# ONLINE SCHOOL BETWEEN PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS. THE STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVE

**Denisa-Georgiana NISTOR, Lecturer PhD. Ioana STĂNCESCU,**

[1] Valahia University of Târgoviște, Student, Faculty of Political Sciences, Letters and Communication, [2] Valahia University of Târgoviște, Lecturer, Teacher Training Department, ROMANIA
Email: nistordenisa99@yahoo.com, stancescu_ioana@yahoo.com

## ABSTRACT

*The pandemic situation brought significant changes regarding the teaching activities, led to the emergency transition to the online system and with it, multiple challenges, both for teachers and students. The students, the main beneficiaries of the online lectures and seminar activities, understood that they have a greater responsibility in learning than before they had and that if they are not fully involved in teaching activities, they will not be able to achieve the desired results. In this context, we considered it necessary to identify and analyze the students' perspective in relation to their experience related to the online school. Thus, a micro-research was carried out, the purpose of which is to analyze the students' opinions regarding the lectures, respectively the online seminars during the pandemic, related to the following aspects: the vertical and horizontal educational relations; the teaching strategies used during classes, the seminars; the students 'access to support materials, the emotional feelings and students' motivation, the difficulties encountered during the period in which the lectures and seminars took place online. The main research method was the questionnaire survey. The target group consisted of students from Valahia University of Targoviste, Faculty of Political Sciences, Letters and Communication, from all years of study, undergraduate and master's degree programs. The results show that students are aware of both the limits of online teaching activities (stress, numerous tasks and homework, connection issues, etc.), but also their benefits (quick and easy access to information resources, development of digital skills, participation in teaching activities from the comfort of your own home, etc.).*

**Keywords:** *the online school; the student perspective; the online school challenges; the benefits and limitations; the educational relationships;*

## INTRODUCTION

The current global situation has brought significant changes in the development of teaching activities, so that the act of learning becomes a responsibility with a much greater share among students. The instructive-educational activity involves the interaction of both the student and the teacher with digital, electronic means connected to the Internet, as well as numerous platforms and applications that contribute to the projection and development of educational activities and are indispensable elements in the online educational environment. In the teaching activities conducted in the online environment, both synchronously and

asynchronously, the teacher must exercise multiple roles, among which the most important are those of guide, counselor, couch, mentor for his students.

Students should also look for information sources on their own and post work assignments on educational platforms in a timely manner.

The pandemic brought significant changes in the conduct of teaching activities, caused the emergency transition to the online system and with it, multiple challenges, both for teachers and students. Also, the students - the main beneficiaries of the lecture and seminar activities carried out online, understood that they have a greater responsibility in learning than before they had and that if they are not fully involved in teaching activities, they will not be able to reach to the desired results.

Apparently, at the beginning of the pandemic, technology facilitated the continuation of distance learning activities during the period when the lecture were suspended, but the reality showed that a large part of the activities carried out face to face is impossible or almost impossible to achieve in the online environment.

Then, „we cannot ignore the major benefit of this period: the integration, even if forced, of technology in tertiary education, respectively in formal education in Romania, in general" (Drăghicescu, Stăncescu, 2021, p.53)

Studies show that technology is increasingly present in human life in the educational process. Therefore, online teaching activities plays a key role in developing digital and language skills for students and teachers and helps them in their subsequent professional life.

Also, the online environment stimulates the teacher to carry out the activity in various ways by using various teaching aids, which maintain interest, curiosity and increase extrinsic motivation and student involvement in teaching (Pânișoară, 2020).

Another important aspect is the fact that „the specificity of online teaching requires the adjustment of the material to the psychological characteristics of the students. This implies a more differentiated structuring in order to individualize and assimilate the material easily (and quickly)" (Gonța, Tripon, 2021, p. 88).

The transfer of educational activities in the online environment mainly negatively affects only laboratory and seminar activities that involve a higher degree of interaction between the student and the teacher. Thus, the interaction is diminished, which is not lead to the development of a quality socio-affective climate.

Students find that work tasks and homework are more numerous in the online environment, and this is due to the teacher's tendency to monitor the student's progress and ensure that he is well prepared for summative assessment, through lifelong learning. However, the use of digital resources in the act of learning is perceived positively by students, because media tools are not foreign to the current generation.

Emergencies and crises are a generator of social change. This change can be interpreted as a destabilization of the functional social state, and in this case, an essential feature of the change is the process of permanent actions whose main purpose is to obtain a new functional state. It is known that social change brings permanent or long-term changes in terms of culture, society, social behaviors, etc. Moreover, the changes come along with a psychological tension that every member of society, the group, feels. A consequence of the current pandemic crisis is that the interaction, communication between the members of the educational act is deficient, which influences other aspects of the social being, respectively of the institutionalized education.

## 1. ONLINE SCHOOL - BETWEEN BENEFITS AND LIMITS

Online schooling is achieved through individual learning experiences or coordinated by the teacher, in asynchronous or synchronous environments, using multiple devices, such as smartphones, computers or laptops, all of them having internet access. Subjects have the opportunity to participate and learn from anywhere, thus being spatially independent and at the same time connected in the act of learning and interaction with their teachers and colleagues. (Singh,Thurman, 2019).

After a period of accommodation with the online educational system, a good part of the students and teachers are currently advocating for the online school, to the detriment of the traditional school, physically carried out, in the educational institutions. On the other hand, there is a very large number of subjects of the educational act who consider that the online school is only an emergency measure and that they are pro-physical school, summing up various reasons. Regarding this issue, we propose for analysis a set of advantages and limitations of the school imposed by the pandemic situation, not at all favorable to the high quality educational act (Marcu, Panțică, Simionescu, 2020).

