The Views of Students with Special Needs on Distance Education in Slovakia

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Abstract **– During the pandemic, the government of the Slovak Republic was forced to take various measures related mainly to limiting contact. These facts also affected the Department of Education, so that all educational institutions were closed. The Ministry of Education, Science, Research, and Sports of the Slovak Republic was forced to interrupt face-to-face teaching in all schools from kindergarten to university and switch to an online form of education. Even universities were not prepared for this form of education, as few universities offered study programs in which it was possible to study either in a combined or in an online form. In the paper, the focus is on the topic of online education of the students with special needs in tertiary education. As part of the empirical investigation, the aim was to map the opinions of university students with special needs and analyze their experiences with this form of education. The findings resulting from the investigation of the involved 83 respondents indicate that online education had many advantages and disadvantages for students with special needs. The most frequently mentioned advantages were, e.g., recordings from lectures and seminars (appreciated most often by students with learning disabilities), handing in assignments was rated as more practical, teachers were more accommodating, better communication during consultations, feeling more comfortable in the home environment (appreciated most often by students with mental, chronic illness and students with physical disabilities of the lower limbs). There were also negative answers, such as social isolation, technical problems, lack of practice, exercises, problems to concentrate, deterioration of health (depression), uninteresting online teaching, reduced time for writing tests.**

Keywords **– Student with special needs, online education, inclusion.**

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1. Introduction

Despite all the shortcomings that occur in Slovak educational system, education is the key means to a better life. According to [18], education is perceived as one of the most important values not only for an individual but also for the entire society. From an individual point of view, it is a form of socialization of a person in the given society and conditions their place in society. From the social point of view, education contributes to the further development of society and to building of well-being as well. The fact that everyone has the right to education, including persons with disabilities, is established by a legislative document in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, more precisely in the Article 24 of that document, which was adopted by the United Nations (UN) in December 2006. The Convention represents an international treaty of states, including the Slovak Republic. By adopting this law, the authors committed themselves to implementing inclusive education at all levels of education [9]. The law has priority over the laws in our republic, ever since the so-called ratification of this legal document took place in 2010. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities was the final step of the declaration from Salamanca, where the document outlined the principle of inclusive education, within which all teaching, including the curriculum and organizational structures, should be adapted to the individual needs of the educated pupil or student [6]. According to [4] the preparation of applicants for higher education is not sufficient. The mentioned authors also point out the shortcomings that are related to career counselling at the secondary level of education.

Another key problem for our work is a lower participation of people with disabilities in tertiary education. It is a consequence of the fact that there are special schools at lower levels of education, but there is no other educational alternative for higher education. University studies take place either in the form of an individual schedule of fulfilling studies related obligations or in the form of inclusion of students with special needs among intact students [7]. Students coming from special secondary schools are much less prepared for higher education than those who attended a regular secondary school [12]. Another reason for the lower number of students with disabilities in higher education is the attitude of society towards these students. With their attitudes, they often act as if people with disabilities do not belong to university, especially in selected study programs. There is an example of a student with the autism spectrum disorder in the primary education teaching program, where requirements and criteria are set for the profile of the graduate and in particular their application in practice. However, social inclusion can occur if a given person, whether with or without a disability, is accepted by society and given the opportunity to integrate into that society [1]. Otherness, difference can be physical or mental stemming mainly from a disability or illness or it can be a social difference that can be related either to the given disability or to the economic or material security of the given individual. Otherness is a common part of our society, but negative feelings can still be associated with it, such as fear, which often results from something that is unknown to us. The only way that difference can be accepted in our society is to try to recognize human difference, understand it, and find out how to be helpful to such persons so that they feel good and appreciated in the society [14]. Law no. 131/2002 Coll. on universities in §100 refers to students with a medical handicap as students with specific needs. Studies require a lot of independence from students with specific needs and more attention from the university. A student aged 20-25 is in a period of early adulthood, when they should be mature enough to deal with various situations related to, for example, independence from parents, building new relationships, etc [8]. It is even more difficult for students with specific needs (hereinafter only students with SEN). For individuals with disabilities, coming to university means leaving their "safe" environment. That is why it is important that the given university has a functioning support system developed when students with SEN arrive.

