
Article

Future Online Learning for Public Administration

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Abstract: This article analyzes the perspectives of professional training of the public administration staff, from the viewpoint of the sustainability criteria, starting from the experiences of the online courses run in the last two years. In order to understand the nature, type and magnitude of the changes caused by the Covid-19 pandemic in the field of professional training for public administration, we performed a survey among public institution employees, by applying a questionnaire. The instrument included qualitative elements, to allow the framing of statistical results. The article is grounded on the hypothesis that the professional training activities in the last two years were organized preponderantly online and it aims to analyze the sustainability of the new teaching systems/methods. The limitations of the study are given by the fact that each administrative system has structure particularities and its own legal framework regarding the professional training of public administration staff, what makes that the model proposed cannot be applied in all countries. The study provides a model of online professional training for public administration staff, sustainable, based on the experience accumulated in the last two years.

Keywords: public institutions; transformations; professional training; pandemic; reform; model

1. Introduction

The improvement of professional training is a fundamental. Right. The constitutions of many states, as well as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, mention this right. Thus, the Constitution of Romania establishes in art.52 that the right to education is ensured through the mandatory general education ... as well as by means of other forms of education and training. In a similar way, the Constitution of Bulgaria mentions in art. 53 (6) that the State shall promote education by opening and financing schools, by supporting capable school and university students, and by providing opportunities for occupational training and retraining. It shall exercise control over all kinds and levels of schooling. Similar provisions appear in the constitutions of Moldova (art.35 (1)), Albania (art.57) or Slovenia (art.57).

For the public servants, there are special mentions by means of which, apart from the right to continuous professional training, also the obligation to engage in this. The Administrative Code of Romania stipulates in art. 458 that the public servants have the right and obligation to continuously improve their skills and professional training. The public authorities and institutions have the obligation to ensure the participation of every public servant to at least one professional training and improvement program once every two years. In Serbia, the Law on Public Servants, stipulates in art. 10 "a civil servant has the right and duty to professional training according to the needs of the state authority". This obligation is also regulated in other countries: the Law on the public office and the statute of the public servant in Moldova (art. 37), Civil Servants Act in Slovenia (art. 9), Civil Servants Act in Bulgaria (art.35).

To the right to professional training of public servants corresponds the obligation of the state and of the local collectivities to create the **legal and institutional framework and to provide the resources necessary** for its materialization.

Additionally, compared to a contractual employee, the public servant also has the **obligation** to perfect their professional training, obligation deriving from the fact that they exercise public power prerogatives and their action is subjected to the general interest. In this context, the public servant has the obligation to follow training forms organized at the initiative, or in the interest of the public institution.

Human resource training represents an ensemble of processes by means of which, following going through specialized programs, the employees develop skills, knowledge, competences, behaviours and work techniques in which they already have a basic qualification, with a view to achieve a higher level of the objectives and duties due to them. The training targets the improvement of the already existing professional capacity [1]. The process of professional training includes six stages: training needs analysis, design of the training program, development of training materials, selection/call of the participants, delivery of the training programs and monitoring/evaluation of the training programs.

In order for the training to be significant and efficient, the training program organization methodology must be achieved taking into account the organizational needs, as well as the specific needs of each participant, adapted to the context and influences of the external environment.

2. Specialty literature

Digital teaching methods for public administration do not only represent a concern of the last two years. There were previous attempts to precisely define and conceptually outline distance learning in public administration. Kern Dieter [2] considers "e-learning as the approach using different internet and web technologies to enable, to evoke, to promote and/or to present learning processes and the development of competencies".

There were also studies that analyzed the technology, the existing platforms and their manner of being used [3], highlighting their adaptability, accessibility or use costs. Comparisons were made between learning in physical format and online education, as well as the hybrid model[4].

Numerous studies emphasized the benefits of online training for public administration [5], from the perspective of financial resources, time-saving, adaption to the learning pace of every participant [6], encouraging public institutions to access distance learning programs for their own employees.

The manners of integrating the new technologies in the training process for the public administration were analyzed from the viewpoint of the existing barriers [7], concluding that the resistance to change or the technological gap [8] are factors limiting the development of this type of professional training.

There was also interest regarding how the introduction of Moodle e-learning platform as part of the teaching process is related [9] or other technical supports/instruments. The perception and acceptance degree of online training by the public administration employees were also analyzed [10] [11] [12].

