

Concerns Regarding the Orientation of Higher Education in Romania. Flexibility - A Current Requirement

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Abstract

The March 2020 - March 2022 period represented a stage of important changes in terms of the development of higher education in Romania. The sudden transition (due to the new Coronavirus pandemic) from the classical, "face-to-face" education/learning and teaching to the online format was regarded as the only way to ensure the continuity of the teaching-learning-assessment activities. The implementation of online education was accompanied by multiple aspects, some of them being similar for all the university centers in the country and for all the fields of study.

In this context, this article presents the results of our research on the perception of students from the Faculty of Economic Sciences within "Ovidius" University of Constanța regarding the experiment on changing the way of carrying out education activities, during the pandemic, but also on how they consider that the activity must be organized in the new economic, social and political context.

Key words: higher education, student approach, flexibility, alternative teaching methods

J.E.L. classification: I21, I23, I26

1. Introduction

Education and learning/teaching are a widely debated topic. We currently find it within certain governmental institutions, at national and international level (with responsibilities in establishing educational policies and their implementation), administrative and non-governmental organizations (NGOs, professional associations, students'/pupils'/parents' associations, etc.).

Ever since the beginning of the 21st century, it has been stated that we are living in the "age of knowledge", in a world characterized by permanent change, which entails changes in each individual, but also changes of the economic, social, cultural, political systems.

The text of the Memorandum on Lifelong Learning, of October 2000, stated that "Today's Europe is experiencing change on a scale comparable with that of the Industrial Revolution. Digital technology is transforming every aspect of people's lives, whilst biotechnology may one day change life itself." (Commission of the European Communities, 2000, p. 7)

The emergence and spread of the Covid-19 virus infection in early 2020, and the recognition of the pandemic by the World Health Organization on March 11, 2020 confirm this scenario, which was described or anticipated in the year 2000. In the context of the pandemic, one of the decisions taken by many countries was the transition to online education/learning and teaching (UNICEF Romania, 2020)).

The first part of this paper presents a theoretical approach to the importance of education/learning and teaching, in the context of the changes that humanity is undergoing, whereas the second part brings to attention a direct type of research on/into the way economics students from Constanța perceived this online school experiment, during the pandemic, for two years (four semesters). The conclusions of this article are based on the results obtained from this research and their correlation with the current concerns over/about the reorientation of the higher education in Romania.

2. Theoretical background

The importance of education and learning for each individual, but also for society is analyzed in specialized papers, mentioned in official documents and debated within several world, European and national organizations.

In many cases, education and learning/teaching are expressed and / or understood as synonyms. However, in order to survive, develop and evolve a society needs education, in order to ensure the training of the individuals, so that they are able to fulfill their roles, the responsibilities they are to take on. From this perspective, we note that the education system of a society is more comprehensive compared to the learning and teaching system. At the same time, the education system includes "along with all the levels and types of learning and teaching, all types of non-school education" (Radulian, 2022, p. 6).

The learning/teaching system, through the school / university institution, is considered the main institutional factor with a role in ensuring education (Radulian, 2022, pp. 1, 5-7). It is obvious that, over time, the institution of education has experienced a continuous evolution process, on the one hand in terms of its main functions, and on the other hand in terms of the institutions involved. In this context, Émile Durkheim (1858-1917), the remarkable educational sociology specialist, recalls the "generic types of education" (respectively, the education systems corresponding to the different "types of society" (Radulian, 2022, p. 1).

The European approach, formulated by the European Council during its meeting in Lisbon in March 2000, is that the education and training systems in Europe are changing, but also that they need to be correlated with the knowledge-based economy and information society (Commission of the European Communities. 2000)

Based on the recognition, formulated in the Conclusions of the Presidency of the European Council, Lisbon, 23-24 March 2000, that "People themselves are the leading actors of knowledge societies", the Memorandum on Lifelong Learning emphasized that "education and training systems must adapt to the new realities of the 21st century" (European Commission, 2000, p. 5.)

In Romania, the Ministry of Education ensures the orientation and implementation of the national education policy. The vision regarding the future of education in our country, Horizon 2030, is based on recognizing its multiple role both for each individual and for society, as a whole (Ministry of National Education. 2019, p. 2). In addition to all these aspects, it is important to remember the point of view expressed by the specialist Iustin Popoiu, i.e., "Education does not only mean preparing for something that is going to happen, it must help people integrate into the present" (Popoiu, 2014, p. 1).

