HOW TO DEAL WITH THE CRITICAL CONDITION IN THE PANDEMIC? UNIVERSITY LIFELONG LEARNING 4.0

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ABSTRACT

Given the current situation all over the world due to the COVID-19 outbreak, education as a system has been obliged to re-invent itself and to adapt to this unexpected situation. In a limited time, many issues pertaining to distance learning; online classes, assessment and evaluation; and equality in opportunity had to be re-evaluated and re-constructed. The universities have designed their courses online and provided online materials to enable the students, professors and instructors to proceed with minimum effect from this critical situation. The major challenges were students being unable to get the benefit of class interaction, which is one of the crucial features in learning; decisions on how to assess the learning in distance education; and some problems the students experienced with lack of opportunity to access facilities such as computers or internet connection at their home.

Boğaziçi University had also thought about these problems and developed its distance learning programme by first sending surveys to students to collect feedback from them. One of the major successes may be the new scholarship programme which was created for students who need support in terms of access to appropriate technological devices or who have connection problems in order to ensure equality of opportunity. Besides the restrictions of the pandemic, its impact on the psychology of students was also among the several essential concerns. Based on the results of the surveys, a programme was developed in order to minimize the psychological impact on the students.

In terms of Boğaziçi University Lifelong Learning, the main goals were to provide true, scientific and dependable information to society about the pandemic through online seminars, and to cover the educational needs of our students under those conditions. Keeping to the values and principles of the university, it was decided to change the settings and delivery of courses and projects to overcome the negative impacts. Ongoing classes and courses were evolved accordingly and transformed to online classes through the available platforms that were considered efficient in terms of online education and training. New programmes were designed to fit the current situation and to maintain participation in lifelong learning. All other work such as preparation for applications for new projects was carried out through online platforms. Transnational meetings and learning mobility were discussed among the partners and re-designed to operate online.

Fast and reasonable steps had to be taken in a very short time due to this unexpected crisis, and we learned that we need more flexible and agile systems in management and education.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 crisis has made it urgent and necessary for universities to innovate in many areas in order to be able to function in this crisis. The focus has turned to more online education and personal learning activities. Universities all around the world have taken precautions and actions to adapt themselves to this new situation.

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The pandemic has caused massive change in the ecosystem of university education. As stated in a message from the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Cambridge regarding changes in terms of teaching, assessment, continuing education and tackling Covid-19, both the students and the academic staff of universities everywhere have undertaken great efforts in moving education online and adapting to new ways of learning (Toope, 2020).

In an overview from the American Council on Education, 53% of school presidents stated that it was "likely" that their organization would continue face to face classes for probably some segment of the fall term, while another 31% said that it was "to some degree likely" that they would continue face to face education (Smalley, 2020). One of the leading American universities, Harvard shared its guiding principles on reopening phases which depends on the status of the pandemic and the strategies to mitigate its impacts. Their plan for a phased reopening of on-campus activities is mainly guided by the two core principles of health and safety and continuation of education and research (Harvard University, 2020).

In Turkey initially the Ministry of National Education (MoNE) and the Higher Education Council (HEC) worked closely together with the Ministry of Health (MoH) in order to determine the appropriate measures against the pandemic. Just a day after the first COVID-19 case in Turkey, a government spokesman announced that all primary and secondary schools and universities in Turkey would be closed. The MoNE delivered courses by means of its online platform (EBA - Educational Informatics Network) and the national TV station (TRT - Turkish Radio and Television Corporation). The MoNE has decided on EBA as the fundamental media for online instruction. EBA is an advanced instructive platform which was developed by MoNE in the academic year of 2011-2012. On this platform, different materials – including educational plan based recordings, archives, digital books, tests and exercises are available for education from preschool to secondary school level. It also supports the professional development of teachers by means of distance education (Özer, 2020). Universities have determined their online education tools mainly depending on the decisions of their senates.

Apart from the move to online education and the new technological supports needed, the psychological aspects of this situation both for instructors and students were also seen as important to tackle during the initial phase of adaptation. It is obvious that we have a lot to learn from this crisis in order to design and achieve the best solutions, and to implement a proper strategy and overcome the major concerns of the pandemic. With this in mind, surveys and data analysis are the first steps in allowing the institutions to analyse their capacity and to plan for the future.

