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# How Students Report about Their Education Experiences during the First Year of Covid-19 Pandemic?<sup>4</sup>

**Abstract:** The aim of this work was to understand the significance of education for students during the Covid-19 pandemic and to explore the context in which educational activities and organizational changes in schooling were spontaneously mentioned. This paper is part of a broader qualitative study in which students' narratives about their experiences during the first year of the pandemic were collected online. From the initial sample of 70 narratives, only those with educational content were selected for further analysis. Thus, the final sample included 34 narratives from 17 high school and 17 university students (5 male and 29 female participants) aged 15–25 ( $M=20$ ). University students' reports were more focused on the positive aspects of online learning, the advantages of self-organizing, and concerns about further education, while secondary school students referred more to difficulties arising from new practices that had a significant impact on daily routines and social aspects.

**Keywords:** students, Covid-19 pandemic, education, narratives, qualitative study

## Education during the Covid-19 Pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic has significantly affected the everyday life activities, relations, experiences, and well-being of students all around the globe. More than 90% of the world's student population abruptly faced lockdowns in the period with no vaccines and limited health service capacity. The Covid-19 pandemic is considered

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one of the greatest disruptions in the history of education (UNESCO, 2020). It was uniquely challenging for students due to the changes in school and social life that required adaptations of their daily routines (Santos, 2020). These threats to the future of education have alarmed experts worldwide, as the education climate is rapidly changing and revealing the shortcomings of different education systems.

### The Importance of Andragogical Principles

With an outburst of the Covid-19 pandemic, the orthodox approach to education was forced to reconsider its widely established practice. Sirbu (2020) points to even greater necessity for acknowledging andragogical principles. Relying on Knowless and Brookfield, Sirbu emphasises: voluntary participation of the learner, creating a cooperative learning climate and demonstrating respect for the students' self-worth, collaboration, utilising practical application, critical self-reflection of learning process, and nurturing self-direction. However, andragogical study in Serbia has shown that university students have not participated enough in adapting and organising online education that was realised in pandemic conditions (Ljujić, 2021).

As a useful extension to both andragogy and pedagogy, heutagogy is predominantly concerned with learner agency concept (Moore, 2020). One of the most important ideas behind heutagogy is to foster agency and engagement in the learning process, and all that with the help of using technology and social media. Moreover, it relies on the humanistic perspective, with learner-centred educational process and the constructivist viewpoint. Blaschke (2019) finds that the current school system suppresses the ability of younger learners to demonstrate self-determination. He considers pedagogy-andragogy-heutagogy continuum, which presents the gradual increase in the level of learner's maturity and autonomy, as well as decrease of instructor's control and course structuring. Therefore, heutagogy seems a suitable perspective for a crisis such as pandemic, which requires a remote approach to learning.

Lastly, it would be important to emphasise the considerable effect of applied andragogy, that is, the encounter of andragogy and psychology in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Relying on descriptive qualitative analysis, Fadkhurosi and Kusmaryani (2021) showed that andragogy-based counselling via WhatsApp successfully reduced students' anxiety during the course of pandemic. Namely, authors recognized that the concept of counselling and andragogy have the common goal, in line with the method of self-understanding, focusing on one important thing that becomes a challenge for oneself, and experience that is the key to determining future decisions.

## Research on Education during the Pandemic

There has been a growing interest among researchers regarding the organisational changes in the schooling system during the pandemic and particularly emergency remote teaching and learning (Ristić Dedić & Jokić, 2021; Stančić & Senić Ružić, 2021). The Covid-19 pandemic is considered both an opportunity and a challenge especially for higher education (Toquero, 2020), as well as a disorienting social experience and an opportunity to engage in learning processes (Koulaouzides, 2021). A variety of methods were applied in order to directly approach the issues that education faced, in particular students and teachers (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021; Džamonja Ignjatović, 2021; Spasenović, 2021; Institut za psihologiju, 2020; Plazinić, 2021).

## Youth Perspectives on “Online” Learning

Different studies showed a lack of personal contact and interaction between teachers and students, as well as among students in online emergency remote teaching and learning, compared to regular classroom practice (Vasojević et al., 2021). When it comes to high school students, Italian study showed that many of them might have felt misunderstood by the teachers due to relational distance, resulting in perceiving homework and online classes as stressors and missing friends more (Fioretti et al., 2020). Another paper also suggested that the absence of direct communication and contact with teachers can negatively affect the quality of teaching process and the results achieved. At the same time, it proved that asynchronous communication and physical distance can help students realise the value of teaching as a complex process of socio-emotional learning and not just the maintenance of academic achievements (Hebib, 2021).

