

# WUT Social Work Department Students Perceptions of the Online Learning Experience During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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## KEYWORDS

COVID-19  
Education  
Online teaching and  
learning  
Students  
Technology

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## ABSTRACT

The spread of COVID-19 has led to the physical closure of universities, accelerating the expansion of online learning methods. West University of Timișoara has adapted to the pandemic context using different online teaching methods, useful also for students that needed to enhance interpersonal relationship skills, such as future social workers. Thus, authors explored social work students' perceptions regarding the effectiveness of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemics. The main goal of the study was to determine the perceptions of WUT students, Department of Social Work, about their online learning experience, assessing the effectiveness of online learning with four indicators: Interaction with professors and faculty colleagues, Student comfort in online learning, Motivation to learn online, and Advantages and disadvantages of online learning. The data was obtained through an online questionnaire applied to 107 students. The results indicate that students were generally satisfied by the online learning experience, 60.7% feeling satisfied with the way the university made the transition to online education and 45.7% appreciating that teachers were prepared for the online environment. Their perception is influenced by their ability to technically access online courses and the educational outcomes. Over 50% of the students expressed satisfaction regarding communication with teachers and colleagues. An important conclusion of the research is that university education can benefit from this glimpse of online education, which has challenged, but in the end, has adapted to a hybrid, alternative, way of education. However, to have a sustainable education, e-learning tools should be constantly adapted to students' needs.

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## Introduction

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has had an unprecedented impact on the education system, due to the imperative necessity of transition to online teaching and learning. This situation has generated and engaged challenges regarding finding the best teaching methods and ways of connecting professors to students. Overall, online teaching has expanded quickly and has requested a change in the educational context, meaning the use of the internet and its incorporation into the teaching process. For carrying out teaching-learning activities and evaluations, universities have adopted the use of a series of platforms and applications. This, starting with March 2020, has been an opportunity to develop and implement effective e-Learning tools and adapt the existing tools to didactic university activities.

Further on, starting in April 2022, considering the evolution of the epidemiological situation at local, national, and global levels, the West University of Timișoara has started using a mixed scenario in the educational process, carrying out online and face-to-face didactic activities.

All these changes have undoubtedly had several positive and negative consequences in the educational sector, leading researchers to examine the impact of the pandemic on the educational system. According to Al-Mawee, Kwayu, and Gharaibeh (2021), who conducted a research at West Michigan University, looking into the preferences and experiences of 420 undergraduate and graduate students, online learning was praised, but the lack of interaction between students and teachers and the perceived harm to academic achievement were sources of complaint. Although the above stated research found that students' perceptions of online learning during the pandemic are generally consistent, one must still acknowledge that study findings can differ depending on the policies implemented at the national level, the unique characteristics of the educational institutions, and a variety of other factors, from how teachers implement the activities to the unique resources and needs of the students (Alexa 2021).

After COVID-19's global outbreak, education had to be delivered virtually, and most universities successfully made the transition in a short

period of time, an aspect which has raised educational development challenges. There are several objectives behind the present research paper, the overall main objective being to evaluate student's perceptions on the effectiveness of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemics. The main indicators of this research article are classified into four areas: interaction with professors and college colleagues; students' comfort in online learning; motivation to study online; effectiveness of online learning (advantages and disadvantages). Thus, the data was obtained through an online questionnaire, and the target group consists of students of the Faculty of Social Work, bachelor's and master's cycles, from the West University of Timișoara.

The main contributions and findings of this research are given below, demonstrating the methodology of data obtained from the respondents, the statistical approach, and data analysis, followed by primary discussions of the results, conclusions of the study, perspectives, and limitations of this study.

### **Changes in educational processes (as a result of the pandemic)**

The COVID-19 pandemic event and the respective implementation of social distance protocols led to a rapid transition to online teaching and learning between March and April 2020 for most higher education institutions in the world, regardless of whether teachers were trained or not (UNESCO IESALC 2020).

As universities are not only a place for academic education, but also for learning social and emotional skills, interaction and social support, switching to online education not only disrupted the education process of students, but also their socialization and interaction.

Learning has been moved to alternative online learning methods of online and pre-recorded teaching lectures, webinars, simulated problem-solving sessions, written assignments to be submitted online, and computer-based exams coupled with written, scanned, and remotely uploaded exams, then to be evaluated by the examiners. This rapid transition of the entire teaching activity therefore offered a unique opportunity to observe the extent

to which teachers have felt prepared for online teaching and learning (Brooks, Grajek, and Lang 2020).