GENERAL OVERVIEW OF TURKISH HIGHER EDUCATION DURING THE PANDEMIC

Initially a few universities declared their intention to stop their in-campus activities, and then all the universities across the country followed suit and cancelled in-person classes and shifted to online education. According to the research by the Turkish Higher Education (HEC), 64% of universities in Turkey had started online education by 23 March 2020, which was the day after the one-week break; and in general, 90% of the courses in Spring Term of the universities were made available online (HEC, 2020). Implementation of the online theoretical and practical courses were 99% and 75%, respectively. The most intense use of online education was in Social Sciences (91%), then Physical Sciences (78%), Engineering (77%), and the lowest was intensity was in the Health Sciences (54%). The majority of universities preferred to use homework assignments (90%) and projects (83%) for the assessment of midterms, while 63% used online assessment.

Besides online delivery of courses, a set of supportive and informative activities were conducted in the universities both for the academic staff and the students. The majority of

the universities provided online training (80%), pedagogical support (77%) and technical support (60%) to their instructors, in addition to the online portals for announcements, guidelines and regulations. The students were kept informed continuously via email or SMS (96%), while online support units (83%), technical support documents (92%), online portals for announcements, guidelines and regulations (80%) were developed.

RESPONSE AND ADAPTATION OF BOGAZICI UNIVERSITY TO PANDEMIC

In response to COVID-19, after the first case in Turkey Bogazici University (BU) Senate and the BU Executive Council jointly decided to suspend all educational activities for two weeks by taking the spring break earlier. The BU Executive Council also voted to cancel all on-campus activities, all off-campus face-to-face activities organized by the University and all university-related travel until the end of April. The Boğaziçi University administration declared that the main priority was the health and security of the students, academic and administrative staff.

After two weeks of suspension, the education programmes of the university re-started as distance education on 6th April 2020. Distance education activities at the university were mainly carried out through the Moodle learning management system (LMS), which had been used before. Later on many asynchronous and synchronous courses were delivered by Zoom and Panopto through the Moodle Platform. In order to facilitate this transition, the instructors were supported not only with technical assistance, but through online webinars about distance education and its pedagogical aspects as well. Instead of online tests, most of the assessments were done as oral exams, take-home exams or assignments. In addition, an option was given to the students to decide if their assessment should be marked by letter grade or on a pass/fail basis in order to decrease the stress on the students during this difficult period.

A specific portal was developed for students in order to inform them about the distance education programme, campus activities, and recent pandemic updates. Boğaziçi University started a scholarship program to provide equipment and internet support for the students. Through the Boğaziçi University Foundation (BÜVAK) and the Scholarship Office the needs of the students were first assessed and determined. As a result, 367 students in April and 275 students in May were furnished with high-speed internet connections, and 172 computers/tablets were given to students.

Medico Social Center, which gives health services at the campus, also continued to provide online treatments and services especially with expert psychiatric support through online platforms for the students.

In terms of R&D Activities, Boğaziçi University was involved in vaccine development, biomedical studies, and new project applications related to the Covid-19 outbreak. Boğaziçi University has also been participating in clinical investigations and national-international phase works.

Besides education and research activities, Boğaziçi University continued social projects and continuing education through the Lifelong Learning Centre. Through digital platforms and online programs, Boğaziçi University effectively developed and provided information meetings, webinars and trainings. News bulletins were shared through different online channels, while community service practices such as open education and psychological support was also provided through digital platforms during this process.

BOGAZICI UNIVERSITY LIFELONG LEARNING CENTRE (BULLC)

Boğaziçi University Lifelong Learning Center (BULLC) is responsible for developing, directing and coordinating all lifelong learning activities apart from undergraduate and postgraduate degree programmes at Boğaziçi University. BULLC functions in order to share the university's academic accumulation of over 155 years' experience of integrating the needs of society with the requirements of the era by presenting high value training. During its 18 years period of operation, BULLC has reached more than 100,000 participants through over 5,000 programmes.

During the period of chaos and uncertainty due to the pandemic, BULLC was also obliged to make changes in its educational activities. On March 18th, all face-to-face classes were stopped and the necessary measures were taken in order to maintain the health and safety of the BULLC staff. The next task was to work out how to transfer ongoing and planned training to the online environment. The most important impediment was that both individual participants and company employees were not ready for such a radical change. Additionally, BULLC was not totally ready either.

