# A New Vision for Higher Education in Poland and Beyond

By Ana Godonoga and Danuta Gruszka

## A Disrupted Global Higher Education Sector

The COVID-19 global health crisis has had an unprecedented impact on different sectors of society, including higher education. Universities and other institutions of higher learning across the world were compelled to cease their physical operations and shift rapidly to so-called 'emergency remote teaching and learning'. Evidence shows that at the beginning of April 2020, schools and universities closed in 185 countries, affecting nearly 90% of enrolled learners (Marinoni et al., 2020). Internationalisation was among the most affected areas, leaving a profound mark on both student and staff mobility.

Depending on their pre-existing capacity for crisis management, infrastructure for distance learning, and available policy and management support, some institutions have been better prepared to ensure a smooth transition to distance learning compared to others. Access to technical infrastructure, competences and pedagogies for distance learning, and requirements of specific disciplines and study programs have been just some of the main challenges experienced by higher education institutions in their transition to distance learning (Marinoni et al., 2020). Fields that require lab- or practice-based learning have found it especially difficult to organise their instruction virtually (Gaebel, 2020). Students from low socio-economic backgrounds, rural areas or with learning difficulties were particularly impacted by the transition to distance learning (Gaebel, 2020; UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning, 2020). Research has also been deeply affected due to the postponement of scientific conferences, cancellation of international travel, and delayed or cancelled research projects (Marinoni et al., 2020).

As many countries are now facing a second wave of infections, distance learning can no longer be viewed as an emergency strategy, but rather as an organisational reality that requires adequate planning and implementation. For this reason, university leaders need to draw on the lessons learned during the first months of the outbreak to understand what worked well and less well in their institutions, and devise an effective strategy for a high-quality distance teaching and learning model.

The remainder of this paper discusses findings of a research study conducted in higher education institutions in Poland, to understand how students experienced the transition to distance learning at the beginning of the crisis, and how this experience can be used to inspire future development and improvement.

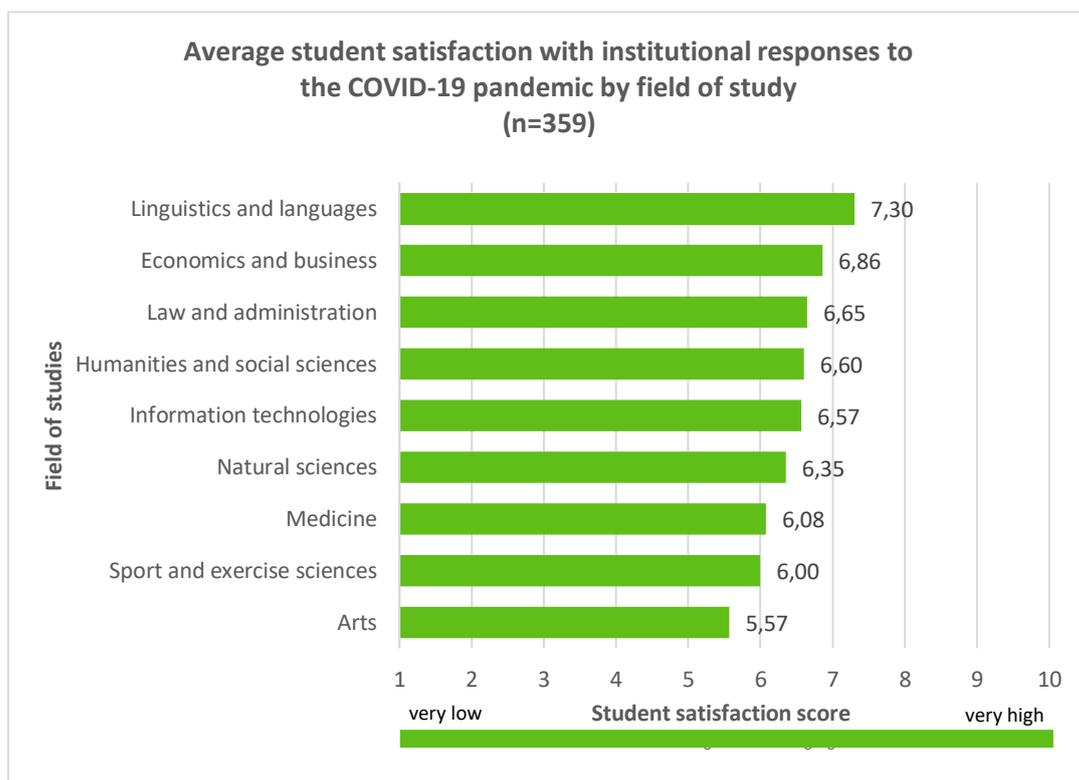## Contextualising the Impact of the Crisis in Polish Universities

