

## Learning Experience under the COVID-19 Crisis: The Case of Romanian Graduates

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### Abstract

*In the context of the changes generated by the COVID-19 pandemic, social distancing, the closure of university campuses and the ad-hoc conversion of face-to-face education to online education have severely affected the learning process and lifestyle of students around the world. It has led to the need to study these changes; studies of this kind are encouraged by international organizations (i.e. the European Commission, the UNESCO, the United Nations), local authorities, academia, etc., to provide the rich data required to understand this reality, and for adopting further measures of social responsibility, and policies mitigating the negative impact of the pandemic on higher education and the students. Therefore, after a year of experiencing the emergency online learning, the identification of problems encountered by students and the study of their consequences have already become a significant social need. This study addresses this need by investigating the case of Romania. So, this study presents the results of qualitative research based on the interviews taken with social sciences graduate students enrolled in Romanian universities. The study used semi-structured in-depth interviews that explored the perceptions, opinions, and feelings of Romanian students regarding online learning, and their attitudes towards transformations that occurred in their learning, academic performance, and student life after a year since the onset of the pandemic and the closure of onsite higher education activities. The article is divided into three parts: the first part presents the context and overviews the literature in the field, the second part describes the methodology and the results, and the last part comprises the conclusions.*

### Keywords

*Remote teaching and learning in Romanian HEIs; online education; Romanian students during COVID-19 crisis; Romanian students' perceptions about online learning during the COVID-19 crisis.*

### Introduction. Context and literature

Among the manifold highly debated social implications of the Covid-19 pandemic, a prominent debate revolves around the disruption of higher education. Since March 2020, when World Health Organization (WHO) declared the COVID-19 outbreak a global pandemic (World Health Organization, 2020), education around the world has undergone major changes (Farnell, Matijević, & Schmidt, 2021). In this context, universities have shifted to the so-called "emergency remote teaching" (Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust, & Bond, 2020, p. 1), over 75 percent of worldwide higher

education institutions (HEIs), and over 85 percent of European HEIs managing to switch to the online format of maintaining instruction by April 2020 (Marinoni et al., 2020; Farnell et al., 2021). The COVID-19 outbreak has changed the way education used to be delivered, forcing both learning and teaching to get on a very unusual path. It brought up to light a new scenario – the remote teaching and learning – as a coping alternative to the fact that higher education institutions had been all forced to close their on-site activities for a long and unknown period (Butnaru, Niță, Anichiti, & Brînză, 2021). The online format of maintaining the education going was widely adopted within universities as the best solution quickly available to provide constancy in students' learning, communication, and educational life (Farnell et al., 2021; Vlachopoulos, 2020).

After over one year and a half, the crisis is still considered a global issue, and we can firmly say it has set in motion various rearrangements aiming to offer a socially responsible solution for “filling the gap left by conventional (face-to-face) education” (Vlachopoulos, 2020, p. 17). Therefore, using the insights that appeared from this emergency online learning experience should be used to consolidate its positive aspects, and quickly address the contextual difficulties and negative outcomes coming along with it.

As Farnell, Matijević, and Schmidt (2021, p. 7) indicate, European universities managed to successfully implement the quick switch to the “emergency remote teaching” (the expression used for indicating the process of “transforming on-site classes to a virtual mode, without making changes to the curriculum or the methodology”). Still, universities from countries that are not digitally advanced (i.e. Pakistan, Vietnam) were not able to establish an effective switch to online education (Adnan & Anwar, 2020; Buzatu, Cojoc, Cotovici, Spirache, Trandafir, & Paun, 2020), lack of an affordable and stable Internet connection interfering with the whole process of online learning, causing at the end fails to achieve the primary goal – enabling students to study properly. In light of this, as Buzatu et al. (2020) noticed that the switch to online learning had been too quickly implemented and too forceful, without offering a proper solution for individuals from poor settlements and for students from low-income families, who had been struggling unsuccessfully to connect to the online classes, or failed to find a place for learning activities (Buzatu et al., 2020). Also, the description of the self-isolating scenery in China indicates a sad reality where some of the Chinese students lacked a good setting for learning and working, not being able to find valuable learning materials. In this context, the online school has been described more as a deadlock rather than a growth habitat (Bao, 2020).