BULLC decided to develop its strategy by including all stakeholders' engaged in the process, with an emphasis on a strong and inclusive communication process as much as possible. Initial actions were taken not only considering the need to continue training just for educational purposes, but also as an important tool for engaging with people as part of their daily living in a restrictive lockdown situation. At BULLC, free webinars in different fields were organised in order to contribute to solidarity with society. Additionally, the open enrolment and custom programmes were conducted via online platforms to provide knowledge and skills to the participants. BULLC tried to keep as much interactivity as possible in the learning environment and to adapt to the online environment. Online certificate programmes on professional development, corporate sustainability, sustainable cities and climate crisis, and social entrepreneurship were among the new programmes developed. During this time, approximately 400 web-based training / other activities were undertaken.

Even in the extremely unexpected circumstances of the pandemic, it seems that BULLC adapted to the crisis quickly, took action within a short time, and continued its activities with the least possible disruption. This is mainly due to the experience gained from the previous crises, operational and administrative agility and adaptability gained through its operations around the world (i.e. in Senegal, Kuwait, Azerbaijan, Kosovo, USA).

RESULTS FROM THE ONLINE EDUCATION SURVEY IN BOGAZICI UNIVERSITY

In order to evaluate the efficiency of distance education in Boğaziçi University, a survey was conducted among the students and the instructors. The survey reached 2781 students in total, with 2527 undergraduate and 254 graduate students, besides the 352 respondents from the faculty.

Technological Aspects of Distance Education in BU

As it is shown in Figure 1, most of the graduate students and faculty members preferred using laptop computers only, but multiple devices were also used by more than 30% of faculty members and graduate students. Undergraduate students equally preferred laptops and multiple devices. Those using only smart phones, tablets or desktop computers were below 10 per cent for all three groups of respondents.

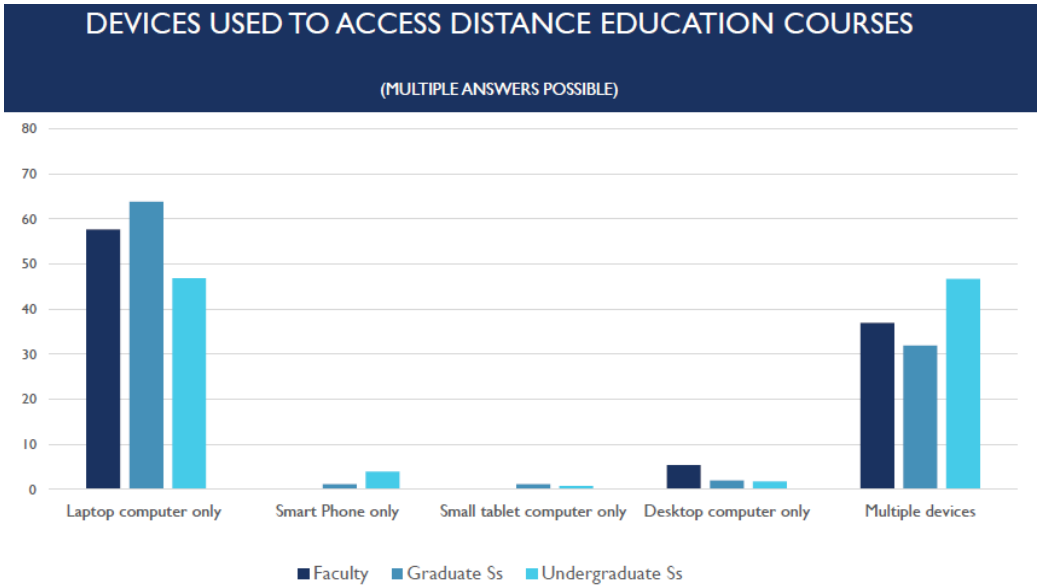

Figure 1. Type of Devices Used to Access Distance Education Courses

According to the responses in Figure 2, 70% of the graduate students and 50% of the undergraduate students stated that they had never experienced internet access problems during the distance education period. Nearly 60% of the faculty members had occasional access problems.