Some of the benefits of online schooling are:
- ✓ The immediate or quick verification of information, respectively of answers;
- ✓ The quick access to various adjacent educational means, conducive to actively maintaining the student's attention;
- ✓ The online communication is a communication preferred by the young generations;
- ✓ The diversification of online teaching and evaluation forms;
- ✓ A uick access to information both among students and teachers;
- ✓ A favorable climate, from the comfort of your own home;
- ✓ The improving or acquiring digital skills;
- ✓ The use of specialized and authorized e-learning platforms;
- ✓ Using the multitude of open educational resources and tools, online applications dedicated to the interactive learning activity;
- ✓ An increased integration of online educational tools in face-to-face activity.

In contrast to what I mentioned above, I also identified some limitations of online schooling, such as:
- ➢ The aggravation or rising of health problems;
- ➢ The endangering of the horizontal and vertical communication;
- ➢ The copyright infringement regarding the electronic writing of seminar topics, papers etc.;
- ➢ Replacing the handwriting with the typed one;
- ➢ A poor interpersonal relationship for beginners;
- ➢ Obtaining hard feedback from the student body;
- ➢ A poor nonverbal communication and paralanguage;
- ➢ The differentiated work with students is affected;
- ➢ A difficult monitoring of the student's learning pace;
- ➢ A lack of technological support / poor internet connection;
- ➢ One of the students aims is to "check" attendances.

## 2. THE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research involves an analysis of the online school, as it was felt and experienced by students at the Faculty of Political Science, Letters and Communication, the specialization Romanian Language and Literature - English Language and Literature.

The purpose of the micro-research is the analysis of students' opinions regarding the lectures, respectively the online seminars during the pandemic, related to the following aspects:

- The educational relations vertically and horizontally;
- The teaching strategies used during classes, seminars;
- The students' access to support materials;
- The students' emotional feelings and motivation;
- The difficulties encountered during the period in which the lectures and seminars took place online.

In this context, it is very important to create a socio-affective climate meant to facilitate the vertical and horizontal socio-human interaction and to motivate the student to learn, to actively participate in lectures and seminars, to research, to deepen (Hattie, 2014).

That is why we have set the following aims of micro-research:

- The analysis of the main coordinates of teaching activities carried out in the online environment (teaching strategies used - methods, teaching aids, forms of organization; horizontal and vertical educational relationships, motivation and emotional feelings of students);
- The identification of the benefits and limits of the teaching activities carried out in the online environment;
- The analysis of the opportunity to coordinate some of the teaching activities online, in the post-pandemic period.

The main research method used is a questionnaire-based survey. Through this method, concrete data were obtained regarding the facilities and difficulties that the students experienced during the online school. The questionnaire, which was applied online in Google Forms consists of 27 questions (closed and open), aimed at the following dimensions:

- teaching strategies used in online activities (methods, means of education, the form of organization of student groups);
- sources of guidance / support from which the students benefited;
- educational relations vertically and horizontally;
- the students' motivation;
- the emotional feelings of the students, correlated with the didactic activities carried out in online system;
- the benefits and limits of the teaching activities carried out in the online environment;
- the opportunity to carry out some course / seminar activities in online system, in the post-pandemic period.

The target group of this micro-research was made up of 45 students from the University of Valahia University of Targoviste, from the Faculty of Political Sciences, Letters and Communication, who follow the courses of the bachelor's and master's degree programs. 93% of the respondents are female and 7% male. Also, 36% of the first year, 40% are students from the second year of study, and 24% students from the final year. Regarding

the age, we can observe from the second fig. that most of the participants in our study (76%) are between 18 and 23 years old.
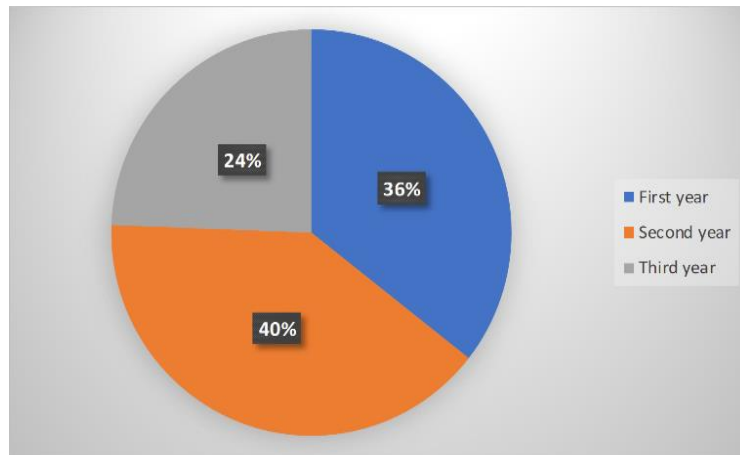


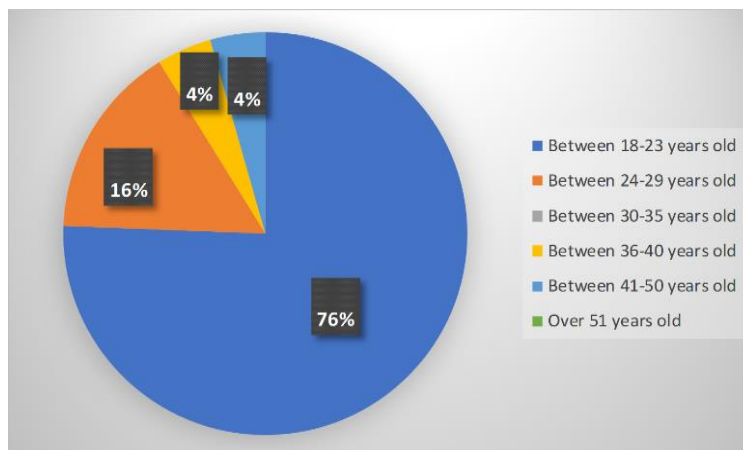*Figure no. 1. The distribution by years of study of respondents*