The university, whether it is private or public according to §100 of Act no. 131/2002 Coll. on universities should arrange academic conditions for students with SEN without reducing the demands on their academic performance.

According to §100 of Act no. 131/2002 workplaces, called support centers, are established at universities to help students with SEN. Coordinators are also involved in supporting and helping students with SEN. The coordinator is authorized by the rector, if it is a legal entity that can act as a coordinator at several universities. If the coordinator is a natural person, it is in most cases a teacher, and if they work at the faculty, the natural person is authorized by the dean of the given faculty. The condition for functioning as a coordinator is an acquired university education in the fields of special pedagogy, social work, or psychology and the use of the already mentioned education in practice [3]. The task of the coordinator for students with SEN is to provide the applicant with information about studies at the given faculty, or to arrange a meeting with representatives of the faculty or department, to inform them about and to agree on the form of the entrance exams and to provide assistance in solving problems, in general, in ensuring the conditions of education. The coordinator actively participates in identifying students with SEN, evaluates the level of assistance that needs to be provided to students. They ensure communication and cooperation with the purpose-built facilities of the university, or with individual faculties and their teachers. The coordinator also provides free psychological or career counselling to students with SEN. Counselling is involved in improving the student's mental health and in increasing of motivation to study and help students find employment in the labour market. The activities of the coordinator are covered by the support fund for students with SEN [14], [3]. There is no consensus in Slovakia about the nature, meaning, and feasibility of inclusive education, because until recently no political demand for inclusive education in tertiary education was announced. However, according to the current wording of Act No. 245/2008 Coll. on Upbringing and Education (School Act) with effect from 1 January 2023, the term inclusive education is defined in § 2 among the basic terms. Inclusive education according to Act no. 45/2008 [11] means: "joint upbringing and education of children, pupils, students or participants in upbringing and education, carried out on the basis of opportunity and respect for their upbringing-educational needs and individual characteristics and supporting their active involvement in the upbringing-educational activities of the school or school facility. The authors believe that the concept of inclusive education will soon be defined in the Higher Education Act as well.

Table 1. Characteristics of students with specific needs

Group	Definition of specific needs
A1	blind student weak-sighted student
B2	deaf student hard of hearing student
C1	student with a physical disability of the lower limbs
C2	student with a physical disability of the upper limbs
D	student with autism or other pervasive developmental needs student with learning disabilities
E	student with a chronic illness student with a medical impairment student with a mental illness

1.1. Education during a Pandemic Situation

The term pandemic is an epidemic of a new disease that has spread over a large territory, for example to several continents or to the whole world [13]. The authors can also talk about a pandemic in connection with the spread of the viral disease SARS-CoV-2, that is the coronavirus, which spread from China to the whole world at an incredible speed, and until a vaccine was developed by scientists, the disease claimed many lives. Also, according to the World Health Organization the coronavirus was a new infectious disease that was extremely contagious. This infectious disease began to spread in Slovakia in 2020. After the symptoms of the first coronavirus patient appeared and were subsequently diagnosed, the government of the Slovak Republic began to take various anti-pandemic measures in March of that year. As a result of the introduction of the measures, which mainly concerned the restriction of contacts, some activities and events had to be cancelled or some were moved to the online space. These facts also affected the sector of education, so that all educational institutions were closed. In other words, the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sports of the Slovak Republic was forced to suspend face-to-face teaching at all schools, from kindergarten to university, and switch to a distance form of education. It was a challenge for most students and teachers, because distance education did not exist in some schools before the pandemic. This mainly concerned primary and secondary schools, although universities were not sufficiently prepared for this form of education either, as this extraordinary situation arose overnight [16], [2].

