
Volume 18

Issue 5 *The cross-cultural effects of COVID-19
on higher education learning and teaching
practice*

Article 5

2021

Cross-cultural effects of COVID-19 on higher education learning and teaching practice: A case study from Greece

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Recommended Citation

Kefalaki, Margarita; Nevradakis, Michael; and Li, Qing, Cross-cultural effects of COVID-19 on higher education learning and teaching practice: A case study from Greece, *Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice*, 18(5), 2021.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/jutlp/vol18/iss5/5>

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Abstract

COVID-19 has greatly impacted all aspects of our everyday lives. A global pandemic of this magnitude, even as we now emerge from strict measures such as lockdowns and await the potential for a 'new tomorrow' with the arrival of vaccines, will certainly have long-lasting consequences. We will have to adapt and learn to live in a different way. Accordingly, teaching and learning have also been greatly impacted. Changes to academic curricula have had tremendous cross-cultural effects on higher education students. This study will investigate, by way of focus groups comprised of students studying at Greek universities during the pandemic, the cross-cultural effects that this 'global experience' has had on higher education, and particularly on students in Greek universities.

The data collection tools are interviews and observations gathered from focus groups.

Keywords: Cross-cultural effects; COVID-19; international students; higher education teaching and learning; global education; higher education; online education.

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Introduction

In a globalised world, with increasing linguistic and cultural diversity within many societies, where an increasing number of academics are seeking employment internationally, and where the global pandemic has helped foster a more universal understanding of the global challenges faced by humanity, educators—and the educational system—are called upon to provide solutions to these complex cross-cultural challenges.

There has been much discussion in the popular discourse regarding the impacts of online teaching, as this mode of teaching became, in large part, the ‘default’ mode of educational delivery during the Covid-19 pandemic. It is true that much of this discourse has not been highly positive, even as remote teaching and learning have often been touted, in media accounts and reports, as the ‘future’ of education. Many discussions that have taken place within the public sphere—whether in the ‘traditional’ media or in the realm of social media—have focused on the *negative* impacts of this mode of learning, particularly for students.

This broader discussion of the impacts of the transition to remote teaching and learning are largely beyond the scope of this study and, indeed, have already been the subject of much research and scholarship that has been performed and published since the beginning of the pandemic. The present study aims to examine the impact of the pandemic and the resulting shift to online teaching/learning platforms, upon higher education and, specifically, the cross-cultural effects of this sudden and unexpected transition to remote platforms.

Specifically, this study poses the following research questions:

RQ1: How were students affected by the changes to academic curricula?

RQ2: How have academics responded to these changes?

RQ3: What is the overall impact of these changes for higher education?

In order to answer the above questions, two focus groups were convened, with two sets of participants, both from a prominent Greek university. One group consisted of faculty from this institution, while the other group consisted of students from the same institution. The questions that were posed to the participants of each group were based on the framework of intercultural competence (values, attitudes, skills, and finally knowledge and critical understanding) proposed by Jane Jackson (2021).

As will be seen in the findings of this study, both faculty and student participants described a variety of challenges that they were tasked with overcoming due to the sudden shift to online educational platforms. Faculty participants placed a particular emphasis on the adjustments to curricula and to their own pedagogical strategies that were (and which remain) necessary in an online teaching environment. In turn, student responses largely focused on the positive outcomes that this transition provided for them. However, the responses of the two focus groups, even if they were indicative of a generational gap, were not mutually exclusive: academic participants highlighted several positive attributes of online teaching, while students addressed some of the specific challenges and difficulties that they faced, alongside a variety of positive outcomes.

Literature review

While Gopal (2011) discusses the implications of intercultural competency for transnational teaching, he explains that teaching cross-culturally is also teaching internationally. The

internationalization of curricula in higher education seeks to address a set of challenges that education systems face in their effort to operate at the global level, preparing students to live and work in a globalized, multi-cultural society (Sá & Serpa, 2020). The internationalization of the curriculum is “a process by which international elements are infused into course content, international resources are used in course readings and assignments, and instructional methodologies appropriate to a culturally diverse student population are implemented” (Schuerholz-Lehr *et al.*, 2007:70).

One of the challenges related to the internationalization of higher education involves the teaching and communication methods used by teachers in the international learning-teaching process (Zelenková & Hanesová, 2019). With the internationalization of higher education institutions (HEIs) and the increasing inflow of international students, university instructors face an increased need to effectively communicate with such students, to ensure effectiveness in educational processes (*idem.*).

