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Οι συναισθηματικές και ψυχολογικές επιπτώσεις της πανδημίας στους Έλληνες φοιτητές ένα χρόνο μετά

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The emotional and psychological effects of the pandemic on Greek students a year later

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Abstract

The psychological and emotional impact of remote teaching due to the pandemic on students is the subject that was investigated in the present study. More specifically, our aim is to trace the emotions and psychological effects on students, one year after the start of the emergency remote teaching in universities. A qualitative research approach to address this topic was chosen, with the use of the semi-structured interview for data collection/production. The participants were thirty (30) students, men and women from various universities and departments throughout Greece, who had taken part in distance teaching and examination. The most important findings of the research were that the feelings of the students during the interruption of the educational function were mostly negative, including anxiety, insecurity and fear, while the general prevailing feelings of students during distance learning were mixed: sadness and tiredness, but also confidence, security and familiarity. Finally, the participants' observations on distance examinations were also mentioned, giving a useful overview of the remote teaching and learning experience according to students, one year after.

Keywords: *higher education, distance teaching and learning, distance examination, psychological effects, emotional effects, university students, pandemic, COVID-19*

Introduction

The unprecedented situation of the recent pandemic affected humanity in all sectors (social, economic, etc.) and clearly also education. For the education, it was decided in March 2020 to temporarily suspend the operation of all public and private schools of all levels, tuition centers and any kind of educational structure. The sudden suspension of all the levels of education led to a crisis in the educational system of Greece, as its operation could not be fulfilled, however, efforts were made to respond immediately to this state of emergency (Karalis, 2020). The sudden suspension of schools, as well as the lack of information to students, initially created confusion among students and many unanswered questions, although the restoration of the educational process was immediate.

More specifically, regarding the higher education on which the present work focuses, the state acted immediately and announced in a short period of time that the semester

will be completed and that the students will continue their studies normally, although the face-to-face education was suspended. Every university in Greece was given the opportunity to teach online, as well as the legal framework was changed for some exceptional circumstances (Karalis & Raikou, 2020). It was decided that the students would attend the lectures of their school via the internet and for this reason various platforms were used (skype for business, zoom, etc.).

The Ministry of Education in its instructions stated, among other things, that distance learning could not be limited only to the asynchronous way of education, but it was necessary to be accompanied by teaching with asynchronous teaching, that is online synchronous teaching, videotaped lectures (Ministry of Education, 2020). Thus, higher education made a transition from traditional face-to-face to a distance made of teaching in order to meet the educational needs of students and not to delay their studies.

The transition to distance teaching at Greek university

According to our personal lived experience, the response of the university community was immediate in terms of the teaching staff, structures and services of the institution. At the same time, the teaching staff of each university continued to be informed and trained on the use of teleconferencing software by conducting webinars for distance education and the pedagogical utilization of the distance teaching system. Therefore, through seminars, the teaching staff of the Universities was trained on the use of teleconferencing platforms, as well as on the way in which from now on they will teach students.

In addition to the training of teachers, students were also informed with instructions for using the teleconferencing software, so that they have the necessary knowledge required to participate in distance education. The students, already from the first two weeks of the transition, actively participated in the online courses and at the same time the access of the asynchronous education platform (e-class) had doubled (University of Patras, 2019-2020).

According to our personal lived experience, the way teaching was carried out until before the pandemic radically changed. Although in the initial stage of the pandemic, distance education was presented as a solution of necessity, now it seems that students will be called to get used to these conditions of education, since even a year after the outbreak of the pandemic, teaching is done entirely in the form of distance education, with negative consequences for the psychology of students.

According to the literature, the terms of distance education created in students additional stress from what they already had to face (Yang, Tu, & Dai, 2020). In addition to managing the major change in the educational function, they also had to deal with practical issues such as lack of necessary equipment (internet connection, computer, etc.), as well as the consequences of these shortcomings, such as not attending their courses. In addition to stress, one of the most common feelings of students during distance education was the anxiety about whether to miss their semester, how to continue their studies and most importantly, what solution will be found for laboratory courses as well as internships. In some cases, a significant percentage of students showed increased symptoms of depression and the mental health of students was significantly affected by the pandemic (Konstantopoulou & Raikou, 2020).

