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SOME CHALLENGES UPON HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE AUTUMN 2020

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Abstract: The paper reveals higher education in COVID – 19 limited environment. The article exposes the opinion of students from the University of Ruse with regards to distance learning. Qualitative research methods are employed to capture students' opinion. They are summarized into four groups, i.e.: 1.) what students associate distance learning with; 2) what are the pros and cons of distance learning; 3) how they envision proper lecture and seminar/lab. in distant environment; 4) what is their overall attitude towards COVID – 19 restrictions.

Keywords: Higher education, distance learning, COVID - 19
JEL Codes: L20, L21

INTRODUCTION

When it comes to year 2020, inevitably main public topic is so cold SARS-CoV-2 virus. This is the official name of the virus responsible for COVID – 19 disease (World Health Organization official web page). When it comes to 2020 autumn, it is referred to the second wave of Covid spread out after the "Covid spring". The Coronadisease changed the normal course of life. More or less, in many areas things gradually return to accustomed parameters. However, this is not the case with higher education. Confusion and uncertainty rules there. Along the Globe academy classrooms remain empty, scientific laboratories and their assignments are reduced to minimum. Students study and pass exams online via various digital platforms during that fall semester. The situation poses lots of challenges upon academia.

Objective of this study is to outline some specific features of higher education in COVID – 19 limitation environment, i.e. – online education. More specifically, to frame the situation with universities in United States of America and Europe, in Bulgaria, and in the University of Ruse, with respect to online learning. Qualitative techniques are employed.

EXPOSITION

The main components

1) Educational model

Universities were forced to respond to a safe environment pressure with a rapid solution for distance learning. Since the pandemic end is not clear, higher education is being transformed into a hybrid model that combines in different proportions online learning and more active live face to face interacting between teachers and students. Consequently, going online quickly is away from perfection, since effective online learning requires time and resources. Its forced widespread implementation rather decline in quality of educational process. (Dimitrov, 2020) Survey conducted with students from United States and United Kingdom over the past two months confirms these concerns. Vast majority of the respondents declare that learning through digital platforms has deteriorated. Thus, the pandemic outcomes make changes in the educational strategy of the students. According to Inside Higher Ed, 20% of current students are willing to skip next year and wait for a more favorable situation. (Zeltzer, 2020)

There is a significant decline in student enrollment due to epidemic insecurity and severe reduction in global mobility. It leads to other two main components: a) enrollment and b) financial situation. (Fig.1)

Fig. 1. Three components of higher education in pandemic environment

2) Enrolment

A large international survey in April among nearly 15,000 young people all over the Globe interested in studying abroad presents that almost two-thirds of them were considering postponing their intentions for a year, and 11% had already made that decision. (QS Quacquarelli Symonds official web page) This outflow is also explained by unwillingness to go for online education mainly and the worries about its competitiveness. Potential students do not want to pay thousands of euros for fees, but to turn out that their diplomas are not valued by employers. This challenges universities, especially smaller ones, with a survival problem. The good news is that 90% of respondents intend to study next year. However, those universities heavily dependent on abroad intake should act quite flexible, to be able to attract them for the next academic year.

3) Financial situation

Universities cannot afford to keep current fees in case that major part of education sustain to be delivered online. People just won't want to pay the same amount of money if their children sit in front of the computer at home all the time (Dimitrov, 2020). Therefore, universities look for solutions to maintain the level of current fees. The most common scenario is to make an effort to return students at least partially to the classrooms. Up till now, the reaction of some of the larger universities, i.e. Stanford is that fees will not be reduced even if all the teaching takes place online.

The above mentioned components are closely connected. The choice of the educational model, more specifically the ratio between online and face to face classes seems to predetermine to some extend the choice for enrolment of potential students. The expected shortage of future students puts pressure over university finances. Thus, choice of educational model seems to be rather tactical than reactive decision.

Current situation

Educational model abroad

The transition to distance learning entirely is shocking even for universities with experience in incorporating digital platforms i.e. those in USA and UK. It is uncommon practice for academia to upload all necessary content online to equip learning process properly. What is more, the current crisis promotes distance learning. However, it will be a challenge after the end of the pandemic: "Students have tasted distance education and they wonder what makes the university so special. If there is no answer to that question, students would not come back" Sarma S. (2018). Universities have to define and promote what special educational service they offer to students that is not available online.