The closing of schools in the pandemic situation was supposed to protect students from infection, but when implementing a distance form of studies, different levels of knowledge were achieved. Students with SEN differ from intact students in their specific needs. Therefore, it was important for teachers to consider the key areas that were necessary for teaching students with SEN in the distance form of teaching. Teachers generally avoided the pace and scope of education that was set before the transition to distance education and assigning a large number of tasks to students with SEN. When designing home education, the relevant teachers should not forget to provide extended time for learning and for working out the relevant assignments [5]. In the definition of inclusive teaching, the main aspects are, e.g., differentiation, participation, and individualization. The electronic environment is also able to ensure the aspects mentioned above, and it is assumed that the electronic environment provides a multi-sensory approach, a high possibility of individualization, and active participation of students in the given education. Among the general advantages of online education for students with SEN, the authors see increasing independence, which is mainly related to personalized schedules adjusted according to their needs. Students with SEN can study at a preferred time, which increases time management skills, and these facts help to prevent overloading of students with SEN [17]. In the online education of students with SEN, professional training of teachers, focused on electronic education, is necessary. An individual approach in the selection of technology that will be used in the online education of students with SEN plays an important role. In the online education, it is necessary to take into account the type and extent of the given specific need and the individual characteristics of the given student when choosing platforms and making pages or teaching materials available. Distance education is very useful for students with SEN; it allows universities to create inclusive educational content, thus prevents discrimination of students with disabilities and has many advantages for the students in question [10].

2. Research Methods and Methodology

The main goal of the research was to map the opinions of university students with SEN on distance education during the COVID-19 pandemic in the territory of the Slovak Republic. The research tried to achieve the goal using the questionnaire method. The main objective had set the following sub-goals:

- To find out whether students with SEN were given help and support by the university during distance education.
- To find out to what extent help and support was provided by the university to students with SEN during distance education.

The research group consisted of 83 respondents - students with SEN participating in distance education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Seven universities participated in the research, namely the Slovak University of Technology in Bratislava (STU), Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra (UKF), the Slovak Agricultural University in Nitra (SPU), Comenius University in Bratislava (UK), the University of Veterinary Medicine and Pharmacy in Košice (UVLF), University of Presov in Prešov (UNIPO), Pavel Jozef Šafárik University in Košice (UJPŠ). There was a total of 64 respondents in the western part of Slovakia and 19 respondents in the eastern part of Slovakia. The most questionnaires were filled out by respondents from western Slovakia, namely from STU in Bratislava, more precisely there were 28 of them. The fewest questionnaires were filled out by respondents from eastern Slovakia, namely from UPJŠ in Košice.

From the point of view of study degree, respondents of the 1st degree (bachelor's study program) were most represented, in which 50 students with SEN participated in the research, which represented 60% of the total number. Respondents of the 2nd degree (master's study program) filled out 30 questionnaires and made up 36%, and the least represented were the 3rd degree respondents (doctoral study program), who were three and made up 4%. The graph no. 3 shows the representation of students with individual SEN. Students with learning disabilities were the most represented, there were 32 of them and they made up 39%, another large group comprised chronically ill students and there were 12 of them, or 15%. 7 weak-sighted students filled out the questionnaire, which is 9%of all respondents, and students with mental illness had the same representation. 6 students with physical disabilities of the lower limbs took part, representing 7%, and 5 students with health impairment completed the questionnaire, which was 6% of the total number of respondents. Three without hearing students made up 4% of the research population, and four students with autism and other pervasive developmental disorders made up the same 5% as hard of hearing students. Blind students had the lowest representation, more precisely 1% of the total number of respondents. Not a single student with a physical disability of the upper limbs filled in the questionnaire. The representation of respondents in individual categories is presented in the following graph.