In addition, the return to their paternal home and the abrupt change of their daily life has created many psychological difficulties for the students. Students who experienced the opposite of returning to their paternal home, that is forced living

without their families, due to exclusion, were even more likely to experience (twice) depression (Ghazawy et al., 2020). Therefore, quarantine and social distance combined with the health threat posed by the pandemic, cause negative emotions, especially in students who are going through the phase of emerging adulthood, to which we will refer later (Konstantopoulou, Pantazopoulou, Iliou, & Raikou, 2020). Therefore, when students experience the period of emerging adulthood, which is a period with intense developmental challenges, and at the same time the pandemic, the levels of psychological discomfort increase.

Regarding the exams, in each university it was decided that the exams initially of the spring semester 2019-2020 and then of all the other semesters until today, to be conducted with the distance method. It was decided that the written or oral examinations of the courses / exercises would be conducted using the means and ways that ensure the inviolable and uniform way of examination of all students. More specifically, the exams were conducted and are still conducted until today in the same way as the courses, which is remotely and through the same platforms and with the addition of the asynchronous exams e-class platform in which students submitted their exams in writing (University of Patras, 2019-2020). More specifically, in the examination of each course, students are connected to the platform chosen by each teacher, divided into "groups" if there is a large number of students, if not, the division of groups is not necessary, and then with the help of supervisors, students are certified. The certification process, due to the circumstances, takes place when each student opens his computer camera when he hears his name from the supervisors, and then shows his student passport or police ID. The process with which the exam took place was well received by many students as it seemed to be a more self-friendly process compared to the traditional way the exam was conducted. But then it seemed that it was not such an easy process because the examination of most courses would be quite limited in time and with several questions, so that students did not have enough time to share answers. The fact of limited time, combined with the urgent need for all students to have in addition to the necessary equipment (computer, camera, etc.) very good internet connection, created a lot of stress, which wouldn't have been with the in-person exams.

Common characteristics of young people: Emerging Adulthood

This generation, in addition to living in a period of technological progress, experiences the economic and political crisis and the general instability that prevails in society, during their emerging adulthood. Although being a young generation who experienced a period of opportunities and increased expectations of emerging adulthood, now due to the prevailing economic, social and political instability, they show a pessimistic approach to their life prospects (Kamarianos, Adamopoulou, Lambropoulos, & Stamelos, 2020). The members of this generation, in an effort to manage the crisis and the instability that prevails and causes them stress, constantly try to be informed and want to determine their own future. They are informed by the technological means to which they have access and are looking for solutions and for paths that concern their future (Raikou & Konstantopoulou 2021).

In short, the characteristics of today's young generation, the Gen Z generation, are more complex than previous generations of young people in this age group. This is because young people want to have the ability to constantly learn and have new experiences and so turn to the technological means offered to them. In addition, they seem to have a natural comfort with new technologies, as they have become accustomed to technology as a key part of their formal education. Now, technology is

a part of their daily life, as they use it for their communication, for their information, for their education and for their entertainment (Kamarianos, Adamopoulou, Lambropoulos & Stamelos 2020).

According to research conducted in recent decades in the field of developmental psychology, a distinct period has been defined in the development of each individual, which follows adolescence but does not have all the characteristics found in adulthood. Studying the specific age phase that most young people go through, Arnett defined it as emerging adulthood (2000). Arnett has identified five dimensions of emerging adulthood which are: a) exploring the identity of each young person, b) the period of instability due to the constant search for identity c) focusing on oneself d) the sense of the intermediary, that is, between adolescence and adulthood, where regressions occur constantly and e) the period of probabilities and increased expectations.

This is the period of time during which a person passes from adolescence to adulthood, and which is a separate phase in the life of each individual and not as a simple transfer to adulthood. This is the age between 18-30 years old, when most young people are students, do not have a stable profession and many do not work at all, and are mainly financially supported by their parents. At this point it would be fair to mention that adulthood is determined by other criteria besides age, which are the acceptance of self-responsibility and the initiative of independent decisions, criteria that young people of this age have not yet realized that they have, since the views of their parents still influence them to a great extent (Raikou & Konstantopoulou, 2021).

Research objective

According to current data, after the study of literature, there was a lack of emotion and psychological effects research in students a year after the outbreak of the pandemic. As students continue to be educated entirely through the distance learning method, it is important to investigate how they were affected emotionally and psychologically.

