

THE PANDEMIC IMPACT IN A HIGHER EDUCATION SCHOOL: STUDENTS PERCEPTIONS

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Abstract

The pandemic situation since 2020 originated the reorganization of teaching and learning processes at various levels, being higher education no exception. Such circumstances presented a set of constraints, but at the same time opportunities, not only for students but also for teachers. The goal of this research is to characterize the student's perception in a High School of Education on the impact of the pandemic in the process of teaching and learning. Following a qualitative methodology, a group focus was organized, being the sample constituted by 5 students from the second year and 5 students from the third year of all undergraduate courses. The preliminary data here presented lay on the following analysis dimensions: classes organization in the first semester of 2020/2021, change in the interactions, teacher's adaption and students' concerns about the professional practices.

The available data point to a diversity of organization of curricular units Intra and inter graduations. It's also evident that the most predominant factor considered in the adaption is the teacher's performance. Changes have been identified with the mode of interaction, whether between colleagues of the same class or with colleagues of other courses. At least we underline the preoccupation about professional practices and subsequent consequences and meantal health issues affecting students.

Key-words: Covid-19; Higher education students, perceptions, hybrid learning.

1. The knowledge produced on the Covid 19 pandemic and Higher Education

In the context of the atypical situation provoked by the pandemic declared in March 2020 by the World Health Organization, the Portuguese government decreed a set of measures needed to minimize the virus propagation which had a significant impact on several society sectors, namely Higher Education Institutions (HEI). These institutions were obliged to physically close and migrate all of their teaching activities to digital platforms. This was an endemic movement, since the statistical data presented by UNESCO (2020) indicate the same measure, by that time, affected already 1.3 million students in 191 countries.

To Carvalho and Pontes (2020), the pandemic and subsequent lockdown measures launched the HEI's in a sudden free fall into a remote emergency teaching model. This was, by definition, a temporary shift to an alternative model due to a crisis that implied the use of totally remote teaching solutions that otherwise would be presential. In these circumstances, the goal wasn't to create a robust educational system, strategically thought and planned, but otherwise enable temporary access to educational resources and contents rapidly, of easy configuration and trustable during the crisis period.

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This is, otherwise, the adopted model to attend localized situations of crisis caused by war, local conflicts or sanitarian or environmental disasters (Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust & Bond, 2020). For this reason, several researchers (Carvalho & Pontes, 2020; Soares, Alves & Teixeira, 2020) understand to be a mistake (and abusive) to state that what happened was an E-Learning model, since this one implies resources and a multi-professional team, strategically conceived and prepared to create the contents and teaching activities in different environments of online platforms.

What is certain is that in the view of this context the HEIs were called to a highly demanding exercise of reconfiguration in the domains of teaching, research and knowledge transmission reflected on a daily reinvention and adaptation of educational practices on teaching and learning.

In the specialized literature, there are available several national and international studies over the different practices adopted by the HEI's (especially in the first wave of the pandemic), as well as on the admeasurement on how the process was endured, perceived and internalized both by students and teachers.

The national study conducted by Seabra, Alves and Teixeira (2020) shows that regardless of the effort of the HEI to continue with teaching in the emergency situation, students and teachers are unanimous in identifying the existence of disparate pedagogic practices resulting from a certain discoordination and the absence of an effective strategy. Also, a strong feeling of work overload is evident. On the other side, teachers positively underline the higher involvement, assiduity and responsibility of students, allied to the easiness, convenience and flexibility of the online model, as well as the possibility of interactions reconfiguration resulting in new social and communicational dynamics between students, teachers and classes.

On a more positive glance, Ferreira, Príncipe, Pereira, Oliveira and Mota (2020) relate a more favourable scenario while describing the student's evaluation of the contingency plan implementation in the process of teaching and learning. In this case, high levels of efficiency of the quick adaptation of HEI's and subsequent creation of non-presential teaching environments were underlined, as well as the correct adequation of educational platforms and the availability and support from the faculty body.

Freitas, Neves and Carvalho (2020), emphasized the dimensions of accessibility, adaptation and interaction to assess the perception of students about the functioning of online teaching during the pandemic. In general, the inquired students have a preference for mostly in-person teaching, which they find less damaging on the teacher-student interaction and more effective in the creation of a propitious environment for the student's participation in the process. A very high percentage of students consider that the lack of physical presence of a teacher in an online class is frankly negative.

