

The role of campus-sessions and face-to-face meetings in distance education

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Abstract (ENGLISH)

This article focuses on preferences for campus-sessions and face-to-face meetings in distance education (DE) and how they want them organized. Results from three surveys among students and university teachers at Iceland University of Education (IUE)¹ are presented: 72 graduate students from seven cohorts in one program answered the first survey and 51 teachers the second. All DE students at IUE were invited to participate in the third: 527 responded (34%). The majority preferred to meet for a total of 2-5 days per course, 2-3 times per semester. Students living further away from the campus and younger students wanted to meet less than did older ones and those living closer. Participants wanted to use f2f sessions for discussions and to create a feeling of togetherness but had mixed feelings regarding lectures: some staff members and groups of undergraduates did not want to spend much time for lectures. Graduate students, who were used to online access to recorded lectures, tended to agree. Access to teacher education is important but DE students at IUE value f2f meetings as a significant part of their education even if some may want to see changes in how they are organized. Guidelines regarding campus sessions are provided².

Abstract (Icelandic)

Greinin fjallar um hvort fjarnemar vilja fá staðkennslu í námi sínu og þá hvernig þeir vilja að henni sé háttað. Greint er frá niðurstöðum þriggja kannana meðal fjarnema og kennara við Kennaraháskóla Íslands (KHÍ): 72 framhaldsnemar úr sjö árgöngum á í tölvu- og upplýsingatækni svöruðu fyrstu könnuninni og 51 kennari svipaðri könnun. Öllum fjarnemum við skólann var boðið að taka þátt í þriðju könnuninni: 527 svöruðu (34% svarhlutfall). Meirihlutinn vildi hittast í staðlotum 2-5 daga í hverju námskeiði, tvisvar til þrisvar á misseri. Nemendur sem bjuggu fjær og yngri nemendur vildu hittast sjaldnar en þeir sem eldri voru og þeir sem bjuggu nær. Þátttakendur vildu nýta staðbundinn tíma til umræðna og til að skapa góðan hópanda en voru blendnari í skoðunum gagnvart fyrirlestrum: sumir háskólakennarar og hópar grunnema vildu ekki eyða miklum tíma í fyrirlestra né þeir framhaldsnemar sem voru vanir því að geta nálgast upptökur af fyrirlestrum á Netinu. Aðgengi að kennaramenntun er mikilvægt. En fjarnemar við KHÍ telja staðkennslu mikilvæga í menntun sinni jafnvel þó ýmsir þeirra vilji skipuleggja hana öðruvísi. Settar eru fram tillögur til að bæta staðlotur, þýddar úr skýrslu starfshóps á vegum kennarabrautar KHÍ og byggðar á niðurstöðum ofangreindra kannana (Jakobsdóttir o.fl., 2008).

¹University of Iceland (UI) and the Iceland University of Education (IUE) formally merged on July 1 2008 into one organisation called the University of Iceland. IUE is now School of Education at the UI.

² Translated from a report by a work group at IUE; based on the survey results (Jakobsdóttir et al., 2008).

Key words: DE, face-to-face meetings, online learning, blended learning, teacher education, access

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Introduction

During the last decade online learning has been increasing in popularity and demand (e.g., de Montes, Oran, & Willis, 2002; Gregory, 2003; Lewis & Price, 2007; Li & Shearer, 2005; Sapp & Simon, 2005). In higher education, that trend has been mapped in several studies on online education in the United States (Allen & Seaman, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007). Online distance education is rapidly becoming the preferred norm, for example, in US library and information science programs (Gregory) and nursing programs (Christianson, Tiene, & Luft, 2002). Across the globe providers of education and training are adding online educational activities to regular classroom experiences. Or replacing the latter with the former to increase flexibility regarding time and place of teaching and learning and to increase access various groups have to education.

However, sometimes the trend is in the reverse direction: providers of distance education (DE) may seek to improve students' experiences by adding more face-to-face (f2f) sessions. But what is the role of such sessions in DE? Time and travel to campus can be costly for students living far away, those who need to pay for child care or those who cannot get time off from work. There is then an increasing pressure on teachers and educational institutions to reduce class time and ensure that time spent on campus is well organized. Teachers and administrators in distance education need guidance: whether and how to blend f2f-meetings with online learning. Why should f2f meetings or campus-sessions be provided and when, where, and how should those be organized? Should student attendance be required? At Iceland University of Education (IUE), such questions became acute in the spring of 2006. This article presents results from three studies among students and staff at IUE aimed at providing answers and a basis for guidelines concerning campus sessions.

The context

IUE has offered most undergraduate programs both online (with campus sessions) and on campus³. The DE program started in 1993 with the aim to reduce the rate of unlicensed teachers practicing in rural areas, which has been quite high. Graduate studies at IUE have been organized mostly online since formally starting in 1994, usually with one to three campus- sessions (one to a few days each) per 10 ECTS course during a semester⁴. DE students were 54% of the 1703 undergraduates or about two thirds of the combined group in the 2007-2008 academic year.