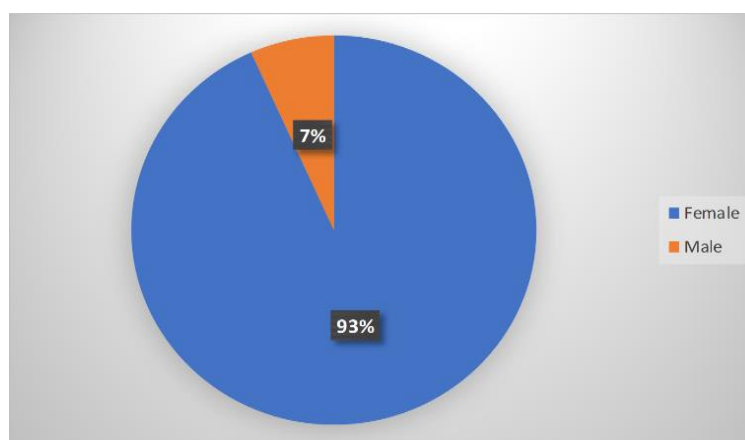*Figure no. 2. The responding students' age range*



*Figure no. 3. The gender of the respondents*

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In the following paragraphs, there are presented the most important results of the micro-research, accompanied by relevant analyzes and interpretations.

One of the items of the questionnaire was to investigate the students' opinion about *the extent to which they participated in the lectures and seminars conducted online.*
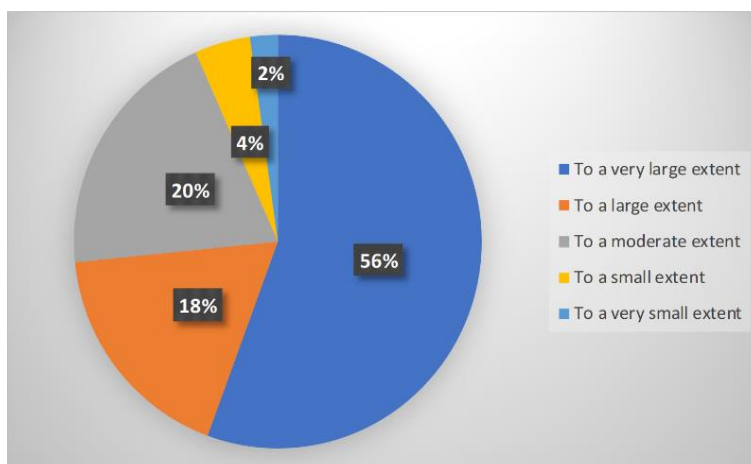


*Figure no. 4. The extent to which students participated in online courses and seminars*

As we can see from the figure above, 56% of students answered that they participated to a very large extent, 18% to a large extent, 20% to an appropriate extent, and 6% answered that they participated to a small or very small extent in online courses and seminars. This result leads us to the conclusion that the online environment was favorable for participation in courses and seminars among students, attendance at classes having the benefit of a positive interaction between members of the educational act and the acquisition, respectively the exercise of important skills.

Another item of the questionnaire refers to *the main sources of guidance / support / that students had during the courses / seminars online*.
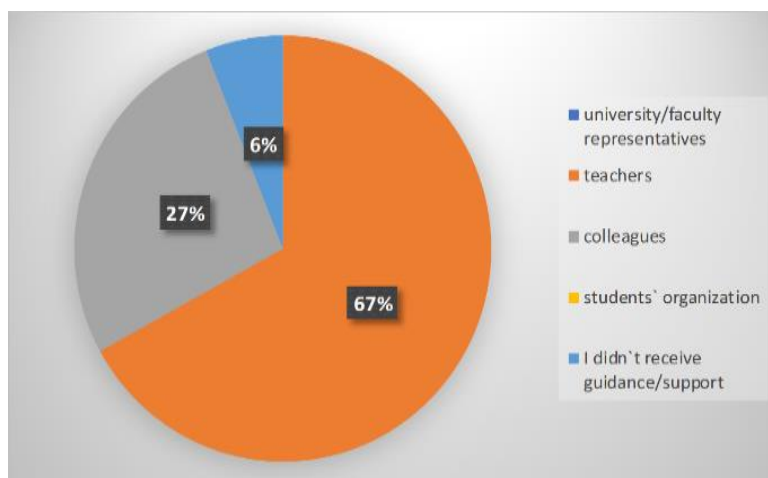


*Figure no. 5. The main sources of guidance / support / that students had during the courses / seminars in the online system*

67% of the students participating in the study claim that the teachers are the main source of guidance / support they had during the online school, while 27% of the students claim that the other students, group colleagues / year they provided support and guidance. The fact that a very high percentage of students, state that they have found in their teachers the main source of guidance / support demonstrates that the relationship established between the both categories of educational acts is a solid one, based on trust and is the premise for overcoming obstacles in online school.

Regarding the main sources of teaching support that students received and used most often, the answers varied, which indicates their diversity, having a positive impact on teaching.
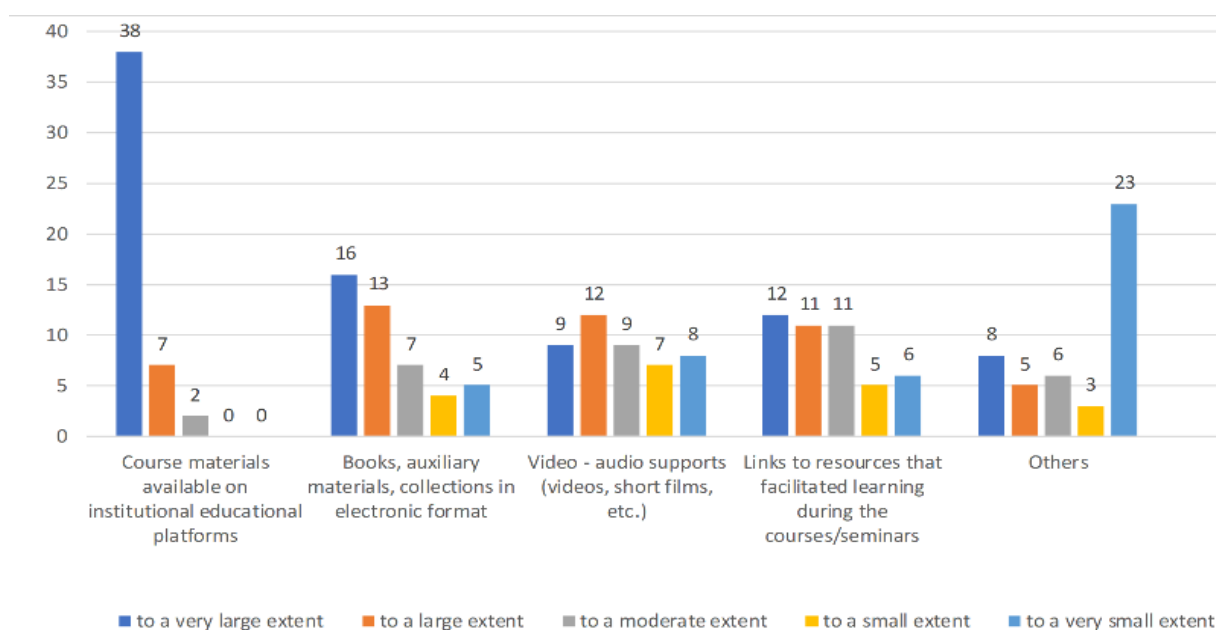


