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Experience of transition to distance education in secondary education from the eyes of Syrian students during the pandemic

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate the educational experiences of Syrian students, who switched to distance education due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the factors affecting success in academic courses during this period. Descriptive survey model was used in this study. Research was conducted using the personal information form, the Distance Education Evaluation Questionnaire in the COVID-19 pandemic, and Academic motivation questionnaire in the COVID-19 pandemic. The study group consists of 200 students studying in Kahramanmaraş in the 2020-2021 academic year and participating in the distance education during the pandemic. The frequency (f) and percent (%) values of the opinions of Syrian students studying in secondary education institutions were calculated. The findings obtained at the end of the research were discussed under the headings of (i) students' views on distance education, (ii) factors affecting academic motivation, (iii) changes in studying habits and (iv) academic psychological support of families and teachers during distance education.

Keywords: Educational Sciences, Student Views, Distance Education, Academic Motivation, COVID-19 Pandemic

1. Introduction

COVID-19, the epidemic disease which was seen in the city of Wuhan in the Republic of China in 2019, has been effective all over the world in a short time. Thereby, as in all other fields, it has led to changes in the education system. According to United Nations educational, scientific and cultural organization, schools were closed in almost 186 countries. Moreover, the data published on 27 may 2020 show that Covid -19 pandemic affected nearly 1,19 billion students all over the world (UNESCO, 2020). During the course of pandemic, the ministry of education in Turkey gave an obligatory break for a two-week period on 12 March 2020. It was decided that the academic year was going to

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be distance learning for the rest of the 2020-2021 academic year. Education was decided to continue by using online technological tools (MEB, 2020).

Technology has been the most important tool for sustaining education outside of school (McBrien, Cheng, & Jones, 2009). Although the adaptation of technology opportunities to education has been named differently in the literature (such as online learning, distance learning, blended/hybrid learning, open learning, internet-based learning, computer-assisted learning), their common point is that they can be used anywhere, anytime by using online tools connected to the internet network and it provides education opportunities (Cojocariu, Lazar, Nedeff, & Lazar, 2014; Moore & Kearsey, 2005). The COVID-19 epidemic revealed the use of alternative education methods and stepped in to solve the problem in the field of education caused by epidemic. As students and teachers stay away from school, the normal secondary education curriculum has started to be carried out by the Ministry of Education as online distance education within the possibilities of high schools in education. In this education system, TV and EBA has the first priority on providing distance learning. The Ministry of National Education has started to provide lessons through EBA program with the help of teachers. The students have started to attend the classes by telephone as well as using the animation video. The meetings were done in the form of teleconferences teacher, parent, administrator, and also the ministry have been in constant communication with students. Teachers developed the use of technology and started to do it with students in the form of question and answer mutually. From time to time, they started to use zoom and other communication platforms in order to provide education in accordance with the curriculum. Assessment and evaluation process has been tried to be compensated in different ways such as online exams and coursework techniques like homework. Since students and teachers were suddenly aparted from schools and lesson were transferred away from normal classes, the main aim was the continuance of education not the effectivity of lessons (Carey, 2020). Since it is not clear what the next days will bring and what will happen in the world, efforts have begun to find solutions and ways to increase the quality in the new education system.

Innovative technological developments have been used in education. While various methods and techniques were applied, this epidemic completely changed the education dimension and eliminated the face-to-face education environment. Accordingly, new methods started to be designed in order to minimize the negative impacts on education. Online learning methods and techniques have gained importance all over the world. In the past, online education was one of the alternative education methods and became one of the solutions for this epidemic. (Telli-Yamamoto and Altun, 2020: 26) revealed that educational institutions should always have alternative plans in reserve in these extraordinary situations (Rieley, 2020). It is certain that technology will be used in the occurrence of extraordinary events (Meyer & Wilson, 2011). Therefore, new educational tools and online education learning methods have gained importance; it has become a

problem for employees at all levels, from teachers, administrators to students. What increases the efficiency that affects the quality in education is actually related to the adaptation of technological systems to education. (Gilani, 2020). The use of technological tools brings with it various problems. Program download, program installation, internet connection access, etc. (Favale, Soro, Trevisan, Drago and Mellia, 2020). It is not fair for all students to receive the same education, as there are places where there is no access to online access, there is no electricity, telephone, internet, economic inequality for students. The number of students at home and financial difficulties make it difficult to get education. Since the students could not get the required information in the lessons, their interest in education decreased. Since the psychology of teachers, students and parents was affected during the epidemic, there was a problem in collecting attention and reluctance was observed. Not all courses are suitable for distance education. Since the curriculum of the Ministry of National Education is planned as face-to-face education, feedback is provided. (Song, Singleton, Hill & Koh, 2004; Parkes, Stein & Reading, 2014; Favale, Soro, Trevisan, Drago & Mellia, 2020).

