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Teaching online in Polish higher education institutions

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ABSTRACT: This article presents the system of higher education (HE) in Poland and the role of remote (and later online) learning in education with the focus on changes induced as the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The analysis begins with a historical background that shows how higher education has been changing after the political transformation of the 1989, and proceeds with a discussion about the conditions in which remote learning emerged. On the one hand, these conditions relate to the existing programmes that e-learning offers – the tools. On the other hand, they refer to the level of digital preparedness – the skills. The article is meant to be descriptive and combines didactic (both institutional and student-related) and administrative perspective of responding to COVID-19. The article analyses how the Polish HE system managed the transition to online teaching caused by the pandemic.
KEYWORDS: COVID-19, Poland, higher education, online teaching

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic had left its mark on almost all spheres of social life. One of these spheres is education. The article analyses how the pandemic has been received by Polish higher education institutions (HEIs) by focusing on the didactic and administrative perspective. While existing studies on HEIs during COVID-19 focus only on the first perspective (e.g. Hauke et al., 2021; Topol, 2020a, 2020b), we believe that only through combining these two perspectives is it possible to analyse how the higher education sector in Poland responded to the pandemic.

The article starts with an overview of the higher education sector in Poland and

digital education before the COVID-19 era. This overview provides a background on how the system has changed due to the introduction of emergency remote education caused by the pandemic. In the following part of the article, the measures (legal, infrastructural) undertaken by Polish government and HEIs are analysed, in addition to their reception by students.

HIGHER EDUCATION IN POLAND: A SHORT OVERVIEW

The higher education sector in Poland has been undergoing transformation along with political shifts and turbulences that influenced the whole country. Thus the educational policy reflected the wider political agenda. After the WW2, when Poland got under the Socialist Bloc, one of the priorities of the political agenda was to make education more inclusive. It had been a political decision to establish universities in the biggest Polish cities across the country to enable local population to gain access to higher education, and thus reduce class divisions in the society. This resulted in a significant increase in the number of HEIs and their rather fair distribution across Poland. Many of these HEIs were founded as an upgrade of smaller academic units (colleges, academies, or subsidiaries of universities). As a result, there were 97 HEIs in Poland by 1989 (Dąbrowa-Szefler and Jabłecka-Prysłopska, 2006).

The political transformation that started in 1989 has significantly changed the tertiary education system in Poland. The most visible change was the rapid increase in the number of students. Such a rapid increase of the number of students was possible with the emergence of non-public HEIs, which started to flourish from the early 1990s. By the mid-1990s the number of non-public HEIs already equaled with the number of the public ones (Raczyńska, 2013), and following by 2000 the gross enrolment rate on the tertiary level in Poland reached 49% and equalled with the OECD average. The enrolment rate continued to increase until 2013 with the peak in 2010–2011 at 74% and then decreased to 68% (OECD, n.d.). As of 2021, there are 373 HEIs in Poland, out of which 134 are public, 241 – non-public, of which 17 are owned by the Catholic Church. The large increase in the number of HEIs had not been followed by a comparable rise in the number of qualified teaching staff. In fact, between 1989–2011 the number of HEIs grew fivefold while the number of academic staff only by 60% (Raczyńska, 2013). Many academics used to work at several HEIs simultaneously, especially since the non-public ones offered higher remuneration. This situation had a profound impact on the quality of higher education, especially in non-public schools. With a few exceptions, most of non-public HEIs offer lower quality of education, which has been reflected in a variety of rankings of higher education such as e.g. *Perspektywy*[1].

The current challenges faced by the Polish HE sector to a great extent result from the changes introduced during the systematic transformation of the 1990s. They all result from the popularization of higher education (illustrated by the increase in the number of HEIs) that has been too fast to be followed by the increase of qualified academic staff, or quality educational offer. They include:

[1] A magazine that publishes rankings of HEIs in Poland. The ranking is well acknowledged in Poland, so that HEIs publish their ranks on their websites and social medial as a proof of their academic quality.

— low birth rates resulting in a decreasing number of young people enrolled in higher education. The decreasing number of young people hit mostly non-public HEIs, some of which had to be closed due to the lack of students. Despite this trend, Poland is among the EU countries with the highest penetration of HEIs (12 HEIs per 1 million population; OPI, 2019).

