



Distance Education in Tourism and Hospitality amid Covid-19: Perspectives of Students and Academics

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Abstract

The current pandemic has reshaped all aspects of life, and higher education is no exception. Despite the growing interest in how universities are coping with distance education during crises, there is limited knowledge on how such a delivery model is perceived by both students and academics. Drawing on the experiences of tourism and hospitality students and academics, the present study delves into the distance education experience amid Covid-19 identifying its advantages and challenges. In-depth interviews with tourism and hospitality students and academics in Turkey (12 students and 12 academics) were conducted, and the data were analysed using content analysis. The findings suggest that distance education amid Covid-19 has brought some opportunities, but also posited significant challenges. On the benefit side, distance education seems to have provided students with easier access to information/learning materials and more flexibility while enabling tourism academics to dedicate more time to research activities. On the negative side, however, students seem to be unhappy for being deprived of their social life at class and on campus whereas tourism academics raised concerns related to their lecture content being monitored and accessible, thus limiting their freedom of "lecturing their way". The current study contributes to the growing body on knowledge on distance education in the time of crisis and provides recommendations to different stakeholders in higher education.

Keywords

Covid-19 and tourism, Distance education, Tourism education, Tourism students and academics

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Introduction

The current crisis caused by Covid-19 has resulted in sudden and radical changes in the traditional education model (Chandra et al., 2022). Distance education has therefore emerged as a solution in response to closure and restrictions on the movements of individuals. With the restrictions and stay-home orders in many countries over the globe, distance education had been introduced initially as a temporary solution, but soon the uncertainty around the pandemic forced greater reliance on distance education for longer periods than initially expected. In this sense, although the distance education model is seen as a temporary solution, given the uncertainty around the ongoing pandemic, it is necessary to examine the distance education experience from the perspective of both students and academics.

Distance education has received considerable attention in various disciplines (Liguori & Winkler, 2020; Bao, 2020) including tourism and hospitality (Qiu et al., 2021; Akyol, 2020a; Akyol, 2020b; Buluk & Esitti, 2020; Göksu et al., 2021; Ye & Law, 2021; Joshi & Gupta, 2021; Hsu, 2021; Tiwari et al., 2021). While valuable, except for one study (Lei & So, 2021), these studies do not draw on the perspectives of both students and academics. To fill this gap and draw a comprehensive portrait of distance education in the field of tourism amid Covid-19, the present study examines the perceptions and experiences of both students and academics within the field of tourism and hospitality. This is particularly important given that tourism and hospitality programs tend to include both theoretical and practical courses. While contributing to a growing stream of research addressing distance education in the time of crisis, the study contributes to the development of effective and knowledge-based strategies to enhance the quality of distance education and mitigate the difficulties associated with remotely delivered educational content.

Literature review

Impact of Covid-19 on Higher Education

The pandemic has had significant impacts on all aspects of life (Demirdelen-Alrawadieh, 2021a), and higher education is no exception. Following closure and lockdown orders in many parts of the world, educational activities have moved to cyber space, leading to an unprecedented reliance on distance education instead of traditional methods (Aristovnik et al., 2020). Initially, distance education was perceived as a temporary situation during the pandemic; however, due to the uncertainty around the pandemic, distance education has continued for longer periods. The shift to distance education has encouraged significant academic interest on this topic. Existing research has evaluated the well-being of students and academic staff during the pandemic (Wang & Zhao, 2020), students' acceptance of distance

education (Rizun & Strzelecki, 2020), and the effects of the pandemic on the policies and functioning of higher educational institutions (Pham & Ho, 2020).

