

## New challenges in teaching and learning of administrative studies – Digitisation / digitalisation and innovative pedagogies

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### Abstract

The very rapid transition to the online teaching and learning system, without sufficient training and not proper adapted to the educational needs of students (already migrated to virtual environments and digital tools), has produced some visible dysfunctions, especially in informal interactions with students. Dimensions investigated using a methodology based on the survey's technique aimed at types of academic activities carried out during the period dedicated to online activities, participation in online activities of 'synchronous' type – face to face – categories of online applications used, types of platforms for asynchronous activities and classical teaching strategies most commonly used in association with online educational techniques. The population was represented by students and teachers from the fields of study administrative studies and academic categories that will provide a serious input for formulating conclusions. We propose to launch a practical module for the training of university professors on the innovative pedagogies applied to the administrative sciences and law academic fields.

**Keywords:** Teaching and learning, administrative studies, digitalisation / digitisation, innovative pedagogies.

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## 1. Introduction

The period of time after the transition to the online educational system was marked by a series of challenges for all teachers in Romanian higher education institutions, in general, but with some more special accents for teachers in the social sciences and humanities fields, particularly. The very rapid transition to the online teaching and learning system, without enough training and not properly adapted to the educational/psychological needs of students (already migrated to virtual environments and digital tools), has produced some visible dysfunctions, especially in informal interactions with student's area.

This time interval was marked, as the specialists show, not only by continuity and fluency: Therefore, 'it is not surprising that there have been occasional reports about some shortcomings, including about technical difficulties as both teaching staff and students get acquainted with the online teaching platforms or as the capacity of band width reached its limits. The move has been further strained by both staff and students, at the same time in many cases' (Loukkola, 2020). The duality of the process, marked by the existence of an interaction between teacher and students, even if it was no longer in the same traditional register ('face to face'), but one mediated by online interfaces, requires a reflection in both directions and with consequences for both dimensions: technological and educational.

The President of European University Association, Professor Dr. Michael Murphy, pointed to the dimension mentioned above and perceived by most of the actors involved, not only as a crisis, but also with internal valences of opportunity, provided a proper investment in infrastructure: like 'all others, this crisis is also an opportunity for universities, not least through the greater use of digital tools for enhancing the quality of learning and teaching. This leap forward must be followed by further investment in digital learning and in digital infrastructure' (Murphy, 2020). But only the equipment and IT infrastructure are not enough to find a solution to the pandemic challenges, or there is a special need to enhance the training dimension for teachers, who are in that challenging situation, in which they were forced in a very short time, to migrate to the online system, without adapting pedagogical methodologies and teaching style.

The conclusion will be extremely interesting and will place a decisive emphasis on the idea of reconsidering teacher training systems, as it is known that few countries are concerned with providing an initial training system for university teachers. Because, as Professor Heinz Bachman (2019) says, it is a real challenge to form/to train a successful and motivating university teacher for students who have changed their educational expectations: 'What is needed to be a successful higher education teacher in today's globalised and rapidly changing world? Is it at all possible to define a minimum that is valid for all kinds of teachers?'

## 2. Research methods and materials

As we have previously seen, to overcome dysfunctions or difficulties signalled by educational partners, teachers have worked hard during this period to cover the gaps in week initial training to deal with complex digital tools. In this context, we designed and applied a research that aimed to identify the main problems faced by teachers during this period but seen through the eyes of students.

*The dimensions investigated* using a methodology based on the survey's technique aimed at: types of academic activities carried out during the period dedicated to online activities, participation in online activities of 'synchronous' type – 'face to face' with the teacher – categories of online applications used, types of platforms for asynchronous activities (uploading documents/learning aids) and classical teaching strategies most commonly used in association with online educational techniques.

In the same investigated context, we initiated the research of *some qualitative variables*, regarding the satisfaction and student’s well-being (as contextual dimensions of the learning process), as well as the weaknesses and vulnerabilities felt in the management of these activities.

*The investigated population* was represented by students and teachers from the fields of administrative sciences and law, enrolled at the University of Bucharest, (the sample consisted of 160 respondents – 69% undergraduate students and 31% graduate students) and academic categories that will provide a serious input for formulating conclusions that can contribute to improving practical applied relationships between digitisation/digitalisation strategies and innovative pedagogies, as one of the newest and most current guidelines in the field of educational sciences.

