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HOW EMPLOYED STUDENTS LIVED THE COVID-19 LOCKDOWN IN ROMANIA

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Oana LUP[1]

Abstract

This paper draws on the conceptual framework of "time poverty" to explore how employed students, a group much affected by "time poverty", experienced changes in time allocation during the COVID-19 lockdown in Romania. Findings of a mixed-method study indicate that working and non-working students perceived and engaged differently with this sudden increase in discretionary time. Compared to non-working students, working students, welcomed this newly acquired time and saw it as an opportunity to engage in both education and self-growth activities. They also show higher levels of engagement with educational activities and an increased sense of satisfaction resulting from this engagement, as well as higher levels of wellbeing. This quick reorientation clearly reveals that time poverty is a barrier to education and personal well-being for working students.

Keywords: COVID-19, employed university students, time poverty, discretionary time, e-learning, self-growth, wellbeing.

Introduction

Time poverty is considered by the Organisation for Economic and Cooperation Development as one of the deprivation factors that influence various aspects of life, such as health, wellbeing, and education (Burston, 2017) and theorized as a complementary measure of income poverty (Williams *et al.,* 2016). Working students, a growing, but seldom investigated segment of the student population, are particularly affected by time poverty. Their need to balance the demands of employment, education, and social life often results in insufficient time for studies, leisure and hobbies, families and friends. It is primarily for reasons of time scarcity that, if offered a choice, many would prefer not working was it not for financial reasons (Manthei & Gilmore, 2005).

Lack of time experienced by working students results in poorer academic outcomes and increased chances of dropping out of school (Curtis & Shani, 2002; Curtis, 2007; Callender, 2008; Logan *et al.*, 2016; Tuononen *et al.,* 2016). In addition to the effects on academic life, working students' leisure and social

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time is also substantially reduced (Watts & Pickering, 2000; Manthei & Gilmore, 2005; Robotham, 2009). There is increased evidence that especially at the time of developing and transitioning to new life stages people need free time to engage in various activities including leisurely ones and to reflect on their choices (Leversen *et al.*, 2012). Working students might be deprived of opportunities for self-reflection and find themselves jumping from one stage of their life to another without enough time to ponder on the meaning of their lives and the choices they make. This is part of a broader problem, as very often working students come from low income background and work in order to support themselves (Robotham, 2009). This phenomenon deepens existing inequalities, against the background of a halt or decrease in social mobility in the last decades (Bukodi *et al.*, 2015).

This paper draws on the conceptual framework of "time poverty" (Williams *et al.*, 2016) to explore how employed students have experienced changes in time allocation and rhythms brought about by COVID-19 lockdown in Romania. This exploration unveils what aspects of employed students' personal and professional lives are most affected by the strains of meeting the dual demands of work and studies.

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in the early spring of 2020 has disrupted people's personal and professional lives in multiple ways. Lockdown measures implemented in many countries meant that employees from many sectors switched to online work or were furloughed, universities closed and teaching moved online. Emerging academic and non-academic studies document a host of detrimental effects of these changes on various aspects of people's personal and professional lives.

For employed students, changes due to lockdown measures might have brought an increase in their discretionary time, for a number of reasons. First, a relatively large number of students working in the service sector were made redundant or furloughed. Second, many of those who continued working moved their work online, thus saving time related to preparing for work and commuting to and from work and school. Third, working online also offered the advantage of flexible schedules and, in some cases, reduced working hours. At the same time, both working and non-working students have had access to the flexibility offered by online education. For non-working students this was accompanied by an increase in discretionary time resources as well, in the form of zero commuting time and no time wasted between courses. Nevertheless, newly gained discretionary time might have been converted into other necessary activities such as household work, helping dependents or taking care of their families.

Against this background, this paper explores: 1. how working students, compared to their non-working colleagues, have lived the change in time rhythms brought about by lockdown measures; and 2. what were the consequences of changing time patterns for their discretionary time budget and uses, their engagement with education, and their overall wellbeing.

To explore these questions I used a mixed method approach. I conducted an online survey with university students to analyze the relationship between employment status and allocation of discretionary time, engagement with academic activities, and a host of measures of subjective wellbeing. Additionally, to get a deeper understanding of how students lived the COVID-19 lockdown I conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 35 undergraduate students enrolled full-time in regular university programs in Romania.

Results indicate that although working students do not report more time spent in leisure activities during the lockdown, compared to their non-working peers, the topic of discretionary time is more salient in their discourses, thus signalling this as one of their most unmet needs. Moreover, when compared to non-working students, working students appear to experience higher levels of wellbeing. This is also supported by their narratives which emphasize an increase in well-beingas a result of an increase in discretionary time and an orientation towards self-reflection and activities promoting personal growth. Finally, both the results of quantitative analysis and their narratives indicate higher levels of engagement with educational activities and an increased sense of satisfaction resulting from this engagement for working students. This suggests that, if provided more flexible arrangements, employed students would become more engaged with educational activities, thus increasing their chances to improve their learning experiences and outcomes.

