

The Challenges and Opportunities of Higher Education in Romania During the COVID-19 Pandemic: An Analysis of Teachers' and Students' Perceptions of Online Education

Diana IVANA¹

Abstract

The education system was massively affected by the COVID-19 pandemics. While primary and secondary education used a mixed combination of online and face-to-face teaching, tertiary education was conducted uniquely online from the beginning of the pandemics, requesting fast adaptation in terms of teaching and learning. Moving classes online was a challenge, especially in the Romanian social background where digital skills are among the less developed in the European Union. The achievement of these competencies is the reason for a large gap between generations. In this context, we are interested in how strongly academic work was affected. We used a questionnaire based on students' and university lecturers' perceptions to assess the changes induced by the pandemic in the online activity. We also test if the differences in terms of skills, attitudes, online interaction are caused by intergenerational issues aiming to enrich the literature evidence with personal recommendations for better adapting learning and teaching requirements in times of change.

Keywords: *online teaching, COVID-19, instructors' engagement, students, education quality.*

JEL classification: I21, I23.

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1. Introduction

Significant effects of the COVID-19 epidemic were felt throughout the educational system in Romania (Nastacă and Ploae, 2023, Săgeată, et. al, 2023), where the tertiary education has been transformed by moving all the courses in the online environment. Romania is currently facing a low level of digitalization compared to other European countries and therefore the rapid transition to online courses was a significant challenge for both instructors and students. This study aims to explore the impact of this transition on the academic activities, by bringing to the fore the instructors' and students' perception regarding the potential changes and by identifying the main skills and attitudes needed and use during the online courses.

¹ Diana Ivana, Babeş- Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, Cluj-Napoca, Romania, E-mail: diana.ivana@econ.ubbcluj.ro

2. Literature review

2.1 Leveraging the Romanian setting to online teaching

In the past, virtual education was a concern for the educational system and the management of educational institutions. The COVID-19 pandemic has made virtual education a challenge for both the education system and society at large (Edelhauser and Lupu-Dima, 2020).

Online teaching, in light of the circumstances created by the COVID-19 pandemic, can be viewed as both a stress test and a catalyst for online education (Daumiller et al., 2021). Actually, for any innovative changes, there are, according to the change management theory (Lewin, 1947), external and internal forces incorporated in a three-step process (unfreezing → changing → refreezing), describing the natural progression of any change (Mishra, Gupta and Shree, 2020). Unforeseen circumstances stemming from COVID-19 resulted in the unfreezing of conventional teaching-learning practices and initiated a transition to online instruction. Additionally, the unfreezing step facilitated the development of motivation and preparedness among both system and stakeholders (Siegal et al., 1996).

Moreover, the second level is implemented through a changing process with two possible options: to either adopt to the new online model that has been implemented in other institutions or to create an innovative one's own (Mishra, Gupta and Shree, 2020).

According to some scholars, adjustments to online teaching will establish three trends in the education system: a rise in educational innovations, a strengthened public-private educational partnership, and an expanding digital divide (Tam and El-Azar, 2020). To integrate the technology into the teaching-learning process, the next step—refreezing—is essential. This allows teachers to not only use methods that students find familiar but also meet the demands of 21st-century technology (Mishra, Gupta and Shree, 2020).

The pandemic imposed significant challenges on both educators and learners. For senior educators, the technical difficulties led some to exit the profession (Stoller, 2020). Meanwhile, students found themselves needing a diverse set of skills, competencies, and resources almost overnight (Livari, Sharma, and Ventä-Olkkonen, 2020). These problems have affected teachers' and students' social, psychological, and emotional health all around the world.(Radu et al., 2020).

To help adjust to the new educational reality, teachers and academic institutions need to work together (Tuma et al., 2021). Given the new aspects of online education and its technological complexity, there is no question that difficulties have arisen in implementing transformation processes in the educational system since the COVID-19 pandemic (Mishra, Gupta, and Shree, 2020).

In the Romanian context, we feel compelled to mention that Romania was ranked 26th out of the 28 EU Member States in terms of digitalisation (DESI, 2020). However, it is noteworthy that Romania continues to confront numerous challenges within its educational system, particularly concerning EU benchmarks. The challenges encompass a high rate of early school leavers (16.4% in 2018), a notable portion of 15-year-old students who are not meeting performance standards in reading, science, and mathematics (approximately 40%), and insufficient educational investment (2.8% of gross domestic product [GDP]) (European Commission, 2019).