### 3. Research data processing

In the process of research data, we followed the two classic ways: on the one hand, data analysis with a quantitative profile, and on the other hand, the exploitation/generalisation of data resulting from items loaded with qualitative information. Aware that the value of our work does not consist in a methodological design made in relation to the principles of separation of the two epistemological orientations – qualitative and quantitative, but especially in the application of collaborative (mixed) principles to a less studied field, that of legal sciences and administrative ones.

#### 3.1. Types of academic activities and online applications/platform used

The filter question that differentiated the subjects of the investigation and that was positioned, mainly in the quantitative area of the processed data, was related to their participation in educational activities that were transferred online, and 98.1% of the students who provided answers, based their feedback on filtering the direct experiences of interaction with the pedagogical activities carried out in the new format.

In connection with the typology of academic activities carried out during the period dedicated to online activities, the answers received were distributed as follows:

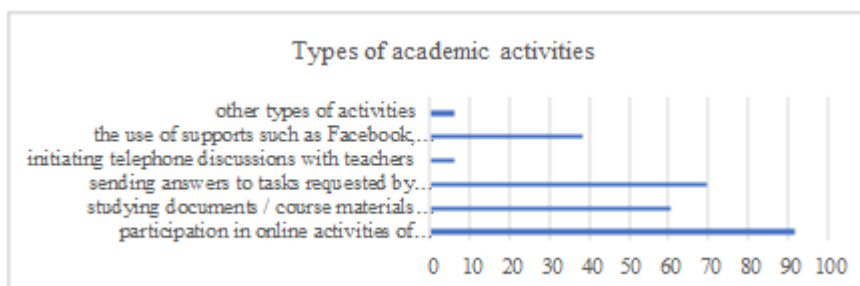
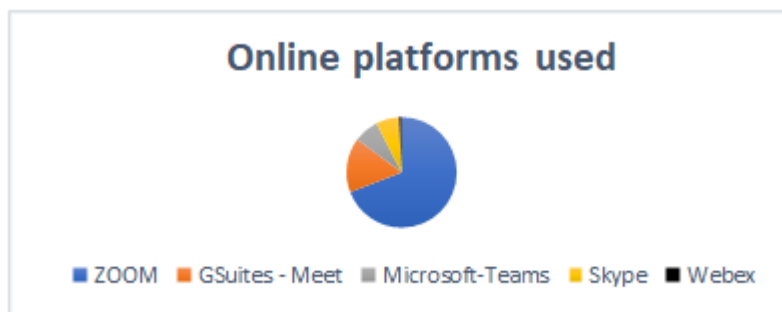


Figure 1. Types of academic activities

It can be realised that the participation in online activities of ‘synchronous’ type – face to face with the teacher, represents the largest share of the answers provided by the students participating in the survey. From the analysis of the previous graph it can be seen that the logic of the activities built by the teachers at that time seemed to follow the scenario: direct interaction – sending questions to which students are going to answer – studying documents/course materials uploaded on platforms (‘asynchronous’ activity) – the use of supports such as Facebook, WhatsApp etc. to complete educational tasks sent by teachers. Rarely, less formal communication channels were also used, such as telephone conversations, using for this purpose, especially the WhatsApp application, mentioned in other types of activities option.

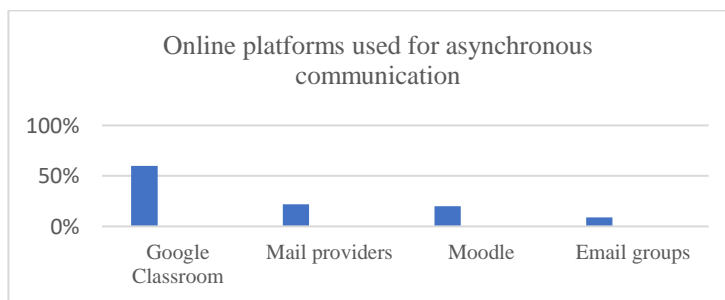
From the perspective of participating in online activities of ‘synchronous’ type – face to face – with the teacher, the online applications that were used, were distributed in the following frequency:



**Figure 2. Online applications/platforms used in the 'synchronous' interactions**

Beyond the performance of these technological tools, we must remember what added value, from an educational point of view, can offer each application, and the preferences previously analysed are not those of students, but are the ones preferred by teachers and used more often by them.

