Challenges of Distance Learning for Students with Special Needs and Migrant Students

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Abstract

Distance learning has opened new opportunities, yet it has also posed particular challenges for students with special educational needs and migrant students who often face additional barriers. These include limited access to technology and digital skills, language barriers, and insufficient pedagogical support, all of which are especially critical for learners requiring tailored assistance. This study examines the impact of such challenges on students' academic progress, social integration, and emotional well-being. It analyzes teaching practices, the use of assistive technologies, and the importance of culturally responsive and adaptive pedagogy. The target group of this research consists of students pursuing studies in the field of education (teacher training). The study recommends a comprehensive approach involving educators, policymakers, and families, emphasizing teacher/student training and the development of support programs for students with special needs and migrant backgrounds. Through such measures, distance learning can become more equitable and empowering for all students, regardless of disability status or nationality.

Keywords: ***Adaptive; Barriers; Inclusion; Migrant Students; Students with Special Need***

1. Introduction

Distance learning has become a widespread mode of education, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, offering flexibility and expanded access. However, it also amplified pre-existing inequalities, particularly for vulnerable groups such as students with special educational needs and those from migrant backgrounds (Holm, 2024). These students often face multiple, intersecting barriers in virtual learning environments. A lack of prior exposure to digital technology and limited digital literacy can hinder their participation in online classes. Many learners with disabilities or

from disadvantaged backgrounds have struggled to access online platforms and devices, making the shift to e-learning particularly difficult (Gitschthaler, 2022) (Zhang, 2024). In addition, language barriers present a significant challenge for migrant students who must learn and communicate in a non-native language. Educators in Europe reported that communication difficulties were one of the primary barriers to successful distance teaching for multilingual students (Gitschthaler, 2022). When students cannot fully understand the language of instruction or express themselves effectively, their engagement and academic progress suffer.

Another critical barrier is the lack of tailored pedagogical support in remote settings. In traditional classrooms, students with special needs often receive individualized assistance or accommodations, and migrant students benefit from in-person language support and feedback. In distance learning, these supports can be diminished or absent. Reduced direct interaction with teachers may leave instructional needs unmet, contributing to frustration and anxiety among these learners (Zhang, 2024). Research during the pandemic in Finland, for example, found that the sudden shift to distance learning decreased teacher support and increased family stress for immigrant-origin youth and youth with disabilities, correlating with higher levels of anxiety. Social isolation in an online-only environment further compounds these issues, as students miss out on peer interaction, collaborative learning, and the routines that provide stability and motivation. stability and motivation.

Given these challenges, this study aims to examine how distance learning affects students with special needs and migrant students, with a focus on the educational and psychosocial impacts of technology access, language barriers, and pedagogical support. The objectives are to explore how a lack of digital skills and access influences teaching and learning, how language barriers shape communication and learning outcomes, and how the presence or absence of adaptive pedagogical support affects the integration and success of these students in an online context. By investigating these questions through qualitative inquiry, the study seeks to shed light on the specific needs of special needs and migrant learners in distance education and to identify strategies to make online learning more inclusive. Ultimately, ensuring equity in distance learning for *all* students is critical for fulfilling the promise of education for everyone, regardless of ability or background (Zhang, 2024).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Distance Learning and Inclusive Education

Distance learning, often via online platforms, has transformed educational delivery in recent years. Studies have noted that while digital and remote learning can provide access to education beyond physical classrooms, they are *not a magic solution* for inclusion (Duka A. L., 2024). In fact, the pivot to online learning during COVID-19 tended to exacerbate existing disparities, hitting students with disabilities and those from migrant or low-income families the hardest (Gitschthaler, 2022). These students frequently face a “digital divide”: limited access to computers or reliable internet connectivity, and lower levels of digital literacy and independent learning skills. Zhang *et al.* (2024) observed, for instance, that migrant children in China struggled with poor connectivity, inadequate equipment, and minimal parental supervision in online learning, which compromised their ability to benefit from instruction (Zhang, 2024). This digital gap means that many special-needs and migrant learners could not fully participate in synchronous lessons, submit assignments on time, or utilize interactive learning tools, widening the achievement gap.

For students with special educational needs, online learning poses additional challenges related to accessibility and support services. Many such students rely on assistive technologies or accommodations (such as sign language interpreters, screen readers, or modified materials), which may not be readily available or effectively integrated into virtual platforms. As a result, these students risk being left behind in a one-size-fits-all virtual classroom. Prior research highlights that failing to address accessibility in e-learning environments can increase educational inequities for students with disabilities (Muwanguzi, 2010). Blind college students faced significant hurdles due to the poor accessibility of common learning management systems, which negatively affected their academic performance (Muwanguzi, 2010). Furthermore, students with disabilities reported communication issues and confusing course organization as major disadvantages of online courses, especially when instructors did not proactively structure content for accessibility (Yi-Fan Li, 2023) (Madaus & Kunkes, 2023). These findings underscore that without deliberate inclusive design, remote education can unintentionally marginalize those with special needs.