Therefore, in some parts of the world, much more than in the others, the switch to online education was hindered by technological and social issues, Basilaia and Kavadze (2020) concluding that online learning can be welcomed only in those countries and regions where online libraries can be accessed rapidly, video lectures and online channels can be watched fluidly, and online resources can be used properly. So, for the students that had digital competencies and were able to use and afford digital technology in pursuit of online learning, this experience had a positive comeback, in which, free time was put up to good use. For instance, Nadolu (2020) portrays the discovery of new hobbies – such as cooking, reading, or personal

development. His study indicates that some of the Romanian students would probably choose the “option of not changing anything in case of a hypothetical new wave of the pandemic crisis” since these individuals managed to organize very well their daily tasks and adapted really quickly to online learning, as they had been used to perform activities in the virtual world. Similarly, in the study of Muthuprasad, Aiswarya, Aditya, and Jha (2021), the Indian students admitted that online learning came along with the opportunity to have a flexible schedule, where they chose when to study, when to work and when to relax. So, time flexibility was indicated as a major benefit of online learning, as well as self-discipline, and the greater ability to focus on what is needed to be done.

As Adnan and Anwar (2020) made mention, the incapability of reaching out to classmates or sharing information face to face is one of the huge disadvantages that comes with this virtual transformation. Still, the literature indicates that the shortcomings related to human connection represented all over the world a huge problem of the switch to online learning. It has shown that university students were forced to continue their learning path in the virtual mode (Ionescu et al., 2020) as the closure of on-site classes affected the learners worldwide - approximately 1.725 billion people, ranging from pre-primary to higher education (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). As Adnan and Anwar (2020) mention the inability of reaching out to fellow classmates or sharing information face to face as being one of the huge disadvantages that comes with this virtual transformation.

Although online classes were attended and the exams were passed well, the isolation made online learning very difficult. For example, loss of motivation, induced by seeing, talking into, or working constantly in front of a screen for a long period amplified the high number of dropouts among first-year students in Romania (Potra, Pugna, Pop, Negrea, & Dungan, 2021). Additionally, students were forced to skip important sleep hours, work too much, or switch from one device to another, forgetting to take a break or feeling satisfaction over things that used to be pleasant (Bertrand, Shaw, Ko, Deprez, Chilibeck, & Zello, 2021). Pursuing this further, the studies of Arribathi, Suwanto, Miftakhu Rosyad, Budiarto, Supriyanti, and Mulyati (2021), Baloran (2020), and Islam, Barna, Raihan, Khan, and Hossain (2020) reported an increase in students' anxiety and the rise of a tendency to suicidal behavior, based on their study with Bangladesh student participants, stating that they had experienced a wide range of provoking feelings, such as mild to severe anxiety, mild to severe depression, stress, sleep disorder and also fear - stimulated by the unpredictability of academic and professional future as long as the closure of universities.

### Research method

This study aims to investigate the perspective of Romanian students towards their online learning experience during the state of emergency imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic. It is based on a qualitative study, in which we applied in April 2020 a semi-structured in-depth interview to 24 Romanian graduate students who experienced the sudden shift from face-to-face to online learning (N=24 participants, 22-34 years old)

It is based on a qualitative study conducted in April 2021 with Romanian graduate students who experienced the sudden shift from face-to-face to online learning (N=24 participants, 22-24 years old, Romanian nationality, 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> year master students enrolled in the Romanian public university system).

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were used to gather participants' insights on the topic of study. Given the social distancing rules in force at the moment of data collection, all study participants were recruited online and the interviews were conducted via largely available video-conference applications. The interview guide used to gather participant's insights comprised 14 discussion units designed to enable students to discuss their experience considering that both students, professors, as well as the universities as such, were forced to adapt to the changes and cope with such challenges as the Internet connection, use of specific applications needed for online learning activities, long hours in front of a screen, no socializing or face-to-face contact, etc.

