

The Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on University Students' Well-Being and Students' Coping Strategies: A Qualitative Approach

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Abstract

Ever since the Covid-19 pandemic broke out, numerous studies have shown up investigating the negative ramifications of this crisis for university students, who are considered to be a vulnerable population. So far, however, the positive consequences of the pandemic for university students as well as how the crisis may have impacted young people's resilience have not been explored. Unlike previously published research on the topic, this small case study attempted to explore any university students' views regarding how the Covid-19 pandemic affected them and how they tried to mitigate the pandemic's effects. To allow participants to freely express themselves, their written texts about the topic were used as a research tool, whereas qualitative content analysis was used as a research method. Eighty-seven undergraduate students took part voluntarily in the research. Findings indicated that the pandemic has greatly and negatively affected the students' emotional, psychological, and mental state, who experienced mainly fear and anxiety. At the same time, however, they received valuable lessons for life, realizing that nothing is a given and that they must live life to the fullest. In parallel with experiencing the alienation from their social environment and their psychological fatigue; the participants, due to their isolation, turned to themselves, revised things, and evolved personally, increasing also their resilience to difficult conditions. Although the students did not mention extensively to have employed coping strategies, those strategies mentioned were constructive. The research findings are discussed in terms of their implications regarding students' support in the educational process and generally their support by universities after the health crisis.

Keywords: Covid-19 pandemic, university students, emotional and psychological well-being, mental health, coping strategies.

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INTRODUCTION

The new coronavirus (COVID-19) origins were traced back to Wuhan, China, in December 2019 (El-Monshed, El-Adl, Ali, & Loutfy, 2021), while it was only some months later when it was announced to constitute a widespread disease (World Health Organization [WHO], 2020). Until 9 January of the new year 2022 -when this article was written, WHO (2022) declared that more than 5.4 million humans died from the lethal virus. Under these new and unprecedented circumstances, people globally have seen their lives change in all aspects. The new normal is including

wearing masks everywhere, washing hands continually, using antiseptics, avoiding crowding and crowded social gatherings, continuous rapid and molecular testing, constant vaccination; while the severe lockdown after the outbreak of the pandemic was the norm among the countries for the restriction of the virus spreading. For the same purpose, people who are exposed to the virus have to self-quarantine; whereas the number of infected people, deaths, and generally the course of the pandemic monopolize daily the media.

In crises and emergencies, it is said that it is common for people to become exaggerated in their

communication reactions and process information in a different way. Other potential consequences for humans are referred to be severe anxiety, confusion, disorganization, fear, and serious dread (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2019). Indeed, studies have been conducted so far indicate confusion, anger, and post-traumatic symptoms as the aftermaths of the quarantine (Brooks *et al.*, 2020). The systematic review and meta-analysis of Salari *et al.*, (2020) showed that the pandemic leads to several psychological and mental health disorders, such as depression, anxiety, and stress, apart from the concerns about physical health. As can be concluded from the above, the aspects of the psychological consequences of the pandemic are diverse: emotional, cognitive, and behavioral (El-Monshed *et al.*, 2021), and thus, of paramount significance is psychological assistance to be provided especially to susceptible groups of people for their mental health to be ensured (Salari *et al.*, 2020).

University students are considered among scholars to be a susceptible group to psychological and mental health disorders, such as anxiety, depression; eating, self-harm, and learning disorders; insomnia, and substance abuse, before Covid-pandemic (El-Monshed *et al.*, 2021; Ponsford, 2016; Wang & Zhao, 2020). This is explained by the many stressors that are encountered at this crucial age, from the transition from late adolescence to early adulthood: change of living environment, need for developing new social relations, adopting new studying behaviors, cultivating skills for time management, handling of the overload work and generally academic demands, as well as the need for their successful fulfillment, intentions after graduation, and financial concerns (Babicka-Wirkus, Wirkus, Stasiak, & Koziowski, 2021; Beiter *et al.*, 2015). At the same time, according to Wang and Zhao (2020), university students are characterized by emotional sensitivity since they lie at a critical developmental phase concerning their judges and values and can be manipulated by social media. Still, the age of 24, at which is a portion of university students, has been found to be a starting point for a large percentage of every long-term mental illness (Ponsford, 2016). Son *et al.*, (2020), presenting research findings that show that mental health disorders negatively impact learners' social interactions, concentration, and motivation, advocated that these disorders prevent students' academic achievement.

