
SHIFT BACK TO ON-SITE TEACHING IN HIGHER EDUCATION – STUDENTS’ PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: The present study focuses on students’ perception of learning and teaching in higher education after returning back to on-site classes. Qualitative data are collected from questionnaires and interviews with students (N 94) at the University St. Kliment Ohridski - Bitola, North Macedonia, at the end of the summer semester 2022. The main objective of this research is to identify students’ expectations, experiences and preferences about teaching practices at tertiary level after experiencing both modes, remote and on-site instruction. The findings show that the expectations were slightly different depending on whether students experienced pre-COVID tertiary education or enrolled during the lockdown. The expectations for moving back to campus of the first group (N 39) were that in-person teaching would be the same as pre COVID but more digitally enhanced. Their preferences for the future did not change and do not defer from the preferences of the second group. The second group of students (N 55), after going back to campus partly changed their preferences for future learning and teaching because their expectations of in-person instruction are not met. They preferred the on-site mode and expected changes regarding the lack of interaction with peers, lack of active engagement in class, of collaborative learning and the anxiety to speak in front of the class, experienced in remote classes. Having the comparison students want more flexibility in learning and teaching in general and would prefer blended learning involving both modes, on-site classes supplemented with online activities, digital distribution of class materials as well as recorded lectures. For on-site classes they demand active teaching methods, group assignments and interaction, support in student-teacher communication and thus a student-centered approach. The results suggest that educators reproduced physical classroom approaches in remote synchronous teaching and returned to well-known methods in the on-site mode. Referenced to other research, that was caused by overload and tiredness of the educators who were forced to adapt to the emergency remote teaching without professional assistance and training. To achieve sustainability of the educational process in higher education students’ perspectives, preferences and performance need to be considered. Educational activities in on-site and online teaching have to be adapted and re-adapted based on evidence, and have to foster engagement, encourage in class communication and build relationships. To implement future effective solutions the educators need permanent training and support with focus on pedagogical and digital methodologies.

Keywords: on-site teaching, remote teaching, higher education, students, experiences, preferences, post COVID-19

1. INTRODUCTION

Many institutions in higher education, as restrictions have been lifted, reopened the campuses and shifted back to on-site instruction or blended learning.

In the last two years during the pandemic lockdown a lot of studies were conducted in the field of learning and teaching in higher education. Most research is about conditions in remote teaching. Widely discussed in literature are also suggestions for enhancing quality of learning and teaching after COVID-19 (Jensen, Marinoni & Land, 2022; Rutherford, Ehlers & Zhang, 2022; Zhang, 2022). They suggest re-structuring face-to-face pedagogies and reflecting on lessons learned during the pandemic (Bunescu & Robinson Canham, 2021). 87% of the European higher education institutions are open to exploring new ways of teaching (EUA, 2020).

The preferences of university students for post-COVID learning and teaching are also a subject of research, but they were conducted in times when students were still involved in remote instruction. They report a high percentage of students for returning to on-site lectures but digitally enhanced (Guppy et al., 2022; Eringfeld, 2021; Miloshevska et al., 2020; Mali & Lim, 2021). A comparison among the students showed that the higher preference for on-site learning is expressed by students who did not experience pre-COVID on-site tertiary teaching (Gherhes et al., 2021). Reports on experiences of students following evidence after shifting back to on-site instruction are limited. Findings indicate that “students, as a group, are deeply ambivalent” about their experiences back on campus (Ezarik 2021).

A data gap now exists with regards to whether university students’ preferences for future learning and teaching change after shifting back to campus. The purpose of the present study is to contribute to the current need for “in-depth reflection on how to ‘build back better’” (Jensen et al., 2022, p.2) taking into account students’ experiences in both delivery modes and comparing the preferences. A qualitative study with university students was conducted after teaching shifted back to on-site in March 2022. Emergence remote teaching started two years before.

