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The University's Social Responsibility During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Case Study

Abstract

Objectives: The Law on Higher Education and Science as well as the Universities' Declaration of Social Responsibility promotes the application of the principles of social responsibility in all areas of universities' activity. These rules are of particular importance during the pandemic, when the crucial fields of universities' functions are at risk. The article aims at evaluating the actions that the Humanitas University in Sosnowiec has taken during the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. The adaptation of these activities to the COVID-19 crisis determines the ability to adjust to the challenges of the environment in which the University operates. In the longer term, it also contributes to how the stakeholders assess the extent to which the University implements the idea of social responsibility.

Research Design & Methods: This article applies a case-study method. It covers the analysis and synthesis of the activities undertaken by the Humanitas University in Sosnowiec within the researched period. Collecting information employed the analysis of the University's website, document analysis, survey, in-depth interviews, and participatory observation.

Findings: The conducted analyses revealed that the COVID-19 pandemic and the resultant limitations made it possible to develop new forms of crisis management at the University. Internal and external stakeholders have adapted to this new organisational situation. The inclusion of social responsibility rules into the functioning of the University enabled it to preserve its values in both internal and external relations.

Implications / Recommendations: The University has implemented the developed recommendations. This allowed the University to proceed with teaching and maintain actions directed to its socio-economic environment, all of which happened with the use of the University's social responsibility principles. Thus, these solutions can serve as a model for other universities facing disruptions deriving from crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Contribution / Value Added: Our research outcomes contribute to the development of management-related knowledge on how to deal with a crisis in higher education. We identify a significant source of the added value in the considerations on how the implementation of social responsibility rules might protect a university against the unexpected and sudden distortions in its global environment.

Keywords: Universities' Declaration of Social Responsibility, social responsibility, stakeholders, COVID-19 pandemic

Article classification: research article

JEL classification: M14; I21

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Introduction

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization announced the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic due to the extensive spread, pace, and the long contagious period of the virus. The pandemic has caused an unprecedented crisis around the world and affected all areas of social, economic, and natural life. Education is one of the areas that have been hit hard by the spread of the pandemic. The introduction of strict sanitary restrictions and social isolation orders have forced all entities operating in the education field to work in a different model, and to suddenly switch to digital education. The decision to physically close educational institutions and suspend full-time classes has generated the issue of securing the possibility of continuing the processes of learning and teaching. The main problems include ensuring equal opportunities for accessing good-quality distance education, supporting pupils/students and teachers in the acquisition or improvement of digital competences, as well as defining the principles of the fair assessment of educational progress, the implementation of educational mobility, and the enrolment of applicants. These problems have affected the education systems all over the world. Moreover, higher education institutions affected by the COVID-19 crisis have been impacted by the pandemic in all of their activities, i.e. in terms of financial stability, institution management processes, cooperation with the external environment, and student mobility (Bao, 2020; Klimowicz, 2020; Marinoni et al., 2020; Oboh et al., 2020; International Association of Universities, 2020; Smalley, 2020; Witze, 2020). These issues have also become the subject of analyses of the situation of individual higher education institutions, which is documented by the research into forty Coimbra Group universities (Coimbra Group Report, 2020). The scale of challenges related to counteracting the crisis in education was also discussed by education ministers from within the European Union (EU). The conclusions (European Union, 2020) developed by the Council of the EU indicate the need to take account of a wide spectrum of threats resulting from the new situation in the process of planning further education. The UE Council also stresses the need to introduce innovative solutions and share all the good practices developed during the pandemic. The focus on education and training has been considered crucial, as the quality of human capital will determine the effective implementation of the Recovery Plan for Europe.

In Poland, in response to the declaration of the pandemic, the Minister of Health issued a regulation (Rozporządzenie, March 13, 2020) introducing 'the state of the threat of an epidemic', and then 'the state of the epidemic' itself (Rozporządzenie, March 20, 2020). In the higher education field, the Minister of Science and Higher Education, with the aim of preventing, counteracting, and combating COVID-19, decided to temporarily limit the functioning of universities, initially suspending studies for two weeks (12–25 March), with the simultaneous implementation of classes using distance-learning methods and techniques (Rozporządzenie, March 11, 2020). In view of the increasing threat to health and life caused by the virus, the Minister of Science and Higher Education extended the period of suspension of classes at universities several times, recommending teaching with the use of distance-learning methods and techniques. A partial restoration of university activity after 26th May was supported by the preparation of a programme document entitled "Environmental guidelines in connection with the partial restoration of university activity" (Ministry of Science and Higher Education, 2020).