However, Freitas, Neves and Carvalho (2020), underline the dimensions of accessibility, adaptation and interaction to assess the student's perception on the running of online teaching during the pandemic. In general, the inquired students prefer a largely in person teaching, considering it less harmful of the interaction teacher-student and more effective on the creation of a favorable environment to the student's participation in the learning process.

We should stress that a considerable percentage of students consider that the absence of the teacher in the online setting is frankly negative. For the authors, should HEI's advance towards definitive solutions of E-Learning, these factor should be considered to work and foster the skills of student's self-confidence and learning self-efficacy.

A last note to highlight that a significant amount of literature states that endured period is as much challenging as it is promising, being expectable that in a medium-term time-course HEI's will consolidate their platforms and resource on the basis of the experience and knowledge acquired (Castaman & Rodrigues, 2020; Oliveira & Chaves, 2020; Rondini, Pedro & Duarte, 2020; This publication is elaborated and disseminated as a contribution to the 3rd World Higher Education Conference organised by UNESCO on May 18-20, 2022, with the purpose of enhancing the contribution of higher education institutions and systems world-wide, under the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, its pledge to leave no one behind, and looking at the Futures of Education. The content of this publication does not necessarily express the views of UNESCO or its Member States.

Sobral, 2020). Carvalho e Pontes (2020) prospect a reformulation in which education and online teaching will be a HEI's strategical priority, followed by an acceleration of digitalization, the reconversion and update of teachers skills and also a student's attitudes change.

For this purpose is worth mentioning the launched initiative in May 2020 by the General Higher Education Direction (DGES, 2020) in articulation with the OECD: *Skills 4 post-Covid – Skills for the future*, aiming to prepare the post Covid future and to give answers to the challenges posed by the pandemic to the academic context, namely regarding the innovative teaching practices, short courses offer, digital technologies implementation in all areas, the retraining of skills and the reconfiguration of academic loads.

2. Methodologic notes

This research has the goal of characterizing a Higher Education School student's perception of the impact of the pandemic in the process of teaching and learning. We adopted a qualitative approach and used group focus as the main technique for data collection. Given the pandemic, the study was made through zoom with the participation of 10 students, 5 students from the second year and 5 students from the third year of all undergraduate courses.

After the transcription a category content analysis (Bardin, 2004) and a content analysis program was used. Research ethical issues were considered, namely the informed consent and the codification of participants to ensure anonymity.

3. Results

The results here presented are focused on four dimensions' analysis: organization of classes in the 1^o semester of 2020/2021, changes in the interaction; adaptation of teachers; students' preoccupation concerning the professional practices.

3.1. Organization of classes in the 1^o semester of 2020/2021 (2.^o and 3.^o year)

In what concerns the curricular unit's organization it's possible to identify 3 types of modalities: entirely online, hybrid and totally in person (Table 1). The totally in-person modality occurred only in the undergraduate courses of Sociocultural Animation, Artistic and Cultural Mediation, and Music in the Community, given the fact that their classes have a dimension inferior to 30 students. On the contrary, in the courses of Basic Education and Visual Arts and Technologies with more than 30 students, such modality was not possible.

About hybrid teaching, it occurred in all undergraduate courses except for Music in the Community.

However, the organization modalities were different, in terms of the percentage of online sessions versus in person, as well as in terms of the type of work developed (in person shift and online shift). Furthermore, it's evident that some of the curricular units of the Basic Education, Sociocultural Animation and Artistic and Cultural Mediation courses opted for a modality totally online.

Table 1. Type of modality of CU teaching by course

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<i>Course</i>	<i>Basic Education</i>	<i>Sociocultural Animation</i>	<i>Cultural and Artistic Mediation</i>	<i>Visual Arts and Technologies</i>	<i>Music in the Community</i>
<i>CU totally in person</i>		X	X		X
<i>CU with in person and online sessions</i>	X	X	X	X	
<i>CU totally on-line</i>	X	X	X		
<i>Classes dimension</i>	<i>Over 30</i>	<i>Between 20-30</i>	<i>Between 15-30</i>	<i>Over a 30</i>	<i>Between 6-20</i>

3.2. Changes in the interactions

Despite that data point that changes occurred at the level of interactions among the several educational actors, it's the interactions between peers and students-teachers that were more evidenced by the participants.

