Research Article

The Quality of Distance Studies: Second-Cycle Students' Position

Vincentas Lamanauskas [1*]
 0000-0002-4130-7899

Rita Makarskaitė-Petkevičienė [1]
 0000-0003-1653-8094

[1] Vilnius University, Vilnius, LITHUANIA
[*] Corresponding author: vincentas.lamanauskas@sa.vu.lt

ABSTRACT

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the education system is still not fully known, however there are many studies examining the impact of the introduced quarantine restrictions on the circumstances and quality of students' studies. Universities faced enormous and multifaceted challenges to organise studies during the pandemic period. During the pandemic, new distance teaching/learning platforms were introduced, and more opportunities for distance communication appeared. There is no doubt that COVID-19 has become one of the accelerators of change in the field of information technology accessibility. However, in such conditions, the issues of the quality of university studies become even more relevant.

An empirical qualitative study was conducted, the purpose of which was to analyse the position of second-cycle university students on the issue of study quality. 64 master's students in the field of social sciences from four Lithuanian universities participated in the study conducted in November-December 2021. The verbal data collected were analysed using quantitative content analysis.

It was established that the second-cycle university study students evaluate basically positively the quality of online learning. The effective realisation of the study process improves the quality of these studies, while the essential worsening factors are psychophysiological and technical disturbances. The pandemic caused also certain transformations in university studies, created the conditions for a wider application of distance studies, and revealed more opportunities to use electronic resources for teaching and study purposes. Although distance master's studies have become a novelty and a challenge to a certain extent, this has also highlighted the need for new teaching/learning methods and forms. In addition, successful and smooth continuity of the study process is only possible if there is sufficient flexibility of the participants in the university study process.

Keywords: distance education, quantitative content analysis, qualitative research, master students

INTRODUCTION

The quality assurance of higher education studies is based on the assessment of the state of study quality at the institutional level. To take steps to improve the quality of studies, it is necessary to objectively assess the state of the quality of studies (Slatkevičienė & Vanagas, 2001). Distance studies are undoubtedly a modern study system, when students are given the opportunity to study independently in a place of their choice, according to the chosen methodology and at a time convenient to them (Rutkauskienė, 2010). It is understood that distance studies are one of the methods of university studies, when teaching and learning take place at different times in different places, and the use of information and communications technologies creates an appropriate learning environment and ensures the progress of teaching/learning processes. It is also clear that not all study programmes can be conducted remotely. It is likely that there are differences in distance

learning for different degrees. After the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, basically all studies were transferred to the electronic space and carried out remotely. One of the fundamental issues is the quality of distance studies in an emergency. Basically, research confirms that the pandemic boosts distance education (Sun et al., 2020), moreover, it is an inevitable necessity in pandemic conditions (Wahab, 2020).

International Context

In recent years, many studies analysing the problem of distance studies have been conducted. In essence, distance learning is not a new thing. These are studies for which a virtual learning environment or other online platforms are used. Through it, teachers provide students with specific study information, educational materials, mid-term tasks, exams, organise contact remote classes, and other study activities. Researchers emphasise that distance studies are an inevitability (Samašonok & Žonych, 2020) but despite this, various challenges are encountered. This is especially true for distance studies under special circumstances (in this case, the COVID-19 pandemic), when it is impossible to carry out the study process in the usual format. A study conducted in 2021 showed that the quality of studies is primarily associated with the improvement of planning and organisation. Better results could be achieved by optimising the content of studies, searching for a closer dialogue between study methods and harmony between theory and practice. Improving the management of the study process is perceived as the second direction of improvement (Lamanauskas & Makarskaitė-Petkevičienė, 2021b). In general, it should be said that there is still lack of consensus in the field of distance education, in other words, "rigid standardization" on how to talk about quality issues (Sherry, 2003, p. 436). Researchers emphasise that it may be useful to further develop how to approach quality issues (Miyazoe, 2008).

Ozer (2022) conducted a study to evaluate the distance education process in sports sciences. The researcher claims that distance education is an alternative model that can be used in cases where the formal education system is disrupted for any reason. Researchers agree that distance education applied during the COVID-19 process has positives and negatives for lecturers and students (Lamanauskas & Makarskaitė-Petkevičienė, 2021a; Ozer, 2022). A study conducted in Portugal showed that there is a relationship between how students perceive the pandemic as affecting their studies and their satisfaction with online course formats. It was found that the stronger this perception is about the impact of the pandemic, the less satisfied students are with online studies (Gonçalves et al., 2020). Many studies conducted during the pandemic have shown that university students face serious technological barriers and difficulties. For example, a study conducted in Indonesia showed that the most important technological barriers are device issues, the Internet connectivity, technology costs, and lack of technology skills, etc. (Rahiem, 2020). On the other hand, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant negative impact on students' learning habits in distance learning institutions, where this study format is common. A study conducted in the UK showed that the pandemic still affected the study habits, lives and mental health of distance students and exacerbated existing problems (Aristeidou & Cross, 2021). Studies conducted with Polish university students (including postgraduates) have shown that students' self-efficacy is at an average level, and distance learning has increased their learning efficiency on average. Students find distance learning tools and software very intuitive; understanding the principles of this form of education is not a problem for them. However, despite the generally positive assessment, students would definitely like to go back to regular education (Rizun & Strzelecki, 2020).

On the other hand, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the adoption of e-learning models has grown exponentially in universities (Fernández-Sánchez & Silva-Quiroz, 2021). As a result, it is necessary to form a university policy in the sense of the realisation of the study process, which would aim to create effective pedagogical models of distance studies based on didactic guidelines for their implementation. A study conducted in Serbia showed that distance education enables efficient learning-teaching during the pandemic, confirming the importance of modern technologies (Marković Krstić & Milošević Radulović, 2021). Similar findings were obtained in a study with Mozambican students. The researchers came to a conclusion that distance studies are considered an important and relevant way of learning, which contributes to the provision of learning opportunities in the field of higher education (Manuel et al., 2021). A study conducted in Ecuador also showed that it is a positive perception of students using online education platforms, on the other hand, online studies bring new challenges for teachers and students to find in them a new way of teaching (Cejas Martinez et al., 2021).

