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Students` perceptions about the impact of COVID-19 on learning process. A sociological approach

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Abstract. The last six months have been marked by the worldwide spread of the new coronavirus (COVID-19) which has triggered a global pandemic crisis. Thus, among the most affected fields of activity is education, educational institutions being forced to transfer all the curricular activities in the online environment, by using various digital tools and also Social Media. Due the rapidly spreading of the novel coronavirus, since the beginning of this year, thousands of higher education institutions around the world have been gradually constrained by local governments and public authorities to replace traditional in-person educational activities with distance education, mediated by the digital environment. In turn, the Romanian educational system, as in the case of other countries, has been forced to respond promptly to the arising pandemic crisis challenges. Over the past decades, several researchers from various scientific fields have shown a growing interest in studying the ways in which technology (Marchello and Kelly, 1989), information and communication technology – ICT (Campbell, 2006; Aczel and Hardy, 2007; Saadik, 2008) or digital tools (Säljö, 2010) can be successfully integrated into curricular activities. Nowadays, all these contributions acquire a special significance, once the educational system has had to adapt, willingly or unwillingly, to the current context. In this context, the purpose of this paper is to present several results of an exploratory quantitative sociological research conducted between 26th of March - 20th of April 2020, at the Faculty of Philosophy and Social-Political Sciences, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iasi, on a sample of 643 students. The main purpose of this research was to highlight the impact of the pandemic crisis on the learning process among students. Among the main research objectives were: (a) to identify students perceptions about the closure of face-to-face university courses and seminars; (b) to measure the proportion of students who were considering, at the time of the study, that the Romanian educational system is ready to switch traditional learning activities with online courses and seminars; (c) to analyze the main concerns among students toward the effects of pandemic crisis on their future educational path and educational outcomes.

Keywords. students, pandemic, impact, education, higher-education

1. Introduction

Over the past decades, several researchers from various scientific fields have shown a growing interest in studying the ways in which technology (Marchello and Kelly, 1989), information and communication technology – ICT (Campbell, 2006; Aczel and Hardy, 2007; Saadik, 2008) or digital tools (Säljö, 2010) can be successfully integrated into curricular activities. Thus, numerous of previous research findings are continuously contextualized and are increasingly being used in the last six months to emphasize the impact of the pandemic crisis on education, in general and, particularly, on formal learning process (Burgess and Sivertsen, 2020; Marinoni,

Land and Jensen, 2020). In this regard, many recent studies focused on how the education system have managed the major challenges related to the forced switch on face-to-face educational activities to online learning, by using digital tools and platforms. For example, although we are discussing frequently about a new generation which is also entitled „digital natives” (Prensky, 2001), not all young people have equal access to technology in order to deal well with nowadays education challenges linked with coronavirus crisis (Williamson, Eynon and Potter, 2020).

Due to the rapidly spreading of the novel coronavirus, since the beginning of this year, thousands of higher education institutions around the world have been gradually constrained by local governments and public authorities to replace traditional in-person educational activities with distance education, mediated by the digital environment. In turn, the Romanian educational system, as in the case of other countries, has been forced to respond promptly to the arising pandemic crisis challenges.

By the State of emergency Decree no. 195/2020 and following social distancing rules, the Romanian President Klaus Werner Johannis had imposed, among other measures, the suspension of face-to-face courses and seminars from all universities across the country. As an effect, the members of the academic staff and both the students found themselves in an ungrateful, unexpected and once unimaginable position to quickly reconfigure the learning process and adapt it to the pandemic context, by transferring online all courses and seminars duties. In this context, universities have begun to use a variety of ad-hoc online tools and digital platforms, which can support curricular activities, trying to mitigate the harmful consequences of suspending face-to-face teaching interactions.

2. Research methodology

In this part, I present several key informations regarding the methodology used in a exploratory quantitative sociological study, conducted between 26th of March – 20th of April 2020, alongwith a team of researchers from Sociology and Social-Work Departament, Faculty of Philosophy and Social-Political Sciences, Alexandru-Ioan Cuza University of Iasi.

