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Teaching Social Studies Online. Insights from a Preliminary Quantitative Study in Poland in the COVID-19 Era⁴

ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 situation has made higher education institutions face the unprecedented challenge of transition into distance learning. As a result, students had to acquire some skills and knowledge remotely, including the experience of learning social research. The article presents the results of research on students' attitudes and perceptions regarding online teaching, learning, their digital skills, and the presence of subjects connected with social research in their diverse study programmes. The study was conducted to investigate how social research is taught at the university level. Using an online survey distributed in May and June 2021, data were collected from 103 students enrolled in bachelor (BA) and master (MA) studies at Polish higher education institutions. Findings from the study show a broad spectrum of students' diverse experiences connected with their participation in online education.

Keywords:

remote learning, COVID-19 pandemic, teaching social sciences, teaching and learning, social inquiry

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INTRODUCTION

Remote teaching and learning are not new phenomena in the education of students at universities (it is used as an important part of the implementation of supplementary studies, courses and training). Zbarachewicz (2020, p. 85) points out that “before the pandemic, e-learning and distance learning were used by universities as tools to support the teaching process”. However, the scale of this phenomenon became an important issue, which, due to COVID-19, extended to the majority of students and academic staff involved in knowledge acquisition and transfer during the winter and summer terms 2020/2021 (Winiarczyk et al., 2021).

Remote teaching and learning became not only a challenge that students and teachers had to face (Ferri et al., 2020; Littlejohn, 2020), but also an inspiring field of academic and cognitive inquiry (Ptaszek et al., 2020; Długosz et al., 2021). Particularly in social sciences and humanities, academics could reflect on the new situation of COVID-19 that brought in emergency online learning (Karalis & Raikou, 2020), and turn these reflections into publications. It makes an impression that the diagnosis of online education has already been done from different perspectives (academics, students) and based on diverse aspects of academic exploration.

Our article partly follows this path of research on teaching online during the pandemic, but at the same time adds a new element to the diagnosis. Namely, we focus on students’ digital skills and their research abilities, especially in the digital environment using digital sources. The rationale behind our approach is that – apart from the medical risks – the pandemic has caused severe information risk, as manifested in the discussions on its origin or the usability of vaccination. We believe that learning social inquiry as a part of social studies should make young people critical and aware of how to select and process information, and how it might be (mis)used. Social inquiry is one of those types of research that ‘lead to deeper knowledge about society and citizenship’ (Wood, 2013, p. 20). It is simultaneously research that leads to socially critical understandings of the world and prompts some form of social action. Social inquiry allows students to ask questions, collect information, investigate what lies behind ideas and events that are part of daily social life, and examine their values and viewpoints. Within these explorations, they can make sense of and understand the mechanisms of how people make decisions and participate in social action (TKI, 2007).

The study we conducted is exploratory – we wanted to get a glimpse of how social research is taught at the university level in social sciences. The article starts with a presentation of the sample, methodology, ethical issues and limitations, as we are building our argument on the data collected. Then, we elaborate on

students' attitudes to online teaching, their digital skills, and the prevalence of social research in their study programmes. The article closes with conclusions and preliminary recommendations.

SAMPLE AND METHODOLOGY

In order to investigate how students of social sciences have received online teaching, and how social research has been incorporated into their study programmes, we have developed a questionnaire and distributed it online. The questionnaire has been developed within a collaborative Erasmus+ project *Navigating Social Worlds: Toolbox for Social Inquiry* and used for a comparative study in five Central and East European countries: Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Poland, and Romania. Our article covers only the Polish sample and the results from Poland.

The sample consists of 103 students enrolled in bachelor's and master's studies at Polish higher education institutions. There are 65 females, 37 males and one person had decided not to reveal their gender. Most of the students are enrolled in bachelor's studies (60) while 39 in master's studies. What seems to be important from the data analysis perspective is that most students study at SGH Warsaw School of Economics (64). Thus, the most frequent fields of study are related to economics including: Finance and accounting (30), Qualitative methods in economy (10), Global business, finance and governance (8), and Management (7).

