University of Turin
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UNIRES - Italian Centre for Research on Universities and Higher
 Education Systems

QUALI-DaD

**A qualitative study of Italian academics'
distance teaching practices
during the Covid-19 emergency
and the meanings assigned to them**

WORKING
PAPERS
CLB-CPS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report illustrates the findings of a qualitative study that explored Italian academics' relationship with distance teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic emergency. Specifically, 18 focus groups with 4 to 8 participants each were held at several universities throughout the country, for a total of 98 participants. Two focus groups were held at each university, one with faculty members in the humanities, and one with faculty members in scientific disciplines. Participants were heterogeneous in terms of gender and career stage, and were selected at random from the CINECA lists.[1] The focus groups took place online, and were video/audio recorded. The material thus collected was analyzed via a grounded and iterative coding process involving repeated rounds of data analysis and discussion among the researchers.

The analysis led to a number of interesting insights, which have been grouped under four main headings.

A controversial question: The participating academic's accounts of their experience with distance teaching are frequently tinged with contradictions that reflect divergent attitudes. While it is not difficult to find positive notes in the narratives of various participants, they are toned down as the academics themselves are careful not to express any overenthusiasm for distance teaching as a cure-all for every ill afflicting Italy's university system.

Teaching in crisis: The first lockdown[2] was an emergency: from one day to the next, faculty members were forced to overhaul their courses completely

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[1] CINECA stands for Consorzio Interuniversitario del Nord-Est per il Calcolo Automatico, a "non-profit interuniversity consortium of 98 public institutions: 2 ministries, 69 universities and 27 national research, healthcare and educational centers. CINECA is supervised by MIUR, the Ministry of Education, Universities and Research. It provides support for the scientific community, develops management services for university administrations and MIUR, and designs and implement ICT systems for the public administration, healthcare and private enterprise" (https://www.cineca.it/chi-siamo/il-consorzio).

[2] When we speak of the "first lockdown", we refer to the period between March 9, 2020 (the day the Italian government declared that the entire country was a "red zone" and put limitations on all citizens' movements) to May 4, 2020 (the beginning of the so-called Stage 2, when the government allowed businesses and places of worship to reopen).

in order to deliver them online. Distance teaching in the first stage of the pandemic was thus beset with daunting problems. Universities did not have the technological infrastructures needed to support the move online, while faculty members lacked experience in the new teaching methods. As a result, focus group participants were less than satisfied with the way the situation played out. A number of difficulties were reported, especially in handling interactions with students, who had become a *wide, invisible audience*. And they were often a passive audience as well, not least because of the use of pre-recorded lectures and the thorny "surveillance" issues it raises. Moreover, participants stressed that their work hours swelled, erasing the boundaries—already far from firm—separating their private and working lives. It must be borne in mind, however, that difficult though it was, distance teaching also had a positive side, as it made it possible to reach many more students, diversify the channels for communicating with them, and save time in performing certain tasks.

The rediscovery of teaching: with its opportunities and upsides, its difficulties and drawbacks, participants credited distance teaching with bringing the university's first mission "back to the center" of the public debate and of faculty members' thinking about themselves and their work. In particular, participants reported that this experience made them reflect on teaching as a educational and formative practice that should be central to the academic profession, as well as on the relationship with students. These reflections often led faculty members to make innovations in their teaching approach.

Hopes and fears for the future: though their experience with distance teaching during the first lockdown inspired mixed feelings and discordant reactions among the participants, they all agreed that it drove them to rethink teaching's method and aims—so much so that it no longer seems possible to go back to the way things were before the emergency. Both those who wanted to return entirely to traditional teaching, and those who would have liked distance teaching to have a certain weight in the future of Italian universities, hoped that technology could continue to be used, flexibly and sensibly, to support educational practice, becoming part of what some of the participants called *augmented teaching*.

WHERE WE LEFT OFF...

1.1 THE BEGINNING OF THE PROJECT

The unforeseen consequences of the Covid-19 health emergency caught Italian universities by surprise. In a very short time—and surrounded by considerable confusion—they had to find alternatives to in-person teaching if they were to continue to fulfill their educational mission even during lockdown. The emergency thus put the spotlight on e-learning, as faculty and students found themselves having to experiment (willingly or less so, and with widely varying levels of familiarity with Internet-based distance teaching (DT[3]) accessed via digital platforms.

To investigate what went on during this period thoroughly and systematically, the Luigi Bobbio Center of the University of Torino, in collaboration with UNIRES[4], launched a study entitled "*Universi-DaD: Italian academics and distance teaching during the Covid-19 emergency*", which began in April 2020 and was concluded in May 2021. The project, whose title, like that of this paper, features a play on words based on the Italian acronym for distance teaching, "DaD", sought to describe and analyze how Italy's universities deployed strategies for moving teaching onto digital platforms (or other telematics-based systems) in response to the physical distancing measures put in place during the health emergency. Specifically, the project set the following (macro) research questions: *Did all Italian universities respond uniformly? Was there a nationally coordinated response, or were there many different responses that varied according to individual universities' organizational and institutional characteristics? Were there any factors at the institutional and individual level that facilitated or distinguished Italian universities'*

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[3] Henceforth we will use the acronym DT.

[4] The survey was co-funded by the Luigi Bobbio Center at the University of Torino Department of Cultures, Politics and Society and by UNIRES, the Interuniversity Center for Research on Higher Education established in 2009, whose members include the universities of Milano, Pavia, Bologna, Firenze and Torino, the Scuola Normale Superiore, LUIC and the CRUI Foundation. The survey was coordinated by Francesco Ramella (University of Torino) and Michele Rostan (University of Pavia), while participants included Alessandro Caliandro, Flavio Ceravolo, Valentina Goglio, Massimiliano Vaira, Eleonora Balestra, Anna Padoin, Antonella Rizzello and Anna Uboldi.

move to digital?

The project addressed these questions on three analytical levels (macro, meso and micro), taking both the individual universities and their faculty members as the unit of analysis. The study used a mixed-method approach and was organized in three Work Packages (WPs).

WP1 (April - May 2020): The first stage of the project consisted of a review of bibliographic material, public documents and the websites of Italian universities in order to collect information about the strategies for digitizing teaching adopted at the national level and by individual universities.

WP2[5] (June 2020): In the second stage, quantitative data were collected using the CAWI technique. To this end, a questionnaire was administered to a nationwide sample of 3,398 members of the teaching faculty at Italy's state universities[6], stratified by geographical area and academic discipline. Information was collected about agency, relational and longitudinal factors at the micro (faculty members) and meso (department, university) levels.

WP3 (March - May 2021): In the third stage, qualitative data was collected from 18 focus groups consisting of faculty members from different disciplines and universities, which discussed the potential and difficulties of the various approaches adopted for digital teaching.

1.2 FIRST FINDINGS

In addition to providing interesting data on how DT was organized and conducted in Italy's universities, WPs 1 and 2 served as the basis for planning WP3, the subject of this report.

The analyses carried out for WP1 demonstrated that from the beginning, Italian universities were able to establish timely and effective lines of communication about DT with faculty members and the student body, as is essential in emergency situations such as that triggered by the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. Three major achievements in this area should be mentioned here:

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[5] The report for WP2 is available at: https://bit.ly/WP2-report
[6] See the Methodological Note (p. 31) for technical details on how the focus groups were organized and conducted.

