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Students' Opinions about Their Own Competence to Conduct the Teaching Process

The Resolution on National Programme of Higher Education 2011–2020 (ReNPVŠ11-20, 2011) emphasizes the importance of a quality study process and easy access to education for students. The objectives and measures defined in the resolution are aimed at improving the international comparability of higher education and the competitiveness of graduates in the labour market. To achieve these goals, it is crucial to provide students with continuous access to information and enable them to acquire quality and comprehensive knowledge by using modern methods and forms of work, as well as incorporating contemporary perspectives and theoretical frameworks into their fields of study (Vršnik Perše, 2021).

However, higher education teachers and staff (hereinafter referred to as professors) face numerous challenges in organizing and conducting lectures and other forms of the study process, which require constant updating of teaching methods and forms of work. Especially during the period of distance learning due to the global health situation (Order on the Declaration of the COVID-19 Epidemic in the Territory of the Republic of Slovenia, Uradni list RS, No. 19/20 and 68/20), both professors and students had to quickly adapt to new methods of education and utilize information and communication technologies (ICT) as key competencies (Baloh and Cencič, 2018; Istenič Starčič, 2020; Perger, 2018; Republika Slovenija, 2016).

Even students majoring in primary education and preschool education encountered specific challenges in acquiring knowledge in the fields of social sciences and arts during the period of distance learning. Adapting to the new mode of education required the use of specific methods and forms of work that facilitated knowledge acquisition, as well as the development of skills and abilities that will be necessary for their future teaching careers.

Technological advancements and globalization have had a significant impact on education, with digital technologies becoming central tools for learning. However, questions still arise regarding the full utilization of the opportunities offered by distance education. Therefore, it is important to further investigate the issues related to distance education and seek practical ways to successfully compensate for practical experiences in kindergartens and primary schools. Furthermore, the opinions of students from other study programmes and subject areas should be explored, and the enhancement of cognitive and artistic abilities and skills of students through longitudinal studies should be examined. It is crucial to thoughtfully select ICT and other flexible forms of education when implementing distance education. These forms can be gradually incorporated and supplemented with appropriate study materials and traditional teaching aids to ensure an effective learning process. Professors have various teaching methods and approaches at their disposal for delivering distance education.

Flexible forms of learning have various definitions and conceptualizations. They are most commonly used when physical presence in education is not possible due to various circumstances, such as distance from educational institutions, special statuses, or health issues. Researchers like Naidu (2017a, 2017b, 2018) and Rutar et al. (2017) believe that flexible forms of learning are an excellent alternative for achieving educational goals. The concept of flexible learning is often associated with the possibility of acquiring knowledge independently of time and place, with an adaptable pace of learning. In the literature, it is often referred to as "anytime, anywhere" (Naidu, 2017a, p. 1; 2017b, p. 269). The understanding of the concept has evolved over the decades. Veletsianos and Houlden (2019) argue that flexible forms of learning can also

serve as a descriptive or conceptual aspect in organizing the study process and addressing educational content. They can also function as pedagogical and technical flexibility in the selection of learning materials and strategies, enabling the flexible use of various learning materials and teaching aids. The concept of flexible learning is often associated with ICT-based education (Pulko and Ulčnik, 2021; Rutar et al., 2017). Pulko and Ulčnik (2021) include smartphones, computers, and tablets as strategies for flexible learning using ICT in individual learning activities. Experts (Veletsianos & Houlden, 2019) emphasize that flexible teaching and learning can only be achieved to the extent to which individual professors and students participating in the educational process can adapt, which is not necessarily easy or self-evident.

One of the key changes in recent years has been a more meaningful integration of digital technologies into teaching and study processes. Educational institutions have transitioned to online platforms that provide access to resources, interactive tools, and other materials for learners and educational programme implementers. These new technological tools have enabled more flexible and accessible forms of education that are available anytime and anywhere (Collins and Halverson, 2018; Istenič Starčič, 2020; Kopačin, 2020; Moore and Kearsly, 2012; Simamora, 2020; Will, 2019). There is a noticeable shift from traditional educational strategies to interactive, adaptable, and individualized teaching. This approach allows students to learn at their own pace and in ways that best suit their learning styles. Furthermore, increasing attention is being paid to the development of social skills that are crucial for students to successfully integrate into the global economy. Therefore, education for future professionals at the university level is directed toward acquiring knowledge in areas at the forefront of future development, such as artificial intelligence, computer science, data science, and other fields, including social sciences and arts (Anders, 2020; Domenget et al., 2020; Simamora, 2020).

In the 2021/2022 academic year, we conducted a study involving 175 students of the Faculty of Education at the University of Primorska. Among them, there were 13 (7.43%) males and 162 (92.57%) females. Of the participants, 80 (45.71%) were studying the Primary Education programme, while 95 (54.29%) were studying the Preschool Education programme. In terms of the study year, 98 (56%) students were in the second year of undergraduate studies, 44 (25.14%) were in the third year of undergraduate studies, 26 (14.86%) were in the fourth year of undergraduate studies, and 7 students (4%) were enrolled in the first year of postgraduate studies. The students responded for the 2020/2021 academic year, during which the studies were conducted entirely remotely, except for the first week of October 2020.

The study was part of a larger quantitative research project, for which we used an online questionnaire to collect data. In this article, we will present a qualitative analysis of three open-ended questions that aimed to gain insights into the students'opinions about the knowledge they acquired during distance learning and theirreadinessto teach in the fields of social sciences and arts. We collected, reviewed, and analysed the data obtained from the responses to the open-ended questions in the online questionnaire. Based on the purpose and objectives of the research, we formulated research questions about the opinions of primary education and preschool education students regarding their readiness to teach social science topics, music didactics, and art didactics, despite these subjects being taught remotely.

After analysing all the responses related to teaching social science topics, we found that despite the different study conditions for which no one was prepared, the students are aware that they will acquire the necessary competencies for teaching in primary schools or preschools through practice when they start working. They believe in continuous knowledge acquisition and connecting it with various theoretical frameworks they have learnt during their studies at the

faculty, regardless of the way the studies were conducted. We found that acquiring social science topics and knowledge related to social science didactics through distance learning was considerably easier and more effective for students compared to arts subjects.

Considering the didactics of music, in the case of traditional face-to-face studies, students find it easier to motivate themselves for lifelong learning and participation in music groups or ensembles. The results of our research indicate that the distance learning conducted during the epidemic cannot enable students to achieve the same results as if the study process for music subjects were conducted in the classroom. In the future, these students will require additional education and, above all, proactivity to be able to provide high-quality music education to children.

As we have observed, distance education, even in the field of the visual arts, poses challenges for all participants in the study process. However, it is important for students to be aware of the limitations of distance learning and knowledge acquisition, and to strive for a more interactive and experiential learning environment. By doing so, they will be able to ensure an interesting and, more importantly, high-quality arts education when they teach in classrooms and preschools, regardless of the changes in the way the studies were conducted.

It would be sensible to further research the aforementioned issues, expand the study, and find practical ways to substitute teaching demonstrations in primary schools and kindergartens in a manner that provides teaching experience for students in front of children in preschool or a classroom, regardless of changes in the mode of study.