

<https://doi.org/10.28925/2518-7635.2021.67>

## CARE OVER THE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS DURING COVID-19 LOCKDOWN

**Marek Bogusz**

ORCID iD 0000-0002-8689-7773

Director of International Affairs Office

WSG University

2 Garbary Str., 85-229

Bydgoszcz, Republic of Poland

marek.bogusz@byd.pl

### ABSTRACT

*This article is a diagnosis of the facts based on inner, empirical research. The aim of the Article is to present the situation of international students in WSG University during the lockdown related to the COVID-19 pandemic and the implemented measures and activities to counter its negative effects. The examples will relate to Poland and the university I represent. This article deals with the following issues: general situation of international students in Poland, brief overview of the university's activities, what tools and procedures to adapt to the new situation were prepared in advance, and what should be implemented in a crisis situation, the challenges of a sudden increase in the level and quantity of distance learning and recruitment challenges of international students. The summary will be a presentation of good practices introduced at the university in the context of COVID-19, which can be implemented in many European universities.*

**Keywords:** COVID-19; good practices; international students; lockdown.

© Marek Bogusz, 2021

### INTRODUCTION

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic had an enormous impact on many aspects of life, including higher education, forcing far-reaching changes in the functioning of the universities. These changes are an attempt to adapt the teaching method to the conditions in which direct student-lecturer contact is difficult or completely impossible. However, for students who do not come from their home Countries, the number of challenges increases significantly. Additional problems that need to be solved relate not only to the teaching process itself, but also life issues, unfortunately, above all, to those resulting from ignorance of local social processes, failure to adapt to seclusion conditions, and bureaucratic processes.

## PROBLEM STATEMENT

The challenges that are particularly inconvenient include functioning in everyday life in a country affected by closure and violation of the separation: work, rest and sleep time. Students coming to Europe for specific educational or economic purposes, often many thousands of miles away from home, collide with reality that is far from their expectations and plans. The extremely important role of the university in caring for the students present within its boundaries cannot be limited only to providing education at the highest possible level, but must include other aspects that will help the students find themselves in difficult reality. Such assistance may take place directly (e.g. financial support, psychological assistance, providing accommodation opportunities, and also by creating an appropriate environment, by creating internal support entities, changing procedures, interacting with the socio-political environment, or cooperation with city and regional authorities.

## GENERAL SITUATION OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN POLAND AND WSG UNIVERSITY

The latest data that can be used to describe the general number of foreign students in Poland come from the statistical yearbook of the Central Statistical Office as of December 31, 2019<sup>1</sup>. This figure is likely to have shaken significantly since the outbreak of the pandemic, but no such summary has yet been made. It can be assumed that the number presented in the yearbook corresponds to the beginning of the pandemic in Europe in February and March 2020.

*Table 1*

**Total number of International student in Poland**

	Full-time	Part-time
<b>Overall</b>	809 259	420 995
<b>International students</b>	68 109	9 340
<b>Percentage</b>	8,4%	2,2%

Most of the foreigners came from European countries, with the most numerous group being people from Ukraine (39.2 thousand, ie 50.1% of all foreigners). The next largest groups were students from Belarus (7.3 thousand — 9.3%) and India (3.6 thousand — 4.6%). Most international students chose universities in the Mazowieckie voivodship, including Warsaw, which is a constant and understandable trend — the capital of the country has the greatest attraction. WSG University in Bydgoszcz on September 30, 2020 had 776 international students from 16 countries educated which represents 21% of the total number of students. This number puts WSG in second place in the Kuyavian-Pomeranian Voivodeship after the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Torun, where the largest number of foreign

students enrol in medical-related faculties. The most numerous groups are students from Ukraine (353 people 43%), Rwanda (63 people 8%), Zimbabwe (42 people 5%) and Sri Lanka (36 people 4%). The number of students from the former USSR countries, including Belarus and Kazakhstan, is systematically increasing.

The amount of Ukrainian students in the total number of students is in line with the nationwide trend and results from the migration trend that has continued more or less from 2012. Students from the former USSR countries participate in classes conducted in Polish (Central Statistical Office, 2020). Before coming to the university, they undergo a six-month language course abroad organized by the universities, preparing them for studies. They also continue the language course after coming to Bydgoszcz. The rest of the students take part in 4 courses (offered) in English.