National Context

After the pandemic began in Lithuania, universities almost universally switched to distance learning. It is obvious that this caused considerable challenges both for the students and for the organisers, and the executors of the studies. It is worth noting that universities were forced to switch to a rather unusual distance education and conduct studies remotely (online). It is understood that some study programmes were conducted remotely even before the pandemic. Moreover, this experience is much greater in postgraduate university studies, i.e., the experience of undergraduates and postgraduates is quite different. It is noted that the problems of the transition to distance education are related to technological preparation, which includes all the necessary tools for distance education, as well as the lack of preparation to convey the necessary information during distance education, etc.

Distance learning has its advantages, such as individual work pace, but the transition to distance learning in Lithuania was too fast, and the transition process was too short. The conducted studies showed (Nausėda et al., 2021) that students face challenges, but evaluate the process of distance learning itself well. The most often emphasised problems are technical disturbances, too much time spent at the computer, lack of concentration, and communication limitations. When studying remotely, it is extremely important to focus on student independence, providing individual support to students, organising their assessment, etc. (Čiegis et al., 2022). However, distance education in Lithuania from a relatively small phenomenon became a universal practice when Lithuania was faced with the COVID-19 pandemic. The transfer of learning/studies to the virtual space took place quite rapidly (Bakonis, 2020).

On the other hand, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the transition to distance education changed the study environment and the nature of activities of university students, the time spent working on a computer increased, and certain health problems became apparent. The study revealed (Strukčinskaitė et al., 2021) that during the pandemic, most students spent many hours a day at the computer, and only a minority took regular breaks. Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated and accelerated the process of depersonalisation of academic life (Dagys, 2020), highlighted many challenges, related to the organisation and execution of the study process (Lamanauskas et al., 2022), for example, it is not known what the student actually does, and how his identification with the studies or the university in general takes place, the student's perception of the quality of the lectures, the student's opinion about the teaching content and forms. Finally, interaction and communication among students remains problematic.

Research Context

A study was conducted, the purpose of which was to analyse the second-cycle students' position in terms of distance study quality. The assumption is made that first and second-cycle studies are fundamentally different, so it is likely that the students' position is also different. Finally, scientific research during the pandemic was focused on analysing the situation in the general education sector, as well as first cycle studies at university. Master's studies, in a sense, remained "overboard". It can be reasonably assumed that the pandemic affected the conditions and quality of master student studies in an ambiguous manner. There is an obvious lack of detailed research on conditions and needs of second-cycle university studies, especially in the context of the quarantine restrictions caused by COVID-19. Although it is difficult to objectively measure the quality of studies, there is no doubt that when assessing the quality of studies, one of the interested participants in the higher education system must be considered i.e., second-cycle students.

In order to realise the purpose of the research, research questions were formulated:

1. What is the general assessment of the quality of distance learning (teaching/learning online)?
2. What are the most important elements for a good quality of distance education/learning (studying)?
3. What essential factors improve the quality of distance education (studying)?
4. What factors reduce/deteriorate the quality of distance education (studying)?

It is likely that the results of the empirical study will help to effectively improve the process of university second-cycle studies.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

General Background

An empirical qualitative study was conducted in November-December 2021. The research is based on the premise that surveys of the opinions and evaluations of study participants are important as they allow identifying current problems, clarifying already known ones, and predicting improvement opportunities. Relatively little structured textual information was collected during the research. The research is based on the assumption that semantic units (words, their combinations, etc.; their presence or intensity in certain text units) reflect certain aspects analysed in the research. According to Lune and Berg (2017), qualitative research provides conditions for delving into the meanings, concepts, definitions, characteristics, descriptions, etc. of phenomena in order to uncover meaning.

Sample Selection

The sample of Lithuanian master students consisted of by gender–61(95.3%) female, and 3(4.7%) male postgraduate students and by study year–36(56.2%) first study year and 28(43.8%) second study year. Practically all master students represent the field of social sciences: educology (*n*=10, 15.6%), educational management (*n*=16, 25.0%), pedagogy (*n*=13, 20.3%), social pedagogy (*n*=13, 20.3%), pedagogical psychology (*n*=3, 4.7%), and social work (*n*=9, 14.1%).

A non-probabilistic target method of forming the research group was chosen for the sample formation, when the most typical persons in terms of the research characteristic are included in the research group. According to Morse (1994), a sample size of 30-50 participants is appropriate for this type of study. Qualitative sample size may best be determined by the time allotted, resources available, and study objectives (Patton, 1990). Thus, it is assumed that such a sample is fairly representative in a qualitative study and allows for appropriate conclusions to be drawn.

Instrument and Procedures

The questionnaire used in the study consists of four open-ended questions. When formulating the questions, the current situation of university studies was evaluated.

The following open-ended questions/tasks are presented:

1. Please comment on the quality of distance learning (teaching/learning online)?
2. What do you think is most important for a good quality of distance education/learning (studying)?
3. What factors, in your opinion, improve the quality of distance education (studying)?
4. What factors, in your opinion, reduce/deteriorate the quality of distance education (studying)?
5. Write what else you might want to say.

The research instrument was discussed in the research group. The initial validation of the instrument was carried out, in which five master's students participated. After evaluating their comments, the research instrument was adjusted.

It was explained to the research participants that the opinions of individual respondents will not be made public, the research is completely anonymous. Comments and/or the context of a personal opinion/position are of particular importance to the research. The questionnaire was filled in by computer, the volume was not limited. Communication with research participants took place by e-mail, as well as using VMA.

