

# EDUCATIONAL MANAGEMENT IN THE COVID 19 ERA. CASE STUDY: ROMANIAN UNIVERSITIES

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**Abstract:** *The pandemic generated by the SARS-CoV 19 virus had, in addition to the obvious effects on the health of the population, multiple side effects. Of these, the effect on the education system can be found among the most important. The long period of lockdown, coupled with the transition to an online learning system, has been a daunting task for any education system. This article presents the ways to approach educational management in Romania from the perspective of higher education institutions. The research considers both the specific legislation issued during 2019-2021 and the ways of implementing and adapting universities during this period. The obtained results show us that at the level of higher education institutions in Romania there was no consensus in the educational management in COVID 19 Era. The conclusion that emerges is that of the need to develop, at national and institutional level, management plans for such periods of crisis and programs for the concrete implementation of these plans.*

**Key words:** *COVID 19, educational management, higher education institutions, online learning.*

## 1. Introduction

Both internationally and nationally, the SARS-CoV 19 virus pandemic has had, in addition to its obvious effects on the health of the population, multiple side effects. We can say that the pandemic has affected, in addition to the health system, the education system, the labor market, the economy in almost all its aspects.

Regarding the education system, the effects of the pandemic can be found at all its levels (Al Lily et al., 2020; Patricia Aguilera-Hermida, 2020). The general feature of the changes made by each state in its education system was the transition to an online learning environment (Burbules et al., 2020; Vlădoiu et al., 2021), due to the conditions imposed by the measures to limit interpersonal contact in order to control the spread of the SARS-CoV 19 virus.

If institutions corresponding to pre-university education levels are generally subordinated to a government ministry, universities are under the coordination of the same ministry, benefiting from an independence known as university autonomy. This

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autonomy is precisely what has generated different approaches to educational management in response to the adaptation to the pandemic generated by the SARS-CoV 19 virus.

This paper presents the ways to approach educational management in Romania from the perspective of higher education institutions. The research considers both the specific national legislation issued during 2019-2021 and the concrete implementing and adapting of universities during this period.

## **2. National Legislation and Bodies**

### **2.1. First reaction**

The SARS-CoV 19 pandemic was legally considered a national emergency. This classification allowed the application of the provisions of the Government Emergency Ordinance no. 21 of 2004 on the National Emergency Management System (Government, 2004a).

For the "implementation in a unified conception of the legislation in force in the fields of protection of life, property and environment against fires and disasters, as well as the implementation of civil protection measures and emergency management" there is a National Inspectorate of Emergency Situations (IGSU) whose organization and operating regulations were approved by Government Decision no. 1490 of 2004 (Government, 2004b). Moreover, IGSU is a regulatory authority in the field, being able to issue methodologies, norms, regulations, and procedures that are published in the Official Monitor of Romania.

An important role in emergency management is played by the National Committee for Special Emergencies (CNSSU), headed by the Deputy Prime Minister for National Security, as chairman. The structure of this committee, conceived as an inter-ministerial body, consists of ministers and leaders of central public institutions, depending on the types of risk managed or support functions distributed in the competence within the National Emergency Management System.

At that time, the normative act provided that "In order to establish strategies and programs regarding the prevention and management of emergencies, CNSSU may request the consultation of experts, specialists, teachers or researchers constituted in technical-scientific support groups" (article 8 index 2, paragraph 1 of the Government, 2004a).

The first reaction at national level took place on January 29, 2020, when based on the Government Emergency Ordinance no. 21 of 2004, the provisions of art. 8 index 2 have been implemented. Thus, the CNSSU requested the consultation of experts and specialists who set up the Technical-Scientific Support Group on the management of highly contagious diseases in Romania (GSTS), formed "following the declaration of public health emergency with international impact due to the new Coronavirus" (Ministry of Internal Affairs, 2020a).

