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From Digital Natives to Zoom Graduates? Student Experiences with Distance Learning during Lockdown in Portugal

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Abstract: Public health measures adopted due to the COVID-19 pandemic made emergency remote learning the designated higher education delivery model under lockdowns, causing several transformations in the sector. Based on an online survey of 1009 students aged between 16 and 24 years old during 2021, this article examines the perceptions and experiences of distance education of a cohort dealing with the second lockdown in Portugal. It explores how young people perceived their student lives during the lockdown. More specifically, the study focuses on higher education experience, from learning conditions to pedagogical quality; expectations regarding academic life; and main concerns about academic (and professional) futures due to the lockdown's effects. The results show that while some students adapted well to remote teaching, stressing its advantages in terms of time management and convenience, the majority disliked it because they had greater difficulty in following classes, not due to material and technical limitations, but rather for lack of socialisation and peer support. We discuss the value of a hidden curriculum for student engagement.

Keywords: student engagement; higher education; emergency remote learning; hidden curriculum; academic transitions



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1. Introduction

COVID-19 has had a major adverse impact on the lives of people and societies over the past two years. Education is no exception. Indeed, public health measures to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted education in over 150 countries and affected 1.6 billion students [1]. The lockdowns imposed on several countries forced many children and young people to migrate from face-to-face education to distance learning. Strictly speaking, this was not distance learning, i.e., “well-planned online learning experiences”, but rather emergency remote learning, “courses offered online in response to a crisis” [2].

This situation has inspired many studies and reports on education in times of lockdown. Much literature has been devoted to the policy responses devised in this period [3–6], highlighting the idea that educational inequalities have increased considerably with the disruption caused by the various lockdowns [6–10]. Some authors have looked at pedagogical issues and teaching practices associated with distance learning [3,11], focusing on teachers' perspectives [12–14], mainly at the school level.

Comparatively fewer studies have looked at the perspective of young students and analysed how they have adapted to distance learning. The reason for this gap may be the assumption that young people would not have difficulties migrating to this type of education because they are considered “digital natives” [15].

In fact, the literature indicates that young people are intensive users of digital technologies [16–19], and digital practices underpin the intense mediated experience prevalent in the everyday lives of these so-called “digital natives”. Navigating in this ubiquitous environment changes the way students think and process information [15].

In contrast, conventional face-to-face teaching in secondary and tertiary education is largely structured in sequential times and contents, delivered step-by-step, and undertaken in rigid spaces.

The shift to online learning imposed by the lockdowns represented an opportunity to change this paradigm, bringing teaching closer to the online environment familiar to young people. One might expect students to prefer this move to online learning. However, a considerable amount of research conducted these past two years on online learning during lockdown converges on a common trait: students generally do not like the virtual learning experience they have been forced to enter [3,20,21]. There seems to be a paradox here: young digital natives, avid users of technology, who claim to prefer face-to-face teaching to distance learning.

Although this result is common to several studies, few go deeper into this apparent paradox and analyse the reasons behind students' preference for the real world.

Based on the results of one online survey applied in the second lockdown period in Portugal (February 2021), this article seeks to determine what young respondents (16–24 years old) think about their experiences of attending classes from home.

The article begins with the debate on the imposition of remote learning during lockdown. It then continues with a brief reference to the digital practices of the young population and the popularity of Information and Communication Technologies (henceforth, ICT) in their daily lives. After explaining the methodology used in the study that serves as the basis for this article, we go into more detail on the reasons why most students in higher education are frustrated with distance learning—despite being “digital natives”.

1.1. Taking Education Online: From Distance Learning to Remote Emergency Teaching

Distance education is a form of teaching and learning delivery originally devised to bring education to those who are not based near an education facility, hence its geographical designation. At its core, it assumes the learner has greater autonomy, with the tutor as facilitator.

The emergence of the internet made distance education synonymous with online courses, which became popular through the Open University models and Massive Open Online Courses. However, the internet used as a medium for education may take on various forms [21], such as virtual learning, e-learning, blended learning and online learning, all of which assume different degrees of face-to-face interaction, synchronous and asynchronous learning slots, and resorting to individualised learning schemes and technologies such as videos, podcasts and games. In general, online learning stands out for its highly structured sequential design and a flipped classroom teaching style.

