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## **ADAPTATION OF STUDENTS TO DISTANCE LEARNING DURING THE COVID 19 PANDEMIC**

**Abstract:** The coronavirus has significantly affected the overall functioning of our lives, including the way of studying. In the Republic of North Macedonia, starting from March 11, 2020, all universities were closed for onsite lectures, as a necessary measure to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. Two years later, most of the university activities are carried out online, which significantly changed the way of studying.

Our research aimed to determine the adaptation of students to the newly created conditions of the study. Through the research, we measured the challenges, motivation for learning, and social connection of the students during distance learning. The research was conducted through a questionnaire with Likert type of questions, answers were collected through Google Form and distributed to the faculties all over the country. The research lasted 2 months and it was conducted on a sample of 234 university students (197 females and 37 males).

According to the results, about 33% of students do well in online studying, compared to 10% who cannot cope at all. In terms of their perception of professors' skills, only 23% manage to respond well to the task, compared to 12% who face serious problems during online lecturing. Socialization and social interaction among the students are among the areas that faced the greatest challenges.

The research detects some of the challenges in distance learning and emphasizes the need for its advancement to the needs of students.

**Keywords:** Distance learning, Universities, COVID 19, Students

### **Introduction**

The COVID-19 pandemic has drastically changed the entire way of social functioning. Among the first measures taken in the spring of 2020 was the reorganization of higher education, the universities very quickly had to switch from face-to-face to emergency remote education. The new measures affected 1.5 billion students and youth who had to immediately adapt to new models and forms of work that included limited access to facilities and less contact with peers and teachers, while at the same time being exposed to more autonomy (1).

In particular, in the Republic of Macedonia, by the recommendations of the Ministry of Education, on 11.03.2020, a two-week complete suspension of the educational process began, so that the course of the semester can continue through electronic communication between students and professors, electronic exchange of information and materials for work. The initial period, i.e. the first semester after the declaration of the pandemic, did not include the implementation of lectures and exercises because e-learning platforms are still being developed.

This paper focuses on the adaptation of students to the new teaching forms and methods that resulted from the COVID 19 pandemic. We aimed the research at determining the priorities, motivation, and perseverance, as well as the feeling of social connection in the extraordinary circumstances as a result of the pandemic situation.

## Studying in Emergency Lockdown

Online education was among the first emergency measures to protect against Covid 19. It was accompanied by many external stressful factors, such as uncertainty, fear for one's health and the health of loved ones, daily happenings at home, and reduced social activities, which strongly impacted students' ability to adapt to the new educational process (2). In addition, during this period, students faced a series of restrictions important for their personal and professional milestones, such as canceled study events, study trips abroad, extracurricular activities, social events, graduation ceremonies, etc (3).

Being in such a situation, the students faced serious challenges, on the one hand, to respond to academic needs, and on the other hand, to postpone the realization of their individual development tasks, mostly staying in their families. It is reasonable to assume that these circumstances will certainly affect their mental health and mental capacities to cope with academic challenges. A significant part of the students also had to deal with dysfunctional family patterns. Research conducted in our country showed that nearly 25% of the students are facing problems in family functioning during the covid situation, furthermore, 42% of the students have difficulties in mutual management of time and space with their siblings (4). Similar research was conducted in the Republic of North Macedonia by News agency – Meta (2021), where 57% of young people reported increasing psychological pressure and deterioration of family relationships during this period (5).

Unlike regular education that is conducted online, the change to emergency remote learning during COVID-19 was not voluntary, which may have had a negative influence on students' study motivation (6). According to the research of Biwer et al. (2021) students reported being less able to regulate their attention, effort, and time and were less motivated compared to before. They also invested more time and effort in their self-study, while feeling less connected to the university. This pattern, however, was not true for all students (7). In the process of adaptation of the students, the individual characteristics of the students, as well as the socioeconomic conditions in which they find themselves, certainly play a big role.