Research has shown that the transition to online education has increased the stress levels of students and teachers (Besser, Lotem, and Zeigler-Hill 2020), while other studies show an increased risk of developing mental illness for students and young people affected by the pandemic COVID-19 outbreak or have developed anxiety problems (Huang and Zhao 2020).

### **Carrying out teaching activities at the West University of Timisoara**

When carrying out teaching-learning activities, the universities used a wide variety of platforms and applications. Also, universities proceeded to change the method of partial and final examination, as well as that of admission in the new academic year, adapting to the new legislative framework (Deca, Gologan, and Santa 2021).

Starting with March of the academic year 2020-2021, the didactic activity at the West University of Timisoara was carried out online. Considering the evolution of the epidemiological situation at local, national and global level and the regulations in force regarding the organization of activities in educational institutions in safe conditions for the prevention of COVID-19, at the West University of Timișoara, the educational process will follow a mixed scenario. The decisions are distinct for each faculty / program / year of studies both with didactic activities carried out exclusively online and with didactic activities carried out in a face-to-face or blended-learning regime (Methodology regarding the organization of the online educational process at the West University of Timisoara).

The transition to online education meant immediate adaptation for West University students and teachers. This sudden shift has generated chaos and fears for the two categories (Eachempati and Ramnarayan 2020). Previous studies show that when making an assessment of how to teach online, it is important to consider the perspective of teachers and how they perceive the transition to online education. It is well known that we have been given a

major focus on students' perception of online education (Nambiar 2020). The perspective of teachers is equally essential because, as providers of education, if they are not satisfied with online education, this is reflected in the way they are taught. This transition to online education has been equally challenging for both students and teachers, who have had to learn new teaching techniques.

Teaching methods had to be adapted to online education and thus different strategies were needed to support students in accumulating knowledge. Easy-to-use online platforms were needed for teachers to take their online courses. Online learning should not try to replicate face-to-face teaching over the Internet. Blended learning offers a flexible opportunity to broaden students' intellectual horizons, allowing the use of teaching-learning and assessment tools and strategies that might not otherwise be feasible in conventional classrooms.

### **Online platforms during the pandemic education process**

The COVID-19 pandemic provided the opportunity to rethink not only the new digital, online and pedagogical possibilities, but also the basic goals of education and how its renewed vision could be harnessed to develop e-Learning tools increasingly the most efficient.

The pandemic has provided unexpected opportunities to promote the adaptation of some of the existing e-Learning platforms in higher education activities. DeWitt (2020) believes that the pandemic created the opportunity for mass adoption of e-Learning platforms "overnight". Most universities quickly adopted Google Classroom, Microsoft Teams, Cisco Webex or Zoom to carry out teaching activities. However, research shows that there have been a number of challenges in how higher education institutions have tried to implement e-Learning solutions to prevent health problems among students and teaching staff (Aguilera-Hermida 2020; Rasmitadila et al. 2020; Bacher-Hicks, Goodman and Mulhern 2020; Day et al. 2021; Kaden 2020).

Three e-Learning platforms were frequently used in the WUT, namely: Google Classroom, Microsoft Teams and Zoom.

The post-COVID 19 period will require substantial change in higher education to ensure not only its survival, but also its evolution. Changes should not only be limited to the creation of a friendly teaching and learning environment based on applications and learning platforms, but also institutional and educational reforms to boost the development of coherent blended learning programs.

### **Recent relevant studies**

Most of the time, technological advancements have brought numerous benefits to human existence. However, in recent years, accelerated by the COVID -19 pandemic, the need to successfully use technology has become a requirement for every field of activity, including education. Despite the fact that technology was already being used in various forms in the academic training of students, enhancing communication and research, the pandemic educational setting mandated the use of technology by both teachers and students, opening up new pathways for teaching and learning, face-to-face learning being transformed into online learning. Even though the wider use of the Internet and online learning have benefited the field of education, individual peculiarities affected how well each person embraced and adjusted to these changes.

Before COVID-19 online education was considered an alluring prospect by educational institutions and students, distance learning was chosen as a way of undertaking higher education, but within the new pandemic context, it became a universal requirement. In the past years, a number of research papers on university students' perceptions of online learning during the COVID-19 epidemic have been released worldwide, demonstrating researchers' concern for the quality of education during these trying times.

