

LSE SU Polish Business Society 2020/21

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# Summary of the Research Unit Report

## **The impact of COVID-19 on higher education in Poland and the United Kingdom**

Conclusions based on questionnaires analysing administrative solutions, and their impact on the students' sense of belonging, implemented at the Warsaw School of Economics, the University of Warsaw, the London School of Economics and Political Science and King's College London.

In the first chapter of our research we focus on examining how SGH Warsaw School of Economics, University of Warsaw, The London School of Economics and Political Science and King's College London responded to the restrictions following the outburst of COVID-19 pandemic. We also conducted the survey on students' sense of belonging to the university among the students of the four universities. In the second chapter we provide our analysis of the survey's results. Please find below the summary of our research.

## Chapter 1

### Admissions

The four universities adjusted the admissions process to a varied extent in line with the pandemic-oriented government restrictions. All four universities pushed back deadlines slightly. Out of the four studied universities, SGH was the only one to introduce significant changes in its admissions process by altering its entry requirements.

In terms of admissions and offer rates, LSE and King's saw an increase in both these figures, with King's enjoying a higher increase in offer rates. LSE, however, had higher enrolment rates, while King's saw a decrease. Nevertheless, both universities welcomed more students with a substantial increase of postgraduate students. UW and SGH, on the other hand, saw a slight decrease in the number of offered places. Data shows that both UW and SGH favored postgraduate students in 2020/21 by reducing the number of postgraduate places by a smaller amount than undergraduate with UW even enjoying a small increase in the number of postgraduate students. This suggests the presence of a "panic master's degree" phenomenon, in which students decide to start or extend their graduate education due to unfavourable conditions on the labour market.

### Mode of Classes

At LSE and King's College, students were able to attend in-person classes in the first term of 2020/21 academic year. This has surely been beneficial to them, at the same time however, the decision caused more uncertainty among students as they felt anxious as to whether their mode of study would change at some point or not. The University of Warsaw on the other hand managed to instruct its students about the teaching format plans more than a month in advance of each term. Finally, at SGH students were informed about the remote mode of study in the current academic year 2020/21 already in June 2020. The School's representative underlines that SGH regarded taking clear and early decisions as a matter of great importance, considering their social costs such as residence and travel plans for the international students.

With all of the education moving online, the subject of technical difficulties became substantially more important in daily practice of academic work. Needless to say, in the year of pandemic this issue also started to affect the exam session, as they had to be organised online unlike in the previous years. On the other hand, despite some initial problems encountered due to the switch to online learning, it is important to recognise the introduction of much welcomed

policies. Measures such as recorded lectures and more digitised administration are much lauded by students and can even be applied to non-pandemic times to improve the overall quality of higher education. We conclude that as some solutions have been introduced and tested due to the outbreak of pandemic, and those sometimes work better than the ones that had been utilized before, the time of distant-teaching might be seen as also bringing some positive changes to the universities.

## Assessments and Results

Unsurprisingly, social distancing rules have made traditional, in-person assessment sessions impossible. Consequently, all of the researched universities responded by moving their exams to online platforms. Polish universities have established visibly harsher monitoring rules, as students were sometimes obliged to record themselves while taking the exams; in some cases, ID controls and cheating counter-measures were introduced. British institutions, on the other hand, retained a more *laissez-faire* approach. In addition, UK universities have also introduced broader assessment support packages, which offered additional exam workshop sessions, more lenient assessment criteria, and longer submission windows. Interestingly enough, despite stricter anti-cheating measures and lower levels of support from universities, students at SGH achieved higher average results than those at KCL during the last summer examination period. However, LSE students' results were higher than those of SGH – consequently, stating any conclusions is fundamentally difficult. Regarding the current winter examination period, SGH students have seen a profound increase in obtained marks – even higher than that of LSE's students during the 2019/20 summer examination period. Unfortunately, we cannot establish any conclusions related to the current academic year, as we lack comparable data from other universities. Yet, we see that average results have increased across all universities. We believe three factors can explain this trend: a) greater possibility of cheating b) relaxed assessment standards and altered assessment formats c) arguably less stressful examination environments.

