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Education During the Pandemic. Professional Training of final-year Social Work and Medical Students

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Abstract: In the context of global social and economic changes caused by Covid-19 pandemic, our study wishes to bring to light the main transformations within the training process of the future specialists in the medical and social field in the context of Romanian online education.
This study focused on the analysis of 211 questionnaires applied to final-year university Bachelor's degree and Master students at the Social Work speciality and medical speciality (Physical therapy and Rehabilitation) recruited from two public universities of the north-east part of Romania. The comparative study analysed the opinions expressed by the university students regarding the training of skills and competences, the involvement in practicum and volunteering activities during the emergency period, the intention to migrate towards another profession or another geographical area. Through this study, we outline a diagnosis regarding the impact of the state of emergency on the academic training process of final-year university students. The purpose of the study is to highlight the progress of the educational process (framework, accumulation of skills and theoretical and practical knowledge, educational and professional concerns and adapting strategies) in the context of the pandemic, among students within the two specialities in their final academic year. This a crucial year for the transition towards a professional career in the healthcare fields chosen. Our results allow us to formulate the conclusion that a high degree of concern regarding the perspectives of finding a job is accompanied by a high propensity towards working abroad after finishing the studies.

Keywords: *education, professional training, social work student, medical student, practical skills, volunteering activities, Covid-19.*

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1. Introduction

On May 11, 2020, World Health Organization declared the new SARS COV-2 virus as the new pandemic of the 21st century (UNESCO, 2020; WHO, 2020). Among the first measures taken in Romania (to prevent the spread of the virus), we note the enforcement of a 14-day quarantine for the social personnel and the beneficiaries, especially in residential centers (MAI, 2020). Other European countries reprised this model of providing social services (Truell & Crompton, 2020), which meant an immense sacrifice of personal life in favor of professional life. Subsequently, social work specialists provided specific assistance over the phone (Banks et al., 2020) and direct support (food, pharmaceuticals, and other emergency services to vulnerable populations).

In the medical sector, measures led to a limitation of hospital activities by delaying all medical procedures except for emergencies and by changing the profile of sections/hospitals within specialized medical units for various diseases to treat SARS COV-2 (Decree no. 195/2020).

In the context of the multiplication of SARS-COV 2 cases, under Art. 1 of Decision No. 6 of The National Committee for Special Emergency Situations (CNSSU), the courses of all pre-university school establishments were suspended starting with March 11, 2020 (with the possibility of extending the measure depending on the evolution of the situation).

Subsequently, Decree No. 195 of March 16, 2020 enforced the state of emergency in the entire Romanian territory. At this point, all aspects of human coexistence were impaired, from personal rights to economic activities. The keyword of this period in all state communications has been "social distancing". Article 49 of the Decree suspended courses in all educational establishments and units during the state of emergency. After this date, all the universities in Romania were forced to adapt their activity depending on the new realities.

In Romania, according to the provisions of the National Education Law (No. 1/2011), universities are autonomous, and they are entitled (while taking on public responsibility and observing the quality of the teaching act) to determine and implement their policies, programs, as well as their specific functioning schedule, according to the laws into force.

The professional training of social workers includes the initial formation ensured by higher education and the lifelong professional training through specific forms. The initial training aims to teach the professional skills necessary to access the profession, and it is part of the national

education system. The academic training process comprises - for the Social Work speciality, 3 years of bachelor's studies, 2 years of postgraduate training (i.e., master courses, which may be followed by 3 years of doctoral studies, according to the Bologna system). For the medical specialities, bachelor's studies take 3 to 6 years depending on the speciality, and they may be followed by master studies (2 years), by residency 4 to 6 years (depending on the speciality), and by doctoral studies (3 years).

The two universities in our study adopted a similar strategy, but there are also elements of differentiation, generated mainly by the speciality/clinical practical component.

Hence, The Board of Directors of "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University from Iasi (UAIC) decided – following the measures adopted by CNSSU on avoiding the spread of COVID-19 virus infection – to suspend face-to-face teaching activities from March, 13. The Decision stipulates that the classes shall be held online; those that are not compatible with the online setting shall be held at a subsequent date, following a schedule determined at the level of each faculty.

