

The Stakes of Maintaining Distance Learning in the Algerian Academic Institutions in the Post-Covid Era

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ABSTRACT: *Distance learning allows students to pursue a degree without having to be physically present in any institution of formal education. It became, at some point, when lockdowns were imposed, an ultimate solution to a new reality that struck the world. This solution seemed temporary as it was appropriate in the context of the Covid era, and the reasons of opting for it were indisputable. However, as now things have returned to what they used to be, distance learning should not be prioritized and promoted in the way it did during the restrictions of the movement. Therefore, this paper aims at highlighting the degradation that this mode of teaching has caused, through the reading of the specialists of the field and their findings on distance learning. Moreover, this article offers a general overview of the academic situation in the context of distance learning in Algeria.*

KEYWORDS: Distance Learning, Knowledge Acquisition, Formal Education, Multimedia, Post-Covid Era

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1. Introduction

To find alternatives to traditional classes and deal with the terrible instability during the Covid era, universities made considerable and bold efforts. Teaching approaches must then be customized to fit the situation to use internet-based learning. Some nations kept some sort of educational continuity, with schools and colleges staying open. Universities and educational institutions use a number of ways with students to study online, and consider the distant and digital platforms as alternatives, and various concepts for distant education have been introduced.

When using online distance learning platforms, teachers and students alike have faced numerous obstacles to learn efficiently. Students were often depicted as hesitant due to a lack of motivation. They delayed feedback due to their teachers' unavailability during learning processes or merely because of their increasing anxiety and sense of isolation. In addition, the researchers of the field believe that these issues are more remarkable due to the inexperienced teachers in using E-learning and the great hurriedness with which they had to adapt their teaching method to the new circumstances. Dissatisfaction with distant teaching has resonated, displaying itself in the attitudes of target students and their resulting grades.

This study has as a sample population students and teachers from the department of English. The teachers who participated in answering the teacher's questionnaire were randomly selected from the English department of the University of Oran 2. They were of both genders, with different teaching experiences ranging from four to eighteen years, and they all held the doctorate degree. This research is a particularly a quantitative one, based on the results collected by means of a questionnaire handed out to twenty five teachers, who at least had one online module, and a hundred students, who, by default, all had online classes during the Covid era.

2. Advantages of Distance Learning

Distance learning expands access to learning and training opportunities and offers more flexibility. Because of the latter, many kinds of distance learning allow students to join whenever they can, on an individual basis. Because many kinds of distant learning are free or low-cost, this type of education is relatively inexpensive. Distance education is also multisensory. There is a vast range of materials available to adjust everyone's learning style. Indeed, some students learn better through visual stimulation, while others get optimal results through listening or engaging with a computer program. Distance learning can also offer more opportunities for communication with students. Introverts, for in instance, who are too anxious to ask questions in class, may from time to time "open up" when given the option to connect via e-mail or other adapted ways (Franklin, Yoakam & Warren, 1996, p. 126). Other associated features of distant learning include: minimizing age disparities, geographical limitations of access to education, bringing education to large audiences, and the blending of education with employment or family life.

2.1 Disadvantages of Distance Learning

Though there are several advantages to distant education, there are also a number of negative aspects that students and institutions should take into consideration before beginning any distance learning program.

Distance learning requires preparing well ahead of time and teachers and students both have to make arrangements at times in order to accomplish tasks on time. There is however no quick feedback with distance learning. A student's performance in a typical classroom setting may be quickly measured through questions and informal assessment.

Distance learning makes students wait for a feedback with which the instructor rather targets students collectively. It takes an inconsistent amount of work from teachers as compared to regular course delivery

methods. It includes not just the time needed for an actual course material delivery, but it must also contain a significant amount of time dedicated to student assistance and preparation. In addition, time used in e-mail correspondence is quite significant. Distance learning may not always offer all of the essential sources. Every degree program has online courses. Besides, physical presence in the classroom is needed for the completion of certain degree programs. Some academic institutions may not acknowledge distance learning degrees. Although most corporations accept distance learning diplomas, not all employers do.

