

IS HYBRID EDUCATION A SOLUTION FOR THE FUTURE OF THE ROMANIAN ACADEMIC SYSTEM?

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ABSTRACT: *The Covid crisis has profoundly shaken classical teaching models, society has become more receptive to digitalization and hybrid activities. The question that arises is whether the hybrid education system will persist and whether it will benefit, or negatively affect, the educational system. To answer this question from a local perspective, we conducted online research in which one of the central themes was the future of education, hybrid or classical. The research methodology was based on a survey performed through a questionnaire containing 15 questions and applied on 595 students of the University of Petroșani, during 31st October 2023 and 2nd November 2023. This managerial research was based on the answers provided by 595 students of the University of Petroșani, that represent 15% of the investigated students. The 15 questions of the survey were organized into 3 sections that could support the future development of the University of Petroșani in the author opinion for the next 5 years. The main conclusion of the investigation was that a year and a half after UPET gave up online education, 90% of the students surveyed want a hybrid education option. The question that the investigation could not answer is whether the efficiency of the hybrid system is at the level of the classic system, or rather how much less impact distance education has on students compared to face-to-face education, and to what extent this reduced impact leads to a reduced quality of the educational process.*

KEY WORDS: *hybrid education, teaching method, academic curriculum, academic research*

JEL CLASSIFICATIONS: *I210, I250.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The pandemic will probably permanently change HE, making a return to old habits increasingly unlikely (Rapanta, et al., 2021). Therefore, in the aftermath of the pandemic, more structured and strategic studies are required to overcome barriers. Even if Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) is different from online learning (Hodges, et al.,

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2024), lessons learned from the pandemic may help to develop methods and ways to overcome certain barriers.

During the academic years 20/21 and 21/22, universities looked for alternatives to the traditional educational model, intending to be able to continue with the teaching–learning process. In the context of home quarantine, virtual/online education is postulated as an alternative, being globally implemented in all educational stages, undergraduate, graduate, and other higher studies. Two models were derived from this, the synchronous one, in which the teacher and the students connected at the same time to teach the class. Additionally, the asynchronous one, in which the teacher left the recorded class available to the student. During the COVID-19 pandemic, digital HE teaching changed radically and stakeholders experienced various barriers. While embracing the positive impact of digital teaching (Nguyen, 2015), these barriers should be eliminated in the future to ensure that negative experiences are replaced with positive practices.

During the last 4 years I have studied the online education in the Romanian academic education systems, and the results were presented in numerous papers (Edelhauser, 2020a, Edelhauser, 2020b, Edelhauser, 2021a, Edelhauser, 2021b, Edelhauser, 2021c).

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The future of work will be a hybrid one, adapted to the needs of employees and the specifics of employers' activity and focused on employee retention, believe specialists from the local and international labor market. "Globally, 27% of top certified employers allow employees to work from home for 20%-50% of their working hours. In Romania, the change in this percentage is quite remarkable, it is an increase of up to 39%. This is a clear consequence of the difficulties that Romanian companies face in maintaining their talents, in order to avoid the effects of the "great resignation" phenomenon. It is clear that employees like this good human resources practice and it is proven by the fact that the 52% of the best employers in Romania have registered a strong increase in the trend of employee involvement compared to the global data, which is equal to 23%", says Davide Banterla, senior HR account manager at Top Employers Institute (Cornea, 2022).

Hybrid teaching is now being used in almost a third of UK university courses and is still sparking debate about its quality and relevance, a BBC analysis has revealed. Almost a third of UK university courses are combining face-to-face and online teaching in the current academic year, the BBC reports, based on data from 50 higher education institutions. The level is much higher than before the Covid-19 pandemic, when, in 2018-2019, only 4.1% of courses were delivered in a hybrid format. And the situation continues to spark debate about both the quality and the relevance and necessity of these courses.

The BBC quotes a first-year student at the University of Bath who said he did not know that there would also be online teaching, as is now the case with a third of teaching time. The student believes that this model does not offer enough value and that watching online courses "is like watching a YouTube clip" alone in your room.

On the other hand, a representative of the same university shows that the vast majority of teaching methods are carried out face-to-face and that course presentations are carried out online. He showed that the hybrid model allows for wider inclusion and that students are encouraged to discuss with faculty leaders when they have complaints.

The BBC also quotes Professor David Latchman from Birkbeck University of London, representative of the Universities UK organization, according to whom higher education institutions are currently continuing the process of accelerating the transition to the hybrid model, which began before the pandemic and intensified during it.

