

## **On-line learning during COVID-19 Pandemic: A Study at Faculty of Arts and Culture, South Eastern University of Sri Lanka**

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### **Abstract:**

COVID - 19 pandemic has disrupted traditional/face to face teaching and learning activities of educational institutes all over the world. With the concept of social distancing and work from home directed by the government, university teachers and students were forced to shift from traditional in class activities to the virtual e-learning environment. This study explores the perception of students regarding the online learning activities during locked down. This study adopts quantitative method with a self-administrated online survey of 364 questionnaires distributed among the students of the Faculty of Arts and Culture, South Eastern university of Sri Lanka. Among the 364 survey respondents, 68.41% had not participated in any type of online learning activities before the COVID-19 Pandemic. The study shows that even though 30.49% of them owned a computer/ Laptop/Tablet/iPad, 92.31% of them have used only the mobile phones to access the online tools for attending virtual lectures. They have chosen Zoom as the easiest tool (66.48% stated only the Zoom and 26.63% preferred Zoom and at least one of the other tools) to attend their online classes. Even though, online learning is considered as enjoyable and fun (58.51%), increased flexibility in time and place in participating for online lectures (60.99%), and possibilities to clarify questions and doubts (65.66%), the online learning has some limitations too such as: lack of interaction with lecturers and other colleagues (60.71%), poor learning environment at home (58.23%), less impact of online learning (53.85%), not secure and not technically reliable (52.47%). Moreover, the study shows that, even though, e-teaching is not considered as better than traditional/face to face classroom lectures (31.32%), majority of the students (57.51%) were interested in participating in the online lectures.

**Keywords:** COVID -19 Pandemic, flexibility, lack of interaction, On-line learning, poor learning environment

### **1. Introduction**

COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in the suspension of all academic activities due to the closure of all state universities and other institutions in Sri Lanka by the Sri Lankan government on the 12th of March 2020. This closure leads to various challenges and the necessity of online teaching and learning activities, especially in the higher education sector. The South Eastern University of Sri Lanka (SEUSL) is one of the national universities in Sri Lanka with six faculties namely: Faculty of Arts and

Culture, Faculty of Management and Commerce, Faculty of Applied Sciences, Faculty of Islamic Studies and Arabic Language, Faculty of Engineering and Faculty of Technology.

The Faculty of Arts and Culture (FAC) is the largest faculty in the university. This is one of the two faculties that were established at the inception of the university in 1995 at Addalaichenai with 33 students. In 1998, the Faculty was shifted from Addalaichenai to the present location. Under FAC, there are seven departments such as the Department of Social Sciences, Department of Sociology, Department of Languages, Department of Geography, Department of Political Sciences, Department of Economics and Statistics and, Department of English Language Teaching, and a Postgraduate unit. Also, the FAC offers special degree programs in the areas of Economics, Political Science and Peace Studies, Geography, Philosophy, and psychological Counseling, Sociology, Tamil, Information and Communication Technology, Hindu Civilization, Trilingual Studies and Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL).

The typical way exists at the Faculty of Arts and Culture was the traditional face-to-face teaching and learning processes same as in other Sri Lankan universities. With the concept of social distancing and work from home directed by the government, university teachers and students were forced to shift from traditional in-class activities to a virtual e-learning environment. This type of e-learning system is new for most of the academics and administrative staff of Sri Lankan universities and is seen as a challenging practice to break this traditional activity and to perform teaching and learning in a new virtual environment (Rameez *et al.* 2020). Even though students in developing countries have different attitudes towards online learning, in common their attitudes are positive (Zabadi and Al-Alawi, 2016).

Therefore, this study explores the perception of students regarding online learning during locked down at the Faculty of Arts and Culture of the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka.