GSTS decisions are subject to CNSSU approval. The first two GSTS decisions were approved by Decision no. 1 of February 2, 2020 of the CNSSU (CNSSU, 2020a). These

decisions focused primarily on organizational and technical issues regarding the specific endowment of hospitals and the staff of institutions and authorities that came into contact with people infected with the new Coronavirus. Until March 9, none of the GSTS or CNSSU rulings targeted the education system.

## **2.2. The influence of the World Health Organization's declaration of the state of the pandemic**

The first decision of CNSSU approving the GSTS Decision no. 8 of 09.03.2020 and targeting the education system was that of March 9, 2020 (CNSSU, 2020b). In it, Article 2 approves the "suspension of the educational process in public school units in preschool, primary, secondary, high school, post-secondary and vocational education, between 11-22.03.2020, with the possibility of extension, depending on the evolution of the situation at national level".

The first decision that targets, even indirectly, the educational activity in higher education institutions, is the GSTS Decision no. 6 of 06.03.2020, approved by CNSSU Decision no. 5 of March 9, 2020 (CNSSU, 2020c) which stops "internships in hospitals for students of medical and pharmaceutical universities", until 31.03.2020 and depending on the evolution of the pandemic, except if they carry out their activity as a form of volunteering in health facilities.

On March 11, 2020, CNSSU approves by Decision no. 7, Decision no. 9 of 10 March 2020 of the GSTS recommending the cessation of activities in higher education institutions until 31 March, with the possibility of extension and the recommendation to use alternative teaching methods (CNSSU, 2020d).

In early March 2020, the World Health Organization officially declared a "Pandemic", given the evolution of the international epidemiological situation associated with the new Coronavirus, more precisely the spread in more than 150 countries, the infection of about 160,000 people and the death of over 5,800 people. The epidemiological evolution at national level is thus part of an exceptional context that could not be foreseen, and which, aiming at the general public interest, constitutes an extraordinary situation, which imposes exceptional measures.

At the proposal of the Romanian Government, the Supreme Council of National Defense decides to establish a state of emergency and approves an action plan. On March 16, 2020, the President of Romania issues Decree no. 195 establishing the state of emergency on the entire territory of Romania for a period of 30 days (President, 2020).

During the state of emergency, there is a restriction on the exercise of certain rights without affecting their substance, a restriction which, pursuing a legitimate, necessary purpose, must be proportionate to the aim pursued. Among other rights, the exercise of the right to education is restricted, as a measure of first urgency with direct and immediate applicability, being specified in art. 49 of the Decree that "during the state of emergency, courses in all educational units and institutions are suspended".

The situation becoming critical, starting with March 17, 2020, the issuance of military ordinances (OM) begins based on art. 24 of the Government Emergency Ordinance no. 1

of 1999 on the state of siege and the state of emergency (Government, 1999), as amended on 16 March 2020.

This is the moment when a specific and differentiated management of the educational management within the higher education institutions starts.

### **3. Regulations Specific to Higher Education Institutions**

The Romanian education system is based on the regulations contained in Law no. 1 of 2011 on national education (Parliament, 2001). According to this law, universities are part of the higher education system, which operates in compliance with certain principles, among which we mention: the principle of university autonomy; the principle of academic freedom; the principle of public responsibility; the principle of quality assurance; the principle of managerial efficiency.

The importance of university autonomy is given by the fact that it is guaranteed by the Constitution (Constitution, 1991). Academic freedom is guaranteed by law. The practical application of university autonomy entitles the university community, through its own structures, to establish its mission, institutional strategy, structure, activities, organization and functioning, as well as the management of material and human resources, in strict compliance with the legislation in force (Parliament, 2001).

#### **3.1. Regulations issued by the Ministry of Education**

Against the background of the pandemic and the state of emergency created by it, but also with respect to the principle of university autonomy, the Ministry of Education can intervene directly only in certain aspects of teaching and assessment, and in others can only give recommendations.

