

INTEGRATION OF STUDENTS INTO THE UNIVERSITY MILIEU AFTER THE IMPLEMENTATION OF ONLINE LEARNING DURING THE ANTI-COVID-19 RESTRICTIONS

Narcis-Claudiu RUPE

Scientific Researcher, The European Centre for Ethnic Studies, Romanian Academy (Romania)

E-mail: narcisrrupe@gmail.com

Abstract. *The anti-COVID-19 restrictions and lack of face-to-face learning have increased depression and anxiety among students, alienating them from the university milieu. It can be argued that students suffered from the phenomenon of social anomie during the pandemic restrictions between 2020 and 2022. After the lifting of these restrictions in March 2022, some universities in Romania adopted blended learning, both face-to-face and online. In this context, did the partial return to face-to-face teaching reduce the anomic phenomenon that students faced during the COVID-19 pandemic? To answer this question means to observe whether students integrated into the university milieu during blended learning. Based on a sample of 130 respondents enrolled in undergraduate courses at the Faculty of Sociology and Social Work in Bucharest, it was observed that students, counter to expectations, integrated into the mixed university milieu embraced after March 2022. The inter- and intra-personal processes in J. Weidman's conceptual framework explain this. Integration was possible because students befriended their own peers, peers with whom they had only interacted online during the pandemic restrictions. Also, the satisfaction they felt at going back to the "lost" style during the COVID-19 restrictions made students feel closer to their own faculty.*

Keywords: Student socialisation; blended learning; post-pandemic; COVID-19; online learning.

1. Introduction

In response to the spread of the COVID-19 virus, most of the world's countries have decided to move education on their territory online. 1.6 billion school and university students across the globe changed their way of life due to pandemic restrictions (Feuer, 2020). In Romania, approximately 377 thousand students were feeling the changes after March 2020 (Dumitrache et al., 2021: 4). After almost two years, universities in Romania could return to face-to-face learning (Rosca, 2022).

Students spent two years in a different academic milieu than the "traditional" face-to-face environment that required them to be physically present in lectures and seminars. Lack of physical contact with peers and professors, interaction through e-learning platforms and the effects of government restrictions and the COVID-19 pandemic (anxiety, loneliness and depression) have taken their impact on students' integration into the university environment. Did the anomic effects of that time continue to manifest in their presence and alter student integration after the faculty partially returned to physical education? Partially because in the case of the Faculty of Sociology and Social Work in Bucharest (the source of the study sample) after the anti-COVID-19 restrictions were lifted, courses and seminars were conducted in a mixed format (partly online and partly physical). Aiming to answer this question, this research sought to test the following hypothesis: student integration into the blended university milieu after the lifting of anti-COVID-19 restrictions was decreased.

2. Effects of pandemic restrictions and online learning on students

At the end of the state of alert in Romania in March 2022, several universities in the country have implemented the mixed learning teaching model to give students the opportunity to gradually return to pre-pandemic "normality". Below, some problems caused by pandemic

restrictions and the inability of online learning to fix them are outlined. The effects of the restrictions and online learning continued to be felt by students even after their lifting and the implementation of blended learning, which was partly face-to-face.

The European COvid Survey (ECOS), research conducted in three waves (November 2020, January 2021 and April 2021) in Germany, the United Kingdom, Denmark, the Netherlands, France, Portugal and Italy found that depression and anxiety have increased among adults in Europe compared with the pre-pandemic period (Hajek, André, et al., 2022). In April 2021, 27% of respondents said they were depressed, while 26% said they were anxious. In all three waves and in all countries, people aged 18 to 29 (referred to as "young adults") had the highest rates of depression and anxiety compared to other age groups (Hajek, André, et al., 2022). "Young adults" were also lonely during this period. In a study by Harvard University, it was shown that 43% of American "young adults" reported that feelings of loneliness increased after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic (Graupensperger, Scott et. al., 2022).

Students, a group that is part of what researchers have termed "young adults", felt the above problems. A study of about 746 thousand students in China showed that after the pandemic began, 45% of them were likely to experience acute stress, anxiety and symptoms of depression (Liu, Zhang, et. al., 2022).