Thus, of particular concern is the psychological state of university students during the Covid-19 circumstances, when uncertainty, and therefore anxiety, have been found to rise among students (Dhar, Ayitney, & Sarkar, 2020); and scholars have drawn attention to the need for the pandemic's ramifications on students' psychological state and well-being to be explored, noting at the same time the long-term and far-reaching impact of Covid-19 on higher

education internationally (de Oliveira Araújo, de Lima, Cidade, Nobre, & Neto, 2020). Relevant studies carried out thus far globally regarding the ramifications of the pandemic and quarantine on university students have shown an increase in anxiety (Busetta *et al.*, 2021; Dhar *et al.*, 2020), stress, and psychological distress; (Husky, Kovess-Masfety, & Swendsen, 2020), fear (Pan, 2020), difficulty in concentration to schoolwork, lack of motivation, depression, and loneliness (Birmingham *et al.*, 2021). Wang and Zhao (2020) found that the university students who participated in their research experienced higher levels of anxiety in comparison to general population. Also, a study from Greece, where also this research originates, indicated a high increase in university students' depression, anxiety, suicidal intention and thoughts, loss of value in life; as well as the deterioration of their quality of sleep, quality of life, and sexual life, as the consequences of lockdown after its first days (Kaparounaki *et al.*, 2020).

Despite the heartbreaking situation formed by the findings above, there is optimism as some studies regarding university students' coping strategies during Covid-19 have shown that students mostly used problem-focused coping strategies (planning, active coping, and use of instrumental support) as well as emotion-focused strategies (acceptance, religion, positive reframing, use of emotional support, and humor), and only little they employed strategies that are dysfunctional (denial, venting, self-blame, and substance use) (El-Monshed *et al.*, 2021). Other studies have indicated that university students tried to handle the psychological impact of the pandemic by studying, sleeping, meditating, doing housework, watching entertaining programs and also the news about COVID-19 (Almomani, Qablan, Almomany, & Atrooz, 2021), or watching TV, playing pc games, writing papers, and reading books (Pan, 2020). Exploring how students handle the stressful situation of the pandemic is crucial since a person's coping strategies can impact his/her psychological well-being and physical health (Park & Adler, 2003).

Taking the above into consideration, this research aims to contribute to this growing area of research by exploring the consequences of the pandemic for university students as well as the coping strategies that students used to deal with the emerging situation. Unlike previous studies that are mostly quantitative, we adopted the qualitative paradigm with an intent to thoroughly understand the research phenomenon from the participants' point of view (Chatzidimou & Stamovlasis, 2014). Furthermore, given that the existing literature focuses mainly on the negative outcomes the pandemic has brought about on university students and, consequently, there is a gap in how resilient young people are and how the pandemic may have helped humans be stronger (Waters, Allen, & Arslan, 2021), we avoided predefined questions to

encourage possible positive consequences to come to the fore. The research findings can contribute to academic faculty's better and deeper understanding of their students and can also indicate the measures that have to be taken in the university for the students' psychological and emotional well-being to be ensured.

METHODOLOGY

The present study was conducted at the Department of Primary Education of the School of Education of the Democritus University of Thrace at the beginning of the winter semester of the academic year 2021-2022. Participants were recruited via convenience sampling (Patton, 1990). Overall, 87 undergraduate students who enrolled in the fourth year of the bachelor's degree in Primary Education Studies and attended a course that was taught by the first author were self-selected to take part voluntarily in the research. These students had previously experienced the strict quarantine measures introduced in March 2020, in Greece, and had attended for three semesters (from March 2020 to June 2021) exclusively their online university courses due to the government's measures to limit the spread of coronavirus. Concerning the participants' profile, 45 were females, 7 males, 34 did not state their gender, while 1 student was stated as genderfluid. The confidentiality of the data as well as the participants' anonymity were guaranteed in advance (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007).