Research shows that both students and academics are faced with various difficulties due to the uncertainty, fear, and anxiety created by the pandemic (Demirdelen-Alrawadieh, 2021b; Gupta et al., 2021). For instance, Wang and Zhao (2020) noted that university students have a much higher level of anxiety compared to other segments of society. Students' adaptation to this sudden change has also been discussed in a number of studies. For instance, it is argued that the enjoyment of distance education and the ease of the techniques used can positively affect students' attitudes towards distance education (Rizun & Strzelecki, 2020). Although there have been some studies on the benefits and challenges of distance education (Liguori & Winkler, 2020; Bao, 2020; Aristovnik et al., 2020), there is limited research drawing on the perspectives of both students and academics. Even before the pandemic, universities used to offer online education in addition to traditional methods (Palvia et al., 2018). Therefore, the use of distance education is not a new practice (Liu, 2012).

Advantages and disadvantages of distance education

A considerable amount of research discusses the advantages and disadvantages of distance education. Liu (2012) stated that distance education eliminates time and place constraints as students will not have to physically enter the classroom environment. Yağcı et al. (2019) noted that distance education has both positive and negative impacts with advantages including time-saving and cost-saving and disadvantages including difficulties and disruptions in communication during the education-teaching process. Distance education is also argued to limit face-to-face communication and reduce social interaction (Göksu et al., 2021). Hsu (2021) argues that learning outcomes in courses delivered remotely can differ from those delivered face-to-face. This confirms that distance education creates some disadvantages compared to face-to-face education during Covid-19 (Liguori & Winkler 2020; Saltürk & Güngör, 2020; Yılmaz-Altuntaş et al., 2020; Aristovnik et al., 2020; Göksu et al., 2021). For instance, according to Liguori and Winkler (2020), the pandemic has created some difficulties in delivering distance education courses. Göksu et al. (2021) stated that the rapid transition from face-to-face education to distance education during the pandemic brought about some negative outcomes with stress, anxiety and depression largely reducing motivation to engage in distance education. Other similar findings are also reported in recent research (Saltürk & Güngör, 2020; Yılmaz-Altuntas et al., 2020; Aristovnik et al., 2020).

Despite the disadvantages, there are some advantages of distance education during Covid-19 pandemic (Park & Jones, 2021; Yılmaz-Altuntaş et al., 2020; Aristovnik et al., 2020; Bao, 2020; Akyol, 2020b; Buluk ve Esitti, 2020; Seo & Kim, 2021). For

instance, alternative learning and teaching opportunities, new methods for virtual internships, and online discussion groups have been developing, thus enhancing student participation and engagement (Seo & Kim, 2021; Park & Jones, 2021). Indeed, distance education has enhanced the technical skills of students (Yilmaz-Altuntas et al., 2020). Akyol (2020b) notes that tourism students were generally satisfied with the quality of online education, and their individual performance increased over time by getting used to the new environment. Buluk and Esitti (2020) suggested that there were some factors affecting course satisfaction such as learning conditions, personal suitability, and support given to the students.

Methodology

Drawing on the perceptions of tourism students and academics, the study delves into the distance education experience amid Covid-19 identifying its advantages and challenges. For this purpose, in-depth interviews were conducted. During the Covid-19 pandemic, an interview protocol was developed for both tourism students and academics to determine their distance education experiences. Interview protocols for both samples were developed based on a detailed literature review on distance education (e.g., Edelheim, 2020; Akyol, 2020a-b).

The interview protocol consisted of two sections. The first section aimed to collect demographic data such as age, gender, academic title (for academics), and year of school (for students) whereas the second section included open-ended questions to understand students and academics' distance education experiences. For instance, academics were asked questions related to the experience of distance education during the pandemic, the preparation process, the techniques used in distance education and how they differ from those in face-to-face education, and the main advantages and disadvantages of distance education. Likewise, students were asked about the distance education experience and whether that experience was beneficial, the quality of distance education, and the benefits and drawbacks of distance education. The data from the students was collected from one of the schools hosting the oldest tourism program in Istanbul, Turkey. The data from tourism academics, however, was collected from various schools across Turkey that provide tourism education.

