Higher Education Students' perceptions about the effects of the confinement on study and learning processes

Fátima Leal

University of Évora

Abstract

Due to Covid19 pandemic, the most part of countries have had restrictions on their social life with confinement being one of the most significant public health measures. Higher education institutions closed and all around the world, lecturers and students had to adapt to this new situation. The confinement brought several consequences to higher education students. The goal of this investigation was to understand the perceptions of higher education students about the confinement effects on their learning. Qualitative methodology was privileged, and interviews were developed using videocall resources. Participants were eight volunteer Portuguese students of social sciences scientific area degrees from a university of the interior of Portugal. Age varied between 19 and 21 years old. They responded to the question "Do you think that Covid19 pandemic confinement affects the study and learning processes?" Answers were recorded and verbatim transcribed. Thematic content analysis was used. Results showed two different positions: 1) Not to me but I believe that for some colleagues it is a Yes (academic skills and interpersonal relationships); and 2) Yes, it affects a lot (not resist to distractors at home; (de)motivation; the "loss of freedom"; the lack of interaction; the importance of spaces; inequalities in technological resources; and the future habit changing). Although the small sample, these results bring new contributions to this new field of research once they represent the students' perspectives about the effects of the confinement in their learning processes. This information can be useful for students but also for teachers and other education stakeholders.

Keywords: Higher Education, students' perceptions, Covid19 pandemic confinement, effects on learning, qualitative methodology

1. Introduction

The confinement imposed by Covid19 pandemic restrictions, was, probably, one of the most difficult public health measures with which population had to deal. Beyond the prohibitions of getting out of home, the closing of educative institutions, shops and all other places brought several different and personal experiences. Several difficulties, psychological suffering, pain, despair and subsequently, an imperative need to adapt to the new situation were some conclusions from researchers that have been studying issues related with this pandemic (Ismailli, 2021; Shahbaz, Ashraf, Zakar, Fischer & Zakar, 2021). According to Ismaili (2021), during pandemic, students experimented mixed feelings of perplexity, loneliness, uncertainty about what would happen with their classes, colleagues, academic degrees and had to deal with personal health problems and with the accessibility to the e-learning resources. Other researchers as Leal and Chaleta (2020) found that during the

confinement, higher education students felt several kinds of difficulties and at different levels when they had to adapt to the non-face-to-face classes system. Some of these difficulties were related with cognition (attention, concentration, information storage); motivation (to perform academic tasks); tiredness; organizational level (management of time and academic tasks); social level (lacking interpersonal relationships with other people); and difficulties in dealing with different roles at home (personal, familiar, and academic).

Gonzalez and collaborators (2020) analysed, through quantitative research, the effects of COVID19 confinement on the autonomous learning performance of higher education students. They studied the differences in assessments by dividing 458 students into two groups: 1) control group (corresponding to academic years 2017/2018 and 2018/2019); and 2) experimental group (corresponding to students from 2019/2020 - students who had their face-to-face activities interrupted because of the confinement). In a complex and interesting research work, the authors found a significant positive effect of the COVID19 confinement on students' performance (students scored better in all types of tests performed after the start of confinement). They also concluded about a general change in the students' autonomous learning process. Comparing to analysis of students' learning strategies made before confinement (that have showed that students did not study on a continuous basis), they concluded that COVID19 confinement led to changes in students' learning strategies towards more continuous habits and with better efficiency.

It is important to understand the perceptions of Portuguese higher education students about the effects of the Covid19 pandemic confinement on their learning process.

2. Empirical study

Methods

The goal of this study was to understand the perceptions of higher education students about the effects of the first pandemic confinement on the study and learning processes.

Participants were eight Portuguese volunteer female students of the 2nd and 3rd Academic years of attendance of Social Sciences scientific area degrees from a university of the interior of Portugal. Ages varied between 19 and 21 years old. More specifically, 3 students (Psychology; 2nd Academic year; 19, 20, 21 years old); 1 student (Psychology; 3rd academic year; 21 years old); 2 students (Management; 2nd Academic year; 20 years old); 2 students (Educational Sciences; 2nd Academic year; 20 years old). Qualitative methodology was used. "Qualitative research is an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyses words, reports detailed views of informants and conducts the study in a natural setting" (Creswell, 1998, p.15). This kind of research tends to be descriptive, holistic and focusing on the depth and details of the subject experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998) looking for an understanding of the meaning that participant built about their experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In the present study, data collection included interviews that were developed during the confinement (17th April and 1st May of 2020). This data collection period was intentional once that non-face-to-face learning had started one month before. Participants agreed with the propose of the investigation and signed the digital

informed consent term. Interviews were developed online, through zoom platform and varied between 25 and 50 minutes allowing the record and the verbatim transcription. This study is a small part of a bigger investigation and here we will only focus on the responses for one specific question "Do you think that the Covid19 pandemic confinement affects the study and learning processes?". Once our sample was so small and this was an exploratory study, we constituted one only group. Thematic content analysis technique, according to Bardin (2008), was used to analyse students' perspectives.

