Students Return after COVID-19 Crisis

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Abstract: The pandemic caused by the SARS-COV-2 virus led to social distancing measures in this context, universities temporarily closed in Romania and most states of the world. The educational process has moved to the online environment, taking place through online platforms. According to General Comment No. 13 of the Committee for Economic, Social and Civil Rights 140, education is characterized by four elements in an interdependent relationship, namely availability, accessibility, acceptability, and adaptability. Thus, the state must provide institutions and educational programs, which provide libraries and digital facilities, accessible to students. The accessibility of educational institutions refers to three aspects: non-discrimination, accessibility from a geographical point of view, and accessibility from an economic point of view, which implies that education does not involve too high costs. Acceptability concerns aspects related to the form and content of education, from teaching methods to the curriculum, and adaptability represents how the educational process can adapt to the needs of changing societies.

1. INTRODUCTION

The global crisis triggered by the pandemic COVID-19 has affected all fields of activity. From the way goods are produced, how we spend our free time, and the way we build plans, all aspects of life day to day have been significantly modified. The system of education could not be untouched by developments from this year, and the consequences can be, in the medium term and long, significant (Comisia Națională a României pentru UNESCO, 2020).

According to the data provided by UNESCO, about the impact of the Coronavirus on education, as of March 15, 2020, the closing of universities affected 91.3% of the number of students worldwide, i.e. 1,575,270,054 students (UNESCO, 2020). A very large part of students from all over the world did not have access to alternative learning methods. The closure of the universities was decided through the prism of the decision to stop the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. 100 countries have decided to close schools across the board countries, affecting more than half of the world’s students.

UN chief António Guterres, in his speech, stated that the decisions taken now will affect over a long period hundreds of millions of people and influence the development of their countries. “We are facing a generational catastrophe that could squander untold human potential, undermine decades of progress, and exacerbate entrenched inequalities,” Also school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic have affected nearly 1.6 billion students around the globe, with immediate and long-term repercussions. In the video message on the occasion of the introduction of the policy document on education and COVID-19, the UN General Secretary said that it is a

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defining moment for children and young people around the world. “The decisions that governments and partners make now will have a lasting effect on hundreds of millions of young people, as well as on the prospects of development of countries for decades”. The health emergency has exacerbated the disparities that already exist in education, and prolonged school closures could reverse the progress of the past five years, especially regarding the education of girls, adolescents, and young women. Projections indicate that nearly 24 million students from elementary school to university could drop out of classes because of the economic impact of the health crisis (UNESCO, 2020). The Secretary-General’s policy paper calls for preventing the existing learning crisis from turning into an irreparable calamity (UNESCO, 2020).

According to statistical data, the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the educational process around the world in two ways: through the complete closure of schools at all levels and through the economic crisis due to the measures to combat the pandemic. “The pandemic had a profound impact on education, closing schools almost everywhere on the planet – the biggest shock to all education systems in our life. The damage will become even more severe as the emergency of health will escalate into a deep global recession,” according to the UN report. There are no areas that are not affected by the consequences of the spread of COVID-19.

The impact of COVID-19 on the education system differs from one country to another, having its particularities (Comisia Națională a României pentru UNESCO, 2020). However: the pandemic has put universities in difficult conditions, forcing them to adapt in the shortest possible time to the transition online, to spend significant funds for the often accelerated digitization, and to make decisions without taking into account the possible consequences for the students.

2. MATERIAL AND METHODS

Teachers are the backbone of education systems and the key to achieving goals of learning, regardless of context and situation. As part of the containment measures related to COVID-19, universities and professors quickly mobilized and innovated to make necessary means available to students’ distance teaching, with or without the use of digital technologies. In addition, teachers had a role essential for communicating measures that prevent the spread of the virus, ensuring that students are safe and supported. With the reopening of universities, their role becomes important. Education systems around the world face a combination of common and unique challenges following the COVID-19 pandemic. It is found that in most countries there is a decrease in the number of active cases, leading to the reopening of universities. Great importance will be given to the way of reopening in safety (United Nations Development Programme, n. d.).

There is no perfect or absolute set of answers to problems related to re-entry within universities. For this reason, each university will have to establish its own optimal and minimum conditions for reopening.

Each school will consider how they can best apply decisions related to the return of students to universities must be made through social dialogue and strategies of communication with immediate effect. Teachers, have to be actively involved in establishing policies and plans for the reopening of universities, and in fulfilling the measures of safety and health in the educational process. Another issue is related to equity, a component of awareness to encourage the return to the university of vulnerable students, including those with disabilities. Posts must accept the challenges specific to students who have lived through painful experiences in families related to
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COVID-19. In the case of selective return or staggered, the information can explain the reason for the decision and the proposed calendar for those who continue to learn at home.

A systemic approach to communications can be adopted, including local/educational authorities, organizations of teachers, universities and the health sector.

Concern for the well-being of teachers and students is at the heart of the process of decision-making, balancing the desire to return to universities. Health and safety policies and practices must be developed together with their representative staff and organizations. Teachers must be prepared for the different ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic can affect both teachers and students. Teachers and students may go through psychological distress and socio-emotional as a result of prolonged isolation. Psychological and socio-emotional distress can lead to teacher burnout, expressed by high rates of absenteeism or even physical or mental wear and tear, undermining efforts to strengthen school resistance.

