Teaching online in Higher Education Institutions. Romania

Summary report prepared by:
Mihai-Bogdan Iovu, Cristina Faludi, Andrada Tobias, Alina Bărbuță

Background

Since the fall of communism on December 1989, the Romanian educational system has been in a continuous reforming process. The education system is regulated by The Ministry of Education (MoE) according to the new Law on National Education passed in 2011 and subsequently amended in the last 10 years.

As in most countries of the world, in Romania as well since March 2020, the COVID-19 crisis has reconfigured educational practices from "face-to-face" interactions to the remote/online environment. The state of emergency was declared on March 16, 2020, for an initial period of 30 days and then prolonged until May 14, 2020. Afterwards, the state of alert was declared on May 15, 2020 initially for a period of 30 days and subsequently renewed by the Decisions of Government until present. Such measures have had a strong impact on education, resulting in periods of physical closure of universities, and pressuring national and local educational stakeholders to take specific measures to mitigate learning losses, to deploy remote learning and to safely reopen universities. The measures taken during this period were based on the autonomy of the universities and on the decisions being communicated by the central authority (MoE). In the first phase, universities suspended all face-to-face activities for two weeks (March 11–22, 2020). Then the decision was extended until the Easter holiday (May 2020) and later, until the beginning of next academic year. It is estimated that around 543,000 students were

affected by such measures. Most universities continued the educational programs on their existing online learning platforms while the Government, through the Ministry of Education, has taken a series of measures to assure continuity of the educational process.

Methodology

A systematic review of the scientific papers addressing Romanian HEIs during COVID-19 crisis was run. Two dimensions were considered: Digital preparedness of higher education and Digital skills of students (as a measure of the system's level of preparedness before switching to remote learning), Policies and strategies at national level and local level (as a measure of responding to the crisis)

Key Findings

- Even if the distance learning process based on different eLearning platforms was in place since 1995, when forced to transition to a fully remote learning process, both teachers and students showed real difficulties in working online. Most Romanian universities have used a mixed strategy for continuing educational process but ICT use is strongly related to the access to internet infrastructure and the level digital skills. Although the degree of internet use among the population in Romania is close to the average in the EU member states, and the degree of endowment of housing with a computer among pupils and students is high, in terms of digital skills, things differ significantly, Romania being ranked the lowest.
- At least at the beginning, in the lack of clear central regulations, education was focusing more on assuring the course continuity and not necessarily on usage of innovative practices. Slowly, universities have adopted regulations regarding the switching to a fully online admission, graduation and teaching and evaluation. Also, during the pandemic, HEIs third mission has become more visible through active involvement in community.
- At local level, universities have taken clear steps towards setting up the environment for a digital university as a long-term resilience strategy. Therefore, UBB has improved its learning infrastructure with focus on vulnerable students as well, supported digital participation of the entire community by developing an online environment for teaching and administration, opened up training sessions for faculty in the area of developing/improving the level of digital literacy, and supported using the new technologies by grants

Key Recommendations

HEIs in Romania were not fully prepared for engaging into an exclusively online pedagogy. However, the process initiated can not be regressed. So, in the future the focus is to assure the sustainability and reliability of this new learning process. Special attention must be given to:

- **Supporting equity and accessibility,** especially for the most vulnerable and marginalized student population groups in terms of access to technology and digital preparedness to use the available technology.
- **Assuring quality and relevance of education** by adapting the content of learning to e new technologies and supporting teachers for using these 'new' tools.
- **Developing educational technical infrastructure** by continuous investment in the infrastructure (e.g., servers' capacity, stable internet connection throughout the campus, appropriate digital devices, digital blackboards).
- **Adopting an interdisciplinary and intersectoral approach** by acknowledging that just a single discipline will not be able to fully equip students with the knowledge and competencies necessary for todays' society, neither will one person, so collaboration is needed.