosed variables: high from 4 to 5 points; medium – 3 points; low from 1 to 2 points. In order to compare the results, arithmetic averages were additionally calculated for each of the examined variables. First of all, Figure 1 presents the results of the research on the respondents' level of satisfaction with online learning, their declared level of motivation to learn in this form, their self-assessment of their involvement in the learning process and their evaluation of the effectiveness of distance education.

When analysing the data in Figure 1, we can see a similar distribution of results for all the compared variables. The surveyed group is dominated by a high and medium level of satisfaction with distance learning and positive opinions on the effectiveness of this type of education prevail. Moreover, the respondents assessed their involvement in learning, as well as motivation to learn on the same level, but in the latter case a slightly higher proportion of respondents who admitted that their motivation to distance learning is low was noted. However, it is difficult to assess whether the low level of motivation is related to the specifics of distance learning or whether it is a matter of motivation to learn in general. The results obtained in the second part of the questionnaire helped to illustrate this issue a little better. Before we move on to them, let us see the arithmetic averages for all the variables examined, which complete the picture of the results obtained in the study and reveal the central tendency occurring in them (Figure 2).

Taking into account the arithmetic averages for all diagnosed variables, it can be concluded that they reach similar values, falling within the range of 3.5 – 3.7. None of the values exceeded 4.0. Therefore, it can be considered a slightly higher than an average level of saturation of the diagnosed characteristics in the studied group.

The second part of the survey questionnaire contained open questions that allowed us to identify the respondents' opinions on distance learning. The obtained research material was categorised, distinguishing the main categories of positive and negative aspects of this form of education. Within the positive aspects, the respondents firstly appreciated saving time and money ("*you do not have to commute to classes", "you can save on tickets and fuel", "you do not have to waste time on make-up or hairstyle, special clothes and it is great"*), the possibility of a flexible time schedule, allowing the reconciliation of home, work and school

duties, as well as for the implementation of other objectives important to the respondents (*"it is amazing that you can listen to a lecture and cook at the same time, for example, or clean, take care of your children", "more than once I took part in classes while being at work, with normal education this would not be possible at all", "the good thing is that you can have the camera and microphone turned off, you can basically take part in classes anywhere, even at the hair salon"*). Research participants also pointed out the positive, from a didactic point of view, aspects of distance learning, mainly related to the implementation of the principle of accessibility (*"the possibility of using various presentations, applications helpful in learning the profession, printing out various materials", "in many classes we had convenient access to materials, learning was easier thanks to this")* and pleasure (*"during classes there was always a nice atmosphere", "usually it was nice during classes, there was no stressful atmosphere"*). In the opinion of some respondents, distance education resulted in an increase of their IT skills, e.g., they learned how to use the Teams application, which was associated with positive emotions and increased self-efficacy. An interesting theme appeared in the statements of a few respondents and concerned a specific kind of feeling of security associated with *"being behind the camera"*.

Among the negative aspects of distance learning were mostly those of a social nature, many respondents were disturbed by the lack of interpersonal contacts, both with the teacher and with other students in the group. In this category, there were statements indicating low mood, pessimistic thoughts, feelings of alienation and even hopelessness: *"…in the beginning it was even good, all this education at home, more opportunities, but in the long run a person lacks contact with another living person. A computer cannot replace that. Even the fact that you can dress nicely, put on make-up and feel special is important. And then… there's no telling, the cameras are turned off, everything is just shoddy…"*. This state was additionally exacerbated by isolation, which also affected other spheres of life, which is perhaps why some respondents said outright that such a situation, including distance learning, was not conducive to mental health. Unfortunately, a deterioration of physical health was also observed, which was mainly related to too much time spent in front of the computer (classes until late in the evening, additional online consultations, *"extending" the class time by the teacher – taking away the students' break"*, doing all the tasks, homework ordered by the teacher on the computer). The respondents complained about general fatigue, eye pain (deterioration of eyesight), back pain, headaches and even nausea when having to *"sit in front of the computer"* all day. Only in two cases there were references to ways of coping with these negative aspects in the form of incorporating special exercises for the lumbar spine or using glasses for working on the computer, which does not mean that other people did not take any remedial measures to improve

