

EDUCATION IN THE POST COVID PERIOD

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Abstract: *The Coronavirus pandemic has caused a global economic slowdown and forced teachers, students and educators at all levels of education to adapt quickly to the use of e-learning. Online and distance learning also took place before the COVID-19 pandemic, both during regional crises such as earthquakes, floods and other natural disasters in order to maintain continuity in education, and as a method of adapting education to the development of technology and the limitations of today's society dominated by a frantic economy. The magnitude of the current crisis is unprecedented and the lasting effects of this will be found in the education process, too. Thus, for some experts, a return to traditional physical education is necessary immediately, while for others, this forced transition to online education is a time to change and reinvent the way in which education could take place in the future. The conceptual solutions to these crises reflect a profound change in policy-making, and this article highlights the need for a trans-disciplinary approach to education policy-making so that the current approach to education leads to a permanent change in the way future education is delivered. We also include military education with its specific disciplines and in complementarity with its own organizational rules.*

Keywords: *education; COVID-19 pandemic; military education*

1. INTRODUCTION

The pandemic highlighted the fact that schools are a complex place, much more than a simple 'learning place'. They give a whole range of knowledge, they are the environment that offers integration and social development, health care, vocational training, community support, internet connections, language services and much more. Now, research shows that school leaders at all levels intend to find a way to continue to provide a wide range of educational and social services when the pandemic ends. The forced transformations of the pandemic on the labor market lead to a rapid adaptation of education and we believe that there will be an explosion of new vocational training programs, faster and more accessible training routes and partnerships with representatives of the economy in its current form. The faster the school adapts to these developments, the better integrated the graduates will be in the economic branches that survive the pandemic and that are really developing.

2. ANALYSIS OF THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

We begin the analysis with what Surgeon General Vivek Murthy said as a rare warning: "It would be a tragedy if we overcame a public health crisis just to allow another crisis to grow in its place."

(Murthy, 2020:27). Of course, Vivek Murthy brought to the attention of readers the related consequences recorded during the pandemic and aggravated by it. And here we are talking about anxiety and depression, about violence, racism and a number of other social and political conflicts. He certifies this hypothesis through case studies conducted mainly in American society. However, students and the school have been similarly affected by government measures to limit the effects of the pandemic in recent years because they have been similar given the massive interdependence of states in this common fight against the virus. A major topic of interest on the European agenda is the adaptation of education and training systems to the digital age, and some recent initiatives need to be mentioned in this regard: (1) the launch in July 2020 by the European Commission of the new European Skills Agenda for Sustainable Competitiveness, Social Equity and Resilience, from which we have two key objectives - promoting lifelong learning and training skills for a job; (2) the launch, on 30 September 2020, by the European Commission of the new Digital Education Action Plan, entitled "Resetting education and training for the digital age (2021-2027)" based on an extensive public consultation process, resulting in that "60% of respondents believe that they have improved their digital skills during the crisis, with more than 50% wanting to deepen them";

the plan includes two strategic priorities embodied in the development of a high-quality digital educational ecosystem and in the majority the strengthening of digital skills for digital transformation; (3) the launch in September 2020 by the European Commission of the Communication on the European Education Area by 2025, an initiative aimed at strengthening the education and training systems following the Coronavirus crisis, at the same time as the EU's recovery (<https://www.edu.ro>).

We deduce from this the concern for the continuation, development and adaptation of the education systems on both continents in the conditions imposed by the pandemic, but also by the labor market that is facing the need for experts in the digital field. Moreover, it is noted that

the COVID-19 crisis has drawn attention to both the opportunities and risks of online life and the need for a better and safer digital environment for all, especially for young people under 18 (Strategy on the Digitization of Education in Romania, 2021:5).

