

RETHINKING HIGHER EDUCATION THROUGH THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC LOOKING GLASS: EXPERIENCES, EXPECTATIONS AND POLICY MAKING FOR FUTURE CHALLENGES

REPENSANDO LA ENSEÑANZA SUPERIOR A TRAVÉS DEL ESPEJO DE LA PANDEMIA DE COVID-19: EXPERIENCIAS, EXPECTATIVAS Y FORMULACIÓN DE POLÍTICAS PARA FUTUROS RETOS

REPENSER L'ENSEIGNEMENT SUPÉRIEUR SOUS LA LOUPE DE LA PANDÉMIE DE COVID-19: EXPÉRIENCES, ATTENTES ET ÉLABORATION DE POLITIQUES POUR RELEVER LES DÉFIS FUTURS

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Resumen

Desde el semestre de primavera de 2020 hasta el periodo de exámenes de septiembre de 2021, todas las universidades públicas de Grecia utilizaron exclusivamente procedimientos de enseñanza y evaluación en línea debido a las medidas contra la pandemia del covid-19. Este artículo examina la forma en que este modelo de "educación a distancia digital" (educación no presencial, soportada íntegramente en sistemas digitales) se implementó en el Departamento de Lengua y Literatura Italianas de la Universidad Aristóteles de Tesalónica y presenta las experiencias y los resultados de enseñanza/aprendizaje de estos tres semestres académicos durante este período de confinamiento sin precedentes.

Palabras clave: Educación a distancia digital, enseñanza/aprendizaje en línea, enseñanza superior, covid-19, cierre de escuelas, confinamiento.

Abstract

From Spring semester 2020 to September 2021 exam period all public universities in Greece used exclusively online teaching and assessment procedures due to the covid-19 pandemic measures. This paper examines the way this model of "digital distance education" (non-face-to-face education, fully supported by digital systems) was implemented in the School of Italian Language and Literature of Aristotle University of Thessaloniki and presents teaching/learning experiences and

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outcomes of these three academic semesters during this unprecedented confinement period.

Keywords: Digital distance education, online teaching/learning, higher education, covid-19, school closures, confinement.

Résumé

Du semestre de printemps 2020 à la période d'examens de septembre 2021, toutes les universités publiques de Grèce ont exclusivement utilisé des procédures d'enseignement et d'évaluation en ligne en raison des mesures de lutte contre la pandémie de covid-19. Cet article examine la manière dont ce modèle d'« enseignement numérique à distance » (enseignement en non-présentiel, entièrement soutenu par des systèmes numériques) a été mis en œuvre au Département de Langue et de Littérature Italiennes de l'Université Aristote de Thessalonique et présente les expériences et les résultats de l'enseignement/apprentissage de ces trois semestres universitaires au cours de cette période de confinement sans précédent.

Mots-clés: Enseignement numérique à distance, enseignement/apprentissage en ligne, enseignement supérieur, covid-19, fermetures d'écoles, confinement.

1. INTRODUCTION.

The covid-19 pandemic has been responsible for unprecedented upheaval across all human activities, with education especially impacted: it disrupted educational systems worldwide¹, necessitating emergency remote teaching and coinciding with increased social media use (Greenhow, *et al.*, 2023). As Bray *et al.* (2020) accurately point out, for almost 20 years, online tertiary education was more the exception than the rule, yet it took just a few weeks for most universities to migrate fully to the internet. “It is a massive, disruptive shift to move all the existing courses online in a matter of days” (Bao, 2020, p. 114) and obviously such shifts require reconceptualization of learning boundaries in a digital age. The pandemic has also exposed many inequities in terms of access to higher education and ability to transition to online learning effectively². However, there is no doubt that higher education has shown a remarkable level of resilience and ability to deal with adverse circumstances (Pappa, 2020).

2. EXPERIENCES.

In Greece, overall, the university sector responded well to the covid-19 crisis, and this has been noted by society. The largest public University of the country (as well as of Southeastern Europe) is Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (AUTH), founded in 1925; about 80.000 undergraduate and postgraduate students currently study there. AUTH is a comprehensive institution with 41 Faculties and Schools covering all scientific fields, ranging from natural and technological to social and health sciences, arts, and humanities. The main campus (figure 1) is located in the centre of the city of Thessaloniki and covers an area of about 430.000 m² (33,4 hectares).