## **2. Literature Review**

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted teaching in educational institutions and has posed a significant risk to the universal learning system. This leads to several challenges and the necessity of online teaching and learning activities, especially in the higher education sector. Handling the new-normal system is the primary concern when thinking of alternatives for a continuous traditional in-class system. Further, closure of universities due to Covid-19 had prompted the government of Sri Lanka to encourage the online based education for continuing higher education activity during a crisis (Rameez *et al.* 2020). During this worldwide closure of educational institutions, countries which technologically sound are well-found with all the tools essential for online education. However, developing countries are yet to implement established online education.

Online learning became the primary mode of teaching the courses during the pandemic (Baczek *et al.* 2020). Even though the rapid progress in the online learning implementation may be widespread among the teachers, they should understand how students perceive, access, and react to it (Agung *et al.* 2020). A survey was conducted from 804 students to investigate their perception of e-learning amongst medical students (Baczek *et al.* 2020). The study found that the main advantages of online learning were the ability to stay at home, continuous access to online materials, learning at your own pace, and comfortable surroundings. The majority of respondents chose lack of interactions with patients and technical problems with IT equipment as the main disadvantages. Moreover, E-learning is a powerful tool for teaching, successful implementation of it into the curriculum needs a good plan and a more dynamic attitude. In the same way, mentors and students are facilitated by the e-learning system to access several subjects whenever they demand (Agung *et al.* 2020).

The stratified random sampling technique was used in choosing 371 students (males: 282 and females: 89) from four colleges and an English language center in Saudi Arabia-Jeddah to study the Business and Technology students' attitudes towards e-learning (Zabadi and Al-Alawi, 2016). The survey results explained that they own a great standard attitude towards e-learning and which showed a significant difference with sex, usage of technology, and the student's skills. A study among medical students shows that the e-learning system has functioned as a critical stress reliever during the Pandemic (Dwivedi *et al.* 2020).

A study conducted among Sri Lankan law students shown that mobile phones play a vital role in accessing technology (Selvaras, 2020). It also indicated that they favor joining in blended learning instead of entirely joining online learning. Student's readiness in using mathematics online portals was studied among undergraduates of a university in Malaysia (Chiou *et al.* 2010). The study reveals that technical skills are the main reason for students having different opinions. It also emphasized that students should be provided with a quality internet connection. The majority of students use computer facilities only at the university and those who do not have a computer have a negative opinion of their ability to study in an e-learning environment, the usefulness of online resources for learning and the availability of opportunities to share and discuss subject matters with other colleagues (Priyangika and Jayasundara, 2012). Moreover, the internet connection is one of the basic necessities of e-learning, and its implementation is influenced by the characteristics of each region (Agung *et al.* 2020).

Impact of Covid-19 in Sri Lankan Higher Education Sectors was studied by (Rameez *et al.* 2020). The study explains that, many challenges such as online delivery, problems related to a practical test via online mode, assessment, examination, the supervision of the thesis, teaching and learning environment and a lack of online teaching and learning skills among staff and students were faced by universities during the Covid-19 pandemic. Availability and sustainability of internet connection, user-

friendliness of the teaching platform, and compatibility tools to access the media were identified as three main problems of online learning in the study conducted among the students of English language education program in Indonesia (Agung *et al.* 2020). The study also explained that participation of students in online learning, especially those who are in rural areas can be increased through more friendly platforms. The success of e-learning in Indonesia is determined by the readiness of technology, support, and collaboration from all stakeholders (Rasmitadila *et al.* 2020). A study intended to find barriers to online learning from the perception of medical students in Philippines reveals that, most frequently encountered were difficulty in adjusting learning styles, having to perform responsibilities at home, and poor communication between educators and learners (Baticulon *et al.* 2020). A survey from 62 countries reveals that students were most satisfied with the support provided by teaching staff and their universities' public relations. But, lack of computer skills and the opinion of a higher workload stopped them from perceiving their own enhanced performance in the new online teaching environment (Aristovnik *et al.* 2020).

Perception of students toward e-learning and traditional face-to-face learning in terms of social presence, social interaction, and satisfaction were studied in an Indonesia Open University. The study reveals that perception on the above was higher in face-to-face learning than online learning. Meanwhile, some students were very innovative by using computer technology (Bali & Liu, 2018).