Firstly, the students underlined the diminishing number and quality of peer interactions outside classes. Such decrease is directly associated with compulsive social distancing, which in turn diminished the capacity of contexts and spaces conditioning the interactions between students.

It was also focused by some students who had in-person classes that the schedule organization (reduced lunchtime) contributed to the decrease of intensity and quality of outside classroom interactions. For example, the following testimony: "I felt the lack of being more time with persons and the fact that we have few lunch hours also conditioned a little" (EMC3F). Another highlighted aspect is related to the reconfiguration of the intra-class interactions. This reconfiguration is partially a result of the social distancing required in classroom activities. Among the students that had their classes divided in shifts, such aspect was yet more evident. One of the students even points breaking ties with students of the other shift: "I feel that it will be odd (...) when all the class will be together since I don't see them for a long time, I had no contact with none of them" (ELEB2F).

For some students, the shifts had positive aspects, since it obliged them to work with other persons of their class ("I feel that this year I learned a lot about working with other groups, beyond ours" (EASC3F)).

Concerning the teacher-student interactions, the participants focused that several communication channels were used, besides email, to replace the in-person contact. The evaluation of the quality of the interactions varied depending on the modality adopted in the CU and the characteristics of the teacher, as exemplified in the following testimonies: "And a lot of times the communication between students and teachers failed" (ELEB3F); "The teachers always answered my emails (...) they all answered and clarified my doubts" (ELEB2F).

Still in this scope, some students felt the need of creating new strategies of interaction to diminish physical isolation. Beyond WhatsApp, they started using other platforms, such as zoom, as a way of interacting with their colleagues. Doing activities with the Students Association and

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the Academic Music Group was another strategy to mitigate these feelings. "Now I see myself doing works and every once in a while, my friends tell me that they don't want to do the meeting for no reason and just because we are in lockdown." (EASC2F).

3.3. Adaptation of teachers

All students are unanimous stating that the majority of teachers had a good capacity of adaptation in front of the challenges imposed by the pandemic context. Students consider that the most determinant factors of success in this adaptation are the teacher and the nature of the CU's. Relatively to the first factor, they highlight the characteristics of the teacher regarding his/her capacities of organization and availability to support students, among others: "I think the problem has to do with the organizational capacity and also with the capacity of knowing how to adapt to the context of class delivery." (ELEB3F). As for the second factor, the hour's typology (Practical, Theoretic-Practical, etc.) of the CU was also mentioned as a relevant aspect in the possible adaptations performed by teachers.

3.4. The preoccupation of students relative to the professional practices

The majority of students showed worries about the impact of the pandemic in their educative process, particularly, at the level of professional practices. Largely the experience of the previous academic year raised some anxiety. Despite the report of different situations, from unchanged professional practices to those totally reformulated ("my internship was destroyed, it was ruined (EMAC2F)), the expectation for the 2020/2021 internships is common to all students. It's notorious that students are more receptive to more flexible internships modalities, despite reinforcing that these adaptations have significant consequences in their learning process and, therefore, in the entry into the labour market ("Because we are heading for the third year without almost none experience of internship. I have no idea how I should do an internship report, an observation report, I don't know, I have never done it and that's it." (EEB2F)).

4. Discussion

The COVID – 19 pandemic forced the reconfiguration, among other aspects, of learnings, experiences and educational practices in the HEI. Nevertheless, studies developed in Portugal on the impact of the pandemic crisis in Higher Education have been focusing on its effects in the course of the very first wave and subsequent lockdown.

Attending to the evolutionary dynamics of the situation and at the many transformations in the most diverse society spheres, further studies are necessary to deepen the understanding of its effects, namely on Higher Education.

The present study focuses on the perception of Higher Education School students over the impact of the pandemic on the process of learning and teaching and, among the results, stand out the changes in the social interactions in the educational context resulting from the sanitary measures imposed by the HEI's to deal with the pandemic.