In order to help address this shortcoming, what is happening today is being explored for the emotional and psychological impact of students during a pandemic and by continuing e-learning for more than a year. More specifically, the purpose of our research was to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the feelings of students experiencing distance education for more than a year?
2. What are the students' views on distance teaching and distance exams?

Methodology

The specific research was carried out based on the characteristics and elements of a qualitative approach. A qualitative approach was chosen in this research, as an attempt to investigate a contemporary social phenomenon (Robson & McCartan, 2016). More specifically, the subtle aspects of the characteristics of the emotional and psychological effects of students due to the distance education that was a consequence of the pandemic are explored. Specifically, students, who were the research sample, were interviewed and we recorded all the views of the sample extensively for each research question.

The conduct and analysis steps of the research were as follows:

- Initially, we investigated the international and Greek research which was relevant to the subject we are studying.
- Then, the research methodology was chosen, as well as the questions of the interview that would follow.

- The recorded interviews then took place, followed by their transcription.
- In order to process the data, a qualitative analysis of the students' answers to the questions asked during the interview was performed. For data analysis, a standard analysis in three consecutive steps was followed, same as the analysis of all the international and Greek research which we have investigated,.
 - a) In the first step, the students' opinions are coded by creating original categories, which were established through the analysis of their answers to the open-ended questions of the interview. From this analysis, categories emerged for every question that described the students' answers.
 - b) These categories were then mapped to the dimensions of emerging adulthood, as described above.
 - c) Then, the synthesis and an extensive description of the emotions and psychological effects of the students was carried out one year after the start of the pandemic.

Finally, the conclusions of this research were conducted.

Sample

The sample consists of 30 undergraduate and postgraduate students at Greek universities. We performed the convenient snowball recruitment strategy through abandonments in social media we performed. There were 2 postgraduate students and 28 undergraduate students. Also, out of the 30 students, 23 were women and 7 men aged 19 to 29 with an average age of 22 years. Out of the 30 participants, 4 study at Department of Educational Sciences and Early Childhood Education, 2 at the Department of Computer Engineering and Informatics of Patras, 2 at the Department of Mathematics of Patras, 2 at the Department of Agricultural Economics and Development of the Agricultural University of Athens, 1 at the Department of Civil Engineering, University of Peloponnese, 1 at the Department of Nursery of Ioannina, 1 in the Master of Classical Archeology at the University of Crete, 1 in Pharmacy of Patras and 1 in the Pedagogy of Primary Education of the University of Patras. Therefore, there are 6 participants from the School of Humanities, 2 participants from the School of Natural Sciences, 2 participants from the School of Health Sciences, 3 participants from the School of Engineering and 2 participants from the School of Agricultural Sciences. Also, we reassured all students that their interviews were anonymous and that none of their names will be included in the research. Also none of the participants was paid for interviewing purposes and all of them were informed consent.

Results

The emotions of the students during the interruption of the educational process in March 2020 were mixed, with the negative emotions prevailing. From the analysis of the findings (Table 1) it seems that the majority (16/30) felt insecure and anxious about the delay of their studies. Characteristics of insecurity stated by an interviewee: *"In the beginning I was very insecure, because I thought I would miss the semester, especially with the internship, that because it would not be the internship, I would miss at least one semester of my studies"*. Also, regarding the stress, one participant stated the following: *"My feelings at that time were mainly stress mainly for the exams because I had few courses left for the degree."*

Table 1: Students' emotions during the interruption of the educational process

Emotions of students during the cessation of the educational process in March 2020	Number of students
Anxiety	16
Insecurity for the delay of studies	16
Comfortable/ relief because we would not have a lesson (avoiding travel to and from university)	14
Curiosity	13
Fear - anxiety	8
Routine change	3
Sadness	2

However, the emotions of the students after the restoration of the educational process changed, with the predominant positive ones (Table 2). According to the answers of the participants, it was found that 14 out of 30 felt happy. An indicative phrase was this: *"When the educational process was restored, I was very happy because a solution was found to do the lessons."* Still, 13 of the 30 students noticed that there was a good response time from the university. An example is a quote from an interviewee about the university's rapid response: *"For my department, the interruption of the educational operation lasted less than a week."*