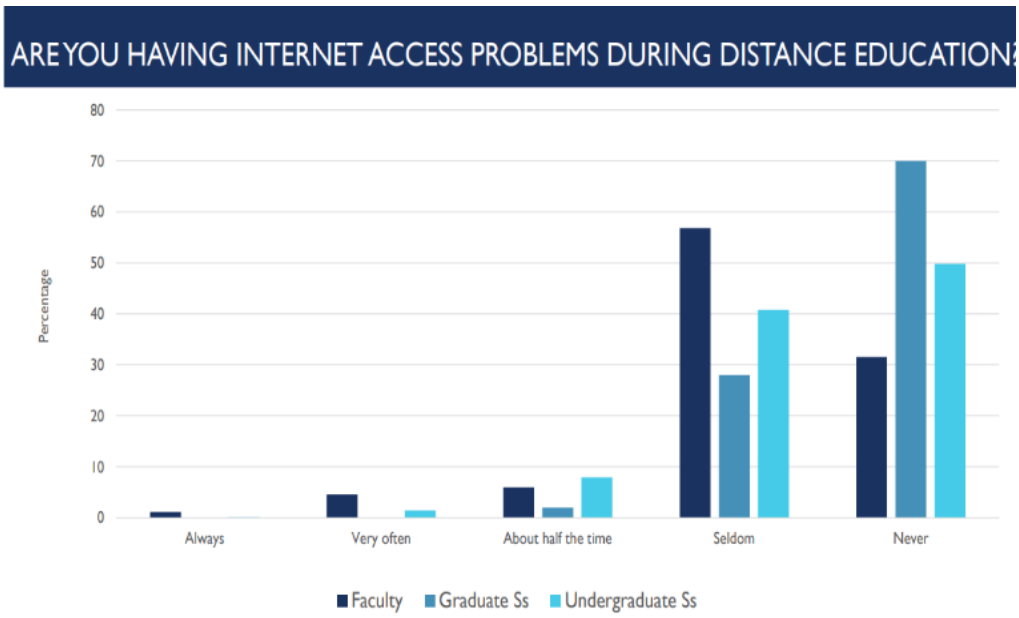

Figure 2. Internet Access Levels During Distance Education

According to the data given in Figure 3, most of the faculty members, graduate and undergraduate students stated that they were satisfied with the technical aspects of distance education at BU. The percentage of students that were not satisfied with the technical aspects of the distance education at BU was around 10%, while this ratio was almost 5% for faculty.

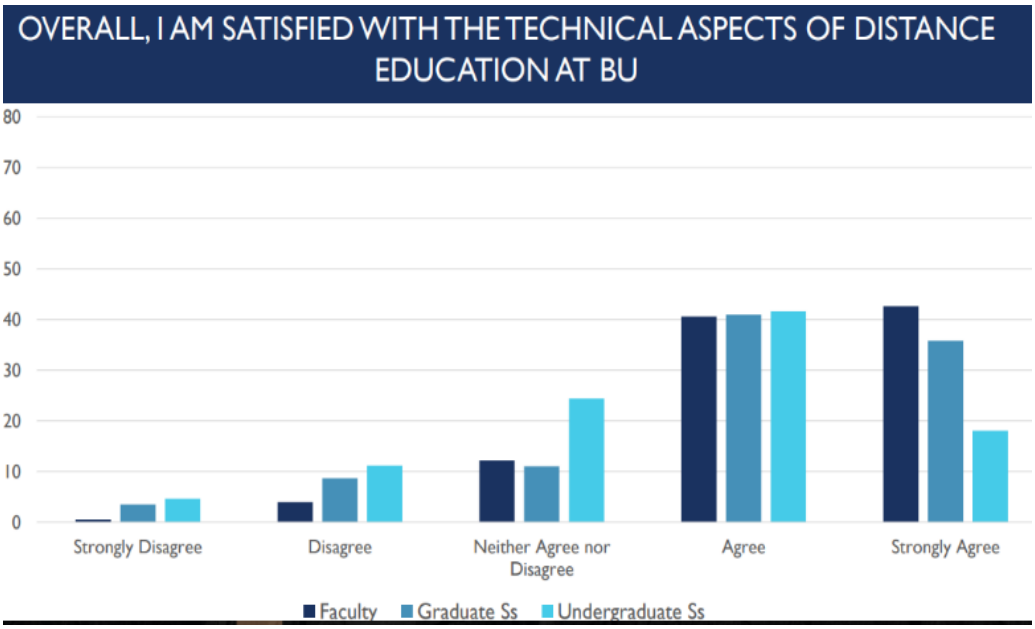

Figure 3. Satisfaction with the Technical Aspects of Distance Education at BU

Teaching and Learning Aspects of Distance Education in BU

In terms of teaching and learning experiences in face-to-face classrooms compared to online classrooms shown in Figure 4, most undergraduate students and faculty members found the experience different. The percentage of graduate students who found the experience in online classrooms different from actual classrooms is also high, but there are more respondents in this category who felt that that there was little significant difference.