For the past years, most of the graduate students have been practicing teachers (working part or even full-time), but managing to complete about 10 ECTS per semester or 20 to 30 ECTS per year.⁵ For the academic year 2006 to 2007, it was decided, however, to open the door for B.Ed. students who had just graduated, lifting a former requirement for a two year work experience before starting graduate-level studies. That group was to be encouraged to be full time students, completing a bachelor's and master's degree within five years. With that change, it was also decided to try a new organization for most courses in the largest program at the department that started in the fall of 2006: to offer weekly f2f –meetings, about three hours each, instead of the fewer and longer campus-sessions that typically last for one to three whole days. The decision was hotly debated, some supported the idea whereas other strongly opposed. Those for the decision argued that many students wanted more classtime on campus and it would be easier for them to form a learning community. Some maintained that the quality of the program would improve; perhaps the tendency had been for some teachers to do most of the teaching during campus sessions but not much teaching online in-between. Arguments against the weekly meetings included that students living far away from the university (more than a 2-hour drive) would have trouble attending such meetings and their access to teacher education from their different places in the country should not be reduced. In addition, it was argued that creating strong learning communities could very well be done online and teacher educators should rather be supported to develop their online teaching skills. Originally, it had been planned that attendance at the weekly f2f meetings should be required but later it was decided instead to try to record such sessions and make them available online or try to accommodate those who could not attend in other ways. Faculty members teaching in the ICT in education program⁶ were among those who opposed the changes and most of them did not change the organization of their courses to include weekly f2f meetings.

To get a better handle on the attitude of staff and students and their experiences regarding f2f meetings in the distance education program two surveys were conducted in the

³ In contrast, University of Iceland, the main university in the country, with which IUE merged in the summer 2008, had only about 5% of courses open to DE students; 8 out of 11 departments had no courses open for DE students in the fall 2007 (Geirsdóttir et al., 2007).

⁴ On the verge of being classified rather as blended than online according to Allen, Seaman and Garrett (2007): Online programs provide 80% or more of course content online (2007).

⁵ 60 ECTS is a full courseload in one academic year. Master degrees are 120 ECTS.

⁶ Information and communications technology in education.

summer and fall 2006. In the academic year 2006 to 2007, extensive curriculum changes were planned for the whole university and new curriculum developed, and implemented the fall 2007. Late in the fall semester 2007, another survey was initiated at the university by a work group made of four staff member and one student representative. The work group was formed by school administrators. One task was to make suggestions to improve the organization of campus sessions. The work group decided to give all distance students at the university (1530) a chance to voice their opinions regarding the f2f sessions. The results of these surveys will be presented in this paper.

Learning online vs. face-to-face

Literature research on f2f and online learning revealed recent studies from around the globe including Singapore, New Zealand, Italy, France, Israel, and USA. These were studies comparing achievement of students in f2f vs. online courses; studies on f2f vs online discussions and/or collaboration; and some indicated group effects by race, gender or age.

Two meta-analyses of recent studies comparing the achievement of students in DE courses vs. f2f classes have indicated little or now differences in favor of the latter (Jahng, Krug, & Zhang, 2007) or even some differences growing over time in favor of DE over f2f (Zhao, Lei, Yan, Lai, & Tan, 2005).

A study among Italian psychology majors showed that there were no significant differences between students involved in collaborative learning in f2f or online seminars in terms of growth in professional competence and self efficacy (Francescato et al., 2006). Ng and Cheung (2007) concluded that online discussion (in-class) involving educators and students (in Singapore) was just as effective as f2f tutor led discussion for recall of concepts. In addition, majority of the preservice teachers who experienced the online discussion felt they learned more online than in the f2f discussion and about half of that group preferred such discussion over f2f. They gave various reasons including less inhibition and reduced fear of humiliation and feeling more relaxed as well as having a better opportunity to share opinions. Ng and Cheung listed potential advantages of online discussion over f2f: Persistent nature of the message, better focus (on content without the visual/auditory expressions), individual reflection, reflection on other's posting; and knowledge building, scaffolding and motivation. On the other hand, students who preferred the f2f environment complained that the online discussion was more time consuming if the group was big due to the message volume and it could be hard to synthesize. Chen, Shang and Harris (2006), on the other hand, emphasized the positive aspects of f2f discussion taking place in real time with physical expressions as effective enforcements to scaffold problem solving and active learning (case method). They reported indications that learning gains among Taiwanese students in a management information system course were less in the online asynchronous discussion environment than in the f2f. Also Sapp and Simon (2005) have pointed out that online communication can be more hostile – where teachers can not as quickly respond to harmful communication directed at students, teachers or the course. Diekelmann and Mendias (2005) have reported dissatisfaction among nursing students regarding groupwork online.

They recommended that online teachers needed to facilitate students knowing and connecting with other team members. It has also been recommended that teachers in online discussion trained students to question and respond because of reasons such as the loss of serendipitous direct instruction (Heckman & Annabi, 2006).

