



“The effectiveness of online training courses at the Institute for Public Services – benefits and limitations”

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Introduction

Although the Public Service had been exploring new and innovative ways of improving employee training since the early 2000s, which also included a gradual shift from traditional classroom-based to online tuition at the Centre for the Development of Research and Training—today known as the Institute for the Public Services—the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 necessitated the immediate shift to online tuition in order for the IPS to continue delivering its training services effectively to public officers. This was also the time when a substantial number of public officers were working from home.

Notwithstanding its many benefits, online learning has presented both the Public Service management and the benefitting public officers with various challenges.

Objectives of the research

The objectives of this research project were to:

- a. determine the effectiveness of online learning when compared to the traditional classroom-based method,
- b. determine the contribution of online learning to employees' professional development, and
- c. explore whether a mixed method of learning would be more beneficial to both employees and to the Public Service in reaching its objective of identifying and developing the full potential of public officers.

Moreover, in order to reach the objective of this project, the following research question was asked:

- How effective are the current online learning courses for Managers 1 and Principals at IPS when compared to being taught physically?



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The following secondary questions sought to consolidate the original question:

- How does online training conducted at IPS contribute towards these employees' professional development in a public administration setting?
- Did the learning outcomes achieved from IPS training contribute to increased job satisfaction and motivation?
- Is online training an effective learning substitute for physical classroom training at IPS?
- Can a fully virtual and synchronous modality of training succeed in reaching IPS's objective of identifying and developing the full potential of public officers or should a blended method be adopted?

Literature Review

The first subject tackled was determining the difference between distance/remote Learning, e-learning, and online learning.

Distance/Remote Learning	e-Learning	Online Learning
Learners and Instructors are separated by distance and/or time	Learners and Instructors may be physically in the same classroom or in an online setting. Technology facilitates the learning process.	Generally, implies a distance between Instructors and Learners. Main element is the use of online tools for teaching and learning
May not necessarily involve technology	Involves the use of technology	Depends on technology
Limited or no personal interaction	May not always involve personal interaction	Involves virtual, face-to-face interaction
May be synchronous or asynchronous	May be synchronous or asynchronous	Is mostly synchronous
Limited discussions between students and instructors	Provides peer-to-peer and Instructor-Student discussions only if conducted physically	Provides peer-to-peer Instructor-Student discussions

Table 1: Differences and similarities of teaching and learning modalities Source: Author's own

As the learning platform adopted by the Maltese Public Service is online learning, the focus of this research project was shifted to this medium.

Online learning is described by different authors as the permission to a learning experience through the use of some form of technology. Benson (2002) and Conrad (2002), cited in Moore et al. (2011), both classify online learning as a more contemporary and improved form of distance learning which enhances learners' opportunities through improved connectivity, flexibility, and diverse interaction.

According to Tynjälä (2013), "workplace learning is often depicted as informal learning taking place without explicit teaching" which entails enhancing employee performance and proficiency by means of continuous corporate training, socialization, and staff development within the context of the organization.

Welsh et al. (2003) describe online learning as "the use of computer network technology, primarily over an intranet or through the Internet, to deliver information and instruction to individuals"

(p. 246). It incorporates processes and applications such as web-based training, virtual classrooms, and knowledge management that "generates and disseminates information and is designed to improve performance" (Rosenberg 2011, p.11).

Baldwin-Evans (2004) illustrate a group of key workplace factors which motivate employees to learn successfully in an online environment.

The Motivation to Learn

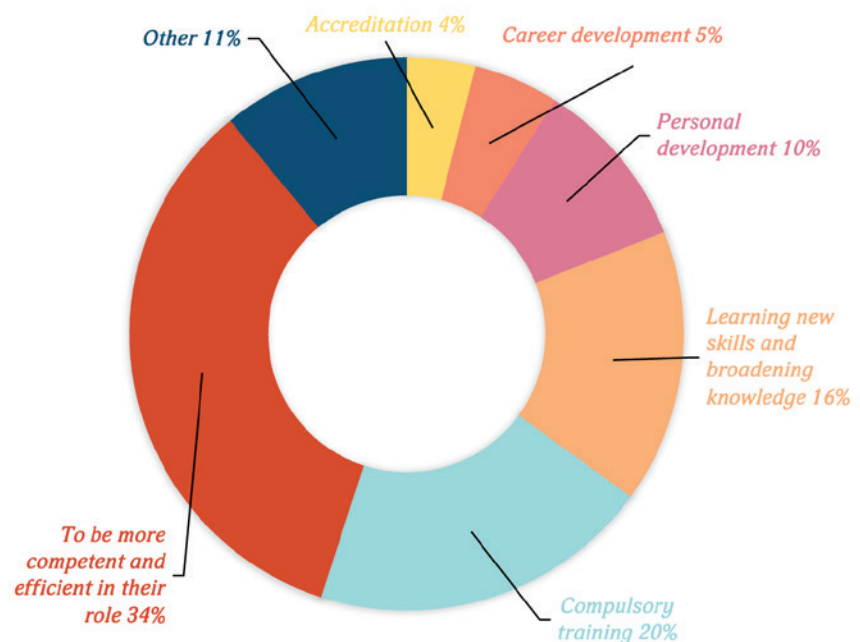


Figure 1: The motivation to learn. Adapted from Baldwin-Evans, 2004

What are the main online learning methods?