2. METHODS

At the end of the summer semester 2022 a qualitative study with students at the Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality in Ohrid, University St. Kliment Ohridski – Bitola, North Macedonia, was conducted with the main purpose to reveal the relationship between educators' perception of Generation Z students and students' engagement, as a complementary study to a study with educators from 2020 (Cickovska, 2020). The article about the results is in review for publication ('Influence of educators' perception of Gen Z students in higher education', Cickovska). The online questionnaire had one open question with the intent not to limit the students with predefined answers and to consider what emerges (What do you think about professors/teaching/communication with professors?). The data was analyzed using thematic analysis and coded in response categories.

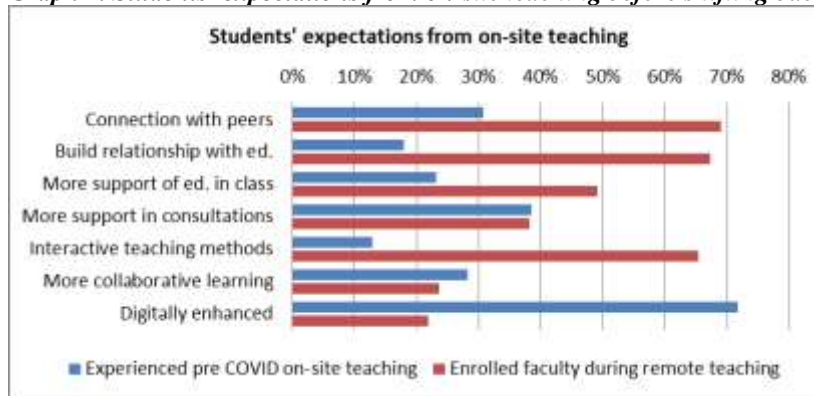
In the time when the study was conducted students were back to on-site classes for three months. In the answers emerged statements about their experiences with remote teaching, expectations and experiences of on-site learning and teaching as well as future preferences. In 94 (48.96%) of the answered questionnaires students commented about the matter and thus they were coded in a separate theme. Therefore the main objective of this research is to identify students' expectations, experiences and preferences about teaching practices at tertiary level after experiencing both delivery modes. The high percentage of comments to this theme was the reason to conduct additional in depth interviews. The questionnaire was anonymous, but in order to be able to elucidate certain elements that would eventually appear in the results, the students were additionally given the option to indicate whether they would agree to participate in interviews. In that case they provided their contact information. 68 students (35,42%) who had a statement about this theme agreed to participate in interviews and were available for interviewing. In the interviews the students were only asked to interpret their statements about the theme written in the questionnaire. Only if other categories emerged in their explanations they were taken into account in the percentage of occurrence in the results.

The response categories are presented in topics: expectations from on-site teaching, experiences in both modes of teaching and preferences for future learning and teaching. To show visible comparisons the results are presented in graphs by percentage of occurrence of the statements in the response categories. Additional sentence boxes clarify the categories and show reasons. Within the categories the coded statements are derived between two groups of students: experienced pre-COVID tertiary education on-site (third and fourth year of study - N39); and students who enrolled during the lockdown and experienced on-site learning and teaching at the faculty only after the shift back to on-site classes (first and second year study N55).

3. RESULTS

The first graph (Graph 1) shows the frequency of occurrence of statements coded in response categories about the expectations students had before the on-site classes started.

