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HOW DO HIGHER EDUCATION FACULTY ADAPT TO THE DEMANDS OF ONLINE TEACHING? REACTION OF HIGHER EDUCATION TO COVID-19 IN POLAND AND THE UNITED STATES – A SNAPSHOT

ABSTRACT: The COVID-19 pandemic caused an unusual situation in universities. All students, lecturers and administration staff had to start distance education. Suddenly, overnight, they all became the subjects of the digital revolution. This text is an overview of selected literature from 2020 compiled to reflect on the differences and similarities between higher education institutions in Poland and the United States as they reacted to the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite their inherent differences the two different systems of higher education in these two countries have reacted to the pandemic in a number of similar ways. It could be observed that the more independent system in the United States reacted faster to the unexpected changes, when faculty and higher education administrators waited for a decision from the centrally governing body: The Ministry of Education. The reaction and focus of the interventions pointed to similar areas: access to technology for students and their teachers, professional development of faculty, and student engagement. It seems that in both cases the pandemic exposed the shortcomings of both systems. While there are many unknowns about the future, the common question for both systems will centre around making higher education institutions nimble enough to emerge from these challenging times better and stronger.

KEYWORDS: COVID-19, pandemic, online education, academic education.

Introduction

Considering the rapid, unexpected and vast changes brought about by COVID-19 at institutions of higher education throughout the world, this paper is an attempt to give an overview of how higher education institutions and their faculty in Poland and the United States have been finding ways to change and adapt in the face of challenges brought about by the pandemic.

According to news outlets, the spread of COVID-19 has not been contained and because the impact of the pandemic on higher education is still in the making, some warn that COVID-19 may have the capacity to alter higher education operations in 2021 as well (Carlson & Gardner 2020). As authors of this text, we have attempted to consider only the latest news, studies, and observations to ensure a current snapshot of the emerging spectrum of fleeting changes. As recent as our references are, we really

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are not sure how and in what terms higher education practices may be forced to change in the near future and how many of these changes will have a lasting impact.

With the sudden and unprecedented arrival of COVID-19, higher education faculty have found themselves catching up on not only the technological requirements of online teaching such as computer hardware and internet connectivity but also the crafting of their online teaching skills (Mason 2020). Questions about student motivation, quality of pedagogy and learning, and access to technology began to very quickly shape discussions throughout academia. Faculty, ultimately responsible for instructional delivery, found themselves lecturing and facilitating learning from their homes, rather than from traditional classrooms, using often completely new and unfamiliar teaching methods (see Blum 2020).

Reaction to the pandemic

In Poland, where all institutions of higher education are regulated by the Ministry of Higher Education, support for faculty started appearing around April, after about a month into the pandemic. At first, faculty were told that the mode of work with students was up to them. Much of the communication with students focused then on sending emails and conducting conversations via Skype or Microsoft Teams. In May, after another month of the ad hoc organised instruction, faculty were told specifically to move all teaching on to the Microsoft Teams platform, a decision not fully implemented until October. The demand issued by the Ministry of Higher Education in September of 2020, also required that a dean representing school administration be added to each group. Teachers were also told to prepare detailed, lengthy monthly reports about what days and what times they were teaching. The focus was on accountability, frequency of meetings, hours spent online, counting of interactions between faculty and students, and not on the effectiveness of teaching.

The following are the directives issued by the Ministry of Higher Education on the 16th of October 2020 regarding the temporary limit of functions among some of the institutions of higher education to ensure appropriate preventive measures necessary to effectively combat the virus (Dziennik Ustaw 2020 R. POZ. 1835):

The territory of Poland is divided into red and yellow zones.

In red zones:

- Education is only conducted remotely. Except for:
 - Classes where subject matter taught does not allow for this type of instruction delivery.
 - Classes for students in their last year of university studies.

- The decision to hold face-to-face classes is within the jurisdiction of the chancellor or director of doctoral programmes.

In yellow zones:

- Teaching is delivered online through the appropriate use of methods and techniques of online and face-to-face education. These two modes of instruction can be blended into hybrid courses. Just like in the case of the red zones, the decision about the mode of instruction lies within the discretion of the chancellor or director of doctoral programmes.
- Any decisions made by the governing bodies of the higher education institutions must first consider safety of students and all school employees. Education in programmes designed to prepare students for specific vocations where standards need to be met, must also consider solutions for the education of students within these programmes.

The Ministry of Education recommends that the communication of all pertinent information necessary for wide dissemination to all stakeholders be done through all available and possible means of communication. The process of updating school websites should be timely and ongoing. All updates and new information must be transmitted using official school email addresses of employees and students to limit the risks of disinformation and to ensure that all school and community stakeholders have access to the latest and accurate information regarding the school's functions.

Optional faculty professional development activities offered could not always take place because of unreliable or completely lacking access to the internet for many of the teachers. By October, faculty were surveyed for the first time about their technology needs and monthly reporting was completely abolished because all scheduling information was available on Teams once the platform was fully implemented.

At the same time, recruitment to higher education institutions continued into the semester but without much oversight from the Ministry of Education. Schools continued to recruit their own students without much of a common model for enrollment.

Finally, the Ministry of Education's directives point to the inevitable: that lab-based activities requiring hands-on experience are going to be conducted face-to-face, whereas lectures will be done fully online. Institutions of higher education in the United States may not have other options either.