Just after the burst of the pandemic, Almahasees, Mohsen, and Amin (2021) looked into how teachers and students in Jordan perceived online learning. They came to the conclusion that, even though it was useful given the conditions, it was still less successful than face-to-face learning and teaching.

In Romania, Cotoranu, Creța and Moldovan (2021) examined the COVID-19 pandemic's effect on Cluj Napoca's Babes Bolyai University students. Their research revealed that respondents experienced an average level of anxiety, indicating high levels of stress, nervousness and difficulty in managing the situation. Respondents expressed concerns about how to take the final exams, the impossibility of returning to college in physical format, the prospects for employment in the near future, as well as the possibility that their grades may be affected. Regardless of the specialization they were engaged in, the COVID-19 pandemic had a detrimental psychological impact on the majority of study participants.

Laili and Nashir (2021) evaluated the perceptions of higher education students on online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the supportive elements and restrictions during online learning. The total number of responders was 103 students who enrolled in an Intensive English class during the 2020/2021 academic year. The findings revealed that students had both positive and negative attitudes toward online learning. Online learning provides flexibility, but it also has drawbacks such as unreliable signal, fewer motivated pupils, difficulty practicing conversation, and high internet costs. The majority of students (91%) choose face-to-face instruction over online learning. The availability of supporting tools, the stability of internet access, and applications of online learning that are easy to access, attractive, motivating, and in the form of a combination among several online learning media to provide the best way of delivering and accepting the material during the teaching learning process are important factors in conducting online learning.

Gorea, Toncean-Luieran and Nagy (2021) conducted a study on 110 students and 15 teachers of The Faculty of Law within the "Dimitrie Cantemir" University of Tîrgu-Mureș. They discovered that students valued having the flexibility to conduct teaching-learning-evaluation activities from any location, saving time and money on travel to and from the university, being able to continue their studies even when they were not feeling well, and having a more manageable daily schedule. Due to some students' preference

not to turn on their microphone and video camera during online learning, a problematic aspect that came up in the study was that the educational dialogue tends or risks becoming a monologue, which is likely to irritate teachers and rob them of the bilateral communication essential to the educational process.

The National Alliance of Student Organisations from Romania conducted a survey on 2.765 students and 375 teachers from 24 Romanian universities in order to outline their needs in the implementation of hybrid education in the 2020–2021 academic year (ANOSR 2020). The goal was to identify ways to develop digitization mechanisms for the teaching process. Their findings demonstrated that the interaction between students and the teaching staff has an impact on online education. The management of the institution by setting up the necessary conditions and ensuring support and technical support, up to the need for ongoing training of teaching staff in terms of pedagogy and regarding the use of digital tools, were all points of emphasis made by both students and teaching staff regarding the transformation of the university environment to make online teaching more efficient. Additionally, the need for the university administration and faculties to put in place a number of policies and mechanisms for overseeing the conduct of online teaching activities emerged, and both students and teachers noticed a lack of genuine interaction, practical activities, and individualized support or guidance.

A well-planned strategy is crucial for the effective implementation of online learning, also according to Baczek et al. (2021), who conducted a survey of 844 Polish medical students after eight weeks of online learning. Although the experience was rated as enjoyable by 73% of respondents, and e-learning can be a powerful tool in their case, they emphasize the importance of a thought-out strategy and a more active approach. They also demonstrated that, for a while at least, online learning may be effective in disciplines like medicine where face-to-face interaction is crucial.

Another notable study involved delivering a questionnaire to 300 students from several colleges in the United Arab Emirates in an effort to



assess important features of online learning in higher education, such as instructor characteristics, social presence, instructional design, and trust. It came to the conclusion that the most crucial factor in successfully integrating online learning was students' trust in online courses. (Nassuora 2020).

Kulal and Nayak (2020) attempted to explain students' perspectives on the impact of online courses, their comfortability in using them, and the support they received from teachers in online classes, as well as teachers' perspectives on efficacy, teaching practice followed, and training received for an online class. According to the study, students are comfortable with online classrooms and receive adequate assistance from teachers, but they do not feel that online programs will replace traditional classroom instruction. It was also discovered that teachers are having difficulty giving online classes due to a lack of sufficient training and development for doing so. The main difficulty with the efficiency of online classes is technical issues. Students gain from the increased use of technology in online learning, but the main worry is that inconsistent internet connections in rural places do not provide comfort in learning.