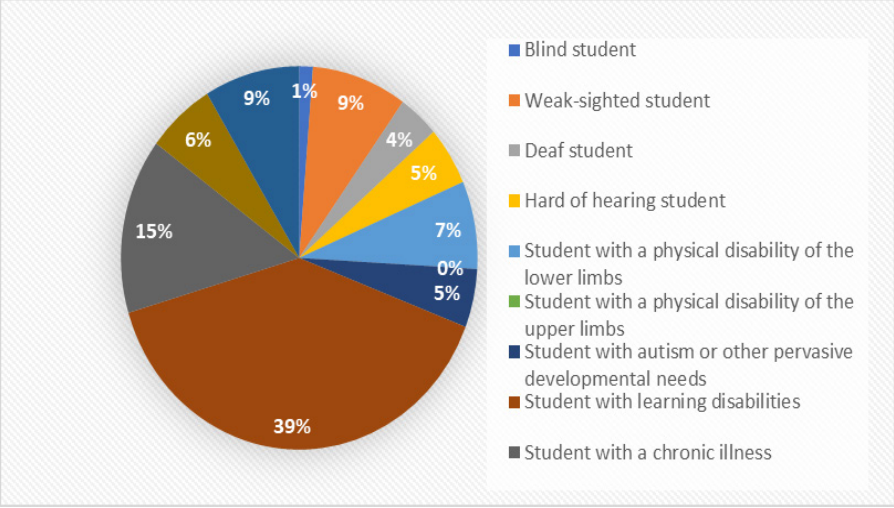

Figure 1. Representation of students with SEN

2.1 Analysis and Interpretation of elected Research Results

From the question "I was able to adapt to distance education in a short time", the questionnaire showed that students with SEN were able to adapt to distance education in a short time.

Out of the total number of respondents, 38 respondents, or 46%, agreed, and 27 respondents completely agreed, which was 32%. Only 9 respondents, representing 11%, disagreed with the given statement, and 11% of the respondents did not have a personal opinion (Figure 2).

The use of IT technologies and their applications, social networks, and various teaching channels is a matter of course for university students. Especially for students with SEN, technologies represent compensatory means and therefore they have mastered user skills.

It is believed that university students have mastered a high degree of self-regulation and self-regulation of learning, they master self-study techniques, and therefore it was not difficult for them to manage the transfer of face-to-face lectures and seminars to the online space.

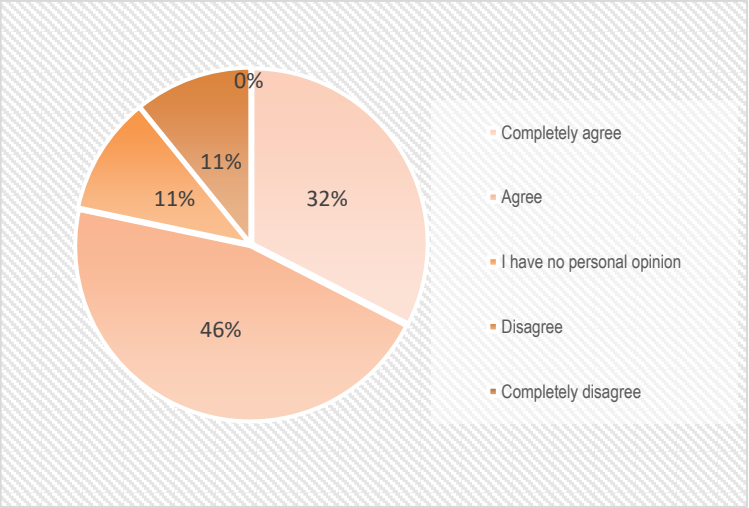

Figure 2. Adaptation to distance education

From the question: "Which platforms were used the most during distance education?", according to the graph below, MS Teams and Meet were the most used during distance education. MS Teams was used by 44 respondents, or 54%, and Meet was used by 34 respondents, which was 42%. It is surprising that Zoom was used by only 2% of the participating respondents (Figure 3). The current generation of university students is able to work with IT technologies at an above-average level. At the beginning of the pandemic, teachers were primarily trained in managing classes in the online space. Each institution had a preferred platform during distance education and used it preferentially.

Preferred platforms during distance education do not require extensive training for users. On the part of students with SEN, there were no requests for instruction in their use; their operation is intuitive for a regular user. The conditions of their use and user settings were generated by the university. The student joined the class via a link in the schedule action in the Academic Information System (AIS). Students were primarily recipients of information and instructions provided by the teacher. For normal communication, the commonly used (before the pandemic, or before distance education) methods of communication with teachers and study officers (for example in the form of e-mail communication or chat applications) were preserved.

