

## UNIVERSITY EDUCATION AND THE NEW TEACHING CONFIGURATIONS DURING PANDEMICS

Georgeta STEPANOV<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Prof. PhD, Moldova State University, Chişinău, Romania

Corresponding author: Georgeta Stepanov; e-mail: stepanovgeorgeta@gmail.com

### Abstract

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the higher education system, including on the journalistic university training was able to emphasize the favourable circumstances for the development of a new form of university pedagogy – the convergent higher education. In this context, the teaching-learning-assessment methodologies and the traditional rules of organizing university training were redacted and obtained new valences and the parties involved in the teaching processes were determined, in order to deal with the challenges, to remodel their activity and communication and to develop new professional skills, mainly of a digital nature. The new configuration of university teaching represents the research object of the present study, whose main purpose is to establish its advantages and disadvantages. In this context, the scientific interest axis is centred: 1) on the changes which took place in the university teaching processes, as a result of the pandemic effects on the education system, and which triggered changes in the scientific-didactic strategies, practices and techniques, traditionally applied in higher education, 2) on the characteristics of the convergent type of teaching, which got extrapolated and started to be applied on a global scale under the influence of the expansion and amplification of the pandemic crisis and 3) on the changes that took place in the identity profile of the teaching staff, following the pandemic effects on their professional activity.

**Keywords:** *convergent higher education, journalistic university training, pandemic effects, the scientific and teaching staff, students, identity profile, professional skills, advantages, disadvantages.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

As a professional field, journalism is very dynamic, fluid and even unstable, “sensitive to social and technological changes, a fact which makes the purpose of the activity, its role and functions to vary from one historical period to the other and from one country to the other” (SPLICHAL & SPARKS, 1994). This is why the concept of journalistic higher education differs from one country to the other and from one historical period to the other and it is influenced

by the existing political, social and economic relationships in the society in which it takes place. The most important and significant mutations at a global level in the field of mass-media and in that of journalistic higher education were determined by political, social and technological changes.

When it comes to the historical development of journalism, the political changes triggered new philosophies regarding the place and functions of journalism within the society – ideologies which are based on principles referring not only to the relationships between individuals and the media institutions, but also on the relationships between the state and the media institutions. The social changes projected new theoretical approaches to the role of journalism as a social activity and generated new social relationships between press, state and nongovernmental institutions, whereas the technological changes brought about new production and broadcast opportunities for the journalistic information, as well as for the interaction between the media consumers and the journalistic products. In relationship to the journalistic higher education, the political changes generated throughout its history more conceptual than functional changes, which mainly manifested in relationship with the goals of university training, with the contents of the curricula and of the teaching aids used in professional training processes, as well as with the established finalities. The social changes put into practice different theoretical approaches regarding the role of the higher education institutions in the society and generated new relationships among these types of professional training institutions and different layers, categories and groups of social individuals. The

technological changes expended the limits of knowledge, offering a larger and larger access to information resources, made the teaching processes more dynamic and redefined the relationships and the interaction between students and teachers.

The ideologies of the political regimes and the social politics which regulate the relationships between various subsystems of a society mark the conceptual aspects of the media institutions, leaving their mark on the editorial policies, the approach angles and the journalistic contents that they use in the information circuit, and the technological achievements mark the functional aspects of the media institutions, usually influencing the operational practices of producing and broadcasting journalistic products, as well as the expression forms of the press materials. The same situation occurs in the field of journalistic higher education: the political and social metamorphosis usually trigger conceptual reshufflings and the technological ones – functional fluctuations which, in time, may lead to some complex innovations. In favourable circumstances, the connections between the conceptual and functional reshufflings may project new higher education pedagogies and even some new educational paradigms.

Any principle change in the relationships which define the activity of the social systems, including that of the media system and of the education system may and it has to be analysed taking into account the causality relationship, since of the world's processes and relationships are organized on the basis of cause and effect. This being said, the metamorphosis which took place in 2020, in the journalistic and higher education teaching processes, as a result of the technological changes, determined by the evolution of the new information technologies and of the social changes triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, are analysed taking this idea into account.

