

## Article

# Social Work Education during the COVID-19 Pandemic—Challenges and Future Developments to Enhance Students' Wellbeing

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**Abstract:** As the COVID-19 pandemic swept across the globe, educational systems were forced to adapt to the new reality of online learning, causing practical academic specializations, such as social work (SW), to be severely affected. To highlight the perspectives of SW students during the pandemic, we used a mixed sociological approach that combined exploratory qualitative research (using the focus-group technique) with cross-sectional quantitative research. Participants who had both on-site and online SW studies before and after the COVID-19 outbreak were included in the study. The study was conducted during a period when almost all educational activities were held online. We aimed to investigate students' perceptions of the educational process during the pandemic, how their wellbeing was affected, and their perspectives on educational and professional development. Students identified advantages of online learning, such as discovering online learning tools, and disadvantages, mainly marked by concerns about their career path once practical activities were heavily limited by institutional measures and policies. Our conclusions suggest that in a post-pandemic context, universities should provide continuous feedback, integrate students' opinions into policies, offer material and technical support, facilitate access to high-quality resources, enrich the SW curricula with resilience programs, and organize peer-to-peer mentoring activities.



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## 1. Introduction

The World Health Organisation [1] stated that COVID-19 spread faster in highly dense social networks such as university campuses. Worldwide, the answer to this matter was to close down universities and shift swiftly from face-to-face learning to online education as an alternative to suspending courses altogether. "Social distancing" or "physical distancing" measures were enforced to minimise interpersonal interaction and avoid community spread.

Although most governments decided to transform academic courses into online remote educational activities, in practice, this situation creates the premise for an increased level of inequality [2].

Whereas universities in Romania had remote learning programs even before the COVID-19 pandemic, students, teachers, and university management alike had to make an effort to transfer all full-time curriculums to online learning.

Hence, there was a drastic change for most students, teachers, and other university employees in the higher education sector. Therefore, the COVID-19 pandemic can be considered an "immersive laboratory" where the acceptance of working from home and online education could be assessed in real-time [3].

To assist with student safety, the Senate of "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iași (UAIC) decided on 12 March 2020, to have all didactic activities online (lectures and seminars, as well as final academic year exams). This decision led to a significant

change from the typical educational experience of students by removing an essential element of social work training: direct work with the beneficiaries during the hours of practicum/volunteering. Since October 2021, Romanian universities have started to resume on-site education. However, each institution decided on the teaching method based on the university economy. For the Social Work students within “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University in Iași, onsite learning resumed from the second semester of the academic year 2021–2022 (March 2022)—precisely two years after declaring the state of emergency.

The literature regarding the efficacy of online versus face-to-face learning needs to be more consistent. Some researchers report higher performances in the case of face-to-face learning, while others found better results in the case of online learning [4]. However, we must consider the specifics of learning activities during the COVID-19 pandemic. When the state of emergency was active, the forced shift to online learning reduced the anxiety related to the interruption of studies and the loss of the university year [5], which seemed to be the inherent consequence of the universities’ shutdown.

Even in conditions of normality, when online/distance learning is a choice, research shows that students who learn online are more likely to interrupt their studies than those who study full-time [6]. On the other hand, the social isolation specific to the assumed distance learning impairs students’ self-confidence and their capacity to study [7].

When assessing student satisfaction regarding online courses, Richardson and Swan [8] focused on the relationship between the social presence of teachers in online learning as a factor influencing student satisfaction.

Whereas online learning opens the gates of education for many students who need flexible schedules or have an individual learning style, it is essential to admit the factors with a possible significant impact on the success or failure of online learning. These factors include self-regulation and motivation, institutional support, interaction and communication, cultural restrictions, digital skills, and access to technological resources and learning platforms [9,10].

Recent studies that assessed how the COVID-19 pandemic and health measures enforced affected the educational process bring to the limelight a series of aspects with an impact on the academic path of students, such as the accurate adjustment of teaching to the online format, the structure of the courses, the evaluation methods, and the support of teachers [11,12]; insufficient feedback from teachers; uncertainty regarding the acquisition of required knowledge and skills [5]; quality of courses [13,14]; learning conditions of students (working space) [15–17]; social support networks, and support and connection with the colleagues and teachers [18,19].

Other studies indicated challenges for the students while studying online: lack of attention and focus as well as a decrease in motivation to attend courses during the COVID-19 pandemic, the lack of personal space for study, and distraction by other family members, taking over several tasks [17]. Hence, their role as students conflicted with different roles belonging to family members [20].

The study conducted by Balta et al. [21] brings to attention worries about students’ mental health due to the sudden shift to the online learning system. Other studies show that students experienced an increase in stress, anxiety, and depression [16,22–24], and negative feelings such as fear, worry, or boredom intensified [16,25]. In addition, moderate to high anxiety levels about COVID-19 are associated with somatic symptomatology, especially fatigue and gastrointestinal symptoms [26].

Forming practical and relational skills and competencies is challenging for online education [27]. Though online education has many advantages, it is challenging to develop practical skills despite using modern learning tools, such as teleconferences or courses/lectures in real-time [28]. For instance, practical skills (i.e., in the field of Social Work or Medicine) can take much work to deliver using online methods [29].

The research gap we identified is related to the specific context of Romanian preparedness in providing online education in the social work educational field. Unlike other countries, such as the United States of America or Australia, where online education is

well-established, Romania is still in an emergent phase of its development, particularly in the social work educational field where direct interaction with beneficiaries is essential. However, previous studies conducted prior to the pandemic highlighted numerous benefits of online education for students. Afrouz and Crisp [30] emphasized that the attitude toward incorporating online education in the social work field remains conservative, with a focus on the importance of face-to-face interaction among students, teachers, peers, beneficiaries, and professionals in the field. While there are similar studies on this topic, most of them focus solely on either a quantitative approach or a qualitative approach. In this regard, we propose a comprehensive approach that combines both qualitative and quantitative methods.

Based on the literature we consulted, our research aim was to investigate Social Work students' perceptions of the online educational process in the social work field during the pandemic in Romania, how their wellbeing was affected, and their perspectives on educational and professional development.

In this regard, the research questions discussed in the final part of the paper are the following:

- What were the main educational aspects and elements in the social work field that were impaired by the pandemic context?
- Which aspects regarding the involvement in practicum and volunteer activities in the social work educational field have been affected by the pandemic context?
- What educational support networks have been accessed by Social Work students during the pandemic?
- How has Social Work students' wellbeing been impaired in the pandemic context?

In the following section, we present the materials and methods used in our research, offering methodological details regarding both the qualitative study design and the quantitative study design. The third section encompasses the presentation of our results and data analysis. The final part of this paper includes the discussions derived from our research questions, as well as the main conclusions drawn from the study.

## 2. Materials and Methods

We performed our research study through a mixed empirical approach. We combined a qualitative study—semi-structured focus group interviews (conducted during the winter of 2020) with quantitative research—a questionnaire survey (performed during the spring of 2021). The chronological distribution of the two investigations was not coincidental; our purpose was to underline from a more comprehensive research perspective the specifics of the educational process in the field of social work in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak. Consequently, in both studies included in the research, we selected students within the speciality of Social Work, “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University Iași, Romania (UAIC), the Department of Sociology and Social Work (S&SW Department) of the Faculty of Philosophy and Social-Political Sciences (FFSPS). Given its exploratory nature, we mention that only undergraduate students were included in the qualitative study. Concerning the quantitative research, we found it helpful to have master's students in our sample—given the significant amount of information provided by participants to focus groups—thus extending the target group we address.

In the first phase, we thought it worthwhile to conduct a qualitative research study to prospect on a deeper level the experiences of students as the shift towards online learning occurred. Whereas the literature was already filled with information related to the specifics of online education, we placed and analysed the phenomenon in a domestic context to point out its particularities as seen and self-perceived by students, all the more as—in the case of the FFSPS—online learning lasted for two years for the period of March 2020–March 2022. Based on the information provided by research participants and the conclusions drawn following the qualitative study, we outlined during the second phase the quantitative design. Hence, around half a year afterwards, we conducted the questionnaire survey, formulated the questions, and selected the items being measured convergently to the data

collected through focus groups. The information was analysed by topic. The sections *Qualitative study design* and *Quantitative study design* feature detailed information regarding the qualitative and quantitative study design, respectively.

### 2.1. Ethical Considerations

Regarding the ethical considerations, we point out that—in both studies—to include the subjects within the research study, we used informed consent, thus guaranteeing and presenting a series of principles concerning data confidentiality and the anonymous character of the focus group interviews and the questionnaire. At the same time, the participation of students was voluntary, and they were not offered material or symbolical benefits (i.e., money, vouchers, extra credits, or bonus points for the subjects) for participating in the focus group interview or filling out the questionnaire. Furthermore, they could refuse to participate in the focus group, fill out the questionnaire, and withdraw from the research study at any given time. In addition, we designed the entire study in agreement with the principles provided by the Declaration of Helsinki [31].

All information (i.e., fragments from focus groups, scales, and items measured using the quantitative study) was translated by a certified translator.