Between work and study: research on working students

In the past decades, the number of employed students has sharply increased across Europe (Robotham, 2009). A Eurostudent study conducted between 2016 and 2018 indicates that 51% of the students who participated in the survey pursued paid jobs during their studies.

Research on the effects of work on educational achievement has reached mixed conclusions (Curtis & Shani, 2002; Callender, 2008; Tuononen *et al.*, 2016). However, comparing the beneficial and detrimental aspects of employment during full-time education reveals that the negative aspects outweigh the positive ones (Curtis, 2007). Overall, studies seem to agree that working more than 20 hours/ week, in jobs unrelated to the program of studies, which is the case for a majority of working students, and especially in the case of freshmen, has detrimental effects on a host of academic performance indicators, such as GPA, number of credits completed, pace of academic progression, and likelihood to graduate (Bozick, 2007, Callender, 2008; Body *et al*., 2014; Logan *et al.*, 2016).

Combining work and study also affects the quality of educational experiences. Working students are dissatisfied with the amount of time they are able to dedicate to studying; between 30% and 60% of the students surveyed in the 2018 Eurostudent study indicated they are dissatisfied with the amount of time they have for studies. Employed students feel pressured and experience a sense of being pulled in two

directions (Watts and Pickering 2000). They talk about lack of concentration for studies as a result of lack of sleep, insufficient time that results in lower quality of their school assignments or even failure to meet the school requirements, and missing classes (Watts & Pickering, 2000; Curtis & Shani, 2002).

All these results evidence an increase in employed students' disengagement with university experiences, given the time pressure imposed by their working schedules (Applegate & Daly, 2006). This has consequences for the quality of their academic experience and, together with the direct effects of lower academic outcomes, has an impact on their future professional growth and earnings potential. Moreover, it affects their level of satisfaction with the academic experience and their general life satisfaction (Applegate & Daly, 2006).

Time constraints due to the dual demands of meeting academic and working requirements affect not only time dedicated to studies, but also constrain young people's leisure and social time (Watts & Pickering, 2000; Manthei & Gilmore, 2005; Robotham, 2009). To compensate for the time spent in paid employment, working students often need to reduce the time dedicated to hobbies and other leisure or extracurricular activities (Watts & Pickering, 2000; Manhtei & Gilmore, 2005; Applegate & Daly, 2006; Robotham, 2009). Research has evidenced that if it was not for financial constraints, many students would prefer not working (Manthei & Gilmore, 2005). The prime reason for this claim is that, in addition to having more time to dedicate to the studies, they would have more spare time for hobbies and recreational activities, more time for friends and family, and, in general a more balanced lifestyle (Curtis & Shani, 2002; Cheng & Alcantara, 2007).

Moreover, many employed students experience what has been referred to as "temporal precariat" (Woodman, 2012). In addition to scarce free time, they also have a limited control over scheduling their free time resources given the working hours. Their free time is poorly aligned with that of their peers, which, in turn, severely strains their social relations and participation in free-time activities with them (Woodman, 2012).

Access to free time is essential for well-being (Williams *et al.*, 2016). There is mounting evidence that, especially at the time of developing and transitioning to new life stages, people need free time to engage in various activities, including leisure, and to reflect on their choices (Leversen *et al.*, 2012). Self-reflection on personal or life growth goals of the university students have been shown to influence positively academic growth factors such as self-efficacy, academic performance, and well-being(Travers *et al.,* 2015).

Time scarcity deprives working students of the opportunities to self-reflect on their lives and choices. This deepens existing inequalities as working students frequently come from a low income background and work in order to support themselves (Robotham, 2009). Results from a Eurostudent study conducted between 2016 and 2018 indicate that almost three-quarters of the employed students (69%) worked to cover their living costs and 50% declared that without

working they would not afford to study. Out of these, 53% were first-generation university students, thus signalling a spiralling of downward social mobility.

Various time constraints and limited free time also result in higher levels of stress and higher levels of anxiety for working students (Curtis & Shani, 2002; Mounsey *et al.*, 2013). Working students also report lack of sufficient sleep (Watts & Pickering, 2000). Stress was found to affect both academic and personal lives of working students (Jogaratnam & Buchanan, 2004).

All these suggest that time is a scarce resource for working students. Although much discussion about time poverty considers the quantity of time available for different necessary and discretionary activities, quality of discretionary time was proposed as a more nuanced measure. Quality of time could be assessed on three dimensions: access to large blocks of time, autonomy of time allocation, and access to time that align with the rhythms of others (Reisch, 2001; Williams *et al.,* 2016). As showed above, working students' free-time schedules often fall short of meeting all three requirements of quality discretionary time.