Anxiety, depression and loneliness are mental problems caused by physical and social distancing, seen as solutions against the spread of COVID-19. These mental problems are manifestations of anomie, a sociological phenomenon theorised by Emile Durkheim, a founder of sociology, which "... refers to the mutual alienation of individuals and the loss of the authority of hitherto naturally recognised rules". (Baltasiu, 2007: 279). From Emile Durkheim's perspective, pandemic restrictions altered the rules of interaction of individuals, thus reducing the authority of these rules.

Although the university milieu is a normative context that regulates student life and should have addressed the lack of norms during the pandemic, this did not happen. Students had similar rates of loneliness, depression and anxiety as other groups in the young adult age group. In other words, the e-learning approach does not reduce the effects of the social anomie generated by the pandemic among students. Studies conducted before and during the COVID-19 pandemic have shown that *learner interaction in the online environment is not sufficient to integrate the student into the university milieu*.

Studies that have addressed distance learning have found that the biggest problem with this type of teaching is the personal contact between the teacher and student (Coyner and McCann, 2004; Hockridge, 2013; Swaggerty and Broemmel, 2017). Thus, students do not form strong connections with their own teachers, connections that should help the student understand the subject matter being taught (Stodel, Thompson et al., 2006). Interactions mediated by online platforms can decrease the sense of belonging to formal and informal groups in the university milieu and can even lead to feelings of alienation among students. These causes are responsible for the fact that dropout rates are higher if subject teaching occurs through online environments than if it occurs face-to-face (Phirangee, 2016).

A study of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in higher education, involving 17 thousand students from 41 European countries, confirmed the above studies: "A paradox therefore emerges a flexible timetable and living at home may, on the one hand, be less stressful and financially demanding, but, on the other hand, may make it more difficult for students to concentrate on their studies and may also alienate them from their peers" (ESU, 2021: 44). Qualitative studies conducted between 2020 and 2022 confirm the above (Son, Hedge et. al., 2020; Knight, Carlisle, 2021).

3. The socialisation process

We understand socialisation as a process closely related to the two concepts by which we analyse the individual's link with society: sociality and sociability. We call "man's quality of

being a social being and society's property of constituting itself as a form of human inter-existence by a single term, sociality ..." (Ungureanu, 2002: 23), while sociability "expresses the capacity (ability) of a person or group of people to integrate into a society" (Ungureanu, 2002: 23). Sociality takes different forms, depending on how an individual relates to other people. This is a qualitative dimension of society, which generates different degrees of integration of people into society. Therefore, sociability is the quantitative dimension of society: "human societies are constituted and develop on the basis of different types or forms of sociality (cooperative or competitive, egalitarian or unequal, dominant or participatory, etc.), and these types or forms generate or allow different degrees of manifestation of sociability" (Ungureanu, 2002: 23–24). Socialisation is the measure of an individual's sociality, his sociability. Through socialisation, the individual's ability to integrate becomes reality inside a particular group.

In the perspective of these concepts, the degree of integration of the student in the post-pandemic university milieu is an expression of sociability, actualisation of this capacity to be a social being in the university milieu. Sociability gains expression in the university milieu because of the socialisation process.

According to I. Ungureanu, we call socialisation "a process ... by which the individual integrates into a society by adopting its values and norms (habits, rules of life, conduct, ideals, etc.) and manifests his own measure of sociality, his sociability". (Ungureanu, 2002: 62). According to R. Schaefer, socialisation is defined as a "lifelong process by which people learn the attitudes, valucand behaviour appropriate to members of a particular culture" (Schaefer, 2016: 73).

This research intends to discover: what is the degree of socialisation generated by "learning both online and in physical format". In the perspective of the present theories, such learning represents a form of human inter-existence with different features than "traditional" face-to-face learning. To measure the degree of integration of a student is also to see the quality of the university environment in which the student integrates.

When is a student integrated into the university environment? According to symbolic interactionist theorists, integration into a group is completed when the individual defines him/herself as part of the group (Kuper, 2003: 1356). It was then for the socialised individual that the new group became a "generalized other," meaning "the organised community or social group that provides the individual a unity of self ..." (Mead, 1932: 154 apud Baltasiu, 2007: 84).

