ACADEMIC INTEGRITY AND ABILITIES FOR ONLINE LEARNING. LESSONS FROM COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract: This paper analyzes the online learning during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic in the Romanian higher education institutions. Based on a survey among the students of Romanian private university affected by the suspension of the face to face classes and on the opinions expressed by specialists, faculty and other students, we identify the challenges, the advantages and disadvantages faced during this period and the lessons we could learn from this experience. While it is clear that no university has been prepared for this rapid shift, the universities that had been using the online educational platforms before the pandemic adapted easier to the online learning. The full-time students would appreciate a blended learning in the future with face to face classes combined with online resources. The university administrators should consider training their professors for online teaching and the government should fight against the educational exclusion of those who do not have access to the internet or to the technical resources necessary for online learning.

Keywords: *online learning, blended learning, academic integrity, academic abilities, education*

Introduction

The second semester of 2019/2020 academic year brought us a major challenge – the necessity to suspend face to face classes and to replace it with online learning. For about ten weeks (more or less depending on each university's choice) both professors and students had to adapt to a new method of teaching and learning. After that, during the exam session, they had to adapt to a new form of evaluation and to find creative

solution in order to preserve the academic integrity during the online evaluation.

Considering this unexpected challenge, we intend to analyze the lessons we could learn from this period of time and how could we improve our face to face learning based on this experience. We shall consider in this study especially the realities of the Romanian universities, but we shall also refer to some international data regarding this subject.

Online learning is definitely not a recent innovation. Many universities have been already using it for their distance study programs. For full-time students it meant however a major change in their daily routine. Most Romanian universities as well as the ones from abroad, used the online learning systems such as Google Classroom, Moodle or online video communication systems – Zoom, Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, WebEx, Skype and so on. The good thing during this pandemic was that almost all these communication systems tried to improve their features and to adapt them to online learning, offering new options according to the real needs. The world-wide replacement of the face to face classes with online learning definitely stimulated the developers of these online communication systems to find the most creative solutions in order to offer the best experience to their users. The competition among these systems was beneficial for professors and students and will certainly impact the online education in the future.

It is expected that the online education makes a huge step forward after this pandemic, especially since some universities have already announced the intention to proceed in 2020/2021 academic year only with online classes.

Method

We have conducted a quantitative study among 24 students in the first and third year of study in order to understand their perceptions and discontents about the online learning. All of them are full-time students so the online learning was a major shift in their academic activity.

At this moment there is not much scientific literature regarding the online learning related to the COVID-19 pandemic and for this reason we have reviewed the specialists' opinion regarding the online learning from the interviews and press articles. This review together with the students' opinions helped us summarize the perceived advantages

and disadvantages of this learning method as well as the guidelines for the future of the face to face and online learning.

Results and discussion

The quantitative study among 24 students enrolled in a private Romanian university (68% of the students were enrolled in a final year of their bachelor's degree and 32% in the first year) revealed some interesting results. Comparing the online educational activity before and after the pandemic, there is a visible increase after March, 13. 72% of the respondents considered the online activity intense during the pandemic, compared to only 32% before.

Only 16% of the respondents considered that they did not have enough information or abilities to use the educational platforms in order to fulfill their obligations. This result is corelated with the use of the educational platforms before the pandemic. The universities that had used the educational platforms before, eased the online educational process both for professors and students. Of course, some students have avoided or minimized the use of these platforms (since the largest part of the student – professor interaction was face to face) and they had difficulties in adapting to the online classed.