After a traditional research, based mainly on the conclusions of various authors who have analyzed the educational reality, we can adhere to the idea that today, higher education is facing a real crisis that does not seem to have its roots in the Coronavirus pandemic but somewhere deeper, in the speed of adapting educational policies to social and technological realities. Rather, COVID-19 has led to an increase in the situation and a new and in-depth analysis of budgets, costs per student and training methods. We look at the realities of higher education; in the US

the reality that already existed at the beginning of March, when we were not aware of how much it will change soon: schooling rates have increased by 213 percent in the last thirty years - faster than any other industry, including assistance medical. At the end of 2018, student loan debt reached \$ 1.47 trillion, more than the national total of credit card or car loan debt. However, students pay a high price for much of the same product that higher education has offered for decades. (Sands & Shushok Jr., 2020:2).

If we refer to the higher education in Romania, it results that

the total number of universities registers a downward trend, a situation determined, first of all, by the decrease of the number of private universities, concomitantly with the maintenance, in approximately the same parameters, of the state higher education network. The number of faculties decreases constantly in the period 2011-2018 (from 614 to 545), after which it reaches 546 at the level of the academic year

2019-2020. The declining trend in higher education institutions is correlated with the trends in student enrollment (Report on the state of higher education in Romania 2019, 2020:4).

But now that COVID-19 is wreaking havoc on the economy, on public health but also on the normal operations of universities, it may be time for a momentum to accelerate change. Perhaps university leaders will seek to think more creatively, says Steven Sample, a former president of the University of Southern California, who advocates 'free thinking,' a practice that requires participants to think beyond the constraints of resources, time, and fears of failure". Because the business world is full of free-thinking examples, and here we can exemplify Elon Musk's SpaceX and Tesla - excellent case studies. The current social, health, economic, development conditions are those that impose programs or inventions that change the game in higher education, which boldly traverses the new reality to improve their graduates and their learning.

In fact, an analysis of the online master's degree obtained in a field related to mathematics, computer science, law, sociology or even philosophy, history suggests that higher education institutions can successfully use technology to allow the transfer of resources to students, thus opening accessibility of education without a proportionate increase in costs. However, there are also universities that have entered into partnerships with business and industry institutions to accelerate the adaptation and quality of the workforce and the development of technology. COVID-19 has forced us all to think differently, and education has some of the biggest implications. We can say that this period has revealed our ability to be innovative when the rules we know no longer apply. Certainly, what has been achieved well in education under the pressure of social distancing measures taken during the crisis will be capitalized on so as to support students' access and success despite deep budget deficits. Moving online training can make teaching-learning, research and training more flexible, but there are opinions that

the speed with which this transition to online training is expected to take place is unprecedented and astonishing (Hodges *et al.*, 2020:4).

3. HOW DO WE CAPITALIZE ON THE EXPERIENCE GAINED DURING THE PANDEMIC?

In this sense, there are aspirational visions, especially now, when the landscape has changed. It is

possible, of course, that this change will become permanent, and if we recognize the opportunities, the conversations that are now taking place between university administrations and their boards around the world and, increasingly, between professors, students and other staff, to lead to that much-discussed transformation in recent years. We agree that

there are two such aspirations that I believe have become urgent: first, a student, staff, or faculty member should be able to be anywhere in the world participating in a learning or discovery community and continue to be on fully involved with the university; and secondly, wealth, income and the postal code should not be predictive factors in student access and success (Sands & Shushok Jr., 2022:2).

Both trends have often been expressed in the last decade, but few traditional universities in Romania and even in Europe can rightly claim that any of these goals have been achieved. Now, under the pressure of the pandemic and the immediate resolution, both were possible even if the means and contents were largely adapted ‘on the fly’, without too much study and prior preparation. Because it is certain that well-planned online learning experiences are different from online courses in response to a crisis or disaster. Of course, the residential model that has proven its efficiency and usefulness for many generations of students, through their holistic development and socialization, will not be completely abandoned.

So, in Timothy Sands & Robert Shushok Jr. view (2022:2), the university becomes the ‘nest’ for the first year and the home base after that. This first year on campus gives students the opportunity to be part of an academic community, allows them to adapt to the new educational status and also facilitates the identification of ways of personal development. It also prepares the future graduate's collaboration with the university's partner economics institutions, thus ensuring a later integration into the labor market more easily.