- Out of the 85 surveyed universities, only 19 had an average score of 5 or less for the accessibility and completeness of the information provided to the public[7]—a sign that Italy's universities held up well under the pressure of the emergency.
- There were no substantive differences between north and south. The ten universities that had average scores from 9.5 to 10 included schools in all parts of the country, north, south and center. Specifically, they were the University of Torino, the University of Salerno, the State University of Milano, the University of Trento, the University of Ferrara, the University of Firenze, Gabriele D'Annunzio University of Chieti and Pescara, the University of Calabria, the University of Palermo and the University of L'Aquila.
- Analysis of the universities' websites indicated that they introduced fairly similar initiatives in implementing DT (e.g., in how examinations were held, degrees were awarded, etc.). This could be explained by an "affordances effect", or in other words by the fact that most universities used the same corporate platforms (e.g., Microsoft Teams, G Suite, Blackboard, Webex, Zoom) for DT, and these platforms tend to standardize their users' digital practices. Less frequent use was made of open source platforms such as Jitsi Meet, Kiro and Moodle, or platforms developed entirely in-house by the university (see, for example, the Saint Camillus International University of Health).

Lastly, WP1 was useful in determining the form to be taken by the sample for WP3. Specifically, the analyses carried out in WP1 enabled us to identify three basic categories for the subsequent sampling procedures:

- Generalist Universities[8]
- More Controlling & Less Controlling Universities[9]
- Northern, Central and Southern Italian Universities[10]

WP2, through its survey of 3,398 Italian academics, found that on the whole, the Italian university system was able to weather the challenge of transitioning

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[7] The score was calculated from the ratings assigned to each university for two fundamental variables: "*Ease of access to information*" (1 to 10), and "*Completeness and clarity of information*" (1 to 10). A team belonging to the research group examined Italian universities' websites and the information made available to the public, rating how easy the information about DT was to obtain and to navigate/interpret on a scale from 1 (minimum) to 10 (maximum).

[8] Universities offering three- and five-year degree programs in all (or almost all) areas of knowledge (e.g., social sciences, the humanities and STEM)

[9] See the Methodological Note (p. 31) for how this category was operationalized.

[10] See the Methodological Note (p. 31).

to DT during the Covid-19 emergency quite well (Ramella & Rostan 2020). Italian academics rallied quickly, ensuring that teaching could continue: as the quantitative indicators used in the survey show, there were no significant cuts in lecture hours and course content or delays in exam schedules during the second semester and summer session of the 2019/20 academic year. Difficulties, however, were not lacking, such as the unprecedented workload and the stress involved in juggling different roles and activities, as well as the worries about the future role of digital technologies in teaching. In this latter connection, there was a major cleavage among academics: 44% of the respondents would like to abandon distance teaching as soon as possible, while 54% feel that this could be a good opportunity to re-think future teaching even after the emergency ends. A further point that the survey brought (back) under the spotlight is that teaching is just as vital as higher education's other two missions, research and community impact. Likewise, the survey drew attention to the importance of training faculty members in teaching methods. This aspect is often neglected, partly because of evaluation mechanisms that reward investments in research over commitment to teaching.

1.3 THE THIRD STAGE OF THE STUDY

Though the quantitative indicators portrayed a situation that was in many respects positive, where the academic profession gave a good account for itself under difficult circumstances, a few points deserve further attention. An emblematic example is the split between the 54% of respondents who would like at least some teaching to take "hybrid" form after the emergency ends, and the 44% who would like to return as soon as possible to the way things were before the pandemic, retaining nothing of the experience with DT.

The many open questions remaining after WPs 1 and 2 called for a third stage of the study—WP3—to dig deeper into the aspects that had been found to be particularly significant, controversial or ambiguous. WP3's chief goal was to achieve a better understanding of the mechanisms and meanings underlying the findings of the earlier work packages (the desk analysis and, especially, the survey), by analyzing the factors that guided faculty members in their DT practices and approaches, the difficulties and potential of the solutions they adopted, and their attitudes towards the future, given the possibility that the heath emergency will recur and it may be necessary to continue with DT.

Accordingly, the third stage of the study set out to collect empirical qualitative material. In particular, a series of focus groups were held across the country, as described in greater detail in the Methodological Note. In general, WP3 sought to determine which factors at the institutional and individual level had a significant impact on the routes taken in transitioning to DT during the pandemic crisis, as well as the factors that influenced the outlook for the future—such as previous involvement in innovative forms of teaching and e-learning.

Specifically, the research questions for WP3 were as follows:

- *How did academics perceive DT, and what factors led them to perceive it either as an opportunity to design innovative forms of teaching, or as a threat to the quality of teaching?*
- *What role did the complex system of constraints and opportunities offered by the technological affordances, the institutional setting and the cultural meanings assigned by faculty members have in how they implemented and judged online teaching?*
- *To what extent did the new educational methods enable faculty members to rethink their teaching practices and strategies?*
- *What consequences will the DT experiment have on future learning delivery methods, and what are the hopes (and fears) for the post-pandemic scene?*

In this report, we will attempt to answer these questions by concentrating on the four main themes that emerged from the discussions among focus group participants and the subsequent analysis:

- A controversial question
- Teaching in crisis
- The rediscovery of teaching
- Hopes and fears for the future

A CONTROVERSIAL QUESTION

2.1 INTRODUCTION

From the very beginning, moving teaching online as a result of the Covid-19 health crisis sparked widespread criticism of universities as well as of schools. Many intellectuals, educators and parents drew attention to the risks and dangers of a transition that was as sudden as it was improvised, especially when the emergency hit in the Spring of 2020. As the critics pointed out, the transition was made without considering the underlying social inequalities that afflict Italy's schools and universities, and, if no correctives were introduced, would widen social divides.

The debate in the major media revolved around the more negative and problematic aspects of the approach to online teaching taken during the Covid-19 emergency, castigating the assumption that education is nothing more than transmitting knowledge, and warning of the widening gap in the opportunities for access, not only to educational infrastructures, but also to the cognitive and relational support needed to benefit fully from this type of teaching (Sundry Authors, 2021; Cacciari, 2020; Saraceno, 2020). Fears for the quality of learning and students' (and undergraduates') psychosocial development were shared by many of the academics who added their voices to the public debate (Resta, 2020a, 2020b; Rete 29 aprile, 2020). That these fears were far from baseless can be seen from the estimates published by the Agnelli Foundation (Gavosto, 2021), and was recently demonstrated by the results of the INVALSI standardized scholastic achievement tests[11] (INVALSI, 2021), where lower scores pointed to a loss of human capital, especially among the more disadvantaged students.

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[11] INVALSI is the acronym for Italy's national institute for educational evaluation, the *Istituto Nazionale per la Valutazione del Sistema Educativo di Istruzione e di Formazione*. The Institute "is tasked with preparing and conducting regular systematic assessments of Italian students' scholastic achievement (the nationwide INVALSI tests), processing the results, improving the evaluation of the school system and of individual schools, and handling Italy's participation in international investigations of the quality of educational systems." (https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Istituto_INVALSI)

For our purposes here, an important aspect of this media debate was its contentious climate and simplification of the arguments involved, which resulted in two distinct fronts, one quite clearly against DT and another, presumed to exist but never brought into focus, in its favor. While other efforts to digitize education—MOOCs, for example—benefit from extensive media coverage amounting at times to hype (Deimann, 2015; Kovanović et al., 2015), such support was rarely voiced for pandemic-era DT except as an emergency measure. And even statements in favor of its circumscribed use in the pandemic were labeled, sweepingly, as pro-DT.

