

Emotions of tutors working in distance education universities during Covid pandemic

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Abstract

The paper is a call for reflection in the post pandemic era focusing on tutors' sentiment since there is a body of literature suggesting a deterioration of tutors' psychological well-being. It is a small case study examining the feelings of university tutors' teaching in distance education universities during the pandemic. It also examines the correlation between tutors' sentiment (negative, mixed/neutral, positive) and years of teaching experience. Twenty tutors working in two different European Open Universities comprised a diverse sample which answered anonymously to an online survey. The results were analysed using mixed methods. The main results suggest that the majority of tutors felt confident and that there is no correlation between years of experience in distance education and sentiment. The case study contributes to the discussion on how we can future proof higher education institutions for uncertain times, taking into account that tutors are foremost humans and not well-oiled machines

Keywords: distance education, higher education, university tutors, covid pandemic, feelings

Introduction

«We should remember, when things go back to normal, people will not remember the educational content delivered, but they will remember how they felt» (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020, p. 3).

The above excerpt highlights the research motivation behind this work. The Covid19 pandemic has been a challenging period in many different ways affecting all aspects of everyday life, including education. In the context of higher education, there are numerous articles pointing out the detrimental effects that the pandemic had on tutors' and students' emotional well-being. From the tutors' perspective, recent studies are reporting feelings of isolation, anxiety, exhaustion, frustration, and burn-out (Dankers, Stoltenkamp & Tuscany, 2022; Akour et al., 2020). Tutors are humans, not well-oiled machines so these negative feelings affect their personal and professional lives (Pham & Phan, 2021). In their vast majority, relevant studies refer to traditional university settings where universities had to make a quick transition and adaptation to online learning. However, there is a lack of studies on the same aspect in distance education settings e.g. Open Universities (Parte & Herrador-Alcaide, 2021).

The aim of this study is to compensate for that gap in the pandemic literature contributing to the existing knowledge base on that particular aspect. Thus, the main research questions are:

- RQ1: What were the feelings of university tutors teaching in distance education universities with respect to their professional role during the pandemic?
- RQ2: Is there any relationship between tutors' feelings and levels of teaching experience in distance education?

The rationale behind the focus on examining the effect of previous experience on teaching in distance education is that recent research work suggests that it is positively associated to university tutors' confidence (Bolliger & Halupa, 2022).

Background- theorising emotions

There is no universally agreed definition of what an emotion is. For the purpose of this research emotions are defined as "subjective and conscious feelings that trigger certain spontaneous and involuntary responses or reactions in individuals to a particular event" (Pham & Phan, 2021, p. 116). The "event" that contextualises this research is teaching online during the pandemic in higher education.

In several relevant research works, including this one, the term "emotion" is used interchangeably with the word "feelings" (McAlinden & Dobinson, 2022). Although teachers' emotions with respect to their professional role are detrimental for their professional practices, research on online learning focuses mostly on learners, overlooking teacher emotion (McAlinden & Dobinson, 2022). A recent systematic review on emotion in educational research has revealed that the majority (almost 3 out of 4) of relevant journal articles included in the review, only taxonomise feelings into positive or negative without any further elaboration (Zhou & Ye 2020).

Relevant works

There are several studies in the so-called pandemic literature on affective concepts that relate to teaching online. They are focusing on tutors' attitudes on risk taking, accepting (unexpected) changes, dealing with stress, and other emotional problems (Bolliger & Halupa, 2022; Parte & Herrador-Alcaide, 2021). In their majority, these studies refer to traditional university settings where universities had to make a quick transition and adaptation to online learning. There is a lack of studies on the same aspect in distance education settings e.g. Open Universities (Parte & Herrador-Alcaide, 2021). A notable exception is the work of Parte and Herrador-Alcaide (2021) who examined burnout syndrome, feelings of isolation, and sense of belonging in a sample of accounting tutors working in distance education universities –and discovered lack of such feelings among research participants. In conclusion, the article reports that these tutors were able to cope well in terms of mental symptoms in their workplace during the pandemic. Their findings are interesting in the light of the volume of research reporting that feelings of isolation are supposedly an intrinsic characteristic of online settings –see for example Dhawan (2020). Parte and Herrador-Alcaide (2021) conclude that two inherent characteristics of online education, namely high flexibility and adaptation, can explain why the feelings of isolation in both periods (pre-covid and during covid pandemic) were similar.