We can state that the specialty studies were mainly focused on the following directions:

- defining distance learning for public administration;
- existing technology, facilities, its flexibility;
- comparison with the classical models and the benefits of online learning;
- integration barriers and elimination methods;
- perception/acceptance degree of distance learning by the public institution employees;
- identification of the methods to develop distance learning for public administration.

All these attempts reflected a practice of online learning for public administration, encouraged especially by the existing technologies and benefits emphasized. However, these practices were conditioned by the access to technology from the public institutions, such as they were much more developed in Eastern Europe and North America. Eastern

Europe was experimenting new learning models, however, without being a frequent practice.

The past two years have led to big changes in the public institutions, generated by the Covid-19 pandemic. These are grouped in five categories, all leading to physical distancing:

- measures regarding the reorganization of the working space;
- measures regarding the use of new technologies;
- measures regarding the relationship with the public;
- measures regarding the review of certain work instruments and working from home;
- measures regarding the medical protection of the staff.

In the new context, the professional training activities for public administration also transformed, the classical courses being replaced by online trainings. Implicitly, the specialty literature is rich in studies and analyses regarding this new context.

Thus, the impact of the pandemic on public administration [13], the impact on digitalization [14], the training/learning process in itself, in view of rethinking, repositioning and adapting to the pandemic situation [15], existing technologies, with a view to integrate them in the training processes [16], the transformations caused [17] or designing the future professional training for public administration [18] were studied.

The existing research emphasizes a wide-scale evolution and use of online training for public administration, benefitting from the previous experiences, the existing technology, but noticing a change, an evolution mainly imposed by the pandemic context.

Because the Covid-19 pandemic is nearing its end and people and institutions return to normal, the sustainability of the training model developed in the last 2 years must be analyzed, starting from the lessons learned and relating to the sustainability criteria [19].

The connection of sustainability with public administration made the object of numerous studies and analyses focused on sustainability as a conceptual focus for public administration [20], as integration in the public administration processes [21] or as concern [22]. From the perspective of professional training, sustainability is seen as a subject that must be integrated as much as possible in the learning process [23].

3. Methodology

This article has as main objective the analysis of professional training improvement in public administration in the last two years, from the perspective of accessibility, organizational manners and training topics.

The second objective is represented by the designing of a model based on the experience accumulated, from the viewpoint of the sustainability criteria.

In order to reach the two objectives, a questionnaire with 13 questions was applied on the Romanian public administration staff, who answered in the period March-April 2022.

The questionnaire had in its first part five questions aiming to identify the manners in which the training were run during the past two years. The first question targeted the identification of the percentage of respondents who followed long or short-term training in the last two years. Those who followed such courses were asked to indicate the topics, having available a predefined list (but also the option "other"), comprising: Bases of public administration, Strategic management, Public function management, Communication, Performance management, Use of new technologies – ECDL, Quality management, Public procurement, Material resource management, Document management, Project management, E-government/ e-administration, Decisional transparency, Management of classified information, Organizing and archiving.

Also, the respondents who attended the training activities indicated if these were in classic format, face to face, online or blended learning (module online and face to face). For the online courses, it was asked that they mention the platform on which they were run: Zoom, Webex, Google meet, Microsoft Teams, other.

Afterwards, by means of an open question, the participants to the study indicated advantages and disadvantages of the online courses.

The fifth question of the first part targeted the evaluation of the online training activities from the qualitative point of view, by scoring the quality of the agenda, the content, the support materials, the platform used, the discussion management methods, the objectives of the sessions, the interactivity and the course duration, on a scale from 1 to 4.

The second part aimed to identify the respondents appetite for the online training activities in the future. First, information was asked on the Annual training plans of the institution (mandatory document in the public administration in Romania), the extent to which they include online and blended-learning courses. Afterwards, the respondents' preferences were identified, either for training in classic format, face to face, or for online or blended learning (online and face to face modules). The respondents were asked about their future intentions to follow online courses. Also here, the questionnaire had as objective the identification of the training topics that present interest for the respondents, in the future.

Also in this part, the questions aimed to identify the length, the optimal number of participants and the training methods desirable for an online course.

The last question, in open format, invited the participants to identify the manners of eliminating the disadvantages of the online trainings, which they previously indicated.