Thus, on April 7, 2020, Order no. 4020 was issued by the Ministry of Education and Research (MEC), which established certain derogations in the field of higher education, during the state of emergency on the Romanian territory. These were aimed at (Order, 2020a):

- modification of the methodology for organizing and conducting bachelor's / diploma exams and dissertation, in the sense that: "for the academic year 2019 - 2020, during the state of emergency, based on university autonomy, respecting the quality of teaching and assuming public responsibility", the bachelor's / diploma exam, respectively the dissertation, "can also be conducted online, based on a procedure approved by the university senate, provided that the university has an appropriate electronic platform."

- teaching activity during the state of emergency, in the sense that, direct teaching activity (face-to-face interaction) is suspended, higher education institutions must use alternative teaching methods (online platforms). In order to ensure the performance of the teaching act, the teachers had the obligation to report "weekly, to the officials appointed by the management of the faculties / departments, the activity carried out through the online platforms".

For those applied didactic activities, "such as laboratories, projects, research activities,

etc., which require" face to face "interaction, recovery was required" in a modular, intensive system, after the cessation of the state of emergency. "

- the semester evaluation activity, indicating that: "during the state of emergency, considering the infrastructure in the universities, the evaluation activities of the students can also be carried out online, based on a procedure approved by the university senate".

As it became obvious that the pandemic would be extended, the MEC also intervened in the admission procedures, forcing all universities to provide both the standard admission procedure and the online procedure (Order, 2020b). As an exception included in this admission procedure, aiming at verifying the authenticity of the documents on the basis of which the admission was made, the order provided for the candidates to assume responsibility for the authenticity and correspondence between the digital/scanned and the original documents.

Although it was still a state of emergency, with an extension of the pandemic period, MEC 4020 is repealed and replaced by MEC 4206 of 6 May 2020, which contained almost the same provisions as 4020. The differences were: elimination of the phrase „state of emergency”; thus came the transformation from compulsory to optional, of the use of the alternative didactic method of teaching: the online mode; the obligation to recover the applied didactic activities before the exam sessions related to the second semester (Order, 2020c).

The transition from a state of emergency to a state of alert (CNSSU 24, 2020e) has allowed educational institutions to resume activity face to face, in compliance with the following rules (Order, 2020d):

- pre-setting the circuits, ensuring a minimum area of 4 sqm for each person and a minimum distance of 2 m between any two close people;
- ensuring epidemiological triage and allowing access only to persons whose body temperature, measured at the entrance to the premises, does not exceed 37.3 ° C;
- ensuring the disinfection of exposed surfaces; medical devices with hand sanitizer and avoiding the crowding of people.

MEC imposed these obligations only "in the conditions in which the physical presence of the students is necessary for the development of activities / examination", an aspect that determined totally different approaches at the level of higher education institutions.

These provisions are reviewed, and it is stated on May 18, 2020, by Order 4266 that "the measure of suspending courses in all educational units and institutions is maintained until the end of the 2019-2020 school / university year, during the state of alert."

By way of exception to these provisions, educational institutions may establish, depending on the specifics of each and with the provision of all safety measures to prevent and combat the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the conduct of certain categories of activities involving "face-to-face" interaction as follows:

- a) activities for concluding the related school situation;
- b) activities for preparing / taking the entrance exams for the bachelor's and/or master's degree cycles;

c) activities necessary in order to prepare / take the final exams for the bachelor's and/or master's degree cycles;

d) other activities established on the basis of the principle of university autonomy, assuming public responsibility (Order, 2020e).

Also, on May 18, 2020, the MEC issues Order 4267, which, from the perspective of higher education institutions, reiterates the provisions of Order 4259 of May 15, 2020, but without repealing it.

After this period of overlapping and contradictory regulations, MEC comes with new regulations only on September 29, 2020 (Order, 2020f), a date which from the point of view of higher education institutions is extremely late, given that the year begins on October 1, 2020.