Due to the epidemic in the world, students are disparted from education. Their primary needs are nutrition, psychology, health problems of family members, and they had to work due to death. Many such problems occur when students are left on their own, when games are played instead of lessons on the phone, their concepts change, sleep patterns differ, etc. (Kaya, 2002: 10; Islam and Ferdowski, 2014: 176). Since the most important factor of education is student success, factors should also be taken into consideration in distance education. It is necessary to increase motivation in education situations experienced in extraordinary situations. The positive and negative aspects of the education provided by the Ministry of National Education should be identified and developed. With this study, it was aimed to evaluate the factors that increase the success of the educational activities carried out in the epidemic. For these purposes, answers to the following problems were sought;

1. What are the views of Syrian students on the practice of distance education?

2. What are the views of Syrian students on the factors affecting their motivation during distance education practices?

3. What are the views of Syrian students about the support they have received since they started distance education?

4. What are the views of Syrian students on the use of technology since they started distance education?

2. Method

The 'descriptive survey model' was applied in the research, since it is to describe the experiences of Syrian students during the transition period from normal education to distance education due to the COVID-19 epidemic in the world (Karasar, 1999). The study group consists of 200 students selected by random sampling from students of secondary education institutions in Kahramanmaraş in the 2020-2021 academic year, who received distance education. Table 1 shows the demographic information of the students participating in the research.

Table 1. Demographic Information of the Study Group

Gender	*f*	*%*
Female	*126*	*63*
Male	*74*	*37*
Devices used in distance education		
PC	67	33,5
Tablet	29	14,5
TV	37	18,5
Smartphone	67	33,5
Grade		
9th Grade	*32*	*58,0*
10th Grade	*102*	*25,5*
11th Grade	*62*	*15,5*
12th Grade	*4*	*1,0*
Number of Siblings Studying in Distance Education		
1	*125*	*62,5*
2-3	*66*	*33,0*
4-6	*9*	*4,5*
Access to distance education		
Yes	*162*	*81,0*
No	*38*	*19,0*

When table 1 is examined, while 63% of the students are girls, 37% are boys. During the distance education, 33,5% of the students received education using a computer while 18,5% with a TV and 33,5% with a smartphone. Grade levels were determined as 58% for 9th grade, 25,5% for 10th grade, 15,5% for 11th grade and 4% for 12th grade. The number of siblings of secondary education students receiving distance education was

determined as 1, 33% with 2-3, and 4,5% with 4-6 students with 1 sibling. While 81% of distance education students have the opportunity to access distance education, it is seen that 19% do not have the opportunity to access distance education.

2.1. Data collection procedure

The collection of the data obtained in the research was carried out by using the questionnaire technique. Data collection tools that do not give a total score to collect information about more than one variable are called "surveys" (Erkuş, 2007). In this research, the four-stage step made by Büyüköztürk (2005) was followed in the development of the questionnaire prepared in accordance with the study. Various stages were used in the development of the questionnaires. While developing the questionnaire, the problem is defined in the first place. During the epidemic in the world, data collection tools were needed to determine the students' opinions about the distance education applications made by the Ministry of National Education, the support they received and the factors affecting their academic motivation during this time. In the second place, a literature review was conducted to create items according to the purpose of the research, and measurement tools related to online distance education evaluation were determined. In addition, education instructors (n=7) working in institutions in different countries were contacted via e-mail and views were obtained on the items that should be included in the data collection tools. A draft form of 50 items for the Evaluation of Distance Education in the COVID-19, and 35 items for the Academic Motivation Questionnaire in the COVID-19, which was adapted to distance education in the global epidemic, were created together with the results of the literature review, using the opinions of the academicians. In the third stage, in order to test the content validity and face validity, 'Expert Evaluation Form' was sent to different experts via e-mail. It was evaluated by reaching academicians from different universities who have a prof degree from Educational Psychology (n=2), Curriculum and Instruction (n=5), Educational Administration (n=1) programs. After giving information about the objectives of the questionnaires, the experts were asked for their opinions on whether the items were appropriate or not. As Büyüköztürk (2005) stated, it was asked in the form of "appropriate/not appropriate" format with two options. In addition, next to the items, there was a field in the form of 'correction/suggestion' for experts to express their opinions. Opinions were asked about how the order of the questions in the questionnaire should be. By evaluating these opinions, a form consisting of 37 items for the Evaluation of Distance Education in the COVID-19 and 21 items for the Academic Motivation Questionnaire in the COVID-19 were created. In the fourth stage, the pre-application form was applied on a study group with similar characteristics to the target group of the research, and the comprehensibility and reliability of the questions in the questionnaires were examined. After the preliminary application, the questionnaires were reviewed for the last time and a 34-item form for the Evaluation of Distance Education in the COVID-

