A Study of Student's Perceptions towards Online Distance Learning during Lockdown Period of COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract
Ensuring the quality of online distance learning in institutions of higher education has been a growing concern during the Covid-19 pandemic. This research was conducted on students' perceptions toward the quality of online distance learning and utilized qualitative and quantitative methods to investigate the perceptions of students. To collect the data, the researchers used a modified questionnaire. Survey analysis was carried out. A total of 570 students from two study programs, Public Sector Accounting and Business Administration at State Polytechnic of Sriwijaya, were asked to answer a questionnaire. The findings of this research revealed that majority of students considered the use of online distance learning in English teaching and learning is effective and efficient in terms of time. The online distance learning is the best choice to keep students away from the COVID-19 pandemic spread. The findings can be used by any lecturers to understand students' perceptions regarding online distance learning, and ultimately improve their online distance learning instructional practices.

Introduction

Approximately 91.3% or around 1.5 billion students enrolled worldwide are unable to attend schools due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the normal functioning of schools, polytechnics, and universities. The uncertainties of the COVID-19 pandemic have surely changed polytechnic systems, especially lecturers, to transform the ways that they connect with, teach, and support students. These changes have disrupted the normal functioning of the polytechnic. All leaders of educational institutions have to put in place alternative methods for students and lecturers to continue with their lessons when attending school is not possible. The rapid spread of COVID-19 has forced Indonesian governments to close schools and enforce at-home distance learning to ensure study activities continue despite the absence of face-to-face

schooling (Azzahra, 2020). Lecturers are instructed by polytechnic management to turn to distance learning as a means of mitigating for lost time in continuing education services, and it makes students learn from home. Students with access to digital devices and internet establish their learning method. The Ministry of Education and Culture (MOEC) decided to suspend all school activities and opted for distance learning through its Circular Letter No. 4/2020. MOEC also grants freedom for each school to choose their preferred online learning platforms. The distance learning requires lecturers to move to online delivery of lessons, and students to learn from home. At State Polytechnic of Sriwijaya, LMS (Learning Management System is used to set up distance learning. An LMS stores unit and course plans and has activities built into it such as discussion forums, assignments, quizzes and e-portfolios. Such a way makes students communicate with their fellows digitally and never see fellow students in person, and thus the real-time sharing of ideas, knowledge and information is partially missing (McCarthy, 2020).

Due to COVID-19, students are missing out on the social interaction that they have with their fellow students and teachers that are essential to their well-being, protection, development and social-emotional skills. Being abruptly withdrawn from friends, lecturers, and the normalcy they rely on, students will suffer either emotionally or psychologically. They miss out on the opportunity to learn essential life skills, such as how to manage emotions, cope with stress, and build healthy relationships. Moreover, they lack of proper interaction with lecturers and miss social interaction based activities that are necessary for growth and learning (McCarthy, 2020; Zhong, 2020). A few recent research studies have explored the challenges and opportunities associated with distance learning during pandemics (Mailizar , Almanthari, Maulina, & Bruce, 2020). Researchers are trying to explore the advantages and challenges of recent distance learning initiatives from the perspective of various stakeholders. The study conducted by Mailizar et al., (2020), suggested that students' voices are important on this issue, therefore, future research should investigate students' opinions regarding distance learning to examine the challenges faced by students. More research is needed to explore the challenges of utilizing distance learning that hinders students from achieving their learning goals. Basilaia and Kvavadze (2020) also suggested that the quality of distance learning should be investigated in future research studies. The objective of this study was to know students' opinions towards distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic in two study programs, Public Sector Accounting, and Business Administration at State Polytechnic of Sriwijaya Palembang.

Literature Review

Abdrahim (2018) asserts that the term 'distance learning' is originated from a German word *fernstudim* (means "distance study") to describe how certain industrial principles could be applied to the craft of teaching. Distance learning has been defined as "institution-based, formal education where the learning group is separated, and where interactive telecommunications systems are used to connect learners, resources, and instructors" (Roux, Paulina, Guzmán, & González, 2014). Students using distance learning work online at home while the teacher assigns work and checks in digitally. Distance learning also includes no in-person interaction between teachers and students and relies on digital forms of communication such as messaging apps, video calls, discussion boards, and learning management system (LMS). Distance learning can continue without disruption even in events like snow days or the Covid-19 pandemic (Bakia, Shear, Toyama, & Lasseter, 2012). In short, distance learning is a field of education that focuses on teaching methods and technology with the aim of

delivering teaching, often on an individual basis, to students who are not physically present in a traditional educational setting such as a classroom.

