

BLENDING REMOTE/HYBRID WORK AND HYBRID ACADEMIC EDUCATION

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Abstract

This study is trying to metaphorically get the pulse of a segment of senior students who are involved in either a remote or hybrid work scenario, as far as, first, the perception of the two employment models among members of the young generation who are also computer-literate, then, to get a feel of which model they would choose for academic education, and, last but not least, to see what scenario is considered to be the best when one tries to blend the roles of a student and an employee simultaneously. For this, a set of seven questions has been drawn up, both choice and open-ended. The paper has been structured into three middle sections, besides the Introduction and the Conclusions, which focus on: fears and their remedies related to remote and hybrid work; the combination of hybrid work and hybrid education; the prospects for hybridity in both education and one's professional life. Twenty third-year, computer science students have been solicited to provide answers, on the logic that they have the understanding of all the "experimental" times that we have gone through: of pandemic online exclusiveness, being back in face-to-face encounters, and then plunged into a hybrid model.

Keywords: remote/hybrid work, remote/hybrid education, young adults, survey

JEL Classification: H5, Z10

1. Introduction

The pandemic times have opened our eyes to a new reality of off-site work, which has triggered a new set of rearrangements and rethinking of various aspects of our existences, in terms of how we prioritize our personal and professional lives, time management, renegotiation of boundaries of all kinds and of work arrangements.

Initially, this situation involved a decentralized approach to locations and space, towards where one could actually be while unfolding his/her professional duties, challenging the very idea of co-presence, which was somehow ingrained and at the very core of what we conceived to be the performance of our tasks and of doing our jobs. Linguistically and conceptually, the notions of "going to work" or "workplace" needed rethinking, as there was no longer a particular site or space or place where one had to be in order to carry out one's responsibilities. The concept of space as associated intrinsically with a particular job simply disappeared, which came along with a certain amount of bafflement for every person.

After having learned how to cope, or get better at using technology, and adapting lifestyles to the new reality, the pandemic was over – or was it? – and novel readjustments needed to

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be made. People craved socializing again, talked about it, looked forward to it and enjoyed it when they were able to interact normally and achieve the lost co-presence again. However, some of the sometimes painfully acquired readjustments left a toll or put their imprint on our awareness, which, along with the ongoing problems related to a virus that keeps producing new variants and seems not quite extinguished yet, have determined people to look for an in-between, a middle way of approaching their work life. Human nature decided that it was perhaps better to have the best of both worlds, and people found themselves craving to preserve in their current realities some of the flexibility that they have come to miss since back in the pandemic and remote work times. Hence, the concept of remote work has emerged and is still being forged in our minds as of recently.

This paper sets out to analyze the realities of remote work and hybrid work, as they are perceived among students who also have to handle their academic education simultaneously with being employed in one of these two forms or arrangements. In comparing remote and hybrid work, we are looking at some differences in their perception by young adults/students, trying to ascertain aspects related to fears and remedies to those fears inspired by these two models of employment. We are further inspecting the meaning of hybrid work, which is taking various shapes and sizes in our minds these days. Then, last but not least, we mean to throw a glance at students' expectations for the future in terms of getting involved in hybrid work (and study) arrangements.

We are using a quantitative and qualitative analysis and are preponderantly interested in the impressions left by the proposed forms of interaction, as most of the reactions and thoughts related to how one should cope with them are subjective, whether we realize it or not, which shall be made evident in what we discuss. In other words, the way we assess both contexts is a matter of perception, is about what we choose to focus on and how we choose to interpret them, of positive thinking and approach more than about definite, factual factors. In the age of advanced technology, and once technological aspects are solved and put aside, the psychology of the individual is what stays decisive in the way in which (s)he is prepared to deal with a particular context, and the aspect individuals need to mostly work upon at all levels, be they management or subordinate. It is not necessarily about what can or cannot be done concretely, as these are matters that can be solved at some point, but about being comfortable, trusting and at ease in a certain environment, about learning how to become metaphorically "equipped" on the inside in order to be able to do that. It is related to "which thinking patterns, behavior patterns, and emotions are appropriate for a given role" [1].

