



Online Versus Traditional Classes: The Case of History Teaching

Aulas on-line versus aulas tradicionais: o caso do ensino de história

Nurdan Atamturk⁽¹⁾; Sevit Ozkutlu⁽²⁾; Hakan Atamturk⁽³⁾

⁽¹⁾ 0000-0002-9770-8456; University of Kyrenia, North Cyprus. Philippines. Email: nurdan.atamturk@kyrenia.edu.br

⁽²⁾ 0000-0002-7990-2853; Near East University, North Cyprus. Philippines. Email: sevit.ozkutlu@neu.edu.tr

⁽³⁾ 0000-0003-4196-436X. Near East University, North Cyprus. Philippines. Email: hakan.atamturk@neu.edu.tr

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ABSTRACT

Higher education has undergone a massive change due to the COVID-19 pandemic worldwide. Many higher education institutions were unprepared for the disruptive effects of the pandemic but the adoption of online teaching and learning platforms was fast and successful for most of them. This sudden change brought new challenges and constraints as well as novel opportunities and perspectives into higher education in general and teacher training programs in particular. In order to provide deep insights into prospective teachers' experiences with online learning mode, this longitudinal case study aimed to compare the initial perceptions of the participants of online education with those elicited nineteen months after the start of the pandemic. Given that the initial views can be misleading, it is assumed that a comparison between the initial and latter views of online learning would be well-founded, which would have sound implications for the future of online teaching and learning platforms for the post-COVID times. Nine undergraduate students studying in the history department of a private university in Nicosia participated in the current study. The data were elicited via reflective essays to be analyzed qualitatively. Overall, the results indicated that online mode of instruction and learning was not favored in the beginning of the pandemic since all the themes emerged were negative. However, the analysis of the latter data indicated that the participants' views changed for the better dramatically. Hence, the results have a few implications for the future of higher education.

RESUMO

O ensino superior passou por uma grande mudança devido à pandemia do COVID-19 em todo o mundo. Muitas instituições de ensino superior não estavam preparadas para os efeitos disruptivos da pandemia, mas a adoção de plataformas de ensino e aprendizagem online foi rápida e bem-sucedida para a maioria delas. Esta mudança repentina trouxe novos desafios e constrangimentos, bem como novas oportunidades e perspectivas para o ensino superior em geral e para os programas de formação de professores em particular. A fim de fornecer informações profundas sobre as experiências dos futuros professores com o modo de aprendizagem online, este estudo de caso longitudinal teve como objetivo comparar as percepções iniciais dos participantes da educação online com as obtidas dezoito meses após o início da pandemia. Dado que as visões iniciais podem ser enganosas, presume-se que uma comparação entre as visões inicial e posterior da aprendizagem online seria bem fundamentada, o que teria implicações sólidas para o futuro das plataformas de ensino e aprendizagem online para os tempos pós-COVID. Nove estudantes de graduação que estudam no departamento 96-436x de uma universidade particular em Nicosia participaram do estudo atual. Os dados foram levantados por meio de ensaios reflexivos para serem analisados qualitativamente. No geral, os resultados indicaram que o modo online de ensino e aprendizagem não foi favorecido no início da pandemia, pois todos os temas emergidos eram negativos. No entanto, a análise dos últimos dados indicou que as opiniões dos participantes mudaram drasticamente para melhor. Assim, os resultados têm algumas implicações para o futuro do ensino superior.

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Introduction

The COVID-19 outbreak has resulted in sudden social, economic and political changes worldwide. One of the precautions implemented by some of the governments in order to prevent the widespread of Coronavirus disease was to encourage online teaching and learning. However, according to UNESCO (2020), % 60 of the world's student population were affected by school closures due to the pandemic.

The emergence of online educational programs from 1980s onwards in order to provide alternative ways for those unable to attend traditional in-person classes paved the way for the ongoing arguments on the 'effectiveness' of online programs in comparison to traditional classes. In terms of the delivery of instruction, education in general and learning and teaching in particular have changed over the past years. Indeed, there are considerable amount of studies arguing that online classes will replace the traditional classes in the near future and it facilitates learning way better than in-person classes (Harting & Erthal, 2005; Kentnor, 2015). However, other surveys on the effectiveness of online learning indicate contradictory results.

