



## Newcomer Students' Perspectives on Online Tutor-Student Sessions in Distance Higher Education

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*The Hellenic Open University (HOU) offers studies in both undergraduate and postgraduate level with the method of distance learning. Aiming to improve the courses quality and the digital educational environment, HOU has adopted a new strategic framework in 2016. In this context, new study programs are developed introducing several innovations such as academic semesters instead of year-long modules, new educational environment based on the student-centered approach, and exclusively digital and interactive educational material. Towards this direction, HOU decided for the first time to design and conduct pilot online sessions using technological means, giving to students the opportunity to participate from distance and broadening courses' openness. In this paper, we explore the role of online sessions and their correlation to various factors in order to improve their effectiveness during the educational process. The participants (N=79) for this study were students who enrolled in the six new postgraduate programs in the fall of 2016, participated in online sessions and completed the course survey. This paper presents quantitative and qualitative data from first semester surveys, and highlights key findings regarding the students' point of view about their participation exclusively in online sessions. Improvement suggestions for academic and administrative support, as well for content and structure of online sessions are also discussed.*

*Keywords: online tutor-student sessions, distance education, higher education*

### 1. Introduction

For over a year, HOU is in an ongoing effort to enhance distance higher education in Greece, evolving the way of providing distance education in both undergraduate and postgraduate level. This effort led to the launching of six new study programs, in the autumn of 2016, which are designed to contribute to particular growing social and academic needs [1]. They also target to strengthen the digital-based educational environment and adopt new ways to support the students, including digital mentoring. The HOU provides exclusively distance education and it uses a variety of technological learning tools. One of the innovations which are introduced in the six new study programs is the choice for the students to select online Tutor-Student Sessions (TSS), instead of the traditional face-to-face. This choice facilitates students' access to the new study programs and allows them to avoid any travel expenses for participating in them. Towards this, groups of students who chose the online sessions are created and the tool Skype for business was used during these sessions.

This study presents the procedure of identifying the students' point of view about their participation exclusively in online TSS, the advantages and disadvantages they noted and their suggestions for the improvement of the procedure.

### 2. Related Work

TSS are seminars whose purpose is the enrichment of the already acquired knowledge, where the tutor encourages, guides and supports students, activates them and creates a collaborative environment. TSS by videoconferencing is very common in distant education, creating the feel of togetherness where students express themselves comfortably with a better teacher-student communication [2]. Moreover, studies indicate that they provide psychological encouragement and the needed support in distance learning, contributing to student's community of practice [3].

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Several distances HEI's have examined the effect of videoconference in education [4] [5] [6]. In Ng's study [4] students' and tutors' views on the use of a synchronous e-learning system for online sessions are examined, indicating the positive use of them. Another study [5] investigated tutors' perceptions of synchronous online sessions. Although tutors experiences have challenged, students and tutors indicated a positive attitude to the offered opportunities, as interactive learning and teaching were endorsed. McBrien et al. [6] explored how online sessions affect students' learning experiences. Students reported positive experiences regarding dialogue as a way of communication and interaction, increasing their ability to participate in education. In addition, a small survey with HOU's students showed that online TSS could boost self-esteem and promote social benefits [7]. Based on the aforementioned studies, HOU followed for the first time the direction of online TSS, investigating benefits, problems and suggestions for improvements.

### 3. Method

#### 3.1 Research Design

Following the grounded theory, which emphasizes in theory development [8], the study's outcomes emerged from the experience of students, who participated in online TSS, and generate corresponding explanations. The qualitative method followed is thematic analysis, which is described as the most commonly used and the most useful method of capturing the complexities of meaning in textual data [9]. The six phases of thematic analysis by Braun & Clarke [10] were followed, which are (a) the familiarization with data, (b) the generation of initial codes, (c) the search of themes among codes, (d) the reviewing of themes, (e) the definition and naming of themes and (f) the production of the final report.

Towards this, a questionnaire of open-ended questions was used for data collection from the students, in order to identify the advantages and disadvantages that they observed from their point of view. In parallel, students were asked to make their suggestions about the improvement of the procedure and effectiveness of online TSS. The researchers used the NVivo software (version 10) for supporting their research method. For the validity of research, a cross check procedure was held by each of the three researchers separately.

#### 3.2 Sample

The sample was students (N=79) from the new six programs who attended online TSS during the first semester. The 46,8% study at Social Sciences programs and the 53,2% at Humanities programs. In terms of the gender, the majority was women (73,4%) and 35,4% of the participants had previous experience in open and distance learning (ODL).

### 4. Findings

Through the coding process, three basic themes were identified, the Benefits, the Problems and the Suggestions for improvements.

