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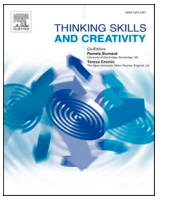

Rethinking public administration education in the period of pandemic: Reflections of public administration students on online education through a SWOT analysis

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ABSTRACT

The current research aims to explore the perceptions of undergraduate and graduate public administration students about online education. The data were gathered from political science and public administration students at the end of the spring semester at a public university in Turkey. Focus group interviews among students were chosen as the data collection method. Later, applying the SWOT analysis, the weaknesses and strengths along with threats and opportunities were identified. In the study, Maslow's needs hierarchy was revisited for a more insightful analysis of findings. Therefore, the study has provided an in-depth analysis of online education to identify caveats for successful implementation. The study concludes that self-actualization is indispensable for revealing the real potential and the creativity of students. Therefore, we cannot overlook the socializing role of university campuses and face-to-face education in the way to self-actualization.

1. Introduction and background

The covid-19 pandemic has been affecting the wellbeing of societies as well as education systems. It has resulted in immense crisis-response migration of universities with online learning serving as the educational platform (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020). University students' academic life, social life, financial situation, psychological condition have been negatively affected by the pandemic. On the other hand, some positive changes in habits and attitudes were also observed like paying greater attention to personal hygiene, quitting smoking, or consuming more organic food. Many papers have been published about such impacts of the pandemic (Aristovnik, Keržic, Ravšelj, Tomaževic & Umek, 2020, p. 2–3). However, we still need discipline-specific research outputs and in-depth studies to be able to draw a more thorough picture regarding the effect of Covid-19. Thus, the objective of the current research is to explore the perceptions of undergraduate and graduate public administration students about online education.

Previously, several comparative studies focusing on differences between face-to-face and online learning have addressed outcomes in the form of student performance. Thus, they have compared the differences in learning outcomes based upon student work (Topper, 2007), GPA (Swan & Jackman, 2000), or overall percentage grades (Horspool & Lange, 2012), and mostly found non-significant

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differences between groups. Nonetheless, a grade is a sign of how a student is doing, but it gives no information on why a student is at that level. Hence, some studies such as Bainbridge et al. (2015, p. 258) criticize the evaluation of student success based on grades as falling short of sufficiently assessing the education system as a whole. They maintain that measured diverse behaviors give insight for responding to the question of why and how a student is getting a particular grade. Thus, it is of use to follow the student behaviors.

This study takes a further step to examine the risks and benefits of online education. Given the arguments of previous studies, the current research, having a qualitative perspective, focuses on student perceptions instead of students' success deriving from grades as the basis of analysis. Therefore, it provides a broader examination of the impact of online education on students' development as an individual within the framework of some seminal works of organizational behavior.

Modern society is an organized society where the principal institutions of life are rooted in the organizational structure. Institutions such as education and health care take the shape of relatively homogeneous organizations that most citizens come across sooner or later (Jacobsson & Löfmarck, 2008, p. 209). So, universities are places where the people mostly get familiar with this fabric of society. In brief, universities are organizations and need to be analyzed as such. Thus, this study aims at analyzing the pros and cons of online education from an organizational perspective.

There is fast-growing literature on distance education applications in the period of the Covid-19 pandemic. Most of the recent studies are discipline-specific case studies such as Hattar et al. (2021) and France, Hangorsky, Wu, Sollecito and Stoopler (2021) for oral medicine/dentistry; Sunardiyo (2021) for electrical engineering; Gorfinkel, Muscat, Ollerhead and Chik (2021), and Brinia and Psoni (2021) for teacher education. Besides, some preliminary studies effectively demonstrate several positive impacts of online learning, such as reducing gender differences (Tang et al., 2021) or its shortcomings in human interaction (Leo, Alsharari, Abbas & Alshurideh, 2021). Nonetheless, these studies fall short of providing a detailed analysis from an organizational perspective.