LMS is a web based technology which assists in the planning, distribution and evaluation of a specific learning process. It is a software environment designed to manage user learning interventions as well as deliver learning content and resources to students. LMS can also refer to an application that is used for tracking, managing learning and administrating system, and is especially used in a learning environment (Riddell, 2016)

LMS is also one of the solutions which are useful for both students and instructor in online learning environment. LMS are tools for student communication and interaction among students and lecturers. LMS will help the lecturers to provide their learning materials and also interactivity features such as thread discussions, shared files and forums. As mentioned, LMS also support management task such as delivery and tracking, examination, planning, virtual live classes and several statistical analyses (Kulshrestha & Kant, 2013). This may save lecturers a lot of time and effort without making any substantial change in teaching process. The goal of an LMS is to keep track of students" progress and performance. The LMS is not just viewed as an instructional trend but as a tool that benefits the adopters as well. As a web based learning tool, the LMS facilitates "any time, any place, any pace" access to learning content and management. There are many factors influencing students' online learning experiences. The factors are lack of community, difficulty understanding instructional goals, and technical problems were challenges in their online learning experiences (Burns, 2013). Some other factors are from learner characteristics and design of the learning environment (Allen & Seaman, 2011).

Methodology

A survey research method was utilized to answer the research questions posed in this study. This method allowed the researcher to gather data from a relatively large number of subjects during one-time frame. However, since the data collected from the questionnaire is both qualitative and quantitative data, this research study can be seen as a mixed research design. Particularly, although most items on the questionnaire are quantifiable, one final question is open-ended, and it allows the participants to describe what they do. Therefore, the final item on the questionnaire is most related to qualitative data in nature. The sample comprised students enrolled in Public Sector Accounting and Business Administration classes at a State Polytechnic of Sriwijaya. College students represent a vast majority of whom have internet access either at home or through a college account. These questionnaires were administered to the students in the fourth semester classes and six semester classes. Of the 600 questionnaires collected, 30 had a large percentage of missing values and were excluded. Thus, a total of 570 questionnaires were used for further analyses.

Table 1. Profile of students (n = 570)

Variables	Overall Frequency	Percentage
Gender (n=570)		
Male	218	38%
Female	352	62%
Study Program		
Public Sector Accounting		
Gender		
Male	112	38.5%
Female	179	61.5%
Business Administration		
Gender		
Male	106	38%
Female	173	62%

An online survey technique was used to gather data about the attitudes of State Polytechnic Sriwijaya Palembang regarding distance teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic. A modified version of Bernard, Brauer, Abrami, and Surkes (2004) 38-item questionnaire was used to assess the effectiveness of online learning. A pilot test of the survey was administered to students of Polytechnic of Sekayu and Abdurrahman Siddik (IAIN SAS), Bangka Belitung. Appropriate revisions were made based on their comments and suggestions. Necessary modifications were made based on their ideas and feedback. This final questionnaire contained 32 items divided over 26 measuring statements of agreement in which all items have to be answered on a 5-point likert-scale, ranging from "strongly agree" (=5) to "strongly agree" (= 1), 4 closed-ended questions, 1 rank order question, and 1 multiple choice question. The data obtained through an online survey were analyzed by frequency of common students' responses and were stated in percentages. Demographic data were obtained using the Likert scale and is reported in percentage of students' responses.

Findings and Discussions

Demographic characteristics of participants

Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the students. Overall, 218 (38%) of the students are male and 352 (62%) are female. Students of Public Sector Accounting consist of 112 males (38.5%) and 179 female (61.5%). While students of Business Administration consist of 106 males (38%) and 173 female (62%). The age of participants ranged from 19 to 21 years. The majority of the participants (100%, n=570) are undergraduate students.

