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Ensuring Quality in the Communication between Tutors-Counselors and Learners in Open and Distance Education. The Case of the Hellenic Open University

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ABSTRACT: The purpose of this research is to investigate the factors that contribute to the quality of the communication process between tutors-counsellors and students in the departments of an Open University where group advisory meetings are organised through video conferencing. Communication in open distance education is multidimensional and since the most important form of communication is the interpersonal relationships, it is interesting to explore how the quality of communication is ensured when face-to-face meetings are replaced by teleconferencing in view of the current pandemic crisis. The research process that was followed is identified as descriptive-diagnostic, adopting a mixed research approach, through the collection, analysis and synthesis of quantitative and qualitative methods. Findings showed that adult students consider that the quality in communication requires the tutor to encourage participation, involvement in the process of learning and developing critical thinking. However, the respondents believe that through video conference there is not a high frequency of interaction. Therefore, it is important to investigate the effectiveness of other factors in the learning process in addition to the technological ones.

KEYWORDS: Distance education, communication quality, interaction, tele-conferencing, tutor – counsellor.

I. INTRODUCTION

The students' characteristics, the suitability of the educational material and the learning environment are crucial elements that determine the successful outcome of a Group Advisory Meeting (GAM) (Sing-Kiat et al., 2022). It is therefore necessary to investigate the communication framework, when the GAMs are completely replaced by the teleconference and here lies the differentiation of the present research. Utilizing teleconferencing for educational purposes is very important, both to create new perspectives and to develop the participants' social skills, the spirit of cooperation and the active participation in the learning process (Lenkaitis, 2020). Empirical research, such as this one, refers to collective knowledge and the formation of the theoretical framework. It is therefore important to highlight how the quality of communication is ensured in all its dimensions (communication among tutor-material-student, students' communication with each other, communication with the educational material and with the technological environment) in a teleconference section. Armakolas and Panagiotakopoulos (2021) investigated the technological factors that affect distance teaching through video conferencing and how they can be related to the effectiveness of the learning environment. Their findings support that the effectiveness of the learning process requires a good knowledge on how to use technological media, the establishment of conditions for participatory processes of all tutors, the familiarity of the participants with the platform for conducting the teleconference, the constant training of all the participants and the proper preparation of the tutors. It is therefore important to investigate the effectiveness of other factors in the learning process in addition to the technological ones.

The purpose of this research is to investigate the factors that contribute to the quality of tutor-student communication in the departments that the GAMs are carried out via teleconference and to highlight the dimensions of this communication usina as case study the MSc "Educational Sciences" of the Hellenic Open University (HOU). Communication is a multidimensional concept and concerns the interaction of the student with the tutor, with the teaching material, with the other students and with the technological environment (Stavrakakis & Xanthopoulou, 2019; Xanthopoulou & Kappou, 2021). Since the most important form of communication in Open and Distance Education is the development of interpersonal relationships through the Group Advisory Meetings (Katz & Kedem-Yemini, 2021), it is interesting to investigate how the quality of communication is ensured, when face-to-face meetings are replaced by teleconferences, especially during the current pandemic crisis where one of its immediate consequences is that schools and universities all over the world had to make a rapid transition from the traditional classroom to the online one. To complete the above purpose, the researchres concluded in the following research questions:

- RQ1. What makes quality communication between tutors and learners in the departments that the GAMs are held via teleconference?

- RQ2. How does a class in a teleconference differ from a face to face class in terms of the interaction's effectiveness between tutors-learners?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