The physical closure of universities was a huge challenge for the decision-makers managing them. It became necessary to introduce new management practices, including: changing the work mode of employees, providing access to library collections, laboratories and studios, and intensifying the use of various tools by lecturers and students alike in order to facilitate distance learning. The sudden shift from teaching and learning based on personal contact to distance learning was in many

cases an emergency, and a number of universities were not fully prepared to implement common digital forms of education.

In this crisis situation, universities had to redefine their role in relation to educational activities as well as define the scope of activities in relation to the surrounding environment. The Humanitas University in Sosnowiec also faced these challenges.

The purpose of this article is to analyse the actions taken by the Humanitas University during the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. As a signatory of the University's Social Responsibility Declaration, the university is obliged to comply with the principles contained therein. These principles are of particular importance during the pandemic, when the principal areas of the university's operation are at risk. The basic issue was to determine how in a crisis situation the university carries out its chief educational and scientific tasks, as well as how it creates mutual relations with the social and economic environment in accordance with the idea of the university's social responsibility.

The character of this study is explanatory. Quantitative and qualitative research methods were used. Owing to the use of multiple sources, the adopted triangulation approach enabled the analysis of the problem from different perspectives (Stańczyk, 2013).

The university's social responsibility

The university's social responsibility is derived from the concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR). In 1953, Howard R. Bowen, considered to be the father of corporate social responsibility, stated (2013) that it was desirable for businessmen to act and conduct politics, which is necessary in terms of the objectives and values of society. The CSR concept had evolved to adapt to different types of organisations and it increasingly highlighted the need to develop civic values and responsibility.

As emphasised by Anna Witek-Crabb (2016), nowadays the concept of CSR is part of the broader trend of sustainable development, which involves conducting business activity that combines economic, social, and environmental goals, and, at the same time, minimises the negative impact of the organisation on the environment. There is a growing conviction that social responsibility applies not only to companies, but also to all organisations that have begun to realise that they are responsible for sustainable development, too. The ISO 26000 Guidance on Social responsibility standard, developed by the International Organization for Standardization and published on November 1, 2010, defines social responsibility as:

> [T]he responsibility of an organisation for the impact of its decisions and activities on society and the environment, through transparent and ethical behaviour that:
> – contributes to sustainable development, including health and well-being in society;
> – takes into account the expectations of stakeholders (persons and groups that are interested in the decisions and actions of the organisation);
> – complies with applicable law and is consistent with international norms of behaviour; and
> – is integrated throughout the organisation and practised in its relationships, which relate to the organisation's activities undertaken within its sphere of influence. (ISO 26000)

The guidance defines the key areas of social responsibility, including: organisational governance, human rights, work practices, environment, fair operating practices, consumer issues, social commitment, and community development.

By conducting teaching and research activities, universities increase social responsibility, which is more and more frequently perceived in both the academic environment and the general environment in broad terms (Ramos-Monge et al. 2017; Vasilescua et al., 2010). The definition of the university's social responsibility (USR), developed by Juan Reiser (2008), specifies it as:

> a policy of ethical quality of the performance of the university community (students, faculty and administrative employees) via the responsible management of the educational, cognitive, labour and environmental impacts produced

by the university, in an interactive dialogue with society to promote a sustainable human development. (p. 4178)

Referring to the principles of CSR, in 2017 the academic community in Poland developed the Universities' Declaration of Social Responsibility (Ministry of Development Funds and Regional Policy, 2017). The document consists of 12 principles and is a voluntary commitment of universities to promoting the idea of sustainable development and social responsibility in their educational programmes and research, as well as in the universities' management and organisational solutions. The declaration defines a university's social responsibility as:

> a strategic and systemic approach to university management as well as building cooperation and dialogue with stakeholders, which contributes to:
> • sustainable development;
> • shaping the values and attitudes of civil society;
> • supporting academic values and creating new ideas;
> • maintaining and developing scientific and didactic competences influencing the efficiency of operations and innovation. (Kulczycka & Pędziwiatr, 2017, p. 9)

The declaration's principles oblige its signatories to take into account and apply the principles of social responsibility in all areas of activity, and to disseminate these principles among stakeholders. According to the Declaration, socially-responsible universities implement the educational and scientific mission, strengthen the university's organisational and managerial capabilities, and build relations with internal and external stakeholders of the university based on ethical values and standards.

