



Online Collaborative Learning in Higher Education in Albania: Some Necessary Innovations

Eriola Qafzezi

Fan S. Noli University, Albania

eqafzezi@unkorce.edu.al

Purpose: The purpose of the current paper is to discuss the necessity for the internationalisation of Albanian HEIs, in light of the recent changes that HEIs in Albania are undergoing. Online collaborative learning is thus introduced as a necessary innovation to be embraced in HE in Albania, illustrated by implementation and findings and comments based on an authentic case study undertaken in the third course, Bachelor level, Fan S. Noli University, Korça, Albania.

Study design/methodology/approach: The paper is supported by a theoretical background on online collaborative learning and factual data about the current state of HEIs in Albania. The latter factual information illustrates the necessity of embracing online learning practices through collaborative learning, supported by examples from the case study. The paper adopts a mixed method approach, combining qualitative analysis with quantitative data derived from surveys carried out with Albanian students.

Findings: There are some conclusions and findings that we have derived from the factual information presented about the current state of HEIs in Albania, combined with data extracted from the case study. They point to the necessary innovations involving Albanian teachers and students of HEIs in online collaborative learning.

Originality/value: The current study bears original value because it provides direct links between the current need for the internationalisation of HEIs in Albania and online collaborative learning as a concrete way to bring about internationalisation. Examples brought are also authentic, taken from the case study, supported by data from pre- and post-implementation surveys conducted with Albanian students who took part in the case study.

Internationalisation of higher education institutions

Education is of primary importance to all generations, and as such, it calls for constant development and innovation. One of Albania's top higher education institutions' (HEIs) priorities is internationalisation and increased mobilities.

This paper will outline some facts about HEIs in Albania, based on a report issued by the Ministry of Education of Albania (2014), followed by some factual information about online learning in Albania, as represented in the Needs Analysis Report on virtual teaching and learning in Albania (2020). We will then introduce examples from implementing online collaborative learning through a case study at the Bachelor level at Fan S. Noli University, Korça, Albania (UNIKO).

Based on the *Report on Reformation of Higher Education and Scientific Research* (2014) issued by the Commission of Higher Education and Scientific Research in Albania (under the guidance of Dr Arjan Gjonça) HEIs should respond to, adapt to and anticipate changes in the labour market and state development. It is essential to think of a unified and standardised higher education system in Albania, which enables possibilities of competition with regional and European markets. One of the long-term objectives of the reformation of HEIs is to create a unified system (A. Gjonça, 2014, p.10). Some other priorities outlined in this report are the encouragement of competition among institutions and individuals, integration of teaching and scientific research, unification and standardisation of the higher education system and integration of the higher education system in the European system (A. Gjonça, 2014, p. 10-11).

In the description of the current state of higher education in Albania, there are highlighted several problems that characterise HEIs in Albania, such as massification and lack of control mechanisms, which lead to a drastic decline in quality standards, lack of investment compared to neighbouring European countries, lack of identity and specific profile of Albanian universities as a result of system enlargement due to market demands, disregarding economic development of Albania and market demand for specific professions. (A. Gjonça, 2014, p. 12-14).

Apart from outlining problems of Albanian HEIs, the report claims that the Bologna Process (1999-2007) initiates, among other initiatives, the ECTS system, Quality Assurance System and adaptation of curricula to European standards, being a process not yet accomplished definitively. The current challenge that HEIs are facing in Albania is related to accreditation, which is a process under completion in Albania, yet, there is still a lack of consensus even in this area of progress due to constant changes in the legal framework, criteria and standards and lack of agreement and accord among HEIs, quality assurance and accreditation systems on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the Ministry of Education and Sports and the Prime Minister.

Introducing online collaborative learning as a component that endorses quality standards in higher education

One problematic area observed in Albania's HEIs is that they are quite limited regarding international and European dimensions. They are held back, almost entirely domestic. This is witnessed in unsatisfactory long-term visionary inclusion in interinstitutional collaboration and a limited number of official joint study programs. Such isolation of HEIs is also evident through the lack of collaboration among Albanian institutions in similar fields, and the lack of integrated and interdisciplinary research projects, which leads to the transformation of HEIs into 'closed' entities, even within the city or region they operate themselves. Another consequence of limited collaboration is weak, almost non-existent relations with the community, labour market, professional organisations and other directly or indirectly related interest parties. (A. Gjonça, 2014, p. 10-17).

