

## STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF PERSONAL AUTONOMY, MOTIVATION AND EFFECTIVE LEARNING IN THE ONLINE ENVIRONMENT

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### ABSTRACT

*The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic changed the global society and generated mutations in all areas of activity, strongly impacting the education system as well. The solutions for the continuation of the educational process-imposed adaptations, changes, rethinking and restructuring of the way in which the instructive-educational approach was carried out until then. The traditional school imported methods, techniques, tools, resources and moved to the virtual space, on educational platforms. In this new context, the resilience, flexibility and creativity of teachers have proven to be fundamental skills for maintaining a satisfactory quality standard, conditioned, however, in many situations by teacher-independent factors: internet connection, appropriate devices or even students' motivation for learning. Education continued, but the differences between the social categories of students deepened. In the online environment the teacher's authority is lower, the efficiency of some methods is lost, communication is altered by contextual, environmental factors, students' interest and motivation are difficult to maintain. Specialists in the educational field state that human interaction in the online environment is artificial, not authentic and does not have the same formative valences as in the physical space of the classroom. After two and a half years of pandemic, in which education took place in the online environment, alternating with periods when teachers and students returned to class, there are both obstacles and opportunities to integrate modern technology in the educational process. The pandemic has shown that today's school needs to change, to be open to the outside world and to take on viable models and paradigms that meet the current and complex needs of students. In higher education, a number of advantages of online learning can be highlighted, as students generally have independently developed study skills, autonomy and the ability to organize their own training and development process. This investigative research aims to identify the students' perception regarding the efficiency of teaching activities in the online environment, how their autonomy and motivation for learning has contributed to a quality educational process, despite the obstacles encountered, and to identify useful landmarks for teachers in achieving an education that integrates the online component effectively. The sample of the study included 83 higher education students from Valahia University of Targoviste, Romania.*

**Keywords:** *autonomy; motivation; online learning; effective learning; students;*

## INTRODUCTION

The last two years have been a major challenge for education systems around the world, as the Covid-19 pandemic has forced teachers, students, parents and decision-makers in education to find the best solutions for the educational process to continue. Teachers have adapted quickly and sought internal and external resources to maintain high quality standards in education and to remain close to their students. Teachers experienced online teaching using synchronous and asynchronous platforms, modern methods and innovative resources, practiced multiple roles, were attentive to the needs of their students, were creative and tried to motivate their students to learn and maintain their psychological well-being even when they were isolated.

At the level of higher education, the educational process was transferred to the online environment, highlighting the opportunities to capitalize on digital skills, student's engagement, self-regulation of learning, commitment, flexibility, efficient organization of internal and external resources, also the creativity, innovation and adaptability of teachers.

Teaching-learning online is not a new concept in the university environment; in addition to the limitations of online education: ineffective communication and relationships, limited cooperative dimension, difficulties in achieving objective assessment and feedback, in monitoring and stimulating performance, in individualizing and personalizing learning (Botnariuc, 2020, p. 47), a number of advantages can also be identified: access to educational opportunities in a flexible way in terms of time and place (Arkorful, 2014; Farrell & Brunton, 2020); scalability of institutional resource (time and money) and low travel costs for students; access to relevant digital resources; valuing the individual differences of learners (abilities, interests, the pace of cognitive acquisition, learning styles and learning needs); increases satisfaction and decreases stress (Arkorful, 2014).

The literature reveals a number of interdependent factors that affect the quality and efficiency of online learning: the support provided by teachers, students' study skills and digital skills, time management skills; ability to balance work, family with study and relaxing time; learning autonomy; self-motivation ability; course design elements; support from the institution or group to which it belongs (Blackmon & Major, 2012; Buck, 2016; Farrell & Brunton, 2020).

The Evaluative Research Report on Online School (Botnariuc et al., 2020) shows that strictly academic and methodical skills are not sufficient in the context of online education, the teacher must also take on tasks of learning counseling, psycho-pedagogical and personal counseling, helping students to adopt meta-cognitive strategies, self-observation and self-guidance strategies in relation to learning.