### 2.2. Qualitative Study Design

The qualitative study was exploratory based on the focus group interview method. We aimed to point out the category of thematic indicators to study via quantitative research subsequently. Hence, we highlighted the specifics of online education compared to onsite education from the perspective of Social Work students. We tried to obtain a frame of discussion on a deeper level concerning the experiences lived and the challenges faced by students personally and educationally due to the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, with effects on their wellbeing. In this respect, we organised four focus group interviews in 2020 with 47 Social Work undergraduate students. All the focus group interviews were conducted online, using the Google Meet and Cisco Webex platforms; the participants agreed to have the focus group interviews recorded. In each focus group, 11 or 12 students from the same academic year participated, and each discussion took from 90 to around 120 min. The students who participated in the focus group attended onsite higher education classes for at least a semester and online courses for at least the same time. We selected the students after sending electronic invitations with detailed information regarding the topic, purpose, and objective attained in the study. Students from second and third years have been invited to participate. Response rate was 15%.

The focus group interviews were semi-structured; Table 1 includes the main thematic analysis areas and the questions of the study after each dimension under investigation.

**Table 1.** The dimensions and questions of the qualitative study.

Dimensions	Research Questions
(1) Perceived didactic activity	(1a) What challenges did students face due to the transition towards online education? (1b) What worries did students face due to the transition towards online education caused by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic? (1c) How do students assess the online teaching activity compared to onsite education?
(2) Evolutions regarding wellbeing on various levels of life	(2a) What changes did students perceive from the perspective of wellbeing caused by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic (socially, physically, mentally, emotionally, financially)? (2b) What types of personal and educational support did students use to face the challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic?
(3) Perceived future professional path	(3a) What are students' worries regarding their future professional path in the context of educational modifications?

Hence, we chose a thematic qualitative analysis procedure due to its widely recognized accessibility and flexibility [32]. Moreover, other studies have highlighted that thematic analysis is suitable for applied research in scientific domains concerned with health and wellbeing [32]. Before qualitative analysis, all the focus groups were entirely transcribed. Subsequently, we coded the information and extracted relevant excerpts to underpin all our interpretations. It is worth noting that we added information allowing the individual identification of the respondents (without breaching their anonymity).

### 2.2.1. Qualitative Study Objectives

The primary objectives of the qualitative study were the following:

- [O1.1] Analysing how students perceive the transformation of the educational activity due to the shift towards online learning caused by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic;
- [O1.2] Analysing the wellbeing of students on various levels of their existence in the pandemic context;
- [O1.3] Analysing how students perceive their future educational and professional path.

We synthesised the objectives proposed starting from the literature consulted—featured in the introduction to the article—by considering these thematic fields. We focused on identifying the main factors influencing the online social work educational process compared to the onsite version, to which the students ascribed positive or negative connotations. Hence, without a limitation to the elements mentioned above, we feature below the factors pointed out by students, which we placed on several levels: [a] *individual* (i.e., motivational, study time management, graduation); [b] *relational* (i.e., in the group of peers or with teachers, where they practice/volunteer, in the family); [c] *related to workspace organisation and occupational health* (i.e., inadequate conditions for studying, sharing the study space with siblings/parents, prolonged exposure to electronic devices for courses, homework, projects, papers); and [d] *technical* (i.e., slow Internet connection, lack of information regarding the functioning of online education platforms).

### 2.2.2. Qualitative Study Participants

The qualitative study comprises 47 subjects—all undergraduate students (BSW). Their age ranges from 20 to 46 years old; 24 are in the second year, while 23 are in the third year. In addition, 41 participants are female (F), whereas six are male (M).

### 2.3. Quantitative Study Design

The cross-sectional study was conducted in the spring of 2021, during the second semester of the academic year 2020–2021. When designing the sample, we targeted Social Work students (both undergraduate and master's students) who had completed at least a semester of onsite learning and one of online learning. The *quantitative study participants* section features a more detailed description of the population included in the study.

The data was collected online using the Google Forms platform; the questionnaire was self-administered and took about 15 min to complete. We shared the questionnaires on the online working and communication groups of Social Work students. The response rate was approximately 40% of the total enrolled students in social work studies. We chose an online study because the teaching activities took place exclusively online in that period, except for laboratories and speciality placements, which were held in a hybrid format (only 30% of practicum activities were carried out face-to-face—as per the successive decisions taken by the university between 2020 and 2021).

Following the qualitative analysis (the details of which are featured in Section 3.1—*Qualitative study results*), we structured the questions into five research dimensions to draft the questionnaire:

- General perceptions on the acquisition of practical knowledge, information, and skills on the educational level for undergraduate and master's students;

- Work performed for studying in the period of online learning for undergraduate and master's students;
- Educational aspects and elements impaired in the pandemic context for undergraduate and master's students;
- Wellbeing and mental impairment for undergraduate and master's students;
- Educational support network in the pandemic context for undergraduate and master's students;
- Online learning and skill acquisition to exercise the profession for undergraduate and master's students.

The quantitative measures collected are related to educational changes; acquisition of knowledge, information, and skill conveyed in the period online; life satisfaction as a subcomponent of subjective wellbeing; psychological and emotional wellbeing; subjective financial wellbeing; mental effects of the pandemic; support network accessed at the educational level; and types of acquired skills.

Data processing and statistical analysis were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 20. The type of analysis used was descriptive, i.e., Pearson correlations and *t*-tests to identify significant differences between the opinions of students regarding the research topics and sub-topics, with differences noted even by their socio-demographic characteristics (i.e., gender, academic cycle (undergraduate or master), age, area of residence).

### 2.3.1. Quantitative Study Objectives

Given the dimensions analysed and the qualitative analysis of the focus groups, the primary objectives of the quantitative study were the following:

- [O2.1] Measuring wellbeing among Social Work students, on various levels, in the pandemic context;
- [O2.2] Assessing the degree to which the students generally self-perceive that during their studies, they managed to acquire diverse practical knowledge, information, and skills to exercise the Social Worker's profession optimally;
- [O2.3] Analysing the students' perceived educational work volume in the period of online education by relating to the self-perceived work volume concerning the period when the didactic activities were held onsite;
- [O2.4] Identifying the main educational elements or aspects considered to have been affected by the pandemic context;
- [O2.5] Analysing the diversity of the educational support network accessed by students in the pandemic context;
- [O2.6] Determining the extent to which Social Work students believe that the online didactic activity helped them acquire the skills necessary to exercise the profession for which they train in the future.

### 2.3.2. Quantitative Study Participants

The population studied comprised a total number (*n*) of 235 students who attended full-time higher education courses in Social Work. When designing the sample, a selection criterion was student attendance of at least a semester onsite and one online. Consequently, we did not include first-year undergraduate students because they were still in their last year of high school when this study began. Of all students enrolled at that point in the Social Work program, we included around 40% in our research sample.

Of all subjects, 166 (70.6%) are undergraduate students (BSW), while 69 (29.4%) are master's students (MSW), both majoring in Social Work; Table 2 includes their distribution per year of study.

**Table 2.** Socio-demographic data of the respondents.

Socio-Demographic Variable	<i>n</i>	% or Mean (Std. Dev.)
Gender		
Male	20	8.5%
Female	215	91.5%
Academic cycle		
Bachelor's Degree in Social Work (BSW)	166	70.6%
Master Studies Social Work (MSW)	69	29.4%
Year of study BSW		
Second year	89	53.6%
Third year	77	46.4%
Year of study MSW		
First year	28	40.6%
Second year	41	59.4%
Area of residence		
Urban		58.7%
Rural		41.3%
Age of respondents	235	24.29 years old (6.95)
Age of respondents BSW	166	22.19 (4.45)
Age of respondents MSW	69	29.33 (9.03)

In addition, 8.5% are male, while 91.5% are female. We point out that the gender distribution of the students in the sample reflects the structure of the research universe. Concerning the residence area in the year before the study began, 58.7% of the participants reported living in urban areas, while 41.3% were in rural areas.

As for the age distribution, they are from 19 to 59 years old ( $M = 24.29$ ;  $SD = 6.95$ ); the mean of BSW students ( $M = 22.19$ ;  $SD = 4.45$ ) is lower than that of MSW students ( $M = 29.33$ ;  $SD = 9.03$ ).

Overall, due to the high participation rate, the sample structure reflects the characteristics of the general population of Social Work students when our research study began.

### 3. Results

This part features the main results of the qualitative study and the quantitative research findings.

#### 3.1. Qualitative Study Results

##### 3.1.1. Perceived Didactic Activity

The focus group attendees identified a series of factors influencing the online educational process compared to the onsite version, to which they ascribed positive and/or negative connotations. These factors are individual, relational, related to workspace organisation and occupational health, and technical.

Participants ascribed mostly negative significations to the individual factors (i.e., motivation, study time management). Students reported, among others, a decrease in productivity due to higher demotivation and insufficient knowledge of their time management methods:

*"I am not productive, personally. I lack motivation, I miss my colleagues, I miss my teachers. I simply don't have the same will to study."* (F, 21 years old, BSW, 2nd year of study)

As for the relational factors (i.e., in the group of peers or with teachers, where they practice/volunteer, in the family), students ascribed positive and negative valances to them.

