

## INTRODUCTION

This volume focuses on education in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, turning the lens on student experiences. After more than two years of the pandemic taking a toll on the entire human community, there is, perhaps, not much value in trying to determine which sector has been most affected by the restrictions brought about by the virus. However, it cannot be denied that education has undergone a series of profound changes, with effects felt by all those involved. This volume aims to capture the voice of the most important participant in the educational act, the students, by presenting their honest opinions and suggestions. How did the pandemic affect their everyday lives and their learning journey? What topics caught their attention during this trying period? What are their suggestions and hopes for the future? These are some of the questions that we are trying to address.

The volume includes papers written by students from a variety of countries and cultural backgrounds, focusing on life and education in Japan during the COVID-19 pandemic, but also drawing parallels with the rest of the world, by looking at countries such as Romania, Great Britain, and Mongolia. Each paper has its own personality, illustrating the experiences of the author. However, when looking at the volume in its entirety, one cannot help but notice that there are important similarities in the ways the students understand the effects of the pandemic, in the subjects that appear to interest them, and in their hopes for the future.

There are three sections in the volume. The first, under the title of “Global Studies During COVID-19”, brings together papers and posters focusing on the implications of online education at university level. The students offer honest descriptions of their learning experience, presenting both the advantages and the disadvantages of this new environment. They

talk about the difficulties they have had connecting with their classmates and professors — both online and on a personal level, the toll that using technology has taken on their physical and mental health, but also express gratitude for the new opportunities offered by this situation, such as being able to spend more time focusing on their hobbies, staying close to their families, or learning new skills. At the same time, they all express the hope that they will be able to transition to face-to-face classes as soon as possible and experience student life as they were imagining it before the start of the pandemic, with on-campus classes and club activities.

The second section, “Japanese Studies”, includes two papers on the topics of Shinto weddings and marketing strategies suitable for Japan. The papers illustrate elements of Japanese culture and society that have drawn the attention of international students during this period of constant changes. Interestingly, these papers can also be seen as symbols of two essential areas of our lives that have been significantly affected by the pandemic, the spiritual and the commercial. The paper on Shinto weddings concludes with the author’s prediction that the number of such ceremonies will keep increasing in the future, while the paper on marketing strategies for Japan suggests that new businesses can make use of online and media marketing tools in the current situation. In other words, we can have faith that, just like education, the spiritual and the commercial will find ways to adapt and reinvent themselves.

The third section, “Teaching During the Pandemic”, follows the previous section by offering examples of lesson plans and pieces of student writing on the topic of Amabie, a Japanese *yōkai* (mythological creature). The lesson plans complete the perspectives included in this volume, presenting examples of the actual form that university classes took during the pandemic, to mirror the opinions expressed by the students about such classes in the first two sections. At the same time, this last section can be seen as a symbol for the hopes expressed by the students, since Amabie gained remarkable popularity in Japan after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, due to the association with the power to drive away diseases and pandemics.

As the title suggests, the main purpose of this volume is to offer insights into life and education during the pandemic through student

representations. The readers will notice that there is a common thread in all the papers and posters included in this volume. The students are aware of both the advantages and the disadvantages that came with the COVID-19 pandemic, expressing their willingness to adapt and make the most out of the challenges they have encountered. What they all share is the understanding that, at least in the domain of education, direct interaction is the element that most of us, students and educators alike, need in order to reach our full potential.

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