

## SCHOOL ORIENTATIONS IN THE POST-PANDEMIC ERA\*

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### **Abstract**

*March 11, 2020 was the day when in Romania the pandemic moved school classes online. Nobody had the slightest idea that we were facing an entirely new situation. An invisible enemy (Covid-19) started to spread fear, changed rules and behaviors. Most of us gave up natural gestures, changed our way of working, vacations were different or didn't take place at all, in short, we adapted to a different lifestyle. The school and the children were struck by the pandemic in a very particular way. Schools closed and no one knew what was coming, because no one was prepared for something like that. The consequences were unsuspected, for the students, parents and teachers alike: they all found themselves in an unpredicted situation. The shock was strong.*

*The Romanian education system had to adapt along the way, to enter, for the beginning, in the virtual, online or hybrid meeting. The communication difficulties, at least at the beginning, were very high. Even now, the shortages of the pandemic period are being felt. But, despite all these, the school had to go forward, to function. The directions of action were and are multiple, involving various scenarios. Although even today this enemy has not disappeared, teachers, parents, students and education specialists continue to find plausible scenarios for the good functioning of the school and society.*

**Key words:** Covid-19; Pandemic; Virtual era; Online school; Post-pandemic scenarios.

### **1. Introduction**

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an unprecedented impact on all levels of education and learning around the world. At the beginning of March 2020, the closure of schools in approximately 194 countries (including Romania) affected more than 1.6 billion students at preschool, primary, secondary, high school and

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university levels, representing 90% of all students included in the education system. It refers to closing schools through physical presence in the classroom. This face-to-face kind of presence has been replaced by presence in the virtual environment, on various educational platforms.

The countries that resorted to online learning alternatives have achieved varying degrees of success according to their capabilities. UNESCO published a set of specific recommendations intended for several countries, to plan and implement distance education, but it is hard to imagine that even the richest of them would follow them all (Guțu, 2021).

The COVID pandemic caught the state system completely unprepared. The private one reacted and adapted more quickly to the new challenges to move to online education. The more cumbersome state system, with great inertia to change, initially preferred to stop classes and then asked teachers to teach online. Without national protocols and solutions, some teachers struggled to teach classes online, others sent out worksheets, but many enjoyed an unexpected holiday. In the period prior to the Easter holiday, the ad hoc organization of distance education almost entirely (91% of the responses) involved the use of applications for sending written messages or images (for example – WhatsApp), direct telephone conversations between teachers and students, different sites with educational content (Petrescu, 2020).

## 2. Consequences of the pandemic, in terms of education

Petrescu (2020), citing other bibliographic and webographic sources, also identifies some problems that students, teachers and parents were faced with during the pandemic period:

**a) There were no protocols.** Teachers could choose whether or not to hold classes, and this highly permissive approach did not encourage work. Teachers are paid, they should teach classes and do the work they are paid to do. In some cases, in the absence of other means, their work consisted only of sending out worksheets and checking them. In other situations, most did not hold classes anymore, the program was reduced to a minimum, in some cases: 1-2 classes in the primary level.

**b) Teacher training and the platforms used.** Many teachers had never taught online before, they didn't know (and still don't know) how to use an online platform.

**c) The infrastructure** was and still is a major problem. Many teachers have access to the Internet and a smart phone that can allow them a basic level of interaction with the students. The problem that some have raised is related to the lack of the means of work - not all teachers have a laptop to help them do their lessons.

Similarly, not all children have access to tablets and laptops, and the phone is not a solution. There are families with 2-3 children who do not have the opportunity to provide the children with an environment that is favourable to learning.

**d) Connectivity.** Going beyond the problems of organizing classes, there are techy problems related to Internet access. According to the European DESI index (Digital Economy and Society Index), Romania ranks 22 out of 28 in terms of internet connectivity (<https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/digital-economy-and->

society-index-desi-2019); 45% of households are connected to the Internet, but they are predominantly in urban areas. The RO-NET program for connecting rural areas to the Internet is far from being completed and anyway it is planned to cover only 35% of what is needed (<https://www.comunicatii.gov.ro/proiecte-in-implementare/proiectul-ro-net>, online, 15.11.2023/)

**e) Ensuring an environment favourable to learning.** The European Commission's Eurostat report pointed out that in 2017, the majority of the population in each EU member state lived in privately owned housing, between 51.4% in Germany and 96.8% in Romania. Also in 2017, over 15% of the EU population lived in overcrowded houses; the highest rate among the member states was registered in Romania: 47.0%. ([https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Housing\\_statistics/ro](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Housing_statistics/ro), online, 16.11.2023).