The questionnaire has been developed based on the previous experience of partner universities and previous measurements used for assessing research competencies (Swank & Lambie, 2016; Visser-Wijnveen et al., 2016) and translated into local languages. It covered attitudes regarding remote learning, self-evaluation of digital skills, formal and informal research classes, level of research competencies and its application. The questionnaire was active for the respondents for 2 months from May 15 to June 15, 2021. Within this timeframe, we collected 103 completed responses from the students. The method was convenience sampling. The questionnaire was translated into Polish and published on MS Forms platform. The data was generated from MS Forms and exported to Excel format. It was analysed in Excel.

ETHICS AND LIMITATIONS

In the survey questionnaire, the respondents were informed about the ethical issues and data protection related to their participation in this research. All respondents

who completed the questionnaire agreed to participate in the study. The respondents were informed that the research results in the form of aggregated data would only be used for dissemination purposes in the form of reports, academic articles and conference presentations. Participation in the study was voluntary. The respondents could omit the question they did not want to answer. They could also finish the survey at any time without any consequences. The questionnaire did not contain any sensitive or controversial questions.

The study has several limitations related to the sample and the tool. The sample is a convenient one, so by no means the results could be generalised onto the whole population. Moreover, the sample is skewed and includes more students from SGH than from other HEIs. The questionnaire was administered through social media FB groups. Therefore, it was not possible to control who filled in the questionnaire. Another limitation for the study is the research tool. The questionnaire was evaluated as a long one according to the feedback received from some of the respondents. The average time to complete it was over 15 minutes. An additional limitation was the time of the pandemic and the general fatigue of students with this type of online research. Many students did not complete the questionnaire due to the many questions addressed specifically to this target group. It should also be noted that remote education can create inequalities related to limited Internet access. We could not reach out to students who had been excluded due to lack of Internet access (poor, limited Internet connection). Although there are limitations to the study, it can be considered an exploration of how research methods are taught at Polish HEIs.

REMOTE LEARNING ACCORDING TO STUDENTS

In Poland, the experience related to distance learning for most university students began only in March 2020. Before that, a small group of Polish students had classes using the methods and techniques of distance learning, or participated in international courses conducted online. This new situation put a pressure on the teachers who had to adjust to the new reality (Romaniuk et al., 2020). It should be noted that the majority of teachers were not prepared for the transition to remote teaching including teaching methods and access to knowledge sources that could be quickly adapted to remote learning in the virtual reality of a pandemic. It was particularly hard in the first semester of remote teaching, when suddenly in March 2020 in-person classes had been suspended. The teachers had to create lecture rooms in their homes, they had to use their own hardware, digitalised teaching

resources (Jabłonowska et al., 2020) and creativity to make it up for students by delivering remote classes (Topol, 2020a; 2020b). This ‘sudden change’ presented many challenges and didactic dilemmas, which shrank the private space of the flat and showed many limitations (verbal communication) and, on the other hand, opportunities (new tools and working methods) brought by remote teaching and connection through technology (Wiederhold, 2020).

At the other end of the teaching, the students also had to adapt to this new reality and new learning reality. They also found themselves in difficult situations (Aucejo et al., 2020; Szczepańska, 2021) due to the closure of their dormitories, the loss of their jobs, the limitation of their contacts, and the space they used daily to acquire knowledge (libraries, archives, laboratories). This problematic context significantly impacted their perception of remote classes and being part of the virtual world of learning and teaching. Student perception of remote learning has been investigated as case studies of different universities in terms of their satisfaction with remote learning (Olszyńska et al., 2021), institutional readiness for digital transformation (Prokopowicz, 2020), or delivering remote classes in a specific discipline of social sciences (Pokrzycka, 2020), or humanities (Sowa-Bacia, 2020). In our study, the respondents were asked to think about the remote learning during the last academic year (2020–2021) and then rate the agreement level with statements connected with their perceptions of remote learning. The findings are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Distribution regarding the respondents’ perception of remote learning (%)