Methodology

The paper follows the case study methodology with purposeful sampling. The sample includes 20 university tutors teaching in two Open Universities in Greek/speaking European countries (Greece and Cyprus). It was as heterogeneous as possible with respect to basic demographic elements (i.e. gender, years of teaching experience and subject matter taught) following the maximum variation sampling strategy.

In order to collect data about both research questions, we used an online survey. The online survey instrument comprised of two basic sections: one section containing demographics including participants' teaching experience in online teaching and another section with an

open-ended question on tutors' feelings. In the latter, the tutors were asked to reflect on their experiences as distance educators during the pandemic focusing on feelings provoked to them (and not in general how they felt during the pandemic). Participation was anonymous. Data analysis was organised in three phases as follows.

Phase 1. The first part of the survey was analysed using basic descriptive statistics and the second part using content (sentiment) analysis. Sentiment analysis is defined herein as the process of identifying opinions from texts and classifying them into different sentiments/emotions to determine attitudes toward a topic at stake (Zhou & Ye, 2020). The text data corresponding to content analysis were analysed manually due to the relatively small number of research participants. Participants' answers were coded from P1 to P20, and then organised into three main themes: positive, negative and neutral/mixed sentiments (see Table 1).

Phase 2. After the phase of manual data analysis, we performed an automated sentiment analysis using two different online sentiment analysers (see Table 1). The purpose was to triangulate our findings. Before inserting the textual data as input data to the digital tools, a preprocessing phase took place where we omitted text that was associated to the reasons behind tutor's feelings focusing more on what these feelings were. In particular, we used chatGPT (an online chatbot that uses natural language processing and Artificial Intelligence) as a sentiment analyser, since there is recent literature that indicates its validity for that purpose (Wang, Xie, Ding, Feng & Xia, 2023; Zhong, Ding, Liu, Du & Tao, 2023) provided that it will be used in combination with other methods that include human judgement (Diwali, Saeedi, Dashtipour, Gogate, Cambria, & Hussain, 2023), as herein. More specifically, we used the "GPT UiO" edition that allows users to use OpenAI's ChatGPT (v3.5) in a way that complies with the privacy requirements of the University of Oslo (UiO). In addition to UiOs chatGPT, we used a dedicated digital tool, that is, a sentiment analyser. Both tools classify sentences into three groups: negative, positive and neutral/mixed sentiment (El Fazziki, Ennaji, Sadiq, Benslimane, & Sadgal, 2017).

Results

RQ1: What were the feelings of university tutors teaching in distance education universities with respect to their professional role during the pandemic?

The results of the automated analyses indicate an overall positive sentiment. They are presented in Table 1:

Table 1. Results of automated sentiment analyses

Sentiment	ChatGPT (%)	SentiGem (%)
Positive	60	70
Neutral/Mixed	25	15
Negative	15	15
Total	100	100

The results of the manual sentiment analysis showed that 65% of the participants had positive feelings, 25% had mixed or neutral feelings, and 10% had negative feelings. The main positive feeling was tutor's self-confidence (mentioned in 50% of all answers) and the main negative feeling was mental stress (mentioned in 15% of all answers). Excerpts from participants feeling self-confidence include: feeling adequate in his role of supporting

students “*confidence in the effectiveness of the support I provided to my students*” (P20). Another participant is attributing their confidence to their readiness «*Confident because I was already using the distance system (of the university) and particularly lucky that I was already prepared at a time when everyone else was in despair*» (P2). Closely related to that, four participants explicitly attributed their positive attitude for the fact that the program that they were teaching was already designed using distance learning methodologies even before the pandemic outbreak (P6, P8, P11, P19).

