

ONLINE EDUCATION THROUGH THE EYES OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

[ONLINE VZDELAVANIE OCAMI STUDENTOV S POSTIHNUTIM]

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Abstract

The Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic was during the pandemic forced to interrupt face-to-face teaching in all schools from kindergarten to university and switch to online education. Even the universities were not prepared for this form of education, as few universities offered study programs in which it was possible to study either in a combined or in an online form. As part of the empirical investigation, the aim was to map the opinions of university students with specific needs and analyzes their experiences with online education. The findings resulting from the investigation of the involved 83 respondents indicate that online education had many advantages and disadvantages for students with specific needs. The most frequently mentioned advantages were recordings from lectures and seminars, teachers were more accommodating, had better communication during consultations, felt more comfortable in the home environment. There were also negative answers, such as social isolation, technical problems, lack of practice, exercises, problems to concentrate, deterioration of health, unattractive online teaching, reduced time for writing tests.

Key words

Student with disabilities, student with specific needs, online education, inclusion, tertiary education

Abstrakt

Ministerstvo školstva, vedy, výskumu a športu SR bolo počas pandémie nútené prerušiť prezenčnú výučbu na všetkých školách od materských až po vysoké a prejsť na online vzdelávanie. Na túto formu vzdelávania neboli pripravené ani vysoké školy, keďže málokterá univerzita ponúkala študijné programy, v ktorých bolo možné študovať či už v kombinovanej alebo online forme. V rámci empirického skúmania bolo cieľom zmapovať názory vysokoškolákov so špecifickými potrebami a analyzovať ich skúsenosti s online vzdelávaním. Zistenia vyplývajúce z prieskumu zapojených 83 respondentov naznačujú, že online vzdelávanie malo pre študentov so špecifickými potrebami množstvo výhod a nevýhod. Najčastejšie uvádzanými výhodami boli nahrávky z prednášok a seminárov, vyučujúci boli ústretovejší, lepšia komunikácia pri konzultáciách, príjemnejší pocit v domácom prostredí. Objavili sa aj negatívne odpovede, ako sociálna izolácia, technické problémy, nedostatok praxe, cvičenia, problémy so sústredením,

zhoršenie zdravotného stavu, nezaujímavá online výučba, skrátený čas na písanie testov.

Kľúčové slová

Študent s postihnutím, študent so špecifickými potrebami, online vzdelávanie, inklúzia, terciárne vzdelávanie

Introduction

According to Samalova (2016), education is perceived as one of the most important values not only for an individual but also for the entire society. From an individual point of view, it is a form of socialization of a person in the given society and conditions their place in society. From the social point of view, education contributes to the further development of society and to building of well-being as well. The fact that everyone has the right to education, including persons with disabilities, is established by a legislative document in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, more precisely in the Article 24 of that document, which was adopted by the United Nations (UN) in December 2006. The Convention represents an international treaty of states, including the Slovak Republic. By adopting this law, we committed ourselves to implementing inclusive education at all levels of education (Lechta, 2016). The law has priority over the laws in our republic, ever since the so-called ratification of this legal document took place in 2010. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities was the final step of the declaration from Salamanca, where the document outlined the principle of inclusive education, within which all teaching, including the curriculum and organizational structures, should be adapted to the individual needs of the educated pupil or student (Hornakova, 2014).

Another key problem for our work is a lower participation of people with disabilities in tertiary education. Which is a consequence of the fact that there are special schools at lower levels of education, but there is no other educational alternative for higher education. University studies take place either in the form of an individual schedule of fulfilling studies related obligations or in the form of inclusion of students with specific needs among intact students (Kvetonova, Strnadova, Hajkova, 2012). Novosad (2008) is aware of the fact that students coming from special secondary schools are much less prepared for higher education than those who attended a regular secondary school.

