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An assessment of the quality of French distance education programs

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Abstract

This article deals with the quality assessment of distance learning in French higher education. This assessment comes from the feeling of some students who follow an online program being registered at a university (or at the CNED for some programs called BTS). It's important to point out today what the e-learning is in comparison to what it is not. The COVID crisis and the distance courses realised during it often have given some bad thought about e-learning. The important question is about the quality of the live experience of being an online student. The context of our study is that of the "Campus connectés". In their territorial configuration, "Campus connectés" (an initiative of the French Ministry of Higher Education) bring higher education closer to all citizens by creating labelled places that welcome students registered in an online program of a university. They are coordinated by a local public authority. In these places, students benefit from the support of a tutor/coach, an environment that encourages success and socialisation with other students.

To date, we have 44 "campus connectés" in France (there will be 89 by the start of the new academic year in September), with a total of about 400 students in a wide variety of programs. We have designed a survey to

ask them about their feelings about the quality of the programs. We will explain our method and give our main results, which will allow us to identify some ways to improve quality of distance education programs.

Keywords: quality assessment, online education, “campus connectés”

1. Introduction

Distance learning is debated in higher education, and even more since the COVID-19 health crisis. It is a quite old educational practice with postal correspondence courses whose origins go back to the 19th century (Glikman 2014) but which has recently switch to a new paradigm with e-learning. Today, distance learning do implies being alone with only some asynchronous modalities. However, the changing of pedagogical model is certainly not complete. Replacing the paper handouts by some training courses with online PDF documents is not a real innovation. It is not only introducing digital devices that changes the way we teach and the way we learn. Distance learning is indeed at the crossroads of technology and pedagogy according to (Béché and Schneider 2019), but we really have to highlight pedagogical innovations and not only technical or, at best, techno-pedagogical ones.

Having this in mind, we are interested in the life experience of the distance learner. This experience can provide us some issues to address pedagogical outcomes. Our study concern a specific learners: students enrolled in distance learning courses and hosted in places we call “campus connectés”.

First we will present the context of our investigation. We will then present the main results of the study's analysis. Finally, we will try to deduce from this some ideas for the design of distance learning courses that promote student commitment and success.

2. Context

The students we have followed are enrolled for the 2020-2021 academic year in an higher educational online program and have been welcome in a “campus connecté”. These students are potentially 409 spread all over the country. We collected 181 responses, i.e. a response rate of 44.25%.

In comparison to all distance learning students in the French higher education (almost 40000), these students are specific being hosted in a “campus connecté”. The “campus connectés” are places approved by the French Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation especially created to bring a good environment to achieve and success a distance program¹. Generally located in towns far from major universities and created by local authorities and stakeholders, they provide students with a place near their living place, a time of presence (at least 12 hours per week), a local support, a place for having relationships with other students. In 2019-2020, the population of students in the “campus connectés” was spread over 13 experimental locations with an average age of 28 years (from 18 to 63 years; median 40 years) and the following features: 73% girls and 27% boys, 49% in initial training, 33% in continuing education, 17% returning to study, 46% in a Bachelor's degree, 24% in a BTS and 31% in other training (mainly CNAM, Master's degree and DAEU modules) For the main enrolments in Licence and BTS, we have noted in 2019-2020 a success rate of 90% for BTS students and 55% for Licence students (the 2020-2021 figures are not yet known).

The main added value of a “campus connecté” is the close relation with a tutor. The proposed tutoring is a type of coaching, more than an educational support. It is complementary to the tutoring that institutions that provide distance learning organise to help students acquiring knowledge. Nissen and Soubrié (2011) and Papi

¹ <https://www.enseignementsup-recherche.gouv.fr/pid39023/les-lieux-labellises-campus-connecte.html>

(2013) contrast horizontal tutoring (by peers) with vertical tutoring (by instructors). The coaching provided on a “campus connecté” is neither horizontal (because the tutors are professionals in the field of learning support, not students themselves) nor vertical (because the tutors are not teachers and do not have the disciplinary knowledge to follow students in all courses). This coaching aims to bring an administrative/methodological support, to develop reflexivity and to maintain motivation and perseverance.