### 1. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Learning autonomy represents a valuable competence for students and a goal of *prospective education*, in the context of rapid changes in all areas of life, which impose the need for *lifelong learning*, updating knowledge throughout life. Autonomy or self-regulation are factors or conditions that facilitate success.

In the field of Educational Sciences, autonomy is a frequently encountered concept, correlated especially with lifelong learning skills. First used by Henri Holec in 1981, this term is associated with different meanings - as a *personal human trait* or as an *educational movement* - being considered either as a *means* or as a *goal* in education (or even both). According to Holec (1981, p. 3) autonomy is "the ability to take control of one's own

learning”. Dickinson (1987, 1994) states that autonomy implies taking responsibility for all decisions related to one’s own learning and their implementation. There are various terms connected to learner autonomy: *learner independence*, *self-direction learning*, *independent learning* and ability to control personal learning experiences (Masouleh & Jooneghani, 2012). In this approach, learners take the responsibility of their own learning, learn at their own pace and use their own strategies.

Among the essential characteristics associated with autonomous learning Philip C. Candy (1991) identifies over 100 attributes associated with autonomy in learning: methodical, disciplined, logical, analytical, reflective, self-aware, motivated, curious, flexible, independent, responsible, persistent, adventurous, creative, self-efficacy and self-confidence, skilled in seeking information, learning style, self-assessment ability, etc. There are over 2700 papers (Reinders, 2016) that refer to the concept of autonomy, most studies being in relation to the process of learning in general, language learning or in relation to digital competence development (Bakar, 2007).

There are also studies that address the relationship between autonomy and motivation (Dickinson, 1995), emotions (Dunlop, 1986), metacognition (Haque, 2018), self-esteem (Hill, 1991) etc. Reeve, Bolt & Cai (1999), Benson (1997), Hurd, Beaven, & Ortega (2001) and Thanasoulas (2000) states that teachers have the central role in developing students’ autonomy, can support them and motivate them to learn effectively, by creating a learning environment in the classroom that supports independent assumption and responsibilities for one’s own their learning.

David Little (1991) argues that autonomy is a psychological relationship of the learner (student) with the learning process and content, a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision making and independent action. For Tassinari (2012, p. 28) learner autonomy represents a “meta-capacity”, a “complex construct, a construct of constructs, entailing various dimensions and components”:

- a cognitive and metacognitive component (cognitive and metacognitive knowledge, awareness, learners’ beliefs);
- an affective and a motivational component (feelings, emotions, willingness, motivation);
- an action-oriented component (skills, learning behaviors, decisions);
- a social component (learning and negotiating learning with partners, advisors, teachers).

An important feature of the student’s autonomy is represented by his/her ability to activate the interaction of the components and to maintain a balance between them, in different contexts and learning situations.

Tassinari (2012) presents a complex dynamic model of learner autonomy (Fig. 1), in which each component has a set of specific macro-descriptors and micro-descriptors for the abilities, behaviors and attitudes subsumed in learning autonomy.

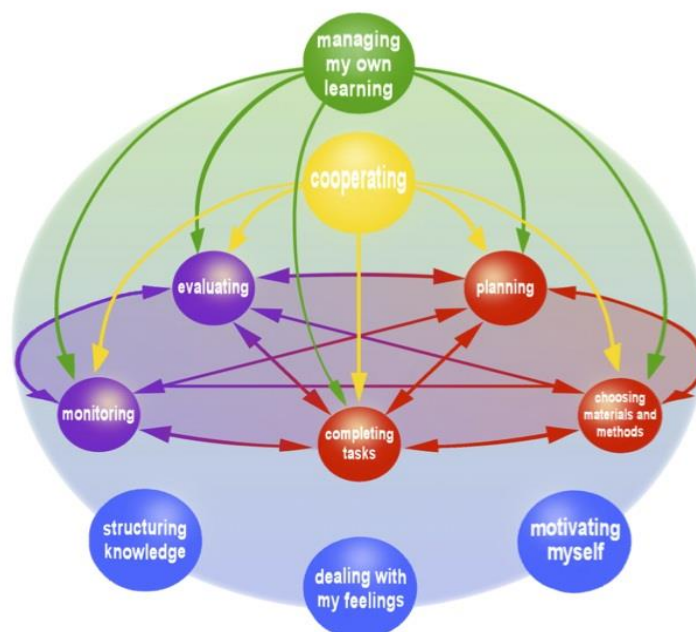


Figure no. 1. The dynamic model of learner autonomy (Tassinari, 2010, p. 203)

Dickinson (1995) stated that autonomy and motivation are closely linked. Motivation is the set of internal motives that determine the choice of a certain activity, shows how long individuals are willing to persist in it and what effort they invest (Dörnyei, 2001).