Specifically, the individual acquires a new social position - social status, and from this, the group expects the fulfilment of the roles associated with the position they have acquired, namely "the set of expectations assigned to a person who occupies a social position or social status" (Schaefer, 2016: 97). More precisely, in the university environment, we say that a student has integrated when " ... they accept the faculty's expectations regarding [their] academic performance as legitimate and behave accordingly" (Weidman, 1989: 310). Thus, a strong indicator of a student's integration into the university environment is the fulfilment of the roles attributed to his or her social position that he or she acquired when entering the university environment.

A research instrument that measures a student's degree of integration according to the fulfilment of the social roles assigned to them was designed by M. Farnese, P. Spagnoli and S. Livi (2022). In this research, the student's degree integration was measured based on the instrument created by the three Italian researchers.

4. University socialising

One of the most widely used conceptual models used in research addressing the issue of student socialization is that constructed by J. Weidman (1989). The American sociologist has the credit of unifying in one model the concepts, variables and student socialisation studies carried out on American campuses, especially in the late 20th century.

How does socialisation occur in a university environment? To answer this question, J. Weidman elaborates a model similar to the 'inputs-environment-outputs' model found in

computer science. From the American author's viewpoint, the student enrolls in a university with a set of personal characteristics specific to his or her personal history, complies with the social norms within this environment, and eventually changes his or her personal goals because of the pressures during the years of schooling.

„Undergraduate socialisation can be conceived of as a series of processes whereby the student:

- 1) enters college freshman with certain values, aspirations, and other personal goals;
- 2) is exposed to various socializing influences while attending college, including normative pressures exerted via (a) social relationships with college faculty and peers, (b) parental pressures, and (c) involvement with noncollege reference groups;
- 3) assesses the salience of the various normative pressures encountered for attaining personal goals; and
- 4) changes or maintains those values, aspirations, and personal goals that were held at college entrance”. (Weidman, 1989: 301)

Weidman argues that by the end of the undergraduate cycle, students' values, aspirations and personal goals will change because of the socialisation process. These signs of successful socialisation are no different from the ones observed by symbolic interaction theorists and authors such as Richard T. Schaefer, Adam Kuper and Ion Ungureanu. Both values, aspirations and personal goals are expressions of the individual's identity, an identity that is formed through socialisation: 'Through socialisation, personal identity is formed, and this in turn reacts to the socialisation environment, particularly through the behavioural variations it determines'. (Ungureanu, 2002: 62-63)

J. Weidman's model succeeds in decomposing the entire socialisation process in the university milieu into parts that can then be operationalised. For this research, the American author is relevant as he shows which factors increase or decrease the degree of student integration during mixed learning, implemented after the lifting of the pandemic restrictions.

The socialisation of the student is carried out by complying with the norms of the university milieu. Compliance is reached through the young person's interaction with agents of socialisation within the university milieu (teachers, colleagues) and outside the university milieu (parents, friends, voluntary organisations, or work colleagues). Interaction with agents of socialisation occurs at the interpersonal level (frequency of communication and attachment to others) and "intra-personal" level (favourable attitude towards the social norms of the university milieu). Inter- and intra-personal interactions shape the student's acceptance or non-acceptance of university norms, in other words, integration according to the model discovered by J. Weidman.

Of these factors, the most important are interpersonal relationships. J. Weidman believes that the norms of the academic milieu will be internalised by the student, especially after he or she has built primary (attachment) relationships within the university (Weidman, 1989, p. 308). And these relationships are built if the student has interacted frequently with others in the academic environment. J. Weidman also points out that subjective appreciation, i.e. the student's satisfaction with the university environment, increases or decreases his or her degree of integration into that environment.

5. Methodological considerations

The research was conducted in June 2022 on a sample of approximately 130 students enrolled in the courses (sociology, anthropology and human resources) of the Faculty of Sociology and Social Work in Bucharest. The sample sought to include students who either started their academic journey in physical format, but also online during the pandemic restrictions between 2020 and 2022. For reasons of data collection efficiency, 93% of the sample was composed of sociology students.