Muthuprasad et al. (2021) conducted an online survey of 307 agricultural students to better understand their perceptions and preferences for online learning. They also investigated the students' preferences for several aspects of online classes. According to the findings, the majority of respondents (70%) were willing to use online classes to handle the curriculum throughout the pandemic. To boost learning effectiveness, the majority of students preferred to use smart phones for online learning and recorded classes with quizzes at the end of each class. Students believe that the flexibility and ease of online classes make it an appealing alternative. However, broadband connectivity concerns in remote locations make it difficult for students to participate in online learning programs. However, in agricultural education, where many courses are practical in nature, a complete transition to online mode may not be viable, necessitating the development of a hybrid mode; the insights from this article can be useful in developing the curriculum for the new normal.

Through a mixed-methods approach, Barrot, Llenares, and Del Rosario (2021) discovered that the types and intensity of online learning problems faced by college students varied. Their greatest obstacle was related to their learning environment at home, whereas technical literacy and proficiency were their least challenging.

Surani and Hamidah (2020) also attempted to examine student impressions of online learning by administering questionnaires to 239 Bina Bangsa University students. According to the findings, 80% of students are willing to participate in online learning, 62% believe online learning improves them, and 32% have trouble understanding the subject. The student perspective of online learning is favorable, but there are various challenges that must be overcome. As a result, it is advised that online learning be designed, implemented, and assessed in order to reduce issues and optimize learning objectives and achievement.

Soliman, Salman, and Gamal El Din (2022) evaluated how students felt about the sudden shift to online education, as well as trying to provide an assessment of online education performance in higher education from the students' perception. An online questionnaire was used to survey 625 MBA and 41 DBA students and the results show that students' satisfaction with online education is influenced by several factors, including their resources and talents. The effects of student, instructor, and institution characteristics on students' satisfaction with online education were discovered to be moderated by student initiative.

Teuku (2020) investigated how students at Universitas Malikusaleh in Lhokseumawe City felt about online education during the Covid-19 pandemic. The study examined learning motivation, learning environment, and the learning process. Results gathered from 100 respondents from Universitas Malikussaleh's showed that during the COVID-19 outbreak, students had a bad attitude about online learning.

## **Materials and methods**

### ***Research objectives***

The main purpose of the study was to identify the perception of the students from the Department of Social Work in the WUT framework regarding the online learning experience during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The objective we propose for this study consists in assessing students' perception of the effectiveness of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic using four indicators:

- 1) Interaction with professors and faculty colleagues.
- 2) Student's comfort in online learning;
- 3) Motivation to study online.
- 4) Effectiveness of online learning (advantages and disadvantages).

### ***Participants***

The participants in the study were 107 students from a total of 280 students enrolled within the Department of Social Work at the Western University of Timișoara. A non-probabilistic selection of the target group was made, with the opportunity to participate voluntarily from bachelor's and master's students from the same department. Most of the respondents are female, most of them aged up to 22, from the urban area (Table 1). Therefore, 97 (90.3%) of the students are female, and 10 (9.3%) are male, 66 (61.7%) are from the urban area and 41 (38.3) are from the rural area. Regarding the study program, 85 (79.4%) are in the 1st, 2nd or 3rd year of the bachelor's degree, and 22 (20.6%) are in the first year of master's studies (Table 1).

**Table 1.** *Sociodemographic characteristic of respondents*

Variables	Category	Count	Percentage	Std. Deviation
Gender	Female	97	90.3%	.29
	Male	10	9.7%	
Degree	Bachelor	85	79.4%	1.15
	Master	22	20.6%	
Residential environment	Urban	66	61.7%	.48
	Rural	41	38.3%	
Age	18-21 years	67	63.2%	7.82
	22-24 years	22	20.9%	
	Over 24 years	18	15.9%	

### *Data collection method*

The data was collected through an online self-administered survey, using Google Forms. A questionnaire containing 32 items was built by the researchers, using both quantitative research questions to measure the quantifiable variables under study and open-ended questions for understanding students' experiences. The questionnaire was sent to all students enrolled within the Department of Social Work (a total of 280) at the West University of Timișoara during the second semester of the academic year 2022-2023. The average time needed to complete the answers was 15 minutes.

