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## Tourism Education During the Pandemic: Students' Perspective

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### Abstract

The onset of the social distancing during the pandemic and the shift from face-to-face to digital teaching and learning prompted researches to study the adaptation and change process of tourism education. The paper aims at identifying the students' views on the learning experience in the context of virtual education environment. A survey was conducted among undergraduate and master students at the Faculty of Business and Tourism, Bucharest University of Economic Studies. The questionnaire was streamlined along three major themes: education competencies, communication and interaction, and impact on the future professional career. Based on the feedback of 269 sampled students, the findings point to: 1) high level of involvement and motivation supported by the availability of digital technologies and students' computer skills; 2) enhanced interaction and team working; 3) varying content engagement along disciplines and lecture/seminar classes; 4) relative loss of creativity in the absence of real-life inter-relations. We found that the self-identification of students with the 'online generation' is strong, yet controversial due to both positive and negative emotions. Overall, we notice the mixed effects of the online education on students' personality, life style and learning. Finally, our paper demonstrates that the integration of online educational tools requires curriculum updates and improvements of teaching methods to meet students' expectations.

### Keywords

Tourism Education; Online Teaching and Learning; Pandemic; Students; Romania

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### Introduction

Since the early 2020, the outbreak of the pandemic has opened a new age in the history of humankind forcefully marked by the 'globalization of isolation'. Tremendous life style and socioeconomic changes have affected people and nations across the world within the emerging 'new normal' paradigm (Ateljevic (2020; Brouder, et al. 2020). Tourism and education were among the mostly hit sectors of the socioeconomic life (Ye and Law 2021; Higgins-Desbiolles 2021; WTO 2020; UNESCO 2020).

Tourism industry worldwide has come under siege due to stringent health security requirements, travel restrictions, and partial or complete closure of many destinations. The World Tourism Organization (WTO) reports a 74% decline of international tourist arrivals and a loss of revenues eight times more than the loss in 2009 as a consequence of the global economic crisis. The future is rather challenging as the return of the international tourism to 2019 levels is expected by 2023 (WTO 2020). New trends emerged like 'staycations' and 'workcations', while other forms of tourism (self-organized tourism, small group and solo travel tourism, virtual tourism) gained more grounds and are expected to remain dominant in post lockdown future (Kaushal and Srivastava, 2021). Changes in business strategies,

consumer behavior and travel demand will be reflected in the forthcoming tourism policies aiming to support the industry's rebound. The pandemic highlighted the vulnerabilities of tourism based on growth strategy with over-tourism effects (Gössling, et al. 2021) and reignited the debates on the need of de-growing and sustainable approaches (Hall, et al. 2021).

Education has also been profoundly challenged by the ongoing pandemic. According to UNESCO (2020) 8.3% of the student population was affected globally by school closures, with more than 1.4 billion students from over 26 countries being out of school. University education seemed to be more able to address the needs of students through online classes; notwithstanding the digital teaching and learning led to disruptions for both teachers and students. Moreover, certain domains of higher education dependent on practical sessions (medical, arts, tourism and hospitality) were negatively affected. Adaptation and change are the coping mechanisms called to empower both tourism industry and education to find alternatives for 'survival amidst the pandemic and subsequent revival' (Kaushal and Srivastava, 2021).

In line with the current research efforts at international level, this paper attempts to frame the changing context of teaching and learning process driven by the shift from face-to-face to online education from students' perspective. The focus of the research is to identify and assess the meanings and understandings attached to online education. Specifically, we search to investigate the students' learning experience in terms of benefits and challenges related to the virtual education environment as compared with traditional classes. To this aim we worked out and disseminated a questionnaire structured along three main themes: education competencies, communication and interaction, and prospects for a professional career. The sample is represented by the undergraduate and master students enrolled at the Faculty of Business and Tourism, The Bucharest University of Economic Studies. The structure of the paper runs as follows: the next section is devoted to reviewing the literature on tourism education; the description of research method then follows; results and discussion of findings and conclusions complete the paper.

