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Challenges for University teachers in the midst of a paradigm shift

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic suddenly became a reality at the beginning of 2020, affecting all parts of everyday life with higher education included. Teaching and learning were transferred online without any particular preparation in many cases, leading to the emergent distance education mode. Nevertheless, discussions have been centered around how this sudden change has led to a paradigm shift in education and how this shift is perceived by the actors included in it. This study presents the perspective of university teachers, in Sweden and Greece, as the receivers of this change but also as the facilitators of learning in this new setting. Focus group discussions showed how changes in higher education during the pandemic have reflected the stages of a paradigm shift according to Kuhn's theory. These stages are summarised in three waves, representing the sudden shift, the concerns for the new learning mode, and, finally, the challenge of the system and the reconsideration of identities. While university teachers in both groups seem to have experienced the process similarly, negative feelings towards change were observed to a higher extent in the Greek group, indicating a higher lack of trust in the respective higher education institution and the overall Greek education system.

Keywords
University teaching, online learning, emergency education, paradigm shift.

1. Introduction

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced higher education systems all over the world in an unexpected and sudden way, forcing the transition of the learning process from an in-person environment to a digital one. Scholars expressed their fear that this sudden change and disruption of the regular function of higher education institutions might have caused an interruption of students' learning and discrepancies in

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the internal evaluation processes lowering the quality of education (Burgess & Sievertsen, 2020). Several states decided to either suspend the function of universities or allow their activities to be delivered only from distance, via online platforms and communications (Molchanova et al., 2020; Peters et al., 2020; Raikou et al., 2020). Simultaneously, discussions regarding the future of universities centered around the potential of hybrid teaching, combining physical and virtual spaces in a holistic learning and research environment (Murphy & Crowfoot, 2021).

Within this framework, learning has not been intentionally transformed. Yet, it has suddenly acquired a different form, shaped by the conditions the pandemic introduced, such as students' negative emotions during teaching, and lack of participation and involvement (Karalis & Raikou, 2020; Raikou et al., 2020). In this new setting, while the curriculum was turned into its online format, teachers were expected to deal effectively with their digital competence and the new reality. University teachers' readiness to teach online was approached in two ways in previous research; firstly through teachers' attitudes about the significance of online teaching and secondly through perceptions of their own competence to teach online. Martin et al. (2019) claimed that online teaching competence requires university teachers to adapt their attitudes toward technology and teaching. Furthermore, university teachers' perceptions were found to have a crucial role in how online teaching goals, duties and challenges are approached. Following this line of thought, the present study seeks the perspective of university teachers on challenges encountered during the pandemic, as well as on the actions taken to deal with them in an effort to map the new conditions being introduced in higher education. The findings are expected to open up the discussion for significant changes, which can shift the paradigm in education.

The measures implemented in response to the pandemic shaped the scenery, where the differences between online teaching and other teaching modes became more evident. Online learning, as learning mediated by the use of the Internet, is used in various contexts and often lacks specificity as a term (Rapanta et al., 2020). This study, however, does not aspire to discuss the concept; instead focuses on its implementation. For this paper, online learning is described as a type of teaching and learning where the learner is located at some distance from the teacher, but also the other learners, the learner uses technology for material access and interaction with other individuals. Finally, the learner is provided with support by the teacher and the system (Anderson 2011b). Online teaching and learning offer a variety of tools and resources as well as

spaces and structures, allowing several forms of organization and learning and, hence, flexibility (Anderson 2011a; Rapanta et al., 2020). Online learning and teaching during the times of pandemic are described by the term *emergency education*. The concept is relatively new, and unanimity over it has not yet been reached.