Otherness, difference can be physical or mental stemming mainly from a disability or illness or it can be a social difference that can be related either to the given disability or to the economic or material security of the given individual. Otherness is a common part of our society, but we can still associate negative feelings with it, such as fear, which often results from something that is unknown to us. The only way that difference can be accepted in our society is that we will try to recognize human difference, understand it and find out how we could be helpful to such persons so that they feel good and appreciated in our society (Seidler, Beliková, Dufekova, 2013). Law no. 131/2002 Coll. on universities in §100 refers to students with a medical handicap as students with specific needs. Studies require a lot of

independence from students with specific needs and more attention from the university. Langmeier and Krejcirova (2006) point out that a student aged 20-25 is in a period of early adulthood, when they should be mature enough to deal with various situations related to, for example, independence from parents, building new relationships, etc. It is even more difficult for students with specific needs (hereinafter only students with SN). For individuals with disabilities, coming to university means leaving their "safe" environment. That is why it is important that the given university has a functioning support system developed when students with SN arrive. The university, whether it is private or public according to §100 of Act no. 131/2002 Coll. on universities should arrange academic conditions for students with SN without reducing the demands on their academic performance. According to §100 of Act no. 131/2002 workplaces, called support centres, are established at universities to help students with SN. Coordinators are also involved in supporting and helping students with SN. The coordinator is authorized by the rector, if it is a legal entity that can act as a coordinator at several universities. If the coordinator is a natural person, it is in most cases a teacher, and if they work at the faculty, the natural person is authorized by the dean of the given faculty. The condition for functioning as a coordinator is an acquired university education in the fields of special pedagogy, social work, or psychology and the use of the already mentioned education in practice (Cernakova, Pokryvkova, 2019). Sender, Polackova (2022) are of the opinion that there is no consensus in Slovakia about the nature, meaning and feasibility of inclusive education, because until recently no political demand for inclusive education in tertiary education was announced. However, according to the current wording of Act No. 245/2008 Coll. on Upbringing and Education (School Act) with effect from 1 January 2023, the term inclusive education is defined in § 2 among the basic terms. Inclusive education according to Act no. 45/2008 Coll. on Upbringing and Education in §2 letter ai) means: "joint upbringing and education of children, pupils, students or participants in upbringing and education, carried out on the basis of opportunity and respect for their upbringing-educational needs and individual characteristics and supporting their active involvement in the upbringing-educational activities of the school or school facility. "We believe that the concept of inclusive education will soon be defined in the Higher Education Act as well.

The term pandemic is explained by Pennington (2020, p. 41) as "an epidemic of a new disease that has spread over a large territory, for example to several continents or to the whole world." Also, according to the World Health Organization (2020), the coronavirus was a new infectious disease that was extremely contagious. As a result of the introduction of the measures, which mainly concerned the restriction of contacts, some activities and events had to be cancelled or some were moved to the online space. These facts also affected the sector of education, so that all educational institutions were closed. In other words, the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sports of the Slovak Republic was forced to suspend face-to-face teaching at all schools, from kindergarten to university, and switch to a distance form of education. It was a challenge for most students and teachers, because distance

or online education did not exist in some schools before the pandemic. This mainly concerned primary and secondary schools, although universities were not sufficiently prepared for this form of education either, as this extraordinary situation arose overnight (Strenacikova, 2020; Caplanova, Szakadatova, Darmo, 2021). The closing of schools in the pandemic situation was supposed to protect students from infection, but when implementing a distance form of studies, different levels of knowledge were achieved. Students with SN differ from intact students in their specific needs. Therefore, it was important for teachers to consider the key areas that were necessary for teaching students with SN in the distance form of teaching. In the definition of inclusive teaching, the main aspects are, e.g., differentiation, participation and individualization. The electronic environment is also able to ensure the aspects mentioned above, and we assume that the electronic environment provides a multi-sensory approach, a high possibility of individualization, and active participation of students in the given education. Among the general advantages of online education for students with SN, we can include increasing independence, which is mainly related to personalized schedules adjusted according to their needs. Students with SN can study at a preferred time, which increases time management skills, and these facts help to prevent overloading of students with SEN (Petretto et al, 2021). In the online education of students with SN, professional training of teachers, focused on electronic education, is necessary. An individual approach in the selection of technology that will be used in the online education of students with SEN plays an important role. In the online education, it is necessary to take into account the type and extent of the given specific need and the individual characteristics of the given student when choosing platforms and making pages or teaching materials available. Linhares (2021) states that distance education is very useful for students with SN, it allows universities to create inclusive educational content, thus prevents discrimination of students with disabilities and has many advantages for the students in question as well.