Public health measures adopted by the government to deal with the COVID pandemic produced a “new” model of online education delivery [22], designated “emergency remote teaching” [2]. These measures involved closing most educational facilities worldwide. With this shutdown, access to onsite learning support structures, such as libraries, canteens, and health services, was also curtailed. Emergency Remote Learning is an educational improvised experience that differs from e-learning and other online education modes in its lack of planning and attention to learners' needs in this specific environment. In most cases, it does not have a specific delivery platform, and merely transports the classic onsite curriculum to a synchronous live presentation or lecture, with no intention to adapt the contents so as to facilitate online learner engagement, such as pauses, interaction, shortened duration and feedback. In addition, while some learners and teachers may have been familiar with the technology involved in online teaching, others were not, which created a steep learning curve and furthered inequalities related to digital literacy and access to hardware and internet connection [23,24]. In fact, the experience of attending online classes on a mobile device or on a laptop is very different to in-person learning [25].

The effects of this abrupt transformation of education brought challenges to European higher education students, namely, worsened performance, higher workload due to social isolation, and poor conditions for studying [26]. Assessment was also challenged by the circumstances of lockdown, and academic dishonesty became a concern [27].

In Portugal, a recent study on higher education institutions' responses to lockdown [28] revealed that most HEIs activated and reinforced their psychological support departments

and/or services; several created a psychological support service and others referred cases to the psychological support services of partner entities or institutions. Likewise, many HEIs developed support and tutoring strategies and psychological and/or social support services, extended examination times and deadlines for submission of theses and reports, and made the rules for payment of fees and emoluments more flexible.

Despite these supportive measures, Portuguese students were challenged by emergency remote teaching. Some studies of Portuguese students' experiences and perceptions of learning online during lockdown were undertaken, mostly during the first wave of COVID-19. Flores' [29] survey of 2718 higher education students found that previous experiences with online learning facilitated students' adaptation to this new delivery mode, as these students were more open and ready for it than those who showed less aptitude for new technologies. In addition, teacher support, availability, and quality of materials provided were also decisive in helping students to adjust. Remote assessment was also seen as more difficult and unfair than onsite assessment.

Another study reported that students felt they spent too much time online, and data on synchronous activities revealed the presence of "Zoom fatigue" due to non-diversification of communication strategies, although assessment was seen as positive due to extended feedback time and preference for continuous evaluation strategies [30]. Technical factors also impacted the positive or negative adaptation of students to this emergency modality, since a high number of students from inland areas did not have internet signal where they lived. This meant they had no network or stable internet, and could not therefore follow the work properly. A large number of students without computers or the technological means for distance learning were also detected [31].

Finally, specific groups of students such as those on international exchanges were particularly adversely affected, as cultural immersion schemes were no longer available to them, they were unable to travel, and they had great difficulty in getting any part-time work [32].

1.2. Young Students and Digital Practices

Marc Prensky [15], an American author, coined the term "digital native" to refer to those born in the last decades of the twentieth century, the early adopters of the new digital technological tools. Following McLuhan's [33] famous maxim that "the medium is the message", Prensky claims that, due to ICT, there is a real discontinuity in the way of communicating and processing information between the new generations and those born in the pre-digital era—the so-called "digital immigrants" forced to migrate, as adults, to the new language.

This new medium brings with it unprecedented features. Networked digital media allow for faster information exchange, simultaneous processing and the performance of multiple tasks. Moreover, the validation of communication through "likes", the basis of online reputation [34], implies a practice of instant gratification popular with young people.

The beginning of this century witnessed the accelerated development of ICTs, and the availability of mobile internet services has undoubtedly increased network communication.

People are now connected to each other in spaces and times previously impossible to connect in, thus enabling a communicative space and the performance of activities "while moving" [35]. The smartphone has become particularly prominent among adolescents, since it allows them not only to be permanently connected with their peers, wherever they are, but also to be independent of adult control [16,17]. At the same time, the emergence of social media generated new communicational possibilities, allowing for content such as photos, videos, news and opinions to be instantly shared.