Lack of technological infrastructure, high cost of the internet, low speed of internet, the financial crisis of the family, and mental pressure for the students are the main difficulties for online education in Bangladesh (Ramij & Sultana, 2020). Online learning perceived as a lack of interactivity compared to face-to-face learning which is mainly due to the lack of social presence, lack of social interaction, and lack of students' satisfaction, (Bali & Liu, 2018).

### **3. Research Methodology**

This study adopts a quantitative method. A self-administrated online questionnaire using Google forms was distributed among the students of the Faculty of Arts and Culture after five months of online learning to find out the perception of students regarding the new online learning activities. The study was conducted from September to October 2020. A total of 364 students responded to the survey.

The questionnaire consisted of two parts. In the first part of the survey, Students were asked about their demographic details and some other questions related to their IT skills, their previous experience about the online learning and mode of accessing online tools. In the second part, students were asked to rate their perception about online learning practices using 5-Point Likert Scale from 1 to 5 (1=Strongly Disagree, 5=Strongly Agree).

The quantitative data obtained through the questionnaire were entered and analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). The findings are explained using tables.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

A total of 364 students from the Faculty of Arts and Culture responded to the survey. Among them, 26 (7.14%) were males and 338 (92.86%) were females. The majority of the respondents were first year students (43.41%). Table 1 depicts the descriptive data of demographic characteristics of survey respondents.

**Table 1: Descriptive data of demographic characteristics of respondents**

N=364	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	26	7.14%
Female	338	92.86%
Year of Study		
1st Year	158	43.41%
2nd Year	92	25.27%
3rd Year	88	24.18%
4th Year	26	7.14%

Table 2 explains the student's IT skills, previous experience about the online learning and mode of accessing online tools. The majority of the students (75.82%) stated that their IT skills are at a moderate level while only 18.68% of them have low IT knowledge. Among the survey respondents, even though 30.49% of them owned a computer/ Laptop/Tablet/iPad, 92.31% of them have used only the mobile phones to access the online learning tools for attending virtual lectures. This explains that the mobile phones are the most preferable device among the students in accessing online tools. In accessing technology, Majority of law students (64%) in Sri Lanka used mobile phones (Selvaras, 2020).

The majority of the students (68.41 %) stated that they never participated in any type of online learning activities before the COVID-19 pandemic meanwhile 53.33 % of the respondents did not have internet/Wi-Fi connections at their home.

Zoom was chosen as the easiest tool (66.48% stated only the Zoom and 26.63% preferred to Zoom and at least one of the other tools) among the students to attend their online classes.

**Table 2: Respondents’ IT skill, previous experience about online learning and mode of accessing online tools.**

N=364	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Ownership of a Computer/ Laptop/Tablet/iPad</b>		
Yes	111	30.49%
No	253	69.51%
<b>How would you describe your IT skills?</b>		
High	20	5.49%
Moderate	276	75.82%
Low	68	18.68%
<b>Availability of Internet/Wi-Fi Connection at Home:</b>		
Yes	194	53.30%
No	170	46.70%
<b>Have you ever participated in any type of online learning activities before the COVID-19 Pandemic</b>		
Yes	115	31.59%
No	249	68.41%
<b>Which is/are easy to use according to you</b>		
Microsoft Teams, Moodle/LMS/VLE	1	0.27%
Moodle/LMS/VLE	13	3.57%
Zoom	242	66.48%
Zoom and at least one of above tools	97	26.65%
None of the above	11	3.02%
<b>Mode of Accessing the Zoom/Microsoft Teams/ Google Class Room/ LMS/ VLE/Moodle</b>		
Computer	2	0.55%
Laptop	8	2.20%
Mobile Phone	336	92.31%
Tablet/iPad	2	0.55%
Mobile Phone and at least one of above devices	16	4.39%

Based on the study, More than 80% of students agreed that the announcements provided by the lecturers are sufficiently clear and precise before starting online lectures and only a 4.94% of students disagreed with the statement. The majority of the students (67.58%) rated that the e-learning system is easy to use and they are happy about the online teaching methods and lecture materials (65.11%).

