

Hybrid Learning in the Post-COVID Context. International Business and Economics Students' Perceptions

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Abstract

This paper aims to get an insight into students' perceptions regarding hybrid learning/on-line learning, in the aftermath of the COVID pandemic. This seems to be increasingly important, as decision-making in any university takes into account the viewpoints of all the important stakeholders, in this particular case, professors and students alike. In this research study, I focused on the first year students of only one faculty of Bucharest University of Economic Studies, namely International Business and Economics.

Keywords: *hybrid learning, on-line learning, face-to-face learning, learning effectiveness/efficiency, the COVID pandemic, students' perceptions.*

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Long before the COVID pandemic, the trend of university blended learning was initiated in many universities abroad, and it was soon picked up by Romanian universities, Bucharest University of Economic Studies being probably one of the first to adhere to this new tendency in education. In the early 2000s, our university began on-line programs, to complement face-to-face learning, at both graduate and post-graduate level, and this was soon followed by the development of a blended learning platform, one of the first in our country. However, professors' and students' opinions regarding this new trend (as far as I had access to them, from informal conversations with peers and my own students) were divided: while many appreciated the institution's alignment with the latest tendencies in education, as pioneered by many universities abroad, not quite so many were willing to invest time and effort in the training necessary at the time in order to benefit from these new technical possibilities. As a result, as far as I could grasp it from my immediate

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context, although they could see the advantages of the platform, not many professors were willing to use it.

During the COVID pandemic, quite abruptly, students and professors started using the university's blended learning platform, as well as complementary on-line platforms and applications (Zoom, Google classroom, even Whatsapp), as these were all of a sudden the only possibility to get in touch with one another. Throughout 2020 and 2021, my personal observations and conversations with my colleagues revealed that some professors and many students were growing more and more tired of exclusive on-line learning and started pointing out the disadvantages of studying/teaching from home, mainly related to health issues, both physical and psychological, associated with this new type of work. Consequently, as well as due to legal changes associated with the official termination of the pandemic, Bucharest University of Economic Studies took the decision – in March 2022 – to return to in-campus, face-to-face activities for most of its programs. The decision was based on the results of a research study carried out at that time, i.e. the results of questionnaires distributed to both students and professors to grasp their opinion on the matter.

Finally, after the pandemic, the BUES academic environment seems to witness a new shift especially in students' perceptions on this issue: countless informal conversations with my own students, more often than not initiated by them, revealed the fact that now they are aware of, and eager to point out the advantages of a combined, hybrid style of learning. Yet, hybrid learning is not adopted as an official policy of our university, and only few programs, especially post-graduate programs, pilot it (for instance, EDURES Master program, i.e. English Language Education and Research Communication for Business and Economics).

1.2 Research questions

The initial question, "What are the current perceptions of Bucharest University of Economics students regarding hybrid learning in the post-COVID context?", had to be refined as it was too general and data was insufficient and very difficult to gather, so it soon became "What are the current perceptions of International Business and Economics students regarding hybrid learning in the post-COVID context?". Moreover, it gave rise to additional questions, such as: "Are students aware of the advantages of on-line learning, when combined with face-to-face learning?", or, "Are

students equally aware of the disadvantages of on-line learning, when not combined with face-to-face learning?”, “Is there/ Has there been a shift in students’ perceptions on this issue?”.

All these questions are important, as their answers will help provide a more documented view of the perceptions of some of our students regarding a new, hybrid, style of learning that could be officially implemented in the years to come, as a result of a need to put to use, or rather, not to waste, the on-line experience accumulated during the pandemic. My expectations, my research hypothesis is that the majority of the questioned students will probably favor a new teaching/learning style, namely a hybrid one.

1.3 Research method and bias

The principal research method was quantitative: a questionnaire was distributed to 50 International Business and Economics 1st year students (my own students in Business English and Communication who agreed to fill in the questionnaire) at the beginning of the second semester (end of February), that is after they had studied for a period on-line and, subsequently, for at least one and a half semesters face-to-face. For triangulation purposes, a second method was used, a qualitative one, namely classroom observation / informal conversations with the same students, for more refined insights into their perceptions and opinions.

Bias, however, is likely to arise from the mere selection of 1st year students only, who experienced on-line learning as high school students, as well as from the small number of respondents.