Studies have found that having to juggle with time schedules and constraints stemming from their personal, education, and working lives, employed students would be grateful to receive personal development advice, advice on number of hours they should engage in working activities, advice regarding time-management and financial management (Watts & Pickering, 2000). However, they confess they do not discuss employment issues with academic staff either because they think that work and school should be kept apart or even that academic staff does not appreciate students working (Watts & Pickering, 2000). This provides insights into what institutions could do in terms of adjusting the offer of classes and services to help working students balancing the requirements of their work, study, and social life.

E-learning programs could partly address the issue of time poverty experienced by working students. While universities in economically advanced countries have increasingly included e-learning and blended learning, i.e. a mix of face-to-face and e-enhanced education, among their study programs, the adoption of such programs in Eastern Europe has been very slow. Research on the advantages of e-learning programs has emphasized that students identify flexibility among the net benefits of these programs (Loh *et al.*, 2016). Flexibility is valued because it allows the students control over the pace of study progress and studies are not tied to a fix time schedule and location. Students also count economical reasons among the major benefits of the online learning, as commuting costs are reduced.

Working students in Romania

Romanian higher education switched to the Bologna system in 2005. The average duration of the undergraduate studies in most fields is 3 years, and in a

few cases 4 or 5 years. In 2018/19 there were 55 public and 37 private universities offering undergraduate studies. From the students enrolled in public universities, 66% did not pay tuition fees. Many universities offer places in dorms but often the demand is higher than the need and the conditions lacking in many places.

The results of a Eurostudent study conducted in 2018 indicated that 34% of the Romanian students who participated in the survey declared that they have regular paid jobs during the lecture period; the mean in the other 27 countries included in the analysis is 35%. However, the average weekly hours that the students work in Romania is 36, while the average in the other countries is 28. 42% of the Romanian respondents work to be able to afford studies. About a third of the responding students identify themselves primarily as workers rather than students who work. This proportion is much higher in Romania (52%) and a couple of other East European countries, including Hungary, Poland, and Estonia. The earnings from employment represent about a third of employed students' monthly budget in most European countries, while for Romanian students this figure raises to 54%.

The study also indicates that working considerably reduces time allocated to the studies. In Romania, students who work less than 20 h/week study 49 hours per week, while those who work more than 40 h/week dedicate only about 7 hours a week to their studies. Results suggest that compared to their non-working peers, Romanian employed students who work more than 20 h/week spend up to 10 hours less time in taught studies. In general, increased time spent in working is accompanied by a decrease in time dedicated to studies. Working students would like to devote more time to their studies and are in general dissatisfied with their time budget for studying.

The outburst of COVID-19 pandemic in the early spring of 2020 created a context for studying how working students lived changes in time patterns brought by lockdown measures and whether some of their newly earned discretionary time went in the direction of education and well-beingengagement. This is an exploratory study that aims at understanding what changes would bring an increase in discretionary time to employed students, a typical category of time poor.

Romania started taking measures relatively soon after the first case of Sars-Cov-2 contamination was acknowledged on 26th of February 2020. On 11th of March all education programs suspended face-to- face classes. The state of emergency was decreed on March 16. On 24th of March the government instituted national lockdown. People's mobility was restricted to the locality they lived at the moment and they could not leave the house without a clearly documented reason, which included work, buying food, medicine, etc. This meant most jobs switched to online or closed. Lockdown lasted until 14th of May.

Methodology

The study employs a mixed-methods approach. I used quantitative analysis to examine the relationship between students' working status and allocation of discretionary time, general well-being, and engagement with education studies during the lockdown. Data were collected via an anonymous online survey. To get a deeper understanding of how this time was lived by working and non-working students with regard to their well-being and educational engagement I employed qualitative analysis of data collected in interviews with university students during the same period.

Quantitative data come from an online survey I designed and conducted between 26th of April and 30th of May, 2020. 2026 respondents from various Romanian universities and programs of studies completed the questionnaire. 73% of them were women and 64% from urban areas. 90% were enrolled in undergraduate programs, and almost 10% in MA programs. Respondents pursuing doctoral studies represented a tiny fraction (0.4%). 37% of the respondents were 1st year students, followed by 28% second year and 24% third year students. 10% of the respondents were 4th year students and less than 1% were in higher year of studies. The sample is slightly overrepresented for women who according to a study from 2017 represented 59% of the university students.