2.2   DT IN PRACTICE: LOOKING BEYOND THE CONTENTIOUSNESS

This contentious climate was apparent to us from the very beginning of the qualitative stage of the study. The participants' representations of their teaching experience during the pandemic were heavily influenced by the fear that DT could be seen as a feasible route in the medium to long term, after the emergency had ended. During the focus group discussions, there was a palpable—and sometimes explicitly stated—sense of alarm at the idea that DT could prove to be the opening salvo in a campaign to introduce and legitimize a techno-solutionist approach claiming to sweep away all of the university's longstanding problems (such as chronic underfunding, understaffing and the high student-to-teacher ratio) through technofixes rooted in a neoliberal vision of higher education.

Consequently, talking about the DT experience became a sensitive topic. In some cases, just how sensitive it is was immediately clear during recruitment, when even asking whether potential participants were willing to discuss their experience triggered misgivings and doubts about our study's objectivity and value freedom. More frequently, the fact that the topic was sensitive came out during the focus groups, where many participants felt that they had to declare that they were opposed to DT before talking about their experience. These participants thus prefaced their account with a sort of "disclaimer" where they first clarified their position and then felt free to describe what DT had been like for them. The experiences they narrated were quite nuanced and complex, showing a certain degree of ambivalence towards the extra room for manoeuvre and the opportunities for growth and improvement that DT might bring. For the overwhelming majority of participants, this experience led them to ponder the nature of teaching and their role as educators (see section 4.3), going well

beyond simply contrasting DT's pros and cons.

There was something ritualistic about the participants' need to "justify" themselves before saying anything positive concerning their experience with DT. It was a need that was perhaps dictated by the fear that if they mentioned worthwhile aspects of the new teaching method, they might find themselves lumped in with some presumed set of pro-DT ideologues. But while it is true that many participants began their accounts on the defensive, it is equally true that just as many welcomed the opportunity to share their experiences in the open setting of a focus group, where they can leave the confines of their own departments and exchange views (and let off steam if necessary) with colleagues from other areas. For some participants, DT was emotionally very trying, especially during the first stage of the pandemic in the Spring of 2021, but this was to a large extent due to the difficulties and tensions typical of that period rather than to problems with the teaching methods *per se*.

So, overall, my conclusion is: I would never [speaking emphatically] do this [DT] as the best way to hold a course. At the same time, however, (. . .), I have to admit that the outcome in terms of exam grades, of learning, was undoubtedly the best in recent years. (FG1)

When lockdown began, I was about to start my courses and I was convinced they'd be canceled, completely. I would never have thought that at the end we'd be able to put courses online so effectively [speaking emphatically]. And so, at the beginning, naturally, I was very happy because the alternative was terrible: doing absolutely nothing. And my overall assessment, then, was positive given what the alternative was. But if somebody were to ask me, would you rather do it in person or online, I'd say very clearly, in person for as long as I live [speaking emphatically]. (FG6)

It is also interesting to note that the perception of this presumed pro-DT ideology can change from time to time, and there is a certain amount of ambiguity in the positions expressed by the participants, perhaps precisely because of the fear of being labeled as DT supporters as a result of their statements. Labeling, in fact, was commonplace: some participants referred to their colleagues who were in favor of extending DT even after the emergency ended as "hidebound" and "conservative", while others—even though they were critical of DT as it was practiced during the pandemic—nevertheless applied similar terms to people who resisted it, calling them "reactionary and lazy":

As I see it, if you see teaching as something dynamic, as something that evolves, as something where there are always new things to explain, I just don't understand how you can go on doing it with DT, frankly. (FG6)

Going back, I think, in this moment eh. . . shows a lot of laziness in teaching. (. . .) laziness means keeping on doing what we've always done. (. . .) And that, maybe, would have been possible if, as people were saying in March 2020, "we'll be out of this by summer" (. . .) by now too much time has gone by, in other words it would really mean being reactionaries. (FG1)

So there's a distinction between conservatives and traditionalists and a distinction between being progressive and being open-minded, I wouldn't say right wing or left wing, which isn't a distinction I like to use. So the progressives, the ones who are more open-minded, are willing to be open to the potential of technology, without thinking that technology is a panacea, that it solves everything. It's a tool, an additional opportunity. By contrast, those who are the most conservative have two kinds of approach, two motivations: one, which unfortunately exists and I don't like to have to say this, but unfortunately I have to say that for them it's a question of convenience (. . .). Meaning, every innovation casts doubt on my abilities, the trouble I take, brings extra work, and so on and so forth. And then there are those who are really still convinced that reading a good old book is the only way to go, and so multimedia is unworthy of education, of a good education. (FG8)

These arguments, though seemingly contradictory, in reality echo a discursive tendency typically seen in studies of media ideologies (Gershon, 2010), or in other words the set of ideas, beliefs and attitudes that people associate with technologies, in which each group regards its own way of using and approaching technology as the "right" way, making a value judgment about it (Comunello et al., 2020).

Once this barrier was overcome, the wealth of experiences and thoughts voiced in the focus groups provided a solid empirical basis for the considerations presented in this report. However, we believe that the anxieties and pressures that came to light early in the participants' accounts sound a warning for the future. The fact that there was such widespread fear among faculty members shows the need to take a closer look at the state of the academic profession, and the conditions that contributed to making a measure necessitated by an undeniable emergency so threatening. Decade after decade of purported reforms to higher education that brought drastic cuts in public universities' funding,

further reduced the number of faculty members and called their credibility and productivity into question (Favole et al., 2021; Mastropaolo & Sciarrone, 2020) may have factored into the misgivings about the move to DT. Moreover, the contentious climate that arose around DT hindered (but, as we will see, did not prevent) dispassionate debate about the opportunities for individual and collective growth that the crisis may have brought for teaching in general.

However, I also noticed an ideological component, you know? So, an ideological component, or various clearly contrasting ideological components, that are then added to all those patently obvious considerations that ought to be taken into consideration, like those connected to the effectiveness, to the meaning of this experience, let's say, with respect to the ends it's supposed to achieve. And then, tacking ideological considerations about whether they were negative or positive onto these experiences dragged down the debate by quite a lot. (. . .) And that's something a bit . . . , as I see it, something to be avoided. (FG9)

3

TEACHING IN CRISIS

3.1 CRISIS TEACHING AND TEACHING IN CRISIS

Crisis teaching: an apt definition for what took place in Italian universities during the first lockdown (March 9—May 4, 2020). It was a crisis that forced faculty members to completely overhaul their courses—from one day to the next—in order to deliver them online. And it was a form of teaching in which faculty members had no training, and the university was unprepared to support. This is also the perception shared by our participants. For most of them, as the material collected in the focus groups show, the severe shortcomings of the technological infrastructures—the inadequate platforms, lack of technical tools, and spotty Internet connections—together with their unfamiliarity with the new teaching methods, meant that DT was poorly implemented in the early stages of the emergency.

Table 1: *The pros and cons of DT that emerged from the focus groups.*

PROS		CONS
Reaching a larger pool of students, demonstrating commitment	PRE-RECORDING	Copyright, quality, sensitive topics, passive students, proctoring
More channels of communication	INTERACTION	No meaningful connection
Greater accessibility: inclusion, internationalization	INVISIBLE AUDIENCE	Greater accessibility: quality vs quantity
Streamlined practices	TIME	More time spent preparing course material
New skills		Work/life balance
Teaching archive		Lack of feedback
		Fatigue

The participants' accounts put the ambivalence of certain aspects into sharp relief (see Table 1). Two of these aspects chiefly concerned faculty members—pre-recording lectures and time consumption—while two concerned students—interaction with the lecturer and engaging a *wide invisible audience* (boyd, 2011).