1.4 Generalizability issues and relevance of findings

Due to the fact that this research study only analyses a limited number of questionnaires, my conclusions do not have a high degree of generalizability. Yet, my findings have the potential to prove valuable for Bucharest University of Economic Studies, as well as for our academic community, as they will help both the professors and the decision-makers to identify a common thread in students’ perceptions regarding a possible future official policy of the university, namely the potential adoption of hybrid learning.

1.5 Paper structure

Apart from the introduction, the paper will be divided in two chapters, Research findings and their analysis, where I shall try to see if the findings help us answer (all) the research questions. They will be followed by brief conclusions. The last part of the paper consists of one appendix, *ASE Students' opinion on hybrid learning in the post-COVID context*.

2. Literature review

To start with, what do we understand by “hybrid learning”? Researchers and educators alike refer to that style of teaching/learning that combines face-to-face learning and virtual learning and that uses hybrid classroom tools (such as videoconferencing or blended learning platforms). According to UNESCO, “hybrid learning can be defined as a learning approach that combines both remote learning and in-person learning to improve student experience and ensure learning continuity” (2020).

A quick search on the Internet reveals that an incredible amount of research has been done in the last couple of years on the issue of hybrid learning. If one searches “hybrid learning advantages and disadvantages”, we obtain as many as 20.3m results, while keywords “challenges of hybrid learning” generate a staggering 149m results, many of which are research articles. Some authors try to analyze the context, while some point out the advantages, and especially, the disadvantages of on-line study.

So what is the context? A press release from UNICEF, from September 15, 2021, presents a staggering figure: 77 million children have been removed from physical classrooms for approximately 18 months worldwide due to the COVID pandemic and at the time of the press release the situation was not yet solved. Organizations such as UNESCO are worried about the negative effects of school closure, especially in the case of vulnerable, disadvantaged groups, and are active in the sector in order to diminish these effects as much as possible.

Among the researchers who attempt to address this new problem that appeared together with the COVID pandemic in 2020, Nebrida and Bangud for instance (2022) focused on “hybrid teaching pedagogy in higher education” and aimed to identify the most important challenges that both professors and students face and, most importantly, to see “how these challenges are responded to”. Namely, they “aimed to develop a model to address problems in hybrid teaching” and identified the most important

mechanisms utilized in addressing the challenges faced by this category of professionals during the COVID pandemic, i.e. “continuous professional development, informal sharing and discussion with colleagues, and institutional in-house training” (2022: 51).

Some authors identify education, alongside health care, as one of the most impacted sectors by the COVID pandemic (Karakose et al.), while others have very specific research interests, for instance the decrease in the level of life satisfaction with particular groups of students (Atilgan and Aksoy), the severe psychological symptoms developed by students in Bangladesh (Hossain et al.), the effects of stress and anxiety in the case of US students (Son et al.).

Other researchers simply focus on the practical side of reopening schools in physical format. We find out that in some countries (Bahrain), governments gave schools the freedom to decide about the mode of delivery of lectures (Al Najjar). More positively, Katherine Boyarsky focuses on “The Benefits of Hybrid Learning in a Post-COVID World”, who notices that “schools are starting to devise delivery of lectures in online settings, in-person learning, blended learning and hybrid learning”, in an attempt to “effectively deliver combinations of methods to achieve” student learning (apud Nebrida and Bangud: 53). Other views are more balanced, in the sense that they take into account both the advantages and the drawbacks of hybrid learning (Mourtzis et al.).

3. Research findings

The results of the 50 questionnaires that I received from my students are as follows. For question 1, “Did you study on-line during the COVID pandemic?”, all 50 answers were affirmative, as expected. Differences among students arise regarding the interval, the period for which they studied on-line (question 2), which varied from 3 months, the shortest, to 2 years+, the longest possible. Only 4 students declared that they studied on-line for 3-6 months, the majority having studied on-line for at least 1 year (17 respondents), 1 year and a half/3 semesters (14 respondents) or 2 years or more (15 respondents).

Question 3, “How would you appreciate this learning experience in terms of its effectiveness?” was answered as follows: 16 students appreciated it as “poor”, 27 as “average” and only 4 students considered it “effective”, while no student appreciated it as “very effective”.