Adapting curricula to the needs of students, whether international or otherwise, is an important and multifaceted process that involves many actors. One of the most relevant strategies associated with the process of internationalization of higher education, as often addressed in the literature, is the transformation of educational curricula, with teachers acting as the key players in the success (or failure) of this process (Niehaus & Williams, 2016). Focusing on elements of intercultural competence, such as the faculty member’s ability to listen, understand multiple perspectives, and communicate cross-culturally, is an important aspect of measuring cross-cultural experiences (Gopal, 2011). The methodologies used in the teaching-learning process represent an important aspect of the internationalization of educational curricula, where in the learner-centered approach, the teacher is a facilitator (Sá & Serpa, 2020). In this process, both teachers and students should possess appropriate multilingual skills, social attitudes, and intercultural competences (Fragouli, 2020; Zelenková & Hanesová, 2019; Sikorskaya, 2017).

This intercultural competence is comprehensive, and involves the cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of the individual, where teachers play a key role (Sá & Serpa, 2020). Acquiring effective communication skills through meaningful dialogue and active listening will provide transnational faculty members with the key elements of meaningful cross-cultural communication, as they face a growing need to develop the necessary intercultural competencies to successfully teach in cross-cultural environments (Gopal, 2011:378). Gaining the culture-specific knowledge and principles required to function in varied contexts can be accomplished through case studies, role-play activities, discussion groups or individual reflection activities, and other exercises with the aim of developing the core elements of intercultural competence (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). However, transnational faculty members undergoing this type of training must understand that the development of such competencies is an ongoing process that involves the deconstruction and reconstruction of one’s fundamental values, beliefs, and perceptions (Gopal, 2011).

Regarding cross-cultural online educational spaces, Wilson *et al.* (2020) conducted research involving four students from two countries (Australia and Singapore) to independently reflect upon their experience and collectively consolidate their learning journey through the pandemic. In their reflections, the students stated that changes to their learning environment made it more difficult to create social connections. The research also found that even in online educational environments, access to unfacilitated and informal spaces is equally as critical and should therefore be encouraged.

The intercultural approach offers a forward-looking model for managing cultural diversity. It proposes a conceptualization based on individual human dignity (embracing our common humanity and common destiny) (Council of Europe, 2008). Intercultural dialogue prevents ethnic, religious, linguistic and cultural divides and enables humans to move forward together, and to deal with our different identities constructively and democratically on the basis of shared universal values. To advance intercultural dialogue, intercultural competences should be taught and learned, spaces for intercultural dialogue should be created and widened, and intercultural dialogue should be expanded to the international level (Council of Europe, 2008).

As stated by Williams & Lee (2015:10), “Intercultural communication skills are needed by both domestic and international students to bridge the cultural gaps,” while HEIs have an important role for the “integration of international students in the lives and cultures of our institutions and their mutual relationships with domestic students.” Educators at all levels play an essential role in fostering intercultural dialogue and in preparing future generations for such dialogue, since through their commitment and by practicing with their students, they serve as important role models (Council of Europe, 2008:32). Similarly, Nelson & Luetz (2021) explain how educational institutions play a vital role in helping their students develop the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes, while focusing on the effects of short-term cross-cultural experiences on the development of intercultural competence in schools and among university students.

Intercultural education can solve the challenges that stem from the process of globalization (Patrascu & Allam, 2015). This was further discussed by Portera (2008:488):

The intercultural education approach represents the most appropriate response to the challenges of globalization and complexity. It offers a means to gain a complete and thorough understanding of the concepts of democracy and pluralism, as well as different customs, traditions, faiths and values. Intercultural education helps to identify the risks of globalization and multicultural communities; of economically motivated rules and regulations without any intervention by governments and/or politics.

Takayama *et al.* (2021), explain how the pandemic has exposed both the promises and challenges of developing global consciousness, with many implications for teacher education, explaining how global citizenship or global consciousness is one of the important values to be nurtured among pre-service teachers and to be taught in schools. Takayama *et al.* (2021), stress, by also citing examples of other research, both the importance of careful curriculum planning and support for a successful international professional experience, as well as why it is important for program facilitators to take an active role in making learning meaningful to teachers’ professional identity development and to students.

Finally, as emphasized by Burikova (2020), in our globalized world, there is a challenge of developing cultural awareness and the role of education is significant. Communicating internationally involves communicating interculturally. This is evident in a study by Wang (2020), that refers to the cross-cultural experience of the Chinese student population studying abroad and finds that a ‘glocalized’ education is necessary, in addition to the reconsideration and revision of educational goals and content, in order to prepare students for future cross-national and cross-cultural challenges.