*Figure no. 6. The main sources of teaching support that students received and used most often*

The main sources of teaching support that the respondent students benefited most often are the support of information provided on institutional educational platforms, followed by links to resources rich in theoretical and applied content that facilitate student learning in seminars or lectures. This result demonstrates that the first source of information that students seek and access is the support / guide that the teacher provides on the university's educational platform.

Another item of the questionnaire was *the participation in the online activities carried out in groups, within the seminars / laboratories / lectures / extracurricular activities / workshops / conferences.*
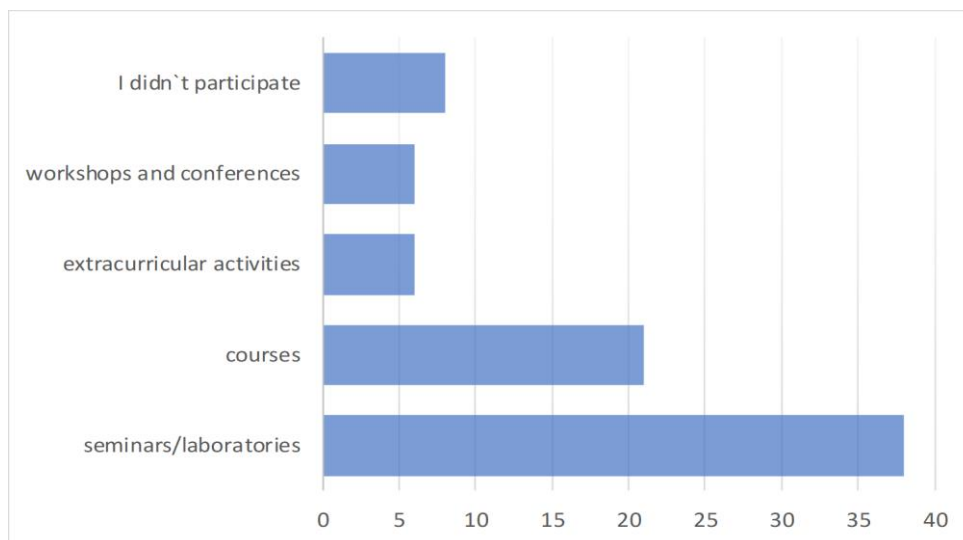
*Figure no. 7. Online activities carried out in groups within seminars / laboratories / courses / extracurricular activities / workshops / conferences*

Most of the respondents mentioned that they participated in the online activities carried out in groups, within the seminar activities, respectively in the laboratories.

Also, a good part of the educators, claims that the work in groups took place during the courses. It is necessary to mention that the ways to group the students are limited depending on the platform used. For example, in the seminar activities carried out on the Teams platform, the application allows the distribution on groups either automatically or manually, made by the teacher. In the opposite direction, the Zoom platform limits this option depending on the package - offer accessed. Moreover, platforms such as Skype are not updated with this option, so they do not allow the use as a form of organization, within the teaching strategy, of group work.

Another very important aspect that micro-research has addressed is *the main learning difficulties that students have encountered during online schooling*.
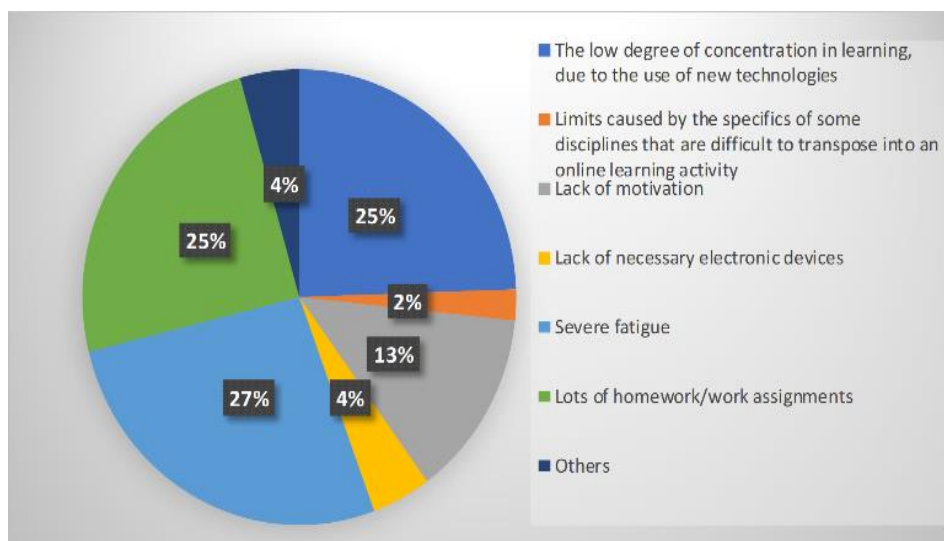


*Figure no. 8. The main learning difficulties that students encountered during online schooling*

Asked to mention the main learning difficulties they encountered during online schooling, 27% of students said that they had experienced severe fatigue. In second place in the opinions of students, with a percentage of 25%, students said that they felt a low degree of concentration in learning caused by new technologies and that they had numerous homework / work tasks. 13% of the responding students faced the lack of motivation in the educational act. We can conclude that the main factor that favored fatigue, low concentration, lack of motivation is the tool used to conduct online classes - the computer. The effects of its long-term use are well known, so they have made their presence felt among students, and on the other hand, among teachers.

