An Analysis of Students' Perceptions of the Educational Use of ICTs and Educational Technologies during the Online Learning

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Abstract—The impact of the use of ICTs in the university context has been investigated for decades, as they are not only tools in themselves, but also generate a new social space and, therefore, a new educational space known among others as virtual education or online learning (OL). Precisely, OL has been presented as an alternative in the historical context originated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has created an unexpected situation for social structures and their educational institutions. The main goals of the study was to know about the students' perceptions of the educational use of ICTs and educational technologies in times of the COVID-19 pandemic. Some specific objectives of the research were (i) to identify the disposition of the students towards the use of ICTs, (ii) to characterize the Interaction with others through the use of ICTs, and to (iii) identify the interaction of the students with LMS and ICTs. An in-depth theoretical review allowed the authors of this paper to construct an instrument to measure students' perceptions about the use of ICTs and educational technologies in times of the COVID-19 pandemic. This research was financially supported by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) as part of the project "Praxispartnerschaften zwischen Hochschulen und Unternehmen in Deutschland und in Entwicklungsländern ab 2017" (Project Nr. 57334905).

Keywords—information and communication technologies, university education, online learning in engineering

1 Introduction

The 21st century has brought a series of social and structural changes in developing countries that were barely imaginable in the last century. Phenomena such as globalization, the growing incorporation of technologies in different areas of people's lives, and the development of the so-called information societies, among others, have meant that people increasingly need to incorporate Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) to be able to participate adequately in the society [1-5].

The Latin American continent has not been exempt from this process. As is well known, this region is mainly conformed by developing countries, and in this matter,

one of its major challenges has been to ensure access to technology (ITCs, for instance) and to reduce the gaps in internet access, which has been the main work of the private sector, such as large telecommunications corporations, through the supply of technology and connectivity goods [6-7]. After improving access, countries have begun to consider solutions to reduce the next gap: the need to equip their citizens with competencies and skills that enhance and promote the appropriate use of ICTs. [8-9].

Concerning the proper use of ICTs, the document of the third Ministerial Conference on the Information Society for Latin America and the Caribbean, entitled "ICTs for growth and equality"[10], establishes the importance of the democratic role that ICTs will play in contemporary societies. These issues have been discussed and problematized in academia and in the educational policy guidelines of international organizations for a long time, but never before has it been so urgent the correct implementation of ICTs and educational technologies (ET) as in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic that broke out in the world more than a year ago [9, 10]. In this context, technology has emerged as the means to continue with life and participation in society. Technological devices with internet access have been our "vehicle" of transport to work, studies, meetings, shopping, banking, a movie or a concert, and to any other activity that required physical movement.

1.1 Impact of the use of ICTs at university context

The impressive progression in the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) had an enormous impact on different aspects of the information society, and crucially, on education systems. The responsibility of university education systems seems to be even greater, because they are in charge of "generating and training" the professionals of a society [2, 3, 10]. In the "new" university context, ICTs are decisive as a guarantor of a change towards the higher education model advocated by the Bologna agreement. [11]. Sáez indicates that, ideally, university students should be able to work in teams, be creative, contribute ideas, as well as be able to analyze, understand and discriminate information [7]. In this sense, the same author points out that the use of technology in university education provides resources that make it possible to train professionals who use active methodologies, since, with the possibility of greater access to information, comprehensive and critical learning is encouraged and intellectual production times are improved. Thus, the use of ICTs is intended to enable people to work, learn and study whenever and wherever they want [3, 4, 9].

The impact of the use of ICTs in the university context has been investigated for decades [3-11], as they are not only tools in themselves, but also generate a new social space and, therefore, a new educational space known among others as virtual education [6, 9]. Precisely, virtual education has been presented as an alternative in the historical context originated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has created an unexpected situation for social structures and their institutions, e.g. for health and education systems [12-14]. In this context, the main response of institutions around the world is to increase the use of e-learning, especially online educational platforms, and videoconferencing rooms. Some university institutions had already been implementing some of these technologies and platforms, but as complementary systems to the face-to-face model [15].

On the other hand, several studies emphasize the essential role that university teachers have concerning online learning [3, 4, 15-22]. The use of ICTs in the educational process is changing how teaching is carried out in universities, as it generates environments that facilitate learning and access to information [20-22]. Some authors suggest that, although teachers need to develop technical skills in these technologies, it is also necessary to have a positive attitude towards these resources [23-24]. In addition, it is necessary to incorporate and manage the ICTs required for each discipline, however, more than their expertise in the use of ICTs [24], what is required is that teachers can guide students towards an interest in developing knowledge and competencies through ICTs [25]. Information societies will constantly aim at technological innovation and, therefore, the role of professionals will be to be lifelong learners in a society in continuous movement, so universities must generate structures and skills to face the challenging social changes.

