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Developing international alumni relations during the COVID-19 pandemic. Polish case study

Abstract

The aim of the study was to analyse short-term impact of the COVID-19 on international alumni (IA) projects funded by Polish National Agency for Academic Exchange (NAWA). The paper focuses on some immediate effects of the pandemic, and also investigates how Polish stakeholders cope with the problems. The research is mainly based on an online survey conducted among Polish HEIs, but it combines also some desk research. The study indicated that the COVID-19 caused serious problems for IA projects in Poland. Almost $\frac{3}{4}$ of the respondents estimated the negative effects of the pandemic as very high or high. The most common reaction to the pandemic was virtualisation and digitisation of IA relations. Activities that could be arranged online, especially through the social media and also through webinars, webpages or apps, are deemed as the most effective in the current situation. Despite the difficulties, almost 85% of respondents would once again engage in the IA project. Two key benefits of pursuing IA relations consist in their marketing potential: 1) IA become ambassadors of a HEI brand; 2) they also pursue word of mouth marketing.

Keywords: international alumni, COVID-19, alumni relations, internationalisation, Poland, NAWA

Introduction and aim

The aim of the study was to analyse short-term impact of the COVID-19 on international alumni projects funded by the Polish National Agency for Academic Exchange (NAWA). The main reason for conducting the research was that the pandemic strongly impacted internationalisation activities in higher education sector. The study focuses on some immediate effects of the pandemic, and also investigates how Polish stakeholders cope with the COVID-19.

NAWA, as a public agency dealing with internationalisation, funds around 20 mobility and promotion programmes, including the International Alumni Programme. The aim of the programme is to support higher education institutions (HEIs) in preparing, establishing and developing international alumni (IA) networks. The programme fosters IA relations and contributes to utilising IA potential for educational processes or foreign promotion. The

programme was open for applicants who were at various stages of developing IA networks. The beginners were also eligible.

The programme was designed for institutional applicants. Funded activities included: online services and IT tools (including databases, apps, webpages), promotion campaigns, information materials, alumni meetings, involving alumni in foreign fairs, mentoring, webinars etc. The programme was suited for funding small projects (a standard budget was around EUR 23 000). In December 2018, the first call for proposals was closed. 22 projects (out of 29 submitted proposals) were accepted for funding. The most frequent applicants in the programme were: universities, including medical universities (14), technical universities (5) and private higher education institutions (6).

Initially, the length of the project was defined as 6-18 months, which meant that the deadline for finishing projects was set for 31st of October 2020. However, in the early 2020 it turned out that the COVID-19 global pandemic severely impacted internationalisation processes in the higher education, including also IA relations. Due to the lockdown, interruption of international transport and closure of the borders, the conditions for implementing IA projects have significantly worsened. Following the problems reported by the project coordinators, NAWA decided to introduce changes in the IA Programme and prolonged project duration by 6 months until the end of April 2021. This means that during the study majority of projects (21) were still running.

Higher education Poland with regard to internationalisation

In order to better understand the context for the IA Programme in Poland, it is worthwhile to have a look at some data concerning higher education (HE) in the country. A very characteristic feature of the tertiary education sector is that there are many relatively small HEIs in Poland. Due to the shrinking population of young persons and the competition among HEIs, including also foreign competition, the number of Polish HEIs, especially private ones, has lowered in recent years. For example, in 2014/2015 there were 302 non-public HEIs whereas in 2018/2019 their number sank to 262 (GUS 2018). However, the overall number of public and non-public HEIs in Poland is still high taking into account the population and the capacity of the higher education sector. In the academic year 2018/2019 there were 392 HEIs in total, including 130 public ones (GUS, 2019, p. 1). The number of students has been also decreasing in recent years. It shrank from over 1,95 million in 2005/2006 to 1,29 million 2017/2018 (GUS, 2018, p. 14).

