

# Assessing the Benefits of Online Learning in Higher Education and its Impact on Law Students

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**Abstract** – The present study aims to analyze the advantages and disadvantages of online learning, focusing on the importance of understanding how legal education can benefit from online learning. The problem under investigation resided in asking what the benefits of online learning for legal education are and how it impacts law students. For this study, a systematic literature review was conducted in order to recollect and analyze the existing literature available regarding legal education and online learning. This process entailed a comprehensive search across academic databases such as Scopus, IEEE Xplore, and ProQuest, with the help of keywords and research criteria in order to enhance the study's result and establish a collection of literature that would help the study's research questions regarding legal education and its impact on law students.

The main hypothesis established that law students are capable of fully embracing online learning thanks to today's level of adaptability, and while the results show that a vast number of students have access to mobile technology and are aware of the benefits of online learning, law schools need to gradually implement this methodology in order to start experiencing mentioned benefits and have an effective applicability of this methods in their teaching programs.

**Keywords** – Legal education, online learning, law students.

## 1. Introduction

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, measures such as lockdowns and social distancing have modified people's habits all over the world, leaving the Internet as the perfect medium to support different sectors of society, as is the case with education. Remote teaching and blended learning begun to be implemented as a temporary solution to mitigate the impact that the pandemic had on education [1], but as time passed, these solutions became the norm, and students and teachers alike had to readjust and adapt to this new digital environment of online teaching, changing students' perspective on their learning experience while modifying the way they valued the quality of taking virtual classes.

In this context, the pandemic brought a set of challenges regarding what could be the appropriate teaching methods for this new normality, and digital learning evolved to reach highly polished tools and platforms that aid in this scenario; not only this, but online learning has also pushed teachers and professionals in the field of education to produce, adapt and innovate new ways of teaching so students feel engaged with the online platforms used for this type of learning [2].

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While it is necessary to assess what defines online learning, we can say that it's similar to distance learning, which is defined as a style of education where the learning process is realized purely online, using the Internet and with the occasional aid of digital tools [1]. With this said, distance and online learning has gained a lot of popularity in recent years. With new technology in development each year, and the Internet providing great access to knowledge and communication in the educational field, the online world has come to play an important role on today's education.

The main challenges presented in this context were the problem of continuing instruction, evaluating students' learning and adapting to the changes brought by the pandemic within the existing academic calendar. The best solution, in this scenario, was to shift towards online learning [3]; and in the case of law schools, in cases which required on-site examinations, the educative system had to gradually postpone these evaluations in order to have a smoother transition from traditional learning to digital learning and online examinations.

To summarize, we can say that the need to adapt to a new normality has brought a series of demands that call for a more online-focused learning process. For example, law students may be able to lookup for legal cases on the Internet, but this accessibility to large databases of indexed cases and legal studies has been enhanced due to the need to adapt to a more digital way of learning in the field of legal education.

## 2. Methodology

In order to better understand the context in which legal education can benefit from online learning in a world moving further towards a more digital way of learning, we conducted a systematic literature review (SLR) to search for previous and current knowledge that may bring some light into the matter of our research. For this SLR, we proposed a series of questions that will help us specify our search for knowledge and gain better insight regarding the literature needed to collect in order to answer said questions, eliminating redundant information that could show to be of less use for our research [4].

The SLR will help us recollect and analyze the existing studies regarding legal education and online learning, while also enabling us to construct a collection of literature that have different approaches and perspectives around the subject at hand [5]. We also established a series of specific filters through some criteria that will allow us to recollect the precise knowledge to conduct our study.

For our research, we conducted a systematic literature review by numbers of literature by searching studies and journals in the databases of Scopus, IEEE Xplore, and ProQuest. Through the use of SLR we analyzed the previous knowledge gathered with the help of search filters, keywords, and specific criteria to categorize each result and enhance our research [4] in order to curate our findings and answer the research questions established for our SLR.

