

# Nursing Graduates' Perceptions of the Academic Experience in the Pandemic and Post-pandemic Period of COVID-19

Percepções dos Graduandos de Enfermagem Sobre a Vivência Acadêmica no Período Pandêmico e Pós Pandêmico da COVID-19  
Percepciones de los Licenciados en Enfermería Sobre la Experiencia Académica en el Periodo Pandemia y Post Pandemia Del COVID-19

## RESUMO

**Objetivos:** descrever as percepções dos graduandos de enfermagem sobre a vivência acadêmica no período durante e pós pandêmico da COVID-19. **Método:** Trata-se de uma pesquisa qualitativa e exploratória realizada através de entrevistas com 23 alunos cursando o terceiro e quarto ano de graduação em enfermagem no ano de 2022. Utilizou-se como referencial teórico a subjetividade de Fernando Gonzalez Rey e análise de conteúdo de Bardin como método de análise de dados. **Resultados:** Foram elencadas duas categorias de análise: Dificuldade de adaptação ao ensino remoto e O processo ensino-aprendizagem presencial pós pandemia. Observou-se nas categorias que a metodologia remota exacerbou o sofrimento psíquico em alguns participantes, todavia, alguns alunos não demonstraram dificuldades. **Conclusão:** O impacto do ensino remoto é inequívoco, ainda que as experiências possam trazer percepções diferentes, portanto, os resultados dessa pesquisa não são generalizáveis.

**DESCRIPTORIOS:** Educação em enfermagem; COVID-19; Educação à distância; Enfermagem; Saúde mental.

## ABSTRACT

**Objectives:** To describe the perceptions of nursing students about the academic experience during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. **Method:** This is a qualitative and exploratory research carried out through interviews with 23 students studying the third and fourth year of their nursing degree in 2022. Fernando Gonzalez Rey's subjectivity and Bardin's content analysis were used as a theoretical framework as a data analysis method. **Results:** Two categories of analysis were listed: Difficulty adapting to remote teaching and The in-person teaching-learning process after the pandemic. It should be noted in the categories that the methodology remotely exacerbated psychological distress in some participants, although some students did not experience difficulties. **Conclusion:** The impact of remote teaching is unequivocal, although experiences may bring different perceptions, therefore, the results of this research are not generalizable.

**DESCRIPTORS:** Education, Nursing; COVID-19; Education, Distance; Nursing; Mental health.

## RESUMEN

**Objetivos:** Describir las percepciones de los estudiantes de enfermería sobre la experiencia académica durante y después de la pandemia de COVID-19. **Método:** Se trata de una investigación cualitativa y exploratoria realizada a través de entrevistas a 23 estudiantes de tercer y cuarto año de la carrera de enfermería en el año 2022. Como marco teórico se utilizó como método de análisis de datos la subjetividad de Fernando González Rey y el análisis de contenido de Bardin. **Resultados:** Se enumeraron dos categorías de análisis: Dificultad de adaptación a la enseñanza remota y El proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje presencial después de la pandemia. Cabe señalar en las categorías que la metodología exacerbó remotamente el malestar psicológico en algunos participantes, aunque algunos estudiantes no experimentaron dificultades. **Conclusión:** El impacto de la enseñanza remota es inequívoco, aunque las experiencias pueden tener percepciones diferentes, por lo que los resultados de esta investigación no son generalizables.