Data Analysis

The research data were presented in writing. The answers received from the respondents were coded. The most frequently recurring semantic units were grouped until primary groups, named subcategories, emerged. In the second step, subcategories were combined into categories. The qualitative research data were processed using quantitative content analysis, where essential characteristics are distinguished in the information array. In addition, quantitative content analysis is a method based on the systematic coding and quantification of content (Huxley, 2020). Devi Prasad (2019) defined content analysis as reducing a large portion of words obtained through qualitative data in order to make meaning of the data by detecting trend

and meaning. Analytical analysis of the content of textual data arrays is considered the basis and essential advantage of qualitative content analysis (Morkevičius, 2005). The obtained verbal data array was analysed in three stages, based on conventional content analysis methods:

1. repeated reading and analysis of answers,
2. search for semantically close answers and "key" words,
3. interpretation and combination of meaningful units, and
4. ranking of categories and subcategories.

To guarantee the reliability of the data analysis, the extraction of meaningful units and the subsequent grouping were carried out independently by two researchers. The researchers consulted regularly on the analysis. In a later stage, the researchers sought consensus on the assignment of subcategories to categories. Coordination and adjustment took place in two stages. There was a one week break between the first and the second coordination stages. The concordance rate was higher than 85%.

Miles and Huberman (1994) state that it is enough for the reliability of data to find the correspondence percentage higher than .70. According to Neuendorf (2002), an inter-coder reliability score above 80% would be acceptable 'in most situations'. The fundamental aim of the researchers, according to Bengtsson (2016), was to organize and extract meaning from the data collected and to draw rational conclusions from it.

RESEARCH RESULTS

After analysing the general position of the respondents on the quality of distance learning, five categories were distinguished: *positive assessment of studies*, *convenience of studies*, *usefulness of studies*, *favourable psychological climate,* and *disadvantages of studies* (**Table 1**).

Table 1. Distance learning quality [n (%)]

Categories	Subcategories	Statements	*n* (%)
Positive assessment of studies [52 (48.6)]	Compliance with the expectations [48 (45.1)]	The quality of distance learning is satisfactory	14 (13.7)
		The quality of studies is good enough	13 (12.0)
		Distance learning certainly does not harm the quality of studies	7 (6.5)
		The quality of distance learning is excellent	5 (4.6)
		I am very satisfied with the quality of studies	5 (4.6)
		The quality meets my expectations	4 (3.7)
	Improving quality [4 (3.6)]	Improving quality; the quality of studies is improving	2 (1.8)
		Quality depends a lot on the teacher and the taught subject	2 (1.8)
Convenience of studies [27 (25)]	Study flexibility [15 (13.8)]	It is convenient to attend lectures	8 (7.4)
		Studies can be combined with work	3 (2.8)
		Good conditions for combining personal and professional life	2 (1.8)
		Distance learning makes it possible to connect from anywhere	2 (1.8)
	Time management [7 (6.5)]	Easier to use, saves time	6 (5.6)
		Distance learning is convenient in terms of time planning	1 (0.9)
	Practicality [5 (4.6)]	Is extremely practical	5 (4.6)
Usefulness of studies [21 (19.2)]	Study fluency [11 (10.0)]	I like this learning option	3 (2.8)
		A very suitable way to study online for master's studies	2 (1.8)
		The information conveyed is clear, informative	2 (1.8)
		It is easy to absorb the information presented	1 (0.9)
		Great addition to live/ real lectures	1 (0.9)
		Ensuring better attendance of lectures	1 (0.9)
		Teachers are well prepared for lectures	1 (0.9)
	Ensuring diversity of methods and activities [10 (9.2)]	Feedback received is useful	4 (3.7)
		Self-directed learning is encouraged	3 (2.8)
		Conditions are created for consultations	2 (1.8)
		Online platforms can do everything that can be done when working directly in the audience	1 (0.9)
Favourable psychological climate [3 (2.7)]	Good relationship [2 (1.8)]	A pleasant, friendly atmosphere prevails during lectures	2 (1.8)
	Feeling better [1 (0.9)]	Distance learning helped me feel freer	1 (0.9)

Table 1 (Continued). Distance learning quality [n (%)]

Categories	Subcategories	Statements	*n* (%)
Disadvantages of studies [5 (4.5)]	Poor quality [5 (4.5)]	My studies suffer in my case because real communication makes it easier to absorb and communicate with teachers	2 (1.8)
		I do not think that distance lectures are of high quality. Live lectures significantly better than distance learning	2 (1.8)
		Students are burdened with practical, group, & individual work	1 (0.9)

Note. Totally 108 semantic units were extracted

It can be seen that the first category *positive evaluation of studies* (48.6%) has the greatest importance, and it is most closely related to meeting the expectations of students, which is summarised in the first subcategory *compliance with the expectations* (45.1%). Such an assessment is basically justified since the second-cycle students choose their study programme rationally and motivated enough, it is not a random decision.

The second category *convenience of studies* (25.0%) is practically related to the first, as it also reflects a positive assessment, especially emphasising the flexibility of studies, time management and practicality. This category fully reflects the position of graduate students as working people. It is important for students to combine work, family and studies while studying, to study at a convenient time, in a convenient place, in an individually acceptable way, to access distance learning content with various IT tools, and to use it in various forms.

The third category *study usefulness* (19.2%) is expressed through two subcategories: *fluency of studies* (10.0%) and *ensuring diversity of methods and activities* (9.2%). In the respondents' opinion, the tools for distance learning in the study subjects are chosen correctly, and good feedback is ensured.

The fourth category *favourable psychological climate* (2.7%) is the least significant in assessing the quality of distance learning. This shows that distance learning does not cause psychological problems for students, or they are minor.

After analysing what is most important for good distance teaching/learning (studying) quality, five categories were distinguished: *smooth organisation of studies*, *professionalism of teachers, suitability of technical equipment and access, development of communication and cooperation between students and teachers*, and *positive attitude of students* (**Table 2**).