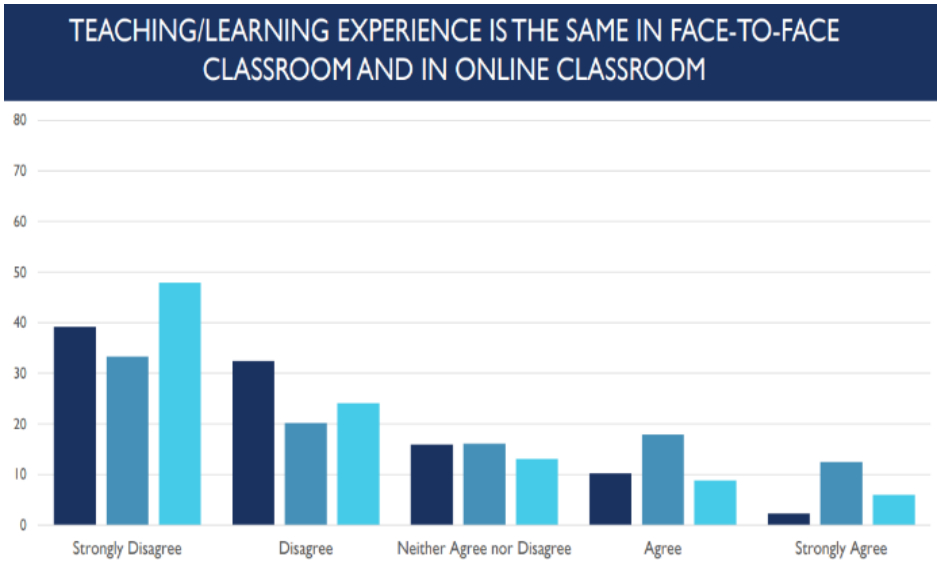

Figure 4. Comparison of Teaching & Learning Experiences in Face to Face and in Online Classroom

As shown in Figure 5, a large portion of students both graduate and undergraduate found it more difficult to stay focused during online lectures compared to in the classroom environment. The faculty members do not constitute a big percentage in a single response category, but at least there is not a strong agreement about difficulty in staying focused during online classes from the point of view of the faculty members.

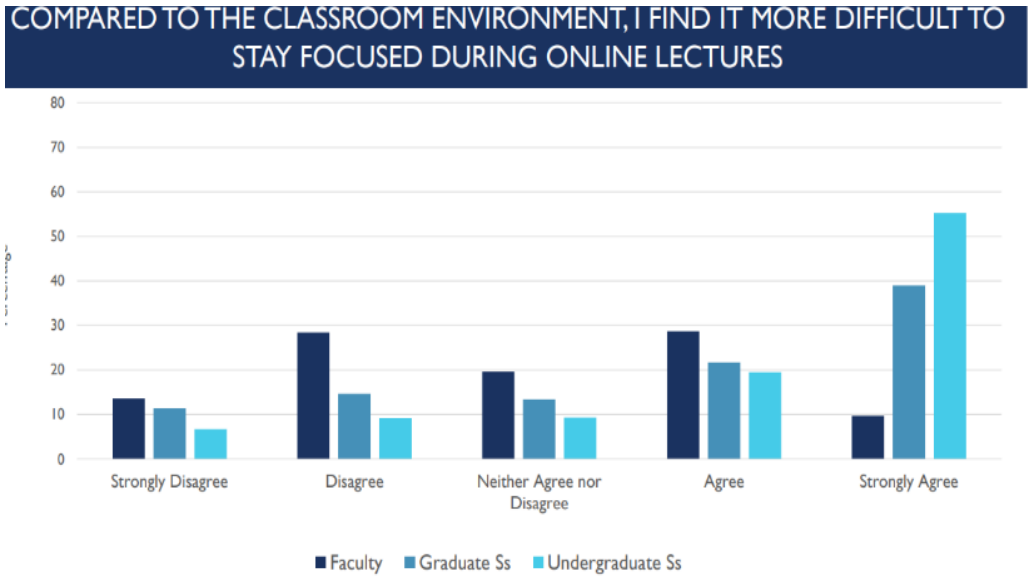

Figure 5. Difficulty in staying focused during online lectures compared to the classroom environment

Figure 6 separately shows that both the faculty and the students admitted that the effectiveness of distance education compared to traditional education was lower. Most of the undergraduate students stated that they were not learning at the same level in distance education. Graduate students were also more or less in the same position, but almost 38% of them found the learning the same for both methods. From the perspective of the faculty, more than 60% of the respondents did not agree that distance education could be as effective as on-campus education.