— conflict between quality and quantity (supply) of educational offer in higher education (i.e. many HEIs offering rather low educational standars). The decentralisation of higher education and the emergence of non-public HEIs led to an increase in enrolment into tertiary education. This proved to be a chance particularly for young people in smaller towns to pursue their dream and get a diploma. This trend was strengthened by the introduction in 1997 of higher vocational schools which were supposed to combine higher education (status) and skills needed at the labour market (employability). However, it led to devaluation of university diplomas, which ceased to be a pass to the elite and therefore a significantly higher social status. The high number of emerging HEIs has not been sufficiently complemented with a proportionate increase in the number of academic staff.

— a limited number of HEIs recognised in Europe/globally as leading HEIs. The vast majority of researchers at Polish HEIs are Polish – they completed all relevant degrees in Poland, often at the same HEI. Out of more than 95,000 academic teachers working at Polish HEIs, only 2,000-3,000 are non-Polish citizens. Although one in eight study programmes is offered in a foreign language, most of them were developed only in the 21st century[2].

DIGITAL EDUCATION BEFORE COVID-19

In the following section we present two key aspects of digital education in Poland. The first one refers to the level of digital skills in the Polish society, while the other covers the history of distance education in Poland from its beginning in the early 90's till the COVID-19 era. These two aspects indicate the level of institutional and individual preparedness for introduction of digital education in the pandemic.

The level of digital skills in Poland has been always below the EU average. In fact, according to the EC Digital Scoreboard data in 2019 Poland ranked on 20–27th position among EU28 in terms of digital skills, as presented in the table below.

The relatively low level of digital skills was a significant burden not only for the higher education sector, but also for the Polish economy. According to the 2020 Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI), the Polish economy was ranked on the 23rd position among the EU28 (EC, 2020).

[2] Own calculation based on data from Radon – part of the Integrated Network of Information and Science and Higher Education, https://radon.nauka.gov.pl/dane/studia-prowadzone-na-okreslonym-kierunku

Indicator	Poland	EU28
Have written a computer program	3	6
Individuals with at least basic digital skills	52	64
Communication Domain – at least basic skills	91	95
Information Domain – at least basic skills	93	93
Problem Solving Domain – at least basic skills	87	90
Software Domain – at least basic skills	57	68
Persons employed using computers at work	43	54

Table 1: Digital skills in Poland, 2019 (%)
Source: Country profile for Poland, European Commission: Digital Scoreboard.

While there are several studies on digital skills in SME (small and middle entrepreises) sector, data on digital skills in HE sector can only be extrapolated from general data on two groups of people: young people and university graduates. Namely, young people (aged 16–24) have the highest-level of digital skills, as presented in Table 2 below. Digital skills of young Poles are equal to the EU average (Eurostat, 2020). University graduates generally have higher level of digital skills than those holding a high school diploma or less. Poles with university diplomas have high level of digital skills compared to other EU citizens, although the gap is much wider for those who have only primary or secondary level education (Śledziewska and Włoch, 2015, pp. 418–419). 75% of adult Poles with university degree were able to solve the PIAAC (Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competencies) test compared to 35% of adults with secondary level education (Palczyńska, 2013, p. 122).

Digital education in Poland was preceded by distance learning in traditional form (i.e. as in correspondence schools by mailing lessons and exercises), with the biggest challenges being access to libraries and direct contact with lecturers (Wojciechowski, 1999). Despite its limited effectiveness, it seemed to be an optimal form of studies for non-resident students due to low costs and high flexibility. Instead of commuting to the university students could learn in place and time of choice.

The first regulations on distance education in HE were introduced by mid-2000s. According to the Ordinance of Minister of Science and Higher Education of 25 September 2007 (Dz.U. 2007 nr 188, poz. 1347), the number of didactic hours conducted in a distance learning mode for full-time and part-time studies could not exceed 40%-80% of the total number of didactic hours for the whole study programme (depending on the type of HEI). According to the Ordinance of Minister of Science and Higher Education of 2 November 2011 (Dz. U. 2011 nr 246, poz. 1470), the number of didactic hours conducted in a distance learning mode for full-time and part-time studies could not exceed 60% of the total number of didactic hours for the whole study programme. In case of practical classes (labs, fieldwork, workshops), distance learning could be only as a method supporting regular classes (Dziewulak, 2012, p. 3). Since 2018, the regulations set for distance learning refer to the number of ECTS (European Credit Transfer System) acquired through remote study (not more than 50%) (Ordinance of Minister of Science and Higher Education of 27 September 2018, Dz. U. 2018, poz. 1861). Since

2020 the number of ECTS acquired remotely cannot exceed 75% of the total number in case of academic studies and 50% in case of practice-oriented studies (Dz. U. 2020, poz. 1411). The Ministry was offering HEIs to use IT technologies for remote teaching, but at the same time paid attention to the quality of education, as education in person has been believed to be better than the remote one (e.g. Wojciechowski ,1999).