On the topic of higher education, the vision of the Ministry of Education is to "develop a sense of academic and professional community". The partnership that must be created between the teaching staff and the students aims to develop a "common research and learning environment. The spaces are developed so that the students and the staff can interact outside the teaching situations" (Ministry of National Education. 2019, p. 10)

Order No. 3343/707/2022 (issued on March 8, 2022) provided the legal framework requiring accredited higher education institutions to return to undergoing teaching activities with physical presence, starting from March 9, 2022 (Ministry of Education; Ministry of Health, 2022)

The decisions to change the way of carrying out the teaching activity in Romanian higher education (issued: March 2020 and March 2022) were sudden, creating multiple problems not only for the institutions, but also for the students and teaching staff. While the transition to the online format was accepted as the only way to ensure the continuity of the educational activity, the decision to stop it (starting from March 9, 2022) generated reactions of protest and dissatisfaction from the managerial staff of higher education institutions, and also from the students.

Through the measures provided in the Emergency Ordinance no. 69 of May 26, 2022 for the amendment and completion of the National Education Law no. 1/2011 it can be said that a new, more flexible framework for providing higher education was created, especially for full-time learning. In the new legal text, synchronous online courses are defined as "courses in which students and teaching staff participate at the same time, but from separate locations, generally other than the university campus" (Government of Romania, 2022; Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education)

3. Research methodology

Throughout this article we have used a combination of research methods. Thus, the first part focused on desk research, based on gathering secondary, quantitative information, using traditional and electronic data sources. In the second part of the article, i.e., for the case study, we have used field research, with a sample survey, while the tool for gathering direct information has been the questionnaire (Jupp, 2010; Silverman, 2004).

For processing direct information, gathered with the help of the questionnaire, we have used classical statistical-mathematical methods (Semantic Differential Scale and Likert Scale), and also the Google Forms app. Moreover, in interpreting the results obtained via the sample survey we have also used information collected via the method of observation regarding the real undeclared behavior, manifested by students during the pandemic and, especially, during the second semester of the academic year 2021- 2022, when the first weeks of teaching activity took place in online format, and the following ones in physical format.

4. Findings

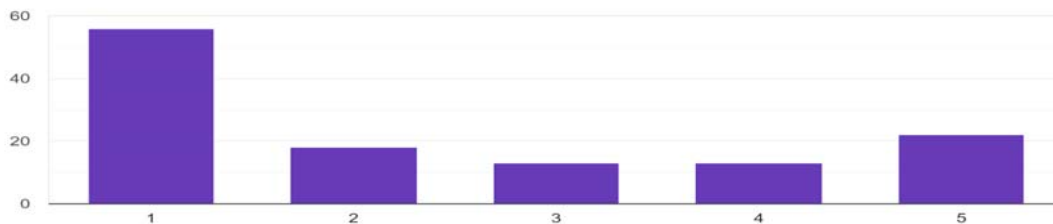
The case study is represented by a direct sample survey research based on a questionnaire. The research was carried out between May 31 and June 12, 2022, on a sample of 122 students of the Faculty of Economic Sciences, from the full-time learning and distance learning programs for the bachelor's degree level, as well as from the full-time learning programs for the master's degree level.

The questionnaire was distributed via the WhatsApp social network and the electronic mail / e-mail. An electronic device connected to the Internet was used to fill it out. The gathered information was then processed using the Semantic Differential Scale and Likert Scale methods, and graphical representations were automatically generated by the "Google Forms" survey management software.

Presentation of the types of questions in the structure of the questionnaire and of the way the answers were processed

1. The question - *"How do you assess the decision to suspend online teaching activity (technology-assisted learning) in the conditions of the pandemic caused by the new Coronavirus and its replacement with the "face-to-face" teaching activity?"* had the following answer options: *Very inappropriate (1) Not suitable (2) Slightly suitable (3) Suitable (4) Very suitable (5)*. Processing the answers with the help of "Semantic differential" method (with five levels) showed that the mean value of the assessment, expressed by the sample, is **2.40**, which shows that this decision was perceived by the students as being **Inappropriate**.

