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The Impact of Covid in Higher Education System of Albania

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Abstract: In this study we will bring up and analyze the experience of distance learning in pandemic conditions of 2020 in higher education system in Albania. A survey takes place in two periods focusing on the students of the second year of the bachelor and the master level. The results of this study reveal socio, economic and legislative issues that should be addressed and discussed in policy maker level. Analysis indicates that out of 77% of the students use mobile phone and only 23% has access to the computer/laptop. In all responses the IT equipment were funded by the family/students. Also, 26.4% has access regularly on internet, the 73.6% of the students do not have regularly internet due to weak cover of internet or lack of electricity. All the internet expenditure is cover by the students or their family. This situation has been a serious one not only for the students but for academic staff also. Distance learning has been stimulated with their own equipments, most of the times. In the meantime, there has been no compensation for additional costs. To solve this situation as effectively as possible at the end of the analysis and findings are given some important recommendations

Keywords: e learning; Covid 19; students' approach; high education level

JEL Classification: A29

1. Introduction

Covid 19 taking place in early 2020, has found the world somehow unprepared, and with it the education system. Among the measures taken from the government of Italy, the first country in the Europe that faced the pandemic was the distance learning started from 9 March, following by Albania, Rumania, Greece³. The Covid 19 affected the education system introducing no face to face teaching or exams and restrictions on immigrations⁴. The uncertainty of the virus environment still leads to following the restrictions measures. The social and economic impact of these restrictions must be defined and addressed with the proper policies and legislations.

The number of infections by the end of October 2020 in the country reached 20,634 positive cases out of a total of 123,960 tests, of which 502 cases ended with lost⁵. While worldwide this number reached

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³ https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/how-covid-19-affecting-schools-europe_en.

⁴ <https://www.study.eu/article/impact-of-covid-19-on-studying-abroad-in-europe-overview>.

⁵ <https://shendetesia.gov.al/covid19-ministria-e-shendetesise-1534-testime-90-te-sheruar-319-raste-te-reja-dhe-3-humbje-jete-ne-24-oret-e-fundit/>.

about 50 million more infectious cases of which about 1.25 million cases ended in loss of life¹. Although the education system adopted the remote learning according the figures calculated from UNESCO, some 1.3 billion learners around the world were not able to attend school or university as of March 23, 2020. Furthermore, the institutions face several challenges coping with the continuity of the pandemic situation.

Among the restrictions measures taken in the very first phase of Covid 19 identification in Albania, was the closing of all education system in a two-week period. Social distance and restriction on public gathering were obliged for everyone in Albania. The hostels and dormitories were closed and students returned at their home. Based on official data of Ministry of Education the number of students enrolled in online lessons on March 2020 was 49,400 students. Compared to the total number 130,264 students enrolled for the academic year 2019-2020, this figure accounts only for 38%. The academic year 2019-2020 was fulfilled in distance.

The negative impact of pandemics is evident in Albanian economy, following the consequences of destroyed earthquake on November 2019. There has been constant increase of GDP up to 2019. Meanwhile the valuation in 2020 shows a decline of 7.5% GDP, mainly as decrease of incomes from tourism and remittances. The budget deficit in 2020 accounts for 80%, meanwhile that the around 34,000 jobs were lost with a rate of unemployment 12%. (OECD, November, 2020). Albanian government during 2020 has increased the investment in health. Restriction was the main measures taken to prohibit the pandemic spread.

The new academic year 2020-2021 has been started in distance on 2 November 2020. The decision to start the new academic year just 2 days before its start found students and academic staff unprepared as well. For students this decision translated into additional costs for occupying dormitory rooms or renting accommodation. For the second time they had to return to their apartments without any compensation for the expenses already incurred. Students were not provided with the necessary infrastructure for the development of distance learning. All the necessary tools that enabled distance learning should be provided through personal or family investments, if possible. The academic staffs were prepared for the development of distance lectures and the development of exercises and laboratory hours on the faculty premises. Developing entirely distance learning was not a new experience, but the programs they would work had to be changed.

That was drafted a new guide for the development of lectures, exercises, tests and the evaluation of students during the distance learning. Digital platform at university level was unified. A new database was created with the e-mail addresses of students and professors under the same domain. The Microsoft Office 365 system was chosen for e-mail addresses and the Microsoft Teams platform for distance learning. These programs were accompanied by a support manual for academic staff and a specific support manual for students. In addition to the manual equipment the academic staff became part of several online training sessions for the most efficient use of the platform. The training continued even after the start of the distance learning and was open to questions that arose during the distance learning. There was no provision of hardware equipment for either academic staff or students.

