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### Distance Learning in the Times of Covid-19 – Kosovar Teacher's Perspective

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# Distance Learning in the Times of Covid-19 – Kosovar Teacher’s Perspective

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**Abstract.** Distance learning is a complex process of teaching and learning, which massively began to be used during the global pandemic COVID-19 throughout the world, which since March has become indispensable in Kosovo as well. These online classes created a situation that was not stable for the education system in Kosovo and showed major educational challenges but also some benefits that teachers had from this experience.

The purpose of this research is to look in more detail at the challenges and opportunities of distance learning from the perspective of teachers. From a questionnaire distributed to 52 English teachers, data were extracted on the challenges and benefits of distance learning. The final analysis shows that despite the challenges, teachers were satisfied with the distance learning process and address the variety of technological tools, as well as the opportunity to try new teaching methods as main benefits. Meanwhile, the participants see the lack of students' access to technology that prevents them from developing their lessons properly as the major challenge during distance learning in COVID-19.

Keywords: Distance Learning, Teacher, Challenges, Benefits, COVID-19

## **Introduction**

While the students had already finished their winter semester exams and were waiting for the spring semester to begin, the COVID-19 outbreak unfortunately made this impossible. Schools and universities in Kosovo were closed since March 11, leaving no choice for teachers but to turn to online teaching. Therefore, the purpose of this research paper is to analyze how teachers dealt with distance learning, what challenges they faced during the pandemic, and what kind of benefits they received from this experience.

In general, the research will focus on English language teachers of primary, secondary schools, but also from universities. The reason why higher education is included in the research is because the Ministry of Education and Science (MES) has already published their distance learning plans for lower education (first and second level), but not one for higher education. As a result, universities had no alternative but to start their own online teaching plan, so a comparison between these levels seemed appropriate.

## **Literature Review**

Before moving on to the methodology, a brief overview of teaching and distance learning in the Kosovar education system is needed. Although there is extensive literature dedicated to distance learning, the topic as such leaves room for much research to be conducted in the future especially in Kosovo during the time of COVID-19, where the lack of research in this area is evident. Therefore, this research paper focuses mainly on the benefits and challenges faced by teachers in Kosovo during distance learning.

In general, most of the resources used address the same benefits and challenges; however some include more details or tend to contradict each other through their findings. These findings are taken from research papers, articles, language and teaching conferences, and books.

Initially, a research paper by Zhang, Wang, Yang, and Wang (2020 p.4) states that some of the most common challenges for distance learning are mainly "weakness of distance learning infrastructure", lack of training for teachers who do distance learning, teaching and learning environment of both teachers and students. The paper has been conducted in Chinese universities and the solution they suggest overcoming these obstacles is to create a better online teaching infrastructure and provide more training sessions for teachers.

On the other hand, a recent study (Basilaia and Kvakvadze, 2020, p.6) conducted in Georgia analyzes the situation of educational institutions during COVID-19. According to the results, although the process of switching from face-to-face classes to online ones was fast, the result was successful. One of the essential benefits mentioned in the paper was that teachers gained useful experience which can be used in the future, given the fact that most educational institutions have decided to continue with distance learning for another period of time.

On the other hand, an article by Bao (2020, p.114) discussed the challenges of teachers and students during online classes. Some of the challenges listed were students' lack of attention, their academic readiness and attitude. For teachers, the author mentioned the lack of digital knowledge, and the lack of support from the institution to teachers.

An interesting and recent research conducted by Sahu (2020, p.3) focuses on a new perspective on the challenges that staff, and students faced during this pandemic. Based on the author, the virus has affected the mental health of students and teachers and some institutions have also canceled classes or postponed them to an uncertain date. Mental health as a challenge of teaching and learning online has influenced the teaching and learning process. The shift from face-to-face classes to online ones has disrupted the routine of teachers and students and adapting to a new work environment can be more complex than they imagined. In addition, the paper analyzes various challenges in addition to mental health. Some of the most common ones are switching to online classes face to face, assessment, international students and their travel restrictions.