### 2.1. Research Questions

In order to have a better focus on our study, we need to use research questions to direct our findings towards the subjects of our research, so we can gather relevant conclusions from the literature selected [6] from the databases previously mentioned. The research questions established for this SLR are the following:

A. What are the benefits of online learning for legal education?

- This will help us understand what are the benefits that online learning can bring to the development and processes of legal education.

B. How does online learning impact law students?

- This will help us determine at what level online learning impacts (positively or negatively) the law students' learning process.

### 2.2. Keywords used for our Research

While looking through the journal databases used for our study and answering the research questions already established, we needed to elaborate and select a series of keywords that would aid us to reach the literature needed to find the answers we were looking for. For this research in particular, the series of keywords used to filter our search within the different databases were selected as follow:

((("legal education" OR "law school" OR "law students") AND ("online learning" OR "virtual classes" OR "virtual classrooms" OR "virtual classroom" OR "distance learning" OR "blended learning")))

These keywords help navigate through the results obtained from the journal databases consulted. With these keywords, it is also possible to categorize the literature found in order to enhance the SLR in order to review the articles in the best way possible.

This categorization facilitates assessing the subject at hand and understand how legal education could benefit from online learning and how it impacts law students.

The following table shows the search results gathered after applying the keywords to the journal databases consulted:

Table 1. Number of literature found in databases consulted

Journal database	Number of literature found
Scopus	1,122
ProQuest	100
IEEE Xplore	70
TOTAL	1,292

### 2.3. Results Filtering Applying Criteria

After consulting the respective databases, we applied the criteria needed to exclude the articles that did not align with our subject and seemed unimportant to reach the kind of knowledge we needed to gather in order to answer our research questions. Table 2 shows the criteria we used to filter the results of our initial research:

Table 2. Type of criteria applied and description

Type of criteria	Criteria description
Article is included	Articles that are mainly written in English
Article is included	Articles published in the last five years
Article is included	Articles that are related to legal education and/or law students
Article is included	Articles that are related to online learning and/or distance learning
Article is included	Articles that focus mainly on the educational field
Article is included	The article is from a scientific or specialized journal and/or magazine
Article is not included	Articles that have high similarities across databases
Article is not included	The article is a chapter of a books or a review
Article is not included	The article is not related to the educational field in any way
Article is not included	The article does not mention legal education at all
Article is not included	Article data is inconclusive

After applying these criteria, a total of 13 articles were selected across all the databases consulted.

The specific number of literature found in each database after applying the criteria is shown in the following table:

Table 3. Number of literature found after applying criteria

Journal Database	Literature after criteria is applied
Scopus	5
ProQuest	5
IEEE Xplore	3
TOTAL	13

## 3. Results

To answer the questions regarding how can legal education benefit from the advantages of online learning and how it needs to be assessed in a way that it improves the learning process as well as students' learning experience, we need to understand that these questions are connected to those who demand legal education (as in law students and law firms) [7]. Apart from this, we need to understand that law schools need to present strategies that produce the methodologies and tools that are needed to partake on this online learning experience, as well as to satisfy the necessities of those who demand legal education. With this we can say that technological innovation is extremely important to implement online learning in law schools so that legal education can benefit from its advantages.

### 3.1. Online Learning and Legal Education

The quick development of information technologies creates a set of new opportunities to legal education in an era influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic and the need of a continuous education through online means. After the pandemic, while many universities adapted to the integration of offline teaching systems with online learning resources, academics set out to explore the advantages of these new methodologies to exploit their efficiency in the online teaching model [8], so that it could improve legal education.

We have to also consider that distance education technologies may represent a risk when implemented incorrectly, yet the urgent need to adapt to these technologies, due to the cybersocialization caused by the COVID-19 pandemic [9], made the educational system (law schools included) to quickly implement new technologies to confront this scenario, answering the demand for online education, redefining the learning process towards a digital transformation, and switching academic work to a remote format, with special attention put in the online learning experience.