As regards the internationalisation, the ratio of foreign students at Polish HEIs is below the EU average, although it has been systematically growing. In 2018/2019 there were 78,3 thousands of foreign students which was 6,5% of all students (GUS, 2018, p. 12-22). The need to intensify internationalisation has been acknowledged by the government, but was also pointed out by external sources, including the EU Commission (2017). Consequently, in October 2017, the Polish National Agency for Academic Exchange was established with the aim to facilitate internationalisation and foreign promotion of Polish higher education and science. The agency launched numerous mobility and promotion programmes, including the International Alumni Programme that was announced in 2018.

Theoretical background

Developing alumni relations may bring various advantages for HEIs. Alumni's identification with their alma mater does not have to be considered only from an economic perspective (fundraising), but can be also viewed in a broader context of developing social bonds (Arnett, German, & Hunt, 2003). Alumni relations may be analysed from a point of view of partnership marketing implying that both sides of the relation can benefit from it (Kępski, 2019). The most advanced research in the field of alumni relations has been done in the USA, but American studies mainly focus on economic aspects such as fundraising and philanthropic activity (Baade & Sundberg, 1996; Borden, Shaker, & Kienker, 2014). Some authors distinguish between the *alumni relations* (non-financial aspects) and the *development* that involves fundraising (Miller, 2013). The topic of alumni relations is still quite new in Europe (Ebert, Axelsson, & Harbor, 2015), especially in Poland, and it is worthwhile to explore various aspects of it.

Alumni programmes may target various kinds of alumni graduating from a particular programme (e.g. bachelor, master, PhD, MBA). The question about the scope of the alumni programme (e.g. whether to include also MBA graduates) has to be considered when preparing the programme. Quite specific and still rather unique are programmes for international or foreign alumni that are called in the paper "International Alumni" (IA). They are especially developed by institutions that have relatively high numbers of foreign students, are (or want to be) active on a global scale, and engage in international collaboration. The role of IA programmes grows due to globalisation and internationalisation of higher education. Internationalisation of tertiary education has been quite intensely investigated by various authors and institutions in recent years (e.g. Barrows, 2000; Hénard, Diamond, & Roseveare, 2012; Knight, 1999, 2008). However, the topic of IA relations in the context of internationalisation has not been much explored yet although some valuable studies in that area

have emerged (Dobson, 2011; Miller, 2013). Currently, due to the change of the global situation caused by the COVID-19, it is needed to explore the impact of the pandemic on IA relations as well as on internationalisation as a whole.

Research methodology

The study combines desk research with a survey that was conducted among Polish HEIs implementing IA projects funded by NAWA. The paper takes into account some data that are available to the programme owner (information about projects and their activities), however the main source of data was the survey. The Internet-based questionnaire consisted of 8 questions and was made available as a link for all 22 project coordinators. It was based on Google Forms and was open for filling in between 5th and 15th of June 2020. The questionnaire consisted of 6 multiple choice questions, and 2 open questions, including one request for possible future recommendations.

Participation in the study was voluntary. However, in order to motivate the respondents they were informed that the results of the study would be later on made available to them, as such a knowledge may be useful for project coordinators. The survey was anonymous (data about the respondents, including their name, e-mail address etc., were not collected). It is worth mentioning that in 4 multiple choice questions it was possible to choose more than one answer. Therefore, the frequency of various answers may exceed 100%.

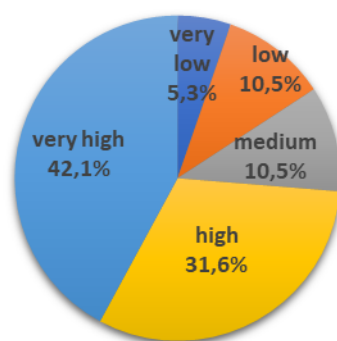
The results of the study are limited due to the fact that the International Alumni Programme supports a relatively small number of projects (22). The institutions carrying out projects make up only 5,6% out of all 392 HEIs in Poland (GUS, 2019). On the other hand, the sample of surveyed HEIs consists of some key stakeholders, including 2 biggest and most prestigious Polish universities (University of Warsaw, Jagiellonian University), 5 medical universities that have traditionally the highest ratio of foreign students among Polish HEIs, and some other universities, economic and technical HEIs that are based in major Polish cities (Warsaw, Wroclaw, Poznan, Lodz, Krakow, Gdansk, Rzeszow, Czestochowa, Bialystok) and play an important role in their regions.