In September 2021, there will be 89 “campus connectés” (Figure 1) opened in France. A “campus connecté” is a small place (no more than 50 or 60 students) in order to guaranty the quality of the tutorial proximity and to provide good support to students who, without the “campus connecté”, might have turned away from higher education. The development objectives of the ministry are not indeed to build an alternative to classical enrolments of students within universities. They are complementary to the universities (for which they promote the distance learning offer) and target a specific public (in the long term, about 5,000 students in all the “campus connectés”, which is extremely small compared to the 2.7 million students in France). For this target the response is to overcome all the type of distance that impact on the student's life: geographical distance, socio-economic distance, distance from social interactions, cultural distance, and distance from the chances of success and opportunities in life. These distances are not systematically opposed to proximity.

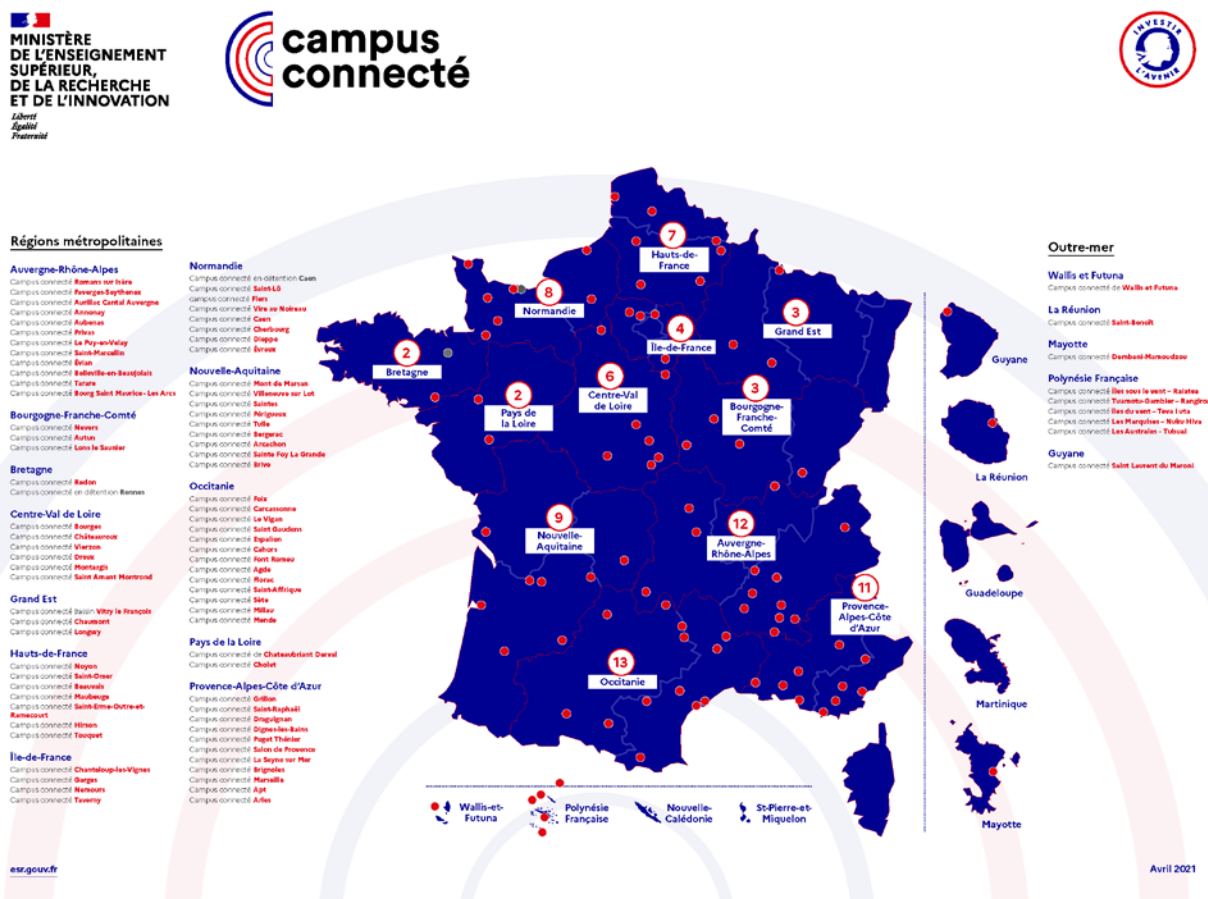


Figure 1: Map of connected campuses (Sept. 2021)

