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BRIEF REPORT

The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Youth Education

Emilia Vasile[1]*, Brindusa Mihaela Radu[1], Liliana Manea[1] and Lia Anton[2]

[1]Athenaeum University Bucharest, Romania
[2]Department of International Business Academy of Economic Studies of Moldova, Moldova

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to the closure of schools in 20 countries and the closure of preschools in 19 countries in Europe and Central Asia. This affected a total of 49.8 million children, from preschool to high school, who had a very disruptive last semester of school (if there was one at all), culminating in the closing schools.

The pandemic has deeply affected education and aggravated the existing social inequities in the region. Children from low-income families, children living in rural areas with poor infrastructure, children from ethnic and linguistic minorities, children with disabilities, migrant and refugee children, children in conflict with the law, children and young people who do not attend educational institutions, boys and girls living in difficult conditions or in abusive homes already faced significant barriers to participation in education and learning and had less education and social advantages than their peers.

The paper presents some considerations from much larger research that analysed the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people.

JEL Classification: I21, I24, I25, I29, J13

Schools are not only a place for academic education, but also for learning social and emotional skills, interaction and social support. School closures have not only disrupted children's education, but also access to school meals, welfare support and referral to basic medical and social services.

The challenge that awaits teachers, school principals, managers of the education system and decision-makers at the local and national level is significant. If this challenge is not met, the impact on children, young people, families, communities and wider societies will be felt throughout life, both socially and economically. Therefore, improving the resilience of the education system, by planning a quality inclusive education for the most marginalized children, should be a top priority for the coming months and years and should be the basic principle of rebuilding a better education and some better schools.

School closures, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, have had negative consequences on both children's educational progress, their emotional health and, more importantly, their online safety. Data from a Save the Children survey shows that almost half of children do not have access to a tablet or a computer, the only devices that can allow real participation in online lessons, and more than 50% say that one of

***Corresponding author(s)**

Emilia Vasile, Athenaeum University Bucharest, Romania

Email: rector@univath.ro

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the major risks of this period was addiction of the internet and, as such, exposure to aggressive content and fake news.

The data are extracted from the "Impact of COVID-19 on Romanian children" study, launched by the Save the Children Romania Organization, following the consultation of 5,000 children in Romania, from primary, secondary and high school, through an online survey.

The closure of schools and the arbitrary organization of some online school courses, where possible and without tools to evaluate the quality of the education process, led to borderline situations. One of these is particularly serious: limiting access to education for vulnerable children without access to the Internet and/or devices that allow them to participate online.

Social inequities have been compounded for children who have not had access to online schooling, and isolation, marginalization and discrimination have long-term educational and psycho-emotional repercussions.

With the outbreak of the global COVID-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020, Governments imposed lockdowns, travel restrictions, the reduction or prohibition of domestic and international mobility and other measures to limit the transmission of the virus. In this context, higher education institutions were forced to close their premises and suspended international exchange programs. According to UNESCO studies, approximately 1.6 billion students from 190 countries (94% of the global student population) were affected by the adoption of these measures.

As a result, distance learning has become the ideal option for ensuring continuity of teaching and learning. But if, for some universities and colleges, the use of virtual tools had already been practiced for some time, for others, it was an unexplored territory and, in these conditions, they had to quickly make the transition from traditional to distance or hybrid learning.

Some leaders in higher education around the world (Erickson and Siau (2003); Kaplan & Haenlein (2016); Xie, Siau and Nah (2020)), consider the implementation and refinement of digital learning as an improvement on traditional teaching. Among the motivations for this change can be mentioned:

i) The opportunity to improve student experiences,

ii) Reducing tuition costs,

iii) Attracting more international students,

IV) Meeting the desire of Generation Z for more flexible learning. In fact, in 2019, investments in education technology (Edtech) were 18.66 billion US dollars and it is estimated that the general online education market will reach 350 billion dollars by 2025.

And yet, despite the digital learning investments from the pre-pandemic period, the emergence of approaches such as e-universities, online certifications, micro-credentials and nanodegrees, most higher education institutions were still largely analogy. Thus, according to The Economist Intelligence Unit Limited's 2020 report, 82% of faculty members in the UK, USA, Australia and Germany offered less than half of their academic courses for distance learning before COVID-19.

The analyses carried out by various institutions in the field indicate that larger universities are the ones that can conduct online courses for the next academic term the easiest, compared to medium and small institutions.

In addition to the interruption of traditional university operations, the pandemic affected the teaching and learning experiences on the one hand, and on the other hand it also determined the reconfiguration of courses.

While this transition to distance education has provided valuable learning opportunities, it has also presented significant challenges for both students and teachers – from the readiness of change and digital maturity to student engagement and equitable access. Thus, many students claimed that they do not feel mentally prepared for the following online academic year (2020/2021).