### **Literature review**

A burgeoning literature on COVID-19 from different perspectives has emerged recently; yet, research on the impact of the pandemic on hospitality and tourism education remains scarce (Ye and Law, 2021). Besides the early assessments searching to pertain to the major challenges faced by the hospitality and tourism industry (Kaushal and Srivastava 2021), another stream of research has been consistently developed on the tourism higher education. The move from face-to-face to online education has focused the research on the adaptation needed to accommodate new tasks and teaching roles (Phi and Clausen, 2020; Stefanini, et al. 2020) as a response to the changes in information delivery, knowledge sharing and ways of learning. Most of these studies are based on surveys to reflect students' view on various aspects related to teaching and learning process in the attempt to identify the benefits and challenges related to online education in comparison with the traditional face-to-face learning environment.

Special attention is paid to education competencies acquired through interdisciplinary approach, teamwork, student skills and engagement (Stefanini, et al. 2020). Largely grounded on experimental research on limited groups of students, previous studies revealed that motivation and prior knowledge determine knowledge assimilation and explain academic results (Garcia-Almeida, et al. 2012). Studies also pointed to the moderating role of the learning environment and knowledge sharing to strengthen the relationship between knowledge acquisition and cooperation culture (Huang, 2020). Innovation competencies are key education assets to foster the response to various issues of tourism industry. Methods such as design-based and value-based learning prove to be effective in activating critical thinking, creative problem-solving and team working (Phi and Clausen, 2020). Moreover, employing co-competition strategies and design thinking enhances students' creativity and critical thinking of issues related to tourism sustainability and development of tourism products (Liu, et al. 2017; Sándorová, et al. 2020). The examination of students' perception of blended learning platform and course satisfaction demonstrates the mediating role of cognitive and emotional engagement (Gao, et al. 2020). The ease of use and playfulness allow students to engage in game-based learning. However, the effects are mixed: positive in knowledge acquisition but neutral in terms of attitudinal changes and game usefulness (Chan, et al. 2020).

A long standing debate addressed the role of digital technologies in tourism higher education (Liburd and Christensen, 2013; Huang, et al. 2013). The online communication and interaction via social media and virtual learning platforms are regarded as an useful complement to face-to-face education providing incentives for students' engagement and motivation. The provision of diverse learning opportunities and experiences contribute to the better understanding of core concepts and engagement into course content (Schaffer, 2017). Nevertheless, the integration of online educational tools requires curriculum adjustments to correlate learning objectives and teaching processes in the attempt to meet students' expectations (Liburd and Christensen, 2013). Within the pandemic environment where the hybrid or online education prevailed, increasing concerns are cast on the de-personalized character and the lack of real-life interactions. In particular, the integration of 'soft skills' deeply sensitive to social dynamics, such as innovation and creativity in online courses, very different from traditional classrooms, was examined by recent research (Liu, et al. 2017).

Tourism higher education is aimed at providing qualified entrepreneurs and employees to support the development of the industry in terms of services quality and customer satisfaction. Skilled employment is even more important in the tourism industry than in other economic sectors as tourism is highly dependent on human capital. Tourism education is central to determine the career intentions of students and to ensure high levels of post-graduate employability through the course contents and programs but also through extracurricular activities (Unguren and Huseyinli, 2020). However, early career decisions of tourism students have often an unplanned character rooted in the extent of social structures and employment experiences (Walmsley, 2012). Moreover, Al-Romeedy, et al. (2020) maintain that between the university curricula, the tourism labor market requirements, and the students' needs there is a significant gap with far-reaching managerial consequences. In the same vein, Văduva, et al. (2020) argue that the education levels of tourism employment matched with the need for educational initiatives should reflect the perspectives of entrepreneurs and managers from the tourism sector. Consequently, other studies go even further on (see, for example, Crawford et al. 2020) and sustain the need to reverse the skill building process (with an emphasis on 'soft' skills) by analyzing the way managers teach employees on the job in order to provide faculty members a better understanding and means to replicate the process.

Much of the extant literature presented above has focused on descriptive quantitative assessment of education competencies and skills focusing on a large range of topics, such as creative thinking and problem-solving, goal orientation, engagement, motivation and positive emotions, team working and teacher-students interaction. As against this heterogeneity of topics, these studies share a common framework of research, namely the combined context of face-to-face and online education systems. Most of them rely on survey as a method of analysis addressing the views and expectations of students as incentives to create content and adapt knowledge delivery means (Huang, et al. 2013; Liu, et al. 2017; Stefanini, et al. 2020; Phi and Clausen, 2020). While we adhere to this research method, our intention is to provide a preliminary evaluation of students' perspective on teaching and learning exclusively based on a digital environment. With the radical socioeconomic and technological changes prompted by the ongoing pandemic, we draw the attention of tourism education academics, entrepreneurs and policy makers to the challenges of the higher education.