Taking into account the fact that the evolution of real estate markets has not undergone major changes during the last 2-3 years, the figures are relatively current. The reality confirmed by the statistics is the following: compared to other European citizens, Romanians live in smaller and more crowded homes. Under these conditions, providing a room so that a child will not be disturbed during the online learning process is just a dream (wishful thinking). It is possible for more than one child to study in a room, but in this case, the necessary means will have to be provided: noise cancelling headphones, although they do not completely reduce the noise. However, if both children are asked to answer at the same time, if there are teachers who do not accept that the students keep their microphones closed, other problems can arise (the ambient noises will be heard by the teacher and classmates).

**f) The decrease in human interaction between a teacher and a student as well as between students.** Hidden behind a screen, reduced to the size of a square on the monitor, participants in an online lesson cannot perceive the body language, the inflections of voices, or the appreciative smile of a classmate. All these small elements are actually essential in communication, in developing an open relationship based on trust. There are studies that demonstrate that the lack of these nonverbal elements in communication increases the feeling of fatigue, the so-called zoomfatigue (Fosslie, Duffy, 2020, <https://hbr.org/2020/04/how-to-combat-zoom-fatigue>, online, 15.11.2023).

It is harder to keep the attention of children/ students because they are distracted by other elements and because it is much harder to intervene when they do not understand something. Classic lectures and explanations that last more than 10 minutes in the online environment tire students. If in face-to-face discussions, a teacher can "teach" for half an hour without losing the students' interest and attention, things are different online, and the students feel disconnected. The solution is the adaptation of the teaching techniques to online education, although even the use of the most modern methods does not rise to the level of classical education that involved face-to-face interaction (<https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2020/03/23/how-effective-is-online-learning-what-the.html>, online, 15.11.2023)

**g) Subjective evaluation.** Evaluations can be subjective if a "one to one" evaluation method is applied: teacher - student. If in classical education, classmates

could witness a subjective evaluation, in the situation where the evaluation is done in a teacher-student format on a separate channel from the other children, the chances of the subjective evaluation being discovered and "charged" decrease drastically. And a parent, even if he attends the evaluation, not having time to compare with other students/ pupils, cannot draw a relevant conclusion.

**h) Conducting exams.** The future of a child is also influenced by the college he completes. The absence of a college entrance exam, the use of baccalaureate and high school grades as a tie-breaking criterion make children and their parents pay special attention to these grades. The problem is that in the absence of a transparent grading system, grades can differ greatly depending on the school, the class, or even depending on the teacher's affinities.

### 3. Advantages (yet) of online learning

Beyond the criticisms and shortcomings of online learning, there are also many advantages that we partially try to mention (Smărăndel, 2020).

Online learning can be defined as an alternative form of education during which the continuation of the educational process is ensured under normal conditions or self-isolation, bad weather, etc., through various IT tools for distance communication.

First of all, in order to be as effective as face-to-face training, it must be found in the form of blended learning (blended learning – online and face-to-face). The presence of each of these types of interaction, when meaningfully integrated, increases the learning outcomes.

Secondly, quality online learning means: time to plan, prepare and develop a lesson, the current situation rather forcing us to act with the minimal available resources and in a reduced time.

The careful planning of online learning involves not only the identification of the content to be covered, but also the careful design of the types of interaction, in order to support the learning process. Then, it must be adapted to the age and even the individual characteristics of the students, lending itself better to the older ages, the high school level, the students and adults in training contexts.