Table 2: Students' feelings after the restoration of the educational process

Students' feelings after the restoration of the educational function	Number of students
Joy	14
Satisfaction for the university	13
Relief	12
Anxiety	6
Dissatisfaction	5
Confidence	2
Curiosity	1

Table 3 deals with the general feelings of students during distance learning. More specifically, the feeling of sadness is reported (7 out of 30). An indicative phrase about the feeling of sadness: *"There is a general sadness because I cannot go to university, talk to my classmates and generally that we are permanently behind a screen"*. Also, 6 out of 30 reported fatigue, while the same number of students (6/30) stated confidence due to their familiarity with distance learning. According to an

interviewee about the above feeling: "... I feel more confident about what to expect and how to handle distance learning."

Table 3: Students' emotions during distance learning

The general emotions of students during distance learning	Number of students
Sadness	7
Fatigue	6
Security/ safety due to familiarity with distance learning	6
Anxiety	4
Disappointment	4
Joy	3

Table 4 analyzes the serious problems faced by students during distance teaching. According to the responses, 12 of the 30 reported feeling isolated and alienated from their teachers and classmates, while the same number of participants said they had a slow internet connection. Regarding isolation / alienation, one interviewee stated: *"The main problems were the lack of immediacy between teacher-student, the resolution of questions and the constructive discussion in the room."* Regarding the slow internet connection, we mention the phrase of a participant: *"First of all is the issue of the internet, the fact that it is not always stable, that is, the technical problems."* Other issues reported were fatigue due to long hours in front of the computer, difficulty in understanding distance labs and theoretical courses, lack of familiarity with technological means, and lack of technical equipment.

Table 4: Problems created by distance learning

Problems created by distance learning	Number of students
Isolation/ Alienation (with the teacher-fellow students)	12
Slow internet connection	12
Fatigue due to many hours in front of the computer/ distraction	6
Difficulty in understanding distance workshops/ practices	5
Lack of familiarity with technological means (students-teachers)	5
Difficulty in understanding distance theoretical courses	5
Incomplete equipment	3

Regarding students' views on actions that would help address the problems created by distance teaching, 9 out of 30 said they did not know how. Of the others who suggested actions, 8 out of 21 reported a return to face-to-face teaching as understood by the following answer: "... *I believe that the reopening of universities (if we are talking about adults) would be desirable as the protection measures for the covid-19 pandemic could be observed, as is the case in many areas of work in which the operation has not been suspended.*" Other actions proposed were the provision of equipment and internet connection (4/21), smaller student groups (3/21) and training of teaching staff in technological issues (3/21).

Table 5 lists the main advantages and disadvantages of distance education as reported by the participants. The vast majority of students, 23 out of 30, answered that the main advantage of distance learning was the saving of time and money due to the fact that it is not necessary to travel to and from university. As one student characteristically states: "*In terms of advantages, first there is the comfort of home. There is also no longer the stress of moving.*" On the contrary, the predominant disadvantage, with 15 out of 30, was that of alienation, both between students and teachers but also students with their fellow students. As typically mentioned: "On the contrary, I consider that the main disadvantage is the teacher-centered learning and the lack of direct contact and intimacy with both teachers and fellow students."

Table 5: Advantages and disadvantages of distance education

Advantages and disadvantages of distance education	Number of students
Advantages	
Save time and money by not having to travel to and from university	23
Greater participation in distance learning courses	4
Contact with a new way of training	2
Disadvantages	
Alienation with teachers-students	15
Difficulty in understanding distance courses	8
Compulsory purchase of electronic equipment / internet connection	7
Fatigue due to many hours in front of the computer / distraction	6
Suspension of workshops/ practice	5
Difficulty in distance examination	3
Presence, but not substantial participation	2

Participants were asked to report proposed changes to the traditional way of teaching in universities, following the experience of distance education. Half of the interviewees (15/30) suggested a hybrid model of education with distant theoretical lectures and face-to-face practices and workshops, or the face-to-face lectures would be recorded and broadcast live to the students. That is, the students themselves would

be able to choose how to attend. This method was suggested by the students and seemed to be more friendly to them. As one participant characteristically stated: "I believe that practical lessons, even workshops, should be done in-person and lessons that are theoretical, yes why not, with distance education." Other suggestions made include easier communication with teachers (3/30) and faster posting of course material (2/30).