To get a richer understanding of the immediate reactions to changes in time patterns experienced by students I started conducting interviews within 3-7 weeks from the beginning of online classes in universities in Romania. The expectation was that by that time the respondents would get over the disruptions of the first weeks of online teaching, would experience some free time, and thus settle toward new activities to fill that time.

Quantitative data and analysis

We used survey data to analyze the relationship between employment status and allocation of free time for discretionary activities during the lockdown, well-being, and engagement with education.

Employment status was measured by asking respondents whether at the time of the interview they were: 1. not working and have not worked before; 2. working; 3. having worked but being furloughed at the moment. I recoded this variable into a dichotomous one (*working student*) separating between those who have had working experiences (=1) and non-working students (=0). This represents the main independent variable of the study.

To measure *discretionary time allocation* I used a set of variables recording percentages of time respondents allocated daily to the following activities*: talking to families and friends*; *relaxation and hobbies*; *spending time online*.

Well-being was measured using the 5-item measures of World Health Organization. This includes five items rated on a six-point Likert scale measuring subjective quality of life. It includes measures pertaining to happiness/good spirits; relaxation; feeling active; feeling rested/waking up fresh; being interested in things. Respondents could indicate how frequent they felt like that in the last two weeks prior to the interview (1=at no time; 2=some of the time; 3=less than half of the time; 4=more than half of the time; 5=most of the time; 6=all of the time).

Educational engagement was measured via three sets of variables. One recorded changes in time allocated to classes at present compared to time prior to the pandemic crisis. The question reads as follows: Could you tell me whether you participate to classes: 1. Less frequent than before; 2. Same; 3. More frequent than before. I constructed a dichotomous variable separating those who declare participating more frequent (=1) from the rest (=0). Respondents were also asked to rate how they feel during the online classes on five 10-point scale variables referring to attractiveness, attention/focus, clarity, interest, and engagement. Higher scores indicate a better evaluation of the online classes on these dimensions. The third variable pertaining to educational engagement measured whether respondents think that online classes are better than face to face, traditional ones. This is a 5-point scale, going from they are 'much better' to they are 'much worse'.

Control variables that could influence each of the dependent variables, namely allocation of discretionary time, levels of well-being, and educational engagement, are as follows: gender (1=female), residence (1=urban), whether the person commuted before the lockdown (1=yes), the year of study, and parents' education status used as a proxy for economic status. The latter variable separated between cases in which at least one parent graduated university (=1) from those in which none of the parents had higher education (=0)

Qualitative data and analysis

We conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 35 students enrolled in various programs of undergraduate studies in Romanian public universities. There were 23 female and 12 male students, aged between 20 and 22, with 3 students over the age of 25. Out of them, 15 were working students. At the time of the interview 3 were in furlough, 1 resigned shortly prior to the lockdown as he could not cope any longer with the long hours worked, and 1 had lost her job, 2 were working offline, 1 had resumed work two days prior to the interview after a period of furlough, and the other 7 were working online on various work schedules. Four worked in jobs somehow connected with their area of study, while the rest were in jobs in the service sector, a fairly typical employment sector for working students.

The participants were recruited using a call disseminated on social media, which offered details on the general topic of the study and the interview procedure

(online). When the students agreed to participate we scheduled the interview and I sent them in advance a statement describing the study and the ethical considerations regarding data protection. I interviewed students in the order in which they responded to my call.

After 25 interviews, split fairly equally between working and non-working students, I began the thematic analysis on the main aspects of the research, including aspects related to time narrative and its uses, references to education and personal, well-being aspects. I familiarized myself with the data reading the transcribed materials and identifying aspects related to the main themes of the inquiry, namely references to discretionary time and its uses in terms of educational or leisurely activities. I continued the interviews, this time paying attention to new identified themes as well as emerging ways of speaking about time. After 35 interviews and a number of short follow-up email exchanges with a number of respondents to clarify ambiguous answers, no new aspects emerged. All the interviews were conducted online, via Zoom and Google meet. The length of the interviews was on average about 40 minutes. Upon their informed consent the conversations were recorded.

The themes identified are salience of discretionary time, uses of discretionary time for self-reflection, increased well-being, and re-engagement with education activities.

Results

Discretionary time allocation and salience of time

Students were asked what percentage of time they allocate daily to various activities. I chose three of these aspects pertaining to uses of discretionary times, namely time spent talking with families and friends, time spent with hobbies and relaxation activities, and time spent online, watching movies, playing games or doing other online activities except working or studying.

Given the nature of these variables I conducted multivariate linear regression with employment status as independent variable and time spent: (1) talking with families and friends; (2) relaxation and hobbies, and (3) online with watching movies, playing games, etc. as dependent variables. I controlled for factors that might have influenced the allocation of discretionary time, such as gender, residence, year of study, whether the person commuted before the lockdown, and parents' education as a proxy for economic status. Results are presented in *Table 1*.