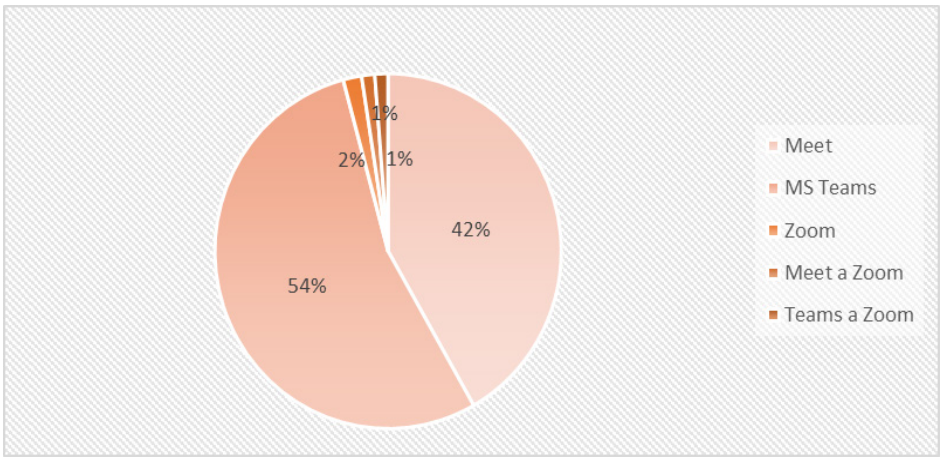

Figure 3. Preferred platforms during distance education

Respondents answered the question "During online education, I did not have an individual schedule for fulfilling my study obligations". The answer stating that they did not have an individual schedule was chosen by 28 respondents out of 83, or 34%, who completely agreed. Also, 20 respondents agreed with the given statement, which is 24%, and 20 respondents did not have a personal opinion on the given issue.

12 respondents out of 83 disagreed, which made up 14%, and 3 out of 83 (4%) completely disagreed, because the interviewed respondents had an individual schedule for fulfilling their study obligations during distance education (Figure 4). 58% of respondents stated that they did not have an individual schedule for fulfilling study obligations during distance education.

The UKF study regulations do not recognize the status of an individual study plan. The study conditions of students with SEN are the same as for intact students.

A student with special educational needs receives the necessary help and support during studies in the form of adjustment and support services provided by the university.

This is specifically specified in the form of appropriate adjustments and support services, and he is provided with compensatory aids. At the time of distance education, the implementation and assessment of student results were moved to the online space. The conditions for passing individual subjects were met in terms of accredited study programs. Based on this, it can be assumed why a large group of students (20%) could not comment on the question asked.

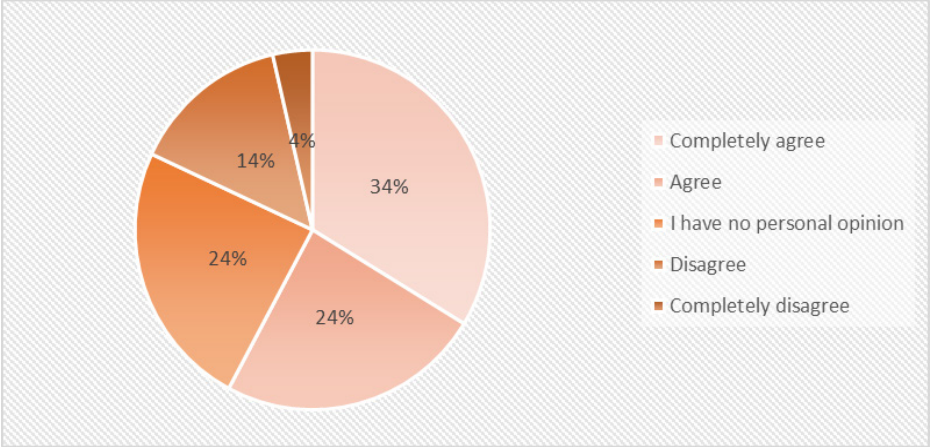

Figure 4. Individual schedule of fulfilling study obligations during distance education

The next question was "During this period, the university provided me with counselling (psychological, special pedagogical, technical) and support." According to the graph below, 29 respondents, or 35%, agreed with the given statement and 7 respondents, or 8%, said that they completely agreed. 24 respondents did not have a personal opinion on the given issue, which is 29%. 14 respondents (17%) indicated that they did not agree, and 9 respondents (11%) completely disagreed that the university provided them with special pedagogic, psychological, or technical counselling and did not even provide them with support for distance education (Figure 5).