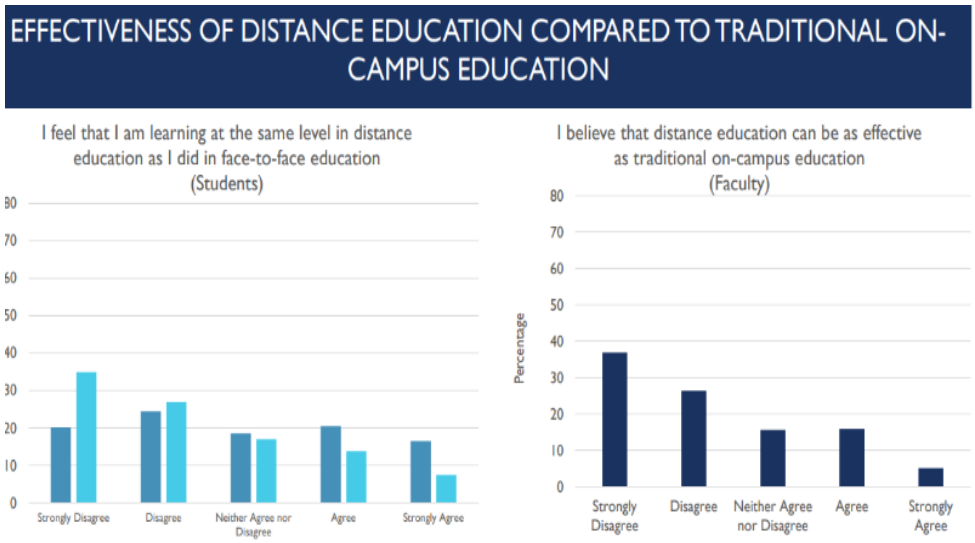

Figure 6. Effectiveness of distance education compared to the traditional on-campus education

Another major challenge of distance learning is assessment methodology. It is shown in Figure 7 that more than 75% of the instructors revised their evaluation criteria for their online courses considering the limitations of distance education. Only 10% of them pursued the same procedures in assessment.

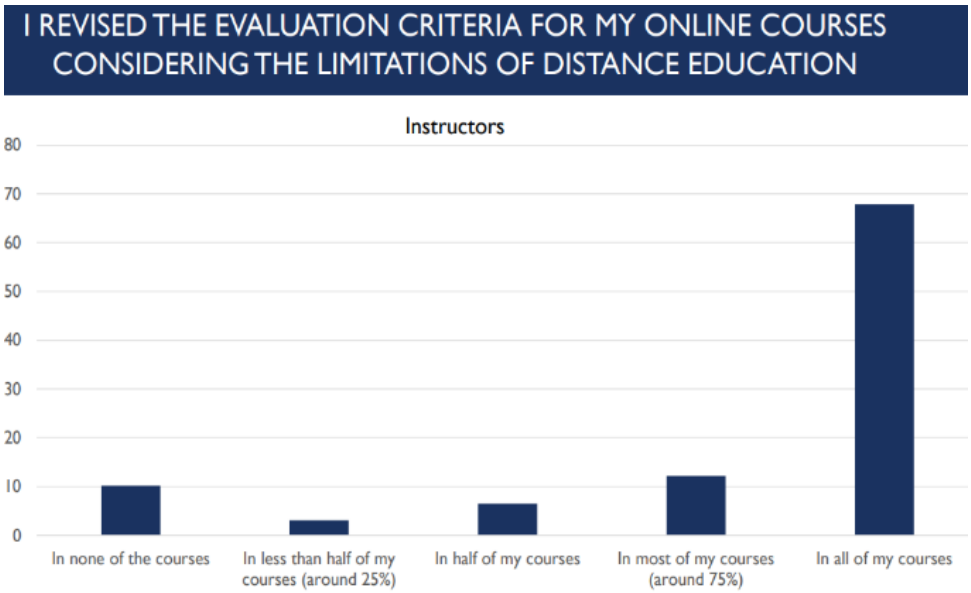

Figure 7. Evaluation criteria for the online courses

In terms of the workload of the students in the online courses, Figure 8 shows that a large portion of the graduate students agreed that their workload in all courses was realistic and roughly the same as the workload for in-class courses. However, undergraduate students mostly agreed that their workload in around 50% of the courses was realistic and the same with in-class courses.

