The Role of Feedback in the Distance Learning Process

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Abstract
In the distance learning process, teachers, students, parents and institutions must continue the teaching and learning process despite the various limitations. During the face-to-face learning process, instructions, concepts and feedback can be verbally communicated within a relatively short period of time; while teachers in the distance learning process must briefly express their thoughts in written form so that every student can clearly understand what is being done. It is not always an easy task. One of the challenges of the distance learning process is to find ways how to provide feedback to students in a timely and meaningful way to help them improve their performance, actively engage in the learning process, and not to lose the link between a student and a teacher. The article, using theoretical (scientific and methodological literature analysis) research methods, analyzes the concept and theoretical models of the distance learning process, describes the preconditions for feedback and the importance of feedback in the teaching and learning process. By analysing the importance of feedback, suggestions for improving the distance learning process have been developed.

Key words: distance learning, education for sustainable development, feedback, student, teacher

Introduction
On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization announced that the Covid-19 prevalence of coronaviral disease reached the extent of a global pandemic (WHO, 2020). On March 12, 2020, the Latvian government decided to announce a state of emergency in the country (Ministru kabineta rīkojums Nr. 103, 2020). All educational institutions were closed. Thus, distance learning or online learning became the norm, and a number of national and international academic societies pooled resources to ensure that student education at all education levels was continued at that time. A distance learning process, as a learning system, has a major impact on different educational system participants, such as teachers, students’ parents and institutions, which need to continue the distance learning process, despite the various limitations. The consequences are that all – teachers, students and parents – must be able to adapt to the use of different electronic devices as teaching tools. In the short term, schools should develop strategies or approaches for the distance learning process that are relevant to the capabilities of each school, teacher, student, and cannot forget the instruments that support
this policy. The habits of teachers, students and parents have changed with the beginning of distance learning. Until now the teacher taught and students studied in the classroom – the learning and teaching process took place in a school where all necessary tools supporting the learning process were in the same place. Learning process through e-learning is very different from the overall learning that happens in schools. Teachers and students do not communicate “face-to-face” directly, but via a variety of electronic devices to establish communication on different Internet platforms. The transition from teaching process at school to distance learning is not easy for all people. However, despite the challenges and obstacles arising from e-learning, the learning process is continued. In the current global challenges, there is an opportunity to discuss the objectives of sustainable development in education set by UNESCO – to develop competencies that enable and empower individuals to reflect on their own actions by taking into account their current and future social, cultural, economic and environmental impacts from both a local and a global perspective. It requires individuals to act in complex situations in a sustainable manner – to explore new ideas and approaches and participate in socio-political processes, with the objective of moving their societies progressively towards sustainable development. Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), understood in this way aims to enable learners to take responsible actions that contribute towards creating sustainable societies now and in the future. It “develops the skills, values and attitudes that enable citizens to lead healthy and fulfilled lives, make informed decisions, and respond to local and global challenges” (UNESCO, 2016, IV). According to Salote et al. (2021), the importance of incorporating sustainability ‘content’ into curricula by adopting methodologies that encourage value education and the development of critical thinking skills in education is a key that deepens the development of ideas on the phenomenon of sustainability, sustainable education and sustainable development (Salote et al., 2021).

One of the tasks of the distance learning process is to find ways how to provide information to students in a timely and meaningful manner. Although teachers can use different written and audiovisual resources to provide content, the importance of communication and feedback between the teacher and the student cannot be underestimated (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). In the traditional learning process, teachers can include feedback into their classroom immediately to avoid misunderstandings. They can also answer questions and encourage students to build their awareness of feedback and engage in the learning process. Although some of this can also be done in the distance learning process, there is a lack of reading body language and visual assessment of students’ understanding. Feedback is an essential teaching practice in the distance learning process, as it can help learn and establish a link between a teacher and a student, despite the fact that they do not cooperate in presence (Bonnet et al., 2007; Leibold & Schwartz, 2015) and promote the development of critical thinking, attitudes and active participation in decision-making underpinning ESD (UNESCO, 2019).

