

THE EFFECT OF DISTANCE LEARNING ON STUDENT EMOTIONAL AND SOCIAL WELL-BEING IN A PANDEMIC CONTEXT

Milena Sazdovska-Pigulovska
Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje
milena.sazdovska@flf.ukim.edu.mk

Distance learning signifies a transformation in the sphere of education, characterized by use of technology as well as new ways of learning and cooperating. Despite the multitude of international scholarly conferences and panel discussions on how to improve the quality of online education, students were seldom consulted on how they personally coped with or felt about the introduced changes and whether they experienced emotional and social consequences from the shift to distance learning. This creates a strong need to investigate how distance learning affects student emotional and social well-being. Emotional well-being can be conceptualized as the balance of experienced feelings (positive and negative) and the perceived feelings (happiness and satisfaction) and is strongly connected to psychological well-being (personal growth, environmental mastery, autonomy) and social well-being (social integration and contribution) (Keyes 2007). The purpose of this study is to explore whether distance learning has an impact on student emotional and social well-being. Online survey research was conducted among 60 translation and interpreting students in North Macedonia, which results suggest that students are highly impacted from an emotional and social point of view. A variety of emotional intelligence-related activities can be integrated to improve specific areas from both academic and personal point of view, such as self-awareness, self-management, motivation and empathy as generic competences of key importance during isolated distance learning as well as for a future profession as translators and interpreters.

Keywords: emotional and social well-being, emotional intelligence, distance learning, emotions

ЕФЕКТОТ НА УЧЕЊЕТО НА ДАЛЕЧИНА ВРЗ ЕМОЦИОНАЛНАТА И СОЦИЈАЛНАТА БЛАГОСОСТОЈБА НА СТУДЕНТИТЕ ВО ПАНДЕМИСКИ КОНТЕКСТ

Милена Саздовска-Пигуловска
Универзитет „Св. Кирил и Методиј“ во Скопје
milena.szadzovska@flf.ukim.edu.mk

Преминот кон учење на далечина претставува трансформација во областа на образованието и се карактеризира со примена на технологија и нови начини на учење и остварување соработка. И покрај големиот број меѓународни научни конференции и панел-дискусии посветени на подобрување на квалитетот на онлајн-образованието, студентите ретко се консултираат за мислење како тие лично се справуваат со новитетите, односно дали се соочуваат со емоционални и социјални последици како резултат на учењето на далечина. Ова создава потреба да се испита како учењето на далечина влијае врз емоционалната и врз социјалната благосостојба на студентите. Емоционалната благосостојба се дефинира како рамнотежа меѓу доживеаните (позитивни или негативни) и осознаените чувства (среќа и задоволство), при што емоционалната благосостојба е тесно поврзана со психичката благосостојба (личен развој, владеење со околината, автономија) и социјалната благосостојба (социјална интеграција и придонес) (Keyes 2007). Целта на овој труд е да се истражи дали учењето на далечина влијае врз емоционалната и врз социјалната благосостојба на студентите. Спроведено е истражување меѓу 60 студенти на студиите по преведување и толкување во Република Северна Македонија, при што резултатите покажуваат дека учењето на далечина има голем ефект врз студентите од емоционален и од социјален аспект. Во таа насока може да се применат низа активности од областа на емоционалната интелигенција, со цел подобрување на конкретните слабости од академски, но и од личен аспект, како самосвесноста, управувањето со сопствените емоции, мотивацијата и емпатијата. Се работи за генерички компетенции, кои имаат огромна важност за време на изолацијата при учењето на далечина, како и, воопшто, за идната професија преведувач и толкувач.

Клучни зборови: емоционална и социјална благосостојба, емоционална интелигенција, учење на далечина, емоции

1 Introduction

Distance learning is an educational format that has become increasingly popular in recent years due to its many advantages, especially in the pandemic context. However, due to its unique characteristics, it is reasonable to expect that distance learning has emotional and social implications for students. Hence, it is necessary to examine both the benefits and risks of distance learning in the academic environment. Numerous academics have explored the effect of distance learning on student satisfaction (Kerzič et al. 2021), its effect on student mental health (Lischer, Safi and Dickson 2021) and on different aspects of student life (Aristovnik et al 2020), whereas many authors determine that students experienced emotional stress during online education (Zapata-Ospina 2021) as well as discouragement, boredom, confusion, and worry (Baltà-Salvador et al. 2021), etc.