## Student Societies and Careers Centres

Student Societies have faced challenges like organizing large-scale online events and attracting new members solely with the use of online means. According to our collected data, the impact these obstacles had on the popularity of student societies has differed between British and Polish universities. The number of new members in student societies has significantly declined at both London School of Economics and Political Science and King's College London. This phenomenon, however, hasn't been observed at the University of Warsaw.

During the pandemic, careers offices started to provide a wide range of online services for students and graduates. The main forms of support offered by careers centres in all four universities are much alike, including one-to-one online appointments with career coaches, online workshops, and career fairs. Moreover, we conclude that the pandemic has encouraged some

careers centres to launch new, more technologically advanced services. Overall, from our analysis, we find that the careers centres put much effort in providing students with professional support, in these unprecedented times.

### **Supplementary support during COVID-19 pandemic**

In time of the pandemic none of the analysed universities decided to introduce the policy of fees reduction for all of its students. The authorities at the universities stood at the position that the quality of teaching is not suffering due to the change in the mode of education to online teaching. Moreover, arguments were raised that the costs of providing online education had not decreased in relation to in-person teaching. Instead, different, supportive measures have been introduced such as COVID-19 crisis-specific funds. The question of whether those have been enough remains open, as answering it is beyond the scope of our analysis of descriptive nature. What should be highlighted is that both the Polish universities mentioned in this report are public universities and as such they do not impose any charges on their Polish students attending full-time courses. Therefore, the fees are not a main source of income for them and it is not possible to directly compare their policies in this regard with policies of British universities relying on student fees to much greater extent.

The residence halls at all of the analysed universities remained open through the time of pandemic and all of those introduced the additional safety measures with the aim to reduce the risk of students getting infected from each other.

The universities have extended their mental health aid policies, increasing the number of available slots for consultations with psychologists or establishing some additional support, like workshops or telephone hotlines.

Finally, the necessity to move all educational activities online burdened some members of the academia with the need to equip with additional, technical gear. In response the universities started to offer technical equipment rentals to the teachers and students. The universities started also to offer an extensive range of courses and workshops for their employees to improve their IT competences.

## **Chapter 2**

For most respondents, a sense of belonging was defined as a feeling of being part of a community with other students, lecturers and seminar convenors, for some it meant the sheer fact of studying at a specific institution or taking part in extracurricular activities and student societies. The self-assessment of the respondents' sense of belonging illustrated that most of them feel a moderate or weak-moderate (3-4 out of 10) sense of belonging, with some outliers indicating a very strong sense of belonging. There was a pronounced national difference in the

indicated sense of belonging, as the UK-based universities averaged a 5.11 out of 10, while Polish-based – a substantially lower 4.2 out of 10.

It was observed that the self-assessed engagement in student life significantly predicted students' sense of belonging, in a way that gender and the country of study did not, at least in a statistically significant way. The key takeaway from that finding is that being engaged with student initiatives or being part of student societies may increase students' sense of belonging, and considering that for the majority of respondents (76.6%) online learning has had a negative impact on their sense of belonging, this may be an important piece of information for current and prospective students struggling to develop a sense of belonging to their institution. A similar proportion (73.3%) of students have agreed that the reintroduction of in-person teaching is something that they are waiting for. In light of the negative sentiment towards online learning and a longing for usual, in-person classes, it is a curious observation that substantial minority (40.2%) of students have still expressed agreement with the statement "I like online learning" – however, as the regression analysis had shown, the agreement with that notion was significantly predicted by the agreement with another notion – that "online learning provides me with more opportunities", which might in turn partly explain this seeming paradox.