The importance of universities' social responsibility is included in the Act on Higher Education and Science. Article 3(2) of the Act emphasises that "The system of higher education and science operates in accordance with international standards, ethical principles and good practices in the field of education and scientific activity, and taking into account the special importance of the social responsibility of science" (Prawo, 2018).

The Humanitas University signed the Universities' Declaration of Social Responsibility in 2017 and has been implementing the principles contained therein since then.

Material and methods

The research subject was the activities related to the implementation of the idea of social responsibility introduced by the Humanitas University in Sosnowiec after the Ministry of Science and Higher Education had announced the pandemic and limited the ways in which the education based on the student-lecturer personal contact could be carried out. The research was conducted in the period from March to July 2020, i.e. from the announcement of the epidemic state to the end of the summer semester that same year.

The applied research methodology was case study based on the analysis and synthesis of activities undertaken by the Humanitas University during that period. The initial stage of the research was literature review as well as a study of non-scientific sources (e.g. good-practice reports), which, due to the dynamically developing situation, had become an important source of knowledge as regards SARS-CoV threats.

This made it possible to identify the level of knowledge, develop the assumptions for the work, and prepare instructions for interviews as well as a research scenario. The availability of scientific publications related to the research subject was verified many times, including during the empirical research and the final work on the publication. That has significantly influenced the final form of this article. In the process of collecting information, we used the following: in-depth interviews with representatives of university authorities and management staff, the Website analysis, the analysis of documentation related to activities deemed to be good practices, online surveys among students and employees, and participant observation.

As we – the authors – have managerial functions, we had started conducting participant observation in the studied entity before we began working

on this article, and continued this in the period covered by the analysis, i.e. after the announcement of the epidemic.

The analysis of good practices (GP) was based on questionnaires. As indicated in the survey, each reported practice has to include a definition of the area in which it was implemented (education, scientific activities, psychological support, material assistance, information and communication activities, volunteering), a detailed description of the practice, as well as an indication of who it was addressed to, what results were obtained, and to what extent the good practice was in line with the goals of sustainable development.[1] The survey among academic teachers (87 people) and students (405 people) was conducted with the aim of obtaining information, assessments, and suggestions connected with distance learning, indicating the positive and negative aspects of such teaching method and assessing the possibility of continuing distance learning in the future.

Characteristics of the Humanitas University in Sosnowiec

The Humanitas University has been operating in the educational market for 23 years and is one of the best non-public universities in the Silesian Province. The Humanitas University (WSH) is a self-financing and operating on a non-profit basis university which educates in the following fields of study: administration (first- and second-cycle studies), occupational health and safety (first- and second-cycle studies), national security (first-cycle studies), radiation therapy (first- and second-cycle studies), English philology (first- and second-cycle studies), pedagogy (first- and second-cycle studies), law (long-cycle Master's programme), psychology (long-cycle Master's programme), and management (first- and second-cycle studies). In

addition, the university organises courses in nearly 30 fields within postgraduate studies. In 2020, the Humanitas University in Sosnowiec obtained the right to confer the academic degree of PhD in law. The staff of the Humanitas University in Sosnowiec includes more than 400 academic staff members. It already has over 25,000 graduates. In accordance with the idea of the university's social responsibility, the tasks carried out at the university go beyond the traditional sphere of providing educational services, conducting scientific research, and developing science. In its activities, the university creates mutual relations with the social and economic environment, striving to transfer knowledge and constituting the basis for the development of social[2] and economic[3] innovations, as well as it creates conditions conducive to the process of lifelong learning. An important aspect of the university's functioning is the introduction of effective management solutions and the creation of a proactive organisational culture focused on changes. The university follows the principles of ethics and implements the principles of sustainable development. Therefore, social responsibility has been included in the vision and mission of the Humanitas University.

