


Exploring perspectives: Undergraduate experiences and challenges in online education–A qualitative study in the Greek higher education context

Maria Stamatoglou ^{1*} 

¹Department of Early Childhood Care and Education, International Hellenic University, Thessaloniki, GREECE

*Corresponding Author: aria.stamatoglou@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this qualitative study is to provide an understanding about the experiences and challenges of Greek undergraduate early childhood care and education students that continue their studies online during the COVID-19 pandemic. Numerous studies were carried out worldwide, since March 2020, trying to explore students' experiences of online education. These studies mainly focused on the issues that arose while studying online education during the pandemic. However, qualitative research on the topic is limited. In this study, a phenomenological perspective will be considered to address the experiences and challenges of early childhood education and care undergraduate university students in online education during the pandemic. The purpose is to inform university lecturers about their future online practices. Overall, 64 undergraduate (62 female and 2 male) students participated in an online open-ended questionnaire and were analyzed with the use of interpretive phenomenological analysis. It was revealed that students were anxious studying in a digital learning environment with the main themes that emerged being isolation, lack of motivation and lack of interpersonal communication. However, students expressed their optimism about the successful outcome of the online experience as they showed skills of flexibility and adaptation with regards to the situation. Although Greece does not have a long tradition of online education practices and these students were not enrolled to the course having a distance learning mode in mind, the findings of the study provide evidence that they encountered an overall positive online learning experience.

Keywords: online distance education, phenomenology, university students' views

INTRODUCTION

As of June 2020, 98.6% of pupils and students were affected by distance education across the globe (United Nations [UN], 2020). For a period of time, a large part of the population had to be quarantined, resulting in the suspension of activities at all educational levels, including inter-school teaching. These activities, both synchronous and asynchronous, involved educational institutions at various levels, such as kindergartens, primary schools, secondary schools, and high schools, as well as institutions of higher education.

Although distance education (Giosos et al., 2008) first appeared in the 19th century, its widespread implementation has been around a hundred years old, with the 1980s being a milestone for its implementation on a global scale. According to research (Bates, 2005), online teaching, unlike traditional teaching, provides freedom and time to students for those who cannot attend face-to-face classroom for any reason. It is worth noting at this point that in Greece, until the emergence

of the COVID-19 pandemic, distance teaching had not been used on a large scale simultaneously and synchronously in all educational levels, except in one higher education institution. Until then it had been used as a supplementary and asynchronous method in some higher education institutions. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the views of higher education students were the subject of study for several researchers around the globe who reported on the factors that influenced distance online education (Baber, 2020; Syauqi et al., 2020) and others that identified that factors that can establish the outgrowth of on-line learning during the same period (Yudiawan et al., 2021). In an attempt to gather information on distance education research (Masalimova et al., 2022) presented a small overview that initially included a total of 139 articles of which 27 articles (qualitative and quantitative research) were retained in the final list through content analysis. These articles reported extensively on students' views on distance online education. More specifically, the four pillars on which these studies were based were students' views and perceptions of distance online education and its

advantages, disadvantages, and challenges. According to the same survey, students' views varied in a range of positive and negative attitudes towards distance online education, as this type of teaching favours distance learning at any time and staying at home provides security given the circumstances. However, they add that distance online education contributes to a variety of physical and psychological health problems, which include fear, anxiety, stress, and concentration problems, since many schools lack the infrastructure for such a process (Masalimova et al., 2022).

Distance education has evolved in the 21st century, based on technological advances, to encourage interaction either between students or between students and their teachers (Saykili, 2018). The use of these technological advances has also transformed the relationship between the student and the teacher, as students are encouraged to plan, organize, and synthesise their own learning experience with the aim of self-directed learning (Siemens, 2005). Finally, according to research (Lionarakis, 2001), through distance education, the student is activated and taught in autonomous learning to master knowledge and then ten criteria are mentioned that are related to the above definition of distance education among which are "versatility, flexibility, measurability, facilitation and learner-centeredness" (Yagli et al., 2010). Others (Miminou & Spanaka, 2013) had also expressed the need for distance online education, which was not part of the Greek reality, except to a limited extent such as:

- (a) by university institutions, thanks to the initiatives of their professors,
- (b) by international organizations, concerning individual interactive meetings, and
- (c) by serious initiatives of private tutorial organizations, but for specific purposes.

Nowadays, the relationship between education and learning has diversified, as new technologies contribute to everyday communication at work and social level (Toki & Pange, 2011) and social interaction takes place through the sharing of online opinions and knowledge (Toki et al., 2013). According to the literature, online learning is either interpreted according to cognitive theories and constructivism or sociocultural theories and can add to the educational process in a positive way. When we refer to the term 'distance online education', we include the terms e-learning, distance education, distance teaching and online learning (Lee, 2010). It is a form of educational process that allows the student and the teacher to engage in an organized and structured learning process through two or multiple communication networks and multimedia is understood as distance education (Saykili, 2018) and allows for interaction between them either synchronously or asynchronously. The term 'e-learning' is very often found in the literature and is the most prevalent term, referring to distance learning using digital technologies (Nichols, 2008). Researchers (Papaioannou & Pansides, 2020) state that often the terms e-learning and distance learning, although considered identical terms, are in fact two different situations, but they can complement each other. The first term, that of e-learning, refers to the use of information and communications technology (ICT) for more effective learning, while the second, that of distance learning, refers to the involvement of

instructors and learners in a learning teaching that takes place at a distance using technological means, in order to enable them to communicate effectively (Papaioannou & Panitsides, 2020).