Previous research on the impact of remote teaching and learning on students are mainly region-specific, although they point to many similar universal implications. One qualitative study with university students and faculty members from Saudi Arabia showed that students perceived both advantages and challenges when it came to online learning (Bdair, 2021). As advantages, they have noticed a flexible learning environment and organisation of time, improved academic achievement, and motivation to become more independent learners. On the other hand, they have faced issues such as inadequate implementations of online learning, maintaining academic integrity, inability to learn from interactions with peers and educators, and assignment overload. Meanwhile, in another qualitative research, high school students were prone to complain about too

much homework, lack of motivation and time management, fear of losing touch with their friends, feeling uncertain about the transition to college, missing out on important events (i.e., graduation) (Scott et al., 2021).

### Qualitative Research in Serbian Context

In the corpus of studies investigating how students in Serbia experienced their education through distance learning and school closures due to the pandemic, mostly online quantitative surveys have been conducted so far (UNICEF, 2020; Zavod za unapređivanje obrazovanja i vaspitanja, 2021). However, there are qualitative studies that have compared online teaching and learning to the classroom practice in Serbia (Vasojević et al., 2021), which investigated schoolchildren's multigenre narratives about learning during the school closure (including stories, letters, and requests) (Kovács Cerović et al., 2021), and conducted in-depth interviews with university students about their experiences during the lockdown (Vuletić et al., 2021). In the state of emergency in April 2020, Vasojević et al. (2021) collected data about high school students' perspectives on the disadvantages of online learning. They reported unsatisfying communication with teachers, too much schoolwork, lack of peer contact, and missing the classroom practice. Kovács Cerović and associates (2021) carried out the research in May and June 2020, when the state of emergency had been lifted but the schools were still closed. The study showed that many high school students evaluated remote learning as demanding and felt overwhelmed by the content, excessive tasks, and amount of homework. Students also faced technological difficulties, especially because they had no previous experience with some of the online platforms (both their own and teachers' technological literacy was significantly underdeveloped). Moreover, they expressed serious concerns about the quality of knowledge and what is the "fair" assessment, and the future of their education.

The perspective on academic integrity could be noticed among university students as well (Vuletić et al., 2021). In April and May 2020, they reported elevated stress levels regarding the organisation of lectures and especially practical work, professors' lack of engagement, and inadequately adapted number of obligations and lessons' pace. Although there were participants who recognised the benefits of timesaving in online studying, most students faced problems with concentration, attention span, procrastination, self-efficacy, and motivation, which affected their general well-being<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> In the mentioned paper (fn. 6), the term **well-being** "implies not only the absence of negative symptoms, but participants' personal evaluation of their life satisfaction and meaningfulness, as well as predominance of

All three above-mentioned studies point to one of the biggest challenges for young people's adaptation to imposed changes in the education system, which is self-organisation, unencouraged prior to the pandemic. Thus, the importance of self-regulated learning for developing the 21st century competencies (Wolters, 2010), was additionally emphasised in the circumstances of education during the pandemic.

However, aforementioned research about experiences of university students also emphasised a few positive aspects for some participants, such as more leisure time and opportunity to self-organise, as well as using studying and pro-activity as a coping mechanism for gaining control over otherwise uncertain life.

These studies provide significant insights into high school and university students' experiences of changes in the education system during or slightly after the lockdown, while the schools and faculties were still closed. However, youths' memories, perceptions, and experiences of remote education could have changed their tone over time, while the mentioned studies (Institut Džamonja Ignjatović et al., 2021; Kovács Cerović et al., 2021; Vasojević et al., 2021;) represented only the fresh impressions in full swing of the crisis. Therefore, new research is required in the field of contemporary education systems that can initiate the subsequent evaluation of the effects of remote learning and narratives around it.

### **Aim of the Research**

This paper is a part of a broader qualitative study (see Nikitović et al., 2023), which intended to "give voice" to young people and understand the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on their lives, with a special reference to the experience of "self". Secondary school and university students have provided reports about the significant impressions and occurrences in their lives during the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic that addressed several critical issues. The persistent appearance of the comments regarding education encouraged the emergence of the following research questions: What is the place of education in students' spontaneous reports? How did high school and university students perceive changes caused by the Covid-19 pandemic in the education system? Are these changes perceived only as risky or also beneficial for that period and the future of their education as well?

Therefore, the main aim of this paper was to explore and describe what education meant to high school and university students in Serbia during the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic. Moreover, the intention was to examine whether,

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functional attitudes, emotions, and coping mechanisms," and will be used in this paper as well, with particular focus on developmental perspective.

and in what context, they spontaneously mentioned organisational changes in schooling and educational activities during the pandemic (both academic activities and learning and extracurricular activities). The aim will be achieved throughout several objectives: 1) Determine the place that education holds in students' spontaneous reports by calculating the percentage of number of words in the reports dedicated to the topic of education (descriptive statistics); 2) Describe the manner in which students' approach the topic of education during the Covid-19 pandemic by conducting thematic analysis (qualitative analysis); 3) Describe the differences between high school and university students regarding their spontaneous reports about educational experiences.

