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University Mentoring Programs during the Pandemic: Case Study of Hungarian Roma University Students

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Abstract: To improve the chances of Roma students succeeding in higher education, several initiatives have been established in recent decades, such as the Roma szakkollégium network (Roma Special Colleges), which joins various institutions around Hungary with the goal of helping Roma youth in higher education. This study inquiries into Roma university students and their support network during the pandemic through the work of Roma Special Colleges, considering that during the pandemic, it was the marginalized and vulnerable groups, such as the Roma, who disproportionally experienced challenges that affected their education. The aim of this study is to examine how Roma Special Colleges through their mentoring programs (1) were able to identify the specific needs of Roma university students during the pandemic; and (2) adapted their work to better assist Roma students during remote education. These findings, generated during a series of interviews with directors and program organizers of Roma Special Colleges, point out the importance of the personalized assistance that mentors in Roma colleges were able to provide, not only supplying needed IT tools and promoting academic success, but also fostering wellbeing, a sense of belonging and positive self-esteem among Roma students.

Keywords: Roma; special colleges; pandemic; higher education

1. Introduction

According to a recent survey of ten European countries, "71% of Roma aged between 18 and 24 leave the education system early (before reaching upper secondary level) and are not in further education or training" (FRA 2022, p. 38). This means that among Roma, attending higher education is rare. In Hungary, the share of Roma students among the overall student population in higher education institutions is disproportionately low. According to the latest 2011 census, only 1.2% of Roma completed higher education, compared to the 17% of non-Roma Hungarians (Híves 2014). This gap is the result of the complex socioeconomic conditions and structural discrimination that Roma face in education and beyond, which make Roma the most vulnerable segment of society in all European countries. Discrimination in education can take various forms, such as enrolling Roma children in "special schools" or educating them in separate classrooms. There is a consensus among academics and policy makers that ethnic segregation affects all levels of education, resulting in a significant gap between Roma and non-Roma children's access to education (e.g., FRA 2014).

On the one hand, many studies point out that social marginalization and segregation are sources of academic underachievement among Roma (e.g., Rostas and Kostka 2014; UNICEF 2011). On the other hand, the notion of identity crisis or crisis of belonging is also discussed among scholars, suggesting that university education may alienate young Roma from their community (e.g., Friedman and Garaz 2013). While the latter is stubbornly promoted by outlets such as mass media, some scholars have also inquired into this claim

(Jancsák 2015, p. 126). For example, in the context of Spain, research showed that education among Roma may indeed be seen as "apayamiento"—or "peer pressure within the Roma community, stating that the behaviour of upwardly mobile persons is not in line with the attitude expected from Roma" (Plainer 2022, p. 84)—by the extended family (Padilla-Carmona et al. 2017). A similar claim was also proposed by Brüggemann (2014), who found that educated Roma are accused of "not being Roma." In the meantime, other recent studies covering various countries in Europe demonstrated through surveys and field research that Roma do indeed support the education of their children, and that fears of discrimination may be responsible for antagonism towards educational institutions, rather than towards education per se (e.g., Dunajeva 2021; Hellgren and Gabrielli 2021).

There has been growing attention to the low participation of Roma in higher education amongst European countries, with some estimates as low as 1% (Morley et al. 2020). An aptly titled report alluding to the low numbers of Roma in higher education institutions, "One in One Hundred", inquires into factors that contribute to the successful completion of higher education of Roma in Serbia, and concludes that among other factors, robust teacher, peer, and financial support systems are key (Bhabha et al. 2018). Many studies have inquired into the specific barriers that hinder the opportunities of Roma to participate in higher education, pointing out that discrimination and lack of belonging are detrimental to the educational success of Roma students, for example in Spain (Flecha et al. 2022). Promoting access to higher education among Roma is imperative to guaranteeing equal opportunities, as well as to increasing the number of Roma 'knowledge producers' in order to include Roma voices in various debates ranging from academia to policy (Roberts 2020).

There is a general consensus that educational equality is one of the key policy goals, and mentoring programs are among the most successful measures in assisting vulnerable students to achieve better academic results by promoting the socio-emotional, cognitive and identity development of disadvantaged students (DuBois et al. 2011; Óhidy et al. 2020, cited in Boros et al. 2021). To improve the academic success of Roma students in higher education, several such initiatives and institutions have been established in recent decades in Hungary, such as the Roma szakkollégium network. This network is sometimes referred to as the Roma Student College, Roma Special College or Roma College of Advanced Studies (Roma colleges hereafter). Undoubtedly, the pandemic was an unprecedented challenge for mentoring programs in continuing their mission to support Roma students, who were more at risk of increased vulnerability at this time, similarly to other marginalized communities (OECD 2020).

