

HIGHER EDUCATION CHALLENGES DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC. A CASE STUDY

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Abstract: *Higher education faced different challenges even before the COVID-19 pandemic. Problems like inequity, disinvestment, conceiving educational programs that develop the necessary competencies for future employees, learning innovation and novelty in teaching methods have been delicate grounds in Romanian educational system for at least 20 years. Due to the world wide evolution of the COVID-19 pandemic, we face an unprecedented situation, regarding the pedagogical continuity of the learning process that has been shifted from the face-to-face approach in the online environment. A sample of 152 students from Ovidius University of Constanta, the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences was investigated with an opinion poll regarding their perception about the problems that the transition of the entire teaching-learning activity in the online environment raised for them. Results show that 64.47% of the participants think that carrying out the educational activity in the online environment is the most suitable procedure during the isolation period; 92.10% of participants and their teachers use Cisco Webex Meetings; 76.97% of students experienced no difficulties in adapting to the online activity; 74.33% of students faced different types of difficulties, mostly related to the competences needed to operate the online platforms, different malfunctions of the platforms, and poor Internet connection; 75.57% of students are happy with the possibility of attending classes no matter where they are; 55.92% of participants are unhappy with the large number of individual homework they have to do; 74.34% of students fear the freezing of the school year. Results are discussed in relationship with educational outcomes and future directions of the educational activity during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic isolation period.*

Keywords: *higher education; challenges; COVID-19 pandemic.*

1. Higher education challenges in the 21st century

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, higher education had to live up to different types of challenges, like inequality, disinvestment, educational programs or learning innovation (Maloney & Kim, 2020).

Inequality can be addressed through different approaches, all of them important for this study. Romania illustrates a case of inequality in three important dimensions (Precupetu, 2013): income, labor market and education. One of the approaches regards the way that higher education struggles with maintaining a well-balanced ratio between competencies and labor market trends. Graduates don't always manage to obtain a job worthy of their training. Underemployment shows recent graduates ending up doing jobs historically

filled by high school graduates (Vedder, 2020). Basically there are a small number of good jobs that can ensure security or an acceptable income, which seem to be the most desirable two features of an ideal job.

The New European Union Agenda for Higher Education (<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/140/higher-education>) refers to aligning the development of competences in the field of higher education with the needs of the labor market; ensuring high-level education accessible to a large extent and favorable to social inclusion, increasing its degree of interaction with society; stimulating the innovation capacity of higher education; increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of higher education.

Another approach of inequality, that also represents a challenge for the educational system, regards the nonparticipation or low participation of students to different types of formal education, which is a source for social exclusion (Voicu & Vasile, 2010). In the last century, there was a gradual tendency of movement of the minimal level of formal education from primary to lower secondary and to higher secondary, not leading thus to marginalization. In the context where it is widely accepted that educational opportunities for children ought to be equal (Shields, Newman & Satz, 2017), all educational systems struggle to promote equality of access and equality of opportunities (Clancy & Goastellec, 2007).

Romanian educational system confronts the problem of the social position as an important factor that blocks or allows individuals to access at least one form of university degree (Voicu & Vasile, 2010). The authors emphasize the fact that despite its generalization at different social levels and groups, the ideal of universal access has never been achieved.

Another important issue for the educational system is **disinvestment**. Authorities finance part of the educational system, but universities must be able to increase their budgets, aside from the state funding, through a series of financial measures (such as rising the tuition fees or accessing European funds, projects and grants). Thus, the university ecosystem is affected by the erosion of public support and public disinvestment, which ultimately lead to unequal opportunities in education, decreased resources for research and fewer graduates (Zhao, 2019), small numbers of highly trained scholars, scientists or managers to sustain development (Altbach, 2005), in the context where contemporary large-scale development requires a sophisticated and at least partly knowledge-based economy.

Disinvestment in public higher education shifts costs to students and their families, which currently pay more for a college degree in order to ensure part of the requirements for a decent job (Quinterno, 2012). Equally important is the fact that families shape the educational ideologies of students (Marquez Kiyama, 2010) and high and medium income families have better chances to financially sustain their children in college.

The educational programs and services are another challenge for universities. They must be implemented in order to effectively meet the needs

of the students and of labor market (Schlossberg, 1989). Authors suggest that most teaching and assessment in higher education focus on the cognitive skills of knowledge and understanding, rather than on affective outcomes of values, attitudes and behaviors (Shephard, 2008). Although this may be correct for some areas of higher education, the author emphasizes that some key issues include assessing outcomes and evaluating courses, providing academic credit for affective outcomes, key roles for role models and designing realistic and acceptable learning outcomes in the affective domain. Thus, universities should ensure that their learning and teaching activities are geared towards student learning and success, while contributing to the advancement of academic and professional knowledge and skills.