#### *Benefits*

Student comments about the benefits of online TSS appear in remarks about seven different themes. The majority of the comments were the general positive comments (47,96%), where students described their general experience with positive feedback such as: *"Amazing and new experience"*, *"It was Interesting process"*, *"Satisfactory"*. The 16,33% of the comments describes that during online sessions questions are resolved and feedback was given (an example comment is *"Important for resolving questions"*.) The 14,29% of the comments refers to the communication and interaction that students have with the tutor and their peers, as illustrated in the following comment: *"I met the tutor and my classmates and I heard their own anxieties and concerns."* The 12,24% of the comments was about how helpful and useful the online sessions were. Only the 4,08% (four comments) describe the benefits of flexibility that online meetings offers (time and space) and the 3,06% (three comments) highlight the benefits of the record of the sessions. Finally, the 2,04% (two comments) describe that online sessions reminds teaching at university and students felt like they were in a classroom. Table 1 illustrates frequencies and percentages of students responded to open ended questions.

Table 1: Frequencies and percentages of Benefits themes

Themes of Benefits	Number of references	Percentage
Reminds teaching at university	2	2,04%
Record	3	3,06%
Flexible	4	4,08%
Helpful/useful	12	12,24%
Communication/Interaction	14	14,29%
Resolving questions/Feedback	16	16,33%
General positive comments	47	47,96%
Totals	98	100%

The 78,57% of the comments for Resolving questions/Feedback were noted from students without previous experienced in ODL. In addition, most of the comments (75%) for flexible and helpful/useful sessions were from the same group of students as illustrated in the following chart.

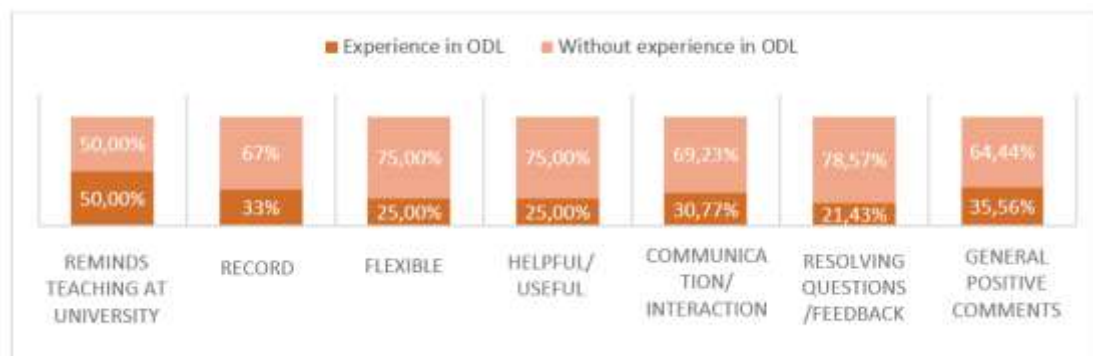


Figure 1: Chart with Benefits themes based on ODL experience

### Problems

Within this theme, students shared the problems or difficulties that experienced during online TSS. Across the student data, we found that the most common problems were: online TSS were few (32% of the comments), some students were unfamiliar with such media (9%), the sessions had a long duration (12%) as we received comments such “*The four hours were excessive*” or “*Long duration, which makes it tedious*” and the 47% of the comments were about the general technical problems (connection, sound, video, software compatibility etc.). Table 2 presents the different themes of the problems with frequencies and percentages.

Table 2: Frequencies and percentages of Problem themes

Themes of Problems	Number of references	Percentage
Unfamiliarity	3	9%
Long Duration	4	12%
Few	11	32%
General Technical Problems	16	47%
Total	34	100%

Most of the comments about problems were noted from both experienced and not experienced students in ODL. Although, the 81,82% of the comments for Few sessions were from students without previous experienced in ODL, as presented in the following chart.