In connection with the types of platforms for 'asynchronous' activities (uploading documents/learning media), the interviewed subjects were mainly used during this period a list containing a generous offer, from which they chose, after as follows:



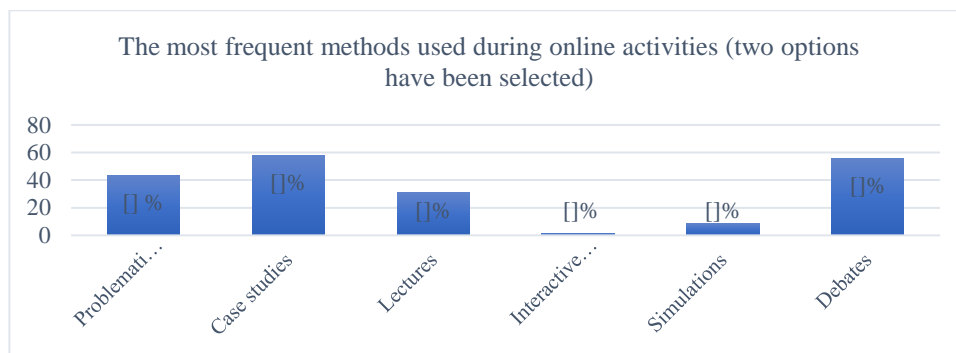
**Figure 3. Online platforms used in the 'asynchronous' interactions/communication**

One can observe the use of complex platforms, such as Google Classroom or Moodle, on the one hand accepted as generally valid tools at institutional level, and on the other hand, bidders to carry out activities in synchronous and asynchronous systems. Teachers tried to take over some behaviours and practices generated by online pedagogical design, with which they were not used to during the initial training period, but which, through frequent use during this period, they have gradually been accepted.

### **3.2. Types of methodologies and pedagogical support**

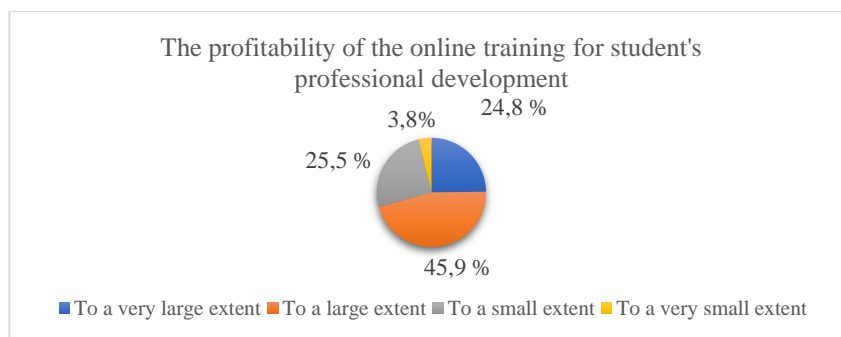
With reference to the technicalities of the pedagogical processes, correlated with didactics applied to higher education, several items were applied which produced the following results:

If we compare the relevant data of this chart with those related to the construction of learning situations in the new online format, we note that, at the level of administrative sciences curriculum, debates and case studies occupy the central place in the action preferences of teachers who worked with these students. Probably the epistemological specificity of this field also proposes an adaptation of the methodological specificity, although, if we look at the status of lectures, we notice that they are much diminished and even ahead of the problematisation. This increases the intensity along with the cognitive and participatory depth of the tools used but also the pedagogical design experiences for the activities carried out online: 'The key challenge in most cases has, therefore, been related to extending the online offer to cover all teaching and, in this context, to the part of the curriculum that really does not bend into the online mode' (Loukkola, 2020).



**Figure 4. The most frequent methods used during online activities**

Regarding the value of online activities during this period, students mentioned that in a remarkably high proportion, almost 70%, considered the courses conducted in this way, as profitable for their training and professional development in the future. This is also the difficulty mentioned in some studies, that students, attached to these new educational means used in the educational process, don't want to return to the previous system anymore and they do not easily accept the lectures or even the classic debates projected in the face-to-face format.



