

PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION EDUCATION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC. TEACHING EXPERIENCES AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract

Although multiple studies focused on the effects that the Covid-19 pandemic had on students and the strategies adopted for dealing with the effects, few authors looked at what was on the other side of the educational process – teachers. The pandemic had the same influence on teachers as it had on any other social or professional group, leading to increased levels of stress, insomnia, anxiety, uncertainty, fatigue or burnout. However, even faced with these issues, educators had to continue their activity and adapt at a moment's notice to a different paradigm of doing their job and shift from on-site to online teaching.

The current qualitative research looks at the multiple effects the public health crisis had on professors in terms of personal and professional life. The paper reviews the measures adopted by educators to adapt to online education, ranging from updates of the course Syllabuses, educational contents, new evaluation methods, video services, and educational platforms used, to communicate and motivate students or the positive and negative facets of e-learning. The interview guide also includes elements related to the future of teaching PA in the post Covid-19 era, the sustainability of online education, and the prospects of returning to the previous paradigm.

The empirical research was conducted using semi-structured interviews, the respondents being educators from the Public Administration programs of Babes-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca, Romania. Male and female respondents (N=19) ranged from PhD students at the beginning of their teaching activity to full professors with more than two decades of experience. The lessons derived from the Covid-19 pandemic are useful for understanding how universities as a whole and professors in particular deal with the uncertainties and turbulence generated by crises, focusing on systemic and individual resilience.

Keywords: public administration education, Covid-19, educational policies, online teaching, sustainable digital transformation.



1. Introduction

Although multiple studies analyzed the effects that the Covid-19 pandemic had on students (see for example: Aristovnik *et al.*, 2022; Cotoranu, Creța and Moldovan, 2021; Yaghi, 2022; Hergüner, 2021; Rinfret and Forster, 2023; Tuzcuoğlu *et al.*, 2022) and the strategies adopted in order to deal with the effects (Raboca and Cotoranu, 2020; Hudrea, Spoaller and Urs, 2023), few authors looked at what was on the other side of the educational process – professors or university educators¹ in general. The pandemic had the same influence on teachers as it had on any other social or professional group, leading to increased levels of stress, insomnia, anxiety and uncertainty, fatigue or burnout. However, even faced with these issues, educators had to continue their activity and adapt at a moment's notice to a different paradigm of doing their job and shift from on-site to online teaching, all while also trying to balance their family life.

The current qualitative research² looks at the multiple effects the Covid-19 public health crisis had on professors in terms of their personal and professional life. The crisis acted as a pressure cooker that aggravated not only pre-existing social problems ('t Hart, 2023; Barnes and Moldovan, 2024) but also stressed the higher education system to its limits, highlighting both flaws and strengths. Analyzing public administration (PA from here on) education in this context should shed light on previously unknown issues and offer a preliminary image of the future of this field. The research reviews the measures adopted by institutions and educators to adapt to online education, ranging from updates of the course Syllabuses, educational content, new evaluation methods, video services, and educational platforms used, to communicate and motivate students or the positive and negative facets of e-learning. The interview guide also includes elements related to the future of teaching PA in the post Covid-19 era, the sustainability of online education, and the prospects of returning to the previous paradigm (face-to-face education).

The article continues with a brief review of the literature, followed by the methodology used to collect empirical data and results and further discussions; the last section reviews policy implications and conclusions.

2. Effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on university educators

Although more than four years have passed since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020, the literature on how PA educators have managed this global shock and

1 We use the term 'educators' instead of 'professors' or 'teachers' as PhD students or practitioners are usually involved in the educational process, teaching courses or seminars.

2 Previous versions of this research were presented in 2022 at the 30th NISPAcee Annual Conference (with the title 'The Impact of Crises on PA Educators. A Qualitative Approach') and at the Transylvanian International Conference in Public Administration. The paper was not published in conference proceedings and was subsequently improved. We wish to thank professors Călin Emilian Hînțea and Roger Hamlin for feedback and suggestions on previous versions of the manuscript.

continued their work is rather scarce. The lion's share of academia and a consistent publication output is focused on the effects of Covid-19 on students and the measures and policies adopted at an institutional level (Tuzcuoğlu *et al.*, 2022; Magarò *et al.*, 2023; Rawat *et al.*, 2023; Jakoet-Salie and Ramalobe, 2022; Hudrea, Spoaller and Urs, 2023; Selvanathan, Hussin and Azazi, 2023) and the educational needs of civil servants in this exceptional context (Chantziantoniou, Bousiou and Pavlis-Korres, 2022; Lalos, 2022), while a scant number of researchers (see for example Yan *et al.*, 2022; Savard *et al.*, 2020; Mina-Raiu and Oprea, 2023; Connolly Knox *et al.*, 2023) analyzed the toll coronavirus had on public administration educators.