their well-being and health. Another issue, quite often appearing in the statements of the respondents, related to deficiencies in the competences necessary for the implementation of the self-learning process, mainly in the area of self-reliance (e.g., difficulties with searching for materials on one's own), responsibility for one's own learning or self-discipline, ability to plan learning, spreading tasks out *("suddenly everything has changed, I had to adapt to the technical requirements of various lecturers, there were many different forms of crediting practical classes, lectures – without[a] precise record of duties it was difficult for me to grasp this distance learning", "... there was a time when I got completely lost in everything, suddenly it turned out that I was away from home, and a colleague wrote to me that the classes had just started... [I had] spaced out...").* The students also had the impression of *"[a] lack of full involvement in learning"*, *"superficial learning"*, increased difficulties *"in gaining knowledge"*, which may reveal a deeper problem, related to deficiencies in deep learning skills, with the use of ineffective learning strategies. In addition, there were external factors interfering with the process of self- learning, with which the respondents had to cope, such as technical problems with the computer, access to the network (the Internet), or distractions: children, other household members, pets *("someone wanted something from me all the time, I could not have listened to the lectures in peace").* A separate issue, relatively rarely taken up by the respondents, was the assessment of the didactic aspects of distance learning (the use of the same teaching methods by teachers, difficulties in the implementation of practical classes, not very objective assessment of examinations, related to the low effectiveness of checking the knowledge of the students by the lecturers and *"the possibility of cheating on tests"*).

In the analysed research material concerning the negative aspects of distance learning, it is also possible to notice single statements that could not be classified to any category, these were most often short messages, given without any justification, nevertheless indicating a specific opinion of the respondents *("I prefer learning at school", "online learning is not effective", "it is tiring in the long run", "you do not use all the possibilities offered by school").*

At the end of this section, it is worth mentioning that the overall analysis of the research material (respondents' answers to the open questions included in the survey questionnaire) revealed a similar percentage of positive and negative opinions on distance learning, while the statements relating to the negative aspects were slightly broader, more developed and often included specific examples to justify the opinions expressed.

Discussion

The presented research was aimed at identifying the opinion of postsecondary school students on distance learning, conducted in a specific time of the pandemic, often in conditions of home isolation, thus limiting important aspects of human life. The research involved adults, mostly professionally active, but also people who consciously took the trouble to complete their education by deciding to start education at a postsecondary school. These factors are certainly important for the interpretation of the results obtained in the research.

The opinions of respondents are dominated by an average level of satisfaction with distance education, average assessments of its effectiveness, with an average level of their own involvement in the learning process and motivation to work (see Ana, Minghat, Purnawarman, Saripudin, Muktiarni, Dwiyanti, Mustiakim, 2020, pp. 15–26). Additional strengthening of this "middle" trend is the similar number of positive and negative aspects of distance learning distinguished by the respondents (9% and 51% of all obtained statements respectively).

As working adults, study participants appreciated the flexibility of distance learning to balance a wide range of responsibilities, including home and work. The pandemic has shown that working from home is possible, and often effective. In the age of the information society and having basic computer literacy and Internet skills, it can become natural. This trend is evident, among other things, in this year's surveys conducted among employees and employers, who expect to be able to work remotely to a greater extent than before: 75% of employees prefer a hybrid working model and 55% of employers say they will remain with remote work, as well as conduct the full recruitment process online (see http://hrlink.pl) When it comes to education, the issue seems a bit more complicated. The pandemic made us realise that e-learning plays a significant role in education. Offering many opportunities such as use of ready-made materials, interactive participation in classes, group problem solving or preparation of projects, asynchronous work (each participant uses the platform at any time) or synchronous work (each participant uses the platform from any place, but at the same – agreed – time people meet), implementation of the principle of individualisation (the system can monitor progress, select contents and work dynamics for each participant, depending on their progress or individual work rhythm).

In addition, a teacher can play similar roles in the process of distance learning as in the case of contact education – from being a person preparing and providing materials, monitoring and supporting the learning process, to a person acting as a mentor, group leader or discussion moderator.

The closing of schools and the transition to distance learning contributed to the development of new models of education, an increase in the IT competencies of students and teachers, which was also noted by the postsecondary school students who were surveyed.