## 2. CONTEXT

---

The significant challenge that the journalistic environment confronted itself with and still continues to confront itself with stems from the “conservation” of social life, in the absence of

valuable and social significant public events, as well as in the limited access of journalists in the environments in which social collective activities still take place – a situation caused exclusively by the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to adapt and exist in the new circumstances, the media institutions, in general, and journalists, in particular, were forced to reanalyse the traditional professional activities and to adopt new labour standards. Therefore, the pandemic effects on the field of mass-media were direct and strong and they triggered conceptual changes, when it comes to the organisational culture of the press institutions, the roles and the professional identity of journalists. At the same time, they also generated functional changes in the institutional activity of the editorial staff and in the professional activity of journalists, modifying the traditional creation itinerary and the classical journalistic production practices. All these elements allow us to assume that the pandemic effects represent long-term effects.

The pandemic effects represent some long-term effects not only in practical journalistic environment, but also in the theoretical one, meaning in the journalistic higher education. This pandemic imposed some new rules of activity both for the media institutions and for all levels of teaching, making them adapt, at a fast pace, to the new-created circumstances. “The educational community presented a prompt reaction and adaptation capacity to the new circumstances imposed by an objective factor – the pandemic crisis, whose proportions difficult to anticipate and nobody was ready to do so. Although for the Republic of Moldova the online teaching was not very familiar (in the sense that, occasionally, some teachers had previously used these forms of teaching), it proved that the new circumstances made everyone accept and use the new achievement manner of the educational process” (IAȘCENCO, 2020).

In the case of higher education teaching, the pandemic situation emphasized the subject of reconceptualising the teaching process, especially of the classical teaching-learning-assessment forms, which was solved by implementing a hybrid teaching format, which cumulated the face-to-face teaching activities with the online ones. As a result, besides the traditional forms of

organisation such as: frequency studies, low-frequency studies and distance studies, a new form has emerged - convergent studies.

Convergent university teaching appeared and affirmed itself following the massive implication of modern information technologies in the teaching processes, and therefore it can be defined as a highly technologized teaching process. It proposes a relatively new approach to knowledge transfer, to selecting, producing and broadcasting teaching materials and the professional training methodology, as the technology mediated teaching-learning-assessment represents the most important process. A main condition for the convergent higher education teaching is that the parties involved in the teaching processes have multidisciplinary professional skills, especially digital skills which could successfully facilitate the teaching-learning-assessment processes.

The convergent higher education massively expended in 2020 following the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and of its global effects which still continue to be strong and direct. Due to the fact that it occurred in an alert pace and in a relatively short timeframe, the university teaching technologization process had many shortcomings. Despite all this, it offered complexity and polyvalence to all teaching activities, as well as new organisation opportunities for the teaching processes. The convergent higher education became a reality and imposed new teaching-learning-assessment methodologies and new rules of organising university training which, taken all together, presented new horizons and new university pedagogies and even a new educational paradigm.

At first, the perceptions of the teaching and scientific staff when it came to the convergent higher education, with its benefits and disadvantages, were extremely different and sometimes even contradictory. Some of them, usually the young teaching staff, relatively recently trained in the university teaching processes, enthusiastically accepted the new practices and forms of activity and fully valued them, being convinced that they improve the quality of the educational processes and make the teaching processes more efficient. Others, especially the teaching staff which were

professionally qualified before the appearance of the new technologies and who have worked for many years in the traditional university training system, had a sceptical attitude towards this hybrid form of organisation, perceiving it as a threat to the classical higher educations. Later on, the number of reluctant members of the teaching staff decreased and this led to a development of new digital skills and to the gaining of exploitation experience when it comes to the opportunities offered by this new teaching-assessment model. "As strange as it might sound, but the pandemic crisis contributed to the appearance of new opportunities for many teachers, who were able to gain new technological skills, and this represented a huge advantage. In our opinion, distance education represents a reality and it will not disappear once the global pandemic crisis ends" (IAȘCENCO, 2020).

