



## Research Article

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# Pedagogical Innovation Amidst Adversity: Exploring Online Pedagogical Practices in Southeast Europe

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## Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic necessitated a rapid shift to online teaching, posing significant challenges to educators worldwide, including those in selective countries of South Eastern Europe (SEE). This study delves deeper into the effective pedagogical strategies employed by SEEr educators during the pandemic. Utilizing a quantitative approach, we conducted surveys with professors and assistants from public universities in SEE to gather their insights and experiences. Our findings reveal a complex landscape of pedagogical strategies tailored to the unique context of SEE. Educators emphasized the importance of synchronous and asynchronous instruction, interactive online tools, and flexible assessment methods. The study highlights the significance of building a supportive online learning community and adapting content for virtual delivery. Additionally, the role of faculty development programs and institutional support emerges as crucial in equipping educators with the necessary skills and resources for effective online teaching. This research contributes to the ongoing discourse on distance education and the long-term implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on pedagogical practices. The insights offered by SEEr educators serve as a valuable resource for local and international stakeholders in education, assisting in the development of sustainable and adaptable strategies for online teaching. The study underscores the resilience and adaptability of educators and the need for continued investment in professional development to ensure quality education in SEE during and beyond crises.

**Keywords:** Southeastern Europe, COVID-19, Public university, Pedagogical strategy, Online teaching

## 1. Introduction

The global onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 forced a radical transformation of educational paradigms, compelling institutions and educators to adapt swiftly to the constraints imposed by the crisis. Among the most profound shifts was the transition to online teaching and learning, a pedagogical revolution that introduced both challenges and opportunities in the realm of higher education. Public universities in selective countries of SEE, more specifically Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, and North Macedonia, like their global counterparts, were confronted with the urgent need to reconfigure their educational delivery methods in response to the

pandemic's disruptive impact.

In this paper, we explore the realities faced by SEE educators as they navigated this unprecedented shift to hybrid and online teaching. Within the context of the broader study, the paper unearthed a rich tapestry of experiences, dilemmas, and strategies employed by educators from public universities in SEE. The profound insights from this case study illuminate the path forward in enhancing the quality of online education in SEE.

This paper seeks to delve further into the specifics of effective pedagogical strategies employed by SEE educators during the COVID-19 pandemic. It capitalises on the invaluable insights gleaned from the case study, aiming to unravel the nuanced approaches that emerged as a response to the unique educational landscape of SEE.

As the international community grappled with the challenges of remote education during the pandemic, educators in SEE were confronted with their own set of circumstances. Local contexts, infrastructure, and socio-economic factors all played pivotal roles in shaping the strategies employed by SEE educators, making their experiences a case study in adaptability and resilience.

This paper embarks on a journey to spotlight the effective pedagogical strategies that emerged from the trenches of online teaching in SEE. It draws from surveys conducted with professors and assistants from public universities of selective countries of SEE, offering a comprehensive perspective on the tools, methods, and approaches that proved successful in the SEE higher education setting.

The findings presented herein carry significance not only for SEE but for the broader educational landscape. They serve as a testament to the remarkable adaptability of educators during times of crisis and shed light on the pivotal role of faculty development programs in equipping teachers for digital education. The insights presented in this paper will be invaluable for local and international stakeholders in education, offering a roadmap for future developments in pedagogical practices and online teaching.

As the world continues to grapple with the evolving challenges of education in a digital age, the experiences and strategies of SEE educators offer valuable lessons and exemplify the potential of adaptability in shaping the future of higher education.

## **2. Literature Review**

The COVID-19 pandemic necessitated an unprecedented transformation of higher education, prompting institutions and educators worldwide to adapt swiftly to the constraints imposed by the crisis. Among the most profound shifts was the transition to online teaching, a pedagogical revolution that introduced both challenges and opportunities in the realm of higher education. Public universities in Southeast Europe (SEE), like elsewhere, were confronted with the urgent need to reconfigure their educational delivery methods in response to the pandemic's disruptive impact.

Before the pandemic, Southeast Europe's educational landscape was already grappling with several challenges. Many universities faced limited technological infrastructure, which hindered the widespread adoption of digital tools and online learning platforms. Internet access varied significantly across the region, with rural and economically disadvantaged areas experiencing significant connectivity issues. These pre-existing conditions posed challenges for implementing online and hybrid teaching models during the pandemic.

