

**RESILIENT UNIVERSITIES IN PANDEMIC TIMES. THE CASE OF BABES BOLYAI
UNIVERSITY, ROMANIA**

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Abstract

Today's pandemic caused major disruptions at global level, impacting systems, cities, communities, and higher education institutions (HEIs) made no exception. From the initial shock, to survival mode and response strategies, HEIs were challenged to identify sustainable approaches to the new normal. Being a resilient university asks for tremendous efforts to prepare, adapt and respond adequately to a major crisis. The existing problems and deficiencies had been exacerbated (related to access, equity, quality, etc.), but several opportunities should be explored (innovation in teaching and learning, technological endowment, digital literacy and training, support services, etc.). The article aims to reveal the response strategy adopted by one of the leading university in Romania, namely Babeş Boyai University (BBU), and to highlight its resilient profile: from an initial limited readiness for

such a crisis, to preparedness and constant adaption to the changing environment: designing new institutional framework for teaching, research and administrative activities, providing access to online education, granting support for students and staff (access to IT devices, training, grants), as well. The ongoing pandemic has been perceived by the university's leadership as a trigger for relevant changes, as well as an opportunity for sustainable development of the institution. In view of all these realities, the current perspective will allow us to identify some good practices and future lines of action needed in the new academic environment as well as future trends of development in connection with actions that will be maintained in the long run, especially since, so as we can easily observe, the ongoing context does not seem to offer us a high level of stability and anticipation perspective.

Keywords: global pandemic, HEIs, resilient university.

JEL Classification: I18, I25.

1. Context

Since January 2020, at global level, we are witnessing an unprecedented pandemic, impacting dramatically health systems, economies, labour markets, as well as educational systems worldwide. Up to October 2021, according to World Health Organisation¹, there have been 233,503,524 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and 477,403 deaths, and in several parts of the world, the so-called 4th wave is dominated by the Delta variant. The vaccination process has been developing at different pace around the world, due to limited access to vaccine doses, people's attitudes towards vaccination and governmental decisions related to restrictions and access for vaccinated and non-vaccinated citizens.

The pandemic management has already included a few total or partial lockdowns around the world, as well as mobility restrictions, alternating with lifting schemes for *returning to normal* (we may also refer to the *next normal*, as in the campaign² launched by UNESCO) and has triggered plenty vulnerabilities, especially in the emerging economies (low capital investment level, rise of unemployment, dramatic decrease of contact-intensive services key to the tourism, travel sectors, as well as hospitality industry, reduced access to distance learning and remote work, etc.). The COVID outbreak has become a severe disruption for the educational systems - according to UNESCO, 1.2 billion students and youth across the planet are affected by school closure (UNESCO, 2020). Nevertheless, this crisis revealed and exacerbated several vulnerabilities of the educational systems, that cannot be ignored and ask for medium and long term interventions, in a strategic and sustainable

¹ More data available here: <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>.

² More details on the campaign are available here: <https://en.unesco.org/campaign/nextnormal>

manner. From the problems related to digitalisation (both technological endowment and digital skills), to access to support programs for vulnerable learners or reduced mobility for international students, teaching and research staff, reduced number of scientific and cultural events, reduced number of outreach activities in local communities, etc. All the above impacted dramatically learners, teachers, schools, communities and systems, as well.

As an immediate response to governmental decisions on lockdowns, universities all over the world decided to close campuses, to suspend the international mobility programs and to switch from in person education to online education, from in person academic events and research collaborations to online ones. Those changes created also a high level of uncertainty and pressure among administrative staff (new support services for teachers, students, researchers and decision-makers), teachers (new skills, adaptation of courses, seminars and new forms of assessments for the online learning context, support services for students, creative activities to attract students in the enrolment process or to maintain students' commitment in remote learning etc.), researchers (limited if any access to research labs, exclusively online project meeting and conferences, etc.)

Based on pandemic data and vaccination process' evolution at national and/or local level, some universities reconsidered opening *on site* activities, others created hybrid learning context or preserved entirely the online teaching and learning system. Still, a high tolerance towards risks and adaptive behaviours are highly needed for this unfolding context, and the gains from those coping times should serve as support for medium and long term strategies. The disruption caused by COVID 19 outbreak "will not be the last to have an impact on the continuity of education [...] and has led to an interest in the concept of academic continuity and institutional resilience of higher education institutions" (Bartusevičienė et al., 2021, p. 152). The need for more resilient universities is clear and the road to achieve such a status might not be the easiest one.