To meet the research purposes, we chose written text as the most suitable tool –in our opinion– for collecting the data since it minimizes researchers' bias and influences upon participants' opinions on research matters (Stravakou, 2019). In particular, the participated students were asked to write, during a teaching hour, a text on the following topic: "How the pandemic has affected us and what we did and do to deal with it".

After the collection of the written texts, qualitative content analysis was used for the content of

the research material to objectively and systematically be presented (Taratori, Stravakou, & Kougiourouki, 2006). The exact stages of the qualitative content analysis applied were particularly the following (Mayring, 2014; Schreier, 2012; Taratori *et al.*, 2006):

1. The gathered written texts were enumerated.
2. The research material was read multiple times for its whole and deep understanding.
3. The units of analysis were determined that were decided to be a word, a phrase, and a sentence, appertaining to the research question.
4. The written texts were read line-by-line and coded according to the specified units of analysis. Here is where the subcategories inductively emerged, either through their original creation or their subsumption to an existing one. At this stage, a decisive step for the subcategories' creation was the repetition of the same units of coding by different participants.
5. The coding system was revised.
6. The main analysis was carried out.
7. The main categories were formed.
8. The two authors, after having conducted the analysis separately, gathered to discuss the coding systems that emerged and resolved any discrepancies.
9. The findings, which emerged and follow in the next section of the paper, are both a frequency analysis of the (sub-)categories' occurrences that were found as well as an interpretation of the findings concerning the research question and the relevant literature.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A frequency analysis of the research findings

Table 1 shows the frequency analysis of the reports of the students who participated in the research. The total number of reports amounted to 462. These reports are distributed into 5 main categories that emerged from the analysis of the research data as follows:

Table 1: The main categories emerged from the analysis

The main categories	No.	Percent (%)
Students' emotions during the pandemic	149	32,25%
The negative outcomes that students reported they have emerged from the pandemic	116	25,11%
Lessons learned from the pandemic	73	15,80%
Coping strategies used by the students to mitigate the consequences of the pandemic	66	14,29%
The positive outcomes that students reported they have emerged from the pandemic	58	12,55%
Total	462	100%

What stands out in Table 1. is the big difference in the appearance of the first two categories in comparison to the others in the participants' texts. Thus, the emotions that students experienced during the pandemic due to this unprecedented situation came first, followed by the negative outcomes that the pandemic brought about in their life. The other categories

appeared with a slight difference between them. More specifically, in declining order, the participated students referred: to the lessons that they learned from this unexpected experience, the strategies that they employed to deal with the pandemic's repercussions on their emotional, psychological, and mental health state; and, lastly, to the positive outcomes that students found

to have been caused by the global hygiene crisis. Coping strategies denote here “an array of conscious behaviors and mental efforts employed to deal with a stressful event or the situation with the aim of minimizing its negative consequence” (Yikealo & Tareke, 2018, p. 2)

In relation to the findings of each main category, the following emerged:

For the 1st category “Students’ emotions during the pandemic”, the participants stressed that

since the outbreak of the pandemic they have been experiencing moderate to high levels of fear. To a lesser extent, they have been uncertain about the future, but they have hope that things will get better. In any case, their emotions during Covid-19 circumstances have not been experienced before, while they have been intense and mixed, which can be also concluded by the findings in Table 2.. Still, several accounts accumulated the emotions of terror and anger, whereas some participants have been sad or have felt a sense of helplessness towards the new and demanding circumstances:

Table 2: Students' emotions during the pandemic

Emotions	No.	Percent(%)
Unprecedented, intense, and mixed emotions	18	12,08%
Fear	54	36,24%
Uncertainty	19	12,75%
Hope	18	12,08%
Terror and panic	14	9,40%
Anger	10	6,71%
Sadness	9	6,04%
Helplessness	7	4,70%
Total	149	100%

