

UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' EMOTIONS AND REFLECTIONS ON RETURNING TO FACE-TO-FACE EDUCATION AFTER EMERGENCY REMOTE EDUCATION: A CASE STUDY FROM GREECE

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ABSTRACT

After the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, abundant research has explored the effects of Covid-19 on university students' psychological and emotional state as well as students' experiences with the emergency remote education that was applied at the beginning of the pandemic in universities worldwide. However, university students' experiences in the transition from emergency remote education to face-to-face education again under the pandemic circumstances have been left unexamined. This small case qualitative research explored the reflections and feelings of 77 undergraduate students from a Department of Primary Education of a Greek university at the time that they returned to on-site education at their campus, after the implementation of emergency remote education. Research data comprised the written texts where participants freely and anonymously recorded their thoughts on the issue under study, and the research method that was used was qualitative content analysis. Findings indicated that the return to on-site education was an emotional experience for the participants. The latter on the one hand self-reported feeling happy since with the traditional model of education they could satisfy their need for social relations; while, on the other hand, they self-reported experiencing anxiety and fear, mainly for not being infected with the virus. Still, several students had concerns about the compliance of the preventive measures at the campus premises and admitted to experiencing difficulties with their adaptation. The findings of the study help us take a snapshot of this special moment for the educational reality, namely, the restoration of the educational normality that was afflicted by the vehement emergence of the pandemic.

Keywords: - emergency remote education, Covid-19, distance education, university students, face-to-face education, higher education

1. INTRODUCTION

Two years have passed since COVID-19 was declared to be a widespread disease [1], leading to dramatic changes in all aspects of people's lives. The education sector could not be left untouched by the wave of the global health crisis, but has been significantly and severely influenced, since, due to governments' lockdown impositions, higher education institutions as well as other educational organizations had to "close their gates" and switch from

face-to-face to emergency remote education [2][3]. According to a European Commission's review, it is estimated that almost 220 million learners of higher education internationally have been influenced by these changes in their educational reality [4].

Just after the coronavirus's appearance on the world map and the consequent changes it brought to life, researchers rushed to record these consequences for university students' psychological and emotional well-being. Research conducted overtime during this period with students from different parts of the world depicted a sobering situation for students' emotional and psychological state due to lockdowns and people's self-restriction, since findings indicated higher levels of psychological distress, anxiety, depression [5], as well as worsening of quality of life and sexual life, and an increase of suicidal thoughts [6]. Meanwhile, studies have shown that the prevailing feelings among university students amidst these difficult times were loneliness [7], worry [8], emptiness [9], unhappiness, surprise, anger, and disgust [10]; while negative consequences have also been found for undergraduate students' academic work [11].

In fact, the consequences of the pandemic for higher education reality and students' learning were also a hot topic among scholars [3]. Several studies investigated students' experience with online learning under the Covid-19 circumstances, with their findings, according to the Masalimova et al.'s review [12], revolving around the following themes: students' views and attitudes towards distance education, learners' views on the drawbacks and benefits of distance education, as well as learners' views on the challenges of distance education. More specifically, Masalimova et al. [12], after reviewing several studies, concluded that, although face-to-face education is indispensable for the students participated in the studies reviewed, who were also partial to it, students' satisfaction and attitudes among the various studies towards emergency remote education ranged between the positive and negative extreme. At the same time, the same review found that the most cited benefits of emergency remote education by students were its positive influence on their learning and their accomplishments, as well as the fact that it is money-saving. On the other hand, the most cited drawbacks and challenges were referred to be the technical problems arisen, students' overload, students' physical and psychological problems, a lack of in-person interaction during online learning and the obstacles to socialization e.t.c. [12]. In the meantime, lots of studies focused especially on the issue of students' engagement in the online environment during emergency remote education [13].

Although abundant research has been carried out regarding university students' life and education during emergency remote learning in the pandemic, there is great difficulty -to the best of our knowledge- in identifying research that explores the post-emergency remote learning experience of university students at their return to face-to-face education at campus. However, students' emotional and psychological well-being at their return to their school physical environment attracts much attention [14] and should be investigated, given the findings of various studies that illustrate an aggravated situation, as presented above.

Thus, this small-case qualitative research set out to give a snapshot of the early post-emergency remote education phase that was experienced by undergraduate students from a Department of Primary Education of a Greek university. The specific research question that was tried to be answered was:

- How did undergraduate students feel as well as what were their thoughts when they called to turn back to their traditional education at their campus, after the end of the implementation of the emergency remote education having previously been applied to Greek universities?