Looking at how learning is made more efficient by using the internet, we can also list some advantages (Smărăndel, 2020):

- **The rapid distribution of the teaching materials:** teachers or administrators can transmit the information they want very quickly, anytime, anywhere and to anyone. Thus, there is no longer a need to synchronize people to meet physically; nobody will lose anything because the information stays online.
- **The pupils/ students can get possession of the materials by simply accessing them:** anyone in the target group has access to all information, anywhere and anytime.
- **The existence of multimedia content:** images, videos, files and any kind of virtual materials which have always made learning more efficient, can also be transmitted through the Internet.

- **Contents can be deleted, corrected or updated easily:** if the distributor realizes that he has submitted wrong information or perhaps wants to update it, he/ she can do so anywhere and at any time. Also, any document can be edited and re-edited, so correction no longer causes difficulties.
- **The service used by one or more people, creating groups:** the information can be directed to one person or to several at the same time individually or groups can be created where users can communicate with one other.
- **The use of interactive contents, the existence of feed-back:** as groups exist, members can exchange experiences, opinions or information. They can also receive real-time, even quick feed-back from the group administrator or peers. Thus, there is also virtual interaction and not only individual learning (Smărăndel, 2020).

#### **4. Online learning/ education directions of action, during the post-pandemic period**

Solutions can also be identified for the recovery and resilience of education during the post-pandemic period (Guțu, 2021). Schools need resources to rebuild the learning loss once they reopen. How these resources are used, and how to target children who have been particularly affected, is an open question (Sievertsen, Burgess, 2020).

As a result, the decision and investments related to solutions for the recovery of education in the post-pandemic period must be guided by the following actions, such as:

- The risk-based approach meant to maximize the educational, developmental, and health benefits for students, teachers, staff and the general public and to help prevent a new outbreak of COVID-19 in the community;
- The need to reach the right, contextualized balance between supporting effective student learning on the one hand and ensuring the health, hygiene and safety of students, staff and the general public on the other;
- Focusing efforts on building a future-proof education system that involves a system that is not only more robust and better equipped to deal with potential new crises, but also more flexible and agile, thus offering a wider range of alternative ways and technologies of learning for all students, so that studies take place in safe environments with appropriate support for their learning and well-being;
- Making efforts to overcome large gaps (including the digital field) and intense focus on flexibility, equity and inclusion, while strengthening, at the same time, the capacities of risk management and implementation of innovative solutions (<https://s9.ro/1fw3>).

Given that the future of the pandemic is difficult to predict, all institutions recognize the need to develop action strategies for the various scenarios we could face in the next academic year.

Although the accelerated digitization that we have witnessed in recent months was the result of an unforeseen event, we can use this opportunity to identify the best and most innovative pedagogical practices emerging in online education to create a pole of expertise regarding digital solutions suitable for distance learning. As the technological challenge is properly addressed, our attention turns to the pedagogical challenges and the perspectives of testing evocative pedagogies on the occasion of participating in this great educational experiment because "The way the school looks today, that's how the country will look tomorrow" (Spiru Haret).

The pandemic has caused the most destructive disruption of education in history. It is therefore vital that the school continues with physical presence and without interruption. To keep schools open and safe, WHO, UNICEF and UNESCO have adopted a set of eight recommendations, formulated by experts from the Technical Advisory Group (TAG) for the WHO European Region, on schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic (<https://www.unicef.org/romania/ro/cum-var%C4%83ta-%C3%AEntoarcerea-la-%C8%99coal%C4%83-%C3%AEn-timpul-pandemiei-de-covid-19>):

- Schools must be among the last institutions to close and among the first to reopen.
- The implementation of a testing strategy.
- Ensuring effective risk reduction measures.
- Protecting the mental and social well-being of children.
- Protecting the most vulnerable and marginalized children.
- Improving the school environment.
- The involvement of children and adolescents in decision-making.
- The implementation of a vaccination strategy that allows children to continue school.

Regarding the pandemic and post-pandemic psycho-emotional health we can keep in mind and learn: (<https://www.unicef.org/romania/ro/pove%C8%99ti/cum-pot-adolescen%C8%9Bii-s%C4%83-%C3%AE%C8%99i-protejeze-s%C4%83n%C4%83tatea-mintal%C4%83-%C3%AEn-timpul-pandemiei-de-coronavirus>, online, 15.11.2023):

**a) Accept that anxiety (pandemic and post-pandemic) is absolutely normal**

If closing schools and alarmist headlines can cause anxiety, we must know that this is a normal reaction of the body to the crisis. Psychologists have long accepted that anxiety is a normal and healthy function that alerts us to danger and helps us take protective measures.