The student support center worked continuously even during the distance education period. They were available to students with SEN in the form of consultation hours and e-mail communication.

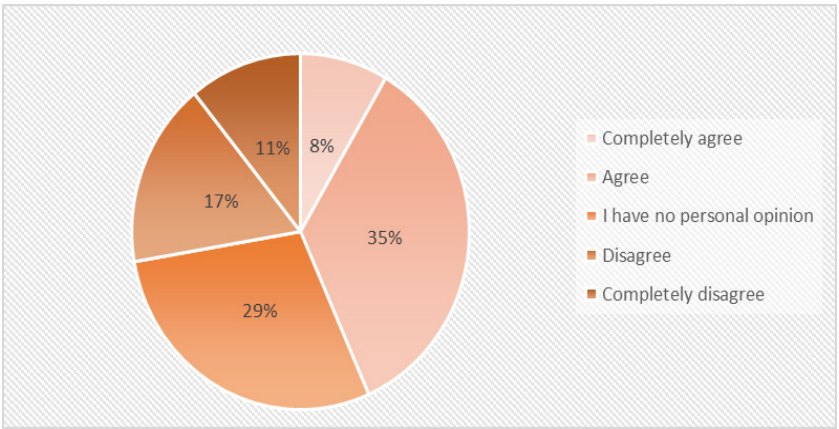

Figure 5. Provided counselling and support

"Online education suited more than face-to-face teaching." The figure shows that 22 respondents, which is 27%, completely agreed and 21 respondents, which is 25%, agreed that online education suited them more than face-to-face teaching. Furthermore, according the Figure 6 - 21 respondents, i.e., 25%, had no personal opinion, 15 respondents, i.e., 18%, disagreed with the given statement and 4 respondents, who made up 5% of the respondents, completely disagreed. So, from Figure 6 is clear that students with specific needs were more satisfied with online teaching than face-to-face teaching. In the beginning online learning was interesting not only for students with SEN, but also for all students and people who actively worked or studied during the pandemic. Originally, it was a transitional period that was not supposed to last long and provided more free time. Nowadays it is clear that a period of almost two years required adaptation to these new conditions, and almost half of the students managed to do so, which they also declare in their statements that the distance form of teaching suited them more than face-to-face. However, many researches and the work of clinical psychologists and counselors also draw attention to the negative consequences of distance learning (psychological problems, social isolation, or cyber-aggression).

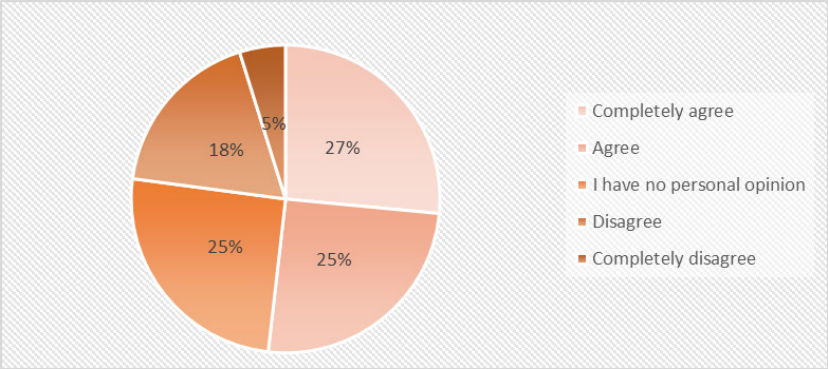

Figure 6. Preference of the teaching method

2.2 Analysis of Advantages and Disadvantages from the Point of View of Students with SEN

In the context of the obtained research results, the views of students on distance education were analyzed subsequently.

Among the most frequently mentioned advantages of online education for students with SEN were mainly recorded lectures and seminars, which they could return to repeatedly, teachers were rated as more accommodating, since they did not have to travel, they saved money and time, they felt better and more comfortable in their home environment.