**DESCRIPTORIOS:** Educación en Enfermería; COVID-19; Educación a Distancia; Enfermería; Salud Mental.

RECEIVED: 03/06/2025 APPROVED: 03/19/2025

**How to cite this article:** Camilo SO, Ichikawa CRF, Liubartas NC, Lopes SG, Fernandes IC, Filipini R, ES Souza, Moretto SA. Nursing Graduates' Perceptions of the Academic Experience in the Pandemic and Post-pandemic Period of COVID-19. *Saúde Coletiva* (Edição Brasileira) [Internet]. 2025 [acesso ano mês dia];15(95):15752-15767. Disponível em: DOI: 10.36489/saudecoletiva.2025v15i95p15752-15767

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## INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 was declared a pandemic in March 2020, starting in the city of Wuhan, China, in December 2019. It spread rapidly due to its high transmissibility, becoming a global public health problem.<sup>(1-4)</sup>

According to a report by the World Health Organization, as of June 2020, 6,287,771 confirmed cases and 379,941 deaths from the new coronavirus had been reported, mainly affecting the American and European continents.<sup>(3-4)</sup>

The first case was confirmed in Brazil in the city of São Paulo on February 26, 2020, and the disease spread throughout the country, with community transmission declared nationwide on March 6, 2020. As of September 28 of the same year, 4,745,464 cases and 142,058 deaths had been reported nationwide.<sup>(3-5)</sup>

In view of this, the Covid-19 pandemic has led to a serious global health, economic, social and political crisis, making the participation of Nursing fundamental and significant, whether in direct or indirect assistance.<sup>(4)</sup> Countries around the world have planned and implemented

measures in accordance with WHO guidelines, emphasizing social distancing and hand hygiene measures to combat the Covid-19 pandemic.

In Brazil, the government has determined some restrictive measures such as the creation of quarantine, which, according to Law No. 13,979 of February 6, 2020, defines the way in which both essential and non-essential services operate.<sup>(6)</sup> This measure was created with the aim of reducing the proximity of people and thus controlling the transmission of the new coronavirus. The emergency phase was another restrictive measure stipulated by the government, which was characterized by a curfew and had stricter rules, due to the significant increase in cases.<sup>(6)</sup> Therefore, they stipulated at this stage that only essential services such as pharmacies and hospitals would operate during normal hours, reducing and limiting the operation of other services.<sup>(6)</sup>

These measures implemented were part of social isolation, which aimed to reduce communication between people, in order to isolate potentially infected individuals and prevent the spread of the virus.<sup>(7)</sup> However, social isolation has interfered in several as-

pects of the population's daily lives, leading to feelings such as insecurity, helplessness and loneliness.<sup>(7)</sup>

Social isolation and other measures adopted against the pandemic, such as the closure of schools and universities, have caused new stressors in people's lives, the interruptions to daily life have been very significant for most students around the world.<sup>(7-8)</sup> Periods of confinement have been associated by studies with less time dedicated to learning, greater stress, changes in relationship patterns and lower motivation.<sup>(8-10)</sup>

Several studies have demonstrated the negative impacts of the pandemic on the mental health of university students, particularly the increase in depressive and anxious symptoms.<sup>(4,7-11)</sup> College students who have maintained a full- or part-time online learning experience for a long time have shown more negative effects from the pandemic and a more pessimistic outlook on life.<sup>(11)</sup>

Thus, we assume that nursing undergraduates have already been the subject of scientific studies that pointed to vulnerabilities related to mental health during the pandemic, and that they are a clientele prone to

developing diseases. Even after the pandemic was under control, we believe that repercussions on academic life became the focus of attention, considering a disruption in the study routine, the postponement of academic tasks and activities, the delay in the course schedule, the expectation of university education and future professional plans.<sup>(4)</sup>

Nursing training is a teaching-learning process with theoretical and practical classes, essential for a solid education, enabling generalist nurses to work in the most diverse scenarios in the health area. Social isolation and the consequent interruption of in-person practical classes, as well as the suspension of internships, generated short, medium and long-term impacts on all aspects of the learning of nursing undergraduates.

Given the relevance of the problem, this study aims to understand the perceptions of nursing undergraduates regarding their academic experience, given the pre- and post-COVID-19 pandemic, so that we can establish preventive measures and possible support projects if necessary. Through this study, we intend to support assistance to nursing undergraduates in a context of firm purposes, in order to contribute to a teaching-learning process worthy of human complexity.