Table 1. *Uses of discretionary time as a function of employment status (OLS coefficients and S.E.)*

	Talking with family and friends	Relaxation and hobbies	Online activities
Employed students	-5.48*** (0.79)	-2.62* (1.3)	-6.02*** (0.81)
Female	2.37** (0.85)	0.67 (1.4)	-1.81* (0.87)
Urban	0.43 (0.81)	2.11 (1.33)	2.45** (0.82)
Year of study	-0.64 (0.34)	-1.25* (0.56)	-1.23*** (0.35)
Commuted	1.65 (0.85)	0.2 (1.39)	-1.01 (0.87)
Parents have higher education	-0.7 (0.48)	-0.2 (0.79)	0.01 (0.49)
N	1994	1978	1993

$^{*}p<0.05$; $^{**}p<0.01$; $^{***}p<0.001$

Results show that employed students allocate significantly less time to leisure activities such as talking to friends, relaxing and doing hobbies, watching online movies or playing online games compared to their non-working peers.

This suggests that although their budget of discretionary time might have increased as a result of changes in time patterns brought by lockdown measures, working students do not dedicate as much free time as their non-working peers to social activities. This raises the question on what activities do they use the extra time, a topic investigated in further analysis.

Compared to non-working students' description of time use, the topic of free time is more salient in the narratives of working students. Given the broad scope of the introductory question of the interview ("Tell me, please, how you have felt lately"), it is quite notable that working students reflected extensively on the time unburdening brought about by the lockdown. The topic of time is significantly more salient in the narratives of the working students.

Five of the working students responded immediately that, relieved from time pressures related to balancing work-life-study, they felt calmer and more relaxed in this period. Out of the five, one gave up working two weeks before the lockdown due to exhaustion and four had switched to working online. Four of the working students also mentioned they felt less tired, as they had more time to rest, even though they were still working at the time of the interview, three online and one offline. One student who had lost her job mentioned that she profoundly disliked the lockdown, but that she was content to have time to allocate to activities she

could not do before. Moreover, two other working students explicitly talked about having more free time now or having time to do the things they liked and two talked about feeling more in control of their program as they could organize it better, according to their will.

In the context of the same question, only one non-working student mentioned immediately that he felt more relaxed in this period. Two others mentioned feeling that they had more time to do things they liked or could not do before, and one mentioned she felt she could rest more. Moreover, three other regular, non-working students mentioned that the first days of the lockdown were like being on holidays – an implicit reference to free time - but in the context of their answer this was more of an expression of the inadequacy/disbelief they experienced as they were home at a time when they were supposed to be in school. Overall, references to increased discretionary time and the possibilities stemming from this did not occupy a similarly central place in their narratives as it did in the accounts of the working students.

Moving transversally through the interviews, there were other instances in which time appeared more salient for the working students. When asked about activities they started or picked up in this context, 12 of the 15 working students mentioned various things they could do now and explicitly mentioned they could do them as they had time at their disposal. Time appeared in the narratives of the non-working students less frequent, in 9 cases out of 20 only.

Discretionary time gave two working students the opportunity to get closer to family members. Their narratives are quite similar: their very busy lives before the lockdown severed their ties with their parents, but now they had time to re-discover these ties. One says “before, I was almost all the time out, we did not have time to talk, eat together ...now I learned about my parents what they like [...] what interests them [...] we now listen to each other not only talk [...] although we do not always agree we try to understand each other, to be empathetic ”. And the other one point out “I was not aware they are so understandable [...] that we have so many topics in common to discuss”.

Out of 15 working students, 10 explicitly mentioned that they were grateful to have more time. On the other hand, only 6 out of 20 non-working students mentioned being happy that they had extra time to engage in activities they liked or could not do before.

This suggests that although in comparison to their non-working peers the discretionary time budget of the working students is much lower, they experience an increase in free-time and are particularly grateful for it.

Catching up and focusing on well-being

Discretionary time appears more frequent in working students’ narratives. What have this meant for their quality of life? Prior research has indicated that employed students are more stressed, anxious, and experience lower levels of well-being

compared to their non-working peers. To test the relationship between employment status and well-being during lockdown I employed the World Health Organization measures of subjective well-being. Respondents were asked to rate on a six-point Likert scale how frequent have they felt: happy and in good spirits; calm and relaxed; active; fresh and well-rested; interested in things in the last two weeks before the interview. For each measure higher scores indicates higher levels of well-being. I used ordered logistic regression to estimate the relationship between working status and each measure of well-being. Results are presented in *Table 2*.