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Hard to say	Agree	Strongly agree
The study organised in this way facilitates learning	13.6	26.2	16.5	22.3	21.4
It creates a higher workload	13.6	20.4	23.3	32	10.7
It is a good solution in crisis, but training should fully return to face-to-face teaching after the end of the pandemic	11.8	16.7	13.7	32.4	25.5
It creates alienation from the study	8.7	10.7	4.9%	35.9%	39.8
It creates emotional burden	18.4	17.5	13.6	22.3	28.2
It hinders seeing the whole study	10.8	11.8	9.8	28.4	39.2

Source: generated by the authors.

The findings show that many respondents think remote learning is a good solution in a crisis, but training should fully return to face-to-face teaching after the pandemic (32.4% of respondents agree and 25.5% of respondents strongly agree). The findings also revealed that for most of the students, remote learning creates alienation from the study (35.9% of respondents agree and an additional 39.8% of respondents strongly agree) and it hinders seeing the whole study (28.4% of respondents agree and 39.2% of respondents strongly agree).

Our study confirms the findings of other studies in terms of how digital learning has been perceived, namely: that alienation is a significant challenge, especially for first-year students (Guadix et al., 2020), who had limited opportunities to meet other students, and that remote learning can be considered as a crisis response, but cannot substitute in-person teaching. At the same time, blended learning, i.e., a combination of remote and in-person teaching has been considered to be at least as efficient as a fully in-person mode (Jiang et al., 2021).

Moreover, students of the first-cycle studies evaluate remote learning more negatively than students of the second-cycle studies. While these groups do not differ in their perception of the workload and both agree that remote learning is a good solution to the crisis, the first-cycle students (BA level) consider remote learning as creating alienation and emotional burden (including a sense of loneliness due to the virtual nature of learning without integration with a group, e.g., during breaks), and making it hard to learn (see also: Długosz, 2020). The second-cycle students are more likely to combine studies with work, and already gained studying experience at the BA level. These two factors might explain this difference.

The students were asked to indicate to what extent the activities mentioned in the questionnaire (e.g., read the materials sent by the teacher) were necessary during the remote learning compared to in-person learning. The findings are shown in Table 2.

The vast majority of respondents (76.7%) reported that they were more obligated to acquire digital competencies during the remote learning than before. The findings displayed in table 5 also show that the majority of the students (72.5%) were obligated to prepare more independent assignments in the form of reports, essays, or other written work than before. In terms of in-group communication, the findings revealed that most students (43.7%) indicated that they had communicated less with other group members during the remote learning than in-person learning. It may result, on the one hand, from the limitations of the remote working tools (lack of purchased licenses for the tools), on the other hand, for example, from the teacher's inability to create rooms for group and subgroup work, or from the fear of losing control over the group in the virtual world.

Table 2. Distribution regarding the activities necessary during the remote learning in comparison to in-person learning (%)

	Less than before	Just like it was before...	More than before	Hard to say
Read the materials sent by the teacher	9.7	37.9	49.5	2.9
Look for various additional information (different from what the teacher recommended)	9.7	37.9	45.6	6.8
Prepare independent assignments in the form of reports, essays, or other written assignments	1.0	19.6	72.5%	6.9
Prepare group assignments in the form of reports, essays, or other written assignments	8.7	19.4	65.0	6.8
Acquire digital competencies	0	16.5	76.7	6.8
Prepare presentations	6.8	35.0	50.5	7.8
Develop practical work	35.9	31.1	11.6	21.4
Communicate with other group members	43.7	22.3	23.3	10.7
Contact lecturers	35.0	27.2	28.2	9.7

Source: generated by the authors.

Moreover, students were more frequently asked to prepare presentations, but were less likely to prepare practical work. As a matter of fact, two out of three students did not develop practical work more than before remote learning began. It might, therefore, indicate that students were mostly asked to search for information online and to complement the knowledge received in remote learning, but it has not been sufficiently translated into practical skills. It may have been due to closing institutions and everyday spaces and restricting access to resources, services, and people. It shifted the focus from practice to theory and understanding theory.