II-A. Quality in Communication at Open and Distance Education

Communication refers to the exchange of information and it is considered essential for the learning process (Wrench, 2009). Zeitoun (1998) defined communication as a process of interaction between two or more parties for the transmission of a particular message, concept, idea, opinion, etc. It is the skill that transmits a message from the sender to the receiver through a selected channel. This interaction with verbal or nonverbal media through appropriate channels includes computer networks and software. Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) allow two or more parties to transfer their experiences (cognitive, psychomotor, and emotional) from one place to another electronically. The established relationship between learning and communication implies that the key to learning is interaction (Llompart, 2021). The interaction is now available online through video conferencing, chat rooms and other media. Garrison and Anderson (2003) reported that all forms of learning occur as interactions between educators, learners, and content. The two angles of the triangle are the human element and the non-human, just as necessary for e-learning. Bates (2005) emphasized two different types of interaction. The first, isolated and individual, such as the learner's interaction with the content/material, and the second, social and reciprocal, occurs between two or more learners. He emphasized that the two types of interactions were important in the learning process. Moore (1989) suggested that there are three main types of interaction within educational contexts: (1) between learner and educator, (2) between learners, (3) between learners and content (see Figure 1). This research focuses on the importance of the second type of interaction, i.e. the interaction that occurs between learners and tutors. A number of subsequent typologies have emerged, which seek to either extend the basic principles of Moore's interaction or to define additional forms of interaction within the educational context. Communication in Open and Distance Education (ODE) is a multidimensional concept and therefore very important and decisive for the success of a distance learning program. Distance education, as it has been developed and shaped in recent years, can effectively respond to modern needs, while also giving the opportunity to many adults to become sharers of knowledge (Vlachopoulos & Makri, 2019), while constant developments in the technological field create new data in the process of distance teaching and learning using digital tools, such as teleconferences (Abad-Segura et al., 2020). In addition, ODE offers the most opportunities for learning and exchange of good practices among higher education tutors, and problems of traditional universities, such as space and time, which sometimes act as a brake on conventional learning (Bordoloi et al., 2021). Communication in ODE is not only about the learner's interaction with the tutor, but also with the learning material, the other learners and the technological environment (Richards, 2015; Stavrakakis & Xanthopoulou, 2019).

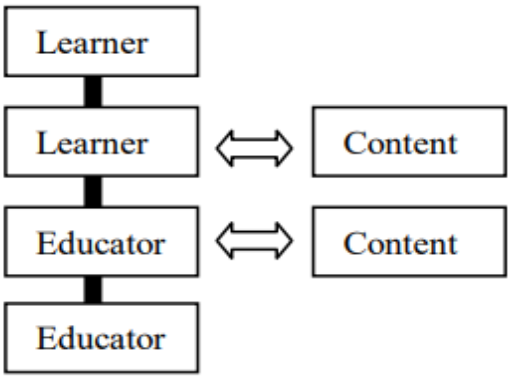

Figure 1. Typical Interaction

The Interaction Matrix (Figure 2) brings together the dynamic interactions that can occur in modern online learning environments into a single model that can be used to design, develop and facilitate online learning initiatives. Considering the full range of possible interactions, the Interaction Matrix shown in Figure 2 illustrates the key elements of a socially structured learning environment, as various collaborative interactions are involved. Sims and Stork (2007) suggest that designers should be aware of the unique cultural and social contexts of trainees, which influence their ability to participate in online learning environments. Emerging plans allow students to integrate their individuality, experience and culture into teaching and learning. Such plans will increase the completeness of the interactions. Designers need to be aware of each of these possible interactions and incorporate as many of them as possible in an effort to provide the learners with the maximum level of control in their learning experience.

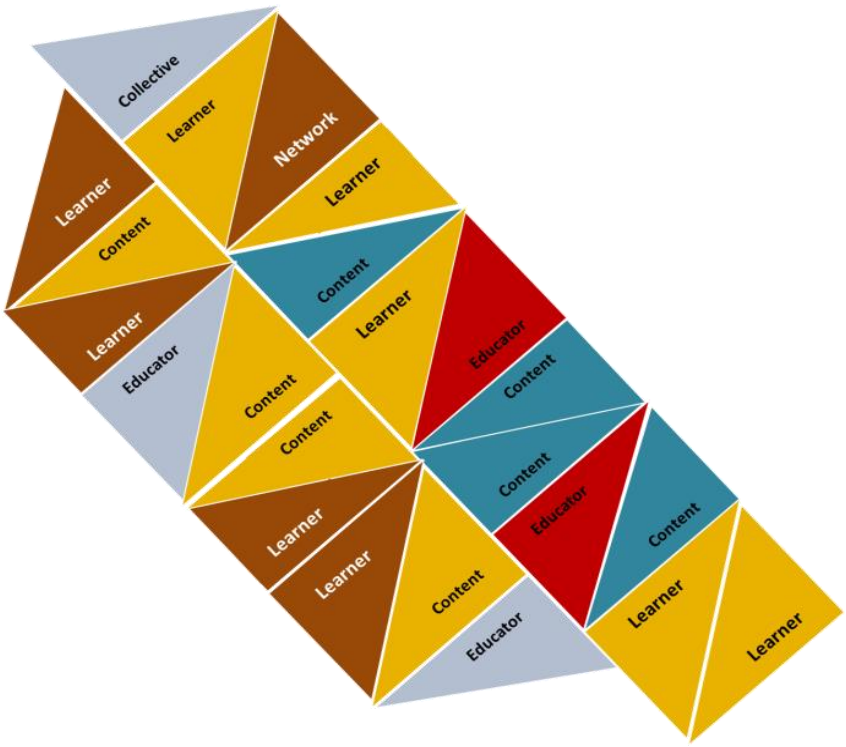

Figure 2. Matrix of interactions in an electronic environment (Stavrakakis & Xanthopoulou, 2019)

