How Romanian Higher Education Institutions Have Adapted to Online Learning Process in the COVID-19 Context through a Student's Eye

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Abstract: The new challenges caused by the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic forced the entire World to stop some activities, including educational activities. This situation pushed educational system to move its space of work in an online environment. In this article, we aim to present some of the measures that have been taken by the Romanian Government and universities in an effort to mitigate the potential risks that threatened the education system. We also intend to present some issues that arose during this educational migration to online learning. The measures adopted include providing technical support for teachers and students in supporting them on how to access and how to use the online resources and tools made available to ensure the continuity of the educational process. Other measures include online courses addressed to students in final years for their training in oral presentations for final exams, and also provision of financial support for students with limited financial possibilities to help them purchase a computer. One problem that would hinder the educational process in the online environment would be technical aspects specific to the online platforms, but also the way students and professors use them. Other difficulties include the lack of digital skills, as well as the lack of involvement in the online learning activities of some professors.

Keywords: *educational process; online learning; digital skills; solutions; online platforms.*

How to cite: Molea, R., & Năstasă, A. (2020). How Romanian Higher Education Institutions Have Adapted to Online Learning Process in the COVID-19 Context through a Student's Eye. *Revista Romaneasca pentru Educatie Multidimensionala*, 12(2Sup1), 175-181.
<https://doi.org/10.18662/rrem/12.2Sup1/304>

1. Introduction

March 11, the Ministry of Education and Research announced the closure of all schools in Romania. Until then, the courses in secondary education were suspended, but in the tertiary education continued. Even though face-to-face classes were suspended, the educational process continued by moving it into the online environment.

In order to respond to the challenges to which the education system in Romania was subjected due to the global crisis caused by COVID-19, the Government through the Ministry of Education and Research has taken a set of measures. They were intended to support the continuity of the educational process by trying to mitigate the potential risks that could lead to the collapse of the Romanian education system. In the following paragraphs, we will briefly describe the measures that have been taken into account by the government and universities. Then, we will describe the issues involved in the teaching process from a student perspective and potential answers to these barriers.

As some experts from the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences in the University of Bucharest said, this online migration of learning process, through a forced digitalization, is done with "different speeds" from one community to another, from one school/ university to another, from one teacher/ student to another. Regarding this aspect, there were extensive debates concerning the possibility of freezing the school year, which concluded with the decision of the Ministry of Education and Research (MEC) to complete this school year (University of Bucharest, 2020).

Therefore, the main purposes of this paper are to identify problems that may arise in the virtual teaching process and to provide potential solutions to these problems.

2. Facing new challenges in the education system

Similar to the other countries that were affected by the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, the educational process was transferred to the online environment. To make the transition easier and smoother to the process of teaching in the online environment MNE came with some ideas. The state came to help the teachers who had difficulties in using the online tools by providing several online platforms that offered training and support in learning these competences. Some of these platforms are digital.educared.ro (MNE, 2020a) and narada.online (MNE, 2020b) where teachers have the opportunity to access the necessary learning resources to support distance learning activities with students, digital tools that make possible the

elaboration of teaching materials, collaborative learning platforms, but also useful tools for remote communication and collaboration, as well as learning communities in which experiences and resources can be shared with other fellow teachers.

Also, a public speaking program was set up to support the students who are going to take their final oral exams. The platform was designed to develop the communication, organizing and structuring of information skills of students, and to provide time management, public speaking and personal branding courses for university students in preparing them for future job interviews (MNE, 2020c).

In this context, universities were also forced to take measures to continue the educational process within their faculties. Thus, we analyzed the measures adopted by ten public universities in Romania in the context of the corona pandemic to the moment when this paper was written (April 10). We selected the first 10 universities according to the number of students enrolled in the academic year 2019-2020, selecting the universities with the highest number of students, listed by the National Integrated Register at <https://rei.gov.ro/statistici-universitati-13>.

The transfer of the educational activity from the face-to-face interaction to the virtual interaction implied the adoption of specific measures to support the activity of students and professors. Most of these universities have relocated their teaching activity on online institutional platforms, as well as on free platforms (such as ZOOM, Discord, [tlki.io](https://www.tlki.io/), Google Hangouts or YouTube, Skype, etc.). To facilitate the familiarization of students and professors with these types of platforms some universities have started to provide technical support for assisting teachers and students to use digital platforms. Thus, some universities have created institutional groups to coordinate the online activity, to provide technical support to students and professors or have created simplified online guides for using digital platforms. Another measure employed by some universities to improve teaching and learning conditions was the provision of psychological counseling.