This study uniquely inquires into such programs and pursues the following research question: How were Roma colleges able to meet the needs of Roma students during the pandemic to facilitate their studies at higher education institutions? To that end, the article begins with a literature review, situating the current inquiry into a broader context of researching Roma in higher education in Europe and in Hungary specifically. Next, the article presents the forms of data collection and analysis, and moves on to presenting the results of the data collection. Here, the work of Roma colleges is reviewed before and during the pandemic. The discussion section interprets the meaning of the results and highlights the importance of solidarity and trust in supporting vulnerable Roma university students, before the study concludes in the final section.

2. Roma in Higher Education, and Case Study of Hungary's Roma Colleges

Despite the low number of Roma in higher education across all European countries, several scholars have inquired into the question of Roma participation in higher education, as this is an important social justice issue. For example, studies conducted in Spain suggest that the intersectionality of multiple factors—discrimination, minority status, low socioeconomic background and being first-generation university students—constitutes barriers that Roma students face in higher education (Flecha et al. 2022). In a similar vein, Hinton-Smith et al. (2018) highlight that structural disadvantage and social exclusion are responsible for the underrepresentation of Roma students in higher education.

In addition, Hinton-Smith and Padilla-Carmona found that higher education institutions in Eastern and Central Europe, as well as in Spain, position Roma students "as not belonging", concluding that "universities must work actively to develop cultures in which Roma students are not only numerically present, but genuinely entitled" (Hinton-Smith and Padilla-Carmona 2021, p. 465). A similar conclusion was reached by Danvers and Hinton-Smith (2022) based on the case of Gypsy, Roma and Travellers in the United Kingdom: universities must engage in contextually-sensitive outreach, but also commit to decolonial practices, in order to be meaningfully inclusive.

When analyzing the academic success of Greek Roma in higher education, Gkofa (2022) found that community factors had a central role: peer groups and role models, as well as organized groups and volunteer organizations that provide academic and emotional support to underprivileged Roma students, were critical in facilitating academic progression. In the context of Hungary, Durst and Bereményi (2021) identified the creation of and participation in ethnic associations and pro-Roma support programs as one of the key enablers of upward educational mobility among Roma. In other words, the role of institutional support networks outside of formal higher education in promoting academic success among Roma university students merits further exploration, which is the aim of this article. In general, despite the growing body of scholarly work about Roma in higher education, this topic has received scarce attention and requires further exploration (Flecha et al. 2022).

The network of Roma colleges consists of various institutions around the country (see Table 1 below), and has a shared mission of contributing to the success of Roma in higher education. Additionally, what makes it a unique endeavor is the empowerment aspect: by supporting Roma students in their higher education studies, Roma colleges also promote a positive Roma identity, a sense of social responsibility and resilience among Roma. Moreover, Roma colleges endorse tolerance and diversity, and promote values of solidarity. Robust findings also point out that support and mentoring programs indeed play a significant role, not only in academic achievement, but also in the upward mobility of first-generation Roma professionals (e.g., Boros et al. 2021).

Table 1. List of Roma colleges in Hungary.

City	Name of Institution
Pécs	Evangelical Roma Student College of Pécs
Pécs	Wlislocki Henrik Roma Student College at the University of Pécs
Szeged	Christian Roma Student College of Szeged
Budapest	Jesuit Roma College
Budapest	Budapest Reformed Roma College
Budapest	Romaversitas
Nyíregyháza	Evangelical Roma College
Miskolc	Greek Catholic Roma College of Miskolc
Debrecen	István Wáli Reformed Roma College
Debrecen	Szent Miklós Greek Catholic Roma College
Eger	Roma College of Eger
Hajdúböszörmény	Balázs Lappai Roma College
Kaposvár	Kaposvár University Roma College

The network of Roma colleges (roma szakkollégiumi hálózat) was established by the Act CCIV of 2011 on National Higher Education, which states that in order to nurture talents and help disadvantaged students participate in higher education, "colleges for advanced studies (szakkollégium) or Roma colleges for advanced studies (roma szakkollégium)" may be established to "offer mentoring schemes for disadvantaged students in order to help them fully develop their talents" (National Higher Education Act 2011). Roma colleges are maintained either by universities or by churches. Each Roma college in general supports 20–50 students yearly, with a total of about 300 university students enrolled nationwide (Hungarian Government 2017; Híves 2019). Officially, enrolled students must

be of disadvantaged background, of whom at least 60% have to be Roma, based on self-identification (Hungarian Government 2017).