In online class meetings, instructors can control and promote student interaction and engagement through different prompts (Shoepe et al., 2020). Today there are several tools, outside of the official environment of a university, that can be used to improve students' experience, offer them access to available services, challenge them about their goals, educational or otherwise, and to make suggestions to them on a practical level. "NavigateMe" for example is an online tool that can be adapted to the specificities of different universities and encourage students according to their lifestyle and needs to make the most suitable choices for them (Clark et al., 2015). Findings (such as those of Mayer et al., 2017; Rasi & Vuorjarvi, 2018) also highlight the important role of audio and video channels, as participants, despite understanding barriers to their use, felt that audio and video would be beneficial for developing social interaction. Instructors who decide whether or not to require students to use audio and video for teleconferences should weigh the social interaction affordances they offer, as well as other factors, such as the technical requirements they must meet for their use (Mayer et al., 2017). Tutors can now, with the help of modern technologies, redesign the learning environment (adaptive learning design) during the course, instead of relying exclusively on advance planning and students actively participate as co-designers (Bower, 2016; Leppisaari & Vainio, 2015). Behera et al. (2020) and Burgoon et al. (2021) investigated the variety of non-verbal behaviors (expressions, head movements and posture, gaze and hand movements above the face) and how they can be integrated into modern learning technologies to automatically recognize the emotional state of learners in real-time time using a state-of-the-art computer vision technique. These findings are very important especially for the cases that learning process is implemented through a teleconference, as recognizing and understanding these is key in designing informed interventions and addressing the needs of the individual student to provide personalized education.

II-B. Differences and similarities of online meetings and in-class meetings in terms of the interactions' quality

The research of Brocato et al. (2015) showed that the perceptions of students differ when they attend an online class instead of a in-class one, so modern and asynchronous methods require different teaching styles, as well as different evaluation criteria (Liu et al., 2020). Also in the same survey, it was found that although students want to have a meaningful learning experience regardless of the classroom environment, teachers were rated lower in online classrooms and students became stricter over the years. For this reason and with the increased implementation of online courses, it is necessary for new as well as for experienced teachers to develop effective teaching techniques in a rapidly changing technological environment. Personalization ("Fit-for-Everyone") is a key element in the successful design of videoconferencing systems that can essentially address the needs of each student individually (Behera et al., 2020), just like in a Group Advisory Meeting. In addition, the tutor should rationally allocate the time of a meeting and plan it, whether it is a face-to-face meeting or a teleconference. The planning of the necessary, useful and relevant actions and the determination of the learning objectives related to knowledge, skills and attitudes should be done. Technology itself cannot save a bad teaching, and on the other hand, a well-designed teaching cannot be destroyed by technology. The comparative study by Smith and Wortley (2017) showed that students respond positively to the teacher's humor whether it is a traditional classroom or an online

classroom, while at the same time their engagement with the material increases and they recall information with greater ease. Finally, the life-long question of Group Advisory Meetings or electronic Group Advisory Meetings it is not only about comparing the efficiency between the two modes, but also how open a university defines itself (Jeong, 2019). A students' satisfaction survey (ideally annual) on the main topics of e-learning would significantly help in understanding it and improving all processes (Richards, 2015).

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research process is defined as descriptive-diagnostic, adopting a mixed research approach, which is a process of gathering, analyzing and synthesizing quantitative and qualitative methods to understand the research problem (Creswell, 2011). Quantitative methods examine the theory of the researcher, while qualitative methods focus on the meanings of the participants (Bryman, 2017) and for that reason it was considered that the present research required both perspectives. The sampling strategy of the research in terms of quantitative research is the convenience sampling, due to the wide geographical dispersion of students in the teleconferencing departments of the Hellenic Open University (HOU).