University-wide responses may include ongoing psychological and social-emotional assessments and support for teachers and students. Teachers must be free to address their own needs, take care of themselves, and manage their stress. University management can contribute to the development of teachers’ skills stress management and coping mechanisms. This is essential to ensure that teachers can teach effectively and provide much-needed psychosocial support to students. At the beginning of the pandemic, it was found that teachers switched to digital teaching. Students were the beneficiaries of distance education, and teachers abandoned the classical form of lessons. Digital solutions in the field of education were not previously used as actively as they might seem. The pandemic put the stress test to the test, and the aggravation of “digital inequality” was confirmed, because 40% of the world’s population still does not have access to the Internet (Kamarianos et al., 2020).

The return to universities represents a second significant change in teaching and learning for students as well as teaching staff. To manage the process, teachers and teaching assistants must receive training and information appropriate professionals to assume the responsibilities and fulfill the expectations in the effort to return to the amphitheaters.

Training, mutual learning and collaboration with other teachers, both within the university and more widely, will be essential. Such support is particularly important when additional pressure may be placed on teachers’ time if they are required to provide both face-to-face and distance education.

The key role of teachers in recognizing educational gaps and formulating pedagogical responses remains essential. As ensuring quality instruction may have been a challenge during the pandemic, teachers will need to assess learning that has taken place at home, online or offline and make adjustments to ensure that those left behind are helped. Flexible approaches will be required of teaching and learning, accelerated learning and remedial educational strategies to ensure that the needs of all students are met. This is especially true for vulnerable groups, those with special needs, ethnic or cultural minorities and those who live in remote rural areas without access to distance education.

Decisions to reopen depended on the context and the universities’ ability to plan, obtain or mobilize budgets and the resources needed to activate hygiene protocols and security measures, ensuring physical distancing and strengthening the capacity of teachers and teaching support staff to
deliver learning outcomes. The reopening of universities will require effective monitoring, evaluation and adaptations to implementation, as is considered necessary. Based on tools from ministries of education, universities must adapt and use simple frameworks to measure progress.

The roles of teachers in the quality teaching process and the promotion of a safe learning environment. The university is a complex institution, a fact that made the management complex and not without problems during the pandemic and after it. In the event of a change in the pace of teaching and student assessment, the university infrastructure will change, to support the educational process. Also if the rate of digitization of learning and student assessment accelerates, it will be necessary to change the support infrastructure of the educational process.

In the context of the pandemic, some subjects were difficult to transfer to the online environment, especially in the fields of technical sciences, health, and sciences vocational.

One of the key solutions is the implementation of hybrid education (blended learning) by conducting online courses, carrying out physical practical activities, as well as integrating into the process of learning the possibilities generated by Open Educational Resources.

Universities must perfect themselves in terms of online education. In the situation where it is difficult to predict the evolution of the pandemic and its impact in the future, the accelerated transformation of the teaching process, increasing online teaching capacity and narrowing the digital divide. The implementation of hybrid education assumes that students and teachers have high-performance electronic devices. In this context, it was the “Euro 200” program that proposed the granting of financial aid for the purchase of electronic devices (United Nations Development Programme, n. d.).

In Romania, following the opinion polls carried out in universities, the following wishes of the students are found: 50.8% want the university to provide the opportunity to follow all courses in an online format, even after the pandemic is over. The number of those who are neutral or do not want this is 47.4%. In conclusion, the problem of university education face to face fully and online, divided the students into two categories, approximately 50 want the resumption of physical qualities, while the other side is proficient in the online environment. This phenomenon must be taken into account in the development of policies in the field of university education.

Another problem from the pandemic period showed that 66% of students believe that the teachers were sufficiently prepared, well, or very well prepared for online education. While 32.6% consider that there were teachers who did not adapt to online teaching. Also, 30.1% of students studied more during the period of the pandemic, 31.3% studied little, and 19% of students studied as much during the pandemic as before it (UNICEF, 2020).

3. CONCLUSION

It was found that during the pandemic there was, at first, a decrease in the quality of university education. This was largely due to the lack of distance learning systems and their adaptation to the needs imposed by the COVID-19 crisis. There was also a lack of software resources.

In many situations, University websites could not work due to increased logging in a HUGE number of students. During the online period, there were problems with the applications during the seminars and courses. Work was done on the Zoom platform, Google Meet, or other
applications. There were hacker attacks, emerging the concept of Zoombombing. This concept characterizes actions related to the violation of online spaces, including the hacking of virtual classrooms.

In March 2020, UNESCO organized a video conference with the participation of 70 member states. The objective of this conference was to create a support group for its members. The Ministries of Education launched online courses, TV lessons, and digital platforms so that education does not stop due to the COVID-19 crisis. For teachers, this was a new challenge. Teachers face an unexpected challenge. It was necessary to guarantee learning with the help of new methods. The educational process should face the requirements and challenges that should reduce the negative impact produced by the pandemic.

It is desired that all the states of the world react promptly so that the educational process recovers quickly, the damages are minor, and in some cases, the recovery can be transformed into new methods of distance learning. To achieve the objectives, three stages are necessary: “copying policy”, “continuous management” and “improvement and acceleration”.

Data provided by UNESCO show that 826 million students worldwide do not have personal computers, while 706 million do not have access to the Internet, representing 43% of the total number of students (Comisia Națională a României pentru UNESCO, 2020).

The pandemic generated by the SARS-CoV-2 virus represented a global challenge, showing that we live in an interconnected society. No country, no society, and no community could tackle alone this issue. The pandemic represented a “test for the system, values, civilization, for all humanity”.

References