Even though previous studies focus on the impact of e-learning on student well-being (Butnaru et al. 2021; Popescu et al. 2021; Clabaugh Duque and Fields 2021), emotional and social implications of distance learning continue to be issues of secondary importance and there is a research gap that needs to be filled especially in the field of interdisciplinary studies, such as translation and interpreting. Namely, conducting online translation and interpreting education is particularly challenging (Hubscher-Davidson and Devaux 2021; Sazdovska-Pigulovska 2021). Therefore, the main goal of this paper is to investigate the link between online translation and interpreting education and emotional and social well-being in an academic context. Online survey research was conducted in 2022 among 60 translation and interpreting students from North Macedonia, whereas the author concludes that distance learning results in significant emotional and social implications for students.

2 Theoretical background

Well-being is a wide-ranging term for physical and emotional safety and a feeling of belonging, sense of purpose, achievement and success, whereas five main types of well-being can be distinguished, such as emotional, physical, social, workplace and societal well-being (Davis 2019). Keyes (2002) suggests a multidimensional approach which includes emotional well-being, psychological well-being and social well-being.

In particular, Davis (2019) defines emotional well-being as the ability to be resilient, manage one's emotions and generate emotions that lead to good feelings. Emotional well-being can be conceptualized as the balance of experienced feelings (positive and negative) and the perceived feelings (happiness and satisfaction) and is strongly connected to psychological well-being (personal growth, environmental mastery, autonomy) and social well-being (social integration and contribution) (Keyes 2007). Emotional well-being includes a positive balance of pleasant to unpleasant affect and a cognitive appraisal of satisfaction with life in general (Keyes 2003).

Initial research already suggests that higher well-being is associated with better mental and physical health, higher self-esteem, self-efficacy and effective coping

strategies (Brett, Mathieson and Rowley 2022). Furthermore, evidence shows a possible link between well-being and academic achievement (Gräbel 2017; Cheng et al. 2021) as well as between psychological well-being and student achievement (Ryff and Singer 2008). It is therefore valuable to explore potential emotional and social implications of distance learning. It can be initially assumed that students are not only affected by virtual learning platforms, but also by their personal experiences and emotions.

3 Research questions and hypotheses

Two research questions are discussed in this paper, as follows:

1. Does distance learning have emotional and social implications for university students?
2. Do students experience emotions during distance learning, which influence their behaviour?

The research questions result in the following two hypotheses:

H1. Distance learning has emotional and social implications for university students.

The first hypothesis is based on the author's findings from a previous research conducted in 2021 showing that many students experienced hardship during distance learning in the current pandemic context, visible through frequent absence from online classes and assignments, dropout, changes in emotional behaviour, such as low confidence and demotivation during online classes, lack of empathy and interest in teamwork, etc. Hence, to assess emotional and social well-being of surveyed students, the PERMA theory of psychological well-being was applied (Seligman 2011), which is founded on five elements, as follows:

- positive emotion (from past and present experiences);
- engagement (involving full deployment of students' skills and attention);
- relationships (connections to others are fundamental to well-being and to adaptation, and are enabled by one's capacity for compassion, empathy, teamwork, cooperation);
- a sense of meaning (which is obtained through a feeling of belonging); and
- accomplishments (implying achievement, success and mastery).

The PERMA model is a theoretical approach that is frequently applied for assessment of key elements of happiness and well-being, which can be used to identify stressors in the environment and thus help find ways for improvement of student well-being.

H2. Students experience a number of emotions during distance learning, which influence their behaviour.

The second hypothesis is made bearing in mind that emotions do not function independently, as emotion and cognition are reciprocally affected (García 2012), and that emotions are significant factors in student engagement during online learning (Pentaraki and Burkholder 2017) as well as that positive emotions support academic performance, whereas negative emotions (anger, shame, anxiety and boredom) are more associated with lower levels of performance (Pekrun et al. 2011).