## Method

### *Sample*

The sample initially consisted of 70 reports written by 70 participants, i.e., students from Serbia. After the researchers got familiar with the contents, they decided to single out those reports which spontaneously mentioned materials about students' experiences regarding education. Therefore, the final sample consisted of 34 narratives written by 34 students aged 15 to 25 ( $M = 20$ ), both secondary school and university students (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** The Participants

Participants' characteristics		Frequency
Gender	Female	29
	Male	5
Level of study	Secondary school	17
	University	17

### *Data Collection*

The instrument was an online questionnaire, administered in the period from March to May 2021. It consisted of two types of items: multiple choice questions which referred to the demographic variables (age, sex, and education level) and open question (with a minimum character limit of 800, including spaces) encouraging students to write about their positive and negative experiences during the first year of Covid-19 pandemic, as well as its effects on the changes in their

self-image. The sample was convenient, and data was collected via social media platforms. The participation was voluntary and anonymous. Raw responses arrived directly to the head researcher, who distributed the adjusted data to the rest of the research team. The research procedure was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade, which issued an ethical licence to the research team.

### *Data Analysis*

Seven researchers read all the 70 narratives in order to collaboratively develop the scheme for coding by using the MAXQDA Analytics Pro 2020 software. The approach to coding was atheoretical, mapping the spontaneously mentioned experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic and the way these experiences affected the self-image and functioning of participants. All researchers made a consensus on the coding system throughout the discussion, and few codes distinguished, directly related to the educational experiences. Three researchers extracted those 34 reports that contain education-related codes and continued the analysis. The first step was counting the words dedicated to education in each student's report and representing them in percentages for conducting basic variance analysis and descriptive statistics. Finally, the thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was applied to a total of 87 coded segments. The three researchers engaged in an inductive and iterative process of regrouping similar codes into higher-order codes, that is, themes that concerned the experiences related to education during the first year of the pandemic. The higher-order codes were eventually categorised into parent themes that resembled positive and negative poles of these experiences. The overview of the themes and the codes relevant to the aim of the research could be seen on the thematic map (Figure 1).

## **Findings**

### *Descriptive Statistics*

#### Proportions of Content Dedicated to Education in Students' Reports

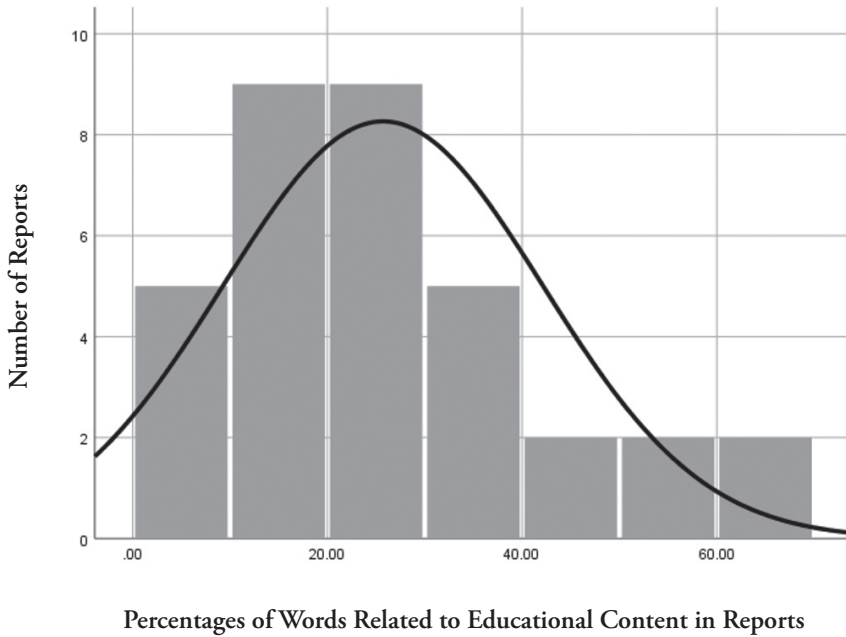
About a half of the participants, thus every second one, spontaneously reported something related to education in their narratives about the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic. For each of the selected reports ( $N = 34$ ), the words in all those sentences related to education content were summarised, and these sums turned

into percentages<sup>6</sup>, thus indicating the proportion of the report dedicated to education (see Appendix A). The statistics for percentages could be seen in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Descriptive Statistics: Percentages of Words Dedicated to Educational Content within Reports

N	min	max	S.D.	Mean		Skewness		Kurtosis	
				Statistic	S.E.	Statistic	S.E.	Statistic	S.E.
34	3.25	64.50	16.41	25.70	2.81	.68	.40	-.13	.79

The distribution of the percentages is mesokurtic and slightly right skewed, which means that the lower numbers of percentages are more represented than higher, which vary more (see Figure 1). On average, students wrote less than 25% of the report with regard to education-related topics (*Median* = 24.27, *Mode* = 12.5).



