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Adaptation of Students to Educational Changes Caused by the COVID-19 Pandemic*

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Abstract

The article presents research results obtained as part of the implemented project regarding identification of the process of adaptation of students to the conditions of new education caused by the pandemic. The opinions of students have been obtained by means of a diagnostic survey. They allowed to reconstruct individual adaptation models adopted by the students in response to distance learning and need to adjust to the education process during lockdown.

Key words: adaptation, students, COVID-19 pandemic, distance learning

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a total lockdown, causing the implementation of a decidedly innovative model of online student education. Unfortunately, their daily academic and social activities immediately had to be adapted to the conditions of isolation. They participated in a great social experiment, education became virtual in the blink of an eye and the area of life shrank to their household (Gruszczynska, 2020, p. 25), the university functioning model suddenly changed, and the students had to find themselves in it (Daniel, 2020, after: Wargadinata et. al., 2020, p. 141).

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Adaptation

According to Leonora M. Cohen, adaptation is defined as the fit or adjustment of the individual to external conditions, but adaptation can also mean moving from one environment to another more suitable (Cohen, 2012, p.3). In turn, the concept of „social adaptation”, Terziev understands, as a state of balance of personality and social community. The experience of this balance is a psychological phenomenon, but as a process, adaptation is filled with social content, which makes it the subject of economics and sociology. On this basis, the category of social adaptation is defined as an economic and sociological category (Terziev 2018, p.1354)

The reaction of the individual, i.e. the response to the situation the individual is in, is always biologically, personality, socially and culturally conditions and, thus, it is always individual. Thus, „the individual model of adaptation of individuals to the changing conditions of pursuit of social goals is, therefore, a resultant of three elements: state of social support, engagement in pursuit of the goal and state of accomplishing and final accomplishment of the socially desired goal” (Korczak, 2015, p. 23).

Based on the invoked definition, the so-called optimal pattern of development of an individual was determined, assuming concurrent presence of social support and engagement of the individual in pursuit of the goal as well as four adaptation models. These are Top Student, Knight, Victim and Shirker (Korczak 2015, pp. 24-26) that can change depending on the obtained social support.

Table 1. Individual adaptation models of individuals to the changing conditions of social goals pursuit

Presented model of adaptation to social conditions	Receipt of social support	Engagement in pursuit of a socially accepted goal	Accomplishment of the socially accepted goal	Likely reaction to change of the social support status
Top Student	Yes	Yes	Yes	Adoption of the Knight or Victim model
Knight	No	Yes	Yes	Adoption of the Top Student model
Victim	No	Yes/No	No	Adoption of the Top Student or Shirker model. Maintenance of the Victim model
Shirker	Yes	No	No	Adoption of the Victim model

Source: J. Korczak 2015, p. 26.

Adaptation, as a response to the occurring and unavoidable changes resulting from the pandemic and experienced by the students, allows to state that their functioning took place in the living environment changed by the pandemic, implicating also the change of the learning environment – distance learning. Ptaszek et. al. are of the opinion that this gave rise to problems both due to the new education formula and digital exhaustion. The extended screen time, information overload, isolation could cause a decline in mental and physical wellbeing (Ptaszek, et. al., 2020, p. 13). Thus, the adaptation process encountered many difficulties resulting from inadequacies in terms of preparation of universities, lecturers and students to the new education form (Karadag et. al., 2021). This state is illustrated by the studies of Kedraka and Kaltsidis (2020, pp. 17-30; after: Karadag, Su, Ergin-Kocaturk, 2021). The scholars claim that the main issue in the process of students' adaptation is low sense of satisfaction with distance learning and low assessment of its quality (Karadag, et. al., 2021). Meanwhile, positive adaptation of students was related directly to the digital skills of students and openness to new technologies (Flores, et. al., 2021). Full adaptation requires social support that should be provided by teachers whose adaptation process to the new conditions turned also to be problematic as well (Lynch, 2020, pp. 189-190).

Today, we can state that the global pandemic requires highly motivated and educated teachers who can model critical thinking and problem solving, even those generated online. It is high time we took a step forward and did what is possible in online education. In many aspects, we are very lucky to live in 2020 and not 1980 or even 1990 as today we have greater digital resources we can employ in distance learning (Lynch, 2020, pp. 189-190).

Thus, referring to the title adaptation, it must be noted that it is a highly individualised aspect of functioning, but intertwined with various educational and social situations. This individual approach to the issue of students' adaptation to the social changes caused by the pandemic is related to the teacher and university surroundings, but one must remember that they have a significant chord with the society.