1.2 Use of ICTs at Chilean university context

In 2006, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) stated that Chile was at the forefront of Latin America concerning the access to the digital era, approaching the connectivity indices of developed countries [26]. These indicators not only reflect the country's efforts to enter the digital era, but also relate to public policies aimed at improving education through ICTs, such as the Programme for Effective Information and Communication Technologies for Education (FONDEF), created at the end of 2002, which aims to promote the development of applied research projects on the use of ICTs to improve learning processes [27-28].

Regarding the use of ICTs by university students, access to computers and smartphones with internet access is almost universal and higher than the rest of the Chilean population. Furthermore, it has been shown that this group uses ICTs primarily to search for information, review content and social networks, and communicate online, using these technological tools for an average of 7 hours a day [29-30].

At the institutional level, Chilean universities have made significant investments in ICTs, such as virtual platforms, learning technologies, and streamlining bureaucratic processes related to university management among others [31]. The use of ICT resources was already advanced before the COVID-19 pandemic, also many postgraduate programs were offered as an online or blended learning modality. These investments and advances in the incorporation of ICTs showed that Chilean students and universities were considered the best prepared educational spaces for online learning in Latin America, but it is important to delve deeper into how this process occurs. In 2018, a study about the use of ICTs at a Chilean private university was published, which demonstrated that, in general, teachers are more proficient in technological aspects than in pedagogical ones. This was the weakest point in the evaluation [32].

These results are related to the distinction of three levels or stages of ICTs incorporation in education: introduction, implementation, and integration [8]. This is because, in the case of Chilean universities (before the pandemic), the incorporation of ICTs was still in the implementation phase. However, the total integration of ICTs in the educa-

tional environment is still lacking. This could be explained by the fact that both university institutions and their students seem to be quite advanced in terms of access, management, and use of technology.

This idea was further explored in a study carried out among a group of student teachers at the Faculty of Education of the Universidad Católica del Maule, in Chile, regarding their ICTs skills [33]. This study affirms that there is still work to be done to integrate ICTs, because some difficulties in the integration of ICTs were identified, such as lack of sufficient training by the university teaching staff and its students, a lack of equipment and infrastructure, and there are still difficulties in accessing the internet from home due to geographical (rural) or economic factors. Furthermore, various academic investigations showed that for students, before the COVID-19 pandemic, the use of ICTs was fully integrated into their lifestyles, but not in their use for learning during their university education [33].

2 Engineering students' perceptions of the use of ICTs and educational technologies

2.1 Methodology

The main goal of the study is to know about the students' perceptions of the educational use of ICTs and educational technologies in times of the COVID-19 pandemic. The specific objectives of the research are:

1. To identify the disposition (readiness) of the students towards the use of ICTs.
2. To characterize the interaction with others through the use of ICTs.
3. To know about the use of different learning skills with use of ICTs.
4. To identify the interaction of the students with LMS and ICTs.
5. To identify the resources available of the students for the use of ICTs.

The research has a non-experimental transactional design, characterized by observing phenomena as they occur in their natural context and crystallizing the data collected over time [42].

Based on [3, 5, 7, 9, 11, 17, 23, 25, 29, 30, 36] and their previous experience in research projects about the use of ICTs and the development of a didactical strategy to incorporate educational technologies at the learning process of university students [16, 20, 37, 38], the authors developed a categories system with indicators for the instrument design. The instrument consists of a questionnaire with closed and open-ended questions organized in five main categories with their respective items (see Table 1).

Once the completed questionnaires were received, the students' perceptions of issues related to ICTs in education were analyzed, considering the responses to the 28 items proposed in the instrument. The statistical techniques consisted, firstly in a descriptive analysis of means and standard deviation, and also the analysis of the homogeneity of each variable with corrected item-total correlation [39]. As a last procedure, the factors and their internal consistencies are analyzed, investigating their Cronbach's alpha and

percentages of responses of grouped variables. All analyses were carried out with the software SPSS.

2.2 Population, available sample and procedure

The instrument was applied during the second academic semester of 2020 and the first semester of 2021, using the Google questionnaire tool. All students of the selected engineering faculty were contacted through an email, inviting them to answer the survey. Each student completed the online questionnaire anonymously, considering ethical aspects according to Chilean social science research criteria. The study material consisted of 256 fully completed questionnaires. With the information consoli dated, we proceeded to analyze students' perceptions of how they rated various aspects of their online learning experience. In order to respond to the five specific research objectives (see above), the responses to each item were analyzed using a descriptive analysis that took into account the mean and standard deviation, and also the homogeneity of each item with the corrected item/total correlation. The internal consistency of the full scale and sub-scales was analyzed using Cronbach's alpha. All statistical analysis were carried out with SPSS software.