At the same time, "Grigore T. Popa" University of Medicine and Pharmacy Iasi (UMF) proposed a two-phase plan: a first phase for the period March 9-10, 2020, where they decided to suspend all activities with students altogether and the second phase in the period March 11 – March 31, 2020, when the courses at all faculties and specialities were conducted online, on the e-learning platform. The practical activities of the preclinical years were carried out according to the predetermined schedule, while the clinical internships were conducted as Case-Based Learning and Problem-Based Learning, in the learning spaces of the University, others than those in clinics (Consiliului de Administratie al Universitatii de Medicina si Farmacie „Grigore T. Popa" din Iasi, 2020).

Through the decisions mentioned above, both universities suspended practicum/volunteering activities for all study programs that included such activities in their curricula.

From the second half of March 2020, the teaching activity at all faculties and specialities (courses, practical works, and internships) took place online on the e-learning platform. Students were able to attend these activities even from their homes, but they had to accomplish all didactical tasks. In this period, trips by the teaching staff members in areas with high epidemiological risk and the outgoing and incoming student mobilities remained prohibited. This decision remained in force throughout the second semester of the academic year 2019-2020.

The new rules imposed – at the level of each higher education establishment – new procedures. They concerned the teaching and learning activities, organization of midterms, organization of graduation exams. They also referred to future academic training for high school students by developing new procedures concerning higher education admission.

The lockdown has made researchers shift their focus towards conducting online classes. Studies conducted in Europe concerning the state of emergency bring similar aspects to light. They analysed issues related to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on higher education admission, the adaptation of the teaching/learning process using online technology, the progress of practicum and volunteering activities (McFadden et al., 2020), challenges of the profession and students' concerns regarding the exercise of their profession (De Jonge et al., 2020), the use of digital technology by students (Papouli et al., 2020), the challenges of online teaching and the use of digital technology by the teachers (Sahu, 2020, Banks et al., 2020).

2. Method and objectives of the study

The study draws on the analysis of 211 questionnaires applied in the period of the state of emergency, May – June 2020.

We collected the data by administering an online questionnaire through Google Forms. After obtaining the informed consent without recording the IP addresses of the respondents/students, we asked them to fill out an anonymous online questionnaire.

The sample (Table 1) comprised 211 university students (Male = 15.2%; Female = 83.4%; N/A = 1.4%) in their final year as undergraduate students (69.7%) and master students (30.3%), from two specialities: Social Work (55.5%) "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University Iaşi (UAIC) and Physical Therapy from Medical Bioengineering Department (44.5%) – "Grigore T. Popa" University of Medicine and Pharmacy Iaşi (UMF).

The choice of the sample was determined by both the interest concerning graduation and the interest concerning practical activities in the case of final-year students. Indeed, it is worth considering that both universities suspended all practicum and volunteering (essential elements in the training and development of sociomedical professionals) activities through internal decisions. We analysed the items in relation to the following variables: cycle of studies, speciality, and income level.

Table 1. Sociodemographic Characteristics of Respondents

Variable	*n*	%
Gender [a]		
Male	32	15.2
Female	176	83.4
University		
UAIC – Social Work speciality	117	55.5
UMF – Medical speciality	94	44.5
Cycle of studies		
Bachelor's degree	147	69.7
Master studies	64	30.3
Income		
< 200 EUR/month	105	49.8
200-458 EU/month	68	32.2
> 458 EU/month	38	18

Note. [a] Three participants did not answer

Source: Authors' own conception

The study focused on final-year students from the Social Work and Physical Therapy specialities (the Department of Medical Bioengineering). This year involves the transition towards future professionals in fields concerning healthcare and direct interaction with the beneficiaries.

When we conducted the research, the students were in the final semester of their academic studies (spent almost entirely online).

Social work and medicine are deeply applied professions, while practice is a fundamental component in the educational path. Thus, in the context of the lockdown, students were unable to attend their practicum physically in the social and medical healthcare establishments.

Among the medical specialities, we chose Physical Therapy within the Medical Bioengineering department because Physical Therapy is a component of social and sociomedical services provided in Romania – day centres, residential centres, palliative centres for children, seniors, oncological patients, disabled people, etc (DPSS, 2019).