Therefore, looking from the perspectives of the scholars studying this issue as well as the circumstances of the pandemic and distance learning accompanying the students, attention was given in the research considerations to the adaptation of students of pedagogy to the changes they caused.

Own Research – Methodological Assumptions

The objective of the research was identification of the processes of students' adaptation to the changes caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The main research problem is formulated in the question: *Which adaptive solutions for the occurring changes are adopted by the students of pedagogy?* The participants of the research were 85 students majoring in pedagogy (87% of women and 13% of men). The research was carried out online by means of a questionnaire and interview.

Research Results

The social changes caused by the pandemic affected education, including higher education, in a specific manner. Many students studied in the remote formula for the first time, but were also forced to leave the students' dormitories. Further pandemic-related problems included lack of access to libraries, problems in completion of professional training, limited social contacts, including but not limited to contacts with academic teachers, but also difficulties regarding formal execution of tasks resulting from the lack of proper digital resources, such as the Internet or computer. The need to leave the students' dormitories (52.4%), entailing also worsening of financial situation and starting work (38.1%) gave rise to high concerns and distress. A highly disorganising factor was the experience of quarantine (33.3%).

An essential factor for the adaptation process was subjective sense of satisfaction with the role of a "remote student" as well as the level of expectations set by the academic teachers which was satisfactory/medium according to 30.4% of respondents, low according to 21.7% of respondents and very low in the opinion of 4.3% of respondents.

The assessment quality, as in the studies of Karadaga et al. (2021), was affected by the level of adaptation to the new educational situation and quality of assistance offered by the academic teachers and university.

The respondents assessed classes conducted in the remote form as well as the inability to complete professional trainings abroad as highly tedious (95.7%).

In the opinion of the respondents, a significant factor in adaptation was stress caused by fear for the health of their own and their relatives, the sense of continuous threat. The need for providing psychological care to the students was found to be a priority (47.7%), with 30.4% of students admitting they would use it if it was

free and offered 24 hours a day. The results comply with those obtained by Ruichen Jiang (2020) or Bao et al. (2020), Mazza et al. (2020).

An important factor co-decisive in terms of the students' activity and their positive adaptation was the possibility and quality of contact with academic teachers (cf. Karadag et al., 2021).

The assessment of the quality of interpersonal contacts by the respondents is satisfactory (65.4% found it good, 21.7% very good and 13% did not present an opinion). The values of these assessments are also reflected in the overall evaluation of distance learning.

The respondents indicated that the level of education during the pandemic does not differ from the level offered before it (43.5%) or is only slightly lower (21.7%), definitely lower (8.7%), with 13% of respondents indicating that it is definitely higher and 13.1% giving no answer. The span of such diversified opinions may be interpreted individually, but Flores et al. believe that positive adaptation correlates highly with the possibility and high assessment of the quality of the student-teacher contact. Conversely, negative correlations were related to the lack of support from teachers. This discovery emphasises the key role of teachers in the process of adaptation to online teaching and learning (Flores et al., 2021).

There is no doubt, therefore, that universities were forced to organise a new learning environment in a virtual space using contemporary technologies. However, their assessment provides another argument not only for their maintenance, in a certain form, obviously, but also an indication of dominant solutions. A vast majority of the responding students (73.9%) participated in the classes via the "Zoom" messenger, and 13% of respondents via MS Teams. On the other hand, only a few students pointed to the diversified approach of academic teachers as to selection of the messenger used during remote classes, and even to combining those. One cannot, however, ignore the opinion of the researchers dealing with this issue as online education in the times of crisis, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, has generated certain and tested technical and digital solutions (Zawacki-Richter, 2020). Therefore, if we assume that choice of the right messenger will streamline and, to a certain extent, facilitate holding online classes, it can be concluded that students should no problems with online classes (subjects) held using them. Unfortunately, analysis of the students' responses shows that they found practical classes (52.6%) most problematic in terms of conducting them with distance learning methods and techniques.

Students who had previous experience with online teaching and learning scored higher in all elements related to positive adjustment. In particular, they did well

with online teaching and learning, we motivated and satisfied, i.e. they felt comfortable with online teaching and learning (Flores, et al., 2021).