As presented earlier, research has been conducted on both distance education and online education with emphasis on the advantages and disadvantages of distance education. The use of Moodle in three different Greek universities (Boulota & Karagiannis, 2018). According to their survey, 58.2% of the participants answered that they were helped and improved their academic effects, and 83.9% emphasized that Moodle offered them many learning advantages. When participants were asked about the ease of use of Moodle, 83.9% responded that they used it without needing explanations of how it worked, and 70.5% reported that it was easy and fun to learn. Furthermore, when participants were asked if they thought Moodle enhanced their communication and interaction with their teachers, 60.8% responded positively, despite the fact that the majority of users were not satisfied with their communication with teachers. Finally, the results of the same survey revealed that 96.6% of students as well as kindergarten teachers had access to logistical infrastructure to engage in learning processes through Moodle. With very few exceptions, 97.0% of the first survey sample was systematically involved in enhancing learning outcomes and were highly familiar with e-learning, indicating that students responded positively to it.

In a recent survey (Al-Mawee et al., 2021), which took place online and concerned American university students' views on distance online education in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, students reported negative experiences in terms of lack of social interaction, and positive experiences in terms of time management and flexibility in terms of location when attending classes. More specifically, this study highlighted that most first-year students perceived the lack of interaction between students and teachers as negative, which resulted in a change to distance online education during the pandemic. This view prevailed, as students stated that they did not learn as much as they could have in face-to-face classes and their grades did not improve through this process. Of course, a major obstacle was considered to be the fact that educational institutions were not prepared for such a transition given the unprecedented pandemic. On the other hand, students responded positively in terms of flexibility of location and time management both in terms of attending classes and writing papers. Advantages included references to the lack of travel, energy savings, time management and time spent with other family members. Finally, only a small number of students reported limited knowledge of using technology. A similar but qualitative study took place in the United States, with 90 undergraduate and graduate students on whether distance online education affected their learning (Kohli et al., 2021). The findings of the study showed that students had difficulty with distance online education, had problems communicating with instructors, lacked motivation to learn, had problems retrieving educational materials from the internet, and felt that the home working environment was either not accessible or not safe. Based on the findings of this research, the need for instructors to take the social and emotional needs of students seriously by enhancing communication between teachers and students and encouraging support for the latter is highlighted.

Table 1. Aggregated table of participant data

Participant details	Total	Percentage (%)
Students enrolled in the semester of the survey	114	100
Students who responded to the survey	66	58.0
Students who attended the course from a location other than that of the institution	15	23.0
Students who attended the course from the same location as that of the institution	51	77.0
Students who have had experience of distance learning online	20	30.0
Students who had no experience of online distance learning	46	70.0
Male students who participated in the survey	4	6.0
Female students who participated in the survey	62	94.0

Table 2. Interview questions

Open press questions
What were your initial thoughts about distance online education?
How would you describe your personal practices regarding time management for your studies?
How would you describe access to lectures and other educational material?
How did you experience communication with the trainers?
How did you experience communicating with your fellow students?
Do you think there are advantages to distance online learning? If so, what are they?
Do you think there are disadvantages to distance online learning? If so, what are they?
What are your thoughts on distance online learning after the semester?
Having the knowledge of distance online education, how would you approach a similar future practice?
Closed-ended questions
Do you have previous experience of distance online training? (YES/NO)
Do you live in your place of permanent residence? (YES/NO)

In addition, a survey was conducted in Greece on students' and teachers' views on lifelong learning and distance education, using questionnaires to students and semi-structured interviews to teachers, through qualitative and quantitative research (ASD Education, 2011). The purpose of this research was to study communication during the distance learning program and to make suggestions for improving communication during the educational interface. The findings presented revealed that both students and teachers consider the role of communication important, as it is considered effective to a certain extent and the role of teachers is particularly important in meeting, through communication, the needs of students in terms of content on the one hand and, by extension, cognitively and emotionally on the other hand. The most important interpersonal communication that developed and emerged, through the research, were meetings, email, and the use of telephone. Finally, it was considered necessary to further improve communication between teachers and students, mainly through the use of new technologies. The barriers to communication in distance education were focused on by the researcher (Berge, 2013) by conducting a literature review, where technical, psychological, social, and cultural challenges regarding communication were presented. In conclusion, it was stated that as the technology used for distance education improves, there is hope that the barriers of ineffective communication will be overcome.

As qualitative research studies on this topic according to researchers Doyumgac et al. (2021) are limited, the purpose of the present research is to give the students the opportunity to respond in depth to the issues presented during this new learning process and the feelings they experienced, as distance online teaching was not foreseen when they started their studies. Considering the above, this research will try to answer the following main research question: How did first-year early

childhood students in a higher education institution in Greece experience distance online education?

METHODOLOGY

Study Population & Sampling

This study was designed as a qualitative study. Regarding the aggregated data of the sample of the present research (Table 1), it is first mentioned that of the total of 114 students enrolled in this semester, 66 participated in the online questionnaire (58.0%). It is evident that the field of early childhood education and training is an area that is almost exclusively composed of women. As it was earlier presented the majority of participants were women (62) and the minority were men (four). These figures represent 94.0% for women and 6.0% for men. In total, 15 students out of 66 (23.0%) attended the courses from remote areas rather than from the location of their study department.

As can be clearly seen from Table 1, the majority of students had no previous experience of distance education, with only 30.0% having previous experience and 70.0% having no previous experience of distance education, which is in line with previous research. These percentages are in line with previous research that had emphasized that online education is not part of the Greek reality and at the same time had expressed the need for its existence in the learning process.

Data Collection & Analysis

In the context of this qualitative research, semi-structured online questionnaires were distributed. Participants were asked to answer mainly open-ended questions (Table 2), which form the core of this research, and some additional closed-ended questions.