1.1 Previous research

Following the outbreak of the pandemic, the idea of crisis management became more prominent in research with a focus on how education systems can maintain their regular operation under the new circumstances (Karalis, 2020). In addition, the literature turned to the implications of educational disruption and the impact of remote or distance learning. Research in relationship to COVID-19 and higher education has centered around two axes, the consequences of the pandemic on university operations, and the implications of the disruption of in-person learning, by transitioning to an online mode for both students and teachers, as well as the impact of this transition on future pedagogical practices. The first can be summarised as the low-density university (Maloney & Kim, 2020), referring to the conditions under which universities are expected to operate after the pandemic. The second refers to the introduction of learning in virtual environments as core in the higher education arena, including synchronous and asynchronous learning, course and curriculum design and laboratory simulation (Raikou et al., 2020).

Research before the pandemic has shown that online teaching is more demanding for the teacher compared to in-person teaching (Andersen & Avery, 2008; Cavanaugh, 2005; Tomei, 2006). Focusing on time, Tomei and Nelson (2019) stressed that effective online teaching is more time-consuming referring to three components of instruction, meaning instructional content, counseling and assessment. Focusing on the effectiveness of online teaching, Frazer et al. (2017) concluded on some characteristics that effective instructors have, including a positive attitude, strong communication with students, maintaining respect and being encouraging. Moreover, Bettinger and Loeb (2017) highlighted the mode of communication as the main difference between online and in-person teaching, with online classes making interactions often asynchronous as occurring in virtual space. In these virtual environments, students' persistence in learning is lower than in in-person learning, making online courses more difficult for the least prepared students, and leading to potential dropouts.

Regarding university teachers' motivations for accepting online teaching, increased online teaching experience seems to contribute to confidence and, thus, act as a motivator (Shea, 2007). However, the flexibility of the work schedule was the biggest motivator to accept online teaching, in contrast to the increased workload which had the opposite effect. As far as university teachers' perceptions are concerned, Shea's study (2007) showed that a lack of training in instructional design might act as a demotivation for online teaching. Furthermore, university teachers addressed the drawback of a lack of in-person interactions with students in several studies (Dick et al., 2020; Shea, 2007; Zhu & Lu, 2020).

Nevertheless, for university management distance learning has been seen as a way to create considerable tuition revenue (Dick et al., 2020; Tomei & Nelson, 2019), with online classrooms facilitating four times more students than regular ones (Tomei, 2006). A fear that this financial benefit might lead to an increase of online learning is quite dominant in the literature (e.g. Dick et al., 2020; Koutselini, 2020; Ramlo, 2021). However, university teachers' acceptance of the importance of online teaching is critical to increase online education and working towards improving its quality (Shea, 2007).

As Dick et al. (2020) pointed out, people, structures and processes have equal significance with technology in cases of shifts in education. For this reason, the agents involved in this interaction of technology and instruction are appropriate to guide an exploration of the emerging challenges.

2. Theoretical Perspective

The rapid changes in the field of education have not come without pain. As presented above, there is a great deal of concern and skepticism about the future of education and teachers' role within the framework of new conditions. This reflection brings to mind the –usually, quite long-period of rearrangements and anomalies aptly described in Kuhn's theory of scientific revolutions argument.

2.1 Scientific revolutions

Thomas Kuhn was one of the most influential philosophers of the 20th century, whose work unexpectedly shaped the development of the sciences. Kuhn's epistemological thought was focused on exploring the progress and evolution of science and the search for truth. His perspective was guided by logical positivism -the most rational extension of positivism- the movement that, with its appearance, essentially put an end to

romanticism, metaphysical concerns and irrationalism that dominated science and philosophy until the end of the 18th century. Kuhn's primary argument was that sciences do not evolve gradually toward truth, on the contrary, it is the paradigm shift that contributes to science evolution when current theories are insufficient to explain new phenomena (Kuhn, 1970).

A paradigm for the American philosopher is any complex of interpretative approaches and methodological conventions, and decisions of a scientific community. Thus, a paradigm comprises the general theoretical assumptions and laws and the techniques for their application that a scientific community adopts (Chalmers, 1999). More specifically, according to the author of the famous *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, paradigms are "universally recognized scientific achievements that for a time provide model problems and solutions to a community of practitioners" (Kuhn, 1970, p. 2).