Research methods and methodology

The main goal of the research was to map the opinions of university students with SEN on distance education during the Covid-19 pandemic in the territory of the Slovak Republic. We tried to achieve the goal using the questionnaire method. We have set ourselves the following sub-goals:

- To find out whether students with SEN were given help and support by the university during distance education.
- To find out to what extent help and support was provided by the university to students with SEN during distance education.

The research group consisted of 83 respondents - students with SEN participating in distance education during the Covid-19 pandemic. Seven universities participated in the research, namely the Slovak University of Technology in Bratislava (STU), Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra (UKF), the Slovak Agricultural University in Nitra (SPU), Comenius University in Bratislava (UK), the University of Veterinary Medicine and Pharmacy in Košice (UVLF), University of Presov in Prešov (UNIPO), Pavel

Jozef Šafárik University in Košice (UJPS). There was a total of 64 respondents in the western part of Slovakia and 19 respondents in the eastern part of Slovakia. The most questionnaires were filled out by respondents from western Slovakia, namely from STU in Bratislava, more precisely there were 28 of them. The fewest questionnaires were filled out by respondents from eastern Slovakia, namely from UJPS in Košice. From the point of view of study degree, respondents of the 1st degree (bachelor's study program) were most represented, in which 50 students with SEN participated in the research, which represented 60% of the total number. Respondents of the 2nd degree (master's study program) filled out 30 questionnaires and made up 36%, and the least represented were the 3rd degree respondents (doctoral study program), who were three and made up 4%. The graph no. 3 shows the representation of students with individual SEN. Students with learning disabilities were the most represented, there were 32 of them and they made up 39%, another large group were chronically ill students and there were 12 of them, or 15%. 7 weak-sighted students filled out the questionnaire, which is 9% of all respondents, and students with mental illness had the same representation. 6 students with physical disabilities of the lower limbs took part, representing 7%, and 5 students with health impairment completed the questionnaire, which was 6% of the total number of respondents. Three deaf students made up 4% of the research population, and four students with autism and other pervasive developmental disorders made up the same 5% as hard of hearing students. Blind students had the lowest representation, more precisely 1% of the total number of respondents. Not a single student with a physical disability of the upper limbs filled in the questionnaire. The representation of respondents in individual categories is presented in the following graph.