Table 1 The intensity of the online activity before and after the suspension of the face to face classes
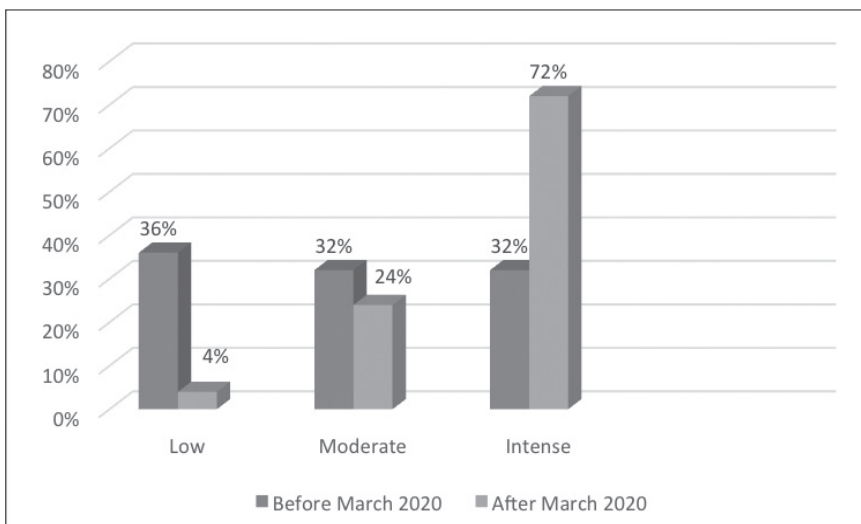
36% of the respondents considered that the quality of the educational process has decreased during online classes, while 44% considered that it has remained the same and 20% that it has been improved. These results are consistent with the survey conducted by Top Hat, a learning platform for higher education among 3089 higher education students from North America, that revealed that 70% of the respondents considered their school's response to pandemic good or excellent, although the vast majority preferred in person learning (Top Hat, 2020).

Among the advantages of the online classes, the students mentioned the flexibility of the program, the time spent on individual study, the financial reasons (the reduction of the transportation or accommodation costs) and even the opportunity to complete the academic year despite the social isolation imposed by the pandemic.

The biggest disadvantage of the online learning was considered the lack of interaction with the professors and with the other students. Although the communication platforms permit the interactions, these were far from ideal because of the internet connection and because of the lack of adaptation to this new form of communication. Many professors complaint that the students' screens were black (with no video connection) and that they felt they were talking to themselves. The students argued that the internet connection was not good enough to permit a video conference and for the time being the thinks had worked on this way. If we were talking about an online study program assumed by the students, the situation could have been different, and the students would have been forced to take care of all the technical aspects regarding the internet connection. Since the students have been enrolled in a full time, face to face program, the professors did not pretend all these problems to be solved at a short notice. Some of the professors tried to help the students by posting the recorded course. This method has both advantages and disadvantages – the students can watch the recording when their schedule permits and as many times as they want, but the interaction with the professor and the colleagues is limited to written messages.

When asked whether there are some aspects of the online learning that could be used in the face to face learning, more than 45% of the respondents answered with *no*, without other explanation. This answer might transmit a general discontent about this period of time, caused not necessary by the content of the educational process, but by the lack of

adaption to this new situation. The rest of the respondents mentioned the recorded courses that would be useful, not instead of face to face classes, but in addition to them. This is an interesting and valuable suggestion also highlighted by professor Mircea Miclea in an analysis about the education of the future (Miclea, 2020). Professor Miclea speaks about the *blended learning*, a teaching method that integrates the online techniques with in person learning. When besides the face to face class, the pupil or the student has the possibility to access that subject online taught in two or three alternative ways, he has the chance to understand it better and to complete his study, even when the class teacher did not present the subject in the most appropriate manner. In addition, this blended learning could have a greater impact for the present digital generation.

It is interesting to notice that the digital generation students did not enjoy very much the online learning. One reason might be, as professor Daniel David noticed in an analysis for *Adevărul*, the fact they habitually use internet for entertainment and are not accustomed to use it for learning (David, 2020). At least partially this is also the professors' fault that they avoided using the online medium for learning. In order to overcome this deficiency, the professors must be instructed in using properly the online medium. We must acknowledge that the present generation of teachers and professors is not prepared for this task.

In a study from 1999 about the students satisfaction regarding the online courses (Fredericksen, 1999), 94% of the students enrolled in an online course considered that they had learned at least as much as they would in a face to face class and the rate of completion was 82% at the online courses compared to 78% at the same courses but delivered in the face to face manner. How can we explain such an attitude regarding the online classes in 1999 compared to the students' attitude during the 2020 pandemic, especially if we consider that during the last 20 years, the online medium has developed a lot? Probably the difference comes from the freedom of choice and the preparation for the online classes. In the 1999 study we are talking about students who had voluntarily enrolled in an online class, had assumed this method of learning and had prepared themselves technically for this activity, while the professors had carefully developed their courses especially for the online medium. By comparison, in 2020 we are talking about students enrolled in full time program, most of them living in the university campus, who were

forced to turn to online learning, while most of the professors moved the content of their course from the classroom to online medium with no adaptation at all. Under these circumstances, it is normal to have a negative attitude regarding this type of online education.

