

Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the education system of the Faculty of Arts

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Nowadays, education is considered a condition necessary for the survival and development of every modern society, and online learning is often discussed as a growing global phenomenon. Is online learning really a phenomenon or is it just, until now, a poorly recognized possibility in the education system, caused by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, or a different approach to teaching and learning at national level?

The pandemic COVID-19 has drastically altered almost all aspects of life of all social groups and has brought a number of economic and social consequences. When it comes to students, as well as youth in general, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused additional difficulties in the fields of education, learning, employment and mental health preservation. Bearing in mind that students and future generations will "bear the burden" of the long-term economic and social consequences of this crisis, it is necessary to avoid emphasizing social status and social differences, but also to enable the inclusion of young people in the process of building a stronger society and introducing new measures in order to overcome the crisis. "Disruption" in the approach to education and weaker employment opportunities, as a result of economic decline, can lead this generation of students to unstable and uncertain state on the road to gaining employment, maintaining quality work places and creating personal income.

Quality assurance and access to online teaching become the core of the global issue of the actual education system. Unequal knowledge of digital services and unequal opportunities for approach to electronic devices, lead to a risk of intensifying and emphasizing economic and social differences among students during the pandemic. For instance, a student from a family of worse financial situation may not have access to digital devices at all, or most of the time, but these devices are necessary for taking part in this model of teaching. Online teaching requires unlimited internet, quality internet, and possession of a laptop or a computer. Lack of physical contact and social support from professors and colleagues may also lead to hardships and inconveniences experienced by a student, and, in the worst case scenario, giving up education. On the other hand, online learning brings a number of benefits: in this way of learning, shy and insecure persons are more noticeable than in the traditional form of teaching, students are allowed to study beyond the borders of their country, while staying home, and in a country where classes are held, there are no costs of rent and stay, or are reduced to a minimum. This form of learning provides equal opportunities for persons with disabilities to be completely involved in educational activities. It is important for the education system to be adapted to novelties and it is also important to take advantage of the opportunities that are offered, and in this way, students keep up with the new technology, follow global trends and thus increase their chances to gain employment and build their professional careers. Online learning is one of the increasingly growing trends in the systems of education.

Since the very outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Montenegro, the University of Montenegro has actively promoted distance learning platforms, and students and professors have relatively easily and successfully adapted to this method of working, i.e. participation in teaching and learning. However, despite maintaining continuity in online teaching, several characteristics of some university units – Faculties of arts from Cetinje: the Music Academy, Faculty of Dramatic Arts and Faculty of Fine Arts should be taken into account. As the poet Tin Ujević said "Art neither receives nor leaves the world as it found it", the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the creative and cultural industry, but it has provided new opportunities and greater publicity for those who do it online. The cultural sector is important in terms of economic development and employability. It encourages innovation in the economy and contributes to a number of other channels for positive social impact, that is why the importance of its sustainability is indisputable.

In spite of the specificities, online teaching can respond to the demands of faculty of arts, but to what extent and with how much success? It is possible to get an answer to this question by evaluating online teaching during the pandemic and by conducting the surveys whose respondents would be students and teaching staff. On the other hand, when it comes to students of study programmes which are based on practice, the pandemic has provided them with more free time for practicing, and when it comes to students of study programmes based on theory, the pandemic has provided them with time for examining different literature and different aspects of art. Zoom and Skype platforms are the most used platforms at faculty of arts, however, for some subjects of a practical nature, online teaching is unfeasible, because it requires group teaching and live contact of academic staff with students.

Valentina Tripecki, student trustee of the Music Academy, considers the problems that students encounter are group playing and group singing, which imply working in groups of thirty and more students and are impossible to be performed online, so that students remain deprived of some subjects such as orchestra and choir, which are actually crucial for their future professional careers. Bearing in mind that music is a temporal art, in this regard, online teaching has its advantages, such as the fact that students have enough time to understand the music they perform, and generally enough time to examine the music itself. However, on the other hand, there are more problems that students encounter, because to play and to hold a class via any application available is almost unfeasible. However, there is a possibility of recording audio and sending it to professors, which makes it much easier for students, but none of these options really represents a good substitute for live teaching.

Performing online teaching at the Music Academy is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it enables the students to read the programme on their own, to learn it and to perform it, and on the other hand, the exclusion of a professor from that process can be very harmful when it comes to the way of playing, primarily the technique of students, because most of them are at the phase of advancement in playing, and this represents a turning point for producing independent artists after graduating from the faculty.

Lana Bulatović, student trustee of the Faculty of Fine Arts, points out that at this faculty, lectures based on theory that do not require work in studios, are quickly adapted to the current situation, with equally quality results in terms of acquired knowledge. When it comes to the study programme graphic design, where practical teaching is mostly related to work on a computer, it was easier to communicate with professors and send them works, which are of a digital nature, and to receive an effective feedback. When it comes to the study programmes sculpture, painting and graphics, it was more difficult. Students do not have an opportunity to make sculptures with certain materials at home, they do not have adequate space, so that drawing, painting and making sculptures get disabled. In spite of it, with good cooperation between students and professors, the maximum quality was achieved under the given conditions. What is the most important, is the daily communication of students and the exchange of knowledge during the lectures, and in this situation, it was not possible. Students get the most out of the lectures from each other. Taking into account mistakes and quality solutions of their colleagues with whom they work on a daily basis, students build their own experiences and develop critical thinking, as one of the key traits that a good artist must possess.

Sara Stijović, student trustee of the Faculty of Dramatic Arts, believes that virtual closeness has opened a window for students to “peer” at the opportunities that the world offers - many free online projections, lectures, workshops organized for people from all over the world who love or deal with movie or theatre. On the other hand, this period offered a structure of hundreds of screenplays and dramatic texts waiting to be written. The movies were not made. The performances did not take place. Neither actors nor directors had the opportunity to prove themselves to others. Once again, the paper became the closest associate of the playwrights. Due to their inability to attend quality lectures in a traditional form, with the help of professors, students turned to the fields of research and learning that they may not have had time to reach before.

Bearing in mind all the previously mentioned, it is evident that students are not enabled to regularly attend the classes foreseen by syllabus and curriculum of all subjects, but also that this model of teaching mostly affects the aforementioned faculties. In addition to it, various projects related to stage play have been postponed: festivals, concerts, exhibitions and performances, but also the activities of Student Councils of faculties of arts. In this situation, it is very important that professors inspire students to study, advance and keep up with their tasks and obligations, but also to point out the problems they encounter while studying, so that the whole academic community can create more feasible models of teaching for the study programmes which are substantially different and specific. It is necessary to mention the fact that, for many years, faculties of arts have faced the problem related to infrastructure, i.e. spatial capacity, because these faculties are established in buildings of former legateships, whose premises are small, making the process of holding lectures difficult, especially bearing in mind the obligation of students and teaching staff to adhere to the measures of the National coordination body for contagious diseases. In this context, the importance of making an appeal and insisting on moving these faculties into the university complex of the Faculties of Arts in Cetinje is evident, since it would represent a great "alleviation" for students and academic staff.

Exposure to pandemics and crises leaves long-term effects when it comes to approach to education, employability, mental health and other opportunities we, as a society, encounter. Strengthening public institutions and strengthening Government are crucial for ensuring the well-being of youth and all future generations in these challenging times. Students should take action as "a connective tissue" in public institutions, decision-making processes and problem-solving processes, to contribute to achieving long-term goals, building fairer and more inclusive policy outcomes and creating social "immunity" to the challenges imposed by modern age. All the good that the COVID-19 pandemic awakened in us can also be a crucial determinant of our society on the road to further prosperity.