The type of activities carried out by students during remote learning seems to be similar across HEIs. However, students of SGH declared that they had to prepare more independent and group projects than students from other HEIs. At the same time, students from other HEIs were more often asked to prepare presentations. It seems that the activities demanded from students were similar regardless of the cycle of study. However, our data suggest that the first-cycle students were more likely to be asked to prepare independent assignments, and develop practical work compared to the second-cycle students.

DIGITAL SKILLS

To gain an in-depth understanding of the general perception and attitude towards the remote learning, respondents were asked to self-evaluate their level of digital skills. The findings are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Distribution regarding the level of digital skills self-evaluation (%)

	Strongly disagree	Rather disagree	Hard to say	Rather agree	Strongly agree
I know how to manage online files (download, save, upload)	0	0	0	16.5	83.5
I know how to use shortcut keys	0	4.9	6.8	25.2	63.1
I know how to open a new tab in my browser	0	0	0	2.9	97.1
I know how to complete online forms	0	0	0	9.7	90.3
I know how to adjust privacy settings	0	5.9	6.9	28.7	58.4
I know how to connect to a WIFI network	0	0	0	3.9	96.1
I know how to connect to an online platform (Zoom, MSTeams, Google classroom, etc.)	0	0	1.0	10.8	88.2
I can easily find the information I need on a website	0	1.0	2.9	29.1	67.0
I can easily navigate through the tools included in different online platforms (Zoom, MSTeams, Google classroom, etc.)	0	1.0	4.9	32.0	62.1
I know which information I should and shouldn't share online	0	1.0	4.9	31.1	63.1
I know when I should and shouldn't share information online	0	1.0	6.8	30.1	62.1
I am careful about my comments and behaviours while I am online	0	1.0	0	20.6	78.4
I know how to create a video	1.9	6.8	14.6	26.2	50.5
I know how to create an infographic	4.9	17.5	15.5	25.2	36.9
I know how to design a website	33.0	30.1	10.7	18.4	7.8
I feel confident putting content I have created online	6.9	15.7	27.5	33.3	16.7

Source: generated by the authors.

Respondents rated their basic digital skills quite high, especially those skills that are essential for active participation in remote teaching. Most students feel confident about finding relevant information on the web, privacy settings, or general

internet awareness. The least prevalent skills among students include advanced abilities such as creating an infographic or a website. These skills are not essential for effective remote learning, but they are very useful in everyday life in virtual reality and can bring benefits related to job search, for example, or further education opportunities.

FORMAL AND INFORMAL RESEARCH CLASS/MODULES

The respondents were asked to think about a specific research class they took during the last academic year (2020–2021) or about any specific research content/module covered in any other class in the previous academic year while studying online. Next, the respondents were asked to indicate whether they had or had not completed such a class/module in the previous academic year. Three-quarters (75%) of all respondents indicated that they had not completed any research class/module in the previous academic year. While this might be attributed to the construction of study programmes, it indicates an important feature of how social studies are taught. Namely, the programmes might not include enough content dedicated to social inquiry, or social research. That, in turn, may have translated in the early days of the pandemic into difficulties in finding and selecting the methodological sources needed to provide research-oriented knowledge.

The education system in Poland has been dominated by the Prussian-styled frontal teaching centred around delivering knowledge that students had to learn and repeat to pass the exam. Social research becomes a part of curricula only after secondary school, provided one studies social sciences and social research has been implemented into the *curriculum*. Cronbach (1986, p. 88) defined social inquiry as seeking knowledge – descriptive and historical data, concepts, propositions that can be generalizable and systematic explanations. As the title of his chapter suggests – social inquiry is for and by Earthlings. It is related to other skills necessary to better navigate the complex contemporary worlds such as problem-based learning (Coombs & Elden, 2004). It also empowers students in the classroom (Jong, 2017) and makes them more reflective towards others and their environment.