Table 2. The most important things for good distance teaching/learning (studying) quality

Categories	Subcategories	Statements	*n* (%)
Smooth organisation of studies [43 (43.7)]	Realisation of the study process [21 (21.3)]	Get feedback and help	6 (6.1)
		Proper selection of the scope of the taught material	5 (5.1)
		It is important to frequently involve students in discussions	4 (4.1)
		The most important thing is to interest, involve students, motivate	2 (2.0)
		Theory combined with active practice & practical applicability	1 (1.0)
		Appropriate balance between lectures and individual assignments	1 (1.0)
		Effective delivery of lecture material	1 (1.0)
		Consistently and clearly presented material	1 (1.0)
	Time management [12 (12.2)]	Time planning, it is very important to plan your time carefully	6 (6.1)
		Possibility to combine work and studies	5 (5.1)
		I can participate qualitatively & do other work at same time	1 (1.0)
	Study flexibility [10 (10.2)]	Appropriate schedule of activities	3 (3.1)
		Flexibility of online activities	3 (3.1)
		A more flexible approach to tasks & sufficient time to complete tasks	2 (2.0)
		Flexible and convenient conditions for distance learning	2 (2.0)
The teacher's professionalism [16 (16.2)]	Sufficient digital competence [12 (12.2)]	Teachers' ability to manage various online platforms	6 (6.1)
		Teachers' preparation to work online	4 (4.1)
		Use of interactive/innovative tools	1 (1.0)
		ICT competences	1 (1.0)
	Pedagogical competence [4 (4.0)]	Teachers' competence in lecturing	2 (2.0)
		Confidence in student as a conscious & responsible person	2 (2.0)

Table 2 (Continued). The most important things for good distance teaching/learning (studying) quality

Categories	Subcategories	Statements	*n* (%)
The suitability of technical equipment and access [15 (15.6)]	The suitability of access [9 (9.4)]	Good internet connection	8 (8.4)
		Have good access to study material	1 (1.0)
	The suitability of equipment [6 (6.2)]	Technical supply and its quality	3 (3.1)
		Absence of interference	3 (3.1)
Development of communication & cooperation between students & teachers [12 (12.3)]	Communication [6 (6.2)]	Smooth communication with teachers	3 (3.1)
		Properly selected means of communication	3 (3.1)
	Cooperation [6 (6.1)]	Cooperation with teachers	4 (4.1)
		Student-teacher communication & cooperation, mutual respect	2 (2.0)
Students' positive attitude [12 (12.2)]	Motivation [6 (6.2)]	The most important factor is the student's motivation to participate in the study process	3 (3.1)
		Students' desire and motivation to learn	3 (3.1)
	Active participation [5 (5.0)]	Active participation in seminars	2 (2.0)
		Active participation during distance lectures	2 (2.0)
		Prepare homework responsibly	1 (1.0)
	Self-discipline [1 (1.0)]	Self-discipline	1 (1.0)

Note. Totally 98 semantic units were extracted

It is obvious that the most important thing for a good quality of distance learning is *smooth organisation of studies* (43.7%). This first category is the most significant as it expresses essential things such as realisation of the study process, time planning, study flexibility. It can be observed that *realisation of studies* is mostly associated with teacher's activity, his preparation to work with remote students.

The second category *teacher's professionalism* (16.2%) just shows that this aspect is extremely important. The subcategory *sufficient digital competence* (12.2%) has the greatest influence in this category. This is completely understandable since the most used for distance learning are various virtual learning environments, video conferencing software, as well as open learning resources, online video viewing, e-mail service, etc. Although teachers use digital technologies during their studies, are confident in their abilities and want to try new technologies, it is noticeable that their use during classes does not fully match the way students imagine innovativeness and interactivity of digital technologies in the present time and in the future. It is not without reason that the third category *suitability of technical equipment and access* (15.6%) has also a similar weight, where the emphasis is on good technical provision and the appropriate quality of tools.

The third category *development of communication and cooperation between students* and teachers (12.3%) is undoubtedly a factor influencing the quality of studies, but in this case, graduate students do not single it out as a particularly significant component. The fourth category *students' positive attitude* (12.2%) is in a similar position as the third. This only confirms once again that the quality of studies depends on the student's motivation and preparation, teachers' competence, a positive atmosphere in the study process, and the appropriate cooperation between students and teachers.

After analysing the answers about the factors improving the quality of distance education (studying), four categories were distinguished: *study process efficiency, study process optimality*, *psychodidactic preparation of study process participants*, and *technological preparation* (**Table 3**).

It becomes apparent that among the approving factors *efficiency of the study process* has the greatest importance (46.9%), which is basically associated with saving time and money and flexibility of studies. One of the most important elements in this category is proper time planning and flexibility of online activities.

The second category *optimality of the study process* (29.4%) expresses the components of study content and process. Student and teacher communication, interactivity, individualisation of studies, etc. are emphasised.

The third and the fourth categories are the least significant speaking about quality improvement factors. Appropriate psychodidactic and technological preparation of study process participants improves the quality of studies, however, it is not a very significant element. Distance studies are technology dependent therefore, it is important to ensure that both students and teachers are using the right tools and have the possibility to use the Internet.

Table 3. Factors improving the quality of distance education (studying)