¹ According to UNESCO (2020) as of August 2020, there were nearly 1.5 billion students affected by school closures, accounting for 70% of enrolled students and 160 countries with full or partial closures, while several other countries implemented localized school closures leading to millions of learners to experience education disruption. Cfr. the evolution of school closures globally from February 2020 to July 2022 in the Interactive map of UNESCO on the impact of covid-19 on Education, available at <https://rb.gy/ri4nnd> (UNESCO, 2022); see also: <https://rb.gy/l4o1p6> (World Bank, 2020).

² Although many universities included in their strategic planning future plans for online education, the reality is that very few of them were really ready to implement urgently a fully digitized educational model (U-Multirank, 2020).

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Figure 1. ATh main campus.



Due to the covid-19 pandemic measures, AUTH, as all public universities (and schools) in Greece, used exclusively digital distance education (i.e. non-face-to-face education, fully supported by digital systems) for teaching and assessment procedures from Spring semester 2020 to the September 2021 exam period³. This methodological change broke the boundaries of formal and informal teaching and learning; it meant a rethinking of the teaching-learning process, of teacher-student roles and their connection to teaching materials predominant in pre-confinement (Jandrić *et al.*, 2018). During the confinement period, AUTH faculty (of who we are members of), staff and students have obviously gone through a difficult time, but we have dealt with problems and we have found new ways of doing things⁴ thanks to the IT Centre (ΚΗΔ -<https://it.auth.gr>) that has risen to the occasion so to speak, expanding even more its technical support and training to all our academic community in technology tools for learning and collaboration, anticipating obstacles and coming up with solutions for problems even before they arise.

³ The first case of coronavirus infection appeared in Greece, and specifically in Thessaloniki, on February 26, 2020. The Greek government decided, among other measures, the immediate closure of schools on March 11, 2020. A few days later, on March 23, and as the country was on alert, a total lockdown was declared, which was initially to last until 24 April 2020 but later on was extended till May 4, 2020 (Papamitsou, 2022a).

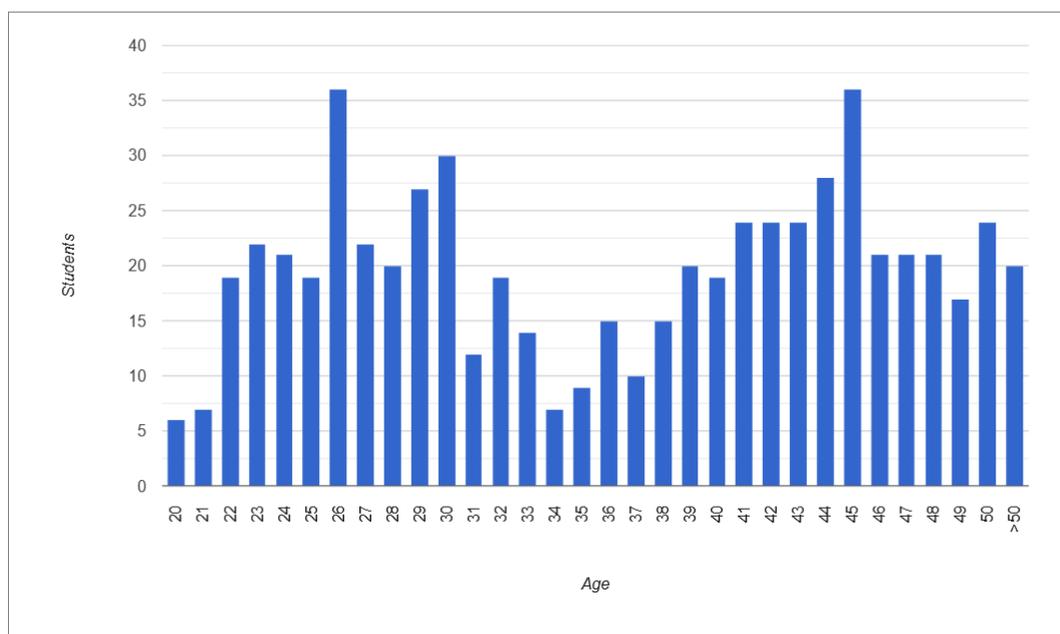
⁴ Papamitsou's (2022b) research on the assessment of the mental state and health of the AUTH community (the studied population exceeded 2000 people) during the pandemic, showed that the students and employees of the university managed their anxiety and fear quite satisfactorily, without physicalizing them or letting them affect their relationships with those around them. However, their self-confidence appeared particularly shaken, and they tended not to set new goals, resulting in them being overwhelmed by ominous feelings such as frustration and sadness.