Furthermore, it was analysed whether and how the respondents got involved in student's life. Very important aspect of that is membership in student societies, as well as participation in various extracurricular activities. The results prove the significance of society membership on overall satisfaction and students' sense of belonging. Students who joined societies expressed a higher average sense of belonging rate at 5.1, compared to 4.0, that of students who did not take part in any societies. This was further enhanced by taking part in more societies in the academic year 2020/2021 (compared to the previous year, when applicable). Thus, accounting for an increase in average sense of belonging rates of 6.3 for those who joined more societies, compared to those who did not at 4.8. The highest membership rates are present among the students who have experienced 2 years of in-person learning prior to the start of the pandemic. 50% of respondents agreed that societies were not more active during online learning. The average satisfaction rates regarding events organised by societies reached 5.4, which corresponds to a 5.4 average in students' own evaluation of participation in the student groups (both on the scale of 1-10). While students from UK-based universities are more likely to be involved in student societies than those attending universities in Poland. Interestingly, however, the satisfaction rates remain higher for those studying in Warsaw than in London.

It was observed that in general students' of all four surveyed universities are participating to a lesser extent in guest lectures, discussion panels and other informal meetings online. The overwhelming majority of respondents stated that they do not participate in such events or activities at all. According to the first group of the examined extracurricular activities, the share of such responses reached 32.1%, whereas only 5.8% of students claimed that they take part in guest lectures or discussion panels once a week or more often. In terms of more informal

online meetings with other students or university staff, the two most common answers were that the respondents do not participate in them (36.5%), or such events are not organised (18.9%). However, there are significant differences between Polish and British universities. The majority of students who answered that they do not participate in extracurricular activities or they are not organised, were studying at UW or SGH, whereas LSE and KCL students were most often choosing the options of “once a month” or “a couple of times in term”. There was also a significant correlation between the number of academic years completed before the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic – those who studied longer, participated in such events more often, and those who have just started studying were most often declaring that they do not participate in extracurricular activities at all. Students in general are also less willing to represent their schools in competitions and contests, however the majority indicated that they would be more interested in doing that in in-person circumstances.

Moreover, most respondents agreed that remote learning negatively affects the social side of their education, as 83.9% stated that it is more difficult to make new friends during online studies. A significant number of students also did not have a chance to meet any other students from their cohort or programme in person (36.5%), and most students agree that they have met much less people than in pre-COVID-19 circumstances (34.3%).

Finally, the forced shift into the new pandemic circumstances has disrupted the way that universities operate, and has generated a number of problems for students – impeded contact with fellow students and staff, disrupted access to university resources, libraries, as well as other campus facilities. The universities have undertaken a set of mitigation measures in order to ensure continued functioning and safeguard student experience, at least in principle. The appraisal of these measures, carried out by survey respondents, has painted a picture of moderate efficiency – the average appraisal was 5.16 out of 10. Similarly to the indications of the sense of belonging, there was a national difference in the assessment of pandemic mitigation measures undertaken by universities – the UK-based universities’ efforts have received an average 5.67 out of 10, while the efforts of Polish universities – an average of 5.29 out of 10. The LSE’s measures have been ranked the highest, at 5.84 out of 10, while University of Warsaw’s at 5.16 out of 10 – the lowest from the 4 assessed universities. When looking at these results it is important to remember that LSE and KCL were still providing in-person seminars throughout most of the Michaelmas term, and that this might have had an effect on the propensity of students to appraise the UK-based universities higher.

Respondents have also suggested further measures they felt their universities could implement in an effort to safeguard students’ sense of belonging – these measures included fostering student integration, protecting students’ psychological well-being, as well as the provision of widely understood technical, financial and administrative support.

All in all, the survey proved that the students are in general feeling less connected to their university, its community and their friends or other students. The lack of in-person social

activities has had an impact on the student's sense of belonging as well as contacts and the quality of relationships with other students. Additionally, some differences have been observed between those who completed more years of studies before the pandemic, in relation to those who began studying this or last academic year. The latter group, in general, has a weaker sense of belonging. Additionally, it was observed that due to the variety of offered extracurricular activities, students at British universities felt slightly more connected to their cohorts and university, than students at Polish schools. However, an interesting question arises – whether the sense of community and engagement with student life was lacking there before the transition of studies online, or if it was pandemic-induced – this in itself warrants further research on this topic.



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