Once participants indicated their intention to participate in this research through a Zoom meeting with the researcher, they were given the following questions to express their views online, specifically Google Forms in Google Drive. The researcher was in communication with the students throughout the completion of the questions through the Zoom platform. There was then an individual discussion with the participants for any clarifications and additions to the answers they had already completed before submitting them to Google Drive. This process took place after the end of a course attended by the students with the lecturer/researcher if they wished to do so and had no other commitments, as is evident from the percentages presented in **Table 1**. The process was completed in about 40 to 45 minutes and there were no connection problems on the part of both the students and the researcher. All participants showed interest in the results of the research, as they emphasized that the situation, they were experiencing was unprecedented and since they had already gone through the first semester (the research took place in June 2020) of distance online education.

The questions presented to the participants were, as follows (**Table 2**).

It was felt that an interpretive phenomenological approach to data analysis would help to extract more in-depth information about students' perceptions of their distance online learning in the midst of a pandemic. Phenomenology is the science that studies how individuals perceive their world and make sense of their experiences (Langdrige, 2007), as well as how these individuals experience and reproduce social phenomena (Iosifidis, 2003). The lives and experiences of individuals underwent a significant change with the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, and using interpretive phenomenological analysis, an attempt was made to understand and make sense of the experiences and emotions (Laverty, 2003) experienced by the early childhood students. Therefore, as face-to-face teaching was replaced by distance online education, it was considered appropriate to study their views phenomenologically, as (Andreitou, 2007) in the phenomenological method an attempt is made to bring to the surface the inner meaning of the experience, which has been lived by the participants, through the study of the 'essence', i.e., the nature of an experience. The description of the experience is done through language with the ultimate aim of bringing out the meaning of the experience and its inner meaning. It is therefore logical (Iosifidis, 2003) that phenomenology has influenced a wide range of social sciences and that phenomenological pedagogy, phenomenological psychology and phenomenological sociology have emerged. In this line, this qualitative research attempted to answer the following main research question: How do undergraduate students make sense of the experience of distance education in the midst of a pandemic?

To understand the way in which the first-year students experienced distance online education, in the midst of a pandemic, a semi-structured questionnaire was designed. Considering the small number of the students and that until then teaching took place exclusively face-to-face, a qualitative analysis of the data seemed appropriate. However, given the situation, this semi-structured questionnaire took place

online, as in other studies conducted during the same period (Kohli et al., 2021; Masalimova et al., 2022).

By the time all participants had completed the interview, the researcher followed the steps of phenomenological analysis as presented by the literature (van Manen, 1989) in which:

- (a) *the researcher focuses on the content* as presented by the interviewees, which was the experience of online distance learning,
- (b) *the researcher explores the experience of the individuals as they experience it and not as they interpret it*, where the students' experiences of difficulties and attitude change in the educational process were evident, as the students had to adapt to the new online environment,
- (c) *the researcher highlights the main themes representing the study phenomenon*, where the advantages and disadvantages as well as the perceptions of the students' future practice became evident through the participants' responses,
- (d) *the researcher presents and describes the phenomenon through a continuous writing process*, with the researcher presenting and describing the distance online education through the participants' responses, quoting as such what the participants had highlighted,
- (e) *the researcher maintains interest in the phenomenon* by presenting the main themes and subcategories, and finally,
- (f) *the researcher balances between the whole phenomenon and its individual parts*, where the researcher made an effort to present not only the whole of the responses, but also each participant's point of view individually with references to what they had to say about what they were concerned about.

Therefore, based on this methodological approach, the above steps of data collection and analysis were followed. This route was followed, in the context of this research, when analyzing the students' responses, as interpretive phenomenological analysis deals with each participant and their own assumptions about the subject (Smith et al., 1999), trying to answer questions about the actual nature and meaning of the situation they have experienced (Errasti-Ibarrondo et al., 2018). Giving emphasis to the voice of the participants is the aim of qualitative research as Stamatoglou (2024) denotes. The importance of voice in social science research and the justifications for incorporating and interpreting research voices in particular ways is also presented by Clough and Nutbrown (2012, p. 63) who emphasize both the voice of the researchers in qualitative research as well as the voice of the participants.

RESULTS & FINDINGS

The results of this qualitative research study are presented in four main axes that emerged from the online semi-structured online questionnaire of the students. These main axes (**Table 3**) were (a) understanding of distance online education, because the majority of the students, as mentioned above, had no experience of distance teaching. In addition, (b)

Table 3. Main axes that emerged from student interviews

Understanding distance online education	Conflicting views on distance online education
The process of personal change of students	Concluding views on distance online education

Table 4. What were your initial thoughts about distance online education?

Initial thoughts	Number of reports
Difficulty	14
Negativity	17
Stress	5
Uncertainty	11
Optimism	16
Total	63

and (c) the students mentioned the advantages and disadvantages of distance online education and finally, they mentioned (d) the process of personal change through the new experiences they experienced.

Understanding Distance Online Education

The initial thoughts of the students varied, which is understandable, as they were experiencing something completely new and also something for which they had not prepared, as until that time no university in the country, with the exception of Hellenic Open University, had undertaken online distance learning as part of its educational process. **Table 4** shows the students’ responses in their attempt to understand the new situation, as they themselves were experiencing a change in their everyday life and, in particular, with regard to their studies. To the question “what were your initial thoughts about distance education?”

The responses from 63 students are summarised **Table 4**. It is immediately apparent that negative thoughts outnumbered (47 responses) initial positive thoughts (16 responses), and this is also evident in **Table 5**, where extracts from the participants’ responses are provided.

A sense of uncertainty and negativity is evident in **Table 4**, as the unknown elements of the situation were preoccupying the students’ minds. Anxiety and fear were presented, as of S2 ‘anxiety and fear of matter’ and S13 ‘it was something new ... there was anxiety and we didn’t think it would be able to

Table 6. How would you describe your personal practices regarding time management for your studies?