**Figure 1.** Distribution of Percentages of Words Dedicated to Educational Content within Reports

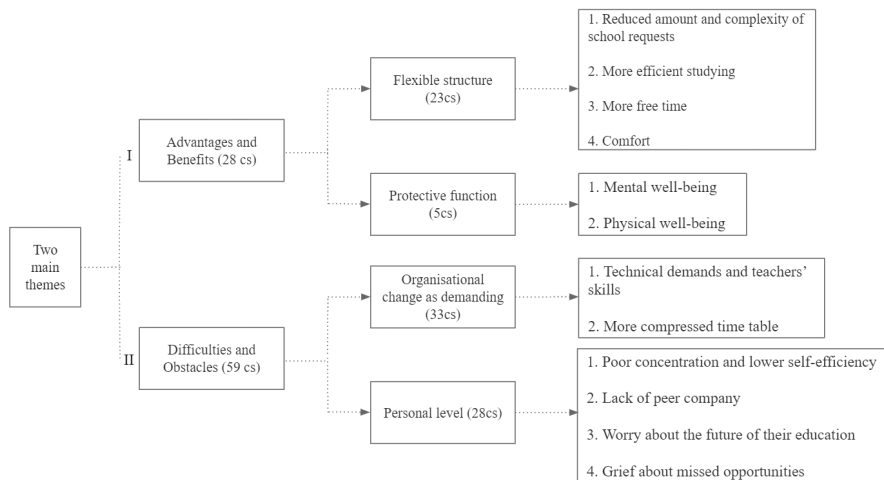
<sup>6</sup> The 100% stands for the sum of all the words within one whole report.



Additionally, those participants who evaluated their experiences with the new organisational changes in education positively (32.4% of participants) wrote significantly less words about it on average than those participants whose experiences were negative or ambivalent<sup>7</sup> (67.6%),  $F = 7.05$ ,  $p = .01$ . In this respect there were no significant differences between groups of secondary school and university students.

## Thematic Analysis

Figure 2 represents the distinguished major themes (2) and sub themes (4) that researchers abstracted, as well as the codes produced in the first stage of seven researchers' joint work.



**Figure 2.** The Thematic Map of the Main Themes and Coded Segments

As it can be seen in Figure 2, students' reports about their education in the first year of the pandemic can be divided into two major themes in general: *advantages and benefits of newly established forms of education* (28 coded segments) and *difficulties and obstacles faced by students* (59 coded segments).

<sup>7</sup> When both positive and negative perspectives are represented in the same report, the negative ones are more prominent.

### *Advantages and Benefits of Online Schooling*

Some students reported on the benefits of online schooling. They primarily experienced their online schooling as more unconstrained and flexible regarding the school assignments and time organisation. Additionally, few participants used the imposed situation regarding new online forms of schooling as an opportunity to preserve their personal psycho-physical well-being. Hence, within the firstly mentioned major theme, which refers to advantages and benefits that students articulated, two subthemes were detected and named *Flexible Structure* and *Protective Function*.

**Flexible Structure.** Refers to the recognised gains brought by the new manner of education system functioning. Although acknowledging the hardship of online schooling, some students managed to find benefits of this system mainly because of the reduced amount of school obligations and requests, which meant more leisure time. The space opened up for both high school and university students to work on themselves, pursue hobbies, and develop the skills for which they previously have had no time and opportunity during the school days.

In the beginning it felt good not to go to school and its toxic surroundings. My school tasks were maximally reduced, so I had more free time to devote to myself which I did, and I can honestly say that I'm the best version of myself ever. (Ana, f, 18)

I want to point out some of the things that were good. I was really pleased with online school. I organised myself much better and the extra time I got I spent outside, "in nature", out of Belgrade, both during the curfew and during summer, when covid related measures were reduced. (Ema, f, 24)

Being able to self-organise, university students found more time for catching up with school assignments they were lagging behind, while secondary school students in particular felt like they had more time to focus on improving their grades and preparing for entrance exams.

Some difficult colloquiums were cancelled, and I passed a hard exam via Skype which made it easier to take it off my back. (Luka, m, 23)

... then we all had online school which was much harder than regular school. The positive thing was that we had more time to prepare for our entrance exams and that at the end of the year we had better grades and GPA. (Jasmina, f, 15)

One more important code that stood out was *comfortableness*. Particularly, two students recognized the advantage and benefit of following the lessons from the comfort of their own home or place of their choice. They found engaging in lessons from home timesaving.

Corona virus didn't have an impact either on my university achievements or private life. Even so it felt good not having to go to university all the time. It was more. (Lea, f, 23)

**Protective Function.** Two codes are recognised within this subtheme: psychological and physical well-being. As for psychological, the focus on education is singled out as a significant coping strategy for some adolescents. Focusing on school assignments and their execution seems to be a significant resource (especially during the period of lockdown) for coping with the situation. Distraction by focusing on academic obligations thus proved to be a certain shield against stress caused by uncertainties that pandemic brought.