The challenges are exacerbated by the rapid transition to online education, prompting universities to revisit discussions about educational reforms, including digitalization of schools and competencies, teacher training, curriculum adaptation, school infrastructure, educational disparities, access inequality, and overall educational quality (Hosszu and Rughiniş, 2020).

Recent empirical evidence indicates that the prevailing view of online education during COVID-19 in Romania is that it exacerbates existing educational disparities and generates new forms of exclusion, while a positive aspect is the enhancement of teaching methods and educational content by teachers (Hosszu and Rughiniş, 2020).

Additionally, economics education is a key component of Romania's higher education system, consistently ranking among the most popular specializations. Unlike other specialties, online learning appears to be an appropriate setting for imparting economics knowledge and skills (Roman and Ploeanu, 2021).

The surprising events brought about by COVID-19 have prompted higher education institutions in the economic field to seize the opportunity for effective education and to view it as a chance to move away from traditional practices and outdated paradigms in favor of learning systems that are more accessible, less expensive, and based on technology (DePietro, 2020).

2.2 The importance of faculty performance targets on student evaluations of teaching quality, instructor engagement, and burnout in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic

Due to the social distancing requirements, the COVID-19 pandemic had a major impact on the daily operations of all public sectors. Those universities that faced the challenge of offering distance and online education were certainly impacted, along with educators who needed to make significant strategic changes to both curricula and educational platforms (Sindiani et al., 2020). At least in the beginning, the pandemic caused serious difficulties for institutions of higher education and major disruptions to teaching and learning (Dodd et al., 2021). The pandemic has exposed the vulnerabilities and inequities within global higher education by intensifying profound societal divides and entrenched systemic disparities. As a result, fundamental changes were brought about in an industry not

recognized for its speed (Purcell and Lumbreras, 2020) by hastening underlying trends and provoking seismic shifts in the sector. As a result, exploring faculty attitudes towards the shift to online teaching and their underlying motivations could shed light on individual variations in the use of online technologies in higher education instruction, as well as how these processes can be enhanced and adapted (Daumiller et al., 2021).

In this regard, the study examines faculty members' perspectives on digital technology and technology-related competencies as a crucial personal element linked to their experiences in online instruction and to student learning. Additionally, the method employed by Daumiller et al., 2021, was used as a benchmark for examining faculty burnout experiences and student evaluation of teaching quality as two pertinent outcomes linked to interindividual and intergenerational attitudes regarding the transition to online teaching because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

One of the most reliable and prominent theory, which describes the way instructors and students felt the changes caused by COVID-19 is the faculty achievement goal theory (AGT) (Daumiller, Stupnisky & Janke, 2020). Achievement goals “are cognitive representations of competence-related end states in achievement contexts that an individual is committed to either approach or avoid” (Schrager, Bodmann and Harackiewicz, 2010). These goals function as “mirrors” for teachers to assess current and future achievement situations, emphasizing various interpretations, behaviors, and responses (Tuominen-Soini et al., 2008, Rinas et al., 2020). Researchers draw on achievement goal theory to underscore the motivation of both students and teachers in light of the goals they have established regarding task completion (Senko and Dawson, 2016).

Van Yperen et al. (2014) state that this theory frames achievement goals across two dimensions: competence and valence. Daniels, Goegan, and Parker (2021) describe achievement in two ways: as demonstrating competence in relation to others (performance goals) or as merely demonstrating competence. Furthermore, the valence dimension distinguishes between approach and avoidance motivation (Van Yperen et al., 2014).

Empirical findings demonstrate that there is a positive correlation between learning approach goals and the perception of the transition to online teaching as a beneficial challenge, which may aid in instructors' development. Performance avoidance goals correlate with perceived threat levels, which have a positive association with burnout and a negative correlation with student evaluations of teaching quality (Daumiller et al., 2021). The consequences of COVID-19 also brought about changes for students; research indicates a significant decline in students' achievement goals, engagement, and success perceptions during the pandemic, alongside a rise in their views on cheating (Daniels, Goegan and Parker, 2021).