### **3.2. Rules of the Academic Year 2020-2021**

The new rules, which consider the public health crisis, take into account the essential principle of equitable access to education. Starting from the effects of the transition to online education, MEC wants to return all students to the teaching and research activities that require their physical presence. However, this decision belongs to the University Senate, but with the observance of strict protection measures against SARS-CoV-2 infection and only after the approval from the Public Health Directorate within which the higher education institution operates has been obtained. Thus, the MEC, through Order 5650, comes with a guide that "was designed to provide recommendations that can be implemented for the safe operation of higher education institutions in the context of prevention, early detection and control of COVID-19" (Order, 2020f).

Moreover, the order calls for "special care to be taken to avoid stigmatizing students and potential staff exposed to the virus."

The guidance issued by the MEC in this regard includes:

- a) General principles and essential measures such as: wearing a protective mask, avoiding changing the room where teaching and research activities are carried out by students of the same study group during a day, the existence of rooms for isolation;
- b) State the scenarios applicable according to the general epidemiological situation, the regional particularities and the specifics of each higher education institution:
  - Scenario 1: Physical participation in the higher education institution of all students in all teaching activities, according to their program, in compliance with all protection rules
  - Scenario 2: Online courses, seminars partially organized online, practice, practical work, laboratories and projects organized with physical presence, in compliance with all protection rules;
  - Scenario 3: Participation of all students / learners in online teaching activities.

Each higher education institution, based on autonomy and assuming public responsibility and respecting the quality of teaching, decides its own operating scenario.

Decisions made regarding the operating scenario can be updated during the academic year whenever needed.

- c) The rules for the preparation of higher education institutions for the opening of the new academic year, which aim at:
- Evaluation of the infrastructure, considering in particular the fact that spaces for the temporary isolation of suspicious cases had to be identified and that the physical distance of 1 m between students had to be ensured
  - Protective measures in higher education institutions, aimed at:
    - (i). ensuring the coordination of activities to prevent infection with SARS-CoV-2;
    - (ii). organizing the spaces thus ensuring the physical distance, which aimed at: establishing the circuits inside the institution; the organization of the halls in which the didactic activities are carried out, of the sanitary groups, of the headquarters of the secretariat, of the department, of the dean's office, of the rectory, of the inner courts and of the outer spaces of the buildings belonging to the higher education institutions;
    - (iii). organizing access to the higher education institution;
    - (iv). establishing the timetable for carrying out the teaching activities;
    - (v). individual protection measures;
    - (vi). hygienic-sanitary measures in the higher education institution;
    - (vii). staff training and ongoing communication to students on measures to prevent the SARS-CoV-2 infection;
    - (viii). measures for students, teachers and other staff in higher education institutions who are at risk and / or have chronic conditions and / or disabilities;
  - Protocols for canteens, dormitories, transport, triage and isolation of sick students.
- d) Criteria for suspending the teaching activities carried out with the physical presence of the students, in case of confirmation of one / several cases of COVID-19. In this sense, it is necessary to collaborate with the Public Health Directorates, which must inform the higher education institution about each case confirmed positively to students, teachers or other categories of staff.

The decision to suspend the teaching activities is established, by decision of the University Senate. There are set procedures to be followed for the occurrence of: a confirmed case of COVID-19 disease in one of the study formations; of more than 3 (three) confirmed cases of COVID-19 disease, in different study groups of the same higher education institution; of cases of COVID-19 disease among teachers.

### **3.3. Implementation at the level of higher education institutions in Romania**

The academic year 2020-2021 was conducted by most universities in online or hybrid system. It was the year in which vaccination was used massively, with some higher education institutions facilitating vaccination among teachers and students by organizing vaccination centers and making appointments, centralized through the institution.

The introduction of the vaccination certificate determined, at the beginning of the academic year 2021-2022, the appearance of an intensely debated topic, namely that of the conditions of access for students, when the courses took place in the face-to-face system.