2.2 Migrant Students and Language Barriers

Students from migrant backgrounds often contend with language barriers that impact their learning in any context, and these challenges are magnified online. Distance learning places a heavy emphasis on written communication (emails, chat, text on slides) and self-guided reading, which can be daunting for students who are still developing proficiency in the language of instruction. During the pandemic, teachers reported that maintaining communication with multilingual learners was extremely difficult; in one study of Austrian schools, educators cited *strong language barriers between teachers and students* as the single greatest obstacle to effectively including migrant students in distance education (Gitschthaler, 2022). These students not only struggled to follow lessons delivered in a second language, but also were often denied contact with fluent peers who might normally help them in person. As a consequence, migrant students in online settings can feel disconnected and unable to ask questions or participate, leading to lower academic performance. It is also revealed that in segregated language support classes, when schooling shifted online, restricted teacher-student communication and a lack of in-person language practice severely hampered learning progress (Gitschthaler, 2022).

Crucially, parental involvement and communication with families play a role here. Migrant parents may have limited ability to assist with coursework or communicate with schools due to language differences. During remote learning, this gap can grow. A report on multilingual education during COVID-19 noted that language barriers made it difficult for teachers, students, and parents to stay connected, complicating efforts to support students' learning at home (Naismith, 2021). Some innovative approaches, such as two-way translation apps and multilingual family liaisons, have emerged to bridge this gap (Naismith, 2021). Nonetheless, the literature consistently indicates that without intentional strategies to overcome language barriers – including providing materials in students' first languages, subtitled or translated videos, and bilingual support staff – migrant students are at high risk of falling behind in virtual classrooms.

2.3 Adaptive Pedagogy and Teacher Support

An *adaptive and inclusive pedagogical approach* is essential to serve diverse learners in distance education. In traditional settings, teachers adapt lessons through differentiated instruction, additional explanations, or modifying tasks for students who need extra help. Doing so online requires even more effort and forethought. Teacher attitudes and preparedness have been identified as key factors influencing the success of inclusive education programs (Duka A. &., 2023). Duka and Hoxha (2023) emphasize that teaching in technology-based inclusive classrooms *"requires adaptation based on the abilities and needs of students with special needs,"* and note that the use of technology is perceived as a significant challenge for both teachers and students in these classes (Duka A. &., 2023). In Albania's context, as Duka and Muharremi (2022) report, many teachers struggled to adjust their teaching to the needs of students with disabilities, indicating a necessity for training in contemporary teaching methods and tools (Duka A. &., 2022). Inclusion of special-needs students in general classes introduces new challenges – instruction must be tailored to their skill levels and often relies on educational technology, which constitutes *"the main challenge for teaching"* in such environments (Duka A. &., 2023). Thus, teachers require support and professional development to confidently integrate assistive technologies and apply differentiated strategies in an online setting.

The literature also shows that the presence (or absence) of supportive teaching practices greatly affects student integration. For learners with special needs, regular check-ins, timely feedback, and modified assignments can recreate some of the scaffolding they would get in person. Hastings and Oakford (2003) found that new teachers' attitudes toward inclusion improved with training and exposure, suggesting that building teacher efficacy is crucial (Hastings, 2003). Moreover, *teachers' attitudes are crucial to the success of adaptive programs*, as positive attitudes correlate with greater effort to include and accommodate students with special needs (Duka A. L., 2024). Duka *et al.* (2024) demonstrated that in inclusive classrooms with a supportive climate – characterized by collaborative group work and project-based activities – students with special needs showed higher motivation and engagement (Duka A. L., 2024). Even though that study dealt with physical classrooms, the principle carries into online learning: when teachers foster interaction, community, and adaptivity (for example, by using breakout rooms for small group work or providing multiple modalities of content), students are more likely to feel included and stay motivated. Conversely, a rigid, one-directional teaching style in distance learning can alienate students who require a different pace or approach.

2.4 Gaps and Current Study

While numerous studies have addressed individual aspects of these issues – such as technology access, language support, or teacher training – there remains a gap in understanding how these challenges intersect for students who lie at the confluence of special education needs and migration. Much of the existing research during the pandemic has been quantitative, highlighting broad trends of reduced performance or well-being among these groups (Holm, 2024). However, qualitative insights are needed to grasp the nuanced experiences of the students themselves: how do they describe the impact of lacking digital skills on their daily learning? In what ways do language difficulties hinder their communication and confidence? How do they perceive the efforts (or lack thereof) of their instructors to include them? Addressing these questions in a specific cultural context can yield actionable knowledge. This study focuses on Albanian students (both those with disabilities and those who have migrated abroad for studies), a context that has received limited attention in the international literature. By prioritizing student voices, especially in a qualitative framework, the research will fill an important gap and inform more inclusive practices for distance education. In the next sections, we detail the methodology used to investigate these questions and present the thematic findings that emerged from the interviews and focus groups.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Participants

This study used a qualitative design to explore in depth the experiences and perceptions of students with special needs and migrant students regarding distance learning. A purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit participants who could provide rich, relevant perspectives on the phenomenon under investigation. A total of 30 Albanian students studying in Albania, Italy, Germany, and the United Kingdom participated in the study.

All participants were enrolled in education-related programs (teacher training studies), ensuring a shared academic background and familiarity with educational processes. Participants ranged in age from approximately 19 to 30 years and included both undergraduate and graduate students.