This first year prepares the student for the second community he will be part of - that of teachers and mentors who guide him in person and remotely. In this scenario each course is HyFlex thus giving the student the opportunity to engage in learning and research depending on his special situation. The student is either in a laboratory or part of a research project, participates in learning on or off campus and thus has the opportunity to schedule time and prioritize their goals. Faculty and teachers could have the same flexibility as well.

What are the consequences of such a scenario in higher education? The university becomes HyFlex in every dimension. Thus, it becomes delocalized but nevertheless having the university campus with its characteristics. The beneficial element for the university is that some of its students and professors are off-campus for a well-defined period of study and the institution can expand its access and gain momentum without having to develop its permanent infrastructure. Also, the costs per student are lower which will make the studies accessible to larger categories of young people and the economic partners of the universities will more easily attract talented students to their companies. They also become interested in teaching-learning at the university and thus the faculty has a group of specialists in each field, who contribute to the good preparation of students.

It should also be noted that with the growth of transnational education, the motivations and models of development increase proportionally. Host countries may have different motivations in opening their borders to foreign education providers: either as a way to meet the high demand for higher education or to accelerate the pace of reforms in their own education policies. Online training is likely to facilitate the process of internationalization, bringing with it benefits related to the possibility of providing higher education opportunities for all students, not just that mobile minority. The idea that higher education institutions can develop digital learning as part of their internationalization strategy is very clear.

We can also bring the language of learning in favor of online education. The language of research is becoming more and more widespread as an English language, and it is increasingly considered the language of education around the world. Also, the “language of digitization” is the same English language, elements that favor both the internationalization of education and its development using creatively and motivatively the proven inclinations of the Z generations or those of the “Millennials generation”.

Looking at it from a different perspective, it is very tempting to compare online learning with residential learning. In fact, an article in the Chronicle of Higher Education has already called for a ‘big experiment’ to do just that (Zimmerman, 2020:4). The idea of blended learning has been included in the political agendas without paying enough attention to the fact that institutions can make different decisions and decide to invest differently, resulting in very varied solutions and results from one institution to another.

So, starting from these results, we will advance some careful reflections that we hope can be taken into account when preparing the evaluations that will result because public policies must be based on a common understanding of concepts and developments as well as a certain degree of consensus on their understanding.

The first idea is that online learning is considered to be of lower quality than face-to-face learning. We believe that all these hasty movements of online educational institutions can seal this perception and lead to a current through which complete educational profiles are not designed so that universities can take full advantage of the real advantages and open possibilities of the online format. In support of this statement, we quote the 16th President of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute, Timothy Sands, who states that

researchers in educational technology, especially in the sub-discipline of online and distance learning, have carefully defined the terms throughout years to distinguish between the extremely diverse design solutions that have been developed and implemented: distance learning, distributed education, blended education, online education, mobile education, learning and more (Sands & Shushok Jr., , 2022:2).

A second idea is the internationalization of training, a concept that is perceived differently by researchers, institutional leaders in education, decision-makers at the national level or educational or related organizations. Thus, at the Romanian level, a series of trends in the internationalization of education have been determined, among which is a “general critique of the reasons and goals of internationalization in the global arena of higher education” (Egron-Polak & Hudson, 2014:7). The internationalization of education is not at all a singular phenomenon but is massively influenced by a series of global, regional and national evolutions and trends in the political, economic, cultural and demographic field and also health.

In this regard, let us look at Europe, which is seen around the world as a model of internationalization; there are still quite a few differences between European nations both in terms of the implementation of the Bologna process and in terms of the level of development of education systems. The Strategic Framework for the Internationalization of Higher Education in Romania in 2015 shows that

funding levels, tuition fees, and scholarship schemes vary significantly between European countries, resulting in different commitments to internationalization and different institutional implementation strategies.

So the wider use of the combined form of education could be an element to overcome these shortcomings at national, European and only level.

This year of crisis has given us a glimpse into what is possible in response to the latest unique challenges for higher education institutions. Students, faculty, and academics from around the world have been involved in this process, and they have managed to do things that have never been done before in order to preserve the teaching and learning of students. When this situation is over educational institutions will have an additional experience in maintaining the continuity of training, an experience that needs to be evaluated, improved and adopted through sectoral policies.