Categories	Subcategories	Statements	*n* (%)
Efficiency of the study process [50 (46.9)]	Saving time & money [22 (20.4)]	Proper time planning	8 (7.4)
		Appropriate time consumption	6 (5.6)
		Optimal/adequate daily load	4 (3.7)
		No need to waste time and financial resources going to lectures	4 (3.7)
	Flexibility [19 (18.2)]	Flexibility of online activities	9 (9.0)
		Flexible study schedule	5 (4.6)
		Individual learning pace	4 (3.7)
		Ability to quickly join groups and work in them	1 (0.9)
	Availability of resources [9 (8.3)]	Availability of information	4 (3.7)
		Availability of methodological resources at a convenient time	4 (3.7)
		Additional information VMA	1 (0.9)
Optimality of the study process [32 (29.4)]	Rationality of organisation [15 (13.8)]	Appropriate communication	5 (4.6)
		Individualisation of learning	5 (4.6)
		Good feedback	3 (2.8)
		Adequate support from teachers	1 (0.9)
		Consideration of suggestions and comments made by students	1 (0.9)
	Suitability of study methods [13 (11.9)]	Interactivity	5 (4.6)
		Active discussions	4 (3.7)
		Group tasks, joint work	2 (1.8)
		Practical work	1 (0.9)
		Consultations with teachers	1 (0.9)
	Study programme attractiveness [4 (3.7)]	Subject (module) attractiveness	4 (3.7)
Psychodidactic preparation of study process participants [13 (11.9)]	Student's well-being & mood [8 (7.3)]	Good emotional state of students	3 (2.8)
		Active student involvement in lecture activities	2 (1.8)
		Active participation in lectures	1 (0.9)
		Student's motivation to study	1 (0.9)
		Student awareness	1 (0.9)
	Teacher's professionalism [5 (4.6)]	Professionalism and creativity of teachers	3 (2.8)
		Teacher's eloquence	1 (0.9)
		Teacher competence	1 (0.9)
Technological preparation [13 (11.8)]	Knowledge of technology [8 (7.2)]	Knowledge of distance learning platforms	2 (1.8)
		Increasing teacher and student experience	2 (1.8)
		Appropriate teacher preparation for distance studies	2 (1.8)
		Good digital skills of teachers	1 (0.9)
		Teacher's ability to deal with technologies	1 (0.9)
	Equipment [5 (4.6)]	Appropriate technical equipment	3 (2.8)
		Appropriate online platforms are used	2 (1.8)

Note. Totally 108 semantic units were extracted

The factors possibly reducing/deteriorating the quality of distance education (studying) are analysed accordingly. Five categories are distinguished: *students' psychophysiological disturbances*, *technical disturbances*, *deficiencies in the study process*, *insufficient adaptability of teachers*, and *lack of communication and cooperation* (**Table 4**).

It can be seen that the main factor worsening the quality of studies is *students' psychophysiological disturbances* (25.1%), which is expressed in the lack of motivation and students' passivity and low involvement in the study process. It is obvious that student engagement has a direct impact on academic success and student achievement.

Technical disturbances (22.0%) (the second category) also occupy a considerable part among the quality-deteriorating factors. In this situation, when the load increases, and other technical disturbances related to software failures are faced, teachers must look for an alternative that would ensure the smooth progress of the study process. To make this possible, teachers should be able to use a wider range of technological programmes.

Table 4. Factors reducing/deteriorating the quality of distance education (studying)

Categories	Subcategories	Statements	*n* (%)
Students' psychophysiological disturbances [28 (25.1)]	Lack of motivation & passivity [19 (17.1)]	Lack of student motivation	7 (6.3)
		Inactive student participation in the lecture	5 (4.5)
		Student passivity	4 (3.6)
		Poor student involvement in the study process	3 (2.7)
	Fatigue [9 (8.0)]	Severe fatigue	3 (2.7)
		Concentration difficulties	3 (2.7)
		Spending too much time online	2 (1.8)
		Poor work & rest regime	1 (0.8)
Technical disturbances [24 (22.0)]	Access disturbances [16 (14.8)]	Poor internet connection, internet disturbances	16 (14.8)
	Equipment disturbances [8 (7.2)]	Limited capabilities of the equipment & technique used	8 (7.2)
Disadvantages of the study process [21 (18.7)]	Increase in study load [12 (10.8)]	Plenty of independent work	7 (6.3)
		Abundance of tests	3 (2.7)
		High information flow	2 (1.8)
	Disadvantages of study planning [7 (6.3)]	Too many lectures per day	4 (3.6)
		Time management/planning difficulties	3 (2.7)
	Disadvantages of realisation [2 (1.6)]	Lack of flexibility	1 (0.8)
		Monotony of technology use	1 (0.8)
Insufficient adaptability of teachers [20 (17.4)]	Lack of innovativeness [16 (14.2)]	Dry theory teaching, monotony	12 (10.8)
		Teachers' traditional approach to teaching	2 (1.8)
		Irrelevant teaching methods	1 (0.8)
		Non-interactive tasks	1 (0.8)
	Lack of flexibility [4 (3.2)]	Inability to adapt to a different presentation format	1 (0.8)
		Teachers' resistance & reluctance to accept innovations	1 (0.8)
		Delayed feedback	1 (0.8)
		Insufficient support from teachers	1 (0.8)
Lack of communication & cooperation [19 (16.8)]	Lack of communication [16 (14.1)]	Lack of direct contact	10 (8.9)
		Lack of direct communication with teachers	4 (3.6)
		Lack of individual communication	1 (0.8)
		Poorly chosen communication platform	1 (0.8)
	Lack of cooperation [3 (2.7)]	Lack of cooperation between teachers & students	3 (2.7)

Note. Totally 112 semantic units were extracted

The third category *disadvantages of the study process* (18.7%) is related to the increase of the workload and disadvantages of study planning and realisation. Due to the extreme quarantine conditions, the problems of the organisation of distance study process emerged, these problems are related to the performance of laboratory and practical work, knowledge assessment, technology application, etc.

The fourth category *insufficient adaptability of teachers* (17.4%) is expressed in two subcategories–lack of innovativeness and flexibility. It must be noticed that lack of innovativeness is basically understood as teachers' prevailing attitude to teaching in general, not related to the pandemic situation. It is worth emphasising that the pandemic struck unexpectedly, the study process had to be reoriented very quickly, teachers faced great challenges–there was no adaptation period, it was necessary to act beyond the boundaries of time, competences, space, etc.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of the study was to analyse the position of second-cycle students in terms of the quality of distance learning. Despite the fact that distance studies have certain disadvantages, this is the way to learn in the future.