For this process to be meaningful, it is important for the teacher to be open and attentive to the needs and feelings of the students. Likewise, it is necessary for the student to also be open and attentive to his or her own feelings and needs, so that we can, in a complex way, understand this student in his or her entirety, in order to help them.

Therefore, this study aimed to understand the perceptions of nursing undergraduates about the academic experience during the COVID-19 pandemic and post-pandemic period.

## METHOD

This is a qualitative and exploratory research that seeks to provide greater familiarity with the problem, improvement of ideas, the discovery of intuitions and the description of the characteristics of a given population or phenomenon.<sup>(12)</sup>

Qualitative research has the ability to describe the complexity of a given hypothesis or problem, analyze the interaction of certain variables, understand and classify dynamic processes experienced by social groups, present contributions to the process of change, creation or formation of opinions of a given group and allow, to a greater degree of depth, the interpretation of the particularities of the behaviors or attitudes of individuals. The researcher interprets various levels of abstraction, identifying the characteristics and meanings of the human experiences that are described by the subjects.<sup>(13)</sup>

The study was conducted with 3rd and 4th year students of the Nursing Undergraduate Course at a University Center in the Greater ABC region. The participating students experienced the pandemic context when they were in the 2nd and 3rd year of the course.

The population consisted of all third-year students in 2022 and fourth-year students in 2022 of the Nursing undergraduate course, totaling 60 students. These students experienced social isolation and consequently the interruption of in-person practical classes, as well as the suspension of internships. However, only 23 students agreed to participate in the research. Five attempts were made with each absent subject, however, the students who did not agree claimed lack of time.

The inclusion criteria for this study were: students over 18 years old, in the third and fourth year of

the Nursing undergraduate course who had experienced the pandemic period.

The exclusion criteria were: students who had a course suspended or had some type of absence from the course during the pandemic period.

The data were collected from March to May 2021. Individual interviews were used for data collection, which were recorded with the consent of the participants. To this end, each participant was guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity of their reports after they agreed and signed the Free and Informed Consent Form. The interviewees were identified in the study with the letter E followed by the numerical order in which the interviewees participated in the data collection.

Interviews as a data collection technique are important when it is necessary to understand practices, beliefs, values and classification systems of specific social contexts, more or less well defined, in which the antagonisms and divergences are not clear enough.<sup>(14)</sup>

Participants were contacted individually, and those who accepted were interviewed according to their availability. The interviews lasted approximately 10 to 30 minutes and were conducted in a private room previously scheduled in the study setting.

Before the interview began, participants were given an instrument that addressed their characteristics. After filling in this information, the interview began with the following guiding questions: How was your academic experience during the COVID-19 pandemic? How did you perceive your mental health in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic? How did you perceive your mental health in this post-COVID-19 pandemic context?

For data analysis, Bardin's Content Analysis method was used to reach

the manifest and latent meanings obtained in the In-Depth Interviews. This technique predominates in the approach focused on the activity of the individual, who is the creator of their knowledge based on their personal and social experiences and values, in addition to recovering the historical character of each individual reality.<sup>(15)</sup>

Gonzalez Rey's theory of subjectivity was used as a conceptual framework. Subjectivity is part of a complex and historical process that escapes human control. The author emphasizes that, when studying subjectivity, the relationship between the individual and society is indivisible as moments in the constitution of the subject, breaking with dichotomies that are very present in psychological thought, such as social and individual, internal and external, conscious and unconscious, cognitive and affective.<sup>(16)</sup> The idea of subject recovers the dialectical and complex character of man, of a man who simultaneously represents a singularity, a social being, a relationship that is not of external determination, but a recursive relationship in which each one is simultaneously implicated in the pluri-determined configuration within which the action of the other manifests itself.<sup>(17)</sup>