Data from Eurostat indicate that in 2021, a high proportion of young people in the EU (95% of young people aged 16–29 years) made use of the internet for a range of activities that take up an increasing share of their daily lives (Eurostat, 2022). Several surveys on the use of ICT by young teenagers show a massive take-up of social media, such as

Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp and YouTube, used daily and often for several hours a day [16,17,19,36,37].

The intensity of socialization and the emotional investment that young people make in social media may even give rise to phenomena such as FOMO (fear of missing out) or FOBO (fear of being offline), which drives many of them to be constantly looking at the screen of their mobile phones while performing other tasks.

The new communicational possibilities and the sharing of daily life through social media substantially extend the moments of interaction with peers, which now extend well beyond school time. However, ICTs also allow virtual access to multiple groups, much more diverse than face-to-face local contacts would allow, which poses the challenge of managing plural sociability. In the privacy of the bedroom or the anonymity of public spaces, it is important to be connected and communicable all the time.

These skills acquired by young people in the use of ICTs (cumulative, parallel process and multi-task, permanent connection/disconnection, speed) contrast with the usual requirements of school work, such as focus, concentration on the task, step-by-step progression and mono-learning.

However, being a “digital native” is not the same as being a digital media user or being digitally literate. Several critics of Prensky’s unconditional optimism have shown that the use of digital technologies may come up against several obstacles, not only in terms of access (lack of access to the internet or poor network connection), the so-called “first-level digital divide” [38], but also in terms of differences in people’s online skills, the “second-level digital divide” [39]. In fact, the use of the internet raises problems of anonymization, the improper disclosure of information, and the lack of informed consent, of which most young internet users are unaware. For instance, the common practice among young people of disseminating so-called “self-generated explicit material” online may subject them to persistent harassment and blackmail (cyberstalking) by others. The remarkable increase in cybercrime cases during the COVID-19 pandemic [40], when much of the population was online, is evidence of many users’ vulnerability.

This study aims to explore how young people experienced their student lives during the lockdown. More specifically, the study aims to delve into young students’ perceptions and experience with remote education; investigate expectations of academic life postponed or frustrated during this period; and apprehend their main concerns about their academic (and professional) future due to lockdown effects.

2. Materials and Methods

This article is empirically based on an extensive online survey undertaken at the Institute of Social Sciences of the University of Lisbon (ICS-ULisboa) [41], applied between 11 and 25 February 2021 during a second extended lockdown in Portugal, following a particularly critical period in epidemiological terms.

The original research conducted aimed to explore the impacts of the second lockdown in Portugal on various spheres of life (family, education, work, health, personal income, social and emotional life), as well as the individuals’ opinions on the political management of the pandemic.

More specifically, the study aimed to explore the following issues:

- (1) To what extent were the restrictions associated with the second lockdown in 2021 perceived by individuals as easier, the same or more difficult to comply with compared to the restrictions imposed in the first lockdown (2020)?
- (2) What were the impacts of the pandemic on individuals’ working lives?
- (3) How did young people experience their student lives during the lockdown and what were their concerns about the future?
- (4) How was the disease experienced by those who were infected with COVID-19 and what marks did it leave behind?
- (5) What were the levels of trust in institutions and policy makers, and who was given more responsibility for the epidemiological situation in the country?

The questionnaire, consisting of 73 questions, was mostly made up of closed questions, although it also included a few open-ended questions. It was largely based on a previous survey concerning the first lockdown in Portugal [42].

In terms of content, the questionnaire included a set of socio-economic indicators (gender, date of birth, marital status, nationality(ies), district and municipality of residence, level of education, current occupation, sector of economic activity, family income, assessment of housing conditions) and was organised into five major sections.

Each section aggregated a set of questions that aim to answer the above-mentioned research questions.

This article explores one of the five topics—the impact of the lockdown on young student’s lives and their experiences with distance learning—and draws on the six questions formulated in the survey on this issue.

