STUDENTS' OPINION ON WEBINARS IN HIGHER EDUCATION
STUDENTU VIEDOKLIS PAR VEBINĀRIEM AUGSTĀKAJĀ IZGLĪTĪBĀ

Authors: **Anastasija Aļeksejeva**[1], e-mail: vaset@inbox.lv, **Mihails Zaščerinskis**[2], e-mail: iizi.info@inbox.lv, **Jeļena Zaščerinska**[2],e-mail: knezna@inbox.lv,
[1] Riga State Technical School, [2] Center for Education and Innovation Research
Scientific supervisors: **Julija Melnikova, Dr. Paed.,** e-mail: julijamelnikova@yahoo.com,
Klaipeda University, Herkaus Manto g. 84, 92294 Klaipėda, Lithuania,
Natalia Andreeva, Dr.paed., e-mail: andreeva_natalia@list.ru, Immanuel Kant Baltic Federal University, Nevskogo street 14, 236041 Kaliningrad, Russia,

Abstract. *Webinars have become an indispensable tool in higher education. However, students' opinion on webinars in higher education has not been analyzed. The aim of the present contribution is to analyze students' opinion on webinars in higher education underpinning elaboration of a hypothesis on educators' contribution to the use of webinars in higher education. The meaning of the key concepts of webinar and opinion is studied. Moreover, the study shows how the steps of the process are related: identifying webinars → defining students' opinion → empirical study within multicultural environments → conclusions. The empirical study was carried out in September 2015. The sample included 19 students from Klaipeda University, Klaipeda, Lithuania. The study results demonstrate that the students' opinions on webinars in higher education are homogeneous. A hypothesis on educators' contribution to the use of webinars in higher education is elaborated. Directions of further research are proposed.*

Keywords: *Webinars, higher education, students' opinion, competence, experience.*

Introduction

Webinars have become an indispensable tool in ensuring online educational environment in higher education for closer inter-connections between students, educators, researchers and other participants of higher education as demonstrated in Figure 1.
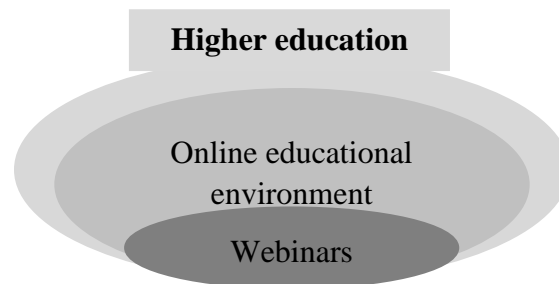

Fig. 1: **The Relationship between higher education, online educational environment and webinars**

It should be noted that the terms *online educational environment* and *online learning* as well as *distance learning* are used synonymously in the present contribution. Against this background, few studies investigate how webinar tools can facilitate interaction in online educational environment. Research on educators' experience in use of webinars has been carried out [2]. The other previous three studies analysed the webinar delivery format in which the presenter and multiple participants from multiple sites interact with one another [23]: 1. A webinar system *Anicam-Live* at the Cyber University in Taiwan ($n = 70$) to facilitate synchronous communication (regarding instruction and office hours) between the instructor and the students is implemented [5]. The results reveal that students were satisfied with the interactions among the instructor and students. The paper did not discuss the instructor's webinar-use experiences. 2. A webinar system *Interwise* at the Open University of Hong Kong is adopted [18]. Ng [18] divided 200 students into 6 groups and had tutors deliver the course through both a face-to-face

mode and a synchronous mode. The findings suggest that synchronous learning promotes tutor-student interaction better than student-student interaction. 3. A webinar system *Elluminate* to facilitate both virtual office hours and the communication of course-related information to students is used [11]. Elluminate effectively facilitated interaction between the instructor and individual students who had questions regarding the course materials. Negative experiences in use of Elluminate to facilitate a seminar that connected two hospitals to each other (site vs. site) were found as Elluminate did not effectively facilitate the seminar owing to the content's irrelevance to participants' learning [8]. The perceptions of student-trainers who used webinar tools have been investigated [23] as well. However, students' opinion on webinars in higher education has not been analysed. The aim of the present contribution is to analyse students' opinion on webinars in higher education underpinning elaboration of a hypothesis on educators' contribution to the use of webinars in higher education.