It is argued that traditional classes do not appeal to the youth who spend most of their time in front of a screen. For example, Proserpio and Gioia (2007) highlight the changing learning styles of the youth and believe that virtual classes can appeal to this virtual generation more than the traditional classes. As argued by Smith (2001), most young people can look upon virtual interactions with favor rather than face-to-face communications, which supports the finding of Proserpio and Gioia (2007). On the positive side, research shows that online courses attract more student participation (Hiltz & Shea, 2005; Shea et al., 2006) and provide an abundance of resources (Lorenza & Carter, 2021).

In a similar vein, convenience has been found the mostly cited advantage of online classes (McEwen, 2001; Moskal & Dziuban, 2001; Dutton et al., 2002; Bocchi et al., 2004; Hiltz & Shea, 2005). Despite these advantages of online learning, recent studies indicate that online learning is not always effective. Regarding students, it has been obviously difficult for them to concentrate due to the difficulty and length of teaching content which at some cases resulted with low grades. Also, the academic readiness and the effective delivery are the other important elements that need to be considered while talking about effective 'online learning' (Bao, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the traditional ways of teaching and learning in such a way that it is nearly impossible for higher education institutions to go back to their traditional ways of teaching. As noted by El-Azar and Nelson (2020), universities which fail to incorporate online instruction are not likely to survive in the post pandemic era. After all the research results which indicate negative perceptions of learners and instructors of online classes during the early months of the pandemic, this claim can only resonate in case online learning environments are favored by the relevant parties in education during the post pandemic times.

This calls a need for comparative studies which compare the perceptions of the relevant parties in the COVID-19 and post-COVID-19 times. Given that there is a lack of such comparative studies in the literature, this study was designed as a longitudinal case study to determine the views of undergraduate prospective history teachers of their initial experiences with online learning mode to be compared to their views during the late COVID-19 times. The results are expected to shed light on the future of the upcoming post COVID-19 digital education.

When the COVID-19 pandemic broke out “emergency remote teaching” sustained the continuation of education. Emergency remote teaching is described as:

A temporary shift of instructional delivery to an alternate delivery mode due to crisis circumstances. It involves the use of fully remote teaching solutions for instruction or education that would otherwise be delivered face-to-face or as blended or hybrid courses and that will return to that format once the crisis or emergency has abated (Hodges *et al.*, 2020, p. 6).

Studies evaluating learners’ experiences with online learning during the pandemic report contradictory results. One of the early studies conducted during the COVID-19 lockdown in Norway found that short time and lack of educational materials were the shortcomings of the swift transition into online teaching and learning (Hjelsvold *et al.*, 2020). They also found that both educators and students adapted fast and that they welcomed the change.

Dong (2020) carried out a study to explore the experiences and perceptions of Bangladeshi students studying in Chinese universities. It was found that the participants were unhappy with the online instruction in China during the pandemic (Dong, 2020). Among the reasons for the negative attitudes were less interaction and unfamiliarity with virtual classes (Dong, 2020). On the positive side, they valued the sense of freedom which online education provided. Similarly, Martin (2020) found that Australian university students preferred on-campus in-person instruction and learning to online delivery of instruction.

Access to online materials, availability of quick feedback and good quality technology were reported to be the advantages of online instruction and learning. Additionally, time management more effectively, improved learning outcomes and flexibility of online assessment were also praised. On the other hand, limited interaction between students and lecturers, online examinations and limited information technology expertise of the lecturers were found to be problematic.

Corroborating Martin (2020), Lorenza and Carter (2021) found that Australian higher education students reported negative perceptions of online instruction and learning in terms of student engagement with their studies and peers, distraction and online workload. Students valued their relationship with the lecturers during face-to-face education (Lorenza & Carter,

2021). Studies indicate undesirable results concerning students' motivation and learning outcomes as well (Coman *et al.*, 2020). The challenges posed by online learning mode in terms of available technologies, internet connectivity and adaptation problems of teachers to online instruction came to fore during the pandemic (Czerniewicz *et al.*, 2020).