### **Research method**

Guided by the tourism education studies at international level, we proceed to examine the students' perspective on online education as an exclusive tool of teaching and learning during the pandemic. The data for the analysis were collected through a students' survey carried out in February – March 2021 on Google Forms. The survey was designed to elicit students' perspective on the impact of the pandemic on the content, quality and tools of teaching and learning. The survey was administered to a sample of 639 second and third grade B.A. and master students in Business and Tourism. The total number of students enrolled is 1,832 of which 34.88% were targeted in the survey. The breakdown of the students by grade and specialization was the following: two-thirds were students in B.A. business and tourism studies and one-third in M.A. programs in administration of tourism affairs, management and marketing in tourism, geopolitics and business. Therefore we consider that our sample is representative for students' community in Business and Tourism studies. The response rate was 42.09%

(269 out of 639 sampled students) enabling us to conduct the analysis of results and find answers to the research questions grounded on the appropriateness of the method to the set of data.

In order to grasp the perspective of students the questions were condensed into three major themes. The questionnaire consisted of end-closed questions to frame the changing context of teaching-learning process and open-ended questions to allow the identification of personal meanings and understandings attached to online education. Initially, the survey was piloted to a reduced group of students to check the readability and clarity of the content and make necessary adjustments. After collecting the students' responses, we also addressed the reliability of the results based on comparison and organization in compliance with our research question. To ensure the consistency of interpretation and to reduce subjectivity, the authors engaged independently in constructing and cross-checking the evidence. Finally, the results were fully agreed by the authors.

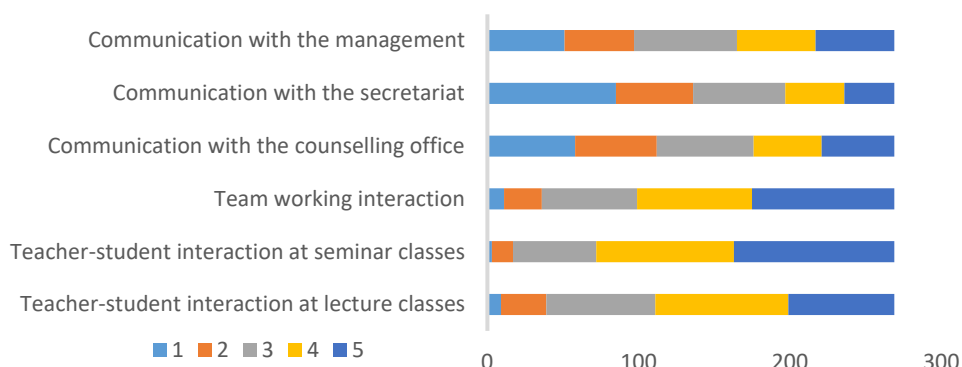
We used control questions related to gender, age and the study program attended by the respondents. The main part of the questionnaire included inquiries into thematic areas of research identified in international literature. The themes refer to *education competencies* (content engagement, computer skills, involvement, creativity and innovation); *communication and interaction* (teacher-student and among students interaction during lecture/seminar classes, team working) and *prospects for future career* (impact of online training, benefits and challenges of online education; the sense of belongingness to the 'online generation' of students). Concerning the first two themes, the students were asked to rank the extent of their answers on a 5-point Likert scale while the effects of online education were appreciated in terms of personal meanings and understandings through open questions.

### **Results and Discussion**

The sample of respondents shows a homogenous group of students according to age (93.6% aged 18 to 23), gender (68.8% females) and education program (77.7% undergraduate students). These similar attributes translate into consistently convergent responses to end-closed questions. Unsurprisingly, the open questions enabling a much more freedom of expression fuel opposing views with regards to online education benefits and challenges. Next, we take an in-depth analysis of the responses and discuss the main findings according to our research objectives.

The teaching and learning process has been largely performed on the institutional platform of the university (online.ase.ro) and zoom sessions. Additionally, some other education and communication channels were used, such as meet.google, whatsapp and skype. At a large extent, students have available technological resources (88.5%); yet 11.2% encountered issues related to poor connection to internet or the lack of video and audio devices. Supported by the digital technologies and computer skills, the students were able to attend the online classes with full attendance (75.8% of them) suggesting a high level of involvement and motivation. Asked to assess the difficulties associated with online classes, the students mentioned the access and ability to use digital resources as being the least demanding.