Very important in the learning act is *the students' motivation during the teaching activities carried out in the online environment.*
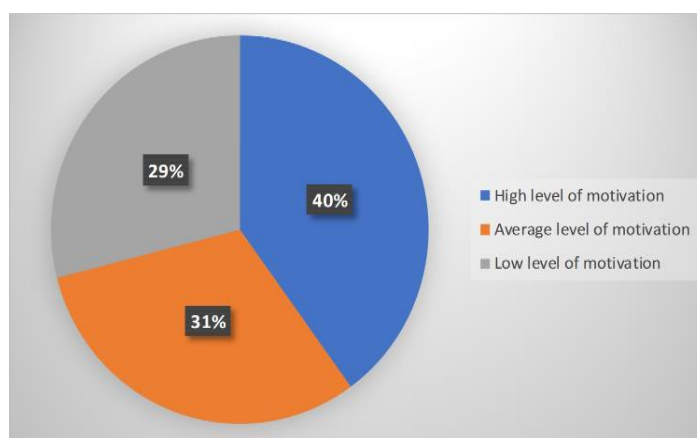


*Figure no. 9. The level of motivation of students during the teaching activities carried out in the online environment*

The diagram presented above shows that 40% of students had a high level of motivation during online schooling, while 31% had an average level of motivation and 29% had a low level of motivation. This reveals that the students' motivation was maintained for a generous period of time, thus indirectly ensuring the vertical and horizontal interaction of the participants of the educational act, and implicitly, ensuring compliance with all teaching principles.

Another item of the questionnaire focused on *the factors that influenced the students' motivation during the teaching activities in the online environment, those that contribute a lot in the instructive-educational act, generously influencing the expected results.*

Tabel no. 1. Factors that influenced students' motivation during online teaching activities

| The factor | The intensity of its influence |
|---|---|
| - the pandemic situation | Very high |
| - a low level of concentration due to:<br>  o new technologies; | High |

| | |
|---|---|
| o the adaptation with difficulty to the new way of carrying out the didactic activities;<br>o the relationship with the people involved in the educational act; | Moderate |
| - monotonous lectures;<br>- the monotonous teaching activities in seminars. | A little |

The statistics in Figure 10 show that students' motivation during online schooling was largely influenced by the pandemic situation, followed by the low level of concentration due to new technologies or monotonous activities. To a large extent, the motivation was influenced by the adaptation with difficulty to the new way of carrying out the didactic activities, by the relationship with the people involved in the educational act. The external factor that influenced the students' motivation to a small extent is the monotonous teaching activities. In other words, the pandemic situation has influenced not only the way in which subjects of school education normally carry out their activity, communication and interaction between them, but also has intrinsic effects, which can be accentuated (in this context, positively) by the activity of the teacher and the ability of everyone to adapt quickly and efficiently to the new conditions. At the same time, during the online school, the emotional feelings that the educators felt were different.
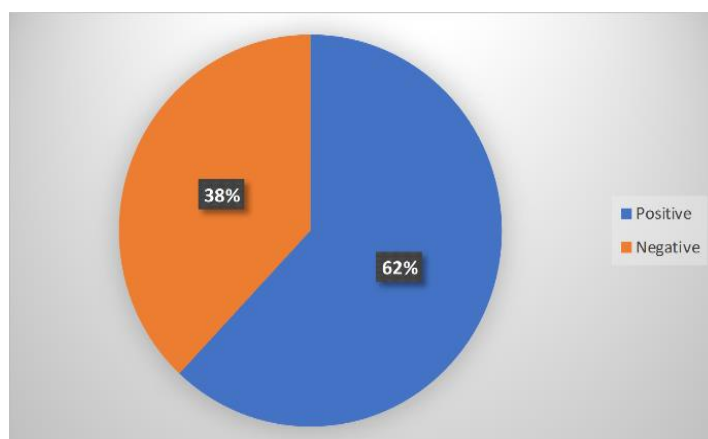


*Figure no. 10. The emotional feelings that students felt in a big measure during the online school*

The emotional feelings that the students felt in a share of 62% during the online school were positive, and in a share of 38% they were negative. The emotions that students and teachers experience in school are defining for their personal and professional success and lead to the systematic fulfillment of the goals of intellectual education and beyond. The fact that emotional feelings are predominantly positive strengthens the correctness, clarity and relevance of all the results analyzed above.

*Factors that have hindered learning or participation in online courses* play an important role in teaching and influence the conscious and lasting participation of students in instructional-educational activities.
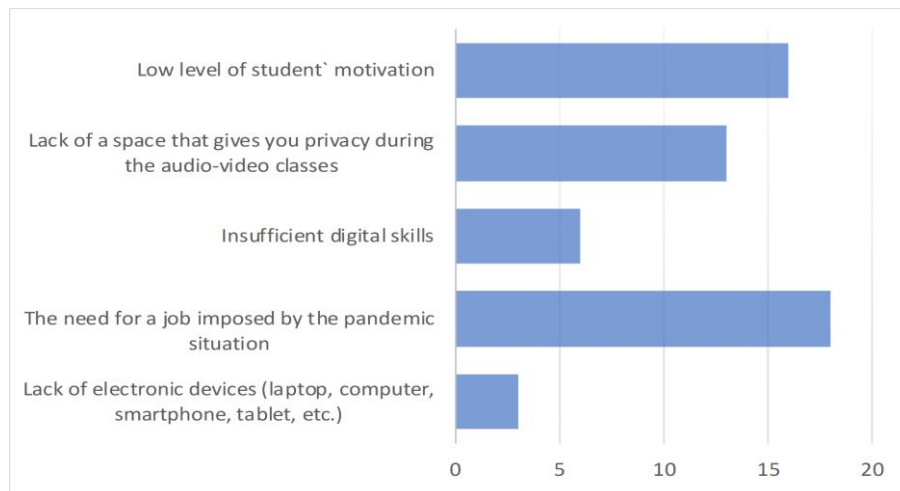
***Figure no. 11.*** Factors that have made it difficult for students to learn or participate in online courses