Figure no. 1 Distribution of the answers obtained for question no. 1



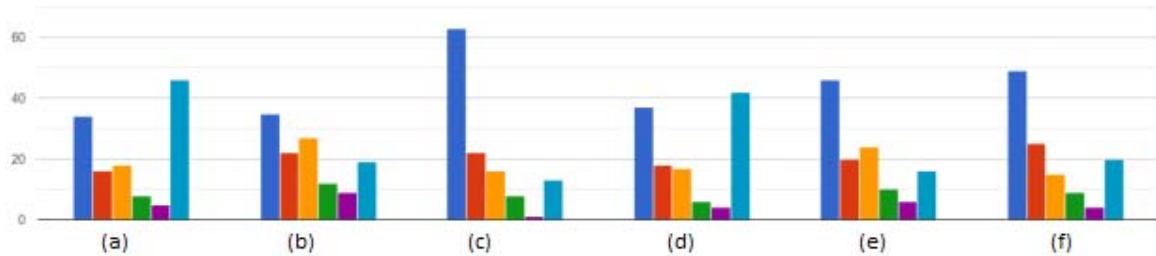
Source: Google Forms processing

2. As far as the question - *What difficulties did you face, immediately, upon the return to the "face to face" type of teaching activity and to what extent?* is concerned, several characteristics / aspects were taken into account, and the levels of assessment / measurement were: *To a very large extent (6) To a large extent (5) Moderate (4) To a small extent (3) To a very small extent (2) Not at all (1)*

After processing the answers, using the "Semantic differential" method (with six levels), the following levels and assessment values resulted:

- (a) Lack of accommodation space impacted *'To a very small extent'*, amounting to a value of **1.98**;
- (b) Lack of financial resources - *"Moderate"*, **3.80**;
- (c) Impossibility to attend courses / seminars- *"To a large extent"*, **4.80**;
- (d) Leaving a job – from *"To a small extent"* to *"Moderate"*, **3.61**;
- (e) Increase in study expenses - from *"Moderate"* to *"To a large extent"*, **4.34**;
- (f) Increase in expenses related to personal needs (food, clothing, housing) - *"Moderate"* to *"To a large extent"*, **4.38**.

Figure no. 2 Distribution of the answers obtained for question no. 2



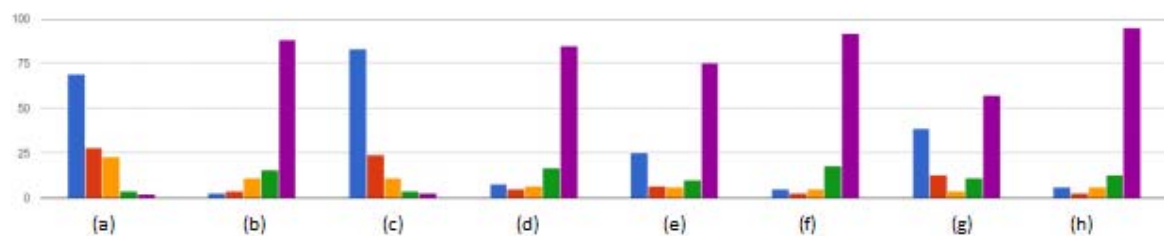
Source: Google Forms processing

3. When asked - *What equipment did you use in order to carry out online teaching activities, and to what extent?* - several characteristics / aspects were taken into account, and the levels of assessment / measurement were: *Most of the time (5) Often (4) In certain situations (3) Rarely (2) Very rarely (1)*

After processing the answers, using the "Semantic differential" method (with five levels), the following levels and assessment values resulted:

- (a) Personal mobile phone was used *"Many times"*, the value obtained being **4.25**;
- (b) Another person's mobile phone / mobile phone in the working place - *"Rarely"*, **1.51**;
- (c) Personal Laptop - *"Often" to "Most of the Time"*, **4.44**;
- (d) Another person's laptop / laptop in the working place - *"Rarely"*, **1.64**;
- (e) Personal tablet - *"Rarely"*, **2.16**;
- (f) Tablet in the working place - *"Very rarely"*, **1.46**;
- (g) Personal PC *"In certain situations"*, **2.72**;
- (h) The PC of another person / PC in the working place *"Rarely"*, **1.51**.