## **ACTIVITIES OF THE UNIVERSITY IN THE FIELD OF CARE OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS**

WSG University when the first lockdown began in March 2020. The University was mostly prepared for the challenges resulting from the transition to the remote mode and for the management of non-educational problems. The preparation was multifaceted and included direct and indirect care for the students, including psychological, medical and technical support, which is unparalleled in higher education institutions. The university has also implemented a special program financed by European Union funds dedicated to this subject. In November 2020, the University made a series of summaries of surveys and case studies on the level of satisfaction of international students and their needs for specific activities of the University.

## **IMPLEMENTATION OF DISTANCE LEARNING**

April 14, 2020 the regulation of the Council of Ministers on increasing the percentage share of on-line classes in the total number of ECTS credits to a maximum of 50% entered into force. In practice, the University, due to its practical teaching profile, has already conducted remote teaching using the university's remote e-learning platform (ONTE), where students receive tasks to be performed, tests and examinations are carried out, and the necessary materials and literature are placed. The share of online classes ranged, depending on the field of study, from 0% to 25%. In May 2020 the university decided to strengthen the staff of the ONTE service department, due to the radical increase in platform users, and thus the need to increase the range of technical and IT services. The university has signed an agreement with Microsoft for the extensive use of the MS Teams platform, as the only platform used to conduct direct on-line classes. Pursuant to the Rector's decree of September 30, all lectures take place exclusively

on this platform. Practical classes and laboratories, the nature of which cannot be carried out remotely (e.g. in computer science or construction), are held on the university campus in a strict sanitary regime. This is possible thanks to the legal environment related to the COVID-19 pandemic prevention. An additional advantage is the integration of the MS-Teams platform with the internal ISAPS student and lecturer service system. Thanks to this integration, students can participate directly in classes from the level of the timetable visible to them.

The division into the so-called “Classes” according to the individual student groups, thanks to which the student and lecturer has access only to the classes designated in the schedule. Students received free access to the Office 365 suite, which allows them to access a number of IT tools to improve teaching, including MS Word and MS Excel. In specialized fields of study (eg IT), the University purchased 40 tablet devices for students thanks to participation in POWER and mSV projects. The dormitory owned by the University in which 196 students reside as of December 31, 2020 is 100% occupied by international students. Pursuant to legal regulations, students should be provided with a place of residence if their situation does not allow for accommodation in a different form. In the spring of 2020, the university has equipped the dormitory with broadband, wireless internet with the possibility of simultaneous access of 160 people.

A room with 25 computer stations for remote learning was also created for students who do not have the appropriate technical hardware. According to the summary of the survey conducted from April to November 2020 out of 265 people, 77 students declared Microsoft Teams as the most popular platform for access to classes, 36 the ONTE platform (more than half of the respondents did not answer this question) 91 students expressed satisfaction with the level of online classes, 48 dissatisfaction, 46 students described their level, as average. The percentage of dissatisfied people increased in percentage in the November 2020 survey (50/50), which is also confirmed by anonymous qualitative research among the residents of the Student House. In the November 2020 survey (34 respondents), 50% of students found online teaching ineffective. In the November 2020 survey (34 respondents), 11 students declared lack of access to the tools needed for online learning, or problems limiting access. The main reported problems in online teaching are: technical problems on the part of the student and lecturer, lack of contact with lecturers (e-mail) and connection quality. The above data indicate that a significant proportion of students express general dissatisfaction with the necessity to participate in online classes.

Despite the implemented procedures and investments, such teaching should be considered not only less effective, but also lowering the overall satisfaction of international students. This prompts the university to return to stationary teaching as soon as possible after the pandemic, or to maintain hybrid teaching with a predominance of traditional classes.

## SPECIAL, NON-EDUCATIONAL FORMS OF CARE FOR STUDENTS

In the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, international students are subject to specific pressures and suffer slightly different problems than local nationals. According to the research, the most frequently reported problems are: language barrier in contacts with people, shopping, contact on offices, finding accommodation, racism, immigration system, transport, weather. From March 2020, the above set was joined by previously unprecedented or niche problems: feeling of isolation and closure, inability to find a job, dissatisfaction with classes, fear of falling ill, lack of social and peer integration, boredom. Since the University noticed the occurrence of these disturbing phenomena, especially from the first-mentioned group, even in times before the pandemic, we established a number of entities and developed procedures concerning them, covering many departments, both scientific and administrative.