...but because I couldn't socialise during the lockdown, I had to take my mind off that fact. I did that by dedicating myself more than ever to my school obligations: I did my assignments as soon as I got them and I can honestly say that it helped me both mentally, and in terms of better grades. I am very content with myself. (Mila, f, 18)

On the other hand, only one participant recognized the online schooling as a means of protection against getting infected with the virus.

When they announced that we are going to be under lockdown and our faculties would not work for the time being, I felt relieved because that meant that, in some way, I will be protected at home and that there's less chance that I will pass the virus to any member of my family. (Jelena, f, 22)

### *Difficulties and Obstacles*

Other side of adolescents' experiences is presented within the second major theme. Observing the quantity of coded segments within the two major themes in Figure 1 (28 against 59) shows a tendency of students to evaluate their educational experience mainly negatively during the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic.

**Organisational Changes as Demanding.** Students primarily referred to the technical requirements and inadequate skills of teachers to carry out the teaching process in online format. Although there was a university student in the sample

who recognised the effort professors have made (*All in all I was surprised how most of our professors were really okay towards students*), most of the participants felt like teachers and professors were not able to meet the requests. It is important to highlight that these kinds of disadvantages were more prominent in answers of younger participants, that is, high school students. As collected data suggested, these students were more sensitive and vulnerable to organisational changes in education, partly due to the lack of external structure that had been provided to them by their teachers in regular classroom practice.

I became less and less involved with my hobbies because I was too busy with online school which was so hard. We can't just learn from the screen because teachers are not equipped for the online format of school. (Nina, 17, f)

I feel that we have distanced ourselves from the professors and our peers. School is no longer a place I like to visit, nor do I consider the time spent at school to be of high quality, because we have to learn everything by ourselves, and contacts with professors are almost non-existent. (Ana, 18, f)

In addition to emphasising that the knowledge they acquired was not on the same level as before, that cheating was easier in online format, and practical work was disabled, participants also spoke about the harmfulness of staring at computers for long periods of time.

The first thing that comes to mind is a feeling of freedom, without responsibility, because my first association is what the school looked like in April and May (of 2020). It was very disorganised and there was a lot of cheating. I feel a little scared because I know that I didn't acquire the knowledge of the material that was done then, and I will probably need it. (Marija, 16, f)

We all know the harmfulness of sitting in front of a computer for a long period of time; we feel tired all the time and when we look at our accomplishments for the day– (it feels like) there's nothing. (Ivana, 17, f)

The last code within this sub theme relates to more compressed timetables of exams. With current pandemic status dictating the necessary measures, examination periods were frequently put too close together, so university students found that newly established patterns to be often overwhelming, exhausting, and hard to keep up with.

Because of the pandemic, in September I had examination periods just a few days apart. I just didn't have the energy for the third one, so I left some of my exams untaken. (Luka, 23, m)

**Personal Level.** It has been recorded that students singled out cognitive, conative, and affective problems referring to the educational sphere of their lives. They reported on a kind of mental inertia that refers primarily to the cognitive aspect. The situation was so overwhelming for some of them that they could not maintain the concentration necessary for learning and listening to the lectures. It was also followed by the low self-efficacy, which led to the decrease in working habits acquired earlier.

I felt like I had lost track of reality and time. My focus is more and more declining, and I am usually a very organised and diligent person. (Nina, 17, f)

...and of course, I wasn't able to prepare for any of my exams (in the summer of 2020). So, I didn't pass any of my exams in June and concentration and motivation were not my allies. (Katarina, 21, f)

One of the factors, which stood out and exerted influence on such conditions, was also the format of lessons that they began to experience after some time as monotonous and consequently boring. It led to the conclusion that there was a certain experience in relation to going to faculty/school.

I really don't like online school. I think it's not a real school and whether we like it or not we are aware that much less knowledge is acquired because we simply cannot resist the chance we have for cheating, etc. (Ena, 16, f)

Special code within this segment was the lack of peers' company in the school setting. Naturally, since schooling and spending time with friends for high school students is closely linked together, they missed it more.

All in all, it is hard for me mostly because we don't go to school, we don't often see friends, and I can hardly wait for this to be over. (Ena, 16, f)

Grief about the missed opportunities is another significant code within this segment. Participants expressed disappointment and sadness about the impossibility to have prom/graduation celebrations, missing their school trips, various cultural manifestations, concerts, parties, etc.