Figure no. 3 Distribution of the answers obtained for question no. 3



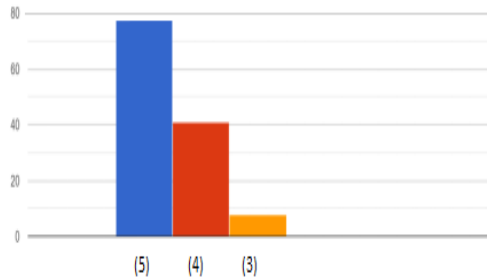
Source: Google Forms processing

4. The question - *How do you assess your personal equipment, which you used in carrying out the online teaching activity?* - had as answer options:

Totally sufficient (5) Sufficient (4) Sufficient to a small extent (3) Insufficient (2) Totally insufficient (1)

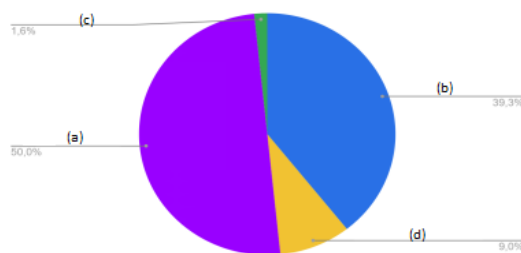
After processing the answers, using the "Semantic differential" method (with five levels), a value of **4.55** resulted, which represents an assessment between *"Sufficient"* and *"Totally sufficient"*.

Figure no. 4 Distribution of the answers obtained for question no. 4



Source: Google Forms processing

Figure no. 5 Distribution of the answers obtained for question no. 5



Source: Google Forms processing

5. To the question - *What device, do you consider, has been of greatest use to you in the online teaching activity?* the following answers were obtained: the most used devices were the **laptop**, with a share of **50%** and the **phone (39.34%)**, whereas the **tablet (1.64%)** and the **PC (9.01%)** were of little use.

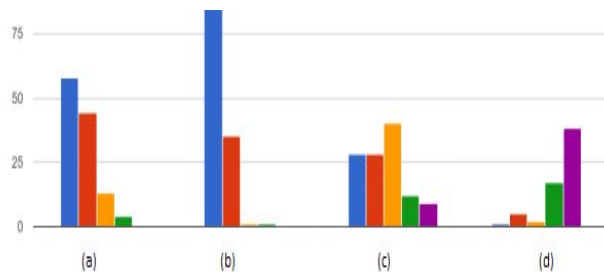
6. As to the question - *What platforms did you use to carry out online teaching activities and to what extent?* - several characteristics / aspects were taken into consideration, and the levels of assessment / measurement were:

Most often (5) Often (4) In certain situations (3) Rarely (2) Very rarely (1)

After processing the answers, using the "Semantic differential" method (with five levels), the following levels and assessment values resulted:

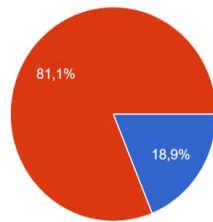
- (a) Zoom Meetings was considered to have been used from "**Often**" to "**Most often**" - with a value of **4.31**;
- (b) Webex Meetings - "**Most often**", **4.67**;
- (c) Microsoft Teams - "**In Certain Situations**" to "**Often**", **3.46**;
- (d) Other platforms - "**Very rarely**", **1.33**.

Figure no. 6 Distribution of the answers obtained for question no. 6



Source: Google Forms processing

Figure no. 7 Distribution of the answers for question no. 7



Source: Google Forms processing

7. To the question - *Did you encounter difficulties in carrying out the online teaching / school activity?* - **81.15%** answered "**Yes**", and **18.85%** answered "**No**".