Suspension of stationary classes due to the pandemic and transition to distance learning by many universities provided an opportunity to obtain research material with regard to evaluation of this form of classes. This subject matter indicates a number of areas where the COVID-19 pandemic left a series of challenges, including but not limited to the transition from stationary education to online courses, as emphasised by Rudenko et al. (2020). In their opinion, this solution allowed the teachers to try new teaching strategies with use of digital technologies. Despite this well-though approach, there were problems with holding online classes, and the major ones according to the authors include: high diversity of educational platforms and online learning applications, difficulties with adjustment of courses to the fully online environment and increasing the students' engagement (Rudenko et. al., 2020).

Today, we can say that the pandemic has forced the creation of a decidedly non-traditional educational offer for students. However, the high quality of these classes provides an opportunity to apply them in the future with the necessary changes signalled by the academic community.

A co-decisive factor determining the process of students' adaptation were the difficulties experienced by them during online classes. According to the students, these included:

- difficulties with dealing with current affairs,
- problems with attention span during online classes,
- undesirable somatic symptoms (spinal pain, worsened quality of vision, etc.) and mental symptoms (continuous tiredness and weariness),
- technical problems connected with network access or lack of proper equipment,
- excessive numbers of tasks for independent execution,
- lower effectiveness of the communication process (increased disturbances and barriers in mediated communication),
- sense of instrumental treatment,
- lower level of knowledge perception.

However, it must be noted that the respondents appreciated the individual attempts taken by the academic teachers to overcome these problems. The respondents indicated also the factors that allowed them to adjust to this new form of education. Among the listed advantages of virtual education, they also pointed to the opportunity to continue education and complete it within the originally expected time limit. The studies of Danikov et al. show that there are relations

between the barriers observed in distance learning and the difficulties with its practical application, insufficient training of students, which may contribute to the dissatisfaction with this form of education and, in a certain way, compromise the process of adaptation to the new education formula (Danikov, 2020, p. 593).

The above data and self-assessment of students regarding the quality of functioning in the new education formula enabled reconstruction of adaptation models of the respondents and allowed to state that most respondents assumed the Knight and Victim adaptation mode, with much lower representation for the Top Student and Shirker models, and that they change in connection with the support provided by the teacher and university.

Closing Remarks

The distance learning formula adopted as the only possible solution in the pandemic conditions (Wargadinata et. al., 2020, pp. 141-153) ensuring continuity of education of the students resulted also in the need for adaptation of students and teachers to the new conditions of pursuit of their goals. Bearing in mind the pace and unpredictability of changes, compromised sense of security and shortages in terms of competences, its application entailed strong, extreme emotions, which affected the process of students' adaptation to the new education conditions significantly. Despite that, the respondents objectively assessed this of form of education rather positively, assigning responsibility for its results to external factors as well as their own commitment, motivation to study or possessed digital competences.

However, in the students' perception, the quality of interpersonal relations as well as method and quality of support provided to the students by the lecturer and university had a decisive impact on the effects of education and feeling of satisfaction with the studies. The pattern of adaptation chosen and adopted by the students depends largely on those factors. Despite many problems, both in terms of participation in the online classes, operation of software (messengers) and significantly higher share of independent work of the students, distance learning cannot be assessed critically. Nevertheless, regardless of this statement, one of the most common concerns is still noticeable as, according to Gruszczyńska, it is based on the assumption that remote education is, by definition, worse in terms of quality. Therefore, a closer look should be given to this statement since if it stays with us after the pandemic, it may not only affect the attitudes of the academic teachers and students but also have effect on the formal requirements set for the studies programmes (Gruszczyńska, 2020, p. 25). This does not mean, however,

that we were fully prepared to holding classes using distance learning methods and techniques. This situation caused students, adapting to the new conditions, lose their privacy, in a sense, and feel discomfort, not only in representation of their surroundings but also the level of their digital competences. This thinking may be stereotypical, but it is confirmed by the unwillingness to externalise one's image during the classes. This situation certainly gave rise to emotional problems which, when combined with the expansion of the pandemic and fear for the life of their own and their relatives, could co-determine their level of engagement and adaptation to online classes. Therefore, the ability to adapt to such extreme conditions requires psychological support, as broadly signalled by the students.

The time of the pandemic has brought radical changes in the previously followed models of academic teaching, revealed its shortages and weaknesses, but has also been an impulse for the search of new, better educational solutions and – which, in our opinion, is the most valuable aspect – has confirmed the cardinal value of education. The value of contact with another human being, value of contact of a student with their master as a meeting and dialogue of unique personalities.

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