Results and implications

The questionnaire was answered by 19 out of 22 approached institutions which makes up a high response rate (86%). The results are presented according to the order of questions in the survey.

1. How do you assess the impact of the COVID-19 on your IA project?

Fig. 1. The impact of the COVID-19 on IA projects



As Figure 1 illustrates, the effects of the pandemic were considered as high or very high by almost $\frac{3}{4}$ of the respondents (73,7%), including 42,1% who estimated it as very high. It demonstrates that Polish IA projects have been seriously hit by the global pandemic. Only 15,8% projects reckoned the impact of the COVID-19 as low or very low.

2. What kind of problems have caused the COVID-19 in your project?

Table 1. The most common problems caused by the COVID-19

Rank	Problem	Frequency (%)
1.	High uncertainty, impossibility to foresee how the situation will develop	73,7%
2.	Impossibility to organise IA conference or meeting	57,9%
3.	Internal problems as regard our organisation functioning	52,6%
4.	No possibility to go for educational fairs or other meetings with IA	21,1%
5.	Problems in contacting IA and networking with them	21,1%
6.	The need to re-shape entirely the concept of the IA project	21,1%

High uncertainty combined with impossibility to foresee any future developments were considered as the most grievous problem caused by the pandemic (73,7%). This difficulty may have at least two aspects. Firstly, various events planned within the projects (conferences, fairs, meetings) had to be cancelled, and it was not possible to determine their new dates (sometimes it was even not sure whether the event can be organised in the future at all). Projects focusing on physical meetings were especially hit by the COVID-19. Considering the fact that the projects have a limited duration, the uncertainty induced by the pandemic imposed high risks on them. Secondly, the pandemic caused serious internal problems in functioning of HEIs (52,5%). Due to the lockdown, Polish HEIs were closed following recommendations of the

Ministry of Science and Higher Education. Employees had to work from home. Infrastructures, internal processes and procedures had to be re-organised in order to adapt to the new situation.

3. If you had known about the pandemic, would you have participated in the IA programme?

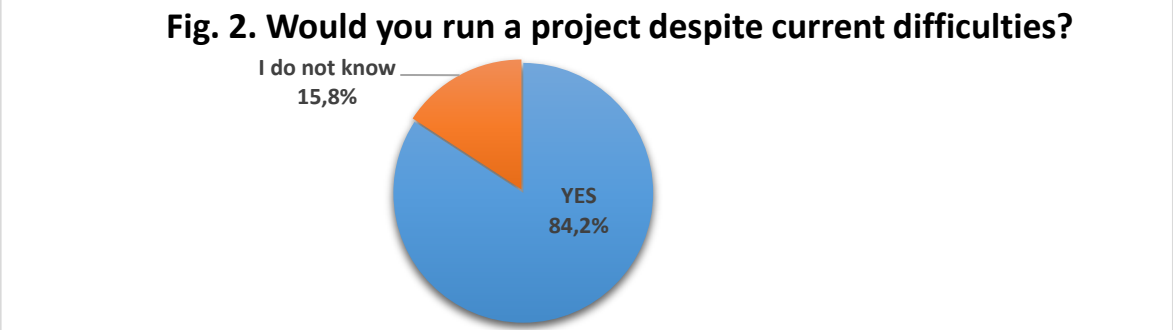
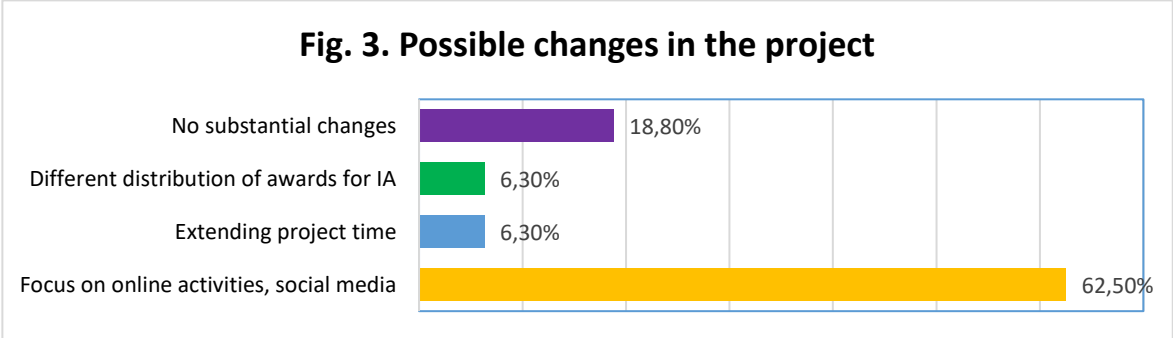