In the past two years, a series of researches were carried out to evaluate self-determination theory during covid learning. Given the uniqueness of the situation and individual differences in self-regulated learning, they assumed that students would differ in their abilities and approaches to adapt to emergency remote learning (8). Some students struggled more with time and effort investment, whereas others struggled more with attention and motivation. This multidimensionality of resource-management strategies suggests a tailored support approach for students. While the surrenders might benefit from more structure and social interaction, the overwhelmed students might need more support in stress management (9).

According to Balaron (2020), 80.38% of the students agreed with the stoppage of schools, and 59.25% disagreed with the conduct of the Online-Blended Learning Approach. The primary reason for these students was poor internet connection (10).

The lack of face-to-face contact had a strong impact on the formation of appropriate communication between the students themselves, as well as in the student-professor relationship. The strong impact of the lack of communication can be observed especially among students who have just started the educational process, without having built solid communication links and a sense of belonging in the environment, which very soon became virtual. A sense of belonging is known to significantly influence college students' social, psychological, and academic outcomes (11). Well-established communication practices are crucial for distance learning success (12). In the professional literature, there is a debate about the effect of online versus on-site learning, according to some the effect is the same and we can make a comparison between the achievements of students (13), while according to other research, online education can have harmful effects (14). What the opposing views have in common is that they agree on the importance of preparing teaching staff and students for online education to achieve the desired effect, but the urgency of the situation left both teachers and professors unprepared.

## Research Methodology

The subject of the research is the possibility of adaptation of the students to the new learning conditions.

In the direction of the research subject, we set the following tasks:

- To examine the challenges faced by students;
- To examine the motivation and persistence of students for learning;
- To examine the social connection between students

An online cross-sectional survey was designed and conducted during the initial peak of the COVID-19 pandemic in the late Spring of 2020. Participants were recruited from the student population. Student respondents were determined using the snowball technique, the survey was published using the online survey platform Google Form on April 26, 2020, and data collection remained open almost for two months, until June 18. We have responses from 234 university students, aged 18 and above ( $M=21.77$ ,  $SD=3.73$ ). The study involved only those students who had access to the internet. It is important for the research period that it was the initial period of the pandemic when the most serious restrictive measures such as several-day quarantines and movement bans at certain times of the day were in effect.

## Results and Discussion

### Students Priorities

The first question was about the students' priorities, and which three things they would single out as the most important during that period. According to the results, the students are most concerned about how their educational process will take place (the lectures, the exercises, as well as the evaluation of the acquired knowledge). As many as 65% of students singled out the educational process as the top priority at the moment. Health is singled out as the second priority (own health and the health of the closest family members), 45% of students singled it out as a priority, which is certainly in line with expectations given the health risks we are exposed to during the pandemic. Regarding the third priority, we received a variety of answers, of which financial security stood out as the most frequent reason for concern among students. The percentage representation of the obtained results is presented in Table 1.

*Table 1*

Presentation of the three most important priorities that cause the most intense feeling of concern among students

What worries you the most right now? (at most three things)		
	N	%
Health	105	45
Socialization	13	6
Education	152	65
Financial stability	41	18
Family	14	6
Failed plans for the future	7	3
Uncertainty	15	6