A consortium made up of 7 Romanian universities (Communiqué, 2021), Universitaria Consortium, requested imperatively, “the regulation in emergency regime, by normative acts at national level (ministerial order or law), of access to universities based on the Green Certificate, an approach strongly supported by the representatives of the university management and of the students” (News, 2021a).

At the same time, the Consortium states that a legal framework is needed to allow them to extend the online and hybrid delivery regime after the end of the pandemic.

The consortium states that “Given the experience gained in the last two academic years, based mainly on online activities in the context of the prolonged pandemic situation, the participants in the meeting request the Ministry of Education to create the legislative framework through which universities can decide teaching activities, organizing the educational process in online / hybrid mode after the end of the pandemic generated by the spread of SARS-CoV-2 virus, based on standards developed by the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS).

It is undeniable that the educational paradigm is changing and that it is a major challenge to the university regulatory framework, which must support it” (News, 2021a).

A statistic compiled by the National Alliance of Student Organizations in Romania (ANOSR, 2021), which collected data on the development of teaching activities at the beginning of the academic year 2021-2022, shows that from public data collected on 295 faculties (out of 365 existing) from the 54 state universities:

1. For undergraduate programs: 160 faculties chose to conduct courses in a hybrid system, 36 in an online system and 99 in the face-to-face system, data expressed as a percentage in Figure 1.

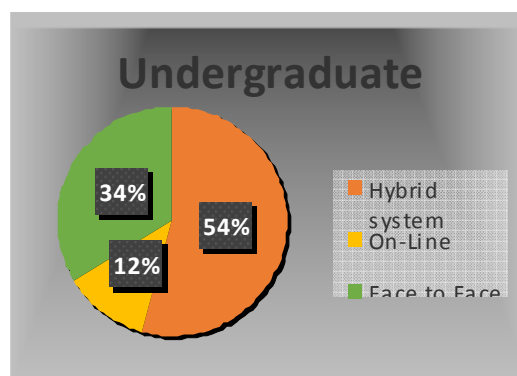


Fig.1. *Percentage of different teaching methods at bachelor's level*

2. For master's programs: 141 faculties chose to conduct courses in the hybrid system, 59 in an online system and 95 in the face-to-face system, data expressed as a percentage in Figure 2.



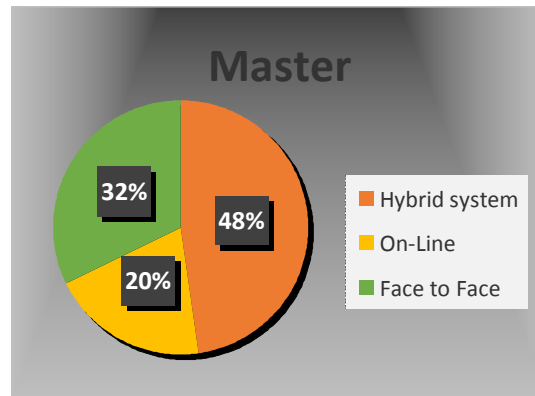


Fig. 2. *Percentage of different teaching methods at master's level*

It is noteworthy that 9 of the 54 universities analyzed, chose to conduct the courses entirely in the face-to-face system and 2 entirely in an online system, the rest having a hybrid teaching system or combined between the three variants.

Where the intention was to fully run the courses in the face-to-face system, as in scenario 1, the alarming increase in the number of people infected with the new virus has led to a switch to a hybrid teaching system.

This was for example the situation of the University of Suceava, which after in the first two weeks from the beginning of the academic year all teaching activities took place face to face, then by the decision of the University Senate they were switched to the hybrid system (Senate, 2021).