For the qualitative research, semi-structured online interviews were conducted using the snowball sampling method, meaning that fellow graduate students in the Educational Sciences program recommended other individuals for study (Creswell, 2011). The sample of the research included the adult students from the postgraduate program ""Educational Sciences" at the Hellenic Open University, and more specifically, those who attended a teleconference class from the year 2017 to the present especially due to the current pandemic. Regarding the research tools, data collection for the quantitative research was made through an online questionnaire created through google forms with closed and open-ended questions based on the axes resulting from the research questions and the literature review, in order to ensure validity of research. The questionnaires were distributed to the groups of thematic units (via facebook and forums) and concern both students who have had the experience of teleconferences in the past, as well as 2020-21 students. The final analysis of the research results was done using the statistical processing and data analysis program SPSS statistics. Secondly, for the qualitative research, a questionnaire with demographic questions was answered and semi-structured interviews (via telephone and face-to-face) were conducted, after obtaining the permission of the participants, so that their interviews could be recorded. The interviews were then transcribed, coded through the QSR NVivo 12 program and the data were analyzed.

Qualitative research - Thematic analysis process

In the qualitative research, the process of thematic analysis was followed based on the six stages of Braun & Clarke (2006) as described at Figure 3. In the first stage, familiarization with the data took place. The second stage concerned the coding of the data. Coding through the program QSR NVivo 12 was preferred. A first identification of meaning units connected to each other was made and the data were meaningfully grouped in relation to the research question.

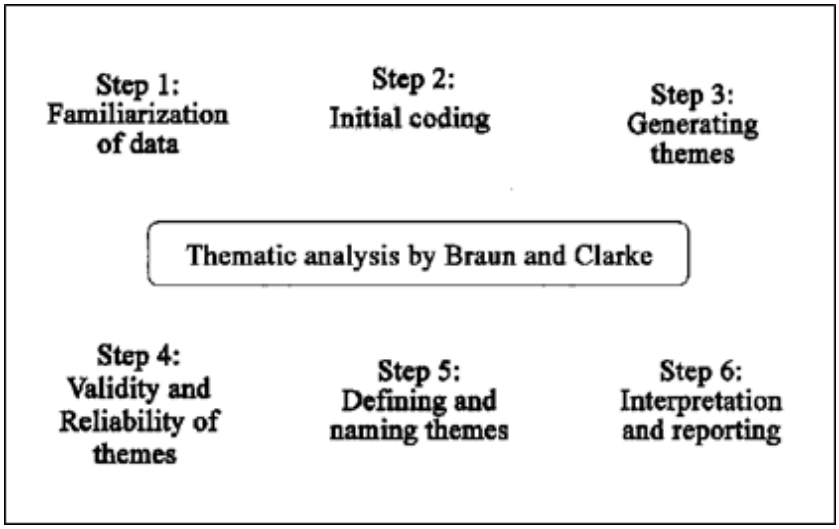

Figure 3. Thematic analysis by Braun & Clarke (2006)

Source: Anyanti, J., Akuiyibo, S., Idogho, O., Ohuneni, S., & Isiguzo, C. (2020). Assessment of Factors Contributing to TB Treatment Adherence among Patients on TB Treatment in Kano State, Nigeria: A Case Study. Journal of Tuberculosis Research, 8(04), 209.

During the third stage, the codes given to the interview data were summarized into themes and sub-themes. The figure below (figure 4) shows an initial correlation from QSR NVivo 12 based on verbal relevance.

