

UPRAVLJANJE REFERATOV ZA ŠTUDENTSKE ZADEVE V SLOVENSKEM VISOKEM ŠOLSTVU MED GLOBALNO PANDEMIJO: IZKUŠNJE, PRIDOBLENE V ČASU PANDEMIJE COVID-19

GORAN VUKOVIČ,¹ PREDRAG LJUBOTINA,²

BOJAN MACUH³ IN ANDREJ RASPOR³

¹ Univerza v Mariboru, Fakulteta za organizacijske vede, Kranj, Slovenija.

E-pošta: goran.vukovic@um.si.

² Fakulteta za uporabne družbene študije, Nova Gorica; Slovenija.

E-pošta: predrag.ljubotina@fuds.si.

³ Fakulteta za komercialne in poslovne vede, Celje, Slovenija.

E-pošta: bmacuh@gmail.com, andrej.raspor@t-2.si

Povzetek Namen: Veliko je govora o tem, kako so se študenti soočili s študijem na daljavo v času pandemije COVID-19. Manj pa je raziskav, ki govorijo o tem, kako so se z izzivi soočali zaposleni iz slovenskih referatov za študentske zadeve v slovenskem visokem šolstvu. Namen raziskave je bil ugotoviti, s kakšnimi izzivi so se soočali, kako so doživljali stres in kaj so najbolj pogrešali. Metodologija: Raziskava je potekala med 27. 5. 2021 in 27. 8. 2021 v spletnem okolju 1KA. Povabilo za udeležbo v raziskavi smo razposlali na vse slovenske visokošolske zavode. Skupaj je dobilo povabilo 112 zavodov. Odzvalo se je 30 zavodov. Rezultati: Ugotovljeno je bilo, da so imeli zaposleni že v času pred pandemijo dobro razvito računalniško pismenost in dobre izkušnje z uporabo interneta. Niso pa bili večji dela preko oddaljenega dostopa, e-učenja, videokonferenc in izdelave video gradiv. Obseg dela se jim je v času e-učenja povečal, saj je bilo študentom potrebno dati več nasvetov in navodil, kot če bi jih dajali fizično v pisarni. Sam stres se jim ni bistveno povečal.

Ključne besede:

referat za študentske zadeve, COVID-19, e-učenje, delo od doma, stres.

MANAGEMENT OF STUDENT ADMINISTRATION OFFICES IN SLOVENIAN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS DURING THE GLOBAL PANDEMIC: LESSONS LEARNED FROM COVID- 19

GORAN VUKOVIČ,¹ PREDRAG LJUBOTINA,²
BOJAN MACUH³ & ANDREJ RASPOR³

¹ University of Maribor, Faculty of organizational sciences, Kranj, Slovenia.

E-mail: goran.vukovic@um.si

² Faculty of Applied Social Studies, Nova Gorica, Slovenia.

E-mail: predrag.ljubotina@fuds.si

³ Faculty of Commercial and Business Sciences, Celje, Slovenija.

E-mail: bmacuh@gmail.com, andrej.raspor@t-2.si

Abstract Purpose: Lots of research has been published about the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on education, students in particular. However, little is known about the challenges and stress Slovenian Student Administration Office staff experienced during and after the lockdown, which is what this survey aims to address. Methodology: The survey was created in the 1KA survey platform and carried out between 27th May 2021 and 27th August 2021. We invited 120 higher education institutions to participate in the survey, out of which 30 responded. Results: The results indicated that Slovenian Student Administration Office staff were versed with digital technology before the COVID-19 pandemic. Most of them were equipped with digital skills and had prior experience with remote access, e-learning system, video-conferencing and preparing video contents. During e-learning, their work overload increased and they were putting in longer hours. Also, students demanded more instructions and guidance on distance learning compared to the times before the COVID-19 pandemic. The vast majority of the staff surveyed experienced technical barriers but most of them felt able to cope functionally with the stress.

Keywords:
student
administration
office,
COVID-19,
Remote
work,
e-learning,
stress.

1 Introduction

COVID-19 is the most widespread global pandemic, which turned into a serious crisis, posing a major threat to human life and health (Xue et al., 2021). The outbreak of 2019 novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in Wuhan, China spread quickly nationwide (Novel, 2020). In only a few months' time, the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has had a devastating economic, social, and health impact across the globe (ILO, 2020).