Motivation is one of the key factors that influence the success of an activity. In the educational context, motivation is the process that generates the main impulse to initiate learning and, at the same time, motivation also provides the necessary strength to support the effort required in the learning process. Gardner & MacIntyre (1993) argued that there are three important elements in the structure of motivation: the desire to achieve a goal, the effort made in this regard and the satisfaction felt with the task performed. Gagne & Deci (2005) stated that intrinsic motivation is the key element in independent, autonomous learning.

## 2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study **aims**:

- (1) to determine the effectiveness of online learning from higher education students' perspectives;
- (2) to highlight the relation between students' autonomy and motivation for learning, in online education, in pandemic context;

### Sample

The purpose of this research study was to find the general attitudes of Romanian higher education students towards compulsory digital and distance learning university courses amid Coronavirus (COVID-19). The sample of the study included 83 higher education students from Valahia University of Targoviste, Romania - all of them enrolled in the *Teacher Training Programme* - level 1, the third year of study). The students participated in the online courses during the two and a half years of the pandemic.

### Survey

An online survey technique was used to gather data about the perceptions of Romanian higher education students regarding online teaching. A special created 38-item questionnaire with open and close items was used to assess the effectiveness of online learning. The distribution of the items was done on a Likert scale with 5 steps, from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*.

### 3. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Related to the students' autonomy in online learning, the items of the questionnaire aimed to identify the students' perception concerning their own abilities/ skills/ competences (*knowing how*) to use technology for multiple educational purposes: to send content to others, to download pictures or movies, to access informational content, to use computer for online classes, for learning, for using educational applications and online platforms with reasonable effort. Figure 2 illustrates that students greatly appreciate that they have developed skills that involve accessing informational content, downloading pictures or movies and sending content to others. According to *The dynamic model of learner autonomy* (Tassinari, 2010, p. 203), it can be appreciated that students are able to **perform various tasks** in the online environment, which means that they have developed a significant degree of autonomy in using technology.