Online education was found to be more tiring (Sklar, 2020). As the transition to online teaching was swift, lecturers did not have time to receive the required training to design their online courses in accordance with the online instructional design strategies. As noted by Hodges and Fowler (2020), the lack of training along with the limited time could have paved the way for inefficient online instruction.

While this transition from traditional classes to online teaching was smooth for some students, it was challenging for most of them. Some of these challenges included network instability and slow internet speeds (Gares *et al.*, 2020; Shim& Song, 2020). Such technological barriers directly affected students who lived in rural areas where the internet connectivity is problematic (Ezra *et al.*, 2021). The quality of the Dutch online instruction was below desirable standards as reported by university students (De Boer, 2021). In terms of equity, research indicates that the poor infrastructure affects students' learning negatively causing inequity (Tinubu Ali & Herrera, 2020).

There are 27 higher education institutions in North Cyprus where the current study is conducted. During the academic year of 2019-20, the number of university students were 103.748. Although the number of Turkish and Turkish Cypriot students decreased during this period, the number of international students increased dramatically. International students were from 140 different countries. For this reason, the medium of instruction in a great majority of the programs offered by these universities is English.

None of the universities offered distance education or synchronous online classes before the COVID-19 pandemic in North Cyprus. The use of Moodle was prevalent in some secondary schools and universities but most of them were asynchronous classes. Thus, many university lecturers were not familiar with online teaching platforms. They had to learn the intricacies of online teaching from scratch. All Turkish Cypriot universities favored campus-based programs before the pandemic and hence did not offer distance learning courses or programs. The reason might be that diplomas received from distance programs are not as valued as the ones acquired through campus-based programs neither in Turkey nor in North Cyprus.

Owing to this undesirable reputation of distance education, none of the universities in North Cyprus indulged in distance education. However, distance education could be a good option for international students if not for Turkish and Turkish Cypriot students. In response to the measures taken by Turkish Higher Education Council, which governs all universities in North Cyprus, all the universities in North Cyprus took up online instruction and learning starting from March 2020. All courses were delivered online up until 2021-22 fall semester

when it was decided to deliver %60 of all the offered courses face-to-face and the remaining %40 online due to the precautions to reduce student density on campus.

Like all universities which moved to online in March 2020 (Martin, 2020) Turkish Cypriot universities changed from on campus to online rapidly as well. The online mode of instruction and learning was quite a new phenomenon for both students and lecturers in North Cyprus. Most universities in the world were unprepared for online instruction in terms of resources and academic capabilities (Treve, 2021).

The universities in North Cyprus were no exception. Although the transition to online teaching mode was fast and successful, challenges were experienced due to the lack of previously prepared online pedagogies. The fast transition to online instruction caused massive disruption to lecturers' as well as students' lives. Lecturers had to work long hours answering students' queries to ease their students' anxiety and stress. Students, on the other hand, were stressed out due to the pandemic and worried about their courses and exams.

The transition to online mode was achieved in one week without any training. During the first two weeks BigBlue Button was used as the main online platform but later Google Meet was utilized. During this transition, the main challenge was to design the courses for lecturers and to be able to follow the online courses for students. During the early days of the pandemic, all stakeholders in education in North Cyprus were of the view that this was a temporary situation and that they would do their best to continue with education during these difficult times.

Online education was a kind of savior for them during these lockdown times and it would be ditched as soon as the pandemic was over. They were looking forward to having their face-to-face classes in the near future. They never thought at the beginning of the pandemic that online education which became a part of their lives during the pandemic might be a favorable learning and instruction mode during the post COVID-19 times. It never occurred to them that online education would be an integral component of higher education.

Materials and Methods

The aim of this longitudinal case study was to compare the perceptions of prospective history teachers of online learning mode during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic with the perceptions of the same participants 19 months after the COVID-19 broke out. When the initial data were collected, the participants had not had any experience of a virtual learning environment before. Given that the initial views can be misleading, the latter data were elicited 19 months later from the same participants to be compared so as to evaluate the likely changes in their views.