I was not able to spend as much time with my friends and partner as I would have liked and I could not attend various events that I like (concerts, festivals, parties, get-togethers). This made me feel like my youth was passing me by while I wasn't enjoying it as I would have liked. (Sara, 25, f)

I am still just a high school girl who gets more and more sad news: there's no prom night or senior school trip, taking final exams will not be the same... nothing is nor will be normal. (Hana, 18, f)

We could not hold the graduation ceremony since it would have endangered us and many people from our surroundings. So, we did not even get to celebrate the end of a beautiful period in our lives. In addition to the university, my social life was largely limited due to fear for my loved ones. (Sara, 25, f)

While grief about missed opportunities refers to the chances and occasions that participants felt like missing in the past, worrying about their future (further) education is another important code that is directed towards concern regarding the future educational and career ventures. Younger participants were much more likely to recognise that their peers spent more time on social media platforms while they should have been studying; that since the quality of schooling has decreased with online format their generation could be at risk in their future school endeavours (for example with enrolment at a university), while university students showed concerns about their professional carriers, whether they would be able to find jobs, or just a place to start practical work. The latter was especially dominant among participants who selected fields for which praxis and near human contact was a necessity (i.e. medical students and filmmakers) and among those students who were at the turning points of their education, who were graduating from high school or college.

In this situation I saw more clearly holes in the system and I'm becoming more and more worried about the future of my generation. They didn't do anything productive, they just hung out on social media platforms. (Nina, 17, f)

I lost a lot of precious experience at university since some practical work was not possible to organise (for example internships in hospital). (Sara, 25, f)

## Discussion

In a presented online survey, secondary school and university students reported about their positive and negative experiences, as well as the effects of the pandemic crisis on their sense of self. Besides all the other relevant topics, only half of the participants spontaneously mentioned education-related content, i.e., every second participant did not. This finding is consistent with the finding of the research of the narratives collected online for a sample of secondary school students in Italy (Fioretti et al., 2020) which also indicate the lack of relation towards school and education in students' narratives about their experiences during the pandemic. Thereby, data in research conducted by Fioretti and colleagues were processed using different methods, by counting of key words mentioned in narratives (such as "school"), unlike our approach, which took into account the entire codes/text related to education. In our research topic of education took approximately a quarter of the average report, less among those participants who have noticed benefits and more among those who mainly saw the downsides of remote learning. Therefore, those students who were more unsatisfied felt a greater need to express their thoughts and feelings, so the important message behind the reports could be interpreted as an appeal.

The number of students unsatisfied or ambivalent about the introduced changes in the education practice was higher, but almost a third of participants managed to see exclusively positive sides. The thematic analysis has shown that some of these participants felt more comfortable being able to organise their own time and catch up with 1) hobbies and skills which they did not manage to deal with before the pandemic and 2) schoolwork and studies. Although there were differences between secondary school and university students regarding the *type of assignments* they had to achieve, the motivation to engage in these obligations probably depended on their academic aspirations also and not only on the age or level of studying. Like other young people in Serbia and the world (e.g. Bdair, 2021; UNICEF, 2020), some of our students favoured online studying because it was timesaving, there was flexible scheduling of learning and leisure, as well as the comfortable environment for monitoring the lectures. Only one student from our study appreciated remote learning for its core purpose (to prevent the spread of the virus), which made him feel sincerely grateful.

The benefits of remote teaching and learning have been recognised in the context of well-being. As previous research in Serbia with university students suggested, self-organising and proactivity represent functional coping strategies that are beneficial for psychological well-being and provide a sense of relaxa-

tion and self-content. Additionally, the same study (Vuletić et al., 2021, p. 12) mentioned that the *rational evaluation of the situation and following the preventive measures* could be considered coping mechanisms. Being able to recognise positive elements of remote learning points to the fact that students from our research have also developed adapting abilities to the rapidly changing education climate and crises such as the global pandemic. This proves that both secondary school and university students' mental health might benefit from the opportunity to self-direct and engage in their own education process (e.g. Fadkhurossi & Kusmaryani, 2021). Students show self-reflectiveness and motivation to study when they find studying directly connected to their personal aim and future career (see Sirbu, 2020). The realised students' autonomy and engagement are probably emphasised due to pandemic-related conditions, such as enhanced technology, social media usage, and time-flexibility (Blaschke, 2019; Moore, 2020). Aforementioned aspects were not directly connected to online classes and lectures, but leisure time and solo-studying.

On the other hand, participants who emphasised the negative aspects, especially those who additionally noticed positive ones, showed the need to elaborate on their experiences. Some of these reports might represent the means young people used to reflect and work through the negative elements of the crisis. Most of the difficulties that students have noticed are in agreement with previous research mentioned in the introduction (Bdair, 2021; Džamonja Ignjatović et al., 2021; Kovács Cerović et al., 2021; Ristić Dedić & Jokić, 2021; Scott et al., 2021; Vasojević et al., 2021), but also with those findings from even before the pandemic (Wong, 2007), indicating technological limitations and personal issues connected to e-learning, compared to regular learning i.e. the classroom practice.

However, when it comes to difficulties participants faced regarding the organisational challenges during the pandemic, they were somewhat different between the groups of secondary and university students. It seems that secondary school students suffered more from the lack of external structure imposed by the teachers. They were probably used to having their time scheduled from the early school levels, so some of them might have been confused with sudden switching between too much leisure time and overwhelming schoolwork. The other explanation might be connected with teachers' inability to create a structure using the online platforms and means, which led to increased confusion among younger students. Possible solutions might lie in collaboration with students, understanding their preference (e.g. social media), as well as enhancing digital literacy of teachers and professors.