The sample represented diverse educational and personal backgrounds. It included students with various special educational needs, such as visual or hearing impairments, learning disabilities (e.g., dyslexia), and physical disabilities, as well as migrant students, defined as Albanian students pursuing their studies abroad. Some participants belonged to both categories, such as students with disabilities studying at foreign universities. This diversity within the purposive sample enabled the study to capture a broad range of perspectives on the experiences and challenges of distance learning among individuals requiring additional support.

Before data collection, informed consent was obtained from all participants. To ensure confidentiality and protect participants' identities, pseudonyms were used in the reporting of findings. A related methodological pattern appears in qualitative studies on distance education and special-needs populations, where purposive sampling is commonly used to capture varied experiences across participant groups.

3.2 Data Collection

Data collection was conducted between March and June 2025 using two qualitative methods: semi-structured individual interviews and focus group discussions. The combination of these methods enabled the study to capture both in-depth personal experiences and interactive discussions among participants. Semi-structured interviews were selected to ensure that key topics relevant to the study objectives were consistently addressed while allowing flexibility for participants to introduce issues and experiences they considered important.

An interview guide was developed based on the three core research questions of the study to ensure alignment between the research objectives and the data collection process. The same guiding framework was also used to structure focus group discussions. The guiding research questions were:

- **RQ1:** To what extent does students' lack of skills in using contemporary technology affect teaching and learning in a distance learning context?
- **RQ2:** How do language barriers influence communication and learning outcomes among students with special needs and migrant students in online classes?
- **RQ3:** What is the impact of pedagogical support (or lack thereof) on the integration and success of students with special needs in distance learning?

Using these research questions as a framework, interviewers employed probing techniques to encourage participants to provide detailed explanations, concrete examples, and personal experiences. Participants were invited to describe their typical experiences with online classes and discuss any challenges related to accessing learning materials, communicating with instructors and peers, or participating in online activities. Additional prompts encouraged participants to reflect on specific incidents, such as difficulties caused by technological limitations or misunderstandings arising from language barriers.

Among the 30 participants, 18 individual interviews were conducted through online video-conferencing platforms such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes. In addition, two focus group discussions involving six participants each were organized, with one group consisting primarily of students with special needs and the other composed mainly of migrant students. Each focus group session lasted approximately 90 minutes. The focus groups facilitated interaction among participants and encouraged collective reflection, allowing participants to respond to and build upon one another's experiences.

All interviews and focus group discussions were conducted in participants' preferred language to promote comfort and facilitate richer responses. Most sessions were carried out in Albanian, as many participants felt more comfortable discussing personal experiences in their native language, despite studying abroad. A smaller number of interviews were conducted in English for participants enrolled in English-language programs. To minimize language-related barriers during data collection, translation support and bilingual moderators were provided when necessary. Methodological literature frequently supports combining semi-structured interviews and focus groups in qualitative research because this approach captures both individual narratives and socially constructed perspectives through group interaction.

3.3 Data Recording and Instruments

All sessions were audio-recorded (with participants' permission) to ensure accurate transcription. Participants were also encouraged to share any relevant documents or screenshots—such as a platform interface they found problematic or an example of adapted material provided by a teacher—to enrich our understanding; however, this was entirely optional. In addition to the recordings, interviewers took field notes to capture non-verbal cues observed during video calls (such as signs of frustration or enthusiasm when discussing certain topics) and to document key points or potential follow-up questions.

The main sections of the interview guide covered:

(a) **Technology Access and Use**, which means questions related to devices, internet connectivity, prior ICT training, and specific technological challenges encountered,

(b) **Communication and Language,** which include questions concerning interactions with teachers and classmates, language barriers, and the use of translation or assistive communication tools;

(c) **Instructional Support,** including questions regarding teaching methods, the availability of accommodations or additional support, feedback, and interactions with instructors; and

(d) **Social and Emotional Aspects**, questions that address participants' sense of inclusion, peer support, motivation, and emotional well-being during distance learning. Probing questions were also used to explore issues in greater depth (e.g., "How did you feel when you encountered that issue?" or "What did you do to try to overcome that problem?")

3.4 Data Analysis

All interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim. For data collected in Albanian, relevant portions were translated into English during the transcription process to facilitate analysis, with careful attention given to preserving the original meaning, particularly for nuanced terms related to education and technology. Qualitative data were managed and analyzed using NVivo 12 software. The analysis followed the thematic analysis approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), which provides a flexible yet systematic method for identifying patterns within qualitative data (Braun, 2006). We began by familiarizing ourselves with the transcripts through repeated reading and re-reading while documenting initial observations and impressions. Next, an initial coding process was conducted: two researchers independently coded the transcripts sentence by sentence, assigning labels to text segments representing meaningful units of information. For example, a segment describing an "internet cut out during an exam" might be coded as a "connectivity issue." We employed a combination of deductive codes derived from the research questions (e.g., "tech-skills," "language-barrier," and "teacher-support") and inductive codes that emerged directly from the data (e.g.,

"motivation-loss" and "peer-help"), which, although not explicitly addressed in the interview questions, appeared frequently across participants' accounts.