In order to realize the research aim, qualitative methods were employed. Qualitative research is an exploratory research type which is used to provide an understanding of reasons, perceptions, opinions and motivations. This type of research not only elicits perceptions of a

small number of people but also provides deeper insights into an issue. The current study was designed as a case study, which is an empirical inquiry evaluating an issue in its real life context. As argued by Yin (2009), a case study is a holistic approach and is effective in evaluating an issue specific to a particular situation.

Nine undergraduate students studying in the history department of a private university in Nicosia participated in the current study. All participants were from Turkey. When the government imposed curfew due to the pandemic, seven participants went back to Turkey while two of them stayed in North Cyprus. The age range of the participants was 19-21. None of the participants had any form of virtual learning experience before. The participants in this study mainly used Google Meet.

The initial data were collected from nine undergraduate students in June 2020 and the latter data in January 2022. Given that the campus closed in March, the participants had three months of experience with virtual classes when the initial data were elicited from them. The latter data were gathered in January in 2022, which meant that they had nineteen months of experience with online learning when the latter data were collected. In lieu with the regulations of the government, starting from September 2022, the participants had %60 of their courses face to face and %40 online.

The participants were familiar with traditional classes but they had to conduct their classes online on Moodle due to COVID-19 pandemic lock down during the spring semester in 2020. These virtual classes were held regularly during a period of fourteen weeks starting from March 15 and ending on June 30. As a course requirement the participants had to write a reflective essay evaluating the courses. This time they were asked to evaluate, compare and contrast the teaching and learning modes, namely online and face-to-face. There was only one open ended question on the reflective essay, which allowed the participants to comment on the two modes without any limitations. Thus, the textual data for the current study were elicited from the reflective essays to be analyzed qualitatively.

The data elicited through reflective essays were analyzed using qualitative methods. The textual data were coded first by each researcher separately for the purposes of reliability. Next, the coded data were classified in order to reach the themes. Then, the themes were tabulated from the most frequent to the least frequent. The reliability of the data analysis was ensured by each researcher's coding the text separately and then engaging in standardization sessions. The validity of the data analysis, on the other hand, was ensured by citing the participants' reflections in quotation marks when discussing the themes. Needless to say, the participants took place in this study by pseudonyms. An ethical approval for the study was granted by the ethical review board of a higher education institution in North Cyprus.

Results and Discussion

After a careful analysis of the initial data, the themes were revealed as stressful learning environment, less student motivation and harmed lecturer-student relationship. The results revealed that all participants perceived the virtual classes as stressful learning environment. Five participants stressed the lack of student motivation and three participants raised the issue of harmed lecturer- student relationship.

Stressful learning environment

All participants found the virtual classes offered on Moodle stressful. As mentioned by the participants most problems were due to technical challenges. During the lock down two of the participants were in Cyprus while seven of them were in Turkey. All participants regardless of where they live reported problems caused by the Internet connection. Ali complained that the Internet was constantly interrupted. Almeda reported the speed of the internet as the biggest problem. It was so terrible that “I could not focus on the classes”. Cansu supported the argument by writing that “the voice of the teacher came and went, which was so distracting”.

All the participants complained about the way exams were held on Moodle. Kaan mentioned, “we were asked to turn on cameras and microphones during exams. When doing so, my internet speed decreased even more because my camera and microphone were on. For this reason, I lost time when moving to next question.” Demet told “according to the exam regulations announced, we were not allowed to turn off the microphone and the camera during exams but the microphones were continuously sizzling. It was hard for us to focus.” Elif reported “the lecturers insisted that our camera and microphone be turned on even though we complained about the buzzing sound.” Melisa had a stressful week when she was unable to register to the courses on Moodle because she forgot her password. Although she informed the admins, her problem was solved one week later.

Ahmet reported that he sometimes had difficulty in focusing on the course because there were so many distracting things happening in his house during his virtual classes. Aylin complained that there was only one laptop in her house and she had to share it with her sister. When they had clashes she had to get into Google Meet on her cell phone.

