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Introduction to the special issue "Higher education during and after COVID in Central and Eastern Europe"

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Is there a need for more research on the effects of COVID-19 on education? While there is research suggesting that the impacts and "the troubling effects of the pandemic on research and higher education… might be felt for years to come" *(The Lancet Editorial*, 2020), there is also discernible pandemic fatigue, not only among the population, but researchers and subjects of research as well (Patel, Webster, Greenberg, Weston, & Brooks, 2020). Indeed, there has been an overabundance of published research articles in nearly all disciplines about the pandemic. The purpose of the current special issue is not to repetitively take stock of what happened during the pandemic but rather explore how the pandemic transformed the education system while rethinking certain practices and strategies engrained in the education system. To some extent, then, taking stock of what we know about the pandemic should help us prepare for the era some call the "new normal post-COVID-19 era" (Cahapay, 2020).

The special issue focuses on Central and Eastern Europe, with some articles focusing on countries—Hungary, Poland, and Romania—and two articles covering themes—the experience of a highly international university and online teaching of social science research methods. Collectively, the articles represent a balance of national case studies and thematic issues relevant to strengthening Covid and post-Covid education systems. The special issue was inspired by an Erasmus+ project entitled "Navigating Social Worlds: Toolbox for Social Inquiry" (2021-2023, Grant Agreement no. 2020-1-PL01-KA226-HE-096356), which explores the state of online education in five European countries (Hungary, Romania, Latvia, Estonia and Poland) and develops educational resources to improve research methods skills through an online Toolbox. Three of the articles (covering Hungary and Poland) are the direct outcomes of this

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project.

Dunajeva Jekatyerina's article reviews how the pandemic has been addressed in the Hungarian higher education sector, particularly paying attention to the challenges and best practices that emerged at this time. The case studies of various Hungarian universities give a realistic idea about projects and initiatives within institutions that were aimed at mitigating the consequences of the pandemic by either building stronger solidarity among faculty and students, strengthening engagement with international students during the lockdown, or alleviating anxiety and create a strong sense of community. With that, one of the important conclusions of this article is that universities can be promoters of innovation and change by producing forward-looking research regarding resilient educational institutions and implementing innovative change themselves.

The contribution of Katarzyna Górak-Sosnowska and Lidia Tomaszewska focuses on the case of Poland, beginning with a general overview of the Polish higher education system, followed by a review of Covid-era policies that affected the provision of higher education in the country. Placing students at the center of analysis, the article also reviews data regarding students' opinions on remote learning, identifying challenges and benefits of online education. These aspects are beneficial for future efforts to integrate online or blended teaching forms into the post-Covid higher education provision. The article also highlights the importance of structural, technical, and organisational preparedness to successfully tackle crises in the education system – those induced by the pandemic or other potential crises in the future.

Even though students' loneliness and isolation usually characterize online education, Sorana-Alexandra Constantinescu, Lorin Ghiman and Adela Pop-Cîmpean importantly point out that even under physical isolation, the problem of bullying—in the form of cyberbullying—remain a threat to students' well-being during the pandemic. The authors generated their first-hand data through a survey to understand the extent to which cyberbullying affected students during the pandemic in Romania. A particularly valuable part of the article is a list of strategies that students identified in the course of surveying to address cyberbullying, underlining that the bully can be the professor as well. The study powerfully highlights that more research is needed in the field of cyberbullying and its effects, exacerbated by other factors such as the pandemic. While survey results clearly indicate that cyberbullying is a serious issue among students in Romania, the article identifies a gap in our knowledge on the topic, inviting scholars to conduct similar research in other countries of the region to understand how the extent or nature of cyberbullying changes during times of crisis.

It is important to highlight that "the COVID-19 pandemic is a unique opportunity for educators and policymakers to rethink education systems and reimagine what is important, necessary, and desirable for future generations" (Rasli, Tee, Lai, Tiu, & Hui, 2022). The article of Michael A. Kozakowski, Kaitlin A. Lucas and Iurii Rudnev aptly points out that the pandemic has provided a push for several decades-long, ongoing transformations of higher education, namely digitalization and internationalization efforts. Focusing on the latter, the authors rely on the example of a highly international European university and discuss 1) ways internationalization has shaped teaching

and learning during the pandemic and 2) the challenges of creating and sustaining community in technologically-mediated teaching and learning environments. Indeed, internationalization should not be undervalued, with some researchers calling "internationalizing efforts as fundamental to a transformative, humanizing education" (Arnove, 2020). This article fills a research gap in our understanding of international communities in the overall scholarship on teaching and learning and may serve as a particularly useful case study for other universities engaging in internationalization efforts.

The article by Laura Kirss, Pihel Hunt and Karmen Kalk provides a handy and comprehensive overview of the literature concerning online education of research methods – a skill at the core of all university education. The authors eloquently synthesize research evidence on the effective teaching of social science research methods and provide particularly useful guidelines for educators on how to be efficient in teaching this skill in an online setting. Notably, the authors highlight that online teaching is a particularly demanding task; ideally, pertinent competencies must be acquired before educators engage in online teaching. This article is a powerful reminder that online teaching of university subjects or skills might necessitate some training, which educators must provide to develop a more efficient teaching and learning culture.

In addition, the special issue contains a book review written by Justyna Jaskólska about an edited volume available in the Polish language and titled *Managing the heart of the university: Dean's offices in the process of changes. New legal and organizational reality* (Dziekanaty w procesie zmian: Nowa rzeczywistość prawna i organizacyjna), edited by Katarzyna Górak-Sosnowska and Renata Pajewska-Kwaśny. While the book looks specifically at the role of the dean's office, Jaskólska suggests that the readers learn a great deal about how cooperation is facilitated between all organizational units at universities by the dean's offices. Since efficient collaboration was one of the most important factors in a timely and proactive response to the pandemic, understanding networks and facilitators of cooperation within higher education institutions may be key to improving institutional resilience.

There are some common themes that emerge from the articles included in the special issue. First, many case studies highlight the importance of nurturing communities at universities which are inclusive and attentive to everyone's needs. Second, in most cases, the importance of universities' autonomy emerges as a key condition of tackling profound challenges, such as emergency remote learning especially during the first wave of the pandemic. There was little to no uniform approach to how online education was delivered at higher education institutions within individual countries, putting university leadership in charge of implementing changes. Third, further improvements in digital skills and IT technology are a condition for not only more efficient online learning environments but modernization of higher education in the region. With digitalization strategies implemented across the countries of this region, governments are working towards this goal. Fourth, new challenges that had to be met during the pandemic, such as attending to psychological and mental needs, as well as protecting students from new forms of bullying, or efforts in strengthening the university community, are conducive to improving the overall quality of education and

culture of education in the region.

   The pandemic thus can be seen as a test of the resilience of higher education systems in Central and Eastern Europe on the one hand, and on the other hand as an opportunity to transform education systems into more resilient, flexible and durable systems. The special issue gives a unique insight into how some countries handled the pandemic and what lessons emerged for the future. Finally, the articles presented in this special issue are potent reminders that universities must be able to deal with the "unknown and uncertainties" to successfully "prepare for future disruptions in the education sector" and "strengthen institutional resilience in the long run" (Rasli, Tee, Lai, Tiu, & Hui, 2022).

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