eLearning for Tourism During COVID-19 - Learning from Students' Perspectives. A Pilot Study

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Abstract. This paper shows a first analysis of the experiences and challenges of studying tourism during the times of the COVID-19 pandemic. 14 tourism students from two higher education institutions in Europe participated in three focus group discussions. One generation of these students started their education in presence and had to shift online with the start of the pandemic, while the other generation started their education knowing that lessons would be mainly online. Authors used qualitative content analysis to analyze the participants' statements. As a result of the analysis, several themes emerged, and students contextualized eLearning as an education method for a future without COVID-19.

Keywords: eLearning · COVID-19 · Tourism education · Focus groups · Qualitative content analysis

1 Introduction

Due to the global outbreak of COVID-19 tourism economy has dramatically suffered. For instance, by the first quarter of 2021, international arrivals were down by 83% [1], or within the European Union especially "sectors that are dependent on human contact and interaction, such as the cultural and creative industries and aerospace industry (due to the decrease in mobility and tourism activities)" [2, p.8] are expected to suffer in the future. Hearing about different statements or similar economic prognoses for over a year now, as well as not being able to fulfill certain study requirements (e.g., completion of an on-site internship) could have also impacted the learning experiences of tourism students at higher education institutions (HEIs). Not only were they involuntarily catapulted into online learning but were also suddenly studying a subject that some identified as a "suffering field of study". By the time this study was completed (August 2021), two groups of tourism students could be distinguished among those who had experienced what it meant to study during COVID-19: (1) those who had started before COVID-19 broke out and (2) those who started during the pandemic.

This paper presents a pilot study on the experiences and challenges of eLearning, which several tourism students described during three focus group discussions [3] conducted from April to June 2021. It also aims at understanding the impact of the digital media, as well as Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) used for

learning tourism. Moreover, since international tourism had decreased massively, a main underlying question regarding the motivation of students to (continue to) study tourism emerged. This also connects to the issue of sustainable tourism development. As the industry attempts to recover from a crisis, so does tourism education, which gives scholars the opportunity to rethink the current curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment [4] including reflections on a more sustainable tourism education. The next part provides an overview on the tourism eLearning literature. Based on the identified research gap, the research questions are introduced. Then, the methodology and results are presented and discussed. The last part comprises a conclusion, limitations, and future steps.

2   Literature Review

eLearning is defined as "the use of new multimedia technologies and the Internet to improve the quality of learning by facilitating access to resources and services as well as remote exchanges and collaboration" [CEC 2001, p.1 in 5]. Concerning HEIs, the emergence of new technologies has affected tourism pedagogy ("how content is delivered"), assessment ("how learning is evaluated"), and curriculum ("what is being taught") [4]. According to Kalbaska and Cantoni [6], there are two main groups of providers for eLearning in tourism: (1) "academic institutions", e.g., by offering blended learning, online courses up to full programs or even MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) and (2) the "industry at large", i.e., for profit companies, independent providers, and public agencies. The eLearning offers from both groups are used by university students as well as within the tourism industry [6]. Especially the use of eLearning by the latter makes it an essential part of e-Tourism.

Due to an increasing global digitalization, eLearning in tourism research is not an unknown field, in fact, with the emergence of the internet there has been a significant and increasing amount of research that has focused on the various forms of eLearning in tourism [5, 7–13]. A search on Google Scholar in August 2021 using the keywords "eLearning" and "tourism" presents 7'970 results (including citations). Different authors with different viewpoints have studied the subject. For instance, Kalbaska's [14] research on "eLearning courses" by Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) about tourism destinations, focuses on the research of the online "training of the travel trade" i.e., vocational training [6]. For this, the researcher explored the use of these courses "for the education and certification of their travel partners". Focusing on another form of online course, Lin [15] studied the experiences of hospitality and tourism MOOC teachers, which is closely related to the university-level initiative MOOC "eTourism: Communication Perspectives". Another perspective was taken by Adukaite's [16] research on ICTs and gamified learning. In detail, the research was based on the case of South African secondary schools and focused on (1) the role of ICTs in tourism education based on interviews with teachers, (2) the evaluation of the promotional campaign of the gamified ICT-enhanced tool WHACY, which allowed the assessment of user experience with regards to engagement and conduciveness to learning and (3) the perception of instructors concerning the adoption of "digital gamified learning in tourism education". Moreover, previous research reveals that in

the existent e-Tourism curricula, scientific knowledge, competencies, and concepts are sufficiently present, while practical skills and capabilities require further attention [17].