McDonald (2021, pp. 3–4) provides an initial overview of the transformations imposed by Covid-19 on PA education, mentioning 'long-standing concerns within public administration, and the academy more generally, about the quality of education students receive from online courses'. The aforementioned research does recognize the existence of job security concerns for teachers that potentially add more psychological stress to already increasing uncertainty during the pandemic. However, there remains a hyper-focus on institutional needs and outcomes for their programs and students that tend to place the onerous burden of responsibility for implementation squarely on the shoulders of educators. Nurlybaeva (2023) analyzed PA education in Russia during the Covid-19 pandemic and concluded that 'digitalization of the teaching and learning process and organization of distant learning' were crucial processes in PA education and that they could also continue to be applied in the future. However, such an approach requires multiple changes on the behalf of both students and professors, as true digital competencies must be acquired by both sides, while program structures and mentalities have to adapt to the new reality.

Digital transformation in higher education, as it occurred in the background of the Covid-19 pandemic, was defined by Jakoet-Salie and Ramalobe (2023) as 'the creation of new infrastructures as well as the increased use of digital media and technologies for teaching and learning, research, support services, administration, and communication, as well as the need for students and faculty to acquire new (digital) skills'. Dymont and Downing (2020) examined educator experiences in moving education online during the pandemic based on a review of 55 studies and found 'a divided, unsettled, and challenging space with pockets of acceptance, characterized by epistemological and pedagogical questions, doubts, and uneasiness'. Kidd and Murray (2020) examined the impact of the pandemic on educators; they found that institutional pressures were internalized and borne by educators resulting in added workloads: 'The intensification of work was reported by all, with frequent mentions of the 'blurring of work-home boundaries', 'longer working hours', a sense of 'constant availability' with students and colleagues, feelings of 'cognitive overloading' ... negatively impacting work-life balance' (Kidd and Murray, 2020, p. 548).

Jakoet-Salie and Ramalobe (2023), based on the earlier work of Shelly, Gunter and Gunter (2010), highlight that there are multiple modes of delivering education in relation to the techniques and technologies used in the process (see Table 1; last column added by the authors). In this context, Covid-19 did not imply only a shift from traditional

face-to-face to fully online education, as hybrid/ blended learning was not uncommon in the higher education setting before, during or even after the pandemic.

Table 1: Modes of education and training

Mode of delivery	Description	Usage/ adoption in the pandemic context and in the future
In-class/ face-to-face/ traditional learning	This mode of delivery includes no technology or online resources. Instruction takes place in a traditional classroom.	Not applicable to most PA education programs, even before the pandemic, as multiple technological resources were already being used (Moodle, Zoom, etc.). Small chances for PA education to revert to this stage.
Web-enhanced or mediated learning	Limited technology is being used. A web page will be used to post the schedule or assignments and due dates for a course with the actual education or training still taking place in class.	Largely the norm before the Covid-19 pandemic. Was largely halted during the height of the pandemic due to security and public health reasons. Current model being reinstated after the vaccine and seemingly preferred by most university decision-makers in the future.
Blended/ hybrid or mixed methods	This mode of delivery blends online and face-to-face instruction techniques. Online discussions and content will take place with limited face-to-face meetings a few times during a semester/year.	Partially used during the pandemic, in the later stages (i.e., after the vaccine) when the threat of Covid-19 was diminished. Courses and seminars were conducted online and evaluations and a limited number of meetings were held face-to-face. Might be the future of PA education, as it combines the advantages of both systems (also see Mina-Raiu and Oprea, 2023).
Fully online	All the learning is interactive; activities take place online, including discussions and assessments.	Preferred method at the height of the pandemic due to public health concerns. Not really a strong preference for it in the future, as the pandemic experience was not always positive (also see Matei and Dinca, 2022).

Source: Jakoet-Salie and Ramalobe (2023), based on Shelly, Gunter and Gunter (2010, pp. 519–521) and the authors

It should come as no surprise that the Covid-19 pandemic was expected to accelerate the usage of Information and Communication Technologies in PA education (Careaga-Tagüenia and Sanabria-Pulido, 2022) and that this expectation has come to fruition. However, according to Yan *et al.* (2022) greater institutional support was and is necessary, as the workload increased during online education, female educators reported more hurdles in trying to achieve work-life balance and older teachers, often less tech savvy, reported more technological difficulties.

Drechsler (2022, p. 44) argues that teaching PA has not actually evolved during the pandemic and that it has not led to genuine innovation, as ‘more often than not, the old teaching experience was just digitized (as early movies were often just filmed stage plays)’. In other words, PA educators simply updated previous face-to-face materials (from PowerPoint slides to case studies, group or individual exercises, and role-playing activities) to the online environment, changing the medium and not the content or pedagogy of their instruction.