2. Resilient university – a fashionable status or a long term model?

Despite its present overuse, resilience is a cross-disciplinary concept referring to "the ability of an entity to bounce back to its original order, form, or design" (Wildavsky, 1988 in Balbachevsky & Kohtamäki, 2020, p. 66) and it has been more recently explored in the academic context and university environment.

The analysis of the resilience concept brings us approaches based on principles such as: "capacity of individuals or social/technical systems to handle boundary conditions and interpret early warnings and weak signals of change. Being resilient entails the ability to guard against something dysfunctional happening, to prevent something damaging from worsening and to recover from

adversity once it has happened. " (Karlsen & Pritchard, 2013, p.1) What can help in this dysfunction prevention approach is the long-term vision centred on expertise, strategies, tools and plans the " person's and/or system's capacity to manage the unexpected and to cope with surprises." (Karlsen & Pritchard, 2013, p.1).

Moreover, resilience can be analysed at different levels, from individual to global one, and it is related to learning, in the sense that it reveals "the ability to accommodate change, while recovering from a crisis, reconstituting a new, stronger, normality" (Foster, 1993 *apud* Boin; Van Eeten, 2013 in Balbachevsky & Kohtamäki, 2020, p. 66).

Despite the fact that "resiliency literature is scarce, inadequate, and fragmented" (Sutcliffe & Vogus, 2003 in Canney, 2021, p. 10), we can identify a special focus on resilience in organizations in the works of Luthans (2002), Weick (2003) or Baran & Scott (2010). Related to the university's resilience we should mention the contributions of Karlsen, J. K& Pritchard. R. (2013), Rosowsky (2020), Rudd et all (2021) and Brammer (2021). Nevertheless, the present fluid context might serve as a great opportunity for in-depth researches on the topic, to reconsider the changing roles adopted by HEIs throughout history, to explore new forms of fulfilling university's mission, to redefine its social responsibility, to ensure continuity in education and to explore new forms of engagement in the society, based on a series of lessons learned:

- the need for strong leadership to preserve calm and to reduce the negative impact of uncertainty,
- the need to share best practices related to crisis-response among universities and other entities,
- the need for resources for a proper intervention in case of immediate switch from on site to online teaching and learning (mainly support services for faculty members, students, administrative and research staff),
- the need for viable lifelong learning programs for teaching, administrative and research staff,
- the need for new teaching strategies that activate students in a more collaborative manner and involve them in real-life problem solving.
- the need for long term partnership with relevant stakeholders in the education field.

Therefore, "the challenge now is to ensure that critical lessons learned are not lost or ignored, but translated into action toward strategic organizational changes and resilience building (Bartusevičienė et al., 2021, p.20).

The evolution of the present pandemic exposed a series of fragilities of the HEIs and the need to focus on academic continuity, at the core of the resilience building. On the short run and as an immediate response, coping capabilities should be used for ensuring academic continuity. Once the crisis is prolonged, a clear action plan to mitigate the risks related to academic continuity should be developed. In a post-crisis context, a medium and long term strategy and alternative scenarios are needed. The role of adaptation capabilities, aiming to “reflect and learn from the success and failures and implement organizational change” (Duchek 2020 in Bartusevičienė et al., 2021, p.49) becomes crucial to the re-design of any higher education institution, based on its 3 main dimensions: education, research and third-stream services. After such a disruptive phenomenon, the HEIs need “to develop a resilient learning system using evidence-based and needs-based information so that responsive and proactive measures can be instituted” (Dayagbil et al, 2021, p.1).

3. Babes Bolyai University – a resilient university

Babes Bolyai University is a traditional, Humboldtian type of institution, with deep roots in Central and Eastern Europe and relevant international academic ties. Its origins date back to 1581, and, therefore, it is the oldest institution of higher education in Romania. It is the largest Romanian university (with almost 45 000 students enrolled in undergraduate, graduate, PhD, and non-traditional academic programs in 22 faculties) and it is ranked on 1st position in country between 2016-2019, in the University Meta ranking system, initiated by the Romanian Ministry of Education and Research in 2016. The British QS STAR audit has evaluated BBU in 2019 as an international university, with excellence in teaching and research (QS*****). The university has also joined the prestigious international academic organization GUILD of Research Intensive Universities in the same year (Center for International Cooperation – BBU presentation).