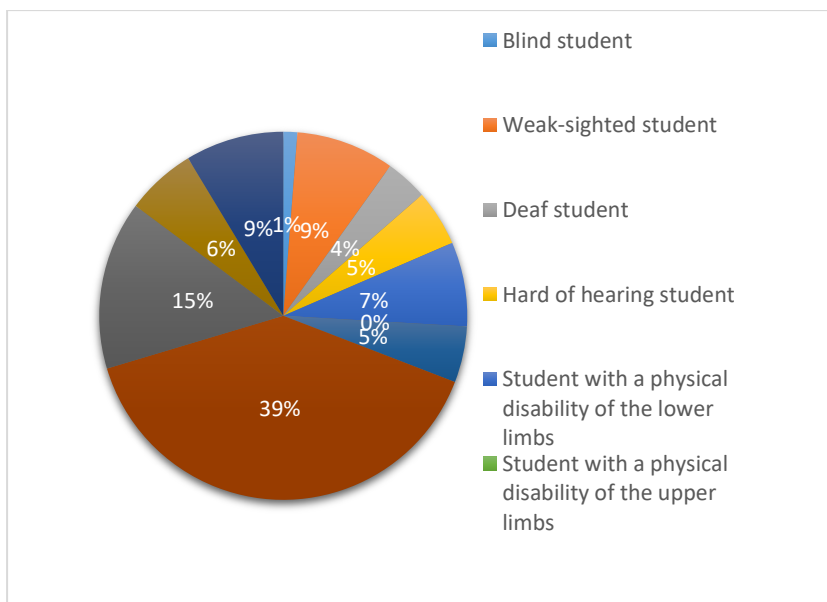


Figure 1: Representation of students with SEN

Analysis and interpretation of selected research results

From the question "I was able to adapt to distance education in a short time", the questionnaire showed that students with SEN were able to adapt to distance education in a short time. Out of the total number of respondents, 38 respondents, or 46%, agreed, and 27 respondents completely agreed, which was 32%. Only 9 respondents, representing 11%, disagreed with the given statement, and 11% of the respondents did not have a personal opinion (see figure 2).

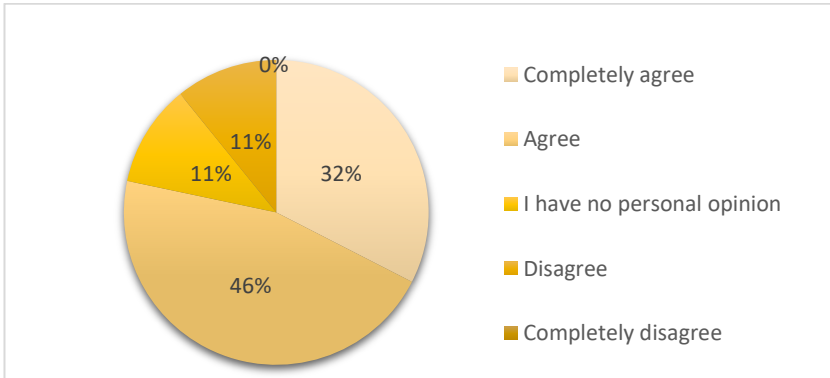


Figure 2: Adaptation to distance education

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Respondents answered the question "During online education, I did not have an individual schedule for fulfilling my study obligations.". The answer stating that they did not have an individual schedule, was chosen by 28 respondents out of 83, or 34%, who completely agreed. Also, 20 respondents agreed with the given statement, which is 24%, and 20 respondents did not have a personal opinion on the given issue. 12 respondents out of 83 disagreed, which made up 14%, and 3 out of 83 (4%) completely disagreed, because the interviewed respondents had an individual schedule for fulfilling their study obligations during distance education (figure 3).

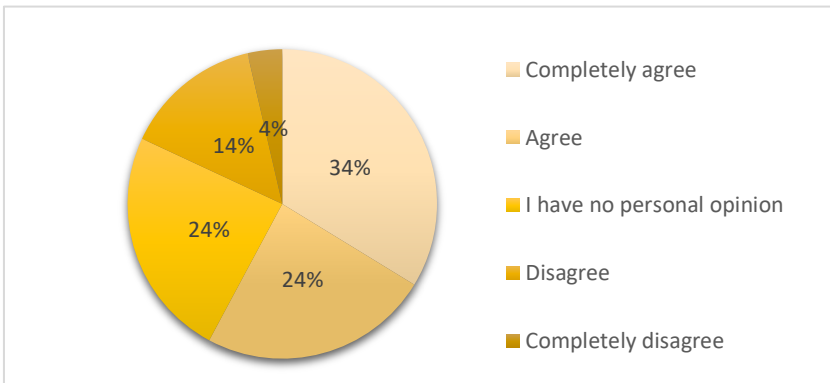


Figure 3: Individual schedule of fulfilling study obligations during distance education

The next question was "During this period, the university provided me with counselling (psychological, special pedagogical, technical) and support." According to the graph below, 29 respondents, or 35%, agreed with the given statement and 7 respondents, or 8%, said that they completely agreed. 24 respondents did not have a personal opinion on the given issue, which is 29%. 14 respondents (17%) indicated that they did not agree, and 9 respondents (11%) completely disagreed that the university provided them with special pedagogic, psychological or technical counselling and did not even provide them with support for distance education (figure 4).