Following the initial coding stage, the research team met to review and refine the codes by merging similar categories and organizing them into candidate themes. Using NVivo's visualization tools, we mapped code clusters to explore relationships among emerging categories. Through collaborative discussion and iterative refinement, four major themes were identified that captured the most salient and recurring patterns within the data. These themes included: (1) Digital Access and Literacy Challenges, (2) Language and Communication Barriers, (3) Pedagogical Support and Adaptation, and (4) Social Integration and Emotional Well-being. Each theme encompassed several subtopics and reflected areas in which participants' experiences converged. Notably, these themes aligned closely with the research questions while also extending beyond them to provide a more comprehensive understanding of students' experiences.

Throughout the analytical process, measures were taken to ensure credibility and trustworthiness through member checking and peer debriefing. Specifically, a summary of the findings was shared with five participants—ensuring representation from both students with special needs and migrant backgrounds—to verify whether the interpretations accurately reflected their experiences. Their feedback confirmed the validity of the thematic descriptions and provided minor clarifications. In addition, an external qualitative education researcher who was not involved in the study reviewed a sample of transcripts and the codebook to provide an independent assessment of the coding process. Any discrepancies or suggestions arising from these procedures were discussed and incorporated into the final analysis. In the following section, each of the four themes is presented in detail, accompanied by illustrative participant quotations to exemplify and enrich the findings.

4. Data Analysis and Findings

Through our qualitative analysis, four main themes emerged that encapsulate the challenges and experiences of students with special needs and migrant students in distance learning. These themes include: (1) Digital Access and Literacy Challenges, (2) Language and Communication Barriers, (3) Pedagogical Support and Adaptation, and (4) Social Integration and Emotional Well-being. Each theme reflects key dimensions of participants' experiences and highlights recurring patterns identified across the data. The following sections describe and interpret each theme in detail, supported by representative quotations from the interviews and focus group discussions. To provide context while maintaining confidentiality, quotations are attributed using pseudonyms and, where relevant, include contextual information such as participants' special needs status or host country.

4.1 Digital Access and Literacy Challenges

All but a few participants mentioned difficulties related to technology access or digital skills, making this the most pervasive theme. Digital Access and Literacy Challenges refers to the range of obstacles students face in obtaining the necessary hardware/software and in using digital tools effectively for learning. This theme includes issues such as unreliable internet connections, lack of personal devices or having to share devices with family members, limited prior experience with e-learning platforms, and difficulty troubleshooting technical problems on their own.

Many students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds or rural areas found themselves on the wrong side of the digital divide when classes moved online. For example, *Arta*, an undergraduate with a mild hearing impairment living in a small town, noted: *"I had to attend live lectures on my smartphone because we don't have a computer at home. It was hard to see the slides on a tiny screen, and the connection would drop often."* Such experiences were common; participants described how sporadic connectivity and inadequate devices interrupted their learning. Those who had to share a single laptop with siblings or other family members had to juggle schedules and often missed parts of classes. *Ben*, a 21-year-old blind student studying abroad, shared another facet of this challenge: *"The platform wasn't fully compatible with my screen reader software. I often struggled just to navigate the course materials. I spent more time trying to make the software work than actually studying."* His account highlights how even when technology is available, it may not be *accessible* or user-friendly for students with disabilities.

In addition to access issues, limited digital literacy significantly affected students' ability to engage in online learning. Several participants admitted they were not familiar with common e-learning tools (such as learning management systems, video conference functions, or online submission portals) and received little to no orientation on how to use them. *Elira*, who has dyslexia, recounted her first weeks of online classes during the pandemic: *"I had never used [the university's online portal] before. Suddenly, everything was on there – readings, quizzes, forums – and I was*

completely lost. I didn't know how to find the assignments. It was overwhelming." Over time, some students learned through trial and error or peer help; others continued to feel anxious and incompetent navigating digital learning, which in turn dampened their academic confidence. Notably, a few participants contrasted their experiences: those who had prior ICT training or who were generally tech-savvy reported adapting more quickly and even occasionally assisting their classmates. However, these were the minority. The majority needed more structured guidance at the outset of remote learning.

It became evident that the lack of institutional support in bridging digital skill gaps was a problem. Most participants said they were expected to "figure it out on their own." Only two students mentioned that their institution offered a brief training session on using the online platforms. As *Hana* (a migrant student in Italy) explained, *"They just assumed we all knew how to use these tools. When I emailed tech support for help, I got a manual in Italian – which I struggled to read – and no real person to talk to."* The lack of timely technical support services, especially in one's native language, further compounded the challenge for migrant students like Hana.

Across the interviews, a clear trend emerged: students enrolled in urban, well-resourced universities generally reported fewer issues related to technological access, with some participants noting that they had received tablets or other devices through their academic programs. In contrast, students studying in more resource-constrained settings—including some participants in Albania and other developing countries—reported significant difficulties in accessing and effectively using technology. Furthermore, digital challenges frequently intersect with other themes identified in the analysis. For example, when students experienced difficulties using online forums or digital platforms, they also missed opportunities to communicate and engage with peers, which negatively affected their social integration. Participants unanimously agreed that improved access to technological devices and greater training in digital skills would have substantially enhanced their distance learning experiences. As one focus group collectively concluded: *"Without the basics – a good internet connection and knowing how to use the platforms – nothing else matters. That's the first hurdle we need help with."*

4.2 Language and Communication Barriers

The second major theme centers on Language and Communication Barriers**.** This theme encompasses the difficulties students experienced due to limited proficiency in the language of instruction, as well as the broader challenges of effective communication within online learning environments. These issues were discussed most prominently by migrant students in our sample, many of whom were required to study in languages such as English, Italian, or German rather than their native Albanian. Similar challenges were also reported by some students with special needs who had communication-related disabilities, including hearing impairments or speech disorders.