Results

It was possible to find two main perspectives in the students' answers. The first category "Not for me but for some colleagues it is a Yes!" and the second one "Yes, it affects a lot!"

Category A - "Not for me, but for some colleagues it is a Yes!"

The category "Not for me, but for some colleagues it is a Yes!" includes the perspective that the confinement imposed by Covid19 pandemic situation does not affect their study and learning processes, but, probably, it affects the study and learning processes of some other students. This perspective is based on the perceptions about i)) the own academic skills and ii) with the need (or not) for social relationships.

Relating to this perspective i) the own academic skills and when comparing with those of other colleagues, the main ideas are that maintaining the routine study habits and being self-disciplined are fundamental to continue the "normal" study and learning processes without alterations; but for students who do not have these study habits and methods well stablished, probably, there are more (and negative) effects of the confinement on their learning.

"Well… in my case [study and learning processes] I don't think so…because I maintain my routine (…) but later, in May [when we will have a lot of assessment moments], I think that (…) with this system, it will be very frustrating for many people [within my class] … because… the fact that we are in this context… I think that it put a lot of pressure in students, and they are more likely to be more worried and angrier, more nervous, more alarmed… I am almost sure about it (…)" (S1)

"(…) in my experience, I think that it does not affect because I have my "discipline", but I feel that it affects some other people because they don't have that Method for study and I think the face-to-face classes are easier for them … perhaps because teachers talk a little bit more about … it is nor pressuring but they [teachers] insist a little bit more in Academic work and on the assessments and this helps some for being more involved…but how at this moment we do not need to go to face-to-face classes or make the assessments in a presential mode, it will be different for them [those students] …" (S7)

Relating to the second perspective ii) the need (or not) for social relationships; the main idea is that it does not affect the student (personally) because she considers that this is not an important issue for herself but perhaps it is a need of other students, and, in those cases, the confinement affects their learning.

"If I think in the confinement in that sense of not being physically with others and talk with them and all of those things, in that point, I think that it does not affect me at all… because I

am a very reserved person and I like very much being on my space (…) but I think that for some people, it does" (S2)

Category B – "Yes, it affects a lot"

This category, "Yes, it affects a lot" represents the perspective that the confinement due to covid19 affects the study and learning processes. This category has several nuances that show us the students' justifications about those effects on study and learning processes: i) not resist to distractors at home; ii) (de)motivation; iii) the "loss of freedom"; iv) the lack of interaction; v) the importance of spaces; vi) inequalities in technological resources; and vii) the future habit changing.

i) Not resist to Distractors at home - Because confinement forces students to be almost all day at home, students deal with several possibilities of activities (distractors to the process of study) that they can do when they are at home (beyond studying);

"no doubt! I am at home and there are several stimuli… "is that so easy to go to the sofa!" and it is so easy to start using the mobile phone …" (S3)

ii) (de)motivation - through online classes, students' motivation it is not the same for non-face-to-face classes (and this affects study and learning processes);

"I would say that yes…it affects (…) because teachers can not motivate students through a webcam not even a child with 6 years old and much less for students with 20 or 30 years old and of course… it affects" (S6)

iii) the "loss of freedom" - the impediment to go out and the feeling of "loss of freedom" brings an idea of closure that does not allow to use the "outgoing home" as a way to "clear the mind" as a study strategy (pause – to stop studying in difficult parts and then, continuing to study and learning);

"in a certain way, yes (…) I used to like very much to be alone [when I go out] and now I can not go [out]… so, this aspects has made studying and learning processes much more difficult because I can not go out from here of my desk and go out to the garden for a walk and after came back with my mind clear" (S2)

"I need a lot of my space…I am an independent person and all this… it is difficult (…)" (S3)

"Yes… in what aspects?...so… we can not go out … we can not go out to relax not even a little bit… we are always stuck here … I am basically always stuck here in my bedroom… I can not see other things…it is always here (…) like this I think that is much more complicated and it is not very positive …for us… for learning…we are much more tired" (S5)

"I think yes… before [the pandemic situation] you could go here and there and now you can't, can you?" (S6)

iv) the lack of interaction - the impediment to going out, ensures the idea that it is not possible to be with friends or colleagues in a personal way and then it is not possible to study in groups.