Another Google Scholar search in August 2021 using the keywords "eLearning" and "COVID-19" generated 76'700 results (including citations). In fact, concerning the topic of eLearning during COVID-19 at HEIs, there are already a number of empirical studies and reviews that cover this topic in general [18–20]. Rapanta's et al. [20] exploratory study reflected on the insights of four online-teaching experts on the "online-learning-related pedagogical content knowledge". The study concludes with contributions concerning the integration of certain activities when it comes to learning design, three types of teaching presence, and the adoption of a "continuous assessment model" [20]. Taking into consideration students' perspectives, Shim and Lee [18] did a thematic analysis on questionnaire answers by 393 college students, receiving students' perspectives on learning environment (where students studied during COVID-19) as well as satisfactory and unsatisfactory elements of remote learning [18]. Regarding tourism education, the involuntary shift of HEIs to online teaching also produced some first studies, reviews and reflections dealing with online tourism and hospitality education [4, 21]. Munoz et al. [22] conducted an exploratory study on social presence in the online learning environment of hospitality-related online courses. The researchers concluded "that social presence was perceived greatly by students while teachers have attempted to enhance the learning environment by augmenting the social presence indicators" [22, p.13]. Another example is the Nankai university case, where researchers were able to recommend an online teaching process during COVID-19 by analyzing interviews and newsletters as well as making observations [23]. The study is aimed at providing "reference for tourism education in other universities" by presenting a number of teaching tools as well as presenting strengths and limitations of different tools such as MOOCs or small private online courses [23].

While the COVID-19 pandemic, and its effects on university teaching and learning, is unfortunately far from finished, more studies are needed. In particular, it is important to listen to the voices of tourism students, to understand their experiences of eLearning as well as their reflections when it comes to studying the subject of tourism while it is being drastically affected.

3   Research Goals and Questions

This research addresses exactly the issues described above through the focus group strategy, and aims at answering the following research questions:

RQ1: *What does it mean for a university student to study tourism during a pandemic?*
RQ2: *How did students experience and judge eLearning as a teaching and learning tool?*
RQ3: *What kind of ICT solutions are considered as interesting to be continued also after the pandemic from the students' point of view?*

4   Methodology

To tackle the research questions, the authors conducted focus groups with 14 tourism students, who at the time were enrolled in the tourism Master programs of two European universities: HNEE – Hochschule für nachhaltige Entwicklung in Eberswalde (Germany), which has a focus on sustainability and management, and USI – Università della Svizzera italiana (Switzerland), which allows students to focus either on the topic of sustainability and management or on the increasingly prominent area of ICTs for tourism. Both programs consist of various practical projects and group work opportunities allowing students to gain and develop soft and teamwork skills needed in their future careers. These skills are needed in tourism first and foremost due to the fact that it is a people-driven industry in which economic success is highly dependent on the success of human interactions. Finally, students are either required or encouraged to undergo an internship during their studies, in order to gain and reinforce their practical experiences [24, 25]. The general outlines of the programs also match academic descriptions about the current state and future visions of tourism education [26, 27].

4.1   On the Sample Design and Conducting the Focus Groups

The first two groups interviewed consisted of five students each, one group from the first and the other from the second generation from USI. The third group involved four students of mixed generations from HNEE. To ensure homogeneity [3] groups were formed according to the university where students were enrolled, and where possible, students were also grouped according to their generation, speaking to peers that are known to them. Students came from diverse undergraduate (Bachelor) academic study backgrounds (e.g., Economics, Hospitality, Social Sciences), and different nationalities (e.g., Swiss, German, Italian).