Moreover than the context of the “campus connectés”, our survey has been special because of the year 2020-2021. This year is impacted by the COVID-19 health crisis. Distance learning has been the focus of multiple points of view which are often opposite, some to measure the advantage of distance learning as a mean of pedagogical continuity, some others to argue that the face-to-face teaching would be the only viable

model. This particular year has led to many confusions about what distance learning is and what it is not. The “campus connectés” show that presence and distance are not opposite. There are many ways of combining presence and distance learning. Building a distance learning program with a rich pedagogical scenario made up of synchronous and asynchronous, individual and collective, formative and summative activities cannot be improvised. It has nothing to do with an overnight switch from face-to-face to online activities. Thanks to digital technology and its acculturation in institutions (particularly via their support services), higher education has been able to ensure educational continuity outside the classroom under normal conditions. This is very important in terms of adaptation, agility, including for examination conditions, and guaranteeing the value of diplomas. However, what has been done is not what distance learning should be. Distance learning must be designed as an adapted and chosen response. Adapted, because it uses flexible methods to be compatible with the living conditions of an identified target audience. Chosen, and not rushed through, by the teachers who contribute to it and by the students who follow it.

It is therefore the expectations and conditions of reception that are decisive in understanding what should be distance learning and how we have to take it forward. This is what we have assessed in our study.

3. Answers analysis

Our survey, designed to take between 20 and 30 minutes to complete, consisted of 73 questions under different headings: accessibility, quality of content, teaching aids, learning progress, interactions between students, interactions with teachers or tutors, overall quality assessment.

1.1 Accessibility

For 60.5% of students, the cost of education is between 500 and 1000 euros a year. Almost one in five students (18.6%) pay more than 1000 euros and one in five (20.9%) less than 500 euros. There is therefore a wide disparity in the cost of training, with amounts sometimes varying by a factor of three. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that 46.6% of students indicate that this amount does not seem justified.

The exams (continuous and final tests overall) take place in the enrolment establishment locations (or in the sector high schools for the BTS) in half the cases. There is clearly an effect of the COVID crisis here, as exams are quite rarely conducted on line in normal circumstances. The students interviewed in our study are 75% to express the need for exams to be held remotely. This is understandable, as travelling to take exams in an institution (that is often far away) for 3 exam sessions a year potentially entails significant costs and requires a high level of availability (often opposite with the very reasons for choosing distance learning).

About 44% of the students indicate that it is not possible to attend online synchronous classes, while 70.7% of them believe that it would be useful.

2.1 Quality of content

A very high part of students (93.2%) felt that it was easy to navigate the learning management system (LMS). Similarly, almost 9 out of 10 students (88%) indicate that it is easy to find all courses on the LMS. Finally, 88% indicate that access to courses is available all year round.

As for the possibility of finding the contact details of the persons responsible for each course, 12% indicate that this is not possible and for a third of the students, it is possible for certain courses only.

The objectives of the courses are not systematically indicated at the beginning of the semester (14.3% answered "no" and 22.9% answered "for some") whereas 86% of students say to need this. Regarding to the

assessment methods, 1 student out of 5 indicates that they are not specified, whereas 97% indicate that they need this information.

Concerning the clarity of the information given, a majority of students consider that it could be improved (15.8% point to a general lack of clarity and 46.3% respond for certain courses).

3.1 Teaching aids

Written courses (PDF files) are the very most common type of resource made available on LMS (92.7%). The students would like to have more dynamic and interactive resources than written lectures. They ask some videos and slide shows with voice.

13% of students report several delays in getting courses online and 26% report delays in some courses only.