This paper, thanks to its qualitative and inductive nature, does not begin with any theoretical assumptions. It first analyzes the topic "online education" within a SWOT framework. Later, based on the findings, the paper applies one of the most well-known organizational theories on education. Besides, it enriches the theoretical discussion with philosophical, psychological, literary, and religious perspectives. Therefore, it provides a more insightful analysis of the subject.

2. Method

The study data were gathered from political science and public administration students at the end of the spring semester at a public university in İzmir / Turkey. The data were content analyzed. Applying the SWOT framework, the weaknesses and strengths along with threats and opportunities were identified. Later, relevant strategies were proposed.

2.1. Sample selection

Participants of the study were selected through the purposive sampling technique. In this technique, participants are chosen based on the qualities they possess, and the scholar purposely seeks participants willing to give information about the scholar's topic of interest. Scholars are supposed to use their own judgment to identify and choose the participants that are well informed about the given research topic (Rivera, 2019).

At the public university chosen as the case study, face-to-face (in class) education was applied in the initial five weeks, whereas online synchronous education was applied for the remaining nine weeks of the 2019/20 Spring semester due to the pandemic. That is why the students were supposed to compare two systems for a given course in a better way.

2.2. Data collection

Focus group interviews among students were chosen as the data collection method. Students were informed of the objective, and voluntary participants were assured of anonymity. Interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Teams in June 2020.

In the study, two focus group interviews were conducted among university students—with undergraduate public administration (hereafter PA) students ($n = 17$) and graduate PA students ($n = 3$).

Scholars generally prefer focus groups as a data collection method as they pave the way for scholars to understand both the phenomena in context and participants' knowledge at the same time. There is no optimal number of focus groups. Interviews can end at the saturation point when there is no new information to be collected (McLafferty, 2004). The current research followed this guiding principle. Two group interviews were conducted till the saturation point.

2.3. Data analysis

The current study used content analysis to investigate the reflections of PA students on online education. Later, responses were categorized in a SWOT framework, which has first appeared in the literature in the early 1960s (Chow et al., 2020).

Transcript processing involved inductive content analysis. Initial analysis by the author clarified the general and specific issues voiced by the study participants. For the bias reduction, another scholar was also involved in the analysis process with his critiques. The process formed a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analysis.

2.4. Validity and reliability

Güler, Halıcıoğlu and Taşğın (2015) maintain that there are three significant steps for ensuring validity and reliability in qualitative studies. The first step is to double-check data; the second is to seek feedback from study participants; the third is to include another researcher for data analysis. Besides, Marshall and Rossman (1999) suggest that the researcher should critically question the author's interpretations and act as a "devil's advocate".

Accordingly, several readings of the text by the author, sharing of study findings with several participants for their approval, involvement of a second researcher to act as a critic when necessary were the measures taken to ensure the trustworthiness of this study.

3. Findings

Table 1 indicates demographic characteristics and the educational details of participants. As seen in the table, 14 out of 20 (70%) participants are female, and 17 out of 20 (85%) participants are undergraduate students. A total of 13 participants (65%) are against online education, whereas five students (25%) are supportive of it. Only two students (10%) could not prioritize any educational system.

As previously mentioned, in this study, content analysis was conducted categorizing responses in a SWOT framework as a tool to analyze the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of online education. Table 2 indicates the results of the analysis. The relevant thematic findings are reported below.

3.1. Strengths

The study participants highlighted motivation, participation, time, and financial benefits as the strong points of online education.

3.1.1. Time and financial benefits

Time and financial benefits were regarded as the utmost value of online education by the research participants. Most of the students, whether online education enthusiasts or opponents, stressed the time and financial benefits of online education. On this issue, participant 8, who was an irregular in-class course participant and in favor of online education, stated:

> *Online education is very advantageous. I was spending almost five hours a day commuting to school on public buses.*

On the other hand, participant 2 also emphasized the time and financial benefits of online education even if he was in favor of face-to-face education and said:

> *My house is far from the campus. Therefore, I was spending two hours in commuting time. Now, I got rid of some expenses regarding the school. Nonetheless, when I think about the different dimensions of the relationship between the course instructor and students, I still prefer in-class education.*

Participant 16 also underlined the time-saving benefit of online education, saying:

> *Online education is so advantageous. Before, I was spending almost five hours commuting.*

Table 1
Demographic characteristics of participants.