A total of 24 interviews (12 tourism students and 12 tourism academics) were conducted remotely due to Covid-19, and the data obtained were analysed using content analysis. The data collection was ceased when the saturation level had been reached (Glaser ve Strauss, 1967). Using the convenience sampling method, the data collection process was completed between February 6, 2021 and February 15, 2021. For this present study, ethical approval was obtained from Istanbul University Ethical Committee (2020/108). The general profile of informants in both samples is presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Demographic profile of tourism students and academics

No	Age	Gender	Year of School
TS1	21	Male	Third year
TS2	21	Female	Third year
TS3	22	Male	Fourth year
TS4	23	Male	Second year
TS5	22	Female	Second year
TS6	22	Female	Second year
TS7	19	Female	Second year
TS8	18	Female	First year
TS9	22	Male	Second year
TS10	20	Female	Second year
TS11	22	Male	Fourth year
TS12	21	Male	Fourth year
No	Age	Gender	Academic title
TA1	29	Male	Asst. Prof.
TA2	29	Female	Lecturer
TA3	33	Female	Lecturer
TA4	34	Female	Assoc. Prof.
TA5	35	Female	Asst. Prof.
TA6	35	Male	Assoc. Prof.
TA7	32	Male	Asst. Prof.
TA8	29	Female	Lecturer
TA9	43	Male	Lecturer
TA10	33	Female	Res. Ass. 'Dr.'
TA11	33	Female	Asst. Prof.
TA12	35	Female	Asst. Prof.

Note: TS= Tourism students; TA= Tourism academics.

Findings

Advantages of distance education amid Covid-19

The qualitative data shows that both tourism academics and tourism students perceive some advantages from distance education amid the pandemic. For tourism students, distance education seems to bring some advantages including the ease of using technology and the physical benefits of distance education (see Fig. 1).

Tourism students appear to be satisfied with the introduction of technology into their education life. In this context, among the most frequently mentioned benefits are related to conveniences such as providing fast and easy access to information, the abundance of resources on the internet, and the opportunity to watch the course recordings again. Another issue is related to the fact that students have the advantage of keeping their courses recorded and accessing these courses easily whenever they want. TS3 mentioned: "...For me, it is very helpful to watch the lesson again. I watch slowly focusing on what I did not really understand during the [actual] lesson, so it's much better". Interestingly, some students stated that one of the advantages of distance education is the ease of passing exams. Although this was negatively perceived by some students, for some others, this represented an advantage.

Physical convenience and accessibility were also mentioned as key benefits of distance education. While taking lessons in traditional methods is seen as more effective and efficient for some students, others make an effort to go to school and are affected by physical factors such as time and cost. In this context, TS3 mentioned: “...Distance education was better for me than going to school, I spent a lot of time going to school, it was a problem to go to school by bus due to financial reasons, saving time...”. Although TS6 agreed on this, he argued that traditional education was more appropriate in terms of effectiveness and efficiency noting: “...My house is very far from school, it was 3 hours to go and 3 hours to come. However, I still would prefer face-to-face learning...”.

The study also identifies the advantages of distance education perceived by tourism academics. As seen in Fig. 1, academics perceive advantages including saving time and cost, more use of innovative techniques in lessons, and more time to concentrate on research activities.