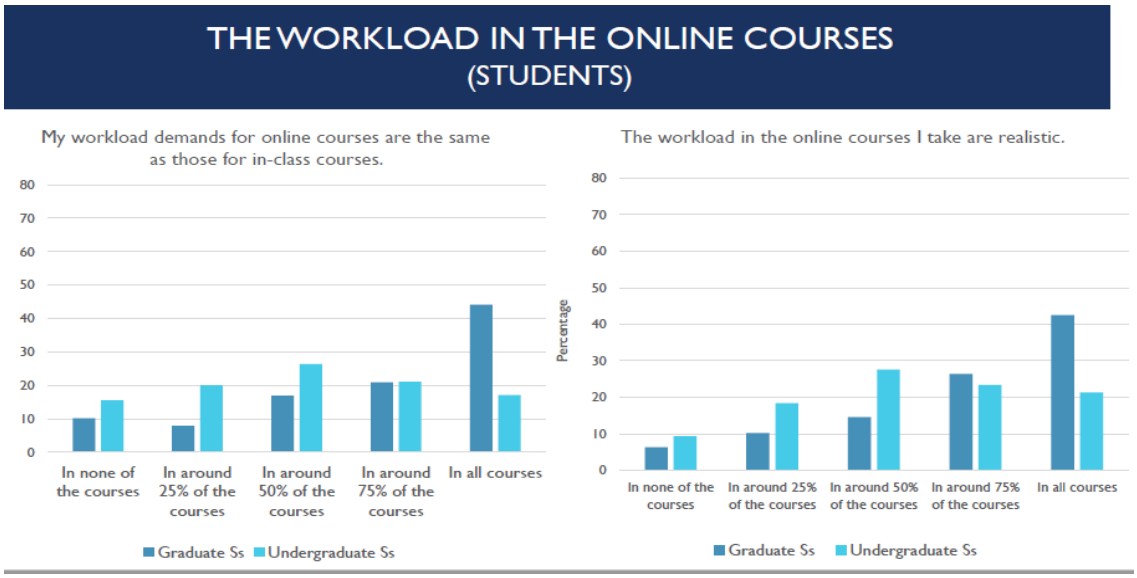

Figure 8. The workload in online courses

According to the survey, the majority of the graduate and undergraduate students were satisfied with the quality of the instructional design elements of online courses. However, about 20% of graduate students and around 25% of undergraduate students were not satisfied as shown in Figure 9.

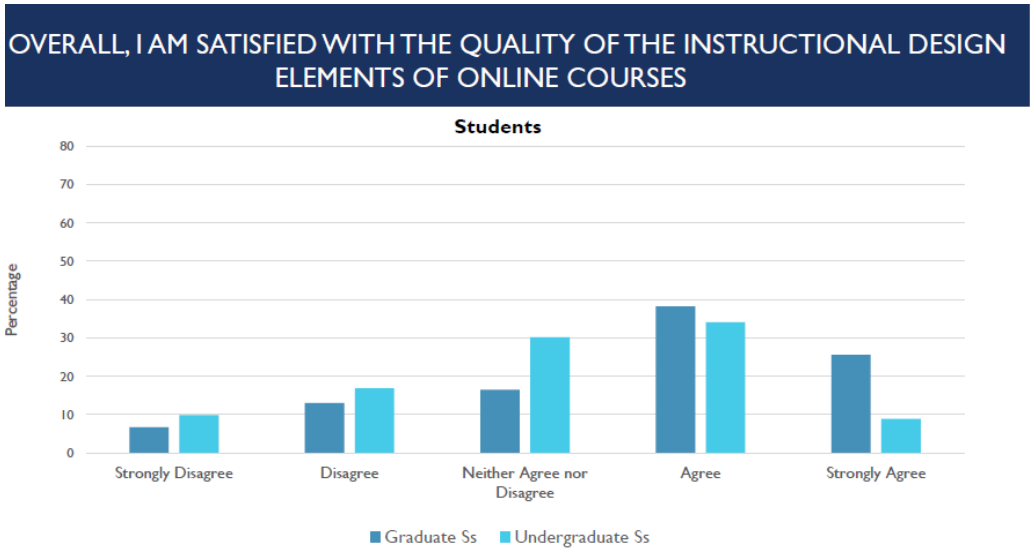

Figure 9. Satisfaction with the quality of the instructional design elements of online courses