Question 4, "In the case of foreign languages, do you think on-line learning is a good choice (in terms of effectiveness)?", only 25 students answered this is not a good choice, while the other 25 consider it effective. When it comes to other subjects (question 5), the situation is significantly different: 32 respondents appreciate on-line learning activities ineffective, and only 18 consider them effective.

Regarding the advantages of on-line learning (question 6), by far the most selected was "time-saving" (39 occurrences), closely followed by "flexibility" (35 occurrences) and "being able to study/work from home (home town)" (30 occurrences). Students also appreciated "the possibility of multi-tasking" (20 occurrences), its "convenience" (17 occurrences), "safety (health)" (11 occurrences) and the fact that this type of learning is "money saving" (8 occurrences).

As far as the disadvantages of on-line activity as concerned, the most mentioned was "the lack of social interaction with peers during breaks" (34 answers), again closely followed by the "poor communication with peers and instructors/teachers" (33 answers). Also many considered "poor understanding of taught subjects" an important disadvantage (25 answers), as well as "health issues (difficult to be in front of a screen for many hours – eyes, back issues)" (18 answers). Only 2 students were worried about the "cost of energy bills", and only a few students mentioned additional disadvantages: "low trust", "easier to get inspiration", "mental health issues", or external disturbing factors".

Question 8, "How would you like to study foreign languages in the future?", received the following answers: face-to-face (25 respondents), on-line (4 respondents) and hybrid (21 respondents).

Motivation of this choice (question 9) registered 39 answers. Most of them revolve around the idea that theoretical lectures could be taught on-line, while practical activities (languages included) should be, or are more effective when they are, face-to-face: "I believe that the theory lessons could be on-line, but the speaking must be face-to-face.", "I think you can learn a language more easily if you are face-to-face with the teacher", "I would like to study foreign languages face-to-face, because it's very important to interact with people".

When studying in campus, students have better access to information, but also "gestures and emotions". This also "helps understanding better the lessons and the tasks that we have to do", while "it is easier to ask questions" and to pay attention to the class (one does not

get distracted as easily as in on-line activities), and one has “better interaction between teachers and students”. Sometimes this choice is strictly emotional, “I don’t want to repeat this experience [on-line study], because I’m a person who works better face-to-face.” Moreover, there is a considerable degree of resistance to on-line activities: “from my experience, and that of my classmates, it [on-line learning during the COVID pandemic] was very ineffective”, “for me, on-line learning is completely useless”.

The respondents who chose hybrid learning motivate their choice by merely listing what they consider to be its main advantages of both in campus and on-line activities, namely: “it’s easier to save time”, “because even if I’d like to participate to every class, sometimes time management wouldn’t give me a chance”, a combination of “saving time” and “not losing contact with reality”, it “allows students to interact in real life and also offers [them] the possibility to access the necessary information on the Internet and save the time which we spend on the road”, or “face-to-face studying is very much enjoyable” while “on-line studying is good for saving time”.

The very role of the teacher might suffer important changes in the years to come, as one answer seems to suggest: “It is important to have a teacher you can learn from and work with, so you improve your skills, but there are also so many on-line tutorials, so you can learn by yourself.”

3.1. Interpretations of research findings

As expected, all students answered that they did study on-line during the COVID pandemic, the main difference lying in the interval for which they had on-line activities. The majority, 46 students, studied on-line for at least 1 year, up to two academic years. However, in terms of effectiveness, no single respondent considered this learning experience as a “very effective” one, and only a minority, i.e. 7 respondents, appreciated it as “effective”. The majority believe it was “average”, while 16 students simply consider on-line learning was ineffective in their case.

In this context, it is somewhat surprising that, at least in the case of foreign languages (question 4), 50% of respondents believe on-line learning is a good choice. If one compares this result to the percentage obtained in question 5, one shall notice that in the case of other subjects 64% of students consider on-line learning is not appropriate. Why this difference in the case of languages? A possible explanation is the following: because the majority

of International Business and Economics students come to university with a very good level of English (certified B1-C2), and their perception seems to be that they already master languages, so they can cope with on-line studying, which is more demanding on the learner if he/she is to get involved and understand any of the taught subjects. As 1st year students, most of them fail to see the difference between general English, which they studied before, and ESP (English for Special Purposes), which is a new subject in terms of vocabulary and professional skills and which they will focus on during faculty years for 6 semesters.

