



Teaching online in Higher Education Institutions of Hungary

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Background

The Hungarian higher education has been profoundly affected by the coronavirus pandemic. As campuses around the globe were forced to shut down, online distance learning became an everyday reality to all students, while faculty were rushed to adjust their teaching content and methods, as well as forms of assessment to online teaching. As a result, this transition exposed flaws in technological abilities, digital preparedness and flexibilities within universities. For most of the higher education sector, online distance education as a teaching model was not new, although it has not been commonly applied on a mass scale before the pandemic. We are yet to fully understand the challenges and opportunities that the pandemic posed for higher education institutions (HEIs) and entire education systems.

Hungarian researchers have inquired about changes in education since the digital revolution, suggesting that in the new age, educators are no longer the sole source of knowledge, but rather their role is in creating a learning environment that inspires inquisitiveness, creativity and collaboration. Besides academic research, long before the pandemic several universities established their own learning and research centers to study online education and develop methodologies, guidelines and resources for Hungarian educators. For instance, at the University of Szeged's Center for Research on Learning and Instruction, with the support of Microsoft Hungary (and later several other sources of funding), initiated the "Classroom of the future project" in 2006, with cutting-edge technology and equipment; it is now a renowned site for innovative teaching training

that effectively merges ICT into teaching and learning. What has also become apparent before the pandemic is the importance of digital skills for both, teachers and learners. The role of digital literacy in modern education was commonly discussed among Hungarian policy makers, highlighting the need to strengthen digital education of youth within the Hungarian education system.

Universities in Hungary switched to remote learning in March of 2020, and many began the next academic year in September of that year as hybrid or blended education, often with large classes delivered online and smaller classes with physical presence. Then, due to intensification of the pandemic and still no widespread vaccination plans, HEIs once again switched to remote learning in November of 2020. Universities ambitiously began 2021/22 academic year returning to traditional, contact education and have not switched to online learning as of yet (November 2021). The sudden transition to online remote learning powerfully underlined the importance of digital skills that must be possessed by teachers and students alike; this recognition is echoed in the new National Digitalization Strategy for 2021-2030. In addition, distance e-learning also highlighted an important strategy that the Hungarian higher education system—notorious for its bureaucracy and complexity – must embrace – innovation. With that, public-private cooperation, which has decades of history from before the pandemic, as a solution-driven approach to innovative learning should be highlighted in the context of education during the pandemic.

Methodology

For analysis, the report uses collections of studies in Hungarian, such as the Special Issue published in *Civil Szemle*, “Education, Digitalization and Civil Society” (2020) and online sources, especially articles and documents published on university websites. This study was also informed by the conference organized by the Tempus Foundation in October 2020, which focused on the effects of Covid-19 pandemic on internationalization of universities and international students; the shared ongoing strategies and experiences from various Hungarian HEIs provide an important insight into how HEIs were able to adapt to various disruptions due to the pandemic. Hence, this study draws heavily on surveys conducted among international students in Hungarian HEIs, as it is a student population whose experience was documented, and may be indicative of the broader student body as well.

Key findings

Benefit of online education that stems from its flexibility: Based students' feedback across several universities that was discussed among academic and non-academic circles in Hungary highlighted the key benefit of online education that stems from its flexibility – for instance, students can access materials easily or download videos and lecture slides at any time. In addition, individualized learning practices, more efficient teaching, and fast distribution of up-to-date materials are also among important advantages of online education. A recent study conducted among computer science students of Eszterhazy Karoly University concluded that students indeed liked digital education and half of the surveyed students are prepared to continue their higher education online in the future.

Universities themselves can be promoters of innovation and change: HEIs, with their forward-looking, research-based approach became hubs for not only knowledge production, but also innovative thinking in overcoming the challenges of the pandemic in the sphere of education, as well as re-thinking education and contributing to a paradigm change. During the pandemic, some universities took initiative at organizing study groups, workshops and research centers, striving to understand the effects of the pandemic on education. Moreover, in Hungary collaboration between several universities also resulted in a partnership that helped the government effort of assessing and halting the virus: four Hungarian medical schools – Semmelweis University as the coordinator, together with Universities of Pécs, Szeged and Debrecen – collaborated on a nationwide coronavirus testing in the spring of 2020.

Covid-19 can be seen as an opportunity in improving higher education: University of Pécs has taken this optimistic approach in rethinking their teaching and operation in the context of Covid-19, striving for institutional resilience. Continuous engagement with international students was a particularly important task. Every year the University offers several international programs, making its international programs eminent in Hungary. The sudden disruptions caused by the pandemic were met with an approach aimed at resilience: discovering potentials and new possibilities in the evolving situation and re-designing the programs accordingly.

Universities learnt to mitigate the adverse effects of online education: The approach of University of Szeged to mitigate the consequences of pandemic was that of building stronger solidarity, which included interactive information sessions, methodological support to teachers, workshops for sharing best practices, and ongoing surveying of faculty and students' experiences. Support was also given to international students,

recognizing their compound sense of isolation. Mental and psychological support to international students was also realized through the Centre for International Relations at Eszterházy Károly University, which provided an invaluable service of intercultural counseling to all international students during the pandemic.

Sense of community was key during the pandemic: A noteworthy initiative that helped alleviate anxiety and create a strong sense of community was the Community Garden initiative at Szent István University's, Research Institute of Agricultural Economics. In many ways, this initiative was innovative and supportive: it allowed for social interaction and networking outdoors, informal learning to take place through a hands-on sustainability project, as well as provided an opportunity to connect with the local community and strengthen students' sense of belonging. As a continuation of this project, the University plans to involve Hungarian students as well.

Recommendations

- It is imperative to pay close attention to students' psychological needs during the pandemic and online education
- Sense of community among university students, their ongoing relationship with faculty are key to student success and well-being
- Ongoing programs to improve digital skills among both, students and faculty are a prerequisite for effective online education
- Elements of online education are likely to remain integral to the higher education system, and should be used to improve efficiency in education
- Special attention must be paid to students who may be more vulnerable during online education, such as international students or those with deprived backgrounds

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