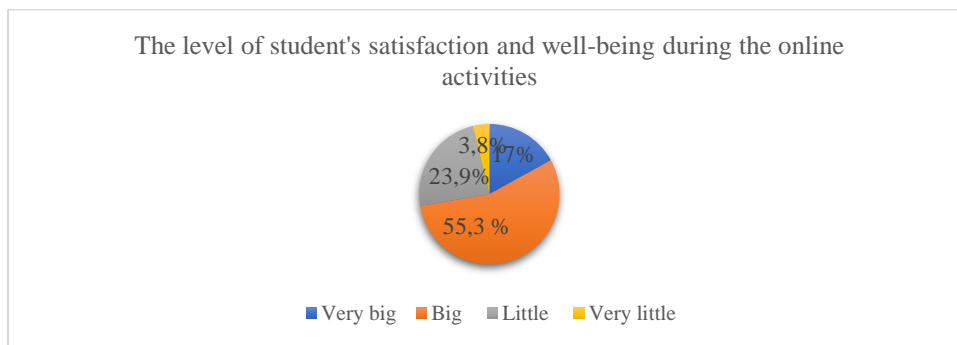
**Figure 5. The profitability of the online training for student's professional development**

Comparing the information from the two graphics it should be noted that the profitability of the online system could be interpreted from the perspective of the idea of 'educational trend', with inspiration coming mainly from students. The receptivity of teachers is one of the elements included in what the specialists call *learning – unlearning – relearning*, as correlated processes, located in the support area for evolution and continuous professional development. However, these processes are not designed systemically or institutionally, the teachers being left, most of the time, to cover their own continuous training needs. 'The need for professional training as a teacher at primary and secondary school level is generally taken for granted but remarkably, when it comes to higher education there seems to be an all-too-common assumption that such professional teacher training is not necessary, as if it is somehow an idea unworthy of the professional academic' (EU High Level Group on the Modernisation of Higher Education, 2014).

### 3.3. Students' satisfaction and well-being during the online activities

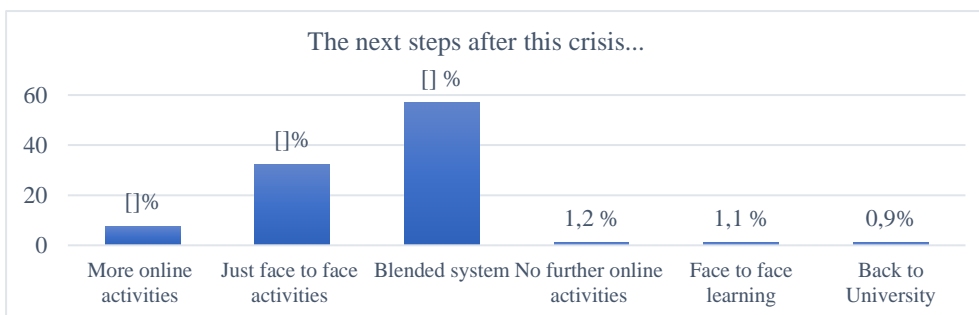
We must make sure that our students' experience, in addition to learning situations and wellbeing conditions, was very well appreciated. However, we consider, taking into account experts opinion, that it is not enough, because the academic and administrative staff also feel confident and cared for, to easily address emotional and social difficulties (most generated by isolation, fear and anxiety and changing work habits). When we talk about changing professional habits, we can also consider this transition to online, with all the pedagogical and socio-emotional consequences, and universities

should develop different mechanisms for counselling, psychological support and professional advice available, not only ‘face to face’ but starting new experiences of specific online programmes.



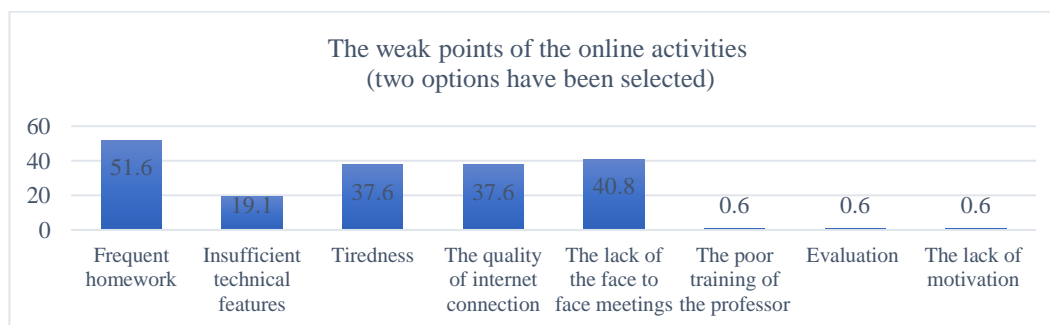
**Figure 6. The level of student’s satisfaction and well-being during the online activities**