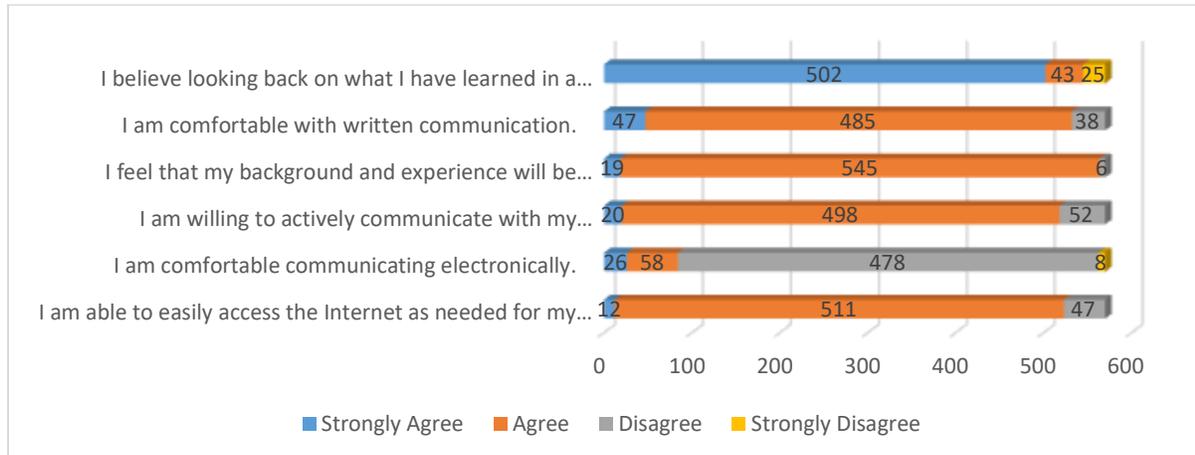**Figure 1.** The 1st Statements about online distance learning

Figure 1 shows that most respondents (Agree = 89.6%) in the study agreed that that they have no difficulties to access the internet. The students (Disagree=83.9%) thought that communicating electronically is not comfortable but there are 498 or 87,4% students who are willing actively to communicate with their classmates electronically. There are 545 or 95.6% students who claim that their background and experience will be beneficial to their studies. Although there are 485 or 85,1% students who prefer written communication to spoken communication. Majority of students (88,1%) strongly agree that what they have learned in a course will help them remember the course better.

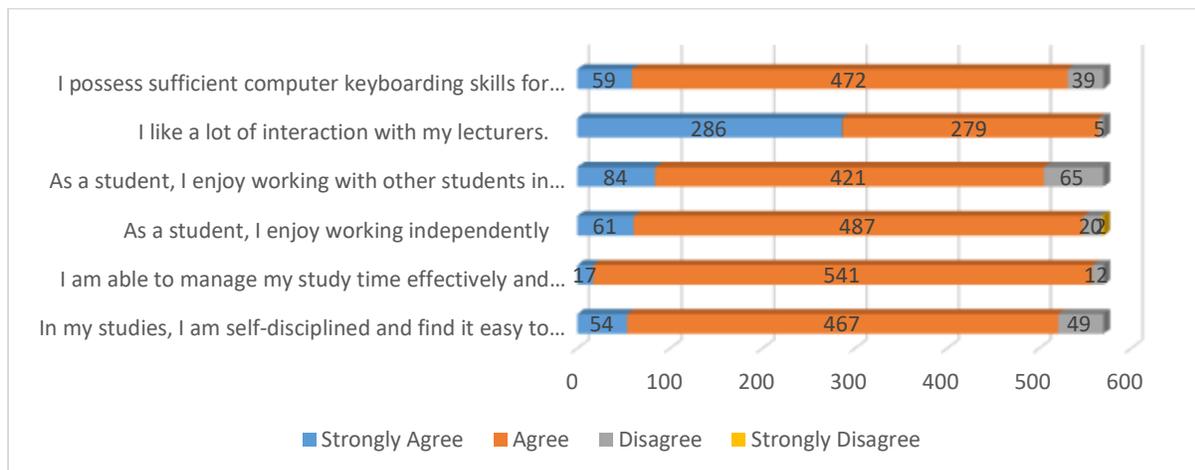**Figure 2.** The 2nd Statements about online distance learning

Figure 2 shows that 82.8% of students have no problems of doing online work it happens because they have computer skills. Even though their computer skills are good enough to support their online distance learning, most of students (SA=50.2%, Agree=48.9%) prefer interactions with their lecturers. There are 73.9% and 85.4% students who enjoy working in a group while doing some assignment from their lecturers and have no matter at all when they have to do their assignments independently. Their independence makes 94.9% students believe themselves that they are able to complete assignments on time. They could do such a way because they are self-disciplined and find it easy to set aside reading and homework time.