Women may like online discussion more than do men. A study of 1368 students in the Israeli Open university showed that women were more active in online discussion than the men. Whereas the opposite was true in f2f discussions (Caspi, Chajut, & Saporta, 2008).

Age has also been shown to matter in preference for online vs. f2f experiences. Tabor's (2007) study revealed that older students appreciated f2f classes more than did younger in a blended course on information security at an American university. However, the older students also appreciated the flexibility of the online more than did the younger due to their workload. Students liked not having to commute to campus. In the course f2f sessions were mostly dedicated to hands-on learning/technical labs whereas students discussed relevant issues online and did no other online activities. Pluses with the online were flexibility of time and to think about responses. Those who disliked the online format complained about finding materials, felt they received less feedback or the content too advanced.

In the following sections, the attitudes of teachers and students at IUE is examined, whether they want them included in the DE courses and how they want them organised.

Earlier surveys 2006

A survey was e-mailed in the summer 2006 to current and former graduate students specializing in *ICT in education* (total of 144 students, 110 women and 34 men) on a postlist in seven cohorts⁷, with a 50% answer rate on average. In their introduction course, all but the first cohort had spent some of the days during one campus session in the countryside. The organization of the introduction course was the subject of an earlier paper (Jakobsdóttir, 2002) where the role of campus sessions in the course was described and their use: for live (teacher and guest) lectures and discussions; to make the voice of the teacher more prominent; for hands-on workshops with software and technology; for work with feelings and attitudes; to prepare the students for the course and to introduce and explain the teaching methods. Last but not least, for social activities and to help create a community of learners and to form strong groups that would work together and/or support each other later on in the course.

Students completing the survey were asked what they thought about campus sessions at the university in terms of amount of time, distribution of sessions during the semester and location of sessions. The majority (90%) indicated a preference for the 40-60 hours/1 week+ worth of sessions provided per course per semester. About 4% thought more f2f time should be provided but 6% less. About 88% indicated a preference for the

⁷ Cohorts starting their graduate studies 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2004 and 2005

distribution of the sessions they had experienced, that is, one to three campus sessions per semester per course, whereas only 6% preferred short weekly meetings. In addition, 74% thought that at least one campus session should be organized outside the capital area with social events. Student comments reflected how memorable that session had been. It appeared the shared memories had worked like a glue to keep the connections stronger within the cohort and to make online communication later on in the program much easier. Many students reported that the experience had been vital in helping create a strong community. People from outside the capital area also appreciated that the Reykjavík residents could not leave early in the evening to their homes.

Later in the fall 2006, a similar survey was e-mailed to staff at IUE (about 142 university teachers⁸) with answer rate about 36%. Of those who answered 53% had five or more years experience of teaching online, 31% had one to three years; 16% had less.

About 71% thought the right amount of campus sessions/f2f time were ca. 40-60 hours (one to one and half week) per one course per semester. One quarter thought more was required but about 4% thought less was better. The majority (63%) wanted to meet once to three times per semester whereas 19% preferred weekly sessions. Only 21% of the teachers thought that there should be at least one campus session provided away from the main campus with social events. It is probably considered too much work and not necessary for most courses after students have been initiated into the school/program and got to know many students through different courses.

The teachers were asked why campus sessions should be provided and how best to spend the time. About three quarters (38 of 51) answered. The teachers emphasized social elements: 15 talked about using time to get to know students or students to get to know each other personally and make connections; 10 talked about being together, closeness and social needs; 2 talked about collaboration or group work; one mentioned that it felt more secure for students to have met with the teacher f2f; one talked about importance of laughing together and having fun. Several teachers emphasized the importance of discussions: 10 talked about group discussion, taking discussions deeper, analysing or synthesizing; 3 teachers talked about the importance of exchanging opinions about the course, projects and teaching; and 7 teachers talked about importance of practice and hands-on experiences. Other uses of campus sessions were mentioned: surprising students; relief from the online mostly text-based environment; outdoor education; teaching to encourage creativity and work methods; student projects; peer evaluation of projects; visits to the main campus library and getting to know the university. Five teachers talked about getting messages more strongly or clearly across to students; and three guest lecturers. On the other hand, 9 out of 38 thought time during campus sessions should not be spent on lectures.

⁸ I will refer to the faculty members/ teaching staff at the IUE as university teachers rather than e.g. tutors or lecturers. The term *university teacher* is a direct translation of the Icelandic term *háskólakennari* and does not have reference to any type of teaching method. Most of the faculty/teaching staff at IUE are contracted to have about half of their work time (48-51%) devoted to teaching, 40%-43% to research and the rest to administration (6-12%). Full professors have slightly more research and administration duties than assistant or associate professors.