In our experience and from the experience of other projects (Apostol, 2017), the students from the specialities of Social Work and Physical Therapy participate in multidisciplinary intervention teams. They have similar concerns in the pandemic context. They regard limited access to practicum and volunteer places, skills practice in the direct interaction with the beneficiaries of services and the possibility of finding a job in their professional field.

In this context, the purpose of the study is to highlight the progress of the educational process (framework, accumulation of skills and theoretical and practical knowledge, academic and professional concerns and adapting strategies) in the context of the pandemic, among the final-year students at the two specialities, given that the final year is essential in their transition towards a professional career in the healthcare fields chosen.

As for the data collection tool, we have chosen a 13-item Likert scale with answers ranging from 1 to 4 or 5, where 1 means to a very great extent and 4 or 5 means to a very small extent. The tool measures student's self-perception regarding:

(**1**) the degree of theoretical knowledge and practical skills acquisition,

(**2**) the impact of limiting or suspending practicum and volunteering activities – throughout the state of emergency,

(**3**) concerns related to finding a job after graduation,

(**4**) the intention to change careers or to emigrate (as an adaptation strategy).

Our objectives in this study were as follows:

O1 - the comparative analysis of university students' opinion regarding concerns about the theoretical and practical training during the emergency period;

O2 - the comparative analysis of university students' opinion regarding the course of practicum and/or volunteering activities, the graduation;

O3 - the comparative analysis of university students' opinion regarding the intention to find a job in and after the emergency period;

O4 - the comparative analysis of university students' opinion regarding migration towards another training form or profession.

The comparative analysis of the opinions expressed by the final-year university students at the two universities regarding the training of skills and competences, the involvement in practicum and volunteering activities during the emergency period, and the intention to migrate towards another training form or profession provides a diagnosis regarding the impact of the state of emergency on students' training. The data were analysed through descriptive statistics, using the statistical software SPSS 17; we applied various tests, mainly Kruskall-Wallis and Mann-Whitney tests, to measure the statistical significance of the differences recorded among several population subgroups.

3. Findings and discussions

3.1. Students' perceived acquisition of theoretical knowledge and practical skills

Using a scale constructed on four answer levels, from 1 = *to a very great extent* to 4 = *to a very small extent*, respondents self-assessed their level of theoretical and practical knowledge acquired throughout their years of study (Table 2). By designing a global score regarding self-assessed competences acquired throughout the academic path, we have noticed that university students have a positive image of the competences and skills acquired throughout their academic years (Mean = 2.25; Std. dev. = 0.62). The multiple theoretical, methodological but also practical acceptations make it difficult to define the concept of competence. The most common definition for the notion of competence (Iovu et al., 2020; McClelland, 1973) is the sum of knowledge, abilities, attitudes, and behaviours contributing to a person's capacity of attaining the job tasks and responsibilities effectively and professionally. As illustrated, the final-year university students believe (to a greater extent) that they managed throughout their academic years to acquire the practical skills necessary for exercising their profession optimally. The respondents' answers have shown a focus on knowledge to the detriment of skill formation in academic training, though both specialities have a strong practical component.

Table 2. Students' perceived acquisition of diverse information and skills throughout their academic years; Source: Authors' own conception

Statement[a]	1[b]	2	3	4	Mean score	Std. dev.	N
I managed to acquire enough knowledge to exercise my profession optimally	10	65.9	18.5	5.6	2.20	0.689	211
I managed to acquire practical skills to exercise my profession optimally	8.6	52.4	29	10	2.40	0.784	210
I believe that the subjects studied throughout their academic years provide the information necessary to exercise the profession for which I trained	15.3	60.3	18.7	5.7	2.15	0.742	209

Notes. [a]**Q.** To what extent do you believe that...?; [b]Rating scale [1 = to a very great extent; 2 = to a great extent; 3 = to a small extent; 4 = to a very small extent]

Between bachelor and master students, there are no statistically significant differences regarding the perceived extent to which they managed to acquire (throughout their academic years) various knowledge and skills for the exercise of their profession ($U = 4221{,}5$, $z = -0.99$, $p > 0.10$). However, it is worth noting that university students at the Social Work speciality, compared to the university students in our sample from medical specialities, believe (to a greater extent) that they managed to acquire knowledge and skills to train optimally for their future profession ($U = 4514$, $z = -1.96$, $p = 0.05$).