The development of IT technologies combined with easier access to the Internet made more HEIs interested in blended learning – a complementary teaching mode that uses both traditional and remote teaching methods, with remote education usually delivered online (Zieliński, 2012). In the early 2010s, it was the only mode of remote learning allowed in national regulations. Remote teaching is facilitated by Learning Management System – education management system that enables participant registration, reporting, administering, and monitoring of the learning process, as well as managing teaching materials – and Learning Content Management System – a system that additionally enables content editing and management (Redlarski and Garnik, 2014, p. 79). Many HEIs developed their own learning platforms while some use open-source platforms such as Moodle or ILIAS (Redlarski and Garnik, 2014, p. 4).

Before 2020, distance learning using digital tools was generally offered by two types of HEIs. The first type were the leading public Polish HEIs which have established units dedicated to distance learning, such as the Centre of Digital Competences at the University of Warsaw, Centre of Distance Learning at Warsaw University of Technology, Centre for Remote Teaching at the Jagiellonian University in Cracow, or the Centre for Open Education at SGH Warsaw School of Economics. These units supported distance education using digital tools for students enrolled in full-time or part-time studies, conducted research on digital education, and some of them offered online courses for other stakeholders (e.g., high school students or adults). While in most cases digital education constituted only a small part of the whole study programme, there were exceptions. One of them was SPrINT (*Studia przez Internet* – Studies via Internet) offered by the Warsaw University of Technology, which was conducted online to a great extent. Most classes were conducted online except for 8 daily sessions a year for practical courses and the examination sessions (Kula and Plebańska 2012).

The second type were mostly non-public HEIs, which offered almost exclusively on-line study programmes in order to attract part-time students. For instance, Vistula University in Warsaw offered BA and MA studies online with sessions held on the university premises only at the beginning and end of every semester, while the exams were held online[3]; The Polish-Japanese Academy of Information Technologies offered online BA studies in informatics with mandatory stationary week-long sessions twice a year.[4]

Overall, despite some progress, there were two limitations related to remote leaning on HE level. One was the traditional preference of in-person education rather than

[3] Akademia Finansów i Biznesu Vistula, *Studia przez Internet I i II stopnia*, https://www.vistula.edu.pl/kierunki-studiow/studia-online (accessed 1.09.2021).

[4] Polsko-Japońska Akademia Technik Komputerowych, *Studia niestacjonarne z wykorzystaniem metod i technik kształcenia na odległość*, https://www.pja.edu.pl/informatyka/inzynierskie/studia-internetowe (accessed 1.09.2021).

remote one. Another referred to technological limitations in terms of hardware and broadband Internet. This has significantly changed with the COVID-19 pandemic.

NATIONAL REGULATIONS ON ONLINE EDUCATION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

COVID-19 has severely affected the HE sector. Polish HEIs were functioning mostly remotely for three semesters starting in Spring 2019.. In the following section we will analyse the COVID-19 regulations and solutions holistically rather than wave-by-wave or semester-by-semester, as introduced by relevant ministries.

On the organisational level, the autonomy of individual HEIs has been stressed by relevant ministries multiple times in order to allow a greater flexibility. It is HEI authorities that take the ultimate decision on how – or whether at all – a study programme is organised, and which classes are to be conducted remotely or at the HEI premises. In case of the latter, i.e. remote classes, the HEIs were obliged to fulfil the sanitary requirements of the Chief Sanitary Inspector. In particular, this requirement referred to laboratory and clinical classes. In case of traineeships, the decisions are left to the HEI authorities, which – if it is possible and if it fits the study programme – might choose to carry them out online. Student dormitories were allowed to operate, provided that relevant sanitary procedures were followed (PSRP 2020a). Libraries were closed for some time (as stipulated by other regulations), but many of them continued to work by providing scanned texts for students, although there were limits introduced on how many pages a student can request.

HEIs were included in the two emergency laws that were introduced as a complex state response to the consequences of COVID-19: the Law of 16th April 2020 (Dz.U. 2020, poz. 695, so called Shield 2.0) and the Law of 19th June 2020 (Dz.U. 2020, poz. 1086, so called Shield 4.0). Both laws made functioning of the universities easier and added to their autonomy. They enabled HEIs to conduct online classes and verify the learning outcomes, prolonged the existing regulations, extended the evaluation time, and smoothened several significant procedures such as recruitment, receiving social scholarships and allowances, and financing. When it comes to regulations related to online teaching, the details were stipulated in several ordinances (MNiSW 2020).