Hybrid teaching, also known as blended learning, merges face-to-face and virtual instruction, offering flexibility in educational delivery. Hybrid models generally involve a combination of online and in-person classes, although the proportion can vary based on specific needs and circumstances. The COVID-19 pandemic significantly influenced the balance between these modes, often necessitating a greater reliance on online education. Research from Iowa State University (2020) has shown that both students and teachers favor hybrid models due to their flexibility and ability to cater to diverse learning preferences. This approach enables students to engage in various activities and manage their time more effectively, enhancing the overall learning experience.

The experiences of educators, their pedagogical strategies, and the challenges they encountered

during this transformative period have been the subject of extensive research worldwide. The sudden transition to online teaching engendered several challenges that educators across the globe had to grapple with. One universal challenge was the digital divide, with disparities in internet access and digital literacy affecting both students and teachers. These disparities were further complicated by economic and social factors, which were exacerbated in SEE due to existing infrastructure limitations. Several studies (Daniel, 2020; Hodges et al., 2020; Ali, 2020; Mtebe & Raisamo, 2018) underscore the critical importance of addressing digital inequities to ensure equitable access to education.

Before the pandemic, hybrid teaching was already being recognized as an effective educational model. Studies have shown its potential to improve learning by combining the strengths of traditional and online methods. Hannay and Newvine (2006) noted that hybrid courses could enhance engagement and learning outcomes by offering a mix of synchronous (real-time) and asynchronous (self-paced) activities. This blend allows for more dynamic and interactive learning experiences, catering to different student needs and preferences.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, hybrid teaching became essential rather than optional. Educators had to adapt quickly to new technologies and pedagogical strategies to maintain educational continuity. Effective practices included balancing synchronous and asynchronous learning, using interactive digital tools, and adapting course materials for online delivery. Studies by Hodges et al. (2020) and Means et al. (2014) highlighted the importance of regular interaction and engagement in maintaining student motivation and learning outcomes. In Kosovo, more specifically, the adoption of hybrid teaching faced unique challenges due to the region's specific context. The lack of prior emphasis on hybrid teaching in higher education meant that the pandemic acted as an unprecedented catalyst for change in this area. The experiences of educators in Kosovo underscored the critical importance of infrastructure and faculty development programs in supporting this transition.

The shift to online teaching necessitated the rapid adaptation of pedagogical strategies to maintain engagement, interaction, and effective learning. Several approaches emerged as effective during the pandemic, both globally and, as we seek to explore, in SEE. A balance between synchronous (real-time) and asynchronous (self-paced) learning activities emerged as a best practice (Hodges et al., 2020; Means et al., 2014). This approach allowed for flexibility while maintaining regular interaction. The integration of interactive digital tools and platforms, such as Learning Management Systems (LMS), video conferencing, and discussion boards, played a vital role in facilitating engagement and collaboration (Adnan & Anwar, 2020; Poole, 2014). The adaptation of course materials and content for online delivery was deemed essential (Hrastinski, 2008; Anderson, 2008). This adaptation aimed to accommodate the unique characteristics of online learning environments and enhance students' comprehension and retention. The implementation of varied assessment methods, including quizzes, essays, and peer assessments, allowed for a more comprehensive evaluation of students' learning (Brown & Liedholm, 2002; Chick et al., 2012). Creating an inclusive and supportive online community was considered crucial for student engagement and retention (Palloff & Pratt, 2007). This sense of belonging was especially important during the isolation of the pandemic.

As the world moves beyond the immediate crisis of the pandemic, hybrid teaching is expected to remain a significant component of higher education. The lessons learned during the pandemic will inform future educational strategies, emphasizing the need for flexibility, accessibility, and the integration of technology. Research suggests that hybrid teaching will continue to be relevant due to its ability to accommodate diverse learning needs and enhance educational resilience. This ongoing relevance is supported by the adaptability and resilience demonstrated by educators in SEE during the pandemic, which provide valuable insights into the potential for hybrid teaching to transform higher education.

