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Digital Skills And Research Methods

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2020 has been one year in which many events took place. The global pandemic caused by the Corona Virus is definitely the event that has changed our lives the most. At the beginning of 2020 all the newspapers, main TV channels and online news blogs were communicating mostly the same. A new and very contagious virus was beginning a world-wide pandemic. SARS-CoV-2 also known as Coronavirus or Covid-19 is not a recent discovery. The first case of Coronavirus found in a human individual was reported in 1965. This virus back then couldn't cause more than a common cold. More similar viruses related to each other have been found later by researchers who decided to call them after their crown-like appearance "Corona". The first reaction of the governments of all the states in the world has been to put the whole population in quarantine. Suddenly everyone had the obligation not to leave the own home apart from extremely vital needs. Shops stopped receiving customers inside unless they would wear a face covering, gloves and would stay 6 feet apart one from the other, the new social distance becoming a law to respect in most states. In a short period of time non-vital activities have been shut, people would have the legal obligation to work and study from home whenever possible. At this point online learning became the only possible way of doing school.

What is online learning?

Online learning or e-learning is learning from anywhere via the internet. Online learning is becoming more and more popular with the rise of new technologies getting faster and more accessible to everyone. Like every new concept invented by humans, it offers many advantages and disadvantages.

Some of the advantages that e-learning offers are:

Flexibility: unlike the traditional learning that takes place in a physical place well defined in space, a classroom, online learning can be done anywhere as long as there is an internet connection. The students and the lecturers can flexibly choose their teaching/learning environment. This possibility of choice means that the user can freely decide to participate to the lectures from their bedrooms, public parks, etc.

Large selection of subjects: the internet is wide and it offers students the opportunity to have easy access to more courses. More and more universities offer the possibility to access online versions of their courses.

Easier accessibility: students have the possibility to get certificates and degrees from anywhere in the world without the need of commuting from home. It saves the student time and also can help the student save money. Online learning helps individuals achieve academic goals without the need to give up on their career as well.

Customize the learning experience: students often have the opportunity to choose from a very wide selection of courses making it easier to schedule their lectures with the professional life and the personal life.

As mentioned before, e-learning brings some disadvantages:

Affects social life: the opportunity to study from your own learning environment affects social skills. Students tend to communicate and exchange opinions and ideas less with other students compared to the traditional learning.

IT skills: online learning can become a very difficult experience for students whose IT skills tend to be poor. Older students tend to have more difficulties with the use of modern technologies.

Technical issues: depending on the geographic location having an internet connection that is good enough can be a great challenge. The weather as well turns online learning into a difficult experience for the student. To the list of possible technical issues, we can add for example electrical engineering or blackouts.

Noise pollution: noise can be controlled by the user of online learning only partially. Noise of third parties, like for example road works, can't be avoided or controlled by the student or

teacher and depending on the quantity of the noise e-learning can become impossible temporarily.

Where does online learning take place?

Saying that e-learning takes place online is not wrong but still does not give a satisfactory answer. Online learning takes place in virtual learning environments (VLE). Virtual learning environment is an online platform used for academic and learning purposes. It consists of online courses, of online reading sources and any kind of material used for academic purposes.

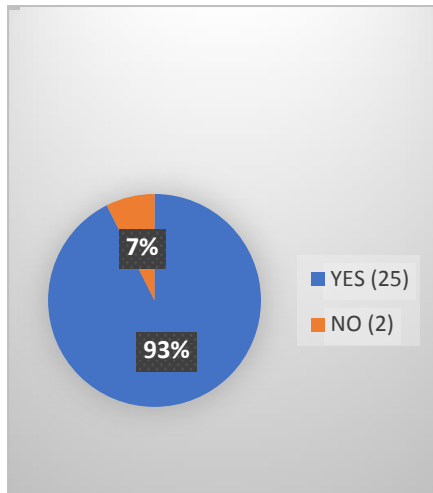
University of Wales Trinity Saint David has adopted an advanced virtual learning environment too: Moodle. MOODLE (Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment) is a popular, free and open-source VLE (Virtual Learning Environment) or CMS (Course Management System), an online platform meant to help teachers, professors, lecturers, trainers and students during long distance and e-learning online classes.