In general, based on the various findings and data provided by authors and researchers we can conclude that there is a lot of information about distance learning, some challenges, and benefits from this experience. However, based on my knowledge Kosovo lacks detailed information on this topic and such research would be valuable to teachers of educational institutions in Kosovo. This research would give a different approach to teachers who believe that face-to-face learning is more conducive and easier to manage. It would provide supporting data emphasizing that with proper planning and by structuring distance learning can become interactive and fruitful.

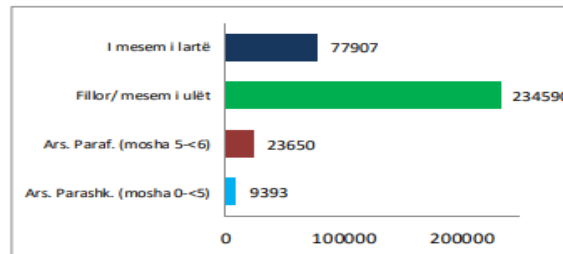
## Purpose of the Research

On March 11, all educational institutions in Kosovo were closed and at the same time distance learning began to gain momentum.

According to statistics published by the MEST (Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology) (2020, p.4), the number of students in pre-university education during 2019-2020 was 345,540 in general (Chart 1), while the number of educational staff was 28,997, of which 23,234 were teachers (Fig. 1).

### Nxënës në arsimin parauniversitar

<b>Gjithsej nxënës</b>	<b>345.540 (M 177.954 &amp; F 167.586)</b>
Parashkollor	9.393 (M. 4.924 & F. 4.469)
Parafillor	23.650 (M. 12.304 & F. 11.346)
Fill./i mes. i ulët	234.590 (M. 120.979 & F. 113.611)
I mesëm i lartë	77.907 (M. 39.747 & F. 38.160)



Gafiku 1. Numri i nxënësve sipas niveleve

### Personeli arsimor

Gjithsej personel....	28.150 (M. 13.941 & F. 14.209)	<b>Fillor/i mesëm i ulët...</b>	21.151 (M. 10.135 & F. 11.016)
• Mësimdhënës.....	23.234 (M. 10.069 & F. 13.165)	• Mësimdhënës .....	17.426 (M. 7.080 & F. 10.346)
• Personeli admin.....	1.566 (M. 1.048 & F. 518)	• Pers. administrativ .....	1.152 (M. 800 & F. 352)
• Personeli ndihmës....	3.350 (M. 2.824 & F. 526)	• Personel ndihmës....	2.573 (M. 2.255 & F. 318)
<b>Parashkollor .....</b>	847 (M. 83 & F. 764)	<b>Mesëm i lartë.....</b>	6.152 (M. 3.723 & F. 2.429)
• Mësimdhënës .....	553 (M. 1 & F. 552)	• Mësimdhënës .....	5.255 (M. 2.988 & F. 2.267)
• Pers. administrativ .....	89 (M. 10 & F. 79)	• Pers. administrativ .....	325 (M. 238 & F. 87)
• Personel ndihmës.....	205 (M. 72 & F. 133)	• Personel ndihmës.....	572 (M. 497 & F. 75)

Fig 1. Educational Staff (in Albanian)

These statistics indicate that this total number of students and teachers has undergone distance learning since March. Therefore, the immediate mobilization of educational institutions and MEST for the realization of distance learning was necessary.

Meanwhile, on March 11, higher education came out with the announcement that all faculties and colleges have suspended work until March 27, 2020, as a preventive measure against COVID-19. This decision affected a total of 50,593 students of public universities, 5,245 students of private colleges, as well as 1500 members of the academic staff in public universities, while 961 members of the academic staff in private colleges (MEST, 2020, p.5; University of Prishtina, 2020, p.1).

Due to the short time for preparation and the lack of prior training, teachers faced a host of challenges which they have not yet overcome, several months after the implementation of distance learning. However, many see this type of learning as a fruitful and beneficial process for the future of education in Kosovo.