Nevertheless, there are both benefits and challenges related to online education (questions in the first half of the questionnaire). More than three quarters of the students consider the communication with teachers as 'good' and 'very good', but difficult with the administrative department and counselling office. In terms of teacher-student interactions, the students value more the seminar classes (80.3%) than the lecture classes (11.9%). Having to accomplish different tasks during the seminar classes raises the motivation, involvement and cooperation and enhances the creative thinking and problem-solving skills. Driven by positive knowledge competencies, team-working on common interest topics is a valuable exercise of interaction and cooperation with peers. Almost 70% of the students rank communication during team working as 'good' and 'very good' (Figure no. 1). On the contrary, the less favorable view on more theory-centred lectures points to the need of changing the knowledge content in line with the virtual learning environment, especially in terms of knowledge delivery. The integration of online educational tools requires curricular updates to facilitate students' interaction with knowledge content and engagement in learning.



**Figure no. 1. Responses to Q2 - On a scale from 1 (low) to 5 (high) how do you assess the interaction in online system?**

*Source: by the authors*

According to students’ opinion, the lack of face-to-face interaction hampers the depth and efficiency of learning (Table no. 1). Some courses are less corresponding to online education, such as mathematics, accountancy or econometric modeling and need interactive learning experiences to enhance knowledge achievement. The online education system has negative consequences on creativity. About 55% of the students consider that the lack of social interaction reduces creativity and innovation. Closer inter-connections and exchange of ideas between teachers and students and among students is key to foster creativity. This has short term consequences (the current training period) as well as long term effects (within the future work environments as entrepreneurs and managers). There are other drawbacks emphasized by students as regards the online education. They complain about the work overloading and, consequently, their inability to manage time efficiently. Somehow, this comes in contradiction with the students’ statement that online education allows schedule flexibility and more time devoted to work and family.

**Table no. 1. Advantages and disadvantages of online education from students’ perspective**

<i>Advantages</i>	<i>Disadvantages</i>
Accessibility of learning resources	Lack of face-to-face interaction
Diversity of learning tools	Communication barriers
Schedule flexibility and time savings	Works well with selected disciplines
Friendly-learning home environment	Work overloading and time management issues
Enhanced capacity to adapt	Classes spread randomly throughout the day

*Source: by the authors*

The comparison between face-to-face and online classes highlights relevant insights into the understanding and meaning attached to education. Two questions placed in a sequential manner are referring to the way students regard the virtual education on its own and in comparison with traditional classroom-based learning (Q6 – ‘how do you assess the online education?’ and Q9 – ‘how do you understand online education as against face-to-face education?’). The answers to the former question were that online education is ‘necessary’ (48.7% of total responses) and ‘interesting and useful’ (40.1% of total responses). The students are aware of the constraints related to social distancing, thus online classes represent a novel and beneficial approach in times of crisis. The answers to the latter question add significant nuances on the distinction between online and face-to-face education environment. More than three quarters of the students (77.3%) regard the online education as ‘different’ from face-to-face classes suggesting that approaches of both teaching and learning have to be re-assessed in line with the opportunities and challenges of the virtual environment.

Based on students’ feedback, the impact of digital education on future career of tourism professionals was assessed from different angles (Q15, Q16 and Q17). First, the utility of practical session under online environment fuel confusing understandings. More than 40% of the answers stated ‘I do not know/answer’ while 58.3% viewed the online practical activities as ‘very useful’ and ‘useful’. Second,

the education and extracurricular activities in university campus are central to the professional training (73.9% of students assessed the contribution of real-life activities as very important and important). Third, the overall impact of online education on future career is described as ‘challenging’ due to the changes of the education system and the uncertainty of the tourism labor market.