Results indicate that for 4 out of the 5 measures, employed students report significantly higher levels of well-being compared to non-working students. They appear to have felt happier, calmer, more active, and more interested in things in the last two weeks prior to the interview than working students. This is consistent with the employed students' narratives regarding how they have felt since classes switched to online. Throughout the interviews, a common pattern in the answers provided by the working students is a deep sense of relief of being less pressured, having more time, getting enough sleep, eating healthier, and, in general, taking care of themselves better. This appears both in the case of those who are home, furloughed, and for those who still work, regardless whether online or offline.

These general feelings of well-being are best summarized by a 1st year student who resigned from a full-time job that often meant working 10 or even 11 hours a day few weeks before the lockdown and returned to his parents': "I missed being home because after I started school and the job I was coming home every two weeks. Since I am staying home I gave up job and I am happy that I am home in this quarantine. I feel more relaxed, much better being home compared to the time I went to work and school." He talks about the benefits of this situation in the following terms: "the healthier lifestyle on the first place; I was not so dynamic and energetic in Sibiu. I was not getting enough sleep, I was overworked and I was eating unhealthy…and now being home I get enough sleep. I am not stressed. [...] I am eating healthier…I have a healthier lifestyle".

Five working students see the benefits of these times in terms of feeling well rested and not tired any longer, while four explicitly talk about adopting a healthier lifestyle, which include proper hours of meals, making sport, and eating healthier or adopting a healthy diet.

	Happy			Calm			Active			Fresh			Interested		
	Odds ratios	S.E.	p	Odds ratios	S.E.	p	Odds ratios	S.E.	p	Odds ratios	S.E.	p	Odds ratios	S.E.	p
Employed students	1.22	0.1	0.02	1.18	0.1	0.049	1.38	0.12	0.000	1.17	0.1	0.07	1.32	0.11	0.001
Female	0.79	0.07	0.01	0.6	0.06	0.000	0.76	0.07	0.002	0.75	0.07	0.002	0.83	0.08	0.04
Urban	1.1	0.09	0.28	1.05	0.09	0.57	0.97	0.08	0.71	1.02	0.09	0.81	1.12	0.1	0.21
Year of study	1.05	0.04	0.17	1.04	0.04	0.29	1.02	0.04	0.57	1.07	0.04	0.07	1.05	0.04	0.19
Commuted	1.18	0.11	0.07	1.15	0.11	0.13	1.29	0.12	0.01	1.18	0.11	0.07	1.38	0.13	0.000
Parents higher education	0.98	0.05	0.69	1.01	0.05	0.78	0.96	0.05	0.45	0.96	0.05	0.41	0.98	0.05	0.73
N	2001			2001			2001			2001			2001		

Table 2. *Well-being as a measure of employment status (odds ratios and S.E.)*

This situation created a context for self-reflection and meditation, a time and a place for personal growth. This became explicit when answering the question if there were any things they appreciated in these times. All the fifteen working students mentioned reasons they felt grateful for in these times. Ten out of the fifteen working students referred to benefits in terms of more time dedicated to the selves and personal growth. They all talked about a change in focus towards themselves and their personal and growth needs. One student mentioned: "I feel good; I was doing less of the automated things I was doing before; I discovered my artistic side…I feel good...I am calmer". She would later say "I had time to stay with me…to put things in order …to make plans for the future, to think what is good and bad with me. Usually before falling asleep I think about what I did during the day and about what I could have done differently… and now I could do this more …I could address some problems…I needed silence and being alone to be able to reflect".

Another says: "I have more time for me, to read, to take care of my spiritual side". When asked how has he lived this period he says: "I feel quite relaxed...I do not see this as a punishment...I like this period, I feel more relaxed, I can rest, I have time to do things I want … And later he would say: "I feel I will lose [these benefits of free time] soon and this saddens me…'

This is in stark contrast with the narratives of the regular, non-working students. Three of them said that there is nothing to be appreciated in these times, while many others considered being home with their families the only benefit of these times. Only 5 regular students talk about using this time for personal development or turning to themselves more and it is only one who got into details on this aspect. Three regular students also talked about sleeping or resting more as a thing to be appreciated, but the reflective time is not a salient feature of their narratives.

Engagement with education

To assess whether employed students' engagement with education changed as a result of the increase in available time I tested the relationship between employment status and a series of variables measuring changes in time allocated to courses, assessment of courses, and satisfaction with online courses.

Students were asked whether there have been changes in their class attendance. I recoded the original variable into a dichotomous one that separates between increased attendance and unchanged or lower attendance. I used logistic regression to estimate the relationship between employment status and increased attendance to courses. I included in the analysis only those who reported that they had at least half of their courses held online after universities switched to online teaching. Apart from the previous control variables I included a set of three variables that report

how frequent respondents encountered problems with the internet connection, due to the lack of an appropriate device, and due to their lack of technological skills needed to attend the online classes. For each of these three variables higher scores are indicative of increased levels of difficulties encountered. Results of logistic regression are presented in *Table 3*.