Figure 3. The 3rd Statements about online distance learning
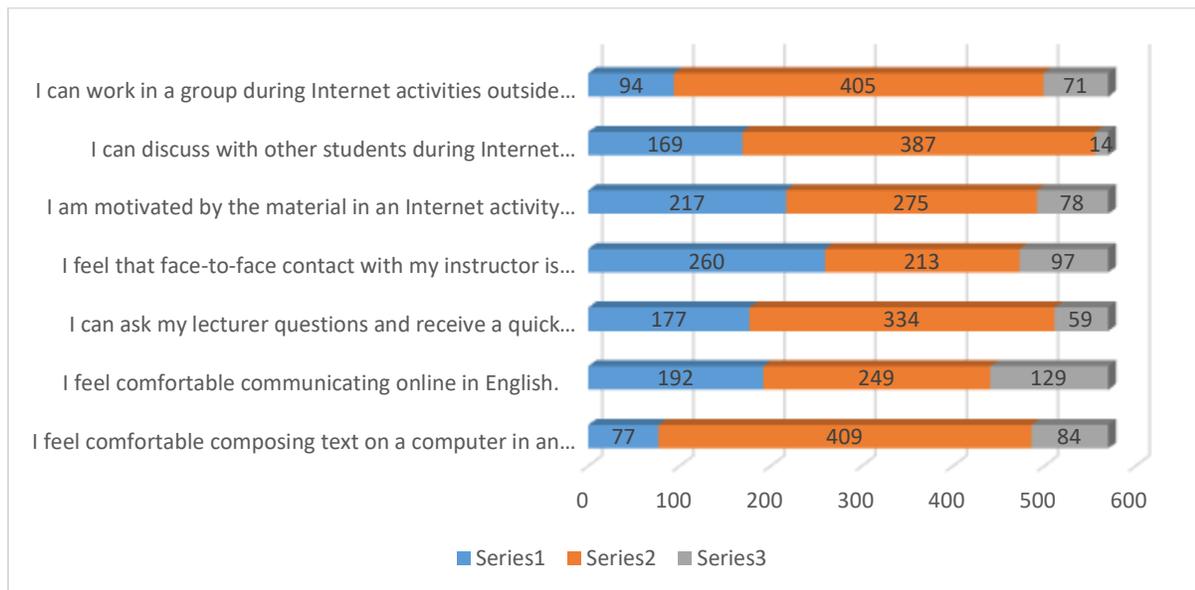
According to the figure 3, 71.1% of students can work in a group even though they have to work outside of class. Such a fact is supported by 67.9% of students who can discuss with other students during internet activities outside of class and 48% of students who are motivated by the materials in an internet activity outside of class. Even though students like virtually to learn outside of class, most of them (SA=45.6%, A=37.4) prefer face-to-face contact with their lecturers. Table 3 also informs that 43.7% and 71.8% of students feel comfortable communicating and composing text in an online environment.

Figure 4. The 4th Statements about online distance learning
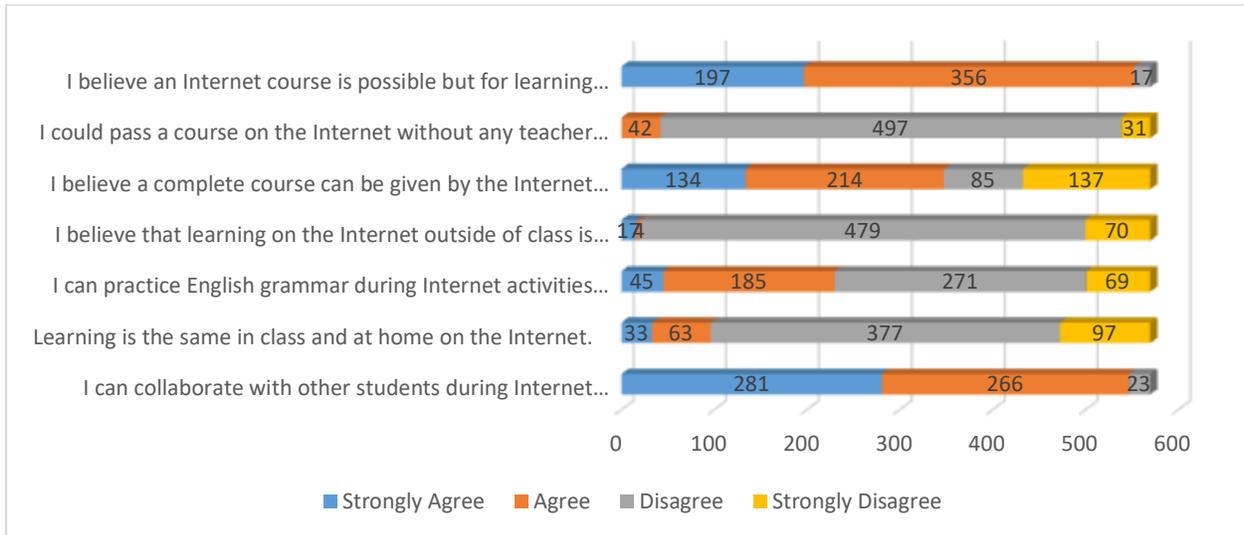
The data from figure 4 explains that most of students (SA=34.6%, A=62.4%) believe that learning English virtually is difficult. It happens because they cannot physically and directly interact with students and lecturers. Whenever they get some problems, it is hard for English lecturers to directly correct their mistakes. Such a thought is supported by data that 87.2% of students believe that their English cannot improve and finally pass the English course. The students (DA=66.1%, SD=17%) think that learning in class and at home is not the same. The data also inform that most of students (D=84%, SD=12.35) think that learning on the internet outside of class is not more motivating than a regular course.

