FEAR AND UNFAIRNESS IMPACT ON THE LEARNING CAPACITY: OLD AND NEW CHALLENGES TO ASSESSMENT AND LEARNING

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Abstract: *Our society streams towards developing, adapting and coping with the increasingly intense waves of crises in a globalized world. For that, we need an education system that provides sustainable assessment methods and guarantees students' knowledge. Intending to understand the problems of the current education system, their origin and potential solutions, we initiated a mixed theoretical study on the assessment and learning processes in higher education. Then, to test the theoretical assumptions, the article takes the Romanian case study and analyses how feedback availability and the assessment environment impact the psychological state of Ph.D. students, their motivation to learn and the ease with which they complied with the Ph.D. requirements, and how socialization and group activities contributed to stimulating the students' capacity of development and integration into the labour market. The results show that assessment environments that put accent on feedback and eliminate competition allow learning to happen. And also, that the absence of feedback, be it from colleagues or teachers, represents a crucial factor in understanding tasks, getting over blockages and better preparing for summative assessments.*

Keywords: fear; unfairness; higher education; learning; assessment

1. Introduction

Since the 1990's we wonder what it would be like for education to embrace more the technological dimension as a tool and as a learning environment. Thirty years later, during the COVID-19 pandemic, we came to embrace technology as the only solution that made education possible during a health crisis. In this way we came to see practically what it means to change and transform education.

Technology introduced to us new learning and assessment tools while raising one of the greatest fears - the fear of not being able to provide future citizens and workers of a good quality when having great tools that allow cheating. Hence, a set of questions arise:

(1)   To what extent the online education allowed more cheating and what values does it ground in our future citizens?

(2)   How much does online education actually differ from in-person education and how much can it replace in-person education?

To answer these questions, we focus first on understanding the main tool of education – assessment, and its role in the learning process. For this we follow a mixed theoretical approach that leads us towards discovering the biological processes lying at the basis of thought so we can understand how learning happens and how assessment is perceived. Consequently, we focus on the role of socialization in assimilating information, building meaning and perceiving reality, and the impact of the learning environment on the learning capacity.

To verify the validity of our findings we used the Romanian case study, in which we analysed the way the Romanian former Ph.D. students in political science perceived the higher education system, its strengths and gaps.

2. A mixed theoretical approach to assessment

Assessment is quite an old process, which is part of our natural behaviour and serves as a mechanism to establish interpersonal relationships, group hierarchies, possession relations, etc. It involves the analysis, and most important, the comparison of someone's knowledge and skills with a frame of reference - be it a written text, a tradition, or a person. As Sadler said, assessment is "a multidimensional process of judging the individual in action" (Heywood, 2000: 32).

In education, the concept of assessment appeared relatively late and used to refer to the children's ability to cope with knowledge tests. But currently, education defines assessment as a process of judging episteme, techne and praxis; meaning that assessment is a process of evaluating one's knowledge on a subject, the methods one uses to apply that knowledge in a practical way, and the skill with which one manages to use both the knowledge and the tools to achieve good results and be as efficient as possible. Thus, assessment is about evaluating two aspects, the cognition and the behaviour.

The natural law theory argues that humans are rational by nature and that human action is also rational. With all this, we cannot overlook the impact of natural (instinctual) sent on the way we think and behave, and the impact of socialization on building meaning and internalizing knowledge. Thus, to penetrate the meanings of assessment and learning it may not be enough to embrace only one theoretical approach, we may need a mixed perspective on the subject where the used theories will complete each other and will help explaining different factors and actions in the learning environment.

2.1 Assessment and learning through the lenses of natural theory

The first theory we embrace is the natural theory. Its view derived from the natural sciences, and focused on the cognitive processes and mechanisms involved in projecting the human behavior and influencing the human knowledge.

The pioneers of natural theory recognize the implications of the natural laws and phenomena on the human behavior and learning. They argue that the human way of processing information and projecting a behavior are not separate processes but dependent. In agreement with this, we differentiate two types of information processing: the automatic and the controlled one. The first describes a fast process in which the humans project a response without passing it through the rational filter. The second is about projecting an answer that passed through the filter of thought where it matched a set of reasons that helped choosing the exact response (Schneider and Chein, 2003). The controlled information processing is responsible for learning and rewriting information. Yet, we must not undermine the power of automatic information processing.