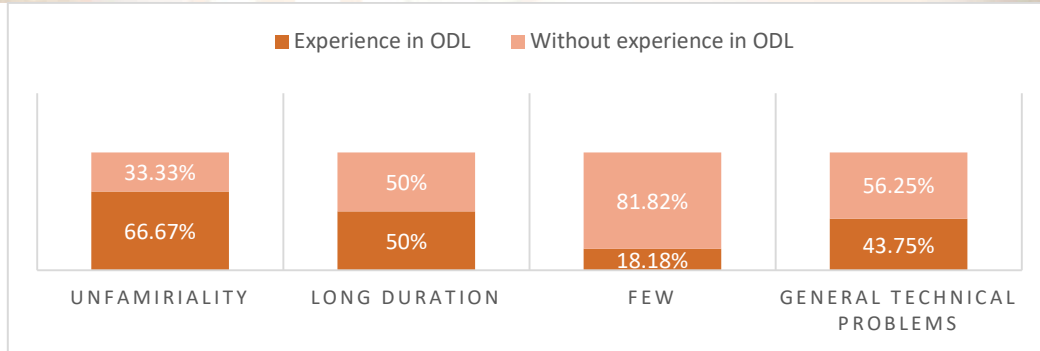


Figure 2: Chart with Problem themes based on ODL experience

### Suggestions for improvements

We found that the theme of less duration (16% of the comments) was frequently double coded along with the More frequent theme (38% of the comments), as in the same comments students suggest both of them (“Perhaps it would better to be more frequent so it lasted less as it is not easy for everyone to always participate in all the duration of the online sessions”). Lots of suggestions (20% of the comments) were about the technical problems need to be fixed for forthcoming sessions. The 11% of the comments were suggestions about blended methods of sessions, either with online and at the same time face-to-face sessions, or conducting the first sessions face-to-face and the next online, such as this comment: “I would prefer the first meeting to be face-to-face for all and the next sessions online, in order to grown to group dynamics and more coherent networking.” The 9% of the comments appears that students need more help before their first session, suggesting pilot sessions. Finally, only 7% (3 comments) suggests different dates and/or time of the sessions, as it would be convenient for them. Table 3 illustrates the different themes of the suggestions for improvements with frequencies and percentages of students responded to open ended questions.

Table 3: Frequencies and percentages of Suggestions themes

Themes of Suggestions	Number of references	Percentage
Organization	3	7%
More help	4	9%
Face-to-face and/or online	5	11%
Less duration	7	16%
General Technical Improvements	9	20%
More frequent	17	38%
Total	45	100%

The 76,47% of the comments of the suggestion for more frequent sessions were from students without experience in ODL and the 66,67% of the comments about general technical improvements were from the same group of students. However, the 60% of the suggestions for different methods (blended sessions or some face-to-face and online sessions) were suggested by students with previous experience in ODL. In the following chart, the themes of the suggestions that students commented are presented, based on their experience in ODL.

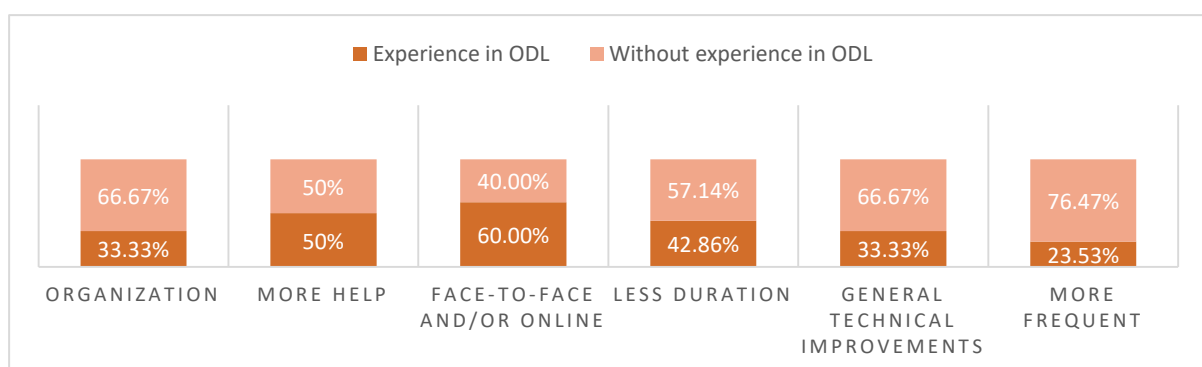


Figure 3: Chart with Suggestions themes based on ODL experience



## 5. Discussion

In general, most of the students shared their positive experiences through online TSS during the first semester of their studies. Interaction between students, tutor and educational material and communication that online sessions have created, are described as an important benefit, which intend to support learning [11]. Resolving questions and receiving help during the sessions are presented as a benefit in online TSS, as also described in face-to-face sessions [4]. Besides the advantages, where face-to-face sessions also have, students present the flexibility and the ability to record online TSS, especially from students without previous experience in ODL.

The HOU organized for the first time online TSS, which include technical organization and preparation. As a result, it appears that the corresponding units of the university were unfamiliar with such preparation. This derives from the important number of comments about technical problems and suggestions for technical improvements, which have a strong impact on students experience in online learning [6]. Moreover, the fact that these comments were noted from both experienced and non-experienced students in ODL, indicates that there are technical problems that need to be fixed and also that the unfamiliarity of students is not the main reason for the problems occurred. As a result, for the forthcoming online TSS, an improved preparation including more pilot sessions and technical support for both tutors and students are suggested.

Finally, the transition from face-to-face to online TSS was made keeping the same format concerning structure, time duration and frequency. However, an important number of comments suggests that online TSS should last less and be more frequent, indicating that they should be more flexible in organization as students are free from time zones and physical boundaries.

This research contributes to increase our understanding of the benefits, problems and improvements of online TSS from students' perspective. As a future work the researchers plan to investigate the tutors' perspectives about the procedure and their participation in online TSS.

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