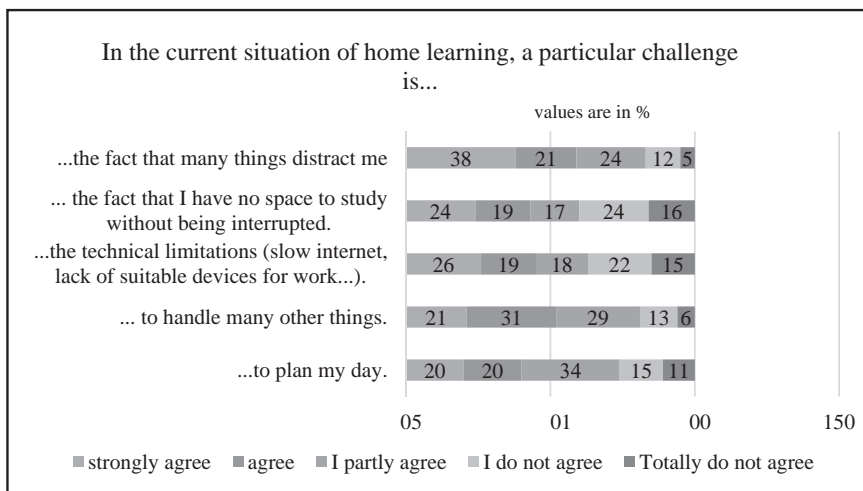
Stability in the country	5	2
Nothing	4	2

Further analysis revealed to us the most common challenges that students face in terms of their education, as the priority that causes the greatest concern for them during this period. =Most often students are worried about the quality of the education they receive: the inability to understand part of the teaching material, the inability to perform practical teaching, uncertainty regarding the methods of passing the upcoming exams, the validity of the exams as well as the validity of the whole semester, in addition, the numerous obligations they receive from the professors – “we spend too much time with online obligations” were cited as a challenge. It is worrying that the students make serious criticisms of the very concept of online teaching, which according to their experience is poorly organized and does not produce the desired results, and on the other hand, online teaching was not organized for all the subjects that are planned for the student’s current semester.

Regarding the challenges of students in the current study from home, the biggest challenge stands out as the over-engagement of students and the problem of focusing on learning and responsibilities in college. As many as 38% of students completely agree and 21% of students agree with the fact that many things attract their attention. Almost half of the students in the sample do not have an adequate space to study without being interrupted (24% strongly agree and 19% agree with the challenge), and they face technical shortcomings important for conducting online teaching (26% strongly agree and 19% agree with the challenge). A detailed presentation of the obtained results is shown in Graph 1.

**Graph 1**

Presentation of the percentage representation of the intensity of students’ challenges when learning from home

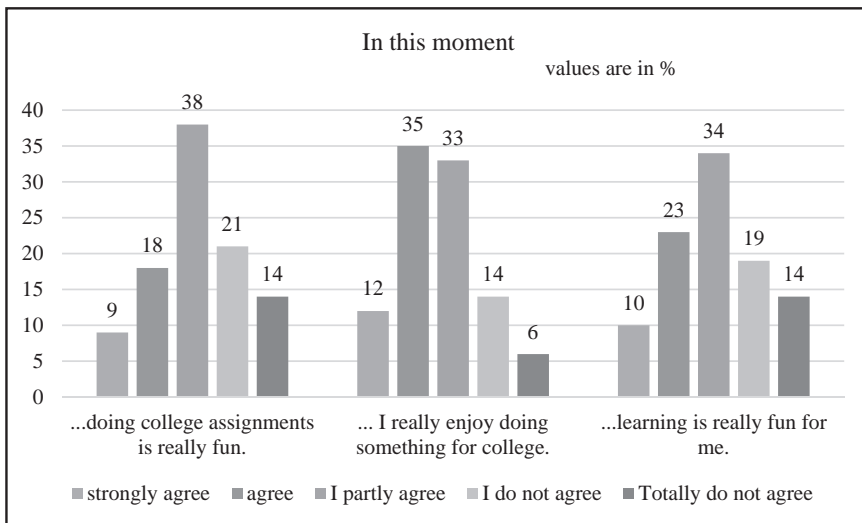


**Motivation and Perseverance**

In terms of motivation, the largest percentage of students feel partially motivated when performing activities related to the faculty. The fact that almost a third of them do not perceive studying and performing college-related tasks as a fun activity is worrying. The results of students’ motivation are presented in Graph 2.

