

# EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES FOR UNIVERSITIES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of the article was to present the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the didactic process and to start a discussion on what can universities do at this specific time to meet the requirements of the Polish Qualifications Framework and also how should the didactic staff communicate with the use of virtual space to achieve the expected quality of education.

The paper is a concept study based on the results of a literature search query, experiences derived from cooperation with institutions dealing in the management of regional development and labour markets, such as the Regional Labour Office, and the experience gained from holding specific positions at the faculty.

As former vice-deans for didactics, both authors have in-depth knowledge about the conditions for the education process implementation and the related challenges. Experience gained from holding a specific position made it possible to propose a comprehensive look at the challenges for universities related to education at the time of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The original features of the paper include: discussion on the importance of universities in the market economy and the education process, presentation of the current situation of universities at the time of the Covid-19 pandemic and the opportunity to get acquainted with the activities that were undertaken by universities in response to the new challenge, i.e. complete transition to distance learning.

**Keywords:** *didactic process, challenges for universities, higher education*

## INTRODUCTION

The World Health Organization (WHO) announced the SARS-COV-2 pandemic, caused by a new coronavirus on 11 March 2020, however, the term of COVID-19 pandemic is used due to the officially confirmed cases of infection in 2019. The first cases of infection emerged in Wuhan, Hubei Province in China and quickly spread all over the world. In a strongly related and integrated world, the problem of the Chinese economy affected the global economy. Many enterprises around the world is associated with agreements or even dependent on supplies from China, thereby resulting in them being impacted by the COVID-19

epidemic regardless of their size. The production and transport of goods from China became substantially limited, thereby limiting the provision of services based on products exported from China in many economies around the world. Global financial markets also reacted to these changes and the global stock market indices declined. This was followed by a health crisis and a healthcare crisis.

A series of often radical solutions were used to battle the virus, including complete lockdowns, quarantines, prohibition of business activity or movement. This took a toll on the labour markets and peoples' awareness. Such a substantial limitation of business and consumer activity contributed to a weakened economy. At the start and spread of the pandemic, the world economy entered a path of recession after earlier turmoil. It is believed that the pandemic became an additional stimulus which accelerated and intensified the economic crisis.

Beyond a doubt, the COVID-19 pandemic affected all economic aspects, coercing a series of changes in labour and lifestyle. It seems that it will remain the main or one of the main challenges for various institutions and social groups for a relatively long time. The higher education system will also face the effects of this situation in the long term.

The learning youth also experienced the pandemic's impact on their lives. Isolation and online education contributed to increased anxiety, e.g. of infection, and changed the youth's individual behaviours. In the document Policy Brief: Education during COVID-19 and beyond it was stressed that "COVID-19 pandemic has created the largest disruption of education systems in history, affecting nearly 1.6 billion learners in more than 190 countries and all continents" [1].

## **IMPORTANCE OF UNIVERSITIES IN THE MARKET ECONOMY AND EDUCATION**

The role of higher education in the development of an entire country and regional development is widely known and discussed. Universities shape the development of the local and regional knowledge-based economy and affect the labour market and the goods and services market. It was demonstrated that university presence at a given location contributes positively to regional development by providing better education for employees, education for entrepreneurs and through regional external effects [2]. Universities largely contributed to the political transformation by, among others, engagement in the creation of modern administrative solutions and by various interactions with entrepreneurs, which was especially important in Central and Eastern European states.

Universities have a substantial impact on the economy because they shape the knowledge, skills and social competencies of the people entering or already present on the labour market. The higher the candidate's potential, the greater the