Methodology

For the purposes of this study, the researchers recruited participants for two distinct focus groups, one consisting of students and one consisting of university faculty

(professors/instructors). Both focus groups consisted of an initial session and a follow-up session held approximately two months later. The students and the academic participants were recruited from the Hellenic Open University. Specifically, the student participants were pursuing a master's degree in the management of cultural units, while the faculty participants were instructors in this field. In total, three students and two academics participated in these focus groups.

The theoretical framework that served as the basis for this study and its particular focus on intercultural competence is derived from the list of cross-cultural skills as defined by the European framework (Byram & Golubeva, 2020). These cross-cultural skills are indicated below:

- a. Autonomous learning skills
- b. Analytical and critical thinking skills
- c. Skills of listening and observing
- d. Empathy
- e. Flexibility and adaptability
- f. Linguistic communicative and plurilingual skills
- g. Conflict-resolution skills

Finally, each of the two focus groups was held in April 2021, with a duration of one hour (60 minutes) per group, with a follow-up session for each focus group held in June 2021, also with a one-hour (60 minute) duration. All participants provided affirmative consent to participate in the study and in any follow-up focus group meetings or interviews, and for their responses to be recorded.

Findings

The two sets of focus groups each highlighted differing perspectives regarding the shift to remote learning and to the changes in curricula that this transition precipitated. Broadly speaking, the students who participated in the focus group expressed a largely positive outlook regarding the changes in their educational experience. Conversely, the faculty members who participated emphasized, to a significant extent, the challenges that they faced in adjusting their pedagogical style and their curriculum to a new, online teaching environment.

Faculty

Both faculty members who participated in this study had several years' worth of experience in blended teaching—that is, both face-to-face and online. As such, they were able to draw upon their personal knowledge of having taught in both settings to address the novel teaching challenges that they faced during the pandemic and the adjustments that they made as a result of the move to an online-only teaching environment.

Interestingly, even though both faculty participants had prior online teaching experience that they could draw upon, their focus group responses heavily focused on the specific challenges that they faced with their teaching during the pandemic. For instance, Participant A expressed characterized the fact that most teaching sessions and examinations were administered online as a “negative.” In turn, Participant B also emphasized “difficulties in exams, such as how to deal with copying, pasting and plagiarism.” According to Participant B, these challenges have resulted in a need “to rethink our assessment strategies, as teachers and students don’t share the same space, we can’t control what students are doing during the exams.”

At the same time, the shift to online teaching presented some new opportunities as well, which were also highlighted in the participants' responses. Participant A stated that they “had to invent

several things and find new ways to build the mutual trust and understanding with students.” Correspondingly, Participant B focused on the need that arose to find “new methods of presenting content online; providing very clear and instructions from the...beginning as we don’t meet students,” adding that students in online learning environments “can be very timid to ask questions.” In response to the latter issue, the same participant added that instructors “have to facilitate discussion and encourage communication as well as find new ways of using technology.”

Both faculty participants also highlighted various aspects of pre-pandemic teaching that were difficult to continue during the pandemic period. As expected, these responses focused on interpersonal aspects of teaching that understandably were paused with the shift to a remote environment. This was highlighted by Participant A, who stated that “the physical interaction inside the class is totally important because you can have eye contact and you can see their reaction, etc.” Similarly, Participant B highlighted that “what we really missed was the spontaneous interpersonal communication that we had in traditional teaching.” These missing aspects were not limited just to the physical classroom space, as Participant B noted, stating that “before, we socialize [sic] with students before the class and during the break. Although this is outside of class, it’s important for instructor-student interaction, interpersonal element [sic] and the relationship building.”

The two faculty participants were also asked to name any challenges that they were obliged to overcome in relation to cross-cultural activity, based on the elements set forth in the aforementioned European framework. According to Participant A, these challenges were, in many cases, opportunities as well:

I didn’t face much during teaching, but there were some challenges and also opportunities, such as cross culture activities with other colleagues, research projects etc. All these digital transition [sic] help us reach and understand more different cultures that could work together with an education environment. But sometimes it causes misunderstanding, sometimes it’s easy to be misinterpreted [sic] what you want to say.