Table 3. *Increase in class attendance as a function of employment status (odds ratios and S.E.)*

	Odds ratios	S.E.	p
Employed students	2.27	0.27	0.000
Female	1.43	0.19	0.01
Urban	1.31	0.17	0.04
Year of study	1.35	0.07	0.000
Commuted	1.25	0.16	0.08
Parents have higher education	1.08	0.08	0.34
Problems with internet connection	0.83	0.05	0.001
Lack of appropriate device	0.97	0.07	0.71
Lack of technological skills	0.94	0.06	0.34

N=1596

Results indicate that employed students have a higher probability to declare that their participation to courses increased compared to the time before. This might be due to the fact that online courses present more flexibility for those still working, while those who were made redundant or furloughed experienced a rise in their time which was partly converted in increased attendance of courses. Higher attendance appears to be also positively related to less frequent disruptions in internet connection, urban residence, gender (female report increased attendance), and being in a higher year of studies.

Respondents were also asked to assess how they felt during the online courses on five items. These are: 1. Bored vs. captivated; 2. Unfocused vs. focused; 3. Confused vs. Clarified; 4. Uninterested vs. Interested; 5. Disengaged vs. Engaged. Each item presented a 1-10 scale, with higher scores indicative of positive evaluation of the courses. I employed multivariate linear regression to test the relationship between employment status and each of these indicators. Results are presented in *Table 4*.

Table 4. Evaluation of the online classes as a function of the employment status (OLS coefficients and S.E.)

	Captivated	Focused	Clarified	Interested	Engaged
Employed students	0.5*** (0.13)	0.49*** (0.13)	0.51*** (0.13)	0.42** (0.13)	0.53*** (0.13)
Female	0.03 (0.14)	0.03 (0.13)	-0.14 (0.13)	0.06 (0.13)	0.07 (0.14)
Urban	0.04 (0.13)	0.14 (0.13)	0.01 (0.13)	-0.06 (0.13)	0.06 (0.14)
Year of study	-0.09 (0.06)	-0.1 (0.06)	-0.08 (0.06)	-0.1 (0.06)	-0.1 (0.06)
Commuted	0.56*** (0.14)	0.6*** (0.13)	0.57*** (0.14)	0.52*** (0.14)	0.49** (0.14)
Parents have higher education	-0.1 (0.08)	-0.01 (0.08)	-0.02 (0.08)	-0.03 (0.08)	-0.05 (0.09)
Problems with internet connection	-0.26*** (0.06)	-0.2*** (0.06)	-0.31*** (0.06)	-0.19** (0.06)	-0.14* (0.06)
Lack of appropriate device	-0.39*** (0.07)	-0.37*** (0.07)	-0.44*** (0.07)	-0.4*** (0.07)	-0.41*** (0.07)
Lack of technological skills	-0.04 (0.07)	-0.02 (0.07)	-0.07 (0.07)	-0.05 (0.07)	0.05 (0.07)
N	1587	1584	1584	1582	1577

$^{*}p<0.05$; $^{**}p<0.01$; $^{***}p<0.001$

Results show that employed students appreciate online classes more than their non-working peers. They report, on average, feeling more captivated by these courses, more focused, clarified, interested and engaged with them than regular, non-working students. This positive evaluation of the online classes is shared by those who used to commute before schools switched to online teaching. Not having had problems with internet connection and having an appropriate device to participate to online classes also result in higher appreciation of the online classes.

Finally, respondents were asked to compare online and face-to-face courses using a 5-point scale variable where higher scores means respondents see online courses much better than face-to-face ones. I used ordered logistic regression to assess differences in the appreciation of the online classes between working and non-working students. Results are shown in *Table 5*.

Table 5. *Appreciating online classes more than in-person ones as a function of employment status (odds ratios and S.E.)*

	Odds ratios	S.E.	P
Employed students	1.95	0.19	0.000
Female	0.97	0.1	0.765
Urban	1.11	0.11	0.305
Year of study	1.16	0.05	0.000
Commuted	1.6	0.17	0.000
Parents have higher education	1.12	0.07	0.079
Problems with internet connection	0.75	0.03	0.000
Lack of appropriate device	0.84	0.05	0.001
Lack of technological skills	0.97	0.05	0.495

N=1596

Consistent with the previous results, employed students and former commuters find the online courses better than face to face ones. Also students in higher years of studies and those who had an appropriate device and did not experience frequent problems with the internet connection are more appreciative of the online classes.