The four closed questions were more specifically related to:

- ease of access to remote emergency teaching from home—
 - (1) In terms of equipment (computers, internet) and space, do you feel you have everything you need for distance learning?
 - (2) In terms of housing situation (e.g., parents, children, sibling, spouse, friends in the same house; living alone at home, etc.) do you feel you have the necessary conditions to carry out your distance learning activity?
 - (3) In terms of terms of time management, do you feel you have the necessary conditions to carry out your distance learning activity?
- and studying in the middle of a lockdown—
 - (4) In general, how do you feel about your experience of attending classes from home?

It also included two open-ended questions aimed at capturing these young students’ perceptions of distance learning and their main concerns for the future:

- (5) We would like you to tell us a bit more about the impact of these new restrictions and this second lockdown on your daily life. What has been easier than you expected and what has been more difficult?
- (6) Would you like to tell us a bit about what your main concerns are for the future at the moment? What worries you most?

The questionnaire was subject to ethics approval by the Ethics Committee of the Institute and required respondents to give their informed consent prior to filling in the form. It was distributed through the Qualtrics platform.

The sample obtained is a “snowball” or “respondent-driven” sample: the survey was initially shared through the social networks Facebook and Twitter and email by the study researchers and the institutions to which they belong among a non-random sample of individuals, and was then shared by the respondents who wished to do so.

This is a convenience sample, restricted to respondents who have access to the internet, which does not allow generalisations to be made about any particular groups, such as the Portuguese population as a whole, for example. Thus, all results based on this sample and presented in this article have a strictly exploratory value.

In total, 7873 responses to this survey were collected (population aged between 16 and 65+), but this article focuses on the sub-sample of young students aged 16–24 (1009 individuals, 13% of the total sample). In this group, girls are largely over-represented (73%). In turn, young teenagers (16–18 years old), many of them still secondary school students, are much less present in this sample (#38) compared to young adults (19–24 years old), who make up the majority of these respondents (#971).

The set of socio-economic indicators allows us to conclude that this sample is socially biased, as it concerns a relatively privileged young population. In fact, in terms of household income before the pandemic, the majority of respondents (56.4%) indicate that it allowed them to “live comfortably”, and more than a third (37.2%) claim to be able to “live reasonably”. Only a small proportion of the sample states “it being difficult” (6.0%) or

even “very difficult” (0.3%) to live on the family income. In sum, this study deals with a relatively privileged young population, and the analysis should bear this in mind.

We conducted a descriptive statistical analysis of the closed questions and developed a thematic categorical analysis of the written responses, in the case of the open-ended questions. While not all young people responded to all open questions, the responses gathered illuminate the possible factors impacting remote emergency learning during this second lockdown.

In accordance with the research aim, we focused the content analysis procedure on the thematic category “education”, unfolding it in the sub-themes “remote learning”, “skills training” and “academic and social life beyond study” in the case of the first open-ended question. In the case of the second open-ended question, education was isolated as the top concern among students. Within that category, 2 sub-themes were most salient: “degree completion” and “devaluation of credentials”. The absence of social life and poor social skills were coded as overlapping with the theme “affective life”. Of all the open-ended questions examined, a selection of the most significant responses was made to illustrate the main response trends for each sub-theme.

3. Results

3.1. Access to Remote Learning

When the COVID-19 pandemic broke out and public health authorities shut down face-to-face teaching activities, not all educational actors were prepared for a transition to remote learning. This first lockdown, in 2020, and the abrupt move to online classes, required students to buy the equipment required to attend remote classes.

This survey was applied during the second major lockdown in Portugal (in 2021), a time when the surprise factor had thus been overcome. This is probably why most of the young students surveyed (83.5%) stated that they were fully equipped to carry out the remote learning imposed under lockdown (Table 1).

Table 1. In terms of equipment (computers, internet) and space, do you feel you have everything you need for distance learning?

Options	Frequency	Percent
I do not have the minimum required	7	0.8%
I have the minimum required	139	15.7%
I have enough	741	83.5%
TOTAL *	887	100.0%

Source: ICS, COVID-19 2021 Survey. * This total refers to respondents who completed all questions related to online learning.

It is also important to note that this sample is mostly made up of relatively well-off students, which explains why most of them said they had the necessary equipment, network access and appropriate space at home to be able to migrate (once again) to online learning without major problems.