Hence, they reported positive significations of the family members, highlighting their role of supporting persons in overcoming their emotional issues and facilitating the process of adapting to the new learning situation.

Punctually, respondents ascribed negative connotations to the relational factors by mentioning the lack of face-to-face meetings with colleagues; eye contact with colleagues,

as they do not turn their cameras on during online classes; nonverbal language, nonverbal feedback during online didactic activities; and social contact caused by the social distancing/isolation imposed by the spread of the virus.

Another category of factors pointed out refers to workspace organisation and occupational health (i.e., inadequate conditions for studying, sharing the study space with other siblings or parents, and prolonged exposure to electronic devices for courses, homework, projects, and papers). Subjects characterised these factors as limitations in the online educational activity compared to the onsite one.

Technical factors (i.e., slow Internet connection and lack of information regarding the functioning of online education platforms) played a tremendous role. The technical factors were new and limiting concerning the optimal unfolding of online didactic activity.

Thus, as the subjects reported, students and teachers initially dealt with issues with the educational platforms, making it challenging to adapt to online learning rapidly.

Subsequently, the significant number of educational platforms to be used in the educational process led to other important issues for students adapting to the new academic context. We note that UAIC initially used various educational platforms with personal accounts. Subsequently, in October 2020, the Senate of the University decided on Microsoft Teams, Google Workspace (formerly known as G Suite), Cisco Webex, and Zoom.

*“... it was very hard to adapt to all the platforms used by teachers. There are many of them, all different. The connection doesn't help, either.”* (F, 21 y.o., BSW, 3rd year of study)

Over time, other issues replaced the ones above, mostly related to the overloading of online platforms and networks, bad signal, or lack of Internet connection in some rural regions where students lived.

The worries that students faced due to the transition towards online learning concerned the processes of assessment, passing the semester, and finalising the academic year (i.e., new online assessment methods and procedures compared to the onsite format, understanding the message conveyed by teachers online, the time spent for online evaluation).

*“I was terrified I would not pass the semester. I didn't know what to expect from the exams.”* (F, 21 y.o., BSW, 3rd year of study)

Furthermore, it was hard to decode and understand the information conveyed during online teaching. Students lacked individual study skills and real-time feedback from teachers, and they noted them as aspects with a negative impact on covering and understanding the subjects taught.

Another aspect deemed negative by respondents was the failure to meet the deadlines for solving exams online due to technical issues out of their control.

New assessment methods emerged using various platforms (multiple-choice tests, essays, portfolios, and projects—specific to a subject) adapted to the online format. They represented another source of worry among the respondents.

Another element deemed worrisome by all the focus group attendees was the lack of practicum activities, which students perceived as limiting to their academic training and in finding a job after graduation.

We mention that, during the emergency state, access to social protection establishments in Romania was restricted (even for beneficiaries and caregivers). Subsequently, many persons still had limited access to institutions during the state of alert. In this context, just a few institutions allowed some students to do practicum or volunteer activities. The faculty reduced the number of mandatory practicum hours by 70%.

*“There are worries. First of all, there was no practicum. We are not ready for this field. I completed 12 h of practicum out of 56; you can imagine how far behind I am.”* (F, 20 y.o. BSW, 2nd year of study)



Despite all restrictions, the involvement of various respondents in the volunteer activities was perceived as having positive valences with an impact in the sphere of wellbeing and exercising communication skills.

*“We couldn’t get out because there was an emergency state, and we were always inside. Then, I saw an ad on Facebook from an elderly centre in my town, looking for volunteers to distribute products, do the shopping, and help the seniors. I enrolled, did my job; I also went for walks. This is how I disconnected. Namely, I connected to the outside world. The seniors were so grateful; I talked to them while observing the protection rules, of course. I was happy to be helpful.”* (F, 23 y.o., BSW, 3rd year of study)

Concerning the online didactic activity, given the COVID-19 pandemic, students perceived the increased individual work volume as unfavourable for understanding and getting a better insight into the subject than face-to-face activity.

*“Teachers tried to combat the lack of interaction with the information and—at a certain point—I think we were given too many projects, which led to overloading. It was very hard to cope with the waves of information.”* (M, 21 y.o., BSW, 3rd year of study)

The respondents saw the quantitative accumulation of information to the detriment of the qualitative side (of understanding the information conveyed by teachers) as negative.

*“Some teachers give us many assignments, a lot to read, to ensure that we still study. And this is very tiresome. I personally cannot review it all. I manage to finish the assignments in time, but I soon forget the information. It is exhausting, and I can’t cope anymore.”* (F, 21 y.o., BSW, 2nd year of study)

Furthermore, students perceived the online space (the host of didactic activities) as disturbing and highly influenced by external temptations. The sources of distraction, such as social media networks, were considered impediments to finalising the assignments on time.

Against this backdrop, students spent more time than necessary doing their assignments, which were perceived as a substitute for face-to-face interactions.

For some respondents, the shift from onsite to online education determined the modification of students’ rankings by the semester GPAs; some students lost their scholarships or budget-subsidised studies.

### 3.1.2. Evolutions Regarding Wellbeing on Various Levels of Life

Upon continuing the qualitative analysis, we highlighted the changes perceived by students from the perspective of wellbeing caused by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. We analysed the social, physical, mental, emotional, and financial changes.

Among the elements associated with wellbeing, the respondents ascribe negative connotations to *emotional changes* determined by the fear of getting sick (if parents worked in the socio-medical field or were in quarantine in medical or medico-social establishments) or by the fear of spreading the virus to other family members. Additionally, there were mentioned worries regarding the health state of the senior family members or those from vulnerable groups who had to postpone or cancel medical appointments for fear of contracting the virus and parents or other family members working domestically or working abroad and whose access to the country was limited or even prohibited.

Additionally, negative connotations have been ascribed by the respondents to *physical changes* associated with sudden weight gain or loss, headaches, ocular and back pain; *mental changes* that generated states of general apathy manifested by the lack of will to participate in routine household activities, the wish to sit around and do nothing, atypical and fluctuating emotional manifestations (i.e., crying or laughing excessively in inadequate situations); *changes in the daily social and educational routine*, and *financial changes*.

The respondents identified the following aspects as having positive valences in maintaining wellbeing: living with the family and increasing time spent with the family members, living in the rural areas favoured physical activities outdoors, time saved in the isola-

tion period given the quick and direct access to classes and students not covering long distances between their residence and the faculty, maintaining financial balance or even adopting money-saving practices, and reassessing personal skills and rediscovering hobbies.

*“I saw this time as an opportunity and started painting, drawing, modelling, watching series, and reading. I kind of used this time for personal growth. ( . . . ) I resumed my so-called gamer life because I used to play a lot in high school. Now, with all that free time, I managed to contact an old friend from high school. We played the entire evening.”* (M, 21 y.o., BSW, 3rd year of study)

The analysis of the focus groups shows that the best educational support was provided to students by the group of peers. In this respect, the students mentioned the support received from the group of acquaintances and close friends and the support from the group/year colleagues, and the feeling of belonging to a common educational space because they had their cameras on during lectures and seminars.

*“I noticed that I managed to pay more attention to seminars, to focus more when we all had our cameras on. Seeing my colleagues’ reactions is very helpful.”* (F, 21 y.o., BSW, 3rd year of study)

However, respondents did not mention to the same extent keeping contact with the teachers (they only referred to it in terms of success or failure).

*“Students and teachers alike struggled to adapt to the new schedule. Many teachers tried to adapt, be as close as possible to the students, and maybe do everything to help them learn because that is the purpose. Some perhaps didn’t succeed. Others did. Some made us pay more attention and be more active, while others didn’t.”* (F, 20 y.o., BSW, 2nd year of study)

Not least, a participant in the focus groups acknowledged that they went to therapy.

The challenges caused by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and by the sudden shift from onsite to online learning determined the students to outline personal adjustment strategies to maintain their wellbeing on a general background marked by deep states of unrest, frustration, anxiety, and fear of the unknown.

*“I believe that significant adaptation processes marked the entire period. It was very hard for us to adapt; it was frustrating, mainly in the beginning, when we all had to cope with everything, the faculty included. We were scared. We had worries, but we managed to adapt.”* (F, 20 y.o., BSW, 2nd year of study)

A critical aspect identified after analysing the focus group interviews is that students used both active and passive adaptation strategies, which they applied to manage the newly created situation optimally (i.e., shifting from onsite to online education in the pandemic context).

On the one hand, the active strategies allowed the respondents to face and solve the situation by seeking information and applying them to remove problems and improve wellbeing.

On the other hand, passive strategies such as refusal to act, resignation, and minimising the pandemic reduced the respondents’ emotional tension.

*“I avoided watching TV as much as possible because I was tired of hearing non-stop only topics related to the virus. I began wishing to see new things, to do new things because I felt I lived a constant and boring routine.”* (F, 21 y.o., BSW, 3rd year of study)

We have also identified emotion-centred adaptation strategies targeting the regulation of emotional disorders directly or with support from a person of reference.