19 and a 19-item form for the Academic Motivation Questionnaire in the COVID-19 were created. Information has been obtained about the classroom, which is thought to be effective on the evaluations of Syrian students regarding distance education, the device they access to distance education, the number of siblings who follow distance education, and changes in success after switching to distance education.

The opinions of Syrian students about distance education due to the COVID-19 global epidemic were made with the Evaluation Questionnaire of Distance Education in the COVID-19, which was developed in accordance with the purpose of the research. In the 34-item questionnaire, there are 16 items about the strengths of distance education, 6 items about the teaching staff, 6 items about the teaching of the courses and 6 items about the problems experienced in distance education. The answers are taken with a 5-point Likert-type rating scale (1 = I strongly disagree, 5 = I strongly agree). Reliability analysis was conducted for each sub-dimension and the entire questionnaire related to 34 items in the questionnaire. The Cronbach Alpha values found for the strengths of distance education subtest (0.935), for the instructors subtest (0.934), for the teaching of the courses subtest (0.829), for the problems experienced in distance education subtest (0.795) and for the entire questionnaire (0.937).Therefore, it is seen that the questionnaire has a high level of reliability coefficient (George ve Mallary, 2003).

The factors that have an impact on the academic motivation of Syrian students in distance education during the COVID-19 global epidemic were created with the Academic Motivation Questionnaire in the COVID-19, which was created within the scope of this study. In the 19-item questionnaire, there are 7 items related to internal factors affecting students' motivation, 7 items related to learning experiences, 2 items related to their families and 3 items related to external factors. The answers are taken with a 5-point Likert-type rating scale (1 = least affected, 5 = most affected). The Cronbach alpha coefficient was calculated to measure the reliability of the questions in the questionnaire. Accordingly, Cronbach's alpha values were determined as (0.901) for the internal factors subtest, for the learning experiences subtest (0.840), for the family status subtest (0.999), for the external factors subtest (0.734), and for the entire questionnaire (0.860). The values found show that with the Academic Motivation Questionnaire in the COVID-19 Process, high-reliability measurement results can be obtained in determining the views of Syrian students about distance education in the COVID-19 global epidemic (George ve Mallary, 2003).

In this study, firstly, the data were obtained by applying the survey forms on the online survey platform called Google Forms to the students. In the beginning, the students were given an informed form explaining the purpose of this study, and a checkbox was added stating that the students voluntarily participated in this study.

Total points cannot be obtained from the quantitative data obtained from the Distance Education Evaluation Survey in the COVID-19 and the Academic Motivation Survey in

the COVID-19. Each item of the questionnaire is interpreted separately. The answers of the students reveal their views on their personal experiences in the online distance education process. For this reason, the data were analyzed by using the SPSS 21 package program and the frequency (f) and percent (%) values of the students' thoughts regarding each questionnaire item were calculated. The data obtained from the pilot application (n=20) and the data of the students who participated survey but did not answer all the questions (n=1) were not included in the analysis.

3. Findings

3.1. The First Sub-Problem of the Study

Table 2. Views on the item "I think that I learned the subjects covered in the lessons during the distance education process."