The respondents were asked to indicate the name of the class(es) they were referring to (open question). These included: Sociology (8), Social research methods and techniques (2), Qualitative research methods (2), as well as Quantitative research methods, Social research, Survey methods, Methodology of social sciences, Data analysis, Advanced statistics, Statistics, Online human resource

management, Methodology of psychological research, Media research methods, Econometric methods, Training in the diagnosis of employee potential, Methods of analysis in special economy, Methodology of linguistic research, Applied economics (each 1).

The respondents were asked to indicate what modules/content they were referring to (open question). The most frequent answers were: Social research methods (4), followed by Quantitative analysis, Qualitative analysis, Qualitative research in social sciences, Exercises in statistics, Social Sciences module, Individualism and collectivism in the academic environment, Diagnosing work, Sociology, Analysis, Advertising on social media (each 1). Later, the respondents were asked to rate the level of agreement with statements about their perceptions regarding identified class/modules. Generally, the respondents indicated that their knowledge of conducting social research increased during the identified research classes/modules completed in the previous academic year. 52% of respondents strongly agree that during the class/module their understanding of the steps of the research has increased and 32% of respondents agree with that statement. However, many respondents do not feel fully confident in using specific techniques for data analysis (e.g., specific software or computer applications). Only 12% of respondents agreed that they felt confident in using specific techniques for data analysis, and 20% strongly agreed with that.

Following, the respondents were asked if they were engaged in individual learning by attending webinars, presentations, (intensive) summer/winter schools apart from what is offered in their school curricula. The findings illustrate that most respondents (89%) did not engage in individual learning. Those who did listed the following courses: Creating online survey, Webinars on mergers and transitions, Preventing money laundering, Psychological webinar, Research in a correctional facility, Introduction to psychology, Various types of webinars related to financial reporting and auditing; Perinatal care for women. The results show that the respondents mainly participated in webinars (they became the equivalent of real meetings with guests, experts). Various answers were indicated, not necessarily consistent with the essence of the question. The respondents were asked to indicate what content the informal research class/module/lesson they attended had covered. The answers included: Creating online survey, Economic analysis of law, Preventing money laundering, Psychological webinar, Mergers and acquisitions, Introduction to psychology and Psychological content. The answers are varied and significantly coincide with the answers in the previous question.

RESEARCH COMPETENCIES

Research methods education is crucial for social studies and pedagogical content knowledge (Nind, 2019). It can be achieved through traditional means of equipping students with relevant knowledge, skills, and competencies to prepare a questionnaire or conduct an interview. However, there are also innovative ways to teach social research such as participatory action research (Guy et al., 2019), or practice research through partnerships (Yliruka et al., 2020). However, it seems that students in our study rely mostly on the traditional types of research methods.

Students feel most competent in finding relevant literature, presenting results, using appropriate reference style, constructing a rationale for a study, writing a research report, and interpreting results. They feel less competent in understanding epistemological assumptions, operationally defining variables, implementing qualitative data collection procedures, or implementing research ethics. In other words, students are keener on the technical part of research, but feel less secure when it comes to study design. In order to find out how the students implement their knowledge in practice, we asked those who had been working on their diploma thesis to answer a few questions about the methodology used to prepare it.

In the next question, the respondents were asked to indicate whether they are preparing their diploma theses. 33% of the respondents (34 students) worked on their diploma theses when participating in the study, including 10 students of SGH and 24 from other universities. The respondents were asked to indicate what methodology they had employed in their theses. Based on the collected data, it can be concluded that the survey method is the most popular among students preparing their diploma theses (18 respondents indicated this method). It also seems to be the most convenient method in the COVID-19. Students were repeatedly asked to complete questionnaires on research related to the COVID-19 theme, which the authors of this article also did. Many students relied on questionnaires distributed online to collect data for their degree papers. It is also possible to use other online research methods, yet surveys seem to be the easiest and usually demand less effort from the respondents compared to e.g., an interview.