Rinfret, McCandless and Grewell (2022) empirically analyzed emotional labor (referring to the management and regulation of emotions as part of one's professional role) in the case of 92 MPA directors during the Covid-19 pandemic and observed that gender and academic rank influence emotional labor, with women experiencing more burdens in this period. The pandemic transformed emotional labor in the case of public administration education, increased the likelihood of burnout to occur (Rinfret, McCandless and Muehlbauer, 2023), and made work-life balance almost impossible. However, in this context, the idea of dedication or vocation should be re-emphasized in the case of public administration educators and practitioners as 'the pandemic serves as a focusing event to remind scholars and students that the public service vocation is at the heart of our field' (Vogel, 2022, p. 80).

In the case of Romania, Mina-Raiu and Oprea (2023, p. 45), based on surveys conducted on 120 respondents (students from 3rd year undergraduate PA students) and five semi-structured interviews with teaching staff, concluded that 'students and teachers agree that despite the difficulties encountered while practicing online learning during pandemic, there are many arguments and great prospects acting in favor of digital educational services' and 'a good solution might be a win-win one: blend the traditional and online education systems in order to take advantage of their pluses and avoid the limits, by implementing hybrid systems'. Matei and Dinca (2022) went beyond classical (university) PA education and analyzed continuous training programs and noted that, although most trainings for civil servants were conducted online during the Covid-19 pandemic, the optimal method for organizing continuous training programs remains, according to respondents, the classic format (face-to-face) or blended learning (online and face-to-face modules).

For a professional field that manages public services and develops public policy, PA education appears as reactive to circumstances as other higher education programs, instead of being proactive or innovative in addressing public needs. Probably the one element we can take for granted from the pandemic experience is that public administration education has changed, and that further transformation is necessary in order to prepare public servants for a post-Covid-19 world (also see Haruna, 2023). The question is, what will drive this evolution more? External pressures, technological advances, institutional needs, employer expectations, student training outcomes, or PA educator expertise? This study attempts to hear from PA educators on how the migration to more online teaching was handled.

3. Methodology: instrument and data collection

In order to analyze the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on PA educators and their coping mechanisms or adaptation techniques we adopted a qualitative methodology which allowed us to obtain more in-depth data and detailed information regarding the aforementioned issues. The instrument consists of a semi-structured interview guide and was applied electronically (via Google Forms) in May-June 2022. The respondents consist of full-time professors, PhD students, and associate teachers from Babeş-Bolyai University's Public Administration and Management Department.

The instrument (interview guide) had the following structure:

- A limited number of socio-demographic questions regarding gender, professional status (PhD student, full-time or associate professor), age, PhD attainment/ status, and teaching experience;
- Open-ended questions regarding their experience of teaching PA during the Covid-19 pandemic:
 - ‘What were the main challenges faced at the beginning of the pandemic (March-April 2020) in the teaching act?’ (question addressed only to those who taught at that time)
 - ‘What were the main challenges you faced during the pandemic in the teaching act?’
 - ‘What were the main institutional measures (at faculty, department or university levels) that facilitated your teaching activity during the pandemic?’
 - ‘What were the main measures/transformations you made individually during the pandemic to make your teaching easier or more efficient?’
 - ‘How was communication/interaction with the students during the pandemic? Did you do something different from other times?’
 - ‘To what extent do you think that online education is sustainable in the field of public administration?’
 - ‘Are there any measures, programs, technologies, platforms, or activities that will be used during the pandemic that you will use in the future? Please give an example.’
 - ‘How would you characterize the effects of the pandemic on you? How has this affected your personal and professional life?’
 - ‘Do you think there is an ideal educational approach that should have been implemented during the pandemic?’
 - ‘What do you think were the main differences between online (pandemic) and face-to-face education?’

We did not collect the data face-to-face via oral interviews as respondents resided in multiple cities in Romania (as educational activities were still partially being conducted online) and there were still public safety concerns regarding the Covid-19 pandemic at the time. We opted for the Google Forms platform, ensuring the full anonymity of respondents (by collecting as little personal information as possible and not requesting any email addresses to be provided /saved), as a data collecting platform and not Zoom or a similar audio-video program as some questions could have been considered ‘problematic’ or ‘sensitive’ for respondents and we wanted to obtain answers that could be as objective, honest and as open as possible.

We sent the Google Form (Interview Guide) to 30 potential respondents and received a total of 19 completed forms (interview answers), from 11 female and 8 male respondents (see Table 1).