Materials and methods

The meaning of such key concepts as webinar and opinion is studied. Moreover, the study demonstrates how the key concept is related to the idea of higher education. The methodological foundation of the present research is formed by the System-Constructivist Theory. The System-Constructivist Theory and, consequently, System-Constructivist Approach to learning introduced by Reich [21] emphasizes that human being's point of view depends on the subjective aspect [15]: experience plays the central role in the knowledge construction process [15]. Therein, the subjective aspect of human being's point of view is applicable to the present research. Exploratory research was employed in the present research [20]. Exploratory research is aimed at developing hypotheses, which can be tested for generality in following empirical studies [17]. The exploratory methodology proceeds from exploration in Phase 1 through analysis in Phase 2 to hypothesis development in Phase 3. The remaining part of this contribution is organized as follows: the next section introduces the theoretical grounding on students' opinion on webinars in higher education. The associated results of the empirical analysis will be presented in the following section. Finally, some concluding remarks are provided followed by a short outlook on interesting topics for further work.

Results

Theoretical Framework

Webinar is a tool that provides computer mediated communication. In comparison to other computer mediated communication tools, webinar is able to transmit video, audio, and images, webinar also enables users to share applications and to use whiteboard, the objective being to exchange information in a real-time and two-way format [23]. Webinar creates opportunities for both educators and learners to experience different levels of interaction online, and these opportunities are essentially different from other communication approaches such as discussion-board postings and e-mails [23]. There are three formats for webinar-session delivery [23]: (a) presenter vs. multiple participants from one site; (b) presenter vs. multiple participants from multiple sites; and (c) multiple participants from one site vs. multiple participants from one or multiple sites. There are five advantages of using the webinar tool to facilitate communication between two sites [23]: (1) Webinar tool is affordable [8]. Users can participate in a webinar session with a computer, video/audio capture devices, and broadband network connections. (2) Webinar tool enables synchronous communication. Instructors can communicate with the learners in a synchronous format to provide immediate feedback to learners [10]. (3) Webinar tool facilitates real-time multimedia demonstrations. Instructors can share the application on the presenter's site with all participants. (4) Webinar tool facilitates multi-level interaction. Instructors can lecture, interact with the audience, facilitate participant group collaboration in a

real-time format [14], and designate certain participants to be in charge of the sessions. (5) Webinar tool provides an environment in which participants can archive seminar content for personal review or for people who missed the real-time session. Webinars are widely adopted as it can reduce corporations' travel expenses and travel time [4]. As webinar is relatively new for online educational environment in higher education, students' opinion on webinars in higher education is of particular interest as partnership between student and educator that means for a student to be equal to an educator as a human being of equal quality [7] emphasizes students' opinion to be particularly important. Opinion is initially determined as individual's view based on awareness and attitudes [3]. Analysis of this definition allows identifying such a new definition of opinion as individual's view based on his/her knowledge, skills and attitudes to a phenomenon. This definition allows considering the terms *opinion* and *view* synonymously in the present research. As students' opinion is based on students' knowledge, skills and attitudes, students' competence serves as an indicator of students' opinion on webinars in higher education. Competence consists of knowledge, skills and attitudes. The elements of competence, namely knowledge, skills and attitude, are inter-related [1]. Students' negative attitude fails to promote the increase in the level of students' knowledge and skills as well as competence, in general [1]. In contrast, students' positive attitude ensures the enrichment of the level of students' knowledge and skills as well as competence [1]. In turn, knowledge is presented by concepts [25]. Skill is an ability to act in accordance with the required quality and volume [3]. Attitude is identified as an individual combination of evaluative judgments about a phenomenon [1]. In pedagogy the terms *competence* and *experience* are used synonymously [1]. As experience plays the central role in a knowledge construction process on webinars in higher education, the subjective aspect of human being's point of view is highlighted by the System-Constructivist Theory.