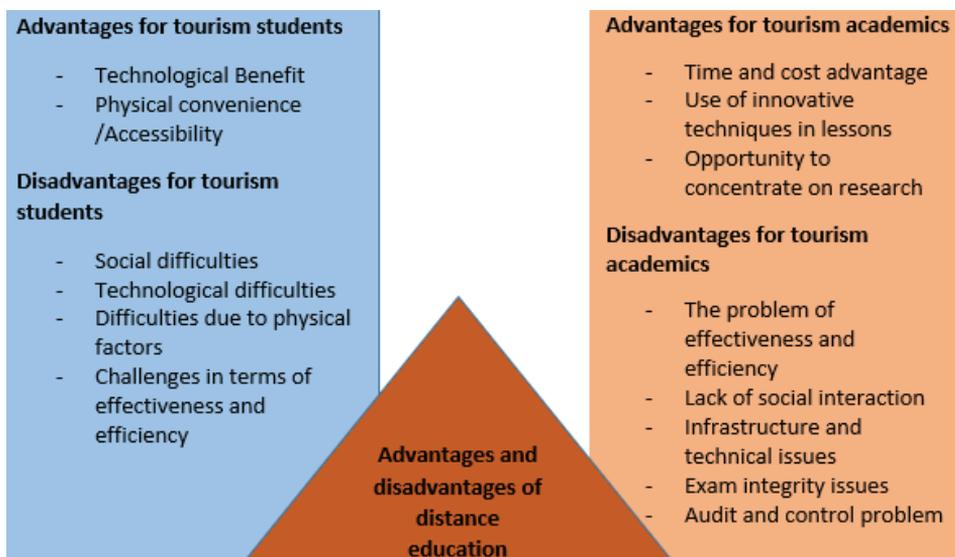


Figure 1. Distance Education in Tourism and Hospitality amid Covid-19

Tourism academics mentioned advantages such as flexibility of course hours and ease of teaching at any time and place. TA8 mentioned:

“...We save time, now we can connect virtually at any time. So there is no need anymore to get stuck in the traffic and go from one place to another for 1 hour. I think this is a huge advantage.”

One of the key advantages of distance education from the perspective of tourism academics seems to be the ability to focus on personal development and to concentrate on scientific research. Academics generally stated that the distance education process

is beneficial in terms of concentrating on academic research. TA6 mentioned “... It [online teaching] has been an opportunity to spare time for the research I am doing...”. Similarly, TA7 noted: “...I personally evaluate this process positively. I have been able to devote time to reading and doing research, I have been able to take part in many research projects, and this gave me an advantage as a faculty member...”

Disadvantages of distance education amid Covid-19

Both tourism academics and tourism students mentioned that the experience of distance education brings some disadvantages. Tourism students frequently expressed issues related to the difficulties experienced in social, technological and physical terms as well as the problems related to efficiency and productivity (see Fig. 1). It is interesting that while the same issue is seen as a benefit for one student, it may be perceived as a problem for another. For instance, although the subject of distance education through technology is seen as an advantage for some students, some students describe this situation as a disadvantage. This situation also affected the distance education experience during the pandemic process.

For students, unsociability seems to be the key drawback of distance education. Specifically, students expressed the lack of a social environment that connects them with their peers and their lecturers. While in traditional education model, students are in close relationships with both their classmates and lecturers in the classroom and school environment, this situation has brought some changes in distance education courses. TS1 mentioned:

“...I think this process is disadvantageous because online education has started to be more like a meeting rather than a student-lecturer relationship. We miss the feeling and warmth of the campus, being side by side with our friends, trying to take notes of what the lecturer said, looking into the eyes of our lecturer, we somehow lost this warmth in online education”.

TS9 stated that there were some differences in the lecturer-student relationship and the social effects of this process due to the lack of face-to-face education. “...There was no classroom atmosphere, most of my friends and I were getting out of bed and connecting straight to the lesson, so it wasn't exactly a school... No place, friends, note-taking, school and classroom atmosphere”.

Technology-related problems also emerge as key challenges for tourism students. Specifically, disruptions and disconnections caused by the internet of both the academics and the student during the lesson, background noise during the lesson, and technology-related problems during the exam harm the quality of the education. For instance, TS9 mentioned:

“...We need to make major renovations on the internet because we couldn't attend our classes on time, we couldn't take the exams; for example, I remember that I took the exam 5 minutes late. Even though I refreshed the page, I couldn't take the exam”.