The network of Christian Roma colleges [Keresztény Roma Szakkollégiumi hálózat] was established in 2011 and currently comprises five institutions: Jesuit Roma College, Hungarian Evangelical Roma College, Greek Catholic Roma College of Miskolc, István Wáli Reformed Roma College, and the Christian Roma College of Szeged. Student membership is conditional neither on religious affiliation nor ethnicity; rather, most colleges, regardless of their religious affiliation, aim to help deprived students succeed in their university studies. Given the relatively small enrollment, colleges strive to provide individual academic assistance for each student, usually in the form of tutorship, mentorship, and educational courses, in addition to scholarships.

Hungarian universities do not keep ethnicity-based statistics of their enrolled students, nevertheless, the growing number of Roma colleges and their beneficiaries show an improving trend of Roma enrolling at higher education institutions in Hungary (Csókas 2020). The number of Roma university students was estimated to have doubled since 2010, as reported during the 2020 conference of the Network of Catholic Roma Colleges (Csókas 2021). The majority of Roma students are first generation college students from deprived households. Considering the growing number of vulnerable students in Hungarian universities, their experience deserves increased attention from both academic and policy makers, especially in the context of the pandemic.

Indeed, in the spring of 2020, when educational institutions shut their doors across Europe, the most marginalized and vulnerable groups, such as the Roma, were hit the hardest. In terms of education, Roma also experienced an unequal burden as online education only "heightened educational disadvantages among the most vulnerable children" (Fejes and Szűcs 2021, p. 61). In Hungary, considerable attention was paid to Roma students at the levels of primary and secondary education, but rarely, if at all, was attention paid to Roma university students and their experience with online education. Even with the recognition of additional challenges to resuming their education during the pandemic, there was little inquiry into the details of such challenges among vulnerable students, and even less understanding of how obstacles to education were mitigated (Ibid.).

With this study, I aim to address this gap. Rather than presenting the work of Roma colleges, a topic that has already been covered by multiple researchers (e.g., Györbíró et al. 2015; Jancsák 2015; Trendl and Varga 2018), the goal of this study is to examine how Roma colleges and mentoring programs (1) identified the specific needs of Roma university students during online education; and (2) adapted their work to meet the new challenges of Roma students in the midst of higher education institutions discontinuing face-to-face education and switching to online education. To that end, I will first provide a short overview of Roma colleges and mentoring programs in Hungary, and then present my findings generated from a series of interviews with directors and program organizers of Roma colleges. The findings of this paper are relevant for understanding support mechanisms of vulnerable groups in higher education during times of crises.

3. Materials and Methods

For this study, I first analyzed secondary literature regarding Roma colleges and reviewed relevant websites, with a special interest in the innovative approaches taken at Roma colleges during and since the pandemic (March 2020). During this research, I was particularly attentive to how Roma colleges were reporting on their students' situation during COVID-19, what events and strategies they offered to their students to better mitigate the hardships of accessing and succeeding in their education, and how various programs were adapted at this time. To complement the secondary literature, I conducted semi-structured interviews in 2021 with representatives of Roma colleges and scholars—these interviews were the primary source of data for this study. All interviews were conducted online and lasted approximately one hour. Respondents, who in some cases were directors, in others program organizers or academic mentors, were informed about

the research project and the secure storage of anonymized data. In total, eight interviews were conducted, two with academic representatives (Interview No. 6 and 7) and six with institutional representatives of Roma colleges (Interview No. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 8). All interviews were conducted in Hungarian and translated by the author. Ethical approval was obtained from the Centre for Social Sciences (1-FOIG/26-2/2023). All interviewees were assured of anonymity and of their right to withdraw from the study. There was no risk, discomfort or research benefit for any research participant.

The locations or religious affiliations of Roma colleges, as well as the interviewees' titles, are omitted from the table for reasons of anonymity. In addition, I identified two scholars of Roma education who have conducted fieldwork with Roma youth and had expertise regarding the challenges that Roma faced during the pandemic. The majority of interviewees were "program organizers" responsible for arranging academic, mentoring and liaising activities at the colleges. They were "key informants" for the study, and were able to give the most nuanced insights into the question under investigation, reflecting on both, institutional and personal struggles and success stories. For analyzing the interviews, I used thematic analysis, which is particularly apt for scrutinizing transcripts from in-depth interviews, allowing for close analysis of qualitative data in order to identify common themes. I primarily relied on the approach of thematic analysis as discussed by Braun and Clarke (2006).