It seems that in the United States the transition to online learning took a more positive turn by the fall 2020 semester. According to a survey conducted by Bay View Analytics after about six months since the beginning of the pandemic, despite challenges, faculty and their leaders seemed to believe that they were ready for online teaching and felt quite optimistic about the future of online learning in higher education (Cengage 2020). Bay View Analytics conducted a similar survey in April 2020 and found that confidence

among faculty and administrators in higher education had increased significantly since April when COVID-19 barely became a reality. When it comes to the conviction that faculty are ready to teach online, vast majorities of faculty (84%) and administrators (94%) felt that they were ready at the start of the fall 2020 semester. Despite the positive outlook for the immediate future, the wave of optimism fell significantly, when faculty and administrators were asked about their personal outlook for higher education. Only 42% of faculty and 57% of administrators felt good about their future.

According to findings at Harvard University and Princeton University, despite faculty efforts and their perceived readings to teach online, students, have not been finding their educational experience fulfilling (Lorin 2020). Many institutions of higher education have reported a drop in enrollment for fall 2020. Two of the most renowned universities in the United States: Harvard and Princeton noted declines in enrollment for fall 2020 at 20% and 14% respectively (Lorin 2020). The decline cannot be attributed to poor faculty performance. Many students feel that paying college tuition for online learning is just simply not the same as paying for face-to-face instruction. Some may simply prefer to wait until the end of the pandemic to go back to the traditional classroom that they are better accustomed to. Yet others, upon losing their or their parents' employment, may suffer unexpected financial hardships that limit their ability to attend higher education institutions that suddenly became much more expensive.

Lessons for the systems

Arguably, the most important lesson from COVID-19 on online teaching, is the instructional support for faculty. Professional development for instruction will probably never be the same, as online learning seems to be evolving (Mason 2020). Teacher training will have to stay focused on best practices for online teaching, materials will include hardware and software aligned with content taught, whereas teacher-to-student interactions will have to have a specific context of learning pathways necessary to motivate students and to keep their educational journey with end goals in mind. Support for teaching practices needs to be examined as our collective assumptions about how real-life classrooms work may not be the best of guides for the future of blended and just-in-time learning (see Pittman 2020).

Many observers of changes in higher education also believe that thanks to the pandemic online education will become a part of any respectable teacher education program (see Koenig 2020). Historically, teaching practices have been taught in classrooms as backdrops for instructional activities and student-to-teacher interactions. The challenge here is that online education, especially when it is done via Zoom or Skype becomes very intrusive into the personal lives of students and teachers. The informal

setting of home life may not always blend well with the formality of a brick-and-mortar educational institution, which universities and colleges have always been recognized as. It seems like the traditional hours of instruction in classrooms may never come back as they used to be either (see Blum 2020).

On universities in Poland, Microsoft Teams is the online teaching and learning platform most widely used. Some institutions are considering distance learning in the long run, while allowing students to take exams at certified centers authorised to administer high stakes tests. At this time, however, the Ministry of Education has not issued any more specific guidelines regarding this. As a result, currently, students can choose their preferred form for taking the exam: online, at a higher education institution equipped to administer such test, or in a face-to-face setting at a local university.

One of the early findings on the impact of COVID-19 on faculty in higher education, was the underscoring of vulnerabilities of part time faculty, who normally work for lesser compensation, often with limited hours as they juggle teaching assignments in many institutions at the same time (Zahneis 2020). Access to hardware, software and training tends to be much more challenging than it is for faculty with full time employment.

When it comes to course design, however, recent research indicates that the planning and development of an online course is a much more time-consuming exercise than preparing for traditional in-classroom courses (Gloria & Uttal 2020). This became evident and still is a topic of many discussions as faculty were in many cases completely caught off guard when the mandate to close classrooms gave them 24 to 48 hours to move traditional courses to online learning platforms. Faculty members with lesser technological know-how, or poorer training in online teaching have been struggling and are likely to struggle in the near future. Poor course design, inappropriate technology, lack of structure for learning environment have been found to result in unengaging courses and poor student retention rates (Gonzalez & Moore 2020).

Some researchers observed that despite the technological connectivity perceived by faculty, some teachers may struggle with professional isolation and lesser effectiveness of their teaching (Perrotta 2020). Access to technology seems to be emerging as one of the most important aspects of changes concerning instruction in higher education. Another lesson from this appears that it is not only faculty who are learning how to accept the new status quo, but students who are getting used to the idea of receiving just-in-time learning whenever it is required and convenient for them.

So, while online education may offer numerous challenges for faculty and students in terms of access, it may also open doors for students who otherwise find school attendance beyond reach because of a lack of transportation, low socio-economic backgrounds, disability, or geographical location, to name a few examples.

Conclusion

The review of the literature on higher education and COVID-19 seems to be pointing to a great degree of uncertainty about the future, as the pandemic seems to have impacted everything that we do in higher education, (see Carlson & Gardner 2020; Smalley 2020) there are certain trends that emerge as we begin admitting students for the fall 2020 semester while making plans for spring 2021. It seems that despite the different approaches that institutions of higher learning in Poland and the United States took to respond to COVID-19, they all ended up having to address access to technology and teacher training as areas of immediate need. Higher education systems in both countries also found similar problems to solve in the near and still murky future: enrolment, faculty readiness to carry content delivery in an online only mode, and student engagement. Despite the different ways that the systems in the two countries are governed, the pandemic seems to have worked as an equaliser pointing to the same urgencies. As the picture of COVID-19 impact on higher education solidifies in months to come and institutions start taking stock of what happened and what needs to be done, further observations and analyses are bound to reveal the path for the future. Considering the unknowns about COVID-19, challenges and adaptations that we have just lived through, may not be enough to sustain higher education for the lasting future.

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