Participant B, in turn, addressed a particular challenge that the online teaching environment posed in relation to intercultural communication, including the lack of non-verbal communication. As Participant B stated:

[In] a traditional setting, it is easier to manage those intercultural differences because you find a way to have more personalized contact with the students. Online is a bit more difficult, for example, I know students from Asia are more low profile and a bit timid, they need more time to open up and you may need to approach them a bit differently. A lot of intercultural communication has to do with body language and eye contact, this is missing from the virtual teaching.

These difficulties, however, also resulted in at least one positive outcome, as also expressed by Participant B: increased empathy. As explained by Participant B:

During the pandemic, I have developed more empathy with students, I have been able to learn more from their viewpoint. You also have to increase your flexibility and compassion as students have to work on their own. I have learnt to build relationships with students on their own terms and I try to understand them. I think I am more sensitive now to my students needs concerning their assignments, their understanding of context and concepts. We need to have more empathy because students may be under stress. I have a student who lost his family member because of the pandemic. Also, they

may be learning in an environment with children at home running around, husband, wife, and parents. This is their classroom now, so we have to develop the sympathy.

Indeed, the participants' responses indicated that the pandemic, in a sense, fostered a greater sense of empathy—as well as mutual respect and understanding—as compared to the pre-pandemic period. As explained by Participant A:

I have also noticed that during the pandemic and the online teaching modality, respect towards our students and their rights has become even more central... I have also personally felt the need to conduct more online sessions with students to establish a better connection with them and learn more about their individual student profiles (given that we had no experience of meeting them [face-to-face]). This has certainly multiplied my workload, but it has been important for my relationships with my students and my understanding of their diverse needs.

As further explained by Participant A, the increased empathy and mutual understanding observed during the pandemic period is directly tied to the move to an online learning environment:

...from the perspective of a higher institution, I believe that human rights are very critical in shaping the pandemic response for education. Online teaching demands a focus on the student and demands the prioritization of efforts that are aimed at maintaining educational continuity for our student populations. One such example has been curricular adjustments to ensure that contents are relevant to the diversity of our students or developing more pedagogical resources for students with specific requirements.

At the same time, as stated by Participant A, it may be difficult to ascertain exactly to what extent the pandemic and the corresponding move to remote educational environments, had an impact on the existing attitudes of faculty members, explaining that “on a personal level, I have always espoused these principles and therefore it is not easy for me to assess the impact of the pandemic on these attitudes. I have always thought of myself as open, respectful and interculturally competent, and tolerant.” A similar sentiment was expressed by Participant B: “I would say that my working experience in a multicultural environment has somehow trained me in an identity informed behavior. But I would argue that the pandemic can bring out the best in people. I mean, we have seen or heard lots of stories the past year focusing on tolerance, resilience, thoughtfulness, etc.”

Both faculty participants also viewed the pandemic-induced shift to online teaching as an opportunity for new or better pedagogical practices to be introduced or (re-)emphasized. Participant A described this transition as “the base [which] we should consider as [a] platform for building the curriculum of the future or post-pandemic.” This situation can, according to Participant A, also serve as an impetus for academics to acquire new professional and personal skills, above and beyond any changes that may be applied to their curriculum or their teaching style. As described by Participant A:

...this is very challenging period there are lots of things to learn; soft skills such as...resilience, flexibility, etc. For me, curriculum is not only to deliver knowledge but also some...personal and professional skills...we should consider those skills as part of what we are teaching, because the world is changing very fast, you could also learn new theories, you should also be flexible to the changes that we face from now on. This is something I would really like to see more in the curriculum.

Participant B shared a similar perspective, with an additional emphasis on the need for increased sharing and collaboration between academics. As this participant stated:

Teachers have to communicate more with each other as we were handling these [situations] and to exchange our own experience, views, knowledge and expertise. Some instructors are more familiar with technology than others, like me. So, I have to share my expertise with my colleagues. We have been exchanging many views on teaching methods. And I hope this sharing and communication will continue post pandemic.

The same participant also emphasized the need for academics to develop additional practical skills, stating that “we definitely need to be agile and flexible, that applies to all of us. We have to be more technologically savvy that we must be more aware of what we can do with technology.” Participant B further connected this need to the aforementioned issue of empathy:

Empathy becomes more important today, to build [this] empathy online through these everyday activities. Because of the lack of the body language, you have opportunity to over-emphasize and create a more substantial relationship; the way we give instructions and address students personally, how we explain the concepts, even in our back channel and communication.