The automatic information processing has a great influence on our behavior because it projects immediate responses. For example, in situations where people notice an unfair treatment towards someone or themselves, their response will be influenced by the automatic processing of information since we recognize fairness and its lack at the level of intuitive information processing (Cappelen et al., 2016). Thus, our response in these situations is fast given that it follows subconscious routes. And only after, the conscious and rationale response will come to complete and maybe correct our automatic actions.

In general, the automatic control of information is related to the automatic responses we project when receiving impulses that trigger in our brain a state of alarm. This state makes the information to be processed urgently to find in the known the easiest ways to respond. The way we act in these situations depends on the human way of organizing needs. Maslow said that human needs are: physiological, security, love and belonging, esteem and self-actualization needs (Maslow, 1954). He classified them in a pyramid where the physiological needs are at the bottom and the self-actualization needs are at the top. Now, the impulses we receive the closer

they are to the basic needs, the faster and the more automatic we act to the impulses we receive. The farther we move from the basics, the closer we get to conscious thinking that requires time and lucidity, which can only be achieved if we are calm. Thus, automatic information processing has a major impact on learning and especially on the perception of assessment and feedback.

Thus, we focus further on understanding two aspects with a major impact on the learning process, namely the perception of fear and fairness in the human psyche.

Perception of fear inducing factors and learning

Higher education institutions were founded to disseminate knowledge, train specialists, and guarantee through assessment the acquired skills. Hence the two roles of teachers: to teach and assess. But, for education to reach its purpose and for assessment to take place, learning must take place at first. Therefore, the main role of teachers is to sustain learning, to guide students throughout learning, to provide feedback for improvement and advice to help information processing and storing.

The things get complicated when we talk about the teacher as the assessor. The evaluation process, unlike the learning one, is a bit more complicated because it can generate impulses that can induce a state of alarm and make us anxious and afraid of the evaluation process itself.

From ancient times learning and the learning outcomes were always associated with the human ability to build a future. Similarly, assessment from the education institutions is meant to evaluate and guarantee competencies. This aspect made us see the education institutions as evaluative authorities rather than as producers of knowledge.

Teachers have a key role in the educational process, namely to assess students' skills and knowledge. However, this role is accompanied by an obligation, which proceeds the previous, namely, guaranteeing the assimilation of knowledge in the learning process and respectively the improvement of knowledge along the way. This obligation gives teachers a second role, namely that of the competent authority to give feedback and advice, to encourage learning. With these in mind we find one of the key issues of the assessment and learning system in higher education, namely the attachment of feedback to assessment.

Because assessment, as most definitions point out, is about comparison with other students and evaluation of the one's capacity to build a future, assessment does not remain at the level of a cognitive process, it comes to interact with aspects of our basic needs some with immediate priority such as: integration, status, friendship, sense of connection, sense of belonging, respect, gratitude, and others; and respectively future needs related to: the capacity to ensure the needs of safety, love and belonging, esteem and self-actualization. Because of this, at the subconscious level people perceive the assessment as a test of their learning skills and as a stressful situation, which keeps them in a state of alarm.

As Boud and Falchinkov (2007) sustain, besides motivating and encouraging, assessment has the power of embarrassing and humiliating the individuals or simply upsetting them. But these, do not allow the learning to happen. Our brain is built in such a way that it prioritizes to keep us alive in the first place, and only then in allows to any other processes of creative thought or any kind of word-based learning to happen. Thus, for us to learn we must not have any impulses that would awake our senses of survival, we must not be in an alarmed state. "A frightened person does not focus on words" but focuses on the impulses that trigger the state of alarm. The more we are in this alarmed state, the less we can learn. "In essence, fear destroys the capacity to learn" (Perry, 2006: 23). Hence one of the central problems of the education system. Because assessment has always been perceived as a process that raises anxiety (Struyven et al., 2005) and one that poses existential questions, any feedback provided by the teacher in the context of assessment will not be assimilated. The education system used to attach assessment feedback to show the student both the mistake and the development

opportunities. Despite this, feedback remains inferior to assessment because assessment affects us at the existential level while feedback is about development and improvement, about thinking, imagining, comparing and associating information to plan future actions which is processed in the prefrontal cortex.