Time management	Number of reports
Effective	37
Ineffective	16
Total	53

replace cross-curricular teaching’, but also some positive feelings emerged as of S41 ‘a new, pleasant experience’ and S11 ‘it was something new, but it’s easy to adapt’.

Conflicting Views on Distance Online Education

With regard to time management, a total of 53 out of 66 students responded. The answers given by the participants could be divided into two categories. Those who thought that time management on their part is effective and those who thought that time management is ineffective. **Table 6** shows the number of responses by category, reflecting the effective time management practice by most of the students (37 responses) and the least number of students mentioned ineffective time management (16 responses).

These views seem to be in favour of the effective time management, probably due to the fact that all students were mature and were able to set a pace to their studies.

Regarding time management in **Table 7**, there were those who found this process effective, with emphasis on “lack of movement” and those who found it ineffective, as the home space was not sufficient for “concentration” and “student commitment to study”. However, there were also students who found it difficult to answer, such as F4 who pointed out that

It is still too early to answer such a question because I am in my second semester still and I have not had time to understand what university is, how you study, what resources you take, how they are properly utilized and how you manage your time properly. In this first year that went by as it did, the only thing that I came to

Table 5. Initial thoughts

Subsections & interview extracts				
Difficulty	Negativity	Stress	Uncertainty	Optimism
‘I thought it would be difficult to understand subject’ S3. ‘I thought I would encounter difficulties in communication between teachers & students’ & ‘That there will be many problems of connection & understanding’ S18. ‘That it will be different & difficult’ S11.	‘I thought it would not work and it would not work’ S20.	‘At first, I was nervous & doubtful. I was concerned about effectiveness of distance learning’ S9.	‘We had not done anything like that, so I did not have a complete view’ S8.	‘I thought it would help not to miss semester because of pandemic’ S5.
	‘At first I thought it would not work, because we know what Greek universities are like’ S6.	‘It was something new ... there was anxiety & we did not think it would be able to replace cross-curricular teaching’ S13.	‘My initial thoughts were whether we would be able to cope’ S19.	‘I found it to be a new & modern means of continuing course & covering material’ S24.
	‘Negative thoughts. You cannot compare it to inter-conversational teaching, where you see professor in lecture theatre’ S10.	‘Anxiety & fear of matter’ S2.	‘If we manage to meet lessons’ S33.	‘That I will be able to attend classes every day’ S60.
	‘How it would not be efficient’ & ‘I did not want to!’ S21.	‘I was very stressed when they announced that universities would not work, being a first year student already’ S30.	‘Wondering how course will be conducted online’ S45. ‘How to get learning process right!’ S1.	‘It was something new, but it’s easy to adapt’ S11. ‘A new, pleasant experience’ S41.

Table 7. Time management

Main topics & interview excerpts	
Effective	Ineffective
‘It was very convenient for me to teach remotely because I am a mother of two, a working mother & I could not attend all classes in person as I did now. After each attendance I spent about one hour to read & absorb material’ S6.	‘ I do not think time management has been effective for me as I am at home all day and it does not help with concentration & time management’ S42.
‘ You definitely save time when you study at a distance’ S42.	‘ Sometimes I lose my concentration because of external factors (other people in house, too much noise)’ S17.
‘I think I can control my time better in terms of reading with my other activities. I have saved time by not moving around university’ S3.	‘ Due to situations and immobility, desire & engagement with study of course was at a low level & as a result there was then an anxiety about completing material’ S13.
‘Because I stayed at home & we watched remotely, there was plenty of time to study’ S12.	‘ Unexpectedly unplanned & time-consuming ’ S11.
‘There was no issue with time management’ S5.	‘I would not say that I have time management that I want because being cooped up at home does not help with concentration & organisation’ S40.
‘Because of distance learning & staying at home, there was enough time for reading and studying’ S8.	‘I’m not using it as I should be’ S44.
‘I think it was a good practice in terms of time management for my studies. So, we did not miss semester & we practiced more in online learning mode’ S10.	‘Fortunately, this particular class is in afternoon & I can attend it ... There are others that I have not attended a single class since beginning of academic year because I’m working ... So, truth is that I’m still trying to figure out how I’m going to manage rest of year’ S50.
‘I had a specific schedule, which nothing else prevented me from doing so, so I became more involved in studying ’ S16.	‘ I have a lot of commitments ’ F35.
	‘ Incomplete ’ F24.

Table 8. How would you describe your access to lectures & other educational material?

Access to lectures	Number of reports
Easy access	49
Difficult access	15
Total	64

understand was that you have to learn how to manage your time properly and qualitatively, to take as much as you can so that you can perform better in your studies and in your future career.

Next, regarding access to lectures and pedagogical materials in **Table 8** and **Table 9**, there were students who viewed access to the materials and lectures positively, citing that they were “clear and useful” given the status of what they were being asked for.

However, there were also those who found this process difficult and this was evident from the responses they gave. A total of 64 out of 66 responded to this question and it is clear

that most students described accessing the lectures as easy (49 responses) and few students faced difficulties (15 responses).

As it was the case in the time management responses, the majority of students seemed to have no difficulty in accessing the material as it is the case with S33 ‘access to the courses and other educational material was very easy, clear and helpful at such a time. There were no complaints on my part’ and less students had difficulty in doing so as it was the case of S17 ‘very difficult! Sometimes I did not have Internet and could not connect to Zoom’.

Process of Personal Change of Students

According to the literature (Nicolaidou, 2008), communication is considered essential for the educational process, while at the same time, the educational process should focus on the cognitive and socio-emotional domain. **Table 10** and **Table 11** present the number of reports in terms of difficulties and facilitation encountered and reflected by the participants during the online distance learning with their teachers and fellow students respectively.