Students were prompt to point out the main advantages of on-line learning, though: most of them seem to appreciate this type of activity for its “flexibility” and “convenience”, for the possibility of “multi-tasking”, for being “time-saving”, probably due to the fact that they do not waste extra time going to and back from the university. They were happy to be able to study from home/their home town. What many of them do not realize is that the very possibility of multi-tasking makes learning less effective, at least compared to face-to-face learning, in campus. Not very many students thought of safety (health safety) as an advantage, which could be a pretty good indicator of their perception of the danger that the COVID pandemic represented. Finally, the fact that only 8 students considered “money-saving” an advantage of on-line study is not very relevant, as many do not work yet, and money spending does not seem to have the same impact as on an income earning adult.

They were also very much aware of the disadvantages of exclusive on-line learning. As we could see above, they identified the “poor communication with peers and instructors” and “the lack of social interaction with peers during breaks” as the most important disadvantages from the list of options, closely followed by “the poor understanding of the taught subjects” and “health issues”, which indeed were also present in the literature. Interestingly, students also added disadvantages to the list: “low trust”, “easier to get inspiration”, “mental health issues”, or “external disturbing factors”. Low trust, or trust issues, may come from the lack of social interaction with their colleagues, i.e. from the lack of validation, so needed for every human being, especially at their age (19-20). By “mental health issues” students may mean the negative psychological effects of working in isolation, which refers us back to the lack of interaction with peers. Finally, “external disturbing factors” is a disadvantage not many are willing to acknowledge, namely the fact behind the computer screen, as

teacher control cannot reach that far, many students simply focus on something else, from other projects, or even work, to computer games and entertainment.

Not surprisingly, 50% of the students who answered the questionnaire would still go for face-to-face learning, while 42% would choose a hybrid form, which is likely to preserve the advantages of on-line learning, without the disadvantages of exclusive on-line learning.

4. Conclusions

To sum up, although most students are well aware of the advantages and disadvantages of on-line learning vs. face-to-face learning, they seem to be indecisive about the future possibilities of academic study. At least in the case of foreign languages, more specifically English, which they have studied for minimum 10 years in school and which they do not perceive as completely new, different, or difficult to understand, some would welcome on-line study. However, a considerable number of respondents stated it clearly that foreign languages presuppose a lot of practical activities, which are more effective when taught face-to-face.

Consequently, half of the 50 respondents would choose face-to-face activities, while only 8% would opt for 100% on-line interaction. 42% though see the future of academic study as a hybrid one, in other words they would be satisfied if they could benefit from the advantages of both face-to-face and on-line learning. Although the last category does not represent the majority, which seems to contradict my initial research hypothesis, I would venture argue that the future is likely to prove that a combination of face-to-face activities and on-line, blended learning platform type of activities, is probably the best choice in terms of access to education and effectiveness of the teaching/learning process, at least at an academic level.

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Questionnaire

ASE Students' opinion on hybrid learning in the post-COVID context

Target: Bucharest University of Economic Studies / International Business and Economics students, i.e. English and Business Communication 1st year students

Your answers will be used for research purposes. They are anonymous and optional.

1. During the COVID pandemic, did you study on-line?
YES / NO
2. For how long? (only answer if you answered "yes" for question 1)
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3. How would you appreciate this learning experience in terms of its effectiveness?
1 (very poor) 2 (poor) 3 (average) 4 (effective) 5 (very effective)
4. In the case of studying foreign languages (Business English/Romanian as a Foreign Language), do you think on-line learning is a good choice (in terms of effectiveness)?
YES / NO
5. In the case of other subjects, do you think on-line learning is a good choice (in terms of effectiveness)?
YES / NO
6. Choose what you consider to be the main advantages of on-line learning from the list below:
convenience
flexibility
the possibility of multi-tasking
being able to study/work from home (home town)
money saving
time saving
safety (health)
other:
7. Choose what you consider to be the main disadvantages of on-line learning from the list below:
poor communication with peers and instructors/teachers
poor understanding of taught subjects

lack of social interaction with peers during breaks
health issues (difficult to be in front of a screen for many hours –
eyes, back issues)
cost of energy bills
other:

8. How would you like to study foreign languages in the future?

face-to-face
on-line
hybrid

9. Motivate your choice for question 8:

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