A recurring concern involved the limited opportunities for immediate feedback and clarification, which are typically more accessible in face-to-face learning settings. Migena, who relocated from Albania to Germany to pursue her Master's studies, described her experience and the difficulties she encountered: *"In a physical class, I can ask the person next to me, or quickly ask the teacher to repeat or explain in simpler terms. Online, I felt too shy to constantly say 'Sorry, I didn't understand.' I would just stay quiet and later try to translate the recorded lecture."* This finding suggests that the virtual learning format can unintentionally silence students who lack confidence in the language of instruction, causing them to miss valuable interactions that support learning and engagement. Participants noted that nuances in meaning were often lost in online environments, particularly in the absence of visual cues or when microphones remained muted. Several migrant students recounted situations in which they misunderstood assignment instructions or exam questions due to linguistic nuances, ultimately affecting their academic performance. Furthermore, the lack of informal communication opportunities intensified existing language barriers. Under normal circumstances, migrant students often develop language skills and gain confidence through casual interactions with peers on campus, before and after classes, or during group activities. However, such opportunities were considerably limited within the context of distance learning. *Fatjon*, an Albanian student in an English-medium program, said: *"During online classes, everybody just logs in, listens, and logs off. There's no chit-chat where I could ask a classmate in my broken English to explain something I didn't catch. That kind of peer support disappeared."* His experience was echoed by others who felt that online classes were strictly business, with little room for the kind of social learning that often helps second-language students adjust. This led to feelings of isolation and hindered the improvement of language skills over time.

For students with special needs affecting communication, such as hearing impairments, remote learning had mixed outcomes. On one hand, features like live transcription or chat boxes provided alternative ways to follow a class (when available and accurate). On the other hand, *losing visual cues and clear audio* proved detrimental. *Arben*, who is deaf

and relies on lip-reading and sign language, found recorded lectures especially challenging: *"If the speaker's face wasn't visible or the video quality was low, I couldn't lip-read. And not every video had captions. I basically had to request notes from the professor or classmates every time."* He mentioned that one of his professors eventually arranged for an interpreter to be present in live Zoom sessions (displayed in a thumbnail window, signing the lecture), which helped tremendously – a best practice that he wished all instructors would adopt. However, such accommodations were exceptions rather than the norm.

One encouraging strategy some participants described was the use of multilingual communication support. A couple of migrant students mentioned that their instructors allowed them to submit questions or even assignments in their native language, which would then be translated. Others used external tools: for instance, *Diana* shared, *"I started using a translation app side-by-side during lectures. I would quickly type a term in Albanian to see the English, or vice versa, to keep up."* Although this strategy was not entirely effective, it illustrates the determination of students to overcome language barriers and adapt to the challenges of online learning. Teachers who demonstrated sensitivity to these issues played an important role in supporting students' learning experiences. Some instructors intentionally slowed their pace of speech, used simpler and more accessible language, or provided lecture notes and outlines in advance. Participants in our study particularly praised instructors who regularly checked for understanding—for example, by pausing during lectures to ensure that students were following the material or by encouraging questions through the chat function and responding both orally and in written form.

A notable trend is that *language barriers are often intertwined with confidence issues*. The fewer students who understood, the fewer they participated, and over time, some withdrew almost completely from active engagement. This had a cascading effect on their learning and even on how they were perceived by teachers (some felt teachers assumed their silence meant disinterest, not realizing it was due to comprehension issues). The Frontiers study in Austria resonates with our findings, having reported that strong language barriers and low parental support were among the most harmful factors for inclusion during remote learning (Gitschthaler, 2022). Our participants similarly indicated that without targeted language support – such as bilingual materials, glossaries of key terms, or tutoring – their academic progress in distance learning was substantially impeded. As one student, *Lorik*, succinctly put it, *"The language was a wall. Online, that wall felt even higher."*

4.3 Pedagogical Support and Adaptation

The third theme, Pedagogical Support and Adaptation, relates to the role of instructors and instructional strategies in facilitating—or, in some cases, hindering—the inclusion of students with special needs and migrant students within online learning environments. This theme encompasses adaptive teaching practices, the availability of additional support or mentoring, and the overall responsiveness of educators to students' needs in virtual settings. It directly addresses our research question concerning the impact of pedagogical support on student integration. The findings indicate that strong pedagogical support often served as a determining factor in whether students felt included and engaged or, conversely, isolated and alienated during distance learning.