It is a fact that the pandemic has been causing lots of challenges for education methodologies. One of the significant outcome of the survey is that the preference for entirely online education is very low. Figure 10 demonstrates that the majority of students and faculty prefer a mix of traditional and online classes, instead of entirely online mode. It is also noticeable that a significant proportion of respondents prefer an entirely traditional delivery mode.

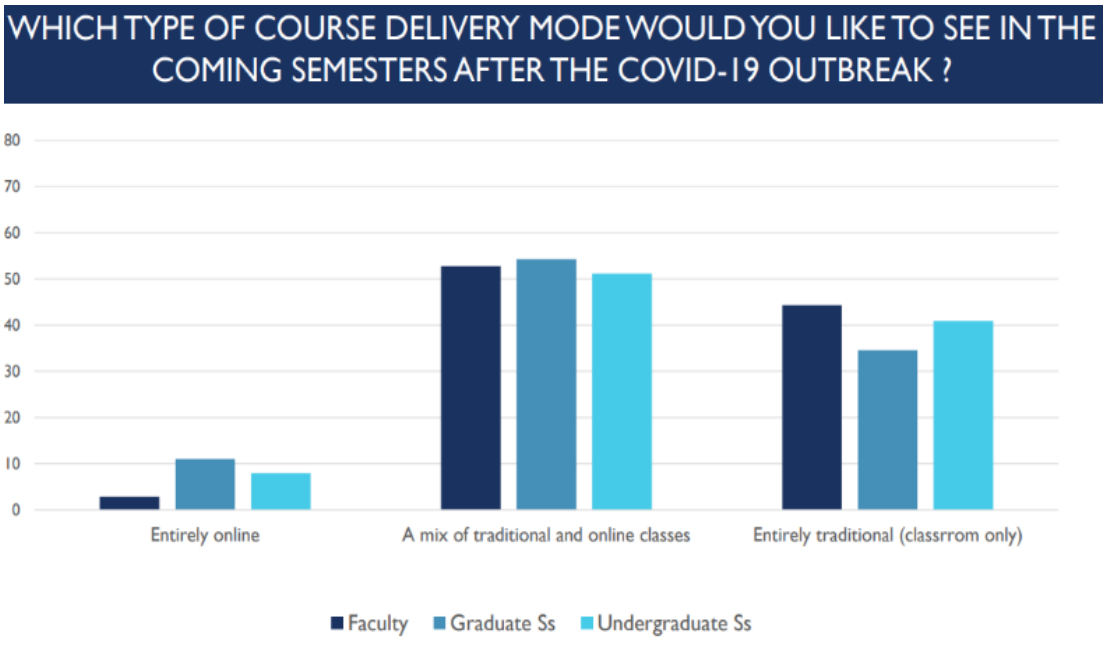

Figure 10. Course Delivery Method after the COVID-19 Outbreak

CONCLUSION

Covid-19 affected, and even put in crisis, all sectors including health and, later, education. The pandemic has been deeply affecting all layers of business and social life. Our usual behaviour patterns, habits, and ways of doing business that we knew and learnt have perhaps changed irreversibly. The main focus of higher education institutions is now on the fall semester of 2020-21, although significant uncertainty continues. However, this is a major opportunity to learn, and to pave the future of the education sector.

Besides the major negative impacts of the pandemic, one challenge of this process is the rapid transition to distance education and e-learning. Learning structures that offer classic one-way communication are being replaced by more interactive, flexible, and self-centred structures. Additionally, constraints (i.e. class size, physical distance, even language) have been removed with online education; processes have been accelerated and access to more people is possible. On the other hand, there are further steps in distance education needed such as capacity building both for learners and instructors; access to technological tools and devices; equality of opportunity in accessing learning resources and education; developing better ways of personal networking and communication.

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