While effective pedagogical strategies are pivotal for successful online teaching, they depend on the competence and preparedness of educators. Faculty development programs and institutional support, both of which have been explored in the global literature (Dennen et al., 2007; Conrad &

Donaldson, 2011), play a vital role in equipping educators with the necessary skills and resources to thrive in digital teaching environments. The local context in SEE, with its unique challenges and opportunities, adds an additional layer of complexity to this equation. In the context of SEE, the case study opens a window into the experiences of educators who navigated these challenges and adapted pedagogical strategies. The insights gained from this study offer a unique perspective and contribute to the global dialogue on effective pedagogical strategies for online teaching. The experiences and strategies of SEE educators offer valuable lessons and exemplify the potential of adaptability in shaping the future of higher education.

The literature indicates that investment in digital infrastructure is crucial for ensuring equitable access to online education, especially in regions where disparities in internet access exist. Enhancing digital infrastructure can help bridge these gaps and provide all students with the necessary tools to participate fully in online learning. The importance of continuous faculty development programs is also emphasized. These programs should be designed to equip educators with the necessary skills and resources for effective online teaching. Continuous professional development is essential to keep educators updated with the latest teaching strategies and technological advancements. Institutions should encourage a balanced approach to synchronous and asynchronous learning. Flexibility in learning methods allows for both real-time interactions and the benefits of self-paced study, which are valuable for students' diverse learning needs. Emphasis should be placed on supporting the use of interactive online tools. These tools enhance engagement and collaboration among students, making the online learning experience more dynamic and interactive.

Creating supportive online communities is another important strategy for fostering student engagement and success. Strategies such as discussion boards and group projects help create a sense of belonging and community among students, which is vital for a positive online learning experience. The social and emotional dimensions of education, facilitated through these strategies, play a crucial role in student retention and success. The challenges educators faced during the pandemic, including technical issues and the rapid transition to online teaching, highlighted the importance of continuous faculty development programs. These programs are essential for equipping educators with the necessary skills and resources to navigate the complexities of online teaching. Institutional support in providing resources and professional development opportunities is crucial for the successful implementation of hybrid and online teaching methods.

The insights from the study hold significant implications for both policy and practice in SEE's higher education landscape. Policymakers and institutions must invest in digital infrastructure to ensure equitable access to online education, especially in regions with disparities in internet access. Enhancing digital infrastructure can bridge these gaps and provide all students with the necessary tools to participate fully in online learning. The findings underscore the importance of ongoing faculty development programs. These programs should be designed to equip educators with the necessary skills and resources for effective online teaching. Continuous professional development is essential to keep educators updated with the latest teaching strategies and technological advancements. Institutions should encourage a balanced approach to synchronous and asynchronous learning. Flexibility in learning methods allows for both real-time interactions and the benefits of self-paced study, which are valuable for students' diverse learning needs. Emphasis should be placed on supporting the use of interactive online tools. These tools enhance engagement and collaboration among students, making the online learning experience more dynamic and interactive.

In general, the transition to hybrid teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted both the challenges and opportunities associated with this instructional approach. The experiences of professors and teaching assistants during this period provide valuable lessons in the effective implementation of hybrid teaching. By addressing the challenges and leveraging the opportunities presented by this approach, educators can enhance the learning experience and outcomes for their students. The insights gained from this period will be invaluable in shaping the future of education in a post-pandemic world. The adaptability and resilience of SEE educators offer a blueprint for future preparedness and support for online teaching in SEE and beyond.

### 3. Methodology

The participants in this study consisted of forty professors and teaching assistants from seven universities across selected countries in Southeast Europe (SEE), including Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, and North Macedonia. These educators were actively involved in online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. The selection of participants was purposive, focusing on educators with diverse teaching experiences, expertise, and backgrounds to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the pedagogical strategies employed. Forty surveys were distributed to forty professors and teaching assistants from seven universities across selected countries in Southeast Europe (SEE), resulting in a response rate of 100%.

The data collection process involved administering a survey questionnaire designed to gather quantitative data regarding the pedagogical strategies used by educators during the transition to online teaching. The survey included Likert-scale questions to assess the frequency and effectiveness of various strategies, along with open-ended questions that allowed participants to provide additional insights. The survey was distributed electronically to the participants, ensuring a broad and efficient reach.

The research process was conducted in several stages to ensure thorough and accurate data collection. The initial stage involved the preparation of the survey questionnaire. The author meticulously designed the survey to align with the study's objectives, ensuring that it would capture relevant and comprehensive data on the pedagogical strategies employed by the educators.