   The first discussion was moderated by a professor. This acted to test and refine the protocol, later used by the two junior researchers, who also needed training. They were closer to students in terms of age and career. The subject of discussion appeared to be relatively easy to talk about and not overly sensitive in its nature, that's why the professor's presence was evaluated as non-intimidating. Participants were not hesitant to share their experiences, generate new ideas, and explore different issues [3], even when discussing topics such as cheating during online exams. To protect students as well as have a limited impact on their schedules, the discussions took place online, in the evenings, for about two hours per focus group. This ensured optimal location and timing for the participants [3]. Discussions were video recorded, and an auto-generated transcript was developed after. A benefit of this method was allowing the researchers to surpass geographical distances [28]. To ensure anonymity, students' names, locations, names of peers or teachers, and courses they described have been anonymized in the results.

The questions that were posed to participants covered several main themes, first and foremost focusing on the studying concept and understanding the students' experiences with eLearning. This was followed by questions regarding advantages and disadvantages of eLearning and the experiences with online exams. The former included questions regarding the preparedness of students for the sudden shift to online learning (also in terms of hardware and equipment). To understand students' experiences and opinions, researchers also asked the question of whether they faced doubts with regards to studying tourism during a time when the industry seemed to be at halt. Finally, the students were asked to share some thoughts about what the best aspects of eLearning would be to keep for the future, as well as provide suggestions for teachers.

4.2   Analysis

The video recording with the spoken word alongside the transcript and the researchers' notes were used for a qualitative content analysis (QCA), which was done with respect to Kuckartz [29]. Coding required a high level of interpretation and took place in several cycles. Evidently, four major themes emerged at the first level. Three of the major themes were then split into a total of seven subthemes on the second level. Subsequently, four out of these seven subthemes were even further divided into a third level. At this stage, one of the four third-level topics ("Affordances", see Fig. 1 below) was once again divided in two main fourth level groups before reaching the final nodes. Whereas the four major themes followed a mainly concept driven category development approach the sub-categories were developed based on a data driven approach [29]. Once the data had been coded with the exploratory category frame, a systematization in view of the research questions was undertaken.

Categories could also overlap (e.g., participants talking about two things at the same time because they are connected). A preliminary state of the research was presented for a review from other communication researchers (14 people) in May 2021, in order to get expert feedback and to improve the analysis.

5   Results

The authors were able to identify four main themes: (1) "Experiences", (2) "Human-Computer-Interplay", (3) "Social Interactions", and (4) "Studying tourism". Some were further divided into different layers of sub-themes (see Fig. 1 below).

5.1   "Experiences"

"Experiences" refers to instances when participants would express different emotions or feelings regarding eLearning during COVID-19. Within the main category of "Experiences", the authors distinguished between experiences they interpreted as positive and negative, as well as references that could not be univocally classified as either positive or negative (e.g., sarcasm).

Negative experiences were mentioned more than twice as much as the positive ones and were further subdivided into categories that were interpreted as negative emotions like sadness or frustration (for a complete overview see Fig. 1 below). A typical example for a reference that was coded as negative, further indicating "loneliness" is the following statement:

1. "(…) I was away from home, so I think that's also contributed a bit of a lower motivation. (…) I was trying to come here to have a bit of another mood, but I didn't really get anything besides being alone so (…)"

To contextualize, this student lives in a shared flat, so even though they were in company of their roommates while studying, they felt alone, which also seems to be connected to a lower motivation to study.

Fig. 1. Theme tree

The "Positive" sub-theme was also further categorized, but into fewer categories than "negative" (see Fig. 1 above). One of the few instances that was coded as a positive experience, was a student who seemed to be grateful to be able to continue their studies online:

2. "I really appreciate the effort of conducting education online because you don't have to stop your progress."

Later, it was explained that in the student's home country, which is different from the one where the university is located, peers could not even continue studying online due to a lack of infrastructure and therefore had to put their educational careers on hold which would ultimately hinder them from entering the work market by the time they had planned to.