The training of skills specific to the activities in the convergent system and their usage in practice contributed to the development of the professional profile of the teaching and scientific staff, offering them identities of a high level of complexity. Expending and, in some cases, even forming the digital culture of the teaching staff offered polyvalence to the functionality of the university training process, but at the same time it showed the necessity to learn throughout life in order to continuously develop digital skills. Lifelong learning has become an important requirement in order to succeed in the technology-dominated circumstances and this is why university managers once again focus on the issue of continuous development for the teaching and scientific staff. The continuous training during pandemic conditions was oriented especially towards organizing different training sessions, in which professors were taught how to use new technological variants and the multiple platforms available for the teaching process, in order to successfully face the pressures triggered by the new climate of the convergent teaching.

For all the scientific and teaching staff trained in university training, regardless of their attitudes towards this new teaching-assessment module, the convergent teaching means, on the one hand, new professional opportunities and, on the other hand, new challenges. The opportunities reside both in the diversification of the teaching

strategies applied in the academic teaching process and in the work tools (focusing mainly on modern information technologies) for collecting, preparing and broadcasting teaching contents and for the organisation of the professional training activities, and the challenges are determined by the fact that, during pandemic conditions, the teaching and scientific staff is confronted with changes in their professional routine and in the labour practices.

The convergent higher education presents a series of strengths – benefits, that the scientific and teaching staff valued very quickly and which they fully benefited from. At the same time, the convergent higher education also has a series of weaknesses – disadvantages, which bring prejudices to the quality of the educational services and to the organisational culture of the higher education institutions.

The strengths of the convergent learning derive both from the advantages of online activities and from those of the face-to-face ones. Therefore, the online activities can be achieved anytime and anywhere if the technical requirements are fulfilled, as they are much more flexible from the perspective of time and access rate, as students can independently go through the materials, being able to accelerate or slow down the learning process. Learning in university rooms, unlike the online one, facilitates informal relationships, on the horizontal, which allow students to better get to know one another, to communicate more efficiently among them, to immediately clarify some uncertainties to freely express their opinions. At the same time, learning in university classrooms facilitates informal, vertical, relationships because they offer professors the possibility to get to know their students better, to identify their strengths and weaknesses, to objectively assess their potential and to act as authentic mentors. Due to the direct and continuous interactions between the traditional learning and the online one, the actors have the possibility to alternate different practices with the purpose of making the university training processes more efficient.

The convergent teaching-learning-assessment presents a series of advantages: “an increased flexibility of the materials and the possibility to permanently be up to date with minimum costs;

the integration of a variety of learning environments; access to a multitude of other available resources through www; (...) an increased motivation and a much more active involvement of students in learning” (CAZACU & CAZACU 2007). The most significant benefits of convergent higher education stem from the fact that it facilitated the access of the participants in the current teaching activities, it made the achievement manner of the teaching contents more diverse, it expanded the distribution manner of these contents, it reduced their dissemination time, etc.

*Access to studies.* At the beginning, the virtual space was only used as an additional distribution platform for teaching materials, and later on it ended up being used in order to organise the distance teaching process, teaching-learning-assessment being completely performed online. The massive shift towards online of the teaching processes took place in 2020 as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic and it facilitated access to studies, both for teachers and for students, regardless of their location. Access to studies was also facilitated by the possibility for the actors to develop their own itinerary and to follow their own work rhythm: “... students read the learning materials in the rhythm they choose and whenever they want. The learning location is freely chosen – it depends on the means used to distribute the learning materials (learning at the workplace, at home, etc.)” (LINK-ACADEMY, n.d.).

*The distribution of information.* The expansion of the speed and the diversification of the distribution paths of the teaching contents represents another advantage of convergent higher education. The technical conditions offered by the new space have considerably expanded the speed and have diversified the distribution paths of the teaching contents.

Currently, the scientific, the teaching staff or the administrators can, very quickly transmit, using a single click, anytime, anywhere and to anyone different teaching information. It can be directed to a single student or to several students at the same time. The transmission of information in online created user groups facilitates the access of a significant number of students to this content. “As groups exist, members can exchange experiences, opinions or information. They can

also receive real-time feedback from the group administrator or from their colleagues. Thus, there is also a virtual interaction and not only an individual learning" (BOAMBĂ, n.d.).