Graph 1. Students' expectations from on-site teaching before shifting back



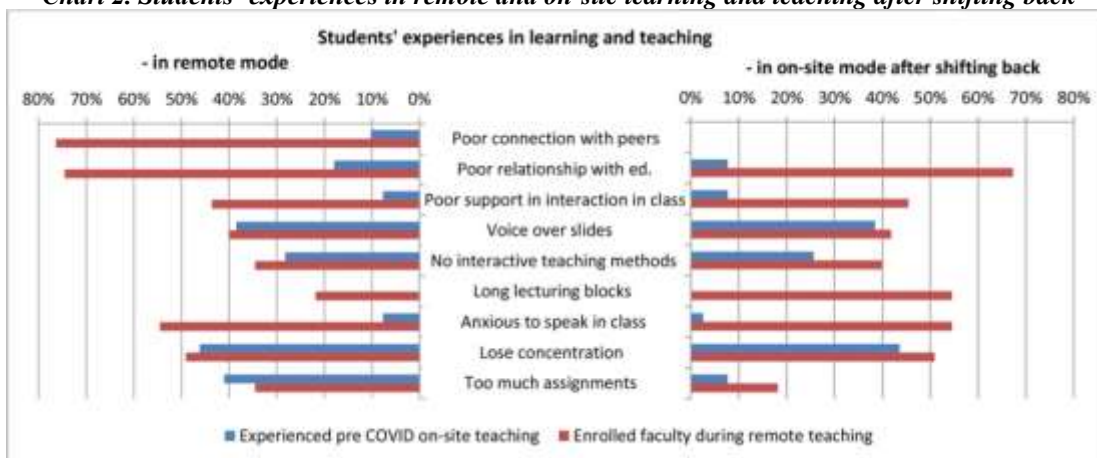
Statements in which students express their expectations from on-site teaching, primarily in relation to elements they missed in the remote mode, appear in a high percentage by students who enrolled faculty during the lockdown. They expected from on-site teaching relationship with peers, change to better relationship with the educators, support in class and in consultations outside the classroom as well as active and collaborative teaching. The students who experienced pre-COVID on-site teaching expected the most, learning and teaching to be more digitally enhanced.

Sentence box 1. Significant formulations about students' expectations from on-site teaching

I was impatiently waiting to connect especially with peers, but also with prof., although a little bit anxious about that; I exp. interaction and a closer relationship with the prof.; I exp. that it will be easier to answer questions. If I didn't immediately answer online, it was taken as a sign that I don't know or that I am not listening – but I was only thinking of to answer correctly; I exp. more discussions and conversations which I missed in online teaching; I exp. we would be more engaged by prof. in class and learn with peers because there was no opportunity for that during online classes; I knew how the lecturing in-person was but that maybe now it would include digital online activities.

Under the topic 'Experiences' are coded response categories which appeared with highest percentage for remote or/and on-site teaching.

Chart 2. Students' experiences in remote and on-site learning and teaching after shifting back



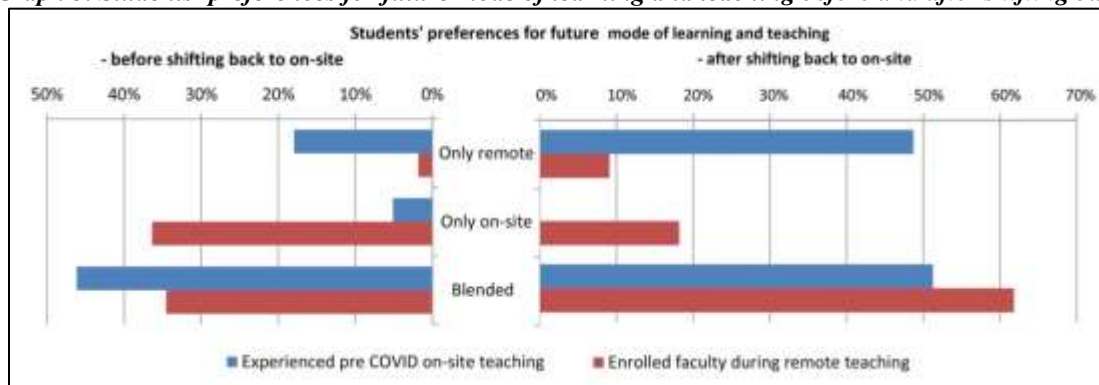
After shifting back students complain that they could not establish the long expected relationship with the educators, that there is also poor support from the educators for interaction in class, that lectures are passive with voice over slides with no interactive teaching methods in both modes. In the on-site mode the lecturing blocks are too long for them, they lose concentration and are anxious to speak in front of the class as in the remote teaching, which was synchronous. They express that in remote teaching they had too much assignments which reduced after shifting back to on-site learning and teaching.