Participant	Gender	Program level	In-class Participation level	View about Online Education
Participant1	Female	Undergraduate	High	Against
Participant2	Female	Undergraduate	High	Against
Participant3	Female	Undergraduate	High	Against
Participant4	Male	Undergraduate	High	Against
Participant5	Female	Undergraduate	High	Against
Participant6	Female	Undergraduate	Medium	In favor
Participant7	Female	Undergraduate	Medium	Against
Participant8	Male	Undergraduate	High	Against
Participant9	Female	Undergraduate	High	Against
Participant10	Female	Undergraduate	Medium	Against
Participant11	Female	Undergraduate	Medium	Against
Participant12	Male	Undergraduate	Low	Against
Participant13	Female	Undergraduate	Medium	Neutral
Participant14	Female	Undergraduate	Medium	Against
Participant15	Female	Undergraduate	Medium	In favor
Participant16	Female	Undergraduate	Medium	In favor
Participant17	Female	Undergraduate	Low	In favor
Participant18	Male	Graduate	High	Against
Participant19	Male	Graduate	High	In favor
Participant20	Male	Graduate	Medium	Neutral

Table 2
SWOT analysis.

Strengths	Weaknesses
- Time and Financial Benefits	- **Anti-social Interaction**
- Motivation	- **Lack of Motivation**
- Participation	
Opportunities	**Threats**
- Technical Advantages	- **Technical Difficulties**
	- **Student Immobility**

3.1.2. Motivation

Some students argued that online education had a positive effect on their motivation. Among them, participant 6, being an irregular course attendant, said:

> *Switch to online education is beneficial for us. We were easily getting distracted in the classroom, but this is not the case for online education. We see only the course instructor on the screen, and (s)he is the focus point. Yes, sometimes we had technical issues like disconnection problems, but this is not a big problem as we can watch the videos later. Furthermore, we have more time to study now as we do not spend too much time going to school.*

3.1.3. Participation

Online education was viewed as offering more opportunities for course participation by students. Participant 1 commented:

> *Some friends being shy to ask questions could have asked their questions. It is an advantage of online education.*

Participant 15 reflected:

> *My house is far from the university campus. I was having difficulty attending the courses. So, it is better like this. I did not have an internet connection at home. I asked our next-door neighbor to share his wifi and solved the problem.*

3.2. Weaknesses

The participant students perceived many drawbacks of online education. For them, anti-social interaction and lack of motivation were the main weaknesses of online education.

3.2.1. Anti-social interaction

The most repeatedly cited reasons for dissatisfaction with online education were its anti-social nature. On this issue, participant 1, being a regular course participant, said:

> *Even if I had to wake up very early, around 6.30 am, in-class education was better. I had a chance to meet with my friends and course instructor in person. We were used to it, and actually, online education is unsympathetic and impersonal.*

Besides, even if some students, such as participant 7, underlined the technical advantages of online education, they explained their negative stance towards online education. Regarding this, participant 7 maintained that online education offered some technical benefits. She said:

> *We can watch the course videos later. Besides, we can ask more questions, whether written or oral, during the online sessions. However, there is no eye contact. All in all, for me, it is not more efficient.*

3.2.2. Lack of motivation

For most of the students, motivation was also a problem. Participant 5, being a regular course attendant, said:

> *I could not get motivated in online education as much as in face-to-face education on the campus. Yes, the duration of lectures is the same as before, but we cannot get motivated at home. In-class education was better as we were taking it more seriously.*

On the same issue, participant 9 stated:

> *The most important problem with online education for me that I live in a crowded house with an extended family. So, there is no quiet place in the house. This has a negative effect on my motivation for online courses. Its principal benefit, on the other hand, is to save time and money. I was spending 1.5 hours arriving at the school.*

Participant 3 said:

> *For me, face-to-face education was more favorable as I was getting more motivated. This is irrelevant to the content or topics but the ambiance. I believe in this way even though I could join the online courses with presentations etc.*