Consequently, the purpose and objective of this research is to analyze in more detail what were the challenges and benefits of distance learning during the months that teachers had to work from home.

## Research Questions

The research question of a research is more than a simple statement because it must also include some details of the full nature of the research.

To justify the purpose of the research topic and achieve the research objectives, we will answer the following research questions:

1. How does the Kosovar education system function in times of the pandemic?
2. How satisfied are Kosovar teachers with distance learning?
3. What are the biggest challenges in distance learning?
4. What are the biggest benefits of distance learning?

### **Research Methodology**

For the purposes of this study, a descriptive (empirical) method was used, more specifically a methodological-qualitative method. According to Dornyei (2007, p. 123), the qualitative method can be defined as a method that collects quantitative and numerical data.

The tool that has been implemented to collect data with the qualitative approach from teachers is a questionnaire. The questionnaire contained twelve closed and open questions asking about demographics (gender, region where they work, working sector), as well as questions related mainly to distance learning, the challenges, and benefits of this teaching method.

### **Hypotheses**

In order to analyze the research focus, the following hypotheses have been put forward. In addition to problem analysis, hypotheses will also serve as a means by which we will test research questions.

- Hypothesis 1: A large number of external and internal factors have directly influenced the development of the learning process in times of pandemic.
- Hypothesis 2: This process has been developed and is being developed in a large number of technical-technological and organizational difficulties.
- Hypothesis 3: Teachers are not satisfied with distance learning.
- Hypothesis 4: The biggest challenge in distance learning has been student grading.
- Hypothesis 5: One of the biggest benefits of distance learning has been the flexibility of time and place.

### **Research - Data Collection**

In order to elaborate on the research problem, we have collected factual data through an online questionnaire distributed through Google Forms. Fifty-two questionnaires were completed by English language teachers, collected from December 1st to December 30th. In the following section we will describe the characteristics of the participants accompanied by graphics, in order to show more clearly the data collected.

### **Characteristics of Participants**

This research was attended by 52 English language teachers from primary, higher education, private language schools and Kosovar universities.

Of the total number of participants, 59.6% were female, while 40.4% were male (Fig.2).

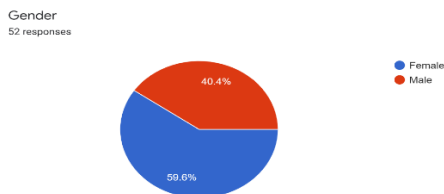


Fig.2: Gender

Regarding the labor sector, out of 52 participants in total, 67.3% are part of the public sector while 32.7% come from the private sector (Fig. 3). Whereas, in terms of teaching experience, the highest percentage (9.6%) belongs to those who are practicing the teaching profession for 1 to 5 years (Fig.4).