According to Sarma, teaching via Zoom is not an effective model. One-way education is considered an outdated concept. He is in favor of video lecturing in combination with other forms of collaboration with students both live and online. What is more, students says "even when we're all in a video lecture together, it feels like you're working alone with the computer". A lack of social element is the main reason for student dissatisfaction. When they study entirely online, they do not have an opportunity to learn from each other. Even when students have all the required materials, they feels like obtaining only 10% of the traditional teaching. (Dimitrov, 2020)
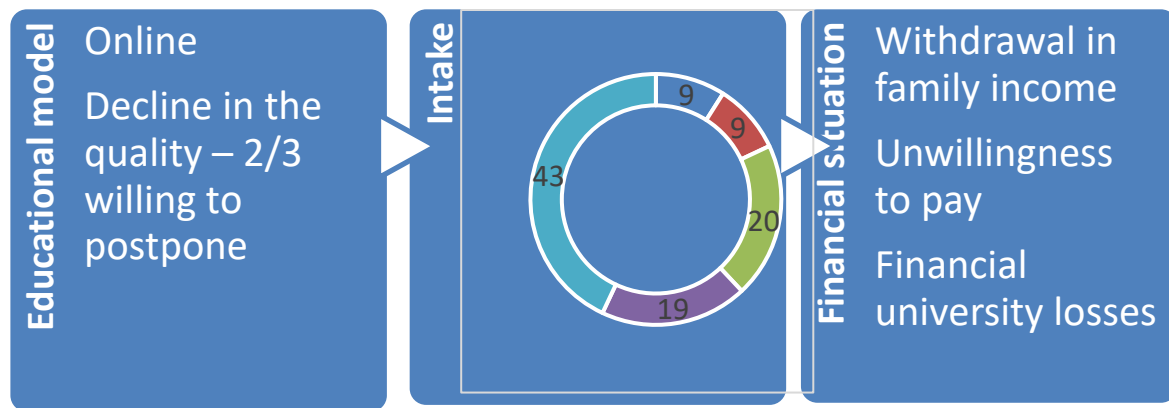
Educational model
Online
Decline in the quality – 2/3 willing to postpone

Intake
43
9
9
20
19

Financial situation
Withdrawal in family income
Unwillingness to pay
Financial university losses

Fig. 2. Summary of the current situation in the three components of higher education in pandemic environment

Financial effects

The training during the autumn semester is carried out virtually regardless of whether the universities have planned it or decided in response to the situation. There are cases of combination of classroom and online classes, which raises a question of costs to ensure health safety.

Another area of concern is student's dissatisfaction with online experience. Students from different universities share that they have been disappointed with distance learning. Some even took the universities they are enrolled in to court to get their fees back, because the offered service is not at the promised level.

Next concern is related to rapid reduction in international students. The pro-western higher education model has built on internationalization for decades. Reduced global mobility and the pandemic uncertainty put negative impact on the financial stability of higher education. All experts' forecasts predict a severe decline in the number of foreign students in the next academic year. According to a Fitch Ratings, American universities could lose up to 20% of incoming international students next academic year. International students pay full fees with no financial aid, opposed to other students. The "big guys" are already above line, for example Harvard expects a 715 million drop for the current academic year. For the same reason, British higher education will suffer losses of about $ 3 billion. More importantly, having foreign students is the only one winning activity for British universities.

The response of universities in this stagnation is to freeze new hiring and to reduce the salaries of senior executives to levels range in 10% to 25%.

A probable scenario in the situation is to widen the gap between research giants such as Oxford, Cambridge and the Ivy League universities and everyone else. Money for research will not decrease, they could even increase due to government procurement to solve public problems imposed by the crisis. Thus, the giants could keep much of their finances.

Student reaction

A British Universities Council survey shows that more than two-third of future students would like to postpone the start of the academic year to ensure a bigger share of traditional education. (Dimitrov, 2020) The QS Quacquarelli Symonds conducted survey with 15000 high school graduate respondents who were asked "to what extent you are interested in university online education due to Coronavirus?" The vast majority declared to be against online education, i.e. 42% not at all, 19% weak, 20% somewhat interested, 9% quite interested, 9% extremely interested (Fig.2, second block) (QS Quacquarelli Symonds official web page). The result is overall drop in freshmen next academic year, i.e. 1845 average drop in British universities, according London Economics.

A lack of social element is the main reason for student disapproval. Students want to be

independent on campus, rather in home. What is more, they believe they gain only 10% of the value form university experience due to online learning.