### 3.1.3. Perceived Future Professional Path

Respondents acutely experienced limited involvement in practicum and volunteer activities (fundamental components in developing skills as future professionals in the field of Social Work). They listed a series of negative effects with repercussions upon the acquisition and development of communication skills, the acquisition and development of

practical skills essential in the Social Worker's profession, the worries regarding graduation determined by the lack of practicum and volunteer activities, and the emergence of prejudice or labels disseminated in the public space discrediting online education.

*"We may be a little underestimated because we are the half-online generation, but I think there are opportunities of working in the field."* (M, 21 y.o., BSW, 3rd year of study)

Furthermore, students mentioned the volunteer activities carried out during online learning as an opportunity to find a job in the field for which they train.

*"... I had the offer to get hired as a Social Worker where I carried out volunteer activity during the state of emergency. They want to create new homecare services."* (F, 23 y.o., BSW, 3rd year of study)

### 3.2. Quantitative Study Results

Considering the conclusions of the exploratory qualitative study and starting from the topics targeted within the focus groups, we identified the dimensions of the quantitative research and the indicators measured through the questionnaire (to be analysed throughout the subsections below).

#### 3.2.1. Wellbeing and Mental Impairment Caused by the COVID-19 Pandemic

To measure diverse components of students' wellbeing, we used a series of scales based on the instruments below:

- The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) represents an instrument that comprises five items (e.g., In most ways, my life is close to my ideal; The conditions of my life are excellent) and is elaborated by Diener et al. [33]. We used this instrument to analyse general satisfaction with life among students. Each item was measured using a scale from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree), the total scores calculated ranging from 5 (Extremely dissatisfied) to 35 (Extremely satisfied).
- The Flourishing Scale (FS) is an instrument that includes eight items (e.g., I lead a purposeful and meaningful life; My social relationships are supportive and rewarding). This instrument was elaborated by Diener et al. [34], and each statement was measured on a seven-point scale from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 7 (Strongly agree). This scale assessed the students' perceptions regarding personal achievements in essential aspects of life, such as social relationships, self-esteem, personal objectives, and optimism. Upon summing up the scores, we obtained one score showing psychological wellbeing, with values ranging from a minimum of 8 to 56 (the high values include the persons with resources and psychological solid points).
- The Scale of Positive and Negative Experience (SPANE) represents an instrument developed by Diener et al. [34], structured into a total number of twelve items, measured on a five-point Likert scale, from 1 (Never) to 5 (Always). The scale comprises two subscales: SPANE-P contains six items referring to positive experiences (e.g., Positive; Good; Pleasant), and SPANE-N includes six items concerning negative experiences (e.g., Negative; Bad; Unpleasant) lived by students in the last four weeks before the study. In each situation, the total scores can range from a minimum of 6 to 30 (for SPANE-P—highest positive feelings score; for SPANE-N—highest negative feelings score). Furthermore, another difference is calculated (SPANE-B) between the total scores for positive experiences and negative experiences, with the values recorded ranging from  $-24$  (unhappiest possible) to  $+24$  (highest affect balance possible). The instrument measured wellbeing and ill-being by assessing their positive and negative experiences.
- The General Subjective Financial Wellbeing scale (GSFWs) represents a subscale made of ten items, part of a more comprehensive instrument called the Subjective Financial Wellbeing Scale (SFWBS), which includes 19 items [35]. This instrument was included to measure financial wellbeing among students, considering the subjective side of perceived financial status [36]. The ten items (e.g., I cannot complain about my

financial situation; I have enough money to pursue my passions; I have enough money to enjoy my life) were measured using a five-point scale from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree). Hence, the total scores ranged from 10 (totally dissatisfied with one's financial status) to 50 (totally satisfied with one's economic situation).

By using Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha$ ), the analysis of the measurement instrument underlined that all the scales and subscales used had a good reliability score (all  $\alpha > 0.80$ ). At the same time, the relationships between the scales were examined by applying Pearson correlations (Table 3). Following data analysis, we concluded that the increased level of satisfaction with life—SWLS led to an increase in psychological wellbeing—FS ( $r = 0.78$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), positive experiences—SPAN-E-P ( $r = 0.56$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), and subjective financial wellbeing—GSFWs ( $r = 0.50$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), given the decrease in negative experiences—SPAN-E-N ( $r = -0.26$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). Increased psychological wellbeing is accompanied by more intense positive experiences ( $r = 0.61$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ) and a reduction of negative experiences ( $r = -0.30$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). In addition, among the students in the sample, psychological wellbeing correlates positively with subjective financial wellbeing ( $r = 0.37$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). At the same time, while affect balance is higher—SPAN-E-B, we found a significative increase in satisfaction with life ( $r = 0.48$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), psychological wellbeing ( $r = 0.53$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), and subjective financial wellbeing ( $r = 0.33$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ).

**Table 3.** Correlations between the scales used.

Scale ( $n = 235$ )	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	Min.	Max.	M	Std. Dev.	$\alpha$
(1) SWLS (5 items)		0.78 **	0.56 **	-0.26 **	0.48 **	0.50 **	5	35	22.73	6.87	0.89
(2) FS (8 items)			0.61 **	-0.30 **	0.53 **	0.37 **	11	56	40.84	10.15	0.94
(3) SPAN-E-P (6 items)				-0.43 **	0.83 **	0.32 **	6	30	22.54	4.25	0.90
(4) SPAN-E-N (6 items)					-0.85 **	-0.24 **	6	30	17.24	4.54	0.84
(5) SPAN-E-B (12 items)						0.33 **	-19	24	5.29	7.45	0.87
(6) GSFWs (10 items)							10	50	31.99	9.08	0.93

\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

After applying the Independent-Samples  $t$ -test, consecutive to grouping the student population in the sample by their socio-demographical characteristics, we concluded as follows:

- The level of satisfaction with life is higher among last-year students ( $M = 23.67$ ;  $SD = 6.67$ )—whether they are the BSW or MSW students compared to students enrolled in other study years than the last ( $M = 21.78$ ;  $SD = 6.96$ ),  $t(233) = 2.12$ ;  $p = 0.03$ ;
- The degree of psychological wellbeing is higher among MSW students ( $M = 43.40$ ;  $SD = 9.66$ ) compared to the BSW students ( $M = 39.78$ ;  $SD = 10.18$ ),  $t(233) = 2.52$ ;  $p = 0.01$ ;
- Positive experiences are more characteristic to MSW students ( $M = 23.46$ ;  $SD = 4.58$ ) compared to BSW students ( $M = 22.15$ ;  $SD = 4.06$ ),  $t(233) = 2.16$ ;  $p = 0.03$ ; to males ( $M = 25.10$ ;  $SD = 3.80$ ) compared to female students ( $M = 22.30$ ;  $SD = 4.22$ ),  $t(233) = 2.85$ ;  $p = 0.005$ ; and to last-year students ( $M = 23.32$ ;  $SD = 4.20$ ) compared to students enrolled in the transition year towards the last study year ( $M = 21.75$ ;  $SD = 4.17$ ),  $t(233) = 2.87$ ;  $p = 0.004$ ;
- The level of negative experiences is higher among BSW students ( $M = 17.62$ ;  $SD = 4.52$ ) compared to the MSW students ( $M = 16.33$ ;  $SD = 4.49$ ),  $t(233) = 1.99$ ;  $p = 0.05$ ; and

among female students ( $M = 17.56$ ;  $SD = 4.50$ ) compared to male students ( $M = 13.75$ ;  $SD = 3.40$ ),  $t(233) = 3.69$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ;

- Affect balance is higher among MSW students ( $M = 7.13$ ;  $SD = 7.64$ ) than BSW students ( $M = 4.53$ ;  $SD = 7.26$ ),  $t(233) = 2.45$ ;  $p = 0.01$ ; among male students ( $M = 11.35$ ;  $SD = 6.17$ ) than female students ( $M = 4.73$ ;  $SD = 7.32$ ),  $t(233) = 3.90$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ; among last-year students ( $M = 6.28$ ;  $SD = 7.38$ ) than students enrolled in study years before the last year ( $M = 4.29$ ;  $SD = 7.42$ ),  $t(233) = 2.05$ ;  $p = 0.04$ ;
- The level of subjective financial wellbeing is higher among MSW students ( $M = 34.15$ ;  $SD = 8.43$ ) compared to BSW students ( $M = 31.09$ ;  $SD = 9.21$ ),  $t(233) = 2.37$ ;  $p = 0.01$ .

Concerning the other cases analysed, we found statistically significant differences depending on the socio-demographical characteristics of the respondents, including the area of residence (all  $ps > 0.05$ ).

Upon correlating the variable of respondents' age ( $n = 235$ ) with the scores of the scales, we concluded that the older the student, the higher the satisfaction with life ( $r = 0.20$ ;  $p = 0.002$ ), psychological wellbeing ( $r = 0.21$ ;  $p = 0.001$ ), subjective financial wellbeing ( $r = 0.22$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), and more positive experiences ( $r = 0.17$ ;  $p = 0.009$ ) due to lower levels of negative experiences ( $r = -0.28$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). Furthermore, as age increases, the affect balance is higher ( $r = 0.27$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ).