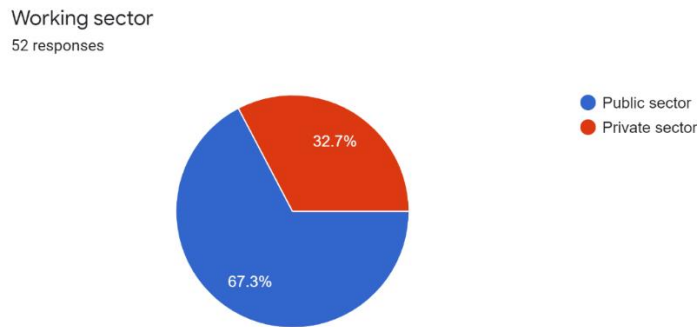


Fig.3: Working sector

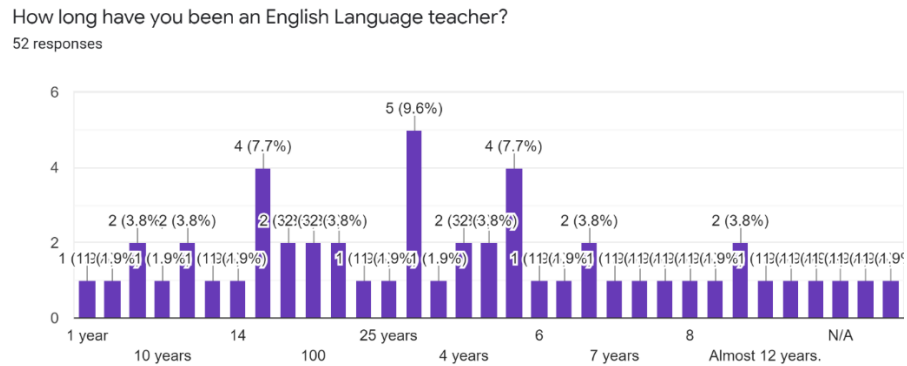


Fig.4: Work experience

### Empirical Findings

The following results show a reflection of teachers and their responses to the distributed questionnaire on the challenges and benefits of distance learning. As a result, the hypotheses will be verified, and we will give our conclusions and recommendations about the discussed topic.

First, from the institutions and the responses of the participants, 80.8% are working remotely, 13.5% work with students face to face, while 5.7% have worked remotely only during quarantine or hold mixed learning (face to face and remotely) (Fig.5).

Are you working remotely/from home?

52 responses

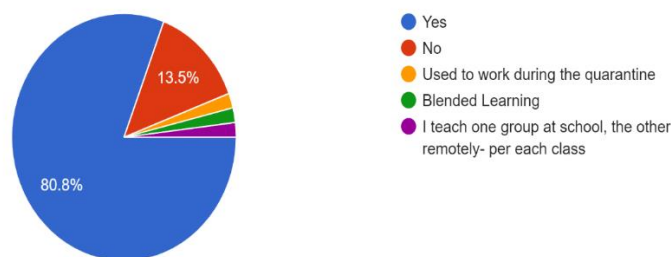


Fig. 5: Distance learning

On the other hand, given the delays in the implementation of the plans that the Ministry of Education planned for distance learning, and the impact that this delay had on pupils, students, and teachers in Kosovo (MEST, 2020 p.7; KAS, 2019, p. 3), we can say that irregularities may have appeared in the teaching process but also dissatisfaction. The following data will prove that teachers are faced with external and internal factors; and technical problems but also benefits during distance learning, so the first two hypotheses are completely correct. However, when asked if they are satisfied with the distance learning process, 65.4% of teachers said they are satisfied with distance learning (Fig. 6). Consequently, the third hypothesis is rejected.

How satisfied are you with remote teaching?

52 responses

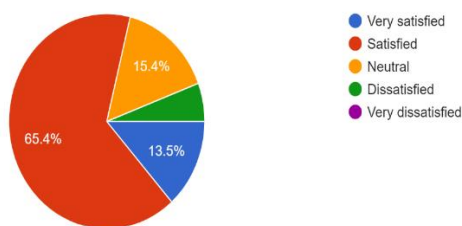


Fig. 6: Satisfaction with distance learning

Despite the positive attitude of teachers towards distance learning, we cannot deny the challenges that followed this process, considering the fact that Kosovo has not implemented distance learning before. Of the ten challenges listed in the question of what the biggest challenges during distance learning have been, student access to technology, and converting activities/book content to fit the needs of students have been rated as the most distinct challenges with 59.6% and work as third with 75.7% (Fig. 7). From the results of the questionnaire, we can say that the fourth hypothesis, which states that the biggest challenge in distance learning is student assessment, is partially correct because there are other challenges that teachers have assessed as distinct during the lesson in distance.