In the same vein, participant 4 replied:

> *I was better motivated in face-to-face education. I do not have the same level of motivation for online education. The campus atmosphere was warm and welcoming. We have tried to get adapted to online courses in time.*

Participant 1 answered:

> *When I get online at home, my relatives are sometimes singing in the next room. Noises are coming from outside, which does not allow me to join online courses effectively. I did not experience such things on campus.*

Participant 11 responded:

> *I mostly suffer from the negative aspects of online education. I cannot study at home without problems. When the university was open for face-to-face education, I was staying in a student dormitory in İzmir and could study without getting bothered. I did not enjoy online education. Although there is a chance to watch course videos later, its difficulties matter to me.*

3.3. Opportunities

Opportunities are external factors having a positive impact on the rise of online education. In this study, participant students underlined technical advantages as the opportunity of online education.

3.3.1. Technical advantages

Concerning the technical benefits of online education, participant 17 stated:

> *There were only minor technical difficulties regarding online education. Nonetheless, it has a time-saving advantage. We can unhurriedly take lecture notes. I can watch the course videos later. There is a need to get adapted to fast-developing technology. I believe that education should (and will) improve in line with technology.*

Participant 10 said:

> *As a matter of fact, I could not take online education seriously. Going to school in the morning was so good and making me more disciplined. Maybe the principal benefit of online education is the chance to watch anytime the course videos of lectures I missed as I fell asleep.*

3.4. Threats

Contrary to the weaknesses that could be worked out within the institution, threats are external elements affecting online education. Technical difficulties and student immobility were regarded as threats by the students.

3.4.1. Technical difficulties

On this issue, participant 12 said:

> *If I need to compare, face-to-face education was better than online education because I have experienced many technical problems during online education.*

As previously mentioned, participant 15 talked about his technical problems but also explained how she solved them:

> *I did not have an internet connection at home. I asked our next-door neighbor to share his wifi and solved the problem.*

Besides, participant 8, being in favor of online education, mentioned network problems as the most significant problem in online education.

3.4.2. Student immobility

About student immobility, participant 13, who was not a regular course attendant, said:

> *For me, online education was not unfavorable. I could* log *on to lectures on time. At home, I was not bothered by others during the course hours. In the classroom, I was having difficulty taking notes. It is easier for me to take notes while watching the videos whenever I want, and I stop them when necessary. If I need to mention something unfavorable about online education, I feel sad to get back from İzmir, where the campus is situated, to my hometown-Konya.*

4. Discussion: Revisiting the needs hierarchy and thinking beyond

The outbreak of Covid-19 has caused unprecedented changes for higher education institutions and their students. Online classes and exams, postponed semesters have impacted students' routine. These changes also revealed the need for in-depth studies to understand how the pandemic crisis has affected students' lives (Aristovnik, Keržic , Ravšelj, Tomaževic, & Umek, 2020). In this period, several studies analyzed the social dimension of online education, such as its role or efficiency in community formation. If a qualitative inquiry is conducted well, it provides a deep understanding of complex social systems (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Along the same line, community formation should be investigated through in-depth studies, especially if it is linked with virtual reality and online education.

In evaluating the impact of online education on community formation vis-a-vis in-class teaching, it is helpful to make an analogy to wallpaper on a laptop. A computer user can enjoy a nice view as a wallpaper on his laptop or PC. Nonetheless, the level of his/her excitement, joy, and feelings is hardly the same when s(he) experiences the view in person. So, even though we can build communities via online education, they may not be the same thing after all.

In the literature, even most scholars researching community formation via online education have similar arguments. Among them, Duemer et al. (2002, p. 9) suggest building virtual social learning communities. However, they do it to supplement the overburdened school system, not in search of an alternate. Likewise, Zuo and Juvé (2020, p. 106) argue that online education does not mimic in-person teaching in a virtual environment.