More specifically, the Ordinance of the Minister of Science and Higher Education of 11th March 2020 (Dz.U. 2020, poz. 405) limited the activities of HEIs through introduction of temporary restrictions, which were supposed to last until the end of March 2020. However, the Ordinance of the Minister of Science and Higher Education of 25th February 2021 (Dz.U. 2021, poz. 363) in practice extended the restrictions until the end of the summer semester of the 2020/2021 academic year. In that period, 54 ordinances regulating and enabling the transition to online teaching at the university level were issued by relevant ministries.

The former Ordinance (Dz.U. 2020, poz. 405) allowed universities to conduct classes with the use of methods and techniques of remote teaching, regardless of whether it has been planned in the relevant study programmes. Moreover, the limitation on the maximum number of ECTS that can be obtained in remote teaching was abolished.

These changes were the most urgent, as majority of the study programmes had been designed to be conducted at university premises, and it would have been difficult to change these regulations at the university level.

The Ordinance of the Minister of Science and Higher Education of 23rd March 2020 (Dz.U. 2020 poz. 511) made it possible to verify the learning outcomes for PhD students outside of the university premises and with the use of digital tools, provided that they enable control of the verification process and its registration. The same rule was applied to BA and MA studies, including the thesis defence, in the Ordinance of the Minister of Science and Higher Education of 24th April 2020 (Dz.U. 2020 poz. 741). The ambiguous part of this regulation was the registration of exams. Some HEIs interpreted the Ordinance as requiring only a technical possibility of registration, many, however, decided that it requires for the exams to be recorded. This interpretation caused further problems in processing and archiving the data: where and for how long should these recordings be stored (Matukin-Szumlińska, 2020)? Later the Ministry clarified that the exams do not need to be recorded; however, still some HEIs decided to keep recording them.

In May 2020, the HEIs were allowed to conduct classes at their premises provided that they strictly follow sanitary regulations and that the classes are dedicated to students of the final year before gredaution (Ordinance of the Minister of Science and Higher Education of 22nd May 2020 (Dz.U. 2020 poz. 911)). This possibility has been used mostly by technical and medical universities and faculties, as their study programmes include many classes that cannot be conducted remotely because they require laboratories or dedicated rooms.

In case of study programmes that are practice-oriented, a significant challenge was related to the traineeship which lies at the heart of each programme. Students were often unable to pursue their training because institutions have limited activities on their premises or were working remotely. This was the justification for the Law of 21st January 2021 (Dz.U. 2021 poz. 159), which has made it possible to limit the scope of traineeship and complement it with other activities. In each case, the decision had to be made by a university senate that is responsible for guaranteeing that the quality of the study programme is maintained. According to a study carried out by student self-governments, more than two out of three HEIs used this opportunity to change study programmes (PSRP, 2020b).

In a summary, Covid-related regulations on the national level have been introduced quickly, in response to the pandemic, giving universities legal framework to introduce changes that would enable remote education. Moreover, there had been several subsequent amendments to the ordinances on the processing of the documentation of the course of study to facilitate managing student affairs, including:

— the possibility to sign the student oath digitally (Ordinance of the Minister of Science and Higher Education of 12th May 2020 (Dz. U. 2020 poz. 853));

— removing the confirmation of picking up student IDs by students from their files (Ordinance of the Minister of Science and Higher Education of 14th August 2020 (Dz. U. 2020 poz. 1411));

— the possibility of storing students' graduation theses in an online repository (Ordinance of the Minister of Science and Higher Education of 12th May 2020 (Dz. U. 2020 poz. 853));

— the possibility of signing the graduation exam protocols digitally (Ordinance of the Minister of Science and Higher Education of 12th May 2020 (Dz. U. 2020 poz. 853)).

Some of these regulations were prepared in order to limit the necessity for students to come to the university to sign the oath, or to deliver their theses in paper. This has been essential for the new students (signing the oath) and for those who were about to graduate (delivering a copy of their thesis to the HEI). Until the pandemic, these documents were processed in paper only, which forced students to visit the dean's office. At the same time these regulations aimed to ease the administrative burden for the HEIs. However, these regulations could only be implemented in universities with proper technical and IT infrastructure. In other cases, teaching was conducted remotely, but related documentation – in particular collecting theses (via regular mail) and graduation examination protocols (the exams were conducted online but the protocol, and so the whole student file, could not be archived unless the signatures of all examination board members were collected) were processed on paper, which put an additional burden on the administrative staff (Wiśniewska, 2021).