It is to be emphasised, however, that HEIs in Albania are continuously updating their teaching and learning procedures and standards as they are all involved in accreditation. For example, UNIKO (Fan S. Noli University, Korça, Albania) received a 5-year institutional accreditation from the British Quality Assurance Agency in 21.09.2017, thus ranked among the first four public and non-public higher education institutions in Albania. Such a fact raises the awareness of the academic staff about further professional advancement, enhancement of research quality and collaboration with other HEIs to sustain high-quality teaching standards and provide internationalisation of academic activity. On the other hand, the pandemic outbreak showed that there was a general lack of confidence among academic staff and students alike related to online/blended learning since this was a relatively new experience among HEIs in Albania, which was used to traditional ways of teaching and learning, predominantly based on face-to-face communication – the traditional classroom. Covid-19 did impose a fast shift from the traditional approach, a change for which most of the academic staff and students found themselves quite unprepared, but tried to embrace the change quickly through the use of diverse platforms such as Google Classroom, Google Meet, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Moodle, etc. However, due to a lack of experience, training and confidence, the first classes were reduced merely to digital correspondence courses, lacking the necessary criteria to engage online learners actively and meaningfully. It is also relevant to mention here that based on the HE quality code (the primary document for all quality assurance processes and procedures in HEIs) there have been settled several state quality standards that are mandatory to be implemented by

HEIs. This code of quality was drafted by a working group set up by order of the Minister of Education and Sports and was amended by DCM no. 824, dated 24.12.2021 (https://www.ascal.al/media/documents/legjislacioni/ENGLISH_PVKM%20e%20Kodit%20t%20Cil%20C3%ABsis%20C3%AB_Perkthim_2021.pdf). In light of this study. We find several standards relevant to the encouragement and enhancement of online collaborative learning in HEIs in Albania that we are proposing through the current paper and the general goal of the internationalisation of HEIs. We cite some of these standards below:

- *Standard II.15 The institution coordinates activities in the information technology area.*
- *Standard II.9 The institution pursues an open cooperation and partnership strategy at the regional, national, and international levels.*
- *Standard II.20 The institution cooperates with other institutions to support its academic, administrative, scientific-research/artistic activity and internships.*
- *Standard II.21 The institution pursues a policy favouring the mobility of the academic staff and students at an international level.*
- *Standard III.16 The study programs aim at preparing students for employment.*
- *Standard III.17 Study programs are designed to promote Albanian and international students' mobility.*
- *Standard IV.3 The institution encourages the development and dynamism of scientific/artistic and scientific activities.*
- *Standard IV.1 The institution has defined scientific research as a main strategy priority, focusing on research internationalisation and related activities.*
- *Standard IV.13 The institution prioritises the mobility of the academic staff and students and provides the mechanisms for high participation rates.*
- *Standard I.2. Higher education institution ensures cooperation relationships with institutions, companies, third parties, and local and/or foreign business actors related to the delivery of study programs in professional training and mobility framework.*
- *Standard III.6 The Higher Education Institution pursues a clear policy to guarantee and promote the quality of teaching and develops special guidelines for teaching methods development and monitoring.*
- *Standard III.1 The higher education institution ensures teaching process realisation and professional and scientific skill acquisition through the best student-centred methods and practices that guarantee outcome achievement.*
- *Standard III.1 The Higher Education Institution ensures learning processes and professional and scientific development through the best student-centred practices and methods that guarantee outcomes attainment.*

Bearing in mind all the *weak points of HE in Albania* as cited in the current paper (unsatisfactory inclusion in interinstitutional collaboration, isolation of HEIs, lack of interdisciplinary research projects, weak to non-existent relations to community and labour market and professional organisations and/or other interest parties), together with the *priorities set in the standards* cited from the HE quality code (activities in IT area, cooperation and partnership, support of internship to comply with labour market demands, mobility of staff and students, cooperation with several parties in the framework of professional training, promotion of quality of teaching, all through student-centred activities), we aim at *introducing online collaborative learning as one of the most beneficial activities for both instructors and learners*, through which some of the problematic areas witnessed in HEIs in Albania could be avoided, and the quality standards can be prioritised.