Poland reported its first case of SARS-CoV-2 on March 4th, 2020. Soon after, governmental measures initially taking the form of social distancing recommendations, became lockdown-type prohibitions, causing the closure of all educational institutions, including universities. The rapidly announced closures were meant to be a temporary solution. However, with the increase in the number of cases and their severity, the make-shift plan became a lasting arrangement. A coherent national strategy to help higher education institutions cope with the crisis was never developed, and responsibility for

devising a solution was delegated to individual institutions. This led to a state of confusion and uncertainty for universities, which was further intensified by hasty governmental directives. Technological barriers were also significant, both on the part of students and faculty. Meanwhile, universities that have been well-known for their high quality provision, efficient management and technological readiness, have been able to remain more resilient throughout the crisis (Kobylarek, 2020).

These findings were confirmed by our study, which investigated student attitudes vis-à-vis organisational responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in the context of public higher education institutions in Poland. The study drew on the results of an online survey completed in May 2020 by a sample of 359 students from 61 public higher education institutions, who expressed their views on the readiness of their institutions for distance learning.

The results of the survey identified disparities in readiness across institutions and study fields. Satisfaction levels were lowest among specialisations that require practical, creative or lab-based work (see Figure 1).

*Figure 1. Student satisfaction with institutional responses by field of study*



**Average student satisfaction with institutional responses to the COVID-19 pandemic by field of study (n=359)**

| Field of studies | Student satisfaction score |
|---|---|
| Linguistics and languages | 7,30 |
| Economics and business | 6,86 |
| Law and administration | 6,65 |
| Humanities and social sciences | 6,60 |
| Information technologies | 6,57 |
| Natural sciences | 6,35 |
| Medicine | 6,08 |
| Sport and exercise sciences | 6,00 |
| Arts | 5,57 |

Perceptions of institutional readiness for distance learning also varied by year of enrolment. First-year undergraduate and graduate students were less satisfied with the introduction of distance learning, while students in their final years of studies regarded the new format more favourably. This may be partly explained by a general need for socialisation and relatedness when students first start a degree. As students advance through their studies and approach the stage when they have to write their final thesis, a larger proportion of their time is spent on independent study. The opportunity to save time on commute and focus on research may partly explain why satisfaction levels were higher among students in their final year of studies.

Instructors' self-motivation was identified as a key enabler of a successful implementation of distance learning, showing that overall, academics were open and receptive to delivering their classes in a virtual format (see Figure 2). At the same time, students noted instructors' lack of experience with e-learning and technology as key barriers to a successful implementation of distance learning (see Figure 3), emphasising the need for university management to provide training and support for faculty on the use of technology and pedagogical approaches suitable for distance learning.