When analyzing the interviews, I began with generating codes in order to establish common themes. Interviews were color coded corresponding to the following codes: motivation, empowerment, mental support, educational support, family struggles, poverty, discrimination, online communication, and trust. Based on these codes, I constructed common themes to be further analyzed in the article. These themes were (1) community and sense of belonging, which was consistently referenced in discussions about motivation, empowerment and mental support, as well as development of personal relationships; (2) flexibility, as an important element of Roma colleges' ability to provide educational and mental support during the pandemic; and (3) sensitivity, which was key in recognizing the challenges related to family struggles and poverty, as well as earning Roma students' trust.

Given the relatively low number of interviews, this study is explorative and the first of its kind. An evident limitation of the study is that only representatives of Roma colleges were interviewed, without firsthand data collected from Roma students themselves. This limitation was in part offset by frequent referencing of students' opinions during the interviews. Nevertheless, a future study may be able to fill this gap. Indeed, a closer look at how Roma university students experienced the sudden transition to online education may be indicative of a larger trend in how vulnerable or marginalized groups across Europe may face unique challenges in continuing higher education in the context of the pandemic or other crises. This study then explores best institutional practices through the work of mentoring programs—a form of non-formal education—that provided support to Roma students throughout the pandemic, and may serve as guidance to developing future mentoring programs for vulnerable university students.

In this study I mainly reference the first and second wave of the pandemic, covering the following periods: the first wave lasted between March 2020 and June 2020 and, although educational institutions had prepared for a traditional, face-to-face school year, during the second wave schools closed in November 2020, and higher education continued online until the end of the academic year (May 2021). During the subsequent academic year that began in September of 2021, face-to-face classes were conducted, although some institutions implemented their own restrictions. From 7 March 2022, the Hungarian government ended all restrictions related to coronavirus (Decree no. 77/2022), and accordingly, higher education institutions also lifted any restrictions implemented due to the pandemic (Hungarian Government 2022).

4. Results: The Work of Roma Colleges before and during the Pandemic

4.1. Education and Empowerment as Goals of Roma Colleges in Hungary before the Pandemic

Most interviewed colleges had approximately 30 students enrolled, of whom an estimated 70–80% self-identified as Roma, the rest were non-Roma students, usually also having deprived family backgrounds. As reported by most of the interviewed representatives of Roma colleges, their institutions have enjoyed wider popularity in the recent years, with more students applying than they can accept. In some institutions, for example, an admission strategy was developed that prioritizes first year students in order to provide a foundation for a "good start at university", while another institution reported to admit a few non-Roma students to increase the diversity of their cohorts (Interviews No. 3 and 4).

Usually, educational content can be broadly grouped into cultural/identity topics, spiritual teaching, and general knowledge (Jancsák 2015, p. 19). Considering the example of the Christian Roma College of Szeged, in their mission statement the College describes "assistance to mature and responsible Christian Gypsy-Hungarian intellectuals" as their primary goal, which they achieve through a professional program that rests on four modules: culture, spirituality, social knowledge, and identity (SzKRSz 2021a). Furthermore, the institutional goals of the Christian Roma College of Szeged also illustrate well the dual mission of education and empowerment:

> We intend to support those young people who wish to gain high results in their profession and–being aware of social problems–would help the rising of the Roma population and promote Roma—non-Roma dialogue. . . . Scholarship is provided to all students of the college according to their results. . . . Mentors, tutors are in charge of supporting students . . . with the help of personal encouragement to achieve different goals. . . . The Roma youth have even less opportunities to get experiences abroad, because [they have no supporting background], and they have low self-esteem. We would like to create a supporting environment for the students. (SzKRSz 2021a)

Not all colleges have a spiritual component, especially if they are not affiliated with any religious institution. In the latter category, Romaversitas, for example, offers classes in foreign languages and computer science, and has expanded its target group from Roma university students to include high school students (Dinók 2017). However, in the case of Roma colleges with religious affiliation, there are plenty of applied, non-spiritual classes. For example, the Christian Roma College of Szeged offers courses about the institutions of the European Union, computer science, economics, as well as grant writing skills (Jancsák 2015, p. 21). The director of the Christian Roma College of Szeged highlighted in a published interview that the College not only supports the academic success of their students, but also contributes to that with values that are usually missing from higher education—namely, community-building aspects, solidarity, and individualized attention (Jancsák 2015, pp. 20–21). These are important tools that help with Roma youth empowerment in addition to promoting their academic path.