The third part of the questionnaire comprised identification elements of the target group: gender, education level, seniority in administration, the function level (management/execution), the type of institution where the respondents are performing their activity.

The data was collected by means of a platform specialized in taking surveys.

4. Results

According to figure 1, 67.86% of the respondents attended long or short-term trainings in the last two years (March 2020 - February 2022).

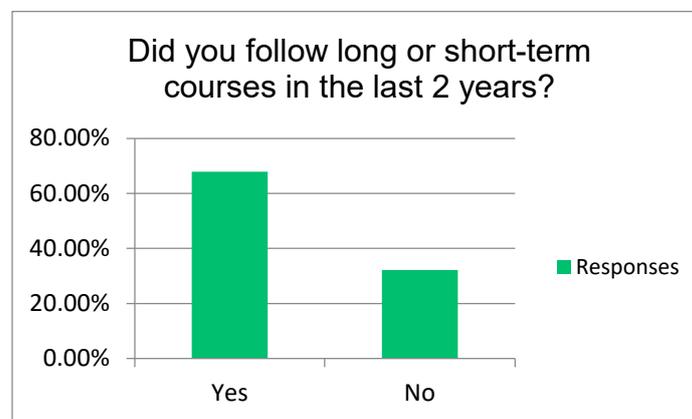


Figure 1. Participation to training activities in the last two years.

Even though for the public servants there are special mentions, indicated in the first part of this article, through which, next to the right, also the obligation to professional training is regulated, only 67.86% of the respondents followed training forms in the past two years, which indicates a low interest of public institutions and the employees to improve their knowledge level. An explanation may be the pandemic context, the long periods of lockdown and the directing of public resources to the medical emergencies, to the detriment of the professional training activities. However, the participation level is higher compared to the previous period, when only face to face courses were organized.

Even though the target group is composed by 65% persons with the age between 35 and 50 years old, with experience in public administration, and only 10171 persons with

the age lower than 35, 20% of the respondents followed trainings on the bases of public administration (Figure 2)

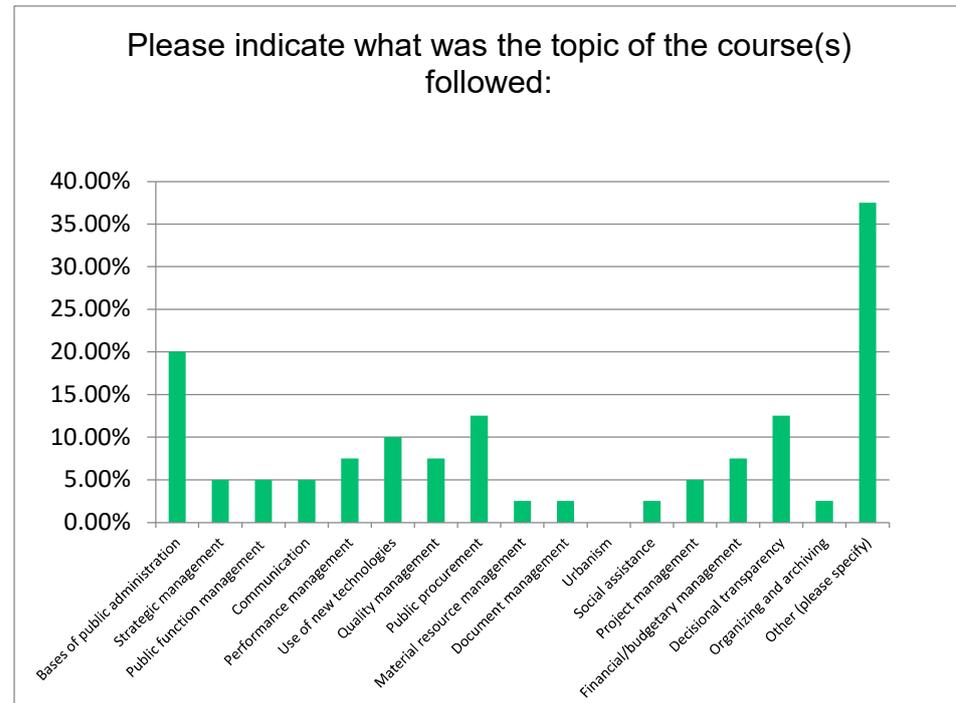


Figure 2. Topic of trainings followed.