Students who wish to find work in certain companies after graduation should be aware what employers think about online education. Distance education does not necessarily encourage students to practice their spoken communication skills as most online activities are about automatic assessment. Distance learning does not provide students with the opportunity to practice verbal contact with professors and other faculty members, and this social isolation is another inconvenience of learning remotely. Distance learners are prone to experience boredom and loneliness and miss out on the social-physical connection that comes with attending a traditional classroom. Not surprisingly, many partakers in distant learning have reported feeling alone, and therefore reducing the usage of communication technology such as bulletin boards, threaded conversations, and instant messaging Chats, email, and video conferencing are all options.

The figure below, from the data collected via a questionnaire, shows that the majority of teachers (62%) have access to remote learning devices, while the rest (38%) do not.

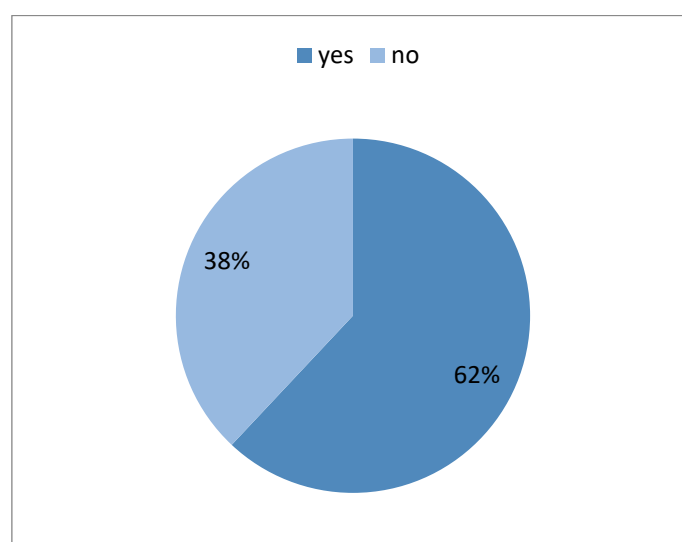


Figure 1: Accessing E Learning Device

One major problem of distant learning is the readiness of teachers and the attitude of students. Students will be unwilling to study remotely if they do not see technology as constructive (Christensen, E. W., Anakwe U. P. & Kessler, E. H., 2001, p. 267). Other noteworthy issues impacting the establishment of a distant learning community include the instructors' incapacity to gain the essential abilities, adopt a positive attitude, and build the appropriate pedagogy. There is a link between pedagogy, personal experience, and distant learning. When an instructor is undecided about the use of technology or sees it negatively, pedagogy is at stake. Many investigations have demonstrated that many educational programs fall short because they have a negligible impact on teachers' attitudes or behaviors (Niederhauser, D. S., & Stoddart T., 2001, p. 25).

Another element of the development of technology pedagogy is the way of introducing the multimedia material to teachers. Other challenges that institutions may face include the time needed to figure out the technology, annoyance with malfunctioning technology, less time for research, and more monetary expenditures to work with technology at home and in the office.

As shown in figure 2 below, when it comes to enjoyment which does not translate to better or more efficient learning, half of the respondents ticked the distance learning box and the other half showed their preference of the traditional class. This, however, is determined by one's inclination towards the teaching technique.