With these in mind, from a natural perspective, as long as the feedback is delivered in the context of summative evaluation it will not be processed and will not provide results.

Fairness and learning

A factor that frequently influences our capacity and motivation to learn is fairness. When we learn, we put effort to understand, memorize and apply the information we receive, and in return we expect a positive response to our actions, like a good grade, respect, appreciation, etc. All these things are perceived at the intuitive level in our brains and are crucial in projecting a conscious behaviour and in motivating future learning. But, if during the learning process we notice an unfair treatment, we automatically associate learning and assessment with the bad things we saw and felt (unfairness, subjectivity, and inappropriateness). This has a major impact on learning and assessment, because our judgments shape our future behaviour and affect the way we learn, the efforts we put in developing ourselves, and the motivation we have for further learning and improvement.

Besides fairness there is the subjectivity factor. People, in general are subjective and their opinions about everything, including the assessment, depend on their life experience. So, no matter the teacher's intention, he's way of assessing people will be bias more or less. By consequence, assessment can be seen as a natural process of collecting and comparing information about the people around us.

Now, because learning is in direct relation with the controlled information processing (Fisk and Schneider, 1984; Schneider and Chein, 2003), an effective assessment that encourages learning, should exclude as much as possible the impulses that generate automatic information processing. When we are in a calm state of mind the learning process flourishes because the information can be processed and assimilated in a personal way. While the fight or flight states will prevent learning and objective assessment from happening.

Considering the above, we highlight two major problems of our assessment and learning systems: the first is about the incapacity of the brain to separate two types of information while being in a stressful environment. Here we refer to the two roles of the teacher, that of a trainer and that of an evaluator.

This problem raises in the moment the teacher provides feedback on the assessment results. The reason teachers do so is because the best way to learn is by pointing the problems right when the learner made them. Thus, teachers find it useful to combine the trainer and the assessor roles. But because these roles are perceived by different parts of the brain, once the assessor role triggers a state of alarm, all the work the teacher does as a trainer, is lost, because learning in a state of alarm cannot be done. Thus, we must look for a practical solution that will help students to differentiate between the two roles of the teacher so that they could learn better.

The other problem is about human subjectivity and fairness interpretation. Just as teachers can be biased in the assessment process, so students can be subjective in interpreting assessment results. So, in order to solve this problem, we must find practical solutions that can separate the evaluation from the person, but most important, to separate the assessment results from the comparison with the others, at least within the summative evaluations. In this way we can avoid students' fear of being judged, criticized, misunderstood, and we can present feedback resulting from evaluation much easily.

2.2 Assessment and learning through the constructivist lenses

The second theoretical approach we embrace in this study is the constructivist theory. Constructivism approaches learning through the prism of the individual, i.e. by analysing the impact of individual life experience on the process of perception and internalization of knowledge (Koohang et al., 2009). Yet, when discussing the learning, as it rarely occurs in individual circumstances, we cannot exclude social constructionist ideas on social groups and language impact on negotiating meanings and internalizing knowledge.

Basically, as Berger and Luckmann (1966) argued, social constructs such as knowledge are the result of socialization that gives the possibility of negotiating and giving meanings. In the same vein, "assessment and learning are social practices that involve the active construction of meaning" (Higgins et al., 2002: 54) in which language plays a key role in communicating, penetrating meanings and learning.

Thus, assessment is a social process in which learning standards are established through socialization, and applied in an evaluation process to measure the student's capacity of learning. But also, assessment is of an individual nature, in which the student shows his ability to learn by applying the knowledge and methods he thought and internalized along with other personal experience. Starting from this approach we can analyse the way in which assessment and feedback are perceived among the students considering that these are social practices with implications of group and individual work.

3. Assessment value, purpose and challenges

The role of assessment goes from guaranteeing personal development to training future specialists. It stimulates serious commitment to learning, an increased level of general culture and intelligence, and grounds the trend of social development.

In the past, assessment was a method to encourage learning. Today, it is "the principle guarantor of quality assurance in education" (Heywood, 2000: 32); it prepares the learners for employment, it measures the quality of learning, accustoms students to the task-evaluation process applied in work, and trains the students for solving life problems and managing personal behaviour. Thus, assessment is a crucial process in education, capable of stimulating and inhibiting learning, of generating ethical and moral principles or replacing them.