Table 9. Access to lectures & pedagogical material

Subsections & interview extracts	
Easy access	Difficult access
‘It was easy access for me’ S10.	‘Going to Zoom was easy but at same time difficult when we had to access material because Moodle was slow’ S12.
‘As I am familiar with technology, I had no difficulty in accessing lessons & material sent to us by teachers’ S16.	‘ Very difficult! Sometimes I did not have the Internet & could not connect to Zoom’ S17.
‘I would say it was easy but challenging & useful at same time, as it is important for us to learn to work in a digital environment’ S34.	‘Some days we had seven hours of class & my battery would run out & I would miss part of class!’ & ‘Access to courses & educational material was not always easy , as there were technical difficulties both on part of student & teacher’ S22.
‘ Adequate for data ’ S56.	‘Accessing training materials was complicated as you did not have teacher close to you to explain step by step what you were going to do but you had to go through process of looking for yourself to read on your own. In general, you felt quite distant & you did not get meaning of course with same efficiency’ S25.
‘ Surprisingly satisfactory ’ F1.	‘ Difficult in present situation’ S53.
‘ Easy, fast and efficient ’ S5.	
‘ Quite satisfactory ’ S8.	
‘ Feasible & helpful ’ S38.	
‘ Pretty good with minor problems ’ S50.	
‘It was very easy to follow lessons & material that was uploaded to Moodle’ S9.	
‘For course proved to be easy without many problems , for educational material access was same as previous semester with exception of delivery of textbooks’ S15.	
‘Access to courses & other educational material was very easy, clear & helpful at such a time . There were no complaints on my part’ S33.	

Table 10. How did you experience communication with your teachers?

Contact with teachers	Number of reports
Good communication	45
Difficult communication	18
Total	63

Table 11. How did you experience communication with your fellow students?

Communication with fellow students	Number of reports
Good communication	41
Difficult communication	20
Total	61

Table 12. Communication with teachers & fellow students

Subsections & interview extracts	
Contact with teachers	Communication with fellow students
‘Communicating with teachers in this format was something unknown & because it was not face to face, but only through messages, it made it difficult & sometimes the response was slow’ S2.	‘No communication’ S1.
‘In general, teachers made a lot of effort for a successful outcome, however, I would have liked a little more help & understanding from their side’ S3.	‘Our communication was excellent & unobstructed thanks to technology’ S4.
‘At first, it was strange, but as time went on & I became more familiar with process, our communication was on mutual understanding & acceptance of both sides’ views’ S19.	‘Excellent, we did not lose our communication at all’ S21.
‘At beginning I found whole process a bit impersonal, but as days went by & communication became easier, if you had participation in course you had more communication with teachers’ S13.	‘Non-existent’ S12.
‘Majority was at our disposal’ S5.	‘Through platform there was no good communication with fellow students. But using other technological means there was a better communication’ S29.
‘Communication has been excellent & I was surprised that every time I emailed a lecturer I received a prompt reply’ S7.	‘Unfortunately, there was no communication. I detected a distancing on their part’ F6.
‘There was not best communication with some teachers due to number of students with lots of questions combined with time frame of course’ S9.	‘Communication with fellow students was not as good as in face-to-face courses’ S10.
‘Good interaction’ S42.	‘As I was a first-year student, I would have liked to meet others in person, however, our communication was good & had a positive atmosphere’ S26.
‘I panicked at first because I preferred face-to-face lessons, but luckily we have very good teachers so whatever we need they are there to help us’ S56.	‘Communication with my fellow students, personally, was zero I had no communication with anyone & that was not pleasant, neither for now nor for next semesters’ S22.
‘I think that face-to-face communication would be of much higher quality’ S57.	‘Communication with fellow students was much better, because we had chat room & we could write there what we wanted to ask them without interrupting flow of course’ S8.
	‘Almost nothing has changed, except for personal contact. It was same as before in face-to-face classes’ S24.
	‘It was also appreciated, we helped each other with questions & there was also respect between us’ & ‘Communication with our fellow students was also through messages, which was difficult because we had not had time to get to know most of them but only talked about course-related issues’ S35.
	‘Despite distance learning, our communication is excellent’ S40.
	‘My fellow students & I have created a social media group & we have daily communication & they are very friendly & we help each other’ & ‘Very good ... something I did not expect’ S62.

The participants’ responses indicate that most students did not experience any problems with their communication with teachers (45 responses), nor with their fellow students (41 responses), although comparatively, communication with teachers seems to have been better than that with fellow students.

Relation to the element of communication, students mentioned the fact that there was a good communication with the professors, with some problems (Table 12). The main focus of students’ communication with teachers was “mutual understanding”, and “acceptance of both sides’ views”. Similarly, there was variation in communication between students, as there were those who experienced “no communication” with their fellow students because they had not had time to get to know each other enough in the pre-pandemic face-to-face classes, and others who were not affected by the new situation.

The role of the teacher in supporting, encouraging and providing feedback so that students can actively participate in the educational process, as previously reported (ASD Education, 2011), and more recently by Kohli et al. (2021) seems to be a crucial factor for the participants in this study, according to the above views.

Table 13. Do you think there are advantages to distance online learning?

Advantages	Number of reports
Safety at home	10
Lack of mobility	28
Time management	10
Familiarization with new technologies	4
No advantages	11
Total	63

The undergraduate students’ opinions on the advantages and disadvantages of distance online education were varied, as there were those who gained positive experiences from this process and others who experienced negative feelings. Table 13 shows that most students mentioned the advantages of distance online education (52 reports), while only 11 students answered that there were no advantages.

In particular, the advantages cited by students included “the security” provided by the house, “the lack of moving” and “time management” (Table 14). Proper ‘time management’ was considered an important advantage by some students, as it enabled them to cope successfully with the new reality, referring to the fact that it reduced their ‘commuting’ and gave them ‘more time’ to devote to their studies.