### *The research instrument*

The instrument used for data collection was a standardized questionnaire based on the 4 indicators: interaction with professors and faculty colleagues, student's comfort in online learning, motivation to study online and effectiveness of online learning (advantages and disadvantages).

The questionnaire included 32 items, 15 with responses on a five-point Likert scale (where 1 = to a very small extent, 5 = to a very great extent) and 17 open-ended, explanatory questions.

### ***Ethical considerations***

The Department of Scientific Research and University Creation, from West University of Timisoara approved the study protocol (23215/2023). Participation was fully voluntary, and data were collected anonymously. Confidentiality and privacy were maintained by using unique identification numbers for each case. The e-mail addresses were not collected. Participants were assured that the data would only be used for scientific research purposes.

### **Data analysis**

The quantitative data, obtained through the answers given to the five-point Likert scale questions, were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics (version 23). Answers to the open-ended questions were analyzed qualitatively following the four categories set out by the indicators of the study's main objective (Interaction with professors and faculty colleagues; Student's comfort in online learning; Motivation to study online, and Effectiveness of online learning - advantages and disadvantages). We chose a combination of quantitative and qualitative data gathering and analysis in order to better understand and explain students' perceptions of the way in which the higher education system functioned during the COVID-19 pandemic. The open-ended questions gave an opportunity to broadly explore students' perceptions of the pandemic period, reflecting on their own experiences and feelings.

### **Results**

Given the four indicators on which our analysis is based, the presentation of the results is achieved both qualitatively and quantitatively. For the quantitative analysis, we made a statistical descriptive (percentage, mean and standard deviation) based on 4 indicators.

### ***Results of Interaction with professors and faculty colleagues***

Analyzing the methods of communication with teaching staff and faculty colleagues, it appears that this interaction was critical in dealing with online education during the pandemic. The two questions regarding the interaction with teachers and faculty colleagues have a percentage of over 50% expressing satisfaction in communication (Table 2). A total of 62.7% are very satisfied with their interaction with the teaching staff, which may indicate that students feel free to express themselves and interact, even online, with the teaching staff. The detailed responses to the qualitative questions show that university students perceive online course communication as being more effective, mostly due to the openness of professors, clarity of the contents and the lack of noise and distractions during classes due to technological benefits, that eased their interaction by respecting the turn of each student on asking a question or giving their input regarding the content. The results also show that 37.3% of the students have perceived and mentioned negative aspects of online communication, namely social anxiety, because not all of them have personally met their professor, some of the professors had their cameras closed during classes, and professor's indifference towards their teaching performance.

A total of 58% of the students are also satisfied with their interaction with their colleagues, choosing satisfied and very satisfied from the five point Likert scale answers regarding communication with colleagues, mentioning in the open-ended questions that communication existed and was maintained as before the pandemic. Even though they did not meet in person, they had benefited of the alternative, online and telephone ways of communicating. As mentioned in responding to the qualitative questions, communication continued to be the same especially if students knew each other before the pandemic period. Even though the results show that more than half of them were satisfied by the communication with their colleagues, almost as many were only somehow satisfied, or not satisfied at all. The reasons mentioned for the presence of dissatisfaction were that they did not speak as often, closeness and building up friendships were harder achieved with no in-

person interaction and without doing other types of activities like leisure ones, especially with colleagues they did not know before the pandemic (Table 2).

For all questions analyzed in the tables, the maximum possible score is 5 and the minimum possible score is 1.

**Table 2.** *Frequency distribution of interaction with professors and faculty colleagues*

Category	Percentage	Mean	Std. deviation
How do you assess the quality of communication with teachers during the pandemic?	62.7%	3.77	.94
How do you assess the quality of communication with your colleagues during the pandemic?	58%	3.61	.99

### *Results of Student's comfort in online learning*

Students' comfort in online learning is critical for them to get high outcomes and be content with the study program they have chosen. Although 78.5% had a place to attend courses/seminars, 21.5% reported feeling uncomfortable during online lessons. 45.7% of them felt prepared, from the point of view of digital skills, to face online education.