8. Those who answered positively to question no. 7 detailed by answering the question - *What were the difficulties you faced in terms of carrying out the online teaching / school activity and to what extent?*

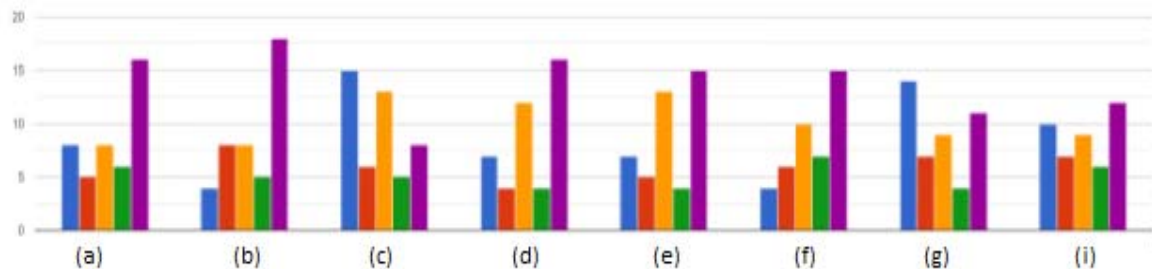
Several characteristics / aspects were taken into account, and the levels of assessment / measurement were:

Most often (5) Often (4) In certain situations (3) Rarely (2) Very rarely (1)

After processing the answers, using the "Semantic differential" method (with five levels), the following levels and assessment values resulted:

- (a) The lack of teaching materials adapted to online learning/teaching was a difficulty that students considered to have faced "**In certain situations**", reaching a value of **2.93**;
- (b) Inadequate teaching methods used by teachers - "**Rarely**", **2.42**;
- (c) Internet connection - "**In certain situations**" to "**Often**", **3.32**;
- (d) Difficulties in using personal equipment - "**Rarely**" **1.88**;
- (e) Personal equipment failure - "**Rarely**", to "**In certain situations**", **2.65**;
- (f) Lack / insufficiency of living space - "**Rarely**" to "**In certain situations**", **2.42**;
- (g) Overlapping with other professional activities - "**In certain situations**", **3.12**;
- (h) Overlapping with different activities of other family members - "**In certain situations**", **2.93**.

Figure no. 8 Distribution of the answers obtained for question no. 8



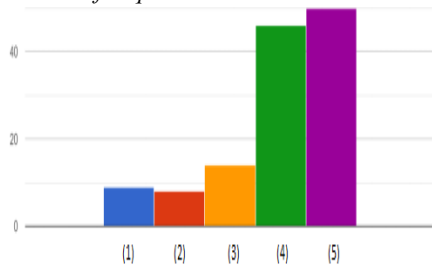
Source: Google Forms processing

9. For the question - *Did the teaching staff offer you support for the proper conduct of the online teaching activities?* - the answers were:

To a very large extent (5) To a large extent (4) Neither (3) To a small extent (2) To a very small extent (1)

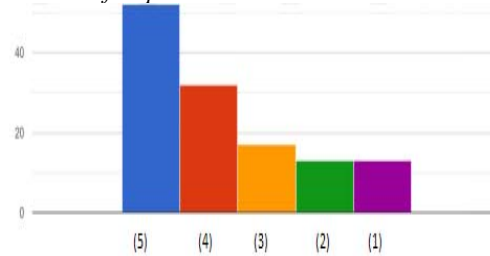
Following the processing of the answers, using the "Semantic differential" method (with five levels), the result was **3.95**, which shows that the students considered that "**To a large extent**" they were supported by the teaching staff in their faculty.

Figure no. 9 Distribution of the answers obtained for question no.9



Source: Google Forms processing

Figure no. 10 Distribution of the answers obtained for question no. 10



Source: Google Forms processing

10. For the question - *Do you consider that there are differences between the teaching activity when the activities were carried out online, compared to the current period, of "face to face" teaching activity?* - the answer options were:

Very significant (5) Significant (4) Neither (3) Not significant (2) Very insignificant (1)

Following the processing of the answers, using the "Semantic differential" method (with five levels), the value of **3.76** resulted, corresponding to the "**Significant**" assessment level.