The procedures for data analysis were carried out based on the conceptual framework of Gonzalez Rey's Theory of Subjectivity and the proposed objectives. They are: full transcription of the recorded interviews and a reading of the texts based on a floating attention. Subsequently, other re-readings were carried out, alternating listening to the recorded material with reading the transcribed material. Next, through a new re-reading, words and phrases from the original texts were highlighted, identifying convergences and divergences, then the first cut-out of the highlighted words and phrases

in each interview was made. A new re-reading of these cut-outs was made and a second cut-out of the phrases and words was made, after obtaining the words and phrases with their meanings and senses determined by the interview, we sought to identify the convergences and divergences between all the phrases, for the construction of the categories and finally, after the construction of the categories, the data was discussed.

This study used human beings, who are nursing students from a private college in the metropolitan region of São Paulo. In compliance with Resolution No. 466, of December 12, 2012, the study will be submitted to the Research Ethics Committee affiliated with the National Council for Research with Human Beings (CONEP)<sup>(18)</sup> under approval No. 5,673,417.

In preparing this study, the criteria for reporting qualitative studies, present in the Consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research (COREQ) checklist, were taken into consideration.<sup>(19)</sup>

## RESULTS

Twenty-three students participated in this research, nineteen of whom were female and four were male. Regarding marital status, twenty people were single and three were married. Regarding religion, twenty people reported belonging to a religion and three had no religious beliefs. Regarding the means of transportation to get to college, twelve people reported using public transportation and eleven people, their own car. Regarding the time spent getting to college, fifteen people reported spending thirty minutes, four people reported spending one hour and four people reported spending one and a half hours. Regarding the availability of scholarships or financing for their studies, sixteen people reported hav-

ing a scholarship and seven studying with their own financing. Regarding housing, twenty people reported living with their family and three people with their spouse and child. The results of the research were translated into two categories, which will be presented below.

### Difficulty adapting to remote teaching in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic

In this first category, we can see excerpts from the speeches that denote the difficulty in adapting to remote teaching. We can also observe that this type of remote teaching was confused with distance learning (EAD). At the time, the students experienced a teaching-learning process based on remote teaching. Let us see below excerpts from the speeches that denote these ideas:

*I thought the distance learning was terrible, I couldn't adapt well.*

E1

*I thought the distance learning was horrible, I couldn't concentrate properly, I prefer going back to school.*

E3

*I didn't adapt to the distance learning, so it was difficult for me to study.*

E18

*The distance learning was bad, I feel a deficit in my education that I will have to make up for later, this worries me and I get very anxious thinking about these things.*

E21

At the same time, it is noted that some students appeared comfortable with the remote teaching method, even using the nomenclature of the teaching method incorrectly:

*I prefer distance learning because I could concentrate better.*

E2

*I found distance learning easier because I could concentrate better and I had more energy [...].*

E11

*It didn't bother me, I felt really good and studied much more than in person.*

E22

The reduction or pauses in practical activities that occurred due to the waves of contamination considerably reduced opportunities in the service fields, hindering the development of the clinical part necessary for nursing training. Let us see below excerpts from the speeches that denote these ideas:

*Distance learning helped in some ways, but it also hindered some aspects, such as practical training. E12*

*I felt it was a loss for my education, because we were harmed in the internship areas. E14*

*In the pandemic context, it has been easy. Distance learning has helped in some aspects, for example in subjects, but it ended up hindering the internships. E15*

In addition to a crisis scenario, considered a stressor in itself, some students presented psychological distress. Let us see below excerpts from speeches that demonstrate both the difficulty with remote teaching and the psychological distress due to the methodology used throughout the pandemic period:

*I felt lost during the pandemic. I already had anxiety, but it got worse during the pandemic. I couldn't concentrate on the distance learning course. I thought it was terrible. E6*

*My depression got worse because I started isolating myself. With the help of the distance learning course, it got worse because all I could think about was sleeping. E4*  
*I felt really bad. I worked a lot more than I used to. I started having anxiety attacks. E10*

However, it is interesting to note that not all students had their mental health affected and were quite comfortable with the methodology applied. Let us look at excerpts from

the speeches that denote these ideas:

*I managed to keep my mental health stable, I had no difficulty adapting to distance learning. E5*

*It remained stable, I managed to adapt well. E16*

Therefore, we noticed that some students were very uncomfortable with the change in their academic routine and had their mental health affected. On the other hand, others were in comfortable positions both from an academic and mental health point of view.