Some of the problems that arise when switching to virtual education are the access of students to the Internet or access to computers. According to the NIS statistics from the total share of households in Romania, 66% of them had access to a computer at home in 2017. In the urban area, 76% of the households had access to a computer at home in 2017, and in the rural area, 52% of the households had access to a computer at home (NIS, 2020). On the other hand, according to the NIS, 76% of the total households in Romania had Internet access in 2019. Moreover, 83% of the households in

the urban area and 67% of the households in the rural area had Internet access in 2019 (NIS, 2020). Therefore, some universities have developed programs to support students with limited financial opportunities to help them purchase a computer.

In the rest of the paper, we are looking to provide some insight into how the educational process continues in the virtual context from a MA student's perspective, addressing some issues and possible solutions. Suddenly, the homes or dormitories were transformed into classrooms. The professor-student interaction has changed and came with some transformations. The teaching methods and the evaluation methods have changed, both the professors and the students had to adapt to the new conditions that the crisis context required.

3. Barriers involved in online learning

3.1. Web camera - the struggle between presence and absence

An important issue that affects the student-professor interaction is the visibility shown by the students during courses. Some of them prefer to shut down their web cameras, and by doing that they build a wall between them and the professor and also between them and their colleagues. In this situation, the professor cannot receive full feedback from his/her students, may have difficulties in engaging students in discussions, and sometimes the professor could feel like he/she is talking by himself/herself. Also, as a student, if you turn off your web camera, this could mean you are no longer there, you left the classroom for doing something else. This could be seen also as a form of disrespect to the professor. These problems could be solved by including in the syllabus a condition that requires all students to keep their web camera on to ensure class participation and mutual trust between student and professor.

3.2. Sound barriers

One of the issues that arose in the context of virtual learning through video teaching platforms is the audio interference caused by the background noise. Other noise interferences are caused by the simultaneous activities that the call participants (students or professors) undertake during the course (such as eating). Noise interferences can also be caused by the other family members or other colleagues from the student dorm that also undertake their activities (participation in classes or work activities) from home or the student dorm. Thus, poor coordination with other family members or dorm colleagues can disrupt class participation. These noise

issues can be solved by closing the personal microphone when the professor or someone else is speaking. At the same time, prior coordination with family members or other dorm colleagues can help to solve the unwanted noise obstructions and can facilitate the concentration during class time.

3.3. Poor technical and digital skills

Other problems that could arise may be related to the lack of digital skills regarding the use of platforms by professors and students. Thus, there might be cases when students and teachers cannot properly use the virtual educational platforms. A possible solution to solve these issues could be to implement online user guides or technical assistance provided by the academic institution. As we already mentioned above, these measures have already been taken by some universities. At the same time, professor training can be done through distance training courses offered by the university.

3.4. The lack of online activities

Another problem to be addressed would be the passivity that comes from teaching personnel that doesn't engage in the online learning process. Some of them just prefer to send several reading materials or homework, but without other forms of interaction. That situation creates a hostile environment for learning especially for students because they could feel abandoned in their educational process. Moreover, the current panic and uncertainty put pressure on students and affect their ability to manage the things they have to do. Thereby, the lack of involvement of professors makes just to increase the feeling of helplessness experienced by students. A solution that can be considered would be to carry out more engaging activities by these professors and their involvement in finding and solving students' problems regarding the learning process in these troubled times.

4. Conclusions

The current situation of the pandemic has forced the educational system to adapt to teaching through virtual platforms and digital solutions. In this paper, we have presented the context of some measures taken by the state and by some of the universities to facilitate the transition to an online educational system. On the other hand, we have presented some problems that appear in online teaching from a student's perspective and some possible solutions.

At the governmental level, some of the solutions adopted by the Ministry of Education and Research were the creation of online platforms that facilitate online teaching, as well as offering public speaking courses to

help students prepare for exams. On the other hand, at the university level, some of the solutions adopted were the use of their online institutional platforms or the use of free online platforms. Other solutions included the provision of psychological counseling, the creation of technical support boards to support teachers and students, as well as the elaboration of digital guides for supporting the use of digital tools.

One of the identified issues that could be barriers in the educational process might be represented by the student participation in the courses with the webcam(s) shut down (which creates a barrier between the professor and the student). Also, another problem can be the sound disturbances created by the background noise, other family members, or roommates. Finally, the lack of digital skills, as well as the lack of interactive online activities, can represent troublesome barriers in the process of transition to online learning.

Acknowledgement

Article funded under NUCLEU Project PN 19130301.

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