Main survey 2007-8: All distance students at the university

In November 2007 a work group consisting of teachers and students built on the former surveys and created a more extensive one. The survey consisted of 9 questions regarding the background of the students; 11 questions regarding the organization of campus sessions/f2f meetings; and 15 questions regarding different online experiences and general attitudes towards the DE program. It was sent through the university information system to all 1530 distance learners (84% female; 16% male) registered at the university in December 2007. Students received three reminders to participate. Data were anonymous. On January 6th, 527 or about 34% of the group had completed the survey. The results appeared to have reached some sort of saturation, had hardly changed from mid December when a preliminary analysis was done (on data from 27% of the participants). Because of that and the time constraint the work group was under, it was decided to close the survey.

As can be seen in Table 1, the participation varied between groups, the highest rate was in the largest undergraduate group – students studying to become teachers at the primary and lower secondary level (45%). It was lowest among the graduate students (27%) perhaps because of a relatively high number of inactive students.

Table 1. Participants and participation rates by type of study in the DE student survey. (U=undergraduate).

Type of study	Participants n	Participants %	DE students N	Participation rate
Graduate studies	175	33	639	27%
Early Childhood Education (U-ECE)	60	11	174	34%
Primary and Lower Secondary Education (U-PLSE)	159	30	353	45%
Teacher Certification (U-TC)	55	10	162	34%
Developmental Therapy/Social Pedagogy; Recreational and Social Activity Studies (U-DT/RS)	77	15	202	38%
Total:	526	100	1530	34%

Answer rate 100%

Majority of participants were female (87%). Most of the students were in the age range 25 to 34 (34%) or 35 to 44 (33%), additional 22% were 45-54. Students tended to be older in the graduate program. The mean age of an undergraduate DE student at the university is 36.1, but 28.7 in the campus program; The mean age of graduate students at the university is 42.4 (Geirsdóttir et al., 2007).

Table 2 shows how far the study participants live from the university main campus in Reykjavík. There was significant difference by type of study ($\chi^2 = 31.9$, $p < 0.001$). In the

U-PLSE⁹ program only 29% lived in the capital area (vs. 52-58% for students in other programs) and 10% lived abroad (vs. 3-5% in other programs).

Table 2. Residence of study participants

Where do you live?	No	%
In Iceland in the capital area	239	46
In Iceland, outside the capital area, but within 2 hour drive	109	21
In Iceland far outside the capital area (more than 2 hour drive)	145	28
Abroad	29	6
Total	522	100
Answer rate	99%	

Participants tended to work a lot: 82% worked with their studies (78% in work related to the professions they were studying for); and a very large percentage of those worked more than full time (31% of the participants) or had a 76-100% workload (42%)! The students in the U-TC program indicated most work. Half of them reported more than 100% workload.

Finally, the participant group was evenly divided in terms of experience of DE: 38% indicated 1-2 semester experience; 35% 1-3 year; and 27% more than 3 years. Most students were only taking DE classes (89%) but the rest were also taking classes on campus.

Statistical analysis was used to identify potential gender and age effects (see findings from studies reported in the section Learning online vs. face-to-face) but also to identify effects by residence (distance from campus) or workload (how much students worked with their studies). Correlational analysis was applied to determine those effects. Also, chi-square analysis was used to determine whether there were differences in answers by type of study (program), and also by gender, age, and residence in those questions/answers where correlational analysis was not possible.

Graduate students in a DE course on distance education at IUE in the spring term 2008, which I taught, were divided into five groups. Each group had access to the results of the quantitative data, analysed each one part of the qualitative data and made a report with suggestions on how to improve the campus sessions. The university work group based their final recommendations partly on those suggestions. Only one student was in the work group (and undergraduate) so it was considered good to give graduate students an opportunity to voice an informed opinion. Also because the participation rate in the survey had been the lowest among the graduate students (27%).

⁹ Acronyms for types of programs/study are introduced in Table 1.

Results

Table 3 shows that 87% of the students are satisfied with the DE programs at the IUE. Only 4% were dissatisfied. Difference by type of study was non-significant but was significant ($\chi^2 = 25.4$, $p < 0.05$) by residence. About 28-33% of those who lived further away from campus indicated they were very satisfied vs. 19% of those living in the capital area. On the other hand, about 10% of those living abroad were unhappy/very unhappy with the program vs. only 3 to 5% in the other groups. An open-ended question regarding the benefits of the DE program showed that students emphasized the flexibility in terms of time and being able to work with their studies in their own time. Those who lived outside the capital area also emphasized the flexibility in terms of location and not needing to move away from where they lived.

Table 3. The overall attitude of students regarding the DE programs at IUE

How happy or unhappy are you with the DE program?	No	%
Very happy	136	26
Happy	320	61
Neutral	44	8
Unhappy	18	3
Very unhappy	6	1
Total	524	100
Answer rate	524	99%

The attitude was not as positive towards the campus sessions as Table 4 shows. Still two thirds were satisfied but 19% were not. Answers differed by type of study ($\chi^2 = 51.0$, $p < 0.001$). The graduate students tended to be more satisfied (82%); but U-PLSE students and the U-TC students less so (only 48%).

