*Student Points of View – Pedagogical, Psychological, Social and Technical Issues*

# STUDENTS' ATTITUDE TO BLENDED CLASSES IN AEROBICS DURING A PANDEMIC

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**Abstract**. The rapid development of information and computer technologies raises the need to create new approaches, methods and models of teaching in higher education. Blended learning optimally combines established traditional face-to-face classes with those conducted in an electronic environment. The aim of the research is to study and reveal the attitude of the students from the UNWE towards conducting blended aerobics training. A total of 116 1st and 2nd year students from the University of National and World Economy are surveyed during the COVID-19 pandemic online through Microsoft Forms. A positive attitude of the respondents towards blended aerobics training is established. Students are willing to use the Moodle distance learning platform. The results of the study give grounds for the development and implementation of a model for blended sports aerobics training.

*Keywords:* sport; distance learning; higher school; program; pandemic

## Introduction

Physical education and sports at the University of National and World Economy (UNWE) have an important role for the promotion of a healthy lifestyle of students and the creation of motor skills and habits. They are a major tool for prevention of negative phenomena in society and an opportunity to form and improve a number of valuable social qualities such as the will to win, discipline, self-control, sense of responsibility, tolerance and teamwork skills.

The purpose of training in physical education and sports at the UNWE is to acquire theoretical knowledge and build practical skills and habits for individual sports, so that students can consciously use the forms, means and methods in sports, in everyday life and after completing their education. An important goal of the educational process is to maintain and improve the physical capacity of young people and to stimulate the need for motor activities. When popularizing physical activity and sports is extremely important to "focus mainly on their impact on physical and mental health, reduction of cardiovascular disease, obesity, osteoporosis" (Ignatova, Rogleva & Milanova, 2017).

The discipline "Physical Education and Sports" is mandatory on the Bachelor program in the first and the second year of study for all specialties of the UNWE. It is possible personally to choose the type of sport that students want to practice. Sports training in the specialized higher school is carried out according to accredited curricula for each separate kind of sport. Classes are held once a week with a duration of 90 minutes. The required study hours are 60 teaching hours per year or 120 hours for both academic years, with 30 teaching hours provided for each semester.

The training course in "Physical Education and Sports – Aerobics" is conducted with the immediate implementation of specific motor actions and exercises. The active participation of the students in the learning process is a good prerequisite for effective educational work and for the realization of the ultimate goal – physical, motor and personal development of the students.

Aerobics was introduced at the University of National and World Economy in the 90s of the XX century. Anastasia Vatashka, Nadia Nedyalkova and Svetlana Tsoneva were the first teachers to conduct these classes.

In essence, mass aerobics is "a streamlined and continuous performance of exercises from basic gymnastics with musical accompaniment, with different levels of intensity and coordination complexity" (Nestorova, 2007). Motor activity includes the performance of specific steps and movements, in various combinations, performed to music. The characteristic features of mass aerobics such as continuity, duration (depending on age), intensity (low, medium, high), coordination, musical accompaniment, health orientation, emotional impact make it interesting, attractive and useful for students.

It was found that aerobics improves mental indicators such as concentration and stability of attention (Barova & Moneva, 2019), as well as short-term visual memory (Barova & Moneva, 2019), so necessary for the specific aspects of training at the UNWE. The practice shows that the number of compulsory classes in physical education and sports in higher education in Bulgaria is extremely insufficient (Ivanov & Tsolova, 2013). This requires increasing the effectiveness of available classes, applying new tools and forms for their improvement (Peeva, 2010).

In the recent years, the UNWE has been looking for new methods to identify the changes in various types of students' qualities under the influence of physical education and sports. For example, individual evaluation tables have been prepared in an online platform on the UNWE website, which allow the results to be entered in an electronic sheet, automatically showing the number of points. This procedure is an additional stimulus for students' activity (Stavrev, 2016).