A key feature of Kuhn's theory is the character of the scientific revolution, which occurs when a new paradigm better explains what is observed by proposing a new model closer to the objective reality. In particular, Kuhn places an emphasis "on the revolutionary character of scientific progress, where a revolution involves the abandonment of one theoretical structure and its replacement by another, incompatible one" (Chalmers, 1999, p. 107). Kuhn's model follows a spiral, rather than a circular, path which begins from what he calls pre-science, a phase before the theory is even formulated, during which no commonly accepted observations exist. The second stop on this route is what Kuhn refers to as normal science when a paradigm is introduced and established. Then, when a series of anomalies in the paradigm challenge the existing theory, the outbreak of a crisis leads to the scientific revolution and to a new paradigm, which responds better to the new situation. An important element in Kuhn's model is that the new theory will emerge only after the proven failure of the previous one and it will emerge precisely as a response and solution to the crisis. Even more remarkable is that, as Kuhn (1970) argues, every new solution presented in a time of crisis, had already been proposed at a time when there was no analogous crisis in science.

2.2 Paradigm shift in Education

Since the work of Thomas Kuhn back in the 1960s, there has been an extremely increasing tendency for scholars and academics to attribute features of his theory to developments and changes that occur in their field of interest. The sciences of

Education are certainly no exception to this general rule. For instance, a quick search of the terms *paradigm shift education* in *Google Scholar*[3] dating from 2020 onwards brought over 52,000 results. Similarly, searches in scientific web bases, such as *Academia* and *ResearchGate*, brought over hundreds of results in almost every scientific domain related to education.

In the early 90's the concept of paradigm shift was the concern of scholars with a strong desire to note down the limitations of the traditional, teacher-centred approach and highlight the need for teachers to assist their learners in developing interpersonal skills, communication skills, problem-solving, decision making etc., all of which were considered as skills essential for the Information Society that has made a dynamic appearance (McBeath, 1994; Stamelos & Gkotsis, 2022). Despite the relevant warnings about a transformational change that was expected to come, and although distance education emerged decades earlier, as an alternative to providing learning opportunities to people who could not be physically present in the classroom (Williams, 2017), it is true that the alarm bell did not concern the evolution of technology and its use in education.

The popularity and penetration of online learning in universities, educational, training institutions, and work environments from the beginning of the first decade of the 21st century have established online and digital learning as an essential axis when planning educational activities and created, thus, the prospects for a new paradigm (Desai et al., 2008). It worth mentioning that information technology varied significantly from the beginning of the 21st century until today, with online education platforms and applications before the pandemic being less developed and elaborate compared to the post-pandemic times. Noticeable shifts from traditional roles of teacher/trainer, such as knowledge transmitter, to roles, such as learning facilitator, coach and co-learner, were recorded (Anderson, 2010), while relevant reports in all areas of education are constantly increasing, especially during the post-pandemic period. References, such as in the field of Higher Education and the way university teachers perceive their role and their interaction with students in the current distance and digitalized environment or in Vocational Education and Training (VET), where online learning seems to be a promising alternative pedagogy (Pangeni & Karki, 2021)

[3] Data retrieved on 17 May 2022. See more at https://www.academia.edu/search?q=paradigm%20shift%20 education, and https://www.researchgate.net/search.Search.html?type=publication&query= paradigm%20shift%20education

are merely indicative of an ever-increasing tendency by field theorists to interpret changes and developments in education as a potential paradigm shift.

While there is still no absolute certainty about how education systems, in general, will look even in the near future, there is strong evidence that we are facing a paradigm, the anomalies of which, if not already clearly perceived, are nevertheless apparent. The accelerating capacity of academic centers, organisations and research institutions developed during the pandemic has produced huge capabilities for interaction that meet needs not present a few years ago. Although the conclusions of this period will be analyzed more systematically some years later, the degree to which learning platforms and digital tools of communication, networking and collaboration have been experiencing an unprecedented boom during the pandemic (Kansal et al., 2021) displays clear manifestations for what Kuhn calls scientific revolution