2. METHODOLOGY

This study was carried out in early October 2021, as soon after in-person lessons began at Greek universities. Research data were particularly obtained at the early stage of the first on-site lesson of an undergraduate course entitled "Educational Assessment" that was taught by the first author. More specifically regarding the research process, undergraduate students attending the course and being in the last academic year of their studies were asked to write in an anonymous text their thoughts on returning to in-person education as well as their emotions towards it [15], after having previously consented to take part in the research and had been informed about their rights to leave the research whenever they wanted [16]. The research tool of written text was considered the most suitable -in our opinion- for this research, because we were looking for the participants' spontaneous and vivid accounts about what they were experiencing as well as the richness of their views, which otherwise would have been difficult to capture [17]. Overall, 77 undergraduates took part in the research: 42 were women, 5 were male, 1 declared to be genderfluid, while 29 students did not mention their gender.

After the collection of the research material, qualitative content analysis was applied for the content of the material to be fully described in a systematic way [18]. The exact stages of the qualitative content analysis, which was implemented both deductively and inductively [19], were the following:

1. The participants' written texts were numbered, and the units of coding were specified. The latter was decided to be a word, a phrase, and a sentence, pertaining to the research question [17].
2. Categories (the participants' reflections and emotions about their return to on-site education) were formulated according to the research question (deductive) [18]. Then, the data was coded in relation to the units of coding, and subcategories emerged (inductive). For the subcategories' construction, a prerequisite was the units of coding to be manifested in different written texts [15].
3. The coders, who were also the authors of the paper, were gathered for an intercoder check. Thus, after their main analysis, they compared their coding systems and resolved any disagreement [19].
4. Finally, the findings that emerged are presented as frequencies and are also interpreted below [19].

3. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

3.1 Frequency analysis of the research findings

The analysis of the students' written texts regarding their thoughts and feelings about their return to face-to-face education led to the total collection of 302 relevant accounts. From the distribution of these accounts into the main categories of the analysis, it is found that the participants put more emphasis on the emotions that they self-identified that experienced when they returned to university halls in comparison to their equivalent thoughts (Table 1):

Table -1: The distribution of the total accounts into the main categories of the analysis

The distribution of the total accounts into the main categories of the analysis	Number of accounts	Percent (%)
Students' emotions at their return to face-to-face education at campus	165	54,64%
Students' reflections on returning to face-to-face education at campus	137	45,36%
Total	302	100%

Concerning their emotions, the participants expressed slightly more positive than negative feelings, even though several students clearly stated that they experienced various and heterogenous feelings when they began again on-site education, as well as they advocated to have felt bizarre and weird (Table 2):

Table -2: Students' emotions at their return to face-to-face education at campus

Students' emotions at their return to face-to-face education at campus	Number of accounts	Percent(%)
Positive emotions	83	50,30%
Negative emotions	69	41,82%
Mixed and strange emotions	13	7,88%
Total	165	100%

More specifically, the participated students stressed mostly to have been happy and joyful, while the attendance of university courses in-person filled them with the hope that the return to normalcy was imminent. Furthermore, several students added that they were excited about this turn of events, eager to attend the courses and participate in the lessons taking part in the auditoria, as well as optimistic about the future, and relieved because their studies would continue as before:

Table -3: Students' positive feelings at the return to face-to-face education at campus

On the other hand, the feeling of stress was intense and prominent among the students who participated in the research, which was followed by the feeling of fear. Lastly, only some participants stated that they were disappointed since they used to enjoy the flexibility of emergency remote education and learning [20], which they had to abandon:

Table -4: Students' positive feelings at the return to face-to-face education at campus

Students' negative feelings at the return to face-to-face education at campus	Number of accounts	Percent(%)
Stress	40	57,97%
Students' positive feelings at the return to face-to-face education at campus		
	Number of accounts	Percent(%)
Happiness and joy	41	49,40%
Hope for a return to normalcy	13	15,66%
Excitement	9	10,85%
Impatience	7	8,43%
Optimism	7	8,43%
Relief	6	7,23%
Total	83	100%
Fear	24	34,78%
Disappointment	5	7,25%
Total	69	100%

Turning now to the participants' thoughts, they mostly advocated that, with face-to-face education, their social need to interact with the members of the academic community and develop social relationships with their teachers and classmates have met, while they asserted that face-to-face education offers more effective learning compared to distance learning applied during emergency remote education. However, they appeared to be highly concerned about the compliance with the preventive measures at the university and, consequently, about the assurance of their health. Still, some indicated that the time has come again to enjoy their life as university students:

Table -5: Students' reflections on returning to in-person education at campus

Students' reflections on returning to in-person education at campus	Number of accounts	Percent (%)
Satisfaction of their need for social interaction and social relations	43	31,38%
More effective learning	29	21,17%
Concerns about the compliance with the preventive measures at university and the assurance of their health	24	17,52%
Experiencing difficulty in adjusting	23	16,79%

Experiencing and enjoying the student life	9	6,57%
Face-to-face education is irreplaceable	9	6,57%
Total	137	100%

3.2 Interpretation of the research findings

Below follows the interpretation mainly of the participants' dominant views:

After three academic semesters of the implementation of emergency remote education, the participated students' return to face-to-face education was an emotionally intense situation for them; where they experienced multiple, diverse, and even strange – according to some participants- feelings. However, the dominant emotions that the students self-identified to experience can be placed in a dipole, where on the one end stands happiness and on the other side stand stress and anxiety. And these emotions were usually intertwined in the texts of same students; as well as these emotions were linked with, and explained by, specific thoughts expressed by students regarding in-person education at campus.