4 Methodology

For the purposes of this research, a cross-sectional survey study was conducted in the first half of 2022 to assess the overall distance learning experience of 60 undergraduate students who spent four semesters of online classes at the Department of Translation and Interpreting within the Faculty of Philology in Skopje, North Macedonia. The respondents' age range was between 20-24 years. Considering that it is not possible to assess emotional aspects with mathematical precision, qualitative survey design was applied by constructing an online questionnaire with 10 open-ended questions with descriptive explanations.

The emotional and social aspects of distance learning were analysed on the basis of the five elements under the PERMA framework. For the purpose of this research, the author constructed a list of questions to determine whether students experienced positive or negative emotions, sufficient engagement in the new e-learning environment, and whether surveyed undergraduate students experienced social connectedness, a sense of belonging to a community and academic accomplishments during distance learning.

5 Procedure

To analyse the qualitative data collected via the online questionnaire, a thematic iterative analysis was conducted. The results concerning the first hypothesis were obtained by identifying patterns in students' explanations and subsequently analysing collected data by common themes which provide insight into factors to student well-being. In relation to the second hypothesis, the results were attained through conducting a sentiment analysis which implies searching for emotional responses among student explanations on the questionnaire. This helps understand the intents and emotions of responses that were classified into three groups as emotionally charged positive or negative words or emotionally neutral words. The sentiment analysis helps identify the emotional state of students during online classes and experienced emotions.

5.1 Results

The results initially show that although distance learning has a number of advantages, many students experienced some form of distress. Students mainly experienced physical distress (37.8%) during online education (sore eyesight, fatigue and tiredness, depression, etc.) as well as emotional distress (stress, anxiety, insecurity, fear, low confidence, demotivation), which was reported by 32.2% of surveyed students. Environmental distress (difficult learning platform, inadequate schedule or technical problems) was experienced to a lesser extent, namely 28.9%. Figure 1 shows initial signs of the emotional implications of distance learning.

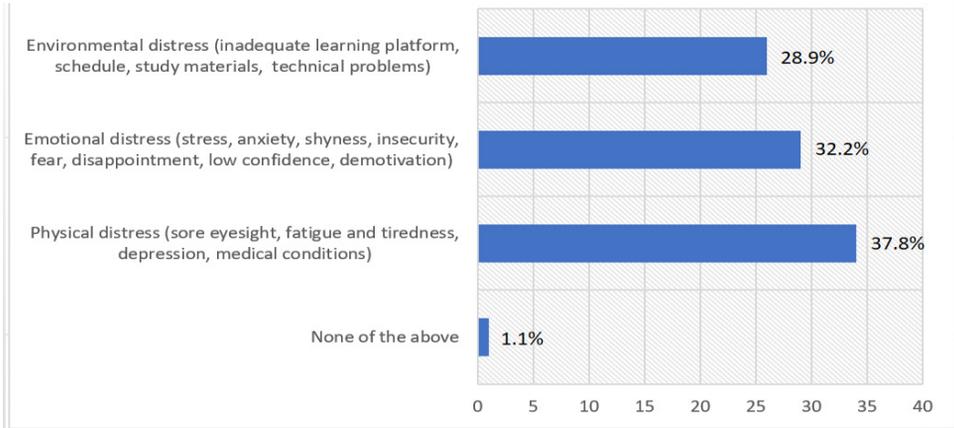


Figure 1. Types of Distress Experienced During Distance Learning

5.1.1 Emotional and social implications of distance learning

The surveyed students were asked to further elaborate on the reasons for their personal experiences, and their responses were analysed by conducting thematic analysis. Firstly, five preliminary codes were assigned to collected data, which served as grounds for mapping five common themes which reveal common patterns in students' responses in relation to their experiences with distance learning: convenience, accomplishments, relationships with others, personal interest and digital advantages. These results show that the main benefits of distance learning involve being in one's comfort zone, which is related to a students' psychological state experienced in a familiar and controlled environment. This was followed by convenience of online education (experienced through better time management) and personal accomplishments (higher efficacy of e-learning and improved digital skills). Less commonly specified benefits include opportunity for collaborative student work (sufficient level of online student engagement).