Sentence box 2. Significant formulations of students about the comparison between both modes of teaching.

I lost concentration during online classes but now on-site is even more tiring and I have to pretend that I listen; Now we have longer blocks of lecturing and I cannot focus – focusing online was also difficult but at least it was shorter; The lectures are the same as online – prof. talk over slides, ask some questions and that's it; Unexpectedly there is even less teacher-student contact; I exp. more interesting online teaching, games and videos, but there was only pure lecturing – Then I expected more interactive on-site teaching but nothing changed; I was nervous and excited about returning to classroom and seeing professors and especially they seeing me and hoped it would be easier to get involved in class, but there is no support and no interactive activities – I am still anxious and try to sit at the back and be unnoticeable; I started my studies online and with time I lost motivation. I couldn't concentrate during online teaching. My motivation increased when I heard the on-site classes are beginning, but after a few on-site classes as most prof. acted the same as online, only talking over slides, I was disappointed and demotivated again; I thought I would understand the topics better in classroom but there is no difference despite the fact that lectures are longer, I am still afraid to ask something;

Students' preferences regarding the future teaching mode, before and after moving back to the on-site mode, are presented in Graph 3.

Graph 3. Students' preferences for future mode of learning and teaching before and after shifting back



Students who experienced pre-COVID on-site teaching preferred blended learning before moving back on campus (46,2%), 5,1% only on-site teaching and 17,9% only remote teaching. After moving back the preferences changed to 51,3% for blended learning, none are for purely on-site and 34,5% prefer only remote learning and teaching in the future. 40 students who enrolled the faculty with remote teaching had statements about their preferences before they started with on-site teaching: 20 of them preferred only on-site learning and teaching, 19 a blended mode and one student noted that he would prefer only remote learning and teaching. The number of statements after experiencing on-site instruction also changed for this group. 49 out of 55 students have statements coded in the topic 'Preferences after shifting back on-site': 34 are for blended mode, 10 stay on the opinion to learn only on-site and 5 students are for remote learning and teaching.

Sentence box 3 contains significant formulations about the reasons why students prefer a certain mode of learning and teaching and why they changed their mind.

Sentence box 3. Significant formulation of students about the preferences for future mode of learning and teaching

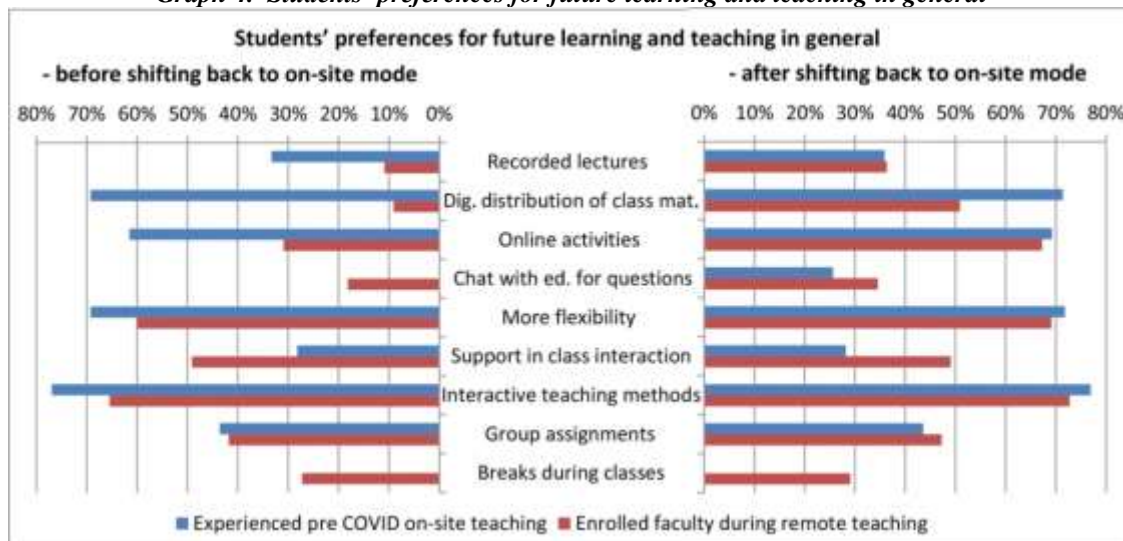
Only online is better. Prof. are anyway talking over power-point presentations. Some tried at least to incorporate additional digital activities online; There is almost no difference in online and on-site classes, so I prefer to learn online and manage my time as I want; I realized that I liked the anonymity, the comfort of switched of microphone and camera and just doing the assignments, so I want back online; I work, so it suits me to study online;