The graph presented above reveals a high rate of student satisfaction, in its own way, unexpected, especially since the formal training was reduced, or, in some places, completely absent. Probably, the change of the pedagogical discourse and the appearance of the new pedagogies, focused on blended learning procedures and alternatives, brought more satisfaction to the students and implicitly, motivation and a little emotional training that they did not meet in the traditional activities. The more interesting are the results, as they represent both students and teachers in the field of administrative sciences.



**Figure 7. The next steps after this crisis**

This chart is an extremely interesting one because it helps us to see how the pedagogical scenarios of the development of educational activities in the field of administrative sciences can be carried out. The need for face to face interaction remains important, 32% because students do not want more online in the formatting of teaching, academic learning, this makes the blended learning option to remain the proposal with which both the rational and the emotional of the student, as educational partner, comes before the organisers of study programmes in the field of administrative sciences.



**Figure 8. The weak points of the online activities**

It was important for research and monitoring of the weaknesses of the online activities and, as can be seen, homework used excessively by some teachers, probably affected the interest and even student participation (not necessarily their motivation, which does not seem to be affected). It is also worth noting the tiredness, which was installed most of the time after an too long interaction on the online platforms (it is recommended at this level of discussion, a reconsideration of the format of activities, alternating methodologies and forms of organisation: lecture – 15 minutes, personal reflection – 15 minutes, debate 30 minutes ...).

All the elements investigated by the research we have conducted, highlighted several trends that confirm the general trend recorded in this first period of pandemic time: the predominant focus on mechanisms, technologies, platforms and less on teaching techniques, methodologies, and pedagogical strategies. We would have liked, at the level of the primary expectations of the research, to find that the psycho-pedagogical training of university teachers could make a difference, only that the observations offered other conclusions: the training of university staff (in many cases and educational systems – including those in Romania – almost non-existent), did not offer any support for a rapid adaptation to new technological and IT challenges. Unfortunately, even in the situation faced by the educational system in the past months, higher education institutions have failed to offer alternatives for continuing education/professional development, which can compensate for the shortcomings/gaps from the beginning of the academic career. And all these forms of intervention in the university career should be designed according to some need's analysis, made with the help of specific methodologies. So far, however, everything that has been achieved has been rather characterised by improvisations, which only the will of university teachers and their motivation have been able to compensate.

#### **4. Conclusion**

‘Now we know that providing quality online education is an expensive affair that will need further investment. It is not a shortcut to savings. We also need further evidence to ensure that the new opportunity for digitally enhanced learning is taken up in the right way’ (Murphy, 2020).

What was an element anticipated in the current contexts, becomes a certainty for any process of recruitment, selection, training and evaluation of academic staff in universities? As many experts in the field say, academic career should be reoriented and rebalanced, in terms of revalorising teaching and learning, not only as a collection of educational/pedagogical practices, which are the most non-standard, but also as a value for motivating students in terms of how fast could he/she changes his/her learning habits or learning motivation. And training in the new field of digitalisation of learning is a priority that no curriculum of any training system will be able to ignore. And that is because, there are expected, changes in both the curriculum and delivery models of teaching and learning in higher education (and we have in mind here, a new curricular design model should be developed: e.g., modularity, new teaching design), as well as reconsiderations of classroom management, in which teachers still need to fine-tune their skills to make the most out of the new learning environment.

This may mean that the simple familiarisation of teachers with the procedures and techniques carried out online, without being accompanied by a construction based on very solid educational-pedagogical principles, may not be enough to allow the formation of multipurpose skills for future university professors. A training programme in this field should remain a priority for every higher education institution, designed and delivered before starting the new package of academic activities. Because, as Professor Bachman (2019) shows ‘To become a competent teacher is a long-term endeavour and there is always room for improvement. But as in in many learning processes, it is helpful to go from the simple to the complex, from the basics to the advanced topics. To define the basics is challenging and at the same time very much appreciated by the learner’.

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