SUPPORT TO HEIS

A number of state bodies implemented measures to support higher education in the pandemic, in order to mitigate the effects on the learning process. The legal regulations described above were supplemented by other organisational and financial measures. Most important ones have been listed below.

Both public and non-public HEIs received state funding for teaching online. 55.3 million PLN were allocated for public HEIs and non-public HEIs. This amount has been distributed according to the number of teachers working at each HEI. This money could be spent on tools for online learning such as e-platforms or relevant hardware (cameras, laptops, tablets), depending on the needs of each HEI (MEiN, 2020). Moreover, additional 10 million PLN was allocated for non-public HEIs on condition that they provide high quality online courses (i.e., none of their study programmes had been assessed negatively until 2018) and had at least 100 students in full-time mode (MEiN, 2021).

In case of international students, many of them left the country and either pursued their education remotely or quit their education. For those international students who decided to stay, the HEIs provided places in dormitories. Moreover, students who were awarded one of the Polish National Agency for Academic Exchange scholarships received a one-time allowance of 500 PLN (MEiN, n.d.).

In case of vulnerable students, the Ministry of Science and Higher Education has provided an allowance due to the extraordinary circumstances caused by the pandemic. The extraordinary circumstances were understood as general deterioration of a stu-

dent situation due to loss of job, decrease in income, quarantine, and increased costs of subsistence caused by the closure of a dormitory. Students who travelled abroad for an exchange program and had to come back, were eligible to claim the allowance for the increased costs of travel. After the allowance funds were spent, the HEIs could apply to relevant ministries for additional funding (IRSW, n.d.). Moreover, some HEIs offered their students hardware such as laptops or cameras for remote learning[5].

STUDENTS' OPINIONS ON REMOTE LEARNING

The picture of how COVID-19 was managed in higher education could not have been complete, if there was no feedback form the students, who had to learn in this new situation. Several nationwide student opinion polls were conducted by student organisations, opinion polls and private entities, of which the most extensive were conducted by the Student Parliament of Poland. Studies prepared by the Student Parliament covered a vast range of subjects, including opinions about remote teaching, evaluation of remote teaching, learning outcomes. Moreover, thanks to its national outreach, the Student Parliament was able to collect a large number of responses. In addition, many HEIs conducted their own studies of student perception and evaluation of digital education. However, in case of HEIs the results were usually collected only for internal purposes and thus were not available publicly. In this part of the article, we present only the results of national student opinion polls.

In quantitative terms, students welcomed the transition to online teaching. In the academic year 2020/2021, the number of students enrolled in HEIs in Poland increased by 0.9% in comparison to the previous academic year. Considering the fact that the number of students had been decreasing before the pandemic, this change indicates that many students must have taken the opportunity to pursuit their education. At the same time, the number of graduates decreased by around 7% (GUS, 2021). It means that, on the one hand, COVID-19 postponed completion of the studies, but on the other it encouraged many former students to continue their education. That is why many non-public HEIs have not experienced a decrease in the number of students (Wójcik, 2021).

According to the survey carried out by the Student Parliament on a sample of over 4,000 students, online classes were evaluated at 2.75 on a scale from 1 to 5. The evaluation has varied depending on the field of study, with students of graphics and IT favouring online teaching and students of pedagogy and arts least enjoying studying online. According to another survey conducted by a research institution with a sample of over 1,200 students, almost half of them considered remote teaching as worse than in-person teaching. At the same time less than a third of students would prefer classes

[5] See e.g. Akademia Leona Koźmińskiego, *Wsparcie uczelni niepublicznych w zakresie prowadzenia zajęć z wykorzystaniem metod i technik kształcenia na odległość*, https://www.kozminski.edu.pl/pl/wsparcie-uczelni-niepublicznych-w-zakresie-prowadzenia-zajec-z-wykorzystaniem-metod-i-technik (accessed 1.09.2021), Politechnika Białostocka, *Bezpłatne wypożyczenie komputerów dla studentów i doktorantów PB*, 9.04.2020, https://pb.edu.pl/2020/04/09/bezplatne-wypozyczenie-komputerow-dla-studentow-i-doktorantow-pb/ (accessed 1.09.2021).

to be held only at the university (Flow, nd.). It could indicate that higher education became more accessible for many, but at the expanse of quality of education.