Existing research drawn from either surveys or in-depth interviews with faculty and students in higher education indicates that many students are often unaware of what is expected of them in online courses. If many of them, before participating in an online course, expected it to be easier than face-to-face, after the actual experience of online courses they considered that they were actually more difficult and time-consuming than face-to-face courses traditional face-to-face (this is largely due to the fact

that students need to spend more time programming, connecting with their teachers and peers, but also taking care of their own mental and physical well-being).

Among the challenges generated by the pandemic, for both teachers and students, can be mentioned the one related to accessing quiet spaces to study, or prepare courses, or teach. Regarding this aspect, Michaela Martin, program manager at UNESCO's International Institute for Educational Planning said: "access to quiet spaces to study or teach was particularly felt among students living in rural communities and faculty in developing countries development where there is limited access to the internet or IT infrastructure to access online learning or teaching".

Also, many students are concerned about adequate, equitable access to the technology and digital tools needed to join remote classes during the pandemic, but also about the lack of social connection, minimal social interactions, and community-building opportunities.

While in Asia and the Pacific, the Americas and Europe almost all higher education institutions reported having the necessary infrastructure to move to online education, in Africa just over half of the total number of higher education institutions do not have communication infrastructures, and many of them had closed campuses. This is a worrying signal as staff and students of these higher education institutions may lose contact with their institutions completely during the closure of these campuses.

Adapting to new remote learning environments and maintaining student engagement have been two of the most important challenges facing both students and teachers since the pandemic began. The analyses carried out at the international level highlight the fact that many students claim that the pandemic has worsened their ability to stay focused and engaged in online courses, a fact also reported by the Faculties. In this context, higher education institutions have acted quickly to adopt new technologies to provide students with immersive learning experiences: video conferencing tools, online platforms, web-based resources and live lectures, etc. and to quickly adopt a new pedagogical model.

The analyses carried out so far on the effects of the pandemic on higher education institutions highlight the fact that this health crisis has accelerated the future of the distance learning revolution by at least a decade. The first half of 2020 saw the largest global investments in Edtech technology in the last 10 years ($4.5 billion, three times the average investment per 6 months of the previous decade).

To be successful in online learning, teachers and students must be proficient in using platforms, installing software, downloading and uploading documents, and navigating the Internet. The health crisis has also disrupted research activities due to restrictions on the international mobility of researchers, resulting in obstacles to research collaboration, the closure of laboratories and the shift to remote collaboration. Those most affected are PhD candidates as they often lack local support networks and may be further affected by the situation in their home country, as well as early career researchers.

In the extraordinary session on education convened by UNESCO in October 2020, renewed commitments to achieve sustainable development goal four (Ensure equitable, inclusive and quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all, Agenda 2030 for sustainable development"), emphasizing the need to invest in inclusive and equitable lifelong learning, but also to strengthen global cooperation in the field of education.

Global Education Meeting Declaration on Extraordinary Session of the Global Education Meeting, Education post- COVID-19: 2020 conveys the urgent and essential message to protect education budgets and support all educational institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. Also, the declaration contains commitments for the safe reopening of educational institutions; supporting all educational staff as frontline workers; addressing the shortage of trained teachers and the professional development of educators at all levels; and bridging the digital divide in education. And the Association of Commonwealth Universities, the University Agency of Francophonie and the International Association of Universities, through the partnership agreement signed in 2020, aim to increase the visibility of higher education in various approaches worldwide.

Conclusion

Globally, the disruption of education systems has led to the registration of millions of children who have lost the accumulation of meaningful knowledge that they would have learned if they had been present

in the classroom, the most vulnerable children and small ones registering the biggest losses.

- In low- and middle-income countries, child learning losses caused by school closures meant that 70% of 10-year-olds could not read or understand simple text, up from 53% before the pandemic.
- In Ethiopia, it is estimated that primary school students have acquired between 30 and 40% of the arithmetic knowledge they would have acquired in a normal school year.
- In the US, learning losses occurred in many states, including Texas, California, Colorado, Tennessee, North Carolina, Ohio, Virginia, and Maryland. For example, in Texas, two-thirds of third-graders scored worse than their grade level in math in 2021, compared to 2019, when half of the kids had the same losses.
- In several states in Brazil, about three out of four children in second grade cannot read, up from one in two recorded before the pandemic. Across the country, one in ten students aged 10 to 15 said they did not plan to return to school once their school reopened.
- In South Africa students are behind where they should be by 75% to 100% of a school year. An estimated 400,000 to 500,000 students dropped out of school altogether between March 2020 and July 2021.
- In addition to learning losses, school closures have had negative effects on children's mental health, reduced their access to a regular source of food and increased the risk of abuse to which children are subjected.
- Growing evidence shows that the COVID-19 pandemic has generated increased levels of anxiety and depression among children and young people, with some studies showing that girls, teenagers and those living in rural areas are more likely to experience with such problems.
- During the period in which schools were closed, more than 370 million children around the world did not benefit from school meals, which for some children meant the loss of their only safe source of daily food and nutrition [1-5].

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