The respondents were asked to rate their self-confidence in pursuing the methodology and felt moderately confident. Further, the respondents were asked to indicate how they had conducted the empirical research. The vast majority of respondents indicated that they had conducted their research exclusively online (21 indications). Again, administering online questionnaires seems the easiest way to collect data, and the pandemic made it even easier.

Another question in the questionnaire concerned the respondents' support from their supervisors. The supervisor's support varied with some students researching on their own, while others benefit from the supervisor's support. The size of the sample and design of the research tool make it impossible to draw any further conclusions. The respondents were asked to indicate how much support they had from their peers/colleagues. The level of support from colleagues is similar to the level of support by the supervisors. In most cases, the level of support from the colleagues was comparable to the level of support from the supervisor.

Finally, the respondents were asked to rate their level of self-confidence in social research in case they will have to carry out research on their own after graduation. The findings revealed that the respondents are not fully confident in their ability to conduct social research. Most of them consider their skills in conducting social research rather low. Unfortunately, in this case, our data do not allow us to draw any further conclusions, but this finding needs more investigation and focusing on the context of teaching social research at universities.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Based on the research results, a conclusion can be drawn that students recognise remote learning as an adequate response to the crisis caused by the pandemic and an important opportunity to continue their education in difficult, life and health-threatening conditions. With the experience of using online tools and social platforms, the students entered the world of remote education with skills and competencies they had acquired earlier. It is worth noting that most of them have grown up with the virtual world experience and been part of it already at the school level. Remote learning at the university thus became their crucial path to the world – both in terms of knowledge acquisition and communication with individuals who provide this knowledge.

At the same time, the study showed that many students did not feel comfortable in this form of remote education. The respondents reported missing contact with their peers and feeling alienated (due to lockdown, in many cases returning to the parents' home, distance, breakdown of relationships, inability to participate in entertainment and cultural offer). Importantly, the greatest number of respondents declaring these negative experiences was among first-year students and BA students. It is a group of young people who did not have the opportunity to socialise and integrate within university walls because of the pandemic. The pandemic deprived them of the traditional places and spaces of integration and direct formal

and informal communication. The results further reveal that remote learning did not contribute to the acquisition of practical skills by the students. We can conjecture that they primarily refer to internships, traineeships, visitations, study visits and implementation of research, all of which became physically impossible during the pandemic – impossible to implement in the field due to the restrictions. Moreover, workshops and practical classes, like sports or art classes, were conducted online and required different skills and tools from both lecturers and students. Even though the students were asked to search for information and do individual or group assignments more frequently, they rarely had an opportunity to develop practical skills.

Another important aspect addressed by the respondents involved digital competencies. We were able to collect important data about digital competencies of the students in this section of the study. The results show that all respondents are at a similar level of digital competencies necessary and at the same time sufficient for remote learning. In the self-assessment section of the level of digital competencies necessary for effective remote learning, the respondents generally declared to have high competencies in this area. They referred to the skill of searching for suitable information online, privacy settings or awareness of their presence on the Internet. The majority of them declared to have such competencies, particularly in areas that enabled students to actively participate in online classes and the virtual environment. Importantly, the students also declared to have less knowledge about issues connected with their presence on the Internet, relating to data protection, privacy, and the ethics of publishing various personal information about them. A smaller group of respondents had advanced skills required for creating infographics or building websites.

The first subsection of the report presents a general perception of remote learning. The results show that students believe distance learning to be a good solution in a crisis. Thanks to access to the Internet, knowledge and computer/tablet skills, based on various programs enabling online communication and knowledge acquisition, universities continued providing academic education. However, we also have to consider psychological factors, including personality factors. The majority of the respondents declared that education should be implemented face to face after the pandemic has ended. At the same time, blended learning was considered by the respondents to be at least as effective as fully in-person mode.