Beyond equipment, factors such as spatial distribution can affect performance in remote learning. Held back at home by the public health measures adopted by the government to deal with the COVID pandemic, young students had to work in a fully occupied environment, 24/7. Compared to the answers given to the previous question, Table 2 shows a lower proportion of respondents claiming to have “enough” housing conditions to perform remote learning (83.5% vs. 79%).

Table 2. In terms of housing situation (e.g., parents, children, sibling, spouse, friends in the same house; living alone at home, etc.), do you feel you have the necessary conditions to carry out your distance learning activity?

Options	Frequency	Percent
I do not have the minimum required	11	1.2%
I have the minimum required	175	19.8%
I have enough	701	79.0%
TOTAL *	887	100.0%

Source: ICS, COVID-19 2021 Survey. * This total refers to respondents who completed all questions related to online learning.

However, the greatest difficulty felt by the young respondents seems to lie in time management in this new context. Excluded from the old daily routines, students are confronted with the need to reformulate schedules and rework study times, which seems to cause problems for some respondents. In comparison with the previous answers, the proportion of those who declare to have “enough” conditions falls to 70.3% (Table 3).

Table 3. In terms of time management, do you feel you have the necessary conditions to carry out your distance learning activity?

Options	Frequency	Percent
I do not have the minimum required	24	2.7%
I have the minimum required	237	26.7%
I have enough	623	70.3%
Missing System	2	0.2%
TOTAL *	887	99.9%

Source: ICS, COVID-19 2021 Survey. * This total refers to respondents who completed all questions related to online learning.

3.2. Studying in the Middle of a Lockdown

Having in common their status as students in secondary or tertiary education and being, at the time of the survey, in remote education due to the restrictions imposed by the government under the state of emergency, the young people surveyed expressed dissatisfaction with this experience. Asked the question “Overall, how do you feel about your experience of attending classes from home?”, a significant proportion of respondents said they felt dissatisfied with attending classes from home (“less” or “much less” satisfied = 76%). Conversely, a minority claimed to be pleased with distance learning (“more” or “much more” satisfied = 24%) (Table 4).

Table 4. In general, how do you feel about your experience of attending classes from home?

Options	Frequency	Percent
I feel more/much more satisfied	215	24.2%
I feel less/much less satisfied	672	75.8%
TOTAL *	887	100.0%

Source: ICS, COVID-19 2021 Survey. * This total refers to respondents who completed all questions related to online learning.

In this case, the proportion of females who say they are pleased with remote education is higher than the proportion of males (26% versus 19%). Faced with the question “We would like you to tell us a bit more about the impact of these new restrictions and this second lockdown on your daily life. What has been easier than you expected and what has been more difficult?”, the 712 young students who gave their written testimony identified impacts on various dimensions of life, from family relationships to physical and mental well-being, including, of course, their academic experience. Here we will focus on the latter.

3.2.1. Remote Learning

As we have seen, the majority of young respondents express dissatisfaction with the experience of attending classes from home. The few who are satisfied with the experience present three types of arguments. The useful occupation of time and the creation of a work routine, enhanced by the mastery of new technologies acquired in the meantime, is one of them, as Margarida points out (each interviewee is identified with a fictitious name, and by gender (F, M, /N/A) and age):

“As a student, studying and classes keep me busy” (Margarida, F, 19)

“The first lockdown was harder, there was more loneliness. In this one we already know how it works, who to turn to and how to do it. We’re already more agile at socialising online, study video calls, Zoom cafes. At college level, the first lockdown was chaos. Now everything is more organized and thought out and, therefore, students are better protected (. . .) the difficult thing will be to go back to having a routine of leaving home every day (. . .)”. (Maria, F, 21)

The saving of time and money, in the case of those who live further away from higher education institutions, is another instrumental advantage of distance learning mentioned by some students:

“The easiest part is being able to wake up later to go to class, as being via online I don’t have to get up early to catch public transport”. (Teresa, F, 19)

“Advantages: Time and expenses in commuting” (Francisco, M, 21)

Some respondents also underlined a teaching method that allegedly favours greater student discipline and organisation:

“I thought the issue of online classes was more complex, but I admit that I actually like this method, as I can feel more productive and organized”. (Raquel, F, 20)

In contrast, for those who were not satisfied with online teaching (about 76% of the sample), complaints ranged from lack of motivation to assessment, since, in order to avoid the fraud that had occurred previously, the exams of both semesters were all taken in person at the end of the school year, requiring greater mental effort during this period. According to some, greater difficulties in concentration and demotivation had an adverse impact on their performance.