The parties involved in the convergent teaching processes have unlimited access to all information uploaded on the educational platforms used, anywhere and anytime. Teachers can, using quite simple operations, fill in, simplify or expend their teaching contents and students are able to access them with one simple click. This type of training offers an excellent opportunity to study at any time of the day, even in the most unconventional moments or places (for example, in means of transport). The actors sync their actions in order to meet physically, at scheduled hours in university classrooms, in order to clarify the uncertain elements and to strengthen the online material.

*The didactic contents.* The convergent higher education offers teachers the possibility to diversify the ways in which they develop their teaching materials by using multimedia, for example, by using audio or video techniques. The internet allows them to send students different types of virtual materials such as: images, videos, folders, journalistic material etc. These can be studied at home and analysed, debated and interpreted in classrooms, a fact that makes learning significantly more efficient. Despite the fact that, in a certain sense, this leads to "the universalisation" of the teaching tools used to produce contents belonging to different scientific fields, the convergent university training offers much larger opportunities to diversify the production methodologies for the teaching materials. In the same context, we mention that teachers have the opportunity to permanently update their already existent teaching contents in the online environment and students have the possibility to immediately access these contents.

The disadvantages of the convergent higher education are mainly connected to the already existent relationships between the actors and the homogenous character of the practical professional training activities.

*Activity conditions.* The pandemic crisis had some accentuated negative effects when it comes to the social distancing of the parties involved in

the learning process. It led to the reorganisation of university training and this generated changes at the level of the conditions of professional activity. The teaching process, which was traditionally organised in university classrooms and which fully exploited all institutional capacities, was partially substituted by a distance learning mediated by information technologies. This fact created new contexts for the exercise of duties and new conditions of activity because the parties involved in the teaching-learning-assessment activities existed in different environments and everyone acted on his own. They do not directly interact, basically they do not know each other and they do not share the same emotions and this makes the creative organization of the teaching activities difficult. The fact that actors do not possess means with the same technical parameters also represents an impediment in the efficient organisation of the teaching process. We also mention that, under these circumstances, communication between the parties involved in the teaching-learning-assessment activities has more of a linear than of a circular character, and it usually takes place on the vertical side, from the teacher to the student and the other way round.

The alternation between face-to-face and online activities, a specific process for the convergent higher education, forces the parties involved in the teaching activities to act in different circumstances and to quickly shift from one educational reality to the other. The lack of time to adapt to these fluctuations is a severe handicap of this new model of professional training.

*Institutional relationships.* The pandemic crisis also led to some negative effects in the institutional relationships, traditionally existent in the university environments and in the organisational culture of the higher education institutions. The time dedicated to face-to-face educational activities in the convergent training is not enough for the parties involved in the professional training processes to socialize, to get integrated in the group and to create emotional bonds. In the university environment there have always been formal and unformal relationships. "Unformal relationships are direct, personal, less regulated and controlled; their regulation is done

using diffuse social norms. The formal relationships are socially defined and regulated by norms and codes. In the informal relationships, individuals establish a relationship with their entire set of statuses and roles; in the formal relationships, individuals participate only with the help of certain statuses and roles, those that include their personality" (ADMINSTRARE.INFO, 2019).

Once the convergent university education is established, informal relationships, which usually ensure the human dimension of any type of institutions relationships, are greatly influenced, mainly because of the lack of direct contact between the participants in the teaching process. Therefore, the spiritual connection between the teacher and his students is undermined, as he stops representing a role model for his students. The marginalization of informal relationships undermines the human dimension of university education and reduces the potential of the school to shape human destinies, transforming higher education into a huge market for educational services, where the teaching industries are oriented to produce specialists in strict accordance with the requirements of the labor market. In the result of these practices, there are some institutional relationships in higher education completely different from the previous ones, in which the traditional values were redefined, reshaped and updated. According to them, university professors do no longer have to teach the audience and to offer it knowledge, they have to train and guide it with the help of links towards various websites which contain topic-related information. The teaching and scientific staff are worried about the situation created and they consider that these relationships are harmful because "the quality of any educational system is determined, among others, by the quality of the human resources within the system, teachers representing the most efficient variable in the training process of human personality" (STEPANOV, 2020).