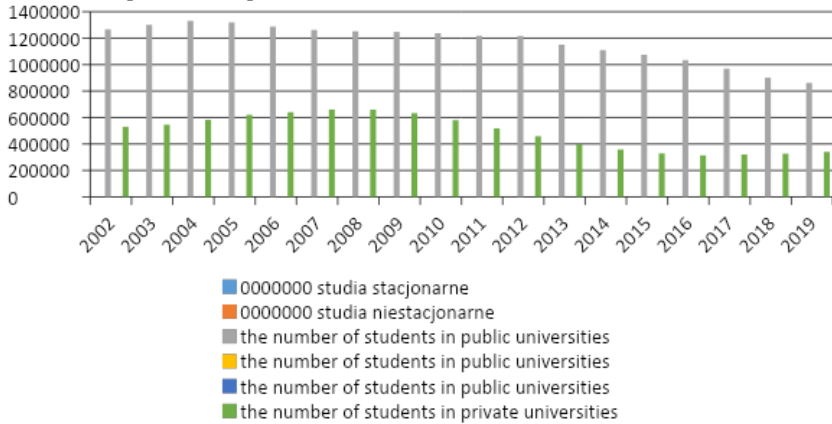
opportunities for finding an appealing job [3]. This potential is shaped during studies by the acquisition of relevant knowledge, skills and social competencies, as well as gaining experience (including experience in an international environment), knowledge of foreign languages and new technologies. The impact of tertiary education on the share of the self-employed in the total workforce was demonstrated. The high quality of human capital translates into innovativeness. Universities are therefore faced with a great challenge to improve this situation. Universities are no longer associated solely with shaping human capital, the catalogue of their functions is broader and this process is dynamic [4].

The changes in the structure and functioning of the education system are a result of the current social and economic situation, which substantially affect the functioning of universities.

Previously, the most important factors that affected the education market included the clear change in the demographic trends and less than optimistic forecasts, end of education of the so-called secondary boom generation, substantial changes in social behaviours, i.e. opening the labour market and consequently labour migration, change in the model of family and its life cycle [5, p. 28]. Last year, the emergence of the SARS-COV-2 virus substantially changes the “rules of the game” by necessitating the introduction of the didactic process’ digitalisation. This produced a new difficulty for the academic teacher to develop interpersonal relations with students, which in direct contact encourages them to seek and use various sources of knowledge and develop their skills to make the studying process effective.

Only 390 thousand people attended studies in the 1990/1991 academic year. For 15 years, this number was increasing systematically, until peaking in the 2005/2006 academic year, when the number of students increased five-fold to a staggering number of 1,95 million. Subsequent years featured a systematic decline in the number of students to approx. 1.67 million in 2013 and slightly over 1.34 million in 2016. According to the ministry’s forecasts, the downward trend will continue until 2025, when 1.25 million people will attend studies [6]. A total of 436,316 people commenced studied in 2016, which is nearly 10 thousand less than in the 2015/2016 academic year. This number included 340 thousand students who commenced education in public universities, featuring 132 (31.8%) institutions according to the data of Statistics Poland, while the number of non-public universities amounted to 238 (68.9%) [7].

**Fig. 1.** Distribution of the number of students in the period of 2002-2019 divided into public and private universities in Poland



Source: Based on Local Data Bank (<https://stat.gov.pl>)

Despite the substantial dominance in the number of non-public universities in Poland, this does not translate into the number of students. Students still mostly choose to acquire higher education in public universities as accredited institutions at the Ministry of Science and Higher Education (see Fig. 1). However, it is worth noting that after a visible decline in interest in education in private schools in 2014, we are currently observing an upward trend in this regard, including a simultaneous decline in the number of students in public universities (which is on-going since 2006).

The current market conditions, i.e. the increasing number of science and research institutions as well as commercial R&D institutions, increasing demand for knowledge services reported by business entities [8; 4], constantly growing e-learning education offer, make a modern university adapt to the social and economic environment.

At the same time, the correct functioning of each university depends on the existence of an academic community which is a collective identity created by the academic environment. Identity is understood as a sum of elements that identify and distinguish an organisation, in this case a university, in a market environment. One of the important aspects of managing a university's reputation is building, in the market environment, a feeling of trust that the education process meets the qualitative requirements of the university's key stakeholders.

The Bologna Process ensured that the level of education is comparable and adequate in all states despite the fact that particular European countries can freely select their curriculum. This allows for achieving the assumed learning effects. The Polish Qualifications Framework (PQF) was initially introduced to define

three categories: knowledge, skills and social competencies. The commencement of work on the introduction of the Integrated Qualifications System in 2008 resulted in the development and implementation of the Polish Qualifications Framework (PQF) in 2016 [9]. These measures allowed, among others, for referring the acquired qualifications to the qualifications in use in other European countries and pointing out qualifications provided in a traditional education and higher education system as well as outside of them (e.g. qualifications acquired on the market).