5.2 "Human-Computer-Interplay"

On the one hand, this theme specifically refers to the affordances that technology can provide [30], which is not about the functionality of technology itself, but rather "what can be done with technology". On the other hand, students described the issues they encountered during eLearning, such as internet connectivity, bandwidth issues, and equipment. They also explained how they overcome these issues (e.g., switching to mobile data when home internet was overloaded, having two screens to follow technical classes). In general, issues were coded less than affordances. The "Affordances" category was further divided into the sub-themes of "Space" and "Time".

"Space" refers to the location where students were learning. This can refer to the sudden ability to study from home, which for example made it possible to avoid commuting, return to one's family, or use the computer to simultaneously/instantly research what is being taught, which was coded as "home office" and could be interpreted as an advantage. A striking example for this is the following statement:

3. "(…) the possibility to invite (…) experts (…) or to take part in lectures of other universities. (…) me for example I took part in a course (…) I think which is normally in presence and this was possible as it was completely online…"

By "normally" the student seemed to refer to a time when COVID-19 did not exist. In this case the course was offered in person and not online, therefore they would not have been able to participate unless physically present. However, "home office" also represented disadvantages, as described in the example below:

4. "I totally agree (…) because she mentioned the fact that she's in the place in her room where everything happens. (…) She is in the apartment and in the same place she does everything else about the university. And actually, that was quite hard because I realized it just yesterday when we came back just for one lesson, and you realize how many many things you (…) lost."

In this example, the student refers to losing a sense of importance and motivation to study due to being constantly in a familiar environment.

Moreover, another sub-category to "Space" referred to a very specific activity related to studying tourism, in presence excursions and visits, which were conducted online during the crisis. However, the execution of these activities, were mostly criticized and the questions about these were only answered by students of the first generation, who could not physically go on excursions, whereas the ones from the second generation still have another year, currently with less restrictions and are more likely to have in-person (physical) excursions. As one student stated:

5. "Because it doesn't feel like it ended. You're sort of in between states that you are aware that you don't have any other courses to follow, at least most of us don't. We have like two exams left, but the course itself, like the Master's, is finished. And the <excursion> was supposed to be that finishing line."

In this case, the physical excursion, rather than the virtual one seems to be a positive reward, which needs to take place in person and indicates a certain milestone within the students' academic career.

"Time" refers to the ability of students to change concerning when they received education. The category was further divided (see Fig. 1 above) and references by students to the categories were discussed within different contexts. Concerning "Recordings", as expected they were mentioned as a useful tool (e.g., for individual recaps), but interestingly also received comments requiring them to be of good quality and format. When it comes to "Recaps", students seemed to, for example, perceive quizzes as a helpful studying tool that could be implemented in the future (e.g., as a way to test knowledge and stay on top of what has been learned in class). The use of "Camera and Microphone" was also discussed, especially the question of switching on the camera, which was perceived as something that should be done as often as possible both by teachers and students to enhance interactions. Nonetheless, students were aware that it is a choice and also mentioned that for example sometimes switching off the camera can help with being less distracted.

When it comes to "Productivity", students were talking about the aspect of flexibility connected to having to study remotely. One student explained how they would integrate eLearning in the future:

6. "I think it should be the opportunity for students (…) if they want to be there in presence or if they also can learn at home, and I think that brings some opportunities (…) to combine also university and a job for example."

Another typical element of studying tourism, "Groupwork", was also reflected upon critically, although benefits were of course also highlighted (e.g., use of shared documents). One student commented on the possibility of conducting a group work in different time zones, while also explaining the challenges this presented:

7. "We had a course on sustainable tourism. In my group, there was one in <Argentina> and one in <Taiwan>. Now time zones didn't really work in our favor, and you could really feel it when working, because we always had to compromise on the most random hours, but you would still feel somewhat bad towards the other people because even if it was four in the afternoon, it would have meant eight in the morning for the one in <Argentina> and eight in the evening for the one in <Taiwan>. Like they were literally at the opposites (…)"

Finally, an interesting recommendation was a reference to real-time collaboration during an online class:

8. "I'm following the course on working in the tourism industry (…) and <Fonte> (…) is using this system to post the questions. (…) I think it could also be used when we're still in class because some people maybe feel shy to ask questions or maybe you want to ask the question and the professor is speaking so you don't want to interrupt."