Table 4. The overall attitude of students regarding the campus sessions/f2f meetings in the DE programs at IUE

How happy/unhappy are you with the campus sessions/f2f meetings at the IUE	No	%
Very happy	61	12
Happy	267	52
Neutral	101	20
Unhappy	64	12
Very unhappy	24	5
Total	517	100
Answer rate	517	98%

Those who were more experienced with DE tended to be more critical ($r=0.13$, $p<0.005$) and also younger students ($r=-0.16$, $p<0.001$). Those who were dissatisfied with the organization of campus sessions, also tended to want fewer days spent in them ($r=-0.27$, $p<0.001$) and have the number of sessions fewer per semester ($r=-0.23$, $p<0.001$). They were unlikelier to want to spend campus sessions on lectures ($r=-0.35$, $p<0.001$) or discussions ($r=-0.15$, $p<0.001$) and were more likely to have quit a DE class ($r=0.14$, $p<0.005$). They were also more negative regarding recordings of lectures as well as web conferences (asynchronous communications).

Results regarding number of days and distribution of campus sessions were similar to results in survey 1 and 2 (see Tables 5 and 6). The highest rate in all student groups preferred 2 to 5 days per course per semester (47 to 70% depending on the type of study), and to meet for two or three times per semester (50 to 67%). Only 3% wanted a totally online program without campus sessions.

Table 5. Preference for number of days in campus sessions per course per semester.

Number of days in campus sessions per semester: How many do you think there should be in one course?	No	%
No campus sessions	16	3
1 day or less	40	8
2-3 days	182	35
4-5 days	142	27
6-7 days	80	15
8 days or more	59	11
Total	519	100

Answer rate 98%

Table 6. Preference for distribution of campus sessions/f2f meetings per semester.

What kind of distribution do you prefer for campus sessions/f2f meetings if your DE program offers them	No	%
Once when I start my studies but never thereafter	85	16
1 time per semester	55	11
2 times per semester	227	44
3 times per semester	77	15
4 times per semester (monthly)	53	10
Bimonthly	11	2
Weekly	5	1
Other	6	1
Total	519	100

Answer rate 98%

There was significant difference by type of study regarding number of days ($\chi^2 = 59.5$, $p < 0.001$). The U-PLSE group wanted fewest number of days compared to other groups. 6% wanted no campus sessions at all and additional 10% 1 day or less per semester. This may not be surprising as a relatively many in that group live far away from campus. Also, there is a low preference for campus sessions in the U-TC group: 2% want no campus sessions and 21% 1 day or less. About half of the latter group worked more than full time with their studies.

Those who wanted more days for campus sessions tended to live closer to campus ($r = -0.14$, $p < 0.005$), work less with their studies ($r = -0.11$, $p < 0.05$), and have less experience of DE ($r = -0.09$, $p < 0.05$). Also, they tended to be older ($r = 0.12$, $p < 0.01$), Younger people may feel more “at home” in the online environment than do older people and feel less a need to communicate f2f.

Similarly, a significant difference by type of study was found regarding the number of times ($\chi^2 = 11.2$, $p < 0.001$) students preferred to meet for campus sessions. A high percentage (30%) of the U-PLSE only wanted to meet once when they started their studies but never after that. The graduate students wanted to meet the most, about a quarter on a monthly basis or more whereas 3% of the U-PLSE group were so inclined.

Those who lived further away wanted to meet fewer times ($r = -0.25$, $p < 0.001$). Of the 29 students who lived abroad, 54% only wanted to meet once in the beginning of their studies but never thereafter. In contrast, a quarter of those who lived within 2 hour radius of the capital and 9% of those in the capital area made that choice. Those who were younger also wanted to meet fewer times ($r = 0.24$, $p < 0.001$). They may tend to have smaller budget to spend besides having more responsibilities at home.

The age factor correlated significantly with number of days if broken down by types of study among the students in the U-PLSE program ($r = 0.28$, $p < 0.05$) and for students in the U-TC program. Older students in both of those programs tended to want more days than did the younger. Age also correlated significantly with number of times (distribution) of sessions among the graduate students ($r = 0.16$, $p < 0.05$) and U-DT/RS program and marginally so in the U-ECE program ($r = 0.24$, $p = 0.069$).

Those who had experienced weekly to monthly f2f meetings in a course in their DE program (about 18% of the total group, 48% of the graduate students) tended to be satisfied with the experience (only 12% disliked it; 72% were satisfied¹⁰). Those who had taken such a course tended to live closer to the campus. 27% of those who had not taken such a course were interested (45% of those living in the Reykjavík area but only 8% to 12% who lived far away).

In the survey students were asked about their attitude regarding mandatory attendance in campus sessions. The results reported in Table 7 show that half of the students do not appreciate mandatory attendance but about 21% are for requiring attendance. There was a

¹⁰ Were happy or very happy.

significant difference by type of study ($\chi^2 = 18.5, p < 0.05$). The U-ECE and U-DT/RS groups were more positive in their attitudes regarding mandatory attendance (33 og 30%). But people in the U-TC group, who attended to work the most, were mostly against it (63%).