Table 2: Demographic data

Gender	Female	11 (57.9%)
	Male	8 (42.1%)
Age³	20-30 years	6 (33.3%)
	31-40 years	2 (11.2%)
	41-50 years	7 (38.9%)
	Over 50 years	3 (16.7%)
Type of teaching activity	Tenured (full-time university employee)	11 (57.9%)
	PhD student	7 (36.8%)
	Associate (full-time employee at another organization)	1 (5.3%)
Teaching experience	Less than 5 years	7 (36.7%)
	5 to 10 years	2 (10.5%)
	11 to 20 years	4 (21.1%)
	21 to 30 years	7 (36.7%)
	Over 31 years	1 (5.2%)
Educational level attained	PhD student	8 (42.1%)
	PhD	11 (57.9%)

Source: The authors

4. Results and discussions

19 responses were received, out of which 17 interviews were completed on all items. One interviewee did not specify his age, and one interview was incomplete, with answers for only the first 4 questions from the interview guide (IG from here on).

4.1. Challenges faced during the pandemic

Question 3 from the Interview Guide ‘What were the main challenges you faced at the beginning of the pandemic (March-April 2020) in the teaching act?’ was addressed only to those who taught at that time and was answered by 18 respondents, as one person did not have any teaching activities at the beginning of the pandemic. One respondent replied that there were no challenges, but most of those interviewed identified the following challenges at the beginning of the pandemic:

- Adapting to the new teaching platforms (Edmodo, Teams, Zoom, Moodle, etc.) and overcoming the logistical barriers regarding the online organization of courses (internet connection and technological failures) as well as the change of the teaching act;
- Maintaining interactions with students (being interactive) and connecting with students;

³ One respondent did not mention his/her age.

- Disinterest and absence of students, lack of interaction and attention from students, and difficulties in transmitting/exchanging information online (due to students with closed webcams, lack of audio, lack of nonverbal feedback and cues, etc.);
- Adapting teaching materials (presentations, case studies, lectures) to the online environment;
- Work from home (the whole family being at home) and adapting to the new work regime; and
- Uncertainty, as no one knew how long the pandemic would last and how long teaching would be conducted online.

For the 4th question of the Interview Guide ‘What were the main challenges you faced during the pandemic in the teaching act?’ all respondents provided feedback and identified a number of challenges related to:

A. Challenges caused by external factors (often technical):

- internet connection issues such as insufficient bandwidth and unstable connections;
- laptop/PC processor capacity or webcam/microphone issues; and
- limited usability of the online platforms used for classes.

B. Challenges caused by internal factors:

- non-optimized home/office workspace for teaching activities; and
- insufficient light in the workspace, etc.

C. Challenges caused by the new educational process (online):

- capturing and maintaining students’ attention through new online teaching methods;
- understanding the connection/technical difficulties of the participating students;
- adapting class activities to the online mode of teaching;
- connecting and interacting with students;
- high workload;
- problems/ difficulties transmitting information (lack of student webcams, non-verbal feedback, etc.);
- use of new teaching tools (Zoom);
- lack of participation and interest of students/lack of interaction with students and colleagues;
- lack of feedback from students and the inability to adapt teaching styles to use different techniques based on student’s immediate reactions or feedback;
- intensive development and use of e-learning pages (Moodle);
- creating exercises (activities) that allow online interaction with students;
- the admission process was much more difficult and required much more work; and
- lack of feedback from a significant number of the students.

4.2. Institutional and individual adaptations

For Question 5 of the Interview Guide ‘What were the main institutional measures (at faculty, department, or university levels) that facilitated your teaching activity during the pandemic?’, three respondents did not provide an answer to this question or answered None/I don’t know. Those who answered this question mentioned that the main institutional measures referred to:

- acquisition of institutional ZOOM accounts and allocation of institutional email addresses;
- scheduling classes with students efficiently;
- provision of the necessary equipment (laptop)/ purchase of equipment by universities (laptops, microphones and cameras);
- use of e-learning platforms (Moodle); and
- training meetings on the use of online tools/ short-term training courses to use different platforms.

For the 6th question of the interview guide ‘What were the main measures/transformations you made individually during the pandemic to make your teaching easier or more efficient?’, we obtained a great diversity of answers, each respondent indicating other measures taken or transformations made during the pandemic to adapt the teaching activity to the new reality of online education. Four respondents did not provide an answer to this question, but all others gave detailed answers:

- we learned new e-learning platforms and interactive learning methods;
- much better organization and concentration than the situation before the onset of the pandemic;
- development of more practical seminar activities for students (case studies), mini assessment tests on Moodle;
- ‘I analyzed specialized readings trying to understand how to approach students in such contexts, how I can keep them focused, and what they can improve on the teaching methods so that the results are optimal’;
- using multiple multimedia materials in teaching (mentimeter.com, YouTube videos, Ted Talks, etc.);
- developed digital skills on Moodle and intensive use of the e-learning platform;
- adapting materials, Moodle pages, most seminar content, assessment materials, and building assessment tools (question databases);
- using various applications to create interesting activities (online questionnaires, teamwork through the Zoom platform, interactive presentations);
- changing the teaching style;
- online consultations (office hours), online attendance on Moodle, the grid question bank that I imported from one course to another;
- several individual assignments for students; and
- improving databases with students (grades, assignments, etc.).