We added another question to measure the extent to which students perceived they were mentally affected by the evolution of the COVID-19 pandemic throughout the year preceding the study (Q. Generally, on a scale from 1 to 10, how much do you think you were mentally affected by the situation of the past year caused by the evolution of the COVID-19 pandemic (1 accounting for not at all, while 10—extremely)?).

The general trend shows that students reported having been more likely to be mentally affected by the evolution of the COVID-19 pandemic ( $M = 6.63$ ;  $Me = 7$ ;  $SD = 2.26$ ).

By applying the Pearson correlation, we pointed out that students who reported to have been much more mentally impaired by the situation caused by the evolution of the COVID-19 pandemic recorded lower levels of satisfaction with life ( $r = -0.30$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), psychological wellbeing ( $r = -0.27$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), and subjective financial wellbeing ( $r = -0.22$ ;  $p = 0.001$ ), respectively. Furthermore, the same students have shown higher levels of negative experiences ( $r = 0.37$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ) accompanied by lower levels of positive experiences ( $r = -0.33$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), as well as a significantly lower affect balance ( $r = -0.42$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ).

Considering the socio-demographical characteristics of our research population, we applied the Independent-Samples  $t$ -test to highlight which categories of students are perceived to have been more or less mentally impaired by the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, the highest scores of the mental impairment degree were recorded among female students ( $M = 6.80$ ;  $SD = 2.18$ ) compared to male students ( $M = 4.75$ ;  $SD = 2.29$ ),  $t(233) = 3.99$ ;  $p < 0.001$ , as well as among BSW students ( $M = 6.95$ ;  $SD = 2.15$ ) compared to MSW students ( $M = 5.86$ ;  $SD = 2.34$ ),  $t(233) = 3.44$ ;  $p = 0.001$ . Not least, age correlates negatively with the degree of mental impairment ( $r = -0.19$ ;  $p = 0.003$ ). In the rest of the cases analysed, no statistically significant differences were found (all  $ps > 0.05$ ).

### 3.2.2. General Perceptions on the Acquisition of Practical Knowledge, Information, and Skills on the Educational Level

Initially, within the quantitative study, we assessed the degree to which students generally self-perceived that—throughout their studies—they accumulated various knowledge, educational information, and practical skills to exercise the Social Worker's profession optimally. In this respect, we measured the participant agreement and disagreement level using a five-point Likert scale from 1—*totally disagree* to 5—*totally agree* regarding three statements (i.e., a. *I believe that, throughout the years of study, I acquired enough knowledge to exercise my profession optimally*; b. *I believe that, throughout the years of study, I acquired the practical skills necessary to exercise my profession optimally*; c. *I believe the subjects studied thus far provide the information required to exercise my profession optimally*). We reiterate here that

our respondents have both onsite and online didactic experiences. This assessment enabled us to analyse the overall opinion of students, which is related to their entire academic path regarding the level of knowledge acquisition and skills for their future professional path.

Data analysis shows that 42.5% of the respondents (a score obtained by adding up the percentages for *agree* and *totally agree*) reported having acquired, throughout their years of study, enough knowledge in their speciality; the percentage seems much higher than that of respondents stating the contrary (22.1%—a score obtained by adding up the percentages for *disagree* and *totally disagree*). On the contrary, the situation is reversed concerning acquiring practical skills specific to the Social Worker's profession. Around a third of the students reported failing to develop practical skills (32.3%), more than their counterparts who stated the opposite (30.2%). On the other hand, students' images regarding the subjects studied throughout the faculty are positive; i.e., 47.7% believe that the curricular field is comprehensive enough and provides valuable information for professional training. On the contrary, one in five students believes that the subjects studied failed to provide the necessary information to exercise the profession optimally (19.6%).

Upon grouping the population studied by academic cycle and assessing the results of applying the Independent-Samples *t*-test, we pointed out that the BSW students disagreed more with the statements than MSW students (Table 4, including means—*M* and standard deviations—*SD*). Hence, the BSW students considered to a significantly lower extent that, throughout the years of study, they acquired enough general knowledge ( $t(233) = -3.74$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ) and practical skills ( $t(233) = -3.83$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ) to exercise the Social Worker's profession optimally. Additionally and also significantly less compared to MSW students, BSW students believe that the subjects studied provided the information required to exercise the profession ( $t(233) = -2.68$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ).

**Table 4.** The extent to which students perceive to have acquired knowledge, practical skills, and information to exercise the profession optimally (by academic cycle of studies).

On a Scale from 1 to 5, to What Extent Do You Agree or Disagree with the Following Statements?	BSW ( <i>n</i> = 166)		MSW ( <i>n</i> = 69)		Independent-Samples <i>t</i> -Test		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Mean Difference	<i>T</i>	<i>p</i>
a. I believe that, throughout the years of study, I acquired enough knowledge to exercise my profession optimally	3.04	1.06	3.59	0.94	−0.55	−3.74	0.001
b. I believe that, throughout the years of study, I acquired the practical skills necessary to exercise my profession optimally	2.77	1.07	3.36	1.11	−0.59	−3.83	0.001
c. I believe that the subjects studied thus far provide the information required to exercise my profession optimally	3.24	1.05	3.65	1.10	−0.41	−2.68	0.01

Starting from the three items measured, we designed an indicator assessing the overall perceived level of acquired academic knowledge, information, and practical skills throughout all academic years (short name of the *perced* indicator). The total scores ranged from a minimum of 3 (*highly disagree*) to 15 (*highly agree*). The internal consistency analysis showed good reliability ( $\alpha = 0.87$ ).

Upon applying the Pearson correlation (Table 5), we pointed out that the more students agreed that they acquired, throughout the study years, enough knowledge, information, and practical skills and that the subjects studied provided helpful information to exercise the profession, the higher reported satisfaction with life ( $r = 0.32$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). In addition, the same category reported higher levels of psychological ( $r = 0.34$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ) and financial wellbeing ( $r = 0.33$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), a greater extent of positive experiences ( $r = 0.32$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), accompanied by a lower level of negative experiences ( $r = -0.22$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), and a higher affect balance ( $r = 0.32$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). At the same time, the new indicator correlates negatively

with the extent to which students believe having been mentally impaired by the COVID-19 pandemic ( $r = -0.24$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ).

**Table 5.** Correlation between perceived and other research scales.

Scale (N = 235)	Perced Scale
(1) SWLS (5 items)	0.32 **
(2) FS (8 items)	0.34 **
(3) SPANE-P (6 items)	0.32 **
(4) SPANE-N (6 items)	-0.22 **
(5) SPANE-B (12 items)	0.32 **
(6) GSFWs (10 items)	0.33 **
(7) Mental impairment COVID-19 (1 item)	-0.24 **

\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

### 3.2.3. Work Volume for Studying in the Period of Online Learning

The forced and sudden shift towards online learning caused by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic coincided with a very brief period for students to adapt to the new context. Consequently, we assessed how the students perceived the work volume they put in for online studies compared to the onsite learning process (Table 6).

**Table 6.** Assessment of the work volume for studying in the period of online learning (percentages of the total population and separate percentages by the level of studies specific to the respondents).

How Do You Assess the Work Volume for Studying in the Period of Online Learning Compared to When the Didactic Activity Took Place Traditionally, Face-to-Face?	Total ( $n = 235$ )	BSW ( $n = 166$ )	MSW ( $n = 69$ )
It was higher. I spent more hours studying	40.9%	37.3%	49.3%
It was the same	25.5%	25.9%	24.6%
It was lower. I spent fewer hours studying	33.6%	36.7%	26.1%

Most student respondents perceived a higher work volume for online studies; they spent more hours studying than during the onsite didactic activity period (40.9%). On the other hand, a quarter of the students reported the same work volume in the two periods (25.5%), whereas a little over a third mentioned that the work volume was lower in the period with online classes (33.6%).

Upon breaking down the results by academic cycle, we point out that the master's students in the field of Social Work perceived more than the undergraduate students that the work volume for online studies was higher (49.3%—MSW; 37.3%—BSW). Conversely, BSW students assessed the time dedicated to studying as shorter during the online didactic than the MSW students who chose the same answer (36.7%—BSW; 26.1—MSW).

We did not find other significant differences regarding the work volume for online studies compared to the period when the didactic activity was held onsite, depending on the socio-demographical characteristics of the respondents. At the same time, when grouping the population studied by evaluation of the work volume (higher, the same, or lower) and upon applying the One-Way ANOVA, we found no statistically significant differences regarding the students' wellbeing on various levels (satisfaction with life (all  $ps > 0.05$ )).

### 3.2.4. Educational Support Network in the Pandemic Context

As we pointed out earlier, a significant proportion of students (over 40%) considered the online learning period highly challenging regarding the hours dedicated to the learning process; they reported higher work volume. Against such a backdrop, one of the primary objectives of this study was to identify the types of support persons used by students for educational support in the context of the pandemic situation in the year before the research.

Hence, we asked students whether they requested at least once in the past year the support of their parents, partner, or other family members, teachers, colleagues, very close friends, a psychologist, or a psychotherapist (Table 7).