Mathias Corvinus Collegium, a private educational institution established in 1996, has recently began a two-year Roma Talent Program, which specifically prepares "talented Roma students seeking to complete their Bachelors, Master's, or Doctorates (PhD) at a foreign university", and thus emphasizes foreign language training, literacy development, application writing and interview skills (MCC 2021). During community events, they discuss topics deemed useful for study abroad students, such as maintaining long-distance relationships, living abroad and alike. Collectively, these Roma colleges and talent programs strongly encourage Roma students to engage in scholarship, as well as participate in civil society initiatives and contribute to their society with their time, skills and knowledge, not only after graduation, but also through their university years.

According to a study that relied on a set of pre-pandemic interviews with Roma students from three Roma colleges, college membership greatly contributed to Roma students' success in their university studies (Györbíró et al. 2015). The forms of support that students highlighted were primarily academic development (additional courses, tutoring),

language skills, access to textbooks available in the college libraries, dormitories, and scholarships, which significantly alleviated the financial burden of higher education for Roma students, many of whom come from deprived families (Ibid., pp. 125–6). Importantly, among the most beneficial services, students rated access to computers and internet as the second most significant factor that helped with their university education. According to the study, several students claimed that they would have dropped out from their higher education, if not for the support of the college. Similar testimonies were also shared with me during interviews.

We can conclude that the Roma college and mentoring programs before COVID-19 on the one hand supported Roma university students with their formal studies, and on the other hand aimed at supplementing their knowledge with additional skills through non-formal learning, especially focusing on various practical and theoretical skills to help young Roma students form a strong, positive identity and succeed in their future careers. Besides nurturing Roma students' talents, these programs provided necessary assistance in terms of access to computers and textbooks. Based on the interviews conducted for this study, during the pandemic, another aspect of support has become critical: strong social network and solidarity bonds.

4.2. Mitigating Challenges as Goals of Roma Colleges in Hungary during the Pandemic

All interviewed Roma colleges attested to the difficulties that the pandemic has meant for their work and their Roma students' academic pursuits, especially during the first wave of the pandemic. As expected, the colleges were better prepared during the second wave and were able to anticipate some of the challenges. Considering that most, if not all, students of Roma colleges come from deep poverty, for them "the most traumatic experience was to move home" (Interview No. 1) and some students even "panicked about the prospect of having to go back home" (Interview No. 3). The following account of one student is illustrative:

> We had one student who moved [back home] to a poor rural area during the pandemic. The student was very extroverted before, and in this rural area felt very alone and depressed. His two worlds–home environment and university life–were mutually exclusive (összeegyeztethetetlen). We offered psychological support to him, which we had to provide online. We also continued providing educational support. . . . What was key is the solidarity and the network that everyone could rely on, it was really critical for this student as well. (Interview No. 1)

Moreover, students were complaining about a lack of space to study, about home chores, such as cutting firewood, and childcare duties, looking after younger siblings, that took up most of their time. "They had to switch roles", explained an institutional representative, "from being university students to re-entering a situation they consciously tried to escape by enrolling in a university" (Interview No. 1). This situation was referred to as "schizoid" by another interviewee, explaining that "students had to take a giant leap back from being intellectuals-in-training back to their deprived family environment, where parents often had no idea about higher education" (Interview No. 4). Indeed, most institutions suggested that the overwhelming majority of their students are first generation university students, and their studies have often led to conflicts with family members.

Furthermore, since most Roma students come from poor rural areas to study in cities, they lack a sense of belonging and community, making Roma colleges even more important in providing a sense of belonging (Interview No. 8). Within their first year, Roma students are able to adjust to urban life and academic requirements, becoming an integral member of their community as Roma college students; the institution thus gives these students a new identity and a sense of rootedness. All of this was disrupted with online education, as several Roma college representatives lamented, and Roma students were in a "state of confusion" (Interview No. 1).

An observation shared by an academic scholar regarding parents of Roma students is worth considering: based on the fieldwork observations of the scholar, students who

were forced to study from home during the pandemic may have in fact sensitized their parents with little or no formal education to the efforts and sacrifices associated with education. The interviewed scholar observed that parents became more aware of what education implied and more sympathetic to their children's goal to study and do well on their academic path (Interview No. 6). This is a topic worth further exploration, considering that there is insufficient knowledge about views and attitudes of Roma parents towards formal education (e.g., Zachos and Panagiotidou 2019), let alone how it changed as a result of the pandemic.