**Table 1.** *Second-degree characteristics of the Polish Qualifications Framework on social competencies classified as level 6 (bachelor's/engineering studies) and level 7 (master's studies)*

	<b>PQF characteristics level 6</b>	<b>PQF characteristics level 7</b>
<b>SKILLS</b>	using the possessed knowledge	
	communication using specialist terminology	communication on specialist topics with various recipient circles
	participation in a debate – presenting and assessing various opinions and positions as well as discussion	conducting a debate
	using a foreign language at level B2 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages	using a foreign language at level B2+ of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages and higher level in terms of specialist terminology
	planning and organisation of work – individually and in a team	team work management
	independent planning and implementation of lifelong learning	independent planning and implementation of lifelong learning as well as guiding others in this scope
	<b>SOCIAL COMPETENCIES</b>	critical assessment of the possessed knowledge
recognition of the importance of knowledge in solving cognitive and practical problems		
meeting social obligations, co-organisation of activity in favour of a social environment		meeting social obligations, inspiration and organisation of activity in favour of a social environment
initiating measures in favour of the public interest		
thinking and acting in an entrepreneurial manner		
responsible fulfilment of professional roles,		responsible fulfilment of professional roles with

	<p>including: a) complying with the principles of professional ethics and requiring others to do the same, b) taking care of the profession's achievements and traditions</p>	<p>consideration of the ever-changing social needs: a) developing the profession's achievements, b) maintaining the profession's ethos, c) complying with and developing the principles of professional ethics and acting with respect towards those principles</p>
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*Source: [9].*

The higher education qualifications framework in Europe is to be shaped according to the map of qualifications suitable for levels 5-8 of the EQF. This map should provide a clear description of the competencies of a person possessing a relevant diploma, present the relations between qualifications and demonstrate the ability to shift and continue the education as part of lifelong learning. The qualifications framework allows for the differentiation of education programmes in terms of their contents, form, profile and duration, while the specification of universal requirements (instead of the programme's contents) allows for classifying a given diploma or certificate at the relevant level of education [10; 9].

When analysing the entries in Table 1, there is no doubt whether students can fully achieve the assumed learning effects after months of distance learning. The universities certify the achievement of these effects on the labour market by issuing state diplomas. This is one of the many challenges faced by universities and its future effects cannot be completely predicted.

## **CHALLENGES FOR UNIVERSITIES IN THE TIME OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

Universities are facing many challenges today, which include demographic changes, polarization of regional and urban centres, rapid changes in the socio-economic environment [11], but in a special way universities were forced to radically change their functioning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The challenges they faced covered nearly all aspects of their activity. When analysing the didactic aspects, it must be noted that basically all universities in Poland shifted to distance learning, which involved various challenges, such as providing adequate e-learning platforms to communicate with students, preparing didactic materials in a manner that enables making them available on such platforms, training employees and students on using online platforms, etc. This was done surprisingly quickly to enable the learning process, often without adequate tools or training on using them.

It must also be noted that the transfer of the didactic activity to a virtual reality resulted in a loss in contact between the students as well as between the students

and academics. The phenomenon, which is yet to be fully explored, is the digital exclusion in distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Not all didactic process stakeholders possessed adequate computer equipment to establish direct contact from home (e.g. no webcams). It is known that the differences in the conditions of functioning of students during the pandemic were substantial. Not everyone had the adequate space to learn or to actively participate in the classes (e.g. many people residing in a single apartment due to remote work or quarantine). The Polish universities mostly decided to close their dorms and make students leave for the duration of the announced pandemic. Research conducted in the Netherlands demonstrate that students conducting education at homes achieved very little progress despite relatively high quality and conditions of living, including Internet access, among others [12]. It is therefore possible to assume that universities around the world, including Polish universities, are faced with reducing the digital exclusion gap, perhaps in cooperation with local, regional or national authorities. These are only some of the problems faced by people in the education process.