It is better for me to have to go to class instead of just opening the phone wherever I am and not listening; There were too many assignment online, now it is different so I don't want anything online;

Why don't professors send lectures online, give quizzes, group assignments and resources online and use on-site classes for discussions and activities – that would be great; I thought we will continue with partly online activities but we have only lecturing in the classroom – I don't like that, I like both; Some professors tried to 'experiment' online but it ended with face-to-face instruction.

The reasons for the change of students' preferences and more specific response categories about blended learning and other elements of learning and teaching in the future are presented in Graph 4.

Graph 4. Students' preferences for future learning and teaching in general



The preference for recorded lectures, digital distribution of class materials, online activities and chat with educators for questions significantly changed for students who enrolled during remote teaching. The preference of the students who experienced pre-COVID tertiary teaching increased slightly for the mentioned categories. The categories 'More flexibility' and 'Interactive teaching methods' have priority with almost and over 70% for both groups. Over 40% have notes about 'Support in class interaction' and 'Group assignments' whereas students who enrolled during the lockdown need more support for in class interaction. Breaks during classes are mentioned only by the second group of students.

Significant formulations with reasons for the change of their preferences are given in sentence box 4.

Sentence box 4. Significant formulation of students' preferences for future learning and teaching

Lectures are too long, with talking over slides, so they can be recorded and posted online, so we can watch or hear them in sections whenever we can or want; I miss interaction with peers in class and something like group assignments, to work together online as well as during of-line classes; I am not able to concentrate for a longer period of time so I want more breaks; The teaching and prof. were not so flexible before the lockdown and it hasn't changed. I liked the flexibility online; Most prof. even changed compared to on-site instruction before the lockdown. Now they are less available for consults both online and offline - a kind of chat for questions would be good; We realized that prof. had not redesigned materials or activities for the online teaching. They use the same PowerPoint presentations, same materials. There are no activities in class and nothing is online anymore. Online and offline activities are needed; There are so many interesting ways for online activities which we experienced with some prof. It would be nice if all of them would use them sometimes; Now there is the possibility to give group assignments, we want to work together.

4. DISCUSSION

Given the fact that the period since university students returned to the on-site mode is short, there is insufficient literature in relation to students' preferences after experiencing both, remote and on-site tertiary instruction. Two generations of students enrolled faculty during the lockdown. Therefore the present study tries to shed some light within this context.