According to the results statistically presented in Table 3, the lack of comfort related to internet connection that sometimes interrupted their course attendance or affected the functioning of the devices, camera or microphone, was the main source of stress and difficulty mentioned by participants. Results also show that some of the students did not own computers or laptops. The university facilitated their online participation by providing, to those who needed, access to the university's computers. Meanwhile, before having access to the university's facilities, using their phones for attending courses, thus smaller screens, did not allow them to properly follow professor's on the screen presentations. As stated by students in their answers to the open-ended questions, exam results were slightly influenced due to

technology, lack of internet or computer issues, which made some university students fail exams and being afterwards reexamined during the next exam sessions.

**Table 3.** *Frequency distribution of student's comfort in online learning*

Category	Percentage	Mean	Std. deviation
Did you feel discomfort/stress while studying at home?	21.5%	2.60	1.22
From the point of view of digital skills, how prepared did you feel for online learning?	45.7%	3.77	1.01
Do you think that online teaching has affected your preparation for exams?	20.5%	2.39	1.30
Did you have a suitable place from where to attend classes or learn?	78.5%	4.19	.92

### ***Results of Motivation to Study Online***

The motivation for studying online was assessed using the items listed below (Table 4). Students confirm, at a percentage of 81.3%, the fact that during the course of the online courses, they were informed about the possible changes and the progress of the educational process. They feel satisfied with the way the university made the transition to online education (60.7%). A small percentage, 7.4%, stated that they had moments when they considered abandoning their studies. As they explain, there are numerous causes that lead them to consider this. The explanations given by the ones who have considered giving up their studies involve primarily the feeling that they were overwhelmed by all the information and activities that needed to be completed, the stress generated by the perceived incapacity in keeping up or the thought that they will fail in completing the numerous tasks given. They also mentioned aspects regarding the difficult accommodation and the lack of money. Students' involvement in the activities was affected by online



learning, especially due to the fact that they missed the practical application of the learned information (volunteering opportunities and practicing outside the university). In some cases, students felt unmotivated as a result of feeling somehow disconnected by the lack of interpersonal physical interaction. They felt a loss of attention and concentration, being distracted either by other in-house activities or transforming the perceived freedom in organizing their learning schedule into laziness and lack of study motivation.

For stimulating their motivation, students referred to some additional actions that might have been taken into consideration by the university or the teaching staff, such as offering more explanations; including some supplementary meetings for those who felt that they needed more answers to their questions; increasing the level of interaction throughout courses; recording the course so that it remains available after completion (Table 4).

**Table 4.** Frequency distribution of motivation to study online

Category	Percentage	Mean	Std. deviation
I was always informed about the progress of the educational process and possible changes	81.3%	4.07	.98
I am satisfied with the way the university made the transition to online education	60.7%	3.70	1.03
Have you had moments when you considered dropping out of faculty studies?	7.4%	1.64	1.01

*Results of Effectiveness of online learning (advantages and disadvantages).*

With the transition of all activities to the online environment, teachers had to adapt to the new way of teaching. They had to use the platforms provided by the university and reorganize the courses and seminars in accordance with the new technology. A percentage of 45.7% of the students appreciate that teachers were prepared for teaching in the online environment (Table 5). Also,

they say that the distance education experience was satisfactory at a proportion of 46.7%, a percentage supported by the answers to the open-ended questions.

Students had the opportunity to organize their study program and thus were able to carry out other activities (77.6%). They have mentioned the benefits of organizing their daily schedule as it allowed them to also be involved in a workplace, or to take care of other family members that needed their attention. A percentage of 29.9% affirms the fact that academic results have improved compared to the period of face-to-face courses. This could imply that students had more time to complete the tasks and obtain higher grades. On the other hand, we can also refer to the fact that for certain disciplines, there was not a very high involvement of the teaching staff, and thus the requirements for the exams were not very high either.

Students perceived the positive and also the negative aspects of the online learning experience. Advantages of this type of learning involved that it was much easier and cost effective to participate to classes, no transportation being needed; they benefited by the calm environment and comfort of their home and were not distracted by other colleagues or noises from the classroom/study room; they could use the saved time for individual learning or do other activities; they have earned or developed new technical skills and competencies; being close to their families or being able to maintain a job throughout their studies was also an important advantage together with the flexibility in choosing the environment from which to participate to classes and having access to more online learning resources.

The disadvantages mentioned by students regard especially the lack of socialization, being able to have face-to-face contact with colleagues and professors and build better relationships; the level of concentration not being as high as when attending classes in a physical environment, or being much more easy to distract as opposed to attending courses in the classroom; technical issues with the internet connection and the anxiety this brought during the exams; lack of practice and volunteering opportunities; too much time spent in front of the laptop.