Table 7. Attitude towards mandatory attendance in campus sessions.

What do you think about mandatory attendance in campus sessions	No	%
Require attendance in all campus sessions	108	21
Require attendance in some campus sessions but not others	149	29
Require attendance in no campus sessions	259	50
Total	516	100
Answer rate	98%	

Younger folks are less likely to want mandatory attendance ($r = -0.16, p < 0.001$). Demands on them may be more than on older people due to young children and family responsibilities. Residence mattered ($\chi^2 = 14.0, p < 0.05$): Most of those living abroad wanted no mandatory attendance (75%) or in some sessions but not others (25%). Surprisingly, residence within the country did not affect the answer.

Comment from the graduate students showed that most of those who were for mandatory attendance (17%) still emphasized that allowances had to be made in cases when people got sick, could not get time off from work, had problems with travel, etc. Those who were against mandatory attendance (49%) mainly emphasized that learning at that level for adults should be their own responsibility. They also mentioned cost and distance as a barrier, difficulties in getting time off from work, regarding scheduling or in cases when people got sick. One person thought there was a lack of reward for attending. Two people mentioned that it was ridiculous to use f2f sessions for delivering Powerpoint slides. Better to use sessions for projects and hands-on work.

Similar items were mentioned among the undergraduates in the U-PLSE group. However, many emphasized that DE should be DE, and the cost factor due to travel should be considered. It was not fair if some students had to spend thousands of kronas for each session. There were also many complaints that it was hard to get time off from work (although one person mentioned that it was easier if attendance was mandatory). Emphasis was put on students' own responsibilities. Some said many sessions were not that important to attend and in any case there were always loopholes and not always fair who found them and how they got to take the final test in spite of not attending sessions.

It is clear that the university may meet with a lot of opposition if it is decided to continue with requirements for attending campus sessions. However, the university is concerned with the quality of teaching while providing education and awarding degrees and licenses for the practice of several different professions. It may be difficult to find good ways in some subjects to provide experiences via distance for students to learn certain things. Some university teachers also strongly feel that students preparing to teach and work with

young children and adolescents need to be more exposed to human contact and closeness than the virtual environment can offer.

Students were also asked how best to spend time during campus sessions (see choices in Table 8). Discussions and seminars received the highest rate overall. Students in all types of studies tended to agree that it was important to use campus sessions for such activities (65 to 82%). Overall, lectures came next on the list indicated by 59%, hands on experiences (by 51%) and creating a good group spirit (by 49%). However, the choices indicated in this questions differed significantly by type of study for each item. The difference was very noticeable regarding preference for lectures. About 80% of the graduate students and a similar percentage of students in U-DT/RS included lectures but only 30% of the U-PLSE group. Students could comment and make suggestions for improving the campus sessions. Out of 159 in the U-PLSE group, 105 students commented. Of those 105, 63% asked that campus sessions were not used for delivering lectures or that time spend on lectures were reduced.

People living further away from campus tended to prefer discussions ($r=-0.09$, $p<0.05$) or lectures ($r = - 0.09$, $p<0.05$) less than people living closer. The latter was true for younger students ($r=0.25$, $p<0.001$) who tended less than the older ones to prefer spending time on lectures as well as computers and software instructions ($r=0.10$, $p<0.05$). Younger students tended more than the older to prefer various other types of activities, including work with group dynamics ($r=-0.23$, $p<0.001$), making connections ($r=-0.15$, $p<0.001$), create good class spirit ($r=-0.13$, $p<0.005$), field visits ($r=-0.09$, $p<0.05$), work with self image ($r=-0.09$, $p<0.05$), og games and singing ($r=-0.09$, $p<0.05$).

Table 8. Student attitude towards how time should be spent during campus sessions.

How should time be used during campus sessions/2f meetings	No	%
Lectures	311	59
Discussions, seminars	402	76
Field visits	196	37
Hands-on, labs	268	51
Demos	196	37
Outdoor teaching	75	14
Oral presentation, communciation	170	32
Group dynamics, cooperation	148	28
Create group spirit, togetherness	259	49
Making informal connections through coffee chats, social events	132	25
Work with self image, confidence	123	23
Games, singing	60	11
Art, creating, performing	82	16
Technology, computers, software	140	27

There was a significant correlation between the preference for lecture time during classroom sessions and a question on the survey about whether students had been exposed to various types of recordings (with sound/images/videos) online. People with little or now experience of recordings were more likely to prefer campus-session lectures ($r=0.25$, $p<0.001$). Of those who had the most experience of recordings only 38% wanted lectures but 73% of those who had no such experience, see Figure 1. However, when data was split by type of study, chi-square test only showed such difference for the graduate students where the percentages ranged from 44% to 97%.