Interviews also highlight employed students' reorientation to studies. Working students explicitly mentioned they had more time for their studies. In the case of a student who used to work full-time as a shop-assistant and was furloughed at the time of the interview the reference to a change in the engagement with school appeared earlier in the interview. When asked what are the things she appreciates during these times, she mentioned upfront the fact that now she could be entirely dedicated to school: "more time dedicated to school...As I was working before I did not have that much time ...now I am 100% dedicated to the courses...maybe even more, even one percent over 100% ...more time dedicated to homework, projects".

The topic of increased class participation appears upfront in the narrative of a student who was in furlough and had returned to work a few days before the interview: "in the beginning it was difficult to get used to it … Honestly, I started really liking it […] I finished all the projects I had". And another student, still working but online mentions that "I decided to do what is best out of this situation and I have switched to attending courses [regularly]".

One student who works online talks explicitly about the centrality of school-related activities in her online behaviour, but also about more intense social contacts with her class mates: "I stay more online because I am always expecting to get news about a new homework or new info on groups...I am more active on Facebook, Whatsapp, Zoom, Skype; I need to be active so that I know what school work is due".

The perks of the online classes is that even the students who worked offline could attend. A student who worked as a taxi-driver mentions that "in the beginning I did not enter [classes] because I was at work [...]. Later, seeing that I cannot interrupt work I integrated it. When I was at work and had classes I was putting the headphones and listening".

In contrast, none of the non-working students talked about time dedicated to school as a reason to be grateful in these times, although some of them mentioned they feel more at ease in the online environment and were content they could learn how to use the new communication technologies. Most of them though mentioned time spent with their families as the prime and sole reason of being grateful for in these times. Moreover, while for working students the increased attendance was part of their effort to 'better themselves' none of the regular students brought out the school or studies aspect or mentioned anything in terms of an increase in attending the classes.

Conclusion

Results of this study show that although employed students' budget of free-time remained lower than the one available to non-working students, they experienced the newly acquired free time as a substantial benefit that opened the door to more opportunities for reflection and an increased engagement with their studies. Employed students also experienced higher levels of well-being during the lockdown compared to their non-working peers, and, according to their narratives, this appear to be a direct consequence of having more time to take better care of themselves.

The general positive accounts of the employed students at a time of increased anxiety and uncertainty as the one created by COVID-19 pandemic are remarkable. Their rapid orientation towards self-reflection and activities promoting personal and professional growth along with their feeling grateful for this additional time speaks about working students' unmet needs regarding time. This provides valuable insights for targeted interventions that would cater to these needs.

The crisis produced by the COVID-19 pandemic has forced universities across the world to switch almost overnight to e-learning. While universities in economically advanced countries have invested in e-enhanced programs of studies in the last decades, the majority of countries at the fringes of the European Union, including Romania, have made very limited steps in this direction. The results of the online survey I conducted show that only 14% of respondents had prior experience with online courses. Results of this study show that although online classes were delivered in an unplanned manner, they were primarily appreciated by working students. Their narratives make references to the flexibility of remote participation. This suggests that investing more in e-education and providing entire e-enhanced programs would help working students receive a better education experience

and increase their chances to graduate. In 2019 Romania had the lowest share of young people between 30 and 34 who completed tertiary education. Increase in e-education could help young people achieve higher levels of education, thus enhancing their future economic chances and well-being.

Working students also experienced higher levels of personal and psychological well-being compared to their non-working peers during the lockdown. Previous studies have shown that working students' time scarcity often forces them to reduce time dedicated to sleep, relaxation, and social activities. Lockdown measures generated more available time regardless whether they were furloughed or switched to online working. Their narratives abound in references to the sense of unburdening this has brought. They talk about feeling less tired and more relaxed and adopting a healthier lifestyle as a result. This creates a context which allows them to turn to themselves and stimulate self-reflection. While this orientation towards self-reflection might be in part due to the extraordinary times we lived, the fact that this is present in their narratives but not so often in those of their non-working peers suggest that they were in much higher need to turn to themselves than their non-working peers.

Studies concerned with challenges and difficulties encountered by working students have made suggestions referring to a number of steps that could be taken for assisting employed students. The most frequently listed are recommendations on reduced working hours, especially for freshmen, working in campus or doing work related to their studies, and receiving advice on time-management. Not much has been discussed in terms of an increase in e-learning, especially in countries where progress in implementing e-education has been slow. However, the crisis of 2020 presented a test for this, and the results of this study suggest that employed students would benefit greatly from an increase in the offer of e-learning programs.

Recommendations

While this study has the inherent limitations of cross-sectional research, it still provides a multi-faceted snapshot of how Romanian students have lived the lockdown and what was the impact of increased free time on their well-being and engagement with studies. Follow-up studies should focus on assessing whether the documented habits of self-reflecting and engaging with studies were preserved following the lockdown when people could return to some of their old activities and routines.

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