## The in-person teaching-learning model post-pandemic

In the post-pandemic period, emotional support from teachers was essential to help students deal with the helplessness and emotional hardships left by this gap in time away from the academic environment. However, many students still reported difficulty in readapting to the in-person model. Let's look at excerpts from the speech that refer to this idea:

*It's been really hard for me to adapt to going back to in-person classes. E8*

*Going back to college made me anxious. E9*

*I was really anxious, scared about adapting, because after all, I was already used to it. I think my mental health is adapting to the new reality of going back to college. E17*

As we can see in the selected speeches, some students felt very uncomfortable when returning to university in person. It is clear that anxiety was a very present factor. At the same time, other university students did not feel any discomfort when returning to in-person activities. Let us look at the following excerpts from the speeches:

*I'm managing to cope well, I'm not having any difficulty adapting*

*again. E5*

*My adaptation is going very well, it's easier to adapt and understand what's been going on... I feel very good. I haven't noticed any significant difference. I'm fine and I feel happy. E7*

Considering the unique characteristics of each individual, it is possible to observe that, even in unexpected situations, such as isolation and changes in teaching methodologies during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as in the return to in-person classes, there will always be individuals who adapt well and others who face difficulties. Therefore, we believe that the most interesting and productive thing is to invest in solutions that serve the collective in a healthy, safe and affective way.

## DISCUSSION

The pandemic epidemiological panorama caused by the new coronavirus required the adoption of economic, political, social and health directives at the federal, state and municipal levels, which focused on social distancing, reducing the spread of the virus and preventing the collapse of the health system.<sup>(3-4)</sup> Given the concern about transmission among teachers, students and staff, most Higher Education Institutions in Brazil and around the world have suspended in-person classes and adopted strategic measures in the virtual learning process, with the focus of trying to reduce the student dropout rate and continuing with academic activities, trying to continue with the commitments of the academic calendar.<sup>(20)</sup>

This emerging adoption of remote teaching to meet the tumultuous demand of the moment has become yet another major obstacle for teachers. Amid the challenges imposed by the pandemic situation, marked by de-

mands, fear, uncertainty, doubts and expectations, teachers were tasked with creating and innovating their pedagogical strategies, while preserving the quality of teaching.<sup>(21)</sup>

However, it is also evident that the teaching staff went through the same process of adapting to remote teaching and that they had to learn how to use technological devices, in addition to trying to adapt the dynamics of classes to the new teaching methods. Thus, the educational reality experienced momentary and permanent changes regarding the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) from a creative, critical, reflective, interactive and motivational perspective for students.<sup>(22)</sup>

The emergency change in teaching strategy, which proved to be complex, imposing and unstructured for remote teaching, was followed by an increase in working hours, difficulties in adapting to new technologies, among other problems generated.<sup>(21)</sup>

Although there are differences that prevent us from considering distance learning and remote learning as equivalent, the criticisms received by these modalities and/or pedagogical actions are somewhat similar, as they focus on and impute precisely the precariousness inherent in the use of digital tools as intermediaries in the teaching and learning processes. Thus, teaching mediated by digital technologies, whether in the distance learning modality or remote learning, is considered, a priori, by common sense, to be of poor quality, because it prevents face-to-face contact, spontaneity, among other things. However, it is interesting to point out that emergency remote teaching is characterized as a temporary solution to a problem that arises immediately. Furthermore, as long as the academic staff has access to the internet, this technology has saved time and resources, allowing access to lectures and classes at convenient