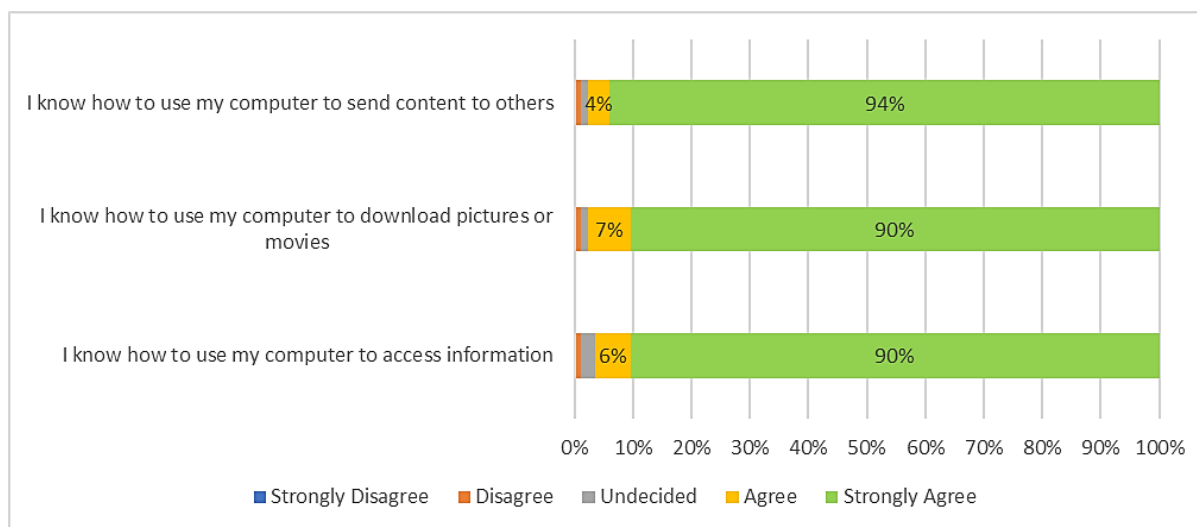
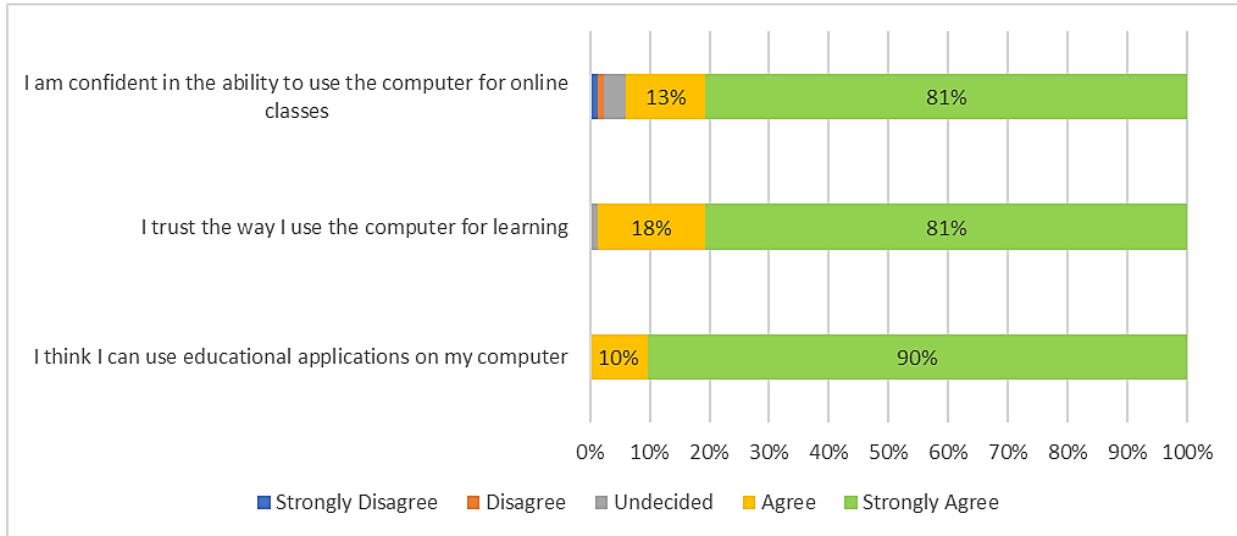


Figure no. 2. Students' abilities to access informational content and to send it to others

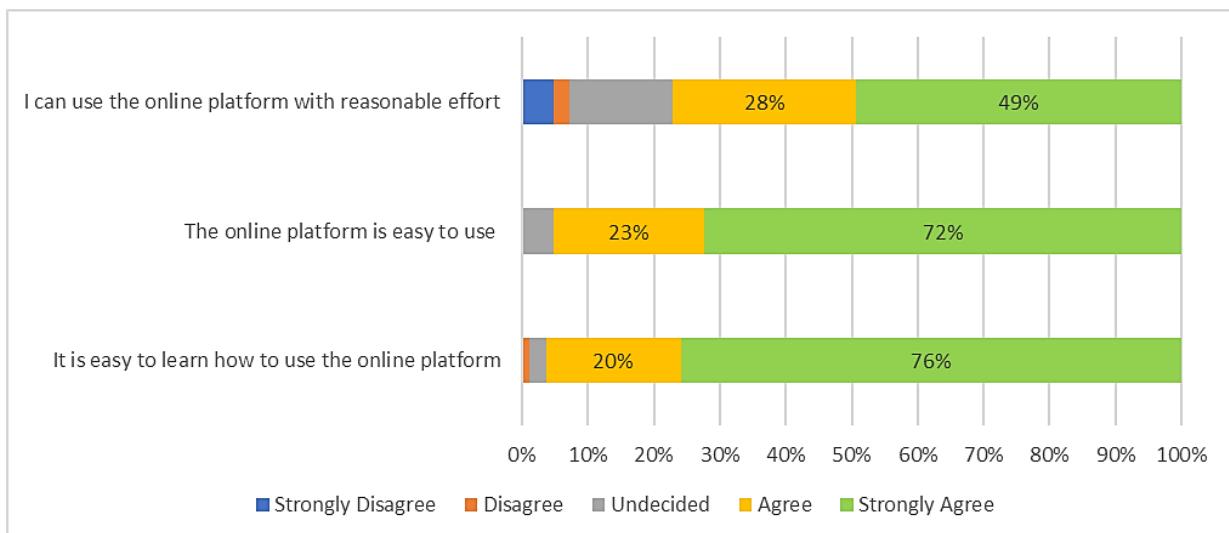
Regarding the students' perception about their own abilities to use the means of modern technology in learning, figure 3 shows that they can use educational applications on their computer, they are able to use the computer for learning and they are confident in the ability to use the computer for online classes, so they are **able to manage** their own learning process.



