

Universities and Re-Construction of Cities: the Role of Research and Education

Report of the World Café Sessions

Table 10: Supporting students: experience of Polish universities

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Three sessions organized under this heading discussed complex challenges faced by Polish universities as a response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Destruction of cities and education infrastructure, as well as the economic and social problems which were caused by this invasion affected Ukrainian students adversely. Polish universities showed immediate solidarity by setting in place initiatives to support them and mobilizing resources in their local communities.

Paradoxically the experience of Covid 19 in the years preceding immediately the Russian invasion helped the Polish universities to face this new challenge by falling back to the previous experience of mobilization and coordination of different actors.

It should be mentioned that universities were the institutions which showed initiative, together with local governments, especially in the cities. At the same time discussion participants mentioned the lack of needed support from the central government.

IT platform for displaced Ukrainian students was created; student fees were waived; Free transportation for Ukrainian students was made available; free internet access to university web-sites were introduced for the students to follow online courses.

Among the institutional initiatives of Polish universities Polish language courses for Ukrainian students were especially well-thought and needed. But it was discovered that for the initial phases some courses had to be conducted in Ukrainian language to be accessible for Ukrainian faculty and students.

It was not only the institutional initiative – Polish students themselves organized to support their Ukrainian peers, starting with the offering places to stay and ending with establishing psychological support structures. Psychological support units – to

address the traumatic experiences of Ukrainian refugees – was identified by numerous institutions as of utmost importance.

At the same time academic matters proved more difficult to solve – differences in curriculum between Polish and Ukrainian universities were difficult to surmount. There are academic spheres where these differences are too big for the two systems to be compatible – e. g. in the sphere of medical education.

Among the challenges facing the policy-makers as how to support Ukraine was the challenge to support in the way not to aid the brain-drain from the invaded country. Interestingly enough, the number of students who transferred from Ukrainian to Polish universities in the aftermath of the invasion did not increase dramatically, so that most of the support measures by the Polish universities were directed towards those Ukrainian students who were already studying in Poland before the start of the war.

It was underlined that while the most urgent phase of these measures is over, the support of Ukraine and Ukrainian higher education sector in Poland is still on-going. What could be the new ways to help the county which is still a victim of Russian aggression? Initiatives like teaching Ukrainian students new and necessary skills to rebuild their country was mentioned, but also the challenge that many students with international education experience do not return home. This is a challenge not only for Ukraine, but also for Poland and asks for rethinking how to make this return to their home countries more attractive for those students.

The secessions concluded with discussion of the lessons learned from this experience and with underlining the importance of reflecting what could have been done differently and how to prepare universities better for this type of extremely negative, but sudden and sometimes inevitable developments. But, however these considerations will conclude in the future, the solidarity shown by Polish universities towards Ukrainian colleagues and students in distress as well as efficiency of their support in complex and challenging environments can serve as laudable examples to emulate.