The article, using theoretical (scientific and methodological analysis) research methods, analyzes the concept and theoretical models of the distance learning process, describes the preconditions for feedback and the importance of feedback in the teaching and learning process. The theoretical research carried out makes it possible to achieve the objective pursued by the article: by analyzing the importance of feedback, to formulate suggestions for the development of the distance learning process.
Analysis of the Concept of Distance Learning

Providing an understanding of theories and concepts related to a particular topic or field is expected from the theory. As Herek (1995) points out, the theoretical system is:

- clearly said or written theoretical assumptions that allow the reader to critically assess them;
- the theoretical frame that links the researcher to existing knowledge;
- the basis for the nomination of hypotheses and for the selection of exploration methods using a relevant theory;
- the formulation of theoretical assumptions in the study that raise questions about why and how. This allows for the transition from describing the observed phenomenon to generalization on different aspects of this phenomenon;
- the theory that helps set the limits of these generalizations. The theoretical frame indicates which major variables affect the phenomenon of interest. This allows you to explore how these key variables can vary and under what kind of circumstances (Herek, 1995).

E-learning is not something new in the education system. Hanson et al. (1997) believe that the word “distance” has a number of meanings and that the concept of distance learning has been extended to a large number of different programs that serve different audiences through a wide range of media and, finally, rapid technological changes challenge traditional ways in which e-learning is defined. The general term “distance learning” including various concepts was previously used to describe education in an unconventional environment. For example, distance learning includes concepts such as correspondence studies, home studies, independent studies, freelance studies, distance learning, remote learning, but the terms are not synonymous (Keegan, 1996).

The concept of distance learning itself occurred at the University of Tubingen in Germany. In the 1960s, researchers used the word “fernstudium” (distance learning) to describe how individual practices were distributed in industry, particularly, technology use and job sharing could be used in the learning process (Moore & Kearsley, 2012). Distance education was defined as a set of learning methods creating learning habits and printed, electronic, mechanical or other devices to facilitate communication between a student and a teacher (Moore, 1972). Delling (1966) considered that distance learning (Fernunterricht) was a planned and systematic activity, which involved the selection of teaching materials, didactic preparation and presentation, as well as the monitoring and support of students, and was achieved by using at least one suitable technical environment to eliminate the physical distance between the student and the teacher. Dohmen (1967) believed that distance learning (Fernstudium) was a systematically organized self-study in which a group of teachers was responsible for each student, consulted them, taught and monitored the success of students. It was possible from a distance by using tools that could overcome long distances (Dohmen, 1967). Peters (1973) described distance learning (Fernunterricht) as a method for obtaining education from a distance. Knowledge, skills and attitudes are streamlined through shared work and organizational principles and through extensive use of technical media, particularly to reproduce high-quality teaching materials that allow high numbers of students to be taught at the same
time, regardless of their place of residence. It is a form of industrialized teaching and learning (Peters, 1973). On the other hand, Holmberg (1977) defined distance learning as a form of learning, which included all teaching methods and all levels of education that did not have direct and independent supervision on the part of teachers, while teachers could plan, organize and manage the educational process.

In 1988, Perraton proposed the following definition of distance learning: it is an educational process in which someone leads a significant part of the learning process and which takes place at a different location and distance from the student (Perraton, 1988). In 1990, Moore gave a different view of distance learning. According to his definition, distance learning is a way of providing teaching through printed or electronic devices and a person who participates in planned learning and teaching process is at a different place or at a different time from the teacher’s location (Moore, 1990). A similar definition was provided by Portway and Lane (1994), who considered that the concept of distance learning referred to teaching and learning situations where the teacher and students were geographically separate, and therefore electronic devices and printing materials were used to provide teaching.

The US Distance Learning Association defines distance learning as “the process of acquiring knowledge and skills through various tools to deliver information, including all types of technology and different types of distance learning” (USDLA, 2004). Thus, distance learning is an educational state that requires communication between a teacher and a student through usage of modern audiovisual communication technologies. Online learning can also be defined as a learning experience in a synchronous or asynchronous environment by using different devices and tools (e.g., mobile phones, tablets, laptops). With the Internet access, students can be anywhere and study, communicate with teachers, and share ideas with other students (Singh & Thurman, 2019).