In addition to these new practical skills that were highlighted by both faculty participants, the two faculty members also discussed the impact of the pandemic in broadening their overall understanding of global issues. As explained by Participant A:

The experience of such a devastating and unprecedented event has also been a learning curve for many of us, I think...including myself... Because of the globality of the pandemic, I personally had to consume more global news, and my knowledge base on how other countries were able to respond to the pandemic...was also strengthened. I also had the opportunity to study such country variations in a research project I was involved in. I also learned more about global organizations, such as the WHO, and the pharmaceutical industry, and I also feel that my understanding of how other higher institutions around the world operate has also increased.

Correspondingly, Participant B described a similar effect, stating: “...as the pandemic moves from country to country we get the opportunity to deep dive into each country's policies, politics, culture etc. So, yes, I would agree that my knowledge and understanding of the world has been strengthened the past year.”

Finally, Participant B also emphasized the need for instructors to “be more proactive, more [active], interacting with students and make them engaged more, create opportunities for discussions, such as team building and team exercise.”

Students

In contrast with the emphasis placed by the faculty participants of the focus group on the challenges posed by the transition to fully online teaching, the student participants, in their responses, placed a greater emphasis on the benefits this new learning environment afforded to them. Nevertheless, certain challenges that did not exist in previous, face-to-face learning environments were also expressed by some of the student participants.

In particular, Student B highlighted how their “studies are better as I have more time to study at home,” while Student A focused on communication, emphasizing that they maintained increased contact “with others by phone, Teams, messenger, social networks, and studies apps.” Student C, on the contrary, cast light on a specific challenge she faced: “my personal and family time get confused in the same space with my studies, which were separated in the normal times. Being a mom, woman, wife, student, professional, this is not what I prefer.”

When asked to address the aforementioned cross-cultural elements and how their coursework was impacted in relation to this framework during the pandemic, the students expressed mixed views. Student A stated that they were generally “better in all these skills,” adding that “I have more autonomous learning skills, due to the class activities; more flexibility in studies such as exams and finding resources; better critical thinking because I have more time to read, think and compare my readings.” Student C expressed a similar perspective, stating that “the analytical and critical thinking are better now for me because I share content with many other people than face-to-face [interaction], and I try to do presentation as much as I can. My cross-cultural elements have been better than before.”

In contrast, in Student B’s response, difficulties and challenges were emphasized:

I actually never seen other classmates from other classes, and we don’t interact with each other so it’s very difficult for me to pay attention and absorb what the professors said, so my listening and observing skill is low.

It was hard for me to listen and take notes, especially when it’s online, four hours long, hard to maintain my attention. Normal times I would be more productive and have more time to engage with the professor in their course for resources.

All three student participants identified, as a positive outcome of the move to entirely online learning as a result of the pandemic, increased study time. This was perhaps best expressed by Student A, who also described an additional social benefit: “I have more time to study and communicate with others and more opportunities to interact with others because of the social media. We don’t know each other but we are very close to each other [sic]. Maybe this is a good way to know others.

However, Student B and Student C highlighted the lack of face-to-face contact and the inability to meet others in person as negative aspects of the move to remote learning.

In addition to increased time for studying, all three student participants agreed that online teaching resulted in curriculum improvements. According to Student A, “this curriculum is better than other years as they gave us more information and the most recent resources.” This view was largely mirrored by Student B, who said that “we have the most recent articles and academic research, which is very important and helpful as we don’t have access to libraries due to the pandemic.” Student C, in turn, focused their response on the improved access to resources and the role of instructors in helping to achieve this improvement. As they put it, “teachers give us different resources and opportunities to work with more projects. Teachers are like leaders on our personal development. It’s the teachers’ inspirations for students to follow the subjects.”

As evidenced by their responses, these improvements appear to have provided students with inspiration and encouragement on a personal level. As described by Student A:

All these changes have made me a better person. I find things inside me that I didn’t know. For example, when I read some key studies, I want to read them. I never had that kind of feelings before.

Similar sentiments were expressed by Student C:

Firstly, I compare my studies with my work and managed to transfer my knowledge to my work, so I developed new skills. I become more creative and try to find more solution. I have a broad new idea, methods, and tools for my profession. I am sorry to say but this crisis made me very nice version of myself, more professionally and academically.

Student B, in turn, connected the increased access to educational resources to an increase in their own personal motivation:

For me, we have more references, and the bibliography is more critical and analytical, which has motivated me to do more research and helped me to be more [exacting] for my studies.