Even though anxiety about COVID-19 is completely understandable, we must be careful to use reliable sources (such as the websites of UNICEF and the World Health Organization) to inform ourselves or to verify any information we get from less credible channels. Let's not forget that if we have symptoms, the illnesses caused by the infection with COVID-19 are generally, relatively mild, especially in children

and young adults. It is also important to know that many of the symptoms of COVID-19 can be treated.

**b) Diversify our activities**

Psychologists know that when we find ourselves in long-term difficult situations, it is good to divide the problems into two categories: those we can do something about and those we can't do anything about.

In present conditions, many things fall into the second category, but there is one measure that helps us cope with the situation: occupying our time with various activities. As possible ways, we can relax and create balance in our daily lives, doing our homework, watching a favorite movie or reading a book before bed, etc., activities that lead us to a state of relaxation, a state of well-being.

**c) Find new ways to keep in touch with friends**

To communicate and spend time with friends while maintaining social distance, social networks are excellent communication channels. Unlimited access to screens and social networks is an advantage, but it must be used with caution: too much of it harms, spoils things.

**d) Do things for ourselves**

For example, read a book, a journal, interact with students in extracurricular situations, interact with parents, water flowers, etc.

**e) Give free rein to feelings**

It is terribly frustrating to miss events with friends, hobbies or matches. These are significant losses. For teenagers, they are rightfully very upsetting, but there is also an emotional compensation that face-to-face meetings imply: we can be more open and we can say aspects that are difficult to mention face-to-face.

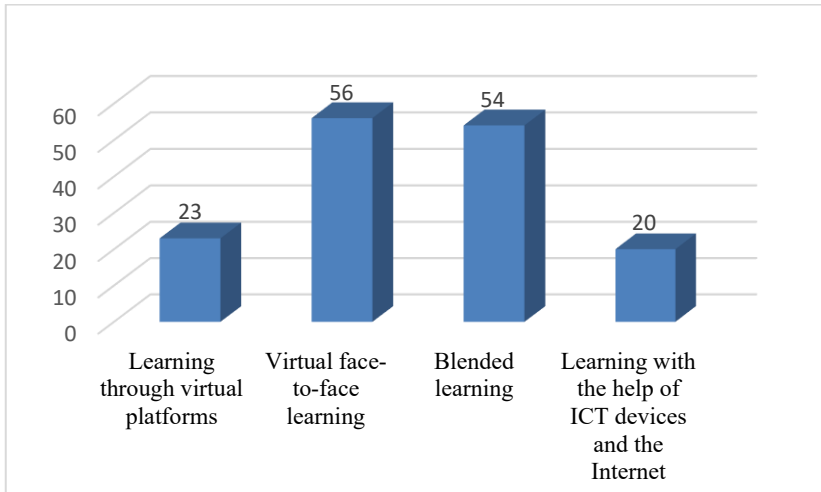
**f) Be kind to ourselves and to others**

Some teenagers (pre- and post-teens) were subjected to bullying and abuse at school because of the coronavirus. The reaction of witnesses to the abuse is the best way to sanction any form of bullying. Let's remember that now, more than ever, we need to be careful not to share or post things that can hurt others.

**5. Results of an ascertaining research**

Following a confirmatory research on a sample of 153 students (The Faculty of Letters and Physical Education and Sport, 2nd year, bachelor's degree) we have identified some important aspects from the pandemic and post-pandemic period. We are presenting, selectively, some of the students' answers (questionnaire-based survey).