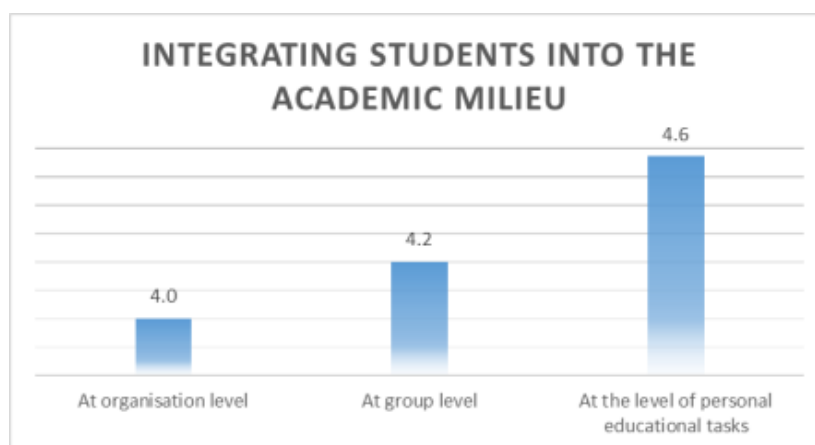
In terms of demographics, most respondents were female (84%) under the age of 22. Most of the responses were received from students enrolled in their first and second years of study.

6. The student's degree of socialization into the university milieu

The degree of student integration was measured using the student socialisation scale designed by Farnese, Spagnoli, Livi (2022). The concrete expression of a student's socialization is the knowledge of the roles he or she fulfils within the university environment, the fulfilment of which determines how high his or her sense of belonging to formal and informal groups within the university environment will be.

The student socialisation scale was translated into Romanian and adapted to the level of the language used by the students in the sample. The successful adaptation of the scale by the Italian researchers in this research was verified by a factor analysis. According to the analysis, the items of the scale, translated into Romanian, actually measure the student's socialisation. The value of the KMO test ("Kariser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling adequacy") had values at each level higher than 0.70: at the organization level - 0.85, at the group level - 0.83, and at the level of educational tasks - 0.87. The factor analysis also confirms the validity of the scale, which was also proved in the article by the three Italian researchers. On the basis of these items, three new socialisation variables were created, which showed the following:

Table 1: Integrating students into the academic milieu



Source: Author's table

The above results disprove the hypothesis of this study. Despite expectations, the students were integrated into the blended university milieu after the lifting of the anti-COVID-19 restrictions.

Students are aware of their educational tasks at the college. Why was the median for this variable higher than that for the organisation and groups? There are two explanations. Either the lecturers' requirements in courses and seminars held in mixed teaching mode were not very different from those held online, so students would have already been used to what they had to fulfil after their partial return to physical education. Another explanation would be related to data collection. Students completed the questionnaire shortly before the summer session started, at which point they knew what exams and papers they had to prepare.

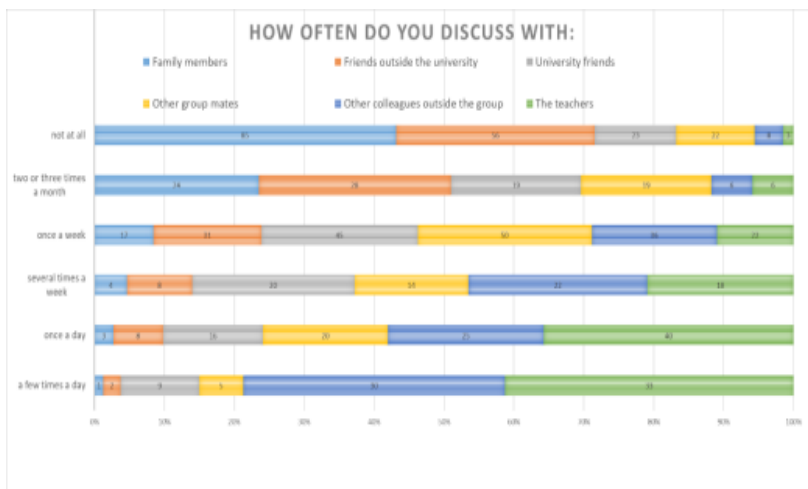
7. Explanation I: Interpersonal process

How do you explain the students' socialization within the faculty as an organization and within groups within the university milieu? Interpersonal relationships (frequency of

interactions and attachment to other classmates) are the processes in J. Weidman's model by which we can explain the above question.

