

THE CHALLENGES FACING THE EDUCATION SYSTEM INTO PANDEMIC CONDITIONS AND WAYS TO SOLVE THEM – GEORGIAN EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

2020 turned out to be a time of mobilization of special efforts for the whole world. Many countries have faced great challenges due to the widespread pandemic; it also has affected educational systems worldwide. Georgia was one of them, so Georgian government has begun to work hardly and has quickly switched to a new system, especially in education. In this topic, we will discuss the situation in Georgia in the education system before pandemic, what the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports of Georgia done, how schools and universities worked to introduction e-learning program for students and how they were engaged in this time. During this period we also conducted online survey of about 900 people of all ages, who were involved in e-learning process, including pupils, students, lecturers, and teachers. We studied how they assessed the e-learning process, what problems they faced, what they learned and how they would use this experience in the future.

Introduction

Due to the widespread pandemic in 2020 all aspects of public life, including education, have faced significant challenges all over the world, Georgia was no exception either. (UNESCO, 2020). The Georgian government has had to make some changes to the education system, among other thing, to avoid spreading of new Corona Virus in Georgia. So according to the ordinance, since March 30, 2020, in both general education and higher education institutions teaching has to be conducted remotely. This form of teaching is designed specifically for students who cannot be physically present in a traditional auditorium or office, this method is flexible for groups of students who want to study while working, as well as very important for students with disabilities and people in the penitentiary system. Although the method of e-learning was quite popular and widely used in many developed countries all around the world, Georgian educational institutions

weren't well-prepared for that. Moving the learning process to the online space has created a number of special issues, such as student's involvement in the process, their motivation and the development of self-regulation skills while working.

Education process into pandemic conditions – Georgian experience

The introduction of e-learning in Georgia has been active since 2008, when it was involved in the project "E-learning in the Caucasus". As part of this project, pilot e-learning courses have been developed and implemented in more than 20 educational institutions in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. However, these were only the first steps. In 2011, the law amended that people living in Georgia will be able to receive education at the first and second levels of academic higher education in electronic form, although this has been only an addition to traditional teaching. As we already mentioned, e-learning method was not fully implemented in any higher education institution. In Georgia as well in many other countries of the world, majority of teachers approved online learning as it makes higher education available to more students. However, only few professors considered e-learning to be effective. Or, put differently, few professors believe that online learning has positive effect on student learning. (Pomerantz, J. et al., 2017) This method was partly implemented in several universities in combination with traditional teaching. Also there was a virtual lab that students could use to conduct experiments virtually.

During this period many schools (not only in the region) faced specific problems. Initially, in order to ensure the continuity of the learning process, teachers used the Internet to work in closed groups - to provide students in each class with new lesson materials, key questions and assignments, and to get feedback.

We all agree that that there is no ready-made recipe with special ingredients that will make you a good teacher we all need to find our own ways to master the profession facing the challenges (Alavidze, 2017). At this time, the educational program of Microsoft Teams provided by the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia has been added and introduced to educational system to support e-learning. The Ministry has created user account of Microsoft Office 365, for about 600,000 students from public schools in Georgia and about 55,000 teachers and school administration representatives, through the LEPL - Education Management Information System (EMIS). The portal has been created that allows students and their parents to access student's data without the direct involvement of the school administration and the teacher, also set up virtual classrooms for every classes and disciplines. Besides, in all districts of Georgia, support groups from volunteer experts has been created to help teachers to understand the technology of e-learning, also support groups of "New School Model" are actively working on about school reform, where important component is the introduction of distance learning and the sharing of experiences with other schools and teachers. According to statistics, 750 active users are involved in Microsoft TEAMS every day. In total, TEAMS has 138,698 active users; on March 23, Office 365 had 143,140 active users; the e-mail and online data warehouse (One Drive) had about 14,000 active users.

Moving to a new model of learning has identified many problems. At first, such as poor computer skills and internet access problem too, but later published the research by The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development – OECD, where it was showed that compared to other countries Georgia was ready quite well. (OECD, 2020)

On March 30, 2020, the Ministry of Education,

Science, Culture and Sports of Georgia, together with the First Channel of Public Broadcasting, launched the new project “First Channel Education”. The students of the TV School had an unprecedented opportunity for e-learning process to attend the lessons from the first grade to the 12th grade, which were conducted by experienced teachers. The lesson timetable was compiled based on the National Curriculum, all subjects were taught once a week for all classes, and certain subjects were taught twice a week for entrants. Also lessons were provided for students with special needs and disabilities, a psychologist and a translator were involved too. The project also includes the additional lessons: music, dance, song, exercise and chess. It’s important to say that lessons were provided for non-Georgian language students too in Armenian and Azerbaijani. (Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports of Georgia, 06.04.2020)

As for the higher education system, they were able to quickly mobilize resources and move to a distance learning mode, in order to provide a continuous process of education for students. As soon as the pandemic began, the first stage of the Council of Rectors, convened at the initiative of the Minister, recommended that the spring semester be resumed on March 16 in e-learning mode. This would allow them to replace the online teaching method with a hybrid form after students return to the classroom. Since one common challenge faced by all universities, the process was conducted through mutual assistance and sharing of experiences between universities. Universities have been advised to follow the guidelines for e-learning and quality assurance developed by the European Association of Higher Education Quality Assurance (ENQA). In addition, an e-learning assistance document was specially created.