3. Methods

The study adopts an abductive, exploratory approach, with focus groups selected as the research tool. Bryman (2012) suggests that focus groups in comparison to individual interviews provide more opportunities to highlight what informants evaluate as necessary. Moreover, adult education research favors focus groups as a research method, which provides space for deep interaction among researchers and participants, all of which are expected to learn both from each other and the process itself (Field, 2000 as cited in Chioncel et al., 2003). Although there is some concern over focus groups, such as a possible feeling of discomfort among informants (Madriz, 2000) or a tendency of some members to groupthink (Janis, 1982), the need to explore emotional experiences and produce insights that perhaps remain hidden in individual interviews (Tracy, 2013) was perceived as more important.

In this study, focus groups followed a specific pattern in both cases, including an introductory session to welcome everyone and explain the scope of the research, the main discussion, and an ending session, which served as a summary and confirmation of what was recorded (Krueger & Casey, 2000). During the focus groups, a researcher guided the discussion, and a co-researcher kept notes while open-ended questions were posed to informants.

3.1 Informants and their background

The informants were employed in higher education institutions; a university in a big Swedish city and a distance-learning higher education institution in Greece. The informants were affiliated in both cases with the respective education departments.

Greece has a heavily centralized education system (Saiti, 2010). Nevertheless, universities remain autonomous. The Greek university in this study is a public higher education institution offering distance education at all levels, under payment for all students. This type of higher education institution is relatively new in Greece and it differs from the majority of public universities, where Bachelor studies are free of charge for Greek and EU citizens. During the pandemic, this institution reduced its expenses due to the decreased need for renting classrooms.

On March 11, 2020, all educational activities in Greece were suspended, as a consequence of COVID-19. Although a demanding task, Greek higher education institutions offered their courses entirely online by the end of March 2020 (Raikou et al., 2020).

Sweden has a decentralized education system (Lundahl, 2002). The university included in this study is public and the leadership within the university is decentralized to the respective faculties and departments. This university also offers courses both on campus and distance with the majority falling into the first category. The studies are free for Swedish and EU citizens, while international students are charged tuition fees.

Each focus group consisted of 6 informants. Discussants from Greece were employed in several institutions, but most had at least part-time employment at the same public higher education institution offering distance courses under payment. The Greek focus group lasted 90 minutes, occurred in Greek[4], while the Swedish lasted 83 minutes and occurred in English. The focus group interviews were conducted via Zoom. They were video and audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Table 1 presents the pseudonyms used for the informants and the research areas present in each focus group.

Table 1. Informants' details

Focus group	Informants (pseudonyms)	Research areas
Greece	Giannis, Elias, Alexia, Elsa, Petra, Melina	Adult education, Vocational Education and Training (VET), organizational learning
Sweden	Karen, Maarit, Anna, Stefan, Andreas, Per	VET, higher education, adult learning and migration

[4] All the quotations from the Greek informants are translated in English by the authors.

The three main axes of the discussion were challenges in teaching during the COVID-19 times, actions taken to resolve issues and predictions on the future of higher education. The research material was analysed thematically following the six steps of Braun and Clarke (2006), starting with familiarising with the material, generating initial codes and creating themes. Then themes were reviewed and modified, and finally they were presented.

3.2 Limitations and ethical considerations

With reference to limitations, this article does not aim to generalize, but to highlight qualitative aspects of the phenomenon under study. More specifically, the variety of the challenges and the ways they were perceived in two different countries is showcased, in an effort to explore how the context of these countries has affected the challenges´ perception.

Finally, informants participated in the study voluntarily. They were informed about the study details before the focus group when they all gave their consent for participation. Aiming for anonymity, all informants' details are hidden with the use of pseudonyms.

4. Findings and Discussion

The prevalent themes in both focus groups are presented and analyzed in this chapter, separated into three waves of changes and challenges caused by the pandemic. The findings from both focus groups are discussed together, with differences highlighted in points of interest.