Table 14. Advantages of distance learning

Subsections & interview extracts	
Safety at home	Lack of mobility
<p>'We are at home, which means we are more comfortable & safer' S2.</p> <p>'Gaining time & giving equal opportunities to those who work from home safely is very important' S4.</p> <p>'We can stay in our cities' S8.</p> <p>'Only positive thing that can come out of this whole process is protection of people in a pandemic' S11.</p> <p>'Because of COVID-19 I am in city, where I come from because there are zero cases per day compared to Thessaloniki. Purely because of fear of pandemic ... Otherwise, everything else has left me behind in terms of university' S19.</p> <p>'I think distance education does not have many positive features' S51.</p>	<p>'We gain time that we would have lost on our way to university' S1.</p> <p>'We're saving time by moving to university' S3.</p> <p>'More useful for people who live far away & do not have opportunity to move to another city, or more simply it's more effective for me being alone in room in complete silence' S13.</p> <p>'No valuable time is lost in travelling, everyone is more relaxed when attending, time is saved for studying material' S20.</p> <p>'There is quieter in classroom, in class, & better attendance without distraction. At same time we save on travel time to & from university' S33.</p>
Time management	Familiarisation with new technologies
<p>'We have more time to study' F9.</p> <p>'It was very convenient for me to teach remotely because I am a mother of two, a working mother & I could not attend all classes in person as I did now. After each attendance I spent about one hour to read & absorb material' S19.</p> <p>'There are advantages such as big time savings' S24.</p> <p>'Time saving, flexibility, & equal opportunities' S35.</p>	<p>'Of course, there are advantages such as continuity of courses & integration of curriculum combined with familiarity with new technologies' S46.</p> <p>'Of course, familiarity with technology is an advantage as well as exposure to a new kind of learning' S52.</p> <p>'There are definitely positives, such as fact that we are in daily contact with technology, & we are evolving' S58.</p> <p>'And of course there are advantages, as lessons continue & we will also get used to using technology' S62.</p>

Table 15. Do you consider that there are disadvantages in distance online training?

Disadvantages	Number of reports
Lack of communication	31
Isolation	4
Lack of incentives	5
Problems with ICT	15
No disadvantages	8
Total	63

The fact that distance online education also gave some working students the opportunity to attend and continue their

studies could not go unnoticed, as well as the reference to the fact that it gave these students 'equal opportunities'.

According to **Table 15**, the number of students' answers (55 answers) shows the weakness of distance online education in contrast to only eight students who considered that there are no disadvantages.

In more detail, as shown in **Table 16**, the disadvantages related to "lack of communication", "lack of motivation", "isolation" and "stress in the digital environment".

As can be seen through distance online education, students were given the opportunity to attend classes from other cities, different from one, where school they attend is based. During

Table 16. Disadvantages of online distance learning

Subsections & interview extracts	
Lack of communication & interaction	Isolation
<p>'We did not have opportunity to get to know our professors & fellow students in person' S1.</p> <p>'In traditional teaching we would have more opportunities to communicate with others' S4.</p> <p>'I think you feel alone, without others around you, for example 30 people around you & you lose your courage' S11.</p> <p>'Yes. There is no interaction between students & teachers to promote dialogue & interaction between students themselves' S14.</p> <p>'There are definitely disadvantages, it's more qualitative interaction in person' S25.</p> <p>'Disadvantages of distance learning were that we could not have contact with our teacher but also could not solve questions on spot. We could not interact with our fellow students & bond with them ... we could not do group work & express our opinion & socialize with other people' S41.</p>	<p>'I feel isolated, but at this time it is more important to survive & be healthy than to be educated' S5.</p> <p>'Yes, face-to-face lesson is different from what happens behind a screen' S8.</p> <p>'There is no realistic contact with both teachers & fellow students. It is more difficult to learn in terms of understanding courses' S10.</p> <p>'It's an impersonal process & when you lose connection, you feel disconnected' S20.</p>
Lack of incentives	Problems in the digital environment
<p>'I feel like I'm not motivated. It's difficult, as this is completely new for all of us' S33.</p> <p>'You can not be 100% focused' & We're not focused all time & maybe there's less interest because we're not face to face' S50.</p>	<p>'Yes, there are difficulties, as we may lose our Internet connection & miss rest of lesson' S52.</p> <p>'Some students do not know anything about technology & how it works' S56.</p> <p>'Some students do not have right technology' S40.</p> <p>'The Internet sticks' S21.</p> <p>'Difficult access to course due to of appliances, the Internet & bad weather' S38.</p>

Table 17. What are your thoughts on distance online education after end of semester?

Reflections after end of semester	Number of reports
Effective	20
Satisfactory	17
Useful	9
Return to normality	10
Total	57

stay-at-home students felt “comfortable and safe” factors essential under unprecedented conditions they experienced.

Students’ views on the impact of “lack of communication” were presented as the main disadvantages of distance online education and this is because students did not “have the opportunity to get to know their teachers and fellow students” “face to face”. These findings are in line with evidence from previous research (ASD Education, 2011), where it was observed that communication is considered effective to a certain extent and the role of teachers is particularly important in meeting students’ needs through communication, both in terms of content, and by extension cognitively, as well as emotionally. At this point, there was no shortage of comparisons between ‘traditional’ teaching and distance online teaching, where it was stressed that ‘we would have more opportunities for communication’ as at the same time it was considered important that students felt lonely, felt ‘disconnected’ and ‘lost their courage’.

So, according to students’ views, advantages such as safety at home, lack of travel and time management were identified, and disadvantages such as lack of communication and motivation, isolation, and stress in the digital environment.

Concluding Views on Distance Online Education

In the question about students’ thoughts on distance education, the majority of the students’ answers showed a positive attitude (47 references) as they referred to the new educational process as ‘effective’, ‘satisfactory’, ‘useful’. A small number of participants (10 responses) nevertheless

Table 19. Having knowledge of distance learning, how would you approach a similar future practice?