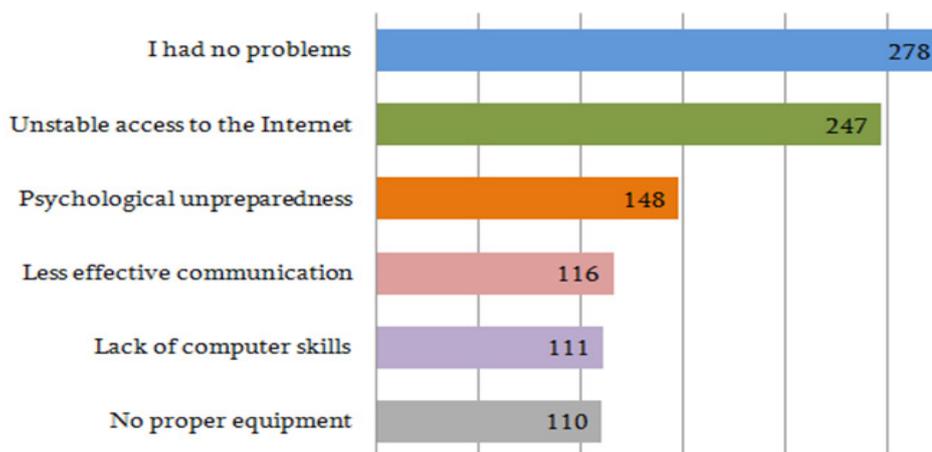
At this time, higher education institutions use a variety of applications and online platforms to promote distance learning: Zoom, Microsoft Teams,

Moodle and Google Classroom. They have also developed relevant guidelines and video instructions for academic staff and students. The learning process has modified for better management of e-learning process, online lectures/seminars are uploaded to the appropriate platform and are available for students, also reviewed teaching methods and assessment systems too. The universities have determined the evaluation mechanism based on the recommendation of the Ministry. The learning courses, which include a practical component and laboratory work, will be conducted in an intensive mode when we will return to the university space. (View Point, 2020)

During this time, we conducted online survey of about 900 people of all ages, who were involved in e-learning process, including pupils, students, lecturers, and teachers. It’s interesting that only 12% of respondents had practical experience of e-learning, the rest had only theoretical knowledge or some general information. Educational institutions managed to get involved in e-learning process very quickly, 97% of the respondents were involved in the first month. To actively participate in this process, educational institutions provided various types of technical assistance to students, as well as lecturers / teachers too.

About the question what was the problems they faced at e-learning process, answers was different, 30% of respondents said that they hadn’t any type of problems, around 28% said that main problem was unstable access to the Internet, but most of them had mobile internet, around 16% of respondents noted that psychological unpreparedness was their main problem, others mentioned that less effective communication (13%), lack of computer skills (12%) and no proper equipment (12%) was also the big problem (Figure 1).

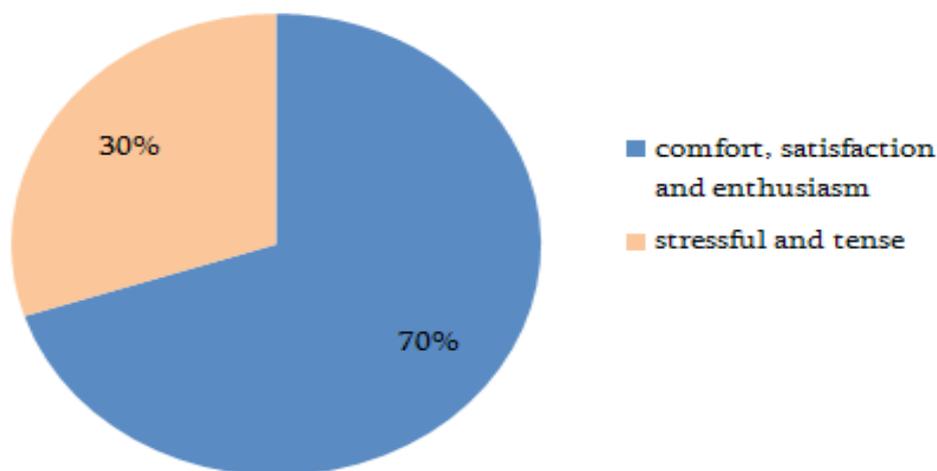
Figure 1. what was the problems you faced at e-learning process?



Attendance at e-lectures was high, ranging between 85-93%. Most of students used mobile phones (about 45%), others laptops, tablets or personal computers. During the e-learning process, a large proportion

of respondents experienced a sense of comfort, satisfaction and enthusiasm (70%), while for some the process turned out to be stressful and tense (30%). Figure 2.