Today we should no longer question the existence or necessity of online distance learning; due to the pandemic outbreak, online education has become commonplace in higher education and

even in high schools and elementary levels in Albania. Questions such as “What constitutes online learning, blended learning and technology-mediated education?” have received quite satisfactory answers in theory and practice from those involved in education at different levels. Several elements can be brought to light about online teaching and learning, among which of primary importance are elements such as engagement and empowerment of online learners, virtual collaboration, designation of the virtual environment, methods of measuring success in the online classroom, evaluation of online learners, evaluation of teamwork through virtual collaborative learning, etc. This paper focuses on online collaborative learning as a fruitful way of engaging online learners towards achieving learning outcomes. We think the online environment promotes collaborative skills because students depend on each other to succeed and improve the learning process outcomes.

There are many benefits that a collaborative approach brings to online teaching and learning. Palloff and Pratt, two leading researchers in online teaching and learning, emphasise that the inability or unwillingness to facilitate a collaborative learning process leads to the failure of many online distance learning programs (Palloff and Pratt, 2007, p. 120). Thus collaboration is key to success. Quoting Harasim, they also outline that collaborative effort helps learners achieve a deeper level of knowledge generation while moving from independence to interdependence, thus strengthening the foundation of the online learning community (Palloff and Pratt, 2007, p. 157). Furthermore, Conrad and Donaldson, in introducing activities that engage online learners, affirm that collaborative acquisition of knowledge is one key to the success of creating an online learning environment. Activities that require student interaction and encourage sharing ideas to promote a deeper level of thought (Conrad and Donaldson, 2004, p. 5). Having outlined such advantages, it needs to be clarified that collaboration is not exclusively related to a meaningful and purposeful process of knowledge gain or generation. Brookfield maintains that collaborative processes promote the initiative on the part of the learners, as well as creativity, critical thinking skills, and dialogue. (Brookfield, 1996, in Palloff and Pratt, 2007, p. 158). On the other hand, collaborative activities can connect learners purposefully, promote interdependence, invite learners to test out new ideas through support groups and receive critical and constructive feedback, and thus, fight feelings of isolation that are commonly shared by participants in online environments (Palloff and Pratt, 2007, p. 158).

Case study of online collaborative learning at UNIKO

Several suggestions are given in the above-mentioned report of the Ministry of Education that aim to improve standards and further investment in HE. The three main aspects worthy of attention and investment are related to teaching (1), research and scientific work (2), and innovation/development (3). We will bring some examples from a case study as an instance of online collaborative learning, which aims at improving standards of teaching, research and innovation in HEIs – the three most important pillars of HE.

HEIs have traditionally involved students in laboratory practice and small group work; however, knowledge gain and skills practice are not always meaningful in interaction with one another, sometimes at the expense of detachment from the real-world application of such knowledge. Thus, educators are constantly challenged to develop authentic group-based activities that encourage purposeful collaboration that support teamwork and the achievement of learning objectives. Such authentic activities will provide learners with the so-much-needed experience to compete in the real market. In addition, working with others will facilitate the process of building a deep understanding in students that takes account of multiple perspectives, reflects the way practitioners work as well as how knowledge is shared within communities of practice (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989; Duffy & Cunningham, 1996; Lave & Wenger, 1991).

As pointed out by Roberts in *Online Collaborative Learning: Theory and Practice* (2004, p. 3), some specific instructional strategies that support authentic activities are case-, problem- and project-based learning (see, for example, Duffy & Cunningham, 1996; Jonassen, Mayes, & McAleese, 1993; Savery & Duffy, 1995). Such approaches encourage collaboration through the following:

- Collective problem solving (Barrows, 1994; Jonassen et al., 1993; Herrington & Oliver, 1997),
- Group project work (Blumenfeld, Soloway, Marx, Krajcik, Guzdial, & Palincsar, 1991; Cognition and Technology Group at Vanderbilt, 1997), and
- Discussion of rich descriptions of realistic cases (Ertmer & Russell, 1995; Stepich, Ertmer, & Lane, 2001).