The constant progress of information and communication technologies has a significant impact on the development of higher education. Modern methods and forms of teaching have to take into account and use the potentials of new technologies

so as to meet the needs and attitudes of today's generations of students. One such opportunity to combine traditional learning with methods and tools in an online environment provides blended learning (Slavova, 2017).

Blended learning is emerging as a modern trend, an alternative to e-learning, in the field of education and training, which thanks to computer technology can be successfully implemented (Koleva, 2016; Slavova, 2017). Globally, more and more universities, schools and companies offer training aimed at modifying courses through the hybrid forms.

Blended learning is a specific organization of learning that combines traditional face-to-face methods with computer-mediated activities (e-learning). This type of training is also called "combined, hybrid, web enhanced and mixed instruction mode" (Martin, 2003). A more complete definition of blended learning is revealed by K. Krause (2008): "blended learning only takes place when there is an effective integration of different ways of delivering learning content, different teaching models and learning styles, as a result of a complex and systematic approach using technologies combined with the best practices of traditional learning". The considered learning technology offers a combination of the innovative technical achievements of e-learning and the proven long-term experience of the traditional student – teacher interaction.

Blended learning creates the necessary conditions for alternating traditional contact learning with asynchronous e-distance learning, without giving precedence to one learning context over another. Blended learning largely ensures the continuity of the learning process, as learners work in an online learning environment and so there is no pause between lessons (Lazarova & Lazarov, 2019; Neykova, 2019).

During the second semester of the academic 2019/2020, the COVID-19 pandemic presented a serious challenge for university students and lecturers, especially in subjects with practical application like physical education and sports. Aerobics classes at the UNWE also had to be reorganized in a new form, more appropriate for these exceptional conditions. That was a sound reason to study students' attitude to a new blended learning form in the Aerobics training course of the University.

**Aim of study**

To study the attitude of the students from the UNWE to conducting blended training in aerobics during the COVID-19 pandemic, in order to develop and organize a model for blended training in aerobics.

**Methods of study**

The study was conducted after the end of the summer semester of the 2019/2020 academic year in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic with 116 students who

practiced aerobics in the classes of Physical Education and Sports at the University of National and World Economy during the academic year. The students are from the first and the second year and are representatives of different specialties and professional fields.

The survey method to achieve the goals of the research was used. A special survey with closed questions was developed. The research was conducted online through the Microsoft Forms platform.

**Results and analysis**

The analysis of the results shows that 91% of the respondents are satisfied with the conducted aerobics classes "to a large extent" and "to a certain extent" (Figure 1). None of the respondents indicated that they had a negative opinion on the issue. Therefore, the surveyed students have a positive attitude towards sports and are aware of the positive impact of aerobics on their health and physical qualities.

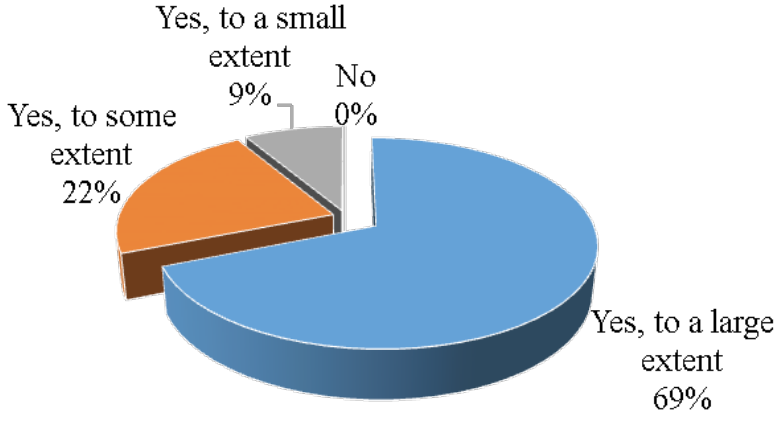


**Figure 1.** Satisfaction of students with the conducted aerobics classes

Figure 2 shows that 78% of the surveyed students have a positive response in terms of knowledge, skills and abilities that would improve as a result of the application of blended aerobics. It is interesting to study the opinion of students on this issue and after applying the blended learning model to track the change in the opinion of students.