4.1 First wave: The sudden shift

Approaching the pandemic as the time of an emergency pedagogy is acknowledged by all informants. Although this pedagogy included elements from distance learning as experienced before the pandemic, the rapid and wholesome shift to online teaching during the second quarter of 2020 has created unique conditions and strategies for all actors, students, teachers and higher education institutions. What was, however, new this time? It was an unexpected event. As the pandemic could not be predicted, there was no previous planning within the education system for tackling its effect. This lack of preparedness seems to be the root of the first phase of challenges for university

teachers, as it emphasized the need to establish a sense of urgency (Kotter, 1996) and it hindered the transition to online learning in several ways.

Firstly, the absence of readiness is expressed in terms of technical infrastructure, mainly by the Greek focus group. Some teachers mentioned a lack of access to digital platforms (e.g., Zoom) for their synchronous part of teaching, leading to improvised and temporary solutions. For example, Giannis referred to his colleagues that could only use the free (limited to 40 minutes) version of Zoom, interrupting their class respectively, to create a new meeting. Moreover, Elsa mentioned how she and her students had no access to library resources since they were not digitalized, making both studying and researching hindered.

> *To be able to have access to resources, access to the library, which I consider an element of the organization (university), and I think that in general, up to the degree that I am aware of, I think it is something from which we are entirely cut off.* (Elsa)

The reference to infrastructure was nearly absent in the Swedish focus group. Instead, the practical implication discussed concerned student placements in schools or other workplaces. That was an issue in the Swedish case, where informants were involved in the teacher-training programme. However, the respective Greek informants were involved in programmes, where student placements were not required.

In this first phase, it is important to refer to the emotional status of university teachers. This sudden shift, combined with the absence of readiness, provoked a series of negative emotions, like stress, anxiety, guilt, loneliness and low self-confidence to university teachers, at least as a first reaction to the new challenge that emerged, symptoms very close to the first two stages of Transformation Theory (Mezirow, 2000). It is worth mentioning that these feelings were more present in the Greek focus group. For instance, Petra referred to how she struggled both with digital tools and time management.

> *I was sick with worry about how I will split the teams, how I will do that, not to do something wrong etc. And obviously, I showed stress and that stressed the people (the students) even more, especially when they were not accustomed (to the digital tools).*

The need for teachers to connect with emerging trends and focus on present work, exploration and experimentation (Doyle & Brady, 2018) was apparent. This first wave finally came to an end when teachers became familiar with the digital platforms,

managed to organize their teaching time effectively, and through trial and error, established new ways of communicating with their students and realizing teaching with the desired level of quality. This progress softened the negative feelings, with stress and anxiety being replaced by a different type of concern.

4.2 Second wave: Concerns about the new learning mode

In the second stage, after teachers managed to deal with the practical issues and when teaching started occurring regularly, the center of concern became pedagogy. More specifically, teachers in both groups discussed the benefits and drawbacks of learning in digital settings, how it can be better supported and what lessons are learned from before. At this phase, the focus was on the digital space as an environment for learning but also teaching.

In both groups, the most prevalent theme was the one of student-teacher interaction and interaction among students as well. All informants had concerns that the online platforms considerably limit the possibility for communication, interaction, and dialogue. Teachers that had worked with distance learning before seemed to be more prepared and, thus, more confident, also because they could more easily find functions on the digital platforms that supported some communication and interaction. Teachers with underdeveloped digital skills felt more exposed and less effective, as the communication means were more of a hindrance rather than an enabler for them. Andreas (from the Swedish group), for example, centers his whole teaching around dialogue. According to him, the element of dialogue is lost in digital platforms. He talks about himself as responsible for not being fully competent in using digital platforms and being concerned about the role of digital spaces as spaces for learning.