**Table no. 2. Self-identification with the ‘online generation’ - understandings and meanings**

Positive	Negative
‘A generation open to take challenges and adapt’	‘A sacrifice generation, isolated and dis-oriented’
‘A hybrid, different and unique generation’	‘The ‘un-visible’ generation’
‘The digital and flexible generation’	‘The lost generation’ of ‘pandents’ ( <i>pandemic students</i> )
‘The change-maker generation’	‘We are subject to poor empathy and low personal development’
‘We are the ‘zoomers’’	

*Source: by the authors*

Currently, the students experience the third semester based exclusively on online classes. The time passed since the outbreak of the pandemic (almost one year) encouraged us to scrutinize the students’ perspective on the on-going education transformations and the pathways to professional development. Within the radically changed education environment, students were asked to define their generation (the last three open questions of the questionnaire). The sense of belongingness to the ‘online generation’ is strong, although controversial (Table no. 2). Either positive or negative, their self-identification revolves around the lack of social interaction. Some of the students argue that the hardships encountered during pandemic made them more adaptable and flexible to respond to challenges and engage in breakthrough changes. They show a high level of confidence to approach the future and make a difference. Taking an optimistic view, students in this category rely on their personality strengths: smart, free, well organized, and responsible to embrace the future. On the contrary, some other students feel lost, confused, purposeless and marginalized. They emphasize the negative personal traits, such as chaotic, introverted, sad, unhappy, and anxious to define themselves. In particular, this group of students needs guidance and support to change the mindset and successfully confront the future. Undoubtedly, the teachers play a central role in empowering students with determination and trust.

The focus of the paper connects with worldwide concerns on educational disruptions caused by social distancing and the shift toward the technology mediated learning environment. The switch from traditional classrooms to digital education has changed the ways to access and deliver information, knowledge sharing and learning environment. Our case study on students’ perspective on tourism education reveals that the innovative modes of teaching and learning have both positive and negative outcomes. Our findings echo those of other recent studies supporting the need of higher education to better adapt the curriculum alongside emerging tasks and teaching roles (Phi and Clausen, 2020; Stefanini, et al. 2020). Teacher-student communication and interaction are key to fostering the motivation and involvement of students in learning and team working. As suggested by the sampled respondents it seems that integration of creativity is more challenging for online courses; this conclusion is consistent with the assumptions of previous studies (Huang, et al. 2013 and Liu, et al. 2017). Mediated by real life social environment and dependent on individual and contextual factors, the loss of creativity in engaging to critical thinking and problem-solving within virtual learning environment should be addressed by adapted teaching guidelines to foster students’ interaction with knowledge content and peers. Overall, we notice the combined effects of the online education on students’ personality, life style and learning.

### **Concluding remarks**

The stringent requirements of social distancing and medical protocols to reduce the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic have urged the tourism higher education to innovate and adapt the ways of knowledge sharing to avoid potential disruptions in teaching and learning. Currently, the tourism higher education is challenged to reconsider the teaching and learning processes and practical sessions to respond to the students’ expectations for training and employability. The global pandemic context opened new directions of research aimed at identifying the benefits and challenges of virtual education

as a self-standing system and not as a complement to face-to-face education as before. Our research contributes to the emerging literature on education competencies grounded on different socioeconomic and development settings by adding insights into the impact of the novel pandemic context on tourism education.

Although preliminary and based on a small research sample, our study points to some important characteristics of the digital teaching and learning process through the students' perspective. As the beneficiaries of the education system, the students' views are central to guiding the forthcoming changes to better connect tourism education and the digital environment. Supported by computer skills and technological means, the interaction and communication between teachers and students and among students facilitate a high level of engagement and motivation. However, as previous studies argued the integration of new educational tools calls for curricular updates and improvements. The absence of the face-to-face interactions urges curriculum adaptation to embody the educational response to the needs of society and economy. Therefore, curriculum revisions are required to align learning objectives and methods with computer-based means to create and transmit knowledge, values and skills. In particular, the lack of real-life social environment to support creativity should be addressed through clear and systematic instructions and guidelines to trigger interactive learning experiences.

Based on the students' feedback, we argue that the pandemic as an external shock factor for the education system, bears far-reaching consequences on the 'online' generation of students. The impact on students' personality, life style and learning requires interdisciplinary approaches of education, sociological and psychological, and management sciences. The education studies should also focus on teachers' opinions to complete the understanding on producing the knowledge and skills required in the tourism labor market. Given that the tourism industry itself is undergoing deep changes, the task of tourism education to provide professionals under uncertain and unstable circumstances is even more challenging and ask for convergent efforts of teachers, students and business managers. Finally, more studies that examine in detail the themes regularly identified in education research regarding competences and skills, interaction and communication and impact on professional careers alongside the enlargement of the geographical coverage to other cultural, educational and economic contexts will add deeper insights on a comparative basis.

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