Although there are individual differences when it comes to appreciation of external or internal structuring, participants clearly recognised the effects of the pandemic on their own behaviour. The importance of developing willingness, motivation and self-management behaviour in learning situations is particularly relevant for successful online learning (Wolters, 2010) and emergency remote learning during the pandemic era. This indicates the necessity of preparing students to be e-learners and to become psychologically prepared for the e-learning environment (Wong, 2007). University students learned to enjoy and appreciate their independence and self-organisation, so professors' tendency to structure their time during lockdown with additional work and deadlines might have been frustrating for some.

Throughout the reports, most of the participants were sending a message that something should be changed in the education practice and system, for they were not able to accommodate and achieve expected results. Some of them were facing concentration and motivation difficulties, which consequently led to decrease in self-efficacy and satisfaction. Not being able to self-organise, secondary school students expected teachers to help them, but they were busy trying to get ahead with their own assignments. Compared to secondary school students, university students perceived that their teachers had worked hard and put more effort into organising the lectures.

Henceforth, some students probably used these reports to send a message that they had needed additional support and understanding at the time, but no way to acquire it. In regular circumstances, this kind of support could be provided by peers in the school setting (Hebib, 2021), which was particularly denied during the state of emergency. School should be a safe space for adolescents to develop their social and emotional skills, and, for some, making the studying less monotonous and peers more easily approachable. Moreover, it offers some kinds of rewards (graduation, excursions, and trips) for decent behaviour, which can be a strong motivator for school assignments and time for resting and gaining strength for further studying. High school students often complained about missing these important events, making them feel alienated, frustrated, and increasing their time spent on social media and other consuming online activities. As one of the previously mentioned papers clearly stated (Vasojević et al., 2021), students from our research also seem to be missing the classroom practice.

Participants stated their worries about their future education, which were also different for the groups of secondary school and university students. Secondary school students noticed how online studying might affect their knowledge and ability to meet necessary criteria for enrolling at the faculty they find interesting. Moreover, the lack of academic integrity might have helped the minority of students make their way through the year with higher grades but leaving respon-

sible students with a sense of injustice and anxiety. These results are in accordance with previous research in Serbia (Kovács Cerović et al., 2021). Although worried about academic integrity, university students were facing different obstacles, such as lack of practical training and subsequent inability to find jobs in the future (Klikovac et al., 2021). However, as mentioned, anxiety difficulties connected to worries about future education might be reduced with the help of andragogy-based counselling (Fadkhurosi & Kusmaryani, 2021). Since practical training is necessary for linking academic knowledge and scientific concepts with practical knowledge and skills which is essential in some domains like medical studies (Krnjaić, 2015), these results are expected. In the context of lifelong learning (European Commission, 2000) and adult education, practical training and student internships is an opportunity for learning and application of professional, expert knowledge (Krnjaić, 2015; Sirbu, 2020), as well as for becoming familiar with and developing professional culture (Steiner, 2013).

However, the fact that participants spontaneously mentioned and articulated these troubles, with no previous suggestion or direct question from the researchers, is a particularly noteworthy result with practical implications for improving the education system and making it more resilient in the case of crisis.

## Conclusion

The contribution of this study lies in the specific methodological approach with researchers occupying phenomenological epistemological position and avoiding any suggestions to initiate the education-related topics in the narratives. Unlike other quantitative and qualitative studies, that explicitly dealt with the interruption of formal schooling caused by the pandemic, the intention of this paper was to investigate if and in what context educational activities and organisational changes in schooling were mentioned *spontaneously*, i.e., what is the position of education and educational activities in the students' subjective experiences during the pandemic. We also considered the potential effects of the pandemic on students' future education. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study that approaches the problem of students' education during the pandemic in this specific and indirect way. Education was an important part of about half of the total number of reports, within which the fourth of the text on average was dedicated to the educational content.

This study proves how there are still many students who firmly rely on the systems' ability to provide structure for learning, making them more and more dependent, less critically oriented, thus unprepared to become aware adult members

of the future society. Henceforth, one of the implications is that students should be encouraged and taught how to structure their own time even before the university level. Adaptation was problematic for some students, resulting in decrease or impairment of their psycho-physical well-being. Last but not least, there were participants who did not mention any educational activities in their reports, although it is expected that these activities occupied a significant part of their everyday lives.

Both secondary school and university students emphasised positive and negative effects of remote teaching and learning but faced certain differences when it came to concrete assignments and (unsatisfied or fulfilled) needs. Almost all students found themselves missing the regular classroom practice and learned to appreciate the socio-emotional benefits from physically going to school. Participants showed worries about their future education, pointing to the lower quality of knowledge, lack of academic integrity and opportunities for practical training. These issues could seriously affect students' aspirations and plans for further education and professional careers. It is necessary to devise ways to prevent the long-term consequences of education during the pandemic for further education of young people, as well as their adult education and professional development.