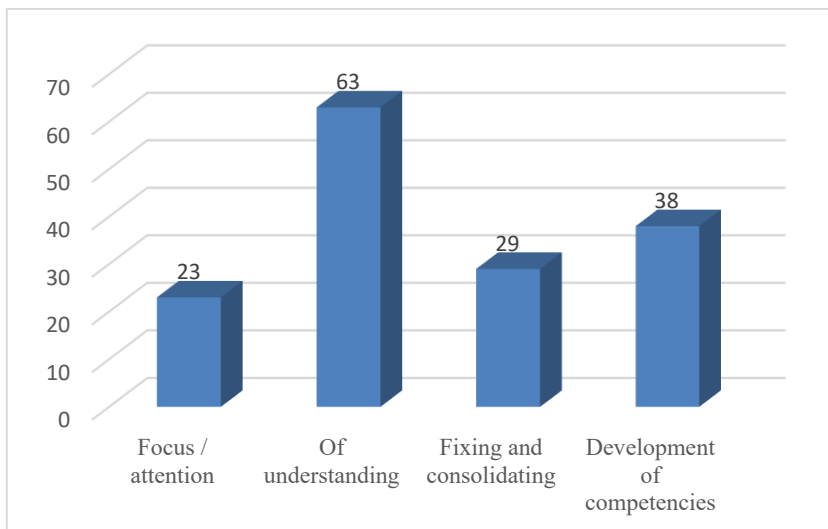
**Question 1: What do you mean by online learning during the pandemic?**



**Figure 1. What do you mean by online learning during the pandemic?**

**Conclusion:** The majority of respondents, through online learning, understand face to face learning in the virtual environment and blended learning.

