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Social distance and the impact of the pandemic on students and university staff view of Poland

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Pandemic situation in Poland

In Poland, the first confirmed case was recorded on 4 March 2020.

A state of epidemiological threat was introduced between 14 and 20 March, and a state of epidemic emergency was declared on 20 March pursuant to a Regulation of the Minister of Health (2020).

Polish universities began suspending classes on 10 March, and all universities closed down on 12 March. Public gatherings were banned, movement of persons and access to public spaces were restricted, and direct social interactions were limited by the Regulation of the Minister of Health of 24 March 2020.

Pandemic situation in Poland

According to the principle of autonomy, Polish universities are independent in their decisions regarding the organization of education. This is why the methods of holding classes may vary from one institution to another. Yet regardless of the selected method of teaching, it is paramount for all higher education institutions to minimize the risk of infection among students, teachers, and administrative staff.

At the beginning of the epidemic, the decision of the universities' lockdown depended on their authorities. Most public universities decided to shift to distance learning.

Pandemic situation in Poland

From October 2020 Poland was divided into yellow and red zones (no green zones anymore), and the decisions about form of education was still possible to be made by universities authorities. However, they could choose only from available forms of education.

In red zones

Education is conducted only remotely. The exceptions were:

Classes including the activities which cannot be conducted remotely

Classes of the last year of studies

By the decision of the rector or the head of the entity providing doctoral student education, these classes might have been held stationary

In the yellow zones

Education could have been conducted remotely or in a hybrid form (half remotely, half stationary).

The decision on the method of conducting education could have been taken by the rector or the head of the entity providing education for doctoral students.

Reaction of universities in Poland

Teaching online is not simply putting learning materials online. Lecturers must organise the content and learning methods according to the new mode of delivery so that students do not feel isolated and alone in the learning process.

Suddenly it turned out that most of universities is not prepared to such a form of teaching. At the very beginning there were huge problems with platforms which were used for distance learning, there was too many people using the platform at the same time, connection was of poor quality many teachers just were not familiar with IT tools which the should use, students had problems with logging in, there were no proper channels of communication between students and teachers, nor the ways of delivering documents.

Consequently, several different forms of online lectures were established. The most dominant forms of online lectures were real-time video conferences, followed by asynchronous forms: Sending presentations to students, video recording, and written communication using forums and chats.

Universities in Poland

From the next academic year 2020/2020 technological situation at universities was much better. New IT solutions were used, teachers and students become more familiar with new form of conducting classes.

However, that was the time when when more and more people began to feel the social effects of isolation and distance learning.

And unfortunately these effects are much more difficult to fix than technical problems.

Impact of the pandemic on students

Certainly, the forms of online learning introduced due to the pandemic constraints were something new and unknown to students that they had to learn. Especially students in the first years of studies (which are usually difficult anyway), who are used to a different mode of study, which took place in upper secondary schools.

Studying from home commonly requires greater self-discipline and motivation to follow through online lessons, particularly in the earlier period when students are getting used to the new system, which might affect the feeling of an increase in study obligations.

Impact of the pandemic on students

Over the last year, several independent studies on the impact of distance learning on university students were conducted in Poland - in fact, many universities conducted such studies among their students. Analyzing the results of several such studies, as well as the WSPA experience in this area, several conclusions can be drawn about the impact of changing the teaching system on various aspects of students' lives.

At the same time, some differences in the results of research conducted at the beginning of distance learning and after several months of its duration can also be noted.

There are two main fields that have been assessed. The first one concerns the strict process of learning - its organization, effectiveness, achieved results, etc. The second one concerns the widely understood well-being of students.

Impact of the pandemic on students

Impact on learning proces.

On the one hand, the students positively assessed distance learning. Most of them are familiar with the use of modern technologies, so using them in the learning process was not difficult for them.

Some of the students praised this form of work, which did not require leaving home, giving the opportunity to use modern tools on an ongoing basis, e.g. diversifying activities with games or movies. They noticed that the lecturers mostly tried to activate and encourage students to actively participate in the classes.

The students also assessed the workload as not too high. Most of them did not feel overloaded with the material and the content conveyed.

The students also emphasized the advantages of being able to plan their learning more independently, although this mainly concerned older students.

Impact of the pandemic on students

Impact on learning proces.

The organization of distance learning gave students one more important opportunity - which they did not have before. Thanks to distance learning, they can study at any university without having to live in a given country.

Impact of the pandemic on students

Impact on learning proces.

Unfortunately, there have also been negative aspects in this area. Noticed partly by students, but mostly by lecturers.

A large percentage of students did not do well with independent study planning. Especially first-year students had big problems with that. Independent organization of learning requires quite a lot of discipline, proper planning and a lot of self management skills.

The lecturers noticed that a very large number of students had problems in this area, they did not attend classes, did not submit their papers on time, did not take the exams at the appointed time, postponed exams and handing over papers.

There was also a group of students who were inactive for most of the semester - explaining that they had a bad internet connection.

Pandemic situation in Poland

Organize yourself! Time and self management as a key to your success



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Programme	Erasmus+
Key Action	Cooperation for innovation and the exchange of good practices
Action	Strategic Partnerships
Field	Partnerships for Digital Education Readiness
Main objective	Innovation
Total budget	132 995,00EUR
Project duration	01.03.2021 – 31.08.2022 (18 months)

Impact of the pandemic on students

Impact on learning proces.