In the traditional form of functioning, universities broadly recognise the issues concerning the generally understood well-being of the students and try to support them at various levels, either by intellectual stimulation (e.g. in scientific clubs), financial aid (e.g. through scholarships or the possibility of using dormitories), supporting an active and healthy life style (e.g. sport classes), internationalisation (e.g. possibility of participation in the Erasmus+ Programme) or through cultural measures (e.g. popular student springs). The pandemic caused most of such measures to be suspended and many students reduced their level of social and economic functioning, while running into problems related to, for example, stress caused by uncertainty, inability to take up work or lack of sufficient resources to lead a healthy lifestyle [13, 14]. Authors of many papers emphasise that universities, aside from teaching, have to provoke the youth to make social interactions and constitute a forum for the exchange of ideas and experiences. The COVID-19 pandemic substantially limited and flattened these functions.

In the current conditions, a university oriented on traditional communication with its Customers-Students was forced to quickly undergo a demanding transformation process into e-communication. One of the more difficult challenges for universities during the COVID-19 pandemic was to carry out a promotional campaign for supporting the recruitment process without the possibility of organising meetings and direct contact with potential candidates. Many universities in Poland were quickly re-deploying their resources and developing new skills. The universities proposed the following, among others:

- online open days,
- online walk-in selected university departments,
- candidate zone – an online guide on topics most important for candidates,

- intensified communication with the use of social media,
- open webinars dedicated to patronage classes,
- educational videos and presentations on YouTube and in regional television.

In administrative terms, the service of students and university employees also had to be shifted online, thereby requiring the development and implementation of online stakeholder service procedures. It was necessary to provide employees with adequate opportunities to work in a sanitary regime, resulting mainly in the implementation of remote work or adaptation of workplaces to the imposed requirements (e.g. installation of glass panes separating the university employees from stakeholders, installation of disinfectant dispensers, moving part of the administrative personnel to unused classrooms to reduce the number of people residing in a single room, etc.).

The scientific dimension also featured a revolution. Most scientific events (conferences, seminars, defences, etc.) were transferred online, thereby enabling the continuation of scientific activity but substantially reduced the quality of interpersonal interactions.

Such a turbulent environment and extraordinary conditions introduced in a big hurry resulted in a series of consequences. It can certainly be stated that the COVID-19 pandemic became one of the most important external stressors [15] that affected the entire academic and student environment, the quality of education and the quality of conducting scientific research. This was caused mainly by factors such as uncertainty, quick pace of the changes in the broadly understood education process and the need to adapt to the changes, need for quick acquisition of the skills of using other means of communication, concern for one's health and the health of his or her family, uncertainty concerning the economic situation and the situation on the labour market, often loss of employment (mainly for students) or forced resignation from a college lifestyle.

## CONCLUSIONS

The COVID-19 pandemic substantially affected the functioning of universities in Poland. On one hand, it accelerated the digitalisation of didactic materials or library resources. It coerced quick acquisition of knowledge and skills related to using distance learning platforms (e.g. Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Moodle) by both teachers and students.

However, such quick decisions on shutting down the universities' traditional functioning and commencing full-time distance learning was dictated by the uncertainty related to the pandemic's duration and testified to the high managerial competencies of the universities' management staff. Nearly three full semesters were conducted remotely on Polish universities and on the eve of the 2021/2022 academic year many universities decided to introduce hybrid classes (some of



them, mainly including bigger groups of students, will be remote, while others, mostly in smaller numbers, will be conducted traditionally). The radical decisions made at the beginning of the pandemic resulted in the graduation and obtaining a diploma by the students. It is difficult to imagine the consequences if the youth was unable to complete its education. The common digitalisation, skills to operate computer systems and the relatively high availability of computer equipment helped to overcome some of the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in the higher education sector.

On the other hand, it halted certain internationalisation processes, for instance, due to the foreign travel prohibition. Due to the lack of traditional classes, the bonds between students and university employees either did not form or loosened. The students of second-degree studies hardly participate in any traditional classes at the universities because three full semesters took an online form.

A separate issue are the economic consequences of distance learning for academic cities. Students contribute to the creation of many jobs, e.g. in services, catering or in the real properties for lease market. That being said, their effect on the economy of academic cities is substantially reduced in the conditions of distance learning.

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