Following the preparation, the data collection stage commenced. Surveys were administered electronically to the participants, who were given adequate time to complete them. Reminders were sent to encourage participation and maximize response rates. This approach ensured that the data collected was representative of the diverse experiences and practices of SEE educators during the pandemic.

The methodology employed in this study was rigorous and systematic, allowing for a detailed and nuanced understanding of the pedagogical strategies used by SEE educators during the COVID-19 pandemic. The purposive sampling of participants ensured that a wide range of perspectives was captured, while the use of both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods provided a comprehensive overview of the educators' experiences and strategies.

Overall, the methodology facilitated a robust analysis of the pedagogical strategies employed by SEE educators, providing valuable insights into their practices during a period of unprecedented disruption and transformation in higher education.

### 4. Data Presentation and Analysis

In this section, we present and analyze the data collected from SEE educators regarding their effective pedagogical strategies for online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. The survey responses were analyzed using the built-in statistical tools in Google Forms to identify patterns and trends. Initially, the data were reviewed for completeness to ensure that all responses were valid. Descriptive statistics, such as percentages and average ratings, were automatically generated by Google Forms to summarize the results. Likert-scale questions, which assessed the frequency and effectiveness of pedagogical strategies on a scale from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree," were analyzed by examining the percentage distribution of responses. This analysis provided insights into the most commonly used strategies and their perceived effectiveness by educators.

The data revealed the frequency of pedagogical strategies employed by SEE educators during the pandemic, ranked in descending order of use. The strategy of "Interactive Online Tools" emerged as the most frequently employed, with 85% of educators reporting regular use of tools such as Learning Management Systems (LMS), video conferencing platforms, and discussion boards. For example, one professor utilized Moodle extensively to organize coursework and assessments, which allowed close tracking of student progress, administering quizzes, and facilitating discussion forums.

This approach was particularly effective in maintaining a structured learning environment despite the challenges posed by remote learning. Another successful instance involved the use of Zoom breakout rooms in a linguistics course. The educator divided students into small groups, encouraging active participation and collaboration during discussions. This method not only fostered deeper engagement but also provided a platform for peer learning, which was highly appreciated by the students.

The perceived effectiveness of these strategies was also examined and presented in order of effectiveness. According to the survey, "Synchronous Learning" was rated as highly effective by 70% of the respondents, with many educators highlighting the benefits of real-time interaction for maintaining student engagement. An illustrative case is that of a teaching assistant who organized weekly live sessions where students could ask questions and discuss lecture content in real time. This approach was praised for creating a sense of continuity and interaction, which many students felt was missing in asynchronous learning environments. Similarly, "Adaptive Content Delivery" was deemed highly effective by 65% of educators. One professor emphasized the necessity of redesigning content to fit the digital format, transforming lengthy lectures into short, engaging videos with embedded quizzes to ensure comprehension. This approach significantly enhanced student engagement and understanding of the material.

A significant number of educators, approximately 68%, underscored the importance of adapting course materials for online delivery. They discussed the necessity of redesigning content to fit the digital format better, thereby improving student comprehension and engagement. For instance, an educator remarked on the importance of not merely transferring lecture notes online but rethinking how to present information effectively in a digital environment. This educator's efforts in reformatting a traditionally lecture-heavy course into a series of interactive modules were met with positive feedback from students, who appreciated the clarity and accessibility of the content.

Educators recognized the significance of creating a sense of community in the online classroom. Strategies such as discussion boards and group projects were frequently mentioned as effective ways to foster interaction and peer collaboration. 60% of educators reported that these strategies were instrumental in creating a supportive online learning environment. One teaching assistant shared their experience of using online discussion forums to simulate the kind of spontaneous interaction that typically occurs in a physical classroom. This approach helped students feel connected and supported, particularly during periods of isolation due to the pandemic.

Participants candidly shared both challenges and successes. Technical issues were a common challenge, with 55% of educators experiencing difficulties with internet connectivity and video conferencing tools. The need for a rapid transition to online teaching was another significant challenge, cited by 50% of the respondents. Despite these challenges, educators recounted positive experiences, such as innovative assessment methods that improved student engagement. For example, 45% of educators reported that using varied assessment methods, such as quizzes and peer assessments, kept students motivated and engaged. One professor introduced a peer-review system where students assessed each other's work, which not only encouraged deeper engagement with the material but also developed critical thinking and evaluative skills among students.