As far as the negative outcomes of the pandemic are concerned, the students highlighted their alienation from their friends, siblings, and other human beings; as well as the psychological fatigue and collapse they have undergone due to the insurmountable psychological pressure and stress they have felt. These two consequences were referred frequently by the participants, but the most cited consequence was the

mental health issues that the students experienced, where specifically high levels of anxiety, panic attacks, overthinking, “dark thoughts”, and other depressive symptoms were referred. Only some students expressed the fact that the whole life had to be put in a pause, considering the lockdown measures taken for the pandemic’s restriction, as a negative consequence:

Table 3: The negative outcomes that students reported they have emerged from the pandemic

Negative outcomes	No.	Percent(%)
Alineation	26	22,41%
Psychological fatigue and collapse	26	22,41%
Mental health issues	57	49,14%
Life in a pause	7	6,04%
Total	116	100%

From this tough and difficult experience, the participated students learned that life is unpredictable and nothing in it is a given. Therefore, they are

determined to live the present intensively and life to its fullest:

Table 4: Lessons learned from the pandemic

	No.	Percent(%)
Nothing in life is a given	31	42,46%
Live the present and life to the fullest	19	26,03%
The most important good in life is health	9	12,33%
Social relationships are of paramount importance	6	8,22%
Not to spend on things that do not please them	4	5,48%
All people united can win	4	5,48%
Total	73	100%

Turning now to the 4th category, regarding the “coping strategies used by the students to mitigate the consequences of the pandemic”, it is disheartening that

it came last in the participants’ texts, although the students have experienced such intense and difficult emotions. It is also apparent from Table 5 below that

the students' reports show considerable dispersion among the subcategories that follow, which can be explained by the fact that coping styles are multivariant and, thus, differ among humans (Babicka-Wirkus *et al.*, 2021). However, the students have tried and are still trying mostly to make positive and logical thoughts about the present situation and their lives now, as well as to comply with the measures against the virus in order to be kept safe, while they show patience and

calmness. Some students have been passing their time creatively with various activities and hobbies such as cooking, walking, and reading. Finally, only a few participants mentioned directly that they have been coping with their emotions and the problem in an active manner, while a few others stated exactly the opposite, namely that they have been avoiding the stressful situation:

Table 5: Coping strategies used by the students to mitigate the consequences of the pandemic

Coping strategies	No.	Percent(%)
Positive and logical thinking	19	28,79%
Compliance with the measures against the spread of Covid	13	19,69%
Being patient and calm	11	16,67%
Creative employment with activities	9	13,63%
Active coping with emotions and the stressful situation	7	10,61%
Avoiding and denying the situation	7	10,61%
Total	66	100%

Concerning now the positive outcomes of the pandemic, the foremost positive consequence was the opportunity that lockdown gave to the participants to delve into themselves and rethink life, leading to their self-development. For fewer participants, this crisis was the reason to develop the ability to adapt better and

easier in difficult situations as well as to develop empathy for their fellow human beings who were having a hard time. Others added that the pandemic has helped them to develop their emotion management skills or learn to protect and love themselves:

Table 6: The positive outcomes that students reported they have emerged from the pandemic

Positive outcomes	No.	Percent(%)
Introspection – reconsidering life - personal development	22	37,93%
More adaptable to difficult situations – feeling stronger	14	24,14%
Developing empathy	8	13,79%
Cultivating emotion management skills	7	12,07%
Self-protection and self-love	7	12,07%
Total	58	100%

In conclusion, from the above findings, the following can be concluded:

- The pandemic of Covid-19 and the changes it brought to the people's lives created a highly emotional and distressing situation for the students who took part in the research. Although all the emotions reported were what could be described as negative, the one that prevailed was fear. Nevertheless, there is still hope among the students that everything will end soon, and the pandemic as well as what it created will be nothing but a bad memory.
- According to the participants' point of view, the negative consequences of the pandemic for them were almost twice as much as the positive ones. Still, another finding that should concern us is the large number of the participants' self-reports about the mental health issues they encountered in conjunction with the psychological fatigue and collapse they experienced.
- Despite the intense emotional and difficult experience of the pandemic, the participating

students learned that nothing in life is a given and so they should live the present and life in general to the fullest.