1.1. Case context.

During the confinement period, contemporary technology-mediated environments expanded our conceptualization of learning contexts (Erstad and Silseth, 2023); in this frame, we decided to reflect on how our School, the School of Italian Language and Literature (SILL – <https://www.itl.auth.gr/dp9it/en>), the smallest School of our University, dealt with online education during the pandemic, taking into consideration our limited funds and resources. As we will show in the next pages, the results have been unexpectedly encouraging, and to some extent surprising. The most salient feature is that student attendance had exponentially risen in the classes. Two reasons may explain this rise:

- a) *Demographic factors*: the big majority of students at the SILL are mature students (figure 2); having already a BA in other fields, they pursue another degree in this School out of love and admiration for the Italian language and culture. Additionally, many of them live in other cities and due to their professional and family obligations as well as economic considerations find it difficult to attend lectures especially since this is a School without obligatory attendance since there are no clinics or labs.

Figure 2. SILL – Students' age (academic year 2020-2021).



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b) *Pre-existing know-how, infrastructure and experience in technology-mediated education:* Apart from the aforementioned AUTH IT Centre that offered invaluable support during this period, all of the School's faculty had experience in using relevant infrastructure, online platforms and tools for synchronous and asynchronous communication, teaching and assessment. At the same time, the students had been already familiarized, to a greater or lesser extent, with what digital technologies can offer in the learning process through the specific and obligatory subjects in digital technologies in the academic field as well as the use of them as teaching/assessment-medium in the rest of the subjects of the School's Curriculum (see <https://www.itl.auth.gr/dp9it/en/node/58>).

Since Spring Semester 2020, AUTH's primary response focused on the immediate challenges posed by this unprecedented situation and as a result no classes or exams were lost whatsoever during 3 semesters away from "normality". In the fully online classrooms, there were students actively attending from other cities (or even countries), students preparing and submitting projects and participating in exams from their home, many of them even with their kids around. As Bergan *et al.* (2021, p. 21) accurately state, perhaps the least hazardous prediction one can make about the consequences of the covid-19 crisis is that "The world will never be the same again". The precise nature of that change is, currently, unknowable but this pandemic presents both a challenge and an opportunity for higher education. As for the latter, it is interesting to note that in Greece's educational system that comprises 24 (all public and tuition-free) universities (<https://rb.gy/Otxiqh>), as far as higher education is concerned, this pandemic has brought economic relief for some families, since they did not have to pay for the expenses of a student's house in another city; it has also helped mainly mature students since they have been able to combine family and professional obligations with their university studies thanks to the Moodle environment (<https://elearning.auth.gr/>), communication platforms and other infrastructure (<https://opencourses.auth.gr/>) and programs used for the online teaching and assessment alternatives offered to them by AUTH⁵. It has been a significant change, however, the results, as it can be seen in the following students'

⁵ AUTH offered to its academic community licenses and support for the use of various programs for online teaching (Zoom, Skype for business, BBB, Google meet, Microsoft teams, etc), and it was up to the teacher to decide which one suited better his/her needs. However, all SILL faculty opted for Zoom for teaching.

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evaluation comments⁶, attending online classes in Spring semester 2019/20 and Fall semester 2020/21, have been very positive:

- Course 11211 (Italian language II): *"The distance learning classes were very well structured despite the short period of preparation and adaptation that the teacher had at her disposal."*
- Course 11216 (Italian language IV): *"Prof. X managed to turn this distance learning course, despite the difficult circumstances, into a masterpiece. Capolavoro! There was no greater participation in any of the previous face-to-face language courses I have attended in the past. Demanding but excellent course."*
- Course 11216 (Italian language IV): *"In general, I can say that although it was a language course and, if anything, a normal face-to-face class was required, an excellent distance learning process took place, given the circumstances and the difficulties, which really benefited us."*
- Course 11336 (Sociolinguistics and Pragmatics): *"Very well-organized course despite the distance learning! Interesting and easy to understand!!!"; "The course is conducted in a very interesting way, there is a wide use of fantastic PowerPoint presentations that make it more accessible and easier to follow online. Excellent organization of the course in the e-learning platform, where all material is uploaded from the beginning of the semester. Students have access to audiovisual material, to the PowerPoint presentations used in the lectures (and even in a ready-to-print format) and to additional material for further study."*
- Course 11476 (Spanish language A1): *"Very well-structured course presentations, rich in content and exercises that help us have very good contact with the vocabulary and grammar required. The level offered is very, very good. It is a lively, comprehensible, well-organized course that will certainly be of use to all. Its distance teaching format is not restricting."*
- Course 11271 (Digital technology in academic use): *"The video deliveries of the lessons have been very helpful. It is very useful for students who cannot attend the lesson at the time of delivery, either because they are at work or because there is a problem with their Internet connection. It would be nice if there were at least recordings of the other courses, so that asynchronous*