In what concerns the manner of organizing the courses in the last two years, they were preponderantly run online (64.1%), using mainly Zoom and Webex (Figure 4), and in blended learning format (10.26%). Still, in spite of the existence of restrictions, 25.64% were face to face courses (Figure 3).

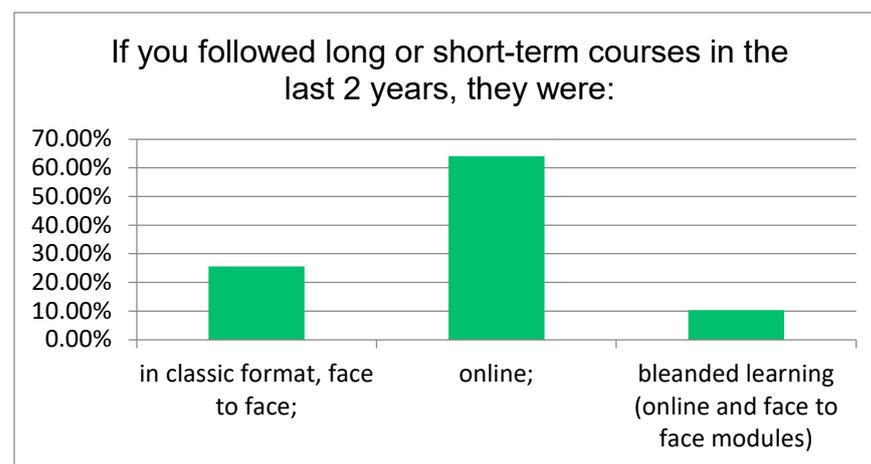


Figure 3. Form of organizing the trainings.

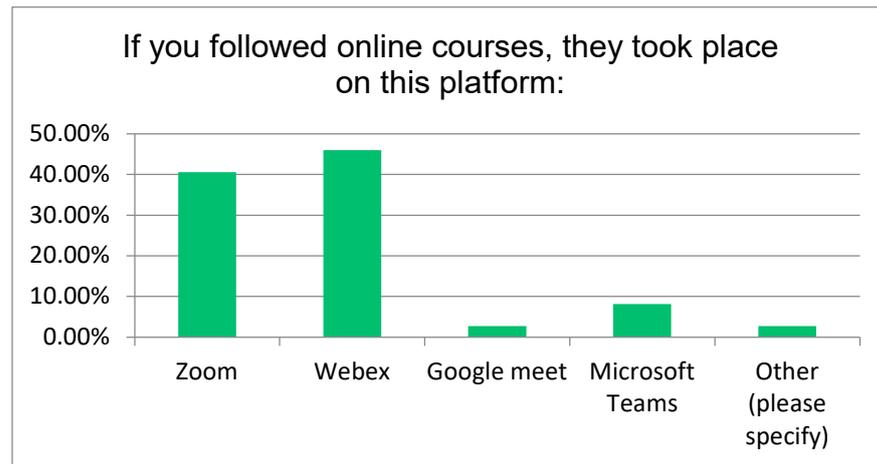


Figure 4. Platforms used.

The participants to the online courses mentioned among their advantages the flexible schedule, the possibility to follow the course regardless of the working hours, the availability of the teaching materials, the possibility to learn at own pace, time-saving, the comfort of the own space, the ease of monitoring each participants contribution, the possibility to attend from any location, low costs, personal protection against the pandemic.

The disadvantages/weaknesses of the online trainings, in the opinion of the respondents, are the lack of physical interaction and socialization, low support in clarifying certain subjects, the inadequate training of the lecturers for such teaching manner, the low quality of internet, the high number of hours spent before the computer, the information is presented more briefly, the lower interactivity, the deficient evaluation, especially in case of group projects, the lack of IT abilities of some of the participants.

In order to assess the quality of the online trainings run, a series of items were listed, regarding the organization, the trainer, the interactivity. For each of them, the values assigned are in the group {1,2,3,4}: the value of this variable equal to one indicates a very low appreciation; value 2 shows appreciation to a small extent; 3 indicates moderate appreciation; value 4 illustrates high appreciation. The higher the value of variable V, the greater the appreciation of the participants. Thus, interactivity has the lowest value (3.15), confirming the disadvantages listed before, and the adequacy of the platforms used received the highest score– 3.63 (Figure 5).