Six preliminary codes were assigned to the collected data, on the basis of which negative themes were mapped. These themes reveal common patterns in students' negative experiences: physical contact, socialisation, collaboration, accomplishments, motivation and stress. On the other hand, the identified themes show the main risks of distance learning: social distancing, low collaboration and stress, followed by less socialisation with peers and increased use of technology, smaller efficacy of online education and lack of motivation and focus, which expressed negative aspects of distance learning.

The results show social factors as the main disadvantage of distance learning, affecting connectedness (or social distancing from teachers and peers) and relationships (less socialization with peers and low student-teacher collaboration) followed by emotional factors, such as stress and lack of motivation during distance learning, and other environmental or personal factors related to ac-

accomplishments (smaller efficacy of e-learning). This leads to the conclusion that the main risks of distance learning are predominantly associated with social and emotional aspects.

The second part of the questionnaire focused on the social dimension of distance learning. Relationships imply connections to others and are fundamental to well-being and for adaptation, and they are enabled by one's capacity for love, compassion, kindness, empathy, teamwork, cooperation (Seligman 2011). One half of respondents indicated that little focus was put on student-student interactions and on teacher-student collaboration, which resulted in demotivation or monotony. One of the main risks of distance learning include lack of face-to-face interaction with instructors and peers. The lack of physical contact and social interaction instigate a sense of isolation and demotivation, which affects the learning experience and thus has a negative effect on student social and emotional well-being.

Furthermore, 72.3% of surveyed students responded that they felt a need for psychological support from teachers or another professional and indicated a need for both academic advising from their faculty and social support from peers. Respondents explained that they felt isolated and disconnected, with many describing emotional signs of stress, such as health-related fear, fear of the unknown and anxiety during distance learning.

Research strongly suggests that social connection is a key factor in dealing with stress (Matos 2021). It is therefore understandable that the absence of social connection greatly affects students mental health. Moreover, 48% of surveyed students were not satisfied with their accomplishments during distance learning. The above results demonstrate that distance learning can be challenging for students due to its social elements.

5.1.2 Experienced emotions during distance learning affecting student behaviour

Emotions are psychological states with important social and adaptive functions (Ekman et al. 1972; Izard 1977). Research indicates that positive emotions are associated with students' attention, concentration, engagement and persistence in learning activities which positively correlate with academic achievements (Eccles 2005) and trigger upward spirals toward emotional well-being (Fredrickson and Joiner 2002). Negative emotions negatively affect performance and academic achievements (Madigan and Curran 2020).

To assess students' emotional experiences with distance learning, words and phrases of emotional tone were analysed in students' responses, and then counted and labelled using three code categories of emotion terms: positive, negative and neutral emotions, as presented on the next two figures. The results on Figure 2 demonstrate that students used a variety of emotionally charged words to indicate positive emotions experienced.

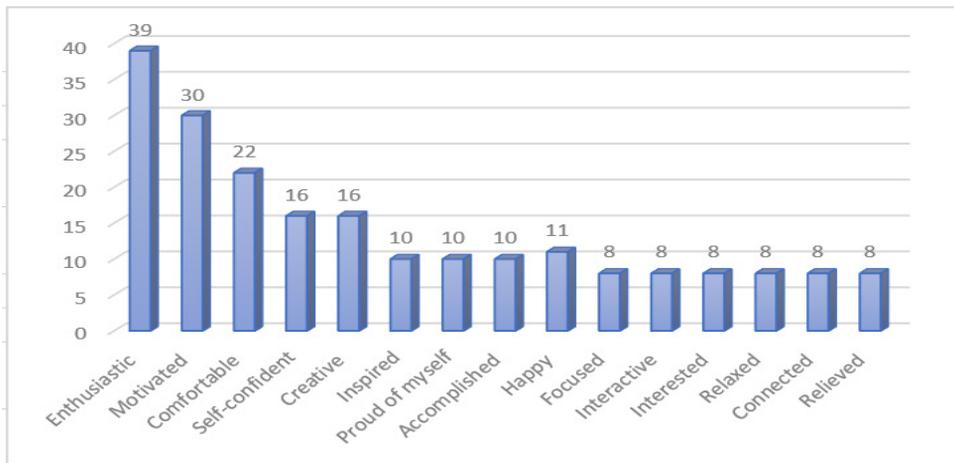


Figure 2. Dominant Positive Emotions Experienced During Distance Learning

As high as 97.5% of surveyed students felt enthusiastic during online education, with 75% feeling motivated and 55% feeling comfortable. However, as for other positive emotions experienced, only 40% of students felt confident during distance learning and 25% felt accomplished, with only 20% feeling focused and relaxed respectively.