For many students who had to move home and were unable to stay in dormitories, it also meant having no or limited access to the internet and computers: a challenge that Roma colleges had to address immediately. In one college, about half of all students had inadequate technology or an unreliable internet connection, and were unable to continue their university studies (Interview No. 3). Some complained that even if their family had computers or laptops at home, many children had to share those (Interview No.1). Others had outdated and old computers that proved insufficient to follow classes online. As a result, in several Roma colleges, institutional representatives insisted that the most deprived Roma students remain in the dormitory with special permission, despite state regulations to close down dormitories nationwide due to COVID-19; this was among the first "emergency steps" taken (Interview No. 2, 3, 4, 8). Those few students who remained in the dormitory were sending part of their college-provided stipend to their families to cover unexpected costs, mainly associated with healthcare and the pandemic (Interview No. 8).

For those who had to move home, Roma colleges also had to swiftly address the problem either by requesting laptops through donations or applying for COVID-19 state grants. One institution that was able to acquire laptops through donations and from their own resources hired a delivery service to supply laptops (Interview No. 8). In another institution, internet connection obstacles were addressed by issuing "emergency scholarships" to provide additional financial support to cover bills (Interview No. 2).

In addition, vulnerable students also suffered the same negative psychological impact as most of their peers: many missed out on career-building internships and mobility programs, while newly admitted students did not have a chance to socialize with their peers at university, and "didn't even feel like university students" during the pandemic (Interview No. 3, 5). This led to a general sense of loss—loss of friends, opportunities and community—adding to the students' psychological toll.

To mitigate these challenges, all interviewed Roma colleges stressed the importance of needs assessments, which were necessary for assuring proper support. One institution established an online "emergency forum" where Roma students had a chance to discuss their challenges and needs (Interview #2). This way, Roma colleges were also able to quickly recognize the immediate needs and adjust their thematic courses accordingly. Flexibility was key, especially during the first wave, as one institutional representative recalled: "on Monday they told us what they need, on Wednesday they had it!" (Interview No. 3). Several institutions suggested that students were missing essential skills for online learning, which Roma colleges had to cover: time management, self-discipline and independent learning were among such skills. In the Roma College of Szeged, for example, the topic of their popular Public Life Debates (közéleti vitaestek) in March of 2021 was digital learning (SzKRSz 2021b). In addition, multiple institutions held lectures on media literacy and fake news, which they considered as critical knowledge during the pandemic. Indeed, some reports identified impoverished Roma communities as "fertile grounds for misinformation", concluding that "misinformation [among disadvantaged Roma communities] is at least as big of a problem as the virus itself" (Mizsur et al. 2021).

In short, many disadvantaged Roma students experienced significant stress when going home to deprived circumstances and an environment not conducive to studying. In fact, multiple studies demonstrate that "socioeconomic factors have a large, pervasive and persistent influence over school achievement", proving that for students from low-income,

poor families, academic achievements are affected negatively (Ferguson et al. 2007, p. 702). To mitigate these challenges, Roma colleges strove to assess their needs and to provide immediate support to students, in the form of access to IT technology or educating skills. In addition to these support mechanisms, Roma colleges adhered to their ultimate goal of keeping the community of Roma students strong, while supporting solidarity and resilience among students.

5. Discussion: The Importance of Solidarity and Trust in Supporting Vulnerable University Students during Crises

This section is aimed at interpreting the above-described findings. In analyzing the work of Roma colleges before the pandemic, especially the dual goal of educational support and empowerment, as well as the institutional support provided during the pandemic, two themes have emerged as critical to the work of Roma colleges: solidarity and trust. This section focuses on these themes as pillars of Roma colleges' success in their mission to promote higher education among vulnerable Roma students.

All interviewed representatives of Roma colleges highlighted that working with vulnerable students necessitates strategies that foster self-esteem and confidence, in addition to helping with academic achievements. Equally important was the maintenance of strong social networks and a sense of community. "For us, building a community and solidarity is even more important than providing professional training", claimed one institutional representative (Interview No. 8). Indeed, a common theme among all interviewed institutions was a stress on the importance of community, which consists of Roma students, their mentors and other college staff. "I was amazed to see the strong sense of solidarity, and this created a protective environment for the vulnerable students", claimed an academic expert upon visiting a Roma college (Interview No. 7).