Many participants contrasted instructors and courses they perceived as supportive with those they found less accommodating. Within our data, supportive pedagogical practices included providing course materials in multiple formats (e.g., presentation slides accompanied by voice-over explanations or written lecture transcripts), recording sessions for later review, offering assignment extensions or alternative assessment options for students requiring accommodations, actively encouraging student questions, and organizing breakout sessions or small-group activities designed to foster participation and engagement among all learners. For instance, *Enkeled*, an education student with mobility impairment, praised one of her professors: *"She was amazing – she would always upload a summary of each lecture highlighting key points. She even prepared short video tutorials on how to use the library database when she learned some of us struggled with it. I felt seen and supported."* Enkeled's experience illustrates how instructor initiative and understanding can directly mitigate some challenges (in this case, technical literacy). The extra effort by that professor made Enkeled feel more confident and integrated, as she didn't fall behind due to technical or study-skill issues.

In stark contrast, students also shared stories where pedagogical support was lacking. *Blerina*, who has ADHD (Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder), found online lectures without any interactive element nearly impossible to follow: *"One of my lecturers would talk for two hours straight on Zoom, no slides, no break, no questions. I honestly checked out after 15 minutes. In class, I would at least get some eye contact or a change of activity to keep me focused."* She suggested that such an approach online made her feel like *"just a viewer, not a student in a class"*. This detachment

is a worrying sign of a lack of integration; Blerina felt the instructor was not attuned to student engagement. Another student, *Ridvan*, a migrant student in France with a visual impairment, noted that one of his courses relied heavily on dense texts and PDF readings: *"I asked if they could provide materials in an accessible format or maybe audio recordings. The response was basically 'we don't have that.' I ended up depending on a friend to read things to me, which was not always possible."* Ridvan's case highlights how the absence of adaptive materials or the willingness to accommodate can severely disadvantage a student.

When pedagogical support was present, its impact on *integration* was significant. Participants described feeling "part of the class" and more motivated to contribute when teachers showed empathy and flexibility. For example, some instructors held virtual office hours or one-on-one check-ins specifically to reach out to students who were struggling. *Nertil*, an Albanian student in an American university, shared: *"After I had trouble in the first assignment, my professor scheduled a 15-minute weekly meeting with me to go over any issues. It made a huge difference – I wasn't afraid to ask questions anymore because I knew he cared."* Through these individual sessions, Nertil caught up, and his performance improved. In his focus group, other students chimed in, agreeing that *"just knowing the teacher is there if you need them"* reduced their anxiety and encouraged them to seek help when necessary. This kind of proactive support was unfortunately not universal, but where it existed, it was often cited as the reason the student was able to succeed.

A recurring subtheme was the idea of adaptive assessment and feedback. Participants appreciated when instructors adapted assessments to be more inclusive – for instance, allowing oral exams instead of written for a student with writing difficulties, or giving additional time for a dyslexic student. *Flora*, who has dyslexia, shared that one lecturer noticed her struggle and offered to give her quiz questions verbally in a Zoom breakout room, which helped her demonstrate her knowledge without the barrier of spelling/reading under time pressure. Similarly, frequent and constructive feedback (as opposed to generic or delayed feedback) made students feel supported. Quick feedback loops allowed them to correct misunderstandings before they snowballed into bigger issues.

From a broader perspective, our findings on this theme reflect what Duka and colleagues have advocated in prior work: teacher training is a permanent necessity, and technology-supported inclusive teaching hinges on teacher preparedness (Duka A. L., 2024). Several participants explicitly stated that they believed some of their professors *wanted* to help but "didn't know how" – suggesting a need for professional development on inclusive online pedagogy. Indeed, one educator in our study (a focus group participant who was also a student) said, *"As a teacher-in-training, this experience has shown me how crucial it is to be adaptable. I've learned what not to do from some of my professors."* This underscores that pedagogical support in distance learning is not only critical for current students, but it is a learning opportunity for the education system to improve teaching practices overall.

In summary, Pedagogical Support and Adaptation emerged as a linchpin for student success. When done well, it compensated for other challenges (technology or language barriers became more surmountable with a supportive teacher guiding the way). When absent, students felt adrift and isolated, often performing below their potential. The clear implication is that enhancing teachers' capacity to deliver inclusive, responsive instruction online is key to integrating special needs and migrant students into distance learning.

4.4 Social Integration and Emotional Well-being

The final theme, Social Integration and Emotional Well-being, captures the interpersonal and emotional dimensions of students' experiences with distance learning. The findings revealed that, beyond academic and logistical concerns, remote learning had significant effects on students' sense of belonging, mental health, and overall well-being—factors that, in turn, can substantially influence academic success. This theme encompasses experiences related to social inclusion and exclusion, peer interactions (or the lack thereof), levels of motivation, and emotional challenges such as stress, anxiety, and other psychological difficulties associated with distance learning. A particularly notable finding was the extent of social isolation reported by many participants. Both students with special needs and migrant students described feeling "out of the loop" socially while studying from home. Jona, a student who uses a wheelchair and was previously highly involved in on-campus disability clubs, described remote learning as a particularly isolating experience: *"When campus closed, all my social interactions disappeared. In class, nobody really talks to each other anymore. I felt like I lost my community overnight."* For Jona and others, the absence of informal social contact – the chats before class, study group meetups, lunchtime conversations – meant a loss of peer support and friendship that are crucial buffers against academic stress. Migrant students similarly felt a disconnect; those who had been hoping to build networks and make friends in a new country were instead confined to their dorms or homes. *Altin*, studying in the UK, said: *"I've been*

here a year, and due to lockdown and online classes, I still don't have any local friends. It's depressing. I attend classes, but I feel invisible."