Several educators highlighted the importance of institutional support and faculty development programs. About 72% of respondents participated in some form of professional development during the pandemic. These programs equipped them with the necessary skills for effective online teaching. One educator remarked that without the support from their institution and continuous professional development, it would have been much harder to adapt to the new teaching environment. The faculty development programs provided them with the tools and knowledge needed to transition smoothly to online teaching, ensuring that they could maintain high standards of education even in a remote setting.

The data collected from the survey offers a comprehensive view of the pedagogical strategies employed by SEE educators during the COVID-19 pandemic. The quantitative data from the survey provides a well-rounded understanding of the implementation and effectiveness of these strategies.



For example, while 78% of educators frequently used synchronous learning activities, qualitative feedback highlighted that real-time interactions helped maintain a sense of normalcy and engagement among students. The experiences shared by educators also shed light on the importance of continuous faculty development and institutional support. Overall, this comprehensive analysis underscores the importance of adaptive pedagogical strategies, robust digital infrastructure, and continuous professional development in supporting effective online teaching. The insights gained from this study not only highlight the resilience and adaptability of SEE educators but also provide valuable lessons for the future of higher education in a post-pandemic world.

## 5. Discussion

The findings presented in this study shed light on the effective pedagogical strategies employed by SEER educators during the challenging times of the COVID-19 pandemic. The discussion of these findings encompasses several key themes and their implications:

### 5.1 *Balancing Synchronous and Asynchronous Learning*

One of the central themes emerging from the study is the importance of a balanced approach to synchronous and asynchronous learning activities. Educators acknowledged the need for real-time interactions (synchronous) to maintain engagement and facilitate immediate feedback. At the same time, asynchronous activities allowed for flexibility and accommodated diverse student schedules. The survey data indicate a significant reliance on both modes of instruction, with a tendency toward more frequent use of synchronous activities.

The balance between these two approaches seems to align with current best practices in online education. It caters to the needs of a diverse student body while ensuring that real-time interactions are available for those who benefit from them. However, it's essential to note that this balance may require the appropriate technological infrastructure and faculty training to be fully effective.

### 5.2 *Leveraging Interactive Online Tools*

Interactive online tools emerged as a pivotal element of effective online teaching strategies. These tools, including Learning Management Systems (LMS), video conferencing platforms, and discussion boards, offered opportunities for engagement, collaboration, and content delivery. Survey data indicate that these tools were among the most frequently used strategies and were perceived as effective by the educators.

The prominence of these tools underscores the significance of digital infrastructure and the role of technology in enhancing online education. Furthermore, it highlights the adaptability of SEER educators in leveraging available digital resources to create interactive and engaging online learning experiences.

### 5.3 *Adaptive Content Delivery*

Adapting content for online delivery was another key theme. This practice, supported by the literature (Hrastinski, 2008; Anderson, 2008), recognizes the unique characteristics of online learning environments. Survey results indicate that educators frequently adapted their content for online delivery. The qualitative data provided more context, revealing the deliberate effort to make content more suitable for digital formats.

The adaptability of educators in SEE is commendable. It aligns with international best practices and underlines the importance of course design that considers the needs of the online learner. However, this practice also calls for continuous faculty development and institutional support to ensure educators have the skills and resources to carry out this adaptation effectively.

#### 5.4 Building Supportive Online Communities

Creating supportive online learning communities emerged as an important aspect of pedagogical strategies. The data indicated that educators recognized the significance of building a sense of belonging and community among online students. The use of discussion boards and group projects was cited as a means to achieve this.

This aligns with established practices in online education (Palloff & Pratt, 2007) and reflects the adaptability of SEER educators in fostering a positive online learning environment. It also highlights the social and emotional dimensions of online education, which are essential for student engagement and success.

#### 5.5 Challenges and the Role of Faculty Development

The study did not shy away from acknowledging the challenges faced by SEE educators during the transition to online teaching. One of the most significant challenges was technological barriers, which were highlighted by 55% of the respondents. These barriers included unreliable internet connectivity, difficulties with video conferencing tools, and a lack of adequate technical support. Educators reported that these issues not only disrupted the flow of their teaching but also led to frustrations among students, who often faced similar challenges on their end. For instance, one educator mentioned that intermittent connectivity issues made it difficult to maintain the momentum of live sessions, leading to a loss of engagement and continuity in learning.