The main role of assessment is to build from a professional and psychological point of view conscious and responsible adults who will constitute a stable, safe and sustainable society. It tells "the students what they can and cannot do, to help them build confidence" or temper their behaviour (Boud and Falchinkov, 2007: 3), and for this reason assessment is a key factor in influencing people's future, highlighting behavioural frames and lightening thinking ways.

From a technical perspective assessment is all about learning and improving the learning skills (Gipps, 1994, in Higgins et al., 2002); it helps people to make connections and interpret information (Sadler, 1998), to associate it with something specific, and use it when necessary. Thus, in education assessment ensures the assimilation and synthesis of information, the formation of critical skills, analysis, interpretation and expression (Heywood, 2000). Yet, all of this is possible because of the formative assessment, which lays the foundations of high thinking skills, while the summative assessment is focused on encouraging competition and motivating learning through evaluation.

The transition of learning and assessment in online during the COVID-19 pandemics raised the issue of fairness, assessment anxiety, inappropriate standards, difficulty of communicating for peer assessment, the lack of traditional methods for teaching and assessment, etc. Some of these problems were present before embracing the online learning, but they enhanced once the technology became a part of our daily reality and the only means that made education possible during a health crisis.

3.1 Assessment challenges in the technology era

The purpose of assessment is to establish a problem-solving model in the students' mind. Regardless of problems' nature, we must learn to find effective methods of intervention (Greene, 1986, in Greene, 2017). Basically, when being assessed we do not learn only the art of being assessed but also the art of assessing. As Perlman (1957) argued, assessment is a process of gathering information based on which the nature of problems are established and paths of action are built (Greene, 2017).

When technology was introduced as an education tool, it transformed assessment and learning into individual processes. That is, in online everything is focused on the individual and on using personal experience for a better internalization of knowledge. With all this, we cannot rule out the importance of socialization for a better understanding, for debating realities, building ideas and perceiving the daily reality. This is where technology raised the issues of connecting individuals with reality, lack of confidence, evaluation anxiety, etc. Although at the individual level online education brought a set of benefits, it also highlighted a set of problems such as: the difficulty to verify the correctness of information, to establish interpersonal relationships, read behaviours and perceive reactions.

This comes from the fact that in online, education, learning, and assessment are often focused on the individual, lacking nonverbal language and other factors. Consequently, we stay focused only on achieving purposes and lack the emotional and human sides. This is one of the reasons why online learning and assessment raised the concern of plagiarism or cheating for completing the tasks by paying specialized business for such services (Walker and Townley, 2012; Ellis et al., 2018; Amigud and Lancaster, 2019). From here raise a set of worries about education and its challenges (see table 1).

Table 1: Challenges and benefits for learning brought by online education

	Factors' nature			
	Individual	**Social**	**Natural**	**Ethical**
Challenges	• Distrust of knowledge correctness; • Fear of expressing ideas that were not previously debated; • Reliability (completing a different task when not understanding and discussing the task); • Difficulty in applying an idea, method, or knowledge when lacking the real-life learning and assessment methods.	• Lack of social skills; • Social anxiety (the absence of social contact and the habit of living and working alone); • Lack of empathy (the incapacity to see real life persons and to interact with people may deprive students of valuable social experience); • Lack of immediate peer review; • Incapacity to rely on group work; • Absence of group responsibility and group working skills.	• Lack of natural competition; • The incapacity to learn or copy behaviors; • Difficulty to judge a situation in a complex way when lacking non-verbal language; • Reluctance to new environments; • Lack of communication and friends outside classes to debate knowledge, etc. • Difficulty to root loyalty and collegiality.	• Abstract behavior towards people; • Absence of privacy limits in an environment free of rules; • New cheating techniques; • The incapacity to guarantee a correct assessment of competencies; • The difficulty to recognize fairness and the risk of losing the learning motivation.

Benefits	• Developing personal methods of understanding and learning; • Encouraging continuous learning; • Focusing on personal results.	• Multidimensional development to cope with different tasks; • Embracing new methods of communication that involve development.	• Individual development without limits; • Encouraging personal learning approaches.	• Experiencing the lack of privacy limits and self-correcting; • Lack of factors that trigger unfairness in the real-life assessment.