Less student motivation

The second theme was found to be less student motivation. It was found that all the participants were happy with the way their history classes were conducted in traditional classes. They valued the discussions with their lecturers and the bond they developed with the course lecturers. Ahmet stated that since it was easy to access the recording of the lesson again on the digital mode, he did not feel obliged to attend the classes every week. He thought he would watch it later, but then he did not have time. Demet argued that for the irresponsible student online education could offer freedom but this was something harmful for the student.

Aylin wrote that she loved discussions they had in traditional classes but they could not have such discussions on the digital mode, which was one of the reasons for her demotivation.

Aylin added “since the speed of my internet was problematic, I could not concentrate and this decreased my motivation”. Ali acknowledged “I was excited to go to class in traditional education. In online education, I never looked forward to attending classes”. Almeda believed “face to face education is beneficial in terms of student motivation”. Kaan complained that “the lecturer was in a rush to cover up all the syllabus. He could not attend to the needs of each of us. This was also demotivating”.

Harmed student-lecturer relations

The third theme was harmed student-lecturer relations. Compared to traditional classes, virtual classes provide less social environment. Aylin reported “we failed to develop a close contact with the lecturer. He ignored the technical problems we had”. Ahmet stated “the lecturer was too busy with the course content. He did not have time to deal with our stress”. Demet wrote the lecturer “focused on the lesson only and he did not have time for chat”. Demet believed, the teacher-student relations are important when it comes to education. In traditional classes, the teacher knows the student better. There is the possibility of getting more feedback. For quality education, effective teacher- student communication is required. Individual differences are more observed by the teacher in a traditional classroom environment. The classroom environment is important for both teacher-student and student-student communication.

The analysis of the latter data which was collected when the participants had a nineteen month experience of virtual classes revealed the themes as comfortable learning environment, lack of a sense of belonging to the university and greater personal responsibility for one’s own learning.

Comfortable learning environment

All participants found virtual learning environments more comfortable than their traditional classrooms. As reported by Melisa, one can just finish breakfast and join an online class in a minute. Ahmet noted that his father had Covid and fell ill. He had to work as a part-time shop assistant and at the same time attend his online courses. If it were not online, he would not be able to continue his studies or pay his fees. Cansu reported that she did not need to bother about cooking or other daily chores since she was at home and this gave her a lot of time so that she could focus on her classes. Kaan stated that submission of assignments was very easy in online classes. As argued by Kaan, now that %60 of their classes were face to face, lecturers asked for physical papers and did not accept them to be submitted online. Kaan believed that this was a waste of paper.

Similarly, in Demet’s view, it was easier to upload assignments onto the system. Not only it saved paper but also time because when one forgets his \her assignment at home, he\she needs to get back home to collect it. That was why they insisted on submitting assignments online even in face to face classes. This was something that was very comfortable for them. Elif

commented that her family had financial problems during the pandemic and it would be impossible for her to live in North Cyprus if it were not online. She added that as the school fees were not reduced during the pandemic, she needed to cut her daily expenses by moving back home. By doing so, she was able to pay her school fees.

In a similar vein, Aylin wrote that living in North Cyprus was more expensive than living in Turkey. Aylin also had to go back to Turkey to save on accommodation and utility costs. She mentioned that she had a hard time in Cyprus during the beginning of the pandemic because her family was running a café in Istanbul and due to the lockdown her family had to cut back on her allowance. She was grateful that her studies continued due to online classes and that she would not lose any time to earn her degree.

Almeda valued the flexibility of online classes reporting that during face-to-face education when one missed a class there was not an opportunity to have a make-up class. However, given that the recordings of classes were uploaded on the system, in case one missed a synchronous class, he/she could watch the asynchronous video. The fact that the recorded videos were always there was highly praised by Almeda since she could refer to them any time she liked. Ali praised the freedom that online education provided. He argued one could access online classes on the beach or on the bus. According to him this ubiquitous aspect was very valuable and the fact that they did not need to buy physical books but use online materials was an advantage.