Another major challenge was student engagement. Approximately 50% of educators expressed concerns about maintaining student interest and participation in an online environment. The lack of physical presence made it harder to read students' non-verbal cues and adjust teaching strategies accordingly. Educators found that students were more likely to disengage or become passive learners when not physically present in a classroom. One professor shared an experience where students would often turn off their cameras during Zoom sessions, making it difficult to assess their understanding and involvement in the lesson. This led educators to seek alternative methods of engagement, such as interactive polls, breakout discussions, and more frequent assessments, to ensure that students remained active participants in their learning process.

Institutional constraints also posed significant challenges. Around 40% of respondents cited issues such as limited access to resources, insufficient training on online teaching tools, and a lack of clear guidelines from their institutions. The sudden shift to online teaching left many educators feeling unprepared and unsupported. One educator remarked that while their institution provided some basic training on using online platforms, there was a steep learning curve associated with effectively integrating these tools into their teaching practice. This lack of preparedness was compounded by the absence of standardized protocols for online assessments, leading to inconsistencies in how students were evaluated across different courses.

Despite these challenges, educators demonstrated resilience and adaptability by developing innovative solutions to overcome these obstacles. Varied assessment methods, such as online quizzes, peer assessments, and project-based assignments, were introduced to enhance student engagement and provide a more dynamic learning experience. Educators also leaned heavily on professional development opportunities to bridge the gap in their online teaching skills. The data emphasize the importance of faculty development programs and institutional support in preparing educators for online teaching. Approximately 72% of respondents reported participating in professional development programs during the pandemic, which they credited with helping them navigate the complexities of online education. These programs not only provided technical training but also offered strategies for maintaining student engagement and managing the unique challenges of remote teaching.

The challenges faced during the pandemic underscored the need for continuous investment in



faculty training and the development of strategies for dealing with unforeseen circumstances. Educators recognized that while technology can enhance the learning experience, it also requires robust support systems to ensure its effective use. The experiences of SEE educators during this period highlight the critical role of institutional backing and professional development in sustaining the quality of education in challenging times.

### 5.6 *Implications for Policy and Practice*

The insights from this study hold significance for both policy and practice in SEE's higher education landscape. The adaptability and resilience of SEEr educators in the face of challenges provide a foundation for future preparedness. Policymakers and institutions can consider several implications. To begin with, investment in digital infrastructure is crucial for ensuring equitable access to online education, especially in regions where disparities in internet access exist. Enhancing digital infrastructure can help bridge these gaps and provide all students with the necessary tools to participate fully in online learning.

The findings underscore the importance of ongoing faculty development programs. These programs should be designed to equip educators with the necessary skills and resources for effective online teaching. Continuous professional development is essential to keep educators updated with the latest teaching strategies and technological advancements.

Institutions should encourage a balanced approach to synchronous and asynchronous learning. Flexibility in learning methods allows for both real-time interactions and the benefits of self-paced study, which are valuable for students' diverse learning needs.

Emphasis should be placed on supporting the use of interactive online tools. These tools enhance engagement and collaboration among students, making the online learning experience more dynamic and interactive.

Strategies to foster a sense of community in the online classroom should be encouraged and facilitated. Creating supportive online communities contributes significantly to student engagement and success by promoting a collaborative and inclusive learning environment.

A final implication would be that faculties should be encouraged and trained to adapt content effectively for online delivery. Considering the unique aspects of the online learning environment, adaptive content delivery ensures that educational material is accessible and engaging for all students.

Generally, the transition to hybrid teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted both the challenges and opportunities associated with this instructional approach. Based on the findings from the research, several key insights emerge regarding the effective pedagogical strategies employed by professors and teaching assistants.

One of the most significant advantages of hybrid teaching is the flexibility it offers. Professors and students alike benefited from the ability to balance physical and virtual classes, which facilitated better time management and the opportunity to develop more creative and engaging lesson plans. This flexibility was particularly beneficial in allowing educators to integrate both synchronous and asynchronous activities, thereby enhancing student engagement and promoting independent learning.