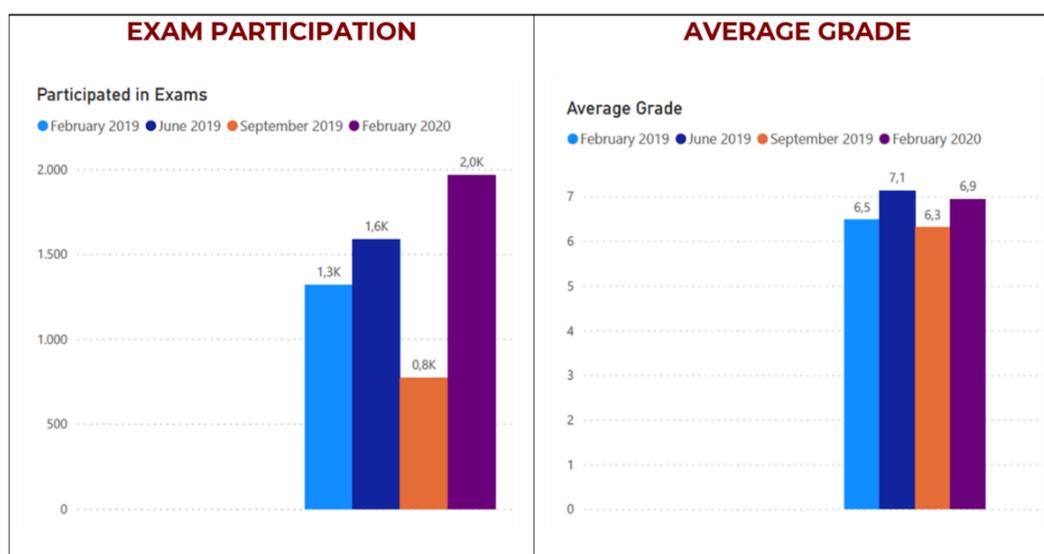
⁶ The translation of the Greek original to English was made by us. Student comments come from the Internal evaluation process (on teaching, administrative processes and infrastructure) that takes place anonymously through the AUTH Quality Assurance Unit (MODIP) platform (<https://qa.auth.gr/>) twice a year.

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The distance education modality, fundamentally in digital support, has offered emergency solutions to this crisis; and although, as García Aretio (2021) points out, remote emergency education was considerably far from what was appropriate in the design and development of quality distance education⁷, in our case, it proved to offer quite positive results, as mentioned above, all things considered. And what undoubtedly everyone, students, faculty and staff alike, have gained is a significant improvement in digital skills. The big majority of our academic community managed to adapt to and cope well with the new reality.

- In the 2020/21 Fall semester exam period, 39,34% of the enrolled students in the SILL had participated in the in-person February 2020 exams (1136 students out of 3345), while this percentage has risen to 55,26% (1966 students out of 3358), in the distance-based February 2021 exams (figure 4).

Figure 4. Exam participation during pre-confinement (2019) and confinement (2020).



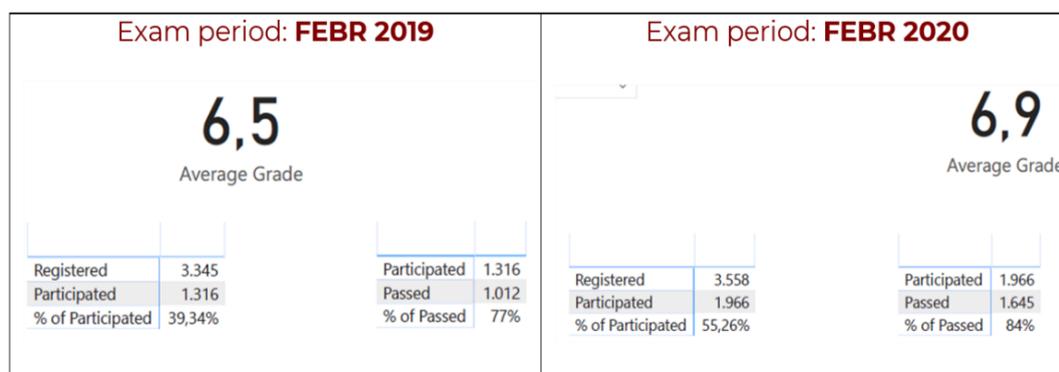
- Similarly, the percentage of those that passed the exams was higher: 84% in 2020 as compared to 77% in 2019 and with a slightly higher average grade (6,9/10 in 2020 compared to 6,5/10 in 2019)⁸ (figure 5).