Source: Author's table

Starting from the challenges we highlighted above two questions arise: how can our assessment guarantee the quality of education? And what principles and values of life does it root in the thinking of future citizens?

4. Traditional vs. authentic assessment

Assessment, as Sadler (1998) said "is specifically intended to provide feedback on performance to improve and accelerate learning" (77). But to what extent assessment in higher education conformed to this goal over time?

Traditional assessment seemed to be convenient for both teachers and mediocre students (Birenbaum and McRury, 1998), but as the students themselves argue, the traditional assessment methods "had a severely detrimental effect on the learning process, especially when they had little to do with the challenging task of making sense and understanding the subject" (Sambell, 1997, in Struyven et al., 2005). A simple demonstration of the fact that complex assessment, that focuses more on analysis, comparison, critique, penetration, and perception, encourages learning more than testing the final knowledge is Zeidner's (1987) and Traub and MacRury (1990) experiments. Zeidner showed that students who were told to prepare for an essay assessment easily passed a multiple-choice test. On the other side Traub and MacRury showed that those who prepared for a multiple-choice test had a hard time writing an essay assessment. This shows that assessment methods that encourage memorizing do not help to internalize knowledge in an effective and long-lasting way, while the methods that focus on developing learning competences help building effective ways of thinking, associating, and absorbing knowledge.

Also, the traditional way of assessing and teaching is often based on the teacher - learner kind of interaction where the relationship always places the teacher above the student. This attitude gives the student a lack of trust in his knowledge, may cause anxiety and make him deviate from the natural learning course. It is that, traditional type of learning and assessment encourage thinking inside the box and conforming to the group performance; it prevents individual development and exceeding the assessment standards (Sadler, 1998). In other words, the traditional education focuses on verifying the final knowledge and not the competencies of thinking and solving a problem in real life. Consequently, this learning type does not train adults for crises and change, but for work routines.

On the other side we have the authentic approach to learning and assessment, which focuses on the learner and comes with different assessment methods to encourage learning. This approach emphasizes the need for different types of teacher-student interaction to ensure that learning takes place at different levels (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Types of interaction in the authentic assessment and learning outcomes

Interaction based on

EQUALITY	HIERARCHY
Learner < - > Learner	**Learner - > Learner**
This type of interaction encourages the negotiation of meanings, discussion of perspectives, sharing knowledge and projecting ideas from personal experience.	This interaction encourages the transfer of knowledge, building knowledge-based hierarchies, boosting confidence and establishing trust relationships.
Learner < - > Teacher	**Teacher - > Learner**
Interactions based on equality between teacher and leaner encourage discussing opportunities, better understanding and developing autonomy and confidence by helping the learner to reach by himself a conclusion instead of imposing one.	This type of interaction helps grounding the normality of work hierarchy, responsibility, and discipline. It also highlights the necessity of having boundaries for efficiency and privacy.

Source: Author's figure

In traditional assessment and learning it was quite common to practice the teacher-learner type of interaction; it established a hierarchy and made teaching easy. But, if adopting only this type of interaction the students will lack communication, negotiation, debate and other activities necessary to learn and develop a wider range of skills. Of course, such a relationship is necessary for the learning and assessment processes to happen according to ethical and moral norms. However, the adoption of only this type of interaction deprives the students of the possibility to form other types of knowledge and competencies. Thus, for assessment to be sustainable and education to be effective, we need other types of interaction to allow formative assessment.

The teacher must assist the student in the learning process, and contribute to his learning by giving feedback, by identifying the students' weaknesses and strengths, and by proposing methods and ways to develop. Thus, the type of interaction and the teaching environment establish the teaching, learning and assessment methods that can encourage at the individual level the biological capacity to concentrate on learning, and at the social level the ability to negotiate, debate, construct meanings and internalize information about reality. To find ways for better learning and long-term assessment, we focus on the case of Romania, where we analyse the subject of fairness and evaluation standards among Ph.D. students, the presence of feedback, the environment in which feedback is offered, the degree of socialization, the evaluation methods and their efficiency in motivating learning and development.

5. The Romanian case study

Like every country, Romania adapted over the years to the challenges posed to assessment by technology, but also to the challenges posed by the simple development of society as a whole and the increasing need to raise the evaluation standards in the higher education once the general level of culture rose. This adaptation led to the implementation of new assessment tools such as anti-plagiarism software, the establishment of minimum requirements for doctoral dissertation, and requirements to ensure the accumulation of research skills, like the ordination no.5110/2018 on introducing the minimum standards for a PhD title in political science. With all this, new challenges to assessment and learning continued to arise.