Online education has clear advantages, but the general perception is that it is of a lower quality compared to in-person education (Hodges et al., 2020) and the shortcomings of the recent experience might deepen this perception.

In order to emphasis the distinction between the real online learning experience and what we have experienced during COVID pandemic, Hodges et at. suggest the using of a different concept, *emergency remote teaching* that captures pretty accurate what happened during the second semester of the 2019/2020 academic year (Hodges, 2020). This concept is more appropriate at least in order to make us aware of the difference between the real online learning and what we have experienced during this pandemic.

The experience of online learning during COVID pandemic included some fixed points that could not be changed at that moment – the number of the students in a class, the content of the subjects that has already been established at the beginning of the academic year, the technical possibilities of both professors and students that could have been improved, but only to a lesser extend during that ten weeks. All these factors are carefully considered in real online education in order to provide the best educational experience possible.

It is generally considered that preparing an academic course might take six to nine months but the online courses during this pandemic were prepared from one week to another. Even if the general content of the course had been already prepared before the pandemic, it would still have been necessary to adapt it to the online teaching. It is clear that the professors did not have the time to do this and most of them were not trained in this field.

Another challenge for online learning during this period was the online examination for the courses designed for face to face delivery. Preserving the academic integrity during the examination was difficult for the professors that were not prepared for online learning. The professors that continued to ask their students to memorize and reproduce the theoretical information had no means of ensuring the

integrity of the exams. The professors who evaluated the understanding and the application of the theoretical information in different contexts were certainly able to offer a correct evaluation to their students. For the face to face learning it would be an important gain if the professors implemented a more creative and applied form of examination.

A major risk for the higher education institutions is the decline in the number of students. There are several factors that might lead to this – the uncertainties created by this pandemic may discourage some potential students to invest in their education, the financial difficulties related to the economic crises may put some students in the impossibility to pay their tuition fees and the other expenditures, the mature students, that are less familial with the online learning system may postpone the beginning or the continuation of their studies until the pandemic situation becomes clear because they do not want to risk to continue with online learning, since their option is for face to face learning.

Conclusions

First of all, we have noticed that most of the Romanian universities implemented online teaching immediately after the suspension of the face to face activities, although in the beginning the suspension had been taken into account only for three or four weeks. Nevertheless, almost all faculty members experienced difficulties with online teaching methods and the universities discovered the limits of the educational platforms used by too many people in the same time. The technical support teams usually available in all the universities were not big enough to assist all the professors and students that needed help.

While the educational platforms and video conferences systems adapted to the new realities, some of these shortcomings were overcome but it was clear for everyone that nobody was prepared for this shift. The switch from in-person to online learning was too rapid in order to make all the necessary adaptations. To look at the bright side of the problem, being force to quickly adapt to the new circumstances, the faculty, the universities' administrations and the developers of the educational or communication platforms have probably made during these about ten weeks progresses that would have been done in normal conditions in many years.

Both professors and students accepted this form of online learning as an alternative to wasting the whole academic year, but if they had to choose, most of them would prefer in person learning. This is a normal preference, since we are talking about students who had chosen this form of learning instead of an online or distance learning that is in general available in many countries and fields.

We have to seriously consider the concept of blended education, combining the online and the face to face learning. Our students are part of the digital generation and some of us, the professors, are not fully aware of the impact of the digital technologies on their life and brain. We are still looking mostly at the disadvantages and at the bad influence of the online medium on the pupils' and students' ability to learn and it is the proper time to consider using this medium to support learning. Our students' presence in the online medium is a reality and it would be an advantage to use this presence in their educational process.

The changing times we live in impose the proper training of the professors in order to be able to teach in different contexts, including the online medium. This pandemic revealed the necessity of a proper training for creating and delivering online courses. Fortunately, the online learning system has developed a lot in the recent years, so there are a lot of resources and experience to be used and assimilated by the traditional learning system.

At this moment we do not have clear information about how the new academic year would start. We hope to start it in normal conditions, that means the learning to be delivered in the system chosen by every student. But the university administration should prepare for the worst by investing in the educational platforms, by training the professors for online learning and why not by looking for ways to support the students who have no access to internet or technologies. The government should also solve this major source of social exclusion – the lack of access to education at all levels.

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