**Table 7.** Support network accessed by students to cope with the pandemic educationally.

In the Past Year, to Cope with the Pandemic Educationally, Have You Used at Least Once the Support of the Following Persons?	Total ( <i>n</i> = 235)	BSW ( <i>n</i> = 166)	MSW ( <i>n</i> = 69)
One or both parents	59.6%	61.4%	55.1%
Partner	55.7%	53.6%	60.9%
Other family members	43%	39.8%	50.7%
Teachers	46.8%	40.4%	62.3%
Colleagues	66.8%	65.7%	69.6%
Very close friends	60.9%	66.3%	47.8%
Psychologist/psychotherapist	6.8%	4.8%	11.6%

At the level of the general population (*n* = 235), over two-thirds of the students in the sample mentioned that to cope with the pandemic educationally, they asked for the support of their colleagues in the year preceding the study (66.8%). In addition, 60.9% reported having received support from close friends, while 59.6% mentioned their parents. Over half of the respondents mentioned a partner's help (55.6%). Conversely, less than half of the students reported the support of teachers (46.8%), close to the support of other family members (43%). Only 6.8% of all subjects used the services of a psychologist or psychotherapist.

Master's students used the support of teachers (62.3%), partners (60.9%), other family members besides parents (50.7%), or a psychologist/psychotherapist (11.6%) more than undergraduate students. At the same time, undergraduate students used the support of parents (61.4%) and very close friends (66.3%) more than master's students. In addition, a relative educational balance was noted concerning support from colleagues (BSW—65.7%; MSW—62.3%).

In this study, we focused on the diversity of the educational support network accessed by students to cope with the pandemic, not considering the measurement of the volume estimated by persons within the network built by students in the year before the research. Hence, each *yes* answer to one of the seven items measured was ascribed to code 1, while the *no* or *not applicable* answers were ascribed to code 0. Consequently, the total scores obtained ranged between 0 (the students did not ask for the educational support of any persons) and 7 (the students used the academic support of all the persons listed).

Data analysis (Table 8) shows that only 5.1% of all students used no support, while 94.9% answered positively, mentioning at least one support person within the list.

**Table 8.** The diversity of the support network accessed by students to cope with the pandemic educationally.

The Number of Support Persons Used by Students to Cope with the Pandemic Educationally	Total ( <i>n</i> = 235)	BSW ( <i>n</i> = 166)	MSW ( <i>n</i> = 69)
No type of person/ persons	5.1%	6%	2.9%
One type	5.5%	5.4%	5.8%
Two types	17.4%	18.1%	15.9%
Three types	23%	22.3%	24.6%
Four types	24.7%	25.3%	23.2%
Five types	14.9%	15.7%	13%
Six types	8.5%	6.6%	13%
Seven types	0.9%	0.6%	1.4%

Upon correlating the statistical data, we noted that the more the educational support network extended, the better the psychological wellbeing among students ( $r = 0.15$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ).



The rest of the correlations between the diversity of the support networks and the scales measuring wellbeing were not statistically significant (all  $ps > 0.05$ ).

### 3.2.5. Educational Aspects and Elements Impaired in the Pandemic Context

Another central objective of the research was to measure the extent to which Social Work students believe a series of educational aspects had been impaired, given the COVID-19 pandemic. The question was formulated as follows: Q. *Given the COVID-19 pandemic of the last year, to what extent were the following aspects impaired?* We assessed the following educational elements: a. *Lack of direct access to courses/seminars*; b. *Lack of practicum activities and direct interaction with the beneficiaries of social services*; c. *Lack of volunteer activities*; d. *Quality of the educational activity*; e. *Time dedicated to individual study in the training field*. All the aspects listed before were measured using a five-point Likert scale from 1 (*to a very large extent*) to 5 (*to a very small extent*); hence, the high scores indicate a low impairment degree.

After the elements mentioned above have been measured considering the general population ( $n = 235$ ), we note that the most impaired aspect concerned the lack of practicum activities involving direct interactions with the beneficiaries of social services ( $M = 1.86$ ;  $SD = 1.26$ ). At the same time, many students mentioned that the COVID-19 pandemic reduced volunteer activities; the subjects missed them to a very large extent ( $M = 2.01$ ;  $SD = 1.18$ ).

Hence, the lack of practicum and volunteer activities was—from the students' perspective—the most impaired educational aspect in the year before the study began compared to the other elements analysed.

As illustrated in Table 9, upon applying the Independent-Samples  $t$ -test, we highlighted that BSW students reported the lack of practicum and volunteer activities and the quality of the didactic activity as impaired aspects more than MSW students ( $ts(233) > 2.03$ ;  $ps < 0.05$ ).

**Table 9.** Educational aspects that students reported as impaired in the pandemic context (separate percentages by academic cycle and the results of the Independent-Samples  $t$ -test).

Given the COVID-19 Pandemic of the Last Year, to What Extent Were the Following Aspects Impaired?	BSW ( $n = 166$ )		MSW ( $n = 69$ )		Independent-Samples T Test		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Mean Difference	T	<i>p</i>
Lack of direct access to courses/seminars	2.05	1.23	2.35	1.30	−0.30	−1.62	0.10
Lack of practicum activities and direct interaction with the beneficiaries of social services	1.76	1.11	2.14	1.35	−0.38	−2.24	0.02 *
Lack of volunteer activities	1.92	1.17	2.28	1.25	−0.36	−2.03	0.04 *
Quality of the educational act	1.99	1.12	2.39	1.20	−0.40	−2.45	0.01 *
Time dedicated to individual study in the training field	2.22	1.21	2.57	1.26	−0.34	−1.90	0.06

\*  $p < 0.05$ .

Subsequently, we designed a measurement indicator regarding the perceived educational impairment of students by the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic (the new indicator was briefly called *ed\_affect*). The total score for the five items ranged between 5 and 25; the values indicate low impairment of educational activities ( $M = 10.45$ ;  $SD = 5.06$ ). In addition, the internal consistency test showed good reliability of the new measurement indicator ( $\alpha = 0.89$ ).

After applying the Independent-Samples  $t$ -test, we point out that, overall, the BSW students ( $M = 9.93$ ;  $SD = 4.96$ ) reported a higher impairment of the educational aspects in the pandemic context compared to MSW students ( $M = 11.72$ ;  $SD = 5.11$ ) ( $t(233) = 2.49$ ;  $p = 0.01$ ). In addition, upon correlating the participants to the study with the score of the *ed\_affect* indicator, we pointed out that the older the respondents, the lower the perceived impairment of the educational activities ( $r = 0.31$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). In the case of the other analyses carried out by the socio-demographical data, we found no statistically significant differences (all  $ps > 0.05$ ).

The analysis of the other correlations between the *ed\_affect* indicator and the different scales used (Table 10) also showed that the students who considered the educational activities to have been less impaired by the pandemic context had higher scores of positive feelings ( $r = 0.16$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ), lower scores of negative feelings ( $r = -0.19$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), and higher affect balance ( $r = 0.21$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). Furthermore, the same students generally perceived themselves as less mentally impaired by the COVID-19 pandemic ( $r = -0.24$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). The other correlations proved not statistically significant (all  $ps > 0.05$ ).

**Table 10.** Correlation between *ed\_affect* and the other research scales.

Scale ( $n = 235$ )	<i>ed_affect</i> Scale
(1) SWLS (5 items)	0.07
(2) FS (8 items)	0.11
(3) SPANE-P (6 items)	0.16 *
(4) SPANE-N (6 items)	-0.19 **
(5) SPANE-B (12 items)	0.21 **
(6) GSFWs (10 items)	0.10
(7) Mental impairment COVID-19 (1 item)	-0.24 **

\*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

The previous results denote that the students in our study give much importance to practicum and volunteer activities, considering themselves highly impaired by their lack or limitation in the pandemic context. By getting involved in such activities, Social Work students can acquire significant experience for their professional training. This aspect is all the more critical as—through direct interactions with the beneficiaries of social services, facilitated by the practicum and volunteer programs—they can exercise the skills and competencies acquired throughout the academic years in an organised setting. At the same time, by getting involved in practicum and volunteer activities and by direct contact with field education, students can have a better insight into the challenges faced by vulnerable population groups, precisely to acquire support strategies adapted to the various categories of needs encountered. Furthermore, the involvement of students in such programs is another chance to meet professionals and see a social worker's concrete work. In other words, such implications practically represent the first resources to be used by students to design a professional network they can access post-graduation to get a job in the field.

### 3.2.6. Online Learning and Skill Acquisition to Exercise the Profession

As we highlighted above, involvement in volunteer programs and practicum activities represents a critical element of the professional training of future social workers. Without such involvement, one cannot discuss an organic development process professionally, involving skill acquisition for the optimal exercise of the profession. In this respect, we asked the following question Q. *To what extent do you believe that online didactic activity helped you acquire the skills necessary to exercise in the future the profession for which you train?* The measurement scale used ranges from 1 (*to a very large extent*) to 5 (*to a very small extent*).

As Table 11 shows, most students believed that the didactic activity carried out online did not facilitate the skill acquisition necessary for the future exercise of the profession for which they train (43.8%—a percentage comprising all the categories of answers of the type *to a small extent* and *to a very small extent*). It is worth noting that over half of the undergraduate students chose one of the two options above (50.6%), accounting for significantly more than that among the master's students who declared the same thing (27.5%).