Variables	f	%
Strongly disagree	44	22
Disagree	29	14,5
Neutral	84	42
Agree	26	13
Strongly agree	17	8,5

In the distance education process, 22,0% stated that they do not think that they have learned the subjects covered. While 42,0% said they were undecided, 8,5% stated that they had learned the topics covered.

Table 3. Views on the item "I can easily use the necessary technologies for distance education

Variables	f	%
Strongly disagree	26	13
Disagree	36	18
Neutral	32	16
Agree	54	27
Strongly agree	52	26

In Table 3, 26,0% of the distance education students stated that they use the necessary technology easily. It is seen that 13% do not use it easily.

Table 4. Views on the item "I can communicate well with my teachers during the distance education process."

Variables	f	%
Strongly disagree	28	14
Disagree	37	18,5
Neutral	56	28
Agree	44	22
Strongly agree	35	17,5

While 17,5% said that they could communicate healthily with their teachers during the distance education process, 14,0% stated that they could not communicate well.

Table 5. Distribution of Student Opinions on the Distance Education Process

	Never		Rarely		Sometimes		Often		Always	
	f	%	*f*	%	*f*	%	*f*	%	*f*	%
I get psychological support from my family during the distance education process	58	29,0	29	14,5	62	31,0	23	11,5	28	14,0
I get academic support from my family during the distance education process.	53	26,5	50	25,0	59	29,5	20	10,0	18	9,0
I get psychological support from my teachers at school during the distance education process.	44	22,0	35	17,5	68	34,0	35	17,5	18	9,0
I can easily access to internet connection required for distance education.	24	12,0	26	13,0	46	23,0	36	18,0	68	34,0
I can easily access the necessary technologies (mobile phone, tablet, computer) for distance education.	31	15,5	38	19,0	41	20,5	24	12,0	66	33,0
The school administration monitors whether the students comply with the Covid 19 measures.	38	19,0	32	16,0	41	20,5	39	19,5	50	25,0

According to Table 5, while 14,0% (28) of the students stated that they received psychological support from their families during the distance education process, 29,0% (58) of them stated that they never received support. While 9% (18) of the students who stated that they received psychological support from their teachers in the distance

education process, 22% (44) stated that they did not receive support. 34% (68) say that they can easily access the necessary internet connection in the distance education process, and 12% (24) say that they cannot. It is 33% (66) who can easily access the necessary technologies (mobile phone, tablet, computer) for distance education, and 15,5% (31) who do not.25% (50) of the students who gave feedback on whether the school administration followed the students' compliance with the Covid 19 measures were followed as 19% (38) stated that they were not followed. As stated in Table 4, it is seen that families, teachers and students cannot communicate in distance education like they did on face-to-face communication.

Table 6. Views on the item "Distance learning is more motivating than face-to-face education"

Variables	f	%
Strongly disagree	89	44,5
disagree	30	15
Neutral	35	17,5
Agree	18	9
Strongly agree	28	14

Distance education is more motivating than face-to-face education. According to the item, 44,5% (89%) say they disagree, 14% (28) say that they do not motivate.

Table 7. Views on the item "In-class discussion environment in live lessons is more effective than face-to-face lessons.

Variables	f	%
Strongly disagree	80	40
disagree	35	17,5
Neutral	32	16
Agree	19	9,5
Strongly agree	34	17

According to the item "In-class discussion environment is more effective in live lessons than face-to-face lessons", 40,0% (80) of the students stated that it was not effective, and 17,0% (34) stated that it was effective.

Table 8. Views on the item "Communication with the teacher in live lessons is more effective than face-to-face lesson."

Variables	f	%
Strongly disagree	8075	37,5
disagree	32	16
Neutral	34	17
Agree	25	12,5
Strongly agree	34	17

According to Table 8, 37.5% (75) state that it is not true, 17.5% (34) of them say that communication is good in distance education compared to live lessons.

3.2. The Second Sub-Problem of the Study

3.2.1. Opinions on student motivation in the distance education process

According to Table 6, it is seen that the students' participation in the items related to education that affects the motivation to study varies between 44.5% and 9%. Accordingly, the item with the highest number of opinions is "Distance education is more motivating than face-to-face education." (86%) 44.5.