Furthermore, the results in Figure 3 below demonstrate that students also used a variety of emotionally charged words to indicate negative emotions experienced during distance learning. Namely, the word stressed was the most frequently used to describe student feelings during online education (92%, 46 out of 50 students) followed by demotivated (90%, 45 students), bored (54%, 27 students), afraid (36%, 18 students), anxious (26%, 13 students), etc. If one compares the results of Figures 2 and 3, it is evident that negative feelings dominate (e.g. stressed and demotivated), which occur more frequently in students' responses than the dominant positive feelings enthusiastic and motivated. Stress is often a source of anxiety for some students and leads to lack of confidence, attention and engagement, and such a wide range of negative feelings experienced affects students' emotional well-being. Moreover, these results show that many respondents experienced emotional insecurities such as low self-confidence, low motivation, anxiety and fear, insecurity and uncertainty.

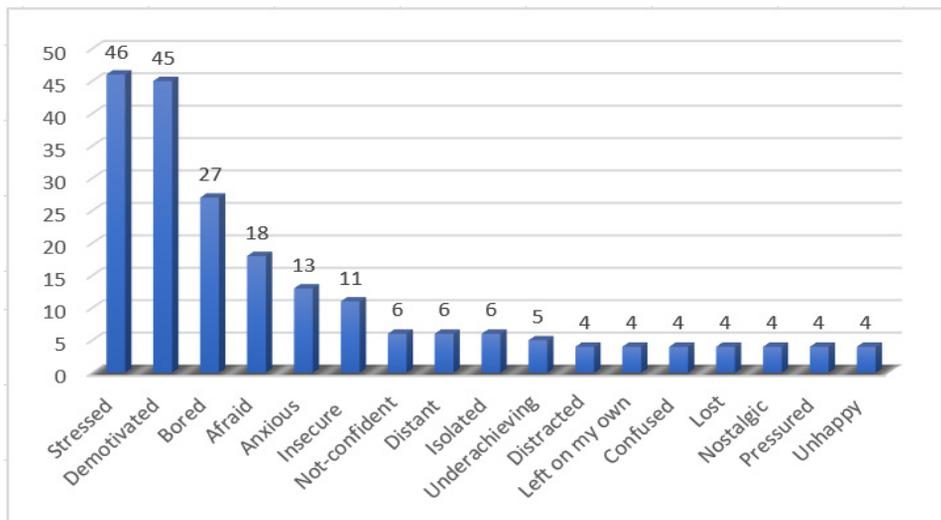


Figure 3. Dominant Negative Emotions Experienced During Distance Learning

The results in Figure 3 demonstrate that distance learning at interdisciplinary translation and interpreting studies is particularly challenging due to social elements, such as a feeling of isolation and physical distance, but it also has significant emotional implications for students, such as, increased stress, personal insecurity, demotivation and lack of enthusiasm. Such psychological states can only be overcome by a learning environment where positive emotions are stimulated. The results also show that online exams are a particular source of anxiety which contributes to low self-confidence and low motivation. According to D'Errico et al. (2016), positive emotions during exam preparation strongly correlate with students' motivation and support the learning process and learning outcome. To conclude, teachers need to be aware of students' emotions in the classroom. For that purpose, teachers must be familiar with the pedagogical strategies that will help their students modulate their emotions (Rippé, Weisfeld-Spolter, Yurova and Kemp 2021).

6 Discussion and conclusions

The discussion needs to be centred around how to improve future education, with special focus on translation and interpreting education, by taking into account students' emotional and social well-being and not only their cognitive well-being. Education is undergoing a digital transition and some form of distance learning will be retained even in the future with the growing use of technology. Therefore, significant changes and improvements that extend beyond the learning environment and put students' well-being in the focus will be required. It is crucial to emphasize three points in the discussion.