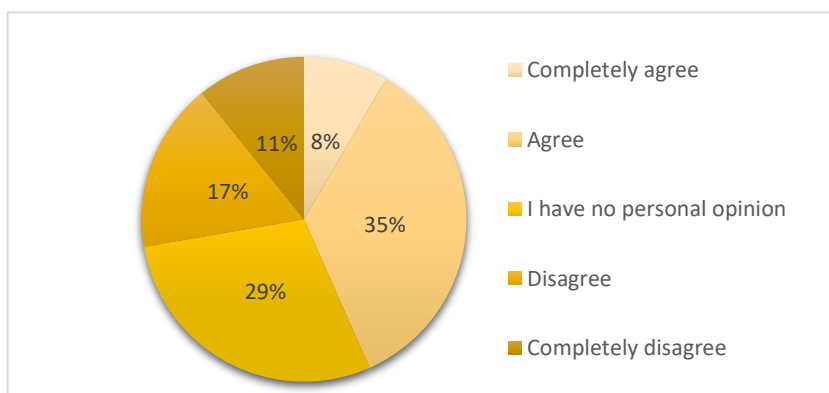


Figure 4: Provided counselling and support

Analysis of advantages and disadvantages from the point of view of students with SN:

Among the most frequently mentioned advantages of online education for students with SEN were mainly recorded lectures and seminars, which they could return to repeatedly, teachers were rated as more accommodating, since they did not have to travel, they saved money and time, they felt better and more comfortable in their home environment.

- "I didn't have to travel, the teachers had materials prepared in digital form and I didn't have to ask for them, digitalization improved the overall possibilities of teaching and online communication." (Visually impaired student)
- "Several professors recorded the lectures and gave students access to the given lectures. As a result, I have much nicer and clearer notes." (Student with learning disabilities)
- "No traveling, more time for preparation and education, we can record lectures and exercises and then play them to better understand the issue if we understood something incorrectly "live" or if we did not fully understand something." (Student with learning disabilities)
- "Online lectures were great because we had them recorded and I could play and save them anytime, etc. Exams were far away, and this material was available. I had a better organized time, and I was more

comfortable with distance education than face-to-face. I would leave the lectures to be held online. (Student with a chronic disease)

- "Better time management, possibility to create recordings, repetition of important lectures. Some lectures/exercises were better in the online space." (Student with learning disabilities)
- "The comfort of home (no struggle to overcome social phobia by traveling and at school), the comfort of recording online classes and being able to play them over and over again." (Student with mental illness).

Students with SEN stated these as disadvantages most often: lack of personal contact with classmates and teachers (isolation), lack of group learning. They did not like many hours spent at the PC, the failure of technology, impaired concentration, reduced motivation, few available study materials, short time to write tests, absence of practice and practical subjects.

- "No personal contact with classmates, little contact with the surrounding environment (most of the time I was locked at home), too much time spent at the PC, which also affected my health." (Student with a chronic disease)
- "Problematic maintenance of attention or concentration on the teaching process, be it interruption by a family member or technical problems with the Internet connection, insufficient or no interaction with classmates." (Student with learning disabilities)
- "Absence of social contact ("face to face" communication). Technology failure during education. The absence of competences necessary to manage online education." (Blind student) • "As a severely visually impaired student, I had headaches, my eyes hurt, more fatigue, "more eye strain", deterioration of vision, since we spent many hours at the computer, depression, deterioration of my social life.
- "Short (absurdly shortened) time to complete exam questions. Lectures and exercises were not recorded, there was no way to revise them. Unreliability of teachers." (Student with learning disabilities)
- "The lack of concentration, the distraction of the surroundings, I did not hear 100% of the information correctly. I often need to see the mouth to understand." (Hard of hearing student)
- "Online lectures did not suit me because I need a personal contact with the teacher. I perceive the subject matter better if I can see it and the subject matter gets me interested. Lack of motivation to learn due to poor separation of leisure time and time dedicated for school, tests structured on the assumption that students will cheat (for example, 20 questions in 10 minutes, I would rather have a properly structured test with proper questions and with a larger time span, because people, who want to cheat, will cheat anyway)." (Student with learning disabilities)
- "Exercises and lab exercises failed miserably. The (calculation) exercises also failed, because many teachers were not willing to prepare materials on which they would show the calculation process in any way. For example, several exercises were completely cancelled or replaced with lectures of theoretical knowledge, while the calculations were