This lack of social integration had tangible effects on emotional well-being. Many participants reported heightened levels of anxiety, stress, and demotivation during distance learning. The uncertainty and independence of remote study, without the usual structure and social encouragement of a classroom, led some students to feel overwhelmed. *Rina*, who has an intellectual disability and thrives on routine, explained that she became very anxious: *"I was constantly worried I was doing things wrong because I couldn't see what others were doing. I felt so much pressure and no relief because there was no one to talk to daily."* Such anxiety was compounded for those who also faced academic hurdles (like the previous themes). Some described a vicious cycle where technical problems or language difficulties would cause them stress, which then made it harder to focus or motivate themselves, leading to falling further behind and feeling even more stressed. This aligns with broader research suggesting that marginalized students experienced more mental health challenges during the pandemic due to reduced support (Holm, 2024).

However, the data also revealed instances of resilience and the various coping strategies students employed, often with support from empathetic educators and peers. Several participants described efforts made by instructors to foster a sense of community despite the physical distance imposed by online learning. For example, one instructor created a dedicated class group chat on WhatsApp specifically designed to encourage informal conversations and facilitate peer interaction and support. *Bleona* found this very helpful: *"If I felt alone or stuck, I could drop a message in the group chat. Usually, someone would respond pretty quickly. It wasn't the same as meeting in person, but it reminded me I wasn't alone."* Another student talked about a virtual "coffee hour" that some classmates organized once a week, where they would join a video call with no agenda except to socialize. Such initiatives were rare in our sample, but where they existed, they made a notable difference in students' mood and sense of belonging.

A noteworthy aspect of this theme was the variation in experiences between students who had access to strong family or community support and those who did not. For instance, some students with special needs benefited from supportive family members at home who helped them remain organized or assisted with technical difficulties. This support appeared to mitigate feelings of isolation to some extent. In contrast, migrant students—particularly those living away from their families—often lacked immediate support systems and consequently experienced the emotional and social impacts of distance learning more intensely. *Shpresa*, an Albanian student in Canada, shared: *"I was basically alone in my apartment for months. There were days I didn't speak to anyone. My motivation to study dropped, and I felt depressed. My family was back home, and the time difference made it hard to connect regularly."* Unfortunately, formal mental health support from institutions was not commonly utilized by our participants – either due to stigma, lack of awareness, or lack of culturally/language-appropriate counseling services. Only one student mentioned attending an online counseling session provided by her university, which she found somewhat helpful for managing stress.

Despite these hardships, participants expressed that recognition of their struggles by others had a positive emotional impact. When teachers acknowledged the difficulty of the times, or when peers reached out to check on them, it made them feel valued. *Agron* recalled how one professor would start each class by asking how students were coping that week, and occasionally gave a free pass on attendance if someone was clearly struggling. *"Just hearing him say 'I know it's tough on you all' made me feel better – like it was okay to feel how I felt,"* Agron said. That kind of empathy can be crucial in fostering a supportive climate, even virtually (Duka A. L., 2024).

In terms of trends, emotional well-being was closely tied to academic persistence. Students who reported severe stress or depression were more likely to have considered deferring a semester or had actually dropped a course. Conversely, those who felt socially connected in some way (be it through a friend, mentor, or active online class engagement) managed to stay on track academically. This finding reinforces the idea that *academic integration and social integration are deeply interlinked*. It also mirrors the conclusions of studies like Holm *et al.* (2024), which argued that addressing unmet support needs and family conflicts can help reduce anxiety among immigrant and disabled youth during distance learning (Holm, 2024).

In conclusion, the Social Integration and Emotional Well-being theme reveals that distance learning is not only an educational challenge for special needs and migrant students, but also a social and emotional one. The lack of everyday human interaction and support can lead to significant mental health strains. As we move forward, any approach to distance education for these groups must take into account measures to promote social connectedness and provide mental health support, in addition to tackling the academic and technical issues.

5. Conclusion

This study aimed to examine the challenges associated with distance learning among two particularly vulnerable student groups—students with special educational needs and students from migrant backgrounds—and to explore how these challenges influence their educational experiences and outcomes. Through qualitative interviews and focus group discussions involving 30 Albanian students studying in various countries, four key themes emerged: (1) Digital Access and Literacy Challenges, (2) Language and Communication Barriers, (3) Pedagogical Support and Adaptation, and (4) Social Integration and Emotional Well-being. Each of these dimensions was found to significantly influence students' ability to engage with and benefit from distance learning.

The findings indicate that limited digital skills and inadequate access to technology represent fundamental barriers that can impede effective teaching and learning within online environments. Without sufficient access to appropriate devices, reliable internet connectivity, and the necessary skills to navigate digital platforms, students are unable to fully participate in virtual learning experiences. This issue was pervasive in our sample and often the first domino in a chain of difficulties. Addressing the digital divide is therefore a prerequisite for any equitable distance education initiative (Zhang, 2024). We also found that language barriers profoundly influence communication and learning for migrant students and some special needs students, echoing the literature that identifies language as a core challenge to inclusion in education (Duka A. L., 2024). In an online setting, where spontaneous clarification is less accessible, these language challenges can result in misunderstanding content, reduced participation, and feelings of alienation.