Table 6: Emotions of students during their participation in distance teaching

Emotions of students during their participation in distance teaching	Number of students
Boring/ Non-interactivity	14
Fatigue in the end	12
Enthusiasm in the beginning	6
Anxiety because questions are not resolved / cannot cope	4
Distraction / inability to concentrate (due to external emotions)	3
Embarrassment (if there are open cameras)	2
Indifference	1

Table 7 summarizes students' views on June and September 2020 exams. As noted in the table, there were two opposing views of students, with others supporting the difficulty and rigor and others the convenience of distance examinations. The 13 out of 30 supported the ease of the specific examinations, indicating the following: *"The examinations were done remotely, so there was the 'comfort' that we were in our 'space'. It was yes more student friendly as it was multiple choice ... ", " ... the questions we were asked to answer were easy, and it leaves me with a very positive note "*. In addition, half of the interviewees spoke about cheating, saying in particular: *"... during the exams many students cheated during the exams"*. However, about one in three participants (11/30) stated that the time available for exams was not sufficient, while other negative points identified were greater difficulty (5/30) and increased stress (5/30) compared to face-to-face exams.

Table 7: Students' opinion on the distance exams

Students' opinion on the distance exams	Number of students
cheating/ notes	15
Friendly/ convenient/ helpful/ easy/ teachers' leniency	13
Lack of sufficient time to respond	11
More difficult than in-person/ more demanding	5
Stressful	5
Strict grading	2

Went harmoniously	2
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Regarding the changes experienced by students during distance education (Table 8), the prevailing views were that it did not affect them at all (14/30), while those who reported a change, 12 reported that their attitude changed and hours dedicated to studying decreased and hours dedicated to reading decreased. More specifically, the students who gave the first answer, stated that: *"As a student I consider that I have remained the same and even a little more dedicated as I am in the last semester of my studies..."* and *«... I would not say that I have changed as a student, because as I said before I was quite familiar with computers and the internet and also, the only thing that has changed for me is that the lesson is done behind the computer. "Everything else seems the same to me. "Regarding the second most prevalent response of the students, they stated that: "The only thing that has changed a bit is the attitude for reading, as it is now minimal compared to previous years."*

Table 8: Changes in students resulting from distance education

Changes in students resulting from distance education	Number of students
No change	14
Lack of good mood/ time for studying	12
Familiarity with teleconferencing platforms	7
Greater participation	6
Increase studying hours	4
Frequent attending to distance learning class	4
Autonomy in learning	2
More efficient studying	2

Finally, regarding the impact of distance learning on student relationships, 17 out of 30 said that their relationships were indeed affected, mainly negatively, and that there was distancing and alienation. A student mentions characteristic: *"Yes unfortunately it affected us. At first it did not bother us that we were not together in person but as time went on, we got tired by our mobile phones and messages, and we wanted to meet in person."* However, we cannot ignore the fact that 12 of the 30 participants gave a negative answer to this question, saying characteristically: *"This period did not affect my relationship with other classmates as much, as there was daily communication mainly through messages, but also video calling whenever it was easy for everyone."*

Discussion

Initially, one of our findings concerned the feelings of students during the temporary halt of educational activities. The most common emotions were anxiety, insecurity about continuing studies, fear, anxiety and curiosity, due to the forced adaptation to rapid changes, that is the forced emergency transition of traditional to distance teaching. Other studies also report negative emotions caused to students by the

interruption of education (Karalis & Raikou, 2020) but also by quarantine in general, with predominant depression and stress (Konstantopoulou et al., 2020; Konstantopoulou & Raikou, 2020).

Regarding the feelings of the students after returning to the normal face-to-face educational process of the educational process, it seems that the joy and relief were predominant when it was announced by the university that the studies will continue with the method of distance education. These findings are consistent with similar research, in terms of the positive emotions that prevailed during the restart of education (Karalis & Raikou, 2020).

In reference to the general feelings of the students during the distance education we would say that they are mixed. On the one hand, they include negative emotions, such as sadness and fatigue, emotions that are in accordance with the results of another research (Konstantopoulou et al., 2020; Satpathy & Ali, 2020). On the other hand, there were positive emotions such as confidence, security and familiarity with the new way of teaching, which are justified since this generation, Generation Z, has the comfort of using the internet and therefore dealt easily with the transition from face-to-face to distance teaching (Kamarianos et al., 2020).