In December, the administrative staff reorganized the possibility of providing academic books by students. Through the application “Book Fair” students could order books directly to the publishing house and then a private postal company delivered the book to the student's residence, anywhere in Albania. This way of equipping with books is really a solution as there is no need for students in

¹ World Vision (2020) ‘Impact Assessment of the COVID-19 Outbreak on Wellbeing of Children and Families in Albania’. Available online at: <https://www.wvi.org/sites/default/files/2020>.

conditions of physical distance to gather in the university premises to collect books and then redistribute them in flats in different cities, thus avoiding social gatherings. But this way of delivering books to the place of residence has the corresponding costs. In the first place, the order of books is realized with an application, which definitely requires the provision of the internet signal. Second, the transportation of books is carried out by private companies and paid for by the students, the farther away from the university the student's residence is, the higher the transportation costs.

This way of providing academic books also envisages a reduction of income for the academic staff of book authors as 10% of the price would be kept to cover the additional costs of the administrative staff to reconcile the ordered and distributed books.

The public universities made possible the digital library through the link <https://ulibrary.rash.al>, accompanied by the relevant manual. In this link students and professors had to choose the faculty where they studied and taught to follow the next steps. This library provided a supplement to the national and international literature for various disciplines. But this library lacked the academic books for which students would be tested. In Albania, the legal framework on which the university education system is organized and operates is regulated by the basic law 80/2015 and a standard of guidelines and a DCM for its implementation. The aim of this law is academic freedom and financial autonomy. The new conditions affecting physical limitations highlighted and further emphasized the inability of the law to adapt to the demands of the new reality.

The assessment of the situation by the Committee of Experts and the transition to emergency in terms of social and physical distancing passed the demands of the law that is not provided for teaching outside the auditorium. Will distance learning lessons be considered legal? The even more worrying problem is the financial situation. The new conditions required the completion of the teaching infrastructure with the same emergency. Distance learning creates additional costs for both, students and teachers. There are still students cannot be part of online learning, causes physical distance from the faculty and the inability to cover the Internet. Who will pay this given financial bill? Even the withdrawal of the academic books through the postal service is a new additional cost for students and an additional service fee for authors of these books.

New decisions and amendments have been entered into force to reduce the negative impacts of COVID 19 from Albanian government in 2020. The government entered into force a normative act on non-payment of the rent for students during two months of lockdown, payment of scholarship as well decisions on how carry on exams on restrictions measures. All the laws and decisions which have been entered into force will be analyzed to see the impact on education system.

The main aim the paper is to assess the impact of pandemic on education system, highlight the gaps and find the strategies and plans to fill in order that education system in Albania to survive in the ongoing uncertainty of pandemic situation. Education system like in other sector has faced challenges and difficulties in coping with these challenges. We want to highlight which is the main financial constraint, legal constraints and how to react and find better solution on addressing the situation of education system.

2. Literature Review

New decisions and amendments have been entered into force to reduce the negative impacts of COVID 19 from Albanian government in 2020. The government entered into force an normative act on non-payment of the rent for students during two months of lockdown, payment of scholarship as well

decisions on how carry on exams on restrictions measures. All the laws and decisions which have been entered into force will be analysed to see the impact on education system.

In a Google search, the authors released a series of studies that mostly sought to analyse the impact of Covid 19 on higher education. Furthermore, studies conducted by international organizations for Albania emphasize the social-economic impacts of the pandemic.

If we mention the results of a study conducted by World Vision 2020, the figures are alarming in relation to the economic situation and opportunities to cope with the pandemic by the population living in Albania. According to this study it is observed full time employment decrease in 9%, 63% of respondent decreased that their employment will be affected by pandemic, 76% of the families do not fulfil their needs for food, and most of the children cloud not attend the remote schooling (1 in 10 children could not attend the on-line classes). Even though the study was conducted in rural areas where people are relied mainly on income from their farm, the figures in this analysis highlight the very critical consequences of the pandemic situation in Albania.

In the study conducted by di Pietro 2020, it is concluded that the negative effects of online learning are directed at less time learning, more stress, a change in the way students interact, lack of learning motivation. In the mention study policies on addressing the negative impact are highlight.