“The hardest thing is the online classes because of the hours straight looking at a screen and reading slides. Followed by an afternoon of studying on the computer. This fosters lower than expected results, difficulty learning and lack of concentration”. (Sofia, F, 22)

“Most difficult: motivation for distance learning”. (Telma, F, 17)

“I think the whole situation has affected us all and I honestly feel a lack of support and planning from the college. I find the lack of anticipation and the way the situation has been managed disturbing, as well as finding it quite demotivating. It’s hard to focus on one semester’s subjects knowing that I didn’t have the opportunity to defend some of my grades from the previous semester”. (Luísa, F, 19)

“Having online classes with group work that has to be done at a distance . . . it ends up being more complicated, having distance classes, although sometimes we have more resources, but at the level of concentration it becomes more difficult”. (Mafalda, F, 21)

“I started the 2nd semester of online university. I met all my classmates and teachers online, there is no visual, social contact, nothing! None of that is possible at the moment and all added to the time distortion it feels like we live in a parallel reality”. (Miguel, M, 19)

3.2.2. Skills Training

The lack of practical hands-on classes was also noted. In fact, courses such as medicine, sports, arts, and those requiring a lot of laboratory practice cannot be transposed to the screen. This is reflected in students' greater difficulty in this area. Fieldwork, necessary for collecting data and gaining experience, and internship placements are also impeded by lockdown and the requirement for social distance.

"I should be having an internship (I'm studying sports science in the exercise and health branch), but since the gyms are closed and they've laid off a lot of people, our placements are a bit at risk. What bothers me most is the fact that the internship takes place online with the face-to-face load (we must do at least 9 h per week, 9 h which we spend in front of a computer in addition to our classes)". (Ana, F, 22)

"I'm exhausted, the online classes are quite tiring and fruitless, plus the lab classes have been totally suppressed and my teachers don't really care about it". (António, M, 21)

"I worry about the study. In my course, the practical and laboratory classes are fundamental and 2 semesters without them are harming me a lot". (Rita, F, 20)

3.2.3. Academic and Social Life beyond Study

The absence of a social network and all student activities and gatherings that are part of the academic experience was also a great concern for many students, particularly those in their first year. The consequences of the lack of socialisation inform the substantial feeling of loss reported by young people, mentioning the absence of the whole of the leisure life that enables intense study time to be counterbalanced and complemented. Erasmus mobility, senior trips, parties, and friendships with colleagues are hardly ever possible over such distances, and this is particularly serious for those who are in their first year at university.

"Briefly, the pandemic happened in the year I was 18 and with that I missed my senior trip and prom, this in high school. I also lost the academic spirit because I entered college the same year as the pandemic, and this includes hazing, meeting more people, parties, going out at night". (Rosa, F, 19)

"My college education and the international experiences I was super excited for that would add so much to my resume and even in personal development. I also worry about the experiences that I am missing and will miss as an 18-year-old girl, which are those experiences to remember, and I won't have the opportunity anymore, prom, senior trip, Interrail, hazings and meeting new real people". (Vera, F, 19)

"Interference in personal projects (impossibility of having face-to-face classes, cancellation of Erasmus) and loss of moments of conviviality (losing eventual contact with friends)". (Carlota, F, 21)

"I'm essentially worried about not living my adolescence, not being with friends, going out, having fun, parties, festivals, even socialising that would have been 'normal' before. It feels like I've gone from being a child to an adult". (Susana, F, 19)

"A year that was cut in half. From March onwards, I didn't have my 12th year anymore and it all went by so fast that I felt like I went straight into college, and it was immense pressure and difficulty. I didn't go to the summer festivals that my parents would finally let me go to, senior trip, prom, beach with friends that I was also already allowed to go to, no hazing, no college parties. These years are not coming back to me. I am growing up and at this moment, that is my fear: the worries that will come to me from now on, the ephemeral life that does not go

back. When we went into lockdown, I was 17 years old and at this moment, I will be 19. I feel that I am still 17 and that I have not yet assimilated what happened". (Rosário, F, 19)

Additionally, sociability as a skill is increasingly valued in the labour market, and young people themselves fear that they have lost this ability through the obligation to maintain physical distance.