**Graph 2**

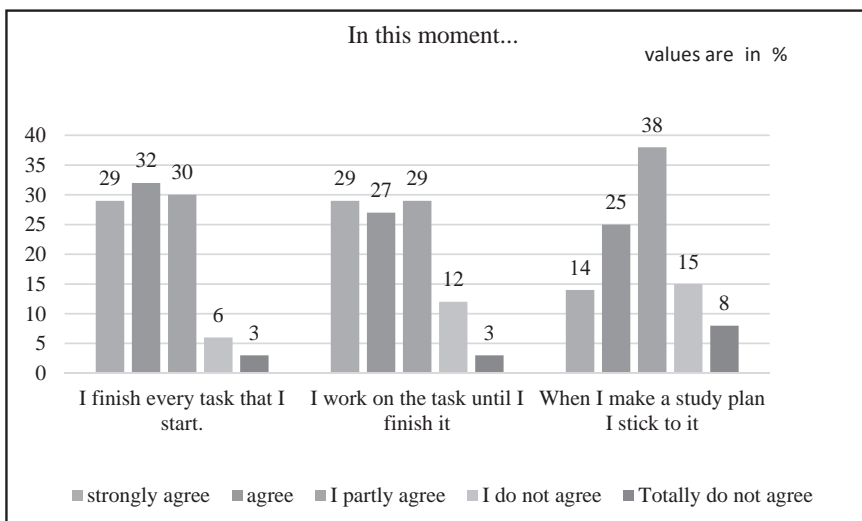
Presentation of the motivation that students currently feel when learning or performing tasks related to college



Even though the students do not feel sufficiently motivated, according to their subjective assessment, they are extremely persistent in the realization of the assigned tasks. More than half of the students surveyed completed every task they start (29% strongly agree and 32% agree with the statement), and work on the task until they finish it (29% strongly agree and 27% agree with the statement). However, students experience partial difficulties when they have to stick to their study plan. The obtained results in terms of persistence are presented in Graph 3.

**Graph 3**

Presentation of the current persistence of students in terms of study and university responsibilities:

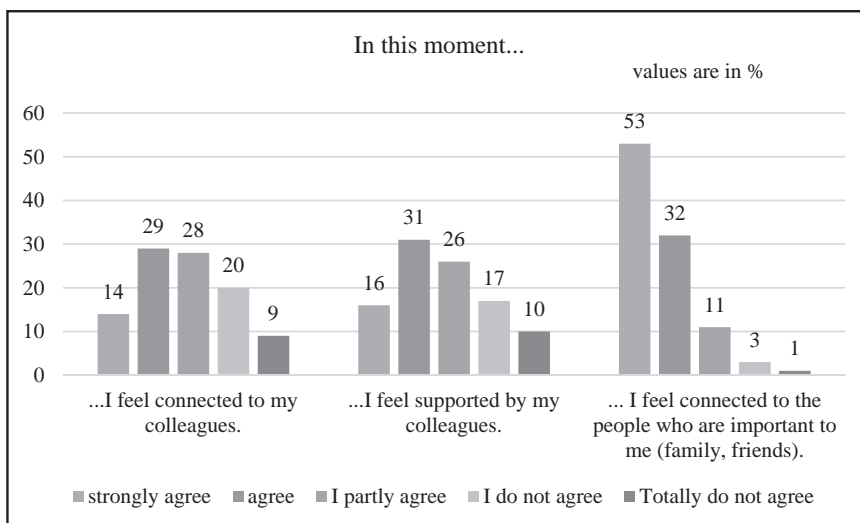


## Socialization

According to the obtained results, students feel less connection with colleagues compared to the connection they feel with family members and friends. About 43% of students feel connected to their colleagues (14% strongly agree and 29% agree with the statement), while 47% feel supported by their colleagues (16% strongly agree and 31% agree with the statement), as opposed to 85% of students who feel connected to family members and friends (53% strongly agree and 32% agree with the statement). Such results are quite expected, given the need for protection against the virus, that is, the recommendation to stay at home, we believe that it intensifies care and attachment to family and family members. The results are shown in the following chart.

