

EDUCATION IN THE CONDITION OF “A TOTAL LOCKDOWN”

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Georgian institutions of higher education started introducing online education tools several years ago. Plans for development and investments were made several years in advance. Though, in winter 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic made the country make fast decisions and the education system went online. Students and lecturers experienced frustration before the unexpected, had to look for solutions for new challenges, such as access to the internet, online platforms, interaction in a new format. At the end of the semester, what most agree on, is that a “hybrid” method of study, with part of educational activities taking place online, is more acceptable than going totally online.

In March 2020, the Georgian government decided to choose a radical approach in fighting the virus: public transport, communication between cities stopped, all offices, education institutions were closed and remained so for almost 2 months. Only grocery stores, hospitals and other institutions providing emergency services remained operational. While the debate over the future of the economic development of the country was raging in social networks and homes, the universities had to do an impossible: just short before the spring semester start (at Ilia State University it was on 16.03.2020), university programs had to “go online,” all teaching staff trained, and material added to e-library. The country started taking measures in order to minimize the dangers COVID-19 posed on the whole world and

Georgia, in particular, as a growing tourist destination.

For big universities, such as Ilia State University (ISU), this was an especially time-consuming and stressful process. Founded in 2006, ISU is one of the biggest institutions of higher education in Georgia. Situated in Tbilisi, the capital of the country, ISU has four departments (School of Arts and Sciences, School of Natural Sciences and Medicine, School of Technology and Education, School of Law) and a big variety of undergraduate, graduate and doctoral programs, with more than 15,000 students.

Over years, the university is involved in different international educational and research projects promoting integrity and application of modern technologies in teaching. For example, for the last 3 years ISU was participating in the

PRINTEL (“Change in Classroom: Promoting Innovative Teaching & Learning to Enhance Student Learning Experience in Eastern Partnership Countries”) project funded in the frames of ERASMUS+ program. Together with colleagues from Armenia and Belarus, a group of lecturers from different Georgian universities attended trainings in Sweden, Spain, Portugal, Austria and learned about modern technologies and methodology in education: active learning, hybrid/blended learning, and gamification were some of the main topics of these meetings. Upon return, participants shared the knowledge with local academic staff during trainings. More than a hundred professors and teachers participated in the training at ISU. The project and the trainings proved to be very timely because the COVID-19 pandemic hit right after the major round of the trainings were over.

As one of the participants of the project and one of the trainers, I found this experience extremely useful and found exchange of ideas and experience with colleagues from different fields during the trainings very helpful. Though, for me personally, it was not the first occasion to learn about technologies in education. In December 2017, I spent 3 weeks in Jerusalem, Israel in the frames of a MASHAV (Center for International Cooperation, a division of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) program “New Pedagogies in the 21st century for Higher Education Teachers.” Emerged in an international group of colleagues from all continents, participants spent exciting times discovering new methods of working with students and making the learning process more effective, pleasant, and even, fun. Upon return, I started to experiment with some of the tools we were introduced to in Israel and shared the information with some colleagues in an informal way.

With this background, and busy with the trainings in the frames of the PRINTEL project, in winter 2020 we suddenly confronted an unexpected task. Exchange of experience and support among peers played an important role in the process of “going online”: in a stressful

environment, where students sometimes demonstrated greater frustration and anxiety before the new, unknown methods of education, the Ministry of Education, and the administration of the university had to make fast decisions and provide instructions on how to face the new reality in classes, without sacrificing quality of education to rapid adjustment measures. Aware of the extraordinary circumstances, none of us have ever experienced before, everyone tried their best to catch up with the changes.

During conversations and discussions with colleagues and students throughout the spring semester 2020 and the summer, we were able to collect some interesting observations and impressions of the local academic world. While some of these ideas are probably universal, there are some, to be linked to economic hardship Georgia experienced because of the decision of the government to implement “a total lockdown policy” and poor economic conditions of the country prior to the pandemic.

STUDENTS’ PERSPECTIVE

In Georgia, major institutions of higher education are situated in the capital, Tbilisi. Students from the regions must travel and rent apartments before the semester and usually leave when the semester is over. Following the total lockdown of the country, thousands of young people were “trapped” in their little hometowns and villages; they did not have to spend on securing apartments or travel anymore, but they had to invest in technical equipment (laptops, cameras for PCs, among others) and fast internet connection.

In fact, many students reported to have saved money on travel and expensive accommodation in the capital, but as it turned out, it hit the pockets of some young people: the capital city offers employment to students necessary to cover not only accommodation, but tuition fees as well. Deprived of jobs and source of income, many students had to ask for

an academic leave for a semester, or if they had an opportunity to do so, take loans.