"This is already the third semester of distance learning and I am missing out on social and academic experiences essential to my development as a person and professional". (Marta, F, 20)

3.3. Lockdown, Remote Learning and Concerns about the Future

After a year of pandemic, and overcoming the initial adjustments to distance learning (adaptation to both digital technologies and the inherent pedagogical models), the concerns regarding the education received arose again. This is clear in the answers to the second open-ended question "Would you like to tell us a bit about what your main concerns are for the future at the moment? What worries you most?", to which 625 respondents stated their concerns.

3.3.1. Completing the Degree

Faced with these circumstances, which they already perceive as being of longer duration and whose end remains unknown, many feared not completing their degrees. Demotivation and the perception of failure, together with the lack of funds to continue (because parents or the students themselves have lost their jobs) and the anticipated difficulty in entering the labour market, were the main causes of this announced abandonment:

"Not being able to finish my studies due to lack of funds". (Rute, F, 20)

"If I can finish the course-and if I can finish the course-will I get a job in the area I am studying?" (Paulo, M, 23)

"The fact that the economy will be affected to the point that I won't be able to get a job after finishing the Masters. The fact that the company that my father manages has not been profitable for a year due to the lockdown, which could affect my being able to continue my master's degree course and my current standard of living". (Luís, M, 24)

3.3.2. Employers' Devaluation of Credentials

Not being able to finish their degree was not the only fear expressed by students. One impact of this abrupt transition to remote education concerns the quality of the education obtained. Students experiencing higher education under such conditions fear not having the proper skills to exercise their chosen profession, and having their diploma devalued by the labour market.

Those that did finish felt no less dissatisfied, as they feared being labelled by the job market as the "Zoom generation", the ones that graduated during the pandemic and therefore had had an educational experience of lower quality:

"The gaps I am having at curricular level since I am in a course with a large laboratory component that I am missing. I am afraid that this will harm me professionally". (Cristina, F, 21)

"I graduated in Zoom and am currently doing a Master's in Teaching Geography, to teach young people in 3rd cycle and upper secondary school, also on Zoom. It's frustrating to be going through all this behind a screen when it's something that needs real face-to-face work, practice and technique, not virtual. What guarantees will I have when I finish? I will probably be labelled as one of the 'COVID generation', those who took exams by computer and will suffer in the job market for having received an education of lower quality. Apart from that,

the emotional issue doesn't make it easy either, to be spending the so-called best years of your life at home is not exactly easy and exciting". (Catarina, F, 23)

4. Discussion

Lockdowns and social distancing led to the closure of educational facilities in Portugal, as in most countries. To cushion the harmful educational effects of lockdown, a "new" form of distance learning was put forward, the so-called "emergency remote learning". This was not a "new" modality of educational delivery. It involved the migration of face-to-face learning to online classes, without adequate planning for the medium used (the digital medium), leading students to be over-exposed to Zoom classes.

The data collected from this non-representative sample of 1009 young students revealed, in general, that there were no difficulties in accessing equipment or internet connection to attend online classes. Respondents also reported no difficulties in using digital media and in adapting to remote learning platforms, which is in line with Prensky's theses about young "digital natives'" skills. However, this does not mean an automatic and positive adherence to the "emergency remote learning" put in place following the lockdown.

For some students surveyed, this solution brought some sense of planning and organisation to their lives during these troubled times. The online classes helped them to create a routine that provided security and a sense of control of the situation, in the face of the external chaos [43].

However, this was not the feeling experienced by most young students. Despite being "digital natives" and intensive consumers of ICTs [18], they paradoxically seemed to dislike this online learning modality.

