

Face-to-face, mixed or distance learning regime? Which one do students of a Higher Education Institution prefer?

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Abstract

The various transformations marked by social, economic and political life in recent decades, have given rise to a prominent place in education, both in the education systems and in the institutions themselves as complex and modern organizations. In times of uncertainty, there are several proposals around education. It is also in this scenario and due to the pandemic we're facing nowadays that distance education (DE) assumes a fundamental role for the development of education itself allowing students to keep learning. In addition to this type of education, and as it is already possible to return to the academic campus, we also consider face-to-face education and the mixed education regime, as options available to students. Through an exploratory-descriptive investigation with a qualitative approach based on the application of a questionnaire, it was our intention to assess which teaching modality the students of the Polytechnic Institute of Maia favor in Pandemic times and afterwards and how they justify their choice.

Keywords: Distance learning; face-to-face education; Higher Education; mixed regime

Distance education

Educational processes can be classified involving two variables: time and space. In the face-to-face education processes teacher and student find themselves in the same space and at the same time, the educational activities are carried out in the classroom. In distance education (DE) there is a separation of teacher and student in space and / or time. Distance education has been known for a long time as the educational process that took place without the presence of the teacher, in which all the instruction material was sent by mail and that the student should carry out his studies individually and autonomously, from the material received, generally printed, which had been specially prepared for that course, with later sending by the student, of lessons or assignments by correspondence. With the technological advancement, new means of communication expanded access to information through newspapers, magazines, radio, television, video, and education importance also began to be conveyed by these other means of communication and information technologies.

The various transformations marked by social, economic and political life in recent decades, have given rise to a prominent place in education, both in the education systems and in the institutions themselves as complex and modern organizations. In times of uncertainty, there are several proposals around education, as a public cultural space, which seeks other scenarios and, above all, lead to the need to "open the teaching systems to new ideas" (Nóvoa, 2009) where "difference and change", the new "conception of learning" and the "strengthening of public space" are considered the main guidelines of these proposals. Today, for the world to be more open and more accessible in the various cultural aspects, educational institutions have to face new cultural and educational challenges, once inserted in an increasingly globalized society, which currently deals with knowledge as an economic resource, but at the same time it requires "globalized, educated, responsible and creative human beings" (Nóvoa, 2015), in a kind of "contradiction" that could probably become one of the "engines of history" in the current century.

It is also in this context that distance education (DE) comes to assume a fundamental role for the development of education itself (in a broad sense). Educational institutions, namely those of higher education, with exclusivity in this way, or in a dual perspective (dual mode: face-to-face and distance), already allow a positive and safe balance of their experiences, taking into account that they expand opportunities for individuals and social groups, confined either by the social agenda (rhythms of life and work), or by space (Morales, 2010). Today, worldwide, distance education has taken a strategic position. It can be seen as a relevant option to respond to the social and pedagogical demands of education, supported by new information and communication technologies. Censored by some, and misunderstood by others, it has been gaining support from educators, seeking an alternative for those seeking access to education.

This paradigm shift demonstrates that today's society is moving towards increasing adherence to distance education. In addition to this conjuncture, society has turned to the understanding that learning is not something watertight, determined to happen at a specific time and with a standardized configuration and that, on the contrary, the education of the present times needs to be constantly reviewed bearing in mind that it is available to everyone at any time and place, as long as it finds technological and pedagogical conditions to be present. This context of emerging renewal requires a recurrent update of didactic and technological methods to the same extent and intensity that requires a proactive attitude on the part of the teachers involved in the process, who must be receptive to changes so that their role does not become out of step and dissociated from the real needs of the educational market (Corrêa & Silva, 2015).

In view of the current socio-historical reality, the issues surrounding distance education in higher education institutions have emerged in an opportunity dimension in which, more than understanding the nature of change, it facilitates the transition process between classroom and virtual in times of pandemic. It is in this context that the DE regime is positioned as an interactive, shared and collaborative structure, assuming its role in the reconfiguration of processes and practices of continuous learning.

The sudden change in the teaching modality

According to the tutelage, higher education institutions and education itself must have the capacity to do more and better and use the Covid-19 pandemic as an "opportunity to innovate". The transformation brought about by Covid-19 made it possible to coordinate strategies to reinforce Portugal's position in Europe, reduce external dependence and "cooperate with third countries". DE thus emerged as a response to the pandemic situation experienced in our country since March 2020, representing a teaching modality that constitutes a quality alternative for students unable to attend the higher education institution in person, based on integration of information and communication technologies (ICT) in teaching and learning processes as a means for everyone to have access to education. From one moment to the next, teachers and students found themselves unable to continue the face-to-face classes, having to readjust to a new form of teaching. Based on Circular No. 174 issued by the Ministry of Science, Technology and Higher Education, considering the need for face-to-face classes, since the courses in question are not credited to the e-learning modality, the HEIs have reorganized and advanced with the proposal of the mixed education regime contemplating the modality of face-to-face classes and classes in distance learning regime.

The Mixed Regime

Bearing in mind that higher education institutions must continue to teach all study cycles in the modality in which they were accredited and / or registered, they had to adapt themselves in order to be able to give a safe answer and to meet the anxieties experienced by students and their families. Thus, the mixed mode of teaching emerges, which was reinforced by the opportunity to adopt realistic and adapted procedures in view of the uncertainty in which we live.

By taking the perspective of IPMAIA students in this investigation, we intend to contribute to a more in-depth knowledge of their preferences, interests and motivations to attend a certain type of teaching regime in response to the challenges introduced by Covid-19 Pandemic.