Empirical Study

The present part of the contribution demonstrates the design and results of the empirical study. The design of the present empirical research comprises the purpose and question, sample and methodology of the present empirical study. The research guiding question is as follows: what is students' opinion on webinars in higher education? The aim of the empirical study is to analyze students' opinion on webinars in higher education. The present empirical study involved 19 students, 15 of them were 3rd – 4th year bachelor students and 4 of them were 1st year master students, from Klaipeda University, Klaipeda, Lithuania in September 2015. Therefore, the sample is multicultural as the respondents with different cultural backgrounds and diverse educational approaches were chosen. Students' different cultural and educational experience emphasized the significance of each student's opinion on webinars in higher education [13] within the present empirical study. Thus, the group (age, field of study and work, mother tongue, etc.) is heterogeneous. The interpretive paradigm was used in the empirical study. The interpretive paradigm aims to understand other cultures, from the inside through the use of ethnographic methods such as informal interviewing and participant observation, and establishment of ethically sound relationships [22]. Interpretative paradigm is characterized by the researcher's practical interest in the research question [6]. The researcher is the interpreter. Moreover, the cases themselves are not of interest, only the conclusions and transfers we can draw from these respondents [9]. Selecting the cases for the case study comprises use of information-oriented sampling, as opposed to random sampling [9]. This is because an average case is often not the richest in information. In addition, it is often more important to clarify the deeper causes behind a given problem and its consequences than to describe the symptoms of the problem and how frequently they occur [9]. Random samples emphasizing representativeness will seldom be able to produce this kind of insight; it is more appropriate to select some few cases chosen for their validity. The number of students depends on the heterogeneity of the group: the greater the heterogeneity of the group, the fewer the number of students [19]. Thus,

19 is a good number of students for the study [12]. In order to analyse the students' opinion on webinars in higher education, the survey was based on the following questionnaire: Question 1: Do you know the concept of webinars? It should be noted that concepts present forms or levels of knowledge [25]. Further on, knowledge is part of experience [24]. Question 2: Do you use webinars in higher education? The evaluation scale of five levels for Question 1 and 2 was given, namely, strongly disagree "1", disagree "2", neither dis*agree* nor *agree „3",* agree "4", and strongly agree "5". Question 3: What is your attitude to interdisciplinary research? The evaluation scale of five levels for Question 3 was given, namely, very negative "1", negative "2", neither negative nor positive *„3",* positive "4", and very positive "5". Both evaluation scales were transformed into the level system as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1

Indicators and levels of students' opinion on webinars in higher education

Indicators	Levels				
	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5
	very low	low	average	optimal	high
	1	2	3	4	5
Students' knowledge and skills	*Strongly dis-agree*	*Disagree*	*Nei-ther* disagree *nor* agree	*Agree*	*Strongly agree*
Students' attitude	*Very negative*	*Negative*	*Neither* negative nor *positive*	*Positive*	*Very positive*

