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Research raport

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Introduction

As part of the project “Supporting mental health in organizations: developing future business leaders”, supported by the International Visegrad Fund, we conducted a study investigating the experiences of academics and students in the post-pandemic times, with particular emphasis on mental health in academia. The data collection technique we chose was a semi-structured qualitative interview, and the group of respondents included students and lecturers from Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia. The interviews concerned the experience of conducting online classes, impressions regarding student-lecturers relations, perceived learning outcomes, and the impact of the pandemic crisis on mental health in academia. The overall goal is to examine the long-term consequences of the pandemic on academia, draw lessons from it, and ultimately create solutions for mental health and well-being care in the post-pandemic era, where the educational reality has irreversibly changed.

Our general findings are as follows:

- Respondents found it difficult to recall their experience of the remote world easily. They tended to forget about the pandemic. Eventually, they were able to share their emotions, but providing detailed examples was challenging.
- Remote education opened up new possibilities and challenges.
- Some academics and students expressed a desire to continue in hybrid mode. For them, interactive practical classes in smaller groups should be conducted on-site, while non-interactive lectures should be held remotely.
- The massive shift to online instruction has highlighted the clear needs of both groups in the areas of relationships and mental health.

Methods

Due to the unique nature of the topic and the exploratory nature of our research, we employed qualitative methods. Between March and June 2023, we conducted semi-structured interviews with students and lecturers from four business schools: Prague University of Economics and Business (Czechia), University of Pécs (Hungary), University of Warsaw (Poland), and Comenius University in Bratislava (Slovakia). We interviewed 10 students and 10 lecturers from each of these schools, resulting in a total of 80 interviews (40 with students and 40 with lecturers). The interviews, which lasted approximately an hour each, were conducted between April and June 2023. They were recorded, transcribed *verbatim*, and analyzed using key categories, including emotions, thoughts, coping behaviors, lessons learned, and the future of education.

Response to the pandemic crisis

The respondents emphasized that the transition to remote mode was a significant challenge. The initial implementation of distance education in the spring of 2020 was more of a rapid adjustment rather than a planned process. The first reactions to the pandemic were often described as a ‘shock.’ As one of our respondents recalls:

I was shocked because I couldn't see the students. The shock of not being able to let go, not knowing exactly what I'm doing or in what environment. The shock of having to redo the lectures because I used to write on the board a lot, and writing on the board in MS Teams is impossible. So, I had to position the camera in a way that I was writing on paper in front of the students. [academic, CZ 1]

It was only during the following semester, which began in the fall, that preparations were relatively better. Universities organized training and provided technical support for their employees, such as in the use of e-learning platforms, communication tools, and virtual teaching aids. However, equipping lecturers with the necessary infrastructure and hardware to conduct remote classes proved to be more challenging. Respondents most often used their personal equipment and conducted classes from their homes, which frequently required finding a balance between family needs, caregiving tasks, and professional duties. During this period, lecturers had a particular need for emotional support from colleagues, superiors, or university authorities. Some of them received such support, for instance, through telephone conversations with

superiors or colleagues, or during company meetings on Zoom. However, these conversations were often lacking or emerged as a result of grass-roots initiatives based on pre-pandemic personal relationships.

Many respondents pointed out the psychological strain they experienced during the pandemic. Some of these challenges were related to the specific nature of remote work, such as the limitations on social interactions, the fatigue that accompanied long hours of teaching in front of screens, and the monotony of virtual meetings.:

We were just one group, maybe 30 people connected on the same call, but we didn't really see each other, didn't hear each other. [student, SK 1]

Many people noticed that during the pandemic, loneliness, often accompanying academic work, became even more acute. Students revealed that it was more difficult for them to stay focused during online classes, as they were more distracted and less motivated. As one of our informants explain:

It was very difficult for me to motivate myself to study at home because, unfortunately, I easily got distracted by watching series. I ended up watching a lot, and as a result, I didn't feel very motivated. It was really challenging for me to find the willpower to focus on my studies. [student, HU 1]

Among the most frequently mentioned difficulties in online teaching, teachers emphasized the lack of contact with the group. While respecting students' right to privacy, lecturers pointed out how challenging it was for them to conduct classes when most participants had their cameras turned off. The inability to observe the faces of the audience made it difficult to adjust the pace or format of classes to the needs of the group, leading to increased fatigue and reduced motivation for the lecturers. Interviewees expressed how much they missed the "spark" in the eyes of curious listeners and the opportunity to be energized by an engaged, attentive, or amused group. Most of our interviewees believed that the moments when they could establish a "real connection" with students brought them closer to the sense of meaningful teaching, which is why their absence during the pandemic was deeply felt.