There were also differences in the material preparation of students. Unfortunately, students living in areas with weaker Internet access had greater problems with active participation in the educational process. The quality of computer equipment was also important - people with worse equipment often had problems with attending classes, sending papers or taking exams. Finally, the students' local conditions also influenced the quality of their education process. In general, it turned out that students with a worse financial situation, unfortunately, also have less chance of fully benefiting from remote education.

Pandemic situation in Poland

Impact on the well-being of students

Unfortunately, due to the restrictions resulting from the pandemic, students were deprived of some very important things for them.

Lack of personal contact with lecturers also negatively affected students and their academic performance, as well as their involvement in the learning process. The possibility of discussing some issues individually and meeting the lecturer turned out to be an important element of the teaching process. In theory, online teaching allows for individual consultations, but in practice they are not a substitute for face-to-face contact. Especially in the second half of 2020, when distance learning was becoming slow, many students and lecturers noticed that they lacked the possibility of individual meetings during their studies.

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Pandemic situation in Poland

Lack of direct, personal interaction during the classes also negatively influenced students' motivation to learn as well as their results.

By participating face-to-face classes, students are more active and feel more motivated to participate in discussions and to work on a given material. Interactions in the classroom with other students and the lecturer have also proven to be very important for students. As a result, they achieved better academic results.

This was not the case during distance learning, where there was no possibility of direct contact with colleagues or the teacher, and students did not feel directly obliged to actively participate in classes.

Impact of the pandemic on students

Impact on the well-being of students

Students' social life has basically been eliminated due to the closure of the dormitories and the transition to full distance learning. Student events were canceled and opportunities for student integration were severely restricted.

The possibility of active participation in student life is very important for young people. Many of them pointed to the negative effects of limiting this sphere.

The sense of belonging to a group decreased as students were unable to integrate. Reduced social and physical contact with others (including the social-distancing measures) triggered numerous negative emotions like frustration, boredom, anxiety, confusion, anger, etc. Inability to share these feelings with friends had negative impact on mental health condition of students.

Impact of the pandemic on students

Overall, it was not so much the need for distance learning as the need for isolation during the pandemic's constraints that was of great importance to students. Remote learning was only one area of youth life that was significantly affected by the pandemic. One of the most important, however, is that students usually spend 3/4 of their time at school and this is where they not only gain knowledge, but also lead a social life.

Summing up, it can be said that the necessity to stay at home, the ban on meeting in larger groups, the inability to have personal contact with friends, numerous restrictions resulting from restrictions - all this definitely had an impact on the lives of young people in Poland. It showed how important social contacts are in every aspect of young people's lives.

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Impact of the pandemic on University staff

It is not only students who have felt the effects of the changes introduced in the education system in connection with the pandemic. The university's lecturers and administrative staff have also been affected by the reorganization of the teaching process.

The first area that was most visible in the case of lecturers was the organization of work with students. Most of the lecturers had a problem with the transition to the distance learning system. Some of them simply did not know the tools on which they were supposed to work (they could not generate an attendance list, record classes, allocate rooms for work, turn on presentations, etc.). However, these technical problems were overcome fairly quickly.

Nevertheless, at the beginning, many lecturers used more passive working methods - e.g. by emailing students with materials for independent work or links to films, quizzes, etc.

Impact of the pandemic on University staff

Lecturers had a bigger problem with the need to reorganize the learning process. E-learning requires a little different approach than teaching in the classroom. It's not enough just to talk to students, you need to be more active in encouraging them to listen and work in class. Many academic teachers had a problem with finding appropriate methods of working with students so as to motivate them to work actively. However, it is easier in the classroom with personal contact with students.

Nevertheless, in the end most of the lecturers coped with this challenge or accepted the low commitment of students.

Some lecturers even noticed very positive aspects of this situation and admitted that thanks to distance learning, their motivation to activate students has increased, and their classes are now more valuable and attractive.

Impact of the pandemic on University staff

The second important area affected by the pandemic is the activity of lecturers in the international arena. With the emergence of the possibility of transferring many activities to virtual reality, the possibilities of participating in them have increased. This resulted in a significant activation of the academic community in the international arena.

For example, the activity of lecturers in terms of participation (active and passive) in conferences, trainings and international seminars has increased. In a situation where they do not have to travel to the place where the event takes place, it is much easier for them to find time to participate in these events.

Impact of the pandemic on University staff

The possibility of organizing these events online has also increased the number of available courses, trainings, seminars and conferences. and this, in turn, has a positive impact on the possibilities of professional development of lecturers, establishing cooperation between universities, implementing projects or joint work on study programs (the possibility of online studies is definitely a plus here).

This is definitely one of the most positive aspects resulting from the pandemic.

Impact of the pandemic on University staff

The reorganization of the teaching process also had an impact on the university's administrative staff.

At first it was quite a negative impact.

Organizationally, most universities were not prepared for virtual contact with students. There was a lack of document circulation procedures and developed tools for contacting students and lecturers. In most Polish universities, most administrative matters were settled through personal contacts with students and lecturers.

Impact of the pandemic on University staff

Over time, however, appropriate procedures and tools were developed to enable the transfer of most matters to virtual space. And while the technology is getting better, it is quite difficult for many administrative staff to switch to virtual contacts with students and lecturers. This is mainly due to many years of habituation to personal contacts, which, however, are irreplaceable in certain situations.

Social distance and the impact of the pandemic on students and university staff view of Poland

To sum up, the changes introduced in the education system at universities in Poland in connection with the pandemic definitely had an impact on many aspects of the lives of students, myself and university employees.

It is difficult to clearly assess whether it is mostly a positive or negative impact.

However, many universities are certainly willing to take advantage of the positive aspects of the situation and work on eliminating the negative ones.



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Thank you for attention