We will begin with the question of pre-recording lectures. On the one hand, this can be said to have positive aspects: a larger and more heterogeneous pool of students can be reached (e.g., working students, students living abroad), and lectures can be replayed as often as needed (this is useful for faculty members as well as for students). But pre-recording also involves a number of problematic areas: copyright issues, the ethics of disseminating content, and protecting lecturers' and students' privacy—especially when classes deal with sensitive topics—not to mention the age-old question of teaching quality. For faculty members, moreover, being perennially filmed and continually trying to produce better and better content was a trial: part of the sensation that they are turning into nothing more than content creators.

Sometimes I have the feeling I've become a file. In the sense that my lecture is much more direct, straightforward. Probably with fewer openings, fewer interruptions, which I think is good in some respects, but in other respects, given the subject I teach (...) which has so many facets, let's say that having different approaches to interpreting it could probably enrich it even more. (FG7)

Isn't the risk of recording that you become a youtuber? I say that as a provocation. But the fact is, we record ourselves, somebody listens to us. Where's the feedback in that?

A second particularly ambivalent aspect is that of the interaction with students. On the one hand, moving online increased the channels of communication: take, for instance, the chat groups (which in some cases enable students to overcome their shyness about asking for more clarification), the web forums (where debates and discussion can take place outside of class hours), or faculty members' online office hours, which put meetings with students on a more flexible basis. This is a far wider range of opportunities for student/faculty interaction than was available in the past. On the other hand, however, participants emphasized that this kind of interaction enabled them to establish few if any meaningful connections with students. Before going online, such connections could generally be made through eye contact during class, through informal opportunities for talking, as well as by interpreting students' expressions and body language in the classroom. This latter aspect also had repercussions on

teaching. With less non-verbal communication, participants in some cases failed to provide further information about topics that students had not understood; in other cases, efforts to avoid this risk resulted in repetition and redundancy.

Here, however, we should mention an interesting gap between discourse and practice, or rather, between current impressions and how things really were. Although the participants uniformly maintained that DT severely curtailed their opportunities for interaction and discussion with students, they were equally unanimous in saying that in the "good old days of in-person teaching" classroom interactions with students were quite limited: the initiative would always be taken by same two or three students, exactly as it was during online classes.

At the end of the day, then, online teaching transfers what we also had offline into the realm of big numbers, in a way. At the end, there's the front row that's super-involved, and then in the back... Just think when we have these long, narrow lecture halls with 150 people, we can't even see them. (FG7)

This "contradiction" can probably be explained by the "ideological" fears discussed in the previous section.

A few words are also in order concerning a third aspect, viz., the potential for reaching a *wide invisible audience* of all the students—those with jobs, disabilities, or homes far from the university—who generally find it harder to attend classroom lectures. While DT facilitated these students' inclusion, and their access to course content, it is a method that raises—once again—the question of the kind of teaching service that is offered and, more specifically, whether it can be considered qualitatively significant.

The final particularly ambivalent aspect is that of *time*. On the one hand, DT—and the technological turn it brought—made it possible to streamline many practices, both on the bureaucratic front—signing contracts, for example, or filling in forms and keeping class registers and attendance logs—and in interactions with students. On the other hand, DT drew attention to the amount of time faculty members spend in their teaching activities, which became more burdensome than ever with the need to make video recordings, find supplementary educational material, and organize their courses in greater detail. As the focus groups showed, participants could no longer draw a line between

their working hours and their private time, but were on the job 24/7.

Another thing is the risk that I personally saw in this period, what with its online classes, endless office hours, webinars all over the place, our days were really, twenty-four hours weren't enough anymore. I realized that I often end up at night doing all sorts of research activities that I clearly am not able to do during the rest of the day, because an academic's job is made up of teaching, institutional chores, but it's also—thank god—made up of research. And so, really, in these two years I've realized that it's really enormously difficult to put everything together and that means practically not having a life anymore outside of work. There're no two ways about it. (FG5)

These aspects are especially ambiguous. But there are others that participants described as positive or as negative. Gaining new skills, new technological tools for interacting and for organizing teaching activities, and having created an archive of recordings and supplementary educational material were listed among DT's pros. The cons include the lack of post-class feedback, the difficulties in planning classes without direct interaction with students, and in tapping the information that the "classroom setting" had provided, or in other words all of the spatial and physical signals that could normally be picked up from students. Other negative aspects were less directly related to teaching in the strict sense, and can be summed up under the heading *fatigue*: the heavy workload, the strain of being always in front of the video camera, and the feeling of being continually exposed all undoubtedly made it harder for instructors to keep their courses going.
Looking at the differences between the participants' narratives about the first and second lockdowns[12], we see that the approach taken to DAD differed in the second stage of the emergency, when there was a greater knowledge and mastery of the tools, and faculty members were better prepared.

A further point that came to light in connection with the dynamics of teaching during the crisis regarded the *relationships with colleagues* and the support provided by professional networks. The difficulties and ambivalences reported by the individual faculty members quoted above were experienced in a broader context, where the professional relationships with colleagues in the same university or department, as well as the information provided by the university administration and the professional associations (the Italian Chemical Society,

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[12] Indicatively, the first lockdown (March 9—May 4, 2020) corresponded to the second semester of the 2019-20 academic year, while the measures resulting from the Autumn/Winter 2020-21 lockdown corresponded to the 2020-21 academic year.

for example), which proved to be enormously helpful, especially in the first stage of the transition to distance teaching, when confusion and disorientation were at their height. Many participants credit their colleagues with being their mainstays in the crisis, and often as serving as sources of practical and moral support.

We found ourselves having to start the course just as the pandemic erupted, and so there was a lot of agitation. But I have to say there was also a lot of support from colleagues, or in other words, those we work with regularly, and those we don't, like, younger people, I mean it was an immediate, a mutual coming to each other's aid. (FG12)

As for the veterinary world, for instance, we've got the Italian Association for Veterinary Pharmacology and Toxicology where there's been a section for teaching, about teaching, for some time now. So this thing that normally supports us in delivering in-person instruction has become even more important for distance teaching because we immediately organized a series of meetings and a shared folder with 07 colleagues around the country, where we shared websites, tutorials, material we found interesting. This enabled us to take a more uniform approach to our discipline nationwide and to the kinds of support we fielded for teaching faculty. (FG2)

Participants also mentioned other more institutional forms of support, such as earlier teacher training courses or guidelines updated as the pandemic progressed, which they found very useful.

As a Type B tenure-track assistant professor, my university put me in a very interesting project, which is a project that focuses on innovation in teaching. And so I undoubtedly benefited from these workshops, workshops that they organized, and so I was also helped, I was also guided. I know that there's also a help desk here that faculty members can turn to for assistance in teaching matters. (FG10)

The empirical material, in any case, does not seem to show a significant divide between universities that took a more controlling approach to the transition and those that gave their faculty more leeway in choosing alternative teaching methods. Accordingly, people's perception of the importance and effectiveness of the social networks, whether official or otherwise, that provided faculty members with support does not appear to have been much influenced by the decisions made at the macro level of the university. To some extent, this may be because Italian universities converged on a rather small number of platforms (Teams, Meet, Webex, Moodle, and so forth), which may have contributed to

making practices more uniform and encouraged faculty members to focus more on their day-to-day needs than on the directives emanating from the university.