The results of the study show that in general, master's students evaluate the quality of distance learning positively. Such study format meets their expectations. This is associated with study flexibility, practicality, optimal time management, etc. In addition, almost 100% of second study cycle students seek to balance work and studies. This is a common experience in many countries. For example, a study in Brazil showed that

postgraduate students learn to combine studies with work and family. They partly study online and then do various tasks at home (Eller et al., 2016). A study conducted in Malaysia showed that some postgraduate students were older adults who already had their career and family before they began studies (Rahmat et al., 2021). Student expectations are obviously a significant factor in the quality of distance learning therefore, teachers should be able to identify and acknowledge/understand student expectations (Gopal et al., 2020).

The conducted research showed that one of the essential things for the good quality of distance studies is the smoothness of the study organisation and teacher professionalism. Suitability of technical equipment and the Internet access also occupy a significant part. Research shows that conditions differ in different countries, therefore, there is no point in generalising. For example, as researchers claim, online learning cannot produce desired results in underdeveloped countries like Pakistan, where a vast majority of students are unable to access the Internet due to technical as well as monetary issues (Adnan & Anwar, 2020). Similarly, a study conducted in Ireland showed that despite positive experiences studying online, most students still prefer in-class learning (Yang, 2021).

The study established that the efficiency of the study process and its optimality are the two most significant factors that improve the quality of distance studies. The most important elements are proper time planning, flexibility of online activities, and information accessibility. The other studies basically reveal similar factors as well. (Waterhouse et al., 2022). Study process optimality includes such factors as proper communication, good feedback, individualised access, etc. According to Jiménez-Bucarey et al. (2021) the student takes the leading role and is recognized as an important and participatory actor in the online study process. Basically, the majority of studies examining the issues of improving the quality of distance studies, consider flexibility as one of the most significant factors, in other words, online learning offers flexibility (Parsad et al., 2008).

During the pandemic, distance studies undoubtedly caused certain difficulties. As the conducted study showed, two essential blocks of factors–technical disturbances and students' psychophysiological disturbances worsen the quality of studies. Disadvantages of the study process, especially related to study planning and increased workload of students, are also considered as deteriorating factors. Studies by other researchers basically reveal the same factors. For example, Malaysian researchers note that due to this pandemic, students' social life had been affected drastically (Azlan et al., 2020). Very often, various technical disturbances such as poor internet connection (El Khuluqo et al., 2021) or low speed of the Internet (Safdar et al., 2020) are pointed out. However, the use of technology is useful. More tools and facilities are fundamentally helping to improve the ability to use technology (Katemba, 2020). In general, it can be said that the experience of distance studying/learning has expanded significantly during the pandemic. Only a minority of students had such experience before the pandemic began. The conducted study confirmed the important point that during the pandemic, students gained experience in participating in remote video lectures, and they learned to use distance learning technologies significantly better than before the pandemic.

A study conducted in Indonesia showed that students acquired negative physical and psychological impacts when learning online (Fathoni & Retnawati, 2021), including mental health issues (Chen & Lucock, 2022). For example, a study conducted in the United Kingdom showed that a little more than half of university students experienced a deterioration in mental health in 2020. This was mainly influenced by isolation, loneliness, and worry about getting sick (Ihm et al., 2021). The conducted research analysis showed that the most common challenges postgraduate students face are technological difficulties, health, and lack of interaction (Seladorai & Mohamed, 2021). According to Ayebi-Arthur (2017), strong IT infrastructure is a prerequisite for online learning. Infrastructure must be well thought out to provide uninterrupted services during and after a certain crisis.

The study has some limitations. Although the study is qualitative, the study sample could be larger. It would make sense to conduct a quantitative study in order to obtain more reliable data. Another limitation is that only master's students in social science programmes participated in the study. This must be taken into consideration when analysing and interpreting the results. It is obvious that when studying natural and technological sciences, practical classes and direct contact with the teacher are also necessary. Meanwhile, in the field of social sciences, this is not so relevant. However, it is likely that the results of this study will have a lasting value in the scientific discussion about the process of distance studies, improvement opportunities, and will contribute to the improvement of the quality of distance master's studies.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

It was established that the students of the second-cycle of university studies positively evaluated the quality of distance learning. Such evaluation is related to the corresponding expectations, study convenience and usefulness. Such studies distinguish themselves in flexibility, practicality, and optimal time management, the quality of studies remains high even when studying remotely in an emergency. The smoothness of the organisation of the studies (proper realisation, time planning, adequate flexibility), teacher's professionalism (sufficient digital and didactic competence), and the suitability of technical equipment and access are considered the most significant components of distance studies.

The quality of distance studies is improved by the effective study process realisation, which is expressed through time and financial savings, flexibility and the availability of resources needed for studies. The optimality of the study process, manifesting itself through the suitability of study methods and strategies, and the attractiveness of the study programme are significant for quality improvement. Psychodidactic and technological preparation of study process participants has the least importance for the study quality improvement.

There are also factors that worsen the quality of studies, which it is important to take into account, and to reduce their impact accordingly. It was established that students' psychophysiological disturbances (lack of motivation, passivity, fatigue) and technical disturbances (poor access and equipment) worsen the quality of distance learning most of all. Study process disadvantages (increase of the study load, planning and realisation disadvantages) also significantly worsen the quality of studies.

It is obvious that the quality of studies has a significant impact on students' satisfaction with their studies, and the organisation where they study. Students' evaluations are very significant in order to improve all study process, especially when they are carried out under unusual conditions (in this case, during a pandemic). In addition, the pandemic caused certain transformations in the university studies, created the conditions for a wider application of distance learning, and revealed more opportunities to use electronic resources for teaching and study purposes. It is likely that the research results will adequately contribute to the improvement of the quality of the second-cycle university studies. An assumption can be made that that the pandemic has affected the study conditions and quality of different study programmes in a mixed way, and for this more comprehensive and detailed research is necessary.