- An interesting as well as disturbing finding also concerns the fact that the participants' self-descriptions of the intense and unpleasant emotions they experienced during the pandemic combined with the negative consequences far outweigh the number of their accounts related to their coping strategies. So, the question arises here as to whether students know, can, or have the skills and the right tools to effectively manage their emotions but also difficult and stressful situations.
- In any case, to overcome the difficulties and stress the participated students have been thinking positively and logically, trying to follow the measures against the virus's contagion to be kept safe, as well as to they have been trying to be patient and calm. Still, some have been employing themselves creatively by doing hobbies and activities.

- Finally, the difficult situation of the pandemic had also a positive impact on students, as it enabled them to deepen themselves, reconsider various issues about life and, thus, develop personally, to increase their adaptability to difficult situations and, consequently, to feel stronger than before, while many developed more empathy for their fellow human beings.

The interpretation of the research findings

The most common reference in the participants' texts about how they have been affected by the pandemic concerns the fear and anxiety they experienced. In most cases, the students reported that they felt moderate to intense anxiety and fear, especially regarding the development of the pandemic and the emerging lockdowns, the possibility of being ailed themselves or their close relatives and friends, as well as the unknown future and the course of their studies during the pandemic circumstances. Some participants mentioned specifically:

There is a strong sense of fear and anxiety about how events will unfold in the future. (Participant 23)

The pandemic has terrified me, I'm afraid because I do not know how to protect myself, if I will be safe, I'm afraid if I or my people suffer (Participant 25)

There were also some students who at the beginning, during the outbreak of the pandemic and when hearing the introduction of the lockdown which meant their return to their parental home in another city, felt happy to rest from their academic obligations or relaxed and enjoyed parental care, considering it to be something temporary. Nevertheless, soon after some time passed and the situation deteriorated while lockdowns were imposed; joy turned into fear, anxiety, and sadness, which in turn led to mental health problems. The following passage of a female student is indicative:

When the pandemic started last year, I thought it would be temporary. I remember the moment I packed five clothes in a suitcase and left by bus for my paternal home ... At first, the days passed quickly, as I relaxed, accepted my parents' care, and thought it was like a short vacation. But as time went on and I did not even leave the house for a short walk, I started to have trouble breathing due to anxiety, sadness, and fear of the unknown concerning my return to my old reality, because I had left a student's life and my boyfriend for an unknown period. (Participant 34)

The rapid changes that the participants experienced in their lives, the new reality to which they had to adapt, the unknown future, the isolation and confinement they had to endure to keep themselves and others safe as well as the intense emotions all these provoked, where in some cases students found it hard to keep their heads above water, triggered mental health

problems to occur. Thus, some participants had experienced severe anxiety and panic attacks. Others mentioned suffering from overthinking or intrusive, negative, and "dark thoughts". The following excerpt from a participant's written text is revealing:

If you asked me to describe the pandemic with a painting, I would make a gallows on a black background and next to it await their condemnation freedom, physical health, free expression, and especially mental health ... I do not want to remember the panic attack I had when I left home on the first day of quarantine to go to the supermarket. Insane people filled baskets with food and ran to catch up. Masks everywhere, gloves and antiseptics on every counter. Everyone was ready for war and scared. People were looking at me with suspicion and I, in the middle, could not breathe. Today, 18 months later, I do not want to remember the horror. (Participant 8)

Several students stated that before the pandemic, in their daily lives, they were surrounded by and socialized with a crowd of people, consisting of their classmates, their teachers, their friends, their partners, their colleagues at work in some cases, and from these relationships they received pleasure as well as they lived happy moments. On the contrary, the need for self-isolation forced them to freeze these relationships overnight and for an uncertain period and live locked in a house with only their parents. Their alienation from their social environment in combination with the strong negative emotions they felt during the confinement and the pandemic exerted intense psychological pressure on them, leading, as several students stated, to their psychological collapse and, consequently, to other devastating consequences as human beings. As a participant characteristically stated: *"The pandemic brought a lot of changes to my life. Initially, I left my place of study and returned permanently to my place of residence. Still, I lost my friends, my daily life, my life. I was very affected psychologically! I was very tired of this situation. I feel like I lost myself."* (Participant 76)