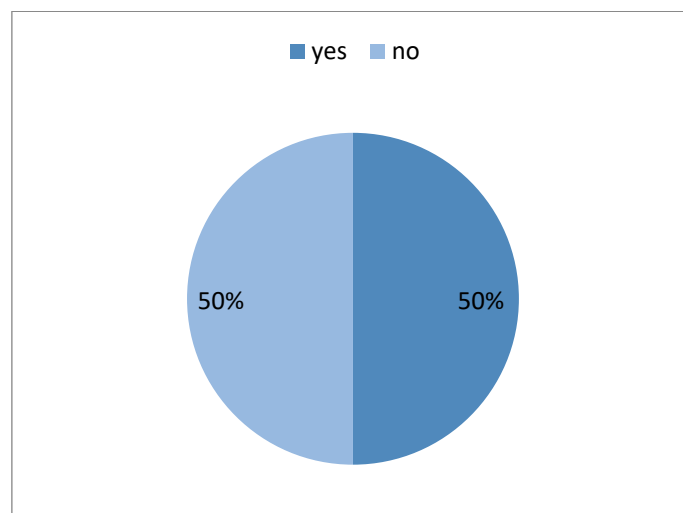


Figure 2.: Enjoyment through Distance Learning

2.2 Adoption of Distance Learning in Algerian Universities

The adoption of distance learning in Algerian universities dates back to 2006, when Algeria launched an e-learning system in collaboration with "Thompson" and "Microsoft." ICT (Information and Communication Technologies) were introduced in higher education as a tool for facilitating access to knowledge. Besides, its courses are supposed to familiarize students with the essentials of communication and networking. It aimed at providing distance teaching techniques to make students acquainted with the new methods of teaching and learning. In so doing, 4.000 courses and lectures on ICTs have been designed by teachers and lecturers (Guemide & Benachaiba, 2012).Guemide and Benachaiba are persistent that ICTs are "technologies used to transmit, store, create, share, or collaborate" information exchange" (p.4). However, there was no real advantage to teachers wanting to integrate their e-learning strategy. While in their professional lives, they use ICTs and e-learning, they do not have any specific programs.

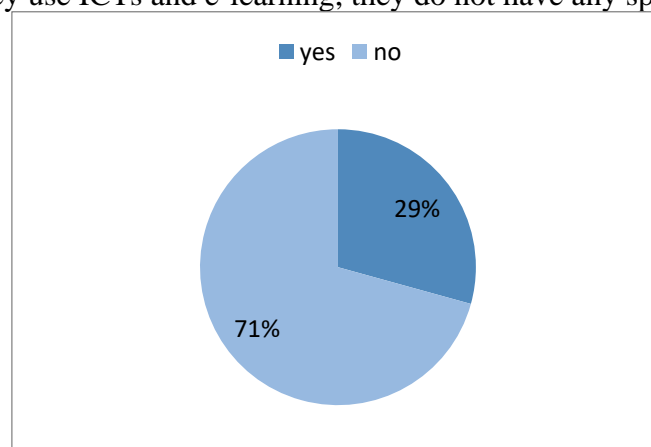


Figure 3: Student's Motivation via Distance Learning.

The figure above on the question of whether the distance learning will excite and motivate learners more than the traditional setting, only (29%) approved of the idea, and (71%) completely disagreed.

For the development of distance education in Algeria, the IDE @: internet is being launched. It is a three-year Algerian European project proposed and funded by the European Union's TEMPUS program (2005-2008). The project's goal is to equip higher education professors with the ability to integrate information and communication technology into their pedagogical tasks, as well as to qualify them to design and administer distance educational projects as part of a larger effort to reform higher education and propose a new LMD system. (Daif Allah & Battouche, 2016, pp 443-444)

3. Distance Learning Environments

One of the ambitions of developing a distant learning environment is to grow a community of learners. This is not comparable to designing an instructional atmosphere. Learners may engage in an educational setting, but interaction, group work, and active learning are not as emphasized in a physical learning setting. Setting up a virtual community will play a part in the support needed in a distant learning environment to make it evolve into a learning environment (Dede, 1995).

Multiple perspectives have been proposed on the use of electronic technology in educational settings. The Web's capacity to reach out to remote learners makes it a practical alternative for all types of learners in all grade levels. The Web can create a dynamic learning environment, one that allows learners to interact and think. The Web also widens the range of individuals who can be reached and materials that may be acquired.

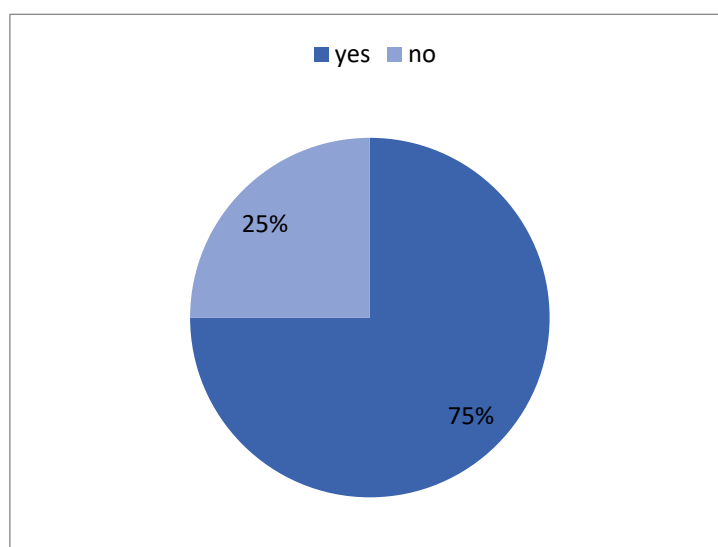


Figure 4: the ability of learning by using technologies and without face to face interaction.