The analysis of the results shows that half of the surveyed persons (52%) prefer the obligatory attendance classes in aerobics, and another 46% are interested in the mixed form of training (Figure 3). It is clear that the UNWE students probably do not associate aerobics entirely with distance learning, but largely prefer traditional

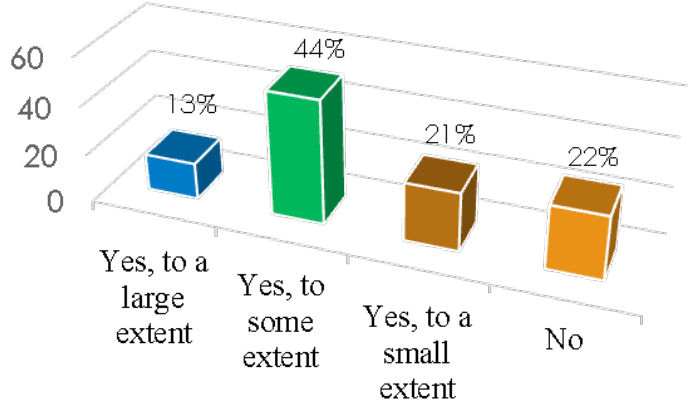


**Figure 2.** Opinion of students on increasing their knowledge from blended learning

practical sports training. At the same time, the fact that a significant part of young people would combine practical aerobics training with online learning in sport should not be underestimated. We would get the most objective answer after applying a model for blended aerobics training.

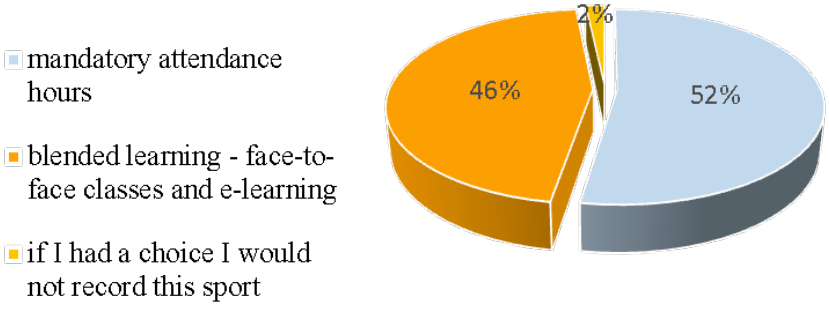


**Figure 3.** Students' attitude about the form of education in aerobics training

A logical fact from the survey is the result that the two most used e-learning/ distance learning platforms in the current situation of emergency during the COVID-19 pandemic by the UNWE students are Teams (97.4%) and Moodle (39.6%) (Figure 4).

The number of students who use these platforms is high, because in the conditions of COVID-19 at the UNWE the lecturers provide materials and hold online meetings mainly on these two virtual platforms. Exams in physical education and sport during the pandemic were conducted through online tests.

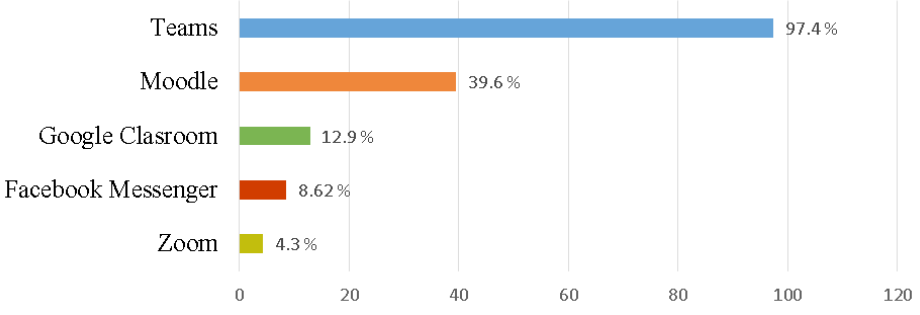


**Figure 4.** Distance learning platforms used by students during a pandemic of COVID-19

A small part of the respondents also uses Google Classroom (12.9%), Facebook Messenger (8.62%), and Zoom (4.3%). It is clear that during a state of emergency the students use more than two platforms.