Moodle became available as public online platform on 20th of August 2002, developed by Martin Dougiamas. It has customisable and personalizing features which allow teachers and trainers create online sites intended for e-learning and online courses and classes.

University of Wales Trinity Saint David is one example of university which adopted Moodle as Virtual Learning Environment to allow the good proceeding of the courses and lectures in this period of lockdowns due to the world-wide pandemic caused by the virus SARS-CoV-2 (commonly known as Corona Virus or COVID-19) which made the online ways of studying and online meeting and classroom not only vital but essential and indispensable.

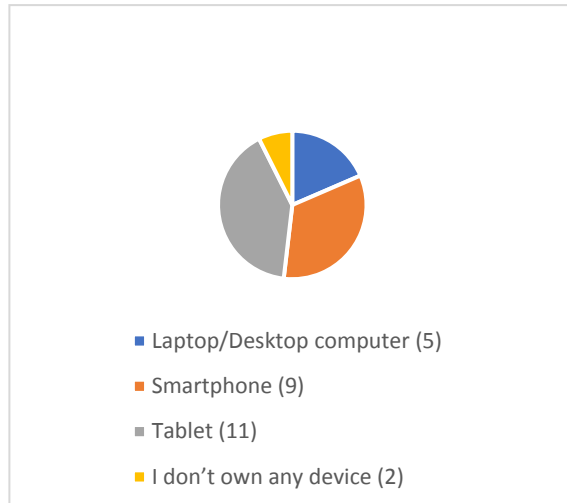
An online survey to the students of the University of Wales Trinity Saint David has given the following results:

Do you own at least one electronic device to access MOODLE (VLE)?



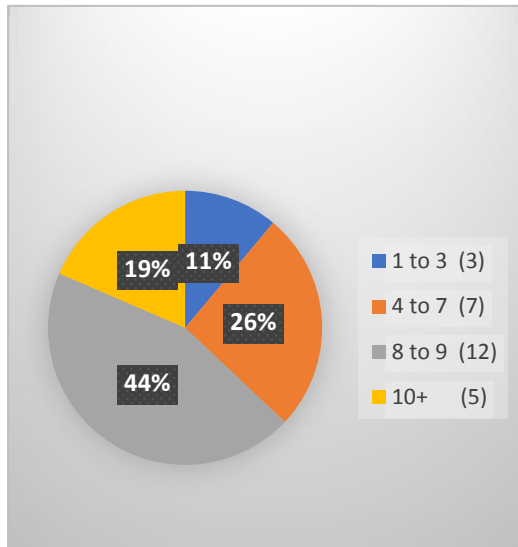
Out of 27 students that participated to this online survey, 25 students said that they have at least one electronic device to access Moodle. 2 students out of 27 confessed that they don't own an electronic device that could access Moodle therefore they have to access the online e-learning platform through devices of friends, family or of public places such as public libraries in order to access the PDF, PowerPoint or video contents or to make and upload assignments.

What device do you use to access Moodle?



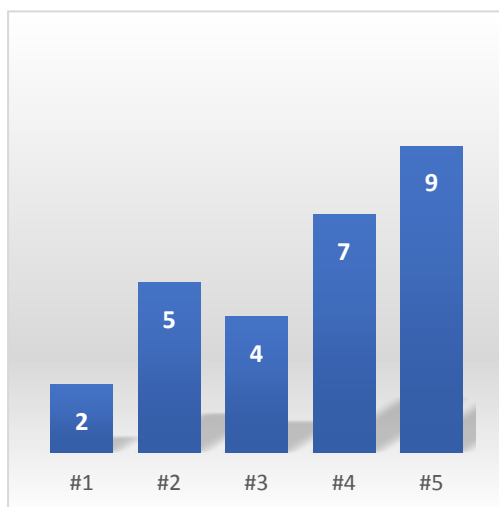
Out of 27 students that participated to this online survey, 20 students said they prefer mobile and smart devices to the classic laptops or desktop personal computers due to their possibility to work remotely and due to the duration of the battery life when outdoors. Students said they slightly prefer Tablets to Smartphones due to the difference in the size of the screen. Tablets have wide displays that make easy for the user the editing of essays and presentations.