Data from the figure above show that only (25%) of students have the ability to learn using technologies with no need of any face-to-face interaction. Yet, the vast majority (75%) say they cannot. For the ones who prefer online classes over the traditional classrooms, it may be owed to their easy access to multimedia platforms, their skills with technology, and especially their high motivational degree.

As a result of the physical separation of teachers and students in distance learning, some scholars have come to the conclusion that these classrooms are short of the "interpersonal potential of the conventional classroom" (Freitas, Meyers, Avtgis, 1998, p 6). The minimized opportunity for interaction is seen as a problem. According to Abrahamson (1998), "students frequently struggle when they do not have direct and ongoing contact with their instructor" (p. 2). These issues are dealt with by Newlands and

McLean (1996) in the form of a sense of isolation and withdrawal from courses. Other researchers found that, compared to on-campus students, distance learning students are less likely to interact with the instructor, despite having more interaction with other students at the distance setting.

Distance learning, according to a multitude of specialists, brings down the social networks that students build in school because it lacks the clear advantage of a learning site where numerous distance students gather for class. They do not have the same opportunities as on-campus students to assess their level of proficiency through peer feedback. According to Newlands and McLean (1996), "the limited degree of interpersonal communication between teachers and students cast doubt on the quality of learning achieved by distance students" (p. 1). Similarly, Bates (1991; as cited in Zhang, 1998) contends that maximizing social interaction is a critical component of distance learning technology. This is especially true when learning objectives are linked to interaction (Zhang, 1998). The level of student/instructor interaction may also be influenced by the specific format used (e.g., teleconferencing vs. computer) within the broad realm of distance learning formats (Freitas, Meyers, Avtgis, 1998). On the word of Thatch and Murphy (1995), "promoting interaction" is one of seven essential competencies for distance education and one of the top five competencies for instructors. Interaction is widely seen as vital to learning.

As students were surveyed to give their opinion about distance learning, their answers ranged mainly from average to poor with "average" being the most given response represented by (39%). The figure that stood out was (4%) rating online classes as excellent.

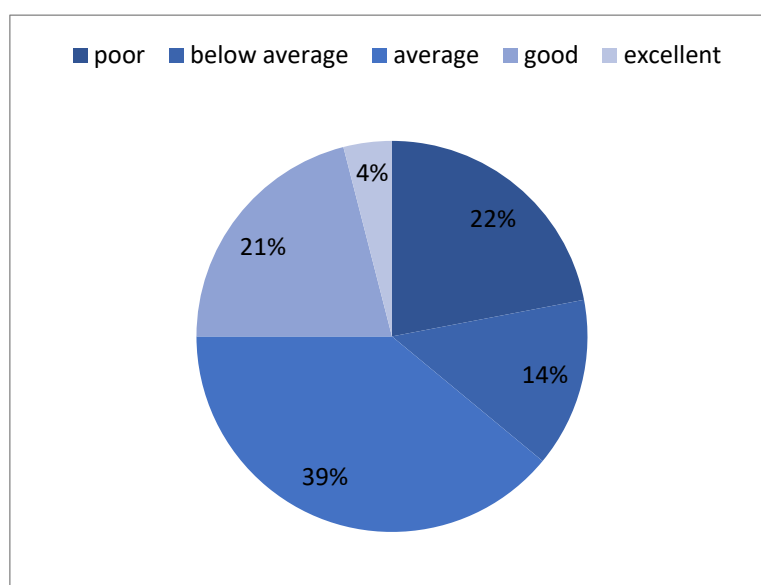


Figure 5: student's opinion about distance learning.

Associating motivation and knowledge acquisition is common sense in traditional educational research and this applies as well to distance learning settings. As maintained by Bothun (1998), "the quality of learning is determined by the student's level of motivation" (Guzly & Avanzino). In the traditional classroom, the instructor was generally the one to who generating and maintaining motivation was attributed. Nevertheless, given the minimized direct interaction between students and instructors in a distance learning environment, the process of creating and keeping up motivation seems to be more multifaceted than in traditional classrooms.