There are two main methods of online learning: synchronous and asynchronous. Synchronous learning is when learners and instructors are "live" in front of a computer at the same time. In asynchronous learning,





blended learning, which is a combination of technology-based learning and classroom-based teaching...

lectures are carried out via a pre-recorded method and are therefore available to learners at any time of day (Rosenberg, 2011).

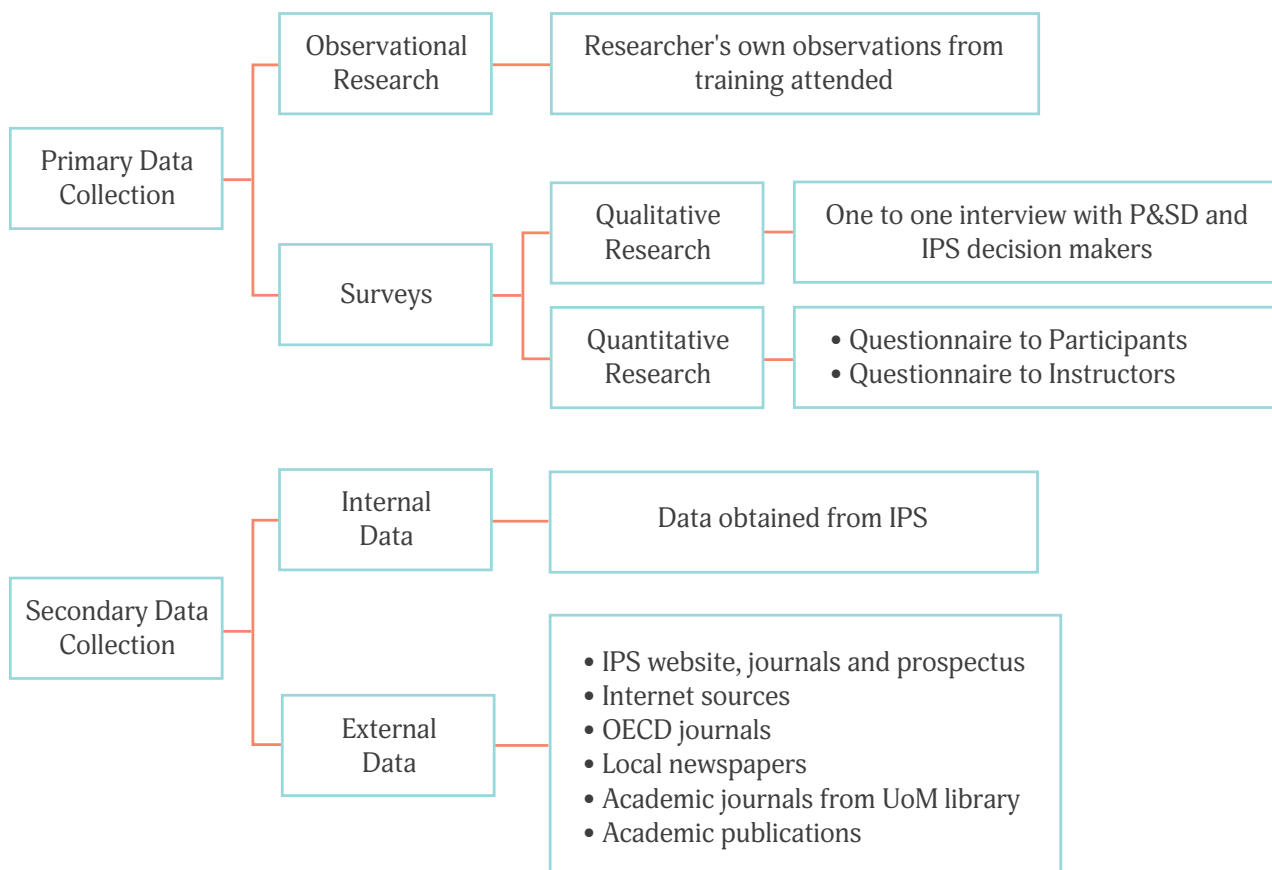
Nevertheless, there is also blended learning, which is a combination of technology-based learning and classroom-based teaching.