2.3 Attitudes towards online teaching

COVID-19's psychological effects on college students are not well understood (Jiang, 2020). It is believed that personal attitudes, along with other contextual factors, play a decisive role in the development of a newly adopted action (Wallence and Chen, 2006). Teachers' feelings about the changes caused by COVID-19 must be undoubtedly addressed, whereas teachers might understand the need for online teaching and learning in both cognitive and emotional ways, based on feelings of concern about their effectiveness during remote teaching (Sokal, et.al., 2020). Hence, this paper investigates three main components with regard to teachers; attitudes, more precisely the perceived threat given by the shift from face-to-face to online learning, the competence development and perceived positive challenge due to the changes brought by the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is remarkable that teachers' attitudes might be impacted by students' attitudes towards online teaching, as it has been noticed that challenges for teachers might come from students' attitudes and behaviours, given that students might be less focused during online learning and might not attend the online course or have access to all e-learning tools (Yusuf, 2020). Research data shows that in this context, access to eLearning and students' indifferent attitude towards online learning are significant challenges for teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic (Alhumaid et al., 2020). According to additional empirical data, teacher efficacy, attitudes toward change, and perceptions of administrative support were all associated with teacher resilience and burnout at the start of the epidemic. (Sokal, et.al. 2020). In addition, some findings suggested that teachers' behavioral intention and attitude during the pandemic were positively influenced by performance expectancy and facilitating conditions (Sangeeta and Urvasi Tandon, 2020).

2.4 Teachers' engagement and burnout and Student evaluation of teaching quality

According to research, working remotely is linked to higher levels of job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and job-related well-being. Nonetheless, these benefits entail a greater intensification of work and an increased inability to disengage (Crawford, Maccalman & Jackson, 2011; Felstead & Henseke, 2017).

A wealth of empirical evidence from UK business schools indicates that greater engagement among academics is likely to affect their perceptions of the new demands related to online teaching and marking (Walker et. al, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly affects teachers' burnout as well. It is important to note that teacher burnout stress did not differ based on ethnicity, location, years of teaching experience, or type of instruction, despite empirical research showing that certain factors, such as anxiety about teaching demands, parent communication, and administrative support, contribute to teachers' burnout during COVID-19 (Pressley et al. 2021).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, scholars focused on the issue of teachers' feelings about relying on technology for teaching (Sokal, et.al., 2020). Some referred to this feeling as "technostress," which characterizes the situation of educators obliged to incorporate technology into their teaching (Al-Fudail and Mellar, 2008).

3. Materials and Methods

3.1 Procedure and Sample

Faculty instructors were requested to complete a questionnaire about their personal experiences concerning the effects of COVID-19 on their teaching activities; afterwards, the students of these teachers were invited to complete a questionnaire evaluating the quality of instruction. First, key-informants were identified among different economic faculties for the online survey. The link to Google Forms was sent to key-informants via email in 2022 during the lock-downs in Romania and, after submitting their answers, the latter sent the questionnaire to university students. To answer the research question, 27 university instructors and 179 students participated in an online survey. The instructors' questionnaire sample included 60% female and 40% male respondents, while the students' questionnaire sample covered 76.5% female and 23.5 % male respondents.

3.2 Measurements

This article aims at measuring university students' and teachers' perceptions to assess the changes brought by the COVID-19 pandemic in the online activity, by using 3 questionnaires: *Faculty achievement goals for teaching*, *teachers' burnout/engagement and student evaluations of teaching quality*. The teachers and students had the possibility to respond to questions in the period February-April 2021. Based on the feedback received, some of the items were adapted so that teachers and students could understand the purpose of the study arising from the context generated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Faculty achievement goals for teaching

This section offered teachers 40 items concerning their learning approach, performance approach, performance avoidance, and work avoidance goals. The items were based on the university instructor achievement goal questionnaire developed by Daumiller et al. (2019) and used a Likert scale from 1 (do not agree at all) to 8 (completely agree).

Teachers' burnout/engagement

The Oldenburg Burnout Inventory scoring was utilized for assessing teachers' burnout/engagement. This scale defines burnout through (physical, affective, and cognitive) exhaustion and disengagement. OLBI comprises 16 items,

both positive and negative, designed to assess the two dimensions of burnout. Responses are given on a Likert scale from 1 (strongly agree) to 4 (strongly disagree). Both positive and negative items illustrate two primary dimensions of burnout, which can be understood as a continuum from disengagement to dedication (e.g., “It happens more and more often that I talk about my work in a negative way.”) and another from exhaustion to vigour (e.g., “When I work, I usually feel energised.”).

Student evaluations of teaching quality

To assess the quality of teaching from the students' perspective, the “Student Evaluation of Teaching Quality – SEEQ” questionnaire was employed. According to Fatani (2020), the SEEQ questionnaire evaluates nine characteristics of effective learning through a five-point Likert scale: learning, individual rapport, enthusiasm, examinations, organization, breadth, group interaction, assignments, and overall rating. SEEQ functions as a fast data collection instrument and has been widely used in various courses around the world, at both graduate and undergraduate levels (Grammatikopoulos et al., 2014).