Although relatively fewer than social and technological problems, the problems caused by physical factors also affected the effectiveness of the courses in the distance education process and were perceived as a disadvantageous situation for students. Since the physical environment provided in the school and classroom environment is not met in the courses given through distance education, it has been stated that this situation poses a problem for the students, and it is stated that there are many distracting elements in the lessons given in the home environment. For such reasons, it is expected that a student who continues his/her education life away from the classroom and school environment will consider this situation as a disadvantage. In this context, second year student TS6 expressed his opinion as follows: “... *Distractions are at the highest level at home, you are definitely more distracted than face-to-face education. Sometimes you just can't focus*”.

Another disadvantageous issue arises from the decrease in the effectiveness and efficiency of the distance education process for students. In this context, second year student TS10 expressed his opinion as follows: “. *It [the pandemic] really affected all of us. I couldn't be productive, and everyone cheated in the exams including me.*

Within the scope of the research, besides the students' experiences of distance education, there were also problems related to the experiences of the academics. As it can be seen in Fig. 1, while there were common views with the students about the disadvantages of distance education, the academics experienced more problems and had more difficulties than the students in this process.

Qualitative data suggests that academics are mostly concerned about the effectiveness and efficiency of the courses taken by the students through distance education. They even agree that the lessons are not as effective as they are in traditional methods. TA4 noted:

“...I ask students to prepare a presentation, there is no obligation to turn the camera on in the presentation, this is an optional thing, so I cannot measure whether the student is reading from the text. They do not cite any sources...”

Findings show that students do not participate in the lesson or even if they do, whether they are really effective in the lesson causes some concerns and reduces the effectiveness and quality of the lesson. In this context, one academic commented: “...*I do not think that distance education is of very high quality, there is little participation, and I do not know what to say because there is little participation. For example, there are 5-6 people in the class and some of them are hungry, I really don't know what to do...*” TA6. The concerns of the academics on this issue should be valid as some students doubt the effectiveness of the courses through distance education and state that they cannot be efficient in this process.

One key disadvantage is that distance education limits the social interaction in the student-lecturer and/or student-student relationship. Although issues such as making an eye contact with students, monitoring whether they are listening or understanding the lesson, being present in the classroom environment in the education given in traditional methods are socially important, these feelings and behaviors may be interrupted during the compulsory distance education process due to the pandemic. For this reason, one of the disadvantageous situations expressed in general terms in the interviews with the academics is due to the lack of social interaction. In this context, TA10 stated:

“...I think that face-to-face lessons would be more effective, after all, student-student interaction is also important in the classroom [...] Having access to the library, being in the classroom, communicating with each other and socializing is very important”.

Academics frequently stated the disadvantages experienced in terms of infrastructure and technical problems in distance education. It is stated that there are some adaptation problems in the rapid transition to distance education during the pandemic. Academics mentioned issues such as frequent disconnections and freezing during the lesson, not being able to open another page while teaching, and not being able to connect to the lesson. In this context, TA5 commented: *“...The university supposedly bought a system, but it breaks down, you cannot connect to the class, the student wants to ask questions or you want to tell the subject, there is a problem with the internet, there have been difficulties either from our university or from the infrastructure of the student...”*. While this issue seems to be common, it should be noted that this may be largely dependent on the technological infrastructure of the universities.

The qualitative data shows that the vast majority of tourism academics are less likely to trust the results of the exams taken remotely. In this context, the student's ability to access information easily from different sources during the exam jeopardizes the integrity of online exams. Tourism students have already used similar statements about exam integrity and stated that they were able to access information easily even during the exam. In this context, TA3 noted: *“...I honestly don't think the exam integrity is maintained... Especially when there is a test, if 3-5 people come together, they can see almost all the questions in the question pool. You see, for example, the student took the exam in 3 minutes, you see, you know that he is cheating, but what you can say, in that sense, the exam integrity is a trouble...”*. Another lecturer, on the other hand, stated that they took some precautions to ensure exam integrity. However, according to him, although precautions seem to have been taken, there were problems in control and monitoring. *“...We applied different systems, the student could not return to the previous question during the exam, he had to do the questions in one go, a time limit was imposed such as minimum 30 minutes and maximum 50 minutes, we*

were also creating a question bank, that is, if I was going to ask 20 questions, I was preparing 60 questions that confused students. questions go... We tried to minimize cheating in this way..." TA2.