Throughout its history, Babes Bolyai University has represented a relevant actor at national level, a model of multiculturalism that aims to preserve tradition and to continuously foster innovation in the University’s triad: teaching, research and third-stream services. The political pressure in various decades (a special situation is represented by the former communist regime in Romania), the financial constraints (the Romanian education system is chronically underfunded – for example, in 2020 the budget allocation reached only 3.4 of GDP representing 38.417.6 mil RON³), the demographic

³Data provided by the Ministry of Education - Legea Bugetului pentru anul 2020, <https://www.edu.ro/legea-bugetului-pentru-anul-2020>

continuous decline, the series of educational reforms (most of them unfinished or failed) transformed Babes Bolyai University into a major player in the Romanian academic environment, navigating through challenging times, with a clear commitment to reinvent itself while preserving the valuable academic tradition. Therefore, we intend to reveal its resilient nature, manifested especially in the on-going pandemic context.

On March 11, 2020, in the context of national lockdown imposed in order to contain the spread of COVID 19 virus, the University decided on closing campuses and on site teaching and research activities (it immediately switched to emergency remote learning- ERL). Initially, it seemed as a temporary decision, but as the health crisis had deepened, the short term response approach was replaced by a medium term adaptive strategy.

Our analysis aims to identify the approaches adopted by the managerial team of the university at the early stage of the crisis, as well as the adaptive leadership promoted so far.

From the very beginning, the university set up a COVID 19 task team, led by one of the Vice-rectors, in charge with ensuring the transparency of all the university's managerial team decisions related to teaching activities (online platforms, access, conduct), research activities (access to online resources) and administrative activities (online procedures for document flows, support services for faculty members and students). The efforts were remarkable in the sense that they were meant to offer a lot of daily support in the crisis to such a complex institution and to communicate on the dedicated section of the university's website the changes in a constant manner. Transparency and support might be considered the core principles that guided the whole process of mitigating the risks associated to the health crisis and impacting the academic life: social isolation for students and teachers, limited access to online platforms and devices, fatigue and low motivation for students in online activities, stress and burnout for teachers, etc.

3.1.The response to crisis approach

The first managerial decisions (March 2020- April 2020) were taken within the framework set up by the national authorities – lockdown imposed by Military Ordinances. Following the announcement of suspending all on site teaching and research activities, the university informed the academic community, 2 days after, about the necessity to adopt social distancing, to make use of electronic communication and to make efforts to ensure the continuity in teaching, research and administrative activities. That response strategy was meant to guarantee the academic community that the university is adopting a responsible and informed approach, granting the necessary support in that unexpected and worrying situation. Due to a remarkable technological endowment and to a relevant experience

in distance learning activities (the university launched the very first distance learning programs in Romania, in 1998), the immediate switch to online activities was not really problematic, as it was perceived as an emergency response.

The most challenging aspects were related to student's access to reliable Internet connection, the teachers' efforts to create interactive content for synchronous teaching for courses, seminars and laboratories, administrative staff's efforts to provide new support services for students, teachers and decision-makers (from the acquisition of laptops and other devices for vulnerable students, to online learning resources through StudHub or psychological online support provided by the University's Psychological Clinic etc.) etc. As the pandemic evolved, the managerial team started to consider a medium term approach, an adaptive one.

3.2. The adaptive strategy

Unfortunately, what has been considered a temporary situation, turned into a prolonged health crisis, and Babes Bolyai University decided to adopt a medium term strategy, in order to preserve the academic continuity. The decisions taken by the managerial team were related to teaching and learning, research and administrative activities, as well.