> *I feel I am a technical idiot; I don't think I'm good at it. So, I don't even try to learn it sometimes. Probably that is me. And that's me. But I think it is a … We have to rethink how we do things if we're going to continue teaching using that medium, which is extremely tough. Some can do it, some can't do it. And I'm one of those that feel very, extremely uncomfortable doing that.*

The lack of interaction is expressed as students having their cameras off, not answering teachers' questions and not participating in discussions, a very common issue reported in higher education during the pandemic (e.g. Adnan & Anwar, 2020; Ferri et al., 2020). One of the main drawbacks in this situation is the limited feedback that

teachers receive regarding their teaching. This feedback is a source of inspiration for adjusting the class to the students' needs and, thus, it is a valuable tool of informal communication. As Sven pointed out:

> *So that live feedback, just seeing people nodding, or turning to someone else looking like, like a question mark. What is he talking about? Or someone falling asleep or, or possibly looking super interested. That kind of feedback makes a huge difference.*

Teachers mentioned that the situation is better when students get to work in groups or when the class is composed of fewer students. In the Swedish focus group, this topic had additional concerns related to General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)[5] and the separation between the working/studying space and the personal living space. Teachers in the Swedish focus group had to deal with the issue of personal data, as the students could argue that they did not want their cameras on because they were in their own private spaces or even because they were not prepared to be seen, an issue already mentioned in the literature (Khlaif et al., 2021). Teachers were not allowed to push further with the issue. Nevertheless, both groups mentioned that students did not always have a proper environment at home to attend a class, as there was either noise, lack of privacy or an urgent need to support another family member. According to Anna:

> *How do we create conditions for that, how do we replace the corridors and all that. And another worry is about Sven´s black squares. The learning environment on Zoom or for the students, the formal learning environment becomes someone's living room, and the living room becomes someone's learning environment. And I think that's problematic. I think that's why all the black squares, how to tackle that becomes a formal issue about attendance, especially in compulsory seminars or lectures.*

In both groups, the limits of the teacher's authority were discussed. Teachers tried to balance between intervening in students' personal space and, hence, personal lives and their intention to engage them in more active participation and dialogue. The idea that personal, in this case visual, presence would assist better communication and further engagement is rooted in how regular classrooms work. All discussants

[5] The GDPR is an EU regulation about the protection of personal data and privacy. The regulation is an important part of the EU privacy law and of human rights.

acknowledged that they, as well as their colleagues, often tried to replicate teaching strategies applied in regular in-person settings. However, the pandemic experience made them reconsider this stance, as they all reflected on the necessity for new teaching approaches in this new teaching environment, whether digital or hybrid.

> *Everything from use… using the chat in zoom to a Google doc or some other kind of place, where in Platform (pseudonym) or somewhere else, where students can actually write down and formulate and make explicit their own understanding. And I think this can be so much good for learning. But it requires from us the teacher to structure that to think through what questions shall we pose.* (Karen)

All in all, both groups claimed that online teaching could offer access to a broader student audience, significantly facilitating the participation of students from remote areas, students with limited time or special learning needs. Other than the practical aspect of access, voices were referring also to symbolic access and issues of power that might be arranged differently in a digital rather than a regular classroom, quite similar to what is referred to as counterfeit discussions, as discussions "where people are talking to each other and it looks as though democracy is in play, but in fact, it's being manipulated and power differences are constantly surfacing in the room between participants and also between leader and participants" (Brookfield et al., 2019, p. 77). In particular, Karen said:

> *I think there is a relocation, in a way, of even power in this way of working and it is a bit unusual both for students and teachers. And if we reflect on that and make use of it, I mean it is amazing here that we sit 7, 8 people in a Zoom room, where everybody has the same size of their squares. Usually in a room, even if we kind of have the same size of bodies approximately, there is, there are usually some people who have a little bit stronger voice, who have easier to be in charge of the discussion and so on. So, I think that there are possibilities of working with inclusion and distribution of power, if we make it in a kind of very aware way.*

4.3 Third wave: Challenging the system – Reconsidering identities

Discussing online platforms as the means for communication and the digital space as the new learning environment, the focus moved to expectations and education aims. In the effort to set the broader framework of the discussion about the challenges the pandemic has introduced, the informants brought up the overall education purpose and its role in society. Clarifying the goal of education was approached as a priority by the informants. The education goal should act as a guideline for moving forward with reshaping education based on the lessons learned during the pandemic.