Another author Burgess proposes small group tuition as a sensible approach in addressing the weaker and students from lower socio-economic background to get recovered the gaps during the pandemic. Further Burgess recommends policy intervention bringing the issues that the eLearning faces. New policies should be cost benefit analysed, and as Burgess mentioned “Younger generations will pay a heavy price for our response to this virus”.

We expect that the research will summarize the information, best practices from developed countries, and based on the results taken from the methodological approach, recommendations will address the current situation of Albanian high education system.

3. Methods and Methodology

As these rapidly transforming learning developments take place, university facilities are emptied and their operational costs are transferred to students and academic staff, too. Through our main aim of the research we want to respond to the following questions:

1. Is the distance education system supported from the institutional/legal perspective?
2. What are the challenges faced by the staff and what are their needs and reactions?
3. What are the challenges faced by the students and what are their experiences?

Primary data mainly are the data published by the official statistical in Albania such as INSTAT, Ministry of Education in Albania. Studies conducted in Albania with the focus the impact of Covid 19 will be analysed and results/recommendations will be compared to our study findings.

Qualitative analysis of the situation will be based on the semi-closed questions presented in the questionnaire followed by the analysis of the focus group, where a selected part of the participants will summarize the topics of problems encountered.

The full qualitative and quantitative analysis will present concrete conclusions on the situation in the education system at the university level in the country. For an improvement of the situation and for

finding new opportunities in coping with any kind of emergency situation will be the recommendations of social and economic policies.

The survey was conducted through prepared questionnaires for two groups: students and lecturer in the public universities. The entire interviewed participants were not limiting to express their opinions beyond the predefined options in the questions.

The population of the questionnaire are the students of the public university system in the country. According to the data of the Ministry of Education, Sports and Youth, there are 19 public institutions located in the 7 largest cities where study around 104 thousand students at the beginning of the academic year 2020-2021. The selected sample is the students of the public university in the capital of the country where about 80% of the students are concentrated at the national level. The questionnaire was sent to students of public faculties of economics where the number of students for this academic year is about 10,500 students. The questionnaire is simple and short. Contains questions with alternatives and open-ended questions where participants have the opportunity to list the advantages and disadvantages of distance learning, without being limited to them.

The questionnaire was distributed through Google form platform, in total 200 students were selected mainly students majoring in accounting bachelor and master degree, and 148 students have sent back the questionnaire. It was obviously that those students do not attend the courses online due to internet connection or lack of motivation to attend online learning.

A questionnaire was designed for the academic staff to test and answer the questions raised during the analysis of the problem. The full-time academic staffs at these faculties have about 150 professors. The questionnaire was sent to 15 pedagogues engaged at the bachelor and master level, with scientific degrees from the scientific master level to the doctoral professor. The answers to the questionnaire were complete at the 100% level.

The focus group discussion was developed with a group of lecturers consisting of 4 pedagogues as well two representatives one from the Ministry of Education and another Administrative staff of Agricultural University. Meanwhile to have a deep approach towards the problems faced by the students, an interactive interpolation was performed via the zoom platform with a group consisting of 20 students at bachelor level and 10 master students. From the confrontation of the problems identified and measured already resulted representative topics. The interview then continued with the focus group of students selected at the bachelor and master level. From the discussed topics where the students actively presented all their concerns and difficulties, the presented topics turned out to be problematic.

A limitation of the research is the fact that no students of the private system were interviewed. Since the treatment of cost sharing between the university and students for this system is another object of study. The private system education shares its costs with the students in order to make a profit. While in the public system the main objective is education. In this context a part of the investments and expenses are covered by public budget.

4. Results

The survey took place between 15 -31 January 2021 and students and lecturer from two public universities were sent via email a Google form questioner. The total population of this test survey were 148 students, 54% from bachelor level and 46% from the master one. Initial analysis indicates that out of 77% of the students use mobile phone and only 23% has access to the computer/laptop. In all responses the IT equipments were funded by the family/students. Also, 26.4% has access regularly on