Blended learning incorporates “mixes of asynchronous, synchronous and classroom learning” (Welsh et al., 2003). Brodsky (2003) maintains that blended learning can be described as “the thoughtful combination of training methods” and Kovalski (2004, p.35) further describes it as “training that combines traditional classroom sessions with e-learning and self-study”.

Furthermore, this methodology may offer organizations various cost savings related to online learning complemented with the personal touch of having lectures delivered physically in a classroom.

Methodology

Both primary and secondary research methods were conducted to investigate the research objectives. The author carried out an analysis of the literature available on online learning and sought the assistance of a sample of participants benefitting from online training courses conducted by IPS. The respondents, public officers in the grades of Manager 1 or Principal, contributed through a quantitative survey, while internal instructors conducting courses at IPS contributed through a qualitative survey. Four semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with the main decision-makers on corporate training and ICT within the Office of the Prime Minister in order to give a holistic overview of the benefits and challenges emanating from this transition in employee training and development.



Research Findings

With regard to the training structure and content of the courses, more than 80% of the respondents agreed that they are easy to understand and follow.

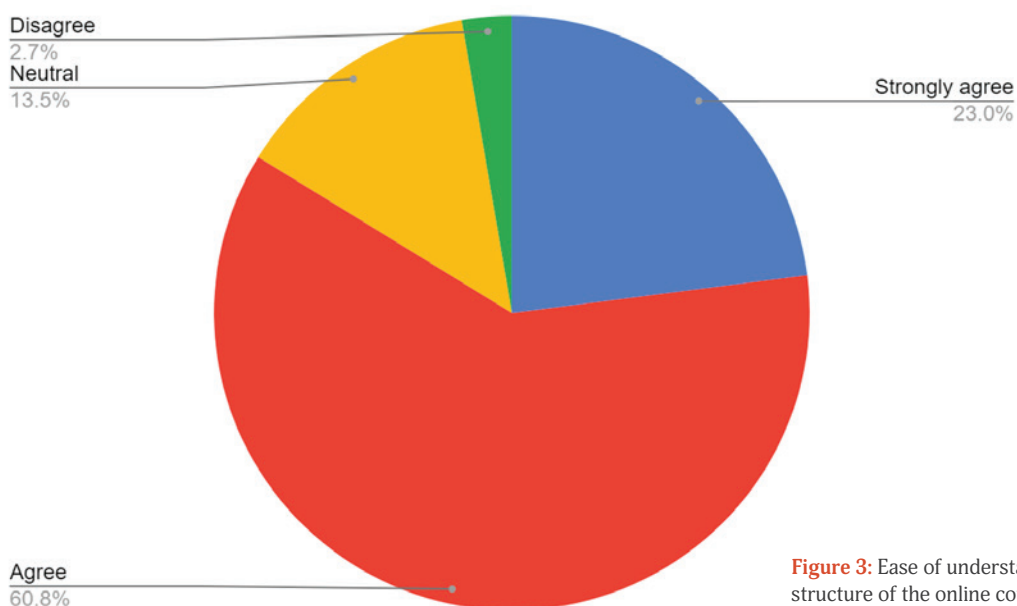


Figure 3: Ease of understanding of the structure of the online courses

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Similarly, respondents agreed that the course content is easily applicable online.