**Question 2. What difficulties have you encountered?**

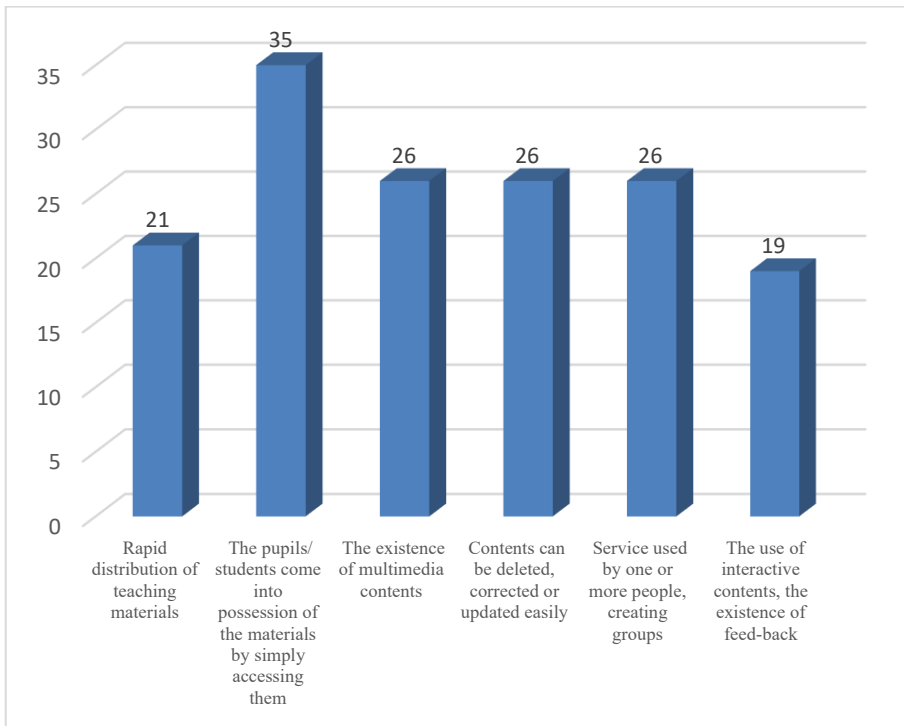


**Figure 2. What difficulties have you encountered?**

**Conclusion:** The main shortcomings are those of understanding and those of training and development of competencies



### Question 3. What were the advantages during the pandemic?

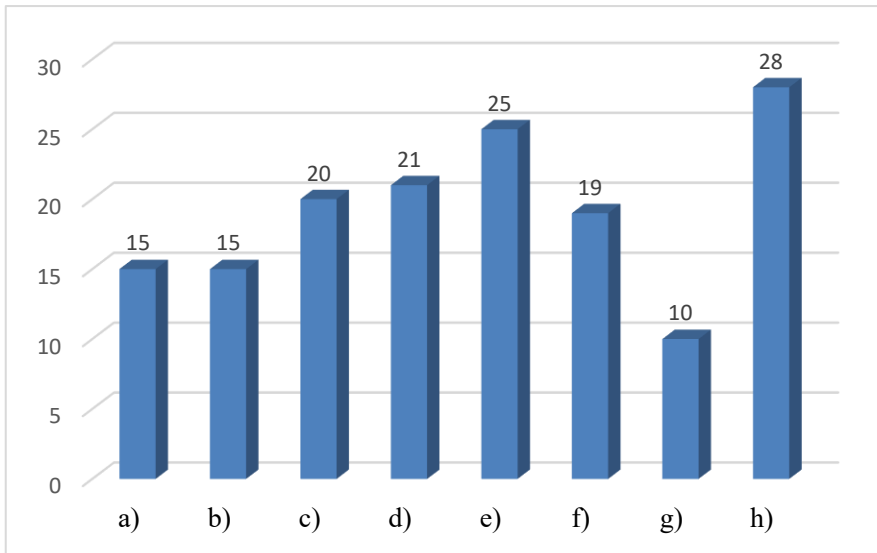


**Figure 3. What were the advantages during the pandemic?**

**Conclusion:** The answers were balanced, with most students preferring to receive the materials by simply accessing them.

### Question 4. What solutions do you think should have been adopted?

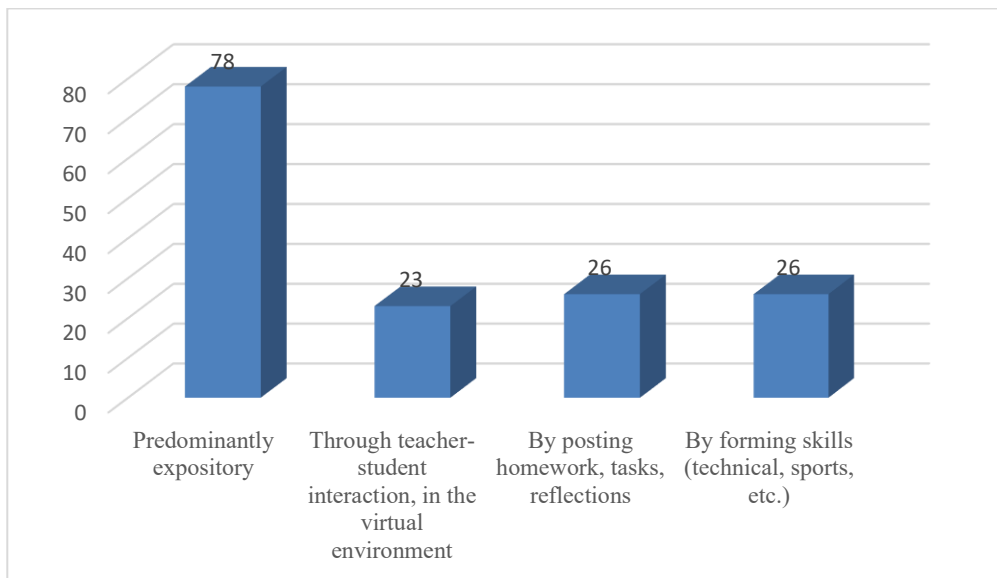
- a) Schools must be among the last institutions to close and among the first to reopen
- b) The implementation of a testing strategy
- c) Ensuring effective risk reduction measures.
- d) Protecting the mental and social well-being of children
- e) Protecting the most vulnerable and marginalized children
- f) Improving the school environment
- g) The involvement of children and adolescents in decision-making
- h) The implementation of a vaccination strategy that allows children to continue school.



**Figure 4. What solutions do you think should have been adopted?**

**Conclusion:** The responses were balanced, with most students preferring to find a vaccination strategy that would allow face-to-face classes to continue.