The university constantly monitors the implementation of the obligations arising from the Universities' Declaration of Social Responsibility through the analysis of good practices which are reported by all administration departments and institutes operating at the university. Every year, higher education institutions submit their good practices to the Working Group, and the four most interesting practices of each of them are

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[1] The survey research on good practices was developed by the University's Social Responsibility Working Group, operating within the Sustainable Development and Corporate Social Responsibility Team, which is an auxiliary body of the Minister of Development Funds and Regional Policy.

[2] "Social innovations are new ideas (products, services, models) that meet social needs more effectively and at the same time create new cooperation relations. Thus, these innovations are beneficial for society and increase the ability to act" (Jędrych & Sczepańczyk, 2017).

[3] "In the field of the economy, innovation is the development and implementation of new concepts and technologies that improve the quality of goods and services or increase production efficiency" (European Central Bank, 2017).

included in the University's Social Responsibility Good Practices Catalogue, which is available on the Website of the Ministry of Development Funds and Regional Policy. The catalogue, developed in 2020, contains a description of initiatives undertaken by universities in connection with the pandemic, including good practices reported by the Humanitas University (see: Ministry of Development Funds and Regional Policy, 2019).

In the education field, the university has created a modern, socially useful education offer, adapting it to the new challenges of innovative economy, while the study programmes take into account the obligations arising from the declaration. Studies are the basic element of the educational offer of every university. Currently, the Humanitas University offers ten fields of study, including eight second-cycle courses and twenty-one specialities. Moreover, the university has the right to confer doctoral degrees in the discipline of law. For many years, it has been implementing EU projects supporting the development of higher education. For example, over 500 students have already benefited from projects increasing their competences, such as 'Innovative Education at the Humanitas University', 'English Philology, Specialisation in International Business Language', 'Human Resource Management on the International Market: Studies in English and Russian', and 'Pre-school and Early Childhood Education' (GP9). The university initiates extra-curricular forms of education, owing to which students expand their knowledge, skills, and competences with the use of practical aspects related to the field of study. One example can be the simulation of a courtroom, where law students, under the substantive supervision of lecturers of the Institute of Legal Sciences, learn to put into practice the theoretical knowledge previously gained during their studies (GP15).

Taking advantage of the presence and knowledge of academic teachers, the university has launched the Academic Law Clinic, which provides free legal assistance to students, academic teachers, and administrative staff in terms of problems related to

the implementation of solutions contained in the Act on Higher Education and Science (GP12).

The university is strongly committed to developing non-formal education, aimed at professional development, personal development, and the acquisition of non-professional knowledge in line with the idea of lifelong learning. The university offers sixty-eight postgraduate courses in business, administration, law, pedagogy, as well as courses, workshops, and trainings for external stakeholders. A special non-formal educational role is played by the Intergenerational University, which includes children's universities, a youth university, and a university of the Third Age. Interdisciplinary classes for students of the university of the Third Age expand knowledge and develop interests, providing opportunities to acquire personal, communication, technical, and computer competences, and preventing the social exclusion of the elderly.

The university conducts comprehensive research-and-development activities. It organises numerous scientific conferences and symposia, and publishes monographs, academic textbooks, and scientific journals, occupying a significant position in the national arena.

An important aspect of the work of the Humanitas University, one resulting from the assumptions behind the university's social responsibility, is the continuous cooperation with the socio-economic environment, supporting entrepreneurs, local communities, non-governmental organisations, as well as local and regional governments. Teachers and managers of educational institutions are particularly important cooperation partners. The need for teachers' constant improvement of qualifications and meeting a wide range of educational needs results in their numerous participation in: cyclical conferences and workshops under the common name of 'Headmaster the Leader' (GP2); the celebration of the Brain Day – an annual educational campaign as part of the World Brain Week, organised by the Institute of Psychology and the Scientific Circle of the Institute of Psychology of the Humanitas University – which has a practical value for

psychology students (GP8); 'Creative Teachers Forum' (GP6); Innovation Forum (GP14); and 'Programming Experts' (GP5). One of the university activities concentrated around creating an educational space allowing for the education of the teaching staff and the implementation of innovative teaching methods is the development and implementation of a creative teaching aid known as the 'Humanitas Educational Mat' (GP16). It consists of a training for teachers on using the mat and developing work scenarios with this teaching aid; 'The Guide for Teachers, Therapists and Parents' facilitates the use of this tool. Cultivating good relations with the university environment also involves initiating and joining a number of scientific, pro-social, and business projects.