For some of the student participants, the broader move to online communication environments—within and beyond the educational context—appears to have contributed to a greater sense of valuing human rights and diversity. As described by Student B:

Yes, I do value human dignity, human rights, and cultural diversity to a greater degree as a result of the pandemic... The pandemic helped me find new ideas and recreate all my [worldview] about human rights, dignity and cultural diversity. All those distance observations and live streaming events brought humans and their cultures together and found out new cultural cooperations [sic] that are very important for the global future cultural exchange.

A similar sentiment was expressed by Student C:

Human dignity as well as human rights are values that people learn to appreciate and respect through the home and the society in which they are raised. But they are also values that continue to be taught and extended within us, especially in critical times when our conscious and mental and emotional intelligence are being tested. I firmly believe in my respect for human dignity and as a human right because of the pandemic, but I realize, because of cultural diversity, the need to re-examine and expand it to a universal level. After all, culture connects people.

On the other hand, reflecting a similar observation seen in the faculty focus group, regarding the difficulty in measuring or ascertaining how the pandemic affected the values of those who already considered themselves to be highly tolerant individuals in the pre-pandemic period, Student A simply stated that “I wouldn’t say that I value human rights, human dignity and cultural identity more, as a result of the pandemic. These values and issues had already been of great importance to me before the pandemic... I have increasingly felt respectful and tolerant to people from different cultures throughout my adult life. So, no, the pandemic made no difference.”

A wider process of cultural expansion and increased cultural understanding was nevertheless described by two of the student focus group participants. As described by Student C:

I have always had respect and tolerance for other...cultures. I feel although that these feelings have been heightened because of the pandemic...It has been an eye-opener to the things that unite us, instead of the cultural barriers we all used in the past to appraise our uniqueness.

This was a learning process that occurred, for some student participants at least, outside the (virtual) classroom. Student B described their experience:

...I do feel more open, respectful, and tolerant to people from different cultures as a result of the pandemic...From the first lockdown I realized that old people from all over the world need my help...our help. I started asking old neighbors if they need any help, or when I was planning [on going] to the supermarket I started asking them if they wanted something to buy for them and leave it outside their door. The way that they could thank me for helping them was a plate with a slice of Greek pitta, or fruits or vegetables from their garden. A French woman gave a slice of quiche Lorraine; the most tasty thing I ever ate, and I just realized the value of being a nice and kind person.

Giving without expecting an exchange is a life position and an example for young people.

Two of the three student focus group participants expressed their opinion that the move to a remote educational environment made, at some level, a positive contribution in terms of their broader understanding of the world. As Student B described:

I do feel that my knowledge and critical understanding of the world (politics, law, human rights, culture, religions, history, media, economies, environment, and sustainability) has been improved as a result of the pandemic, because the difficulties that the pandemic made me to face, made me also realize that learning from the past is a very important matter of fact... So, I am of the opinion that understanding the past, respecting politics, law, human rights, culture, religions, history, media, economies, environment gives us the opportunity to create our future and resolve the problem of sustainability.

A similar view was shared by Student C:

...Analysis of the economic impact of the virus per country, references to places that develop or manufacture vaccines (who really knew before that India manufactured vaccines in world scale?), even the realization that we would have to dump somewhere these billions of masks and needles and tubes—it was a shock of knowledge to people who suddenly found out that they had the time to learn all this information. Like someone had requested the people around the world to return to school and get re-educated about the world around.

This was not a universally held view, however, as expressed in Student A's more critical comments regarding the remote environment:

I feel that the amount of confusion, caused by rapidly changing government information (worldwide) and fake news over the internet, has diminished my understanding and knowledge of the world. A person cannot perceive the world through a screen.

Finally, all three students had particularly glowing reviews for what they described as the supportive and inspiring role of their professors and instructors during the pandemic period. The responses provided by the students clearly indicate that, during this time span, the importance of professors and instructors arguably expanded beyond just the traditional instructor-student relationship to the realm of personal guidance. This is significant, when considering the many challenges—both academic and personal—that students and academics likely encountered in the midst of such a challenging and unexpected development.

For instance, Student A expressed their view that "...it's my best year, because my tutors helped us a lot by sharing their personal life and experience. They inspired me to be better and think more critically in my studies." Student B focused on the academic guidance they received from their instructors, stating that "I have more feedback from my tutor, which has made me to research more. How tutors are going to respond and share with us will affect our learning experience."

Perhaps, however, the most cogent explanation was provided by Student C, who said:

The tutor I like acts like a mother and guided me through difficulties. I became more creative and think in a different way. I start to be more professionally in what I do. My tutor has inspired me out of the typical limits and distance education. I think that this is the way distance education must be.

