Teaching online in Higher Education Institutions. Poland

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Background

The political transformation that started in 1989 has significantly changed the tertiary education system in Poland. In made higher education more popular and accessible what is reflected in the high number of students and level of penetration of HEIs in Poland. The vast majority of HEIs is supervised by the Ministry of Education and Science, with the rest overseen by ministries related to their profile. However, the regulations issued by these authorities are often similar, which in fact makes the system centralized. The Law on Higher Education and Science of 2018 forms legal backbone of higher education in Poland. Accordingly, higher education is carried out in three forms – first cycle (BA level), second cycle (MA level) or unified master's level (long cycle). In the academic year 2019/2020, there were 1.2 million students in Poland. The current challenges faced by the Polish HE sector include: low birth rates resulting in decreasing number of young people enrolled in higher education; conflict between quality and quantity of higher education; and limited number of HEIs recognised in Europe/globally.

Methodology

A systematic review of the scientific papers addressing Polish HEIs during COVID-19 crisis was run. Following dimensions were considered: transformation of higher education

in Poland in recent decades; digital education in Polish HEIs before COVID-19; national regulations of online education during the COVID-19 pandemics; support to HEIs and students by state bodies, and students approach to digital learning.

Key findings

In the pre-COVID-19 times online education has been carried out only marginally, as an addition to regular studies (selected courses offered as e-learning), or by several, usually non-private HEIs which this way tried to attract part-time students. After the outbreak of the pandemics remote teaching became mainstream. The HEIs have either used the existing platforms dedicated to online learning or used the platforms of global software providers – usually Microsoft (MS Teams) or Google (Click Meetings) – which allow synchronous communication between a student and a teacher. Many HEIs already had signed agreements with these providers for other services, which meant that adding a component that enabled online teaching was relatively easy.

The Ministry of Science and Higher Education and other ministries responsible for relevant types of universities used their powers to adjust the laws and regulations to online teaching. The two rules that were noticeable in these legal changes were: to give the HEIs autonomy in decision making, and to enable digitalization of the processes (not only teaching, but also related administrative tasks). The adjustment to online teaching depended on the structural, technical, and organisational readiness of the HEIs.

Recommendations and challenges

- **Teaching online after Covid-19.** Online teaching has proved to be working. These methods can be used in case of lectures and part-time studies. Seminars, workshops, and trainings can also be conducted online to some extent, but their efficiency depends on the methodology and type of classes. At the same time, there are some types of courses that cannot be conducted online.
- **Organising teaching online. The** Ministry of Science and Higher Education gave HEIs autonomy in decision making. This has either been implemented on the HEI level or faculty level. It has eased the transition as the HEIs or faculties knew their facilities, technical infrastructure, and study programmes, and therefore could adjust in the best

possible way. However, the adjustment was possible only if the HEI already had structural capacities and IT solutions.

- **Teaching tools and methods.** In order to prepare the teaching staff for digital education, HEIs should organise trainings in digital tools to enable teachers to use the technical solutions and feel confident while conducting online classes. Teaching online should also be verified whether it is conducted in real time and in good quality.
- **Verifying learning outcomes.** Online education has made information-based exams hardly useful, as students could find answers on the Internet. Transition to teaching online could in fact facilitate a change in examination into projects, teamwork, or conceptual tasks that demand from students critical thinking and problem-solving approach.
- **Being a student online.** The pandemic has placed a huge burden on students. To address that, many HEIs have offered psychological support to their students, lowered or postponed student fees (in case of part-time students). Substituting relations between students has proven to be much more complicated, although, it has been partly supported by student organisations.
- **Interest in higher education.** Remote learning enabled many students to pursue their studies through the flexibility of learning. Many students, who gave up their studies before COVID-19 or were unable to combine them with work, decided to enrol and graduate.

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