However, on the other hand, it has revealed a number of shortcomings of the type of education implemented exclusively remotely and the various difficulties of a technical, organisational and/or personal nature with which students, their parents and teachers coped. The consequences of permanent distance learning were felt mostly in the sphere of social development. Social contacts in the virtual world turned out to be insufficient, not very satisfying and in the long run not very successful in meeting the needs of belonging to a community of learners. The situation was of course exacerbated by the compulsion to isolate oneself or to limit social contacts to a minimum in other aspects of life.

Conclusions

The results obtained in the research seem to confirm the belief that distance/online learning will not replace the school, but may, however, become a valuable complement. It seems that only such a complementary option could meet the expectations of all educational entities and have a positive impact on the quality of education and human development. This aspect has been noticed, among others, in the report *"Digital Competences and Distance Learning in the European Union"*. (https://www.parp.gov.pl/storage/publications/pdf/Edukacjacyfrowa_2020-09-22.pdf).

It considers introducing the following solutions to the education sector that have worked best in the times of pandemic and isolation:

1. ***Conducting final or certification examinations and examinations confirming qualifications online***, which, however, may raise some doubts in the light of the respondents' statements pointing to less reliable ways of evaluating students' achievements and widespread „cheating" in exams (perhaps improving the methods of verifying knowledge could somehow solve this problem);
2. ***Adapting to the new time model***, which provides the student with a greater autonomy and the ability to independently make decisions when he/she will learn. In the context of the results obtained in the research (see also: Rodek, 2020, pp. 107–122), it seems that certain difficulties may arise in this respect, related to insufficient self-discipline, independence and responsibility for one's own learning process, which manifested themselves even in the group of adults who consciously undertake the toil of education and are internally motivated to learn.

In addition, there are also the problems with the organization of the learning process, distribution of tasks over time and ineffective learning strategies signalled by the respondents (see Rodek, 2019, pp. 112–120). Teachers should be aware of these difficulties and be prepared to help those in need. There is also a need for greater care to develop students' competences within self-learning;

3. ***Familiarizing teachers with digital technologies***, which seems to be a valuable postulate. Teachers should be able to try out different digital learning solutions and to understand how they can be used to support students' learning (see, for example, Moorhouse, Wong, 2021).

The above deliberations can be supplemented with recommendations regarding:

- **the introduction of systemic solutions in the field of digital hygiene of students, parents and teachers** as a permanent and necessary element of digital education of the information society. These solutions could support responsible use of new technologies, foster development, and eliminate the negative consequences caused by the inappropriate use of digital devices, not only during distance learning, but also outside it.
  This education should cover all stages of learning and should be appropriate to the age and experience of the students (see Adams, Chuah, Sumintono, Mohamed, 2021, pp. 1–16). It is worth noting that the surveyed adults, despite their life experience and maturity, identified health problems related to the implementation of distance learning, perhaps additionally reinforced by the need to perform professional duties also online. The feeling of helplessness in the face of this negative state of affairs and poorly exposed remedial measures taken to protect and improve one's health, revealed in the research may cause anxiety;
- **respecting the principle of novelty, i.e., diversifying classes through the use of various teaching methods, forms of work and teaching aids.** In this way, a student will not experience boredom during classes, will be more interested in the contents of the education, and his/her motivation to learn will increase.
  This principle, resulting from the psychological regularities of learning, is important in every age group. The surveyed postsecondary school students also noticed that most of the methods used by teachers are informative and visual, and the classes are not very exciting, which in some way could have conditioned the feeling of the average level of satisfaction with distance learning by them experienced, as well as their motivation to learn.
  In this aspect, another proposal to introduce a system for assessing the level of media, information and digital competences of teachers and students using standardized tools, based on the latest scientific knowledge, may be justified (see Ptaszek, Stunża, Pyżalski, Dębski, Bigaj, 2020, pp. 183–186).

The research presented in the article certainly does not exhaust the discussed issues. They were conducted among students of postsecondary schools, and the selection of the trial was deliberate. Therefore, the obtained results cannot be generalized to the entire study population. However, it seems that they provide a certain picture of the condition of distance learning in the situation of the coronavirus pandemic and its reception by adults who have consciously made the effort to supplement their education. Additionally, they also indicate the urgent need to search for conditions and circumstances of complementarity of two realities: the real and the virtual.