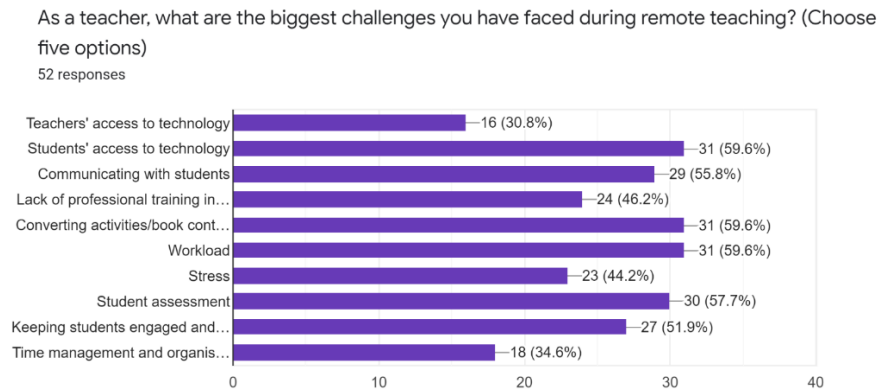


Fig: 7: Distance learning challenges

However, every experience also highlights the good side from which the sufferer benefits, in our case the teachers. According to Appana (2008), some of the benefits of distance learning are the improvement of the quality of teaching, the numerous opportunities for teachers to extend the explanations of teaching topics beyond the textbook. In our context, with the responses of 52 participants we can state that of the ten options listed in the table of benefits of distance learning, with the highest percentage was the option wide range of tools with 63.5% (Fig. 8). Therefore, in conclusion, we can say that the fifth hypothesis, which states that the greatest benefit in distance learning is the flexibility of time and place, is rejected as participants have chosen other options as greater benefits during the learning process.

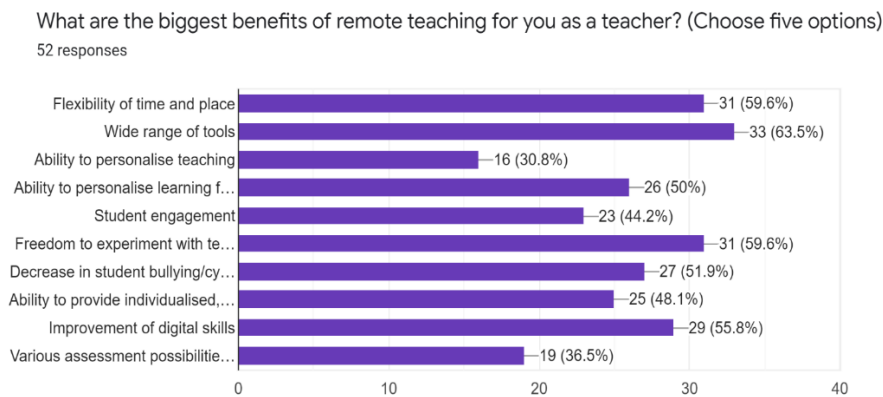


Fig.8: Distance learning benefits

## Conclusion and Recommendations

### Conclusion

Preparation for distance learning should be taken seriously by policy makers, education experts and teachers and students who are necessarily an integral part of the whole process and face the vicissitudes of this process directly. The COVID-19 period found the field of education in Kosovo unprepared, so from this research we can draw the following conclusions:

1. Teachers are satisfied with distance learning and acknowledge that during this period they have encountered many challenges and benefits.
2. Access of students and teachers to technology, student motivation, communication with students, lack of professional training have been challenges displayed during distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.



3. Benefits, on the other hand, such as the space given to teachers to try different teaching methods, the reduction of harassment of students when teaching takes place face to face, are answers that teachers have given from their experience of several months.

### **Recommendations**

We have in mind that the small number of participants of English language teachers, as well as the fact that they belong to different educational institutions cannot generalize the situation with distance learning in Kosovo, but can be taken as a basis for further research. specific.

Teachers' responses and this research in general can be the starting point of a number of initiatives in Kosovo for the benefit of the teaching process. A more detailed research can be conducted in each educational institution separately, i.e. not taking all levels of education as in our case. This would help:

- to formulate separate policies for each institution and educational level;
- to create and compile professional training sessions for the development of distance learning;
- strengthen and expand the coverage of the internet distribution network.

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