Lack of a sense of belonging to the university

Three of the participants raised the issue of the loss of the sense of belonging to the university. Aylin stated that she always dreamt of being a university student abroad. She would be free and have many friends. She would enjoy the facilities on the campus, join the student clubs and study at the library. According to her the worst part of online education was being confined to her room at home again. She believed university students needed to socialize with people from a variety of cultures so as to develop themselves. The university, in this respect, is a good venue since people with different nationalities came together on the campus. She regretted missing such opportunities.

Similarly, Demet expressed deep concerns about not being able to interact with other students or the lecturers like a normal university student. Interaction with the lecturers during the online mode was quite different. It was more straightforward and course related only. However, she missed the discussions they had with the lecturers before the pandemic. She valued the fact that she could ask them anything about life and they engaged in discussions in the canteen while having their coffees. She felt she was “a part of the university in those days” but now she no longer felt that way.

Ahmet felt the same with Aylin and Demet. He mentioned that Turkish people were all social and emotional people and communicated with their eyes and facial expressions as well

as words. As reported by him, “keeping close with our lecturers is important to us. When we like a lecturer we get more interested in his\her course. Ideally it should not be the case but that is the way with us”. Ahmet valued the emotional engagement with the lecturers and belonging to the community which the university formed in traditional classes.

Greater personal responsibility for one’s own learning

Two participants admitted that they felt the need to monitor their own learning more during the pandemic. Cansu complained that during the transition to online learning she felt uncertainty about her academic life. She wondered how she could make a good history teacher if the pandemic lasted long. This made her feel the need to develop herself academically. To illustrate, prior to the pandemic she usually stuck to the materials brought by the lecturers only.

During online mode, however, Cansu searched for other sources and materials to bring in a variety of perspectives to the issue. She believed a good teacher had to be knowledgeable and willing to learn. Additionally she became aware that her computer skills were not at a desirable level. Thus, she enrolled to an online computer course. Cansu wrote “I have to empower myself to be a good teacher. During the pandemic our lecturers might not have time to monitor our development. For this reason, I have to be more careful with my own learning”.

Kaan felt the same way as Cansu. He needed to be more indulged in the assessment process. He explained,

We have discussed the assessment tools and the weightage of each tool with the lecturers because we are really worried about the online exams. For example, we have allocated %10 for the online exam and %20 for the group work and %15 for presentations. I have learnt how to share my screen and give an online presentation. This is really beneficial for me because when I am employed as a teacher I might need to teach online. I also find Google Meet very useful. Scheduling a meeting, sending the link, recording the meetings and uploading the recordings onto the system are skills that every teacher needs to know nowadays.

Overall, the results indicated that online mode of instruction and learning were not favored in the beginning of the pandemic since all the themes emerged were negative. This result can be endorsed by that of Fruehwirth *et al.* (2021) that the rapid shift to online learning during the pandemic exasperated students’ negative feelings. However, as the analysis of the latter data indicated the participants’ views changed for the better dramatically. The participants very well liked online learning after nineteen months of online experience. To illustrate, stressful learning environment did not emerge as a theme in the latter data analysis. This could be acknowledged by the fact that the participants got used to online learning environments and that all the uncertainties and challenges they had experienced at the beginning of the pandemic were resolved.

Access to technological devices and a stable internet connection are amongst the basic requirements of online learning (Croft *et al.*, 2020). Turkish students who lived in rural areas in Turkey had internet connectivity problems. While the participants raised such technical issues in the first data, the technical challenges that were voiced in the first data were not mentioned in the latter data. The internet infrastructure must have been developed in the regions they lived.

As revealed by the analysis of the initial data, student motivation decreased due to the technical challenges, such as the speed of the internet and the lack of lecturers' expertise in online teaching mode. The result regarding technical challenges corroborated that of Schlesselman (2020) who found that the challenges faced by both faculty members and students included technology, accessibility, and connectivity. The lack of lecturers' expertise went in line with Bartlett and Warren (2021) who found the inefficiency of instructor support. According to Lyons (2004) in order to ensure effective history teaching online, lecturers need to be skilled in the use of technology, possess good organizational skills, and empathize with the students appreciating the challenges exposed by their first-time online class experience.