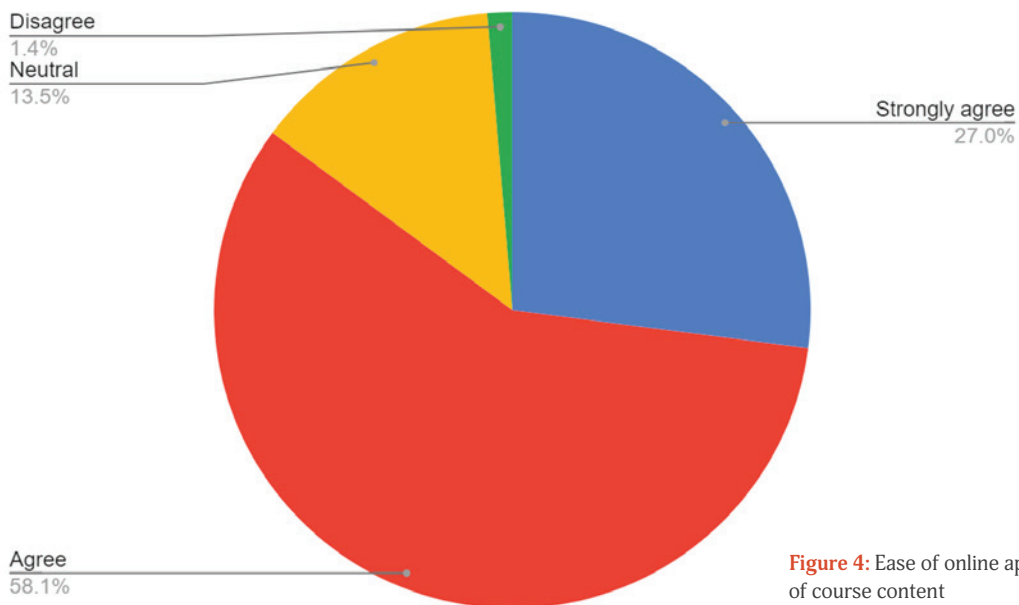


Figure 4: Ease of online applicability of course content

Benefits of online learning

All interviewees and questionnaire respondents agreed that one of the most important benefits of online training is the logistical advantage. Furthermore, over 60% of the respondents felt that online learning offers adequate participant engagement.

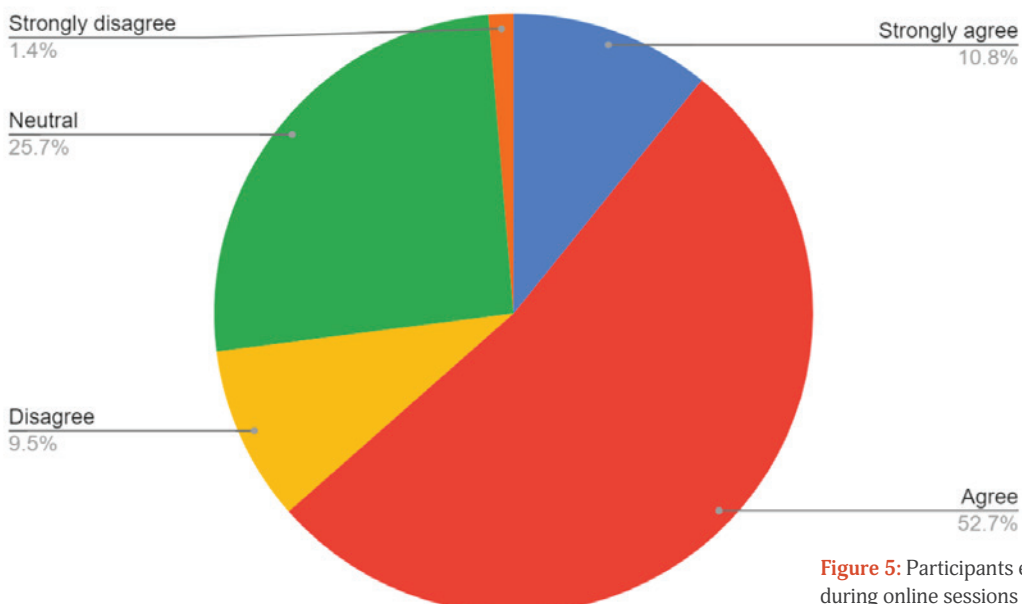


Figure 5: Participants engagement during online sessions

It was also noted that the majority of respondents felt that, during online sessions, there is an open dialogue and everyone has a chance to participate in discussions in such a way that they could connect easily with both instructors and other participants.

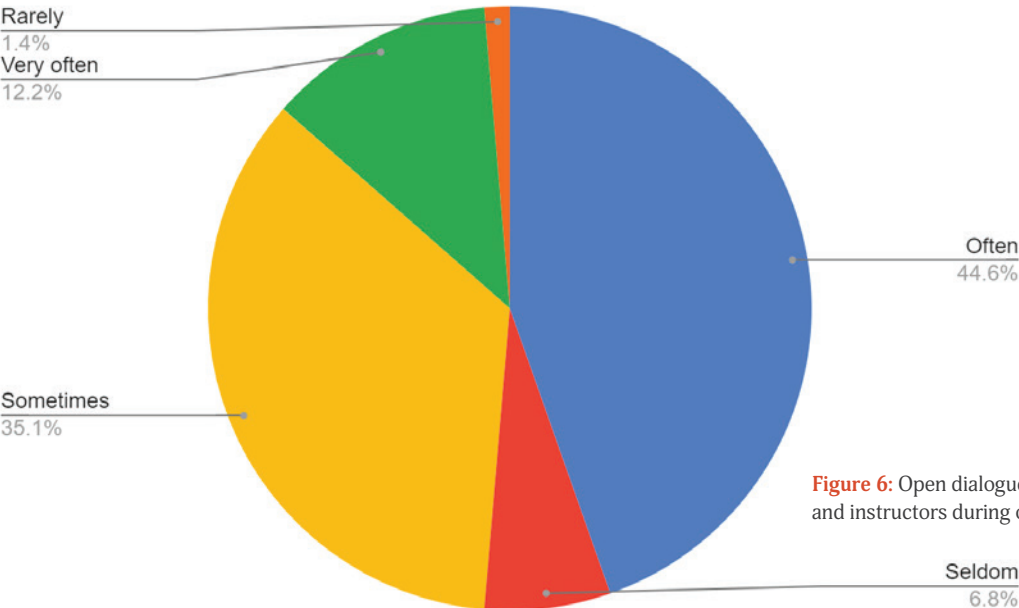


Figure 6: Open dialogue between participants and instructors during online sessions