A priority project aimed at increasing the readiness of the WSG University to provide care for international students and improving the quality and conditions of studying foreign academic youth at WSG through support, information and integration activities is the implementation of the project under the “Welcome to Poland” program (National Agency for Academic Exchange, funding from the POWER program) called “Welcome Center”. The activities of the project planned for 2018-2021 are aimed at: functioning of the point of comprehensive information and service for foreign students and employees, improvement of procedures and practices related to the process of studying young people from abroad at WSG, increasing the competences of WSG staff in the field of language and intercultural skills, activities acclimatization and integration for foreign students of WSG (including integration of staff and students), many departments, both research and administration.

Support for international students functioning at the University during the pandemic has significantly increased and is mainly manifested in activities such as; assistance in immigration procedures, support in finding accommodation, comprehensive information on pandemic restrictions, providing knowledge about the principles of social coexistence and new university procedures in the field of education. An extremely important point from the point of view of the effective operation of the point is that its employees are foreigners — one English and one Russian, and these are graduates of the University with several years of experience in Poland. According to the conducted evaluation of the functioning of the point, out of 174 respondents, 154 know the point and scope of its activities in the Welcome Center, 20 are of the opposite opinion, 162 people find the Welcome Center helpful and are satisfied with its operation, 12 people are of the opposite opinion. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of students reporting psychological problems increased significantly. The Psychological and Pedagogical Counseling Center has been working at the University since 2014, the employees of which provide free

support in such situations. The aim of the clinic is to provide psychological support to students of the University in the form of psychological and medical consultations regarding the individual educational difficulties of the student, but also counteracting the feeling of alienation, fear of pandemic and depressive disorders. In addition, the clinic, in cooperation with the Student Self-government, provides support interviews in the event of difficulties resulting from disability, illness or other traumatic life situations, also resulting from a sense of being lost in the national reality or a difficult situation in the country of origin. In 2020 the staff of the clinic with English and Russian translators was strengthened.

During the pandemic, the Clinic provided this type of assistance to 76 people, 17 of whom underwent a full cycle of psychotherapy, and 2 students were referred to their country of origin for specialist hospital care. An important problem faced by foreign students is the issue of ostracism, or even aggressive and xenophobic behavior towards them. The WSG University has undertaken cooperation with the Police and city authorities on this matter, establishing a special team for counteracting this type of phenomena. They mainly concern accusations and irrational fear of coronavirus infection.

Thanks to the team and constant monitoring of this type of phenomena by many university units, including the Student Service Department and the International Affairs Department. During the pandemic, international students indicate the inability to use facilities to improve and maintain health and physical condition. In accordance with the restrictions introduced on November 28, 2020, sports facilities, including gyms, swimming pools and sports halls, were closed for use. However, the legislator provided for the use of such facilities by official sports sections. Therefore, the University made its facilities (gym, swimming pool and sports hall) available to international students associated in the Academic Sports Association — as at December 31, it was 49 students from 6 countries. There is a medical care facility at the University called Academic Medical Center. Students who want to use the services of specialist doctors, physiotherapy, laboratory tests or other medical assistance are granted special discounts on these services.

For those who, for reasons of employment or voluntarily, take advantage of state insurance, these services are free and use them according to the rules applicable to nationals of the country. Efforts are being made to obtain the status of a COVID-19 vaccination point, which, after the government introduces the 3rd stage of vaccination for 18-60 years old, will become the closest and most accessible facility for such vaccination. However, this only applies to people insured by the National Health Fund. The University in 2020 during the summer break in teaching, it radically changed the recruitment procedures for foreign students and the methods of promotion, adapting to the need to switch to the maximum contact-free mode in accordance with the sanitary regime.

The recruitment process from the moment a candidate from abroad applies to the University to signing a study agreement and arriving in Bydgoszcz takes place entirely through the internal ISAPS IT system. In accordance with changes in legal regulations, scanned documents obtained legal force at the recruitment stage. However, upon arrival in Poland, the student is obliged to provide original documents certified by the Polish Embassy in their respective countries before signing the contract. At the same time, the University completely gave up paper circulation and the traditional form of promotion and information (leaflets, posters, etc.) in favour of on-line tools such as mobile applications, websites and social media.