A target sample of students were surveyed to determine how easy or how difficult it is when learning online or in a physical setting. And, according to their answers, (16%) believe that distance learning is more or less the same as the traditional one, while (47%) suppose that it is easier than regular classes, and the remaining (37%) deemed it as more difficult than regular classes as shown in figure 6 below.

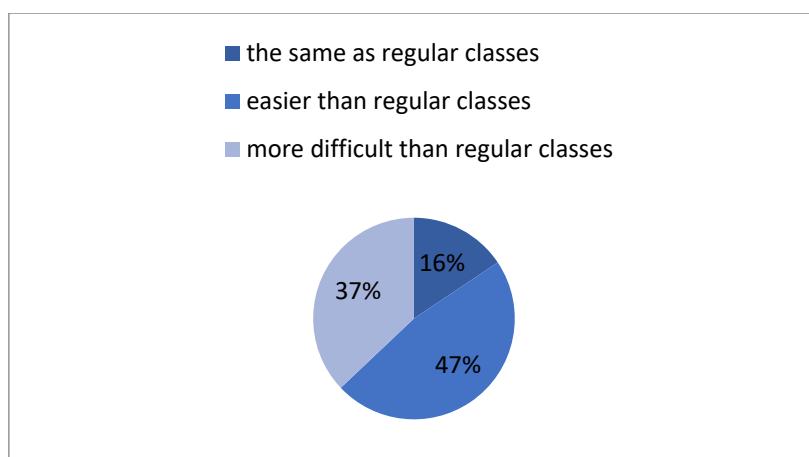


Figure 6: Student Evaluation of Distance Learning.

Not all distance learning surveyors attribute student motivation to the instructor's interaction with students. As an alternative, it is believed that a lack of instructor/student interaction can be a catalyst for student enthusiasm in learning:

The absence of an animate instructor can be seen as encouraging the student to look a little deeper into accessible resources and come out as a more unconstrained and motivated learner qualified enough of self-instruction, a feature in which contemporary employers are very interested (Jones-Delcorde 1995 p. 28).

3.1 Student Motivation and Satisfaction in Distance Learning Environments

Given the possible decline of interaction between the instructor and the learner in a virtual learning environment, technology can be used as a tool for motivation;

A primary function of the use of television, computers, and telecommunications in distance learning is to motivate students rather than simply to provide them with information" (p. 2). Some surveys suggest that the tools used have an effect on the student's motivation in the context of distance learning. Students consume more energy when the methods are difficult and do less when the latter are more familiar (Ksobiech and Salomon as cited in Clark and Salomon, 1986).

The figure below shows that a significant number of students, that represent (43%), find online education to be more difficult and more challenging than the traditional one, and still another (39%) have difficulties sometimes, and only (18%) did not complain about it.

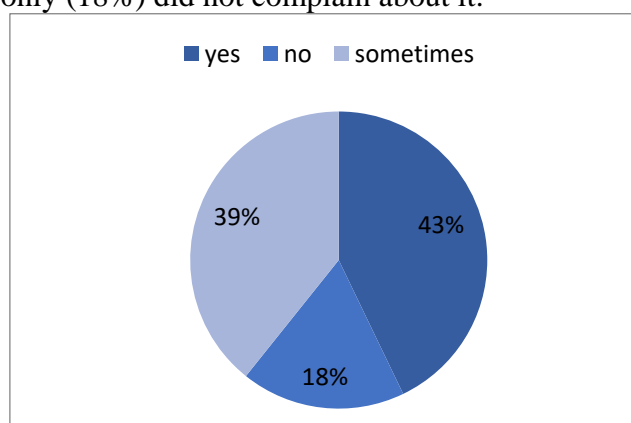


Figure 7: difficulty of distance learning compared to traditional class.

It is common sense to presuppose that students' motivation is linked to their approval of distance learning as a method of instruction—that is, how much they see it as an effective and comfortable method of instruction. Students' observations and opinions have an impact on the overall learning effectiveness, making their approval of the learning environment and process critical. There has been little data that has openly been destined in any methodical way to student satisfaction with distance learning, especially that which makes use of interactive video and synchronous communication as the favored media.