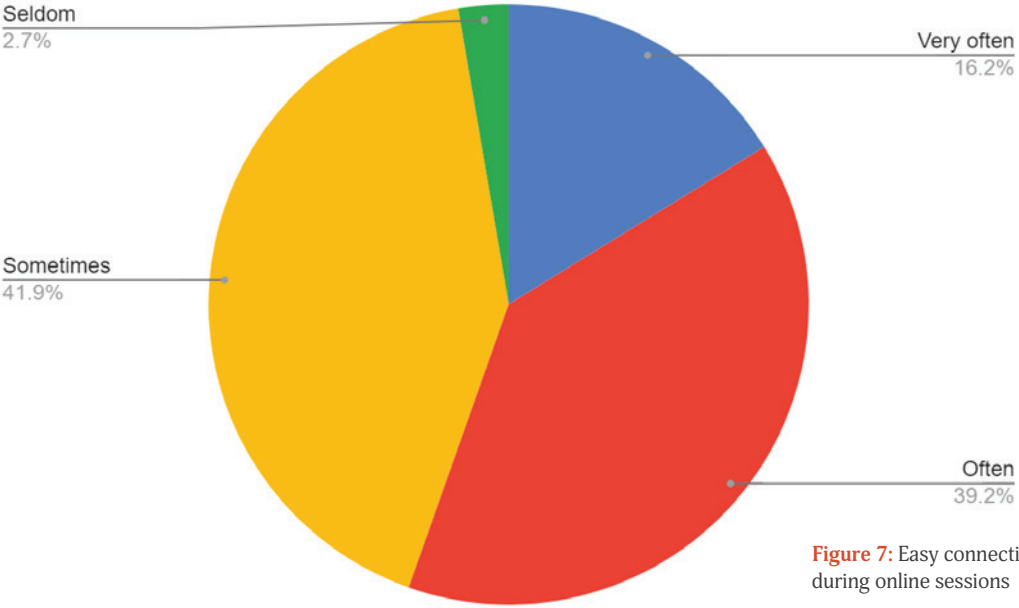


Figure 7: Easy connection with instructors during online sessions



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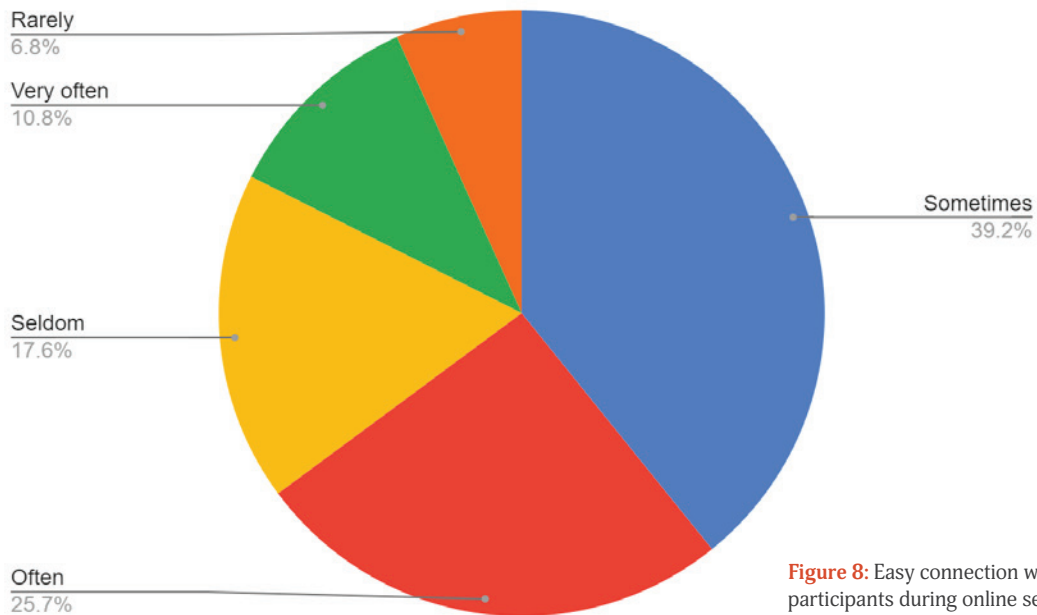


Figure 8: Easy connection with other participants during online sessions

Interestingly, many course participants replied that the online courses were relevant to their day-to-day duties and that they were able to bridge knowledge gaps and change their work behaviour and practice afterwards. This complements the comments of the IPS Principal that a substantial number of requests for development training are regularly received from employees or their line managers.