"honestly, I think that it affects because were are isolated, and everybody and it is like this…online... of course we communicate…we are with friends and that...but it is through computer, through phone… I think that because we are so alone…in my case, for example…I

am a person that likes to study with others and that, here at home, it does not happen…I am studying alone…and I lose my willpower…there is, when I have other people doing the same near to me, I do it and I don't blame it…but if I am alone I always start thinking … "hum…perhaps now I should rest a little bit and after that I will be back in a quiet moment" but then I do not came back in one hour but only after 3 or 4 hours … I think that it is really like it…because there is no mutual help or interaction between colleagues… or because we are not together, and we are not face-to-face with them… that's why it is Yes! I think this confinement affects a lot" (S4)

v) the Importance of spaces – reflects the idea that it is really important to have spaces with quality when is necessary to study and learning. In normal situation, when students do not have this quality at home, they look for them outside (universities, libraries, gardens, café terraces or other) but, in an obligatory confinement situation, that is not possible and these restrictions affects their study and learning processes.

"when houses have no space…apartments are small… being in confinement affects a lot the study and learning processes" (S6)

"before [pandemic situation] I used to say "look… let's go to the library" …and the context of a library it is completely different (…)" (S3)

"(…) I don't really like studying in my bedroom because I think the bedroom is for relaxing… and then I am going to study in the living room… but in the living room, my parents are also there - once we all are in confinement at home -, and they are watching television (…) there, also, it is not possible to study (…) so..it is complicated … After that, being at home… 24 hours over 24 hours always here at home…" (S3)

vi) Inequality in technological resources – this perspective represents a global awareness of the situation and that without Technology resources the teaching-learning system not even could happen. The comparison with others, especially the poorest countries, show us the consciousness about the privilege of having this Alternative to continue the Academic year attendance.

"it affects because this is a general problem and it is not only in here… and here we are lucky once we have all these technological devices that permit us to deal with the situation… but imagine those countries where internet networks are precarious… or there is no internet at all… imagine what is to be one year without classes…because we know that this is what usually happens in poor countries…and there …they don't have all these pc's, mobile phones, tablets… and this really affects the teaching and the learning process" (S8).

vii) the future habit change – represents the perspective that the confinement forced the non-face-to-face classes system and this brought the discovery of new possibilities, new ways of studying, learning and working recurring to technological resources, and, perhaps for some people (students and workers) the adaptation was so good that they may come to prefer this situation of being at home in a permanently way, in the future.

(…) it also can affect but in the contrary … perhaps for some students who like so much this experience that after, even they can be back to the face-to-face system, they prefer not to do it anymore… who knows? They can stay so much positively impressed with these new technologies … and this can be true not only for students but also for teacher and other professionals" (S6)

3. Conclusion

With the pandemic situation, the implementation of public health measures like confinement brought several consequences at personal and social levels. In terms of Academic life, specially to higher education, many things have changed: a great part of students had to leave their universities places to back home to their official living place; the face-to-face class system was suddenly replaced by the non-face-to-face regime; students and teachers had to deal with the "university inside their screens"; they also had to deal with the need to conciliate the familiar and the Academic/professional roles. Beyond all these aspects, the adaptation to the new situation had to happen (in a better or worst way) and the study and learning processes should "must go one". The goal of this study was to understand the students' perceptions about the effects of the confinement imposed by Covid19 pandemic on their study and learning processes.

Two main positions emerged from students' speech: the first one that the confinement did not affect the own study and learning processes but, when comparing with other colleagues, for sure it would affect; the second position was deliberately that the confinement really affect the students' study and learning processes.

Although our sample was very small - and that was one of the limitations of this study -, this partition was interesting once it did not appear the restrict position of a "no…it does not affect at all". Rather, it appeared one undoubted position of a "yes, it affects" and another one - the first one - that represents something "beyond myself", there is, "not for me, but I can imagine what is this for my colleagues, because I know them, and I know how they work". This fact it is curious, and it can be an indicator of the consciousness that students have about the gravity of the situation and of a social empathic feeling that seems to naturally emerge in public calamity situations.