Approximatively how many times a week do you access MOODLE?



Out of 27 students that participated to this online survey, 24 said that they access at least every other day the online e-learning platform and 17 of them confessed that they access the Virtual Learning Environment Moodle more than once a day in order to make sure that they stay updated and don't miss any notification, news or update on their online assessments of events regarding their course. 3 students out of 27 said they access the platform maximum 3 times a week due their very busy working and family schedules of the possibility to access it.

On a scale 1 (not at all) to 5 (a lot) how useful do you find MOODLE in this period of online learning?



Out of 27 students that participated to this online survey, 20 of the students are happy over the average with using Moodle giving it at least 3\5 stars on a review. The rest of 7 students consider Moodle and online e-learning platforms useless or almost and would prefer to go back to a classic way of doing University, the offline way.

Another online learning platform used by the University of Wales Trinity Saint David is Microsoft Teams. Very similar to other meeting softwares such as Zoom etc Microsoft Teams is used for online meetings between individuals allowing them participants to have video conferences in real time with the possibility to share media content and links in real time with the participants of the meeting in real time. UWTSD uses it for its online classes. Microsoft Teams is a secure software and has plenty features that are very useful during online classes such as the possibility to add a wide number of participants, allows members to share PowerPoint slides with the other participants and gives the users in the meeting an impressive and innovative experience.

Analysing the above short survey, overall VLE platforms have had a good impact on the students of the University of Wales Trinity Saint David and on their academic progression during their experience with the virtual learning environment. The study shows that most of the students use MOODLE and Microsoft Teams regularly with just little difficulty. Almost every student that answered the questions has shown that overall most students have at least an electronic smart device that they use to access the online learning platforms and that it helped them to learn in more efficient ways. Students confessed that they would recommend Moodle and Microsoft Teams to other Universities and to their friends and relatives.

My personal experience with the Virtual Learning Environment – Moodle. In June 2021 after a period of break for me from the academic and leavening environments I decided to start studying again. A friend of mine, already a student at my same actual university, suggested to me to try to get enrolled at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David. Due to the global pandemic caused by the Covid-19 virus and the lockdowns caused by it, the nearest campus to my home didn't have any classes going on. Not any physical classes at least. Luckily for everyone, the university was already using an online learning platform that offers a virtual version of their courses, giving students the opportunity to continue their studies remotely with no problems during the national lockdowns. I must confess that the first experience with MOODLE and Microsoft Teams has been slightly confusing. The whole virtual learning environment was a very new concept for me which I never met before in my life. The lecturers and the staff from the university have taught us students how to use the VLE

platforms, what were their features and advantages and in short time every student in my group found out how useful and powerful learning tool that virtual learning environment platforms are and what is their full potential, the opportunities that it creates for the students that know how to use it. On MOODLE students can find PowerPoint slides related to their studies, an online library that they can use for their study and for their assignments, links to other useful sources such as online videos or guides to topics discussed during the terms. It also allows students to find important news and information about the campus and the changes that take place during the academic year staying in contact with university staff and fellow students and colleagues. On MOODLE students can upload their assignments in a very easy way and get them checked and corrected by the lecturers. Microsoft Teams on the other hand helped lecturers and students to stay in touch easily and attend online classes in very constructive ways. Virtual learning environment platforms are essential for the running of online learning.

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