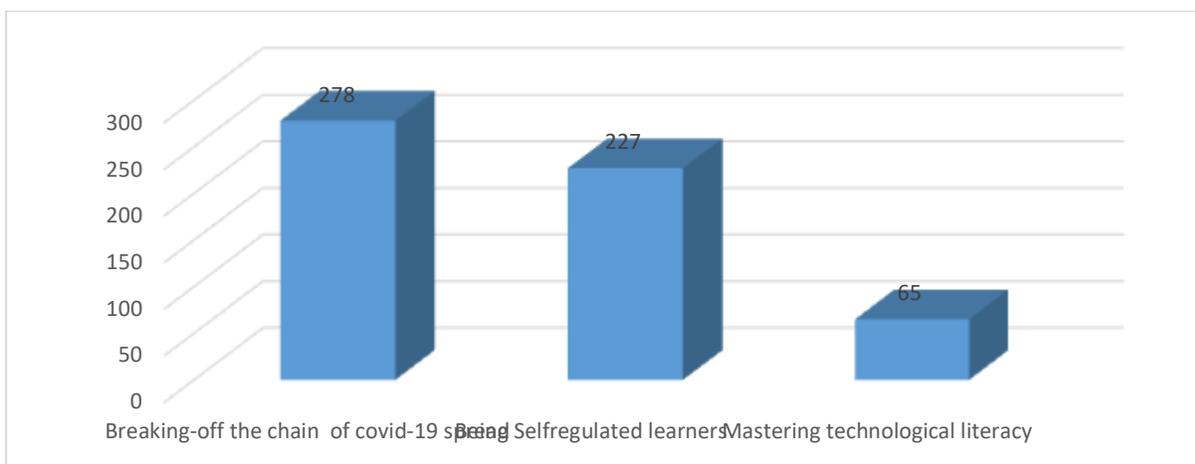**Figure 5.** The greatest benefit of online distance learning

Figure 5 shows that most of students (48.8%) argue that the major purpose of conducting the online distance learning is to break off the chain of Covid-19 spread. The corona virus pandemic taking place at the present time forces the lecturers and students to teach, learn, and study at home in order to slow the spread of the disease. Using distance learning in pandemic of this disease can prevent the spread of this virus.

There are 227 or 39.8% students say that the online distance learning make them become self-regulated learners. To make them comprehend the courses, they have to use various "cognitive and metacognitive strategies to accomplish their learning goal. Learners who are able to hone in on their self-regulated learning skills frequently utilized time management, reviewed material regularly, sought help from lecturers or peers, meet deadlines, and had the skill of metacognition in order to reflect upon their own learning. Online learning also allows students to work at a time and a place that is compatible with their learning needs. A number of students commented on their ability to focus more of their attention on the content of the course and less on issues that may arise when attending a traditional class environment.

The corona-19 pandemic taking place in this planet make all schools close their doors and bring new paradigm. Based on the figure 5, there are 65 or 11.4% students say that there is a change in the educational paradigm in which online distance learning through ICT has become an option in the teaching learning process and has become a necessity in these times of pandemic in order to continue with the student learning process. The effect of the Covid-19 pandemic makes all students have to improve their technological literacy. For the first time students were introduced with LMS for their learning media, they got difficulty because their digital skills were not enough to swap to the new setting. But now they are accustomed to using and operating LMS.