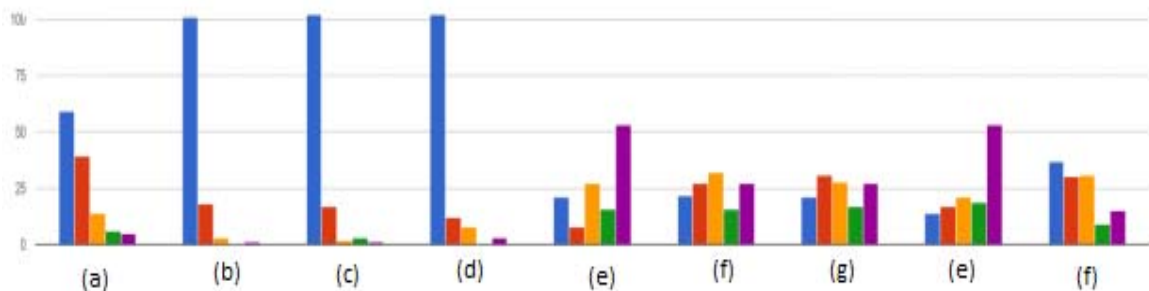
11. For the question - *How do you assess the period of online teaching activity?* - several characteristics / aspects were taken into consideration, and the levels of assessment / measurement were:

Strongly Agree (+2) Agree (+1) Neither (0) Disagree (-1) Strongly Disagree (-2)

Following the processing of the answers, using the "Likert Scale" method, the following values and assessments resulted:

- (a) *It was more interesting, compared to the "face to face" period - the value being 1.14, which is the "Agree" assessment;*
- (b) *It gave me more freedom in organizing time: 1.77, respectively "Strongly Agree";*
- (c) *I had more free time, (by eliminating the time spent travelling to the university, the preparation for the commute, etc.): 1.73, respectively "Strongly Agree";*
- (d) *I have cut certain expenses (transport, clothing / footwear, food, etc.): 1.68, respectively "Strongly Agree";*
- (e) *It created a feeling of isolation from society: 0.41, respectively "Disagree";*
- (f) *I missed the interaction with my colleagues: 0.008, respectively "Neither";*
- (g) *I missed the interaction with the teachers: 0.016, respectively "Neither";*
- (h) *I consider that I have received less information compared to the "face-to-face" format: 0.65, respectively "Agree";*
- (i) *I consider that I have received more information compared to the "face-to-face" format: 0.53, respectively between "Neither" and "Agree".*

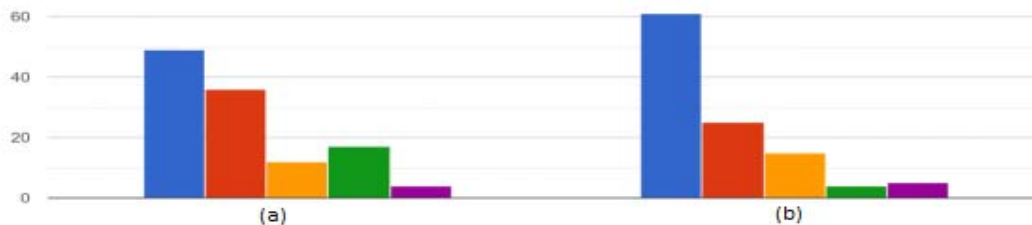
Figure no. 11 Distribution of the answers obtained for question no. 11



Source: Google Forms processing

12. To the question - *For the next years, for economic learning/teaching, how do you assess the online format compared with the "face to face" format?* - the answer options were: *Very suitable (5) Suitable (4) Indifferent (3) Not suitable (2) Very unsuitable (1)*
Processing the answers, with the "Semantic differential" method (with five levels), showed that the students consider the online format as "**Suitable**" for the bachelor's degree level (*the value being 3.92*), but especially for the master's degree level (**4.21**).

Figure no. 12 Distribution of the answers obtained for question no. 12



Source: Google Forms processing

The questionnaire continued by posing several questions that contributed to shaping the profile of the researched sample.

13. The answers to the following question show that - In *March 2020*, **19.83%** were *pupils*, **42.98%** were *undergraduate students*, **27.28%** were *employed undergraduate students*, and **9.91%** were in a *different situation*, respectively employees and some of them were higher education graduates.

14. During the *pandemic period (March 2020 - March 2022)* we note that: **82.42%** of the respondents mentioned that *they continued their activity both as students and as employees*, and **24.32%** of them *switched to another job*.

15. After the *pandemic period (March 2022)*, **56.21%** of the respondents stated that *they continued their activity as a student, but also as an employee, on the same job*; **25.81%** continued their activity as a student, but gave up working, and **17.98%** continued their activity as a student, but moved to another job.