Nowadays, legal education faces a set of challenges to adapt to the modern world and its needs, with professionals being demanded to excel at the necessary skills to be considered competent in the current job market, with competences such as complex problem solving, creativity, use of new technologies, and specialized mobile applications. In this regard, this new layer of demands has become a challenge for law students to surpass in order to be recognized as competent lawyers in a job market emphasizing digital competences [10]. The necessity to surpass these challenges can only be satisfied with the implementation of effective online methodologies that improve the knowledge of new technologies applied to legal education, so that it may benefit from the advantages that online learning can provide.

Education in the era of artificial intelligence and constant technological growth has had an impact in teaching methods ever since the COVID-19 outbreak; this due to the call for effective adaptability that was demanded for educational institutions all over the world, so that they could change their teaching methods to focus more on the digital medium. Law students, then faced the new reality a lot of students from other academic backgrounds also faced at the time: the great set of challenges presented at a moment of social and academic changes, while also adapting to the emerging technologies needed to surpass the shortcomings that came as a result of a quick and improvised necessity to adapt to a new normality during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. For this to work, legal education needs to implement innovative strategies that stimulate students' interest in learning through the implementations of these new technologies in order to establish a more diverse teaching system, enhancing the benefits that online learning can bring to students in regards to the better understanding of digital methodologies and a more diversified line of work for future graduates in the legal field [11].

Online learning implies that the teaching process is not constrained by time or place, which could be considered one of the biggest advantages in regards to time consumption and time management effectiveness. In this way, developing this way of online learning has been presented as a novel concept. Law, as one of the most demanded careers across the world, has immensely contributed to the transition from the traditional way of learning to a more sophisticated online learning method [12], in which legal education sees itself benefited from the integration of technologies and redefined terms of teaching for academics to enroll into more effective ways to improve the learning process for students to engage in future developments of applications and platforms that will keep on enhancing the online learning experience.

With this said, future development of technologies in favor of online learning can provide a set of fruitful advances for legal education, as the usage of technology in the way law is thought in universities is a model proven useful [12] that can also be replicated in other forms of education.

Universities and law schools can be empowered by using technology to leverage disciplinary knowledge, with the growing potential that this knowledge can be transferred to other disciplines that facilitates a better student engagement [13], showing a positive future regarding the levels at which this technologies can be exploited to maintain the growing interest for legal education to transition into a more digitally focused learning process, empowering students to expand their disciplinary knowledge (regarding learning technologies) in the process. However, classrooms within these universities have been long dominated by the traditional forms of teaching, which in exchange can present a problem to internationalize the classrooms [14] (this in reference to the possibilities that online learning can bring while expanding the reach of different universities); in this regard, legal education can benefit from online learning in the way that virtual classrooms and other digital platforms and interactive tools let teachers reach a more transnational level to improve their learning process. In this regard, legal education could also benefit from online learning by the multitasking factor that comes with the implementation of these technologies, improving distance learning in comparison to face-to-face learning, and improving the effectiveness of teaching through modern methods [15].

### ***3.2. The Impact of Online Education on Law Students***

Regarding how online education impacts the wellbeing and learning process of law students, according to Jones *et. al.*, students' perception on this subject respond to different levels of interest the educational institutions have put on the matter, because, even if there has been an increased interest in the wellbeing of online learning and how it impacts students in the recent years, it is necessary to further explore how different perceptions are given in regards to study law in an online context. Findings show that students viewed online learning in law school very impactful in the practice of the learning process, as well as having an impact at a social level; and although online learning had many practical solutions given to them, law students seemed particularly preoccupied by the delivery of said learning [16].

This means that even though online learning can have positive outcomes in the practical sense, teachers and institutions need to develop more engaging and effective ways of teaching in an online scenario to motivate law students and assess their future wellbeing with strategies that will improve their experience regarding online legal education.