Another result of this study regarding decreased motivation went in line with that of Trinkle (1999) who argued that students' enthusiasm and participation declined in online classes in comparison to traditional classes. This result could be explained by the fact that students did not attend the synchronous classes at the set time but preferred watching the recorded online classes at a more convenient time. That asynchronous classes are available at any time can also be an advantage of online teaching but it makes way for decreased participation.

The other theme was found to be harmed by student-lecturer relations via the analysis of the initial data. The online environment changes the fundamental nature of the interaction between students and lecturers. The importance of the social role of lecturers emerged both in the initial and latter data. This social role referred to teachers' functions in building and improving student-teacher relationships in online learning environments (Guasch *et al.*, 2010).

Given the complexity of the many tasks of online lecturers at the cognitive and managerial levels, online lecturers can inadvertently exclude sensory and expressive skills to establish and maintain relationships with students (Major, 2010, p. 2184). Most problems concerning the issue stems from lecturers not attending to the affective or social role which becomes very important in establishing an expressive connection with students (Coppola *et al.*, 2002).

Compared to the negative perceptions of online education that were elicited in the analysis of the initial data, the analysis of the latter data revealed more favorable perceptions of virtual classes. In contrast to the first theme, which is stressful learning environment, of the initial data analysis, the participants viewed the online mode as a comfortable learning

environment in the analysis of the latter data. This meant that after nineteen months of experience with online learning, the participants' perceptions changed dramatically in favor of online instruction and learning. This result was endorsed by the findings of related studies which highlighted the comfort of online classes (McEwen, 2001; Moskal & Dziuban, 2001; Dutton et al., 2002; Bocchi et al., 2004; Hiltz & Shea, 2005).

Loss of the sense of belonging to the university emerged as the second theme in the latter data analysis. Although the participants praised online instruction and learning since it enabled their academic life to continue, they were away from the campus and the physical presence of their lecturers and peers. The participants valued the social presence of their lecturers. Lecturers' role cannot be denied in students' developing a sense of belonging to their universities. They were of the view that embodied interpersonal relations with lecturers shaped them and added to their culture. They considered education as a social experience. Regular face-to-face contact with lecturers helps students develop a sense of belonging.

As far as higher education is concerned, students experience a profound sense of belonging and connection to their university and to their peers within it (Reed & Dunn, 2021). Research indicated that students' sense of belonging was associated with academic achievement (Walton & Cohen, 2011).

The third theme that emerged through the analysis of the latter data was greater personal responsibility for one's own learning. Säljö (2010) posed that the definition of learning changed with the introduction of digital technologies. Online learning environments affect the learning styles of individuals by enabling them to take responsibility for their own learning. Because online students are required to take greater control of their learning process and be more active in stimulating their peers' learning, the shift to student-centered approaches ensured by the online platforms facilitate learning efficiency as well. Furthermore, since lecturers share power and responsibility with their students (Schrum & Hong, 2002), lecturers are expected to adopt more facilitative approaches in creating learner-centered online classrooms (Salmon, 2004; Smith, 2005).

As the comparison of the results indicated, the negative perceptions of the participants regarding online education at the beginning of the pandemic changed in favor of online instruction and learning dramatically. It is strongly believed that the results of the analysis of the data reveal sound results concerning the perceptions of the participants of online education. Bearing in mind that first impressions could be misleading without enough experience, the analysis of the latter data collected after nineteen months of experience with online education provided more reliable and accurate insights into the issue. The comparative nature of the current longitudinal study was useful in displaying the changes as well as the factors affecting these changes in the participants' perceptions of online education.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic created a crisis for universities. Most universities adapted to this sudden change from face-to-face to online teaching with the driving force being the continuity of education behind them. In this study the likely variations between university students' initial perceptions of online education during the beginning of the pandemic and latter perceptions nineteen months after the beginning of the pandemic were evaluated. The results indicate that the initial perceptions changed for the better dramatically. This investigation is expected to contribute to the relevant literature by providing deeper insights on the strengths and weaknesses of online education as perceived by prospective history teachers.

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