Question 4: What are advantages of webinars in higher education? Question 5: What are disadvantages of webinars in higher education? No evaluation scale was applied to Questions 4 and 5 as the questions were open. The results of Question 1 (Knowledge), Question 2 (Skills) and Question 3 (Attitude) of the questionnaire used in the survey are demonstrated in Figure 2 where the vertical numbers show five levels to measure students' opinion on webinars in higher education, and the horizontal numbers present the code number of the student who participated in the survey. The results of Question 1 (Knowledge) of the questionnaire used in the survey show that 3 students' evaluation of their knowledge of the concept of webinars refers to the very low level, 16 students' evaluation of their knowledge of the concept of webinars refers to the low level. The results of Question 2 (Skills) reveal that 19 students' evaluation of their skills in use of webinars in higher education refers to the very low level. The results of Question 3 (Attitude) demonstrate that 19 students' attitude to webinars in higher education refers to the high level.
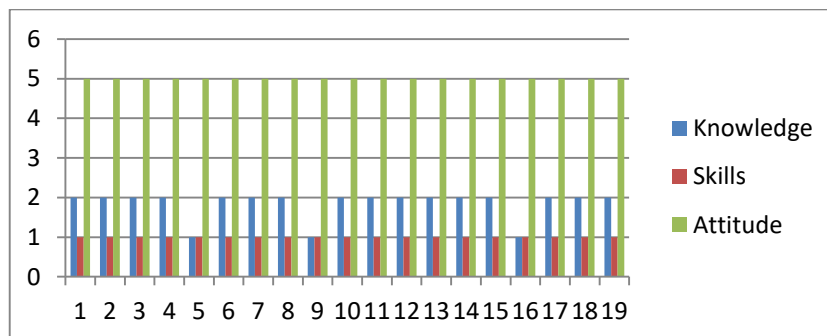

Fig. 2. **The results of Question 1 (Knowledge), Question 2 (Skills) and Question 3 (Attitude)**

Question 4 (Advantages) includes such results as webinars are interesting, webinars are given by famous scientists, webinars can be led by students, too, webinars ensure a variety of illustrations of the topic under discussion, webinars' topics are similar to the topics of lectures. Question 5 (Disadvantages) discloses such results as webinars are more suitable for non-obligatory and optional courses in pedagogical studies such as philosophy, sociology, etc., webinars do not always compensate real communication between educators and students. The data were processed applying *Excel* software. Frequencies of the students' answers were determined in order to reveal students' opinion on webinars in higher education as shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Frequency of the students' answers and mean of results

Indicators	Levels	Number of answers	Percentage	Indicators' mean	Total mean
Students' knowledge	Very low	3	15.78%	1.84	2.61
	Low	16	84.21%		
	Average	0	0%		
	Optimal	0	0%		
	high	0	0%		
Students' skills	Very low	19	100%	1	
	Low	0	0%		
	Average	0	0%		
	Optimal	0	0%		
	high	0	0%		
Students' attitude	Very low	0	0%	5	
	Low	0	0%		
	Average	0	0%		
	Optimal	0	0%		
	High	19	100%		

The survey showed that the students' knowledge of the concept of webinars is of the low level (84.21%). The students' skills in webinars in higher education are of the very low level (100%). The students' attitude to webinars in higher education is the high level (100%). The findings of the empirical study allow concluding that the students demonstrated a low level of competence in webinars in higher education (2.61). The summarizing content analysis [16] of the data reveals students' opinion on webinars in higher education is homogeneous. The students' opinion on webinars in higher education is found to be positive as the students highlighted more advantages than disadvantages of webinars in higher education. The data analysis also reveals students' willingness and great interest to use webinars in higher education.

Results and discussion

The empirical findings of the research allow drawing the conclusions on students' positive opinion on webinars in higher education. The following hypothesis has been formulated: students' competence in webinars in higher education enhances from low level to high level if the course frame work is much focused towards provision of students with a webinar tool, ensuring students with technical support in use of webinars in higher education, student training in use of webinars in higher education. The present research has *limitations*. The inter-connections between webinars, students' opinion and higher education have been set. Another limitation is the empirical study conducted by involving the students of one higher education institution only. Therein, the results of the study cannot be representative for the whole area.

Nevertheless, the results of the research – definition of students' opinion - may be used as a basis of analysis of use of webinars in other higher education institutions. Further research tends to focus on empirical studies to compare students and educators' opinions on webinars in higher education. The search for relevant methods for evaluation of the use of webinars in higher education is proposed. And a comparative research of different countries could be carried out, too.

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