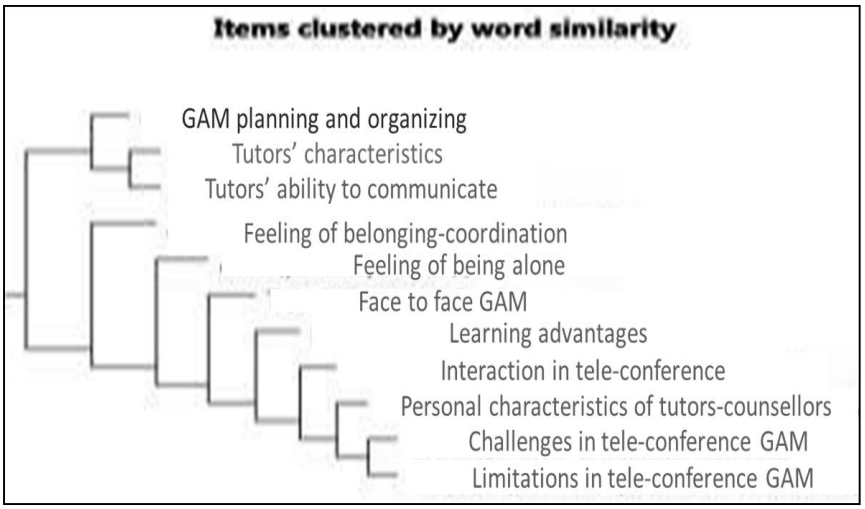

Figure 4. Correlation based on verbal relevance

Also, based on the coding of the interviews, tables of relationships between certain thematic categories were emerged. In the fourth stage, the above codes were re-examined, so that there are no overlaps and any need to merge or separate them can be identified. Next, in fifth stage, the redefinition and naming of themes took place. At this stage, the names of the themes of the final analysis were decided, so that they are comprehensive and give the reader a first idea of what each theme includes. Next, the smaller thematic categories were classified based on the research questions into three corresponding thematic axes, which are as follows (Table 1). In the fourth stage, the above codes were re-examined, so that there are no overlaps and any need to merge or separate them can be identified. Next, in fifth stage, the redefinition and naming of themes took place. At this stage, the names of the themes of the final analysis were decided, so that they are comprehensive and give the reader a first idea of what each theme includes. Next, the smaller thematic categories were classified based on the research questions into three corresponding thematic axes, which are as follows (Table 1).

Table 1. The final three thematic axes

Thematic Axis	**Themes**
1st thematic axis: Characteristics of quality communication between tutors-counselors and students in the teleconference classes.	Appropriate educational methods Personal characteristics of the tutor and students A sense of belonging to a community
2nd thematic axis: Qualitative characteristics of tutors-counselors in a teleconference class	Good practices in an electronic environment Communication "gift" Learning benefits Organization and planning of the Group Advisory Meeting
3rd thematic axis: Differences between teleconferencing and face to face classs regarding the quality of interactions	Challenges in an online classroom Feeling isolated Limitations on a teleconference class

In the sixth stage, the final analysis took place. The initial goal was to identify phrases that would lead first to organizing the individual thematic categories and then to condensing the content of these interviews. The independent documents (the interviews of postgraduate students of the MSc in "Educational Sciences") that were investigated were also the units of the analysis. In this way, the above system of thematic categories and subcategories emerged, which responds to the purpose of the research, the individual objectives and the research questions.

B. Quantitative research

For the quantitative research, the "survey" research model was adopted, i.e. research in which primary data is collected through the answers of a questionnaire, to which the participants respond in person, by telephone, in writing or by e-mail (Bryman, 2017). In the above method, the questionnaire is its most important tool, but at the same time the results depend on other factors, such as the participation and honest answers of the respondents. Robson (2010) states that sample surveys "offer a relatively simple and direct approach to the study of attitudes, values, beliefs and motivations" (p. 275), which is why this particular method is often used in

educational research. At the same time, given that the structures and evaluation criteria it uses are standardized, the consistency and impartiality of the findings are ensured, which in turn can lead to generalizations (Creswell, 2011). This was one of the reasons why the quantitative approach was chosen in order to investigate the perceptions of students that participated in the MSc of "Education Sciences" on the characteristics of quality communication between tutors and students. In addition, the quantitative approach was chosen for reasons of time and cost economy, but also because the respondents, as long as the questionnaires are anonymous, answer more honestly. The collection of data through the online questionnaire has, in addition, the advantage that the information finally collected can be easily coded and processed statistically (Creswell, 2011; Robson, 2010). The following figure (figure 5) schematically illustrates the methodology process for quantitative methods research.

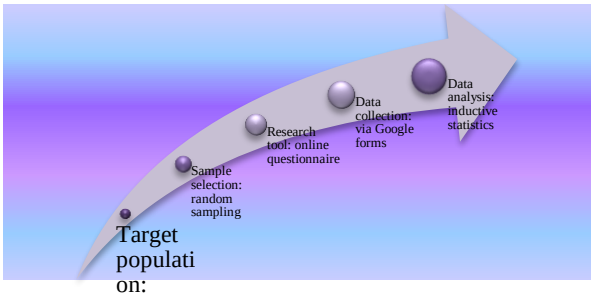

Figure 5. Quantitative research methodology

IV. EMPIRICAL RESULTS

Results of first research question

RQ1. What makes quality communication between tutors and learners in the departments that the GAMs are held via teleconference?