There is a multitude of advantages for learners involved in collaborative approaches, such as distribution of knowledge and workload among group members, transfer of skills to real-world experience, development of soft skills, encouragement of competition, motivation of purposeful research, raised awareness about other cultural backgrounds, motivational support, etc. Collaborative activities used to take place in the classroom or on campus; however, nowadays, aided by the development of IT and computer-mediated teaching and learning, more flexible approaches have been adopted, and new opportunities have risen for student collaboration and support. Teachers and learners have adapted to a new sense of presence, being here and there simultaneously.

The case study described in this part of the paper portrays the experience of Albanian students engaged in online collaborative learning within the framework of the Valeu-x project, supported by Erasmus+. The pilot module was implemented during the winter semester with a total of 13 students of the third course, Bachelor level, English language Branch, Faculty of Education and Philology, UNIKO. It took place on the subject of *Translation* through the implementation of an authentic case study composed of authentic activities that relied on realistic tasks accomplished through online collaborative learning among team members. It was implemented over three weeks, consisting of twenty classes. The learning experience was centred on the main task of *setting up and operating a translation centre* that would provide real service in Korça, Albania.

Through the several tasks and sub-tasks, we aimed at providing students with opportunities that would help them gain real-world experience of market demand concerning translations, work out problem-solving and time-management techniques, gain familiarity related to individual contributions to team success, and a lot of other situations that mimic real-life work settings. During the implementation of this case study, students were mainly involved in online collaboration; they only met physically to meet potential stakeholders that would support their translation centre and for advertisement purposes. Such activities in the case study framework will be summarised in Table 1.

The case study revolved around setting up and operating a Virtual Translation Centre using up-to-date virtual information and communication technologies. Through teamwork as well as individual contribution within teams and sub-teams, students have contributed to the founding and operation of the translation centre, the various units to operate within the centre, the roles of teams and individuals who operate within the centre, the time span of tasks' completion, expected outcomes, etc. The Translation Centre functioned virtually, but it was contextualised in reality because, as part of their job, students need to translate University documentation and materials, which would finally constitute the External Evaluation Folder (part of the current accreditation process). The students have explored the case on their own, with the assistance

and (if necessary) collaboration of the teacher and e-tutors. As their teacher, I have advised learners and intervened only if there were any problems or unclear matters. When needed, expertise in communication and information technologies was provided to learners by e-tutors through tutorials or assistance during online meetings. Knowledge about the lack of expertise was gathered using questionnaires to identify areas that need more practice for successful online collaborative learning. The purposes of the case study were multifold: develop students' digital competence, foster online collaborative learning, provide students with authentic experience and involvement in teamwork, and encourage learners to build expertise through learning in a realistic context (Honebein, Duffy, & Fishman, 1993; Jonassen et al., 1993).

During the implementation of the case study with students in the third year at the Bachelor level, there have been cases of online teaching and learning as well as blended learning, flipped classrooms, display classes, and final presentation (open day). Several tasks and sub-tasks have been given to students, online team meetings through the platform Microsoft Teams, complementary work on Miro Board has been accomplished, and Kahoot games and liberating structures have been used. Physical meetings on terrain have also been part of the aims of the pilot module. Students have participated fully in all activities, and e-tutors' assistance was shared among relevant classes. In the actual physical meetings with potential stakeholders' representatives from "Thimi Mitko" City Library and from NGO Dorcas AID Albania joined with the hope of generating possible work for the *Virtual Translation Centre* in the future, hopefully shifting its status from a fictive virtual translation centre to a real one, assuring sustainability.