According to the quoted professor, universities must constantly monitor educational outcomes and student satisfaction with the application of the hybrid model. He says that "everything should be audited from a quality point of view. Online teaching should help students in their learning experience". Lila Tamea, representative of the Office for Students, says in turn, quoted by the BBC, that hybrid teaching offers a flexibility that must be appreciated, but it is necessary for universities to provide students with as much information as possible about the amount of online teaching, even before they enroll.

In Romania, a year before the author's research at the University of Petroșani, namely in October 2022, ANOSR analyzed the national academic context related to hybrid education. Thus, "Only 30% of state universities have publicly announced the integration of an online activity component for master's and doctoral cycles, while for bachelor's programs only about 15% of 53 universities allow teaching activity in a mixed format," students from the National Alliance of Student Organizations of Romania (ANOSR) reported. The National Alliance of Student Organizations in Romania (ANOSR) notes with disappointment the reluctance of universities to organize extensive consultations with the university community in order to precisely identify the specific study programs where the blended learning component would have been beneficial, namely the programs for which classical education remains the preferred option for students and teaching staff, in the context of the start of the first academic year in which blended learning is regulated by the National Education Law.

In May 2022, Emergency Ordinance no. 69/2022 was adopted, which specifies that "some educational and/or research activities within the full-time form of education may be carried out by using specific electronic, IT and synchronous communication resources provided for in the quality standards developed and approved by ARACIS", these being subsequently regulated depending on the study cycle, field and type of activity (learning-teaching or practical application and research). Although the pandemic period led to a forced transition of teaching activity to the online environment and that in many cases the digitalization was carried out at a poor quality, there were also examples of good practices that could be taken over and capitalized on by universities. The pandemic context constituted an opportunity to adapt to international trends, in terms of making educational resources more accessible, by optimizing the digital skills of students and teachers, as well as by streamlining certain administrative, teaching and communication processes. Following the two years of online, hybrid or mixed education, our expectation was to observe a paradigm shift, consisting in making higher education more flexible and in optimizing digital learning-teaching tools and techniques.

However, after reviewing the decisions of the university senates, adopted after the development of specific standards by ARACIS, we noted that only 30% of state universities have publicly announced the integration of an online activity component for master's and doctoral cycles, while for bachelor's programs only about 15% of 53 universities allow teaching activities in a mixed format. At the same time, we noted with indignation that approximately 20% of universities have not adopted a decision in this regard or do not provide access to such documents of public interest, students not being formally informed about the way teaching activities are carried out (Tintar, 2022).

3. METHODS

An online research was carried out between 31st October 2023 and 2nd November 2023, among students from the undergraduate and master's programs of the University of Petroșani, which had 595 respondents out of a total of 3,600 investigated students, and it revealed both positive aspects and some negative ones. It was an exhaustive investigation of the entire population, represented by undergraduate and master's students, but an intentional sample resulted, the degree of retrievability of the questionnaires being 15%. Also, I could not achieve a representative sampling due to the fact that the use of data such as the name, age or gender of the respondents would violate the ethics and deontology of academic life.

The sampling of responses was carried out according to four relevant criteria: the level of studies, the faculty they belong to within the university, the residence and the labor market status of the responding students.