In the Greek focus group, the discussion started with the intense request from the management to conduct the examination process keeping credibility and fairness standards as high as possible. Giannis expressed his concern about the university's stance by stating that *"I remember last year in the university, let's say, half of the discussion at the institutional level was about how to secure the credibility of the examination process"*. This concern introduced a series of measures that, with the lack of technical infrastructure, became rather impossible to apply, according to the discussants. This priority was considered of secondary importance by the group discussants, who thought that quality was not equally prioritized. The discussion of quality then turned to two contradictory issues, first, the fact that higher education has been turned into a product, with universities often prioritizing profit and recruiting students-clients, and second, the fact that tertiary level education programmes are not connected to the Greek labor market needs (Menon et al., 2018).

Regarding the discussion on higher education as a market, it is important to mention that during the pandemic, the Greek university where informants are employed reduced its expenses due to the decreased need for renting classrooms. Petra pointed out that the institution has benefited financially from renting fewer spaces for in-person courses, while Alexia confirmed that this situation also assisted in serving *"a vast amount of learners and give access also to those who might come from far way"*.

The widespread fear in the group of participants was that while the transition to a hybrid teaching model would be fast after the pandemic, a respective preparation, including training on new pedagogies, digital skills development and provision of appropriate infrastructure, would be absent. Melina, for instance, expressed her concerns that the financial benefits of distance education would be prioritized and a big part of higher education would be offered in distance mode *"because it is financially more beneficial because it offers possibilities for many people to access education,*

(and) for universities to have some profit." She, therefore, expects bigger groups of students in distance courses; however, she doubts that the course quality will be secured (also in Inglis, 2005).

Starting from quality, the discussion moved to the relevance of higher education provision with the labor market needs. Giannis claimed that the Greek higher education system focuses heavily on knowledge instead of skills development, which makes the distance between higher education and labor market not easy to bridge, a view which has been often presented in Greek reports (e.g. Foundation for Economic & Industrial Research, 2018). This lack of applicability of the knowledge gained through tertiary education is challenged by Elias as well, claiming that university and labor market should work together *"to re-examine the curricula, but also to adjust in such a way that the graduates can make use of what they have learned"*. The role of the university professor, as the one who is supposed to be aware of both the market and tertiary education, is brought up by Elias, introducing the importance of university teachers' identity and the need to reflect on it. The discussion on identity, however, in this group is limited to the multiple responsibilities of university professors; to be a good teacher while also producing a number of publications. Finally, the Greek discussants distinguished themselves from the average university teacher, as they were active in adult learning. Therefore, pedagogical competence was implied to be already present and, hence, less of a challenge.

The Swedish focus group, nevertheless, although concerned with quality and the purpose of education as well, went further on with discussing the teachers' identity. As Maarit puts it:

> *…and it's about identity issues. Who am I as a teacher? How do I practice my profession in this new situation? What does it mean? Do I want to go with it? Do I want to do something else and so on. So the questions of that comes very close to the teachers' practice and identity.*

According to Maarit, the question of identity is based on the question of practice. The pandemic introduced a new learning scenery, which may be better facilitated by a hybrid learning environment in the future. This new learning mode has become a permanent structure, although it started as an emergency solution. Concerns around a hybrid learning environment refer to if it is to serve the same educational goals as before and if the practice of teaching and learning remains the same. Anna expressed

her concerns about education goals that cannot be achieved by the new learning mode, while she stressed that identifying these goals is the first step towards safeguarding their achievement. Sven built on further by mentioning that *"we cannot make assumptions from an emergency teaching solution to a regular hybrid system of a more permanent state."* With these questions brought up, per expressed concern about teachers being seen only as content producers, an idea prevalent in the Greek focus group, as well. With communication realized via online platforms and smart devices, he was afraid of the redundancy of an individual as a learning facilitator.