In November 2020 amendments were made in the Education Law of Latvia, where Section 1 was supplemented with the definition that “distance learning is the form of the acquisition of education in which an educatee acquires the contents of an educational programme implemented by an educational institution independently and individually, using specially structured study materials offered by the educational institution, different technical and electronic means of communication. Achievements of the educatee are assessed according to the requirements of the relevant educational programme” (Education Law, 1998).

To sum up, it can be said that it is difficult to define the concept of “distance learning” and to determine how qualitative the definition is. There is no universal way to say how to describe the quality of education and the distance learning process because each concept contains very complex other concepts that depend on a variety of factors, such as technology, curriculum characteristics, students, teaching design, etc. (Meyer, 2002).

**Theoretical Models of the Distance Learning Process**

Four of the most influential distance learning theories can be found in the works of Holmberg, Peters, Moore and Garrison (Table 1).
Table 1

Theoretical Models of the Distance Learning Process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Concept</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Börje Holmberg</td>
<td>Distance learning communication model</td>
<td>Motivation, empathy, communication, educational autonomy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael Graham Moore</td>
<td>Transactional distance and learner autonomy</td>
<td>Dialogue and structure, students’ autonomy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Otto Peters</td>
<td>Distance education as the most industrialized form of education</td>
<td>Division of work, instructions, self-training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Randy Garrison</td>
<td>Communication and learner control</td>
<td>Cooperation, self-guided learning</td>
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Holmberg (1986; 1989), as a leading theorist in distance learning and distance learning education, developed a philosophy on a distance learning communication model influenced by the theory of humanism and andragogy. His theory described as a “predicting theory” uses a teaching methodology based on teaching and learning communication styles and applies “empathetic emotions” (Bernath & Vidal, 2007). Holmberg published his ideas for the first time in an article “The Techniques of Correspondence Teachers” in 1960 and mentioned that a didactic conversation was based on his theory. He stressed that his approach to distance learning was based on a very general observation that personal feelings of empathy and personal relationships between students and teachers supported learning motivation and improved learning outcomes (Holmberg, 1960). He emphasized that the content of course materials and the nature of negotiations were a means of promoting the independence of students. Holmberg’s theory focused on promoting student support and encouragement through clear instructions. He was the first theorist who focused on the importance of personal aspects in distance learning and the importance of empathy as an essential ingredient in teacher and student interaction (Holmberg, 1986, 1989). To sum up, in his theory Holmberg tries to explain the relationship between two-way communication and the effectiveness of distance learning and teaching. Such relationships include interaction, emotional engagement, learning pleasure, motivation and teaching effectiveness. Holmberg believes that the dialogue between a student and a teacher is the most characteristic feature in distance learning and the circumstance that promotes learning.

Moore’s transactional distance theory was introduced in the early 1970s. It highlights one of the problems – the separation of a student and a teacher from one another. He turns to the nature of “distance” within distance learning and its impact on teaching and learning relationships. The distance refers to the communical and psychological distance between students and teachers, which is considered to be more relevant than the physical separation between the teacher and the student. To overcome the distance, there must be two variables in the training process: (I) dialogue (targeted, constructive interaction assessed by each participant towards better understanding) and (II) structure (rigidities or flexibility in relation to course objectives, evaluation or evaluation strategies and types). In all teaching and learning relationships, the distance level depends on whether students remain alone with their materials, whether they can communicate with their teacher (dialogue), and the degree to which the programme is preconceived and defined (structure) (Moore, 1994).
Peters (1967, 1989) highlights the role of distance learning as an industrialized form of teaching and learning. He thinks that distance education is characterized by job-sharing and the development of briefing units that could be mass-produced and delivered in a standardized way, thereby achieving substantial savings. The specialist group develops, supplies and supports the concept of distance learning; the final product is an educated individual. This view of distance learning was considered to be controversial and limited because it did not address important issues related to communication and interaction in the field of education. Garrison, for example, notes that this is not a teaching or learning theory but an idea of organizing distance learning. The focus on structural and organizational issues in distance learning has had a significant impact on future studies (Garrison, 2000). Peters (1993, 1998, 2000) then addressed the issue of the role of distance education in the postindustrial community. He states that distance learning is consistent with postindustrial trends in classroom dislocation, self-directing, student social interaction and relationships with electronic devices. According to this opinion, the main objective of education will be self-fulfillment, and autonomous groups will be the main part of the educational process. Peters (2000) predicts that, in response to the opportunities and lifelong learning requirements of new technologies, all universities will be transformed into self-education and distance learning institutions.