### **Practical Implications**

Students in their narratives about life during the pandemic, even when they were not directly asked about their educational experiences, clearly point to the weaknesses of the educational system, which are particularly prominent in terms of organizational changes in education and emergency remote learning. Thus, implications for educational practice point to the necessity of supporting the development of students' self regulation, particularly working habits, self regulated learning, planning and time management as well as both students' and teachers' digital competences and critical thinking. Important aspects of self-regulation articulated in this paper relate to processes and aspects such as: defining goals, planning, assessing one's own abilities, self-evaluation during the learning process, noticing weaknesses and difficulties in learning, planning problem solving procedures, assessing learning effects and achievements etc. All this is of special importance in educational process for the development of an individual's critical attitude, for his conscious reflexive decision-making and taking responsibility in making decisions important for further education, career management and achieving subjective psychological well-being. In this respect recommendations are related to the necessity for improving regular school practice and resilience of the school system for potential future emergency situations.

## Limitations

This study covers a very wide period of time during the Covid-19 pandemic: from lockdown and closure of all schools and universities, including some hybrid forms and almost regular forms of schooling with (intensive) preventive measures, to a variety of implemented online methods and procedures. This is the reason why the conclusions are more general than expected for qualitative studies. Moreover, the study did not cover some groups of students, particularly vulnerable groups who lack internet access and adequate devices necessary for distance learning. Additionally, overrepresented girls could lead towards (gender) biased conclusions.

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## Appendix A

### Frequencies, Percentages and Evaluation of Education-Related Content in Reports

N	Student, f/m	Total number of words in the report (100%)	Number of words in segments dedicated to education	Percentage of words in segments dedicated to education (%)	Evaluation of the experience*
1	Nina, f	255	107	36.90	-
2	Lara, f	226	31	8.93	+
3	Milena, f	155	34	13.33	+
4	Jana, f	266	10	4.42	-
5	Olja, f	1001	60	38.71	-
6	Ivana, f	231	133	50.00	-
7	Tamara, f	561	119	11.89	+
8	Luka, m	204	82	35.50	-
9	Jelena, f	150	19	3.39	+
10	Ema, f	254	46	22.55	+
11	Jelena, f	167	39	26.00	+
12	Marko, m	453	129	50.79	-
13	Bojana, f	220	77	46.11	-
14	Mila, f	193	61	13.47	+
15	Sara, f	151	49	22.27	-
16	Ena, f	257	65	33.68	-
17	Jasmina, f	155	43	28.48	-
18	Irena, f	177	69	26.85	-
19	Nikola, f	136	70	45.16	-
20	Lea, f	351	36	20.34	+
21	Marta, f	507	40	29.41	+
22	Petar, m	176	96	27.35	-
23	Katarina, f	152	138	27.22	-
24	Dušan, m	437	30	17.05	-
25	Marija, f	244	94	61.84	-
26	Jovana, f	249	51	11.67	+
27	Anđela, f	169	35	14.34	-
28	Valerija, f	176	76	30.52	-
29	Ana, f	914	109	64.50	-
30	Mirjana, f	237	22	12.50	-
31	Isidora, f	154	33	3.61	-
32	Hana, f	160	46	19.41	-
33	Dorotea, f	255	5	3.25	-
34	Nada, f	226	20	12.50	+

*Note.* Plus (+) stands for positive, and minus (-) for negative evaluation.



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## Kako učenici i studenti izveštavaju o svojim obrazovnim iskustvima tokom prve godine pandemije kovida 19?<sup>11</sup>

**Apstrakt:** Cilj ovog rada je da steknemo uvid šta je obrazovanje značilo učenicima i studentima tokom pandemije kovida 19 i u kom su kontekstu obrazovne aktivnosti i organizacione promene u školovanju spontano pominjane. Ovaj rad je deo šire kvalitativne studije u kojoj su narativi učenika i studenata o njihovim iskustvima tokom prve godine pandemije prikupljeni onlajn. Od inicijalnog uzorka, koji se sastojao od 70 narativa, za dalju analizu odabrani su samo oni sa obrazovnim sadržajem. Stoga su krajnji uzorak činila 34 narativa, koji potiču od 17 učenika srednje škole i 17 studenata (N=34, od toga 29 ženskog pola), uzrasta od 15 do 25 godina ( $M=20$ ). Izveštaji studenata su se više odnosili na pozitivne aspekte onlajn učenja i prednosti samoorganizovanja, kao i na zabrinutost zbog daljeg obrazovanja, dok su učenici srednjih škola više naglašavali teškoće koje su poticale od novog načina rada, koji je značajno uticao na njihovu dnevnu rutinu i društveni život.

**Ključne reči:** učenici i studenti, pandemija kovida 19, obrazovanje, narativi, kvalitativna studija

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