2.3 Characterization of the sample

In total, 256 students answered fully the questionnaire: 16.41% are women (42) and 83.51% are men (214). Regarding the age ranges of the respondents, 88.28% (226) of the participants are between 21-25 years old, 7.03% (18) are between 26-30 years old, and 4.69% (12) are between 26-30 years old. Related to the participant´s distribution by engineering school, most of the participants study industrial engineering (28.91%). The participant's distribution by others engineering schools is: 22.66% from mining engineering, 20.31% from mechanical engineering, 18.75% from computer sciences, and 9.38% (12) from electrical engineering.

2.4 Statistical results

The results about the students' perceptions about the use of ICTs and educational technologies are presented in this section. Table 1 exposes the results for the 28 considered items.

Table 1. Results of the closed questions

Items	$\bar{x}$	Low 1-2	Med. 3	High 4-5
1. I feel prepared for online learning and the use of ICTs.	3.38	9.4%	46.9%	43.8%
2. I am motivated to learn using ICTs.	3.22	20.3%	39.1%	40.6%
3. I am competent in strategies and resources for learning using ICTs.	3.44	14.1%	40.6%	45.3%
4. I find the flexibility of time offered by online learning useful.	3.86	7.8%	25%	67.2%

Items	x̄	Low 1-2	Med. 3	High 4-5
5. I find the flexibility of space offered by learning with ICTs useful.	3.77	6.3%	31.3%	62.5%
6. Learning with ICTs facilitates interaction with the teacher.	2.72	42.2%	32.8%	25%
7. Learning with ICTs facilitates interaction with other students.	2.5	56.3%	18.8%	25%
8. Group activities are easier thanks to ICTs.	2.89	39.1%	29.7%	31.3%
9. I use different learning strategies (memory, drill, analysis and reflection, synthesis and summarizing, etc.) thanks to ICTs.	3.73	3.1%	39.1%	57.8%
10. I strengthen my learning style (verbal, logical-mathematical, auditory, bodily, visual, interpersonal, and individual or a combination of the above) thanks to ICTs.	3.78	9.4%	28.1%	62.5%
11. Using ICTs I organize my time where it is more effective for me to study.	3.81	9.4%	25%	65.6%
12. Using ICTs, I organize better the timetables where it is more effective for me to do university work.	3.7	7.8%	32.8%	59.4%
13. I improve the length of my concentration time using ICTs.	3.61	15.6%	28.1%	56.3%
14. The work and study timetable is strengthened by using ICTs.	3.44	18.8%	32.8%	48.4%
15. I plan my work and study week better thanks to ICTs.	3.67	20.3%	15.6%	64.1%
16. I know how to search for relevant information using ICTs.	4.02	6.3%	18.8%	75%
17. I know how to organize the information I find in ICTs.	4.06	3.1%	17.2%	79.7%
18. I can distinguish between relevant and irrelevant information in ICTs.	4.02	6.3%	17.2%	76.6%
19. I am proactive in responding to new ICTs learning tasks.	3.81	4.7%	31.3%	64.1%
20. I feel more responsible for my own learning process using ICTs.	4.06	4.7%	18.8%	76.6%
21. I have a computer, phone, tablet, etc. permanently available for learning.	4.19	14.1%	12.5%	73.4%
22. I have all the software and programs for learning.	4.16	4.7%	20.3%	75%
23. I have access to the Internet for learning.	4.25	6.3%	20.3%	73.4%
24. I consider that the costs (food, maintenance, transport, etc.) for learning with ICTs have increased compared to when they are not used.	3.05	40.6%	21.9%	37.5%
25. I consider that the costs of requirements (technology, internet, software, books, etc.) for my training have gone up.	3.94	15.6%	14.1%	70.3%
26. The university supports positively the use of ICTs for learning.	3.91	7.8%	21.9%	70.3%
27. In my family, the use of ICTs for learning is positively supported.	3.75	18.8%	18.8%	62.5%
28. In my group of friends, the use of ICTs for learning is viewed positively.	3.83	15.6%	18.8%	65.6%

Note: N is equal for all (256) and 20 of the items reach the minimum (1) and maximum (5) value, except for items 4,5,10,17,18,19,20 and 23 where the minimum value (2). x̄ = Mean.