As far as the *teaching activities* were concerned, the first intervention consisted in a technical and logistical implementation plan for exclusively online courses and seminars, that included investments in personalized educational platforms and specialized training for academic staff, followed by constant upgrading of the existing infrastructure. The challenges of exclusively online activities - fatigue related to extended exposure to computers for teachers and students, decreasing involvement of students in synchronous activities, the extra-time devoted by teachers for the design of new formats for courses, seminars, laboratories and exams, etc. - were meant to be addressed. Therefore, the Didactic Council launched *the new university pedagogy*,⁴ a valuable guideline for teachers involved in online teaching, which focused on the need to re-consider the didactic paradigms, to adapt teaching methods and tools to the online environment, to recalibrate the curriculum, while enhancing the students' learning experience and the quality of the whole teaching process. As a follow up, a series of webinars and online debates were launched, for the dissemination of good practices and identification of solutions to a variety of teaching and learning online-related problems. The

⁴ The New Pedagogy is available here: https://www.ubbcluj.ro/ro/infoubb/noua_pedagogie_universitara/

emergence of a *community of practitioners* was probably the most relevant outcome of the above mentioned efforts.

The Babeş-Bolyai University chosen way of carrying out the academic activities proposed for the first semester of the academic year 2020-2021 were agreed and approved based on the decisions made by the Faculty Councils. Half of the Councils submitted the decision to organize online activities (11 out of the 22 Faculties), the others opting for three different types of hybrid activity (Hybrid and Hybrid 1 – 3 Faculties, Hybrid 2 – 4 Faculties and Hybrid 3 – 3 Faculties) but mostly based on online interaction. (Hotărârea 12.653 / 10.09.2020) As an example, the Hybrid, Hybrid 1 type activities meant basically online courses and seminars and on-site teaching and research organised events. Hybrid 2 meant for the Bachelor lines that the courses and seminars were carried out online, while the practical works and laboratories were being held on-site. In the case of the Master lines except for the practical laboratories all the activities were held online. Hybrid 3 – on-site activities mostly for the third year students, research and some applied laboratories. It should be added that, even in the case of the Faculties with an applied field of specialization that have initially opted for teaching activities with physical, on site presence, little by little the courses and seminars moved completely online due to the occurrence of numerous cases of infection among teachers and participating students. Therefore, the enthusiasm determined by a possible favourable perspective of such a scenario proved not to be a viable one for medium or long term.

The teaching and research staff and the students continued to carry out the online activities, in accordance with the legal provisions. Beyond the didactic activities, the recommendation was for the academic year 2020-2021 that the research, individual study processes, research events, etc. to be carried out in the online / distance regime.

As far as the administrative activities were concerned, there had been established the possibility for employees to carry out home office activities, by concluding additional documents to the individual employment contracts or complying to the unilateral decision of the employer, when this decision was provided by the legal provisions in force. The time periods and the effective ways of organizing work at home were set by each head of the administrative department (the Rector's Office along with the units in its structure, the General Administrative Directorate, the faculties and other units directly subordinated to the Rector's Office), with the approval of the Rector, by work decision, completed and assumed by the signature of the head of the department. (UBB, Mesaj și circulară, 6.11.2021)

Regarding the management of documents, all information and operations required by the administrative departments from the university (auxiliary and non-teaching staff) were recommended

to be sent online, via the e-mail address of each department. A request for the use of electronic means was also made. If electronic means of communication are not chosen, the recommendation suggested that documents to be handed in only after an online or telephone appointment. (UBB, Mesaj pentru comunitatea UBB, 3.11.2020)

The university's admission regulations were designed for a process that took place mostly online, within the university's own platform, specially designed and structured to be able to adapt efficiently and quickly to the new requirements of this process in pandemic times. The current academic year was initially planned to start in a classical "face to face" manner for the vast majority of the students (vaccinated or tested), (HCA 8781, 26.07.2021), and all the Faculties have prepared for the resumption in the sense of the traditional educational processes completed with all the tools gained during the adaptation to the online teaching environment. BBU has proposed three scenarios for the next academic year:

Scenario 1 - the physical participation of the students in all the didactic activities, with the compliance of the regulated protection norms;

Scenario 2 - participation in a mixed system with physical and online presence depending on the specifics of the activity and the available infrastructure;

Scenario 3 - participation of all students in online activities;

The extremely low vaccination rate – around 33%⁵, the extremely highly increasing incidence rate of new cases (e.g.: in 30th September 2021 - 12.032 new cases were registered in the last 24 hours, with an incidence proportion of 4.79 cases per 1,000 persons in Cluj county⁶), as well as the relaxation conditions favoured by the authorities' decisions taken throughout the entire summer period, determined that this favourable initial presumed context for "returning to normality" to be cancelled by the new reality, which maintained all the fears related to the impossibility to ensure and

⁵ Data provided by Guvernul României - Știri Oficiale, 30.09.2021; <https://stirioficiale.ro/informatii/buletin-de-presa-30-septembrie-2021-ora-13-00>

⁶ Data provided by Covid – 19, - Raportări, 30.09.2021; <https://vaccinare-covid.gov.ro/raportari/>

support on the long term the safety conditions and the adapted infrastructure needed for the compliance to the special ongoing academic situation.