completely moved to self-study, which combined with the absence of books for the exercises is a recipe for failure. The lab exercises, despite the considerable effort of the teachers, failed simply because there was no practical transfer of knowledge, because the online practice is just a lecture under a different name and not practice." (Student with learning disabilities).

Conclusions and discussion

83 respondents took part in the research. The first four questions were demographically focused, that is, we asked about the university they attend, their level of education, gender and a specific need. The most respondents came from the STU in Bratislava, more specifically 28 of them. And the second largest university student group was from UKF in Nitra, with 16 students. Considering the level of studies, respondents in the bachelor's study program predominated, and regarding gender, there were more female respondents, who made up 63% of the research sample. Students with learning disabilities were the most represented, which did not surprise us. The main goal of this research was mapping the opinions of students with specific needs on distance education during the Covid-19 pandemic. As part of the sub-goals, we focused on:

- To find out whether students with specific needs were given help and support by the university during distance education.
- To find out to what extent help and support were provided by the university to students with specific needs during distance education.

Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sports of the Slovak Republic according to §100 par. 5 of Act no. 131/2002 Coll. on universities and on amendments and additions to certain laws established the so-called minimum claims of a student with a disability according to §100 par. 2 on support services according to a specific need. Furthermore, we looked at whether the university provided the respondents with counselling (psychological, special pedagogical, technical) and support during this period. 29 respondents agreed with the given statement, 7 respondents completely agreed, 24 respondents had no personal opinion, 14 disagreed and 9 completely disagreed. Thanks to the results of the first two sub-goals, we concluded that some support services were provided to them to a lesser or greater extent. The results were greatly influenced by the fact that the students leaned towards the central tendency in some questions, which could be due to the fact that distance education is not currently taking place and the students could have already forgotten the given facts. Nevertheless, we believe that inclusive education is an increasingly discussed topic in our society, but there are various barriers within higher education. Suhajdova (2018) is of the opinion that inclusion is threatened by the decline of today's society, our ruthlessness and intolerance towards each other, such as parking in reserved places for people with disabilities. The given author is of the opinion that unless there is an inclusive society, there will be no inclusive education either. Other barriers include negative attitudes towards students with disabilities, lack of understanding of various needs, limited knowledge or lack of willingness or time on the part of coordinators, or until now prevailing information barriers. Expanding the

minimum requirements for students with SEN (Decree of the Ministry of Education of the Slovak Republic No. 458/2012) could help to overcome information barriers, and for the actors to have a common vision of inclusive education, that vision should also be supported by a political demand for inclusion. According to Suleri (2020), distance education could become a regular part of higher education. And the basic aspects of an inclusive environment (participation, differentiation and individualization) could be achieved within online education. As part of the research part, we set ourselves the main goal of mapping the opinions of students with specific needs on distance education. Distance education had many advantages and disadvantages for students with disabilities. The most commonly stated advantages were, e.g., recordings from lectures and seminars (appreciated most often by students with learning disabilities), handing in assignments was rated as more practical, teachers were more accommodating, better communication during consultations, they felt more comfortable in their home environment (appreciated most by students with mental, chronic disease and students with physical disabilities of the lower limbs). The most stated negatives were, e.g., social isolation, technical problems, lack of practice, exercises, problematic concentration, deterioration of health (depression), uninteresting online education, reduced time for completing tests. Although according to the questionnaire in the context of the question whether distance or face-to-face education was more suitable for them, they were more inclined towards distance education, negative opinions still prevailed.

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