Trying to assess students' future expectations, we explored their preference towards online, hybrid or on-site education. Most students mention the usefulness of hybrid education, because of the specific activities they need to practice for becoming future social work professionals (table 5).

**Table 5.** *Frequency distribution of effectiveness of online learning*

Category	Percentage	Mean	Std. deviation
Were you able to organize your study program during distance learning?	77.6%	1.07	.98
How do you appreciate the distance education experience?	46.7%	3.19	1.29
How prepared do you think the teachers were for online teaching?	45.7%	3.41	.92
Do you appreciate that during the pandemic period you had better academic results than during face-to-face courses?	29.9%	3.28	.81
In the future, what type of education do you prefer? Online	24.8%	2.03	.87
Hybrid	20.8%	3.12	.98
On-site	54.4%	3.28	.88

A graphical depiction (Figure 1), in the form of a word cloud, was made regarding the student's representation towards online learning. Various responses were given when asked to describe in just one word the period spent learning in the online environment. Most frequent responses were that for them this experience was *tiring, interesting, good, perfect, different, efficient* and *stressful*.



faculty colleagues, as well. Despite causing social anxiety in some cases, online course communication with the teaching staff was perceived as being effective due to professors' openness, clarity of content, and the lack of noise and distractions during classes, which eased student's interaction. The self-efficacy of teachers has an essential role in students' adaptation to online classes. On the other hand, the self-efficacy of students is related to their academic achievements and their involvement in the study. Furthermore, students profited from alternative, online and telephone modes of communication with their colleagues, and communication remained consistent, especially if students already knew each other. The dissatisfaction with communication with colleagues was caused by the fact that they did not speak as frequently; closeness and friendship building were more difficult to achieve with no in-person interaction and without engaging in other types of activities, such as leisure ones, especially with colleagues they did not know prior to the pandemic.

Students' familiarity with online learning is crucial if they are to achieve excellent results and be satisfied with the study program they have chosen. Despite the fact that most of them had a place to attend courses/seminars, some reported feeling uncomfortable during online lessons. The greatest source of stress and difficulty noted by participants was a lack of comfort associated with internet connection, which occasionally disrupted their course attendance or affected the working of the gadgets, camera, or microphone. According to the findings, some of the students did not own computers or laptops, but the university enabled their online involvement by offering access to the university's computers, enabling them to adequately follow professors' on-screen presentations. Exam results were slightly influenced by technology, such as a lack of internet or computer problems, which caused some university students to fail exams and then be reexamined during subsequent exam sessions.

Most students affirm that they were informed about probable modifications and the development of the educational process during the course of the online courses and that they are pleased with the way the

university transitioned to online education. Just a very few of them said they considered dropping out of school, primarily due to the fact that they felt overwhelmed by all of the information and activities that needed to be completed, the stress generated by the perceived inability to keep up, or the fear of failing to complete the numerous tasks assigned, the challenging accommodations and the lack of funds. Students' participation in activities was impacted due to the fact that they lost opportunities for practical application of the learned material (volunteering and practicing outside of the university). Also, in some cases, students felt disconnected by a lack of physical interaction, experiencing a loss of attention and concentration, being distracted either by other in-house activities or transforming the perceived freedom in organizing their learning schedule into laziness and a lack of study motivation.

Professors providing more explanations, holding supplementary meetings, increasing the level of interaction throughout courses, and recording the course so that it is available after completion could result in more motivated students. Teachers with high self-esteem tend to believe that they have much better control over the student's class, motivating students and helping them in their learning processes (Tschannen-Moran and Hoy 2001). Students have better school results and become more involved when they perceive teachers as efficient in terms of classroom management (Burić and Kim, 2020). Data collected from 844 students from Romanian universities shows that the pandemic forced professors and also students to work harder during the pandemics, an aspect that highlighted the need to make financial investments for the acquisition of licenses to create virtual animations or simulations, as well as using new teaching strategies, such as the use of debates and brainstorming sessions (Barbu, Popescu and Moiceanu 2022).