Firstly, although teachers cannot act as psychologists, they can and need to create a positive environment for students where positive emotions are stimulated. The survey results suggest that soft skills must be included in formal curricula, because

students' overall well-being can be improved by building on emotional and social skills, such as emotional awareness, managing emotions, self-confidence, empathy, motivation and adeptness in relationships which fall under the broad domain of emotional intelligence. Students express interest to work on such skills and to engage in motivation-boosting and self-confidence-boosting activities.

Secondly, this study aims to emphasize the importance of emotional and social well-being in order for students to achieve a positive experience in the higher educational process. Informal skills and competencies are mainly disregarded during distance learning because teachers mainly focus on organisational and digital issues and put student well-being in the background. For that reason, during the pandemic, author has increasingly focused on generic competencies by integrating emotional intelligence-related activities that help students recognize their emotions and manage such emotions during challenging times, such as distance learning in the pandemic context and in a simulated professional context. Social skills were also tackled (through team work and empathy) and motivation (through activities that improve self-confidence and self-motivation) in order to more efficiently deal with the challenges of distance learning.

Finally, emotional intelligence-related activities help students use their personal experiences (positive or negative) to understand the inter-relation between student emotions and actions. Emotional intelligence relies on understanding our own emotions and emotional reactions as well as on identifying the experiences of different feelings and sentiments (Bliss 2006).

Bibliography

- Aristovnik, A., Keržič, D., Ravšelj, D., Tomaževič, N. and Umek, L. (2020). Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on life of higher education students: A global perspective. *Sustainability*, 12(20), 8438.
- Baltà-Salvador, R., Olmedo-Torre, N., Peña, M. and Renta-Davids. (2021). A. Academic and emotional effects of online learning during the Covid-10 pandemic of engineering students. *Education and Information Technologies*, 26, 7407-7434.
- Bliss, S. E. (2006). The affect of emotional intelligence on a modern organizational leader's ability to make effective decisions. *Unpublished Master's Thesis (Online)*. Available from <http://eqi.org/mgtpaper.htm>.
- Brett, C. E., Mathieson, M. L., Rowley, A. M. (2020). Determinants of wellbeing in university students: the role of residential status, stress, loneliness, resilience and sense of coherence. *Current Psychology* (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-022-03125-8>.
- Butnaru, G. I., Haller, A., Dragolea, L., Anichiti, A., Tacu Hârșan, D. (2021). Students' wellbeing during transition from onsite to online education: Are there risks arising from social isolation? *Int J Environ Res Public Health*, 18(18), 9665.
- Cheng, T. J., Jin, J. and Cheng, J. (2001). Demystifying subjective well-being of academically at-risk students: case study of a Chinese high school. Inequity and inclusion in schools. *Soc. Incl.* 9, 36–46, doi: 10.17645/si.v9i4.4572
- Clabaugh, A., Duque, J. F., Fields, L. J. (2021). Academic stress and emotional well-being in United States college students following onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Front Psychol*, 2021 (12), 628787.