The interviewers filled in the data collection sheets according to the 14 discussion units of the interview guide, and these were used as support material for the analysis. Data analysis followed the similarities and differences in the responses of the interviewed participants that helped us identify common topics and themes and the frequency of their appearance, as well as the connections among them.

## Results and discussion

The analysis of the interviews was used to identify the main themes which shape how Romanian graduate students perceive online education after experiencing it since the beginning of March 2020, when a sudden shift occurred from traditional in-class education towards an entirely online learning format.

A first theme that emerged was that students associated online learning with uncertainty, confusion (even chaos – especially at the onset of the pandemic). The interviewees mentioned fatigue and exhaustion, and also stress and isolation as major sources of discomfort and uncertainty. The respondents provided multiple arguments for explaining the factors lying based on their exhaustion, and implicitly, of their low online learning effectiveness.

That is why such statements as “school in an online environment is more complicated than in a traditional one” (P1, 23 years) appeared in one way or another in most interviews. These statements indicated that the process of adaptation to online classes was perceived as being difficult (i.e. “it is difficult to take notes and pay attention to explanations on screen at the same time” and “... it is quite hard and almost impossible, and not normal for the disciplines which include problem-solving and doing mathematical exercises to be taught online” - P1, 23 years); many of the interviewees have reported coming across difficulties in adapting to online teaching.

Factors of technical nature included such issues as the quality of the Internet connection, proper functioning of devices used for specific online learning activities, which also contributed to adaptation difficulties of some students, 40% of the

interviewees having underlined the fact that online learning showed their reliance on technology and its use, thus, poor quality of technology becoming a barrier for proper understanding of the information delivered by professors. In this context, study participants mentioned that online learning is becoming less clear as in a digital learning environment things do not depend solely on what a student does but also on such other issues as the quality of a laptop, the connection to the Internet, or even the operation of the e-learning application that could also have operation disruptions. Therefore, online learning is turning into an unknown realm for students as both teachings provided by instructors and communication as such are getting more difficult. The interviewees mentioned this type of difficulty sixteen times: “online classes are less clear and may generate confusion. It is hard to understand professors when they talk in front of a screen displaying just some names” (P6, 24 years). Also, respondents reported difficulties in communicating with their peers present in online classes.

The main negative aspects underlined by the interviewees in explaining the encountered adaptation difficulties and low efficiency associated with learning in a digital environment comprised loneliness, stress, and low concentration due to lack of direct human contact, communication, and face-to-face interaction (17 mentions). Also, most students reported low concentration in online classes compared to face-to-face classes, explaining it by being more easily distracted at home than in a classroom (19 mentions) and mentioned home temptations as the main reason for this kind of disruption.

Moreover, loneliness was reported as being a severe problem, many times associated with states of anxiety: “stress is higher in an online environment because you are alone, and you have to manage yourself on your own” (P3, 22 years). The interviewees also mentioned the communication difficulties and the abilities to get along with other peers in class due to lack of relations among them, and because “the young need to socialize, go out together, communicate, and interact with each other” (P3, 22 years), and concluded that online learning makes the student feel alone – „you are alone even if you attend a call with other people (P3, 22 years., F). The state of loneliness and the discomfort of meeting peers just on online learning platforms generate in students a sense of helplessness, not belonging to the group, and even thoughts of school abandonment, especially among first-year graduate students: “It all happens in an online system, making it difficult to get to know even one person, let alone 20 people (...). I thought I was going to quit after three days, I felt I couldn’t communicate with my peers” (P4, 23 years). Although the interviewees reported having overcome this barrier and being able to establish communication, the experience was quite disappointing as students failed to be at ease with their peers, first-year master graduate students being mostly affected: “It was hard to work with a team of new peers from the master program as I did not know them, and it was difficult to communicate and share ideas related to group projects, which turned out to be difficult to manage online” (P5, 22 years).