In the table below, we find that students interacted most per day not with their own colleagues or friends from the university, but with teachers. Through daily discussions with teachers, students learned the values and standards of the faculty and became part of the institution.

Table 2: Frequency of interaction in the university milieu



Source: Author's table

In terms of integration into the college community, it was not the quantity but the quality of interaction that made the students feel closer to their colleagues. Not the quantity because during the pandemic students had a discussion a few times a week with other colleagues (ESU, 2021: 22), while after the lifting of the restrictions, Romanian students had from the sample discussed by other colleagues once a week. But, these discussions, occurred between peers who, after the partial return to physical education, became friends.

Table 3: Number of new friends that students have made among colleagues after the lifting of COVID-19 restrictions

| How many good friends have you made since you started university among your classmates? | N | % |
|---|-----|-------|
| 0 | 7 | 5,2 |
| 1-2 | 58 | 43,3 |
| 3-4 | 42 | 31,3 |
| peste 5 | 27 | 20,1 |
| Total | 134 | 100,0 |

Source: Author's table

8. Explanation II: Intrapersonal processes

The subjective appreciation of the academic environment is in J. Weidman's (1989) model, a factor that increases or decreases the student's inclusion in the university environment. It is not so much the quality of the academic environment that matters in itself, but the positive or negative perception the student has of this environment. A student checks the extent to which his or her own goals can be achieved in the university environment and draws conclusions whether this environment is conducive to his or her own aspirations. If he perceives it as useful, the young person, according to J. Weidman's model, will be satisfied or dissatisfied with the university environment he belongs to.

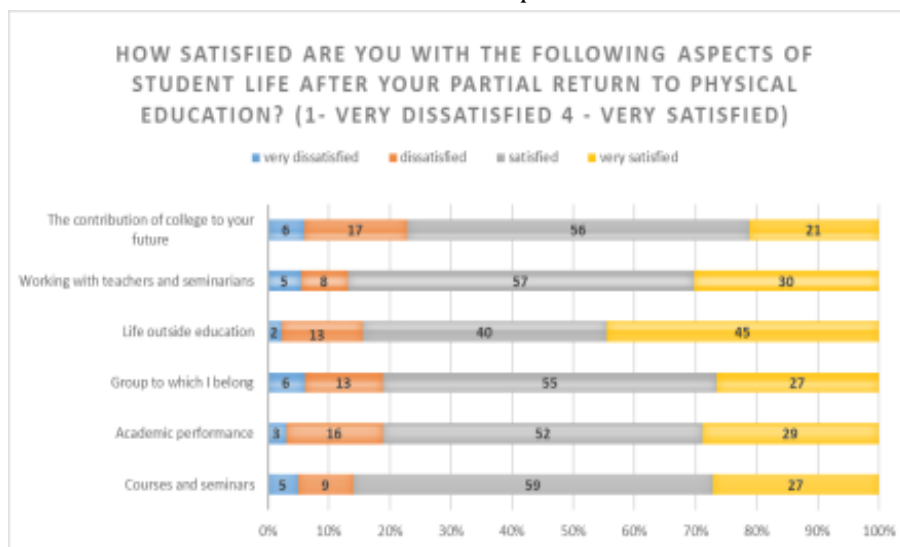
Online learning provides resources that differ from face-to-face learning and is useful for achieving the goals set by students. Therefore, students will also value online, face-to-face and mixed forms of learning differently.

During the pandemic, students evaluated online learning forms according to the form of education, field and level of study. Students were most dissatisfied with the move of seminars and practical classes to online format (ESU, 2021, p. 34). The degree of dissatisfaction was even higher for students enrolled in fields of study such as agriculture, general and veterinary medicine, where practical placements are worth much more to them than for those studying one of the humanities (ESU, 2021, p. 34).

For students enrolled in humanities subjects, such as those in the study sample, blended learning (partly online) was not as high a reason for dissatisfaction as for those enrolled in agriculture, general and veterinary medicine.