A total of 18 students say that the need for a job imposed by the pandemic situation has made it more difficult to learn or participate in online courses. Sixteen students argue that their low level of motivation is the factor that has most influenced their learning and participation in courses, followed in order of frequency by factors: lack of space to provide privacy during online classes, insufficient digital skills in terms of students, and finally, the lack of electronic devices (laptop, computer, smartphone, tablet, etc.). At the academic level, there are often cases in which students work. Both online and physically, the time and activities that each student's service requires make it difficult for them to participate continuously and actively, influencing the formation and exercise of professional and transversal skills pursued by each academic discipline. As for the motivational factor, as is well known, it can be fed extrinsically and intrinsically. We can consider that the unforeseen and not at all unusual changes imposed by the pandemic were the basis for the decrease of the students' motivation to participate in the online classes and seminars.

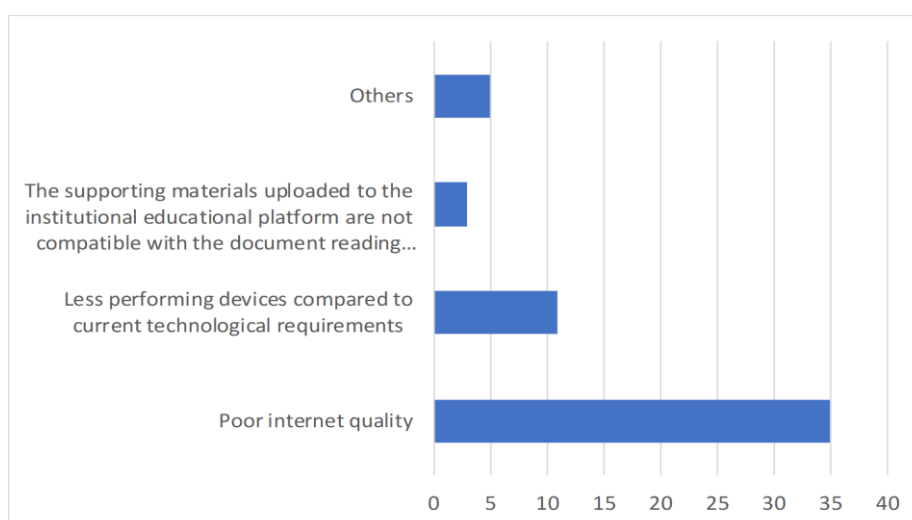The questionnaire also included items related to the technical difficulties encountered during the online activities.



***Figure no. 12.*** *Technical difficulties encountered by students during online activities*

Below are the technical difficulties encountered by students during online classes. Among them, in order of their frequency, we list: poor internet quality, less efficient device in relation to current technological requirements, support material uploaded on the educational platform incompatible with the device that the student uses. Poor internet quality is a factor that often did not depend only on the student. Given that the internet and educational platforms were used and requested by most students, this resulted in poor internet quality and difficult use of institutional platforms. From another point of view, the less performing devices or their lack can be eliminated, because the university has provided a generous number of devices to facilitate learning and participation in online classes, as well as teacher-student, student-teacher interactions.

Essential in the didactic activity is the relationship with the teachers during the development of the didactic activities in the online system. The teacher-student relationship can be a strong factor that influences the motivation of the subjects participating in the learning act.
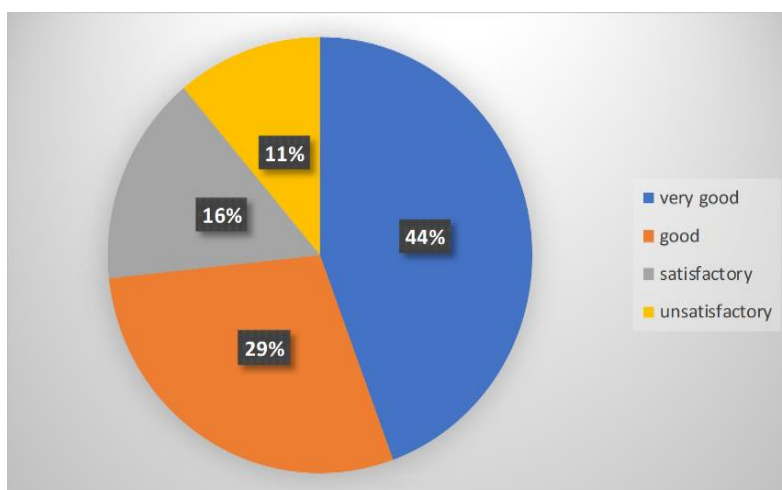


***Figure no. 13.*** *The relationship of students with teachers during the development of teaching activities in the online system*

Regarding the relationship with teachers during the teaching activities in the online system, in proportion of 44%, students said that it was very good, 29% said it was good, 16% said that was satisfactory and 11% unsatisfactory. It is clear that vertical interaction is an essential and even decision-making factor in some cases for each student. The very good and good teacher-student relationship predominated, which increased the students' motivation and facilitated the efficiency of the online teaching, especially as the teacher acquires new values and roles, being a guide and support in many ways for students, but also main factor that can alleviate or eliminate any unforeseen problems that have arisen during online schooling.