These examples show that, in its activities, the university conducts formal, non-formal, and informal education, as well as it promotes social responsibility in its educational programmes and research, and is actively involved in shaping relations with the socio-economic environment.

Changes in the functioning of the Humanitas University in connection with the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic

By signing the Universities' Declaration of Social Responsibility, the Humanitas University has fully supported the university's mission to not only educate students for the modern economy, but also become a centre for shaping social and civic values and attitudes, as well as taking actions contributing to sustainable development. These premises have become extremely important in the context of the threats posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has a serious negative impact on the implementation of most of the 17 sustainable development goals, as confirmed by the latest United Nations report, namely the 'Sustainable Development Report 2020: The Sustainable Development Goals and Covid-19' (Lafortune, G. et al., 2020).

With regard to internal stakeholders (employees and students), under these exceptional circumstances, the Humanitas University took measures to ensure the health and safety of all the employees in the first place. As early as 11th March, classes based on direct contact between academic teachers and students were suspended, contact with university employees via phone or email was introduced, and university employees were required to work remotely. The implementation of the principles of the university's social responsibility during the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic proved the need for innovative solutions for educating students, enabling teaching staff and administration employees to acquire new competences in virtual communication, and undertaking initiatives for external stakeholders.

The epidemiological crisis became a generator of new challenges in educating students and university staff. The crisis situation required the introduction of new forms of university management, and the effectiveness of these changes was conditioned by the application of appropriate measures.

In the initial phase of the pandemic, the changes at the Humanitas University primarily involved making internal stakeholders (employees and students) aware of the need to modify the university's organisation and to teach classes using distance-learning methods and techniques. This solution enabled students to continue their studies and obtain credits during the semester, and allowed teaching and research staff and administration employees to continue their work. In this crisis situation, reliable communication became the key issue. In anticipation of further developments related to the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus, extensive information activities were undertaken. Namely, all the latest information regarding safety issues and all necessary information related to the organisation of education was posted on the university's Website, its official Facebook profile, and at the Virtual University. The prolonged period of suspension of traditional classes and their

replacement with e-learning[4] lectures and courses required the students to be provided with online access to information on the availability of classes and teaching materials prepared by lecturers. Students have been provided with access to these materials for a period of several weeks, which means that each student can download and play the course at any time. Classes at the Humanitas University are conducted in real time, in accordance with the class schedule, using three tools: the ClickMeeting platform, the Moodle e-learning platform, and the Virtual University.

The success of non-standard activities in the university's practice has so far required building a strong coalition of employees for engaging in developing new solutions, owing to which a sense of co-responsibility for the functioning of the university was built in this unprecedented situation.

In this new reality, the stakeholders found themselves in a coercive situation, in which, regardless of the possibilities, competences, and willingness, the newly introduced solutions must be used by everyone, not only those who want to and can do this. One of the main challenges of efficient online education comes down to supporting academic staff in preparing and implementing classes in the virtual space. Conducting classes via the Internet requires academic teachers to change a number of behaviours, including the form of contact, the working time, and the evaluation system. The process of constant communication between a lecturer and students – as well as greater involvement in building relationships when compared with the direct-contact system (Kwasek, 2017) – also requires a special commitment. Academic teachers involved in conducting e-classes should have appropriate didactic, organisational, evaluation, and technical competences. Taking

into account the fact that part of them did not have the required experience, knowledge, skills, and digital competences, the IT department employees at the Humanitas University conducted a number of training courses for the university employees about using dedicated platforms (ClickMeeting and Moodle) and creating and conducting e-classes. The entire training was remote and lasted six weeks. During this time, each lecturer learned the tools for creating e-courses and elements of the methodology, including developing (creating a scenario and implementing it on the platform) and managing students' learning process. The examination session in the persisting pandemic-related regime required academic teachers to acquire new competences for conducting online examinations. During the training, the principles of conducting examinations as part of distance education were also discussed. At the university, final exams are conducted with the use of IT technologies that ensure control of the verification process and registration of the achieved learning outcomes. Assistance in implementing these tasks is supported on an ongoing basis by the IT department employees (GP7). An interesting educational novelty was that students, who are often more skilled in virtual communication, shared their knowledge with lecturers, primarily those who were just starting distance learning. Owing to online didactics in the lockdown period – and due to the suspension of traditional forms of education – students can continue their education at any time, at any pace, and in any place.