The possibility to rewatch recorded lectures uploaded on the universities’ website at any convenient time was a positive experience for many because not all had a chance to be online at the time of the online lecture; shortage of technical equipment in some families was also a widespread reason: for many families with several children—either school age or students—the challenge was to find enough equipment for all to allow them attend online classes. In many Georgian households, possessing a laptop for each family member is a luxury. Moreover, there are families, especially in poor regions, without necessary technical equipment (smartphone, PC) or without access to internet.

Students’ also mentioned these drawbacks of the online semester:

- First of all, they all miss the feeling of being a student. Time spent on the campus, meeting new friends, interaction during lecture, discussions and group work is what makes student years unforgettable. Online communication is not able to replace this and makes young people suffer because of missed opportunities.
- Being representatives of a generation that already spends a lot of time with gadgets, young people have noticed that online classes have made them suffer physically. Much less exercise and need to move, causes different health issues, like problems with eyesight, back pain, and depression. Especially those, who are employed and must work during the day and later, attend online classes, had to spend more than 10 hours a day in front of the laptop.
- Lack of access to the library. Not all literature is available in electronic format. Students from the regions, or almost all during the total lockdown with public transportation stopped, were deprived access to literature for several weeks.
- According to some students, it is hard, or even impossible, to develop certain skills,

such as presenting to a big audience, when they are not present in the same space: you cannot make eye contact or follow their reactions. This is a point that members of the teaching staff also made when describing serious inconveniences in communication with students. Though, teachers don’t suffer from lack of experience, they just feel less comfortable in the “online” format; while students, who must use their student years to work on the skills, consider it a serious problem.

PERSPECTIVE OF THE ACADEMIC STAFF

Distance learning, hybrid learning, and gamification were not completely unfamiliar terms for most of the teaching staff before the pandemic. Right before COVID-19 hit the country, the necessity to incorporate electronic resources into teaching were discussed by faculties on several occasions. With usual skepticism (“online communication cannot replace face-to-face communication”) and some traces of laziness (“it will take me a lot of time to use on daily basis various online teaching platforms”), most of the academic staff acknowledged the inevitability of wider application of online tools in teaching and started experimenting (KAHOOT, Moodle, Trello, Padlet) before the COVID-19 struck. The pandemic made the process much faster, literally dropping us into cold water: while most of us expected to have enough time to experiment with online teaching tools and platforms for the next semesters and choose the most appropriate for our needs according to fields of study, we suddenly had to face the reality where decisions had to be made as quickly as possible. Leaving this to individual professors and teachers could cause some of them to fail or lose much time in finding the most convenient way of turning their courses into an online format. Therefore, a decision was made on an institutional level: in a quick survey in the university, Zoom was named as the most

frequently applied and easy to understand program, and the administration of the university started the process of purchasing an institutional/licensed Zoom account that allows meetings without time restrictions. Free meetings in Zoom last for 40 minutes, while lectures as well as seminars at ISU last for 50 minutes. This created some inconvenience before the institutional account was purchased and this process took rather long, since there was suddenly a huge demand on Zoom worldwide.

During the online semester, there were several challenges all professors had to deal with. Most typical:

- Silent, invisible students: less problematic during lectures, it is extremely inconvenient when students are reluctant to turn on cameras during seminars; or when, due to poor internet connection, it is impossible to listen to some of participants.
- Course instructors have to spend much more time on communication with students on technical issues: writing emails and messages with Zoom meeting codes and passwords, as well as helping students to learn how and where to find uploaded lectures and files takes double time and effort.
- Exams, previously organized mostly in class, turned out to be most challenging: while there is no one-fits-all approach here due to a variety of demands and expectations instructors have in different disciplines, almost everybody had to think of their own way how to test their students, ranging from oral exams in Zoom to exper-

imenting with online platforms such as Exam.net.

In general, the teaching staff reported to find a mixed, hybrid method of teaching more convenient and effective: while lectures can easily take place online or be recorded and made available for students online, seminars and practical work has to return to labs and seminar rooms.

SUMMARY

After a challenging and turbulent semester, the academic world was a bit shocked to discover that the fall 2020–2021 semester had to be online too. The growing number of COVID-19 cases in September made the government decide to proceed with care and not hurry with reopening all schools and universities. On the one hand, with lessons learned and lectures recorded in the last semester, this should not be a disappointing news after all, but it seems that most actors involved in the educational process are hungry for more communication on campus! Students protest in front of the ministry of education, sign online petitions and actively express their discontent in social media. The academic staff at universities is meanwhile revising syllabi, looking for more online educational tools, and watching online guides on how to apply those for better results. And all of us together, students and teachers, look forward to a healthier environment, when we can return to lecture halls and wish the same to our colleagues in the world.