The European higher education is dealing with some multiple and complex challenges from society that require appropriate solutions. Internalization on the labor market and the dynamics of the workforce, the development of digital technologies, the emergence of new areas and specializations, and social issues are just a few of them. In the face of this reality, European norms redefine university education in all its essential dimensions: the teachers' teaching skills, the professional and transversal competences of the students, the university relationship with the labor market and society, in general, the relationship between education and research. Thus, European norms (Christensson, Staaf, Dakovic, Peterbauer & Zhang, 2019) argue for a **creative, active and innovative learning environment**, one of the main challenges this study tries to address.

The higher education learning experience nurtures and enables the development of learners as active and responsible citizens, critical thinkers, problem solvers, equipped for life-long learning. The publication Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA (ESG, 2015, <https://www.eua.eu/>) states that institutions should encourage students to take an active role in creating the learning process; they should assure themselves of the competence of their teachers and ensure that adequate and readily accessible learning resources and student support are provided.

One of the fundamental needs of the educational system is the need to improve teaching practices at the university level in the context of the development and integration of digital technologies in all areas of work in the labor market, which has led to the complexity of competences that graduates of higher education have to prove.

The range of teaching methods used in university education is very varied, from traditional methods, mostly based on information acquisition, to methods focused on the formation of complex competencies. New pedagogues developed in recent years in the academic field promote participatory methods, aimed at empowering and involving students in their own training process and harnessing their creative potential. In spite of the pace of development of digital technologies and their potential for the education act, they are still not yet sufficiently exploited and/or effective. In the context of the emerging trends of an open and flexible academic research space and society's

needs, digital technologies offer intra/inter-university collaboration opportunities and the socio-economic environment still underutilized and exploited by teachers and students in the educational process. Open virtual spaces (collaboration platforms) accessible to those interested in education and academic training, building opportunities for internationalization and creating links between education, research and innovation, favouring the development of projects as a basis for teaching, learning, training and evaluation. Faced with these realities, teachers are continually challenged to update their teaching strategies through forming, training and exchange of good practices.

2. Education during COVID-19 pandemic

Starting from March 2020, the Romanian educational system faced a different challenge. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, schools and universities were closed and all didactic efforts were moved toward the online environment, in an unprecedented effort to ensure the educational continuity (Nedelcu, 2020). Thus, we witness a forced break from the classical organization of the educational activity, from its structures and its routines. At this point, avoiding disruptions in learning, didactic and communication discontinuities is become a priority of all educational systems. Although learning activities are multifaceted, nurtured by different sources and factors, we don't only face an educational continuity, but a pedagogical one as well. Thus, it becomes important to ensure a deliberate organization of didactic efforts to keep a consistent connection between teachers and students, in order to both achieve cognitive objectives as well as to maintain motivation, mind development and communication.

Different initiatives preferred by governments, schools or teachers, in order to efficiently reach quarantined and isolated students include (Nedelcu, 2020):

- Elaboration of support documents, like methodologies, guides, resource packages for moving teaching in the online environment;
- Using specialized platforms for online learning and official websites that centralize the initiatives in this field;
- Supporting students and parents through frequent messages, explanations, questions and answers (the use of e-mail and social networks);
- Instating specific measures meant to achieve equality in education, mostly because the vulnerable groups, during crisis situations, become even more vulnerable (acquiring computers and telecommunication packages by the authorities, for families in difficulty);
- Reorganizing assessment procedures (adjusting, annulling or reprogramming exams);

- Promoting decentralized solutions, based on procedural decisions of local authorities.

In the context of the coronavirus pandemic, of the evidence of person-to-person transmission and of the high infection rate, the Romanian government has adapted a strategy of prevention that included the closure of educational institutions (Rus, Sandu & Tasește, 2020).

3. Objectives

The research aims to identify:

1. What are the most frequently used online solutions;
2. Whether or not the adaptation process to this new type of didactic activity was difficult and what barriers were involved;
3. The advantages and disadvantages of the online environment in educational context;
4. The biggest fears of students regarding the educational activity as they get closer to the end of the school year;
5. The emotional status of students during this isolation period, related to carrying the educational activity in a virtual environment.