As mentioned before, what has been considered to be a temporary situation, turned into a prolonged one and yet again the University had to rethink the strategy. Thus, the Faculties received once more the authority to decide upon the academic process organization for the 2021-2022 academic year, choosing between a combination of on site, online or hybrid academic activities (HCA 10753, 14.09.2021). The organization of the academic year involved the creation of the administrative framework to ensure good predictive functioning and at the same time flexible and adaptive one to the evolving and changing environment, which brought to light a number of new Senate decisions, (HCA 11401, 22.09.2021) that are ensuring on the one hand the specification of general issues necessary for the proper functioning of the educational process, and on the other hand, updated scenarios for the teaching activities, in the case of those Faculties that were forced to switch back to online environment.

The difficult adaptation to the prolong operationalization of the online activity context implies for BBU the integration of synchronous and asynchronous processes, allowing and encouraging empathy with students by focusing on aspects related to psycho-pedagogical methodology and rethinking ways to promote online access for students. Moreover, increased attention is needed for all aspects related to the university environment development, aspects that are an important for creating a basic student experience, fostering the development of real valuable skills and dynamic learning community.

The success favoured by the development of well-structured strategic plans might turn the idea of temporary adaptation to an unexpected context, into a clear focus on facilitating the identification of strategic opportunities that could be maintained on the long run, applicable not only in the special online environment conditions that are determined by current pandemic factors. These should be considered good practices, which can complement the traditional methods and can enrich the teaching-learning-assessment tools in parallel with the digital space and technological evolution, favourably integrating all the interested parties, which in other conditions, from various reasons could not access university training courses. Moreover, the adaptive on-time management of the university academic environment impact the teaching-learning-evaluation and scientific research activities, as well as other events that take part within the university such as: temporary lectures, book releases, international conferences and workshops, sport events, various student events and on-going projects.

In this sense, we strongly believe that it is imperative to consider and support the development of a high-performance digital education ecosystem that pursues the long-term benefits generated by

this process, as a natural phenomenon of transformation, in line with current organizational and educational trends and not just as a temporary adaptation to an environment that sometimes might be too difficult to be foreseen.

In our view, universities resilience, as in the case of Babeş -Bolyai University, would involve seeking for changes that are happening and that have taken place in the educational environment during the recent period, looking at the same time at what should and can be adapted in order to create educational value added processes, understanding trends and behaviours (some of them already becoming familiar) in the way in which they have and will influence future development perspectives.

4. Concluding remarks

The present COVID 19 pandemic triggered plenty of vulnerabilities of educational systems worldwide: from inadequate technological endowment, to resistance to change for new forms of teaching and learning fuelled by shortcomings related to low digital literacy, low access to schooling, high dropout rates, learning deficits, low quality of the educational services, etc.

For their learning and teaching mission, HEIs need to address properly the challenge of continuous enhancement of the quality of educational services, by transferring the best practices to be applied into all type of IT and online available instruments, online relevant content development and learning resources, dynamic methodologies, performant and efficient engagement of the students, course content innovation, etc. In hybrid or exclusively online academic environment, new platforms as well as new pedagogies (properly linking the curriculum with the teaching methods, carefully chosen learning environment, and adopting relevant assessment procedures) are necessary for a better response to the educational needs of today's students. Nevertheless, ensuring academic continuity and enhancing the learning experiences should be mandatory for HEIs.

The impact of the global pandemic on HEIs is a complex one, and response strategies should replace the short-term actions, for a sustainable transformation of the educational environment, in a resilient and responsible manner.

BBU should be considered a relevant resilient university, with clear involvement in identifying appropriate short term solutions for the present pandemic context, along with accountable medium and long term action plans. The university triad - teaching, research and third-stream services - is being heavily challenged nowadays, and these unfolding decisions will definitely shape the future design of the academic environment. If the lessons learned will fuel the new adaptive behaviour, we might experience more flexible, resilient academic environment in the near future.

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