Equally relevant is *the relationship with students (especially with the group colleagues, or the year ones), during the online teaching activities*.
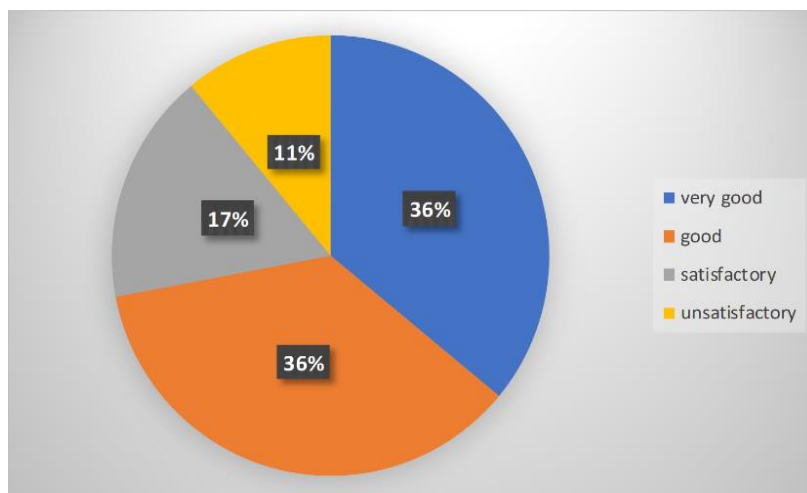
***Figure no. 14.*** *Relationship with students (especially with the group colleagues, or the year ones), during the development of teaching activities in the online system*

From the point of view of the horizontal relationship (especially with the students in the group or in the year), in an equal percentage of 36%, the students mention that the relationship was very good and good, while 17% of them say that the relationship was unsatisfactory, with 11% remaining to claim that the relationship was not satisfactory. The relationship between students was greatly influenced by the measures of isolation and social distancing imposed by the pandemic, so for the final years the interaction between students was predominantly online, which implies a weaker establishment of emotional connection, collegiality and self-help, collaboration. In other words, for the beginner years, the student-student relationship will be better consolidated after returning to the faculty benches, creating a united team and an efficient communication that brings with it a united team. Also, the return of the first year students to the desks can be a new beginning for them. However, the students collaborated to a large extent very well, and this was due to the teachers and the predilection of the younger generations for socializing online.

The research items also targeted open-ended questions, the answers to which varied. One of these items required students *to specify at least one advantage and at least one disadvantage of online schooling*. The results obtained for this item are summarized in the table below, having as a criterion for ordering their frequency.

Table no. 2 - The benefits and limitations of online schooling

| THE BENEFITS | THE LIMITATIONS |
|---|---|
| Comfort / convenience; | A lack of motivation to participate in lectures / seminars; |
| Development of digital skills; | A severe fatigue; |
| A numerous attendance at courses / seminars; | A low concentration; |

| | |
|---|---|
| A decreased transportation / dormitory costs; | A difficult understanding of scientific content; |
| Time economy; | A lack of access to technology / technical failures; |
| A flexible schedule; | A poor internet connection; |
| A harmonious merging of service with faculty; | A long time spent in front of the screen; |
| The possibility to participate in courses from anywhere; | Overload regarding seminar assignments / topics; |
| The teaching support posted on the institutional platform. | A difficult assessment of time pressure; |
| Improving digital writing in terms of word processing; | It simulates increased anxiety. |
| Attractive classes in terms of new technologies; | |
| Registration and participation in classes of students from several counties of the country; | |
| Socialization through digital means, preferred by current generations. | |

From the students' perspective, the benefits of online school are, in terms of frequency: comfort and convenience, development of digital skills, numerous attendance at teaching activities, reduced transportation and dormitory costs, saving time and flexible time, flexible program in terms of merging the service with school, the possibility to participate in courses from anywhere, the teaching support posted on the Moodle institutional platform, the improvement of digital writing from the point of view of word processing, the attractive classes due to the use of new technologies, the enrollment and participation of students from several counties and the social media preferred by current generations.

Regarding the limits, the students claim that the biggest limitation is the lack of motivation to participate in courses and seminars, followed by increased fatigue, difficult understanding of scientific content, poor internet connection, overwork on seminar tasks, difficult assessment on time pressure.

An overview of table no. 1 surprises that students have found multiple advantages of the online education system, advantages that cover several perspectives: time management,

space management, respectively distance, a financial perspective, a personal one (by developing digital skills), but also an educational one (related to the adaptation of classes and seminars in the online system, the facilities of the institutional platforms, of the didactic resources).

Thus, there are the limits that refer to the student's own abilities to maintain concentration, to self-motivate and to manage his emotional feelings so that the positive ones predominate. However, there are also limitations related to the technical sphere (the internet speed, the performance of the device that the student owns).

The degree to which students have adapted to return to face-to-face teaching activities varies and it depends on the particularities of each person.
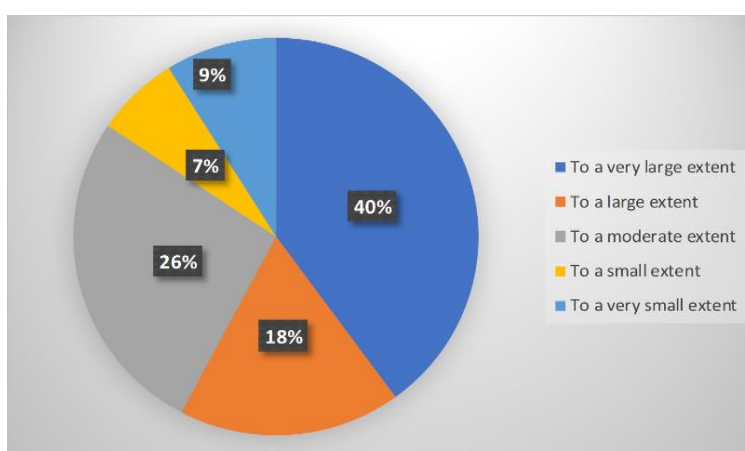