Conclusion

It is evident that both academics and students faced a series of unanticipated challenges as a result of the sudden and indefinite transition to remote teaching platforms. Much has been heard in the popular discourse and in discussions occurring in the public sphere regarding the pros and cons of remote education, and the extent to which this mode of teaching may represent the ‘future’ of education more broadly. While such discussions oftentimes seem to place a heavy—and perhaps undue—focus on the negative aspects of this teaching context, the responses received from this study’s focus group participants represent a balanced set of perspectives that highlighted both the challenges and potential benefits presented by remote teaching and learning, and the usage of and increased emphasis on remote platforms more broadly in many aspects of life.

One of the notable observations that can be made here is the difference in emphasis seen in the responses furnished by faculty members as compared to those of the students. While students largely focused on the positive outcomes that resulted from the transition to remote learning, the responses of the faculty participants largely focused on the difficulties that they faced and the challenges that they continue to face. These views were not mutually exclusive amongst the participants of the two groups, however. For instance, the faculty members, in their responses, also discussed the opportunities and benefits that online teaching potentially provides, while challenges and difficulties were not entirely absent from the students’ responses.

In part, this difference in emphasis in the responses of the two groups of participants may represent a generational digital divide to a certain extent: namely, the corresponding differences in the comfort level of the two age groups with technological tools. Indeed, one of the faculty participants clearly mentioned their less-than-total comfort with using certain new technological tools and platforms. On the other hand, students—typically younger than their instructors—are more likely to be, at some level, “digital natives,” or to at the very least possess a significant degree of fluency in the use of technological products, which allows them to more easily adapt to the introduction—sudden, in the case of the pandemic and the unexpected shift to remote learning—of new technologies or new technological environments.

Another notable finding pertains to human relations and emotions. In the popular discourse, technology is frequently accused of being “impersonal” and of drawing people apart, even as it brings people together in terms of the increased ease of communication in real-time or across large distances. However, responses provided by both faculty and student participants frequently highlighted several positive social outcomes from the move to remote teaching platforms. This includes increased empathy (including cross-cultural empathy) for students, as expressed by a faculty participant, and the increased guidance and support that, in their responses, student participants stated that they received from their instructors.

Finally, both students and faculty members were obliged, as a result of the sudden and unanticipated shift to remote platforms, to make adjustments to their work habits. For example, faculty participants described the increased difficulties that the lack of face-to-face interaction with students posed. Similarly, student participants described improvements in their ability to study, even if the difficulties that online learning posed to issues such as their ability to focus and their ability to keep their educational life separate from their personal and family lives, were also highlighted.

Due to the difficulties in convening in-person focus groups and utilizing university facilities in the midst of strict pandemic mitigation measures in Greece, and with a corresponding lack of resources resulting from pandemic-related financial cutbacks on the part of institutions of higher education, it was difficult to conduct a broader study that would involve focus groups

encompassing more participants from the same university and/or from additional universities and from countries other than Greece. The research team acknowledges this limitation; but, nevertheless, calls attention to the rich observations made by the focus group participants of this study, which may reflect broader sentiments about the impact of the pandemic and the corresponding move to remote educational environments, on cross-cultural understanding, empathy, and the educational process itself. The themes identified in the responses received from the focus group participants also generate potential avenues for future research, as will be indicated below.

As the strict pandemic measures appear to be giving way to a return to “normality” (albeit altered, with lasting impacts from the pandemic), future studies can examine the extent to which new educational qualities (such as cross-cultural empathy) attained during this period will demonstrate longevity, particularly with regards to a return to in-person learning. Furthermore, future studies can examine the extent to which both academics and students may continue adjusting to online learning contexts or if the challenges addressed by both groups will remain a ‘constant’ that, in some form, may be ‘inherent’ to the online teaching and learning environment. For instance, will changes in instructors’ pedagogical approaches and a potentially renewed emphasis on empathy continue to positively impact students, and will this be the case even after a return to physical classrooms occurs? Finally, future research can also examine the extent to which curricula changes enacted during the pandemic period will themselves demonstrate longevity (or not).

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Dr. Fotini Diamantidaki for her important contributions to this work.