- "I didn't have to travel, the teachers had materials prepared in digital form and I did not have to ask for them, digitalization improved the overall possibilities of teaching and online communication." (Visually impaired student)
- "Several professors recorded the lectures and gave students access to the given lectures. As a result, I have much nicer and clearer notes." (Student with learning disabilities)
- "No traveling, more time for preparation and education, students can record lectures and exercises and then play them to better understand the issue if students understood something incorrectly "live" or if students did not fully understand something." (Student with learning disabilities)
- "Online lectures were great because students had them recorded and I could play and save them anytime, etc. Exams were far away, and this material was available. I had a better organized time, and I was more comfortable with distance education than face-to-face. I would leave the lectures to be held online. (Student with a chronic disease)
- "Better time management, possibility to create recordings, repetition of important lectures. Some lectures/exercises were better in the online space." (Student with learning disabilities)
- "The comfort of home (no struggle to overcome social phobia by traveling and at school), the comfort of recording online classes and being able to play them over and over again." (Student with mental illness)

The arguments are linked to a positive view of distance education were related to saving time and financial resources. Students with SEN have a more complicated approach to, for example, part-time work, which puts the financing of the education of students with SEN on the parents' shoulders. Costs for travel, meals, and general expenses were saved to a great extent. Some statements that highlighted the positive aspects of the transfer of education to the online space can evoke a higher attractiveness of education for students, as the "paper-pencil" form has moved to more modern forms, or form of communication and teaching through platforms.

Staying in the comfort of home could increase well-being and a positive background for students, because it must be admitted that in some surveys, students are critical of the lack of social background for students (for example, space to heat food, insufficient quality of buffets...) the university is actively working towards improving these conditions for all students.

On the other side, students with SEN stated disadvantages most often: lack of personal contact with classmates and teachers (isolation), lack of group learning.

They did not like many hours spent at the PC, the failure of technology, impaired concentration, reduced motivation, few available study materials, short time to write tests, absence of practice and practical subjects.

- "No personal contact with classmates, little contact with the surrounding environment (most of the time I was locked at home), too much time spent at the PC, which also affected my health." (Student with a chronic disease)
- "Problematic maintenance of attention or concentration on the teaching process, be it interruption by a family member or technical problems with the Internet connection, insufficient or no interaction with classmates." (Student with learning disabilities)
- "Absence of social contact ("face to face" communication). Technology failure during education. The absence of competences necessary to manage online education." (Blind student) • "As a severely visually impaired student, I had headaches, my eyes hurt, more fatigue, "more eye strain", deterioration of vision, since students spent many hours at the computer, depression, deterioration of my social life.
- "Short (absurdly shortened) time to complete exam questions. Lectures and exercises were not recorded, there was no way to revise them. Unreliability of teachers." (Student with learning disabilities)
- "The lack of concentration, the distraction of the surroundings, I did not hear 100% of the information correctly. I often need to see the mouth to understand." (Hard of hearing student)
- "Online lectures did not suit me because I need a personal contact with the teacher. I perceive the subject matter better if I can see it and the subject matter gets me interested. Lack of motivation to learn due to poor separation of leisure time and time dedicated for school, tests structured on the assumption that students will cheat (for example, 20 questions in 10 minutes, I would rather have a properly structured test with proper questions and with a larger time span, because people, who want to cheat, will cheat anyway)." (Student with learning disabilities)
- "Exercises and lab exercises failed miserably. The (calculation) exercises also failed, because many teachers were not willing to prepare materials on which they would show the calculation process in any way. For example, several exercises were completely cancelled or replaced with lectures of theoretical knowledge, while the calculations were completely moved to self-study, which combined with the absence of books for the exercises is a recipe for failure. The lab exercises, despite the considerable effort of the teachers, failed simply because there was no practical transfer of knowledge, because the online practice is just a lecture under a different name and not practice." (Student with learning disabilities)

It follows from the above that students are aware of the pitfalls of distance education. The authors comment objectively on the results of the research and publish all of them. Nevertheless, it is possible that the reader subliminally perceives the prevalence of negative views on distance education. The negative conditions that represent the starting point for the university were revealed. Look for possibilities of using these observations to improve educational practice. It is necessary to make not only the content, but also the forms of education more attractive. For example, in a certain period the university offered the possibility of so-called of hybrid education, when students were present at classes and access was also allowed to students via educational platforms.