5.3   Social Interactions

This theme was used when participants were mentioning and discussing instances related to interpersonal interactions and eLearning. In this case students referred to the differences of interaction between online vs. in-presence learning. Upon analysis of the statements, the category was further divided into two subcategories of "Student to Teacher" and "Student to Student" interactions. The primary reason for this division was the differences that existed between these interactions.

One student described a student to teacher interaction, which does not take place the same way online, as follows:

9. "Maybe you ask something to the professor, at the end of the lesson you just go to the desk, and you ask something, whereas I mean (…) you don't do it when you have a call (…), you don't remain in the call with the professor unless you have just an important question."

Students on the other hand, seem to have different levels of social interactions (in and out of class) and stressed the benefits of these as a way to enhance their learning. A benefit was mentioned by one student, talking about meeting out of class to work on a university project:

10. "Like it would have been nice (…) to get like (…) just like get together and go to actually (…) explore the project and see them so we could actually get (…) even more practical info about the organization for the project."

Moreover, students also mentioned the tendency to discuss the lectures and what they have learned during the pauses between lectures or during the lunch break. They also mentioned the benefits of discussing contents and solving problems with each other in class and learning from their peers, which seems to be hindered online.

5.4   Studying Tourism

As mentioned earlier, students were asked to explain their perceptions about studying tourism especially during the pandemic. In response, students seemed to either not have a specific opinion ("I could have studied anything it would have been the same") or were very optimistic about their higher education in tourism, the rebound of the industry after the slowdown, and even mentioned that it was "the perfect time to study tourism" as they would have been unemployed otherwise or are hypothesizing a fast

restart of tourism, where the contents they study (e.g., sustainable tourism) will be in demand more than ever:

11. "(…) I actually restarted studying because of Corona so I was like ok, well, take the two years because in these two years you will find no job whatsoever in tourism because of the virus. So, I said OK, well, then just do your damn Masters (…). I believe that we will be back, and we will be back strong. So yeah, I think it's a perfect time (…)"

6 Conclusion, Limitations and Future Outlook

The study was able to answer all three research questions in an explorative matter. Studying tourism during a crisis does not seem to be an issue to the interviewed students (RQ1). They still view it as an important field of study, viewing the crisis as an opportunity rather than a catastrophe. Regarding their experience (RQ2), students seemed to connect studying online during this time with rather negative than positive emotions. Especially the emergence of the theme "Social Interactions", stressing the differences between online and in-person learning, leads the authors to conclude, that they do not judge eLearning to be a suitable alternative for in-person learning. Nonetheless, students did identify different elements of eLearning, which are recommendable for the future (RQ3). Here, however it is important to remember that they propose the adaption of certain solutions only under specific conditions or as an addition to in-person teaching. Moreover, here, the concrete contribution of this paper to e-Tourism research and tourism practice can be highlighted. As Fuchs & Höpken [17] suggested that ICT capabilities need further attention, an inclusion of more eLearning applications in the curriculum might train students' ICT literacy.

While for this pilot study it has been possible to interview 14 students, researchers should extend the sample size in further iterations, also including institutions from outside Europe and ensuring that saturation of themes is reached. Moreover, relationships on how items are connected could also be coded [29]. Additionally, it is important to mention that even though a novel and promising approach because people were interviewed online, this poses limitations as well. Technical difficulties sometimes hindered the conversation flow, in this case the moderator had to ask participants to repeat words or paraphrase. Moreover, similar research with students of other fields of study could be conducted (e.g., fashion, public management), so that the specificity of studying tourism is further highlighted. Furthermore, the analysis could also generate more value by extending to a discourse analysis and by showing how the use of eLearning in this context of the pandemic differs from the common, voluntary use. The project could be further extended to interview the use of eLearning after COVID-19.

Lastly the authors would like to point out that, similar to students, instructors also had to quickly learn to use and adapt to various online teaching platforms while also guiding students through the process to the best of their capabilities, in order to adapt to this novel situation. This study is currently being extended by conducting in-depth interviews with tourism teachers to gain a wider perspective on the subject.

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