The extensive interaction and mutual assistance among faculty members and the reliance on professional networks of colleagues in allied or similar disciplines who furnished practical and moral support confirm the importance of the dynamics that can arise in this kind of "invisible college" (Crane 1972), as was found in an earlier study (Ramella, Roncarolo 2020)[13]. As Abbott (2001) noted, the academic profession has strong disciplinary networks, a system of disciplines that transcends the boundaries of individual organizations and even of individual countries, where careers are heavily influenced by each discipline's internal dynamics, and the professional practices dominating each of these disciplines are reflected in how the universities themselves are organized. In a crisis like DT, it is not surprising that these networks should prove to be more of a bulwark than ever.

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[13] https://bit.ly/CLBCPS2-22

THE REDISCOVERY OF TEACHING

4.1 TEACHING AT THE CENTER

Unexpectedly, teaching has moved into the spotlight, gaining fresh relevance. During the health emergency, it suddenly became one of academics' central concerns.

Teaching has also become a crucial issue for the public, and a topic that crops up almost unavoidably both in official discussions and the ordinary conversations that are part of academic life. Nor has the topic "resurfaced" only in discourse: above all, it has affected daily practice and daily work. In addition, this tendency—which we can frame in terms of a rediscovery of teaching—has clearly not arisen simply because there have been so many reasons and opportunities for pondering the subject. As the participants remarked, there has been a true rediscovery, in the sense of a resurgence in the attention devoted to instruction, and, in particular, in the value assigned to it.

In the focus group discussions, the mentions of rediscovery thus point to a keener awareness of teaching's worth. They also reflect an implicit recognition of the shortcomings of the past, when ordinary teaching practices were seen as being of little interest and relatively marginal importance.

The participants' accounts, in fact, refer to a number of aspects that invite us to reflect on the role played by teaching in the Italian university system in recent decades, and on the changes that have been spurred by the pandemic. This unexpected breach of the expectancies of everyday life (Garfinkel, 1967) foregrounded a problem that the participants see as typical of the current university system: teaching ranks low on the implicit but nevertheless pervasive scale of prestige attaching to academic tasks. Several participants stated that DT made them more aware of the dismissiveness generally expressed towards teaching practices in academia. Some, for example, note that:

Now we can try to convince ourselves otherwise, but the fact remains that teaching is the Cinderella [speaking emphatically] of the Italian university, in other words nobody gives a damn about it [...] A lot of people teach very grudgingly, they don't go to class.

[. . .] And so I think this will help [. . .] focus more attention on teaching, which is tremendously valuable [...] it's a basic draw for students [...] but in the dynamics of recent years [...], it's been woefully neglected. (FG1)

Some of the most explicitly critical attitudes that participants aired about university life can be seen in this brief excerpt. Alongside a new consciousness of the importance of teaching, there is also a desire to give voice to a long-felt but long-unspoken impression. In a discursive frame that hinges increasing on teaching, the participants ask whether it is possible, and at times more legitimate, to finally admit the academic world's open secret: its scant regard for teaching duties. These are opinions associated with certain categories of academics, and are often most clearly expressed by early-career faculty. Similar stances are also taken by academics with a more "pedagogical" background and wider classroom experience. Essentially, the faculty members who are more closely attuned to these issues seen to occupy similar positions in academia and share similar forms of capital and experience, making them more likely to look askance at attitudes that were formerly mainstream.

One of the upsides is that, effectively, attention has moved, has shifted, to teaching, finally. And also as, in a way, a parameter for assessing our work which . . . which in tenure and promotion reviews becomes a list of qualifications but doesn't add to your score. (FG1)

And I think that DT, from this standpoint, I mean these approaches ought to make us stop for a minute and think about teaching too, something we weren't used to doing. [...] And I think we should work at this, it's an effort that we, more than ever, have to make in the future as well, or in other words stop and think about how teaching is delivered and received, even when the emergency or the pandemic is over. That's all. (FG8)

In addition to some very firm opinions, there were also less critical and more pragmatic viewpoints, such as those quoted above. All in all, the focus groups offered a nuanced take on what a greater awareness and reassessment of the many aspects of teaching might look like.

4.2 DT: A DEVICE OFFERING DIFFERENT VANTAGE POINTS

In this connection, distance teaching seems to serve as a "socio-technical device" *à la* Deleuze (2002), a device that has been able to offer different vantage points (Ruppert et al., 2013). Essentially, the pandemic's breach of everyday expectancies clearly called for a complete overhaul of even the simplest and most obvious aspects of ordinary teaching practices. DT appears to have torn away the veil of obviousness that shapes the routines of quotidian reality. This loss of the Schützian *epoché* that bracketed the day-to-day world was thus a sort of "ethnomethodological" tool, calling all of the teaching practices that were usually taken for granted into question. Accordingly, the participants' words describe a shared journey from an initial sense of rupture and disorientation to a series of trial-and-error approaches and culminating in unexpected discoveries and a new awareness.

For me, the effort was in really coming out and saying, "hell, I'm concentrating more on the meta-communicative aspects than on the content of the communication"—but that's to be expected [speaking with emphasis]. In the sense that that's also a part of teaching, but in many things, when you're concentrating on a single goal, you also go on autopilot, don't you? In this case, on the other hand, it was all absolutely new. (FG4)

And so it made me discover that I was still capable of enthusiasm, and that's not to be sneezed at, and the fact of being able to improve. [...] So at the end, it also made me rediscover the enthusiasm of teaching which, over the years, a little bit, a little bit gets lost. (FG13)

These changes primarily involved the sphere of unspoken opinions and attitudes about how to "do teaching" on an everyday basis, with repercussions on teaching practices themselves. The picture the respondents paint is one of intense, wide-ranging experimentation, exploration and innovation. The early difficulties in coming to grips with the new tools and the new way of holding lessons were also opportunities for improvement, for example in knowing how to use various platforms for meeting students, applications for exams and lectures, etc. For example:

This situation drove us, it forced us to use other tools [...] around here we talk about life hacking, which is a great expression because it brings a lot of things together, I mean, you've got to be a bit inventive to overcome an obstacle. And so, Kahoot! to Studium,

no?... Exam.net have become my daily bread [...] Perhaps there's an interesting aspect, this, this stimulus for us to find something where otherwise we'd say, "no, no because I don't have time, and so on and so forth". (FG9)

The participants' narratives show them continually working to improve and, above all, to bring themselves up to date. DT thus gave them an opportunity to put themselves to the test, and increase their skills and knowledge.

4.3 REFLEXIVITY

The change in teaching practices and attitudes to them, combined with the fact that faculty members had more time to spend—willingly or less so—"alone with themselves" and the intensive use of digital devices that made it possible to gauge their performance more readily appears to have sparked a virtuous circle whose driver, and whose outcome, was an ever more deeply rooted reflexivity.

The increased tendency towards reflexivity (Beck et al., 1994) regarding how teaching was approached in the past semesters is a crucial aspect emerging from our analysis of the participants' accounts. Faculty members saw this period of crisis as an opportunity to reflect on their own identity, their work and the meaning of teaching and the university system. Their accounts show a difference in the forms of awareness regarding their processes of reflexive self-analysis. There is a particularly sharp divide in level of awareness between academics in STEM and SSH disciplines. Essentially, the participants' narratives speak of many different forms of reflexivity regarding their daily work. However, a number of faculty members in the SSH disciplines seem to have gained a greater awareness of their own strengths and weaknesses.