For another student, her psychological exhaustion was so great that it did not allow her to effectively fulfill her academic obligations by attending the online courses conducted at that time:

"The pandemic causes me uncertainty and anxiety. In particular, our confinement affected my psychology to such an extent that it was difficult for me to attend classes. I got to the point where I could not take exams in some courses, not because I was not interested or had not read, but because this whole situation had exhausted me mentally." (Participant 59)

Overall, the above findings that are verified by the quotes of the participants' written texts support that the psychological consequences of the pandemic are multidimensional, having an emotional, cognitive, and

behavioral dimension (El-Monshed *et al.*, 2021). These findings are consistent with previous published relevant findings which indicate that university students have been suffering from anxiety (Baloran, 2020; Dhar *et al.*, 2020), fear (Pan, 2020), worries about their health as well as their families' health (Roy *et al.*, 2020), mental health disorders (Wathelet *et al.*, 2020), or emotional exhaustion (El-Monshed *et al.*, 2021). Although the findings of the present study cannot be generalized due to its small sample as well as the findings should be interpreted with caution since they only rely on the participants' self-descriptions and accounts, they highlight the university students' emotional, psychological, and mental state to be strained and burdensome from the pandemic, a situation that is confirmed by other studies.

This situation should concern all those directly or indirectly involved with university students, and foremost universities and academic staff, who are called upon, when returning to face-to-face education, to apply a pedagogy of care in order to help students heal their psychological trauma (Bozkurt *et al.*, 2020). The open discussion between instructors and students as equal vulnerable individuals (Mehrotra, 2021) about the wounds that the pandemic left – or is still leaving – as well as the search for solutions to cure these wounds, should be at the heart of the educational process. In this context, the educational practices during the latter are recommended to be steered through empathy and care (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2021). Except for the recognition and acceptance of emotions, the situation, and its consequences during the courses; a necessity based on the findings of the present study seems to be for academic faculty to apply positive education (Waters *et al.*, 2021) and teach to students the effective -according to the literature- coping strategies in order students to be able to manage difficult situations and crises, like the one of the current pandemic.

The latter stands as a necessity for the students in our case given the fact that the findings of the coping strategies that the participants stressed to have employed during the pandemic are more than one-quarter of the reports concerning the intense and unpleasant emotions that the participants felt, together with the number of reports about the negative consequences that the participants stated that they were brought about for them by the pandemic. So, although the participated students did experience unprecedented for them and unpleasant emotions, they did feel to be alienated from their social environment and some did suffer from mental health disorders; the findings indicate that they did not deal with them or could not deal with them by using coping techniques. The inability of students to use coping techniques due to the ignorance of such strategies and techniques, which was given by us in the previous subsection of the analysis as a possible interpretation to explain the small number of

references in the texts about the coping strategies found, even seems to be confirmed by a couple of students' texts. Specifically, one participant acknowledged the difficulty of her self-control over her emotions as such: *"Unfortunately, I have not yet found the best way to handle my emotions. Sometimes I find it difficult to control them"* (Participant 59). Another student added: *"It is necessary to cope with our emotions to pull through in this situation. Of course, coping is difficult and even the contribution of an expert is necessary to achieve it."* (Participant 71)