- Davis, T. (2019). What is Well-Being? Definition, Types, and Well-Being Skills. *Psychology Today* [Online], 2 January. Available from: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/blog/click-here-happiness/201901/what-is-well-being-definition-types-and-well-being-skills> [Accessed: 30 June, 2022].
- D'Errico, F., Paciello, M., Cerniglia, L. (2016). When emotions enhance students' engagement in e-learning processes. *Journal of E-Learning and Knowledge Society*, 12(4), 9-23.
- Eccles, J. S. (2005). Subjective task value and the Eccles et al. model of achievement-related choices. In A. J. Elliot & C S. Dweck (Eds.). *Handbook of Competence and Motivation*, 105-121. Guilford Publications.
- Ekman, P., Friesen, W., Ellsworth, P. (1972). *Emotion in the Human Face: Guidelines for Research and an Integration of Findings*. Oxford: Pergamon.
- Fredrickson, B., Joiner, T. (2002). Positive emotions trigger upward spirals toward emotional well-being. *Psychological Science*, 13(2), 172-5.
- García, J. (2012). The emotional intelligence, its importance in the learning process. *Rev. Educ.* 2012 (36), 97–109.
- Goleman D. (1998). *Working with Emotional Intelligence*. New York: Bantam Books.
- Gräbel B. F. (2017). *The Relationship between Wellbeing and Academic Achievement: A Systematic Review*. New York, NY: BMS.
- Hubscher-Davidson, S., Devaux, J. (2021). Teaching translation and interpreting in virtual environments. *Journal of Specialised Translation*, (36), 184-192
- Izard, C. E. (1977). *Human Emotions*. New York: Plenum
- Kerzič, D., Kalariparampil, J. A., Alvarado, R. P. B., da Silva Bezerra, D., Cheraghi, M., Dobrowolska, P., Fagbamigbe, A. F., Faris, M. E., Franca, T., Gonzales-Fernandez, B., Gonzales-Robledo, L., Inasius, F., Kar, S. K., Lazanyl, K., Lazar, F., Machin-Mastromatteo, J., Maroco, J., [...], Aristovnik, A. (2021). Academic student satisfaction and perceived performance in the e-learning environment during the COVID-19 pandemic: Evidence across ten countries. *Journal PLoS ONE*, 16(10), 1-23.
- Keyes, C. L. M. (2002). The mental health continuum: From languishing to flourishing in life. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 43(2), 207–222.
- Keyes, C. L. M. (2003). Complete mental health: An agenda for the 21st century. In C. L. M. Keyes & J. Haidt (Eds.), *Flourishing: Positive psychology and the life well-lived* (pp. 293–312). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Keyes, C. L. M. (2007). *Promoting and protecting mental health as flourishing: A complementary strategy for improving national mental health*. *American Psychologist*, 62: 95–108.
- Lischer, S., Safi, N., Dickson, C. (2021). Remote learning and students' mental health during the Covid-19 pandemic: A mixed-method enquiry. *Prospects (Paris)*, 2021, 1-11.
- Madigan, D. J. and Curran, T. (2021). Does burnout affect academic achievement? A meta-analysis of over 100,000 students. *Educational Psychology Review*, 33(4), 387-405.
- Matos, M., McEwan, K., Kanovský, M., Halamová, J., Steindl, S. R., Ferreira, N., Linharelhos, M., Rijo, D., Asano, K., Vilas, S. P., Márquez, M. G., Gregório, S., Brito-Pons, G. [...], Gilbert, P. (2021). The role of social connection on the experience of COVID-19 related post-traumatic growth and stress. *PLoS ONE*, 16(12).
- Pekrun, R., Goetz, T., Frenzel, A. C., Barchfeld, P., Perrye, R. P. (2011). Measuring emotions in students' learning and performance: The achievement emotions questionnaire (AEQ). *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 36(1), 36-48.
- Pentarakaki, A., Burkholder, G. (2017). Emerging evidence regarding the roles of emotional, behavioural, and cognitive aspects of student engagement in the online classroom. *European Journal of Open, Distance and E-Learning*, 20(1), 1-21.

- Popescu, E. F., Tatucu, M., Dobromirescu, V. (2021). Students' well-being in online education in Covid-19 context. *International Journal of Education and Research*, 9(2), ISSN: 2411-5681
- Rippé, C.; Weisfeld-Spolter, S.; Yurova, Y.; Kemp, A. (2021). Pandemic pedagogy for the new normal: Fostering perceived control during COVID-19. *ZDB-ID*, 43(2), 260-276.
- Ryff, C. D. and Singer, B. (2006). Best news yet on the six-factor model of wellbeing. *Soc. Sci. Res.* 35, 1103–1119. doi: 10.1016/j.ssresearch.2006.01.002.
- Sazdovska-Pigulovska, M. (2021). Integrating experiential learning in the virtual translation classroom. *The Roles and Identities of Interpreters and Translators in an Ever-Changing World: Proceedings of the International Conference*, (Hankuk University of Foreign Studies), 43-53. South Korea, Seoul
- Seligman, M. E. P. (2011). *Flourish: A visionary new understanding of happiness and well-being*. Free Press.
- Zapata-Ospina, J.P, Patiño-Lugo, D.F., Vélez, C.M., Campos-Ortiz, S., Madrid-Martínez, P., Pemberthy-Quintero, S., Pérez-Gutiérrez AM, Ramírez-Pérez, P.A., Vélez-Marín, V.M. (2021). Mental health interventions for college and university students during the COVID-19 pandemic: a critical synthesis of the literature. *Rev Colomb Psiquiatr*, 50(3), 199-213.