3.3 Data analysis

The statistics gathered from both faculty instructors and students had been analyzed the usage of descriptive records, that specialize in mean scores to become aware of styles and trends.

For *Faculty Achievement goals for Teaching*, a set of 40 items was used, with responses measured on an 8-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (do not agree at all) to 8 (completely agree). The suggest rankings for every object had been computed to evaluate the emphasis teachers located on getting to know, overall performance, and professional development, as well as their worries approximately gratifying their teaching duties.

The Oldenburg Burnout Inventory (OLBI) assesses emotional exhaustion and disengagement throughout 16 items. Each object had a Likert scale starting from 1 (strongly agree) to 4 (strongly disagree). The suggest scores were calculated for each object to determine the general level of burnout and engagement amongst instructors.

For the evaluation of teaching quality, the Student Evaluation of Teaching Quality (SEEQ) questionnaire was used, having a five-point Likert scale starting from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The imply ratings for each of the nine dimensions (e.G., enthusiasm, organization, rapport, studying, etc.) had been calculated to assess students' perceptions of teaching effectiveness.

The imply ratings for each of these dimensions supplied a complete overview of teacher and student perspectives. These were then interpreted to assess the general impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on teaching quality, teacher well-being and the teacher-student relationship the online learning environment.

4 Results

Faculty Achievement Goals for Teaching

Teachers showed a great dedication to both continuous self-improvement and educational quality. Meeting expectations is highly valued by instructors, as seen by the item *"I want to fulfill the different requirements very well"* scoring 7.67. In a similar manner, it is remarkable that teachers aim for high performance in their teaching positions with means of 7.52 for *"I want to be very good"* and 7.74 for *"My goal is to teach very well."* With a score of 7.11 for the item *"I want to avoid fulfilling the different requirements poorly"* and 6.96 for *"I want to avoid being bad"*, the teachers also clearly demonstrate a desire to prevent poor performance. The significant emphasis on growth is highlighted by the mean score of 7.67 for the item *"I want to constantly improve my competences"* in terms of professional development, and the score of 7.63 for *"My goal is to expand my professional and methodological knowledge as much as possible"*, which further supports this dedication. However, ratings like 6.67 for *"I want to avoid not learning something new"* and 6.48 for *"It is important to me to avoid having my competences not develop further"* indicate that instructors were somewhat concerned about stagnation. With a mean score of 7.22 for *"I want other people to notice how good I am as an instructor"* and 7.04 for *"It is important to me that others don't think my teaching is bad,"* they also demonstrated a high desire to be seen as competent.

Faculty Burnout and Engagement

Teachers demonstrate a combination of burnout and engagement, according to the results from of faculty burnout and engagement data based on the Oldenburg Burnout Inventory (OLBI). The evidence show by the mean scores for *"I always discover new and interesting parts in my work"* (M = 1.70) and *"I find my work to be a positive challenge"* (M = 1.67), that many teachers are being stimulating and find their work difficult, while many also suffer from emotional tiredness. For example, the following sentences show increasing fatigue and difficulties recuperating from work.: *"There are days when I feel exhausted before I get at work"* (M = 2.70), *"During my work, I often feel emotionally drained"* (M = 2.74), and *"After my work, I typically feel worn out and weary"* (M = 3.07). Despite these burnout indicators, teachers reported also feeling engaged with their work (M = 2.04) and managing work pressure effectively (M = 1.89), implying that they are dedicated to their teaching duties despite the fact that the pandemic has heightened their fatigue.



Figure 1. Results for Faculty Achievement Goals for Teaching
Source: empirical evidence