Garrison and Baynton’s established control theory says the concept and practice of distance learning is an individual form of learning based on self-learning (Garrison & Baynton, 1997). Garrison’s approach places emphasis on direct communication between teachers and students and interaction between school groups and a teacher. Interaction means that a student develops and maintains control. Control does not require a form of self-reliance that excludes all external interaction and resources, rather by means of communication, the student and the teacher can agree on the degree of control that each has over the learning process. Control is basically collaboration because it depends on both the teacher and the student, although it exists separately from each other. Control is not automatically transferred to the student, freedom of choice in terms of school time and place is given to the student, without taking into account the capacity and resources of the student. Control is constantly debated thanks to continued interaction (Garrison, 1989). Garrison’s theoretical work also deals with the relationship between theory and the development of different distance learning paradigms. He believes that, along with the prevailing paradigm in distance learning that has highlighted independent learning, which is conducted mainly through self-learning, is what can be called the future paradigm of distance learning. This paradigm places much greater emphasis on interaction and knowledge building and is consistent with constructivist approaches about distance learning (Garrison, 2000).

Content and Role of Feedback in the Distance Learning Process

There are many studies on the positive effects of feedback on students’ learning, achievements and motivation (Epstein et al., 2002; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Narciss & Huth, 2004; Price et al., 2010; Shute, 2008). In the distance learning process, where there is rather limited scope for interaction, the feedback from teachers on learning performance plays an even more important role than in the “face-to-face” process, since it can help manage the learning process, improve performance and maintain motivation (Hyland, 2001). Boud and Molloy (2013) also agree with this statement, and they argue
that feedback from students on feedback provided by teachers is also important. The manifestation of teachers’ and students’ feelings can be seen as feedback that cannot be overlooked, as recent studies highlight the role of emotions in all learning contexts (Martínez & Agudo, 2018; Pekrun & Stephens, 2010). Chetwynd and Dobbyn (2011) note that effective feedback is crucial in the distance learning process, where comments on performance can be the key or even the only communication between a teacher and a student. There are differences between providing feedback in the learning process in the classroom and in the distance learning process. The distance between teaching and learning activities and the devices are necessary to reduce this gap among the most frequently mentioned differences between teaching in the classroom and from a distance (Bernard et al., 2009). Tsagari thinks that distance education is linked to problems and opportunities that are not covered in the “face-to-face” context. For example, students in distance learning have more opportunities to choose content and how they learn, they have more freedom in choosing tasks and teaching materials, and they have the opportunity to ignore activities that they do not consider useful for their own development. On the other hand, distance learning creates problems that do not appear in the context of the classroom, such as initial motivation for students, providing access to real-time interaction and developing students’ awareness of their learning speed and direction (Tsagari, 2013). Mirke et al. (2019) have come to a conclusion that the learning path in the e-course should be customized, taking into account learners’ socio-demographic parameters and online learning readiness rate. In a self-paced e-learning course, the system should select the on-boarding materials for each learner, based on the data obtained from learners’ self-evaluation during enrolment in the course. Later, during the course, short self-evaluation forms should be built-in to follow the learners’ path and progress.

Canning (2013) gathers the value of feedback, explaining its importance to both teachers and students. Teachers should be able to provide students with qualitative feedback, while students should be able to understand and use it effectively. No matter how capable a student is, they will not be able to use poor-quality feedback to improve their performance. Many studies in recent decades have demonstrated the importance of effective feedback in supporting learning (Bangert, 2004; Carless, 2006; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). In an article about seven principles of good practice, Chikering and Gamson (1987) write that feedback is an important element in the learning process and it helps learn and improve performance. They believe that feedback includes assessment and immediate comments, it allows students to assess existing knowledge, rethink what they have learned and what they still need to learn, and get suggestions for future job improvement. Dialogue with the student not only promotes motivation, but also encourages the development of sustainable education. In this perspective, it is important to allow for critical thinking and the formulation of students’ position. It takes time to think about transforming the experience into knowledge and something meaningful. However, feedback has many different forms. It can be a continuous and unconscious dialogue or structured discussion with others. Teacher can also vary these shapes. The essential means of providing and obtaining feedback are listening, speaking, writing and creative reasoning. Documenting what is and was done by raising questions and evaluating critically is a valuable feedback tool and an important part of the learning process (Mendela et al., 2008).
Although scientists have made recommendations to improve the quality and effectiveness of feedback, it is not possible to find a specific description of effective feedback. There are a number of researchers who have described the criteria for effective feedback. Howard (1987) argues that for feedback to be effective, four important criteria should be taken into account:

- content of feedback: provides accurate information on the correct and incorrect answers; there should be accurate information indicating skills and knowledge. The feedback should be specific and should indicate both the evaluated performance and the learner’s proven capabilities;
- the degree to which feedback is individualized, the extent to which performance is to be assessed individually. The higher the number of responses, the more the opportunity to assess and provide more individualized feedback;
- timely feedback is more effective than delayed, so it is recommended to give immediate feedback;
- feedback sources and delivery method: these two parameters are interrelated and have a significant impact on the possibilities of all other feedback criterias. For example, feedback provided by your computer automatically gives you information about the performance of a particular person – it is personalized, fast, but it provides limited information. On the other hand, feedback to group conferences and seminars is immediate, more individualized, and more exhaustive, as each student can ask different questions about different content. The delivery method also determines the source of feedback. It is possible for teachers and students to provide immediate feedback to live conferences, but this is the case for automatic, computer-generated feedback (Howard, 1987).

Howard’s list outlines not the specific characteristics that should be associated with feedback, but the feedback components that teachers should care about when creating it.

Hyland (2001) thinks that motivation may be the most important feature of effective feedback in the context of distance learning. This emphasis on motivation was also reflected in the Cole’s et al. (1986) study on effective feedback in the context of distance learning. According to the researchers, feedback in the distance learning process should be supportive, it should provide encouraging comments and also offer opportunities for a dialogue, as well as the possibility of commenting on feedback. In addition to putting emphasis on the motivating aspect of feedback, the specific features of distance learning have led some authors to assume that feedback in the distance learning process requires more clarity compared to the feedback from the learning process in school, as it should be noted that the distance learning process does not provide as many opportunities for diverse interaction between teachers and students. Price (1997) argues that students and teachers in the distance learning process need a crystal-clear explanation of the assessment criteria and when and how they are used. In addition, Price points out that the tone and word selection of feedback comments are essential for feedback effectiveness, as distance learners have limited opportunities to understand a teacher’s sense of humor and commenting style (Price, 1997). To sum up, it can be concluded that feedback in the distance learning process:
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- helps improve students’ learning process, thereby allowing them to achieve their goals and progress (Adcroft, 2011);
- motivates students to improve their present and future performance, while also highlighting their strengths and weaknesses (Weaver, 2006);
- creates opportunities for a dialogue between the teacher and the student (Beau-mont et al., 2011);
- promotes reflection and self-regulation, thereby encouraging the autonomy of learners (Espasa & Meneses, 2010).

Based on literature review, it can be concluded that effective feedback is important for both the classroom and distance learning processes. Although there are differences between providing effective feedback in the “face-to-face” process and in the distance learning process, there are characteristic elements that should be taken into account when providing feedback in both the “face-to-face” and distance learning processes:

- timely – to provide feedback as long as it is up to date (it should be provided quickly enough to make it useful for students and to improve their performance) (Bailey & Garner, 2010; Costello & Crane, 2010; Evans, 2013; Glover & Brown, 2006; Rodway-Dyer et al., 2010);
- clear (unambiguous) – it means that feedback is understandable to students, is linked to learning outcomes (constructive harmonization) and to evaluation criteria (Costello & Crane, 2010; Evans, 2013; Lizzio & Wilson, 2008);
- educative, not only evaluative – identifies the learning needs and/or previous knowledge of students and it can detect unpredicted results achieved (Costello & Crane, 2010; Evans, 2013; Lizzio & Wilson, 2008);
- proportional (criteria, goals) – feedback is provided on key task assessment goals (Boud, 2000; Davies, 2003; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Nicol & Mac-farlane-Dick, 2006; Stefani, 1994);
- indicative, i.e., related to the performance of the student – feedback points to the target (replenishment) and clarifies what the student has done well and what is not so good (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Bailey & Garner, 2010);
- forecasting, i.e., feedback suggest what the student can productively improve in the future (Hattie & Timperley, 2007);
- ongoing, i.e., a continuous dialogue than the final outcome – feedback is provided sufficiently frequently and in a detailed manner, it supports a peer/teacher dialogue, allows students to provide their feedback on the feedback received and supports raising questions. Instead of the end point of teaching and learning processes, feedback should be seen as an invitation and starting point for communication between students to further develop skills and ideas in negotiations with teachers (Bailey & Garner, 2010);
- sensitive – feedback should reflect the context and history of each student, emotional contribution and needs and capacity (Costello & Crane, 2010).