The countries and companies responded quickly in a way that they imposed restrictions on public life and enabled working from home (Dervišević et al., 2021). The situation is not calming down, on the contrary, in January 2022 we are even recording daily records of new infections.

It is therefore expected that there will be more telecommuting/telework in the future as compared to the past.

With this said, the research question, which this study will be looking to answer, is: "How does the perception of the e-learning environment influence the preference for the traditional in-person learning process?"

2 Background

2.1 Student Administration Office

Student Administration Office, Office of Study and Student Affairs Student affairs, student support or student services are different names for the department or division of services and support for student success at institutions of higher education to enhance student growth and development.

People who work in student affairs provide services, programs, and resources that help students to learn and grow outside the classroom. Some things that student affairs professionals do for students every day include (NASPA, n.d.):

- enhance student learning;
- guide academic and career decisions;
- mentor students;
- promote leadership skills;
- offer counselling during crises.

The size and organization of a student affairs division or department may vary based on the size, type, and location of an institution. Until COVID-19, employees worked in offices. Later, however, they began to work from home, or partly from home and partly at the office.

2.2 Working from home

The workplace is subject to changes in reply to numerous technological and societal trends that are making work more accessible and the performance of work faster, cheaper, and greener (Perry et al., 2018). Working from home (also called telecommuting or telework or WFH) is getting more and more a common practice (Bloom et al., 2015). It is not easy to grasp the meaning of telecommuting since there are various definitions that include various elements (Haddon & Brynin, 2005): technology, location, contractual arrangements and time. International Labour Organization definition of WFH is a “working arrangement in which a worker fulfills the essential responsibilities of his/her job while remaining at home, using information and communications technology (ICT)” (ILO, 2020). Remote work (i.e., performing work at a location other than one’s primary office) is one form of flexibility that is highly valued by many employees and often used by organizations to attract high quality applicants (Allen et al., 2013; Fellows, 2019; Humphrey et al., 2007; Thompson et al., 2015).

No one was prepared for a pandemic. Thus, before the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority of Slovenian companies provided a flexible arrival to or departure from work, while reduced working hours and work from home, whereas WFT the latter was more of a privilege than a right then (Dervišević et al., 2021). More precisely, work from home was introduced for the jobs which can be carried out from home; the mentioned option is not possible in the case of a vendor, for example. Although flexible working time offers many good things (Zupan, 2019).

Telecommuting is not a new form of work, especially not in international/EU teams, which perform intellectual type of work. Effective collaboration and communication within the IT network are of crucial importance for a successful telework (Rozman, 2020; Rozman et al., 2017).

The World Health Organization issued certain recommendations regarding control over public life in the case of COVID-19. Measures for the general public include the implementation of flexible work arrangements. These are: teleworking, distance learning, reduction and avoiding crowds, the closure of non-essential facilities and services, protection for vulnerable groups, local or national movement restrictions, coordinated reorganisation of health care and social services networks to protect hospitals. Besides, there are also the actions aimed to staying-at-home. The measures are combined with individual protective measures against COVID-19 such as frequent hand washing and cough etiquette (World Health Organization, 2020). On the basis of these very recommendations, the countries and companies felt encouraged to implement general restrictions (where possible) in order to limit infection transmission.

When it comes to the economic impact of social distancing measures aimed to stop the spread of COVID-19, we have to consider an underlying issue about the modern economy: how many occupations can be carried out at home? Also in Slovenia, all people in Slovenia did not work from home during the pandemic. Schools did not have any strategic plans for distance learning, should such case arise. Classical classes were held in most schools. Therefore, the schools did not have the equipment for distance learning.

2.3 Work Stress

The home atmosphere involves a lot of mood swings if compared to that at the office and employees may find it difficult to concentrate on work constantly. Besides, the capacity of an average employee to work with broader and general instructions is in question. Working in a company enables more bureaucracy and more coordination than telecommuting. Only more preparation and independence are needed for a successful performance of all tasks during telework. However, working from home does not impede this in any way (Kumar & Aithal, 2016).

In relation to the first month of working from home, many employees were in a state of semi-shock. They spent a lot of energy on just how to figure out the logistics of working remotely so they did not have time to deal with emotions as well. They had to face new reality. As the panic over remote working logistics has decreased, people have settled into a routine. But now we can see the troubling signs of the emotional pressure of the employees who work from home (Murphy, 2020).