From Figure 5 it is obvious that 87% of the UNWE students would like to attend the Moodle platform as part of blended aerobics training. These results lead us to an online version in which students once a week would successfully enter the electronic platform Moodle to receive materials, videos and the necessary information on the discipline of aerobics, as part of this type of learning.

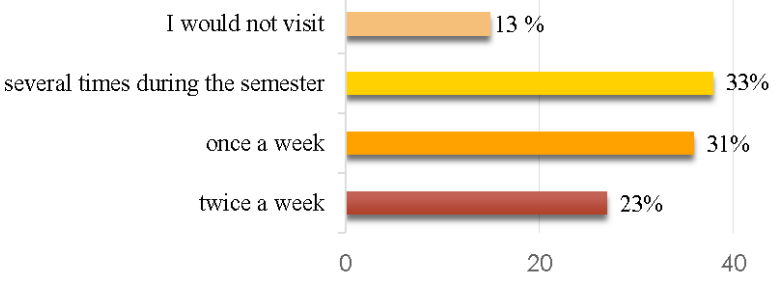


**Figure 5.** Attitude of students about the frequency of attending the Moodle platform

The majority of the surveyed students (77%) are positive about the hypothesis that the application of a model for blended learning in aerobics will motivate them to learn and accept more effectively the provided knowledge and practical exercises (Figure 6).

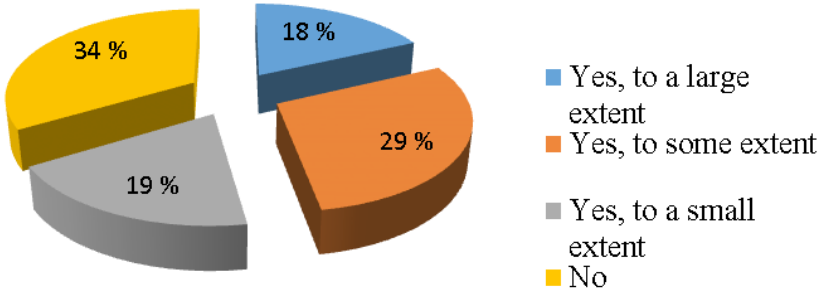


**Figure 6.** Students' opinion that the application of blended aerobics training will motivate them to study more effectively

**Discussion**

The ways and forms of education have changed significantly over the last two decades. New educational practices are being created, as a result of the modern tendencies of development of the information technologies in all public spheres. Taking account of these trends, teachers and students in contemporary universities need to interact in a way that leads to the most effective learning outcomes.

Blended learning is an innovative approach to teaching and learning, which provides individual approach in the learning process. In our opinion, this type of training is a potentially possible solution for supporting, supplementing and enriching the traditional practices in physical education and sports training in an interesting and motivating way for students.

The results of the survey during the pandemic of COVID-19 support our hypothesis about organizing and testing a model for blended learning for students at the UNWE practicing aerobics.

The established positive attitudes of students to this type of training would increase their interest in the learning process in physical education and sports and contribute to more effective participation of young people in sports and practical classes. The expressed readiness of the students to visit the specialized platform for distance learning Moodle and the students' skills acquired for online sports training during the state of emergency presents a serious argument for organizing blended aerobics training. The future model of blended learning will contribute for the improvement of sports results and achievements of university students.

**Conclusions**

Based on the research conducted with the students from the UNWE about their attitude to organizing and conducting blended aerobics training during a state of emergency, the following conclusions can be made:

– Half of the students perceive aerobics mainly as traditional practical training and less often associate it with distance learning

– A significant part of the students accepts the blended form of aerobics training, as a prerequisite for increasing their learning results and sports achievement

– Students are willing to participate in blended aerobics training by visiting Moodle e-learning platform regularly.

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