When the findings in Table 2,6 are examined, it is seen that the answers of the students to the items with learning experiences are between 42.0% and 8.5%. Accordingly, while the students answered the least item "Seeing that I have the knowledge of using educational technologies affected my academic motivation" (27-13.0%); It is seen that the item with the least participation is "Distance education is more motivating than face-to-face education" (9-44%).

3.2.2. Distribution of student views on family life

According to Table 5, it is seen that students agree between 14% and 58% in the items related to family situations. Accordingly, it is stated that the families of the students do not support the students in the distance education process. 14.0% - 29.0% of the students stated that they did not receive psychological support from the teachers. It is seen that internet access, where economic inequalities are seen, is also related to family life.

3.3. The Third Sub-Problem of the Study

3.3.1. Findings regarding the opinions of students on teacher support

When Table 5 is examined, it has been determined that students have not received sufficient support from their families and teachers since the transition to distance education. According to this information, it is stated that students do not receive sufficient support from their families and teachers in the academic field after they switch to distance education.

3.4. The Fourth Sub-Problem of the Study

3.4.1. Findings regarding the use of technology in teaching during distance Education

When Table 1 is examined, it is seen that the students' level of participation in the items related to the use of tablets, computers, mobile phones, and TV while teaching varies between 33.5% and 14.5%. According to this, the participants attended the courses most frequently with computers 33.5% and smart phones 33.5% during distance education. Tablets (27%) 14.5, TV (37) 18.5% were found to be the least. In addition, it is seen that the use of the internet and telephone is related to the economic situation of the family.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

Although the change that comes with the interruption in education on a global scale due to the COVID-19 global epidemic is extensive and rapid, the process has been experienced in a unique way for every country, institution and user. Education and training has undergone a field test of how it should be shaped according to the needs of the new world order and created personalized scenarios that allow educators to make rapid changes in their teaching. Although e-learning applications are not new, the dramatic change that came with the epidemic has left the learning and teaching processes out of the boundaries of time and space and gave it a new face.

During the COVID-19 global pandemic, courses, lectures, workshops, which have been made accessible by various educational institutions in the virtual environment, allow students to interact with different educators than ever before in traditional education. The findings of the study showed that 48.6% of the participants followed other educational contents besides the distance education provided by the Ministry of National Education. However, students stated that they think that online distance education allows them to manage their own learning processes. This situation can be interpreted as the students participating in the research also benefited from this opportunity created for the development of 21st century skills (Pellegrino & Hilton, 2012), which are frequently talked about, and for transferring the responsibility of learning to the learner.

Despite academic honesty is difficult to measure online, transparency and fairness of assessment processes are more important than ever for students. Considering that teachers adapt to the changing ecosystem overnight and the course contents are prepared according to formal education, it is a successful practice to carry out the lessons and practices in accordance with the course contents specified in the curriculum can be decisive for the execution of the educational process. As a matter of fact, researches show that problems arising from technology or the system can affect all individuals in the online distance education process (Çığlık & Bayrak, 2015). On the other hand, when the online education is more likely to be interrupted due to technical problems and the possibilities of individuals compared to formal education, the fact that the duration of the course hours is determined according to these factors may also be a determinant in terms of the quality and efficiency of education. The findings obtained from this research showed that the students thought that the evaluations made during distance education were made in an objective way, they stated that the lessons/applications were suitable for the content of the courses and they found the duration of the lessons sufficient. On the other hand, students state that they think that the online distance education provided does not contribute to their academic development. This finding can be interpreted as if an application where technology is the basis of education is implemented in the future, it should be improved in terms of quality. It seems likely that there will be a need for

redesigning the curricula in a way that will increase student curiosity and respond to student needs.

Although online distance education offers flexibility in many aspects, it is thought that it is not sufficient in terms of psycho-motor learning, which plays an important role in skill acquisition, and distance education is more suitable for theoretical courses (Dutile, Wright, & Beauchesne, 2011). The findings obtained from this research also show that the participants think that distance education is more suitable for theoretical courses. Although the situation developing with the COVID-19 epidemic requires the use of technology in education to be more effective, learning is a social process and takes its power from communication. The social aspect of learning needs to be re-evaluated in this context. In this context, the findings obtained from the research show that the students think that creating a classroom environment with forums/live lessons is not sufficient for socializing. The importance of the social dimension in terms of student success in distance education has been revealed in studies (Wegerif, 1998; Arasaratnam-Smith & Northcote, 2017). It is thought that virtual learning spaces have not been successful in filling the socialization need of education within the scope of this research.