On the other hand, one of the problems for course instructors at the beginning of the pandemic was the time constraint. The transition from face-to-face education to online education had to be completed quickly and efficiently. The time limitation negatively affected the reorganization of education processes in some cases. However, Aristovnik et al. (2020, p. 18–19) found out that university students, in general, were satisfied with the lectures, seminars, and mentorship reorganization. Besides, according to their study, students do not think there is an increase in their workload. Likewise, in this study, participants did not mention any increase in their workload. They did not talk about any specific reorganization problem either. Therefore, the findings are in line with the study of Aristovnik, Keržic , Ravšelj, Tomaževic, and Umek.

In one of the early studies concerning master of PA students and their online education experience, Scheer (2001) suggested that the distance learners got enrolled in online courses due to necessity. Even if they were grateful for being given the opportunity of having online classes, all of the students interviewed in the study indicated that they would prefer to attend traditional classes if they had the chance. Thus, Scheer concluded that PA students' preference for distance learning courses might be situational rather than permanent. In the same vein, most of the participants of this research preferred face-to-face education even though they admitted some benefits of online education.

As to the theoretical interpretation of the phenomena in question, Abraham H. Maslow's needs hierarchy seems fitting for an insightful analysis. The needs hierarchy of Maslow (1943) is depicted as a pyramid. The pyramid grounds on physiological needs at the bottom, then rises with safety, belonging, love/esteem, and ends with self-actualization at the top. Accordingly, people are motivated to satisfy lower-level needs before trying to fulfill their higher-level needs.

In the Hawthorne experiments, while searching the link between productivity and working conditions, Elton Mayo and his team revealed the significance of motivation. Therefore, the human relations era in administrative sciences emerged thanks to his experiments. In order to improve Mayo's research, Maslow sought to understand what motivates the people and identified five sets of goals- or needs-for motivation. Maslow's psychological analysis of motivation became the springboard for subsequent researchers such as McGregor and Herzberg. They used Maslow's concepts to develop more comprehensive theories of organizational behavior and motivation. However, Maslow's study remains the point of departure (Shafritz, Russell, Borick & Hyde, 2017, p. 296).

Considering Maslow's needs hierarchy, students' low-level needs such as safety and social needs should be satisfied to fulfill their higher-level needs (Güven and Taşkın, 2008). The findings of this study show that motivation (or lack thereof) was regarded both in positive and negative ways for online education. Simply put, it was either strength or mostly the weakness of online education for students. Hence, it was clear that their needs for motivation were not the same.

For most students in need of getting socialized in school or pursuit of self-esteem, motivation in online education is one of their biggest problems. On the other hand, for some others, who were not regular course participants of the face-to-face education period, online education is more favorable. It can be said that they do not need to get socialized in the school, or probably, they don't regard the school to satisfy their belonging or self-esteem needs for different reasons.

Here, one should ask a simple question: what is the utmost objective of higher education? If universities are organizations with the principal aim of revealing students' real potential. Then online education does not satisfy the love and belonging needs of students. Hence, it hampers their improvement towards self-actualization.

To sum up, no matter we return to pre-pandemic or new-normal, students will need university campuses as much as university campuses need them because there is a clear difference between educating and informing people. The corona pandemic surely affected our perspectives on different issues. However, to be able to think about a revolutionary change in post-pandemic university education, we should also change our understanding of human beings, which can be summarized by Aristotle's well-known saying: «Man is a social animal». Even this dictum of Aristotle is enough to underscore the role of the university campuses for a healthier psychological state of students.

Having said that, there is a need for a broader perspective for identifying human nature. Different approaches go beyond Maslow's needs hierarchy to analyze human behavior. On this issue, several Maslow critics indicate the deeply Western and precisely American bias found in Maslow's self-actualization concept (Bobic & Davis, 2003). For Mook (1996), self-actualization in Maslow's need hierarchy conflicts with many cultural constructs in non-Western societies. For Cullen (1997, p. 366), self-actualizers are the quintessence of the protestant work ethic. Some harsher critics even maintained that Maslow's self-actualized individual was a validation of political and social elites. The individual autonomy and self-fulfillment in Maslow's hierarchy is the psychological matching part of the emphasis on individual rights in liberal democracy. Nonetheless, control generally belongs to a powerful elite instead of masses in liberal democratic societies (Cullen, 1997, p. 357).