Certainly, besides the barriers due to lack of human interaction, there were difficulties linked to the attempt of students to not fall behind with doing several tasks at once, where they often failed at and felt frustrated: “online classes are not necessarily a

problem but additional work, the time allocated for research and never-ending discussions among the peers many times end up in a hassle" (P7, 23 years).

Although confusion showed high frequency in the interviews, physical and mental fatigue were among the most frequently mentioned topics (23 out of 24 subjects). As for mental fatigue, 18 subjects also correlated it with the implicit stress, inability to keep pace with sudden change and high volume of projects and papers, as well as the additional tasks, online school becoming in the minds of students "much more demanding compared to the face-to-face learning environment" (P3, 22 years). The subjects mentioned "fatigue" (23 mentions), as well as "sadness" (17 mentions), the latter having been correlated with "nostalgia" and the desire to come back to normal school. Sadness was also correlated with "loneliness", and even "fear" (4 mentions): "We have to take part in a group, but we are alone; you attend a class, but in fact you are alone and each person stays in its own bubble" (P19, 23 years), and even "fear" (4 mentions).

As the interviewees were asked to comment on what was really missing in the online classes, they indicated "group belonging" (5 mentions), saying that they missed this feature of face-to-face learning, stating that "you belong to a group but, in fact, you are alone in your own house" - P16, 23 years), "mutual trust" (5 mentions) and "sense of accomplishment" (5 mentions), "relaxation" (10 mentions) and "happiness" (8 mentions).

Quite often the subjects also mentioned "frustration" (18 mentions), which seems to closely correlate with "nervousness", "tension" (7 mentions), and also "boredom" (4): "I get asleep in my chair" (P8, 23 years) as well as exhaustion. These feelings seem to correlate with addiction to technology, triggering a sense of captivity: "I start feeling monotony" (P20, 23 years), that cause "stress" (10 mentions) related to a routine, or even generate thoughts of not having real freedom: "I panicked as I did not feel comfortable because I prefer face-to-face human interaction" (P21, 23 years), and "since we moved to online learning, it is as if all our life happens there, and it is confined within to the digital world. We live in its confinement," (P22, 24 years), "the school routine is more tiring" (P24, 24 years) than in the real world, "there is often much to do and stress comes along" (P21, 24 years). We observe here that technology is seen both as a facilitator of online learning and also as a constraint of individual freedom, alienation, and exhaustion.

As for the mentioned advantages, the students underlined the comfort of one's home, the chance to relax and attend classes at the same time ("you can attend a class at the desk, or stay in bed surrounded by pillows and duvets" - P8, 23 years), and also the chance to spend time more efficiently by engaging in different tasks simultaneously. The subjects emphasized the easiness of doing housework concomitantly with attending classes, with half of the respondents having reported multitasking as "a way of combining duty and pleasure and creating a comforting environment" (P9, 24 years).

The facilities provided by technology are seen as a way of using time better, benefitting from flexibility in doing daily routines and managing better school-related and daily

tasks: “I have more time for my personal interests, such as reading, spending time with my family and pets” (P9, 24 years). Flexibility correlated with the opportunity to do several things at the same time, appearing in most responses – whether these were job or house related, or concerning other personal interests. Consequently, the subjects stressed flexibility and accessibility, as students develop well-defined habits staying always in the same space, often at home. So, the respondents enjoyed “the hours spent cooking, with their laptop on the table, while the professor was talking” (P12, 23 years), feeling more efficient, “online classes allowing you to do other things at the same time”, and also feeling happy as “each person can do whatever they feel like, and attend online classes at the same time” (P13, 24 years).