Tourism academics appear to be unhappy with their lectures being recorded and monitored. In this context, TA7 commented: *"...When the university administrations started to record the lectures during the lectures, these brought some responsibilities to us; I mean, while I was teaching the lesson, I felt that we were not as free as we used to be..."*. Moreover, according to the participants, this situation is not only limited to the monitoring and control carried out by the senior management, but at the same time, the fact that the courses are recorded causes some reservations in terms of accessing the records of the students. In this context, TA9 expressed his view as follows: *"... Since the lessons are recorded, you have to be very careful with every word you say, I feel like the students are a bit open-eyed..."*.

Discussion and Conclusions

The present study has discussed the distance education experience amid Covid-19 identifying its advantages and challenges. Drawing on the experiences of tourism and hospitality students and academics, the study identified the advantages and disadvantages of distance education from the perspectives of both students and academics. Findings from the study contribute to the current literature and offer practical advice to different stakeholders in the higher education sector.

While many studies have been conducted on the benefits of distance education in various disciplines and the challenges that come with it since the outbreak of the pandemic (e.g., Rannastu-Avalos & Siiman, 2020; Aykol, 2020b; Buluk & Esitti, 2020; Göksu et al., 2021), research addressing distance education in the field of tourism and hospitality remains limited. Existing studies mainly focus on the perspectives of tourism students (Aykol, 2020b; Buluk & Esitti, 2020; Göksu et al., 2021). While limited, some studies have focused on tourism and hospitality education (Ye & Law, 2021; Chandra et al., 2022; Işkın et al., 2022). Unlike previous current studies, in this study, the perspectives of both tourism students and tourism lecturers were examined in order to provide comprehensive answers to the research questions.

Based on the findings of the study, the transition of educational institutions to the distance education model with the Covid-19 pandemic has provided some advantages to both students and academics. While students can benefit from the convenience of watching the course recordings again in distance education modeling, unlike in traditional teaching, the lecturers have the opportunity to concentrate on academic studies thanks to the increased spare time. In fact, it is argued that distance education can potentially make education sustainable (Işkın et al., 2022).

While the pandemic has changed social interaction in tourism (Zhang et al., 2021), it has also affected distance education. Distance education has not come without some difficulties. In fact, students and academics complain about the lack of social interaction often associated with traditional education. Although it is difficult to fully provide the social benefit obtained in the physical teaching environment in distance education models, the techniques of distance education platforms used in universities can be developed or existing techniques can be used more effectively in order to increase this social benefit. For instance, having cameras on during the lesson can provide more effective communication and interaction. On the other hand, it is important for universities to work on infrastructure and use technology more effectively in order to reduce the difficulties experienced in the distance education process to some extent. Qiu (2021) notes that the use of technology facilities in tourism education during Covid-19 is essential. Moreover, it is necessary to provide academics with trainings that will increase the effectiveness of the distance education process to understand and eliminate the difficulties of the process as another common challenge for students and lecturers is the lack of efficiency and productivity. This result should be worrying for organizations that will adopt the distance education model.

The study has some limitations. First, the data related to students was collected from students at one university in Turkey and therefore the findings should be approached with caution. Second, due to financial constraints, data was collected directly by the author of this study, a tourism academic, and hence this might have created a social desirability situation. This may have also contributed to students being less open to sharing their experiences. Future research may consider these limitations to generate more accurate insights. There are also several opportunities for future research. Researchers may evaluate the outcomes of distance education in the field of tourism by drawing on the perspectives of different stakeholders, such as industry practitioners. It might also be interesting to examine the effect of distance education on students' attitudes toward post-graduate education in tourism and hospitality as well as their attitudes towards careers within the industry.

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