A. Quantitative research results

Regarding the first research question, the 32.84% of the participants claim that they neither agree nor disagree with the statement that "*I had many interactions with the Tutor - Counselor during the course*", with the 31.34% agreeing with the above statement, the 21.64% disagree, the 8.96% strongly agree and the 5.22% strongly disagree with the above proposition

Then, the 33.58% of the surveyed students answered that they agree with the statement that "*I asked my questions to the Tutor - Counselor through different electronic means, such as e-mail, forums, instant messaging tools, etc*.", with the 26.12% remaining neutral, the 18.66% disagreeing, the 14.93% strongly agreeing and the 6.72% strongly disagreeing with the above proposal

For the following statement "*The Tutor-Counselor regularly posted some questions for the students to discuss in the forum of the thematic module*", the 29.85% of the surveyed students argue that they disagree with the proposition, the 27.61% stated that strongly disagree, the 19.40% remained neutral, the 14.93% agreed and the 8.21% stongly agreed with the above proposition

Regarding the tutor's ability to respond to students' questions in a timely manner, the 34.33% claimed to strongly agree, the 29.85% agreed with the above statement, the 23.13% remained neutral, the 7.46% strongly disagreed and the 5.22% disagreed.

Another important aspect of communication's quality especially in open and distance education is the feedback given from the tutor-counselor to his/her students. For the next statement "*I received enough feedback from the Tutor - Counselor, when I needed* it", the 35.82% of the surveyed students responded that they agree, the 27.61% strongly agree, the 23.88% remained neutral, the 8.96% disagree and the 3.73% strongly disagree with this.

Indicatevely, some other statistics that refer to the satisfaction of students from the online learning include the following:

- The 34.33% agree with the statement "*Overall, I am satisfied with the online class"*, the 26.87% strongly agree with the above statement, the 20.90% remains neutral, the 0.45% disagree and the 7.46% strongly disagree with the above proposition.
- The 35.07% agree with the proposition that "*The thematic module via teleconference contributed to my educational development*", with the 26.12% remaining neutral, the 20.90% strongly agreeing, the 11.94% disagree and the 5.97% strongly disagree with the above proposition.

- The 33.58% of the surveyed students maintain that they remain neutral on the proposition that "*The thematic unit via teleconference contributed to my professional development*", with the 23.88% agreeing with the above proposition, 17.16% disagreeing, the 16.42% strongly agreeing and 8.96% strongly disagreeing with the above proposition.
- The 30.60% of the participants remain neutral on the proposition that "*I am satisfied with the level of interaction in the online classroom*", with 29.10% agreeing, 20.15% strongly agreeing, 14.93% disagreeing and the 5.22% strongly disagreeing with the above proposition.
- Finally, the 37.31% of the surveyed students claim that they completely agree with the statement that "*In the future, I would be willing to attend a thematic module again exclusively via tele conference*", with 26.87% agreeing with the above statement, 13.43% disagreeing, 12.69% remaining neutral and 9.70% to strongly disagree with the above proposition.

B. Qualitative research results

All respondents agree that an online classroom requires specific skills, not just technological ones, as they consider that the teleconferencing platforms used by Open Universities are relatively simple to use and all tutors-counselors can handle them. Technology is a very important factor, which for some tutors-counselors it can act as a brake (Respondent- R8), while for others it can open new horizons (R2, 5, 6, 7, 9) and facilitate their work. Therefore, the issue of the specialized training of tutors-counselors in managing an online classroom becomes very important. Everyone believes that tutors-counselors cannot keep the interest of the students undiminished, no matter how well he/she knows his/her subject, when they use only the presentation as a method, with the result that the to conclude a tedious monologue (R2, 8). All respondents wish to implement educational methods and techniques that will activate and involve as many students as possible in the learning process. According to them, the individual characteristics of each student, but also of the tutors-counselors relate to the quality of communication in a teleconference class underlining that "*A tutor-counselor, however interesting as a personality, is not enough to cope with an electronic department"*.

Results of second research question

RQ2. How does a class in a teleconference differ from a face to face class in terms of the interaction's effectiveness between tutors-learners?

A. Quantitative research

The most important differences according to the respondents, refer to the familiarity with computer technology with an average of responses 1.99, the amount of acquired knowledge with an average of 2.49, the motivation to participate in e-classroom activities with an average of 2, the quality of the learning experience with an average of 2.62, the quality of knowledge about the tutor-counselor with an average of 2.84, the quality of interaction with the tutor-counselor with an average of 2.90, the quality of interaction with fellow students with an average of 3.27, the frequency of interaction with an average of 3.29 and the quality of knowledge about other students with an average of 3.53.