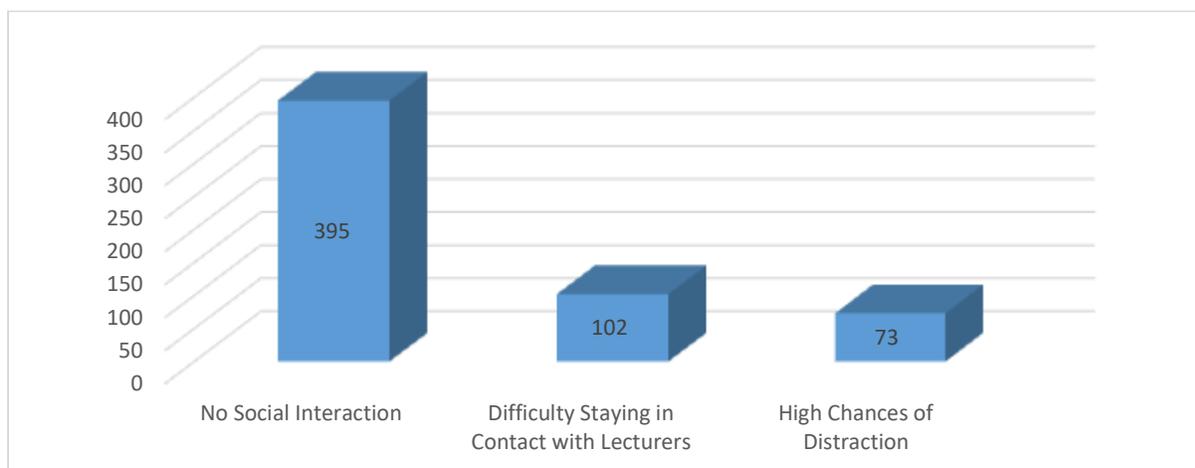**Figure 6.** The greatest drawback of online distance learning

Figure 6 shows that more than half of the students say that online distance learning makes students feel isolated and miss the social physical interaction that comes with attending a traditional classroom. It is shown by the high percentage of students choosing No Social Interaction (69.3% or 395 students). Students feel that they do not have the chance to practice the lessons verbally. As it is known that distance learning only limits students to classes and learning materials that are based

online. Though students can interact through chat rooms, discussion boards, emails and/or video zoom conferencing software, the experience cannot be compared to that of a traditional campus.

The figure 6 also shows that 17.9% or 102 students have difficulty staying in contact with lecturers take place when students are going to have more difficulty getting in touch with their lecturers. Though they can send an email, it is definitely not going to get them the immediate response they would get if they were able to sit down with their lecturers.

There are 12.8% or 73 students who say that online distance learning increases high chances of distraction referring to face-to-face interaction and classmates who can help with constant reminders about assignments. Students need to keep themselves motivated and focused if they are willing to complete their distance learning course successfully. In other words, if a student has any doubt then he has to clear himself without taking help from his lecturers or friends since he cannot talk to friends and other colleagues that he usually does in a normal college course. He must be able to make himself get accustomed to getting himself motivated and focused   to complete a course successfully.

Figure 7. The positive experience towards online distance learning
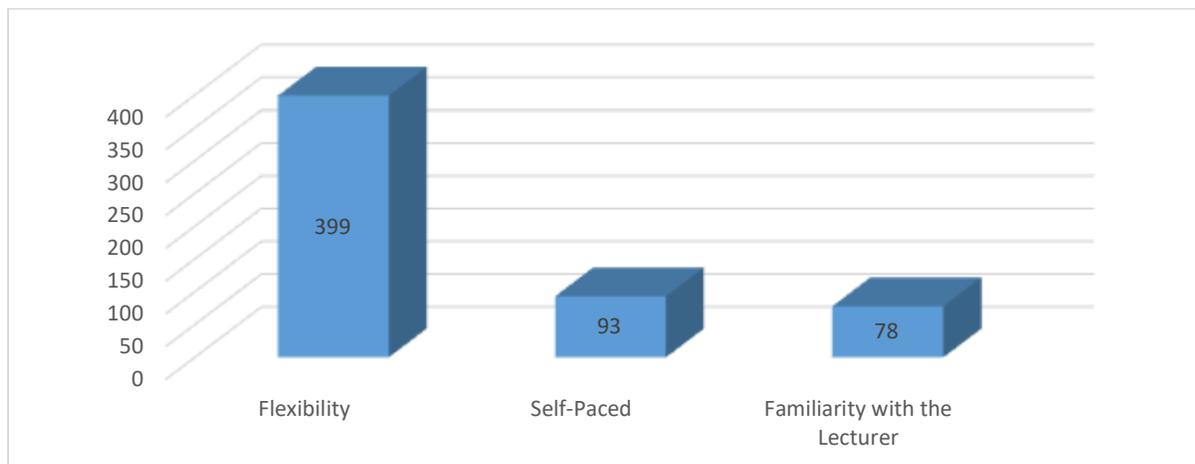
Based on figure 7, the flexibility of online education has been widely recognized as one advantage. The most important factor that contributed to participants' positive experience was the flexible class participation time. 70%   students in this study emphasized the convenience they enjoyed from not being required to drive to campus and plan their work and study at their own time.