Colleges used online platforms such as Teams to imitate their community online, sometimes with "gossip rooms" where only students were allowed. One institution scheduled "unity time" that was spent solely on "catching up with students and feeling connected to our community", in order to "try to make [students] feel like they are still cared for even though we were online" (Interview No. 1). Another institution dedicated time to peer support through their "Message from quarantine" event, when students were encouraged to record short videos about their challenges (Interview No. 3). Yet another institution regularly held a student-led event called "in unity" in order to "take ownership of the Roma college as their own space, to keep their community together and motivate each other" (Interview No. 4). These events often began with a game and ended with a discussion about their studying routine, challenges and issues. Having realized the increased anxieties among students, some institutions decreased their educational content and allowed time for sharing feelings (Interview No. 5).

These community-oriented events were not without challenges, as they still required students to spend time in front of the monitor, which was increasingly difficult, especially during the second wave (Interview No. 5). All interviewees stated that the second wave was easier for them, as, having learnt from the first wave, there was time to prepare for online work. Nevertheless, several institutional representatives also admitted that the second wave was more difficult for students, who were increasingly going through a fatigue of online interactions. This phenomenon of "online meeting fatigue", sometimes also referred to as "Zoom fatigue", was indeed a common challenge for university students worldwide (e.g., Toney et al. 2021; Peper et al. 2021). To mitigate this, several Roma colleges increased the intensity of one-to-one mentorship sessions and focused more on mental and psychological wellbeing (Interview No. 2, 3). One institution, to prevent online fatigue, gathered feedback from students and made changes every month to accommodate students' requests and needs (Interview No. 4).

Interestingly, all interviewees believed that their students do not openly reach out to their university faculty with issues they see as personal, such as inadequate home environment or lack of computers to follow online classes. Vulnerable students need

support, but rarely receive it from their university (Interview No. 4). Routinely, students complained of receiving little or no help from their university teachers, with whom they were not able to develop even a basic pedagogical relationship (Interview No. 3). Moreover, in one instance, a student recalled that in one university class, where he was not able to follow the lecture due to an unreliable internet connection at home, the professor simply assumed that he was neglecting to participate in the class (Interview No. 1). An institutional representative believed what distinguishes their institution from universities is the established trust (Interview No. 2).

Indeed, revealing details about one's home environment may be distressing and may require a trust-based relationship between vulnerable students and their educators, which is often lacking. Numerous research studies have supported the argument that a trust-based student-teacher relationship is especially critical for vulnerable students (Széll 2018, p. 100). In the absence of such relationships between Roma students and their formal educational institution, Roma colleges take on a special role. The motivating environment created in Roma colleges rarely extends to university classes, where students tend to be more passive and "only spoke up if they had to" (Interview No. 4). According to an institutional representative,

> [Roma students] don't have enough trust or communication with [their university] teachers. They might be embarrassed about their circumstances; they might feel ashamed. But they don't feel like that with us. We are on duty basically 24 h, and our students know this. They know we are always there for them and will help. They have trust in what we do. But this is an ongoing, continuous work, and building trust is not easy. We talk to them all the time so that they open up to us . . . we always ask and listen. If we think together, we do everything better! (Interview No. 4)

Indicative of trust was students' willingness to turn on their cameras. Academic research showed that at the time of the pandemic, the leading reason for students to leave their cameras off during online classes was anxiety, fear of being exposed, shame and other issues related to privacy concerns (Gherhes et al. 2021). In Roma colleges this was not the case:

> Everyone had their cameras on [during events and workshops]—we saw the whole family in the background, some siblings came to say "hi" to the camera, too. Some of these little kids became "honorary members", as we jokingly called them. We are a family, a community. Out of 32 [students], maybe two started our online sessions with their cameras turned off; in that case the rest of the group asked them to turn on the camera. They were called out by their peers. I doubt these students have their cameras on during university class; what I am sure of is that the acceptance, understanding, and solidarity we have here, with many of our students sharing the same challenges, means a great deal for their success. (Interview No. 2)

One interviewed scholar suggested that this trust should be understood as "institutional trust", where Roma and other vulnerable students know that "the entire institution stands for them and for their interests" (Interview No. 6). This trust also helps to keep the community intact, albeit on online platforms.

Besides flexibility and trust, what seems to be key is the decentralized, non-hierarchical nature of Roma colleges, where students feel that they not only belong, but are equal members of the community. In one institution, students formed a "self-government" and were in charge of representing their peers, organizing events and taking up roles of leadership (Interview No. 2). All activities were organized in a way to promote participation from all: in several colleges, group activities involved fewer students in each group, while in another college all events were planned carefully to involve all students in an interactive way, creating a cooperative and open environment "unlike in their university classes" (Interview No. 3, 4). Students were also encouraged to assume responsibility for their

own communities and to engage in voluntary work: for example, colleges organized outreach programs to high schools, in order to discuss the issues of social prejudice and discrimination, as well as to encourage diversity and mutual acceptance between different ethnic groups.