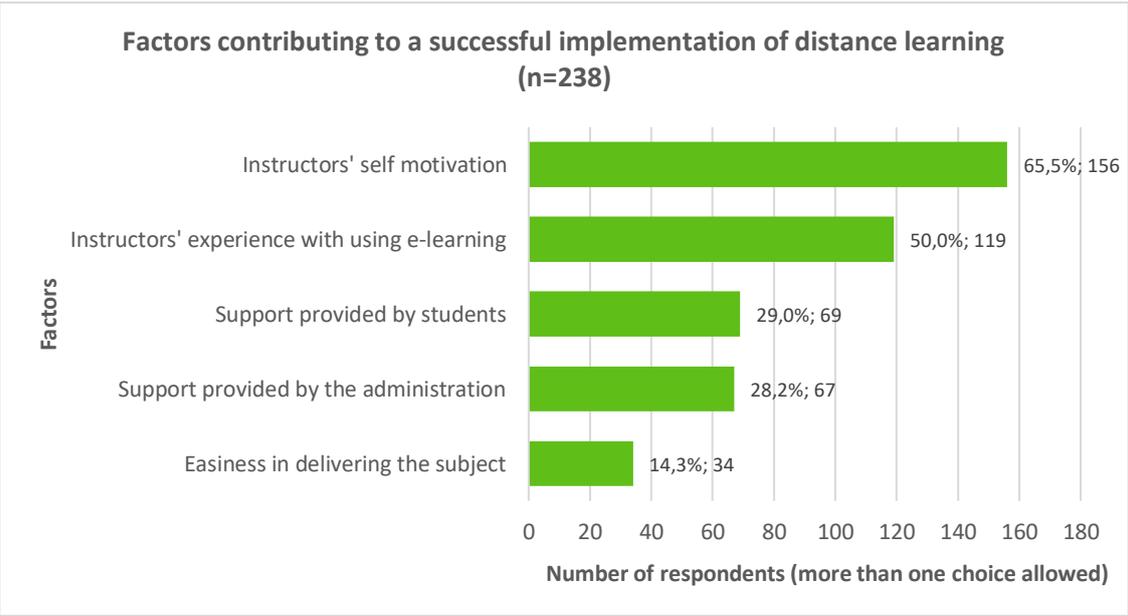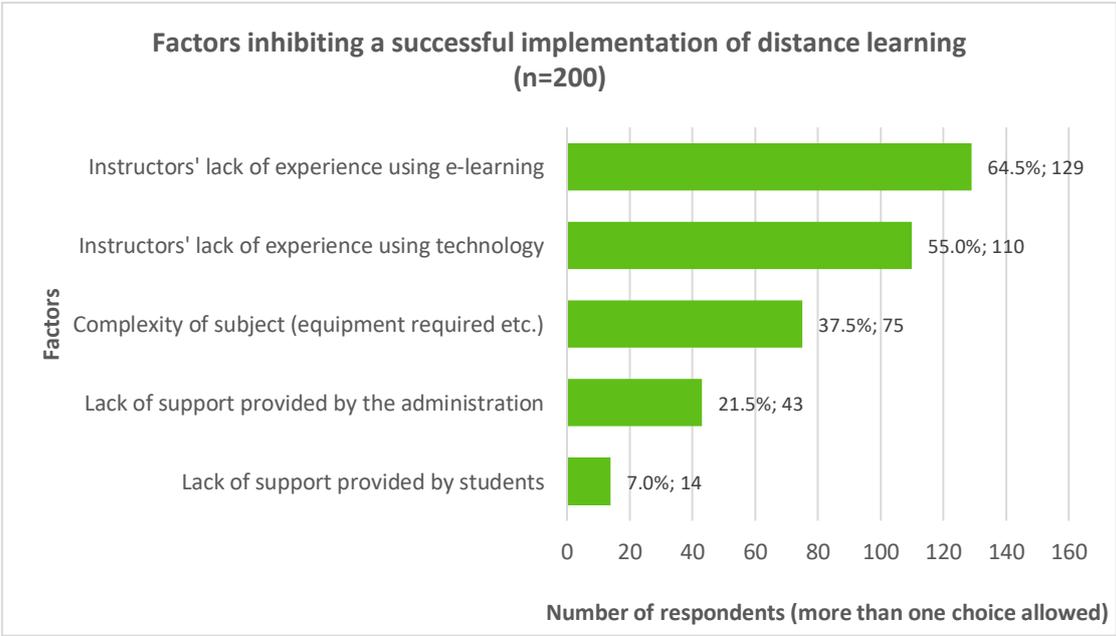*Figure 2. Factors contributing to a successful implementation of distance learning*