In addition, after applying the Independent-Samples *t*-test, we concluded that BSW students ( $M = 2.90$ ;  $SD = 1.04$ ) appreciated that they acquired the skills necessary to exercise their profession ( $t(233) = 3.14$ ;  $p = 0.002$ ) throughout the online education period to a much lesser extent than MSW students ( $M = 3.40$ ;  $SD = 1.13$ ).

**Table 11.** The extent to which the students consider that online didactic activity helped them acquire skills necessary for the future exercise of the profession for which they train.

To What Extent Do You Believe That Online Didactic Activity Helped You Acquire the Skills Necessary to Exercise in the Future the Profession for Which You Train?	Total (n = 235)	BSW (n = 166)	MSW (n = 69)
To a very large extent	5.5%	3.6%	10.1%
To a great extent	22.6%	22.3%	23.2%
Nor to a great nor a small extent	28.1%	23.5%	39.1%
To a small extent	28.9%	31.9%	21.7%
To a very small extent	14.9%	18.7%	5.8%
Mean	3.25	3.40	2.90
Std. dev.	1.12	1.13	1.04

We point out that, using the Pearson correlation, we found that the less the students believe that the online activity supported their skill acquisition process necessary to exercise their profession in the future, the lower reported psychological wellbeing ( $r = -0.13$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ). In addition, they are less likely to believe that all the knowledge, practical skills, and information acquired during the academic studies, including in the onsite period (in the *perced* indicator), could help them exercise their profession optimally ( $r = -0.13$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ).

#### 4. Discussions

##### 4.1. Educational Aspects and Elements Impaired in the Pandemic Context

The closure of universities due to the establishment of a state of emergency has brought the necessity of proposing alternatives to the traditional learning system. However, this has been relatively difficult to manage because, in Romania, social work curricula stipulate that practical skills training needs to be carried out through a specific number of hours of practice spent in social work institutions. As a result, online learning becomes not just an option but a necessary solution to mitigate the risk of suspending the academic year and the potential challenges faced by final year students who may be unable to complete their studies. Students have accepted online education solely as a compromise in response to the prevailing epidemiological situation [37].

Upon analysing the study's results overall, we conclude, which is far from surprising, that the Social Work students perceived the lack of face-to-face interactions with colleagues or teachers and the beneficiaries of social services whom they could meet within the practicum activities more acutely. Beyond any doubt, face-to-face interactions represent an essential part of the learning process in social work education, but they are inherently absent from online classes. In this context, besides the worries related to the level of technological/digital skill, the access to the devices necessary to attend online courses, and the lack of or poor Internet connection, the significant challenges were determined precisely by the possibility of interacting, communicating in another way besides technological means. Even under such circumstances, we noted a paradox mentioned by respondents: due to the lack of direct, face-to-face interactions, most students chose to turn off their cameras during lectures or seminars (when the regulations allowed them), which suppressed all forms of nonverbal communication, with negative consequences on understanding the information conveyed by teachers. In addition, Floyd [38] argues that most human communication is nonverbal; studies report that 65–70% of the time allotted to communication accounts for nonverbal one [39].

On the other hand, online didactic activities involve minimal digital skills by teachers and students alike, allowing them to use different learning platforms. In the lack of such skills, we can identify effects that impair the academic performance of students (e.g., having to pay tuition after benefitting from state-subsidised education or losing the scholarship) and the teachers' capacity to carry out the courses easily. Our results show that Social

Work students noticed a greater focus on individual study to the detriment of synchronous interaction specific to the teaching-learning process. Hence, as Kara [40] points out, digital skills among students and teachers determine their implication and motivation in online, offline, or mixed learning.

Within our study, students perceived a substantial increase in the work volume put in to study online, an effort considered even more consistent than during the onsite learning period. We notice compensation for the lack of face-to-face interaction/direct communication; online interactions among students and between students and teachers increased considerably. It also determined an increase in the work volume, which affected the balance between professional and private life; our findings agree with the elements studied by Yaseen et al. [41].

Other studies [42] focus on different challenges of online education influencing the quality and efficiency of the didactic process: uncertainty regarding the unfolding of assessment throughout and at the end of the semester and uncertainty concerning knowledge acquisition by students. In the case of our study, we pointed out that Social Work students manifested uncertainty regarding the quantity and quality of information and skills acquired, but also high levels of uncertainty concerning the assessment methods and their capacity to pass the exams from the perspective of knowledge acquired and technical issues faced during assessments.

Many students are “digital natives”, meaning the transition to online learning could have been less challenging. Consequently, some students can enjoy the pressure of school digitisation generated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the effects of isolation can be mitigated by using social media because research has shown that most young people use social media to develop their identities and communicate with colleagues [43]. However, the respondents in our study reported difficulties caused by the lack of digital skills.

Over time, online activity forced the students to assume multiple learning roles concomitantly: to cooperate with colleagues and teachers through online learning platforms, to coordinate their learning tasks for a maximum learning effect, to communicate with colleagues and teachers to express and share opinions, and to act as team leaders for learning assignments. They also had to search for information, solutions, and other sources necessary before posting them on the learning platforms to discuss them with their colleagues, download or upload learning resources independently, and take responsibility for their work [44]. In our study, students encompassed all the aspects above into various strategies of adjustment to the new educational context.

Yu [44] found several downsides to online learning, such as lack of enthusiasm, lack of credibility of graduation diplomas/certificates obtained online, poor technical infrastructure, lack of practicum activities in the online education, lower interaction levels, less knowledge acquired, and lack of interest for online education. Within our study, we identified students’ opinions expressing fears that society would think less of their online learning system.

Online learning requires more responsibility and self-discipline from students. There are three significant challenges for students during online learning: aspects related to the management/organisation of education programs, factors associated with the educational activities, and aspects related to technical infrastructure [9]. These challenges can ultimately lead to mental health issues, thus affecting the success of online learning [45]. In our research, the factors influencing the online educational process compared to the onsite version are individual, relational, related to workspace organisation and occupational health, and technical.

The efficiency of online learning is influenced by several determining factors: students’ age, sex, area of residence, Internet connectivity, family issues, perceived importance of teachers in the online learning process, and the eLearning Framework of universities [46]; they are vital predictors of online education acceptance by students [47]. Students’ involvement improves satisfaction, increases learning motivation, reduces feelings of isolation, and improves online learning performance [47].

Students' dissatisfaction with the online courses suggests the lack of attractivity and interactivity of these courses and schedule overloading in particular. The role of institutions is essential given that students' capacity to study online depends on the efficiency of universities in implementing the online system.

The students' training and willingness to engage in online learning contribute to their satisfaction [48]. However, most students were not ready to accept the sudden change in the learning standard.

Our study, similar to other research suggested [30], also highlights the positive aspects of online education, particularly for students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, those in the social protection system, students with family responsibilities, or those living in remote areas far from the university campus. For these students, access to social work education was much easier both in terms of managing learning tasks, time management, and financial considerations.

#### *4.2. Aspects Regarding the Involvement in Practicum and Volunteer Activities*

According to the findings of our study, subjects considered the lack of practicum and volunteer activities as the most impaired educational elements against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic. From the students' perspective, the impaired aspects can negatively affect their professional path. In this respect, we mention that studies highlight the worries of students regarding their future professional careers [25]. Lack of involvement in practicum and volunteer activities specific and necessary to access the labour market [49,50] influenced the students' perspectives concerning their academic path [51,52] and graduation [53,54].

In addition, even without the additional pressures caused by COVID-19, the research conducted before the pandemic period admitted that Social Work students faced significant challenges in balancing practicum responsibilities and engagements related to studies, work, and family in ways that had a negative impact on learning [55,56]. All these factors intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic, which also reflects in our study. Furthermore, when assessing the knowledge acquired throughout the academic years for the optimal exercise of the profession, students also considered the pre-pandemic period. Most believe that the subjects studied, skill acquisition practice, and knowledge acquisition had an optimal level. However, the pandemic period affected practical activities necessary for professional training. Against this background, students ended up less involved and more distracted by the environment during online classes [57], to which we added the respondents' need for practical activities.

For the Social Work curriculums focusing on knowledge (theory) and skill development (practical orientation), restricted access to the social institutions where students carried out practicum and/or volunteer activities represented a challenge. For the Social Work students, skills of direct interaction with the beneficiaries were significantly impaired, thus causing severe worries regarding their medium-term and long-term training.

Hence, according to the study participants, practicum was absent in the efficacy of online learning. Nothing can replace direct interaction with a beneficiary because clinical experience and human interaction are crucial for practice in the healthcare field [58].

This is closely connected with "field education"—an essential component for the training of future professionals in Social Work, which is "the signature pedagogy for social work" [59]. Throughout the periods of restricted and limited practicum activities by SW students, field education suffered a lot, as reported by many studies conducted in the last two years [60–64]. The results of our study align with the elements identified in such research worldwide: the lack of direct interactions with the beneficiaries of social services and the restriction of practicum and volunteer activities affected the students significantly. However, we mentioned that these studies consider that the pandemic situation determined a revisitation of how we can adapt field education to the online setting even after overcoming similar crises.