The findings obtained from this study show that students think that teachers manage the process successfully and receive feedback on the issues they need. Studies have revealed that giving feedback to students (Haar, 2018) and increasing teacher-student interaction (Shea, 2006) are factors that affect success and satisfaction in distance education.

Schools have an important role to play in equalizing the impact of individual and family factors that students bring to the learning environment. However, with the closure of schools due to physical distancing, these individual and family factors have become more visible. In this context, although e-learning can be a great source of support if used correctly, it has the potential to increase the gap between existing inequalities in education. This is clearly demonstrated in the findings of this study. Participants think that distance education makes socioeconomic inequalities among students more evident. As Anderson (2020) stated, moving education systems to online environments has revealed inequalities in education due to both inadequacies in accessing technology and systems and deficiencies in human capital. As students' academic motivation will change depending on where they are, their living conditions, what they find important, the purpose of education will also change. The findings of this study reveal that emotional and physical deprivations affect academic motivation. Students state that they think that not being able to meet their socialization and physical activity needs is a determinant on academic motivation.

Not all students will be able to control their learning due to problems such as having online access, problems in using technology, insufficient parental support, and limited social capital. Creating an environment that will effectively use learning at home can

also come back as a pressure factor for educators, learners and families. Efforts should be made for infrastructure deficiencies and efficient use of the new system by users. Another factor affecting their academic motivation is the quality of the working environment. It has been observed that if the technology use of secondary school students is weak, online education is evaluated negatively (Antalyalı, 2004; Demir & Yurdugül, 2015). However, students do not think that the way the exams are administered affects their academic motivation.

Although the courses are given in accordance with the curriculum, there have been some changes in the study habits of the students in this transition from formal education to distance education. Teachers use classroom communication tools, give feedback to students in a short time, 24/7 access to educational materials

It has eliminated the excuses required for students not to complete the tasks assigned to them (exam preparation, homework/project writing, etc.). The changes in the study habits of the participants since the transition to distance education, the decrease in exam anxiety and the preparation for the lessons have been enough time to study. Using time and planning personal development activities are some of the skills that need to be acquired. The participants stated that the most common activities they do outside of the classroom during distance education are listening to music, doing housework and cooking.

5. Recommendations

Prejudiced groups have been found in every period regarding distance education, but the arguments put forward by these prejudiced groups can also be worrying factors for formal education that does not renew itself and does not keep up with the requirements of the age (Telli-Yamamoto and Altun, 2020). As Erkut (2020) stated, the COVID-19 crisis creates a good opportunity to shape a new generation of education for the whole world. Although there are negative aspects of online distance education, it should not be forgotten that it has benefits in an extraordinary crisis such as the COVID-19 epidemic. Educational institutions can always produce solutions within the possibilities and needs of the institution. Although the education and training practices will be revised according to the future conditions, it is possible to make some suggestions for the arrangements that can be made if a model in which online distance education is largely an education center is adopted. For example, in order to increase student interaction in distance education and to eliminate the problem of social isolation, more effective courses can be made, for disadvantaged groups who have difficulty in accessing distance education, these courses can be recorded and students can be followed later. It should be shorter than face-to-face education, departments can be accredited, allowing students to take common courses from different educational institutions, alternative bc plans can be

made, lessons in distance education can be made more fun, student-oriented and motivating by teachers, social media platforms can be used for educational communication, Creative, interactive, student-centered and group-based lessons can be planned (Partlow & Gibbs, 2003), more effective instructions and feedback can be given to the student's attention and attention can be drawn to the lesson. The curriculum is planned for distance education. (Keeton, 2004), in other words, even if the learning process will be carried out remotely and online, efforts can be made to make it more humane.

In conclusion, it is certain that the COVID-19 global pandemic will change the way educators and students see education. The opportunities brought by this change will undoubtedly bring with it some difficulties. It seems that both educators and students need to develop additional skills in order to be productive in this educational environment. In future studies, research can be conducted to redefine training needs and tool identification in order to be more effective in the e-learning environment. However, this autonomy provided to the trainer and the learner should improve both the trainer and the student's time management, increase academic motivation, and skills.

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