The usage of digital tools, and digitalization in general, was a key factor in weathering the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, as these tools were used for both administrative and educational activities (Hudrea, Spoaller and Urs, 2023). For example, the usage of the Moodle platform in the case of the Faculty of Political, Administrative and Communication Sciences (Babeş-Bolyai University) increased from less than 100,000 logins in March 2019, to over 500,000 logins in March 2020 (when the Covid-19 pandemic was officially declared in Romania and face-to-face education was paused), reaching a peak of over 1,850,000 in January 2021, to latter decrease to under 1,800,000 logins in January 2022, when the vaccine⁴ was rolled out and face-to face education resumed (see Figure 1).

However, it is worth mentioning that higher education institutions were more advanced regarding digitalization than classical public administration organizations, as educational platforms (such as Moodle, Edmodo, and Microsoft Teams) or communication services (such as ZOOM, Webex, and Microsoft Teams) were already used before the pandemic for educational purposes. Universities, especially Western ones, had already developed ‘massive open online courses’ or MOOCs (see Drechsler, 2022; Ramalobe and Jakoet-Salie, 2023), and the complementary infrastructure and culture, thus we can argue that some were quasi-prepared for the pandemic.

4.3. Online interactions and communication

The 7th question of the Interview Guide was ‘How did the communication/interaction with the students go during the pandemic? Did you do something different from other times?’. Out of the 19 respondents, nine answered that they thought it was a faulty/ cumbersome/ one-way communication, and 6 respondents did not see any significant differences from the classical face-to-face teaching, indicating rather new methods to facilitate online communication.

A. Answers that indicate more difficult communication are:

- teaching students without seeing/knowing them, most of them did not open their webcams and were not open to interaction;
- it was more difficult to involve introverted or apathetic students, so targeted communication was often needed;
- communication with students was rather one-way due to the specifics of online teaching;
- non-verbal communication was more difficult to observe, and some students had technical problems, especially with the internet connection; and
- ‘I spent a lot of time answering messages from students: the lack of face-to-face interaction, students’ reluctance to engage or ask questions online leads to an increased need for them to ask further clarification by email.’

4 For a more detailed discussion regarding the Covid-19 vaccine and vaccination policies in the public sector see Barnes and Moldovan (2024).