Despite the physical closure of the university, its students can use the rich online research resources to which the Humanitas University Library has purchased access, including the LEGALIS Legal Information System, the Lexoteka database, the LEX Journal Reading Room, the LEX Monographs database, the EBSCO database, the IBUK Libra online reading room, and the NASBI digital library. Upon request of students, the library staff have developed a thematic list of electronic sources for diploma theses. In this crisis situation, it has also been of great importance for students to have access

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[4] "E-learning is the teaching-learning process performed with the use of modern information and communication technologies, where there is a feedback between the participants of the educational situation. E-learning is often referred to as: distant learning, online education, remote education, online learning" (Sołtysiak, 2016).

to the administrative services provided online by all the university departments. Convincing employees about the need to develop this type of service engages them in collaborative efforts in order to meet the challenges related to the functioning of the university during the pandemic.

Launching an *'information emergency'* through telephone calls and emails at the student and applicant service points increased the students' confidence at the university and created a platform for dealing positively with the specific situation in which it currently operates.

As part of the identification of problems arising from the extraordinary situation related to the pandemic, this particular socially-responsible university decided to provide financial support to students who have found themselves in temporarily difficult life situations.

A great help in understanding the changes taking place at the university in the work organisation system, the emergence of doubts related to the course of studies, and obtaining credits for subjects and defending diploma theses was provided owing to the 'Frequently asked questions' link being launched on the university's Website. Replies to students' questions were made available to anyone interested. The issues raised by students were analysed and, in many cases, they led to a modification of the applied solutions.

In line with the assumptions behind social responsibility, the university has also undertaken a number of initiatives and activities for the external environment, which were closely related to the multifaceted threats caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The consequence of the ongoing dialogue between the university and the external environment was a quick response to the emerging challenges related to the suspension of teaching activities in educational institutions. It was a huge challenge for teachers to switch from face-to-face to virtual teaching. As remote classes require new digital and methodological competences, the university organised a webinar for teachers, entitled 'School during the pandemic:

How to effectively teach remotely'[5], during which the university employees shared their knowledge and experience regarding the methodology of remote classes (GP3).

A series of free webinars entitled 'Do not isolate yourself from knowledge'[6] made it possible to transfer knowledge to the external environment (as well as to internal stakeholders). The online lectures are publicly available on the university's Website and concern topics related to both the COVID-19 pandemic (including legal regulations and crisis coping mechanisms) and general development issues, thus facilitating access to knowledge, information, and efficient use of free time. Lectures are conducted by the university employees, who are specialists in fields such as law, psychology, management, pedagogy, and national security. Webinars are held on the ClickMeeting platform and are broadcast on Facebook in real time, with the possibility of asking questions. This formula gives the recipients specific knowledge in a given area, while the creators get feedback on the direction and topic of subsequent activities. It also provides space for the exchange of views between academic staff and practitioners and enthusiasts in a given field (GP4). Due to the great interest in this form of transfer of knowledge, it is planned that these lectures will be continued in their present form even after the pandemic ends.

One of the biggest challenges of the pandemic period is the activity of healthcare institutions. Overloaded healthcare workers, who are the occupational group most exposed to infection, have to permanently cope with stress. Therefore, issues concerning various aspects of the healthcare area related to COVID-19 are reflected in the initiatives undertaken by university employees. The Humanitas University has initiated specific forms of assistance

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[5] Over 1.8 thousand persons took part in the webinar; on Facebook, in turn, the video from this lecture was displayed 16 thousand times.

[6] Over 11 thousand persons attended the lectures until July 31, 2020, which was measured on the basis of visits to the ClickMeeting platform as well as the audience numbers on Facebook.

which can be implemented in crisis conditions and are aimed at external stakeholders, thus responding to specific needs and challenges. The employees of the Institute of Psychology, in cooperation with the Krzysztof Czuma Psychiatry Centre in Katowice, have introduced an initiative titled 'Free psychological support for medical personnel'. It is designed for medical staff, their family, and the employees of the State Sanitary Inspection (Pol. *Sanepid*). Online advice is provided by experienced psychologists, psychotherapists, and, importantly, by students of psychology under the professional supervision of academics. Psychological assistance has been extended to successive groups that need this kind of support the most – the elderly, children and adolescents who are victims of domestic violence, and people who have lost their jobs or are at risk of losing them. The amount of the provided advice indicates that it is a much-needed initiative and fully fits into the characteristics of an organisation serving its environment (GP11).