When asked to list the disadvantages of distance learning, most students indicated alienation from the learning and increased difficulty in understanding the entire learning. Alienation is a big challenge, especially for first-year students who have had limited opportunities to meet other students and staff face-to-face. Addi-

tionally, the results show that distance learning can be considered a crisis response but cannot replace personal learning. Studying online cannot replace social interactions connected with the daily reality of studying within university walls. These interactions allow students to acquire knowledge and have a broader experience of studying (using library resources, participating in seminars and academic conferences, cultural events and student life).

During academic classes conducted online throughout the pandemic, most students were (to a greater degree than in normal study mode) obligated to prepare more self-directed/unassisted assignments such as reports, essays or other written assignments. It required more computer workload and more time devoted to preparing these assignments. It was not easy for many students due to various other limitations, responsibilities, and housing conditions.

The students stressed that they were asked (more often than before the pandemic) to prepare presentations (search for information and present it), less so than to prepare practical tasks (practical competences in daily relations in various institutions). This situation resulted from restrictions such as lack of possibility to do practical tasks in the field. In non-pandemic conditions, these tasks would have been done with experts who could show and explain how to implement various activities in practice, how to use certain tools, etc.

The study did not show significant differences regarding assignments for students given by lecturers. They were similar regardless of the cycle of studies. However, BA students stressed more often that they were asked to prepare self-directed/unassisted assignments and practical tasks for the classes compared to MA students. As far as group communication is concerned, most replies suggested that the students communicated less with other group members in remote learning compared to studying in non-pandemic conditions (within the university walls). Regarding the section on formal research classes/modules conducted online during the pandemic, the results indicate that the majority of the respondents did not complete any such modules during the academic year. Students at the SGH Warsaw School of Economics reported an absence of research classes implemented online more frequently than other students in the previous academic year. As we stressed before, it could result from pandemic-related restrictions and a lack of possibility to practice and then implement research activities in the field.

Regarding the respondents' research competencies, the students are keener on the technical and theoretical part of research but feel less secure when studying design, implementation of qualitative data collection procedures, or implementation of research ethics. BA students feel less competent at research skills than MA students, particularly in research design and data interpretation. The data indi-

cates that the respondents' research competencies are not complete, and that the students do not feel comfortable and safe when it comes to conducting research. This important issue is worth exploring in the future to examine what the students' research competencies look like now (connected both with field research and online research).

Furthermore, the study shows how social research methodology is used in diploma theses of the respondents. Students indicated what methods were used in their papers. Survey method (defined as a comfortable method in the era of COVID-19) dominated among replies. It is worth mentioning that this method (without a larger additional workload) enabled the students to conduct online research in similar conditions to a non-pandemic reality (of course, we must bear in mind ethical issues and issues connected with the respondents' online safety).

The respondents mostly indicated their confidence in researching at level 4 on a 5-level scale. It reveals that they are confident in the area they were trained in. However, conducting research in the era of the pandemic was another matter. The respondents reported to have conducted the majority of empirical research online. In this sense, the pandemic contributed to the popularisation of empirical research conducted on the Internet. It is also a subject worth exploring in the future in terms of training students to conduct such research and tools used to conduct online research ethically.

After analysing the respondents' replies concerning their confidence in conducting social research after graduation, we conclude that they are not completely confident about their competencies in this area. The majority of them declared low competencies in conducting post-graduate social research. This perception can result from several factors, one certainly being the restrictions in conducting research caused by the pandemic. However, we also have to bear in mind the form and character of methodology classes (theoretical, practical, mixed) in which students participate.

As for the supervisors' support in methodology classes and research activities, the respondents indicated a diversified level of support. Some students conducted their research on their own, others benefited from their supervisors' support. Additionally, they indicated support from their classmates. However, the level of support from classmates is similar to the level of support from supervisors (in most cases the level of support was comparable).

The study reveals a broad spectrum of diverse experiences of students connected with their participation in online education and experiences connected with training to conduct research in the course of their studies. As we attempted to

show, our study can initiate further exploration concerning teaching and learning social studies online at higher education institutions in Poland.

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