4. Sample and instruments

The sample comprised 152 students, from the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, from Ovidius University of Constanta. The students were all female, aged between 18 and 52 years old, from all levels of study. The ethics of the research were ensured by obtaining the consent of all the respondents to participate to this research. The study was conducted online, with the aid of Google forms. The confidentiality of the personal data was also ensured. We used an opinion poll, conceived by the authors. The poll consisted in 8 questions, with specific answers from which the participants may choose one or more answers, considering how well these variants go with what they think and feel.

5. Results

We obtained the following findings and results:

- **The first question** asked the participants their opinion regarding how suitable the movement of the educational act from the face-to-face approach to the virtual approach is, in the context of this isolation period caused by COVID-19 pandemic. 64.47% of the participants think that this is the most suitable procedure, 34.21% of the participants think that the online educational activity is acceptable; and 1.31% of the participants think this online approach is not suitable.

- **The second question** asked the participants to name the most used online platforms to carry out this activity. Results show that 92.10% of participants and their teachers use Cisco Webex Meetings, 41.44% use Zoom Meetings, 1.31% use Moodle, 1.31% use Academis, 42.10% use WhatsApp and E-mail.
- **The third question** asked the participants if the adaptation process to this new approach was problematic or not. 76.97% of students experienced no difficulties in adapting to the online activity, while 22.36% experienced difficulties.
- **The fourth question** was interested of the main barriers the students encountered during this online experience. Results show that 26.97% of respondents faced difficulties and malfunctions of the platforms; 24.34% of respondents had difficulties with their Internet connection; 23.02% of subjects experienced difficulties related to their competences in operating with these online solutions; and 32.23% of participants encountered no difficulties.
- **The fifth question** allowed students to identify the main advantages of the online solutions in the educational process. Results show that 45.39% are satisfied with the access to didactic means, books, courses, information; 23.68% are satisfied with a more flexible schedule that these platforms may provide; 17.10% like the higher level of responsibility and self-discipline that online activity imply; 75.57% of students are happy with the possibility of attending classes no matter where they are; 6.57% acknowledge that the online activity implies a higher attention level from the students; and 9.86% are satisfied with a more active participation from students during classes.
- **The sixth question** regarded the identification of the main disadvantaged of the online solutions in the educational process. Results show that 55.92% of participants are unhappy with the large number of individual homework they have to do; 27.63% have difficulties in time management; 5.92% of participants are unhappy with the control and assessment of the homework by the teacher; 3.94% have difficulties in identifying a personal learning method; 38.15% of students are unhappy with the lack of communication and isolation from their colleagues.
- **The seventh question** regarded the biggest fears of students regarding the ending of the schools year. 74.34% of students fear the freezing of the school year; 30.26% fear the modifications of the school year; 25% fear the final assessment and exams at the end of the semester; and 7.23% fear the monitoring of their performances and the assessment of their results.
- **The eighth question** investigated the emotional status of the students during this isolation period, related to conducting the educational activity in the online environment. 50% of students feel happy and at ease, 37.5% feel fearful and afraid, and 12.5% of participants feel sad.

6. Discussion and conclusions

The study tried to show the overall image of the way of carrying out the didactic activity in the Ovidius University of Constanta and some coordinates of the students' perception about the university's initiatives, in the context of the state of emergency decreed by the Romanian Government.

We identified that a percentage of 64.47% of participants agreed to translate the teaching activity from face-to-face to online. Although the Romanian educational system faces methodological and technical problems related to ensuring the optimal conditions for online activity, the university field has a number of advantages, primarily in terms of beneficiaries and their age, independence and digital skills which they possess, compared with beneficiaries in pre-university education.

Our university has taken steps to acquire access to platforms that can be used in the educational environment, also providing the necessary support for carrying out activities. Consulting groups were organized for teachers who, in turn, supported students in difficulty with tutorials and explanations on the installation and use of software. Also, at the University level, an emergency command was set up, which elaborated a series of documents with regulatory value, valid during the establishment of the state of emergency on the Romanian territory, which outlined the main lines of activity. A code of conduct, online safety measures and support for the educational activity were taken into account and solved.

Thus, the most used online platform was (and still is) Cisco Webex Meetings, which allows for online conferencing. The sharing mode of the lecturer's desktop allowed the students to see in real time the PowerPoint presentations of the courses or various other materials necessary for the activity. In parallel, the students benefited from consulting on common WhatsApp or mail groups, where the teachers of our faculty could post information, announcements or send teaching materials and homework. The cyberspace realm offers much potential for positive educational initiatives (Dunkels, Frånberg & Hällgren 2010; Bishop, 2013).