The uncertainty about the course of the COVID-19 pandemic and the related threats to health and life may be a source of existential fears and anxieties that contribute to the search for new ways to deal with this difficult problem. This issue has inspired an employee of the Institute of Psychology to participate in the international research project titled 'The Coronavirus Anxiety Project'[7], which involves the study of anxiety, the phenomenon of 'coronaphobia', and their impact on the mental health and well-being of people around the world (GP10).

The university also undertakes research related to various aspects of the pandemic. The problem of medical staff's safety in facilities where COVID-19 occurs is particularly important and is of huge interest. The research project titled 'Selected Aspects of SARS-CoV-2 Epidemic Management in the Perception of Healthcare

Employees'[8] was implemented by the Institute of Management Sciences of the Humanitas University. The aim of the study was to get to know the opinions of doctors, paramedics, nurses, electroradiologists, and healthcare managers on the management of the crisis related to the SARS-CoV-2 virus outbreak as well as on the procedures for dealing with patients suspected of being infected with the coronavirus. Another objective was to find out what the levels of protecting medical personnel against the risk of the SARS-CoV-2 infection are. The research is of practical character and should contribute to the process of increasing the effectiveness and efficiency of public administration activities in the field of crisis management (GP1).

Also, great competences of the employees of the Institute of Law made it possible to transfer knowledge. Namely, they were part of the first team in Poland that was developing a commentary to the law on the so-called Anti-Crisis Shield, prepared by the government in connection with the crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic. In cooperation with the University of Economics in Katowice, the researchers prepared a special issue of *Zeszyty Naukowe* [*Scientific Journals*] of the Humanitas Management University, titled *Changes in Managerial Activities of Companies in the Coronavirus Pandemic Era*.[9]

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[7] The research project's preprints were read and recommended by over 1,100 users from around the world.

[8] As part of the study, 467 questionnaires were returned and 11 in-depth interviews were conducted. A report was prepared which indicated the need for significant changes in the functioning of healthcare institutions connected with the crisis management process, personal protective equipment supply level, the functioning of procedures related to contact with COVID-19 patients and patients suspected of having COVID-19, and the lack of tests among medical personnel. The research book was submitted for printing. For more information, see the University's Website: https://www.humanitas.edu.pl/Aktualnosci/?id=18132/_ Panstwo_o_nich_zapomnialo___Wyniki_badan_naszego_ Instytutu_cytuja_media_z_calej_Polski.

[9] Its electronic version is in preparation.

Concluding remarks

The pandemic situation has generated new circumstances and conditioning for the functioning of the Humanitas University in all areas of its activity. The university authorities were faced with the necessity to implement key tasks essential for the functioning of the university under completely new conditions. Despite the unstable situation and lockdown, the university responded to these new challenges immediately. All the activities undertaken during the pandemic and enabling the university to function in this absolutely unique time were a crisis intervention, particularly in the first period. The conducted research shows that in the basic areas – education, science, organisation management, and relations with the socio-economic environment – the university performed its tasks as much as it was allowed to do so by the objective conditions. All internal stakeholders (students, academics, and administrative staff) faced the need to improve and acquire new competences, knowledge, and skills to function in the new reality. The assessment of the usefulness and methods of implementing the distance-driven didactic process – expressed in surveys conducted among the teaching staff and students – is the basis for modifying the existing solutions and the continuous improvement of the online education process.

At the same time, however, the lack of direct contact was pointed out, particularly in the area of sharing views between the lecturers and students, as well as preventing the initiation of spontaneous interactions, which significantly restricts the process of teaching and learning. It is the basis for modifying the existing solutions and continuously improving the quality of the online education process.

Needing to carry out didactic classes in a virtual form, with diversified digital competences, made it necessary to support academic teachers with a wide range of training and individual consultations. At the same time, the University had to develop digital-learning management systems and collaboration platforms that support live video communication. The management team had to undertake new activities related to managing human and financial resources. This involved, among other things, reorganising working practices (introduction of remote work), developing additional channels of communication with employees and students, minimising the negative effects of the pandemic on the academic community, and financial management. The coronavirus pandemic forced the university to improve the digital tools necessary for both teaching and implementing administrative activities. It was particularly important for departments working for students and applicants, which have switched to full online services. The emergence of new, unprecedented research areas focusing on COVID-19 issues has allowed pioneering scientific research, the effects of which are of both theoretical and practical character. Specialist knowledge and the extensive experience of researchers has enabled a massive knowledge transfer to diverse groups of external stakeholders by means of multiple forms of non-formal education.