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Appendix A

Questions to faculty members:

1. How has the pandemic affected your teaching and communication with students?
2. As an instructor, what things were you doing previously that you don't do now with students and/or what teaching elements are now more difficult to achieve?
3. Do you think that there are challenges to overcome as an instructor in the classroom in relation to cross-cultural activity as a result of the pandemic??
4. How do you think we can make progress in relation to cross cultural links, now and post-pandemic?

Follow-up questions:

5. **VALUES:** Would you say that you value human dignity, human rights, and cultural diversity to a greater degree as a result of the pandemic, or not? Could you please justify your reply?
6. **ATTITUDES:** Do you feel more open, respectful, and tolerant to people from different cultures as a result of the pandemic?
7. **KNOWLEDGE:** Do you feel that your knowledge and critical understanding of the world (politics, law, human rights, culture, religions, history, media, economies, environment, and sustainability) has improved/been strengthened as a result of the pandemic?

Questions to students

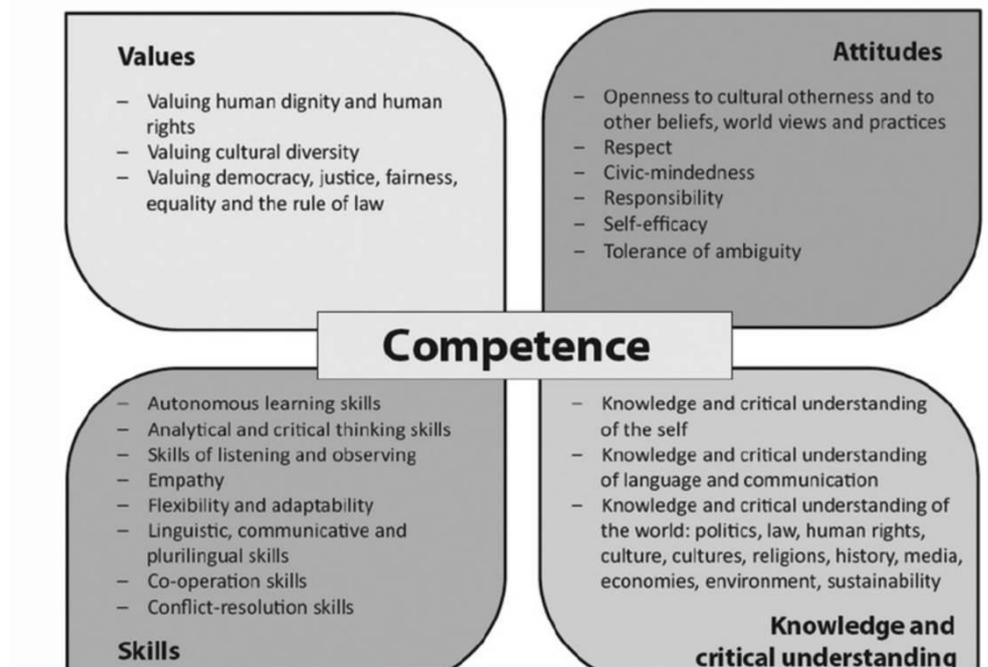
1. How has the covid-19 pandemic impacted your studies and your communication with others (professors and other students)?
 - a. Which **cross-cultural elements** were different, inside the classroom/academic environment, before the pandemic and what has changed now?
 - b. Autonomous learning skills
 - c. Analytical and critical thinking skills
 - d. Skills of listening and observing
 - e. Empathy
 - f. Flexibility and adaptability
 - g. Linguistic communicative and plurilingual skills
 - h. Conflict-resolution skills
2. Refer to positive and not-so-positive elements of how the pandemic has impacted your studies and communication with others.
3. How has the move to online teaching affected the course for you? How are you performing your academic work differently as a result?
4. In which way have changes to the taught curriculum impacted cross-cultural links in the academic setting?
5. Do you think your professors have responded effectively to the pandemic during the course regarding their teaching and pedagogical practice? Regardless of your answer, please provide an explanation.

Follow-up questions:

6. **VALUES:** Would you say that you value human dignity, human rights, and cultural diversity to a greater degree as a result of the pandemic, or not? Could you please justify your reply?
7. **ATTITUDES:** Do you feel more open, respectful, and tolerant to people from different cultures as a result of the pandemic?
8. **KNOWLEDGE:** Do you feel that your knowledge and critical understanding of the world (politics, law, human rights, culture, religions, history, media, economies, environment, and sustainability) has improved/been strengthened as a result of the pandemic?

Figure 1

Framework Intercultural Competence



Competences for democratic culture Source: Council of Europe, 2018b, vol. 1, p. 38.
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