The data gathered from the survey confirm the above expectations: *students enrolled in the undergraduate courses of the Faculty of Sociology in Bucharest were satisfied overall mixed education* (for all items in the questionnaire related to this aspect, the median of the answers on a four-point Likert scale was "thank you"). Students were particularly positive about the following: their cooperation with professors, the courses and seminars held in the mixed format, their extra-curricular activities, the group they belong to, their academic performance and the faculty's role in their future.

Table 4: Satisfaction with aspects of student life



Source: Author's table

Of the aspects of student life mentioned above, the greatest satisfaction (45% said they were "very satisfied") was with life outside academic activity. After two years of long-distance interaction with their own peers, not living on university campuses, and being deprived of spending time away from home due to restrictions, they have "made up for what they missed" during their time in co-education. Unsurprisingly, students were most satisfied with informal activities outside study and classes.

For students, the partial return to traditional teaching was a reason for great satisfaction (cumulatively, 87% answered "satisfied" or "very satisfied") because after two years of waiting, they could collaborate unmediated by technology with teachers in the faculty. However, this collaboration "did unfix" the problems of online learning. As we can see in the graph above, the lowest satisfaction was recorded in terms of the contribution of the faculty to the student's future (77% "satisfied" and "very satisfied" responses), a sign that the online educational act makes it difficult to adopt a future professional status.

Students are satisfied with the faculty's contribution to their future, their relationship with the faculty and their academic performance has more integrated more into the faculty, as has the organisation, more than other students. For them, the partial return to a physical format brought them closer to the values promoted by the college and helped them get to know how the college works after two years of not crossing its threshold.

It can be stated on the basis of the correlation table below that through the unmediated contact of technology with teachers the students' "sense of us" increased. Even the partial return to physical learning is enough to solve a problem often reported by researchers concerning distance learning: the emergence of alienation. Thus, teachers are a source of role models in mixed learning, helping integrate students into the university and helping them acquire a future professional status.

Table 5: Correlations between student integration in the academic milieu and aspects of student life

| | | Integration into the organisation | Integration at group level | Integration at individual task level |
|--|---------------------|-----------------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| The contribution of the university to the student's future | Pearson Correlation | .364** | .304** | .455** |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .000 | .001 | .000 |
| Life outside education | Pearson Correlation | .174* | .198* | .252** |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .049 | .025 | .004 |
| Group to which I belong | Pearson Correlation | .091 | .296** | .236** |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .299 | .001 | .007 |
| Academic performance | Pearson Correlation | .263** | .273** | .456** |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .002 | .002 | .000 |
| Working with teachers and seminarists | Pearson Correlation | .310** | .218* | .461** |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .000 | .013 | .000 |
| Courses and seminars | Pearson Correlation | .201* | .158 | .356** |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .020 | .069 | .000 |

Source: Author's table

The students felt that they were part of the groups in the college although they interacted with their peers more on academic, formal and difficult topics. Such interactions occurred after two years of students not being able to have extracurricular activities together

with their peers due to restrictions. So this minimal interaction was enough, after two years apart, to bring them closer together.

9. Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced universities globally to implement online learning. After the restrictions were lifted, at some universities courses and seminars were taught in a mixed mode (online and face-to-face) so that the transition to the 'normal' pre-pandemic university environment could be made smoothly. This research observed the extent to which mixed learning contributed to this transition from the perspective of student integration into post-pandemic life.

The interaction mediated by online platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic did not make it possible for students to build their own friendships, a process that would have increased their socialisation. The return, at least partially, to face-to-face learning has remedied this problem. As a result, against expectations, students became integrated into the face-to-face and online university milieu introduced after the restrictions were lifted. It remains to be seen in future studies how the socialisation process has changed in universities that have switched from co-education to fully physical education.

Student satisfaction with the university milieu is, in J. Weidman's model, along with the making of primary relationships or friendships, an important factor in the student's integration into the university environment. Student satisfaction has increased because of being able to return to the extracurricular activities they were deprived of during the two years of the pandemic. The satisfaction, in particular, with these changes has thus amplified their integration into the post-pandemic blended university milieu and in the future into the full face-to-face one.

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