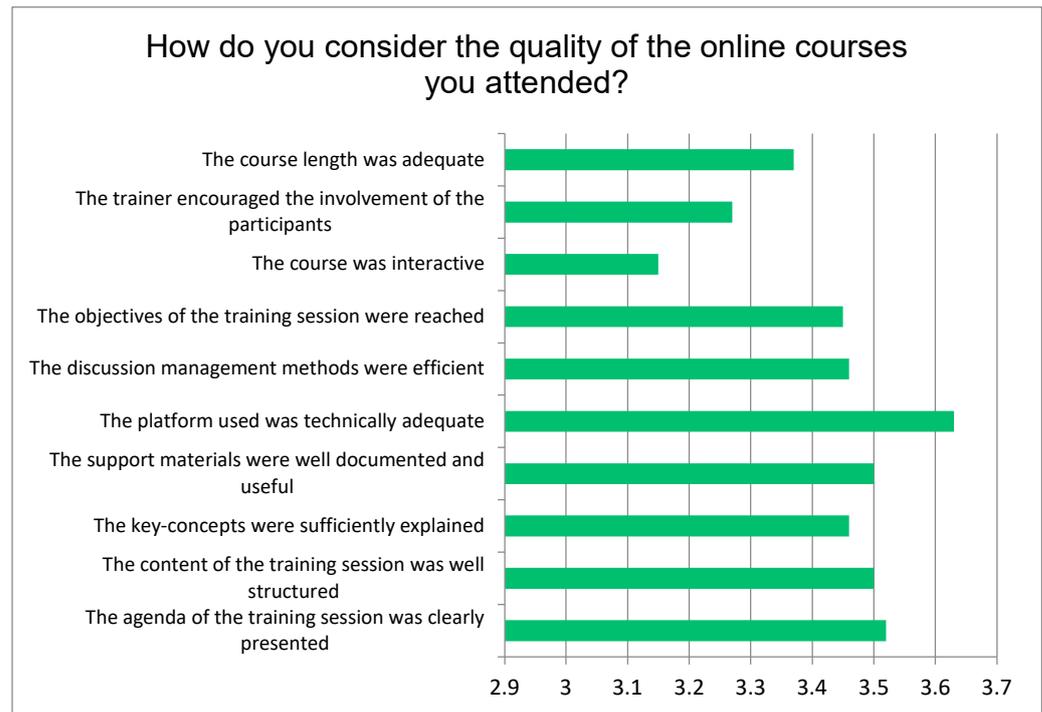


Figure 5. The quality of the online trainings.

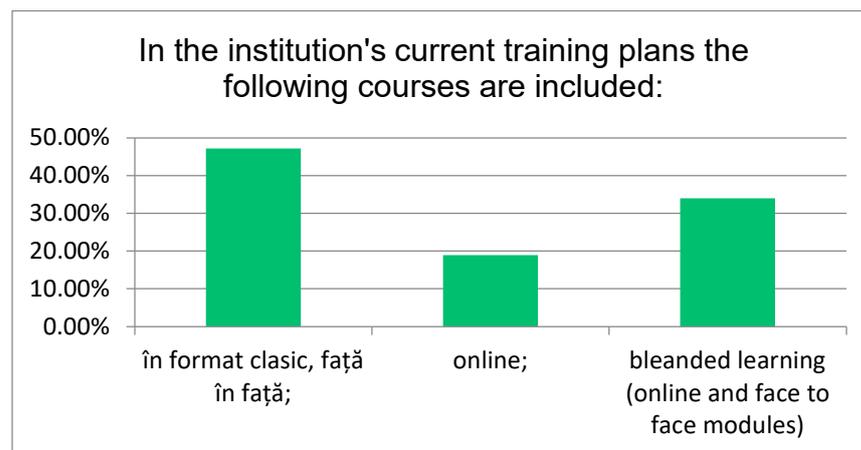


Figure 6. Content of the training plans.

However, the coming to an end of the pandemic period led the public institutions to include in their training courses for year 2022 predominantly courses in classic, face to face format, in a proportion of 47.17% (figure 6), which is in line with the respondents' preference: 42.86% consider that the optimal manner of organizing trainings for public institutions is the classical one (figure 7).