Future practices	Number of reports
Uncertainty and fear	12
Optimism	45
Total	57

expressed a desire to return to normality, meaning face-to-face courses (Table 17).

Thus, according to students’ reflections on distance learning after the end of the semester (Table 18), students seem to have experienced it as a useful, “comprehensive and effective” process, which was “very efficient”. The positive feelings experienced by some students were evident from “the satisfaction” they felt about the effective completion of the training process as they were able to take the time, familiarise themselves with new condition and overcome any problems.

When asked about their future approaches to a similar practice, most students expressed their ‘optimism’ (45 references) in contrast to only 12 students who expressed their ‘fear’ and ‘uncertainty’ at the idea of a future distance learning process (Table 19). Having experienced online distance learning, students according to Table 20, expressed their views on future practices, which were contradictory, as there were those who felt that in such a case in the future they would be possessed by “uncertainty and fear”, mainly because they thought that they would not be able to pass the exams. Some of them certainly did not hesitate to refer to the whole process as ‘frightening’ and ‘difficult’. On the opposite side, there were those who had another more optimistic view of things. According to the latter, there was a belief that in the future a similar situation would be dealt with “positively” as they would be “more disciplined” and “prepared” and “better organized”, which would lead to “better results”. The views of the participants in this study are in line with the views of university students in other countries (Kohli et al., 2021; Masalimova et al., 2022) emphasizing the universality of the situation experienced by students around the world.

Table 18. Reflections on distance learning after end of semester

Subsections & interview extracts	
Effective	Satisfactory
<p>‘It was a practical process that met my learning needs as it was comprehensive & effective’ S3.</p> <p>‘In relation to difficulties we face, it is a very efficient process’ S8.</p> <p>‘It was a nice experience, we saw education from a different perspective & became more familiar with technology’ S21.</p> <p>‘It was a very convenient process that met my learning requirements as it was done in an integrated & efficient manner’ S34.</p> <p>‘In general, it was a remarkable effort (by both teachers & fellow students) for smooth progression of course & completion of curriculum’ S45.</p>	<p>‘I feel satisfied that we made it to end’ S1.</p> <p>‘It was something we had to experience & overcome. Personally, I feel very satisfied because I was at home, I had time to study, practice, & study. Overall, I had a schedule that helped me study & stay engaged with my studies’ S10.</p> <p>‘It was an unprecedented process & something completely new. I did not think it was possible because there were many of us & I thought there would not be a good understanding. In end, communication with my fellow students helped me a lot in various issues’ S13.</p>
Useful	Return to normality
<p>‘Distance learning was a nice alternative to deal with situations & a useful application in future’ S26.</p> <p>‘In end, distance online training proved to be effective & useful. We became familiar with searching the Internet & department’s website. It was something new, a new way of teaching, but we got most out of it’ F55.</p> <p>‘If circumstances dictated it, of course, yes, it is useful, but in my opinion face-to-face teaching is irreplaceable’ S4.</p>	<p>‘Stop being distant’ S19.</p> <p>‘To find regularity in our studies’ S24.</p> <p>‘I wish it would not go on’ S49.</p> <p>‘I hope it does not happen again’ S33.</p> <p>‘That I would not want it to go on again. However, if circumstances require it, we will all have to compromise’ S32.</p> <p>‘Thank God it’s over. I could not take it anymore’ S11.</p> <p>‘I hope to be in school by September’ S57.</p>

Table 20. Future approaches to distance online education

Subsections & extracts from interviews	
Uncertainty & fear	Optimism
'It's hard to know what will happen' & 'Scary' S41.	'It will be easier in future because we will know process' S1.
'No hope of passing exam' S3.	'I have positive feelings towards distance education. I knew that I would have this experience at some stage of my studies & I would be happy to have it again' F4.
'I will try to focus on positive' S22.	'With better organization there will be positive results ' S9.
'I want to hope that it will not affect way we teach later on' S34.	'Maybe if there is better organization, & if I am more disciplined ' S21.
'I would not for world's sake & next semester I would not want to do distance just for sake of isolation' S35.	' It will be a very positive development. Now that we know how it worked first time, I will be prepared for next one ' S11.
'As I mentioned with this whole process I have a lot of stress, & it does not compare to face-to-face training' S16.	'Since we have all now gained some experience in distance learning, I think that a future attempt would be more successful , as it would not have trial form of this semester; black spots that make process difficult have been identified, so they can be more easily avoided' & 'In end, distance learning seemed to be effective in some areas. We became familiar with how we can search & use school's pages & how we can make assignments & search for information to a satisfactory degree' S52.
'Although there are positives, there are certainly negatives, but it is a way of learning' F42.	' It was a new way of teaching that I think we made most of S10.
'Stop being distant' S23.	' It's certainly a very good & effective solution ' S56.
	'It's not as difficult as it looks. It is manageable & can be a great asset if used properly ' S14.

However, the participants' views were dominated by positive thoughts for a future use of distance digital education as, through the process of personal change, students described it as a useful and effective process. The students experienced a personal change by coming face to face with the new learning process, that of distance online education. Through this change they showed evidence of adaptability and flexibility, skills appropriate for early childhood educators. In this way and considering distance online education as an inevitable future practice, the students revealed their uncertainty about the future, but the positives of this learning process.