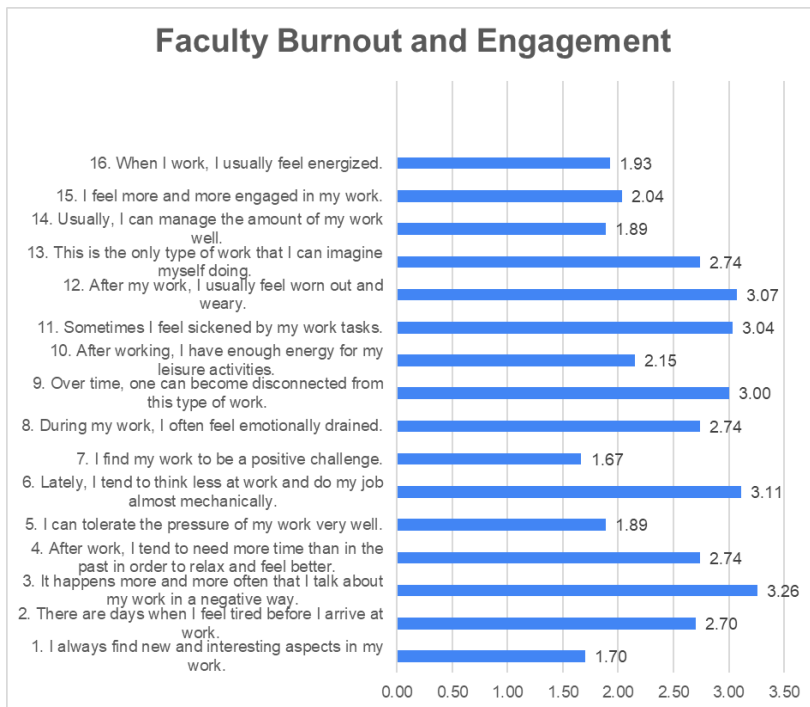
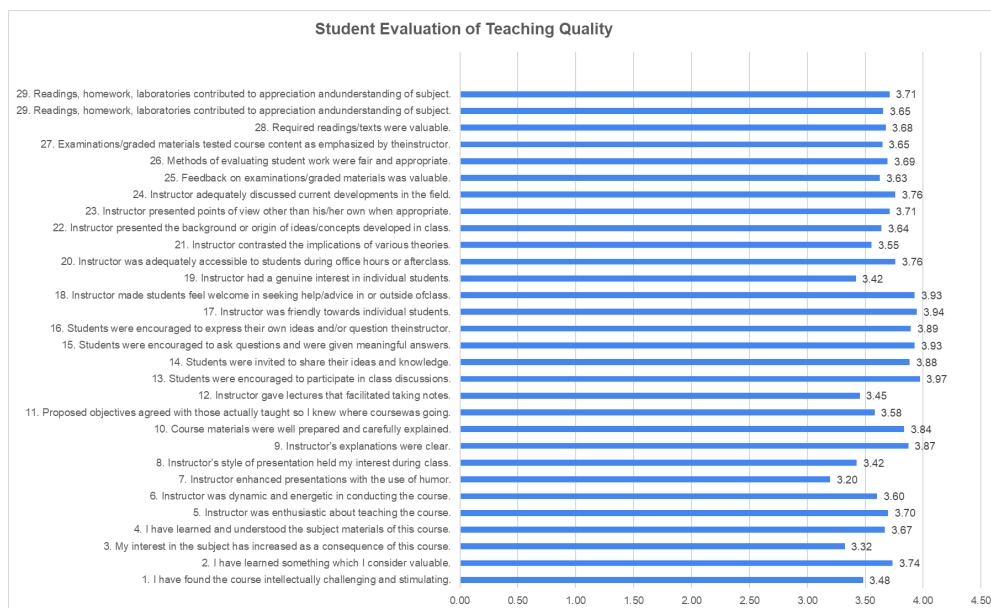


Figure 2. Faculty Burnout and Engagement
Source: empirical evidence

Student Evaluation of Teaching Quality

A high degree of satisfaction with the quality of instruction was shown by the positive ratings that students gave to several elements of their teachers' performances. With a mean score of 3.87, the item "Instructor's explanations were clear" demonstrated how much students valued straightforward communication. With a score of 3.84 for "Course materials were well prepared and carefully explained," the arrangement and preparation of the course materials were rated similarly. As seen by the mean scores of 3.70 for "Instructor was enthusiastic about teaching the course" and 3.60 for "Instructor was dynamic and energetic in conducting the course," students also commended their teachers for their zeal and vigor.



5 Conclusions

The findings indicate that while online instruction presented significant challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic and was novel to everyday operations, it has also enhanced certain facets of the educational process, including instructional strategies and the caliber of instructional resources. However, the disparities in Romania's educational system have been highlighted by the technical challenges and the unfairness of access to educational resources. To overcome these obstacles and successfully adjust to the new educational standards in the "New Normal" or post-pandemic setting, a concerted effort by educational institutions and instructors is required. Only a small number of institutions used cutting-edge e-learning and administrative systems to adapt their administrative

and learning procedures to the pandemic scenario. Therefore, being adaptable and flexible in the face of many environmental changes continues to be the fundamental.

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