4. MILITARY EDUCATION AND ITS SPECIFICITY IN THE PANDEMIC

In order to make a real analysis of military education, both the specific characteristics of the military organization and the objectives established by the strategic planning documents adopted at the level of the Ministry of National Defense must be taken into account. Romania's Military Strategy 2021 states that the main features of the operating environment include

interconnecting capabilities in all confrontational environments and at all levels of employment, improving autonomous systems, increasing the scope of cyberspace actions and hybrid strategies and actions (Romania's Military Strategy, 2021:9).

It follows that the development of the military education system must be in line with the objectives assumed by the Ministry of National Defense and lead to their fulfillment in the medium or long term, as planned. Defense education will be based on three fundamental directions which are to personalize and ensure the educational process for all military students, to make the education system more flexible according to priorities and challenges and to adapt the system to external changes and future trends.

Thus, defense education, under the action of the Covid-19 pandemic, like all systems in the world, is beginning to transform and modernize so as to provide a portfolio of skills needed to be created and developed to meet the complexity of its missions. type of “labor market”. The resulting conclusion was that adapting defense education to distance and/or blended learning was also the most important way forward.

Following this forced shift from military training to residential to non-residential learning, institutional

assessments are being made to identify the most appropriate directions and pathways to make the transition, and some universities are proving an accelerated pace of transformation. It is important to determine why and what changes are needed to enable distance learning to be introduced into the educational institution and what the concrete effects are. The key is to identify the necessary changes in hardware, software selection, resource needs materialized in money, time, staff, etc. and an appropriate organizational approach. Another key we believe is the mastery with which are added to university studies the training elements specific to the military organization, those necessary in creating the climate specific to military entities or the leadership skills of military structures.

In this regard, NATO has identified areas of distance learning that can be supported (Defence Education Enhancement Programme, Strategy for Distance Learning Support, 2021:9) and potential courses of action for each of them. The first direction consists of institutional support in the administration and management of a modern distance learning program that brings with it concrete challenges that consist of: “legal requirements for the distance learning system; limited experience of faculties in distance education and training, lack of support staff trained to provide distance education; lack of necessary system technology and hardware. The option is that online teaching does not replace the social interaction between the actors involved in teaching and the learning processes. Especially in military education, establishing trusting relationships between leaders, subordinates and colleagues who is essential for the successful execution of missions is a part of education that should not be lost in the process of transforming defense education. It is emphasized that it is necessary to develop the faculties so that they can design and deliver lessons using active methods of learning in a distance learning class with their own teachers and instructors or from partner schools that are competent in teaching (both synchronous and asynchronous), digital and social literacy.

Therefore, mixed or hybrid programs, as exemplified above, can be designed to correspond as closely as possible to both NATO-sponsored development directions and the training and human resource development necessary for the military organization so that so that to be able to be met the assumed military objectives.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The educational landscape in Europe and around the world has changed fundamentally and teachers, students and their families have adapted quickly and continued to learn, showing determination, adaptability, perseverance and creativity. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has raised awareness of significant gaps and shortcomings in digital skills, connectivity and the use of technology in education, the economy and the labor market.

Moreover, the COVID-19 crisis has drawn attention to the challenges, opportunities and risks of online life, and these must be assessed so that education and training systems become appropriate for the digital age, given the real and major impact of the digital transformation.

And the current general context of higher education is a major factor influencing societies, the labor market and its future, along with the continuing expansion of digitization and increasing the use of technology in education, including open access resources. It is successfully added to the transformation stage, the benefit of reducing the costs transferred to students and their families.

Based on the analysis of current trends, what are the future European trends in the evolution of education? A focus is on increasing the quality and visibility of each university while maintaining the reputation it has already earned and increasing the competition for talented students and researchers. A new balance is also sought between short-term and long-term goals influenced by the rate of subsequent social involvement of graduates and the intensification of the development of strategic partnerships with the economy.

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