2. Remote and hybrid work – fears and remedies

2.1 Prep phase and focus group

I have selected for the study a number of twenty third-year computer science students as respondents to the questions. I wanted to have the same age segment, of more mature students who have already been through the pandemic in an online education system, being accustomed to its specificity, but have also experienced the comeback times, of return to face-to-face academic activity.

The focus group consisted of ten students who are employed in a remote work system and ten who are employed in a hybrid work arrangement, for the sake of comparing notes and

answers given from within the respective situation. All twenty students are part of a full-time studies program, thus struggling to attend courses and seminars simultaneously with fulfilling the duties for their job in the respective form of employment. Besides having adjusted to the requirements of their job, they have to also accommodate the newly found form of hybrid education, which in our case, at the Romanian-American University, entails carrying out a part of the semestrial activity online, the equivalent of thirty percent, i.e. a few courses and seminars, while attending the rest, including tests and final examinations, face-to-face.

Conducting the research among representatives of the young generation eliminates, to a reasonable extent, the problem of handling technology, i.e. of being literate, astute or even proficient in this area. The interviewees do not display issues related to fear of being able to cope with technology, as they are young (i.e. proverbially more flexible and adroit in this sphere), as well as, moreover, students of computer science, which minimizes the impact of stress brought about by using technology down to almost null, hence making their answers, from a psychological point of view and given the absence of this pressure factor that might have induced additional fear reverberating on their perception of the situation, all the more relevant. It is worth mentioning, however, that a certain effort of dealing with new technology has to be made by them as well, as adjustment to certain platforms, software, applications, customized intranet and workflow was required from their part, but we may consider that the effort was less significant or came in handy, coming from overall technology-literate young people.

2.2 Fears

The respondents had to pick one of the four possible answers to Question 1, “What is your greatest fear among the ones enumerated below, related to the system of employment you are part of (remote or hybrid work)?”. The options provided were:

- a) loneliness and missing socializing
- b) the integration of the corporate culture and identification of colleagues (putting a face to a name or avatar)
- c) being visible to the management, being acknowledged
- d) coping with new technology (applications, platforms etc.)

Statistics rank the loneliness and isolation factor as taking precedence over others in the area of distancing oneself from the office on-site interactions. Loneliness is picked up as the greatest struggle by twenty percent of the respondents of a poll conducted by Insights Manager Erin Eatough, next to collaboration and communication (holding an equal percentage), which goes to show how significant this factor is [2]. Buffer's 2019 annual report on the State of Remote Work ranks loneliness the second most significant struggle, holding nineteen percent of the first choices, right after “unplugging after work”'s 22% [3]. In the updated, 2022 version of the same statistics, in which respondents could choose all those that apply from a preset of options, loneliness still appears in the top, with twenty-four percent allotted to it, after the same inability to unplug holding twenty-five percent, so very close, while thirty-one percent of the interviewed stated that they no longer have any struggles [4]. Most of Kojic's nineteen members of the focus group she has conducted her

study on, consisting of CEOs, freelancers, marketing specialists or entrepreneurs, refer to loneliness and isolation as among their most significant problems in working remotely (in an enumeration of two or three each), either directly, using these specific terms, or indirectly, by mentioning improper routines, lack of or poor communication and coordination, less excitement or absent inclusiveness [5].

Corporate culture is a relevant aspect in many articles written on work that is trying to encompass distance from the workplace in various forms. Martine Haas signals the need for remote workers to understand the “company’s norms, values, and expectations” at the same level and quality as people working on-site, within a hybrid work scenario, and to “integrate them into the company’s culture” [6].

Below, there is a table that synthesizes the answers given by the two sets of students and the number of students that have chosen each answer.

REMOTE WORK EMPLOYEES	HYBRID WORK EMPLOYEES
integration of the corporate culture and peer identification (4)	loneliness and missing socializing (4)
loneliness and missing socializing (3)	visibility to management and being acknowledged (3)
coping with new technology (2)	integration of the corporate culture and peer identification (2)
visibility to management and being acknowledged (1)	coping with new technology (1)

Table 1. Answers to Question 1 – What is your greatest fear among the ones enumerated below, related to the system of employment you are part of (remote or hybrid work)?