Still related to this first position - in which the perspective is that the confinement imposed by Covid19 pandemic does not affect their own learning, but perhaps it affects the learning of some colleagues -, it would be interesting to understand why this happens and why there are some students who have this kind of perceptions. Some justifications are related with the idea that when having study habits and methods well stablished, the study and learning processes still go one (anyway). Based on verbalizations, it seems that for students that have this perception, it does not matter about the external situation once they maintain their focus on their goals and on the procedures that are necessary to achieve those goals. In this discussion it would be interesting to ask what other characteristics, in addition to academic ones, will have these individuals who take this perspective (e.g., personal characteristics as related with attention and concentration abilities; self-regulation; social and interpersonal relationship needs; or even motivational orientations).

A very recent quantitative study developed by Flores et al (2021), in Portugal, looked for differences in students' adaptation to and experience of online teaching and learning. The authors found significant differences on the perceptions about how students experienced online teaching, specifically, between those students who had previous experience with this kind of experience and those who had not. So, students with prior experiences in online teaching and learning situations also had higher means in all items related to a positive adaptation to this new system (e.g., dealing well with online teaching and learning, being motivated and satisfied, feeling comfortable with online teaching and learning and claiming that they learned well through online teaching). On the other hand, students without previous experience in online teaching and learning situations, showed more negative sensations (e.g., fear, anxiety, tiredness and stress) and higher means in items related to difficulties (e.g., concentrating and in resisting to the external difficulties). Through the results of this investigation, it was possible to suppose that students without any experience in online teaching and learning system found more difficulties whereas those students with some or more experience found the online system more dynamic and effective than the face-to-face teaching regime.

Although our study did not asked to students about their previous experience in other non-face-to-face learning system situations, the findings of Flores' research team can bring us another possible justification for the differences between our students different positions.

Relating to the second position, in which the perspective is that the confinement imposed by Covid19 pandemic affects the students' study and learning processes, it is possible to find several justifications to explain how and through what, this can happen: not resist to distractors at home; (de)motivation; the feeling of "loss of freedom"; the lack of interaction; the importance of spaces; inequalities in technological resources; and the future habit changing. While the four first reasons (e.g., not resist to distractors at home; (de)motivation; the feeling of "loss of freedom"; the lack of interaction) seem more intrinsically positioned factors; the two reasons (the importance of spaces and inequalities in technological resources) transmit us an idea of factors more external positioned by which the confinement can interfere on the study and learning processes. The last aspect that was found (the future habit changing) it seems more a predictive consequence of the experience of this confinement period.

Blankenberger and Williams (2020) written about the impact of COVID19 in higher education institutions. According to these authors, the opinions, and perspectives of students about this system are diverse. For some, this can be a negative experience but for some others, it can be a positive one. On the other hand, students have gained experience with this kind of learning system and perhaps this can be a factor that can lead to the wish to repeat and to continue in the online regime. Universities must prepare and anticipate this possibility adapting, on one hand, their courses offer in with more diversification teaching and learning systems; and on the other hand, investing in infrastructures and equipment.

Although these findings refer to the students' perceptions about the first confinement, we believe that these results bring us more contributions to the understanding of educational issues related to the effects of the Covid 19 pandemic confinement on learning. We should not forget that, in this moment, the pandemic it is not considered extinct at all. For these reasons, these findings can be useful for the several intervenient in higher education system (students, teachers and the own educational institutional as a whole).

References

Biesta, G. (2019). Teaching for the possibility of being taught: World centred education in an
    age of learning, *English E-Journal of the Philosophy of Education*, vol. 4, pp. 55–69.

Blankenberger, B. and Williams, A. (2020). COVID and the impact on higher education: The
    essential role of integrity and accountability, *Administrative Theory & Praxis*, vol. 42(3),
    pp. 404–423. Crossref.

Brooks, S. K., Webster, R. K., Smith, L. E., Woodland, L., Wessely, S., Greenberg, N., &
    Rubin, G. J. (2020). The psychological impact of quarantine and how to reduce it: rapid
    review of the evidence, *The Lancet*, vol. 395(10227), pp. 912–920.
    https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)30460-8

Entwistle, N. J. (2018). *Student learning and academic understanding*. London & Cambridge,
    MA: Academic Press.