## GOOD PRACTICES

Summarizing the effectiveness of measures to counteract the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic at the University of Economy in Bydgoszcz. We can distinguish a few of them which seem possible to be implemented in many higher education institutions in Europe and which bring measurable benefits, unfortunately difficult to quantify, rather qualitative. One of the quantifiable indicators indicating the rightness of the activities undertaken is the 18% increase in the number of recruited foreign students for the 2020/2021 academic year. However, data that will allow to determine whether this situation is in contradiction with the national trend should be available only in mid-2021. Regardless of this, in order to ensure comprehensive and proper care for foreign students in the new pandemic reality, and also after it, the following steps are proposed:

1. Paying attention to non-educational needs of foreign students, such as the residence, life, health or social matters mentioned in the article by creating procedures and entities aimed at fulfilling or supporting these needs.
2. The need to ensure high-quality on-line education, especially by refining technical procedures, high-quality Internet connections, and providing students with appropriate software and hardware. It is necessary to precisely train the academic staff that will adapt to such teaching.
3. Internal research shows the need to return to stationary teaching as soon as possible, whenever possible. Students point to the shortcomings of knowledge transferred remotely and a reduced quality of education.
4. It seems justified to implement transformations in the structure of universities in accordance with the ideas of “University 2.0” and “University of the University”. This can manifest itself in equipping universities with institutions and infrastructure that have so far been rare, such as psychological clinics, medical centers, kindergartens, universities for the elderly.

This solution brings multiple benefits. Firstly, it provides students with a place for apprenticeships, secondly, it provides an additional, controllable

space for managing noneducational challenges, thirdly, it can bring additional financial benefits by using such spaces commercially, and fourthly, it increases the prestige of the university and causes greater interaction with students, but also with the local community.

## REFERENCES

- Central Statistical Office (2020). *Higher education in Poland in 2018-2019*. Warsaw, Poland. 74–85.
- Rajkumar, R. (2020) COVID-19 and mental health: *A review of the existing literature*. *Asian J Psychiatry*; 52(10). 20–36.
- Dong, L, Bouey, J. (2020) Public mental health crisis during COVID-19 pandemic. *China. Emerg Infect Dis*. 26 (1). 16–18.
- Lee, J. (2020) Mental health effects of school closures during COVID-19. *Lancet Child Adolesc Health*. 4(6). 42–51.
- Brooks, S., Webster, R., Smith, L.(2020) The psychological impact of quarantine and how to reduce it: Rapid review of the evidence. *Lancet*. 39 (5). 912–920.
- Wörfel, F, Gusy, B., Lohmann, K. (2016) Mental health problems among university students and the impact of structural conditions. *J Public Health*. 24(2). 125–133.
- Sciensano (2020) *COVID-19 gezondheidsenquête: Enkele voorlopige resultaten*. <https://doi.org/10.25608/f0tt-py28>.

## ОСОБЛИВОСТІ РОБОТИ З ІНОЗЕМНИМИ СТУДЕНТАМИ ПІД ЧАС КАРАНТИНУ COVID-19

Марек Богуш, магістр у галузі мистецтва, педагогіки, директор Департаменту міжнародних відносин Університету економіки у м. Бидгощ, викладач у сфері креативних індустрій. вул. Гарбари, 2, 85-229, м. Бидгощ, Республіка Польща. [marek.bogusz@byd.pl](mailto:marek.bogusz@byd.pl)

Ця стаття є діагностикою фактів на основі внутрішнього, емпіричного дослідження. Мета статті — представити становище іноземних студентів в Університеті економіки у м. Бидгощ під час карантину, пов'язаного з пандемією COVID-19, та вжиті заходи для протидії його негативним наслідкам. У статті висвітлено такі питання: загальне становище іноземних студентів у Польщі, короткий огляд діяльності університету; інструменти та процедури адаптації до нової ситуації, що були підготовлені заздалегідь, і що слід реалізувати в кризовій ситуації; виклики раптового зростання рівня та кількості проблем дистанційного навчання та набору іноземних студентів. Для забезпечення всебічного та належного піклування за іноземними студентами в умовах



нової пандемічної реальності, а також після неї, пропонується звернення уваги до різних потреб іноземних студентів, таких як проживання, здоров'я чи соціальні питання, шляхом створення процедур та організацій, спрямованих на задоволення цих потреб. Необхідно забезпечити якісну он-лайн освіту, шляхом уточнення технічних процедур, якісного підключення до Інтернету та забезпечення студентів відповідним програмним та апаратним забезпеченням. Внутрішні дослідження показують необхідність якнайшвидшого повернення до стаціонарного викладання, коли це можливо. Студенти вказують на недоліки знань, переданих дистанційно, та зниження якості освіти. Університети мають бути оснащені елементами інфраструктури, які досі були рідкістю, такими як психологічні клініки, медичні центри, дитячі садки, університети для людей похилого віку. Це рішення приносить багато переваг.

**Ключові слова:** COVID-19; передові практики; іноземні студенти; закриття.

Received: 25.10.2021

Accepted: 23.12.2021