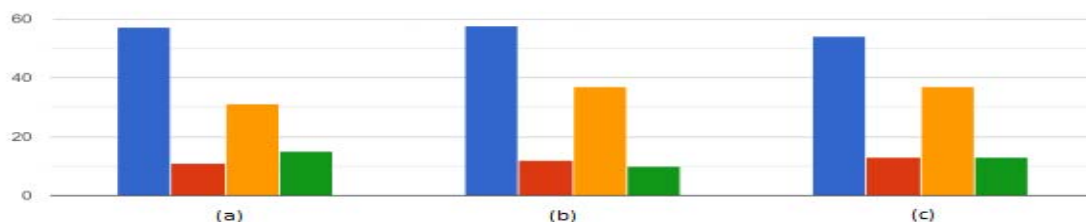
16. To the question - *Where did you carry out / are carrying out your professional activity?* - the following answers were obtained, expressed in percentages:

Table no.1 Centralization of the answers obtained from question no. 16

	In the private sector	In the budgetary sector	Full-time	Part-time
Before the pandemic	50%	9.64%	27.19%	13.16%
During the pandemic	49.57%	10.26%	32.46%	8.54%
After the pandemic	46.15%	11.40%	32.46%	11.11%

Source: Author's own processing

Figure no. 13 Distribution of the answers obtained for question no.16



Source: Google Forms processing

17. To the question – *In terms of the next semester / academic year, do you want the teaching activity to take place:* out of the sample of 122 students, **104** chose the answer *Face to face*, which represents a share of **85.2%**, and **18** students (**14.8%**) opted for the *Online* answer.

18. Some characteristics related to the structure of the sample used in the research:

Table no. 2 Centralization of the answers regarding the distribution by gender / sex:

M	F	Total
23	99	122

Source: Author's own processing

Table no. 3 Centralization of the answers regarding the distribution by main domicile:

In urban areas	In rural areas	In Constanta county	In another county Specify	TOTAL
57	36	25	4	122

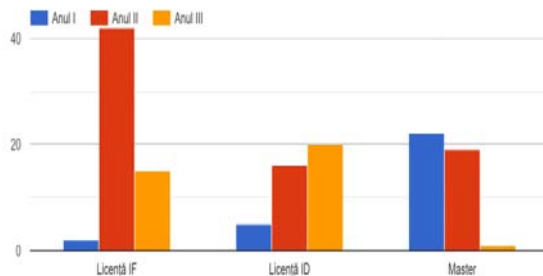
Source: Author's own processing

Table no. 4 Distribution according to the study program (within the Faculty of Economic Sciences) in which the respondent student is enrolled:

	Year I	Year II	Year III
Bachelor's Degree full-time learning	0	41	14
Bachelor's Degree distance learning	1	12	20
Master's Degree	17	17	

Source: Author's own processing

Figure no.14 Distribution of respondents according to the study program



Source: Google Forms processing

5. Conclusions

The results of the undertaken research bring to attention aspects related to the students' perception regarding the carrying out of the teaching activity, in the last two years, in which the two formats, namely the traditional, face-to-face, and the online format alternated.

The pandemic period offered students the opportunity to experience a new way of conducting teaching, learning, practical applications, and assessment activities, based on the use of resources and information technologies specific to online learning/teaching.

The transition from face-to-face to online learning/teaching (from March 2020) and then the return from the online system to the traditional format have generated reactions of dissatisfaction from the students.

The March 2020 change was received with concern, distrust of the use of information technology. There followed a period of adaptation to a new style of school, but also of life, which after a while became the "normal" format, and these new aspects started to become advantages for students (more free time, higher flexibility in terms of the organization of the teaching activity, increasing the share of students with jobs).

The return to the traditional learning/teaching (in March 2022) was marked by the expression of dissatisfaction both from students and from higher education institutions. These reactions led the representatives of the leadership of the Ministry of Education to consider that the National Education Law no. 1/2011 defines in a limiting way the full-time learning form by associating it with the direct presence of teachers and students in the university space.

The aspects stipulated in the Emergency Ordinance no. 69/26 May 2022 for the amendment and completion of the National Education Law no. 1/2011 create the framework for a new, more flexible way of carrying out the activities in higher education, especially for the full-time learning form.

The need for flexibility and modernization of higher education is found in the results of this research, even if it focused on only a sample of students from the Faculty of Economic Sciences within "Ovidius" University of Constanța.

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