Students complained mostly about the excessive amount of individual work they were required to do during remote learning, about teachers who sent learning materials only via e-mail, and about limited direct contact with teachers (PSRP, 2020a). Another study similarly indicated that limitec contact with lecturers was a major challenge for over half of the students included in the study, while learning demands increased (Flow, n.d.). Moreover, according to another study around a half of students declared that at least one course was entirely canceled due to the pandemic (NZS, 2020). In some cases, remote learning has not been conducted in real time by lecturers, but relied on self-education based on the materials provided by the lecturer. In order to control the quality of teaching many HEIs have implemented means of verification of the teaching process. During the summer semester 2019/2020 verification of the learning process was carried out by three out of four HEIs (PSRP, 2020a).

The above mentioned studies were conducted in September 2020, after the first semester of online teaching. This was the most challenging semester, as HEIs had to switch to remote teaching in an emergency mode. Until the IT infrastructure was provided and relevant regulations introduced, classes had not been held at all, or teachers reserved to simply sending presentations to students and the students had to process the materials on their own. It took several weeks to switch to online teaching. Then, the quality of online teaching improved in the subsequent semester. While 41% of student self-governments negatively evaluated online teaching in the winter semester of the 2019/2020 academic year, in the summer semester of the 2020/2021 academic year it was only 18% (PSRP, 2020b). Students likely recognized and appreciated the significant effort the HEIs put to adjust to the new way of teaching. However, when asked to self-evaluate, students believed that in the remote mode their learning efficiency decreased. At the same time, almost half of them dedicated less time for studying than before the pandemic (Flow, n.d.).

Assessment of learning outcomes was mostly limited to the teaching content. Online tests as a method of assessment of learning outcomes were evaluated low by the students for two reasons. Firstly, they were focused on verifying memorized information. Secondly, teachers limited the time allocated to answer each question in order to reduce the possibility of checking information on the internet; however, many students found this too constraining. Other challenges raised by students was that the identity of those who took a test or wrote an essay was not possible to verify remotely (PSRP, 2020a).

According to the study conducted by the Student Parliament, three out of four last year students took their graduation exams in the academic year 2019/2020. However, only 7% of those who did not take the graduation exam indicated COVID-19 as the reason. The graduation exams were conducted online or remotely (PSRP, 2020a). In fact, the vast majority of HEIs (almost 9 in 10) used this opportunity and conducted graduation exams remotely (PSRP, 2020b). This means that the HEIs were efficient in leading the students through the whole study cycle.

CONCLUSIONS

COVID-19 greatly accelerated digital transformation of the HE sector in Poland, and the transition was relatively smooth, although with some challenges. In the pre-COVID-19 times, online education was seldom carried out and offered mostly as a number of e-learning courses – usually electives. After the outbreak of the pandemic, remote teaching became mainstream. HEIs either used the existing platforms dedicated to online learning or used the platforms of global software providers – usually Microsoft (MS Teams) or Google (Google Meet) – which allow synchronous communication between students and teachers. Many HEIs had already 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 introduced laws and regulations to facilitate online teaching. The two rules that were noticeable in these legal changes were: to give HEIs autonomy in decision making, and to enable digitalisation (not only teaching, but also related administrative tasks). The adjustment to online teaching largely depended on the structural, technical, and organisational preparadeness of the HEIs.

As of mid-August 2021, the law that has temporary limited functioning of HEI in Poland has been waived with the Ordinance of the Minister of Education and Science (Dz.U. 2021, poz. 1464). Therefore, Polish HEIs are getting back to the campus reality, however the pandemic has been not over yet. The rationale for lifting the limitation was a practical one: the state of remote learning could not become permanent, as it would mean that cohorts of students would graduate without ever physically visiting the campuses of their universities.

The transition to the new reality is a gradual process. HEIs are still allowed to conduct some part of the teaching programme online, as long as the state of pandemic has not been lifted. At the same time, some aspects of the pre-COVID-19 university life are returning: for example, teacher evaluation can be conducted again, and student IDs are valid only till mid-October and have to be revalidated at student services offices, more and more classes are set back in the in-person mode.

It is impossible yet to evaluate the long-term impact of the emergency education induced by COVID-19 on the learning outcomes of students. There are no comparative studies in Poland on the learning outcomes by students from different cohorts of pre-COVID-19 and mid-COVID-19 education. In the short term, it seems that the response to COVID-19 – of the ministry and the HEIs – has been adequate. It is yet to be seen, how which elements from the emergency education in COVID-19 era will be taken by the HEIs and used to enhance the educational process.

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