I have decided on the formulation of the options provided for Question 1 subsequent to the consultation of the relevant literature that I have read on the challenges posed by remote and hybrid work, detaching the most relevant and frequent occurrences. Also, every one of the four answers is paired with a certain aspect/need that I consider the answer to represent, as follows. The ideas of socializing and avoidance of loneliness send to the satisfaction of an emotional need, symbolizing an *emotive* component. Getting acquainted with one’s colleagues, knowing enough things about them to be able to draw a more or less satisfactory picture as far as their unique personalities and ways of interaction, which are detailed enough to separate them from a crowd in one’s mind and make their uniqueness known, along with knowing and comprehending thoroughly the mission, objectives and identity of the company as a whole satisfy a need that we shall call *cognitive* in the specific environment of the company or workplace. Being acknowledged by, and visible to the management, being respected and valued and detaching oneself as an individuality from the others in the eyes of those representing the superior hierarchical levels have to do with one’s *prospects for reward*, promotions and not missing out on other opportunities and bonuses made available in the work environment. Not making one’s contributions known may entail, at the opposite pole, potential material and face loss disadvantages. It ultimately means not obtaining maximum yield or benefits from a situation, not capitalizing on

maximum potential gain. Finally, having enough *know-how* to handle technology is a practical need and at the same time a *sine qua non* condition to be able to carry out one's activity. What needs to be stipulated in connection with these pairings is that any given answer from the four may contain a plurality of ingredient-aspects: a feeling component, a practical one, as well as identity and building image-of-self needs etc., i.e., at some point, the lines as to the type of sphere that each of these choices reflects become blurred, as any given option reunites more types of needs. However, I have tried to detach what I have considered to be the most relevant, weighty or primary need fulfilled by the actions mentioned in the option in each case. The second table shows the way in which these needs have been prioritized by the two categories of students-employees.

REMOTE WORK EMPLOYEES	HYBRID WORK EMPLOYEES
<i>cognitive</i> (4)	<i>emotive</i> (4)
<i>emotive</i> (3)	<i>prospects for reward</i> (4)
<i>(technological) know-how</i> (2)	<i>cognitive</i> (2)
<i>prospects for reward</i> (1)	<i>(technological) know-how</i> (0)

Table 2. Prioritizing of needs among remote and hybrid student-employees

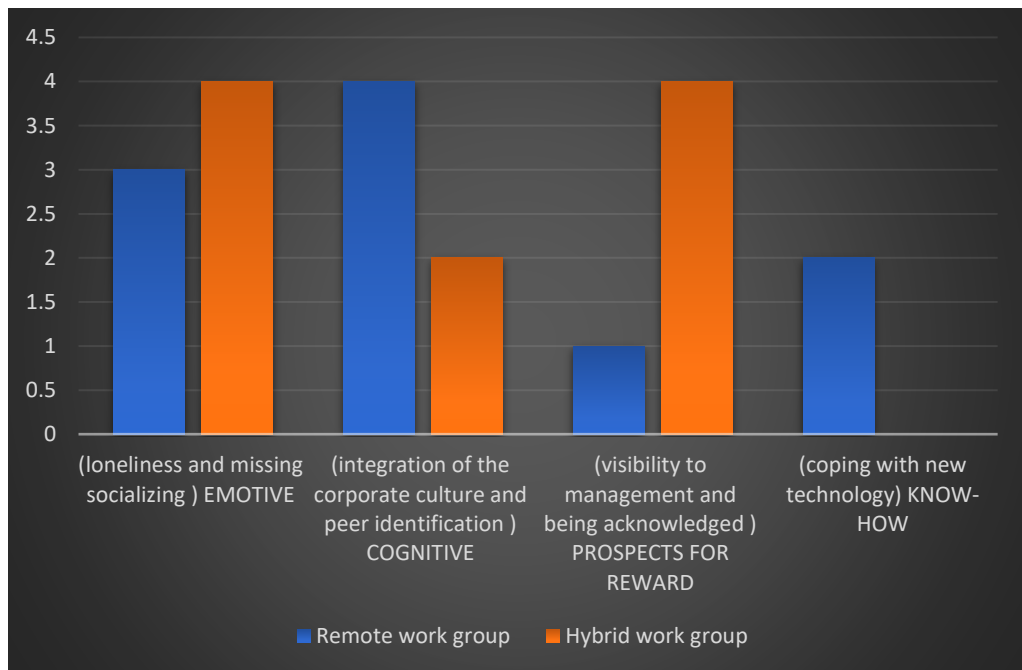


Chart 1. Question 1 – What is your greatest fear among the ones enumerated below, related to the system of employment you are part of (remote or hybrid work)?