*Figure no. 3. Students' abilities to use the computer for learning*

In the university environment, educational platforms were used even before the pandemic, but the sudden move of the entire educational process in the online environment imposed the exclusive use of educational platforms for synchronous and asynchronous activities. This approach has generated multiple challenges/ difficulties for students, for teachers and even institutions. Figure 4 indicates that students appreciate they can **use online platforms without considerable effort**. The self-confidence given by the success of the activities contributes to the increase of the self-esteem and to the motivation for the use of those online means.

The ability to perform various tasks in the online environment, to manage their own learning process and to use online platforms easily are important elements of autonomy



*Figure no. 4. Students' perception related to their personal ability to use the online platforms*



Figure 5 shows how students appreciate / evaluate their own ability to understand and learn through online platforms. The distribution of answers indicates that, although they appreciate that they have the necessary skills to achieve effective learning, they still do not make the most in the process of acquiring knowledge. Lack of motivation or metacognitive skills or a low level of them could be one of the factors that contribute to blocking the learning process. As other research state (Botnariuc et al., 2020) authentic, face-to-face relationship is essential in the educational process. Communication and interaction mediated by devices lose their relevance, distracting factors from the environment appear, the feedback is not real and immediate due to the placement in the virtual space.

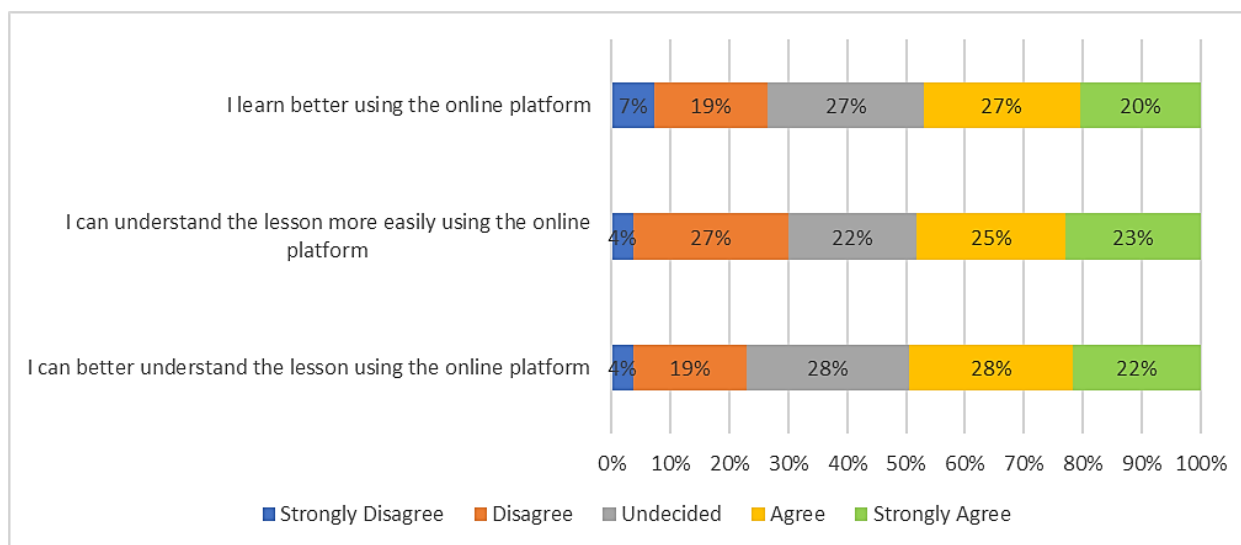


Figure no. 5. Self-assessment students' performance in learning