The aim of the study was to reveal students perceptions related to the impact of pandemic crisis on the learning process. Therefore, the research was conducted mainly in the first part of the State of emergency period. The online platform <http://www.isondaje.ro> had been used to gather students' opinions. Moreover, the questionnaire dissemination was made especially through social media, being used the communication channels of students.

1.1. Parcipants

The reseach sample-size (N) consisted of 643 subjects, students at Faculty of Philosophy and Social-Political Sciences. Out of the total number of respondents, 14 percent were male, while 86 percent were female. The average age of respondents was 21.6 years, 52 percent being residents in urban areas and 48 percent in rural communities. Also, 92 percent were undergraduate students, while 8 percent attended one of the master's programs proposed by the Faculty of Philosophy and Social-Political Sciences.

1.2. Research objectives

In this paper, I followed three main research objectives:

(O1) To identify students perceptions about the closure of face-to-face university courses and seminars;

(O2) To measure the proportion of students who were considering, at the time of the study, that the Romanian educational system is ready to switch traditional learning activities with online courses and seminars;

(O3) To analyze the main concerns among students toward the effects of pandemic crisis on their future educational path and educational outcomes.

3. Data analysis and findings

Given the exploratory nature of this empirical research, the data analysis is mostly descriptive, following elements that are mainly related to measure opinions, attitudes and perceptions that students tend to have about the impact of the pandemic concerning their educational path. Data analysis was carried out using SPSS ® Statistical Software.

1.3. Students perceptions on the temporary suspension of face-to-face university teaching activities

One of the initial question included in this research was to assess the students' perception on the temporary suspension of face-to-face university teaching activities. Thus, almost all the sampled students were agreeing with the measures taken by the university regarding the suspension of face-to-face courses and seminars during the state of emergency. Following data analysis, we identified that 96 percent found the measures as being good or very good, while 4 percent were against. Therefore, a large majority that emerges from this data analysis comprised students who supported the new academic regulations which came as a result of the pandemic context.

<i>In the current situation of declaring the pandemic, what do you think of the decision to stop the courses / seminars in-person organized within the universities?</i>	Percent (N = 643)
A very good measure	77%
A partially good measure	19%
A partially wrong measure	3%
A wrong measure	1%

Table 1 Students perceptions about the closure of the universities during the pandemic

While identifying the students' opinions about the measures related to temporary suspension of face-to-face teaching activities, we also aimed to highlight their own perception on how the Romanian educational system is able, generally speaking, to cope with the new regulations imposed by the pandemic context. By applying the non-parametric Chi-Square test, it turns out that students' opinions are well defined (Asymp. Sig = 0.000; Chi-Square = 235,575; df = 3)

Test Statistics

	To what extent do you consider that the universities are prepared for carrying out online educational activities?
Chi-Square	235,575 ^a
df	3
Asymp. Sig.	,000

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 160,8.

Table 2 Chi-square analysis on the students perception on how the universities are prepared for carrying out online educational activities

Thus, in descriptive terms, about two-thirds of surveyed students considered that the academic education system in Romania is not quite well suited to support online educational activities (65 percent). On the other hand, 35 percent of respondents pointed out at the time of survey that universities are ready to adapt their curricular activities by using various digital tools. Therefore, as we have seen, most students had a rather negative point of view about how the Romanian educational system can effectively respond to challenges related to the social context in which the academic field finds itself.

<i>To what extent do you consider that the Romanian higher education system is ready for organizing online educational activities?</i>	Percent (N = 643)
To a great extent	5%
To a moderate extent	30%
To a small extent	46%
Not at all	19%

Table 3 Students perception on how the Romanian higher education system is ready for organizing online educational activities

Additionally, the research revealed by using Mann-Whitney U test, that respondents being in final years of study tend to pronounce more critical evaluations compared to their peers from first years, referring here to the way they perceive how education system is ready to meet the challenges of using new technologies and online learning tools ($U=32736,5$; $Z=-2,198$ Asymp. Sig= $0,028$).