Almost one in two students (47.2%) regret not having last year's assessment papers. Four out of five students (78.5%) indicate that they felt the need for them. When last year's papers are offered, it appears that in 61.4% of cases, corrections are not available, whereas 9 out of 10 students feel that this would be really useful.

Training exercises are often proposed (almost 2 out of 3 students). In 30.5% of cases, training exercises are only present in certain courses, while more than 8 out of 10 students indicate that they feel the need for them in all courses.

Only 1 out of 3 students say they are informed about the possibility of borrowing books. 94% do not know if mail order loan is possible. Not surprisingly, 2/3 of students report that they do not use the library services available at their institution.

4.1 Learning progress

A very high proportion of students (76.7%) say that a knowledge test at the beginning of the year or semester is generally not proposed. Three quarters (75.9%) feel that it is very useful in each course.

A great part (61.2%) of students report having homework to do. Less than 1 in 10 indicate that they do not have any. Those who do not have homework would like to have, for each course, between 1 and 2 homework assignments a year in 37.9% of cases and between 3 and 4 a year in 37.9% of cases.

57.4% of students do not have any progress meter in their courses. 76.3% feel that it would be useful.

44.1% of students indicate that they do not have a general annual schedule with the dates of enrolment, the beginning of each semester, the holidays, the revision and assessment sessions and the dates of juries for diplomas. 92.4% of them point that this is be useful.

5.1 Interactions between students

About 6 out of 10 students (61.2%) indicated that no gathering time proposed by the enrolment institution during the year. 69.5% say they would appreciate. Most of students (57.6%) would like to have one to two gathering per semester. Nearly a quarter would like to have between 3 and 4 per semester. There is a really need of socialization by gatherings with other students of the same program in addition to the socialization within the "campus connecté".

Three quarters of the students indicate that they do not have any asked group works. This is not a request because almost two thirds (63.9%) of students feel that it would be useless for them.

A very large part of students (89.7%) reveal that a forum exist for students to exchange points of view and topics. Apart from forums, it seems that institutions also offer other communication tools such as Facebook, Whatsapp or Discord. Furthermore, three quarters of students indicate that it is easy to communicate with other students. However, 68.2% indicated that they did not have any interaction with students of the same program and 61.7% indicated that they do not really feel this need.

Finally, 60.5% of students ignore if they have the possibility to link up with an alumni network.

6.1 Interactions with teachers or tutors

Only about 6 out of 10 students report that they can contact all their teachers. In a third of the cases, this is only possible in certain courses. It should be noted that almost 7 out of 10 students feel the need to be able to contact the teacher for each course. Among the preferred tools for exchanging information, e-mail and the forum come out on top.

13.5% of students indicate the average answers time within one day, 47.1% indicate less than 48 hours and nearly a third indicate between 3 and 7 days. On the whole, the answers times seem to be fairly satisfactory, even if there are sometimes major disparities. It would also seem that, on the whole, the answers provided really help students.

Synchronous exchanges between students and teachers are not very common (25.4%). When they exist, they are scheduled fairly regularly (38.3%: once a month; 17%: several times a month; 21.3% several times a semester).

The time to make corrections available varies considerably. They is less than 48 hours in 10.9% of cases, between 8 and 15 days in 22.4% of cases and in 18.4% of cases more than 15 days. A small proportion of students also says that some assignments were not corrected. Especially if formative assessment is used, care should be taken not to have too long a delay. This is a request that students informally make to the tutors who monitor them in their "campus connecté".

41.3% of students indicate that it is possible to exchange with the reviewing teacher. It seems that this is only possible in some assignments (29.1%) and that it is not possible in almost one out of three cases.

We notice that one student in two said that the date of exams results are not respected. Finally, it seems that in 31.6% of cases it is not possible to discuss exam results with teachers.

The institutions rarely propose a distance quality learning evaluation survey. Only a quarter (21.4%) of institutions offer one.

7.1 Overall quality assessment

When asked student how they would you rate the quality of their distance learning program. 5.7% said they were not satisfied, 33.4% were moderately satisfied, 46.3% were fairly satisfied and finally 14.7% were very satisfied.

Comment noteriez vous la qualité de la formation à distance que vous suivez ?