Our interviews reveal an extremely high level of disengagement from both students and teachers. For instance, one of our interviewees, a Polish student, proposed the concept of a "Zoom Bot" that would automatically connect students to lectures and generate a welcome message explaining that the user may have Internet connection issues and might not be able to be actively participating. During online lectures,

students often left Zoom meetings when group work in breakout rooms began. Additionally, there were instances of awkwardness when academics entered breakout rooms or asked questions and the group responded with complete silence.

Based on our interviews with students and lecturers, we observed two 'vicious cycles' that influenced the online education process. First, there was a cycle of disengagement, where disengagement on the students' side led to further disengagement on the teachers' side, resulting in even more disengagement from the students, and so on. For example, in classes where hardly any cameras were turned on, some lecturers also chose to turn off their cameras, which further contributed to disengagement among the students. As one of our interviewees stated:

They pretend that they learn, we pretend that we teach; It is all about pretending. [academic, PL 1]

Secondly, there was a cycle of 'hide and seek'. The more teachers felt that students were disengaging from the learning process, the more inclined they became to 'chase' after them. For instance, when students engaged in cheating during exams (which was relatively easier in online exams), teachers felt more compelled to exert control or increase the difficulty of exams, thereby leading to further instances of cheating. As explained by our respondents:

I had the feeling that I was perceived a priori as someone who cheats, just because it is online. And there was a lot of whole-room screen sharing, some tight-fisted surveillance, scrutiny, etc. [student, CZ 1].

It never occurred to me that something like this could happen. And we found out that we only had the best grades, so I thought to myself, it's not possible. So, we're going to want everyone to have a camera switched on. And the students argued - we don't have a camera - and we protested - you're going to have a camera. We made it more and more strict, the student always managed to get around it. [academic, CZ 2]

Both cycles, namely the 'disengagement' and 'hide-and-peek,' were driven not only by actual behaviors but also by mutual projections and mistrust, which involved assuming ill will from the other party. These dynamics were further exacerbated by the physical distance and lack of human connection.

The lecturers noticed that the remote form changes the dynamics of group processes taking place during classes, making it difficult to build a sense of security and community. For this reason, classes – including

those conducted in small groups, in the exercise or workshop formula – are much less likely to exchange opinions, confront views, and reveal personal feelings or experiences. It seems, therefore, that while it is possible to reproduce the “formal” content of classes in a remote form (which makes it possible to transfer lecture classes to virtual space), it is very difficult to conduct classes based on the participants’ own experience. Facilitation of the group process online required some additional effort. One of our respondents notices:

When I teach classes, I make an effort to explain everything to my students and provide them with clear explanations of what I am doing. In moments of silence (...), for instance, I would say something like: 'Now, ladies and gentlemen, I need to open a document here and simultaneously open a presentation. It will take me a moment, so please be patient.' I believe that these longer pauses, where students are unsure of what is happening, are not conducive to an effective teaching process. [academic, PL 12]

In online reality, some extremely difficult situations happened that would not take place in face-to-face class (e.g., a naked person appearing on camera, or sounds of violent screaming heard in the background). In those cases, academics sometimes were completely lost. These situations, along with the overall changes in the education process, imposed a significant psychological burden on the academics. As one of our interviewees stated:

I had a very clear feeling that I was losing control, that I was not controlling the room as I had been controlling it all my life. [academic, PL 11]

Coping behaviors

Our interviewees developed various mechanisms to cope with the challenges posed by the pandemic. Some of them attempted to motivate students to turn on their cameras during lectures by offering them extra points. One academic even experimented with increasing students’ attentiveness:

After each thirty or forty-minute module, I would change the image that hung behind me to see if the students were alert. Therefore, it turned out that someone immediately realized and then everyone was waiting for what the next picture would be, so I hung everything I had at home and we made jokes about it all. I thought it was so funny. [academic, PL 11]

Home rearrangements emerged as a common coping behavior:

I rearranged my room every week because I can't stand the consistency. I love changing environments, adventures, etc. And I was sick that this closet is always there, and I always look at the same thing, and everything is like a squirrel wheel, and so everything is really the same... I rearranged my room weekly. [student, HU 2]

Our interviewees also revealed the emergence of organization-level practices during the pandemic. For instance, in Poland, a group of female lecturers regularly gathered online to discuss feminist books and simply connect with each other. In Hungary, academics participated in online gatherings called ‘Mentor Harbor,’ explicitly created for sharing thoughts and feelings related to the pandemic. Despite these grassroots initiatives, some academics expressed the need for a more systemic response from their respective schools. As one of our interviewees stated:

[...] To be honest, for the whole year I have not received any – and I say this with such full conviction – no one took care of my well-being. And for some sort of systemic support. I was getting e-mails that I had to switch here online, report here how many hours (I work), in what IT system I register it [academic, PL 12]

Lessons learned

Some of the respondents attempted to find personal meaning in the challenging experience of the pandemic and remote education. Our interviewees spoke about how they had developed new skills (such as proficiency in using IT tools) and gained a greater understanding for themselves and their students. They learned to accept the imperfections that come with education, not only in the virtual realm.

Educators also acknowledge that the hybrid mode of conducting lectures is not effective, particularly when interactions within the group are necessary, and part of the group is online while the other part is physically present in the room.

The future of academia, including business schools, is unclear, but our respondents unanimously claim that it will not be the same as before the pandemic:

There are plenty of sources, [...] scientific articles, so you don't even need to know the language anymore because AI can probably translate it for you. So I have the impression that now is the time when the university, i.e. educators, must come up with a different form of cooperation with students. [...] I think that (...) we should be someone who can show how to evaluate the

information we find, teach how to think, teach how to analyze, teach how to synthesize this information, how to search for knowledge, how to answer questions, how to ask questions, teach discuss, learn to establish relationships in a group. In this sense of group relations, I mean more talking and discussing, right? So, I see the development of the university in this direction rather than just passing on dry facts. [academic, PL 13]

Respondents declare that there is decreasing importance of sharing theoretical knowledge, which will be accessible by many other channels. What will be important is focus on practical skills, critical thinking and building networks.

One educator pointed out that online education will become common but incomplete, with a focus on achieving financial goals and neglecting the networking aspect. On the other hand, on-site education will be considered a complete experience, emphasizing the development of real-life valuable knowledge and the opportunity to build a network.

Conclusions

It is important to emphasize the non-obvious outcomes related to online education and mental health issues. Our study reveals some serious dangers of online education, such as extreme disengagement or the ineffectiveness of knowledge assessment. On the other hand, there is a strong pressure to maintain elements of online education due to the increasing accessibility of knowledge and decreasing financial costs. There is also a concern about the redundancy of educators - will they still be needed? Currently, efforts are being made to adapt teaching methods by blending online and live tools (e.g., popularization of Moodle). The challenge lies in not misusing the 'online' possibilities. Taking a long-term perspective, the content of lectures needs to be adjusted.

People tend to forget about the pandemic, but forgetting impedes learning and adaptation to future crises. After the crisis, there is a need for reflection, not just action. This is where academia plays a role that needs to be redefined. The unclear role of academics in training future leaders necessitates critical thinking about management and current leadership programs. For example, defining performance is not obvious, especially during times of crisis. Perhaps we need more room for procrastination, boredom, and unproductiveness. Perhaps we also need a greater tolerance for ambiguity, uncertainty, and accepting limitations and factors beyond control in companies.

An important role of academia relates to being a container of emotions, reflecting and mirroring. Moreover, there is strong uncertainty regarding whether the university is a place to discuss difficult emotions such as despair, blame, loss, and anger, and eventually, who should 'contain the containers'?



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