After applying the Kruskall-Wallis test, we have found that global self-assessment regarding the knowledge level acquired throughout the three academic years is significantly different by income levels – ($H(2) = 9.09$, $p = 0.01$); it was higher for people with better income, over 458 €/month (Mean = 2.06), compared to the categories of university students with low income, under 200 € month (Mean = 2.38) or between 200 - 458 €/month (Mean = 2.17). Minimum wages in the EU member-states range between 312 EUR and 2142 EUR per month, with Romania ranking the penultimate: 458 EUR/month in January 2020 (Eurostat, 2020). Thus, the higher the monthly income of university students (close to national minimum wage – 458 EUR/month), the higher the satisfaction degree regarding the knowledge and practical skills acquired throughout the academic years.

In our opinion, perceived financial security and comfort (thus basic needs covered) helped the respondents to focus on educational needs. They saw their education efforts as an added value to their professional training.

3.2. Students' degree of impairment concerning the limitation or suspension of practicum and volunteering activities in the pandemic context

The acquisition of a high degree of theoretical and practical information and knowledge is – in the case of both specialities – closely related to the extent to which they get involved in practicum and volunteering activities. In addition, in both specialities of our sample, there is an applicative/practical side specific to the academic path of students.

The last year (2020) was marked by the health crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. Hence, practical activities were also affected. In this respect, through this study, we wished to emphasise the degree to which university students at the two specialities were concerned and affected by the limitation or suspension of practicum and volunteering activities. Hence, as Table 3 illustrates, eight out of ten students reported that their practical activities had been affected to a great and a very great extent (and their direct interactions with the beneficiaries of the social and medical services).

Furthermore, three-quarters of the subjects reported the same concerning volunteering activities.

Table 3. The extent to which university students reported being affected by the lack of practicum and volunteering activities

Impaired activities[a]	**1**[b]	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**Mean score**	**Std. dev.**	**N**
Lack of practical activities, of direct interaction with the beneficiaries of the social/ medical services	61.6[c]	19.4	12.8	3.8	2.4	1.66	0.99	211
Lack of volunteering activities	48.8	20.4	15.2	8.5	7.1	2.05	1.28	211

Notes. [a]**Q.** How were the following aspects impaired, given the current situation?
[b]Rating scale [1 = to a very great extent; 2 = to a great extent; 3 = sometimes; 4 = to a small extent; 5 = not at all]
[c]Results are expressed in percentages (%)

Source: Authors' own conception

The Mann-Whitney statistical test has shown statistically significant differences for the analysis of perceived impairment caused by the lack of practical activities, of direct interaction with the beneficiaries of the social/ medical services, by the cycle of studies ($U = 3651{,}5$, $z = -2.97$, $p < 0.005$) and by speciality ($U = 4679$, $z = -2.14$, $p < 0.05$). We have found the same coordinates for the analysis of the impairment caused by the lack of volunteering activities depending on the variables stated above – cycle of studies ($U = 3464$, $z = -3{,}26$, $p < 0.05$) and by speciality ($U = 4544{,}5$, $z = -2.32$, $p < 0.05$). Thus, bachelor students and medical students reported a higher impairment caused by the lack of practical and volunteering activities.

However, when we analysed the correlation between students' degree of impairment concerning the lack of practical and volunteering activities and their income level and perceived competence level, we found no statistically significant differences.

3.3. Students' level of concern on finding a job after graduation

During the state of emergency, medical students and Social Work students were no longer able to carry out practical and/ or volunteering activities. They could no longer attend practicum/volunteering fairs, job fairs, experience exchanges, study mobilities, conferences, which made them worry they would not find a job.