Other universities have chosen to remain in the face-to-face system, even if in those cities the number of cases of infection has increased or they have registered cases of illness, showing that:

- "The measure of taking online courses is not justified because, at the moment, there are only six teachers in isolation, as no teacher is infected with the Sars CoV-2 virus, ..., no student is infected, being only 16 students in isolation because they were in contact with Sars CoV-2 positive people" (News, 2021b).
- "Like the universities of Medicine and Pharmacy in the country, we continue the activity face to face and we will monitor the situation daily.  
At the moment we have about 1% of students with Covid. We do not have serious cases, we have rooms to isolate those infected but we will monitor the situation and we will react accordingly.  
If we see an upward trend, we will take the necessary measures, the next step being the transition to a hybrid system" (News, 2021c)

The hybrid system involves the development of teaching activities both face-to-face and online. So, the online component of the teaching activity is, by interpreting the data from figure 1 and figure 2, the majority.

Two statistical studies (Lup & Mitrea, 2020; ANOSR 2020), one conducted in the period immediately following the onset of the pandemic (April 26 - May 30, 2020) and one conducted at the end of 2020, collecting the opinions of both students and teachers on when to carry out online teaching activities shows that:

1. From a managerial point of view, aiming at the didactic activity, it is necessary to transform the university environment in order to make the online teaching more efficient by:
  - a) "the creation of sufficient conditions and the provision of technical support including the need for continuous training of teachers in terms of pedagogy and the use of digital tools" (ANOSR, 2020),
  - b) implementation of "procedures and mechanisms for monitoring the development of online teaching activities, both on the quantitative component and on the qualitative component" (ANOSR, 2020).

In this regard, it is stated that "even though many universities have offered online courses, they have continued to be configured and taught according to the same plan as the courses that were held face to face" (Lup & Mitrea, 2020).

- c) providing all students and teachers with access to the Internet, high-performance digital devices and online tools and platforms,
  - d) preparing an action strategy at university level in order to establish the culture of quality of online education.
2. From a managerial point of view, aiming at the administrative activity, it is also necessary to find solutions, because:
  - a) communication with administrative staff has been assessed as more or less deficient,
  - b) there has been little support from universities for the services and information provided,
  - c) the lack of well-being support services, such as health services, psychological counseling and sports, was acutely felt, as their general well-being was worrying.

Both studies reach similar conclusions, showing that:

- " In order to meet the needs of students, Romanian universities will have to rethink their offer of educational and non-educational services to students, improve communication with them, offer a learning program adapted to the online environment and especially prepare online courses taking into account the specifics of this environment of organization and communication "(Lup & Mitrea, 2020).
- Concrete solutions must be found "in relation to the situation of each university, taking into account the competence of management, the responsibility of teachers and universities to find the optimal measures" (Lup & Mitrea, 2020).

These aspects were well captured in an online education guide, developed at Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj Napoca, which states that: (i) for university education the transfer in the virtual environment of courses and seminars proved to be more than a passing challenge, it deeply affected our cadence, but especially the efficiency of the activities and that (ii) in the opinion of the authors, no online teaching has been carried out, "the teaching practices so far can be rather limited to what is known in the

literature as relocated emergency teaching. In other words, being constrained by context, we resorted to a relocation of teaching and assessment, we transferred it from the classroom and seminar in another educational context - in the virtual one" (Opre et al., 2022).

#### 4. Conclusion

The pandemic was both a danger and an opportunity. Going beyond the serious health problems of the population, the imposition of the intense use of online media in almost all aspects of daily life, has generated an acceleration of the digital transformation, of the individual adaptation to this environment.

One of the most obvious changes has taken place in education. The effect was different from country to country, but closely linked to the level of digitization at the national level and skills at the personal level.

To this aspect, if we add the differences in legislative approach and management at national and institutional level, we find that the results are profoundly different.

The results of the research show that:

- (i) at national level, the novelty of the problems generated by the pandemic caused a non-correlation and inconsistency of regulations, doubled by over-regulation, **and**
- (ii) at the level of higher education institutions in Romania there was no consensus in educational management in the COVID 19 Era.

The negative effects in the finality of the education act are obvious, these being found in the different reports issued as a result of the research carried out by different people at national level. The conclusion that emerges is that of the need to develop management plans for such periods of crisis and programs for the concrete implementation of these plans at national and institutional level.

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