There are 93 or 16.3% students claim that self-paced study is another positive experience found in this study. The students have full control of when to study the required knowledge content by lecturers.

One interesting phenomenon found in this study was the comfort level or familiarity with the lecturers. There are 13.7% students say that they feel good about the classes, because they knew the lecturers pretty well. When they were asked if this familiarity brought any effect on their perceptions towards the quality of the distance learning class, they answered that they believed this familiarity made them feel more comfortable since they had already known how the lecturers behaved and his way of teaching.

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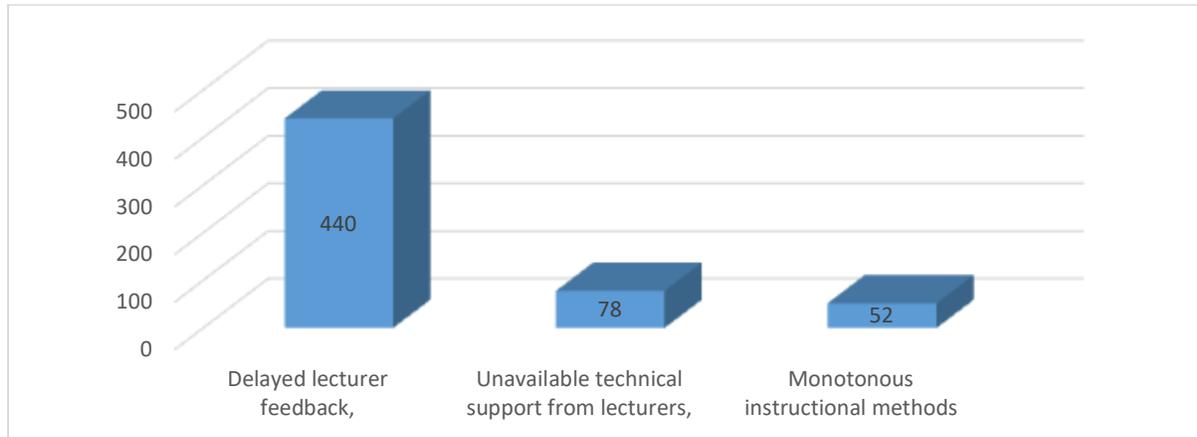**Figure 8.** The negative experience towards online distance learning

Figure 8 shows that the first negative experience towards online distance learning felt by students is the delayed feedback from lecturers (77.5). The delayed feedback from the lecturer was conceived as the main factor which shaped students' negative experience on the quality of online distance learning. Students expect to receive timely feedback from lecturers on discussion postings, exam or tests, and submitted assignments.

The unable technical support from lecturers is chosen by 13.7% as the second negative experience towards online distance learning. When students have technical problems, they need someone to help them. The person that came to their mind first was the lecturer. Thus, when the technical support from the lecturer was not available, negative experiences will be brought up. A few students mentioned that they and their classmates had no technology background.
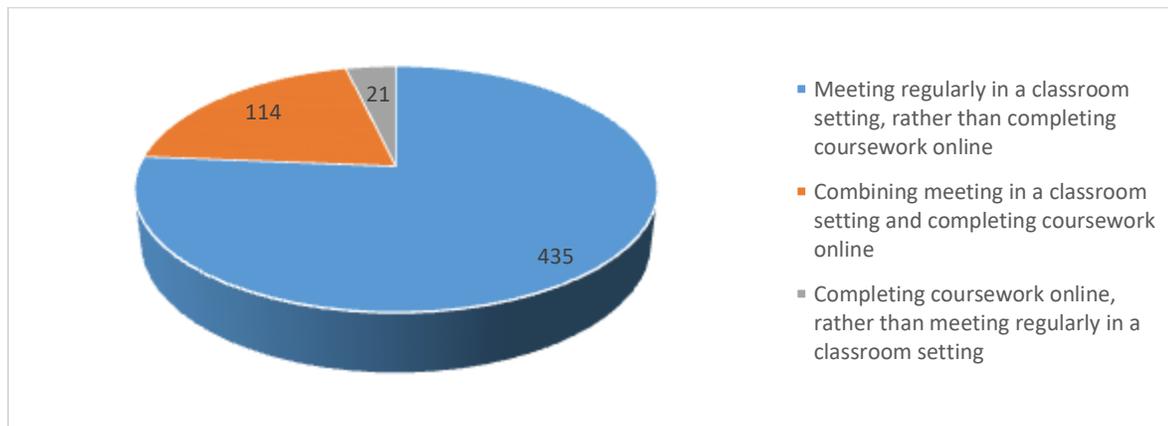
Another reason causing the feeling of isolation is the monotonous instructional methods used in the online class (9.1%). Students in this study indicate that the message board is the only communication and interaction method used by their instructor.