As for the effectiveness of online teaching and learning, students rated both the positive and bad aspects of their online learning experience: it was much easier and less expensive to participate in classes because no transportation was required; they benefited from the calm environment and comfort of their home and were not distracted by other colleagues or noises

from the classroom/study room; they could use the saved time for individual learning or other activities; they earned or developed new technical skills and competencies; and they were close to their family or could more easily maintain a workplace; but all these also impacted on the lack of socialization and building better relationships; being much more easily distracted as opposed to attending courses in a classroom; technical issues with the internet connection and the anxiety this caused during the exams; and too much time spent in front of the laptop.

For teaching and learning preferences, older students prefer online learning owing to employment and household commitments, whilst younger students prefer on-site education since they want to meet their instructors and coworkers. However, due to the specialized tasks required to become future social work professionals, most of them emphasize the value of hybrid education. The study conducted by Alexa (2020) with 131 undergraduate business students at the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration in Iași during the 2020-2021 academic year shows that the teaching, learning and evaluation experience was mostly positive, and 43% would like to continue with a hybrid system of education in the future.

The experience with teaching and learning in the adverse situation of COVID-19 should encourage social science teachers to benefit from its advantages, to adapt and prepare the curriculum so that it meets the new needs and trends in university education. The huge transformation in the learning and teaching environments, the new educational contexts created by the so-called "forced digitalization", has brought and continues to bring radical changes in the behavior of teachers.

## **Conclusions**

COVID-19 has emerged rapidly and has been a global health threat. Researchers are attempting to identify the way in which the pandemics impacted university education by evaluating students' perceptions on the matter. Thus, the goals of this study were to investigate the effectiveness of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The outcomes suggested that

implementing online education due to the spread of coronavirus had an impact on students' relationships with professors and colleagues, comfort in online learning, motivation to learn and the effectiveness of online learning. Although on a general level, most students consider themselves satisfied, a series of aspects are essential and the impact on the education system of universities remains relevant for the students. Technology raised the main issues during online learning. For example, students used mostly personal computers and laptops, only those that didn't own one requested support from the university, but most of them mentioned having trouble with the internet or their personal devices.

For a large number of students, university has managed to solve the problems generated by the COVID 19 pandemic.

The new environment created as a result of the pandemic requires professionals to develop new skills that universities can offer to train students. Skills should include the ability to research a wide variety of digital sources and resources and use a wide range of data services. For teachers to change, the creation of reflective learning communities is required, along with a redefinition of the meaning and scope of the teacher's role. Such a change is only possible through the development of new coaching skills, which requires the development of reflective and cognitive skills of teachers themselves and peer coaching environments for a real adaptation to the new era of educational contexts.

Even if the new generations of students are much better acquainted with the new technologies, it is essential that they learn to use them in the learning process.

Prior to the pandemic period, we never had access to so much data, and the partial return to the traditional education system must take into account all these new developments, the benefits brought by the use of online platforms.

WUT has implemented and offers today, an important variety of software programs. The multitude of applications, platforms and programs available today to any student and which have become a habit for better



learning, are becoming step by step a new way of approaching post-pandemic education using practice questions with multiple choices, problem solving, tests, etc.

What becomes an acceptance is the fact that hybrid learning has become a necessity and a reality. It integrates face-to-face learning with technology to optimize student engagement. Hybrid learning involves reconceptualizing and redesigning a course or program for delivery in a blended environment. There is no one formula for design, but it is obvious that they are based on the skills and level of knowledge of the teachers and the way in which they are capitalized in the plan of the educational process.

The most important conclusion of this research is that university education will implement important changes due to the benefits offered by this glimpse of online education, which has challenged, but in the end, has adapted to a hybrid, alternative, way of education. To have sustainable education, that combines on-site and online education, e-learning tools should be constantly adapted to students' needs, as shown in the present study.

### **Limitations and Suggestions for Further Studies**

There are certain limitations regarding the representativeness of the sample, because the number of answers received, from 107 students, compared to the total number of 280 students of the Social Work Department of the West University of Timișoara, can be considered unrepresentative (38,21%). However, if we want to collect more data than what is currently accessible, we will need to do so over a longer period of time.

Another potential limit of this study could be the potential socially desirable answers provided by the students to the researchers, who are, some, their professors.

The study can be extended and conducted by the authors for the general population of students of the West University of Timișoara, so we can have a full and clear image of the perceptions of students studying at different faculties.

This study illustrated that we need to find a balance between different types of education, and develop online initiatives for sustainable education.

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