Objective, Sample and Methodology

Study Objective

The objective of this study was to assess, through the application of a questionnaire, which teaching modality IPMAIA students favor in times of Pandemic. This study is justified by allowing to understand the preference that students give to different teaching modalities, in addition to highlighting whether their perception comes from the frequented modality or not.

Methodology

The design adopted in the present investigation is of the exploratory-descriptive type with a qualitative approach based on the application of a questionnaire. Our aim was to assess which teaching modality the students of the Polytechnic Institute of Maia privileges in times of Pandemic.

The study population was directed to students at the Polytechnic Institute of Maia. A questionnaire consisting of two parts was applied: I - Sociodemographic data, and II - Specific questions in order to obtain information considering the object of study of the present investigation.

Sample characterization

In the present study, a non-probabilistic or non-random sampling process was used, using convenience sampling, focusing on the study of students of all levels of teaching at the Polytechnic Institute of Maia. The individual characteristics of the respondents can be seen through the table below. Of the 207 respondents, 56% are male and 44% female. Regarding the age groups with the highest percentages, we have 56% of respondents aged 17-20 years, 36.3% aged 21-25 years, 2.2% aged 26-30 years and 5.5% over 30 years old. Students from various IPMAIA courses were surveyed, including the Specialization Courses, Bachelor's and Master's degrees, with 29.7% of respondents attending the 1st year, 56.6% attending the 2nd year and 13.7% attending the 3rd year.

Table 1 – Sociodemographic distribution

Characteristics		No	%
Gender	Male	116	56
	Feminine	91	44
	Total	207	100
Age	17 to 20 years	116	56
	21 to 25 years	75	36,3
	26 to 30 years	5	2,2
	+ of 30 years	11	5,5
	Total	207	100
Education	1st year	61	29,7
	2nd year	117	56,6
	3rd year	28	13,7
	Total	207	100

There is a predominance of male respondents (56%) and the largest participation in the study is reflected between 17 and 20 years old with 116 respondents belonging to this age group, that is, 56% of the total. As for education, most respondents attend the 2nd year, thus representing 56.6% of the sample.

Data Analysis and Discussion

Given that we are dealing with the analysis of personal issues, we chose to proceed with a quantitative analysis.

Thus, with regard to the first question, *Have you ever attended classroom teaching exclusively?*, The vast majority of students (87.9%) answered in the affirmative, with this experience occurring in the years before the Pandemic.

Regarding the second question, *Have you ever attended distance learning exclusively? When?*, the majority of students (79.7%) said yes, since this experience started in mid-March 2020, and was justified with the transition from face-to-face teaching to distance learning, due to the Covid-19 Pandemic. Only 20.3% of the students reported that they had already attended distance learning exclusively in short-term training courses.

As for the third question, *Are you attending the mixed education modality for the 1st time?*, 87.4% students answered affirmatively and 12.6% answered that it wasn't the first time that they were attending the mixed teaching modality.

In the fourth question, *What type of teaching regime do you prefer?*, 49.5% of the students reported preferring the face-to-face teaching, followed by 26.9% who opted for distance education and 23.6% who chose the mixed teaching modality.

As a justification for the choice of the on-site teaching modality, the respondents reported that they feel motivated to go to the Campus because, in this way, they assimilate the contents better (100% correspondence); the following variables were *I am not so easily distracted*, *I like to separate the leisure space from the study space* and *I can answer questions more easily*, all with 71.4% correspondence. The variable *Allow me to socialize with colleagues* obtained 57.1% correspondence and, finally, the variable *I can create a closer relationship with colleagues* with 42.9% correspondence.

When justifying the distance education modality, and the way they prepare themselves and the space that surrounds them for the learning activity, students mentioned, both with 77.8% of occurrences that they remain attentive to the class and perform the activities proposed and that remain present in the class from start to finish. With 55.6% of occurrences, they mentioned being careful to get out of bed to attend the class and to be careful to respect the class period and pause to eat their meals. This was followed by the variable *I am careful to separate leisure and learning* with 44.4% of correspondences. Finally, with 33.3% the variable *I am careful to get dressed to attend the class* appeared. As a justification for the choice of mixed education modality, the participants in the study indicated that they were fully identified with the fact that they could spend periods at home and also on campus and with the fact that they did not compromise on socializing with their colleagues. The variables *I can be in person with the teachers to get to know them and for them to get to know me*; *I like to alternate, so none of the modalities becomes tiring and I feel more motivated*, didn't get any correspondence.

Regarding the fifth question, *In the post-pandemic period, which teaching modality would you prefer to attend?*, most students (71.3%) expressed a preference for face-to-face teaching, followed by mixed education (19.9%) and, finally, distance education with only 8.9%.

Conclusion

This study allowed us to assess that, since the vast majority of students surveyed have already attended the different forms of teaching (face-to-face, mixed and distance learning), their preference falls on the face-to-face teaching modality, above all because this teaching modality allows them to better assimilate the contents, since they are not so easily distracted and allows them to separate the leisure space that they associate with their home from the learning space that they associate with the Academic Campus. The last objective of the study analyzed the students' perception regarding the teaching modality in the post-pandemic period. The teaching modality they would like to attend is in line with the classroom teaching modality, falling, in the overwhelming majority, in the face-to-face teaching option even in pandemic times. It is considered that the fraction of students observed is significant, so the results of the study on the perception of the preferential education regime in pandemic times will be relevant, even though there is no representativeness for polytechnic higher education.

This study showed that students recognize the teaching modalities, the temporal relevance of one over the others and the positive and negative characteristics of each teaching regime, however, they prefer the face-to-face regime to the distance or dual regime.

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