Current research data is contradictory. Dunbar and Selby (1996), for instance, conducted a survey amongst students who had freshly completed a video-conferencing class and found out that their view of the experience were rather negative. Students gave an account of feeling "less involved and interested in their video-teleconferencing class compared to their traditional classes... they felt the video-teleconferencing class did not enhance the quality of their education" (p. 18).

Figure 8 below may sum up all the issues faced by students mainly and can be conclusive in the context of Algerian universities. As the covid era did not last long to make online education a new reality, the adaptability to it in the post-pandemic era became questionable. Students and teachers alike missed going back to classes and the workplace only to be ordered to still continue with the distance learning method. Adaptability as shown below is represented by a very low figure as students and teachers had been mentally prepared to return to normal classes after the restrictions were lifted. Distractions, mainly social media apps and platforms are another major problem making distance learning less efficient. Students tend to spend more time on those apps because of their addictive nature. However, the figure that highlights why online education cannot give satisfaction overall is that of the technical issues and the quality of the internet connection. The latter can kill the motivation of both teachers and students who try to adapt to a new method of instruction.

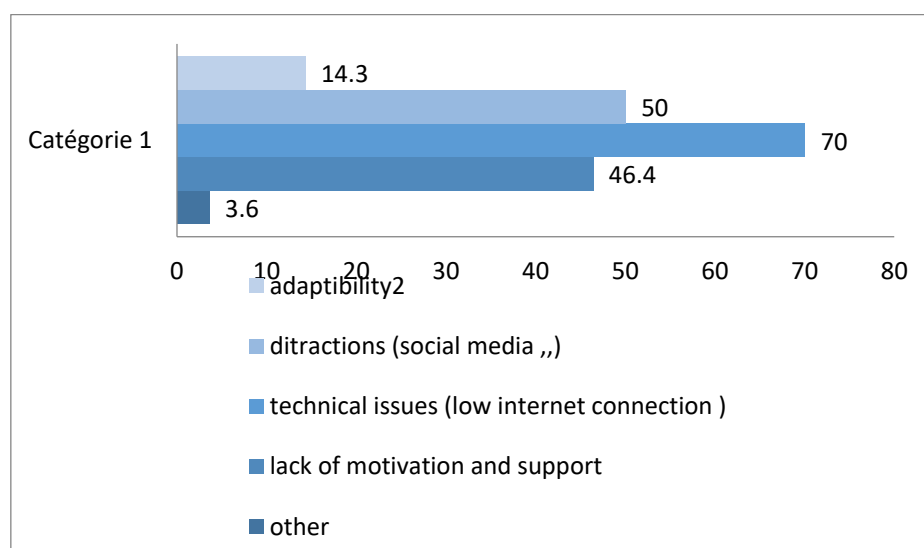


Figure 8: challenges faced during distance learning.

Video-conferencing encourages more course participation and furthered access to professors when judged against traditional classroom environments. Sipusic et al. (1999), for instance, realized that students in partially and fully mediated courses achieved statistically considerably better than students in a similar course but in a traditional lecture approach. In addition, students in both mediated modes were pleased with their experiences, and "neither group felt the technology was a significant barrier" (p. 18). Swan (1995) noticed that high school students taking part in a two-way interactive network enjoyed the practice, deemed the experience as similar to the traditional classroom, and would take another interactive video network course if it was offered. As a final point, Martin and Bramble (1996) found out that adult learners in a two-

way interactive video system were content with their training and realized better test scores when judged against traditional training, regardless of the fact that the interaction made easy among students was their least assessed aspect of the system.

4. Conclusion

Distance learning is an exceptional way of teaching adult learners because they need flexibility to cope with the challenge of the presented priorities. Adult learning is not effortless, because of the loss of motivation as a result of lack of face-to-face contact with teachers and peers, possible unreasonable start-up costs, and lack of teaching staff support. Besides these barriers to distance learning, a literature review found that learners implicated in distance education are more prone to having insecurities about the following: acquiring knowledge, self-evaluation problems, and lack of support services such as tutors and technical assistance, a sense of remoteness, and inexperience with this sort of learning, which directs towards to academic problems. Faculty barriers to distance learning consist of the lack of training in course development and technology, lack support for distance learning, and ineffective teaching staff selection for distance learning courses. Managerial impediments consist of infrastructure, lack of technology, course curriculum, and student evaluation. Research concerned with facing these problems should be carried out so that distance learning, which can be an effective learning method, can be done more successfully.

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