Some of the common sources of stress that they face, are (Scott, 2020): (1) Lack of structure: it is necessary to set a specific schedule for work, private duties, and rest. (2) Too Many Distractions: many people forget that those who work from home still have to work. (3) Difficulty with setting boundaries: it is important to set the limits in terms of to-do and not-to-do list. In doing so, the line between productivity and leisure time, between the time for socialization and working time will not be blurred. (4) Social isolation: the possibility for socialization and hanging out is reduced and that can consequently lead to poor awareness of work. (5) Lack of focus: it can happen that people who work from home can give precedence to private matters over work tasks.

The other source indicated that the most important advantages for people who work from home are increased autonomy and flexibility. For the organizations, these are increased human resource capacity and the reduction of indirect expenses. And for society, the benefits are a reduction in environmental damage, solutions for special-needs populations, and savings in infrastructure and energy. On the other hand, there are also disadvantages: to individuals, possible sense of isolation and lack of separation between work and home. For organizations, the drawbacks are the costs involved in the transition to new work methods, training, damage to commitment and identification with the organisation. Lastly, dealing with a danger of creating detached individuals is a downside for society (Harpaz, 2002).

3 Methods

In present research we adopted a research methodology developed by Raspor (Raspor, 2021). This new approach allows researchers to collect and analyse data about student administration office professionals as well as about students and professors. Furthermore, with the use of this methodology a comparison between results, specific findings and conclusions can be made.

For the purpose of this research we gathered data from Slovenian administrative staff at Universities and independent higher education institutions. Data were collected using an online survey. Considering that we are still in the middle of COVID-19 crisis, this is one of the first attempts to collect data in this field. Consequently, our sample is small (38), but it still offers some interesting conclusions since the sample provides enough data for generating a multivariate linear regression model (Finch & Finch, 2017; Jenkins & Quintana-Ascencio, 2020). However, we suggest that the research should be upgraded in the future.

3.1 Research Instrument

The research was based on a survey questionnaire; it was the 1ka online survey, submitted on 27 May 2021. It was open and running between 27 May 2021 and 27 August 2021.

We asked participants to provide personal data such as gender, work status, age, and to answer the questions regarding the impact of the distance learning during COVID-19 pandemic on stress. The questionnaire was sent to a total of 160 addresses: universities, higher education institutions and higher vocational colleges.

We collected our data using an online questionnaire based on seven-item Likert scale. Participants were asked to express their agreement with statements where »1« is used for »I strongly disagree« while »7« means »I strongly agree«. So all items were positively worded.

The data was statistically analysed and tested using SPSS.

3.2 Demographic data

86% of our participants are females, while 14% are males. In addition, their age ranges from 25 to 60 years. Consequently, their experience level also differs. For example, 31% of participants has less than three years of work experience, while 65% have more than ten years of work experience in the higher education system.

3.3 Hypotheses

H1: A higher level of satisfaction with the e-learning environment leads to lower preferences for traditional in-person learning.

H2: A higher level of perceived e-learning induced stress leads to a higher preference for traditional in-person learning.

4 Results

The level of satisfaction (Figure 1: Remote working experience) with the e-learning environment is measured with the four-item Likert scale. Each Likert item is a statement that the respondent was asked to evaluate on a scale ranging from 1 (lower level) to 7 (highest level). In addition, we tested the reliability of all our scales using the Cronbach Alpha test, which resulted in 0.912 for the particular scale.