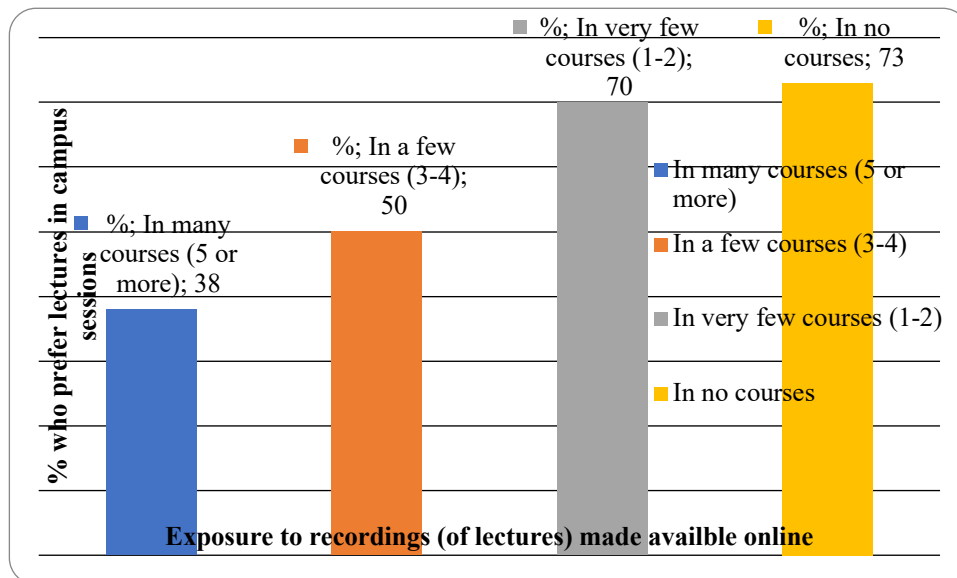


Figure 1. Preference for lectures in campus sessions by exposure to recordings made available online.

On the other hand, there was not a significant correlation between experience of (asynchronous) online discussions and preference for spending campus time for f2f discussions. There was a significant correlation between such preference and interest for online discussions. Those who were interested in online discussions tended also to prefer to use campus time for discussions ($r=-0.16$, $p<0.05$). And women were found to be more satisfied with the experience of online discussions than were men ($r=0.20$, $p<0.001$), which appears to support the finding of Caspi, Chajut, & Saporta (2008) that women were more active than men in online discussions.

Guidelines regarding campus sessions at IUE

The work group, formed by the IUE administration, made a report, based on the above results, which included many suggestions to improve campus session at IUE (see an online copy in Icelandic, Jakobsdóttir, Jónsdóttir, Valsdóttir, Frímannsdóttir, & Jóhannsdóttir, 2008). The work group also based their report on suggestions and arguments made by five groups of graduate students who got access to the survey results

and analysed the qualitative data from the main survey. The work group suggestions concerned e.g. attendance, organisation, teaching methods and focus. Some of them mainly have relevance to IUE (now the University of Iceland – School of Education). Some of the suggestions that may have wider applicability are shown below (translated from the report).

Guidelines for campus sessions

Attendance

- In general attendance will not be mandatory but the responsibility of students themselves.
- However, teachers can require mandatory attendance when there is teaching/learning involved that is difficult to organise differently (e.g. in arts & crafts, in lab work or for oral exams/presentations). In some cases it may be possible for students to fulfill such attendance by being in synchronous online connection.
- Study/curriculum guide will clearly show which courses require mandatory attendance.
- Study materials and/or recordings from campus sessions should be provided online for those who cannot attend sessions.

Organisation

- Most courses will have two campus sessions with a total of two to five days. Teachers are encouraged to collaborate in the organisation of campus sessions. Some may need to use them little or not at all which may give more time for others.
- (Bi-)weekly f2f meetings can be offered for the graduate students instead of campus sessions. However, mandatory attendance cannot be required and care should then be taken to accommodate students who cannot attend if the course is not available as a DE course.
- Needs of DE and regular students are for the most parts different so in the undergraduate program it is better to teach those groups separately. But when groups are very small and need to be joined, measures should be taken to accommodate the needs of both groups.
- Time schedules need to be made available early, before the time to register, so students can see when campus sessions are.
- Campus sessions should be within set times early, mid- and/or late in the semester.
- When building a strong student cohort, e.g. in the different graduate programs, it should be considered to provide an early campus session outside the main campus.

Teaching and focus

- Lectures should be recorded and made available online when they are used as a teaching method; and less time should be used for the use of lectures in campus sessions.

- More emphasis should be on the use of campus session in a variety of ways, e.g. for small group discussions, seminars, lab work, and to build up the group/create a good class spirit.
- Support and guidance will be increased for teachers (pedagogy and technical skills).