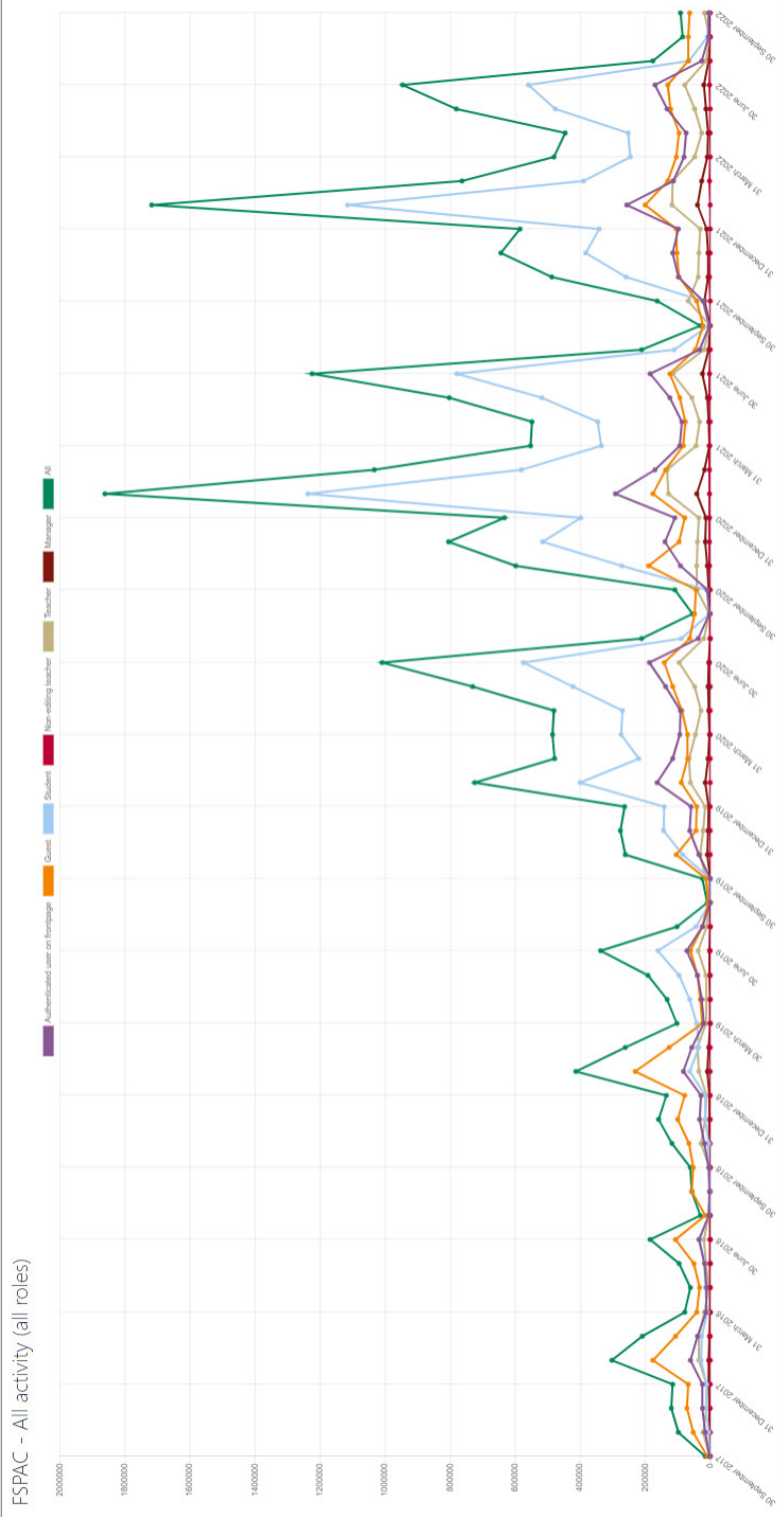


Figure 1: Usage of Moodle (September 2017-September 2022)

Source: The Authors

- B. Those who saw advantages in online communication answered as follows:
- very efficient, faster communication through the communication channels provided; and
 - ‘We mainly used social platforms to communicate information about the seminar (official Facebook group, WhatsApp, e-mail), but any important information was also posted on Moodle. Normally, I would have passed this information in physical meetings’ (Respondent 4).

Two of the respondents describe in detail what they did differently from other periods, namely:

In the beginning of the pandemic, the students needed more help, especially the 3rd year students, and that’s why we introduced weekly consultations with the students who were in the coordinating phase of their undergraduate work (thesis). I kept track of attendance at online seminars on the Moodle page, we introduced on Moodle for each course a formula for calculating the final grade, so that students know exactly how to calculate it (Respondent 14).

Although there were some communication issues (technical issues on the part of the students or simply the fact that they did not want to keep the camera on and get involved in class), there were advantages. Taking advantage of the fact that all the students were in front of the computers and connected to the internet, we managed to carry out more practical and interactive activities. For example, based on theoretical information, they had to look for and present practical aspects (Respondent 10).

4.4. Sustainable online education

In the case of the 8th question of the Interview Guide, ‘To what extent do you think online education is sustainable in the field of public administration?’, seven respondents believe that online education is not desirable, six said it is sustainable and five believe the hybrid version is best.

Relevant answers for the above options were:

- *‘It is not sustainable. The students in the former face-to-face/on-site programs are weak/average, you could only work with those with a good level of knowledge and motivation. But even in the case of good students, most of them want face-to-face, as they consider that they have something to gain from the interaction in the classroom. At distance learning, it is possible that there are quite a few adults who know why they signed up and why they give money, thus their involvement is better, even if the general level is only a little better than the on-site program’ (Respondent 8);*
- *‘The ever-expanding digital transformation is a reality we cannot ignore. It has been shown that online education can be a solution in managing a crisis situation, but I do not consider that we can perceive it as a 100% sustainable option in Romania, at least not at this time, due to inequalities in access to education’ (Respondent 4);*

- *‘Extremely sustainable, it allows you to deepen external solutions, investigate them, and develop much better critical thinking’* (Respondent 2);
- *‘Online education can be sustainable through the proper involvement of professors. By using technology and various applications, more interesting activities can be carried out than face-to-face ones. Such activities can be teamwork, student presentations on which we can discuss, or individual questionnaires and tasks, which are then discussed with the whole class. In order to carry out such activities face-to-face it usually takes more time to centralize the results, and students can only use mobile (telephone) devices to search for information’* (Respondent 10);
- *‘In my opinion, online education comes with both advantages and disadvantages. Yes, online education is beneficial because it allows you to pursue university studies from wherever you are, but I believe that for the assimilation of knowledge, it is still necessary to continue classical education, especially in terms of seminars’* (Respondent 12).