6. Conclusions

My research and interviews among representatives from Roma colleges have culminated in the conclusion that vulnerable students, such as Roma, rely significantly on a network of support that often is provided through non-formal educational platforms, which has proved critical for their continuation of higher education during the pandemic. There are three important implications of this study: (1) it is imperative to consider students' wellbeing and to improve relationships with educators in order to facilitate access to higher education among vulnerable and deprived youth; (2) non-formal educational institutions are key to the academic success of vulnerable youth at the level of higher education; and (3) there is a clear indication that many educational institutions plan on continuous use of digital resources and online platforms not only for educational purposes, but also for youth empowerment and awareness raising.

Importantly, while every interviewed Roma college claimed that they had not one student who dropped out of university during the pandemic, nearly all shared that several students were "very close"; what proved to be a decisive intervention is personalized attention. Assigned mentors repeatedly inquired about the wellbeing of students whose participation was poor, considering their family background and circumstances under which they had to continue their education. Decisions about personal assistance were then fully grounded in the experience of the students themselves. One of the interviewed scholars shared that in her fieldwork, she observed that Roma mentoring programs carefully select and train their mentors, so that they are not only professional educators, but also sensitive to issues of discrimination, marginalization and social deprivation (Interview No. 6). An important part of developing a personal relationship is recognizing that students' mental wellbeing is key to their success. The pandemic "demystified mental support", which used to be considered taboo, and during the pandemic students' openly sought out psychological assistance (Interview No. 4).

In all cases the relationship between students and the institutional representatives (mentors, program organizers and others) was not merely professional, but also personal. Any event began with an informal conversation inquiring about students' wellbeing (Interview No. 1, 2). One institutional representative suggested: "I called my students all the time, I knew all of them and their circumstances" (Interview No. 3). In another interview, a similar commitment was shared: "We strove to make our relationship [with students] as lively as possible, we feared that some of them would just disappear. We called them, texted them, asked about them daily, we monitored their progress and wellbeing . . . and we reacted immediately when they reached out to us" (Interview No. 4). Indeed, a former student who graduated from university in January 2021 struggled to find words to express his appreciation for his Roma college: "I feel so lucky to have benefited from membership at the Roma college . . . I would have dropped out of university without this support network" (Interview No. 5).

While all interviewees stressed the necessity of face-to-face interactions, some also noted the benefits of their time working with vulnerable students remotely: one institution was able to invite inspirational and renowned guests since they were "just one click away" (Interview No. 3), and another institution was able to make some of their events public (e.g., Roma cooking night) that helped to raise awareness about Roma culture (Interview No. 2). Several considered streaming their events in the future to provide broader access to some of their activities for the Roma and non-Roma community. These measures may help raise awareness about important societal issues concerning discrimination, challenges of vulnerable students in schools, and other topics.

Finally, it is important to highlight that the challenges discussed in this study are not culture-specific. Instead, these are common issues faced by vulnerable students, many of whom come from deprived family backgrounds. "These problems", explained an institutional representative, "have to do with poverty and with students being first-generation university educated" (Interview No. 4). What is unique and constituted as good practice in Roma colleges is their dual goal to assist with university education, as well as to create a platform where Roma and other vulnerable students can form networks and bonds of solidarity. In the meantime, these colleges encourage community involvement through volunteering opportunities and promote leadership, by allowing students to not only participate, but also organize events. Students learn to be responsible citizens and have a sense of belonging. This all amounts to healthy self-esteem, which is essential not only for a successful university career, but also for prosperous, inclusive democratic societies to thrive.

Lastly, we must return to the initial research question: How were Roma colleges able to meet the needs of Roma students during the pandemic to facilitate their studies at higher education institutions? In answering this question based on interviews with program coordinators, it is important to restate the best practices employed by Roma colleges, and especially the institutions' role in creating communities and promoting a sense of belonging. This article shows that a strong sense of community improves the motivation and wellbeing of Roma students. In addition, a flexible approach to assistance, which was swiftly adjusted when needs and circumstances changed, is imperative to provide various forms of support to students. Finally, sensitivity to the marginalized and deprived environments that define the home experience of many students was also key in appropriate mentorship and education of vulnerable students.

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