

EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES FOR UNIVERSITIES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Introduction

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.

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.

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.

Conclusion

Universities are facing many challenges today, which include demographic changes, polarization of regional and urban centres, rapid changes in the socio-economic environment, 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.

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. 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. 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.

Results

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.

When analysing the entries in Table: **Second-degree characteristics of the Polish Qualifications Framework on social competencies**, 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.

Second-degree characteristics of the Polish Qualifications Framework on social competencies

	PQF characteristics level 6	PQF characteristics level 7
	using the possessed knowledge	
SKILLS	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
	SOCIAL COMPETENCIES	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, 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		responsible fulfilment of professional roles with 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

Methodology

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 market, 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 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.