Figure 9. The rank of effectiveness of online distance learning
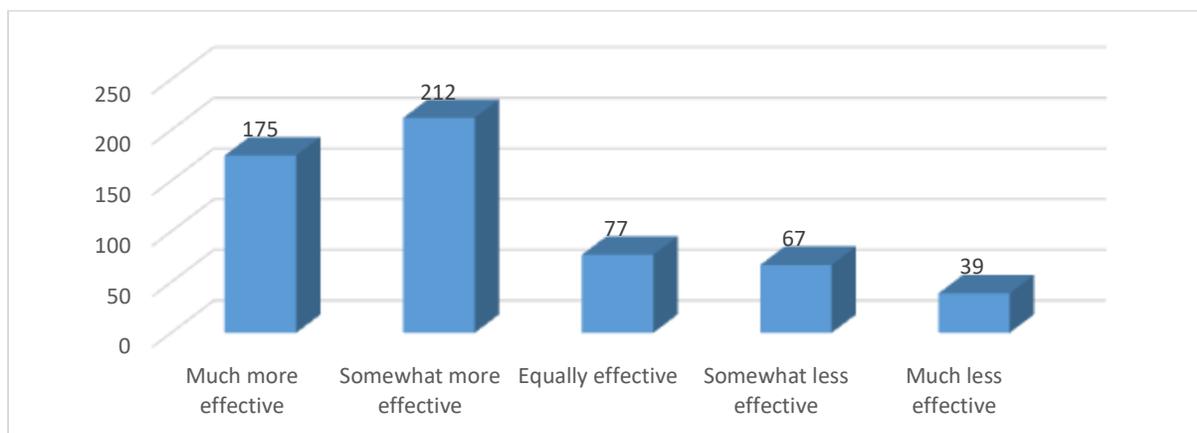
The figure 9 shows students' responses on effectiveness of online distance learning. 175 students or 30.7% say that online distance learning is much more effective. 212 students or 37.2% say that online distance learning is somewhat more effective. The students (11.7% and 6.8%) claim that online distance learning are somewhat less effective and much less effective. The figure also shows that there are 77 students or 13.5% who consider online distance learning equally effective.

Figure 10. The class format students prefer

- Meeting regularly in a classroom setting, rather than completing coursework online
- Combining meeting in a classroom setting and completing coursework online
- Completing coursework online, rather than meeting regularly in a classroom setting

The data in figure 10 shows that students give various responses toward the class format they prefer during the Covid-19 pandemic. More than half of students (76.3%) prefer meeting a classroom setting to completing coursework online. There are only 114 or 20% students who like to combine meeting in a classroom setting and completing coursework online. The figure 1 also shows that there are 21 students or 3.7% who like completing coursework online rather than meeting regularly in a classroom setting.

Conclusion

The findings of the study indicate that most of students show positive response towards the use of online distance learning. Even though traditional students may have some misgivings about online distance learning. Some expressed that they felt that learning is a social activity and, therefore, must be held in a traditional format. Seemingly, they have not experienced what online distance learning is purported to be today. They indicated that they mostly perceived their online course experiences as being positive experiences.

Their responses reflecting their perceptions of online courses living up to their expectations lead us to conclude that more research needs to be done in this area. Information on demographics including age groups, genders, and socioeconomic status could be an area for future research providing a better picture of the population of online students and their perceptions of online distance learning relative to their station in life.

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