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Having been surpassed the ERE phase (Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust & Bond, 2020), viewed by students as a period of limitation and social constrain in educational contexts (Seabra, Aires & Teixeira, 2020), they now have a vision with both positive and negative aspects. While we register a decrease in the number and quality of peer's interaction with eventual negative consequences for student's socialization and their general wellbeing, the participants also refer to the positive consequences of new intra-class interactions, originating new social relations and favouring the emergence of new social dynamics in the classes.

Another relevant element is the adoption of new interaction strategies by the students themselves to diminish their physical isolation. New strategies were also adopted in the interactions between students and teachers recurring to different channels of communication, different from the previous in use and with no loss in the reported social interactions. In that sense, the expected minor efficacy in the interaction student-teacher pointed by Freitas, Neves e Carvalho (2020), was not reported.

Contrary to Flores et al. (2021), in which the students mention, among the major worries, the lack of support from teachers and the difficulty in having their needs answered, in the present study we register a positive evaluation on the capacity of adaptation of teachers to the new educational reality brought by the pandemic.

This positive perception results from the organization and availability capacity of the teachers, but also of the characteristics of the curricular units, an aspect that follows some of the results found by Ferreira et al. (2020).

The major preoccupations of the participants in this study are associated with the uncertainty in their educational process, particularly regarding the internships. This aspect was also identified in the study of Seabra et al. (2020), where the students pointed out among the constraints of the first wave lockdown (e.g., time management, access to information, work overload, etc.). the preoccupation with the fact that the internships and practical classes didn't provide the required skills to perform the profession in the labour market. Despite this concern, the present results suggest that the experience resulting from the pandemic contributed to the acceptance of higher flexibility in the internships formats, preconizing the development of adaptation capacities which are a fundamental skill in the labour market.

5. Final Remarks

This exploratory research, part of wider research on the impact of the pandemic in the process of teaching and learning in higher education, points that after a pandemic context there are subsistent educational differences regarding the practices and experiences previous to the pandemic. Notwithstanding being examined a restricted set of factors within the view of students, some of the aspects identified in the first wave withstand, such as the central preoccupation with the adequacy of an educational process for the profession exercise in the labour market. Others have changed, such as a more positive perception of the adaptation capacity of teachers in face of the constraints posed by the context, and the perception of the interpersonal relationships among students that adopted new formats and strategies to foster positive social interactions. The introduction of new teaching strategies and novel tools and digital activities are an example of that.

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Further, we verify the effort that, in this context, teachers and the diverse members of educative communities engaged to establish and to provide the students with a positive environment for the personal relationships. Nevertheless, the closure and digital migration of teaching activities, beyond provoking a substantial diminish of socio-cultural activities, was also a factor of stress, anxiety and additional tension for the mental health of the students, as mentioned by several studies within this scope.

For example, Poeta (2018) asserts that in Portugal the higher education students have a prevalence of risk behaviors and mental disorders. In the review made by Gundim et al. (2021), it was verified that the psychological suffering of students is evidenced in stress, feeling of unachievement in face of isolation, disturbance with the permanent surveillance, preoccupation with preventive care, fear of losing friends and relatives, worry with the country's economic situation, signs of depression and anxiety and headaches, irritancy, auto-isolation, loss of will to accomplish activities, anguish and even food disorders. This makes it evident that HEI's should not only invest in the creation and organization of Mental health support offices and free phone lines of psychological counseling for students, but also reinforce the divulgation of the existent support services to ensure that the academic population is aware of the available mechanisms and informed to better signal cases of distress.

A final remark must highlight that from the present studies emerges the certainty that the unprecedented digital transition provoked a disruption and an accelerated shift in the model of school and teaching. This implies that, once surpassed the pandemic crisis, instead of crystalize the *status quo*, it will be our common capacity to create new and systematic answers that will result in innovative and better adjustments. For that it's necessary to reexamine models and established education policies, as well as the identification and application of new organizations and HEI's functioning approaches having quality insurance as a core driver.

This study contributes to bridging the knowledge gap about the most recent effects of the COVID-19 context in Higher Education since the literature is still referential to the first lockdown phase in Portugal. Even so, the results should be considered with caution due to the limited sample analyzed and the HEI specificities that condition the possibility of generalizing. In this sense, we call for further studies that will allow a wider vision of the range of transformations that occurred in the teaching and learning in HEI resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.

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