178 responses

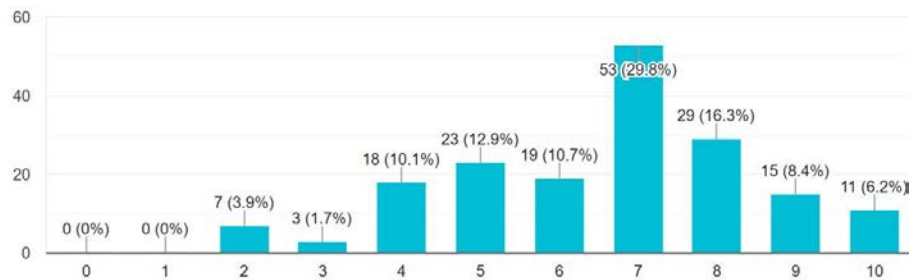


Figure 2: Overall rating (0 least good, 10 best)

4. Summary

The techno-pedagogical systems used in online education have greatly increase learning experience. Students do not feel alone and lost in their training programs. The overall assessment of the quality of the learning experience is quite positive. However, some negative points and requests are highlighted, especially in the open comments of the survey.

Some course materials are not well updated, including in courses with additional fees (this is not a matter of price). Differences in pedagogical design, not necessarily well understood, are indicated between different courses within the same program. The resources are largely textual documents in PDF where students want more voice commented slideshows, videos, podcasting, screencasts to demonstrate software tools. This reflects a techno-pedagogical design still directly inherited from mail training. Interaction needs to be developed. This really calls for synchronous exchange times to facilitate inter-understanding. Negative opinions and requests concerning assessments were frequent, particularly on the question of internships in the 2nd year of the BTS. The need to understand the criteria used in assessments is important. Regarding to exams and homework, there was a strong demand for past years papers and answer keys in order to better understand what was expected in the assessment. Especially for homework, synchronous feedbacks and formative assessment with debriefing by the students are expected.

Finally, there are some requests to personalise the online environments according to the progress of the students and what is expected of them. This is what is expected from learning analytic tools providing student dashboard (and also teacher's dashboards). Learning analytics are not yet widely deployed in the LMS used in French institutions (mostly in Moodle platforms). Inspiring uses can be found in other countries, in particular in Quebec with, for example, the digital study environment of Laval University integrating advanced functionalities for analysing learning traces (see <https://www.enseigner.ulaval.ca/ressources-pedagogiques/site-de-cours>).

5. Conclusions

To conclude, it seems to us that the appropriation of the uses of digital technology in distance learning programs is underway. In the short to medium term, we can expect a new period of maturity in online distance learning. Fortunately, we are still far away from a glass ceiling of the pedagogical innovation. Some fields of improvement have a strong technological component, such as the deployment of "learning analytics". Others are much more organisational and just as important, as shown for instance by the need for students to benefit both from borrow documentary services and distance learning programs.

A lot of work and funding have been put into the pooling of digital resources, for example with France Université Numérique² or the Universités Numériques Thématiques³. More generally, the French State invested €265M between 2012 and 2018 (see IGAENR Report No. 2018-49 "Digital educational innovations and the transformation of higher education institutions"⁴) in several investment projects aiming to support institutions in their digital and educational transformations. These investments go hand in hand with supporting students in their life experience as online learners. Among other things, it seems particularly strategic to ensure that teaching periods (sessions, semesters, years) get off to a good start by giving students as much visibility as possible on the times that will mark out their learning. This need is evident from the study we carried out and even more so from the daily interactions that the tutors/coaches on the "campus connectés" have with their students.

Although the student panel in our study is in a favoured position relative to unaccompanied distance learners on a "campus connecté", it seems to us that their experience of studying at a distance is well characterised and not confounded by their experience as accompanied face-to-face students. It is therefore interesting to give feedback to the designers of e-learning programs within institutions. Online training, which is in the process of evolving, needs this feedback, just as it needs to go beyond the strict opposition between distance and presence. Here too, "campus connectés" are demonstrators of successful hybrid training that can arouse curiosity and interest. This is what we are contributing to.

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