Table 1: Tasks, tools, purpose in online collaborative learning, Bachelor level

Tasks and subtasks	Tools	Purpose
<i>Setting up and operating a translation centre</i>	Microsoft Teams Market needs' analysis Interviews Questionnaires	Define the necessity for the existence of a translation centre
<i>Deciding on the name and slogan of the virtual translation centre</i>	Microsoft Teams Online discussion Microsoft Teams	Build team spirit Contribute to realistic tasks
<i>Roles' Descriptions</i>	Microsoft Teams Miro Board Video tutorials Liberating Structures Conversation Café, Appreciative Interview, Min Specs What? So What? Now What?	Define roles that operate within teams and sub-teams Have clear goals to facilitate realistic evaluation during further stages

<p><i>Responsibilities for each role</i></p>	<p>Microsoft Teams Miro Board Liberating Structures Tutorials Conversation Café, Appreciative Interview, Min Specs What? So What? Now What?</p>	<p>Define the responsibilities of each role Have clear goals to aid realistic assessment for teams, sub-teams and individual contributions within teams</p>
<p><i>Human Resources Office to assign roles to students</i></p>	<p>Microsoft Teams Miro Board E-mail Liberating Structures Conversation Café, Appreciative Interview, Min Specs What? So What? Now What?</p>	<p>Design roles based on concrete skills and abilities Mimic real-life situations</p>
<p><i>Creating a logo, a web page, posters and advertisements for the virtual translation centre</i></p>	<p>Microsoft Teams Miro Board Liberating Structures Conversation Café, Appreciative Interview, Min Specs What? So What? Now What?</p>	<p>Get involved in teamwork Develop soft skills Develop digital competence</p>
<p><i>Exchange of visual means produced by students</i></p>	<p>Microsoft Teams Display of posters, business cards, and roles presentation within teams</p>	<p>Get closer to each other Recognise responsibilities and accomplishments of each role to enhance chances of effective collaboration</p>
<p><i>Learning more about the profession of translator</i></p>	<p>Microsoft Teams Flipped classroom Recorded lectures Kahoot games</p>	<p>Gain translation competence Discuss sensitive issues</p>
<p><i>Posting activities on a timeline</i></p>	<p>Miro Board</p>	<p>Evaluation of ongoing tasks</p>

<i>Meeting with potential stakeholders</i>	Physical meetings	Sustainability of the translation centre
<i>Presentation of accomplished work</i>	Posts on Miro Board Questionnaires Powerpoint presentations	Feedback Self-evaluation Peer evaluation
<i>Dissemination of deliverables</i>	TV report on a local television channel Interviews Displays Instagram posts	Going public Become market-available

Analysis of data derived from pre- and post-implementation surveys with students

Students were given surveys to complete before and after implementing the case study through online collaborative learning. Both pre-and post-implementation surveys were composed of two main sections: in the first section, students had to rate their answers on a Likert scale, whereas the second section included some further considerations in the form of open questions. The pre-implementation survey included questions related to the previous experience of online collaborative learning and expectations, aspects of the role of a teacher and e-tutor, communication, collaboration and interaction, and soft skills. Apart from the sections already mentioned in the pre-implementation survey, the post-implementation survey included questions related to contents of the pilot module, aspects related to the virtual teaching and learning environment, and aspects related to digital competence. Open questions in both surveys are associated with the possibility of including the pilot module in an elective course in the future, listing the advantages and disadvantages of online collaborative learning and additional considerations not covered by the questions given.

Students' answers to pre-implementation survey questions

Concerning the pre-implementation survey, students have revealed that 85.7% already believe they possess enough knowledge to be involved in online collaborative learning. They also understood the technicalities of using the online learning platform and were confident about their digital competence and use of online tools. They all agreed (50%) and strongly agreed (50%) that collaborative work is conducive to successful outcomes. However, 85.7% agreed and strongly agreed that online collaborative work is productive at this pre-implementation stage, and 71.4% considered it time-saving. All students responded that they would like their contribution to online collaborative activities to be identified (42.9% strongly agree and 57.1% agree). Most (85.8%) consider the online-project-based approach in HE challenging. At this stage, 69.2% said they enjoy online collaborative learning, whereas the rest neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement. All students agreed and strongly agreed that collaborative work encourages them to be more active and that they expect online collaborative learning to improve their problem-solving and inter-personal skills, inspire creativity, improve confidence and self-confidence, make learning fun and productive, and help with future work ethics, negotiation and conflict-resolution skills.