Other statistics include the following:

- The 65.67% said that they have never posted a message on the topic forum, the 30.59% posted on the forum once a week, the 2.23% twice a week, the 0.74% three times per week and the 0.74% four times per week.
- The 62.68% claimed that they have never posted a message in another group of the thematic unit (e.g. Facebook), the 29.10% post on the forum once a week, the 5.97% twice a week week, the 0.74% three times a week and the 1.49% five or more times a week.
- The 60.44% of students claim that their overall educational experience is good, the 30.59% answered "very good", the 5.97% answered "excellent" and the 2.98% answered "bad".

B. Qualitative research

All participants noted that in an online classroom there are additional challenges that everyone involved must overcome. Apart from the technical issues, which are usually observed in the first meeting, a tutor-counselor in a teleconference department should be able to meet the additional challenges and his/her sense of humor is a good way to cover the awkward moments. Respondent 3 said "*My tutor-sounselor had a sense of humor, there was no distance, he covered it*". The majority of the participants consider that the one who faces the most challenges in an online class is the tutor-counselor. However, most of the respondents think that a teleconferencing can work very well, but "*It still needs a bit of awareness for all of us. And let's all think about it better. In other words, we who find it easy to turn off the camera and the microphone, that this is probably not exactly the term participation. And on the other hand, inform people about what they will face, educate them*" (Respondent 4). Most respondents in the teleconferencing departments feel more isolated and experience the feeling of loneliness. Only the Respondent 1 stated that he did not feel isolated. Finally, most participants consider that computers do not help to limit the feeling of isolation, and for this reason, additional effort is required from the tutor-counselor. They also consider that specialized preparation is needed on the part of the tutor-counselors that they are going to teach in a teleconferencing section, so that students can interact and make the process more interactive. All participants report that there are several limitations to interacting in teleconferencing classes, the main ones being the lack of eye contact, minor technical issues that arise, especially at the beginning, learning the functions of the platform they are going to use

and the difficulties of fellow students who delay the whole the department. They also mentioned the technical problems they faced. Although, as most said, they were not extensive or serious, they mostly involved some minor network outages, especially for participants who lived in more far and "difficult" (geographically) areas, but they affected their participation and communication in the e-classroom.

V. DISCUSSION

From the above results it became clear that there are points that need improvement regarding the quality of the communication in online classes especially for the proper use of new technologies. This finding is supported by the studies Mayer et al. (2017), Rasi and Vuorjarvi (2018), in which the important role of audio and video channels is highlighted, as the participants in these studies claim that audio and video help important in the development of social interaction. The findings of the qualitative research also support the above finding, as all the participants mentioned the closed cameras of fellow students as an obstacle to the creation of interaction relationships. In addition, a well-designed curriculum and the right guidance of tutors can work effectively and contribute to removing the barriers created by the digital illiteracy of students allowing them to achieve learning outcomes (Salazar-Márquez, 2017), a fact that is also confirmed by the findings of the qualitative research, as some participants appeared to have faced difficulties, especially in the first online GAM. Although the online GAM contributes to the greater freedom of choice of place and time of learning and gradual autonomy of the student, he/she needs support and guidance, so that the students do not feel isolated and their academic development is negatively affected. However, the support of the tutor-counselor is equally necessary, since the teachers are not unaffected by the structural changes (Xanthopoulou & Stavrakakis, 2019).

Group learning does not negate autonomous learning and there is the possibility of planning it in online classes by the same autonomous participants. That is why the identification and understanding of the involved parties of a university, as well as the investigation of their needs and expectations, are conditions for effective quality service provision and are of crucial importance for those who manage and are responsible for drawing up educational policy (Xanthopoulou, 2020). The lack of eye-to-eye contact of students has an effect on teaching not only on acquiring knowledge, but also on the cultivation of interpersonal and interactive relationships (Carmo & Franco, 2019) and this is one of the biggest challenges faced by the tutors in teaching via teleconference. However, the quality of interactional relationships can be achieved with relatively simple, but effective strategies (Martin et al., 2019) and build meaningful collaborative relationships, which in turn will contribute to increasing satisfaction levels. This fact was highlighted through the present research (quantitative and qualitative), since the overwhelming majority of the students of MSc in "Education Sciences" considered the monitoring of the GAM teleconference successful.