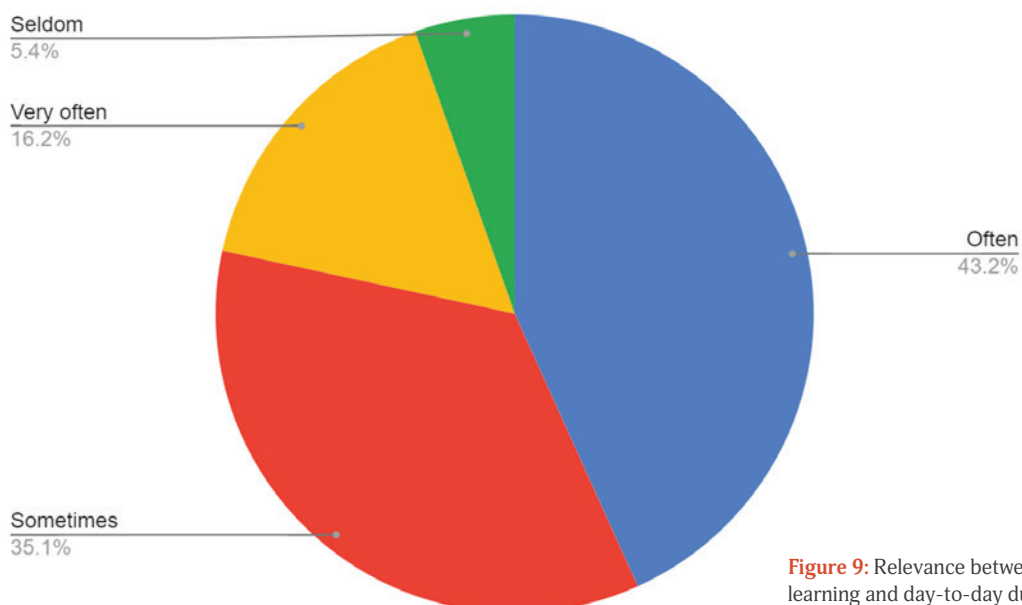


Figure 9: Relevance between online learning and day-to-day duties

Challenges and limitations of online learning

Such challenges for some instructors and participants include the lack of a “classroom feeling”. This was clearly highlighted when respondents were asked if they preferred the traditional classroom-based method of learning. Responses were somewhat evenly distributed.

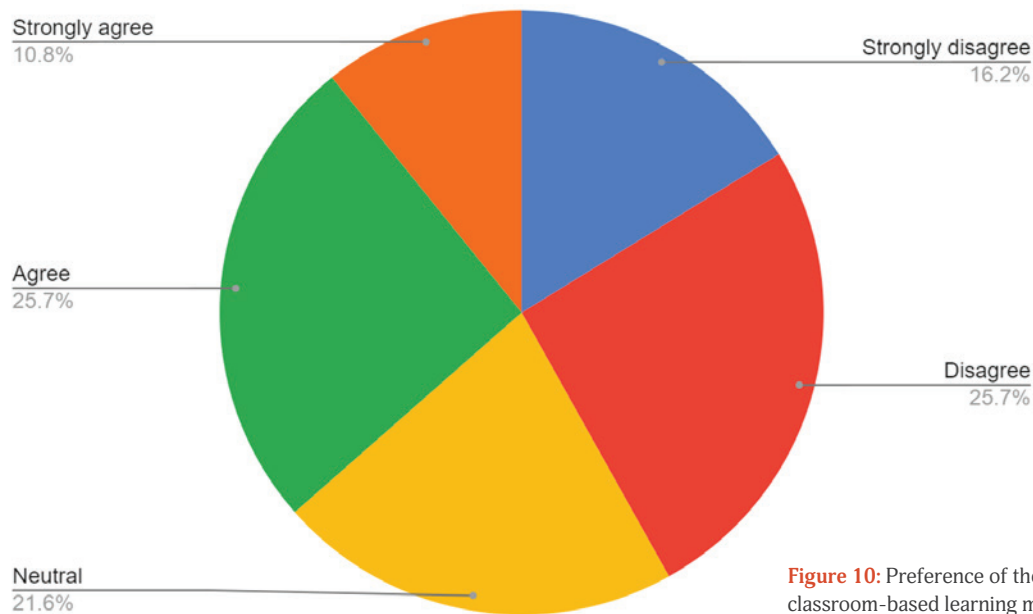


Figure 10: Preference of the traditional classroom-based learning method

Another limitation which emerged from the study was the internet connectivity of participants from their homes, which although minimal, still impacted some of the respondents' replies.