As far as the emotion of happiness is concerned, this feeling was most of the time linked in the participants' texts with, and explained by, their reflection and assertion that face-to-face education satisfies the humans' need for social relations and interactions; the opposite of which is a widely advocated drawback for distance education generally [21] while it has also been cited as one of the disadvantages of the emergency remote education implemented in the midst of the pandemic by students in several studies having been conducted so far [12] [22]. For example, a male participant in our research wrote about his happiness for returning to face-to-face education:

I feel happy to see my fellow students and professors again. I prefer face-to-face education more and I enjoy it, because for so long, during emergency remote education, I have lost the feeling of being close to others, because when the lessons are done up close, students have social interactions, and the lesson becomes more expressive and effective.” (Participant 43)

As can be seen from the excerpt above, the students' joy for returning to on-site classes was also -and to a lesser extent- associated with their assertion that with this type of education, they obtain better learning outcomes in comparison with distance education. Similarly, Serhan [23] in his research, where investigated students' perceptions of an American university regarding the use of Zoom in their online education during Covid-19 circumstances and its impact on their learning, found that most of the participated students opposed the view that Zoom made better their learning. However, the pedagogical value of online learning generally in comparison with face-to-face education seems to be a crucial issue of debate among scholars in the literature [24]. To explain the reasons why our participants expressed their learning gain in the case of face-to-face education rather than emergency remote education, we found through the texts that the participants attributed the ineffectiveness of the latter not only to the absence of social interactions in the online educational environment, but also to the lesser opportunities that it offers for dialogue or/and any disagreements on course subject, to the students' difficulty in concentrating, to the technical problems that usually arose, as well as to less students' engagement to e-learning process [25]. Therefore, it seems that in this case the pedagogical value of the distance education provided under covid-19 circumstances may have been influenced by the inherently distinct characteristic of emergency remote education, namely its unplanning and unpreparedness; since successful online learning presupposes a long-basis, multifaceted, multidimensional, and complicated planning, while numerous options have to be taken on the basis of learners' characteristics and needs, as well as it presupposes a careful consideration of numerous issues pertaining the pedagogic-teaching triangle (educator, learner, and course content) [26] [27]), where student engagement is a crucial factor. Moreover, for online learning to be successful the necessary technology and the know-how to use it as well as an effective classroom environment are needed [25]. Still, it has been argued that two requirements for online teaching to be as effective as face-to-face one are intense instructor attendance and active/collaborative learning [28]. All the above thus require expertise, proper infrastructure, long preparation, and enough time, which were obviously not the case in the emergent transition to online classes under the covid circumstances [29].

Based on the above, it is not surprising the fact that some participants emphasized that they prefer face-to-face education [22] [30] and rendered their joy in returning to campus to the claim that they find on-site education indispensable [12].

But, while students expressed to be very happy that the day had finally come to meet again the other members of the academic community, to attend classes on campus, to live again alone being independent, and to

“have the sense of normality” (Participant 52, Gender not stated); they simultaneously advocated being anxious and scared about the consequences of the pandemic and their impending illness due to their coexistence with others during face-to-face education, given that the virus’s transmission takes place within the crowd: *«I feel happy that we have returned to face-to-face education and we are now on campus, we live alone, we are independent, we are reconnected with our friends and our teachers. But I'm very anxious as well as scared because now it's more dangerous to be infected with the coronavirus.»* (Participant 76, female)

The participated students’ anxiety and fear of not becoming infected with the coronavirus during their return to face-to-face education [31] usually appeared in the research material alongside their concerns about the non-compliance of the preventive measures against the spread of the virus at university premises. Although the regulations for the reopening of all kinds of educational organizations in our country -including universities- provided for the compulsory use of a mask, the systematic demonstration of vaccination certificates, rapid test infection or molecular control; the implementation of protocols in case of positive cases [32], as well as there were antiseptics in all university premises and their frequent use was encouraged; people’s compliance with the preventive measures under the risk of virus transmission will judge after all whether the returning to social activity was successful [31]. And the students appeared in their texts to be suspicious and skeptical about whether personal hygiene and protection measures (the regular use of antiseptics and distance retention) would indeed be respected by their classmates, while the students also directly questioned the adequacy of these measures to ensure their health and that of their relatives. In particular, in the latter case, some opposed the return to on-site education, stating that it was carried out quickly, early, and despite the presence of confirmed cases in the general population of the country; while others stated with certainty that the student population would not comply with the measures and soon or later there would be confirmed cases among them: *the crowds around me cause me a lot of anxiety and a widespread fear as to how the situation will evolve...I do not believe that we will adequately adhere to the measures, which will burden the already burdened situation* (Participant 73, female)