internet, the 73.6% of the students do not have regularly internet due to weak cover of internet or lack of electricity. In these conditions the students are obliged to pay more than two times per month the mobile offers in order to cover the internet service. All the internet expenditure is covered by the students or their family. The internet service is essential for the ongoing learning activity of the students, around 57.6% of the responders work more than 6 hours with the online platform. Access to this platform has been difficult in 53.6% of cases, while opportunities for training materials have been at the level of 86.3%. The tuition fee has changed in 9.9% of cases, but book costs have increased to 53.6% of students. There has been no additional benefit to compensating for the energy consumed by the home in any case. Additionally, cost on heating, internet, rent of house, books and no reduce on students' fee were some of the disadvantages on distance learning. The number of interviewed students who can work to cover their expenses is at the level of 32.7%, about one third of them. Advantages on distance learning are related mostly on respecting the restrictions and non-causing spread of the virus in their families, giving opportunities to work part time and follow the online lessons.

In the questionnaire conducted with the academic staff participated 15 lecturers engaged mainly 54.5% in both bachelor and master levels. Of these, 14.3% engaged only in bachelor and the rest only in master. The technological equipment needed for the development of distance learning was in 71.4% of the cases personal devices and only in 28.6% of the cases provided by the faculty. All academic staff had full internet coverage. This service in 85.7% of cases is paid by the academic staff itself although most of the time the internet service was used for distances learning. The use of digital platforms was realized without difficulty in 71.4% of participants. This is because in the same percentage these platforms are accompanied by training manuals. Approximately 79% of the academic staff has made additional investments to enable teaching in the new format. These investments included the purchase of school boards at home, equipment with professional headphones, higher-resolution cameras, and other teaching aids. In no case the academic staffs have received compensation for the extra energy consumed, both electricity and other forms, even though the work was done from home. Among the advantages of distance learning are the creation of flexibility in time, more time and opportunities for caring of children, more time available for research, increased capacity for the use of technology, greater opportunities for the use of materials provided by internet, better protection from Covid, preservation and health insurance, application of new forms of teaching. The most important part of the questionnaire is the presentation by the academic staff of alternatives for improving distance learning. In the first place it is necessary to equip all students and professors with laptops. In order to have a secure signal, internet supply must be provided. Compensate distance learning participants for any additional costs associated with this form. More awareness is needed among students. Lectures should be recorded and archived giving students the opportunity to listen to them whenever necessary. So in this way distance teaching should be combined with distance learning.

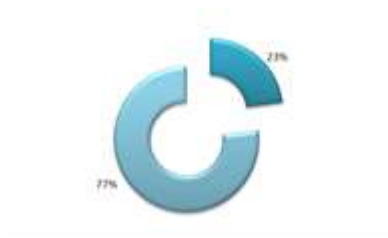


Figure 1. Students Using Phone
Source. Authors

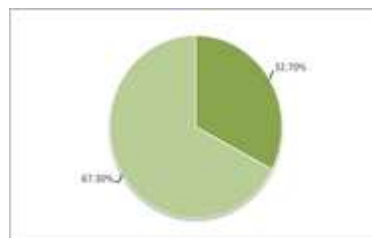


Figure 2. Students that Work
Source. Authors

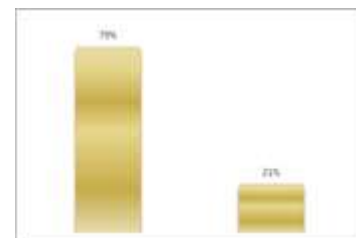


Figure 3. Investments from Staff

Source. Authors

5. Analysis

The transition of university-level teaching from the physical presence system to the auditorium to the distance learning system highlighted several problems.

First, in Albania the development of distance learning has no legal basis. Law no. 80/2015 “On higher education and scientific research in higher education institutions in the Republic of Albania” in Article 87, point 3 specifies “... teaching activities in the auditorium.” The development of distance learning at the university level is not legally provided for. The question that arises from the beginning is whether these distance learning lessons are taught or not. This calls into question all the credits obtained by the students for this period.

Second, the lack of IT equipment for academic staff. The use of computer programs and platforms enables audio-visual contact with students. But this communication is realized only through the safe and fast signal of the internet and the use of additional electronic devices, laptop, web camera, headphones and microphone. The implementation of non-university teaching requires that these investments and costs for the Internet service be covered by the academic staff.

Third, the academic staffs already “employed at home” in addition to the duty as a lecturer has at the same time family obligations. In one perspective this can be analysed as an advantage as it enables greater care towards other family members. But there are other members, especially children, who need internet signal and computer equipment. In the same way as the university level, other systems continue with distance learning.