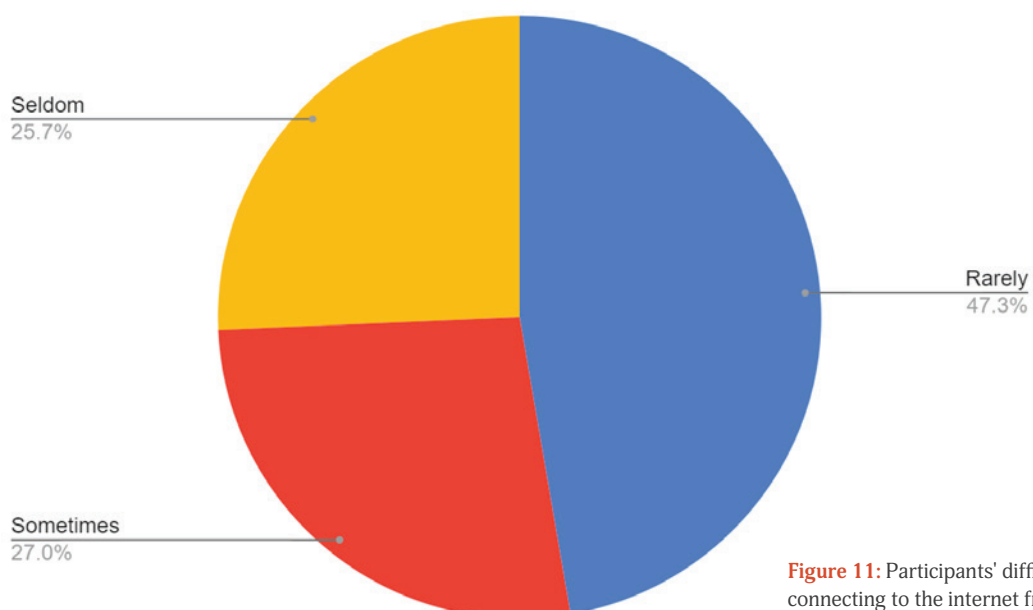


Figure 11: Participants' difficulties in connecting to the internet from homes



Some respondents complained about the number of participants in a session, which sometimes reaches 25 participants, limiting their opportunity for active discussion and interactivity. Another limitation observed was the overlapping of topics, with the same topics being repeatedly covered by different instructors.

Other limitations indicated by both instructors and participants include the several interruptions that take place during online sessions; these range from family members and pets, colleagues, and construction and maintenance works carried out in the instructors' residences or vicinity.

The effectiveness of online training against classroom-based tuition

The interviewees all agreed that the effectiveness of online learning is undisputable, especially during the pandemic and also when considering work commitments and logistical restrictions.

Nevertheless, they also agreed that full online tuition is more adequate when courses do not require a high level of personal interactivity or are a direct replication of a classroom-held session.

According to the Permanent Secretary, courses which require in-depth discussions and personal interactivity, such as leadership skills, decision-making and emotional intelligence courses would be more effective when conducted physically in class. Similar cases include induction courses for newly recruited public officers in lower grades and for team-building exercises, as observed by the Director at IPS.

The same trend was noted in the instructors' replies. Respondents in favour of classroom-based tuition maintain that:

- Participants are losing significantly from actual classroom-based training;
- In-person training provides more opportunities for personal interaction and

experience sharing;

- Instructors can control participants' attention better;
- Participants' interactivity "is almost inexistent" and they engage in other things rather than actively participate in the online lecture;
- Full online learning can never instil the same learning skills as classroom-based tuition.

On the other hand, respondents who feel that online learning is more effective assert that:

- Online learning is more productive, participative, and has the required positive effect on participants;
- Online learning improves participants' self-discipline to follow lectures, even though there are less restrictive timings;
- The close proximity between the instructor and the participant enables participants who refrain from asking questions during the sessions to reach out to instructors alternatively, such as through chats or emails.



- Participants are more attentive during online sessions because “the classroom setting can sometimes be tedious”;
- Disruptions between participants are lessened, because “going to get something to drink or the bathroom is more personal with online training and does not cause any concentration lapses to the participants and the lecturers”.