There are some observations that we can make based on the information in the tables and chart above. To start with, the insecurities related to manipulating technology and being in

the know in this respect, keeping up with the times, surprisingly still represent an issue, even though we are dealing with students in IT and we are far from the incipient stages of the pandemic, when this reality hit hard a lot of people. This happens in the remote work scenario, where the employees have no direct access to the headquarters, at least not as part of an official, structured timetable. The issue is no longer present in hybrid work contexts, where intermittent access to on-site people and equipment should presumably put employees at ease completely, a theory that is actually proven by the data. This shows that pandemic online exclusiveness has managed to at least give people enhanced technological know-how, helping them learn more about technology and improving their computer operation skills.

Students interviewed in the remote work employees subgroup had not known their colleagues previous to the hiring, having, from the very beginning, from their day one of work, made their entrance in the company directly into this scheme of remote interaction. This is the reason why familiarization with the company in terms of corporate culture and identity as well as co-worker identity is ranked first. The main worry for remote work staff is cognitive. What we may further explain here is that informal discussions, chance or side comments, or details from the changing scenery and individuals' interaction with it help familiarization with peers and corporate identity much better and quicker than formal introductions or video meetings that represent constraining contexts by their nature, in which people do not express themselves fully freely. Someone's particularities, personality traits and individuality may be caught much more rapidly and significantly from less controlled, less regulated and more relaxed interactions. We can also add the huge weight borne by the *unmediated* access to the non-verbal component which exists in hybrid environments, as opposed to remote ones.

Probably the most obviously predominant element, the one that holds the most weight and highest relevance in work environments that contain a remote feature is the emotive one. In both subgroups, it occupies either the second or, respectively, the first position among the answers; in the first subgroup, the equivalent of thirty percent of respondents chose it, and, in the second, forty percent, i.e. if we consider the respondents' answers together, the first percentage among the four options, i.e. thirty-five percent goes to this emotive ingredient, transforming it into the most relevant fear-need for both work scenarios that involve distancing. We have a chart below with the percentages by answers of the two subgroups reunited.

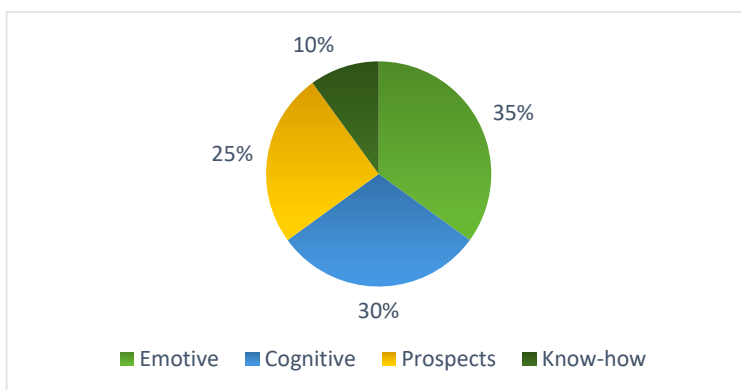


Chart 2. Ranking of the four fears/needs as per the twenty respondents

The students were asked to list some possible remedies to eliminate or help with their fears. This qualitative part of the study, therefore, consisted of an open-ended question, requiring their input in enumerating solutions and motivating their choices, explaining exactly how these are meant to diminish the negative impact of the fears above.