*Figure no. 15. The extent to which students have adapted to return to face-to-face teaching activities*

In a percentage of 40%, the students adapted to a very large extent to the return to the activities carried out face to face, 26% to a moderate extent, 18% to a large extent, 7% to a small extent, and 9% to a very small extent. It is found that the return to the face-to-face system enjoys a significant percentage (84%) of students who have adapted to a moderate extent, large and very large. The return to "normal" is embraced by most students, highlighting the natural need for a complete socio-affective climate, with face-to-face interaction. Moreover, the activities carried out in the physical system are known by the subjects, so that the need to participate in teaching activities carried out in an official setting, in an educational institution is pronounced, which is evident from the results presented. Although the online school as a whole had a positive impact among the target group, the school physically „runs" in full conditions and norms of the educational system is the one that prevails in the preferences of students, given the large number of respondents who claim to have adapted very quickly to what most people call "normality."

Another item of the questionnaire refers to *the students' opinion regarding the further development of the course or seminar activities in the online system, even if the pandemic situation no longer requires it.*
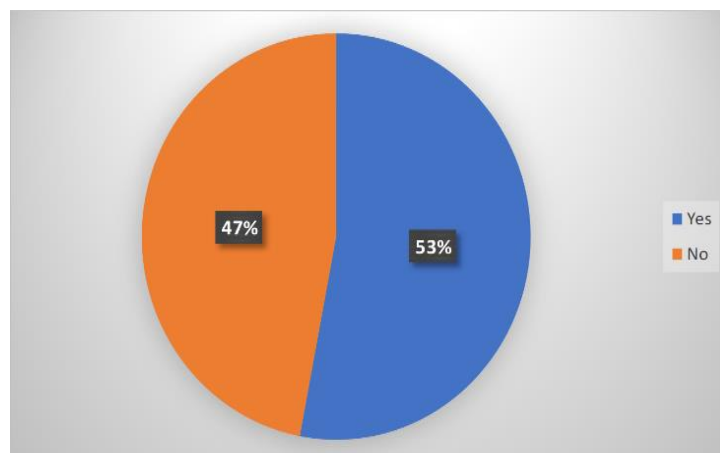
**Figure no. 16.** *The students' opinion regarding the opportunity to continue conducting the lecture or seminar activities online, even if the pandemic situation no longer requires it*

The opinion of the students regarding the opportunity to carry out some lectures or seminar activities online, even if the pandemic situation no longer requires it is 53% in against and 47% favor this fact, therefore, the school physics takes precedence among students' wishes. The opinion of the majority is noticeable, this being pro-physical school if the pandemic environment does not require it. However, the difference of 6% between the two opinions of the students demonstrates their ability and flexibility to adapt to all events and changes that occurred "overnight".

So, referring to the expressed needs of students on this issue, a possible change at the university level is not to be neglected, „by promoting an innovative teaching approach, based on a mixed format, in which direct activities, of rigorous guidance and directing of learning, to alternate with those that offer a high degree of independence and autonomy to students, being mediated by ICT" (Drăghicescu & Stăncescu, 2021, p.70).

**CONCLUSIONS**

Considering the results presented and analyzed previously corroborated with the study of the literature, we can formulate the following ideas with conclusive value.

The online environment stimulates the teacher to carry out the activity in various ways by using various means of education, which maintain the interest, curiosity and increase the extrinsic motivation and the student's involvement in teaching.

Most of the students prefer physical classes because socialization with teachers and colleagues is increased, the assessment is conducted in objective conditions, known to all, the concentration and motivation are increased, and the teaching process is no longer disrupted by poor internet connection;

A consequence of the current pandemic crisis is that the interaction, the communication between the members of the educational act is deficient, which influences other aspects of the social being, respectively of the institutionalized education.

Therefore, after two and a half years of pandemic, although the conditions were harsh, it is found that the instructive-educational activities were carried out in an optimal manner, being rich in seminar tasks designed to strengthen the theoretical content,

educational platforms were used and digital means of education. Also, for today's students, online learning has become a common education option.

Moreover, the online school has shown that both teachers and students have created a mechanism that worked even when resources were minimal or the crisis situation took us by surprise, forcing us to adapt overnight to a new reality of the surrounding and educational world.

Well-being and balance are fundamental to a harmonious teacher-student relationship, and last but not least, students report that work tasks and homework are more numerous in the online environment, and this is due to the teacher's tendency to monitor student progress and ensure that he is well prepared for summative assessment through lifelong learning.

The use of digital resources in the act of learning is perceived positively by students, because media tools are not foreign to the current generation.

All these challenges have been fully realized in successes, such as: quick access to information, cultivating predominantly positive emotional feelings, socializing online as a favorite act of the new generations, acquiring digital and linguistic skills required by technical devices, adapting to success in the online system and capitalization of teaching materials through educational platforms.

In conclusion, the online school demonstrated that both teachers and students created a mechanism that worked even when resources were minimal or the crisis situation took us by surprise, forcing us to adapt overnight to a new one. realities of the surrounding world and education. Well-being and balance are fundamental to a harmonious teacher-student relationship (Szekely, 2020, p. 64).

In the whirlwind of adaptation to the new context, this perfect aspect has been transferred to the background, with alignment, recommendations following reports being paramount. Thus, the student's well-being is in fact the key to a successful quality teaching activity.

In order to carry out lectures and seminar activities in the online system, both teachers and students had to use platforms dedicated to the educational act, such as: Moodle platform, e-learning, Google Classroom, but also a multitude of applications meant to facilitate the communication and presentation of theoretical content, such as: Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Skype, Google Meet. On the other hand, the teaching aids used were mostly digital (e-books; educational sites - e-learning, Mentimeter, Mindmaps; audio-video videos).

All those aspects contribute to the motivation of students and offer the possibility to work in teams / groups, which increases the cohesion of the group of students and promotes interpersonal interaction.

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