To see the assessment impact over the doctoral students' capacity to learn and develop we chose to address an interview to 12 former Ph.D. students that we separate in two groups: the ones that went through an older evaluation system (7), and those that finished their studies after 2018 (5). The first aspect we focus on is the admission experience.

5.1 The admission experience

The admission experience has the purpose of sorting the students based on their competencies and capabilities. Thus. By nature this activity will trigger our alarm systems regarding our place in the group. So, we asked our interviewees to describe their experience from the admission colloquium. The answers show that at the admission colloquium the admission committee approached individually the students and not as a group. Consequently, the students gave more importance to the preparation for the admission colloquium instead of the event itself. Most of our respondents argued that a bigger challenge and quite an impulse for learning was the need to choose a research topic and the work for preparing the research proposal but not the colloquium.

Meanwhile, most of those who completed their doctoral studies by 2018 saw the admission colloquium as a strong impetus for individual learning and training and as an objective evaluation of their knowledge. Some of them saw the preparation for the admission colloquium as an opportunity to self-assess knowledge and skills, and as an opportunity to connect with other teachers.

Thus, some respondents saw the initial assessment as an impetus to mobilize for thinking, informing, and preparing the ground for initiating a learning process at another level, while others had a niche perspective and perceived the evaluation as a sorting process or as a formality. With all this, the majority of the students appreciated the individual work and excluded any implications of the admission assessment as a moment for receiving feedback.

Guidance commission

Most of those who finished their studies after 2018, identified the admission and the evaluation committee with a guidance commission. It was perceived this way because of its periodic evaluations throughout the Ph.D. studies. The interviewees sustained that the commission helped them a lot or

"Partially during the periodically presented reports where recommendations and discussions were made on the researched subject, weaknesses were identified, and the improvements were checked at the next report".

Also, the students found the commission's role to be about putting them on the right research path and encouraging them to improve their work. Yet, the students who defended their doctoral thesis prior to the implementation of the periodic evaluation method by reporting did not have the opportunity of being guided by a commission. An interviewee sustained that

"There was no such commission in general during my studies. But the fact that I worked with several teachers at the same time made me feel like I benefited in a way from such a commission".

Thus, during doctoral studies most of the work is individual, still our interviewees sustain and show that receiving feedback was important. Yet it also mattered the environment in which it was presented. Given that it was presented individually, the students avoided shameful and humiliating situations in the presence of other colleagues. This helped them focus on receiving feedback and projecting future actions for improvement of their research.

5.2 Peer feedback

An important aspect of the assessment was the availability, involvement and opportunity to receive peer feedback. It is not new that peer feedback is "effective for developing critical thinking, communication, lifelong learning, and creating or stimulating the

development of collaborative skills" (Nilson, 2003: 34). Peer review gives students the opportunity to negotiate and penetrate better the meanings by presenting their personal perspectives with no boundaries. Unlike teacher feedback, in peer feedback we do not have a hierarchy of authority, so the dialogue is conducted in a different way allowing students to ask questions in their own way and find answers in terms of their knowledge. So, we asked our interviewees about their perception of the peer feedback during their studies. Consequently, some interviewees sustained that peer feedback

"helped us improve our theses, especially in the early stages of research".

Others said that they

"Had study meetings with their colleagues, which helped me through the mutual critical analysis of the research and through the exchange of experience that took place at those meetings".

Both the colleagues and the referents helped the Ph.D. students by

"indicating possible vulnerabilities in the logical development of the thesis chapters, in the coherence and clarity of application of the models of correspondence and conceptual interpretation, respectively in the methodology used, so their contribution was likely to significantly improve the final form and content on the thesis".

Also some students benefited from peer feedback provided by the Ph.D. students in their senior years. The later, explained the tasks and shared their models of report structuring so the students could build and align to an academic writing and formatting standard for their periodic reports.

During the COVID-19 pandemic the students that finished their dosctoral studies after 2020 experienced online learning. They claimed feedback was more present in the first year of study and that later they were left alone. The social distancing measures constrained the students to adapt and study individually in the online environment, the reason why the interviewees underline the importance of interaction and feedback from their coordinators and coleagues.