Discussion

The results of these surveys have to be taken with some precaution. The relevance is highest for teacher education and the context described. But also the answer rate was not very high as has been found in earlier studies using online surveys. Lefefer, Dal, and Matthíasdóttir (2007) reported response rates as only 24% in an online survey among 2093 upper secondary/junior college students. Other studies have shown response rates in online surveys as 15 to 29% (Comley, 2000, as cited in Lefefer et al.) or 25 to 60% (Moss & Hendry, 2002, as cited in Lefefer et al.) So the response rates we had for the IUE DE programs between 27 to 45% (34% on average) are not unusually low. Mid December was perhaps not a good time to ask students to participate in the main survey; examinations were starting in the earlier half of the data gathering period, and then people tend to get very busy in preparation for the Christmas holiday. The results, however, appear credible because survey results hardly changed after an increase in number of answers from 416 to 527 (response rate in mid December 27%, in mid January 34%). Also because there were similar findings from particular questions in the main survey (involving all DE students at the university) and the earlier surveys (involving seven cohorts of the ICT and education graduate students; and the university teachers).

University teachers at IUE and most DE students clearly value campus sessions and f2f meetings in their courses. Teachers and students tend to want to meet about two to three times per semester for a total of two to five days per course. However, those views vary with types of program, age, residence, and work load. Naturally, those who live far from the campus tend to prefer less f2f experiences than those living closer. Also, as Tabor (2007) reported, older students prefer more f2f sessions than do younger. There are some differences by type of program. However, the programs differ in terms of residence and how old registered students are in addition to other factors not mapped in these surveys. But clearly, graduate students value more emphasis on theory and research through lecturing whereas undergraduates may want more hands-on experience and exposure to different types of teaching methods. Perhaps that they can themselves apply in their own practice.

It should be kept in mind, that students at IUE sign up for the DE program supposedly knowing how it is organised. Therefore, a tendency to agree with the current situation is maybe to be expected. Those who cannot afford time or money to attend campus sessions may not apply for the DE program. However, there is not a pressure on the school to try to attract more students because there is a considerable rejection rate of applicants.

The views expressed by the participants in these surveys may well shift over time as technology advances and students and teachers become more used to communicating, networking and teaching and learning online using social software (see, for example, descriptions of trends in Anderson, 2007). Such trends may be reflected in the results that younger students tended to prefer less f2f time and/or to meet less frequently. There were indications that students used to accessing lectures online (live or recorded) were much less interested in spending campus sessions on lectures than did students who were not. On the other hand, students who liked online asynchronous discussions also tended to like to spend campus time for f2f discussions. There are pros and cons to both types and use of one type does, at least not yet, cancel out a need for the other. Other uses of campus time may depend on the type of course and subject (and the teacher) but hands-on experiences and creating a good group spirit should be high on the list. Administrators and teachers will have to think carefully about how to spend campus time in DE programs, especially if they make students' attendance mandatory.

Attendance in campus sessions is not required in the graduate program. However, graduate students are informed that if they miss sessions it is their own responsibility. It varies by teacher how and to what extent they accommodate the needs of those who do not attend the sessions. It is increasingly common to record sessions live and put the recordings online¹¹. In courses I teach, I have experimented with keeping students connected through Skype or other software allowing sound chat and video broadcasting. Sometimes on my own computer or I have asked team members of those persons to keep them connected on their computer (see Figures 2 and 3).



Figure 2. Group working in a campus session in Reykjavík with a group member in Florida (using Skype). January 2008. Photo: Sólveig Jakobsdóttir.

¹¹ Or other types of recordings including voice narrated Powerpoint slides and Camtasia screen recordings with narration.



Figure 3. Group socializing during a campus session in Reykjavík with a group member in France (using Skype). September 2007. Photo: Sólveig Jakobsdóttir.

In the undergraduate programs teachers can require attendance in courses they teach. However, information regarding mandatory attendance accidentally was left out of the curriculum guide for 2007 to 2008. Discussion recently on the staff postlist showed different views. People tended to agree that it could be necessary to have campus sessions in subjects requiring hands-on experiences including arts and crafts. Faculty members who were critical about mandatory attendance emphasized flexibility, student responsibility, teachers' responsibility to make campus experiences worthwhile, and that attendance might be preferable but not necessary in many subjects.

Teachers and administrators also need to listen to students' opinions. Lectures should be kept to a minimum and/or recorded and made available online. We also need to think what cannot be done online, only in f2f sessions.

I attended a „virtual“ conference organised in the UK in 2006¹², and another one in the UK in 2007 at the Cambridge campus¹³ the latter with many social events and informal chats throughout the conference. I engaged in discussions and got valuable information at both conferences. What stands out is that I got to know many people at the Cambridge conference, some of which I have been in contact with electronically for the last months. As was expressed by students in the first survey, the level of caring, commitment and connections was different. Fun memories are shared from being together at a certain time and place.

¹² VLEs: Pedagogy and implementation, the theory and practice of learning platforms and virtual learning environments

¹³ Twelfth Cambridge conference on open and distance learning

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Acknowledgements

Thanks to all participants in the surveys and to the graduate students who worked on the qualitative data and came up with suggestions to improve campus sessions at the university. Special thanks to people in the DE work group who worked with me to design and implement the main study reported here and to create the guidelines that are presented in this paper.