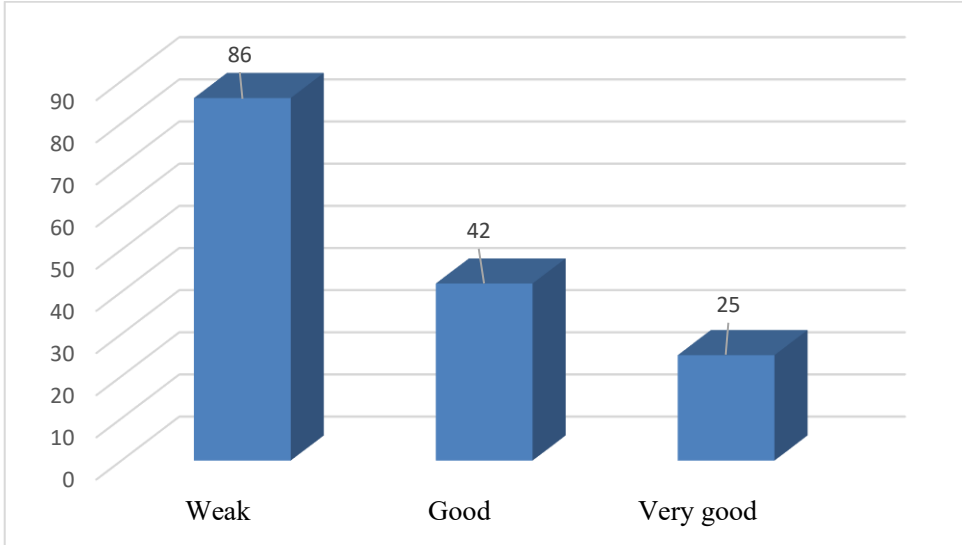
**Question 5. How was the teaching done?**



**Figure 5. How was the teaching done?**

**Conclusion:** 78 surveyed students appreciated that the way/ style of teaching was predominantly expository (with an emphasis on informative values).

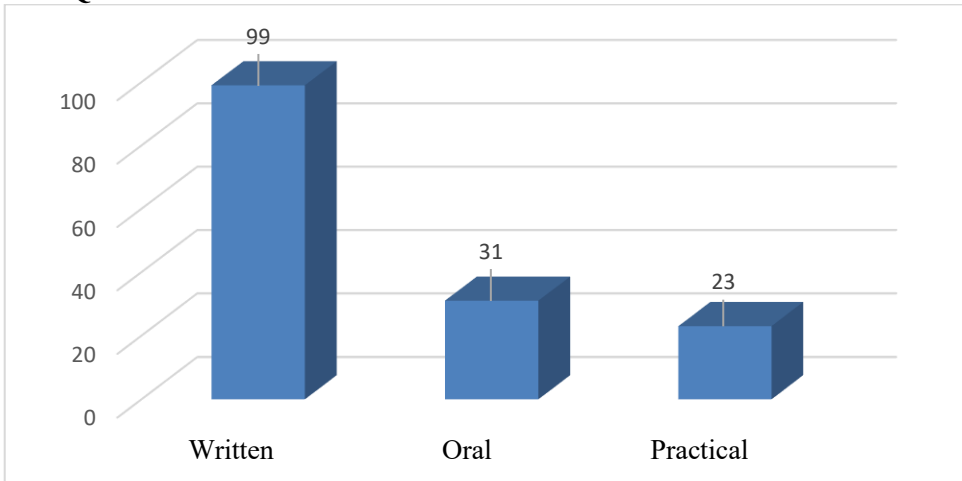
**Question 6. What was the quality of the learning?**