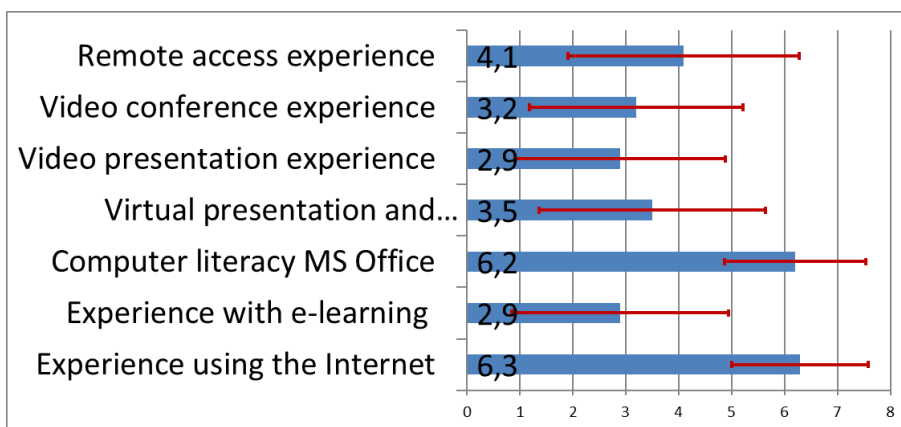


Figure 1: Remote working experience

Perceived stress induced (Figure 2: Stress level items) by e-learning during COVID-19 crisis was measured with a nine-item Likert scale with the same value for Cronbach Alpha. Lastly, the preference level for a traditional in-person learning system is obtained by a three-item scale with Cronbach Alpha value of 0.826. All test values significantly exceed the recommended 0.7 level (Pallant, 2001; Hair et al., 2010).

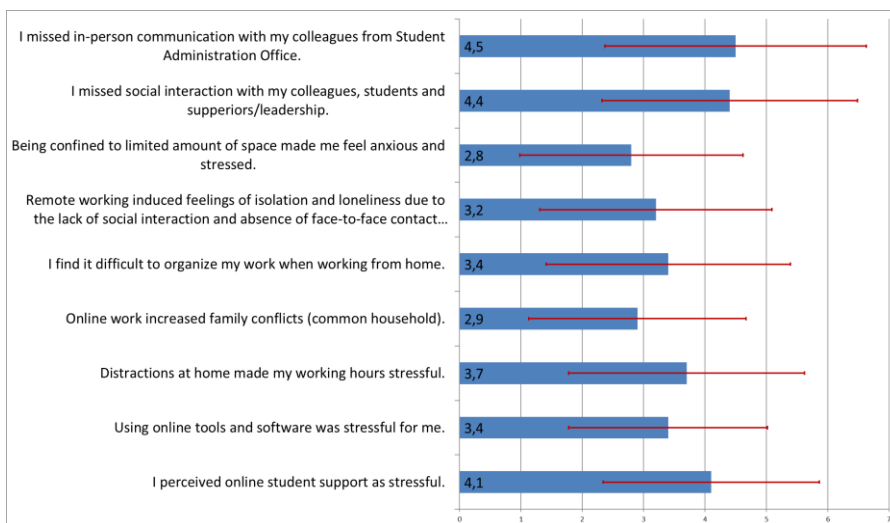


Figure 2: Stress level items

Our regression model confirmed positive and statistically significant correlations between variables (Table 1: Regression coefficients). It strongly supports our hypothesis H2 ($B = 0.236$; $r = 0.01$). On the other hand, we have to reject our first hypothesis H1, since it is worded in the opposite direction. We concluded that a higher level of satisfaction with e-learning environment still increases the probability of presence for a traditional in-person learning system. The conclusion is supported with a high significance level ($B = 0.236$; $r = 0.007$).

Table 1: Regression coefficients

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	1,911	0,677		2,822	0,009
	Stress induced by e-learning	0,236	0,081	0,520	2,925	0,007
	Satisfaction with e-learning	0,262	0,094	0,496	2,791	0,010

The model explained 32.2% of total dependent variable variance (R square = 0.322). Both independent variables have a comparable influence since Beta values are similar (0.520 and 0.496).

5 Conclusion and future research directions

In this research we aimed to answer the following question: "How does the perception of the e-learning environment influence the preference for the traditional in-person learning process?" Our findings suggest that most employees missed social interaction with their colleagues, students and superiors/leadership (4.4). They also missed in-person communication with their colleagues from Student Administration Office (4.5). They perceived work as stressful already before COVID-19 pandemic (4.5) which has increased after the COVID-19 outbreak (4.8). Lastly, online work also increased family conflicts (due to common household) (2.9).

The existing research mainly focuses on the implementation status, existing problems, practical cases, and teaching experience of online teaching during the epidemic period, and there is a lack of research on education governance strategies during the epidemic period from the policy perspective.

The aim of this research was therefore to explore how Student Administration Staff experience stress imposed by the new coronavirus, and thus add value to the previously collected data of existed research. The results of this survey could serve as baseline data for future research.

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