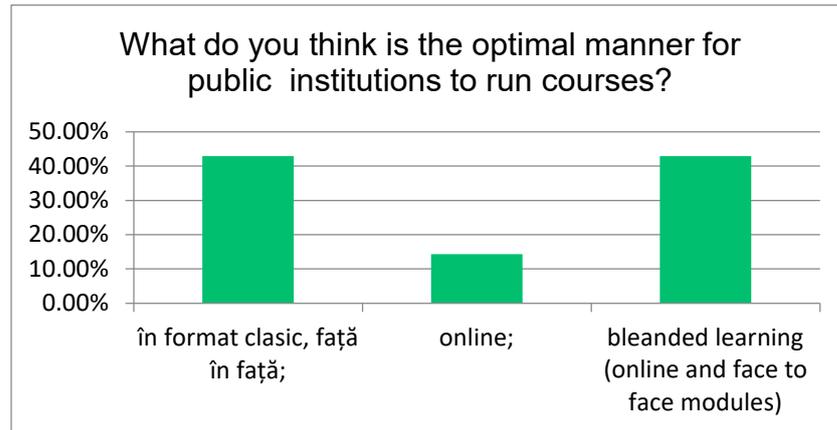


Figure 7. Optimal manner of running trainings for public institutions.

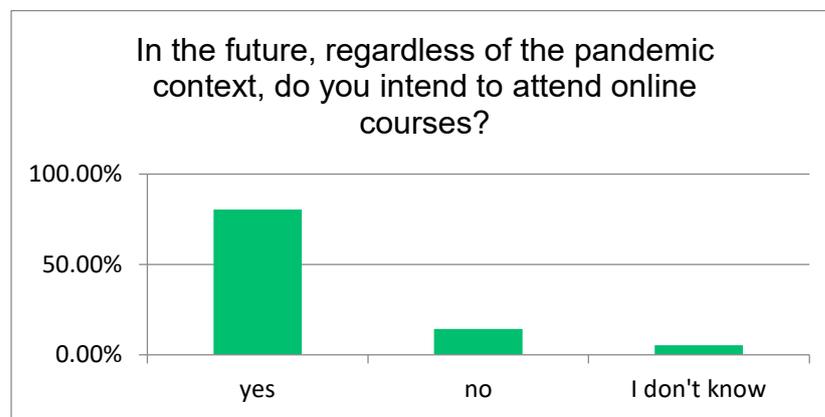


Figure 8. Intention to attend online courses.

However, regardless of the pandemic context, 80.36% of the respondents expressed their intention to attend online trainings in the future (figure 8)

In order to evaluate the interest regarding the future training topics in online format, a series of possible topics were listed. For each of them, the values assigned are in the group {1,2,3,4}: the value of this variable equal to one indicates no interest for this topic; value 2 shows insignificant interest; 3 indicates a quite high interest; value 4 illustrates high interest. The higher the value of variable V, the greater the degree of interest for a particular training topic. Thus, in the future, the respondents are interested at a level of 3.37 by Strategic planning and 3.34 Activity planning. (Figure 9)



Figure 9. Future training topics, in online format.

The optimal duration of an online course, in the opinion of the respondents, is of 3-4 hours (Figure 10), with 10-15 participants (Figure 11), using interactive presentations and practical applications (Figure 12).

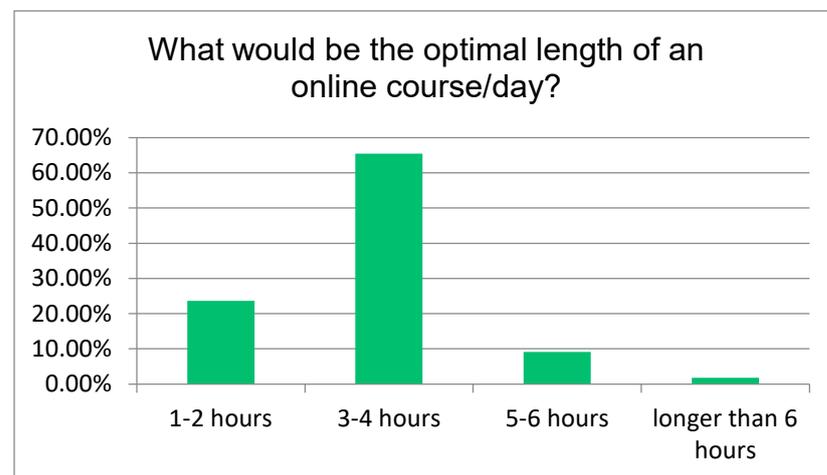


Figure 10. The optimal length of an online course.