Another problem with Maslow's needs hierarchy is the difficulty of determining what level of need is motivating an employee, especially in big organizations (Şimşek, 2005). A novel of Sabahattin Ali, a well-known Turkish novelist, can eloquently portray how difficult it can be:

In the novel, the protagonist Rasim begins to work in a firm. Raif Efendi is one of the longest-serving clerks in the firm. Seeing him as so senior, Rasim asks the young clerks why the firm has not raised Raif Efendi's salary even if it is throwing away money, left and right. They laugh and say: "He is a slouch that's why!" In time, Rasim also has a negative view of him. Besides, the top manager of the firm, Hamdi often reprimands Raif Efendi for not doing his job even if he works so hard. Again, one day, he raises his voice to Raif Efendi and slams the door for a similar reason. Without any reaction, Raif Efendi picks up a pencil and scribbles something on a sheet of paper. Being tired of Raif Efendi's apathy for a long time and wondering what he was drawing, Rasim somehow goes over to his desk

and gets the paper when Raif Efendi was not around. In the novel, Rasim explains his astonishment as follows:

> *I was at his desk, I reached for the page. Then I froze, bewildered. For here was a sketch, the size of a palm, of Hamdi. In a few masterful lines, he had captured the man's essence.*
>
> *At the same time, and in one flash, this drawing explained Raif Efendi to me. For now, I could well understand his unwavering serenity and his reluctance to form relationships. For how could a man so intimately acquainted with his surroundings, and so clear and sharp in his observations of others, ever know anger or excitement? What choice did a man like this have, in the face of small-minded attacks, but to stand firm like a rock?* (Ali, 2017, p. 13–14).

5. Conclusions

In line with the above discussion, the conclusions of the study are as follows:

- Some earlier studies, such as Scheer (2001, p. 101), underlined the need for further research, as they failed to identify any features or constructs that could predict successful distance learners. This study, thanks to its qualitative nature and SWOT framework, underlined some characteristics. Therefore, it provided an insightful view on the antecedents of motivation with relevant seminal works. Besides, numerous scales about e-learning or online education have been developed till today. Nevertheless, Ginns and Ellis (2009, p. 661) argue that stakeholders seeking to use an analysis based on an e-learning scale would do well to keep in mind its interpretation. They maintain that the more e-learning becomes built-in into the fabric of university infrastructure, the more difficult it may be to identify which parts of the university draw a parallel to the students' perception when responding to one of the items in the scale. Today, in the pandemic, online education is deeply integrated into the infrastructure of universities. In parallel with their claim, the question of online education quality has become more complicated and intriguing. Therefore, this study has provided an in-depth analysis of online education to identify caveats for successful implementations.
- Bainbridge et al. (2015) found out that learning outcomes in online education were the same or better than in traditional face-to-face classrooms for more than half of the leaders of educational institutions they surveyed. Furthermore, recent studies, such as (Adedoyin and Soykan, 2020), maintain that the challenges caused by the pandemic are well-investigated and transformed opportunities by universities. Hence, online learning will be sustained, and hybrid educational systems will become more common. This study also reveals several benefits of online education for students. Therefore, the study recommends that public administration programs should go on to avail the online education infrastructure even aftermath of the pandemic but with consideration of different nature of social sciences from other fields. Thus, the degree of hybridization should be different.
- Finally, regarding the impact of this study on the policy-makers, we need to increase self-actualized citizens to establish successful public policies. Therefore, we cannot overlook the socializing role of university campuses and face-to-face education. However, we should bear in mind that creating an ideal individual/citizen is a contested terrain. Psychoanalysis and religion are two different spheres considering the human soul (Fromm, 2015). For example, Sufi psychology, related to both, focuses on developing a healthy human soul. Sufism proposes a path for personal development with several steps to be an *insan-ı kâmil* (universal man). However, the characteristics of a self-actualized person of Maslow are partially different than the ones of *insan-ı kâmil* (Sayar, 2017). Thus, there is a need for further in-depth studies on different perspectives of self-actualization.

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