Although the students' immaturity in coping with their emotions can be justified in part by their age (Wang & Zhao, 2020) and their inexperience in life, this is a critical finding since it has been stated that young people's well-being and social and academic adapting are improved when they have obtained social-emotional skills, such as self-regulation and self-control; whereas the attainment of health-related skills generally is an important legacy for both young people and their children to have a better life in the future. Furthermore, people who show higher levels of anxiety or experience continuing stress are seemed to be more susceptible to mental health disorders and physical illnesses, as well as more susceptible to psychological experience are seemed to be humans who lack healthy coping strategies (Yikealo & Tareke, 2018). Still, cognitive, physical, and emotional exhaustion as well as lower academic achievement are also said to be repercussions of continuing anxiety (Babicka-Wirkus *et al.*, 2021). These may explain why the participated students stressed to have been suffering from mental health issues as well as psychological fatigue since, while experiencing strong emotions, such as fear, they did not implement to a great extent coping strategies to mitigate the negative consequences. Almomani *et al.*, (2021) found that the resilient university students in their study employed coping strategies to mitigate the pandemic psychological impact on them, whereas the vulnerable students experienced mood and distress symptoms. An interesting finding in our study is that the students stressed to experience psychological fatigue as well as mental health issues were those who did not mention employing any coping strategy at all.

Consequently, there is a need amidst these special conditions for the students' coaching by mental health professionals to effectively cope with their emotions. Thus, the university is called upon to satisfy this emerging need in the context of its mission to prepare students for their professional arena but also to make them responsible citizens and capable of meeting the demands of human activities (Law 4485/2017), for which it is crucial the acquisition of socio-emotional skills. Therefore, in the context of the students' university studies seem to be of paramount importance their mentoring, coaching, and support on how to deal with the consequences of the pandemic as well as other

potential crises and, generally, on their psychological well-being and socio-emotional skills by mental health professionals.

Despite the small number of the participants' reports on coping strategies, based on the literature, the most types of strategies that the students reported using were constructive. Specifically, the various types of the coping strategies that are available in the literature are classified into two broad categories: a) evasive or disengagement strategies (e.g. denial and distraction), which concern behavioral and cognitive mechanisms employed to escape from the stressor, and b) approach or active strategies (e.g. positive reappraisal of the stressful situation, acceptance, take concrete measures), which concern behavioral and cognitive mechanisms employed to actively react to the stressful situation by altering the problem or the negative emotions accompanying it (Freire *et al.*, 2020). Applying this taxonomy to our relevant findings, it is apparent that the participated students employed the active strategies, like in other studies (Babicka-Wirkus *et al.*, 2021; Falasifah, Fitria, & Hakim, 2020; Yikealo & Tareke, 2018), and, mainly, this of positive reappraisal of the stressful situation. For example, some students particularly mentioned:

"I am trying to think positively" (Participant 7),
"Personally, I try to manage the situation logically and with the thought, that time will pass quickly." (Participant 44).

The cognitive coping skill of positive reframing had the most significant effect on the teenagers' growth through the pandemic in the Water *et al.*, (2021) study. Interestingly, in our research too, the participants who stated to have been stronger due to the pandemic circumstances also referred to have used positive and logical thinking as a coping strategy.

No matter of the coping strategies that the students employed and if they employed any, there were many students who identified and demonstrated the positive effects of the pandemic on their lives, reminding us of the value of seeing the glass half full in all situations, no matter how difficult they may seem. Thus, there were not few participants who found in the necessary social isolation the opportunity to turn to themselves, to reflect on their future, their life, and perceptions, to seek what they really desire for themselves, to challenge old mental patterns and behaviors, and to redefine their priorities. As a female participant described:

"The covid-19 drastically changed the daily life, but mainly the personality and the perceptions of each of us about life as well as the way of our dealing with difficult challenges that can occur at any time ... Finally, like any change, so did the advent of the pandemic clearly show how much we do not like to inconvenience ourselves and how important are the

priorities we set in our lives, which we reviewed in the pandemic." (Participant 68)

Other participants reported that the pandemic made them more resilient in dealing with difficult and dangerous situations and in managing the problems that arise from them. As a result, they admitted to feeling stronger and being more ready to respond in similar situations in the future. However, more participants indicated that the foremost lesson that took from this undoubtedly difficult crisis was the realization that everything flows and that nothing lasts forever, appreciating the greatest gift for every human being that is life itself. That is why many have admitted that from now on they are determined to live their lives to the fullest in every moment. According to a participant: *"The lesson I learned from this crisis is that we must live our every moment to the fullest because it can very easily be turned into a close memory."* (Participant 60)