As far as open-ended questions at this stage are concerned, students have answered that they would gladly enrol for an elective course that is based on online virtual collaboration since, as they stated, such a course would combine productivity and creativity and activities related to brainstorming, feedback and the building of an online community that shares content, experience and improves skills. They also emphasised that such an experience would help them with their future job placement. Other reasons for choosing such a course stated by students are innovation, escape from the routine, and development of self-confidence and collaborative

skills. Students have also listed some advantages and disadvantages of using online collaborative learning. Advantages mentioned include: lack of pressure to engage physically within a stable environment, a mutually beneficial experience, improvement of online engagement, facilitated peer feedback, fostering a sense of online learning community, enhancing digital skills, easier access to information, access to up-to-date technology educational tools, flexible time schedule, improved communication, saving of time, the chance of being the leader of a group and profiting from such an experience for the future, enhanced critical thinking skills, increased interaction among peers. On the other hand, some of the disadvantages mentioned include imposing someone's approach onto other peers, lack of skills to work within a team, profiting from the work of the best students, delayed responses causing delayed deliverables, lack of up-to-date devices, problems with the use of the platform, and slow internet.

Students' answers to post-implementation survey questions

In the post-implementation stage, students' answers to the survey revealed that practical activities and assignments in different parts of the case study were relevant to putting the knowledge into practice (61.5% agree and 38.5% strongly agree). They also stated that the pilot module's case study fitted their learning needs (77%) and prepared them for the future job market (84.6%). Furthermore, 84.7% said they would encourage online collaborative learning even in their Master's Degree. All students found the use of online tools useful for collaborative learning and agreed that understanding the use of social platforms had been provided during different stages of case study implementation. Most (92.4%) agreed or strongly agreed that online communication between teachers and students through online platform tools was effective. In contrast, all of them agreed that online communication through online platforms and tools among peers was effective (53.8% strongly agree, 46.2% agree). All students considered the quality of audiovisual materials to be important for successful online learning, and they all agreed that collaborative work is conducive to successful outcomes.

Referring to the possibility of future participation in online collaborative activities, most students would like to be identified (38.5% strongly agree, 53.8% agree). They stated that collaboration tools suited students' needs and learning goals (38.5% strongly agree, 53.8% agree, and 7.7% neither agree nor disagree). Regarding whether students considered the online project-based approach challenging in HE, compared to 85.8% of students in the pre-implementation survey who assessed the online-project-based approach in HE as challenging, in the post-implementation survey, 61.6% consider it was challenging (46.2% agree, 15.4% strongly agree). We think that such a decline in a percentage goes to show that implementing a case study based on online collaborative learning has been successful and meaningful and has realistically increased levels of purposeful collaboration among students. In addition, 92.3% of students agree that the online-project-based learning approach is worth the challenge. All students stated that they enjoyed online collaborative learning, and most agreed that group work has encouraged them to be more active (84.6%). Online collaborative learning has aided effective teamwork (92.3%) and induced them to take on more responsibility for learning (92.4%).

According to students' response to the post-implementation survey, online collaborative learning has helped them achieve good academic performance (92.4%), and teamwork has allowed them to build up their knowledge through other peers' input (92.3%). According to data extracted from the survey, students have learned more through interacting with peers rather than by working alone (77%). They also emphasised that success on deliverables depends on clear roles' assignment and task specification (30.8% strongly agree, 61.5% agree) and that the team's success reflected team members' success (92.3%). The continuous contact between group members also aided in individual contribution within the team and task completion in

due time (92.5%). Most students have kept to the rule of using the platform for educational purposes, not social matters (76.9%). All students agreed that activities carried out within online collaborative learning were meaningful, the materials presented and delivered were visually pleasing, and they suited the learning goals. Most of them agreed that online collaborative learning had helped them to develop soft skills (91.7%), encourage social interaction (84.6%) and confidence (92.3%), and inspire creativity (92.3%) and had also made them realise that social networking sites may also be used for educational purposes (92.3%). Online collaborative learning, based on the answers of the post-implementation survey, makes learning fun and enjoyable (61.5 % strongly agree, 30.8% agree, 7.7% neither agree nor disagree) and helps the development of interpersonal skills (53.8% strongly agree, 38.5% agree, 7.7% neither agree nor disagree). Also, most importantly, online collaborative learning brought students closer to real-life work situations (61.5% strongly agree, 30.8% agree, 7.7% neither agree nor disagree), helped them with future work ethics and negotiation (69.2% strongly agree, 23% agree, 7.8% neither agree nor disagree).