DISCUSSION

This study sought to examine the experiences of students during an unprecedented situation that they experienced in higher education in Greece, during the first wave of the pandemic, from March to May 2020. It is important to stress that until that time distance online education had not been operational in a large number of audiences and for the majority of courses. Also, no previous recommendations or training had been given to higher education teachers at the level of individual institutions or as a whole. The surveys on distance online education up to the advent of the pandemic concerned students who were enrolled in a university whose curriculum provided for distance online teaching rather than face-to-face teaching, as in the case of Hellenic Open University. Few studies (Al-Mawee et al., 2021; Kohli et al., 2021; Masalimova et al., 2022; Yudiawan et al., 2021) had focused their attention on students' experiences and through content analysis they identified surveys of qualitative and quantitative methodology in which students presented the positive and negative aspects of distance online education.

The results of this research are in line with those of previous studies, where students in distance education make the most of the freedom and time provided to them if they cannot attend classroom sessions for any reason (Bates, 2005). At the same time, as reported by the participants, the relationship between the learner and the teacher was highlighted through online teaching, as the literature indicates that students are encouraged to plan, organize, and

compose their own learning experience with the aim of self-directed learning (Siemens, 2005). Despite the concerns expressed, the students seemed to agree with research (Lionarakis, 2001) on distance education, and more specifically that it "teaches and activates the student how to learn on their own and how to function autonomously towards a heuristic path of self-learning and knowledge".

Students' responses in this study underline and confirm the importance of what other researchers have reported (Gotovos et al., 1992). Socioemotional education supports the personal, social, ethical, cultural/cross-cultural, spiritual dimension in the educational process and its impact on the emotions, beliefs, interpersonal relationships, and the well-being of each student (Nicolaidou, 2008). To conclude the report on the disadvantages of distance online education, we cannot but mention its characterization as an impersonal process, where if the Internet connection is lost, the rest of the lesson time can be lost, thus highlighting the stress that students faced in the digital environment. The literature states that new technologies contribute to everyday communication, at work and social level (Toki & Page, 2011) and social interaction takes place through the sharing of opinions and knowledge online (Toki et al., 2013). The participants in this study presented their negative emotions in the digital environment, which goes against the previous view, although ultimately, progress was shown in the area of students' cognitive development.

Also, students' views in this study are in agreement with the findings of a survey (Boulota & Karagiannis, 2018), regarding the use of Moodle in three different Greek universities, where 58.2% of the participants answered that it helped them to improve their academic performance and 83.9% answered that it offered them many advantages in their learning. Also, the views of the first-year students in the present study converge with the findings of a related study (Al-Mawee et al., 2021), it concerned the views of American university students on distance online education in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, where students reported negative experiences in terms of lack of social interaction, and positive experiences in terms of time management and flexibility in terms of location when attending classes.

Finally, these findings are consistent with those of other studies (Masalimova et al., 2022), which postulate that

- (a) distance learning favours distance learning at any time and staying at home provides safety given the circumstances,
- (b) distance learning contributes to a variety of physical and psychological health problems, which include fear, anxiety, stress as well as concentration problems, and
- (c) that many schools lack infrastructure for process.

This study provides clear evidence that the undergraduate students were confronted with a new reality, that of the COVID-19 pandemic during which they experienced a personal change regarding the learning process. The new reality of distance online education brought to the surface both positive and negative experiences for first-year early childhood students. The use of interpretive methodological analysis, where participants are given the opportunity to present experiences and reproduce social phenomena (Iosifidis, 2003) contributed to creating a picture of the new reality through the eyes of the first-year undergraduate early childhood education students. Focusing on the students' views, both positive and negative elements of such an educational process are highlighted in order to include these experiences in the study and design of the online lectures. It is also apparent in this study, as in previous related research (Al-Mawee et al., 2021), that a significant barrier was perceived by the students to be the fact that educational institutions were not prepared for such a transition from face-to-face teaching to distance online teaching, given the unprecedented pandemic. The same views were presented by researchers (Kohli et al., 2021), who stated that faculty should take time to provide emotional support for students in situations such as those experienced in the midst of a pandemic. Despite the uncertainty about the future, the students in this study stated that distance online education is, given the circumstances, an unavoidable future practice and they were able to take the time to familiarise themselves with this new situation, showing adaptability, flexibility, and a positive attitude. The students seem to have followed the path from understanding distance online education to experiencing the advantages and disadvantages of this type of education, then realising their personal change in attitude towards distance online education. This attitude can contribute creatively to their learning path, while emphasising the importance of communication (synchronous or asynchronous) and interaction between students and teachers and between students in the digital environment.

CONCLUSIONS

This aims to add to the existing literature that focused on the learning experiences of students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Taking various research studies into account, this study follows a qualitative stance on the students' experiences. The qualitative nature of this study provides insight on the understanding of distance learning education for students who did not have any similar experiences previously. The views of the students in general consist of similarities and differences amongst themselves and the existing literature. The students' process of personal change during this new learning

experience also gives light to the issues that lectures need to consider when on-line education is at stake. Therefore, the significance of this study is that it gives voice to the undergraduate students regarding their distance learning experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic and at the same time provides lecturers with valuable information that can assist future practices.

This study has some limitations. As it is small-scale research it does not aim to generalise but rather to present and analyse the views of undergraduate students in early childhood education, it is considered appropriate to inform the academic community about their experiences and opinions. Among the limitations of the study, reference can be made to the reduced number of participants, due to the participants' obligations after the course and the impossibility of face-to-face interviews given the circumstances. The impossibility of face-to-face interview may have affected the responses given by the students since the researcher was unable to ask supplementary questions to clarify the meaning of what the participants answered. In light of the limitations and findings presented in this study, future research will address issues to enable educators on their part to respond in a timely manner to the typical issues that arise in the online learning process. This is in agreement with the literature, where emphasis is given for the need for distance online teaching in higher education in Greece is deemed necessary not only during times of severe health and safety conditions, but overall.

Further research should highlight the goal for distance education during the 21st century to evolve based on technological advances and encourage interaction either amongst students or between students and their lecturers in order all those who are involved are able to positively contribute to the future practices of higher education learning.

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