Question 9 in the Interview Guide was ‘Are there any measures, programs, technologies, platforms, or activities that will be used during the pandemic that you will use in the future? Please give an example’. The answers to this question were positive, indicating that respondents will also use in the future some of the programs and platforms adopted during the pandemic: Google Docs package, Moodle, Zoom, Teams, YouTube, Mentimeter.com, professional PPT templates, Padlet, Slido, Kahoo, SurveyMonkey (for questionnaires) and PollEverywhere.

One respondent pointed out that many of the skills used were not new to the pandemic, simply applied in a new way: *‘Evaluation tools are useful for learning/testing, even if the exams will return to the face-to-face method. I understood, while being online, how to write a guide for self-instruction – a guide to help you go through the materials, to define learning objectives for students (described in practical terms, in situation x to know how to do y); how to conduct consultations with students, last minute recaps on Zoom, before exams, etc. Yes, I will use many of the lessons learned during the pandemic.’* (Respondent 8).

4.5. The effects of the pandemic on the professional and personal lives of PA educators

Only one respondent considered that his/her life was not affected when answering question 10 ‘How would you characterize the effects of the pandemic on you? How has this affected your personal and professional life?’. The rest of the respondents consider that they have been affected by the pandemic and identified clear and mostly negative effects on their personal and professional lives, as summarized in Table 3.

One of the respondents stated that: *‘It affected my physical and mental health, it demotivated me professionally. I feel like two years of my life have been stolen. I only liked the first month of ‘vacation’. We feel, and we will feel for a few years, the lower level of students as a result of years of online education. For now, I see how low their level of work is, how difficult it is to process simple concepts (compared to before the pandemic, the same work tasks generally*

Table 3: The effects of the pandemic on the life of PA educators

Effects on personal life	Effects on professional life
Increased levels of anxiety and depression	Burnout, overload
Fear of the unknown	Overuse of screens, development of chronic fatigue and migraines
Discontinuing interaction with family, especially vulnerable people (parents, grandparents)	I worked harder and with less satisfaction; I got burnout
The boundaries between personal and professional life have blurred	Great stress, especially in the beginning
It affected my physical and mental health	It demotivated me professionally
Limiting social interaction	The lower level (qualifications) of students, as a starting point
It involved making some purchases at home (laptop, printer)	Lack of interaction with students and academic atmosphere
A broader understanding of the needs of others and the ability to be more resilient in a similar context	I could have been much more productive working from home for work and at the same time teaching ⁵
More time for some activities	Lack of interaction with students and colleagues

Source: The authors

produce poorer results, the grades are lower). The same goes for undergraduate work. It affects me professionally' (Respondent 8).

Another respondent identified advantages and disadvantages of the pandemic over the life of teachers: *Advantages: Working from home/anywhere, more flexible schedule, time spent in traffic can be used for other activities, lower expenses. Disadvantages: isolation, anxiety, depression* (Respondent 12).

Regarding question 11 from the Interview Guide 'Do you think there is an ideal educational approach that should have been implemented during the pandemic?', all respondents said that there is no such thing as an ideal approach, but a mix of equipment, platforms, techniques and personal implementation is recommended.

5. Conclusions and policy implications

The last section reviews the main differences between online and face-to face education (see Table 4) and the advantages and disadvantages of online education (see Table 5). Finally, several policy recommendations are offered both in the design of online PA education, and in the PA educators' contribution to the profession of public policy and administration.

⁵ Answer provided by an educator who was also a practitioner (had another job besides teaching).

Table 4: Specificities of online and face-to-face education

Online education	Face-to-face education
Goals are easier to achieve	Students must be present and get involved in group or individual activities in seminars
Students are not so attentive or involved. The lack of feedback is harmful to their educational act as we cannot adapt to their needs when teaching	Much more interactive activities
Quick evaluations, grades, and assessments are done instantly	Higher effectiveness (as measured by the quality and quantity of knowledge transmitted and acquired by students)
Travel is no longer necessary (both for the professor and the student) so the educational process is more flexible	Fewer individual or group activities can take place
Lower attention and involvement of the student (e.g., the student is at work physically and online at classes)	Interactions between students or students and educators are more intensive
The interaction and connection between students and professors are much weaker	Schedules must coordinate with others which leads to inefficiencies in time management
Isolation and alienation	Social anxiety and pressure to engage with others
Wider use of online tools (Moodle and Zoom)	Less access to online and independent learning tools while engaging in-person
It was harder for students to get to know each other and collaborate (especially in the case of those in the first year)	Easier to learn names and encounter other students
Lack of immediate feedback from students	
Lack of evaluation oversight	
Higher formal attendance	
Less interactive teaching, which has led to less professional involvement of students	

Source: The authors

From these characteristics of online education compared to classical education we can determine the advantages and disadvantages of online education as shown in Table 5.