On a general note, they had concerns related to finding a job. Thus, almost three-quarters of the subjects reported being to a very great or a great extent concerned regarding this aspect. Social and medical professions evolve permanently. They revisit their standards and intervention methods regularly because they have to adapt continuously. In our case, the change involved a restriction of activities within institutions and a limitation of access for both beneficiaries and students.

Table 4. The extent to which university students have concerns in what regards finding a job

Rating scale[a]	Full sample	Speciality		Study cycle	
		Social work	Medical speciality	Bachelor's studies	Master
	n=211	*n=117*	*n=94*	*n=147*	*n=64*
[1] To a very great extent	46.9[b]	34.2	62.8	53.1	32.8
[2] To a great extent	25.2	23.1	27.7	29.3	15.6
[3] Sometimes	12.3	16.2	7.4	11.6	14.1
[4] To a small extent	3.3	5.1	1.1	1.4	7.8
[5] Not at all	12.3	21.4	1.1	4.8	29.7

Note. [a]**Q.** In the context of the pandemic and of the current social situation, to what extent are you concerned about finding a job?
[b]Results are expressed in percentages (%)

Source: Authors' own conception

The Mann-Whitney test has shown that university students at medical specialities are more concerned about finding a job (Mean = 1.50) compared to Social Work students (Mean = 2.56). The differences between the two subcategories are statistically significant ($U = 3300$, $z = -5.33$, $p < 0.005$). Another statistically significant difference is the one related to students' concerns regarding professional perspectives by the cycle of studies ($U = 3007$, $z = -4.45$, $p < 0.005$). Bachelor's students are more concerned (Mean = 1.76) compared to master students in the two fields analysed here (Mean = 2.86). The explanation, in this case, could be that a significant percentage of master students have had at least one work experience.

We have also found a statistically significant difference between the students' income level and the extent of their concerns related to finding a job, emphasised by the Kruskall-Wallis test ($H(2) = 29.73$, $p < 0.005$). Students with low income – under 200 €/month – are the most concerned regarding professional perspectives (Mean = 1.56), followed by students

with an income between 200 – 458 €/month (Mean = 2.28), and by students with an income over 458 €/month (Mean = 3.21). Hence, the concern level increases as income decreases.

Additionally, the Goodman and Kruskal's gamma test highlights that university students at both specialities who self-assessed higher theoretical knowledge and practical skills acquired throughout the academic years are slightly less concerned about finding a job (γ = -0.191, $p < 0.05$).

Furthermore, the Goodman and Kruskal's gamma test has shown a higher degree of concern related to finding a job accompanied by a higher degree to which university students were impaired by the lack of practical activities, of direct interaction with the beneficiaries of the social/ medical services (γ = 0.462, $p < 0.005$). Such a correlation – calculated through the same test was found between the acute state of concern regarding the perspectives of finding a job and the high degree of impairment caused by the lack of volunteering activities (γ = 0.425, $p < 0.005$).

3.4. Transition towards another profession than the one of the academic training

Universities carry out their activities in an ever-evolving setting - geographical changes, high population mobility, research and education internationalisation/globalisation (Florea & Galeş, 2016), influence of technology on the educational process, increased competitiveness. They always have to adapt to the need of adapting to these changes. The educational implications are, first of all, related to professional life. The online setting of courses for 14 months (from March 2020), the sporadic access to institutions for practical/volunteering activities may make students choose other professions or other educational programs. We asked them to what extent they intend – after graduation – to work in their academic training field. At the level of the general population of university students in our sample, eight out of ten respondents wish – to a great and a very great extent – to find a job according to their speciality (Table 5).

Table 5. The extent to which the university students investigated intend to find a job in the academic training field after graduation

Rating scale[a]	**Full sample**	**Speciality**		**Study cycle**	
		Social work	**Medical speciality**	**Bachelor's studies**	**Master studies**
	n=211	*n=117*	*n=94*	*n=147*	*n=64*
[1] To a very great extent	55[b]	48.7	62.8	54.4	56.3
[2] To a great extent	27	27.3	26.6	28.6	23.4

[3] To a small extent	10.9	13.7	7.4	10.2	12.5
[4] To a very small extent	7.1	10.3	3.2	6.8	7.8

Notes. [a]**Q.** After graduation, to what extent do you intend to look for a job in the field for which you trained?
[b]Results are expressed in percentages (%)

Source: Authors' own conception

After applying the Mann-Whitney test, results show statistically significant differences between the degree of intention related to finding a job in the field for which they trained and their speciality, in the sense that the medical students wish to a greater extent compared to Social Work students to work in their academic training field ($U = 4518.5$, $z = -2.47$, $p < 0.02$). On the other hand, after applying the same test by the cycle of studies (bachelor's studies or master studies), we found no statistically significant differences ($U = 4518.5$, $z = -0.01$, $p = 0.99$).