Feedback should contribute to the development of positive self-confidence and motivation (see Fig. 1).
To sum up, it can be considered that effective feedback in the distance learning process can provide the student with the support mechanisms necessary for the active involvement of the student in the learning process. In a distance learning environment, feedback may have a positive impact on students by promoting responsibility for the acquisition of the material and by establishing a dialogue on feedback and evaluation which, by its nature, helps the student engage actively in the learning process and not to be a passive observer.

Suggestions

1. In order to facilitate the development of positive self-awareness and motivation in the distance learning process, teachers should provide feedback to help improve learning among students, indicating what the student has achieved, what needs to be improved and what to do to improve performance, thereby enabling the student to achieve goals and progress.

2. The use of modern technologies provides new opportunities to meet individual learning needs. By using technologies (voice records, drafts, computer-generated feedback etc.), teachers can provide and students can receive personalized feedback and less time resources are consumed.

3. The feedback provided should be simple, understandable to the student, which clarifies the learning needs and/or previous knowledge of students and should be timely, that is to say, to provide feedback while it is important for the student. The feedback should be sensitive to the student.

4. Students should involve in the feedback a dialogue in the distance learning process, so that students are active and not passive beneficiaries of feedback. Moreover, if
students become more independent, rely on self-directed learning and rely less on teacher leadership, a dialogue is developed where students themselves act as evaluators, using peer assessment or self-assessment.

5. In order to improve the effectiveness of feedback, students should provide their feedback on the feedback provided by the teacher.

6. It would be advisable for students to document how they used feedback to move to the next phase of training. This strategy provides additional benefits through the development of students’ metacognitive skills and a more active involvement of students in the learning process.

Conclusions

The analysis of theoretical models of the distance learning process gives an idea of conceptual categories, philosophy and origin, which allow developing new theories and, consequently, improving the distance learning process, both theoretically and practically. Distance learning is a way in which a student participates in the planned learning process but the student is at a place or time, which differs from the place of the teacher, and uses different media. Distance learning is very different from the face-to-face learning at school. Teachers and students do not communicate directly, but via a variety of electronic devices to establish communication on different Internet platforms. The transition from the face-to-face to distance learning is not easy for people. However, despite the challenges and obstacles arising from e-learning, the learning process is ongoing.

Feedback in the distance learning process is a tool that involves students in the learning process, promoting responsibility for learning achievements and participation. Dialogue between students and teachers improves the performance of students, so that the student is at the center of the learning process as an active participant.

As sustainable development becomes more and more relevant in society, process and dialogue-oriented learning, especially if there are no answers to all issues at once, leads both students and teachers to constantly think, raise questions and use diverse thinking patterns, which promote meaningful use of feedback in the learning process. Feedback is of high importance in professional advancement, social interaction and education for global development. Schools have to meet the challenge of using the fast-growing supply of technical and pedagogical media (study platforms, digital textbooks and study material) to open up opportunities for individualized and communicative lessons within a lifeworld-oriented education for global development. This does not only require critical openness and the appropriate staff, but also affects the whole school system. To date, education for sustainable development has been promoting knowledge, skills, values and attitudes that empower learners to take informed decisions and responsible actions. Through education for sustainable development and distance learning, there is a need to continue the dialogue between sustainable development and education.

Further studies should deal with the role of feedback in the distance learning process, the impact of the dialogue between students and teachers on student’s achievements and satisfaction with the learning outcomes, as well as the quality of the distance learning process.
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