When referring to the manner in which the actual work activity unfolds, video time was mentioned among the preferred method of interaction in meetings, as opposed to merely audio input from the peers and managers. The reasons given were the following. One was a better control of who provides input and how often, and thus avoiding both stealing the spotlight and inability to break in the more vocal colleagues' conversations, so a more balanced discussion from the point of view of participation of all those engaged in it overall. Somehow, once the people can actually be viewed on a screen rather than present as names in a list, this increases their visibility. Then, visual access to the others during the presentation of input helps with aspects like getting the feeling that one is being listened to, understood and integrated. A lot of this feeling is thanks to the presence of the non-verbal component of communication, which is overwhelmingly important (as theory portends). What is specifically gained through it occurs due to regulators – the nods and micro expressions that regulate the taking of turns in exchanges – and the ability, by following the facial expressions, to get a kind of immediate feedback for what one puts forth. The downside would be that image quality and potential lags diminish the accuracy of this feedback, as well as the above-mentioned aspect of the non-verbal being somehow also constrained by the formality of the context, whereas non-verbal communication in physical co-presence is much richer and allows for more forms of expression.

As far as side activities are concerned, all the respondents enumerate attending company-organized events such as team buildings, outings, parties, going out for food and drinks, and thematic gatherings. A marked preference is expressed for these events bearing a specific topic, distinctive feature, a unique trait. A desirable characteristic of these specific get-togethers would be the element of surprise, for them to be unexpected – both in terms of timing/scheduling and content – and preferably humorous. The expressed predilection for these forms of congregating rather than the regular restaurant reunions is overwhelming. The reason provided is that they are much funnier and fun than the latter, neutral category, and thus manage to break routine better, bring excitement in the attendants' lives and illustrate character of participants better, helping with the manifestation of, and familiarization with peer identities.

3. Hybrid work and hybrid education

This part of the study blends questions that require subjective, creative answers with choice ones. The students were asked to define hybrid work, by answering the open-ended Question 3, "What is hybrid work?" I wanted to check the perception of this concept, given the amount of confusion signaled in literature that deals with, first and foremost, what it means, which seems to be yet unclear, let alone the way it is configured and implemented. In other words, based on the opinions expressed by the focus group, we may conclude indeed that "What exactly hybrid work will look like for each organization is just beginning to take shape" [7].

Let us look at what we mean by unclear ideas of hybrid work among the interviewed students. Most of them perceive the notion of hybrid work as entailing a work arrangement that presupposes on-site time combined with remote work. The ten students in the second subgroup were all able to provide definitions along this line. By contrast, students in the exclusively remote work subgroup were more confused as to what a hybrid environment would mean. They mentioned as potential features of this hybrid structure not necessarily the alternation of time chunks or days inside and outside of the office or company location for the same employee, but also other scenarios. For instance, there was the notion of flexible work hours in terms of daily variations of the beginning and end-time of the work day, i.e. an employee could start the workday at eight o'clock and leave at four or start at twelve or even one o'clock in the afternoon and leave at eight or, respectively, nine o'clock at night, and that these variations can be made of one's own accord, during the same week, without previous notice to the manager; this basically meant a flexible schedule for a certain individual that needs not be agreed upon in advance and could vary from one day to another, depending on one's mood. Other students defined hybrid structure as a part of the company employees being completely remote, while others are always in, which is also actually the case when an employee joined in the pandemic time and works exclusively remotely, being the "newbie", while others have the experience of office time together from before the changes brought about by the virus occurred [8].

If defining hybrid work seems easier to the subgroup of students who are employed in this work model, whose answers are consistent with the basic feature assigned to this concept, both subgroups of students were having difficulty agreeing on what hybrid work conditions should actually look like concretely and specifically, and who holds the right to define them. Some say that the management is supposed or expected to come up with the structure, and the employee has a passive role, being at liberty to accept or pass on the job, while others see it as a process of negotiation between parties, and, what is more, as an ongoing bargain, being not only fully personalized, but subject to renegotiation even subsequent to the hiring. This more collaborative and fluid approach is embraced by more than three quarters of the respondents. Most of them agree that hybrid work should not mean that the company has certain time intervals – weeks and even months of alternation between work from the office and remote work – set in stone from the beginning for all employees, but that the alternations should be personalized and negotiated with every individual. Some statistics show this tendency favoring more autonomy, to even reach full autonomy in deciding the hybrid work scenario; a survey of "more than 140,000 U.S. employees" showed that "About four in 10 employees say they want full autonomy to come and go as they wish, and six in 10 want more structure", with the mention that the six nevertheless "don't agree on 'how' to coordinate" [9]. The students' answers also reflect this trend towards an extreme variability. What we may conclude based on this is that the fluidity that this concept of hybridity may reach in the future is maximum, and miles away from the early attempts that we are experiencing with these days.