⁷ See García Aretio (2021) for a brief presentation of the most relevant drawbacks found in these emergency and remote educational practices, which, according to the author, should be taken into consideration in the event of new total or partial closures of educational facilities.

⁸ Likewise, from a statistical point of view, we have also noticed a slight rise in the average grades of the School comparing the September exam periods: in 2019 (in-person exams) the average grade was 5,65/10 while in 2020 (distance based format) 6,33/10.

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Figure 5. Student percentages that passed the exams and average grades during pre-confinement (2019) and confinement (2020).



These data could raise objections to those that are skeptical about the credibility and integrity of the online exams, however, we believe that statistically speaking the afore-mentioned numeric differences do not necessarily imply that there has been a problem in the materialization of the exam; ATh IT Centre made sure to organize examinations into specific time slots for each School in order to prevent the system from shutting down due to the overuse by hundreds of students being connected with cameras on, etc. simultaneously. All faculty was regularly trained (through video tutorials, instruction manuals and online workshops) to improve the design and implementation of distance-based oral or written exams, reliable assessment procedures, personalized Moodle quizzes, etc. As for the increase of the exam participation percentage during confinement, it was to be expected due to the demographic characteristics of the students of the SILL mentioned above. After all, as one of the (many) students wrote in the evaluation of the Course 11231 (Pedagogical theories and classroom practices):

I have to say that I much prefer the online course to the face-to-face course because I live several kilometers away from the School and this way I can FINALLY ATTEND classes, after many years of wanting to and not being able to.

3. EXPECTATIONS AND POLICY MAKING.

We are convinced that “Higher education will never be the same again” and this pandemic just might be the reason for the universities to gain students that for demographic and economic reasons discarded till now the possibility of getting a university degree at this point of their life.

Nontraditional students, including displaced workers and adult learners or those coming from less robust financial strata might find in the new post-covid-19 era the possibility they had been looking for, for them to get access to higher

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education. When one door closes, another window opens... However, for the higher education institutions to make the best out of the opportunities opened, they must perform needs analysis and invest in the purchase and maintenance of high-end technology platforms and tools for learning and collaboration, as well as in the constant training and support of staff and students in use of the latter. At the same time, financial planning, studies programs, and curricula must adopt necessary modifications so as to respond to the needs of these new fully distance-based or dual (distance-based and face-to-face) educational models. As Bray *et al.* (2020) put it: "With the foundation of tomorrow's model based on who can best meet the demands of how, when, where and why students want to learn, institutional priorities will have to include how to reassemble and realign resources". This task may look different for each institution, but according to the authors, universities should consider aspects such as: innovating delivery models; developing flexible credentialing; flexing faculty engagement; standardizing experiential learning; engaging economic clusters; reinvigorating the humanities. As far as the latter, they stress –and we cannot agree more with them- that:

COVID-19 is turning the spotlight on questions concerning society, nature and the human experience. To help students enhance their problem-solving and critical thinking skills, universities will want to promote fluency in the humanities as an integral competency in a technology-laden future. As artificial intelligence is ushered in to augment the limitations of our species, it is the arts and humanities that will show the way for humans to outshine machines. (Bray *et al.*, 2020)

4. FUTURE CHALLENGES.

Since the beginning of the covid-19 crisis, the main challenge for educators has been what appropriate steps should be taken to prevent learning loss for the students (Okoye *et al.*, 2021). And in the case of the School of Italian Language and Literature, we have seen that not only there was no loss but surprisingly the School has gained students in the classroom audience, along with an enhancement of digital skills of all parties involved. Of course, due to the social distancing measures and resultant quarantine the immediate rapport teachers normally have with their students in the classroom has been lost but on the other hand, the (teaching and administrative) staff has successfully adopted a great number of the infrastructures, programs and educational models that have been developed by different institutions during this pandemic in order to maintain nonstop teaching and learning. Universities have worked hard on the research front in relation to the pandemic and have contributed much needed expertise and commitment. And this is a legacy that will be definitely used in the future that is ...already here.

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