One of the main shortcomings of online education, as shown in Table 4 and Table 5, refers to diminished interaction and involvement during classes, reduced two-way communication, or lack of attention/ feedback on the behalf students, which is especially detrimental to the educational process as ‘the main factors which can influence students’ academic performance are attendance at seminars and in-class involvement’ (Pavelea and Moldovan, 2020, p. 109).

In a consumer-driven market for education services, the temptation will be to place on educators and eventual employers, rather than school administrators or students, most of the stress for capitalizing on the advantages and ameliorating the disadvantages of incorporating online education into PA professional training. Because if students feel burdened or under-prepared, they may migrate to different programs. However, in the past, school expectations of students to attend classes, complete assignments, and work to understand and apply their course learnings have long been the most critical component of successful

Table 5: Advantages and disadvantages of online education

Advantages	Disadvantages
Goals are easier to achieve	Students are not so attentive, involved
Quick assessments, grades, and final assessments are done instantly	Attention and involvement of the student (the student is at work physically and online at classes) is lower
Travel is no longer necessary (both for the professor and the student) so the educational process is made more flexible	The interaction connection between students and professors is much weaker
Wider use of online tools (Moodle and Zoom)	Isolation and alienation
It was harder for students to get to know each other and collaborate (those in first year)	Lack of evaluation oversight
Higher attendance of students in class, especially in the case of long-distance (off-site) programs	Less interactive teaching, which has led to much less professional involvement of students
	Lack of immediate feedback from students

Source: The authors

PA higher education. Programs now must add new expectations of online engagement, securing access (just as students secured transportation to class) and proactively verbalizing questions and comments to classmates and educators.

The discoveries of educators' abilities with technology during the Covid-19 pandemic also represent a great opportunity for PA education to not only advance the skills of their students but also directly and indirectly to facilitate government administrative services adoption of similar tools that can improve service delivery. There is very little difference between student and citizen online encounters with providers or PA education and PA services respectively. Similar UI (user interface) ease of access and training for users is required to ensure useful digitalization of public services as a component of administrative reform. One key to these changes will be the existence of common platforms that quickly become familiar because they are simple to use.

According to Bryan *et al.* (2018, p. 255) 'the thoughtful application of a limited number of tools may be as or more effective than using a wide variety of technology in an online setting'. This will lead to further student involvement in online classes, which increases when they interact more frequently with their colleagues. Although online or distance learning and face-to-face education are clearly two distinct *modus operandi* in the case of public administration education, Scheer (2001) argued that there is no actual difference between them regarding student performance or satisfaction in the case of master-level students. While this may be due, in part, as the findings of studies show, to the fact that educators exert a great deal of effort to bridge that gap, Scheer's (2001) findings, by extension, suggest that the tasks of engaging online that have been pioneered by PA educators during Covid-19 can, over time, be transferred in part to students. While students seem to prefer traditional classes, as do many educators, some enroll in distance education out of necessity (Scheer, 2001, p. 101). So, the situation during the Covid-19 pandemic may

be less of a one-off event and more of a harbinger of the need for greater flexibility in all aspects of the new Uber-economy.

Savard *et al.* (2020, p. 530) argue that online courses should be redesigned in a flexible manner, having in mind the objectives of the educator and the students' skills that have to be developed, following a set of basic principles:

- 'Know your audience;
- Know the course objectives that meet expected learning outcomes;
- Know the timeline you are working with (i.e., length of sessions and program requirements);
- Know your role in the learning environment;
- Know the students' role in the learning environment;
- Know your strategy for engaging students to maintain momentum;
- Know what tools are available and link them to the course objective and learning styles of the students; and
- Know which tools work with your learning outcomes.'

While helpful, these recommendations must rely on a quadrilateral implementation and onus distributed evenly between educators, program administrators, student learners, and ultimate employers who will be both hiring graduates and providing additional OJT (on the job training) that will hopefully synchronize and build upon their college experience. In this challenge, there is a great opportunity for recent graduates to create something equivalent to a programmatic IT specialist. When computer use became common, technical workers were needed to maintain systems. However, public policy and administration practitioners operate in a world where people/consumers expect access online to be obvious and effective. That means that not only are computer experts required to maintain the system, but professional experts are also needed to translate and communicate the traditional policy administration processes to the general public.

What cannot happen is that educators be saddled with all the duty of re-forming their courses, violating their personal life at home to provide free office space and extra work hours, while bearing the emotional obligations to reach out above-and-beyond to make sure students stay involved in the programs. Systematic tools are needed in each PA education institution to make these new functions part of the mechanism of operations. It does not help the students learn or the schools to grow or the government offices to improve services if educators are the elves secretly doing the work at night that magically appears in the morning. Besides the obvious abuse and stress, this will lead to PA educators leaving the profession and going to where their skills are compensated, and a reasonable workload is expected. Teaching professionals to balance their work and private lives is one of the most important lessons anyone can learn in their career and that is best taught by example.

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