As far as their studies are concerned, for the time being students seem pleased with the scenario of one third of the studies being online. They welcome this flexibility for their studies. To Question 4, "Do you feel that the hybrid education scenario at your university is currently a welcome adjustment?", they answered "yes" in a proportion of ninety percent (eighteen positive answers out of twenty), and what is worth mentioning is that the two respondents who did not choose to answer affirmatively chose the option "I am not sure",

as there were three options given: “Yes”, “No” and “I am not sure”. Question 5, “Do you think that the online part of your studies should be increased or decreased?”, for which the potential answers were “Increased”, “Decreased” and “I am not sure”, there are still two students who seem in doubt, whereas the other eighteen are more or less uniformly divided, as eight answered in the direction of having less time online, whereas ten voted for more. The conclusion here would be that almost all think that a mixed scenario for their studies is a good idea, but they do not agree on how long the online proportion should be.

4. Hybridity – prospects for the future

In this part of the survey, students were required to answer two choice questions. Question 6, “What kind of scenario would you prefer while simultaneously being an employee and pursuing your academic education (including master studies)?”, provided the following possible answers (and I have mentioned in brackets, for every scenario, the number of respondents who picked it):

- a) online education and remote work (0)
- b) online education and hybrid work (0)
- c) face-to-face education and remote work (2)
- d) face-to-face education and hybrid work (3)
- e) hybrid education and remote work (3)
- f) hybrid education and hybrid work (12)

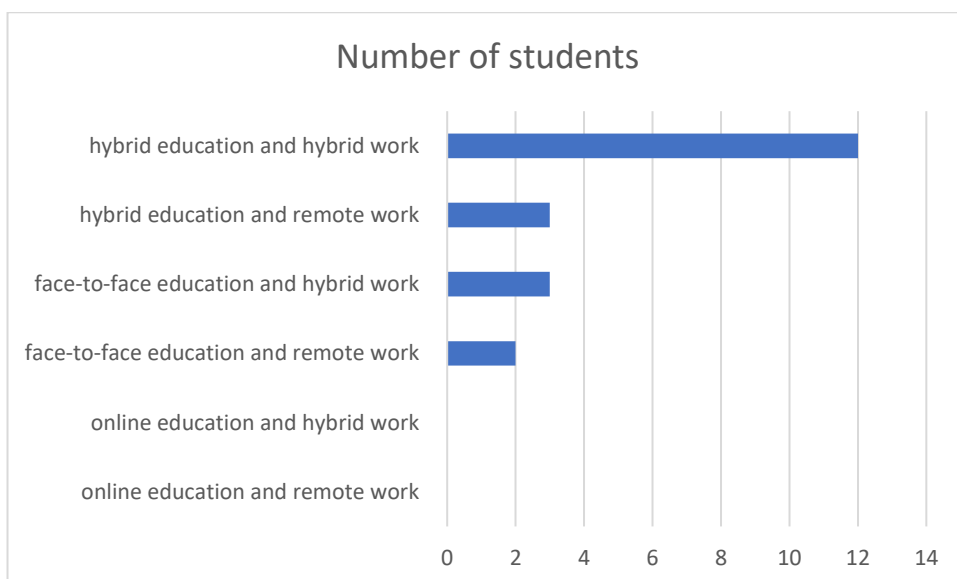


Chart 3. Question 6 – What kind of scenario would you prefer while simultaneously being an employee and pursuing your academic education (including master studies)?

Some aspects are worth a few comments. For one, no student believes that education should be fully online after having experienced this scenario during the pandemic; they do not want it repeated, and nobody thinks that academic education that unfolds exclusively online is a good idea, which is why for the first two answers the number of respondents is zero. Hybridity is favored in both education and one's professional life, more than half of the students choosing the last option. What we interestingly notice is that a great number from the students currently caught in a remote work scenario – half of them, five out of ten – migrated towards the hybrid model. Also, the two undecided students from the previous questions, when no longer given the option of undecidedness, went towards a mixed concept model for both their studies and work, choosing the last option. The students who chose face-to-face education for the future might have nevertheless agreed on the appropriateness of a hybrid studies scenario in the previous question temporarily, based on the still uncertain health situation globally, in the hope that it might get less risky for one's life or wellbeing to be fully onsite in the times to come. The results are displayed in the chart above.