As we will see, this reflexivity led participants to rethink many hitherto unquestioned aspects of academic life.

4.3.1 *The academic's role and responsibilities*

One of the core themes in the participants' reflections on their working lives is that of the academic's role and responsibilities, often called into question during the DT experience. As one participant observed:

Today, because of the emergency, we've had to learn to use and, perhaps, in a way, they've also spurred us, pushed us to reflect a bit on, on the, on the meaning we give to our teaching, you know. (FG8)

In this discursive frame, teaching is problematized as an educational and formative practice, and not a mere question of transmitting content. For example, one participant explains:

I have to think, I'm thinking about what a university lecture is today [...] The problem is that I've not, in in-person classes [...] I've asked myself [...] fewer questions about what I have to do, about what my role is. It came naturally to me. [...]. But with remote classes, the questions I didn't ask myself before I'm asking now, I'm asking them a bit more. And so, what's my role? Is my role really just talking about innovation and stimulating the kids to be creative? I don't know, it seems to me that there's more to it than that. Do I really only have to think about how to convey information and make sure they understand this information because then they're going to have to use it in their lives, yadda yadda yadda? Well, here I think we're also challenging some old assumptions about my role as, as a teacher. (FG8)

In the participants' words, reflections about what teaching's job should be are linked to deeper value orientations regarding how they see their professional identity and the meaning of their vocation. Along this line of interpretation, the relationship between teaching and research is given critical consideration. Participants take up different positions in this connection, but there are recurrent mentions of the need to problematize and give meaning to academics' twin animating spirits, as teachers and as researchers.

I'm very convinced [...] that research and teaching run in a loop and that that's the way it should be in a, let's say, ideal world, ideal academic world [...] I hope there'll be change and I hope that, with this, there will also be an awareness of creating teachable moments for university faculty. (FG1)

I took it as a challenge. Because I, I and I think everybody connected here, if we're here it's because we're teachers who believe in teaching. It's because we have this, this dual outlook, don't we? On the one hand the world of research, on the other hand that of teaching, and some people are more passionate, let's say about teaching. [...] We're passionate about it and, consequently, I took it as a challenge and I think I'm not the only one. (FG9)

In acknowledging this ambivalence, participants connect it with the distinctive nature of their profession. Accordingly, they note that there is an urgent need to breathe new life into teaching and accord it greater recognition as one of the pillars of university work. Moreover, these considerations are linked to a widespread sense that, in preparing for an academic career, there is a lack of attention to content delivery strategies. This viewpoint is common among younger faculty members in the early stages of their working life.

As, as far as my own personal opinion is concerned, undoubtedly, as our colleagues have stressed, there has been an occasion of enrichment, anyway of learning, no? It has enabled me to improve the educational material, to try to improve how I explain things. It's true, though, that we've had no training, OK, we haven't been trained even for normal teaching, but in a way we've imitated how our own professors taught. And it really takes a lot of time. (FG13)

A common thread running through the participants' remarks is that there is little institutional effort to train faculty members in teaching methods. The pandemic seems to have riveted participants' attention on this particularly fraught issue.

4.3.2 *Relationship with students*

A second core theme that comes to light in the participants' accounts concerns how they problematized their relationship with students, and their approach to presenting content and holding classes. Many of the observations found in this line of discourse are closely connected with the previous theme of roles and responsibilities. Some participants, having to deal with new and unfamiliar online testing procedures, raised questions about proctoring as an aspect—whether needed, advisable or extraneous—of their jobs. Most of the participants' reflections in this area, however, revolve around relational dynamics. For example, several faculty members raised concerns about the relational distance—necessary or obsolete—between the instructor and the student. Differences of opinion apart, DT encouraged greater scrutiny of how dialog between students and faculty takes place, and how important it is.

It put us very much to the test and, perhaps, for this reason too, it gave us the, the strength to try to change our approach, where we could [...] I tried to reinvent myself, from this standpoint, and to seek greater dialog. Well, this, undoubtedly, is what I tried

to have myself, dialog. Not that I didn't have it before, but trying to understand from them what they wanted from me, I mean. (FG4)

Above all, the participants' reflexive effort consists of a willingness to question how much of what is conveyed in a classroom lecture is and can be absorbed by the students. Several faculty members discussed their own methods of presentation and the cultural tools deployed by students to decode the content transmitted to them. In the following excerpt from a participant's remarks, for example, we can see the beginnings of a change in the attitude to teaching, once considered non-problematic but now subject to crucial self-analysis:

I get the impression um... that maybe, in the past, I didn't have a real feel for what was going on in the classroom. In the sense that I had the impression that the students were following [laughs], were understanding everything [...] This year, seeing the mass of questions about very elementary things, very trivial things [...] I've realized that, maybe, even in past years, it's not as if they were following the lessons all that well, just that I wasn't aware of it, you know? (FG16)

Several participants observe that students are less and less independent, less competent in organizing their study, and in fact incapable of taking notes and selecting material:

It's just that now, unfortunately, the kids with everything predigested for them, if they don't transcribe the recordings of our meetings, our lessons and if they don't study from that they can't study at all [...] believe me, I heard my own words parroted back to me at the quiz. (FG17)

Lastly, DT seems to have brought long-standing problems out of the shadows. This is the case, for example, of the issues associated with working students and older students, working mothers and students from migrant backgrounds.

A thing that sticks with me [...] maybe I could and should do much more for the ones who don't come into college [...] this experience has shown that, maybe, in fact, if we get organized to give them more support ... (FG10)

Maybe this experience gives us an opportunity to imagine an augmented teaching, in the sense that this familiarity we have, that we've been forced to have in these two academic years, gives us some opportunities. For example, to tackle the questions we've always dealt with naively: the working student, the pregnant student who needs to

follow the course and wants to follow the course. (FG5)

The experience in delivering DT enabled some participants to view these students in a different light, "discovering" those who, they felt, had all too often been neglected by the university system and by themselves.

4.3.3   *Rethinking the university's role*

A third core theme emerged from the reflexive attitude towards the problems encountered during day-to-day experience with DT. An array of minor aspects—such as those associated with organizing classes and communication with students—seems ultimately to have led participants to weigh the role of the university as an institution.

The participants focused on wide-ranging issues involving their universities' modes of operation. In particular, their accounts reveal a concern with what they see as a shift towards greater inclusivity on the part of the university. This is an issue raised by a number of participants, who take different stances.

Some faculty members maintain that the new visibility gained by the group of "atypical students" (working students, young mother, older adults, the disabled, migrants, political refugees and so forth) through DT can prove pivotal in leading to educational inclusion policies and promoting higher education, not least in the form of lifelong learning.

For a certain type of student that's been systematically ignored by the university, who's never been taken into account, this tool is enormously valuable [...], it has to be used a lot, really a lot because, as I say, otherwise the university, or culture with a capital C, would not have one of its fundamental roles, which is to disseminate knowledge to everyone without discrimination. (FG11)

By contrast, other participants see various dangers in this trend arising from the DT experience. A minority believes there is a risk of moving towards an institution which, though inclusive, is inevitably leveled downwards, unable to pursue selective goals. For example, some faculty members lament the tendency to make the university more like high school. Others fear that there will be a false democratization, where DT is merely a substitute for concrete, effective

social policies in support of students.