Those who benefited from peer feedback appreciated its impact on their research path, while those who did not benefit from it or just partially, embraced individual research and feedback from their Ph.D. coordinators but psychologically felt alone. Implicitly, their habit of working alone impacted their ability to integrate into the labor market and embrace the team work.

5.3 Learning through projects, conferences and workshops

For personal and professional development it is necessary for students to be involved in varied activities that require thinking at different levels. Putting them in different situations encourages the learning of multiple methods and skills to apply in real life.

In doctoral studies, students are mostly concerned with conducting research in the interest of their study so they can build a thesis, meaning mostly they deal with individual work. Yet, the teachers try to involve them in other activities to familiarize them with other actions and help them integrate easier on the labor market by adapting to teamwork. In the case of the present students, they were involved in activities such as workshops, conferences, debates and projects. The experience gained by the students from these activities shows that they appreciated the conferences and the workshops for

"applying the research methodology and clarifying the concepts, but even in this case, due to the topic, the feedback was not extremely specific on the topic of my research".

We note that the Ph.D. activity, in addition to student research, largely depended on the degree of collaboration of universities with various institutions for the involvement of students in training programs. What we observe is that the students who completed their doctoral studies before 2018 highlighted a larger and more detailed list of activities and projects in

which they were involved, compared to those who completed their Ph.D. after 2018 who mostly mentioned the conferences that were actually part of the requirements for obtaining a Ph.D. Their capacity to invlove in extracurricular activities was diminished by the pandemics that restricted everybody's mobility.

The importance of extracurricular events influences student's learning. One of the students' stated:

"the doctoral program I graduated included the obligation to participate in workshops and conferences, as well as the construction of a research project and its submission for funding. Applying to these academic events was closely related to my study and doctoral research activity".

Similarly, another student stated that he participated in national and international conferences and projects along with the coordinating Professor.

"Collaboration in these activities helped me to explore the theoretical and practical perspectives, to understand the degree of methodological adaptability, to underlie the development of work dynamics in conducting research. The topic of these activities was marginally associated with the subject of my research, yet they were useful in terms of operationalization and continuation".

Also depending on institutional resources, some students had more opportunities than others. For example, one of the interviewees sustained that during his Ph.D. studies he, together with other colleagues, had study visits in Universities from Craiova, Constanta, Barcelona and Naples. Also he benefiсed of a period of mobility outside the country, in Budapest, with the help of Rome Education Fund.

Along with this, some interviewees highlighted that their involvement in extracurricular, personal and professional training activities was strongly influenced by the coordinating teacher. One of the interviwees had the opportunity to work with researchers from Lithuania on a study about teachers' training regarding classroom diversity, and contribute to the development of a democratic education textbook.

Considering all responses we conclude that traditional way of assessment at the Ph.D. level are kept only when summative assessment was needed: for the admission and for final competencies assessment. Thus, doctoral studies are mostly about formative evaluation. The students' progress on complying with the academic standards is assessed through formative assessment and feedback from coordinators, peers and commissions.

Throughout the study we observe that from the feedback perspective, the students value any type of feedback and the extracurricular activities that helped them to develop a wide range of competencies, while the final summative assessment is perceived as something normal, a natural procedure for confirming a few of the acquired competencies.

Since the doctoral thesis and the Ph.D. requirements are the only summative assessments, we want to verify how much the assessment standards give students the feeling of fairness in evaluation. Do they consider the new standards sufficient? excessive or normal?

5.4 Technology and assessment standards

The evaluation criteria are constantly changing with the intention of adapting and complying with the new challenges in education and work. One of the factors that enhanced the rate of change in the education standards is technology, which given the COVID-19 pandemics became a normality and the only means through which education was possible for almost two years. In order to understand the impact of technology on learning and assessment in the technology era and after the pandemics we asked our interviewees if they consider the new standards for a Ph.D. imposed in 2018 as being enough for assessing the competencies of a Ph.D. student (see figure 2).