The present study shows that before moving back to campus university students who enrolled during the lockdown had a greater preference for on-site teaching but students who experienced pre-COVID on-site teaching prefer the combination of both modes. Results from other researches are not consistent, probably because they do not defer between the two groups of students and/or due to the context in which the studies were conducted, like the size of the country, different teaching traditions and practices, students' profile. Ezaric (2021), Gherhes et al. (2021), Mali & Lim (2021) found out that over half of university students preferred on-site teaching after the pandemic ends, a smaller percentage were for blended learning. One large scale survey in the UK has similar results but another research in the UK has contrary results: over a half were for a blend of in-person and online teaching (Snelling, 2022). At the University of Cambridge students preferred a permanent, but partial, shift to online teaching

(Eringsfeld, 2021). One study (Gherhes et al., 2021), as in the present study, compared preferences of the two groups of students, and came to comparable results determining a higher preference for on-site learning of the group which enrolled during pandemic. The matter also captured Macedonian researcher attention (Miloshevska et al., 2020) stating that 61% of students of four countries including North Macedonia did not believe that online learning is better than in-person, 44% disliked online learning. Macedonian students were slightly more in favor of online learning.

Miloshevska et al. (2020) assume that the preference for on-site teaching is due to the teaching methods in remote teaching and Mali et al. (2021) interprets the same preference two ways: that that students only long for the return to normality or they simply prefer on-site learning. The results from the present study confirm Miloshevska's et al. assumption and the relevance of the first assumption of Mali et al..

In the statements coded in the topic 'Expectations from on-site teaching' students express what they missed in remote teaching and expect it to be better on-site. They note that remote teaching was mostly synchronous instruction with voice over slides, without active teaching methods and collaborative work. It is consistent with results from the prior research in North Macedonia as in Bosnia, Turkey and Poland (Miloshevska et al., 2020) and in other countries (Bunescu et al., 2021; Barbu, Popescu & Moiceanu, 2022) where online lecturing was also used to share PowerPoint presentations, without subsequent discussions or interactive methods.

The long expected on-site teaching did not fulfill students' expectations, on the contrary, the statements show that on-site teaching does not differ from the synchronous remote lecturing. The students noticed that educators imitated remotely what would have been on-site lecturing. This is more relevant for students who did not experience on-site tertiary teaching pre-COVID. The other group mostly expects digitally enhanced teaching but note even that professors who tried to make changes in remote teaching moved back to old routines. Gherhes et al. (2021) also states that the level of engagement during e-learning is higher than during on-site learning. In a large sample of university students 40 percent back on campus are at least somewhat satisfied with the ability to connect with educators and 34 percent feel dissatisfied (Ezarik, 2021).

After experiencing both modes of learning and teaching students demand interactive teaching methods, more flexibility, digital distribution of class materials and online activities with almost and over 70%. Miloshevska et al. (2021) also determine the same percentage of Macedonian students who would like digital distribution of class materials to remain. The percentage of statements in the response categories of the topic 'Preferences for future learning and teaching in general' increases for both groups of students, enrolling pre and during the lockdown, and they almost level each other out in many elements. The shift to a significant higher percentage is evident by the second group, especially for online activities, digital distribution of class materials and recorded lectures and slightly for group assignments. Before moving to on-site teaching they expected that it would be digitally enhanced and engaging. As a generation they have grown up with the advantage of digital technology and content and prefer self-paced and interactive learning, seeing technology as a tool to communicate, interact and learn (Cickovska, 2020). This fact also explains why the first group significantly increases the preference for the opportunity to chat with educators for questions - it stopped after moving back to campus. A greater difference between the two groups exists in the preference for breaks during class and support in class interaction. A noticeably shortened attention span, thus learning best through "chunking" of information as opposed to a long-drawn out lecture, and heightened anxiety levels both lie in the generational characteristics of the students (Cickovska, 2020). In sage on stage they request breaks and support because they are anxious to speak in front of the class. That might be influenced by the short period of time after shifting back to on-site instruction. Students might need more time to adjust. The first group probably did not often mention these categories because of being familiar with the professors and the long lecture blocks. An action-oriented approach is a solution. Active and collaborative teaching methods foster motivation, frequent change of activities and good relationships and thus help in creating an engaging and safe environment which impacts the ability to navigate and engage in learning, including feeling comfortable to ask questions (Cickovska, 2020).