In this sense, Heart *et al.* also analyzed students' perceptions over the methodologies used in blended learning over their law courses. Blended learning captures both traditional and digital methodologies, with law students finding relative satisfaction with the methods presented, and even though there were mixed perceptions in regards to this way of teaching. It is relevant to point out that many students deemed these methodologies unsuccessful due to the way they were delivered, and that teachers and institutions should experiment with various methods to maximize learning effectiveness and students' satisfaction [17].

For many years, traditional means were used to qualify law students' progress throughout their career. And while there were brief interventions of alternative ways of teaching (such as video applications, for example), which complemented this traditional way of learning, nowadays, in an era of constant growth and technological innovation, it is necessary to emphasize on the importance of online learning and its benefits bound to the continuous learning after the COVID-19 outbreak. While different realities can give different results regarding law students' perception, it is possible to understand how engaging this learning process when examining students' experience in different online learning platforms; this also helps understand how students acquire legal knowledge through these online methodologies.

For instance, Kivalov *et al.* talked about how new methodologies could make learning processes more sustainable to improve law students' motivation. Students showed higher efficiency while having the aid of online learning, even when there were problems due to the challenges presented while trying to engage and keep the attention of students in the distance [18]. This would represent a high opportunity to take into consideration the problems the online learning can bring to law students, in order to assess them and improve this methodology in order to enhance the quality of online legal education. Therefore, we can argue that law students may be motivated to promote the application of online learning to conduct their law studies and benefit from its advantages, only if they are given the correct tools to exploit this method of learning.

So, with the data gathered, we can see a glimpse of effectiveness regarding online education for law students [19] when given the correct tools and implementation to make these methodologies

engaging for students, revealing the success online education has in the legal field, while also enhancing the teaching methods used to conduct mentioned learning process.

According to Selvaras, a vast number of students have access to mobile technology and are aware of the benefits that blended an online learning can bring to them; and even though they prefer a more blended-focused environment (mixing traditional and digital means), this does not mean necessarily that online learning should be discarded. Law schools can implement online learning gradually or mixing this methodology with the shared benefit of blended learning classrooms. In this study [12], students also indicated that they saw potential benefits from using social networking platforms in order to better focus their learning process and also integrate current (and future) technologies in their own education. In this regard, law students could benefit from using online technology even in a blended learning scenario, facing the challenges that assess matters such as access to technology and affordability.

#### 4. Conclusion

Law students are in the process to fully embrace online learning but the practical implications are that this online alternative should be further implemented in universities in order to surpass the obstacles presented in relation to student engagement and accessibility; and as the COVID-19 made an impact on face-to-face learning, designers of new online learning programs should listen carefully to students' perception so that online learning is fully implemented in an effective way. And with that, we can say that law students will be able to produce more quickly and effectively while using the tools available in online learning, only if the necessary resources and training to improve their learning experience in the digital world are provided to them.

Developing various methods of online learning creates new opportunities for students to reach new goals, acquire new sets of disciplines, and expand their knowledge. Nowadays, it is crucial to understand these new ways of teaching and implement innovative tools and strategies that will help students adapt to the context of online learning.

If we were to apply online learning techniques, then there would be a more effective way for law students to analyze different legal systems across the world through the use of databases and various legal platforms, without the need of moving from one place to another. Not only this, but methods such as online consultations and distance learning and training programs for law students, among other applications, could prove beneficial for the future of online learning in legal education.

In conclusion, legal education could benefit from online learning, only if law schools enhance the way they transfer knowledge to their students in the virtual world and keep innovating through strategies and methodologies that aim at a more sophisticated way of online education.

It is also necessary to take into consideration that, nowadays, the use of digital devices come as second nature to many students, so the finesse with which law students could adapt to online learning methods is already there, so that educational institutions only need to have an effective applicability of this methods in their teaching programs, so that law schools can give their students a set of tools that aid them to enhance the skills necessary to excel in this digital learning experience in legal education.

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