Through the Goodman and Kruskal's gamma test, we have highlighted a significant statistical correlation between the intention of working in the training field and the extent to which the university students in our sample believe that throughout their academic years, they managed to acquire diverse theoretical knowledge and practical skills. In other words, the more subjects believe to have acquired enough knowledge and practical skills, the more they wish to work in their academic training field ($\gamma = 0.297$, $p < 0.005$).

However, we have found no statistically significant differences between the intention of changing the activity field after graduation and income, the concern related to finding a job or the perceived impairment of practical and volunteering activities involving direct interaction with the beneficiaries of social and medical services.

Whereas, generally, we have not found an obvious desire of migrating towards another profession, university students who see their future profession as a vocation are in minority. As Table 6 shows, only a quarter of all the students in our sample see their future profession as a vocation. It is also worth noting that one in three Social Work and master students see their profession as a vocation, which occurs only in one of five cases analysed among students at medical specialities or bachelor's studies.

Table 6. Percentage of students who see their profession as a vocation

Variable	*n*	%[b]
Full sample	211	27
Social Work speciality	117	33.3

Medical speciality	94	19.1
Study cycle – bachelor's studies	147	22.4
Study cycle – master	64	37.5

Note. [a] **Q.** Is the profession you train for a vocation for you?
[b]Reflects the percentage of participants answering "yes" to this question

Source: Authors' own conception

Interestingly, university students in our sample who see their future profession as a vocation have a slightly lower intention of emigration ($U = 3164.5$, $z = -3.27$, $p = 0.01$) and of considering changing profession after graduation ($U = 3489$, $z = -2.54$, $p < 0.02$); we have obtained these results by applying the Mann Whitney test. Additionally, university students who perceive positively their level of theoretical and practical knowledge acquired throughout their study years see their profession from a vocational perspective ($U = 3353$, $z = -2.53$, $p < 0.02$). Hence, it appears that university students with a preference for their fields of study are more likely to focus on the learning process.

3.5. Emigration perspectives among students

Along with the social worker profession, medical professions feature a very high degree of mobility in the European Union territory. The causes of social workers' mobility could be, on the one hand, the great number of Romanian communities in various states of the EU space (mainly Italy, Germany, France) and the UK in need of a support person facilitating their social and professional integration. On the other hand, we note the social workers' perspective of having a job recognised professionally and financially (Lazăr et al., 2016).

According to the EU Single Market – Database related to regulated professions (European Commission, n.d.) the countries recording the highest proportion of Romanian social workers are also the countries with many Romanian migrants: France, Italy, Ireland, and Great Britain (Rădoi & Irimescu, 2017). Along with Germany, Poland, Belgium, and Great Britain, Romania ranks among the top five EU countries with social workers who had their qualifications recognised in another member-state.

The phenomenon of labour force migration in the medical field has also been recording an ascending trend due to the need of accessing better employment conditions in countries with more advanced economic and medical systems or career opportunities. Medical graduates from Romania work in other countries, among which France, Germany, Sweden. At the European level, the application of the Regulated Professions Database tool, managed by the European Commission, shows that medical professions are

the most mobile and with the highest migration in the European countries, with 156579 exercising physicians of another nationality than the destination country. The Romanian physicians record one of the highest migrant medical staff percentages in the Eastern European countries.

In our study, results (Table 7) shows that a third of the university students investigated consider to a very great and a great extent the possibility of getting hired abroad, in the context of the current situation caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. On the other hand, over two-thirds mentioned they would not choose a job abroad.