If compared with the expectations before moving back and taking into consideration the statements which describe reasons, it is evident that preferences changed because of a low level of teaching quality in the on-site mode. In remote teaching the generational preference for digital enhanced learning was met to some extent. As a result the preference for the future mode of learning and teaching changes from on-site to blended learning, meaning a mixed format with a combination of online and on-site activities, for both groups of students, but for almost a half of the students enrolled pre-COVID even changes to a remote mode. Guppy's et al. (2022) found out that university students envisioned more blended instruction post-pandemic and some modest increase for fully online courses. Higher education foresees the most growth in blended forms of learning post-COVID-19, using the benefits of virtual teaching (Rutherford et al., 2022; Snelling, 2022). The overall picture across the 30 EHEA countries, for example, clearly points to digitalization and digitally enhanced learning and teaching (Zhang, 2022). Blended

learning can help create a student-centered approach and can greatly improve the learning effects (Jiang et al., 2021). Learning and teaching should be organized with multiple offline and online activities, modules of lectures also recorded for online distribution, group assignments combined online and on-site, materials broken down in short sequences with visual multimodal static or dynamic elements and with shared online resources (Cickovska, 2020).

The students also express that educators changed and are less engaged in teaching after shifting back. This also affects the change of preferences to blended and online learning. Referenced to other research there is a consensus that the pandemic has a negative short-term influence on educators and that they are genuinely tired from coping with remote teaching (Mali & Lim, 2021; Rutherford et al., 2022), with increased workload and no benefits in the salary (Jensen et al., 2022). Most educators in higher education had no previous experience or preparation and support during remote teaching in North Macedonia (Miloshevska et al., 2020) as in other countries such as EHEA (Jensen et al. 2022). The academic staff at the institution where the present study was conducted had already lost enthusiasm before the pandemic due to not being able to activate Generation Z students (Cickovska, 2020). A large scale study presented that worldwide higher education institutions concentrated on technical issues “rather than pedagogical methodologies for distance learning, resulting in a psychological impact for both students and teachers (Barbu et al., 2022, p.5). A new blended learning design will additionally increase educators’ workloads. Adequate teaching training and time to prepare modules require constant collaborative efforts between educators and instructional design experts.

“More than ever, it is necessary that HEIs and students collaborate closely in finding solutions to provide the current and next generation of students the same, if not better, learning opportunities than pre COVID-19 generations of students had.” (IAU, 2020, p.3)

5. CONCLUSION

After the shift back from remote to on-site classes in higher education and experiencing both delivery modes pre-, during and after the COVID-19 lockdown, students have come to expect flexible, active and collaborative digitally enhanced learning and teaching involving: both delivery modes, on-site classes supplemented with online activities, digital distribution of class materials, recorded lectures, support in student-teacher communication and active and interactive teaching methods in the on-site classes.

The study identified a change of preferences for the future mode of learning and teaching after moving back on site. Students who enrolled during the lockdown changed the preferences from on-site to blended learning and students who also experienced pre-COVID tertiary instruction changed to a blended mode and almost forty percent now favor remote learning. Thus points to a need for further research whether students’ preferences stay consistent or change being longer on campus, which has an important impact on the planning of implications for future learning and teaching in higher education.

Thus raises the issue if students’ preferences stay consistent or change being longer on campus, which has an important impact on the planning of implications for future learning and teaching in higher education.

The present preferences for learning and teaching in general and for blended learning, where higher education foresees the most growth in the future, require that materials, lectures, activities and assignments need to be redesigned to be suitable for the combination of synchronous on-site and asynchronous online delivery. Remote and on-site teaching have to be adapted and re-adapted in cooperation with students implementing good practices and approaches from both delivery modes based on evidence.

The conclusions of this paper also highlight the necessity of adequate and permanent support for educators as well as training in teaching methodology for digital enhanced learning and teaching. A sustainable conceptualization and implementation of an immersive student-centered approach needs constant monitoring and development on all higher education levels.

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