Another major conclusion is the critical role of pedagogical support. The presence of adaptive teaching methods and supportive instructors can significantly mitigate the other challenges. When teachers proactively adapt materials, check in with students, and create an inclusive climate (even virtually), students with special needs and migrant students feel more integrated and are more likely to succeed (Duka A. L., 2024). Conversely, a lack of pedagogical support – such as rigid, non-interactive teaching and inflexibility in assessment – exacerbates difficulties, leaving these learners behind. This underscores that teacher training in inclusive, technology-supported pedagogy is vital (Duka A. L., 2024). Finally, our study draws attention to the often-overlooked aspect of social and emotional well-being. Distance learning, particularly under pandemic conditions, can erode the social networks and routines that students rely on. Many participants experienced isolation, stress, and demotivation, which in turn affected their academic engagement. This finding aligns with research linking reduced support in distance learning to increased anxiety among immigrant and disabled youth (Holm, 2024). It is a reminder that educational outcomes are intertwined with mental health and that supporting students holistically is crucial.

In summary, distance learning has the potential to serve as an equitable and empowering mode of education, as highlighted in our abstract; however, this potential can only be realized through proactive efforts to address these interconnected challenges. The implications of this study are substantial and multifaceted. For educators, the findings underscore the importance of adapting teaching practices and remaining attentive to the diverse needs of students within online learning environments. For educational institutions and policymakers, the results call for greater investment in technological infrastructure to ensure that no student is excluded due to limited access or insufficient digital skills. Additionally, there is a need to develop inclusive curricula and educational resources, as well as provide support services, such as tutoring and counseling, specifically tailored to the needs of remote learners. By amplifying the voices and experiences of students directly affected by these challenges, this study contributes a nuanced understanding that may inform the development of more effective practices and policies aimed at fostering inclusive distance education.

6. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, we propose several recommendations aimed at different stakeholders – educators, policymakers, and educational institutions – to improve the distance learning experience for students with special needs and migrant students. These suggestions seek to address the identified challenges and promote a more inclusive and supportive online learning environment:

- **Educators:** *Adopt inclusive teaching practices and proactive communication.* Teachers should receive training on accessible online pedagogy, including how to use features like captions, transcripts, and assistive technology compatibility when designing course materials. Instructors are encouraged to differentiate instruction by providing content in multiple formats (visual, auditory, text) and by being flexible with assessments (for example, allowing alternative formats or extended time for those who need it). Regular check-ins with students – such as brief one-on-one meetings or quick surveys – can help identify those

struggling silently. Educators should also establish clear communication channels, encouraging students to ask questions (via email, forum, or office hours) and responding promptly. Culturally responsive teaching, which acknowledges students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds, is key; for instance, teachers might learn a few basic words in their students' native languages or use simple language to ensure clarity (Gitschthaler, 2022). By fostering an open, supportive atmosphere, educators can ensure that all students feel seen and can participate fully.

- **Policymakers:** *Invest in infrastructure, training, and support programs for inclusive e-learning.* At the policy level, closing the digital divide must be a priority. This includes funding initiatives to provide necessary devices and internet access to students who lack them, whether through device lending programs, subsidies, or community internet centers. Policymakers should also mandate and fund professional development programs for teachers on digital skills and inclusive teaching methods, ensuring that what Duka (2023) called the "permanent necessity" of teacher training is met. (Duka A. L., 2024) Additionally, education policies should encourage the development of resources for multilingual education, such as curricula and online platforms that offer content in multiple languages or include translation tools. Support for creating accessible learning materials (e.g., screen-reader-friendly documents, sign language-interpreted videos) can be provided at a national or regional level so that individual institutions are not left to tackle these resource-intensive tasks alone. Finally, policymakers can facilitate partnerships with organizations (NGOs or tech companies) that specialize in assistive technologies or language support to integrate their solutions into public education systems.
- **Educational Institutions:** *Create an inclusive online learning ecosystem with comprehensive student support services.* Universities and schools should establish clear protocols and support structures to assist special needs and migrant students in distance learning. This could include orientation sessions on the use of e-learning platforms at the start of each term, with tailored guidance for those less familiar with technology. IT helpdesks should be adequately staffed and trained to handle accessibility issues and language queries, possibly offering support in students' native languages. Institutions should also expand their disability support services and language support services to the online realm – for example, by providing note-taking services, captioning for live lectures, sign language interpretation on request, or tutoring for students struggling with the language of instruction. Creating virtual spaces for social interaction is equally important: institutions might facilitate virtual clubs, peer mentoring programs, or discussion boards where students can connect informally, thereby alleviating the isolation many reported. Moreover, counseling and mental health services should be made easily accessible online, with counselors sensitive to the cultural backgrounds and unique stressors of migrant and special-needs students. By taking a holistic approach – addressing academic, technical, and emotional needs – institutions can significantly improve students' outcomes and well-being in distance learning.

Implementing these recommendations will require concerted effort and collaboration among all stakeholders, but the payoff is a more equitable and effective education system. When educators are equipped and empathetic, when policies provide the necessary resources, and when institutions foster inclusive communities, distance learning can truly become empowering for all students, regardless of disability status or nationality, fulfilling the vision outlined at the start of this paper.

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