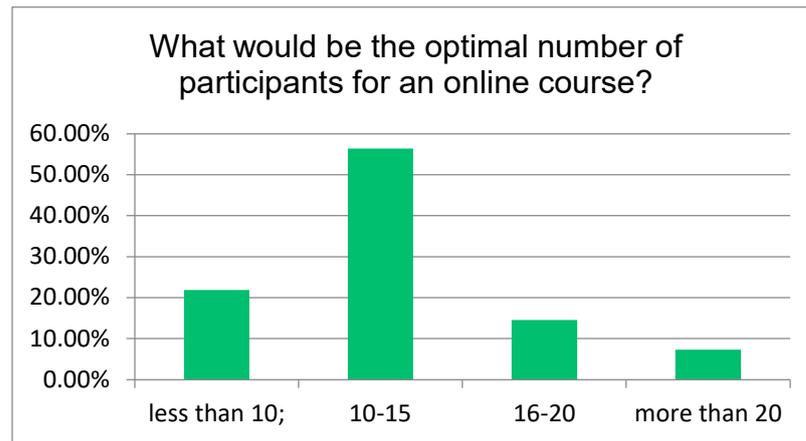


Figure 11. The optimal number of participants to an online training.

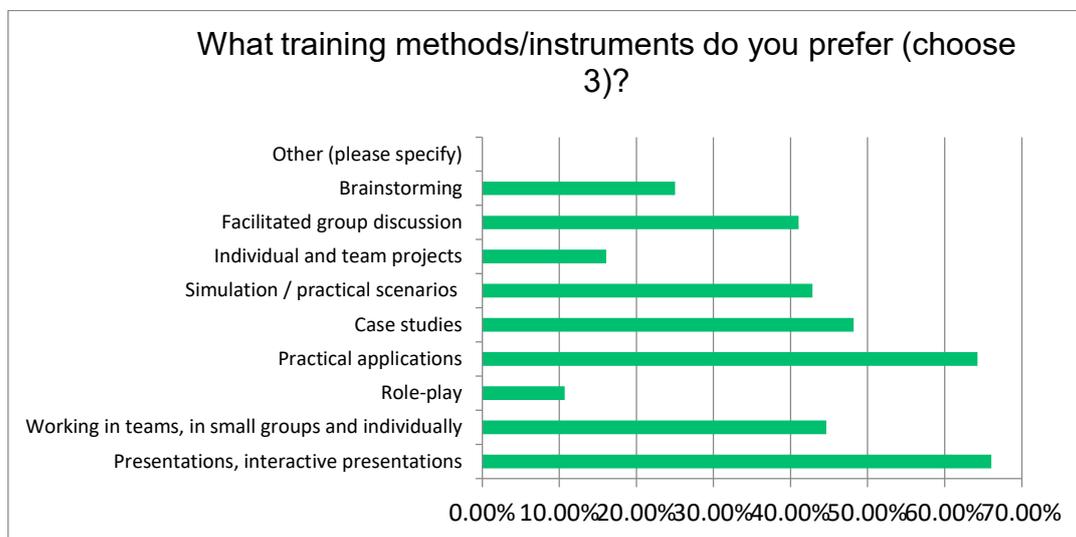


Figure 12. Preferred training methods/instruments for online courses.

5. Discussions

In order to improve the online trainings, the respondents believe that they must be combined with the face to face courses, resulting the blended learning variant. At the same time, the following are necessary: the improvement of the internet connection in the institutions, the creation of spaces, halls within public institutions, in order to not be distracted by the daily activity, the training of the lecturers in online teaching techniques, the increase of the interactivity degree, a lower number of participants and a shorter duration of the courses. An important component is represented by the educational materials, which must be adapted to the online system, with a higher degree of interactivity, focused on case studies and examples.

The German Sustainability code contains 20 criteria [23]. They will be also included in the Romanian Sustainability code, in course of being elaborated, and are grouped in four categories: strategy (significance, vision and objectives), process management (rules and structures), environment (ecologic sustainability aspects) and society (social sustainability aspects). Criteria 1-10 refer to the sustainability policy and criteria 11-20 – sustainability aspects, use of natural resources.