Figure 2: PhD students' perception of current standards for assessing doctoral skills

20%   20%

60%

■ Too high   ■ Enough   ■ Too low
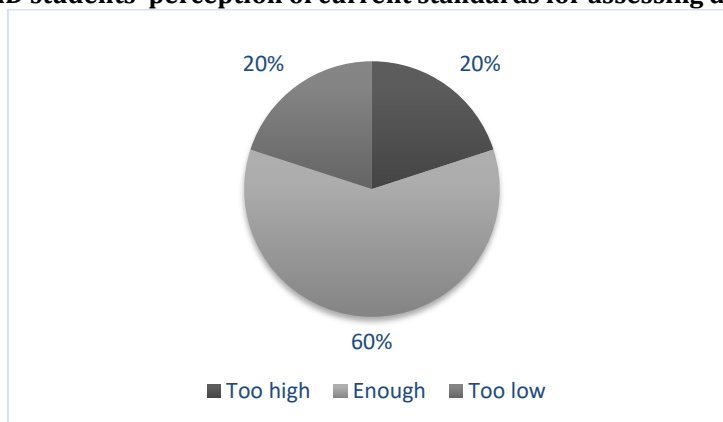
Source: Author's figure

The students who defended their doctoral dissertation after 2018, completed part of their studies according to the rules and constraints of the pandemic. All of them claimed that technology helped them a lot both in research and in compliance with academic standards, meaning attending conferences.

In addition to changing the assessment standards, technology came with many benefits such as the availability and accessibility of information, the emergence of various new research tools and new methods of storing and processing information. These aspects raised the ethical issue of using technology to cheat and comply easily with the assessment standards. For this reason, 20% of the participants in the interview that sustained their Ph.D. after 2018 consider that the assessment standards are not enough for fairly assessing the students' work and competencies. While 60% of the participants believe the standards are sufficient, and 20% believe they are too much. Those claiming that the assessment standards are too high come from a non-EU education system with a different culture, which had difficulties in complying with the basic requirements during their doctoral studies especially because they had a modest knowledge of English and Romanian, which were the only languages allowed for writing the thesis and for carrying out the entire doctoral activity.

Another aspect that influenced students' perceptions over the assessment standards is related to previous education. Students who were trained in an education system in the EU and in a field related to political science were better prepared for the activities of doctoral studies than those who came from a field with no connection with political sciences and from an education system with different evaluation standards. The continuity and connection of evaluation methods proved to be crucial for understanding the evaluation tasks, for identifying their relevance and connection with the real world.

6. Conclusions

Society is constantly changing, so it is normal for the challenges to the education system to keep raising. However, what we consider to be unnatural is the persistence of permanent challenges caused by permanent factors, namely the factors with implications in the thought process, like fear and injustice. The human biological response to these factors is not a conscious one to expect a change in the way we see the events that induce fear and anger because of injustice, but it is a subconscious one that once triggered does not allow the learning process to take place.

Developing the study, we found that for freeing learning from fear and injustice we must create learning and assessment environments that do not allow comparison of feedback

to establish interpersonal relationships between students, construct assessment methods and techniques to encourage the development of a personal imprint on answers, encourage teamwork, develop self-assessment skills and give access to socialization.

We verified these hypotheses in the case study, which showed us that injustice is a major factor in highlighting our level of focus and motivation for learning. The environment in which the assessment and feedback take place can free students from the fear of being judged, and help them focus on improving their learning and their competencies instead of comparing themselves with other students.

Also, feedback was a crucial aspect in the learning process. The students that received any feedback from teachers, committees and colleagues felt more confident in their skills and learning results, and knew what they should improve, compared to those that did not receive any feedback.

Equally important was socialization, which although considered trivial, the students highlighted its lack during the pandemic and the difficulties they had in learning given the absence of coleagues with which they could exchange information, discuss homework and negotiate meanings. The absence of socialization made our students feel alone in the learning process, which froze their ability to connect, establish friendships and discuss meanings, deadlines, problems and exchange solutions to learn better and comply more easily with the learning and assessment requirements.

Following this study, we conclude that to improve the learning capacity in higher education, we must encourage the teachers to create a learning and assessment environment similar to the one in the Ph.D. studies - one that does not trigger a state of alarm in students, that encourages learning, socialization, aquiring skills, and self improvement. This will help us teach students to differentiate between the two roles of teachers: the assessor, which usually triggers a state of alarm, and the feedback giver that must inspire trust for the information to be taken over and be processed.

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