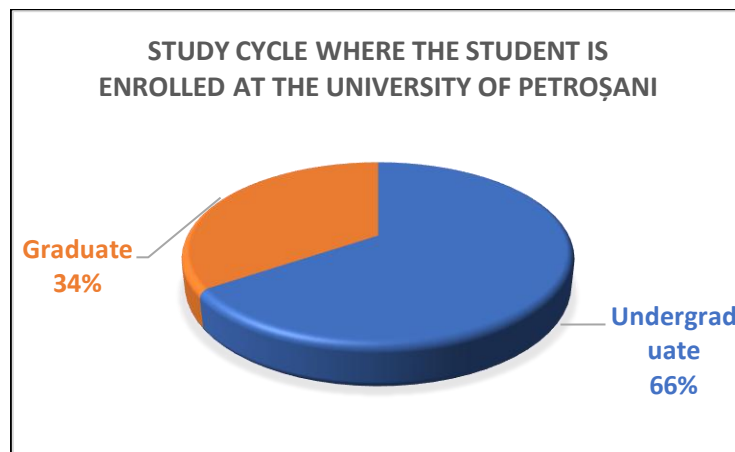


Figure 1. Academic status of the respondent – student study cycle

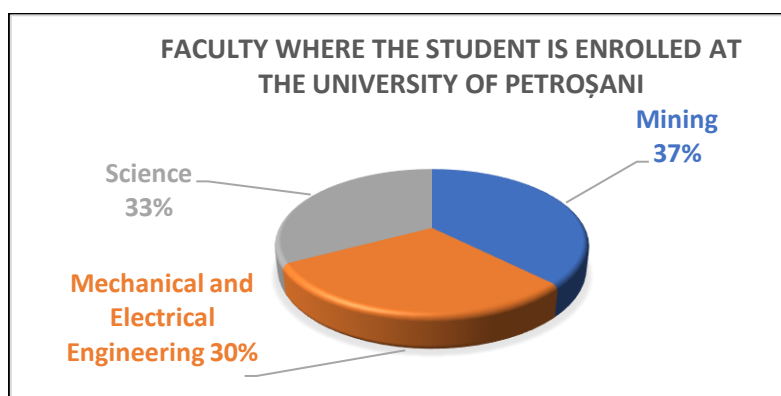


Figure 2. Academic status of the respondent – student faculty enrolled

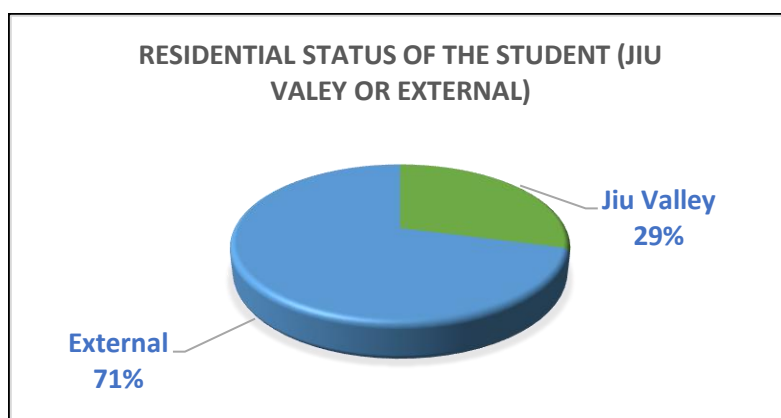


Figure 3. Residential status of the respondent

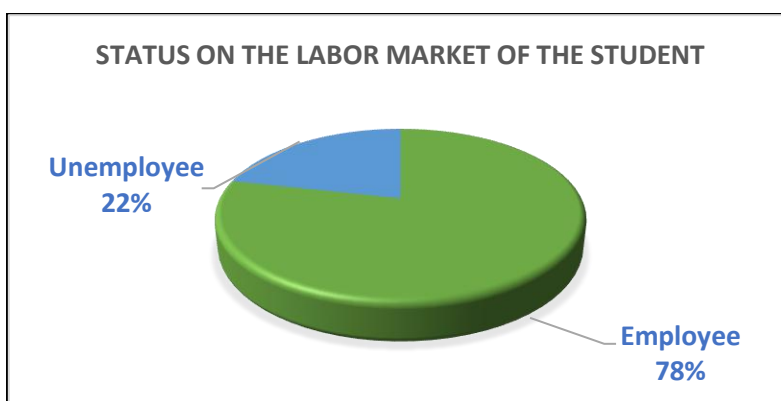


Figure 4. Labor market status of the respondent

However, the research is not without value and can also be considered relevant in light of the fact that the number of respondents was similar to that of respondents in

the investigations carried out by the Quality Assurance Department of UPET in the academic years 2021-2022 and 2022-2023, which aimed precisely at assessing student satisfaction.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The following results are based on the responses of 595 students and master's students out of the total of 3600 investigated (1/6 of UPET students – 16.5%). So, 76% of the 390 students (not graduate students!) are employed, also 84% of the 422 students and master's students that have residence outside the Jiu Valley are employed, and 66% of the 173 students and master's students have residence in the Jiu Valley, but they are employed.

4.1. General findings

At the end of the 2023 year, 66% of the students surveyed are generally satisfied with the quality of the educational act carried out at the University of Petroșani, and 20% of them stated that no improvements are necessary.