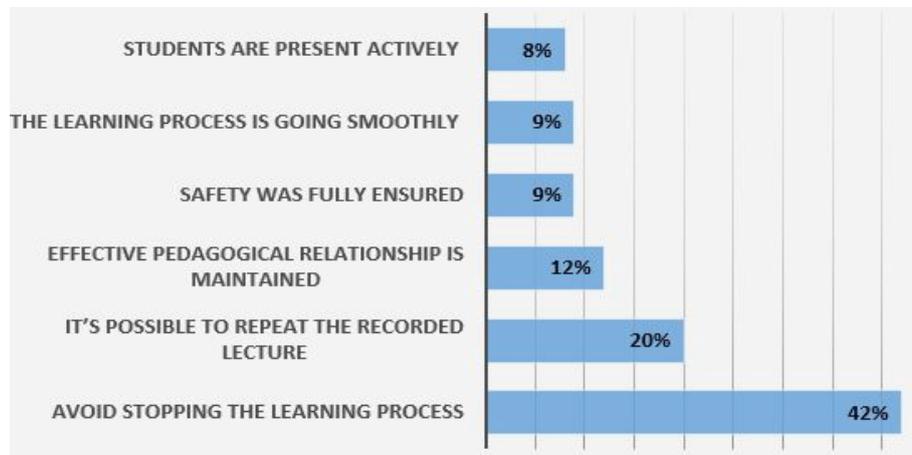
Figure 2. How did you feel at e-learning process?



As for the question, what were the positive features of e-learning, 42% of respondents said that it helped them not to stop the learning process, 20% mentioned that it's possible to repeat the recorded lecture, 12%

said that effective pedagogical relationship is maintained, for others it was important that safety was fully ensured(9%), that the learning process is going smoothly (9%) and students are present actively (8%). Figure 3.

Figure 3. What were the positive features of e-learning?



The use of e-learning elements in the learning process was acceptable for 61% of respondents and they will try to use the e-learning elements in the future, 29% only in extreme cases think about using this tool, for the remaining 10% it is undesirable to use it in the future.

According to the respondents, the school/university has coped quite effectively with the transition to e-learning, they rate the activities of the educational institution with an average score of 4.1 (from 5), also respondents believe that the use of e-learning was an interesting and useful experience in the learning process, which is rated with an average score of 4.2 (from 5).

Microsoft Corporation and the International Organization for Economic Development and Cooperation(OECD) gave high assessments to the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports of Georgia to promote distance learning in the context of the COVID-19 crisis. According to Anthony Salsito, Vice President for Education at Microsoft Corporation, Georgia has managed transition to online education with good results. Salsito noted that the crisis has once again shown how effectively used digital learning tools in Georgia, also the project of TV-school was very useful for students who are

living in different regions and maybe had problems of internet access, that was good step from the Ministry of Georgia for developing students' skills to find themselves facing the challenges of the 21st century. (Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports of Georgia, 15.05.2020).

It should be noted that The International Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has realized a report about the challenges created in the education field during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and the steps taken by the Georgians to ensure continuous education process measured as the best, including the “TV School” project too. The Ministry of Georgia was able to instantly mobilize all teachers and people involved in education system, which led to the continuation of the learning process and the protection of the health of students and teachers. Education was available to students from all regions of Georgia, because of schools’ and universities’ administrations, lecturers and teachers tried not to interrupt the learning process, also supporting and engagement of students and pupils has determined the academic achievements of each of them (Reimers et al, 2020)

Conclusion

The rapid spread of COVID-19 has demonstrated so many different issues, what about we didn't think before, there were so many problems and challenges from the beginning and every country tried really hard to do their best in every spare. For us that for education system and every person worked to do their job for new generation, for students. For sure we needed rapid technological changes, also that were an opportunity to remind ourselves of the skills as informed decision making and creative problem solving, that was the great way for students to learn quick adaptability in the new world and make their own decision. As research has shown, one of the main problem in switching to online learning was psychological unpreparedness and lack of appropriate technical equipment. Therefore, it's important that educational institutions and relevant governmental agencies should carry out preparatory work for 2020-2021 academic year, which will significantly increase the effectiveness of online teaching.

These processes have really changed our life, introduced new systems into the learning process, developed certain areas, and our community adapted to the new technological challenges. Through this pandemic, the importance of disseminating knowledge across borders, companies, and all parts of society is quite clear. If online learning technology can play a role here, it is incumbent upon all of us to explore its full potential and work together for future success.

As we have seen online learning is considered to be a fully acceptable and effective method in parallel with traditional teaching methods, both by pupils and students, as well as by teachers. Therefore, even if the created pandemic situation allows us to conduct the educational process in the learning classrooms, this method will remain an active method of teaching. The decisions by Georgian government due pandemic

situation were positively assessed by various important organizations around the world. This new steps in education system are relevant and very important for students and all of the new generation.

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