Another main concern for many students is that financial difficulties will have a negative impact on the quality of education. In response, academic administrations declare this will not happen, but the measures they rely on are cutting expense of management salaries and new recruits, which is inconsistent in a long run.

Bulgarian situation

The number of Bulgarian students who study abroad is over 20 000 counted from year of 2016 According to Ministry of Education and Science. (Dimitrov, 2020) At thousand students average have been enrolled in foreign universities for the last two years.

Restrictions affect negatively candidates who are interested in enrolling abroad. University fairs and presentations are canceled and budgets cut. However, these face to face presentations have been an important factor for many students. According to Emily Allen, candidates who are admitted in famous universities abroad are willing to enroll despite restrictive situation. The Coronavirus worries students who are admitted to less-known universities. (Dimitrov, 2020)

A common feature of our society is medium to high uncertainty avoidance. Thus, crises like this could influence the scope of potential university options. Students would be more likely to enroll university in the country, located closely to their home place. According to Emily Allen, students who are admitted in more than one western university apply to a university in Bulgaria as well, as an insurance against uncertainty. What is more, from rational perspective, the economic situation is tight, the educational model is a hybrid one, thus students could reduce their costs staying home when online.

In terms of educational market, higher education is not that diploma competitive, which is a prerequisite for less damage compared to western societies. Bulgarian universities is not heavily dependent on international students, which does not oppose financial shock.

Regarding educational model, the universities in Bulgaria were forced to introduce distance learning as well. This is uncommon task for our educational system. Survey among 1,187 students at University of Sofia "St. Kliment Ohridski" during the first wave of emergency shows that 1/3 of them have switched all their subjects online, and 41% - online for at least half of their classes. The lessons have been carried out synchronously with audio and video connection. Prof. Atanas Gerdjikov defines the shift online as a great success due to the realization of 60-80% of the classes via synchronous connection. According to students, going online has had mixed success. Some teachers adapted quickly, others did not (Dimitrov, 2020).

Regarding the financial picture, any reduction in fees is not expected. "E-learning is not cheaper than face to face due to the fact that teachers allocate more efforts and time to prepare online courses, tests, etc. Another argument in favor of keeping current taxes is the need for investments in equipment, infrastructure and software. Therefore, probably taxes will remain unchanged.

One consequence with respect to next year freshmen is that Covid temporary change application model, instead of an entrance exam, respectively gathering of people, the results of the matriculation exams will be employed.

Challenges

The changes affect most strongly students studying abroad and those planning so. For those who have chosen domestic universities the uncertainty is not that severe. In both cases candidates have to make a decision on how to continue or start their higher education in the new situation. Many factors affect this decision.
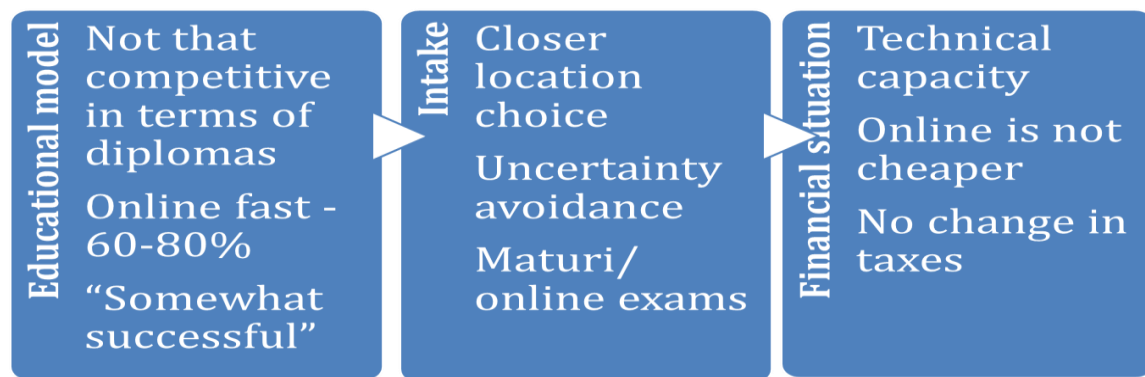
Fig. 3. Summary of the current situation in the three components of higher education in pandemic environment in Bulgaria

Universities concern about the outflow of potential students due to the lack of a social interaction in learning process. Many students who apply aim common university experience. They don't want to be at home, rather want to be independent (Dimitrov, 2020).