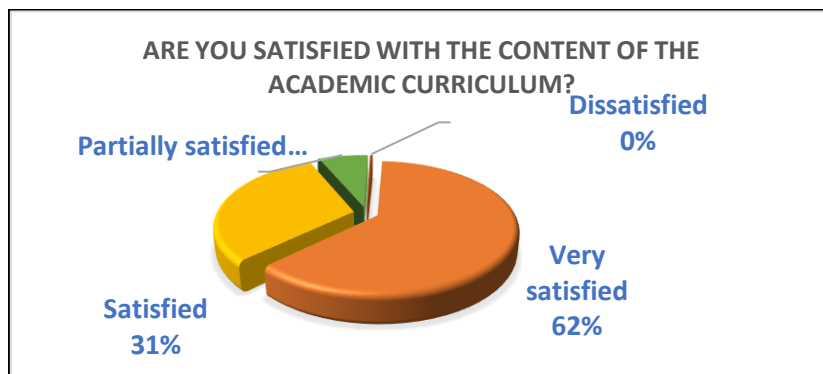


Figure 5. Content of the academic curriculum satisfaction for the students

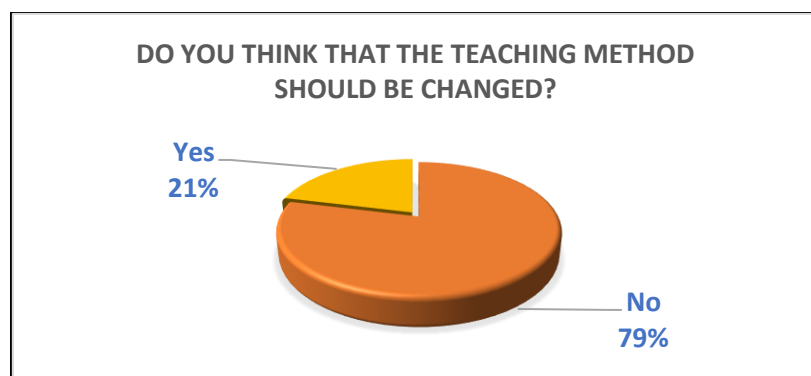


Figure 6. Teaching method satisfaction for the students

Also, 66% of the students surveyed consider the technical conditions for the educational process to be ok, 80% of the students surveyed are satisfied with the way they can get information by accessing the UPET website. Even so, 30% of the students surveyed want changes in the educational process, and 15% of them came up with concrete proposals.

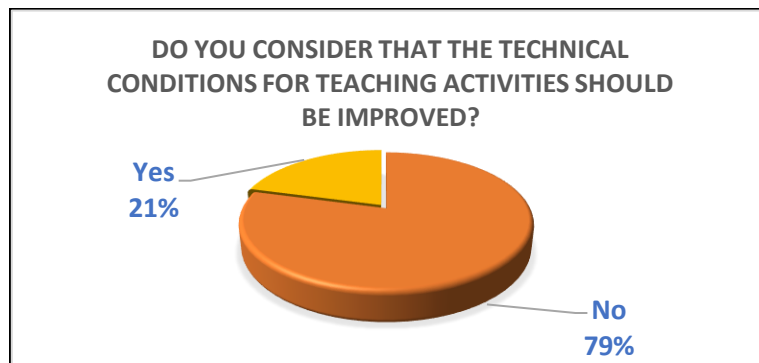


Figure 7. Satisfaction regarding the technical condition of the teaching activities for the students

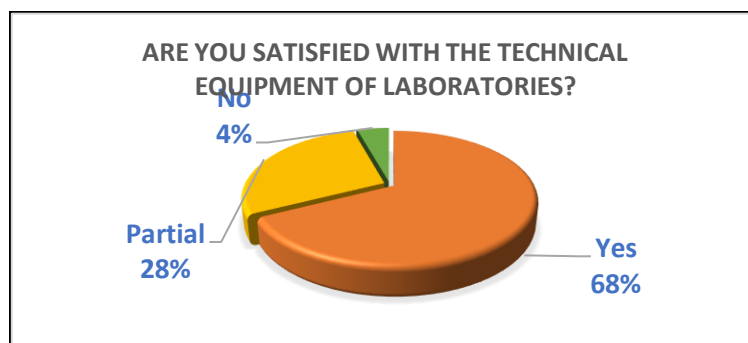


Figure 8. Satisfaction regarding the technical equipment of laboratories for the students