**Figure 6. What was the quality of the learning?**

**Conclusion:** most of the respondents considered that learning was poor during the pandemic.

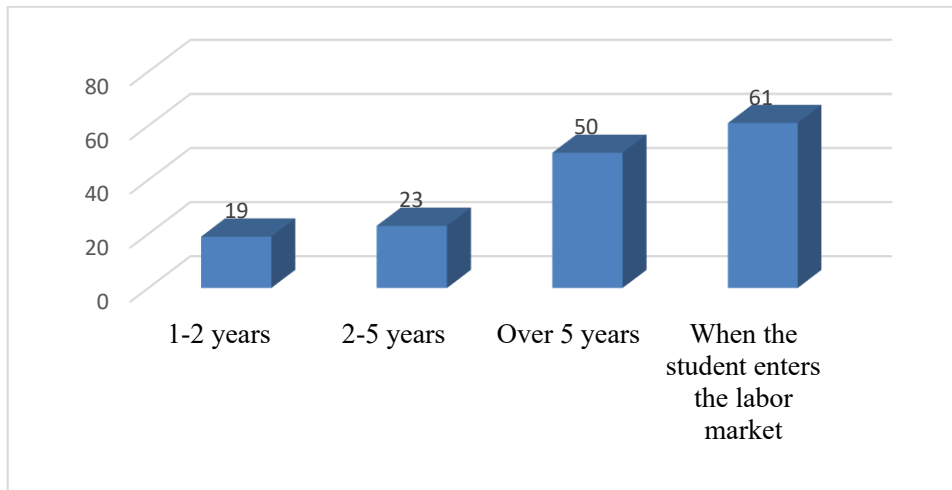
**Question 7. How was the assessment carried out?**



**Figure 7. How was the assessment carried out?**

**Conclusion:** The evaluation took place in the classic manner, i.e. "written", with various variants.

**Question 8. How long do you think the effects of the pandemic will be felt?**



**Figure 8. How long do you think the effects of the pandemic will be felt?**

**Conclusion:** The students (most of them) surveyed believe that the effects of the pandemic will be felt when they enter the labor market.

Following the application of the questionnaire, the data processing and the intervention premises, we consider it appropriate to present some objectives, in the short, medium and long term, for recovery and resilience in the educational field.

**In the short term:**

- Decisions regarding student progress and examinations;
- Modification of school calendars;
- Supporting parents in planning and integrating education at home;

**In the medium term:**

- Assessment of educational gaps;
- Adaptation of the school curricula;
- Development of online educational environments and mixed educational approaches;

- Professional development and support of teachers and school staff;
- Educational support programs for students;
- Recommendations for schools regarding recovery and assessment practices;
- Managing the workload of the teaching staff.
- Mobilization of education experts to create orientation and training packages for teachers;
- Providing IT devices and internet access for the most marginalized students.

**In the long term:**

- Integrating socio-emotional skills into the curriculum, pre-study practices, as well as school planning and school ethos;
- Addressing the digital divide;
- The transformation of pedagogical practices, including the use of mixed education;
- Assessing the impact of school closings, in 2020, on education (disaggregated data).

**6. Conclusions**

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on education tends to affect not only learning, but also other social aspects such as mental health, violence or pronounced social inequalities.

The response from the government, civil society and development partners has been prompt and decisive, but there are still gaps and challenges that need to be addressed. Distance learning experiences have so far provided valuable lessons, including the importance of quickly adapting the education system to the changing realities. Traditional education must not only be adapted and reformed, but this reforming process must embrace opportunities for innovation and thus become more open to meet the current demands of children, young people, including those from vulnerable groups, and members of the society at large. The pandemic situation can turn into an opportunity to rethink the curricula, the teaching-learning-evaluation processes and the development of student skills in order to strengthen their online learning skills and support their motivation.

According to some international data, despite global efforts to support the recovery of the education systems, they still face major disruptions and obstacles. There should be an emphasis on maintaining continuity of education as a priority for world governments.

A tangible solution would be for the responsible authorities to focus on the recovery of education systems, addressing the urgent need to reduce school dropout rates and manage learning losses, as well as be oriented in four directions:

- Generating a response to the disruptions in educational processes caused by closing schools;
- Inclusive scaling of distance learning systems, connecting all students and all educational institutions to the Internet.
- Effective management of the recovery and modernization of logistics infrastructure in schools;
- Data collection, knowledge distribution in order to increase the resilience of education systems;
- Elaboration of a long-term action strategy focused on the recovery of national education, facilitating access to studies mainly for students from socially vulnerable families, also with health problems. The interventions at the national level must be based on the introduction of new initiatives to support educational

institutions in the recovery stage, focusing specifically on three important areas: providing support to children through the educational system, managing learning losses and accelerating digital education.

Another solution to the recovery of the educational field after the pandemic is a reform of the teacher training and evaluation system, from a psycho-pedagogical module to all degree levels, the elimination of bureaucracy through the digitization of schools and the provision of tools and software so that we can have a classroom management with a high-performance digital system, which would also mean improving the educational process.

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