**Table 3: Students’ perception on learning materials and online tools**

Statements	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
Announcements provided by the lecturers are sufficiently clear and precise before starting online lectures	80.77%	14.29%	4.94%
Easy to use e-learning system	67.58%	19.23%	13.19%
Happy about online teaching methods and lecture materials	65.11%	17.86%	17.03%

Students were asked to rate their view on some positive and negative statements related to online learning. Around 58.51% of respondent stated that the e-learning is enjoyable and fun. A survey conducted by Agarwal & Kaushik (2020) during COVID-19 revealed that 95% of post-graduate students found online sessions are enjoyable and interesting. As per Verma *et al.*, 2020, 57% of students felt online classes are safe, comfortable, and enjoyable. According to the survey results, a significant number of respondents (60.99%) mentioned that the flexibility in time and place in participating for online lectures was increased. Also, 65.66% of students reported that the possibilities are increased to ask questions and clear doubts during on-line lectures. A study in Pakistan reveals that, online education promotes opportunities of capacity building (87%) and professional development (91 %), Hussain, 2007.

**Table 4: Students’ perception on some positive statements about online learning**

Statements	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
E-learning is enjoyable and fun	58.51%	21.15%	20.33%
Flexibility in time and place in participating for online lectures was increased	60.99%	23.90%	15.11%
Possibilities to ask questions and clear your doubts during online lectures	65.66%	17.58%	16.76%

In case of negative statements, more than 50 % of the respondents agreed with each statement. About 53.85% respondents agreed that the impact of online learning is less and around 52.47% of them stated that the online teaching is not secure and not technically reliable. Among them, 60.71 % and 58.25% of respondents stated that there was a lack of interaction with lecturers and other colleagues and Poor learning environment at home respectively.

**Table 5: Students’ perception on some negative statements about online learning**

Statements	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
Lack of interaction with lecturers and other colleagues	60.71%	25.00%	14.28%
Poor learning environment at home	58.25%	21.15%	20.60%
Impact of online learning is less	53.85%	27.20%	18.95%
Online teaching is not secure and not technically reliable	52.47%	27.75%	19.78%

Further, students were asked their perception on traditional/ face to face classroom lectures and online lectures and their willingness to participate in online learning activities in future. Only a 31.32% of them reported that the e-teaching is better than traditional/face to face classroom lectures meanwhile majority of the students disagree with the statement (44.24%). Among them, 58.52% of students were interested in participating in the online lectures in the future.

**Table 6: Comparison with traditional/ face to face classroom lectures and future participation in online learning**

Statements	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
E-teaching is better than traditional/ face to face classroom lectures	31.32%	24.44%	44.24%
You are interested to participate for online lectures in future	58.52%	19.23%	22.25%

## 5. Conclusion

The findings of the study reveal that the online learning is enjoyable and fun, increased flexibility in time and place, and increased possibilities to clarify questions and clear doubts. Meanwhile, online learning has some challenges too, such as lack of interaction with lecturers and other colleagues, poor learning environment at home, less impact, not secure and not technically reliable. Although face to face/class room learning was felt as better than the online learning, the students have shown greater interest in learning via online.

As a result of the closure of the universities in Sri Lanka due to lockdown and increasing threat of Covid-19 in its second wave, the students have had no alternative except being confined to their houses. This forced them to join in the online learning without wasting their time and perpetuate their studies in order to successfully complete their degree programme. The positive dimension of Covid-19 is that it has forced the students and staff who have never interacted with each other before to join in teaching and learning activities via online platform. Therefore, the online learning has become a blessing in disguise for students at the time of Covid-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, as highlighted above, there are some serious limitations to online learning. Most importantly, the online learning could be a



remedy to theory-based courses in the universities, not the practical training or practical based courses as it requires physical presence of students to operate the equipment and adequate testing, etc. Therefore, it is up to the administrators to find ways and means to address the concerns of practical based courses via online in future.

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