University management is facing situation of shrinking finances due to decline in potential students, especially lucrative, international ones. To compensate, management is cutting the salaries of senior employees.

There are areas of study that cannot be studied online i.e. medicine, engineering, etc. Physical presence there cannot be replaced by digital. Probably these students will be the first who will go back to classroom.

University of Ruse

In order to capture students attitudes towards online learning in the University of Ruse "Angel Kanchev" a qualitative research have been employed among students Faculty of Business and Management. The arguments in favor of qualitative techniques is that they provide debt of understanding which lags in quantitative ones. Respondents are able to freely disclose their experiences, thoughts and feelings without constraint. Qualitative methods offer a dynamic approach to research, where the researcher has an opportunity to follow up on answers given by respondents in real time. (Molhov, et all 2004). The techniques employed are structured interview and focus groups. The research has taken place in the University of Ruse and online, during the first half on October 2020. Forty students have taken part in the survey. They form a pool from the following majors: Business and management, Public administration, European and global studies. The overall objective of the research is to study the students' attitudes towards online education and the Covid restrictions. The following questions have been discussed: 1) what they associate online learning with; 2) what are the pros and cons of distance learning; 3) how they describe proper lecture and seminar/lab. in distant environment; 4) what is their overall attitude towards COVID – 19 restrictions. This study has limitation as follows, a) it captures the "picture of the moment" in a rapidly changing environment; b) it depicts situation in a particular area of study and one faculty; 3) the respondent represent 2nd, 3th and 4th year students, thus freshmen are uncaptured.

The answers of the respondents are as follows:
1) The first question: "Opportunities, consultation, school break due to the force major outbreak, holiday, restriction, unfear grades, waste of time, letting loose";
2) Pros and cons of online learning:

Table 1. Pros and Cons of online learning

Pros +	Cons -
Comfort "I can work and study at the same time", "I am in pajamas in bed", „I can easily do my chores" "Optimizing breaks and gaps in the timetable"	**Ineffective communication** "Common communication takes much longer" "Everyone apply his/her right to non reply to a question, either via email, or in online classroom"
Flexibility "I can combine studying with something else i.e. to practice MA in another city" "I can take care of my baby and to attend lectures"	**Technical difficulties** "Error 404" – log in problems Diversity of platforms in hand Google availability Lack of technical equipment – "I use my phone while my son occupies the laptop" Lack of online culture and formal training
Resource availability Available course resources – "There is access to all materials in any course content", "More time to do active forms - assignments"	**Lack of social element** "I would rather interact much more with the instructor" "I prefer face to face interaction, body language help me to understand more" „I have more examples and detailed explanations sitting in class. It helps me to understand better"
Responsibility "I realized, I am the owner of my study. Thing go well, if I put efforts." "If we make an agreement, we need to keep it, otherwise nothing good happened"	**Decrease in the involvement** "Mechanical appearance" "Social laziness – one or two respond actively" "Lack of feedback" Unfair grading

3) Features of proper lecture and lab:

Table 2. Features of proper lecture and lab

Lecture	Lab.
More visualization "video lecture, movie, illustrative examples"	More action "to challenge us, to provoke us to think" "Games" "Active interaction with students in small groups" "team tasks"
Delivery "preliminary readings, no more that 5-7 pages" "short summary" "Question and answer session"	**Delivery** "Q and A sessions"

4) Overall attitudes towards Covid restrictions are: "absolutely necessary", "too restrictive", "exaggerated", "too much fuzz in the media, creating too much stress". However, no matter if we believe in Covid or not, there are rules and we are supposed to stich to them.

5) Practical implications, revealed during the survey
– Students would rather have some kind of control on communication process;

– students prefer to do preliminary summary reading;

– Majority of them are in favor of classical way of learning, in the classroom. However, there is a chunk of students who work and study simultaneously. Thus, they prefer online form.

CONCLUSION

University administrations have focused their efforts on finding a model to bring students back into classrooms without exposing them to the risk of infection, to attract candidates for the new academic year, and to provide funding for its normal course.

The crisis has put universities in a position to look for new ways to justify their prestige, necessity and fees in a difficult financial situation. They responded with online solutions, but overemphasis on digital tools also risks losing many students.

Oppose to western environment the situation in Bulgaria is not that severe. However, there are similarities in terms of pressure to go online and pros and cons of that decision.

Qualitative survey with students from Faculty of Business and management, University of Ruse reveals their attitude towards Corona disease and online learning. Overall, they are more in favour of class experience.

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