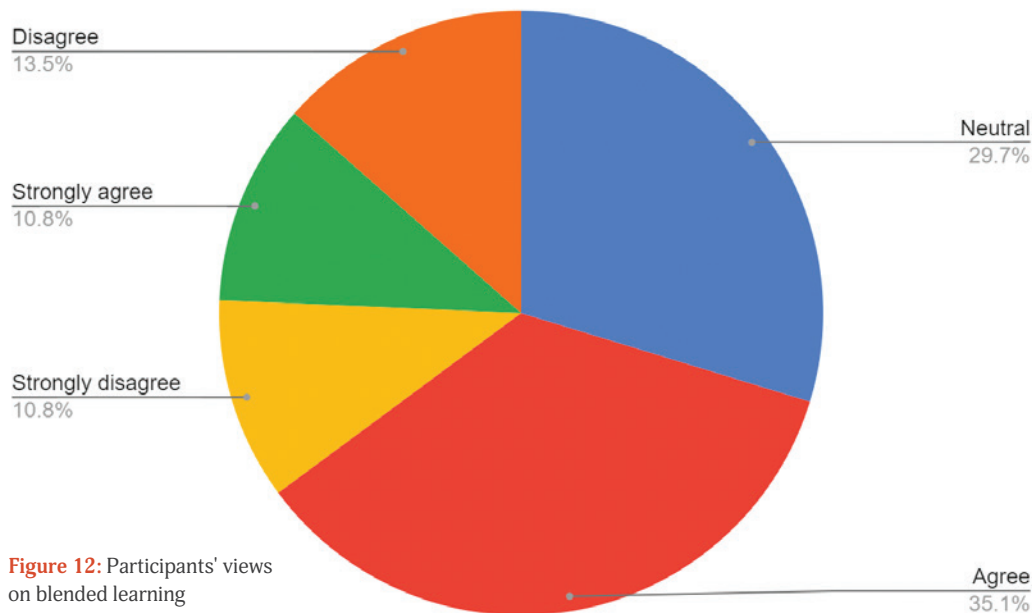
The concept of blended learning

An important aspect about online learning which emerged during this research project was that not all courses can be conducted fully online. Although for the interviewees—in principle—all modules may be conducted online, it would be ideal if a mixed modality of training is introduced.

The responses pertaining to blended learning submitted by the participants were somewhat divided. While 10.8% (8 respondents) strongly agree, and a healthy 35.1% (26 respondents) agree on blended learning, slightly less, that is 29.7% (22 respondents), neither agree nor disagree. 24.3% (18 respondents) in total disagree or strongly disagree with a mixed modality of learning.



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The CIO believes that technology can assist thoroughly in any type of lecture transmission but admitted that certain hands-on modules would be facilitated if they are conducted physically while other theoretical lectures are carried out virtually.

The IPS Principal, while asserting the significance of human interaction in training sessions, also maintains his preference for a blended model system which, as Brodsky (2003) stresses, is a “thoughtful combination of training methods”. He affirmed this belief when he declared that the Senior Management and Leadership Training Module, which replaced the Management Toolkit module, has been redesigned to comprise three

pre-recorded sessions and one physical session. Both the Director and the Permanent Secretary agree that a blended learning environment would be more beneficial for the personal interaction necessary in decision-making, negotiation, and leadership training modules, amongst others.

As aptly explained by Kovaleski (2004, p. 35), blended learning combines the traditional classroom-based tuition with online learning and the ability to study on one’s own initiative.

A general consensus about blended learning seems to prevail among instructors responding to the questionnaire. Many agree that:

- Physical interaction leads to social interaction and people can share their experiences in a collegial setting;
- A mix of virtual and physical training sessions is ideal, and instructors should be allowed to advise IPS on the best modality;
- Recording technical courses, followed by a live session, is the most effective and beneficial way of learning. Non-technical courses involving soft skills should be physical to encourage different methods of interaction;
- Blended learning is almost like having “the best of both worlds”;
- Training should be in the ratio of 20% physically present to 80% virtual attendance.

Conclusion

The replies received from the respondents of the questionnaires have revealed that the preference for the modality of learning is largely dependent on the personal perception, needs, and motivations of both participants and instructors.

Although most respondents have shown a significant preference for online learning, others are still inclined to favour traditional classroom-based learning, mainly because of the increased interactivity offered by this learning modality. Nevertheless, the preference for blended learning is gaining fast momentum.

Through the research carried out, the author has established that although online courses are very effective and efficient, especially with regard to logistical issues, not all courses can be carried out in a totally virtual environment. Certain topics necessitate physical personal interactivity which can only be provided when a lecture is conducted in a traditional classroom.

To this effect, the author suggests, along with other recommendations, that a more blended format of lectures is embraced at IPS. In this way, purely theoretical sessions can be transmitted virtually, while topics requiring personal interactivity and discussions are conducted physically in class.



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