Although this unforeseen and unprecedented situation, caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, brought a series of logistical problems, 77% of the participants claim that they did not encounter problems adapting to the online activity. The use on online communication applications became more and more frequent in the last decade, allowing young people to use online communication to set up in-person meetings as well as to keep in touch with friends they did not meet often (Bornstein, 2018). The author suggests that adapting to the more multimodal (audio, video and text) nature of the next generation of communication applications is a key factor in the explanations of youth's online activities and development.

Our opinion is that, for Romanian education, this transition caused by the COVID-19 pandemic is a catalyst for online education in higher education, whose general trend at the national level is to introduce online courses to

support certain categories of students, such as young employees, whose physical presence in class is hampered by professional activity or adult students who, in addition to professional activity, face various family problems.

Thus, among the advantages identified by the participants, the most important are the possibility to participate in classes from any location where they are, access to information and the more flexible program that online courses can offer. Literature shows there are several advantages of the virtual classes, and amongst them, there are the ones our study identified. Thus, Johnson (2017) emphasizes the following ideas:

- Increased convenience – virtual courses lack the limitations of location or time that a traditional classroom setting implies.
- Schedule flexibility – the accesibility of an online platform gives students to take breaks at certain times of the work day to take a class.
- Knowledge retention – the effectiveness of the learning experience in short interactive modules, that can be repeated, make learning more manageable.
- Immediate feedback is provided. In a traditional setting, feedback sometimes takes weeks to disperse.
- Increased participation and engagement – social learning, rating features, interactive comments and chat are some of the ways that the virtual courses may allow the contribution of each interacting student.

A significant number of participants in the study suggested that conducting online courses led them to better practice their time management skills, the level of involvement in learning in each discipline was higher and this type of interaction employed them more strongly than face-to-face teaching. Unfortunately, one of the common practices in class is that a small number of students interact in discussions with teachers, depending on how well they have prepared for the activities that take place.

Among the disadvantages identified by this study is the large number of topics in each discipline. The didactic and administrative contexts submitted the teacher to additional efforts in order to prove the accomplishment of the didactic activity, in the form of practical activities performed by the students, duly archived. Thus, the teachers found themselves in the situation of requesting to each student the accomplishment of more complex subjects, of individual study, which were delivered on electronic support. This brought an extra pressure on the student who, having to adapt to the changes in the form of education, faced difficulties in managing time and identifying additional resources to complete the homework received.

All these aspects led to the installation of certain student anxieties. Their biggest fears were the freezing of the academic year, major changes in the structure of the academic year or the finalization of the semester and the exams. Studies show that stress has increasingly become a part of students' academic life, due to different expectations placed upon their shoulders (Reddy, Menon & Thattil, 2018) and its main directions include personal

inadequacy, fear of failure, certain interpersonal difficulties with teachers or inadequate study facilities. These directions are, in part, suggested by our results as well. There is a common opinion, spread by different commentators, that teachers only offer their students video-conferenced lectures supplemented by emailed assessments. This raises the issue of the final assessments, the student grades and evaluations, among other problems. The idea that the result of this virtual activity will be a flawed product at the end of the isolation period is widely discussed in the media. Therefore, students have concerns about the outcomes of this academic year. To this, media added the lack of institutional investment needed to achieve quality online education at scale. Our sincere opinion is that each teacher's expertise, energy and talent may be key ingredients in overcoming such disastrous outcomes. Each teacher can really make a difference for his/hers students. Furthermore, with the support of the Ministry and of the university management, the didactic activity can be completed adequately and the academic year will not suffer.

We believe that, beyond the real problems of facilities and online support, Romania is facing a problem of trust in the education system in general. Such attacks are not necessarily a novelty in our country. However, given the timing of the survey, when nationally and globally the level of anxiety and stress is high, students' answers are justified. We are at a time when the planning of teaching activity is done in small steps, as the authorities announce different approaches and rules in the context of the pandemic. The announcement that schools and universities will not open until the beginning of the next academic year, partially reassured the participants in the educational act, in the sense that in the context of a certainty, each educational institution seeks firm solutions for the optimal completion of teaching activities.

In the context of this adaptation that our University did, advising, proctoring and tutoring services were also provided. Furthermore, specialists from our faculty have also ensured psychological counseling for students with difficulties in emotion and distress management.

For the future, we feel that universities should increase their contingency plans and evaluate their remote teaching strategies. Postmodern feedback should be used; teachers should be enabled to use different online solutions, focus on engagement, compassion and flexibility should prevail. Students should be encouraged to weekly provide feedback about their learning experiences and negative feedbacks should be addressed in order to improve the activity. The available technologies allow universities in general and Ovidius University of Constanta in particular, the chance to offer a quality learning experience for students. We are optimistic that technology can be positively used to impact student learning in the best way.

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