Translated by: *Andrzej Puc*

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Dorośli uczniowie wobec edukacji zdalnej w dobie pandemii wirusa SARS-Co-V-2

S t r e s z c z e n i e

Artykuł jest doniesieniem z badań na temat nauki w formie zdalnej – w czasie pandemii wirusa SARS-Co-V-2 przeprowadzonych wśród słuchaczy szkół policealnych. Przedmiotem badań były opinie słuchaczy szkół policealnych na temat edukacji zdalnej. Badania miały charakter diagnostyczny, zastosowano w nich metodę sondażu diagnostycznego z techniką ankiety. Autorski kwestionariusz ankiety został skierowany do 85 słuchaczy szkół policealnych w województwie opolskim. W wyniku przeprowadzonych badań ustalono średni poziom poczucia satysfakcji, stopnia motywacji i zaangażowania w naukę własną respondentów oraz przeciętne oceny poziomu efektywności nauki prowadzonej w tej formie. Badani wskazali zarówno pozytywne jak i negatywne aspekty nauki zdalnej. W pierwszej grupie znalazły się głównie aspekty, związane z oszczędnością czasu, pieniędzy, elastycznością tej formy kształcenia, natomiast w drugiej – aspekty natury społecznej, zdrowotnej, związanej z niedostatkami w zakresie samokształcenia i ewaluacji procesu kształcenia.

S ł o w a k l u c z o w e: edukacja zdalna, edukacja dorosłych, pandemia wirusa SARS-Co-V-2

Adult students' attitudes towards distance learning during the SARS-Co-V-2 virus pandemic

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Дистанционное обучение взрослых обучающихся во время пандемии вируса SARS-Co-V-2

Аннотация

Статья представляет собой рапорт об исследовании дистанционного обучения во время пандемии вируса SARS-Co-V-2, проведенном среди студентов высших учебных заведений. Предметом исследования стало мнение студентов высших учебных курсов о дистанционном обучении. Исследование имели диагностический характер, был использован метод диагностического опроса с методикой обследования. Авторский опрос был проведён среди 85 учащихся высших учебных заведений Опольского воеводства (Польша). В результате исследования был определен средний уровень удовлетворенности, степень мотивации и вовлеченности респондентов в самообучение, а также средняя оценка уровня эффективности обучения, проводимого в этой форме. Респонденты указали как положительные, так и отрицательные стороны дистанционного обучения. Первая группа включала в себя в основном аспекты, связанные с экономией времени, денег и гибкости этой формы обучения, в то время как другая группа включала аспекты социального и медицинского характера, связанные с недостатками в самообучениях и оценке процесса обучения.

Ключевые слова: дистанционное обучение, образование взрослых, пандемия вируса SARS-Co-V-2

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Estudiantes adultos hacia el aprendizaje a distancia durante la pandemia del virus SARS-Co-V-2

Resumen

El artículo es un informe de estudio sobre el aprendizaje a distancia durante la pandemia del virus SARS-Co-V-2, realizado entre estudiantes de escuelas postsecundarias. El tema del estudio fueron las opiniones de los estudiantes de escuelas postsecundarias sobre el aprendizaje a distancia. La investigación fue de naturaleza diagnóstica, y se utilizó el método de una encuesta diagnóstica con técnica de encuesta. La encuesta del autor se envió a 85 estudiantes de escuelas postsecundarias del voivodato de Opolskie (Polonia). Como resultado del estudio, se determinó un nivel promedio de satisfacción, grado de motivación e implicación en el autoaprendizaje por parte de los encuestados, así como una evaluación media del nivel de efectividad del aprendizaje realizado en esa forma. Los encuestados indicaron los aspectos positivos y negativos de la enseñanza a distancia. El primer grupo comprendía principalmente aspectos relacionados con el ahorro de tiempo, dinero y la flexibilidad de esta forma de aprendizaje, mientras que el otro grupo incluía aspectos de carácter social y sanitario, relacionados con deficiencias en el autoestudio y evaluación del proceso de aprendizaje.

Palabras clave: aprendizaje a distancia, educación de adultos, pandemia del virus SARS-Co-V-2