**Factors contributing to a successful implementation of distance learning (n=238)**

- Instructors' self motivation — 65,5%; 156
- Instructors' experience with using e-learning — 50,0%; 119
- Support provided by students — 29,0%; 69
- Support provided by the administration — 28,2%; 67
- Easiness in delivering the subject — 14,3%; 34

Factors

Number of respondents (more than one choice allowed)

*Figure 3. Factors inhibiting a successful implementation of distance learning*

**Factors inhibiting a successful implementation of distance learning (n=200)**

- Instructors' lack of experience using e-learning — 64.5%; 129
- Instructors' lack of experience using technology — 55.0%; 110
- Complexity of subject (equipment required etc.) — 37.5%; 75
- Lack of support provided by the administration — 21.5%; 43
- Lack of support provided by students — 7.0%; 14

Factors

Number of respondents (more than one choice allowed)

Despite the challenges raised by the respondents in relation to the delivery of remote teaching and learning at the beginning of the outbreak, a notable proportion of them mentioned that they would like their institution to incorporate more online-based pedagogical approaches over the long term,

recognising the opportunities these approaches provide in terms of flexibility, accessibility and convenience.

Although hybrid and distance learning have become more popular in recent years (Hwang, 2018), never before have universities been pressured to introduce digital learning solutions so urgently. Although still imperfect in many ways, distance and hybrid learning will continue during the academic year 2020/2021 in Poland and will likely extend beyond that, as universities recognise the benefits of complementing traditional with distance learning approaches.

## A New Vision for Higher Education

The COVID-19 crisis has served as a wake-up call for higher education systems worldwide of the need to adapt and innovate to sustain their relevance and competitiveness. It is time for university management to test new approaches that are able to cater to the needs of diverse students and faculty. Without a doubt, the global pandemic has caused major disruptions to the higher education provision. But it has also generated opportunities for a more accessible, equitable and flexible education, and internationalisation possibilities that are no longer bound to a physical location. Going forward, new formats of teaching and learning will require more inclusive and participatory approaches, making students not only recipients but also co-creators of their education. This was reiterated in our study, with many students mentioning feedback as a critical factor in the success (or lack thereof) of the transition to distance learning.

While the effects of digitalisation on higher education is not a new topic, its relevance in the wake of what seems to be a long-lasting crisis has intensified without precedent. Universities, whether they want it or not, are steered towards a new organisational reality, where not only teaching and learning requires adaptation, but also support systems for students, training opportunities for faculty, and systems for monitoring and assessing the quality of education delivered through alternative formats.

The University of St. Gallen in Switzerland has launched its own learning app, known as Brian, to enable students to prepare for exams in a fun and engaging way. Arizona State University in the United States is using Minecraft in its distance teaching, and colleagues from RWTH Aachen University in Germany are working on the development of an application to support teaching in virtual reality using avatars. The technological revolution can no longer be reversed, but universities can and need to learn how to adapt and capitalise on its opportunities so that it moves from an 'emergency solution' to an added value to the education provision.

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## Biographical details

**Ana Godonoga** is a Research and Teaching Associate and PhD candidate at the Institute for Higher Education Management, WU Vienna University of Economics and Business, Austria. Her core responsibilities include independent research, teaching, and student support activities. Her PhD focuses on university social responsibility. Before joining WU, Ana worked as Associate Project Officer at UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning in France. She contributed to the development and implementation of international research projects on higher education and assisted with the design of online and blended learning courses on higher education governance and quality assurance. In addition, Ana worked on research projects related to higher education performance and quality management, both as a Research Associate at the OECD, and as Vice-Chair of the Quality Advisory Board of the Erasmus Mundus Association. Ana holds a joint Master's degree in Research and Innovation in Higher Education from Danube University Krems, Austria and Osnabrück University of Applied Sciences, Germany. Her research interests relate to the civic and social role of higher education, and quality and performance management in traditional and online learning environments.

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