Table 7. The extent to which university students investigated intend to find a job abroad after graduation

Rating scale[a]	**Full sample**	**Speciality**		**Study cycle**	
		Social work	**Medical speciality**	**Bachelor's studies**	**Master studies**
	n=211	*n=117*	*n=94*	*n=147*	*n=64*
[1] To a very great extent	10.9[b]	8.5	13.7	12.9	6.2
[2] To a great extent	19.9	14.5	26.6	21.1	17.2
[3] To a small extent	30.3	30	30.9	32	26.6
[4] To a very small extent	38.9	47	28.7	34	50

Notes. [a]**Q.** In the context of the current situation, to what extent do you intend to consider the possibility of getting hired abroad?
[b]Results are expressed in percentages (%)

Source: Authors' own conception

Upon more thorough analysis, after applying the Mann-Whitney test, we have found statistically significant differences related to the intention of getting hired abroad by the cycle of studies and the specialities followed. Hence, university students in our sample studying medical speciality reported a higher level of intention to go abroad ($U = 4234.5$, $z = -3.02$, $p < 0.005$), which we may also note for bachelor's students ($U = 3837$, $z = -2.24$, $p < 0.05$).

However, by using the Goodman and Kruskal's gamma test, we have not identified the existence of a statistically significant correlation between the extent to which university students intend to get a job abroad and the degree to which they would consider the possibility of migrating towards another profession than the one of their academic training ($\gamma = - 0.105$, $p > 0.10$). The high degree of concern regarding the perspectives of finding a job is accompanied by a high propensity towards working abroad after finishing the

studies ($\gamma = 0.373$, $p < 0.005$). Not least, university students who self-assessed the knowledge and practical skills acquired throughout the academic years positively intend to a smaller extent to work abroad. The correlation between the two scores is low but statistically significant ($\gamma = - 0.165$, $p < 0.05$).

Upon using the Kruskall-Wallis test, if we consider income level, we notice that university students with lower income intend to a greater extent to find a job abroad ($H(2) = 15.02$, $p = 0.01$). In other words, university students at both specialities, with low income, under 200 €/month, consider more the possibility of getting hired abroad after graduation (Mean=2.72), and the intention decreases as income becomes higher – between 200 – 458 €/month (Mean=3.13), and over 458 €/ month (Mean=3.37), respectively.

On the other hand, we found no statistically significant differences when we compared the extent to which university students would consider the possibility of going abroad and the degree to which they perceived to have been affected by the lack of practical and volunteering activities.

4. Conclusions

The medical and social protection systems alike have undergone a deep crisis. It has affected both the beneficiaries and the specialists of these fields. The services provision methods also have changed considerably. The state of emergency (what the entire world experienced as lockdown) meant access denied to social and medical establishments for anyone from the outside. It has entailed delayed medical procedures except for emergencies, to assisting beneficiaries only over the phone and online. The elimination of face-to-face activities and the shift towards the online setting had a strong negative influence on the activity sectors where human interaction is essential.

Education and healthcare system characterise the level of social, cultural, and economic development of a nation, while the level of higher education quality in these fields influences the wellbeing of the population tremendously, both locally and nationally.

The emergency period has impaired the subjective wellbeing of students in our sample (Rădoi et al., 2021), and their perception of the professional insertion. Our respondents see the social worker or medical profession as an opportunity for personal and professional development and a profession much more than a vocation. This study analyses the relationship between acquiring knowledge, training competences, practical training, involvement in volunteering activities (as elements of exercising the future profession) and elements/variables such as income, study level, and academic affiliation (Fig. 1).