Flores, M.A., Barros, A., Simão, A.M.V. et al. (2021). Portuguese higher education students'
    adaptation to online teaching and learning in times of the COVID-19 pandemic: personal
    and contextual factors, *High Educ*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-021-00748-x

Gaeta, M.L., Gaeta, L. and Rodriguez, M. D. S. (2021). The Impact of COVID-19 Home
    Confinement on Mexican University Students: Emotions, Coping Strategies, and Self-
    Regulated Learning, *Front. Psychol*. Vol. 12:642823. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2021.642823

Gonzalez T, de la Rubia MA, Hincz KP, Comas-Lopez M, Subirats L, Fort S, et al. (2020)
    Influence of COVID-19 confinement on students' performance in higher education. PLoS
    ONE 15(10): e0239490. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal. pone.0239490

Hilton III, J. and Vogeler, H. (2021). Religiosity Outcomes in Post-Secondary Courses:
    Comparing Online and Face-to-Face Instruction, *Religious Education*, vol. 116(1), pp. 26–
    40.

Hodges, C., Moore, S., Lockee, B., Trust, T. and Bond, A. (2020). The diference between
    emergency remote teaching and online learning, *Educause. Rev*.
    https://er.educause.edu/articles/2020/3/the-diference-between-emergency-remote-
    teachingand-onlin e-learning. Accessed 23 Mar 2020.

International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE). (2020). *Essential conditions*.
    Arlington, VA. International Society for Technology in Education.
    https://www.iste.org/standards/iste-essential-conditions

Ismaili, Y. (2021). Evaluation of students' attitude toward distance learning during the
    pandemic (Covid-19): a case study of ELTE university, *On the Horizon*, vol. 29(1), pp.17–
    30.

Larsson, J. and Holmström, I. (2007). Phenomenographic or phenomenological analysis: does it matter? Examples from a study on anaesthesiologists' work. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-being*, vol. 2(1), pp. 55-64. DOI: 10.1080/17482620601068105.

Leal, F. and Chaleta, ME. (2020). Face-to-Face and Remote Learning During the Confinement Due to Covid19: The Experience of Higher Education Students, *International Journal of Higher Education Pedagogies*, vol. 1(1), pp. 30-35. https://doi.org/10.33422/ijhep.v1i1.19

Lei, M. and Medwell, J. (2021). Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on student teachers: how the shift to online collaborative learning affects student teachers' learning and future teaching in a Chinese context, *Asia Pacific Education Review*, vol. 22(2), pp. 169–179.

Marton, F. (1981). Phenomenography - Describing Conceptions of the World Around Us, *Instructional Science*, vol. 10, pp. 177-200.

Michels, M., Glöckner, A. and Giersch, D. (2021). Personality psychology in times of crisis: Profile-specific recommendations on how to deal with COVID-19, *Personality and Individual Differences*, vol. 174. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2021.110676

Morgan, H. (2020). Best practices for implementing remote learning during a pandemic. The Clearing House, *A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas,* vol. 93(3), pp. 135–141.

OPP. (2020). Recomendações para intervenção psicológica no ensino superior. Documentos de apoio à prática OPP. Documento disponível online em https://recursos.ordemdospsicologos.pt/files/artigos

Pedro, N. (2020). Webinário *Ensino Online em Situação de Emergência: Analisar o Passado, Planear o Futuro*. Available in:https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CD4_c64cLFE&t=332s

Pfattheicher, S., Nockur, L., Bohm, R., Sassenrath, C. and Petersen, M.B. (2020). The emotional path to action: Empathy promotes physical distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic, *Psychol Sci.,* vol. 31(11), pp. 1363–1373. https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797620964422 PMID: 32993455 19.

Roberts, B., Harms, P., Smith, J., Wood, D. and Webb, M. (2006). Using multiple methods in personality psychology. In M. Eid and E. Diener (Eds.), *Handbook of multimethod measurement in psychology*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, pp. 321–335.

Shahbaz, S., Ashraf, M. Z., Zakar, R., Fischer, F. and Zakar, M. Z. (2021). Psychosocial effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown on university students: Understanding apprehensions through a phenomenographic approach, *PLoS ONE*, vol. 16 (5), pp. 1–30. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0251641

Sedereviciut-Paciauskien, Z., Valantinaite, I. and Kliukas, R. (2021). Communion, Care, and Leadership in Computer-Mediated Learning during the Early Stage of COVID-19. *Sustainability*, vol. 13, pp. 42-34. https://doi.org/10.3390/su13084234

Snelling, J., and D. Fingal. (2020). 10 Strategies for online learning during a coronavirus outbreak, *International Society for Technology in Education*. Retrieved from https://www.iste.org/explore/10-strategies-online-learning-during-coronavirus-outbreak.

World Health Organization. (March 2020). *Mental health and psychosocial considerations during the COVID-19 outbreak*, Geneva: World Health Organization.

info@ictle.com
www.ictle.com