It's true, but what a serious university has to do is reach the students in the little out-of-the-way towns? Because if they stay in the little out-of-the-way towns they'll always be marginal. The role of the elevator as, of the university as a social elevator is lost if we think we're going to bring the lessons to them, leaving them in isolation like monads. The social elevator works when social interaction is created and social interaction is created in person. And so, it's true that we seem to be elitists and indifferent to the needs of the poorer fringes. But the needs of the poorer fringes are not met by giving them DT, they are met in other ways. (FG9)

Essentially, reserving online courses for certain categories of student could be a subterfuge to justify a creeping retreat from any attempt to design and deliver effective measures for disadvantaged students, such as income support and residence halls. In this connection, some participants argue that online teaching could heighten inequalities in educational opportunities rather than reduce them, because it would become a mere palliative masking the lack of an effective defense of the right to study.

5

HOPES AND FEARS FOR THE FUTURE

As we have seen, instruction during the first lockdown was perceived more as *crisis teaching* (Hodges et al. 2020) than as *distance teaching*: a situation where faculty found themselves completely unprepared to hold courses with unfamiliar tools and procedures. While many points were raised, one thing certain is that teaching can no longer be the *Cinderella of the university*. The pandemic forced academics to reflect on their teaching, devoting more time and energy to it, but it was also a chance to take another look at methods that had been picked up in the past and often perpetuated unthinkingly. What happens, then, when academics are invited to think, to picture what the teaching of tomorrow could be? What happens when they are asked to voice their hopes and fears?

One of the main findings of the earlier quantitative study was that there is a cleavage between academics who would like to combine the new methods and tools in their teaching methods, and those who would prefer to go back to the way things were before the pandemic. The qualitative survey, however, presents a different picture, which heralds an inescapable change.

Undeniably, there are also advantages (…) objectively we can't go back, it's not possible, I don't think it's possible. (FG1)

One basic consideration that all in all I think that our work has changed, and that it's changed definitively because I don't think we'll go back. (FG7)

The creative disruption (Christensen et al., 2011) brought by the pandemic encouraged academics to think about—but above all to rethink—the teaching methods that had been used until then. Undoubtedly, gaining new skills, learning new tools, new ways of teaching had a major impact on how teaching itself was conceived. In looking at the continuum between those who hope for a return to traditional teaching and those who picture a more blended learning approach, we can see a least common denominator: the digital channel as a supplementary teaching tool. Being obliged to use technological tools enabled faculty members—whose appetite for tech varied considerably—to see first-hand what the benefits might be: the ability to share additional material

more readily, to interact in class with more orderly methods, to have a platform facilitating teacher-student and student-student interaction. With this whole new range of opportunities in the offing, some faculty members have spoken of *augmented teaching*: instruction delivered in person but enhanced by the affordances of technology.

When I talk about augmented teaching, this is what I'm talking about. I'm talking about a kind of in-person teaching that represents the heart of the teaching action, supported, augmented as it were, by these tools. (FG5)

Though the upside of using technology was widely acknowledged, one of the aspects that was most heavily stressed was that online teaching can complement in-person teaching but never replace it.
Interacting with students, getting to know them as individuals and creating shared moments all have an undoubted impact on the quality of teaching. Nor should we forget that certain types of content are far more difficult—and in some cases impossible—to convey in the virtual classroom. How well the latter works hinges on many contributory factors: the number of courses, their timeslots, and students' experience. This is why getting content and medium to mesh together effectively is such a crucial issue. As there are so many different types of course, instructors must be able to establish what tools are best suited to their goals, in what we might call *organizational flexibility in teaching*, or in other words a reorganization with an array of opportunities, tools and methods that faculty members can choose from. The idea is to make the technological tool fit the content to be conveyed, rather than the other way round.

What participants would like to see is blended teaching, meaning a blend of activities delivered through different channels, rather than a blend of students in the classroom and students attending remotely. This is a necessary distinction, since there is often confusion about the meaning of this term, and assigning different meanings leads to radically different results. A blend of online students and students in the classroom is decidedly unpopular with the participants, who maintain that it risks creating "children and stepchildren", as well as being seen as *schizophrenic* by instructors who find themselves having to interact simultaneously with students via different channels.

This thing doesn't work, it's especially schizophrenic for the teacher and since it's schizophrenic for the teacher it penalizes the student. (FG15)

Thus, what participants hope for and expect is a new, more aware kind of teaching that can learn from the pandemic experience and that, through the joint, participatory contributions of faculty members and students, can lay the foundations for rethinking educational provision. Investments will be needed in faculty training as well as in physical and technological infrastructures, given that those that are now available are obsolete, especially by comparison with those habitually used in daily life: social media such as Facebook, Instagram or YouTube, for instance, offer more interactive platforms, more attractive graphics, and more user-friendly operation.

This is an issue that can only be addressed at the level of university policies. The choices pursued from now on will have an enormous impact on teaching. A university that enables students to attend remotely will undoubtedly see enrollment rise. Participants do not necessarily regard this as positive: the potential for more varied programs, a larger number of courses and the increase in teaching hours raises a fundamental question: how will teaching quality be affected? What kind of education will the university be able to provide?

Whether teaching is in person or remote, the teacher/student ratio is always a key indicator, because quality teaching calls for small numbers and abundant resources. These are aspects that were already problematic well before the pandemic broke out.
The illusion that university can be attended via smartphone can not only lead to demagogic tendencies, but there is also a risk that it can fuel a belief that solving complex problems such as increasing inclusiveness at the university or facilitating access to education is simply a matter of using the right technology.

We see rights increasing. For example, I'm thinking of some classes, some categories of individual; the right of working students, or of pregnant students. But the role of a community, isn't it to make it easier for these people to access a university education? And so, the risk of continuing with DT is that I wouldn't want it end up by rolling back rights we already have and that in fact should be bolstered. (FG14)

Let's have this struggle, then, which is a struggle against the system[...]. Because unfortunately courses for people who can't attend are increasingly discouraged by the system because the system isn't interested in integrating people who aren't already integrated in some way in their own equilibrium with society, But we should do more. (FG18)

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The broader research project underlying this second working paper set out to investigate how Italian academics responded to the transition to distance teaching necessitated by the restrictions imposed because of the Covid-19 health emergency. The first working paper presented the findings of a survey of a sample of Italy faculty members' experiences with alternatives to in-person teaching during the emergency, the practical difficulties they encountered, and their expectations for the future (when it was still hoped that the DT experiment would not be continued the following year). This second working paper has sought to explore and understand the meanings that lay behind remote teaching practices, exploring faculty members' experiences and their representations of them. The stories collected from the 18 focus groups conducted in 10 Italian universities cast light on several key themes running through faculty members' experiences that can be useful in understanding the current situation and, above all, in planning for the future.

A NEW AWARENESS OF TEACHING PRACTICES

One of the first points to emerge was that distance teaching during the pandemic proved to be an unexpected opportunity for individual and collective reflection about teaching. At long last, teaching returned to the center of attention. Though it is one of the university's three fundamental missions, up to the time of the pandemic it had been overshadowed by research and even by the third mission of benefiting society. By throwing practices that academics had always taken for granted into turmoil, the Covid-19 crisis set in motion a process—though not necessarily a conscious one—that led faculty to spend more time thinking about their teaching methods and lesson content, as well as their role as educators and members of a community.