REFERENCES

Adnan, M., & Anwar, K. (2020). Online learning amid the COVID-19 pandemic: Students' perspectives. *Journal of Pedagogical Sociology and Psychology, 2*(1), 45-51. https://doi.org/10.33902/JPSP.2020261309

Aristeidou, M., & Cross, S. (2021). Disrupted distance learning: The impact of COVID-19 on study habits of distance learning university students. *Open Learning: The Journal of Open, Distance and E-Learning, 36*(3), 263-282. https://doi.org/10.1080/02680513.2021.1973400

Ayebi-Arthur, K. (2017). E-learning, resilience, and change in higher education: Helping a university cope after a natural disaster. *E-Learning and Digital Media, 14*(5), 259-274. https://doi.org/10.1177/2042753017751712

Azlan, C. A., Wong, J. H. D., Tan, L. K., Huri, M. S. N. A., Ung, N. M., Pallath, V., Tan, C. P. L., Yeong, C. H., & Ng, K. H. (2020). Teaching and learning of postgraduate medical physics using Internet-based e-learning during the COVID-19 pandemic–A case study from Malaysia. *Physica Medica* [*Medical Physics*]*, 80*, 10-16. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ejmp.2020.10.002

Bakonis, E. (2020). Nuotolinis mokymas ar mokymo organizavimas nuotoliniu būdu? [Distance teaching or distance teaching organization?] *Švietimo Problemos Analizė* [*Analysis of the Education Problem*]*, 8*(186), 1-8. https://www.nsa.smm.lt/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Nuotolinis-mokymas.pdf

Bengtsson, M. (2016). How to plan and perform a qualitative study using content analysis. *NursingPlus Open, 2,* 8-14. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.npls.2016.01.001

Cejas Martinez, M. F., Navarro Cejas, M., Venegas Alvarez, G. S., Proano Rodriguez, C. E., & Mendoza Velazco, D. J. (2021). Student perceptions of Ecuadorian virtual platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Problems of Education in the 21st Century, 79*(2), 241-254. https://doi.org/10.33225/pec/21.79.241

Chen, T., & Lucock, M. (2022). The mental health of university students during the COVID-19 pandemic: An online survey in the UK. *PLoS ONE*, *17*(1), e0262562. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0262562

Čiegis, R., Šimanskienė, L., & Ramanauskas, J. (2022). Nuotolinės studijos ar nuotolinės paskaitos? Paskaitos auditorijoje ar nuotolinės paskaitos? [Distance studies or distance lectures? In the auditorium or distance lectures?] *Regional Formation and Development Studies, 1*(36), 114-120. https://doi.org/10.15181/rfds.v36i1.2393

Dagys, J. (2020). Universitetų raidos tendencijos: Vadybos ir COVID-19 pandemijos [Trends in university development: Management and the COVID-19 pandemic]. *Problemos* [*Problems*]*, 98*, 107-112. https://doi.org/10.15388/Problemos.98.9

Devi Prasad, B. (2019). Qualitative content analysis: Why is it still a path less taken? *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung* [*Forum Qualitative Social Research*]*, 20*(3). https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-20.3.3392

Eller, A. M., De Araujo, B. F. V. B., & De Araujo, D. A. V. B. (2016). Balancing work, study and home: A research with master's students in a Brazilian university. *Mackenzie Management Magazine, 17*(3), 60-84. https://doi.org/10.1590/1678-69712016/administracao.v17n3p60-83

Fathoni, A., & Retnawati, H. (2021). Challenges and strategies of postgraduate students in online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Jurnal Prima Edukasia* [*Prima Edukasia Journal*]*, 9*(2), 233-247. https://doi.org/10.21831/jpe.v9i2.37393

Gonçalves, S. P., Sousa, M. J., & Pereira, F. S. (2020). Distance learning perceptions from higher education students–The case of Portugal. *Education Sciences, 10*(12), 374. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci10120374

Gopal, R., Singh, V., & Aggarwal, A. (2021). Impact of online classes on the satisfaction and performance of students during the pandemic period of COVID-19. *Education and Information Technologies, 26*, 6923-6947. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10639-021-10523-1

Huxley, K. (2020). Content analysis, quantitative. In P. Atkinson, S. Delamont, A. Cernat, J. W. Sakshaug, & R. A. Williams (Eds.), *SAGE research methods foundations.* SAGE. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526421036880564

Jiménez-Bucarey, C., Acevedo-Duque, Á., Müller-Pérez, S., Aguilar-Gallardo, L., Mora-Moscoso, M., & Vargas, E. C. (2021). Student's satisfaction of the quality of online learning in higher education: An empirical study. *Sustainability, 13*, 11960. https://doi.org/10.3390/su132111960

Katemba, C. V. (2020). Teachers' perceptions in implementing technologies in language teaching and learning in Indonesia. *Acuity: Journal of English Language Pedagogy, Literature and Culture, 5*(2), 123-136. https://doi.org/10.35974/acuity.v5i2.2299

Lamanauskas, V., & Makarskaitė-Petkevičienė, R. (2021a). Distance lectures in university studies: Peculiarities of regular and distance study process. In J. Szada-Borzyszkowska, & E. Jakubowska (Eds.), *Różnorodność w edukacji dorosłych XXI wieku* [*Diversity in adult education of the 21st century*] (pp. 11-25). Instytut Kultury Regionalnej i Badań Literackich im. Franciszka Karpińskiego [Institute of Regional Culture and Literary Research Franciszek Karpiński]. https://epublications.vu.lt/object/elaba:113982588/

Lamanauskas, V., & Makarskaitė-Petkevičienė, R. (2021b). Distance lectures in university studies: Advantages, disadvantages, improvement. *Contemporary Educational Technology, 13*(3), ep309. https://doi.org/10.30935/cedtech/10887

Lamanauskas, V., Gorghiu, G., Santi, E. A., & Pribeanu, C. (2022). Satisfaction with the online education during the pandemic: A comparison between Romanian and Lithuanian master students. In M. Turčáni, Z. Balogh, M. Munk, M. Magdin, L. Benko, & J. Francisti (Eds.), *Proceedings of the DIVAI 2022–14th International Scientific Conference on Distance Learning in Applied Informatics* (pp. 237-248). Wolters Kluwer. https://doi.org/10.18662/rrem/14.3/616

Lune, H., & Berg, B. L. (2017). *Qualitative research methods for the social science*. Pearson.