The novel findings above answer positively to the research gap on whether the pandemic has increased young people's resilience and strength (Waters *et al.*, 2021), supporting that people through the adverse conditions of a crisis or disaster are strengthened as personalities, gain greater endurance in difficulties, be able to face difficulties, living thus a better life (Amirudin, Syamsul, Marnani, Rahmah, & Wilopo, 2021). However, a question that arises is why only some students could obtain valuable lessons from this difficult situation in life. As this study used a small sample size, the positive consequences of the pandemic and the lessons that may be learned from this crisis would be a fruitful area for further work, since these issues have not been adequately explored yet. Additional studies focusing especially on how the pandemic has impinged upon university students' academic achievement regarding their psychological state as well as studies that use valid, tested, and measurable scales are also needed.

CONCLUSION

This small study set out to explore how the pandemic of Covid-19 has impacted preservice Greek teachers from a regional university in the country, as well as to explore how these students were trying to mitigate the consequences of the pandemic for their psychological, emotional, mental, and overall state and health.

The findings of the research showed an expected situation for the consequences of the pandemic which was reflected in previous relevant research that is the students' psychological, mental, and emotional state is particularly burdened due to the unexpected and difficult conditions we are going through. As shown in other studies, the pandemic and the consequent humans' social alienation created a highly emotional and distressing situation for the

university students, giving rise to strong emotions and mainly fear, creating mental health issues, as well as leading them even to psychological collapse. However, the last two circumstances seem in our research to have mainly concerned those students who did not use a strategy to manage their emotions and the other adverse effects of the pandemic.

The current data highlight the additional burden that university teachers are called upon to bear amid this global health crisis, who in the educational process need to apply a pedagogy of care (Bozkurt *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, in university lessons, the near future - and not only - seems to be an urgent need in light of the findings for the adoption of a humanitarian approach by academic staff, where social justice, care, empathy, and equity prevail (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2021). There is a need for academic teachers, as mentors, to show a genuine interest in the feelings, emotions, concerns, and problems of students amid the pandemic, to show a sincere disposition and pedagogical love (Stravakou & Kougiourouki, 2011), caring for the psychological trauma of students, but also of themselves, by building meaningful relationships and showing students good practices according to the literature to be able to manage the difficulties they face. Let the pandemic be the occasion for a redefinition of the pedagogy applied by academic teachers (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2021; Mehrotra, 2021), an opportunity to provide to the society not only professionals but people and citizens with a more integrated personality, who will be able with courage and endurance to face adverse and difficult conditions, whichever they may are.

Another important practical implication concerns universities' mental health services. A key policy priority should therefore be to plan for the long-term care of students' psychological, mental, and emotional well-being regularly workshops, where students -especially the less resilient- receive psychological and emotional support and acquire tools to develop personally, spiritually, and emotionally.

However, despite their emotional strain and burdened psychology, it is particularly hopeful that the students, adopting a more global view of things and critical and optimistic thinking, indicated that in this difficult situation for all of humanity there are positive consequences as well in people's lives but also lessons for a better life. These are novel findings since, before this study, such evidence was purely anecdotal. Therefore, the participated students, as students of life, stated that they have learned great lessons from the pandemic for life itself, and with these lessons they can teach us that nothing is a given in life, that life is small and precious, that it deserves respect and we must live it to the fullest. The pandemic itself for some participants was a lever for their personal development, as during the self-isolation they focused on their inner world, on

their real self; where they redefined their priorities while overcoming the difficulties of the pandemic, which has led them to become stronger, as people and personalities.

The latest findings are also the hopeful message with which we wish to close the article, letting the students themselves give us a great lesson we can learn from the pandemic: Difficulties and crises always exist and will exist in life, however, it is up to us to choose whether in these circumstances we will take the role of a victim or a fighter, who takes the difficulties as an occasion for introspection and personal development as well as appreciates the most valuable gift of life itself.

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