The application of criteria 1-4 (strategic analysis and action, materiality, objectives and depth of the value chain) involves the elaboration and adoption by the public organizations of sustainability strategies that include the professional training competence. On the one hand, the topic of sustainability must be a training subject, which was not identified in the training topics taught in the last two years or in the ones desired for the future.

On the other hand, the training composition can target exactly the modalities of elaboration and application of the sustainability strategies. At the national level, in Romania, considering that the Sustainability code is being elaborated, training on this subject must become a national priority, being integrated in the training plans of any public institutions.

For the materiality criterion, digitalization brings opportunities and options contributing to the elimination of carbon emissions and the preservation of resources, fact which leads to the need to continue and develop professional training in public administration in online format.

The consideration of the "Objectives" criterion implies their clear formulation in matters of sustainability, in the organizational strategy, the establishment of monitoring and reporting responsibilities. The objective regarding the increase of the training level of the employees is a sustainable development criterion, which must be found in the strategy.

From the perspective of the value chain, the sustainability criteria must be considered. From the viewpoint of the professional training process in the public institutions, the process itself can be considered, as well as the integration of certain training topics regarding the development of the competences of the employees to analyze the depth of the value chain, such as "Green purchases".

Process management (criteria 5-10) presupposes the clear establishing of responsibilities, which in the field of professional training means establishing the process responsible person, with the role of analyzing and integrating the sustainability elements. Also, the public organizations must review their own procedures and processes, in order to integrate the sustainability aspects. The application of these criteria at organizational or administrative system level implies including course topics such as "Sustainable processes" or "Elaboration of sustainable operational and system procedures". The "Control" criterion implies the establishment of performance indicators connected to sustainability in the periodical planning and control internal processes, such as the professional training must target learning how to formulate performance indicators regarding sustainability. The "Stimulation systems" criterion considers the increase of the employee's motivation in applying the sustainability criteria, fact which implies for the public organization the review of their motivation plans/methods and the integration of components related to sustainability, which can be a professional training topic.

The integration of the "Involvement of the interested parties" criterion presupposes for public administration their identification and involvement in the sustainability process. Also in this case, by means of the professional training of the employees, the methods of identifying and involving the interested parties can be learned, together with the elaboration of risk matrixes, influence maps etc.

"Innovation" (sustainability criterion) for the professional training activity refers to the orientation towards activities contributing to reduce the negative impact on the environment and it targets both the training process in itself, and the promoted topics, training subjects, aspects also considered when applying the environmental criteria (ecologic sustainability aspect, criteria 11-13). The environmental aspects impose the reduction of the natural resource consumption; which leads to the option of online courses, optimized as duration and period.

The criteria regarding society (14-10) consider the manner in which the employee's rights are observed (in this case, the right to professional training), the application of the equal chances principle, the increase of the qualification level, as well as the manner in which the involvement of the staff in society and in sustainability management is encouraged, which implies, by means of training, the awareness and adhesion of the staff to the sustainability values. Under this category fall also the measures, standards, systems and processes targeting the prevention of illegal behaviour and corruption, elements including also the anticorruption training.

6. Conclusion

The sustainability perspective implies the rethinking of the professional training in public administration, both with respect to the process, and to the content.

The ecological aspects of sustainability and innovation lead to the option of the online courses, with a duration of 3-4 hours/day and small groups of participants, option that would ensure the decrease of natural resources consumption and the reduction of the negative impact on the environment, using the experience of the last two years and the existing technologies.

The professional training process implies the observance of the employee's rights (right to professional training), providing equal access, by applying the principle of equal chances, and targets the increase of the qualification level. Every public organization must include in its own strategy objectives regarding the increase of the qualification level of their staff and must allocate resources in this sense. The planning of the training process must integrate the sustainability aspects, part of the organizational sustainability strategy. The training plan will include clear responsibilities regarding its application and monitoring.

The content, the training topics, require a thorough review, because the courses attended until now or desired for the future are not connected with the sustainability elements. The topic of sustainability must be a training topic in general, as well as its concrete application modalities, such as training courses can be considered, with subjects such as: "Elaboration and application of sustainability strategies", "Application of the Sustainability Code", "Green purchases", "Sustainable processes", "Elaboration of sustainable operational and system procedures", "Integration of sustainability elements in the motivation plans", "Methods of identifying and involving the interested parties", "Performance indicators regarding sustainability", "Prevention of illegal behaviours and corruption".

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