Question 7 probed into how the students see their future lives in terms of favorite work models, asking them “What work model would you choose after graduation – remote, hybrid or fully on-site?”. The chart below sums up their selections, making it more than plain that the return to a fully on-site model, after the times that we have lived involving the remoteness factor to some degree, is seen, at least at this moment, as a virtual impossibility, as highly unlikely.

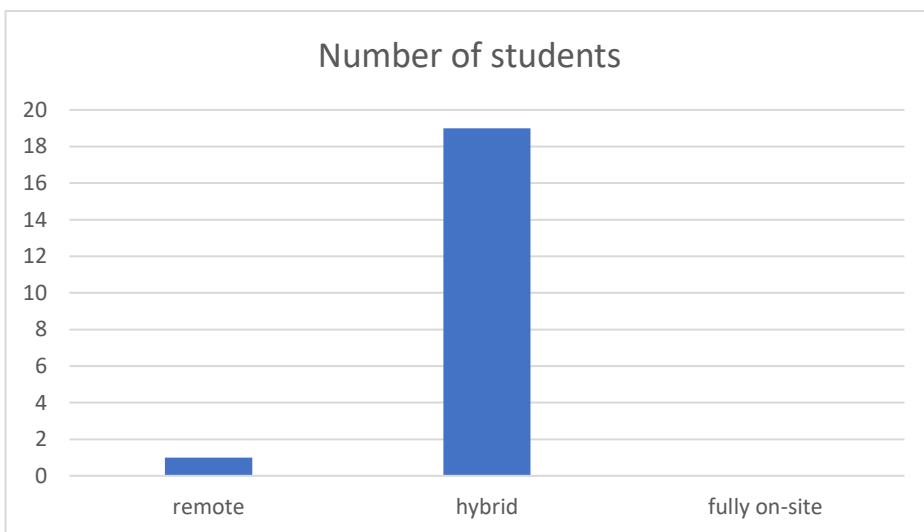


Chart 4. Question 7 – What work model would you choose after graduation – remote, hybrid or fully on-site?

5. Conclusions

The quantitative-qualitative analysis above reveals a few aspects related to the perception of remote and hybrid work and studies at the moment of the questionnaire. Firstly, notably, it is obvious that there is an emotional component related to socialization, loneliness and isolation that still represents a concern for all categories of respondents, i.e. for the young

generation overall, irrespective of their preferences for future work and education models. This only goes to show that the pandemic distancing and seclusion times have left their mark on the psychology of the young adult, who finds it a reason for concern, stress, with it even bearing the potential to trigger anxiety. The first two questions in the study reveal not only the fact that the emotive ingredient is relevant and draws attention to it, but that its importance is extremely high. Moreover, this occurs among students of IT, who are proverbially and perhaps stereotypically non people persons, displaying lower communication skills and, according to some, needs. The way they rank the emotive factor seems to be contradicting this outlook.

Then, we may conclude that young people have also learned how to value their freedom and wellbeing – perhaps another consequence of how the potential jeopardy raised to one’s health and life has determined a rethinking of one’s priorities and has perhaps changed the way the professional life has been automatically put first by some. The future, therefore, needs to be flexible, even highly or fully so, and negotiation and fluid boundaries appear to be the next norm. Both companies and future employees need to adapt to this new environment if they want to keep going. Technology will be part of our lives to a great extent, which entails in itself endless returns made on it by companies having this profile, and, from the perspective of the consumer of technology, befriending it and allotting significant amounts of money for its purchase.

Fully online education does also not seem an option. Despite the ability to adjust to the fully online system during the pandemic, the experience is perhaps found flawed, since it is not chosen by any of the young adults.

Most of the times, once the logistics is out of the way, the hybrid models of either education or work have a lot to do with how one decides to wrap her/his mind around the concept, as there are, objectively speaking, pros and cons involved in both staying remote and being there. As a last conclusion, we could say that the reconsideration of psychological boundaries and growing an inner psychological balanced profile that readjusts mindset are necessary and the key to successfully adapt to this new world ahead.

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