Comparing the two groups, it is clear that the quality of education is seen a little differently and can be partially explained by the two countries' different educational systems, the Swedish tradition of individual's responsibility for learning and the Greek strongly related to state-controlled education (Prokou, 2008). Indeed, participants from Sweden focus on theoretical reflections about what learning is, as well as what the role of a university teacher is in the learning process. The direction in the Greek focus group is more critical with reference to the system, its effectiveness and its goals, showing that the lack of trust in the structures is more urgent to be resolved. The fear of losing their jobs or considerably lowering the quality of their work is prevalent only in the Greek group.

5. Conclusions

Discussing the changes brought in higher education due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this study has given the word to university teachers to talk about their experiences, concerns and actions. Overall, the Swedish discussants placed little emphasis on practicalities and infrastructure, while their focus lay on interaction with students, feedback and learning in digital environments, hence quality issues of teaching in digital or hybrid settings. On the contrary, the Greek university teachers focused primarily on practical issues and their working conditions. This differentiation in the discussion locus indicates the different conditions and cultures prevalent in the two countries.

Elements of a paradigm shift in this research study concern the repetition of patterns, problems and solutions from the past. Nevertheless, as Kuhn (1970) points out, during a crisis, these patterns are more prone to receive some response and, thus, lead to action and change. The Greek focus group provides several of these patterns, like the marketization of universities and the lack of connection between higher education and

the labor market. Furthermore, the rapid expansion of distance learning and the inclusion of students with mobility constraints is a point of interest. It highlights how offering online courses, as a reaction to the pandemic, did not necessarily aim at inclusion; instead, it underlined issues and solutions for inclusion. This reminds us of Kuhn's scientific revolutions, where "what intervened between the first sense of trouble and the recognition of an available alternate must have been largely unconscious" (1970, p. 86). With university teachers negotiating their role in the emerging paradigm (Anderson, 2010), the discussion around questions of identity seems to be supporting a paradigm shift process as well. In addition to this, the variety of negative feelings, including concern, fear of the unknown and lack of confidence, is also indicative that the current identity of the informants is not fitted for the new situation. Therefore, they themselves are called to change, a process which slowly goes through various stages, identifying points of questioning, re-thinking and revising, very close to what Mezirow (2000) refers to as transformation learning.

Elements of the paradigm shift are also present in university teachers' discussions about the future of higher education. While they all expect hybrid education to become the new reality, the expected change is not always perceived positively. Currently, most universities are preparing for more hybrid models, designing courses, and investing in infrastructure and competence development. Nevertheless, as shown in this paper, the acceptance of the new model should not be taken for granted. The pandemic, as a period of *emergent education*, has not been an appropriate setting to test a hybrid model. As the informants pointed out, more reflection is required on the topic and more preparation and readiness are required by the university management.

Finally, the fear and the negative feelings expressed by the informants are expected in times of change, similar to what the pandemic has introduced. Nevertheless, comparing the Greek and Swedish case, it becomes evident that more intense negative feelings are present in a context where university teachers feel weak against new challenges related to the digitalization of learning, while they are also not included in decision-making. Greek participants seem to feel stripped from their agency and unable to affect the main conditions of the current situation, whereas their power is limited only to how to run their classes. While the pandemic and its effects have been, to a great extent, outside of human control, the collaboration with the university and the trust in it as an employer institution can be restored, leading to an increased agency for university teachers. A condition for this is acknowledging that "technology itself was, at least in

most cases, not the problem" (Dick et al., 2020, p. 244). People and procedures are equally important to the technological part of this emergency venture.

Overall, the tendencies observed are fear of the new and the unknown and optimism that the new situation, through reflection, can be an opportunity for improvement. Higher education institutions can decrease fear feeling, by transparent processes and clear communication with their employees (Karalis, 2020). At the same time, involving university teachers in course management processes can also be beneficial for a relationship of trust between the university and the teacher in the new era. On the other hand, a future approach should be characterized by openness and focus on solutions rather than focusing on the problems that have emerged. In this process, university teachers should receive competence development in online learning facilitation (also in Hartshorne et al., 2020; Ndlovu et al., 2022), but also some basic understanding of the management and how they can contribute to it.

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