The assessment of the University's operation in compliance with the principles of social responsibility is documented by the analysis of good practices implemented at the University. The areas covered by these good practices constitute a broad range of impact and they are connected with educational activities, scientific activities, psychological support, voluntary services, and communication and information activities. The solutions adopted in the good practices are consistent with the objectives: no. 3 (Good health and well-being), no. 4 (Quality education), no. 8 (Decent work and economic growth), no. 9 (Industry, innovation, and infrastructure), no. 13 (Climate action), and no. 16 (Peace, justice, and strong institutions).

Incorporating the principles of social responsibility into the university's operation allowed the preservation of the organisation's values in its relations within the organisation as well as with the socio-economic environment, plus it created an atmosphere of acceptance of a non-standard situation resulting from the pandemic.

The functioning of the higher education sector in times of the pandemic has revealed several problems, the resolution of which is not fully predictable. One of the most important aspects is the implementation of virtual education. The abrupt withdrawal from face-to-face learning and the transition to online learning was an *ad hoc* measure and as such is referred to as "emergency remote teaching" (Hodges et al., 2020). In the light of the lack of ability to use remote learning programmes, a lack of experience in conducting this type of teaching activities, and *ad hoc* adaptation of pedagogical methods, the issue of education quality and the assessment of learning outcomes arises. Both employees and students had to face this problem (Mishra et al., 2020). This situation temporarily required academic teachers being supported with a variety of trainings. In the longer term, in view of the likely hybrid model, it will be necessary to develop new pedagogical methods of virtual education and verification of students' knowledge.

Remote teaching requires a high level of technological advancement as well as a greater digitisation of higher education institutions, since the overall digitisation level in institutions is insufficient (Yesner, 2020; Sherwood, 2021; UNESCO IESALC, 2020). The experiences from the first period of the pandemic show that higher education institutions must accelerate the digital transformation fundamentally, increasing flexibility in education and reacting to major crises in a rapid manner (Sa & Serpa, 2020; Gallagher & Palmer, 2020). The weight and directions of changes resulting from the COVID-19 crisis, during which digital technologies came to be used on an unprecedented scale in education and training, as well as the need to adapt education and training systems to the digital era, are both recorded in the European Commission's document entitled *Digital Education Action Plan 2021–2027* (European Commission, 2020).

The fundamental problem of the functioning of universities in times of the pandemic and after it ends concerns financial matters. Research conducted by the EUA Public Funding Observatory (PFO) prognosticates short- and long-term effects of the coronavirus pandemic, indicating that all sources of income of higher education institutions (tuition fees, public funding) will be somehow impacted by the crisis (Estermann et al., 2020; Smalley, 2020). The financial deficits that universities around the world are struggling with might mean that some of them, especially the smaller ones, will have to close permanently (Witze, 2020).

The challenge for the development of higher education in the context of internationalisation is the issue of student mobility. The question arises as to what form it should take during the physical closure of universities and campuses, and as to the whole university infrastructure and virtual education implementation. In a report published at the end of May 2020, the network of the Coimbra Group universities confirmed that 70% of its mobile students were able to continue their mobility virtually, although it is difficult to determine whether it took place from their host country or their country of origin (Coimbra Group Report, 2020; EUA Briefing, 2020).

Within the context of universities' social responsibility, ensuring the health and safety of internal stakeholders is of particular importance. Factors such as the physical distance between the stakeholders causing gaps in communication and cooperation, the decline of a sense of academic community, work overload, as well as psychological pressure can all have a negative effect on students and employees alike (Klimowicz, 2020; Sahu, 2020).

The underlying question remains as to the direction in which socially-responsible universities should go. Doubtlessly, they must be based on the fundamental values: democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, as well as social justice, integration, and equality for all. They should implement the principles of academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and the involvement of students, lecturers, and all employees, and be an important creator of activities for the common good (Harkavy et al., 2020).

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