Fourth, students have borne the extra cost of distance learning with their personal and family income. Starting with hardware devices where most public system students continue to use mobile devices to be part of distance learning, to the detriment of other devices. Providing internet signal is not always safe creating gaps in regular lesson attendance. There are areas in the country that have no internet coverage at all. Book insurance is another additional cost. Let us not forget that there is more than one child in a family. In terms of distance learning each of them needs IT equipment. Additional costs can be borne by increasing revenue to a comparable level. But revenue growth cannot be confirmed as long as the pandemic results in economic and social crisis. Parental unemployment can also be offset by additional student costs.

6. Conclusion

The pandemic situation in Albania, for the public and non-public education, at university level, has caused a change in the way of teaching. All public and private institutions ended the academic year 2019-2020 and started the next academic year 2020-2021 using distance learning.

The new teaching approach was implemented under emergency conditions due to the pandemic. This unprecedented situation has found students and academic staff unprepared for such radical and sudden changes. It was such a significant change that there was no reference, instruction, decision, or legal framework for the development of e-learning and its monitoring.

This immediate change did not involve any additional investment for students and professors. For students, the accommodation costs of the 2019-2020 academic years were not fully justified as they left for their residences in early March while the academic year ended in July 2019.

The accommodation cost for the year 2020-2021 has been fully paid by students although they did not stay in student residences. This expense was not reimbursed by host institutions.

The beginning of e-learning was realized without any investment in computer equipment suitable for this form of learning. According to the survey results, most students use their personal mobile phones for teaching. Some students cannot provide Internet connection. For each student, the costs of the internet service have increased, but this has not been compensated by the educational institutions. Staying at home also increased their families' energy costs, while universities were emptied and operating at minimal capacity. Even this expense was not covered in the student's budget. The costs of university books have become an additional cost for them. Under these circumstances, students have become a heavier economic burden on their families.

For university staff, the use of e-learning platforms required additional work time. The use of personal equipment has been another investment required to support the development of e-learning. All extra operational costs of students have been charged to the university staff as well. None of these investments and expenses has been refunded. Extra hours were not paid. While for the academic staff, the authors of the books, as a result of the situation there was a decrease of the revenues from the sale of books.

Based on the analysis of these legal, economic and social aspects, we can conclude that implementation of e-learning at university level in Albania needs legal reforms and investments.

7. Recommendations

In this study, we expect to have important findings that will help to understand the situation in which universities find themselves. Recommendations will be focused on the juridical and institutional aspects of higher education. We also consider that should be developed a comprehensive discussion involving the civil society, because as the consequences of the pandemic are not yet properly evaluated.

In order to change the situation caused by the pandemic in university education in Albania, based on the preliminary evaluation, which will be improved with the realization of this study, we believe that certain precautions should be taken:

1. The legislation that underpins higher education in the country needs to be amended. The definition of the term “e-learning” should be included in the law. The section where teaching in the auditorium is sanctioned must be formulated in such a way as to include e-learning. This juridical change must be followed by relevant instructions.
2. The Albanian government should involve more experts when making decisions regarding higher education, there is a growing concern that there are examples of political decision making is becoming increasingly centralized during the Covid 19.
3. Students must be reimbursed for unexpected expenses, accommodation costs.
4. The Ministry of Education should make cooperation agreements with cell phone companies to enable Internet coverage throughout the country.
5. For the students, internet and energy costs should be reimbursed by the university.
6. For students who are not equipped with computer, the university should provide those. And if those devices are insufficient, the university should invest in additional equipment.
7. Academic staff should be paid for the extra hours of work required to support e-learning.
8. Providing new IT equipment for all university staff.
9. Reimbursing university staff for internet and energy costs.

10. To create a digital library with academic books. The cost of this library will be covered by the university. Students will not pay additional fees for the purchase and transportation of the books. The academic staffs, who are the authors of the books, must be compensated by the university's income for books that are sold.

11. To reduce student tuition fees during the entire period of e-learning.

12. To consider the possibility for the application of new projects on the topic of digitization, or the addition of new capacities for distance learning.

13. The education decision makers to design strategy where the gaps of distance learning to be addressed and actions for recovering the gaps to be recommended.

Those recommendations are needed to make the most effective and adaptable usage of e-learning. The quality of the students' education today will be reflected in the development of the country in the future.

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