Manuel, A. A. M., Buque, D., & Quive, R. (2021). Students' perceptions on distance education: A case study in Mozambique. *Problems of Education in the 21st Century, 79*(2), 229-240. https://doi.org/10.33225/pec/21.79.229

Marković Krstić, S., & Milošević Radulović, L. (2021). Evaluating distance education in Serbia during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Problems of Education in the 21st Century, 79*(3), 467-484. https://doi.org/10.33225/pec/21.79.467

Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook.* SAGE.

Miyazoe, T. (2008). Quality in distance education: A macro-analysis of recent trends and issues. *International Journal for Education Media and Technology, 2*(1), 15-26. https://jaems.jp/contents/icomej/vol2/IJEMT2.15-26.pdf

Morkevičius, V. (2005). Terra incognita: Kiekybinė viešosios politikos diskurso turinio analizė [*Terra incognita*: Content analysis of public policy discourse]. *Viešoji Politika ir Administravimas* [*Public Policy and Administration*]*, 11*, 74-85. https://vpa.ktu.lt/index.php/PPA/article/view/27140

Morse, J. M. (1994). Designing funded qualitative research. In N. K. Denizin, & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 220-235). SAGE.

Nausėda, E., Purauskas, D., & Parišauskienė, D. (2021). *Nuotolinių studijų iššūkiai KVK VF logistikos vadybos studijų programos studentų požiūriu* [*Challenges of distance studies from the point of view of students of KVK VF logistics management study program*]. https://vb.kvk.lt/object/elaba:100931194/100931194.pdf

Neuendorf, K. A. (2002). *The content analysis guidebook.* SAGE.

Ozer, U. (2022). Evaluation of distance education process in sports higher education. *Problems of Education in the 21st Century, 80*(1), 195-212. https://doi.org/10.33225/pec/22.80.195

Parsad, B., Lewis, L., & Tice, P. (2008). Distance education at degree-granting postsecondary institutions: 2006-2007. *National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences*. https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2009/2009044.pdf

Patton, M. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods*. SAGE.

Rahiem, M. D. H. (2020). Technological barriers and challenges in the use of ICT during the COVID-19 emergency remote learning. *Universal Journal of Educational Research, 8*(11B), 6124-6133. https://doi.org/10.13189/ujer.2020.082248

Rahmat, N. H., Sukimin, I. S., Sim, M. S., Anuar, M., & Mohandas, E. S. (2021). Online learning motivation and satisfaction: A case study of undergraduates vs postgraduates. *International Journal of Asian Social Science, 11*(2), 88-97. https://doi.org/10.18488/journal.1.2021.112.88.97

Rizun, M., & Strzelecki, A. (2020). Students' acceptance of the COVID-19 impact on shifting higher education to distance learning in Poland. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 17*(18), 6468. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17186468

Rutkauskienė, D. (2010). *E. mokymasis Lietuvoje. Prielaidos ir iniciatyvos. Nuo didaktikos e.didaktikos link* [*E-learning in Lithuania. Assumptions and initiatives. From didactics to e-didactics*]. Technologija [Technology].

Safdar, G., Rauf, A., Ullah, R., & Ur Rehman, A. (2020). Exploring factors leading to quality online learning in the era of COVID-19: A correlation model study. *Universal Journal of Educational Research, 8*(12A), 7324-7329. https://doi.org/10.13189/ujer.2020.082515

Samašonok, K., & Žonych, A. (2020). Nuotolinės studijos: Neišvengiamybė, iššūkiai ir tobulinimo galimybės [Distance study: Inevitability, challenges, and opportunities for improvement]. *Mokslas ir Edukaciniai Procesai* [*Science & Processes of Education*]*, 2*, 23-35.

Seladorai, D., & Mohamed, M. (2021). Digital learning among postgraduate students in the times of COVID-19: A literature review. *Creative Education, 12*, 1494-1502. https://doi.org/10.4236/ce.2021.127114

Sherry, A. C. (2003). Quality and its measurement in distance education. In M. G. Moore, & W. G. Anderson (Eds.), *Handbook of distance education* (pp. 435-459). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Slatkevičienė, G., & Vanagas, P. (2001). *Veiklos kompleksinio vertinimo sistema: Sudarymo teorija ir metodika* [*Complex evaluation system of activity: Formation theory and methods*]. Technologija [Technology].

Strukčinskaitė, V., Strukčinskienė, B., Strazdienė, N., & Griškonis, S. (2021). Universiteto studentų gyvensenos ypatumai pandemijos metu: Darbo kompiuteriu aplinka ir fizinis aktyvumas [University students' lifestyle during pandemic: Focus on computer-based work and physical activity]. *Sveikatos Mokslai* [*Health Sciences in Eastern Europe*]*, 31*(6), 14-18. https://doi.org/10.35988/sm-hs.2021.195

Sun, L., Tang, Y., & Zuo, W. (2020). Coronavirus boosts online education. *Nature Materials, 19*, 687. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41563-020-0678-8

Wahab, A. (2020). Online and remote learning in higher education institutes: A necessity in light of COVID-19 pandemic. *Higher Education Studies, 10*(3), 16-25. https://doi.org/10.5539/hes.v10n3p16

Waterhouse, P., Samra, R., & Lucassen, M. (2022). Distance education students' satisfaction: Do work and family roles matter? *Distance Education, 43*(1), 56-77. https://doi.org/10.1080/01587919.2021.2020622

Yang, L. H. (2021). Online learning experiences of Irish university students during the COVID-19 pandemic. *All Ireland Journal of Higher Education, 13*(1), 1-22. https://ojs.aishe.org/index.php/aishe-j/article/view/499