times and improving communication between students and teachers.<sup>(23)</sup>

On the other hand, for many students, remote learning has brought considerable harm. The main negative points during the pandemic in the training of nursing students, in addition to the psychological issues related to social distancing, were the increase in reports of stress, anxiety, depression, fear, sadness, among others. The lack of practical classes also had a negative impact, since theoretical and practical knowledge is required to train nurses.<sup>(7-11)</sup> Other negative points were observed. Among them: unattractive and tiring methodologies, difficulty in concentrating and adapting, problems with the internet, lack of equipment and software that were of good quality.<sup>(24)</sup>

It is important to emphasize that educational institutions will never be the same after the pandemic. The university, as a living organism, also reinvents itself to continue its existence in interaction with undergraduates. Education is necessary to help face crises, stages of uncertainty and find the strength to follow new paths. In this sense, it is clear that one of the fundamental aspects of the teaching-learning process is the emotional and affective connection between teachers and students.

It is important to note that, after the COVID-19 pandemic, Brazil has been facing a new challenge: dealing with the mental health of the population. Many people have suffered damage to their mental health due to the loss of family members, feelings of fear, lack of socialization and job instability, which have led to increased levels of stress and psychological distress. Memory lapses, depression and anxiety may also be related to the brain effects of COVID-19, in addition to the social impacts of isolation and loss. Therefore, considering that the pandemic has had a major negative impact on the mental health of

university students, it is worth highlighting the importance of welcoming students to reconnect with them.<sup>(7-11)</sup>

Vulnerability to states of tension that affect health is mediated by complex mechanisms and systems of the personality that, in some cases, improve the individual's ability to face them and, in others, facilitate the development of states of tension.<sup>(17)</sup> When an individual presents adequate personality traits in their functionality and a combination of life-optimizing factors, there is a better chance of overcoming potential harmful effects on their health. Each individual presents individual peculiarities regarding the unknown, with subjectivity and complexity of experiences lived in difficult times prevailing.

However, the return to in-person classes focused exclusively on resuming curricular components and learning objects, without considering the socialization that the school environment promotes, should be the subject of intense reflection in the new understanding of the post-pandemic university. Returning to university in person should not be understood as simply reoccupying the space, but rather being able to inhabit it fully; being able to shape it creatively, with new strengths and intensities, as a deliberate and committed exercise of citizenship.<sup>(25)</sup>

Therefore, we believe that the most interesting and productive thing to do is to invest in solutions that can serve the collective in a healthy, safe and affectionate way. Social and individual subjectivity, as non-separate processes, cannot be restricted to mechanical variables of cause and effect, but must be seen as distinct moments of the same thing. However, each person tends to understand the subjective in a different way, taking into account how the experience appears constituted in the

organization of subjective senses of each specific subject.<sup>(17)</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Teaching mediated by digital technologies, whether in distance learning or remote learning, brings genuine difficulties to students, considering not only the distance between student and teacher, but also spontaneous situations experienced in the classroom. The academic losses for some students went beyond the adversities inherent to the pandemic period, also related to the remote methodology used, exacerbating psy-

chological distress, making the educational experience even more challenging.

Adapting to remote teaching in the face of a pandemic led to increased levels of stress, anxiety, and depression. The lack of practical classes was also a detrimental factor, since theoretical and practical knowledge is required for nursing training.

However, the advantages of this remote teaching method were also noted, as it allowed access to lectures at convenient times, generating a pleasant experience for some students. These students demonstrated that they were not affected in terms

of their mental health, despite validating the difficulty faced with the new reality.

The results of this research are not generalizable. The reality of the field of study in question is unique, presenting its own characteristics in the teaching-learning process during and after the COVID-19 pandemic period, which is, therefore, a limitation of the study. We are clear that this topic requires continuous reflection and is not limited to this work. In this way, new studies can be developed in order to continue the investigation.

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