In addition, another issue that was investigated concerned the serious problems that tele-teaching created for students. The findings of the research showed that the main problems are located in psychological and technical fields. Specifically, as far as the psychological sector is concerned, the research showed as a significant problem the sense of isolation and alienation, while the technical problems they faced focus on the difficulties of connecting to the internet, a finding that agrees with other relevant research, where the technical connectivity is listed as a major one, creating anxiety in students (Al-Jarf, 2020).

Concerning the advantages and disadvantages of distance education of emergency distance education during the COVID-19 pandemic, the interviewees talked about saving time and money as the most important advantage on the one hand but pointed out disadvantages such as alienation between teachers and students, as well as difficulty in understanding the tele-lectures and purchase of electronic equipment and internet connection. Regarding alienation between teachers and students, similar findings are described in the research of Raikou, Kaltsidis, Kedraka, & Karalis (2020). Another of our findings refers to the students' emotions during their participation in a tele-education. It seemed that during the tele-teaching they feel bored and lack of interactivity, while towards the end of the online course they get tired. The above result is confirmed by the research of Al-Jarf (2020).

Finally, according to the students' views on distance examinations, it became apparent that there was extensive plagiarism as access to notes or communication between students and the exchange of answers was easier in face-to-face examinations. For this reason, there was the opinion that the exams were convenient, easy and graceful on the part of the teachers. It is worth mentioning that the lack of sufficient time to answer the exams was pointed out, however in the end the exams left a positive tone to the students.

Concluding thoughts

In summary, the specific research focused on the feelings of students experiencing distance education for more than a year, as well as their views on the specific way of teaching and distance examinations. The purpose of this research was to study and investigate the feelings of students and their psychological effects, one year after the forced cessation of the educational process of universities. The method we used in this

research was a qualitative approach since through it the subtle aspects of the characteristics of the emotional and psychological effects of the students due to the distance education are investigated.

Although we are talking about the Generation Z generation, which, as we have pointed out, demonstrate greater familiarity than other generations in adapting to new technological conditions, according to our findings, the emotions that we observed do not resemble that familiarity. This is because the most important findings of the research were that the feelings of the students during the interruption of the educational function were anxiety, insecurity for continuing their studies, fear and curiosity. In addition, the general prevailing feelings of students during distance education were negative, such as sadness and fatigue, but there were also positive ones such as confidence, security and familiarity with the new way of teaching. Furthermore, the prevailing views on the serious barriers posed by distance education were isolation, alienation and the technical problems that arose. Also, the main advantage of distance teaching was the saving of time and money, while the disadvantages include the alienation between teachers and students, the difficulty in understanding the lectures and the forced purchase of electronic equipment and internet connection. Finally, the general prevailing views of the students about the distance exams were that there was extensive cheating by the participant students, it was a convenient easy procedure, and there was leniency on the part of the teachers, although there was not enough time to answer the exams.

According to the above findings, it seems that every way of teaching has important elements to offer to the educational process. It is clear that face to face education could in any case be benefited and enriched with elements of online education, since, as it can be seen, students' views are positive towards the latter, while the students find it easy to use ICT. As a result, the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic can serve as a good reason for the renewal and development of teaching and learning in the university context, therefore, teaching methods that combine face to face with distance learning can enhance students' interest and participation in the lesson (Karalis & Raikou, 2020).

Among the limitations of the research, we should mention the quarantine conditions, where it was difficult to recruit the individuals of the sample since the pandemic conditions made the whole process more impersonal. Also, the interviews for safety reasons were conducted through a tele-conference platform, with connection problems during them, with the result that there is direct contact of a qualitatively different kind. In addition, another limitation was the fact that there was not enough bibliography, international or Greek, to investigate the issue of students' emotional and psychological impact of distance education due to pandemic one year after the transition from face-to-face to online teaching. As suggestion for further work, we would suggest conducting a corresponding research on students' feelings and views if distance education continues, especially in a more structured and organized way. Furthermore, this research could be used in comparison with other research that will study the feelings of students long after the start of distance education.

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