Concerning open-ended questions at the end of the survey, it is quite interesting to observe that even after the implementation of the case study, students all agreed to enrol in an elective course based on online collaborative learning, emphasising that the case study was fascinating, that they have enjoyed being part of the current pilot module, that they think it would help them for the future job market, that their levels of collaboration have increased and become more meaningful. In addition, their translation and IT competence have improved as a result of the pilot module. Some of the advantages they listed when they took the survey upon completion of the pilot module are: improved time management skills, benefits from peer collaboration, increased levels of motivation, improved communication and IT skills, enhanced problem-solving and negotiation skills, appreciation of the possibility to get to know online platforms that could also be used in their future profession, acknowledgement of student's active role in the teaching and learning process with the teacher as an observer and the e-tutor as an assistant, student-centred experience of learning, learning through entertaining themselves, raised levels of confidence, being safe from possibilities of virus infections due to being online, and lower financial costs since they did not have to commute to attend lessons physically. But, again, as far as disadvantages are concerned, they mentioned slow internet, lack of up-to-date devices, excess exposure to screen time, delays in delivering work on time since some students were not as actively involved as others, and lack of physical socialisation.

After having analysed and taken into consideration all students' answers, we do think that courses which foster online collaborative learning can and should be included in Albanian HEIs because students have quickly embraced student-centred learning based on the current case study of the pilot module and, the advantages, as stated by students themselves, outweigh the disadvantages.

Conclusions

In light of the current priorities of HEIs that are going hand in hand with the accreditation process of Albanian HEIs, we think that online collaborative learning should occupy a more significant share of the educational process and, as such, it should also be incorporated in the syllabi of curricula in HE. Collaboration and interdependence are key criteria for the founding and successfully implementing online learning communities. Unless collaboration is promoted, there will be inactivity in online environments, lack of interaction, and, thus, failure to achieve the desired learning objectives. Furthermore, the case study implemented at the Bachelor level at UNIKO is an authentic proof that students have quickly embraced online collaborative learning and developed several competencies towards achieving a common goal that mimics labour market ideas in real life; thus, students can compete better in the future labour market. We also support the view that virtual/blended learning through the implementation of online

collaborative learning and virtual mobilities is a good alternative to students' and teachers' limited physical mobilities and, if implemented meaningfully and purposefully, it will take us some steps forward towards institutional internationalisation and accomplishment of criteria of accreditation.

References

- Agency of Quality Assurance of Higher Education. (2021). The Quality Code. www.ascal.al/kodi-i-cilesise
- Brookfield, S. D. (1996). *Understanding and Facilitating Adult Learning: A Comprehensive Analysis of Principles and Effective Practice*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
- Conrad, R. M., and Donaldson A. (2004). *Engaging the Online Learner: Activities and Resources for Creative Instruction*. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.
- Honebein, P. C., Duffy, T. M., & Fishman, B. J. (1993). Constructivism and the design of learning environments: context and authentic activities for learning. In T. M. Duffy, J. Lowyck, & D. H. Jonassen (eds.), *Designing Environments for Constructive Learning*, (pp. 87-108). Springer-Verlag, Berlin, Germany.
- Jonassen, D., Mayes, T., & McAleese, A. (1993). A manifesto for a constructivist approach to uses of technology in higher education. In T. M. Duffy, J. Lowyck, & D. H. Jonassen (eds.), *Designing Environments for Constructive Learning*, (pp. 231-247). Springer-Verlag, Berlin, Germany.
- Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (2014). 'First report for the reform in higher education and research', https://arsimi.gov.al/wpcontent/uploads/2018/08/Raport_Final_Ministria_Arsimit.pdf
- Paloff, R., and Pratt, K. (2007). *Building Online Learning Communities*. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.
- Roberts, T. (2004) *Online Collaborative Learning: Theory and Practice*. Information Science Publishing, UK.
- Vladi, B. et al (2020). 'VALEU-X: A needs assessment report on virtual collaborative teaching and learning in Albania'. VALEU-X Project Consortium. DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4290969