### Graph 4

Presentation of the current social connection of the students



## Conclusions and Recommendations

The need for urgent remote learning is already far behind us, most universities have returned to on-site lectures with face-to-face interaction between students and professors. This means that higher education is slowly returning to already known and proven ways of functioning, but definitely, the past period of online education and remote experiences will leave an important stamp for an extraordinary time that required emergency measures. On the other hand, it is quite certain that online learning will leave an important mark in future educational formats. We must use the experience we had, and in the future universities must be prepared when there is a need for urgent remote learning.

According to the results of our research, distance learning is a serious challenge for students, facing a lack of technical support for teaching, but also a feeling of being burdened by numerous obligations. Students are most motivated when they are doing something for college (47%), but they perceive learning less as fun (33%). Persistence is perceived by students as the strongest characteristic of the examined variables, 61% complete every task they start, 56% work on the task until they finish it and 39% stick to their study plans. Despite serious socialization challenges, 47% feel supported by their colleagues, and 43% are connected with their colleagues, but 85% feel the greatest connection with their family members.

The implementation of quality online education certainly requires a better learning platform, as well as well-prepared teaching staff, but also the preparation of the students is particularly

important. Under the preparation of the students, we support the basic technical skills of the student, but also technical support and assistive technology necessary for the implementation of online teaching, but in the process of preparation, the adaptive abilities of the student and his resilient skills play an equally important role. Hence, higher education must also take care of the student's mental health, build a support system during the entire educational process, and especially in crises such as the pandemic.

This research may serve as a framework for future research on a tailored intervention to support students adapting to online and remote education. Important aspects that should remain in focus during online teaching are the student's socialization and sense of belonging while taking into account their motivation, attention, and effort regulation during self-study.

## Limitations

The present study is not free from limitations. To assess the adaptation of students to distance learning during the first pandemic months, only a self-report measure was used. While participants may not be representative of North Macedonia students, this represents a substantial sample for a rapid, time-sensitive survey. For a better understanding of the adaptation of students to distance learning during a pandemic situation, a longitudinal study is more recommended, considering all other factors that affect distance learning.

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## COMPREHENSION READING AS PART OF A TEXT INTERPRETATION

**Abstract:** Understanding a text in teaching is based on reading and experiencing it. One of the tasks of the Macedonian language refers to training the student for independent experience, understanding and evaluation of literary works of art from different genres.

Interpreting a literary work in the text-teaching-student triangle implies several levels of consideration of teaching literature: teaching purpose and tasks, program content, interpretive models, textbook, teacher characteristics and student's cognitive-experiential possibilities.

The purpose of teaching Macedonian is for students to master the basic laws of the language in which they will properly express themselves orally and in writing, to get to know, experience and be able to understand certain literary works.

**Keywords:** Text, Reading comprehension, Interpretation, Realization

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In the third and fourth grade, in the program provided for the Macedonian language, the students are introduced deeper in the process of reading and understanding what has been read. When interpreting a given text, the analytical and synthetic method are used to a greater extent, and it needs to be interwoven with solving problematic problems arising from the text and experiences through which the student will begin to perceive, discover, research, evaluate and conclude. In this way the curiosity, the conscious activity and the research activity of the student are stimulated.

Comprehension of the text is a state in which cognitive, emotional and motivational factors act. Attention is paid to certain objects or situations based on previous experiences. In this way a unique experience is formed, which Kant denotes by the term "unique experience." This real, special, unique, that a text can provide can only be achieved in direct interaction between the individual and the work.

Understanding what is read has different meanings that refer to understanding the cause-and-effect relationship, identifying the problem and defining it as perceiving, devising, linking new information or new content to what has already been adopted. In determining the understanding, the inclusion of the new and the unknown in the circle of the old and the known is emphasized, ie the connection of new information with the previously adopted, the realization of the essence and the