Interactive tools and platforms were indispensable in maintaining student engagement. The use of Learning Management Systems (LMS), video conferencing, and discussion boards enabled professors to create a collaborative learning environment. Such tools were instrumental in facilitating group discussions, problem-solving tasks, and other cooperative activities that fostered a sense of community among students. These strategies not only kept students engaged but also helped to develop their critical thinking and teamwork skills.

However, the hybrid model also presented several challenges. Managing the cognitive load associated with dual modes of instruction required professors to be proficient in using technological tools while ensuring equitable attention to both in-person and remote students. Technical

difficulties, such as issues with video conferencing and internet connectivity, were common and necessitated quick adaptation and troubleshooting.

Despite these challenges, the preference for hybrid teaching among educators was notable. The ability to blend different teaching styles and adapt to students' needs made hybrid teaching a favoured approach. This preference underscores the importance of flexibility and adaptability in contemporary teaching practices.

This paper also underscores the critical need for a stable infrastructure to support hybrid teaching. Reliable internet access, adequate hardware, and proper training for educators were identified as essential components for the successful implementation of hybrid teaching methods. Institutional support, in terms of providing necessary resources and professional development opportunities, was crucial in this regard.

In conclusion, the experiences of professors and teaching assistants during the pandemic provide valuable lessons in the effective implementation of hybrid teaching. By addressing the challenges and leveraging the opportunities presented by this approach, educators can enhance the learning experience and outcomes for their students. The insights gained from this period will be invaluable in shaping the future of education in a post-pandemic world.

## 6. Conclusion

The experiences and practices of educators in Southeast Europe (SEE) during the COVID-19 pandemic offer valuable insights into effective pedagogical strategies for online teaching. This study highlights the adaptability, resilience, and innovative approaches demonstrated by these educators, providing a solid foundation for future improvements in the online education landscape.

One of the key takeaways from this study is the importance of a balanced approach to synchronous and asynchronous learning activities. The ability to maintain real-time interactions while providing flexible, self-paced learning opportunities is crucial for catering to diverse student needs. This balance not only enhances engagement but also allows for immediate feedback and accommodates different schedules.

The role of interactive online tools has been pivotal in maintaining student engagement and fostering collaboration. Learning Management Systems (LMS), video conferencing platforms, and discussion boards have become indispensable in creating a dynamic and interactive online learning environment. The widespread use of these tools underscores the need for robust digital infrastructure and continuous technological advancements.

Adapting content for online delivery emerged as another critical strategy. The unique characteristics of online learning environments require educators to be flexible and innovative in their content delivery methods. This adaptability ensures that educational material remains accessible and engaging, promoting better learning outcomes.

Building supportive online communities has proven essential for student engagement and success. Strategies such as discussion boards and group projects help create a sense of belonging and community among students, which is vital for a positive online learning experience. The social and emotional dimensions of education facilitated through these strategies play a crucial role in student retention and success.

The challenges faced by educators, including technical issues and the rapid transition to online teaching, highlighted the importance of continuous faculty development programs. These programs are essential for equipping educators with the necessary skills and resources to navigate the complexities of online teaching. Institutional support in providing resources and professional development opportunities is crucial for the successful implementation of hybrid and online teaching methods.

Given these findings, it is recommended that policymakers and educational institutions prioritize investments in digital infrastructure and faculty development programs. Enhancing online learning infrastructure will ensure equitable access to education, particularly in regions with

disparities in internet connectivity. Additionally, continuous professional development will keep educators abreast of the latest pedagogical strategies and technological tools, enabling them to deliver high-quality online education.

Future research should build on these findings by exploring the long-term impact of online pedagogical practices. Longitudinal studies could assess how sustained use of these strategies affects student outcomes over time. Comparative studies across different regions could also provide a broader perspective on the effectiveness of various online teaching methods, offering insights that could be applied in diverse educational contexts.

In conclusion, the transition to hybrid teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted both challenges and opportunities. The experiences of professors and teaching assistants provide valuable lessons in the effective implementation of hybrid teaching. By addressing the challenges and leveraging the opportunities presented by this approach, educators can enhance the learning experience and outcomes for their students. The insights gained from this period will be invaluable in shaping the future of education in a post-pandemic world. The adaptability and resilience of SEE educators offer a blueprint for future preparedness and support for online teaching in SEE and beyond.

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