A sedentary lifestyle appeared together with the disappearance of traveling to the university, it was seen as a negative consequence of online learning, most subjects indicating a high incidence of “strong back pain, the physical condition being affected by lack of daily exercise” (P2, 24 years). Respondents also mentioned the benefit of the time saving due to the disappearance of the need to travel to campus, showing that movement from one place to another was tiring and lasted quite long: “I saved much time by just not having to commute (...), and managed to have more time for my own interests” (P10, 23 years). Along the same lines of more efficient use of time, another respondent reported that not having to travel and the online learning provide “more time for studying - the hour I used to spend on traveling, I allocate for getting ready for the online classes” (P11, 23 years)

Spending time with the family was another advantage mentioned by the respondents, who mentioned having gone back home at the start of the pandemic. In this case, family ties strengthened, “(...) especially the family relationships: P14 (23 years) explained that she started spending more time with the family, began organizing movie nights, cooked more often together with the family members. The family was a support for the times when I felt overloaded due to online classes.”

Despite the mentioned advantages (multitasking, time flexibility, more time for hobbies and family, home comfort), more than half of the respondents believe that online learning is less effective than the traditional face-to-face learning: “Students do not concentrate as much, pay less attention compared to face-to-face classes, find various simultaneous activities to engage in during classes” (P15, 24 years).

We found that such advantages are also seen as causes of distracted attention, low concentration in class, and lack of interest (12 mentions), which also reduce the efficiency of the educational process (14 mentions): “Being in one’s own environment may be both an advantage and a disadvantage as a learner cannot concentrate as well as in the classroom, being easily distracted by other things” (P5, 22 years). Only two of the 24 respondents discussed mainly the advantages of online learning, and did not feel distracted or perceive it as being an obstacle, quite the opposite, they viewed online classes as a better learning method compared to traditional methods. The isolated responses were provided by two graduate students, one from the first and the other from the last year of study.

## Conclusions

Therefore, after carrying out an interview-based exploratory study that aimed to understand how Romanian graduate students experienced online learning between the middle of March 2020 – beginning of April 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic, we may conclude that these students continued their education with no interruptions and adapted to a large degree to the online learning environment. Similar to the case of other European universities reported by previous studies (Farnell et al., 2021), the constancy of student learning was reached in Romanian universities by the sudden transition of traditional classes to the online format - the so-called "emergency remote teaching" (Hodges et al., 2020, p. 1).

Most study participants reported that the shift to online learning provided such benefits as schedule flexibility, multitasking, more time for hobbies and family, the comfort of working from home, just a minority of respondents (8,33% of graduate students) showed a preference for the online learning system by viewing it as suiting better their needs than the traditional learning system.

As it was also shown by studies conducted in other parts of the world (Muthuprasad et al., 2021), our study indicates that Romanian graduate students especially appreciate the advantages of having a more flexible schedule due to the online learning mode. Even though respondents saw multitasking and the comfort of a home environment as benefits of online learning, we found out that the majority of participant graduate students perceived these benefits as turning against them, and becoming the causes of low attention span, lack of concentration, and drop of effectiveness in their learning.

Over 90% of graduate students included in our study (22 out of 24 interviewees) wish to go back to face-to-face education or a mixed learning format with classroom-based activities, not mediated by the computer, and direct interaction with their peers and professors. The lack of socializing and face-to-face contact, long hours spent in front of a screen, sedentary lifestyle, and additional effort needed for online learning made students feel alone, exhausted, demotivated, confused, sad, and even anxious. Loneliness brought by online education, and lack of contact with peers, teachers, and academia, in general, have been identified in all interviews as critical issues dropping learning efficiency as they have a huge negative impact on students' psycho-emotional state and their general well-being.

Overall, our findings complement previous studies tackling the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on higher education (Nadolu, 2020; Arribathi et al., 2021; Farnell et al., 2021; Potra et al., 2021; Bertrand et al., 2021), offering insights that might help academia to better design their classes and student interactions. Our study shows that even for the graduate students who managed to organize themselves well and use digital technology in pursuit of online learning, this was a puzzling experience. As Adnan & Anwar (2020) mentioned, the incapability of reaching out to fellow classmates or sharing information face to face represents a huge problem of this virtual transformation.



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