Although there are many difficulties and challenges related to online teaching-learning, there are also clear advantages. As can be seen in Figure 6, students appreciate that online platforms bring advantages in learning, in improving academic work and school performance. According to Arkorful (2014) and Farrell & Brunton (2020), students can have access to educational opportunities in a flexible way in terms of time and place, can access to relevant digital resources, value the individual differences of the learners: abilities, interests, the pace of cognitive acquisition, learning styles and learning needs.

Observing the students' answers to all the items, the share of *strongly disagree* answers is very low, which indicates a small number of students who have a negative perception of their own autonomy in learning in the online environment. According to Dickinson (1995), autonomy and motivation are closely linked. A high level of personal autonomy contributes to increased motivation for learning. And the optimal level of intrinsic motivation, supports the effort needed to overcome obstacles in learning.

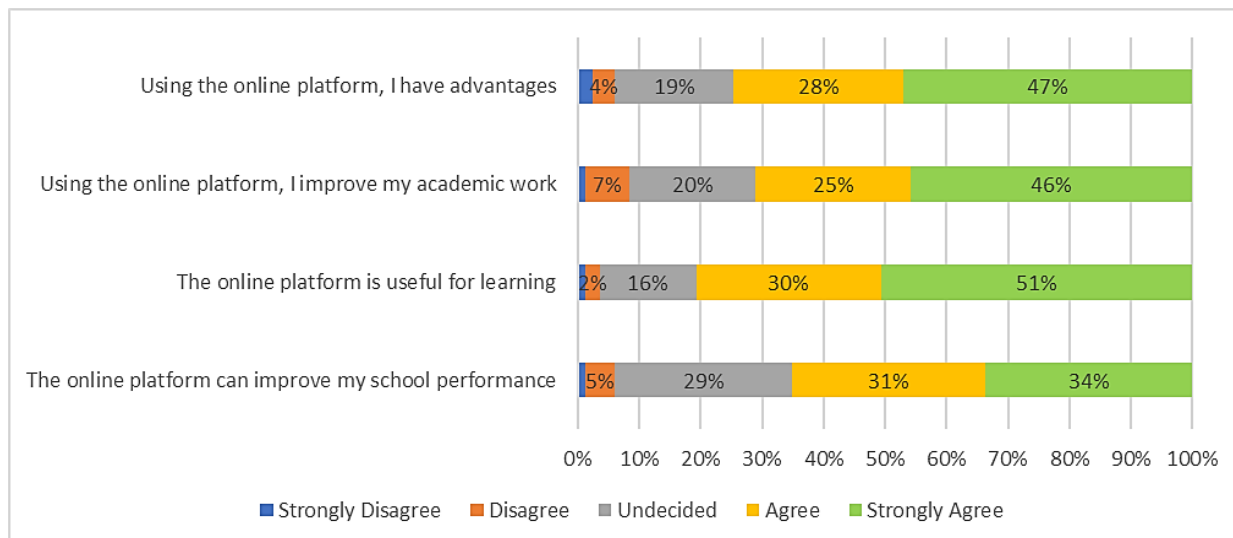


Figure no. 6. Students' perception related to the advantages of using online platforms in learning

## CONCLUSIONS

Online learning is a form of independent study, even if there are teachers who guide and facilitate this process; therefore, in online academic learning, autonomy and intrinsic motivation are the elements that ensure success.

Autonomous students are more successful learners, they have more effective learning outcomes (Albert, 2007).

Motivation is the key to contributing to learning success. Although they have developed skills in using online platforms, learning autonomy must also be supported by the strength and vigor of motivation. The relationship between autonomy and motivation in learning is one of interdependence. The development of learning autonomy must be a priority goal of prospective education, but it must be supported by the art and skill of stimulating student motivation. In pandemic or post-pandemic context, this is one of the fundamental roles of the teacher today.

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