Ranks				
	Year of study	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
To what extent do you consider that the universities are prepared for carrying out online educational activities?	Year 1 and 2 (for undergraduate) and year 1 (for master)	494	313,77	155001,50
	Year 3 (for undergraduate) and year 2 (for master)	149	349,29	52044,50
	Total	643		

Test Statistics^a	
	To what extent do you consider that the universities are prepared for carrying out online educational activities?
Mann-Whitney U	32736,500
Wilcoxon W	155001,500
Z	-2,198
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	,028

a. Grouping Variable: Year of study

Table 4 Mann-Whitney U test – Association between students perception on how the Romanian higher education system is ready for organizing online educational activities and years of study

1.4. Students concerns about their educational development in the context of pandemic crisis

The main concerns among the sampled students are related to both long-term and short-term perspectives regarding their educational development. Thus, more than half of the subjects (54 percent) included in the research believe that their academic training will be adversely affected

by the pandemic crisis. Moreover, only a quarter of respondents considered that their educational path will not be negatively influenced by the current context. Also, one out of two surveyed students (52 percent) thought their academic performance would be lower compared to previous semesters. On the other hand, in a much lower proportion of only 26 percent, respondents disagreed that the measure of suspending face-to-face teaching activities would adversely affect in any way their grades. In the hierarchy of students concerns regarding their future educational development, the third position includes those who thought that other peers would adapt better - from a technical point of view (for example, issues linked with easier access to a personal computer, better knowledge and skills of using PC and software, access to a reliable Internet connection and so on), in order to cope with the rigors imposed by transferring teaching activities in the digital environment. In contrast, 26 percent of respondents are not concerned that their peers would better align to online learning activities. Likewise, almost half of surveyed students (49 percent) mentioned they have much more difficulties in understanding of specialized documents (books, articles or research papers) that they have to study on their own.

<i>To what extent do you agree / disagree with the following statements:</i>	Strongly agree and Agree	Neutral	Disagree and Strongly disagree
I consider that my academic training will be negatively affected by the pandemic crisis	54%	21%	25%
The period of interruption of face-to-face educational activities will affect my final grades	52%	22%	26%
I consider that there are other peers who adapt easier than me to the new requirements and the transition of courses / seminars in digital format	49%	25%	26%

Table 5 Students concerns about their future educational path

4. Conclusions and future directions

Therefore, as can be seen from the descriptive data analysis, the vast majority of students considered that the academic regulations taken to reduce the spread of the new coronavirus were appropriate. At the same time, two out of three students pointed out that the university system in Romania is not sufficiently prepared to transfer their teaching activities online. Regarding the students' concerns about their future academic path, it can be seen that over half of them believed that the final results will be affected by the pandemic crisis. In the near future, a longitudinal study will be considered. The research will follow the evolution of students' opinions, attitudes and perceptions regarding the effects of pandemic on their educational path. Thus, in the second half of June, a new quantitative research will be conducted, which will contain similar questions, on a sample of students from the Faculty of Philosophy and Social-Political Sciences. This empirical approach will be doubled by a qualitative study, which will enrich all the informations already collected. By conducting semi-structured interviews with students, we will seek to obtain in-depth explanations, highlighting the reasoning after which they built their opinions on the studied topic. Behind the factual data are various reasonings, patterns of understanding and thinking about recent events. Hence the current concerns that try to identify answers to questions such as: "What are the most effective ways in which universities can adapt to situations of force majeure, similar to those caused by the pandemic?", "What are strategies by which universities can temper students' fears about their educational path in the context of similar situations?". While analyzing the results, we must consider the fact that the

study took place during the initial stages of the emergency period, a time marked by profound social anxiety due to the pandemic and uncertainty of the things to immediate future will bring.

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