On the opposite, excerpts on feeling mental stress include: a participant who attributes it to technical problems, not feeling adequately supported by the university, and not feeling adequately prepared to support groupwork online («*Anxiety about technical problems, abandonment by the institution regarding the transition from face-to-face to distance, lack of using computer-based groupwork techniques*», P4). Another participant felt that their professional role was cancelled and that they couldn't communicate with their students («*confusion, anger, suffocation, resentment, frustration, not communicating with my students*», P16). An example of a participant who expressed mixed feelings is mirrored in this excerpt where confidence is mixed with feeling confused sometimes («*Most of the time confident, but sometimes confused*», P12). Finally, an example of a participant with neutral feelings is echoing the message that it was «*business as usual*» for them («*I operated in the same way as before that. Systematically and consistently*», P15).

RQ2: Is there any relationship between tutors' feelings and levels of teaching experience in distance education?

A Spearman's rank-order correlation was run to assess the relationship between tutors' sentiment and years of teaching experience in distance education. The results showed that there was no statistically significant correlation between these two, $r(s) = 0.12$, $p = .935$. The variable “years of online teaching experience” was further categorised to three groups in line with existing research work (Bolliger & Halupa, 2022):

- a) those who were never to online teaching (0-2 years),
- b) those that had some experience (3-7 years), and
- c) the experienced ones (11 years or more).

Somer's d was run to determine the association between the two variables, which resulted in rejecting it ($d = 0.102$, $p = .603$).

Discussion and conclusions

The aim of this paper is to present the feelings of distance educators with respect to teaching online and examine if they are affected by teaching online experience. The context of the study is the emergency remote teaching that took place during the pandemic. Lessons learnt from the pandemic experience are valuable in the post-pandemic era and in preparation for the «new normal» that has to be more sustainable than ever before.

In the relevant literature of teacher emotions there are several works reporting negative feelings with respect to teachers' professional role during the pandemic. Some of them attribute these feelings to supposedly inherent characteristics of online learning, such as feelings of isolation. Yet, we know from previous research on teaching online that the most important factor is teacher's choices and decisions. That does not mean that paying attention to the affective aspects of learning and teaching online is not important, especially when stress and urgency arise (McAlinden & Dobinson, 2022).

We performed sentiment analyses of feelings of distance educators working in Open Universities (RQ2). The results of the automated sentiment analyses overlap at a great extent

with the results of the manual sentiment analysis. Positive sentiments seem to dominate, with mentions of feeling confident, trust, and positive experiences. However, there are also instances of negative emotions like stress, abandonment, and confusion, along with some neutral statements.

The distance educators that participated in this case study did not experience negative feelings in their majority. On the opposite, they felt confident on the grounds that for them teaching online was «business as usual». We also found fact that there is no statistically significant correlation between teaching experience and types of feelings that teachers experience with respect to teaching online. This finding is partially aligned with the study of Bolliger & Halupa (2022) who reported that tutors' prior online teaching experience was a contributing factor that affects confidence. Our finding does not mean that the experience of teaching in a distance university is not related to feeling confidence on teaching online. It means that it does not seem to increase as the years of experience in teaching online pass by. However, our results are in line with the work of Parte and Herrador-Alcaide (2021) who suggest that tutors working in distance education universities were able to cope well in terms of mental symptoms in their workplace during the pandemic, while at the same time there was a reported deterioration of mental health for the tutors working in normal universities that had shift to distance education.

Regarding study limitations, the small sample size has a negative effect on the generalizability of the results. Yet, the case study suggests that alliances between traditional universities and distance education universities that could result into fruitful exchange of tutors lived experiences from the pandemic and help towards the psychological well-being of all tutors could contribute towards creating future proof universities in an uncertain future for higher education institutions. Future research plans include a focus on tutors' coping strategies that reduce stress related to teaching online in the face of adversity (Huang, Zhao & Zhang, 2022).

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