The youth experience of communication through digital media is based on permanent connection and feedback, fast information exchange and multi-tasking, and involves an emotional investment. This seems to contrast with their online learning experience. In the open answers to the survey, many complained that this distance learning is the mere reproduction of face-to-face classes (spending hours watching presentations on the screen) and complained about the excessive duration of the classes, the workload required, and the suspension of practical, experimental or internship classes, which it is difficult to transfer directly to the digital medium.

The mismatch between teaching practice and the medium of communication used is certainly one of the causes of the displeasure with this "emergency remote teaching" that many young people express. This conclusion is in line with other studies carried out during the last two years, which underline the specific pedagogical requirements of distance learning—very different from the emergency solution adopted.

However, this is not the only reason for students' displeasure. Based on young people's perspectives, this study sheds light on other aspects that are generally little explored, which have to do with the broader student experience, well beyond the academic dimension.

In fact, the written testimonies show that the transition to higher education constitutes a turning point at this stage of life due to the significant importance that this biographical moment signals for the young person.

The entry into higher education and the first months of university are critical occasions for learning another relationship with knowledge and with studies. It is a "time of strangeness" [44], marked by the sudden absence of the tutelary figure of the (secondary education) teacher as a daily resource for the student, and of knowledge previously organised in accordance with the textbooks of each discipline. In this case, it requires adaptation to a new "student craft", which involves decoding and mastering the rules of the formal curriculum independently.

The transition to university student status also carries with it expectations of new friendships and new experiences, in a scenario of freedom of movement and greater autonomy—in studies, but also in multiple other spheres of life. For some, entry into higher education is also the moment to leaving their parents' home to continue their studies outside it. Participation in parties and group outings, as well as meetings for group work

or study, or even participation in student academic mobility, fosters new friendships and transforms these years into perhaps the most effervescent period of self-discovery and experience of (at least symbolic) emancipation from the family. In sum, higher education is seen as a moratorium period [45], where they get to experiment with being young before having all the responsibilities of adulthood.

Furthermore, the first year also represents a “rite of passage” [46] from adolescence to young adulthood, and is associated with a wide range of experiences in the public or private sphere shared with old and new peers. As evidenced in the open-ended responses, many young students associate the first year of higher education with the social and academic rituals that surround the recognition of their new status. In the Portuguese context, academic hazing (a set of ritualised practices that introduce newcomers to the institution and their older peers) has strong adherence [47,48]. This comprehensive experience of the condition of being a university student is only fully possible face-to-face, in the physical co-presence of peers and other interlocutors, and with the physical spaces wherein they move—either the different spaces within the university or more diverse places of conviviality outside it. As Orón Semper and Blasco [49] recall, the hidden curriculum is more than the interaction between teachers and students: it is the very notion of socialisation, the tacit norms and values of an institution, the relationship networks built up during student life.

As we have seen, the written testimonies reveal the disillusionment that distance education has caused in many students, not only because of the impossibility of developing social skills, but also because of the “impossibility of the public celebration of their transformation, that is, of their ritual consecration” [50]. Similarly, other experiences were also affected by the lockdown, such as Erasmus mobility, which several regret not being able to do.

It is therefore not surprising that many of the respondents reveal an enormous disappointment regarding access to higher education under current conditions, resulting from a clear mismatch between cherished expectations and the lived reality.

5. Conclusions

While it is not fair that the access to and the potential of distance learning is limited in a situation such as a pandemic, this paper has evidenced that the digital native rhetoric does not translate into young people’s preference for online education. If their daily use of the internet for leisure provides mastery over several platforms and tools, distance education requires a more “natural” familiarity with online environments. Instead, quality distance learning demands that instructional design, dedicated platforms, and specific skills of teachers and students be fully developed. Pedagogies that promote active learning and self-regulation training in skills, such as time and effort management or metacognition, can create more autonomous students.

On the other hand, it is urgent that the “distance” in remote learning no longer be associated with isolation, for instance, by allowing the return to hybrid models for those that choose to do so. Our results stress the value students see in peer and teacher interactions as sources of support and knowledge, not only of the academic kind, but also of an affective and social nature. Hence, higher education institutions should emphasise their role as dialogical spaces of encounter, civic participation, and creation, beyond the transmission of skills and contents. Student engagement and wellbeing, both onsite and at distance, depend on that.

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