In general, the results show a high percentage of agreement with the following statements that refer to students' ICTs skills: students state that they know how to organize information (79.7%), distinguish between relevant and irrelevant information in ICTs (76.6%), and are proactive in responding to new learning tasks with ICTs (64.1%). (64.1%). They also report feeling more responsibility for their own learning process

using ICTs (76.6%). In terms of access, the majority of students report having a computer, telephone, or tablet for learning at all times (73.4%), with all the software and programs for learning (75%), and with access to Internet (73.4%). However, it is striking that despite the high percentage who report having access, there is still a significant percentage who say that they do not have permanent tools to make use of ICTs (14.1%). Related to this issue, most of the students perceive that the costs of requirements (technology, internet, software, books, etc.) for their training have increased (70.3%), but this has not been the case with the perception that the costs of food, maintenance and transport have increased (40.6%).

On the other hand, there are those items that evaluate the support network for the use of ICTs, where students perceive that their university (70.3%) and their families (62.5%) positively support the use of ICTs for learning, as well as their group of friends positively view their use of ICTs for learning (65.6%). Despite the high percentages of these variables, there is still a significant percentage who state that they do not receive positive support from their family in the use of ICTs (18.8%).

As for the spatial-temporal benefits of learning through ICTs, the students perceive the flexibility of time (67.2%) and space (62.5%) offered by learning with ICTs as useful. Most of them state that with the use of ICTs they can better organize the times when it is most effective for them to study (65.6%) and when it is most effective for them to do university work (59.4%), as well as allowing them to better plan their work and study week (64.1%), and to a lesser but significant extent, they recognize that work and study schedules are strengthened with the use of ICTs (48.4%).

3 Discussion and conclusion

The main goals of the study was to know about the students' perceptions of the educational use of ICTs and educational technologies in times of the COVID-19 pandemic at a Chilean university.

In the specialized literature, three levels or phases of ICTs incorporation in education systems can be distinguished: introduction, implementation, and integration [8]. The descriptive analyses show that the implementation phase is indeed at an advanced stage; however, it does not yet seem to be in the integration phase, because the variables grouped in Factor 4, which allude the access to the internet and technologies, are those with the highest percentages in the instrument. However, some indicators show that access is still not universal, since, when asked about the permanent availability of ICTs for their studies, 14.1% of students still say that they do not have them permanently. This situation is reinforced by the variables asking about positive family support for learning through ICTs (to assess the implementation phase), where 18.8% say that they do not have this support. This variable could be strongly related to the variable in Factor 3, which indicates that students consider that the costs of requirements for learning with ICTs have increased (70.3%). According to this information, it is possible to infer that there is a family factor (and maybe also an economic factor) that could produce some difficulties to face this change in the learning modality. It is possible to refer to factors

specific to the household, such as, for instance, having technological devices with sufficient internet connectivity for the family members or spatial issues, such as an exclusive space for study.

Moreover, students are able to discriminate the information they find, to support academic studies through them and to recognize the potential of ICTs (they recognize that the length of their concentration time has improved, that their work and study timetable has been strengthened and that they plan their work and study week better).

However, the theory has also pointed out how important motivational aspects are in the successful integration of this type of learning. The role of teachers and the importance of having technical competencies, but also a positive attitude towards technological resources are also mentioned [16, 18, 23, 24, 25]. This can be applied to the case of learners, where the instrument has shown that students are technically good with ICTs for learning (Factor 1), but the results show that particular attention needs to be paid to the motivational aspects (Factor 5). In this factor (5), the students recognize that this learning method is useful for making time (67.2%) and space (62.5%) more flexible. In addition, they recognize, to a lesser extent, that learning through ICTs is something that motivates them (40.6%). However, as this factor is the one with the least internal variation and least reliability, it would be necessary to extend the instrument for future research and add more questions that investigate especially the emotional aspect of this type of learning. In relation to this, various theoretical approaches point to the importance of social factors in learning through ICTs, where ICTs are necessary to encourage encounters, such as virtual platforms or discussion forums so that the social nature of learning is not lost. These research results correspond to Factor 2, which deals with social relations in the use of ICTs, showed the lowest levels of agreement with these indicators, indicating that learning through ICTs does not facilitate interaction with the teacher (42.2%), with other students (56.3%) and that group activities through these media are not necessarily easier (39.1%). This shows that this factor needs to be addressed to improve the learning process with the integration of ICTs. In this sense, it shows also the need to improve the measurement instruments, because only one question specifically addresses the relationship with the teacher (and it was here poorly assessed). On the other hand, theory indicates the importance of teachers successfully integrating ICTs into teaching-learning activities, so it would be important to investigate this aspect in future research.

The authors of the present research are aware of the exceptional context caused by the COVID-19 pandemic that has led to the rapid incorporation of ICTs in university education, but they believe that the integration of ICTs in educational systems will continue to be necessary due to their many benefits and the flexibility they offer for further learning both formally and informally.

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