Furthermore, it is important, as shown through the present quantitative and qualitative research, but also from others (Mayer et al., 2017; Martin et al., 2019) that the online tutor uses educational techniques that will contribute to the creation of meaningful relationships with students, especially with the help of technology that offers a multitude of tools to motivate students to learn. It has been shown that the relatively simple practice of audio feedback, inspired by assessment practices, can be extremely effective (Rasi & Vuojarvi, 2018; Holbeck & Hartman, 2018) for engaging students in the learning process and for cultivating more personal and collaborative relationships between all involved. Tutors who have moved from face-to-face to online teaching have found that, for their pedagogical mediation to be successful, specific skills and techniques are required and often, in order to redefine their professional identity, they turn to their colleagues for support (Carmo & Franco, 2019). It seems that the collaboration and support of colleagues can help tutors and is a promising practice (Leppisaari & Vainio, 2015), since, as it emerged from the findings of the present research (quantitative and qualitative) several tutors according to the participants need further support in order to successfully respond to the new online environment.

Finally, as shown by the findings of the qualitative research, the biggest barrier to interaction in an online classroom is the lack of visuals and audio, which Martin et al. (2019) also mention, adding that they are vital for building relationships and feeling satisfied for the students. Even successful tutors in a traditional classroom need time and training, as Armakolas and Panagiotakopoulos (2021) observe, to have equally good results in a remote environment, a fact that is also supported by the findings of the present quantitative research, since according to the students interviewed the most important factor that makes a difference in an online department is familiarity with computer technology. A good start for tutors-counselors is to use techniques similar to the classroom, a view also supported by Martin et al. (2019). As many students rarely raise any topic for discussion either on the department forum or on some social networking platform, it is considered useful to emphasize the cultivation of team-collaborative relationships. In this direction, the findings of Bergdahl et al. (2020) also advocate that the online presence of teachers in informal electronic networks is beneficial both for the involvement of students and for the quality of learning results. The students whether it is a GAM for life whether it is through video conferencing they wish to experience a meaningful learning experience (Brocato et al. 2015). Ultimately, either the students follow a face to face GAM either an online one does not change the fact that they wish to feel that the tutor-counselor who collaborate, is a person who is interested in the course of their studies and supports them, a fact that for some students can be of decisive importance for the successful or unsuccessful outcome of their studies (Martin et al., 2019).

VI. CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

The main conclusions derived from the quantitative research regarding the differences between a teleconference class and a live class in terms of the quantity and quality of interactions, the most important differences are the familiarity with computer technology, the amount of acquired knowledge, the motivation to participate in online class activities, the quality of the learning experience, the quality of knowledge for tutors the quality of interaction with tutors but also the quality of interaction with other fellow students, as well as the frequency of interaction and the quality of knowledge about other students.The qualitative research revealed that In a GAM through teleconferencing, the interaction created between tutors-counselors and students can be as effective as that of a live department under certain conditions. Having students feel like part of a community is an essential feature of a quality online classroom, but achieving this feeling is not easy. The communicative "gift" of tutor is a key element of a good interactive relationship, which can be cultivated, even by tutors who do not feel confident in an online section. The good organization and design of an electronic GAM by tutors it is very important, although more demanding than a lifetime. For the research participants, the part of organizing a teleconference is solely the responsibility of tutors-counselors.

In an online GAM there are additional challenges that all involved must meet. Apart from the technical issues, which did not appear to be particularly serious, there are additional challenges, especially for tutors-sounselors related to a set of factors. Since the process of digital communication is different, the training of tutors-counselors it should also be corresponding to the different requirements they should be able to manage from a small technical problem, to more complex situations, such as the distancing created by closed cameras, the lack of personal contact, their familiarity with the medium and procedures. In an online GAM there are several restrictions on interaction. The main ones are the lack of eye contact, micro-technical problems, especially at the beginning, learning functions of the video conferencing platform used by the university, difficulties of students who delay the whole section, inconveniences related to the physical space of the participants and affect the flow of the meeting, the protection of personal data and regionally limited capabilities of the network. Nevertheless, the quality of the interactions can be just as effective as in a live GAM.

Through this research and its findings, some concerns emerged which in turn gave rise to proposals for further research. In particular, it was shown that tutors-counselors who teach in the electronic departments of the HOU they are faced with several challenges, that is why it is important to carry out a qualitative research that will concern the tutors-counselors, within the framework of quality assurance in open distance education. Similar research can be carried out in more departments and other scientific fields as they may be governed by a different philosophy and present inherent differences, so that it is not possible to generalize the conclusions of this research. As many aspects of an electronic GAM remain unexplored, the relationship of different variables to the quality of interactions generated in an electronic section could still be explored. The findings of the present research, as well as future research, can be used on a practical level so that universities that implement online teaching can create digital educational material suitable for teaching in an online classroom with online activities that will contribute to better interaction between participants.

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