This experience—almost traumatic for some participants—has returned teaching to the forefront of the academic debate. More than that, it has demonstrated the importance of providing faculty members with training in teaching methods and laid bare the distortions wrought by the university's system of career incentives. Research and academic output enjoy far higher status in tenure

and promotion reviews, while commitment to quality teaching is not equally rewarded. Distance teaching could thus prove to be the shock that brings a fresh start for rebalancing the university's three missions.

A DIVISIVE ISSUE

While this experience made faculty members more conscious of their teaching methods, distance teaching was also a sensitive issue among the public at large. Fueled by particularly critical media coverage, the debate on distance teaching during the Covid-19 emergency often framed the far more nuanced stances taken by academics in terms of black and white, for and against. Looming in the background of the participants' accounts, we see the fear that technosolutionism—the belief that there is a technological fix for everything, even complex social problems like access to education and inclusion—will take hold, and that the current situation may be yet another excuse for further cuts to the chronically underfunded public university system. Consequently, many of the participants showed a defensive attitude at the outset of their accounts, voicing strong opposition to DT, but the experiences they related provide a more multi-faceted, thoughtful picture, not of a clearcut division of pros and cons, but of alternating benefits and disadvantages.

A UNIVERSITY SYSTEM IN NEED OF RETHINKING

As regards the prospects for the future, participants feel that in-person teaching could benefit from the lessons learned from the experience with DT during the pandemic. Nevertheless, going back to in-person classes is still the ultimate goal. While many participants agree that some forms of instruction mediated by technology can also be useful in the future, they can only be a supplement to in-person teaching, if possible complementing it. It is widely felt that the pandemic, and the changes it has brought (not just in education, but in society in general) will continue for some time, and going back to the way things were before is thus neither possible nor to be desired. For this reason, then, the participants believe that it is particularly important to recognize that the transformation in teaching must not end with the emergency that sparked it. Their hope is that there can be a thorough rethinking—guided by the universities (and by the Ministry) and engaging all members of the academic community, students included—of teaching policies and more generally of the development model to be pursued for the Italian university system.

METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

In the third stage of the project, qualitative data was collected from 18 focus groups consisting of faculty members in different disciplines from universities around the country who were invited to discuss and exchange views about distance teaching.

This stage took place in three steps. The first consisted of planning the focus groups and preparing the tools to be used for them. These tools included:

- A guide indicating the issues to be discussed and the prompts and probes used to stimulate discussion
- The Informed Consent Form, both on Google Forms and in PDF format
- A questionnaire covering participants' sociodemographic characteristics.

As regards focus group planning, an equal number of universities exercising a high and low level of control over the choice of alternative teaching methods were selected from the institutions across the country to ensure that the groups were representative. Level of control was classified on the basis of faculty members' responses to the questionnaire administered in June 2020 during the second stage of the research project. Specifically, the answers to the following question were used:

B2. Were you able to choose what kind of distance teaching you used?
(a) *Yes, I was able to choose in complete independence, without restrictions*
(b) *Yes, I was able to choose from a number of options offered by my university/department*
(c) *No, I was not able to choose, I had to follow the instructions given by my university/department*

The variable thus taps the level of control perceived by faculty members. Universities where over 50% of faculty members selected the third response option were classified as exercising a high level of control, whereas those where this option was selected by less than 30% of respondents were classified having a low level of control, and thus leaving greater freedom of choice to their teaching staff.

The low-control universities included:
- University of Torino
- University of Pavia
- University of Calabria
- University of Roma
- University of Milano

The high-control universities were:
- University of Napoli Federico II
- University of Cagliari
- University of Catania
- University of Bologna
- Catholic University of the Sacred Heart

A total of 10 universities around the country were thus selected:
- 4 in the north
- 2 in central Italy
- 2 in the south
- 2 in the islands

   Two focus groups were held at each university—one for the scientific disciplines and one for the humanities—following the principles of homogeneity as regards the discipline taught, and of heterogeneity (Kunda, 1992) as regards sociodemographic characteristics such as gender and career stage (see Tables 1 and 2). Having a heterogeneous sample enabled us to be more confident that the cultural trends we observed were objective, given that they were encountered recurrently in uniform social groups (Cardano, 2003).

Table 1: *Categorization of focus group participants*

		Sex	
		Men	Women
Career stage	Early	Non-tenure temporary assistant professors Tenure-track assistant professors	Non-tenure temporary assistant professors Tenure-track assistant professors
	Advanced	Associate professors	Associate professors
		Full professors	Full professors
		Tenured assistant professors	Tenured assistant professors

Table 2: *Focus groups*

| | | Type of DT governance | | |
		Low-control	High-control	Total
Discipline	STEM	2	4	6
	SSH	7	5	12
	Total	9	9	18

Table 3: *Participant sociodemographics*

Sociodemographic characteristics	No.
Women	51
Men	47
Average age	47,2
Min/max age	31/70
With children	50
Non-resident in city of university	25

Faculty members were selected from the CINECA lists[14]. All names were saved in an Excel file and cataloged by university, disciplinary area, gender and role. Each academic was assigned an ID, and the names of the candidate focus group participants were drawn at random. Each candidate was contacted individually at his or her institutional e-mail address (available on the Web) and asked to express a preference among a number of time slots proposed via a Doodle poll. If there was no response to the e-mail, a follow-up e-mail was sent 7 to 10 days after the first. If there was no answer or a negative answer to the second e-mail, the names of further candidates were drawn and contacted. All information regarding the contact sequence was entered on an Excel file in order to keep track of contacts and responses.

Once a feasible date for the focus group had been identified, it was communicated to the participants together with the time and a link for participating

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[14] Lists are available at: https://cercauniversita.cineca.it/

in the meeting. A reminder was sent on the day preceding the meeting, and participants were thanked afterwards by e-mail.

The planning stage was followed by the second stage, in which the focus groups were conducted. In view of the continuing health emergency and the restrictions on mobility, all focus groups met remotely on the Webex platform. Regular exchanges between members of the research team and a trial focus group made it possible to calibrate the theoretical and methodological tools used in the focus group technique, as well as the procedures used by the group facilitators and observers. After the trial focus group, the guide, prompts and probes were revised in order to more effectively steer the conversation to the research questions.

The focus groups lasted an hour and forty minutes on average, while the number of participants ranged from 4 to 8; a total of 98 academics thus voiced their views[15]. All focus groups were conducted by a facilitator and an observer (who took notes of the discussions and the salient dynamics). Meetings were video- and audio-recorded; the audio recordings[16] were first transcribed automatically using Amazon Transcribe, and then reviewed and transcribed manually.

Transcriptions were analyzed using a grounded and iterative coding process (Altheide, 1987): the analysis categories with which the various sections of the transcriptions were coded emerged naturally and gradually in the course of the many sessions where the four researchers who drafted this report read and discussed the material. Intensive collaboration among the researchers ensured that the analysis categories thus constructed were as objective as possible and made it possible to resolve any conflicting interpretations of the findings (Krippendorff, 2012). Through a further iterative and collaborative process, the analysis categories were then clustered into the four main narrative themes that provide the framework for this report (Morgan, 1996).

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[15] Initial plans called for organizing focus groups with 8 participants each. After the trial group was held, however, we opted to reduce the target number to 6. Conducting a focus group on a Web platform, in fact, seems to hamper the interaction and dynamism typical of this research technique, making interactive exchanges more difficult.

[16] No specific analysis was carried out on the video recordings. Sittings were video-recorded as well as audio-recorded simply because they were held remotely via Webex, which automatically takes both audio and video.

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