*The homogenous character of the practical professional training activities.* The effects of the pandemic are also visible in the operational practices, applied in the training process of the future journalists. If, prior to the beginning of the

COVID-19 pandemic, the students' practical activities were highly heterogeneous, being organised not only in classrooms but also in laboratories and in the field, at the time and place of certain events, at the moment the situation changed considerably. Social isolation and the distance organization of the professional training of the future journalists made it impossible to carry out practical activities with students on the field, in real time and space. It is well-known that these types of activities develop the future journalists' creation skills the best and form a minimum number of skills, which they definitely need to possess in their future jobs. Therefore, university professional training shifted from a dynamic process, achieved in university classrooms and beyond them, into a static one, easily achievable anywhere by using various gadgets, a fact also presented by researchers V. and A. Cazacu, who identified some other disadvantages of technology mediated learning, such as:

- The student's state of isolation (which does not allow him to preserve the right level of motivation on the long run);
- Difficulties in organizing the time for study;
- Finding the right balance;
- The lack of motivation;
- The lack of teaching resources that the student is used with;
- Difficulties in developing special skills (CAZACU & CAZACU 2007).
- They state that the development and implementation of an distance learning course in the curricula might meet the specific problems of this new model of professional training.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

Generalising the above-mentioned aspects, we notice that the COVID-19 pandemic triggered some essential changes in the contemporary higher education landscape and implicitly in the professional activity of the teaching and of the scientific staff. The pandemic effects were strong and direct and they therefore created favourable circumstances for the formation of the convergent university teaching – a hybrid form of organisation

for the university studies which cumulate both the traditional teaching activities, based on the direct contact between the parties involved, and the online activities, focused on the indirect contact, mediated by technology. Due to the fact that the didactics of higher education acquired new values, the actors were determined to reshape their activity practices and to find their place in the new configuration of university education, which, becoming a reality, called for redefining the traditional teaching-learning-assessment methodologies and the rules for organizing university training.

### References

---

- ADMINSTRARE.INFO (2019) *Social relations: conceptual delimitations, types of social relations* [in Romanian]. Available from: <https://administrare.info/administrare-publica/1349-relatiile-sociale-delimitari-conceptuale-tipuri-de-relatiile-sociale> [19 March 2021].
- BOAMBĂ, E. (n.d.) *Online learning - advantages and disadvantages* [in Romanian]. Available from: <https://www.dascalidedicati.ro/invatarea-online-avantaje-si-dezavantaje/> [30 March 2021].
- CAZACU, V. & CAZACU, A. (2007) *Distance learning - a new perspective of education in the Republic of Moldova* [in Romanian]. Available from: [https://ibn.idsi.md/sites/default/files/imag\\_file/Studii%20la%20distanta\\_o%20noua%20perspectiva%20a%20invatamintului%20in%20RM.pdf](https://ibn.idsi.md/sites/default/files/imag_file/Studii%20la%20distanta_o%20noua%20perspectiva%20a%20invatamintului%20in%20RM.pdf) [30 March 2021].
- IAȘCENCO, T. (2020) *Distance learning: advantages, disadvantages, problems* [in Romanian]. Available from: <https://cuvintul.md/18411/invatamantul-la-distanta-avantaje-dezavantaje-probleme/> [30 March 2021].
- LINK-ACADEMY (n.d.) *The benefits of distance learning* [in Romanian]. Available from: <https://www.link-academy.com/avantajele-invatamantului-la-distanta> [30 March 2021].
- SPLICHAL, S. & SPARKS, C. (1994) *Journalists for the 21st century: tendencies of professionalization among first-year students in 22 countries*. Norwood, New Jersey: Ablex Pub.
- STEPANOV, G. (2020) *Personnel policy in the field of journalistic higher education in the Moldovan SSR (1966-1980)* [in Romanian]. In: Rotaru, L., Xenofontov, I.V., eds. *A utopia that has become a reality: higher education in Moldovan SSR - from planning to reproduction, volume I*. Chișinău: Lexon-Prim