Apart from the students’ reservations and concerns regarding the adherence to the measures against coronavirus and the safeguarding of their health, the difficulties that many said that they experienced in readapting to the reality of face-to-face education as well as to their educational routine at university are also notable. As a female participant wrote:

It's not easy to come back to the old reality, since we've been so affected by the pandemic, and it lasted a year and a half. Now we must get used to it all over again. And it's not an easy thing to behave in a way that we were used to when we had been before in university. (Participant 63)

Several participated students described how difficult they found it to interact with several people again and/or to follow the rhythms required by on-site education and each lesson during it; since they used for a year to be confined to their own home, to attend classes from the comfort of their computer, to interact mainly with their parents - as most of them declared that they had returned to their parental home and hometown during emergency remote education.

The above findings come with no surprise given the findings of the several studies which have been cited in the introduction of this article and have described a sobering situation to have been brought about by the pandemic in university students’ well-being and psychological state. The outbreak of the pandemic signaled changes in all aspects of people’s lives that people found hard to adjust to, while these changes were stress-provoking and can lead to distress in case of a lack of coping strategies [33]. The findings of the present study showed that the changes that occurred in the students’ life at their return to face-to-face education, after nearly two years of the implementation of emergency remote education in the comfort of their home, were also difficult to manage for several participants and a stressor for them. These changes had to be addressed by the participants under the fear and anxiety not to be infected with the virus and disperse it to their relatives, friends, and families, and the students were reasonable to experience such emotions since the pandemic has not been a distant past yet.

Finally, for few participants the feelings of fear and stress were arisen due to their concerns of a possible interruption of face-to-face education by an increase of infected cases and a subsequent possible return to emergency remote education that entails isolation and confinement, which comes with no surprise regarding these students’ preference to face-to-face education: *«Now, after so long, we finally return to face-to-face education. Along with the feeling of joy, fear also prevails in me. Not fear of getting sick, but of returning to distance education and having to live in isolation.»* (Participant 52, female)

4. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, extensive research has been carried out to explore the consequences of the pandemic for people's lives and psychological state, while a special research interest has captured university students' well-being and educational experience of emergency remote education amidst coronavirus circumstances. However, far too little attention has been paid in general to humans' adaptation after their freedom from the preventive measures of social isolation [31] and, in particular, to university students' transition and adaptation to face-to-face education again at their campus, after the end of the implementation of emergency remote education [14].

Taking this research gap as a point of departure, this small case qualitative research attempted to catch and capture this special moment for the educational reality: the restoration of the educational normality that was afflicted by the vehement emergence of the pandemic, as this occurred at a Department of Primary Education of a Greek university. Seventy-seven undergraduate students were voluntarily recruited to participate in the research by drawing an anonymous written text up regarding their thoughts and emotions about their return to face-to-face education at campus.

Although the findings are not generalizable and therefore should be interpreted with caution, they may help us understand the university students' socio-emotional and psychological needs at this transitional phase of their education, which should at a next step be fulfilled [34]. Interestingly, the findings have shown a contrasting situation and image, since, on the one hand, the participants self-identified to feel happy, because with face-to-face education they would satisfy their human need for social interactions and relations with the other members of the academic community. However, on the other hand, the participants felt mainly anxiety and less fear, mainly for not being infected with the virus, since it is transmitted through social contact, which takes place during on-site education. Several students who participated in the research appeared concerned about the compliance with the preventive measures at university premises and thus about the assurance of their health during their return to face-to-face education, while several participants also stated that they were having difficulties in adjusting to the regularity of their education.

The findings of this small case study - when the pandemic is still ongoing and its future course is uncertain- suggest particular courses of action for the assurance of the university students' health to enjoy their return to the normality of their education. Thus, people in charge should supervise the adherence to the measures at the university premises, but the most crucial is to be each student, and generally each member of the academic community, aware of his/her individual responsibility and obligation to comply with the preventive measures. Another critical implication concerns the students' psychological support by the university's health services [35]. Such support is necessary not only for the students to be able to successfully manage their emotions and for their adaptation to on-site education as well as the social life with the coronavirus to be facilitated, but also for the students to be provided with effective strategies to deal with crises and manage their feelings in the future.

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