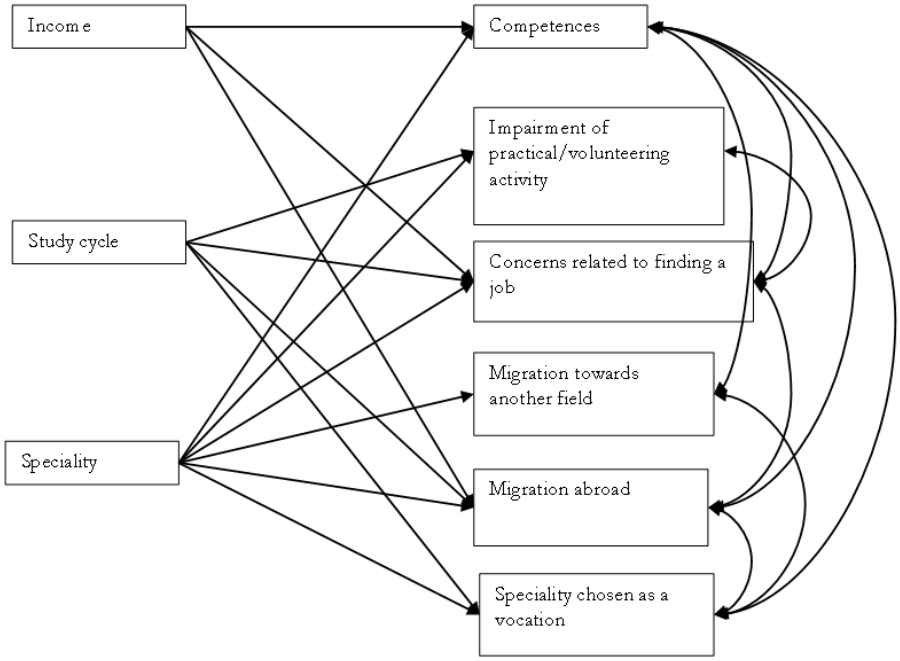


Figure 1. Relationship between competences-skills-professional training during the pandemic
Source: Authors' own conception

The framework analyses mentioned above have enabled us to outline elements suggesting the employment intentions of final-year university students in the field for which they trained or migration towards another profession or another country (brain exodus).

In the opinion of final-year students at the two specialities, the competences (knowledge, skills, abilities) acquired throughout their years of study correlate with high income, strong motivation of finding a job in their field, and low concern regarding labour market insertion. In addition, university students mention a focus on acquiring knowledge, which makes the social work students more confident in finding a job compared to medical students.

University students at the two specialities who got more involved in practical/volunteering activities also have a high perceived level of competences acquired during their academic training.

The low intention of getting hired in their field is strongly influenced by low income, lack/non-involvement in practical/volunteering activities,

and professional affiliation. Medical students have a higher intention than social work students to find a job in the field for which they trained. Another significant element is the perceived competence level acquired throughout academic training. The higher it is, the less a student wishes to activate in a field different from their academic training.

The last aspect analysed was related to the exercise of their profession, for which they followed an academic training program in a different country. It is worth noting here that the final-year medical students consider to a greater extent to exercise their profession in a different country than social work students. The possibility increases for university students with low income, who did not have a high perceived level of competences acquired and are concerned about finding a job in their country. One last aspect noticed here is the availability expressed by the final-year university students to find a job outside their field, to migrate towards another profession.

This study has highlighted that, in the pandemic context, a perceived financial level above minimum wage in Romania influences perceived academic competences, reduces concerns about finding a job, and decrease the intention of migrating abroad. In addition, the academic training level (mainly undergraduate, less postgraduate) correlates with perceived competence level, insufficient practical skill acquisition and involvement in volunteering activities.

High perceived educational and professional competences reduce concerns related to finding a job, migration towards another field or abroad while considering the future profession a vocation correlates with high perceived academic knowledge and low intention of migrating towards another field or country.

5. Research limits

One of the research limits is that we cannot generalise the findings at the international level. We can interpret them based on the characteristics of the specific educational measures taken to prevent the spread of the SARS-COV2 virus. However, we believe it is worth consulting our analysis when outlining comparison frameworks with an international coverage concerning the specifics of the educational process during the pandemic period. Another limit was represented by the online format of the research (it may have restricted/lowered the response rate due to the lack of control over the final volume of the sample). Despite this aspect, we managed to include a significant number of students in our sample (which may be considered representative of the general characteristics of the population studied). It is

an exploratory study; hence, it has not covered all the aspects and elements specific to students' life during the pandemic. Therefore, we believe a follow-up is necessary involving other sub-thematic studies. We wish to continue the study using a phenomenological qualitative approach for a better insight into the matter.

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