As shown in our analysis, students are fully aware of how important it is to get involved in practicum and volunteer activities, given that their university training as future Social Work professionals focuses on field education besides acquiring theoretical information and knowledge. In addition, students were aware that online activities were inferior to the traditional ones in terms of laboratory or practical activities, direct student–teacher interaction, knowledge acquisition, and assessment; all these aspects have been pointed out in other studies, too [3]. Hence, students reported that online didactic activity helped them, to a small extent, acquire the skills necessary for the future exercise of the profession for which they train.

In the Romanian context, during the pandemic waves of 2020–2022, the practicum activities were restricted to a maximum of 30% of all specialised practicum activities. In other international situations, things unfolded differently in this respect (e.g., in Australia). In response to a request by the Australian Council of Heads of Schools of Social Work (ACHSSW), the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) reviewed its curriculum parameters within the Social Work programs during the global pandemic. AASW altered the quality standards in the field, particularly regarding the placement hours, which were “not applicable” in “normal times”: reducing mandatory placement hours, limiting the types of activities, as well as reducing supervision requirements [65]. Such modifications are essential to minimise students’ shortcomings during the pandemic [60]. In Romania, though, such measures were significantly more restrictive.

#### *4.3. Educational Support Networks*

According to our findings, most students felt the need to use support persons for the educational level during the pandemic. They built a diversified support network, mainly consisting of colleagues, close friends, and family. In quite a few cases, teachers were mentioned, particularly by master’s students, as support persons. However, it is also worth noting that respondents generally did not rank teachers at the top of their support persons. Other studies have pointed it out, too, reporting that the students felt more disconnected from instructors than teachers would believe [66]. A potential adverse effect of this aspect is that the students belonging to the academic community were significantly shaken by the shift to the online setting and the limitation of face-to-face interactions [66].

Our findings agree with other studies also concerning the fact that the role of family members, colleagues, and support groups from the university influences academic results, too [67]. Recently, just over two decades ago, there was a focus on peer-to-peer support to improve understanding of course materials and clarify complex concepts [68]. It was also highlighted that an individual’s access to informational resources could be improved by building relationships and acquiring social capital by building strategic connections and relationships outside their immediate networks [69]. This aspect became even more stringent during the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to the quantitative analysis, the diversity of the support network determines an increase in psychological wellbeing. Other studies indicated that lacking social networks was associated with an impaired mental state [18,70].

The pandemic itself probably increased stress, isolation, and uncertainty for students and teachers. Additionally, whereas increased stress usually would lead to lower performances, the pandemic may have provided more time for students to dedicate to classes in the lack of extracurricular activities, social commitments, and any age-specific commitments [4].

#### *4.4. Impairment of Students’ Wellbeing in the Pandemic Context*

Data analysis has shown that most students perceived a mental impairment due to the situation caused by the evolution of the COVID-19 pandemic. The fear of a new virus, social distancing, job loss, and the lack of information and knowledge on the pandemic created and exacerbated feelings of uncertainty, depression, and anxiety [71,72]. In addition, our results indicate a strong correlation between the high level of mental impairment caused

by the COVID-19 pandemic and the decreased satisfaction with life and psychological, emotional, and financial wellbeing—all accompanied by an intensification of negative experiences. Though we did not measure the level of anxiety in the quantitative study, it became apparent in the analysis of the focus groups (i.e., students listed examples of situations accompanied by states of anxiety). A moderate to high anxiety level during the COVID-19 pandemic was associated with general somatic symptoms, particularly fatigue and gastrointestinal signs, already discussed in similar studies [26]. Our investigation continues the empirical endeavour elaborated by Butnaru et al. [73], showing that students experienced various situations and feelings affecting their wellbeing on multiple levels. Youth wellbeing was affected by the fear of contagion, but perhaps even more by the unexpected isolation and the shift to online learning—topics recently discussed in focus group interviews.

Among students' primary causes of anxiety, we mention the fear of contagion for themselves and their loved ones, economic struggles in the family, and educational disturbances [23]. A particularity of the Romanian situation is that students were especially worried by the potential health issues of the loved ones working abroad (who could not return home). This particularity is more cultural: in Romania, a household often comprises three generations of the same family (children, parents, and grandparents).

Our findings also show that students' positive experiences correlate with lower mental impairment levels during the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, as suggested by other research studies, positive emotions and concerns regarding the future positively impacted students' educational involvement through resilience [74]. Hence, we can consider resilience a potentially protective factor against the social and academic challenges generated by COVID-19. Consequently, the pandemic could be seen as a real opportunity for a curricular change in Social Work. In a recent study, Jordan [75] notes that the syllabus for the speciality of Social Work should comprise resilience courses to train resilient people and practitioners considering the situations/problems and individuals/groups with which they will work. The analysis of the focus group interviews shows that students faced challenging situations that determined them to activate their adaptation mechanisms. Before the pandemic outbreak, the British Association of Social Work [76] stated that—by the end of their training—Social Work students should be able to manage and promote their safety, health, wellbeing, self-care, and emotional resilience. As students underscored, they woke up to this situation and had to accept it due to the circumstances and manage the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### *4.5. Limitations of the Study*

Our study has a number of limitations. Firstly, it did not include instructors/teachers in the sample. Initially, our aim was to uncover the opinions of students about their educational experiences during the pandemic. However, we intend to expand the study to include instructors/teachers and investigate the advantages and disadvantages they have identified related to online learning. Secondly, the research findings cannot be extended to the general population of Social Work students, despite being conducted at one of Romania's major universities. Nonetheless, our aim is to develop a research design that focuses on a representative sample of Social Work students from all the leading university centres in the country.

### **5. Conclusions**

Our study revealed that, besides the disadvantages, online learning has also brought various benefits in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, the flexibility of time and location for studying, the absence of daily commutes between home and university, and the ability to select the optimal study and working hours have enabled students to balance their academic responsibilities and family obligations. This has been particularly helpful in situations where students needed to take care of sick family members (due to illness) or younger siblings. Additionally, online learning has allowed students to achieve

a healthy work–life balance, meet their commitments to both university and family, and even rediscover and explore their hobbies.

The sampled students emphasized several key issues with the organization of online education, including uncertainties surrounding the acquisition of skills and knowledge, unclear or excessive tasks and requirements from teachers (especially during the lockdown period), concerns about the evaluation methods used, and limited feedback from teachers. Addressing these issues could lead to the development of a more effective online education system in the future, as well as the implementation of peer support programs, mentoring, and counselling services by the university to improve academic performance, facilitate student integration into the academic setting, and enhance student wellbeing. Engaging with peers, participating in working groups or workshops, and interacting with instructors through mentoring activities can help fill students' knowledge gaps.

Essential ingredients for effective online learning include the interaction between instructors and students, adapted study materials, and emotional and social support. Additionally, online examinations can lead to improved student achievement when appropriately supervised. Positive perceptions of online learning, mutual interactions, timely feedback from teachers, and strong self-organizational skills can contribute to academic success and increase students' preference for this learning style.

As our analysed data suggests, the sampled students relied mainly on the support of their peers to cope with the educational challenges brought about by the pandemic. As a proposed future development, we believe that the academic should implement various projects aimed at building and consolidating a "peer-to-peer learning" ecosystem. Such an ecosystem would bring value and meaning to the overall learning experience by promoting the idea of a collaborative working community where teachers and students are part of the educational process. Additionally, "peer-to-peer learning" could facilitate the collaborative learning process within an organized framework based on discussions and feedback between the main academic stakeholders.

Peer support and support networks are important factors for the integration and acceptance of students in academic institutions, which can lead to academic success. By developing strong networks both on and off-campus (e.g., with teachers/instructors, or mentors), students can access the necessary resources for their academic success.

We believe that the development and integration of personal resilience could be a fundamental part of the social work curriculum. Specifically, the curriculum should provide strategies and content to equip undergraduate students with the requisite skills to thrive as future social work practitioners. Given the complex challenges inherent in social work practice, it is essential to cultivate emotional resilience, proficient boundary-setting, self-assurance, and continuous positive social interaction.

A future proposal regarding social work education is to provide graduates with support and confidence so that they can apply the knowledge acquired in demanding social work practice.

Considering that students' wellbeing is strongly linked with emotional resilience and a healthy lifestyle, it is important for academic institutions to take these factors into account, allowing students to make informed choices regarding their lifestyle and recognizing the significance of such choices for their overall wellbeing. Consequently, additional research is necessary to determine the effectiveness of innovative pedagogical approaches in promoting students' wellbeing and enhancing the teaching-learning process.

In conclusion, we emphasized that students have developed in the pandemic context various needs and expectations from the academic setting in addition to the quality of the information received during courses. Our research indicates that several factors are pivotal to promoting the wellbeing of Social Work students. In a post-pandemic context, universities should consider providing continuous feedback, integrating students' opinions and recommendations within university policies, offering material support, counselling, and technical support, facilitating access to high-quality informational resources, and organizing peer-to-peer mentoring programs and activities in the future.



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