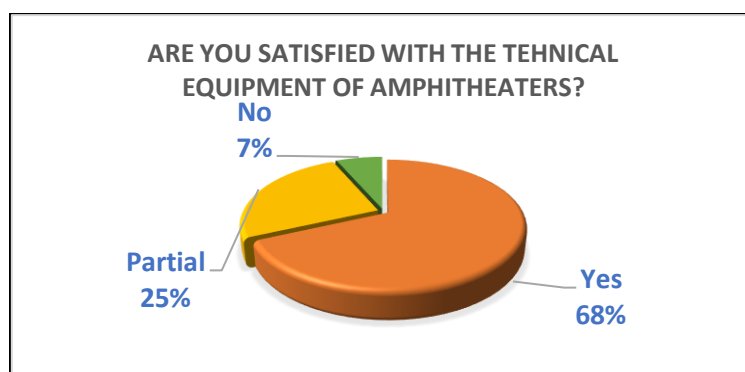


Figure 9. Satisfaction regarding the technical equipment of amphitheaters for the students

4.2. Findings and discussions regarding the hybrid education

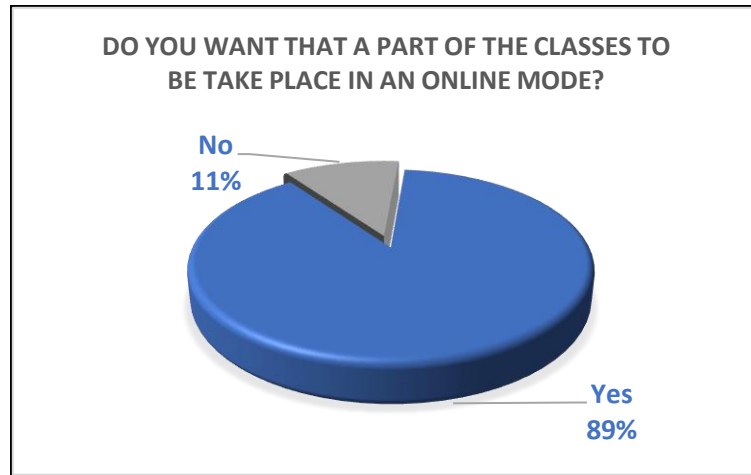


Figure 10. Option for online education versus face-to-face education in the student vision

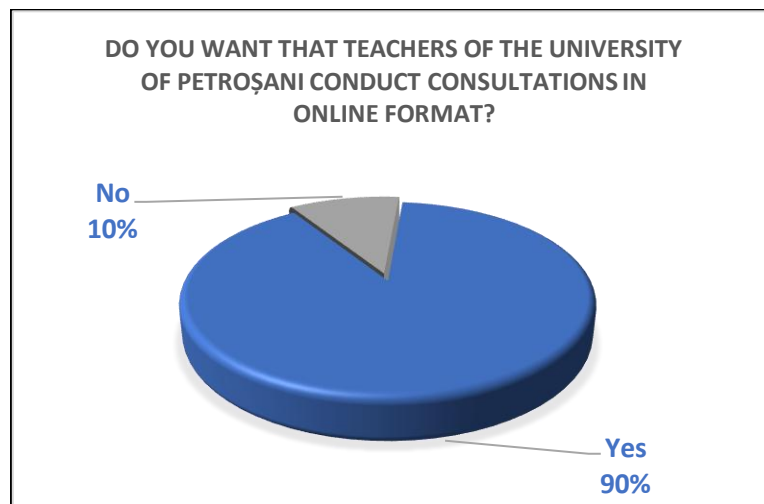


Figure 11. Option for consultations to be conducted in an online format in the student vision

In conclusion 533 students out of the total of 595 investigated (90%) want the professors of the University of Petroșani to conduct consultations in online format, and 89% want a hybrid format for the classes. The cause is complex, the dual status of student and employee is the main one, but the solution of hybridization has been avoided by the UPET management for more than two years.

So, after one and a half years when the University of Petrosani and the whole academic education system gave up online education, 90% of the students surveyed want a hybrid version of education.

5. CONCLUSIONS

In the period of just a few months, the COVID-19 pandemic has radically transformed the lives of people around the globe, affecting all sectors, especially education. In this line, studies have provided meaningful insights into students' satisfaction and perception of different aspects of their academic experience during the pandemic. Other studies have identified the prevalence of mental health symptoms, loneliness, stress, and anxiety symptoms, among higher education students, being higher in Latin American students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, these students preferred online teaching, showing higher grades and preference for this method compared to Europeans. On the other hand, European students preferred face-to-face teaching.

The conclusion of the investigation conducted at the University of Petroșani is clear, 90% of students embrace the idea of online learning, but doesn't this huge percentage also hide a few pitfalls? Doesn't the quality of the educational process suffer, doesn't the lack of interaction and feedback negatively affect quality, these are questions to which perhaps convenience, distance, lack of time due to employability will never allow us to obtain honest and correct answers from students.

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