3. Discussion

83 respondents took part in the research. The first four questions were demographically focused, about the university they attend, their level of education, gender and a specific need. The most respondents came from the STU in Bratislava, more specifically 28 of them.

And the second largest university student group was from UKF in Nitra, with 16 students. Considering the level of studies, respondents in the bachelor's study program predominated, and regarding gender, there were more female respondents, who made up 63% of the research sample. Students with learning disabilities were the most represented, which did not surprise us. The main goal of this research was mapping the opinions of students with specific needs on distance education during the COVID-19 pandemic. As part of the sub-goals, the research focused on:

- To find out whether students with specific needs were given help and support by the university during distance education.
- To find out to what extent help and support were provided by the university to students with specific needs during distance education.

Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sports of the Slovak Republic according to §100 par. 5 of Act no. 131/2002 Coll. on universities and on amendments and additions to certain laws established the so-called minimum claims of a student with a disability according to §100 par. 2 on support services according to a specific need. Questions 8-13 were in the form of statements, and they helped us to ascertain the support services provided by the university. Using 5-point scales (completely agree, agree, have no personal opinion, disagree, completely disagree), the respondents expressed their level of agreement with the given statement. In a question that is not mentioned in the article, the researchers also tried to find out whether students with SEN were provided with help with securing literature during distance education, the graph showed that 36% of respondents had no personal opinion and 33% of respondents completely agreed. In the next question, respondents were asked whether students with SEN were provided with materials from lectures, seminars, or exercises, while 48 respondents agreed, 15 respondents completely agreed, 11 respondents leaned towards the central tendency and 9 disagreed. According to the above-mentioned results, the situation was inclined toward the possibility that students with specific needs were provided with materials from lectures, seminars or exercises during distance education. Only 11 respondents agreed and 4 completely agreed to the question of providing an individual schedule for fulfilling study obligations. Furthermore, the research looked at whether the university provided the respondents with counselling (psychological, special pedagogical, technical) and support during this period. 29 respondents agreed with the given statement, 7 respondents completely agreed, 24 respondents had no personal opinion, 14 disagreed and 9 completely disagreed.

The another question was focused on providing adjustments during exams. As modifications and services provided was meant extending the time, replacing the written exam with an oral one and vice versa, a combination of a written and an oral exam, spelling correction on a PC, assistant/writer, interpreter. The results were split to 22 respondents, or 26%, agreed with the statement, and 22 respondents disagreed. 13 respondents (16%) completely agreed, 13 respondents completely disagreed, and 13 respondents had no personal opinion.

4. Conclusion

According to the results of the first two sub-goals, the authors concluded that some support services were provided to them to a lesser or greater extent. The results were greatly influenced by the fact that the students leaned towards the central tendency in some questions, which could be due to the fact that distance education is not currently taking place and the students could have already forgotten the given facts. Nevertheless, the authors believe that inclusive education is an increasingly discussed topic in Slovak society, but there are various barriers within higher education. Other barriers include negative attitudes towards students with disabilities, lack of understanding of various needs, limited knowledge or lack of willingness or time on the part of coordinators, or until now prevailing information barriers. Expanding the minimum requirements for students with SEN could help to overcome information barriers, and for the actors to have a common vision of inclusive education, that vision should also be supported by a political demand for inclusive education and the given political demand should be enacted, i.e., legally defined in the Higher Education Act. As part of the research, was set the main goal of mapping the opinions of students with specific needs on distance education. Distance education had many advantages and disadvantages for students with disabilities. The most commonly stated advantages were, e.g., recordings from lectures and seminars (appreciated most often by students with learning disabilities), handing in assignments was rated as more practical, teachers were more accommodating, better communication during consultations, they felt more comfortable in their home environment (appreciated most by students with mental, chronic disease and students with physical disabilities of the lower limbs). The most stated negatives were, e.g., social isolation, technical problems, lack of practice, exercises, problematic concentration, deterioration of health (depression), uninteresting online education, reduced time for completing tests.

Although according to the questionnaire in the context of the question whether distance or face-to-face education was more suitable for them, they were more inclined towards distance education, negative opinions still prevailed.

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