Figure 2 demonstrates that despite the difficulties caused by the pandemic, the vast majority of project coordinators (84,2%) would have decided to participate in the IA Programme once again. Nobody explicitly answered “no”. However, almost every sixth respondent expressed hesitation (“I do not know”). Nevertheless, the overall results indicate the need for IA projects and the determination of their coordinators to pursue them even during the pandemic.

4. What major changes in the project would you introduce if you had known about the pandemic?

It was an open question, however, the answers given by the respondents can be categorised and presented in a quantitative way. They are summarised below in the form of a graph.

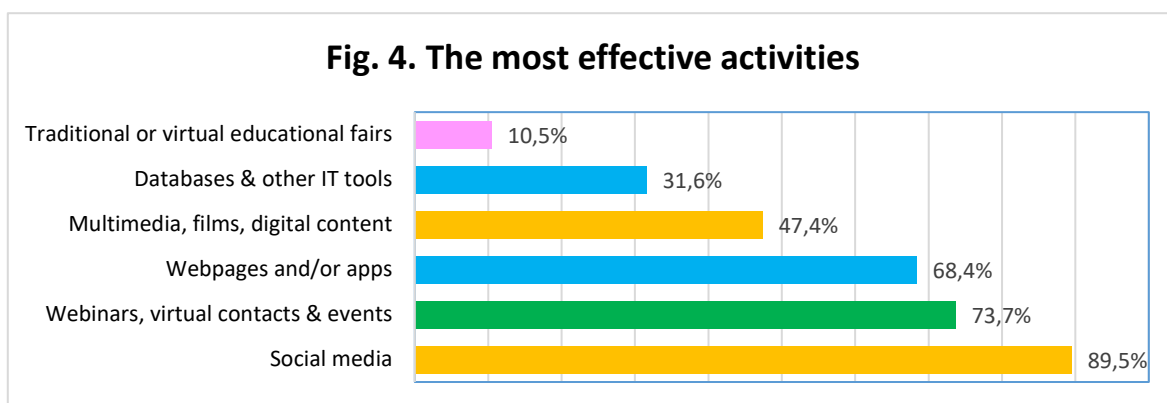


The question had a hypothetical character. The answers clearly indicate that the project coordinators would choose especially online activities and social media. This trend may be called “virtualisation” of IA relations. 18,8% of respondents considered no substantial changes in the projects. Probably that answer was given by those who already based their projects on online activities from the very beginning. In such a case, even if the COVID-19 complicated

project implementation (e.g. during the lockdown), project activities were possible to be carried out through the Internet.

Only 6,3% respondents pointed out the need for extending project time. However, in reality this ratio may be considered as much higher. According to NAWA data, 64% of IA projects (14 out of 22) requested extension of their implementation time. Majority of these requests were submitted to NAWA in April and early May 2020. Maybe the respondents considered the project extension as a fact that already happened and could be taken for granted and they did not much focus on it during the survey. Nevertheless, it seems that extending project time by several months was a quite common need resulting from the pandemic.

5. Which activities related to IA are the most effective in the current situation?



Three activities considered as the most effective in the pandemic situation are linked with social media (89,5%), virtual contacts and events (73,7%) and webpages and/or apps (68,4%). Even two further most effective activities (multimedia & films; databases & IT tools) are related to the Internet-based or digital/IT solutions. Respondents' answers strongly indicate that IA relations will tend to be virtualised and digitised (i.e. based on social media, Internet, digital content and IT solutions) because of the pandemic.

6. What are the biggest problems in developing IA relations?

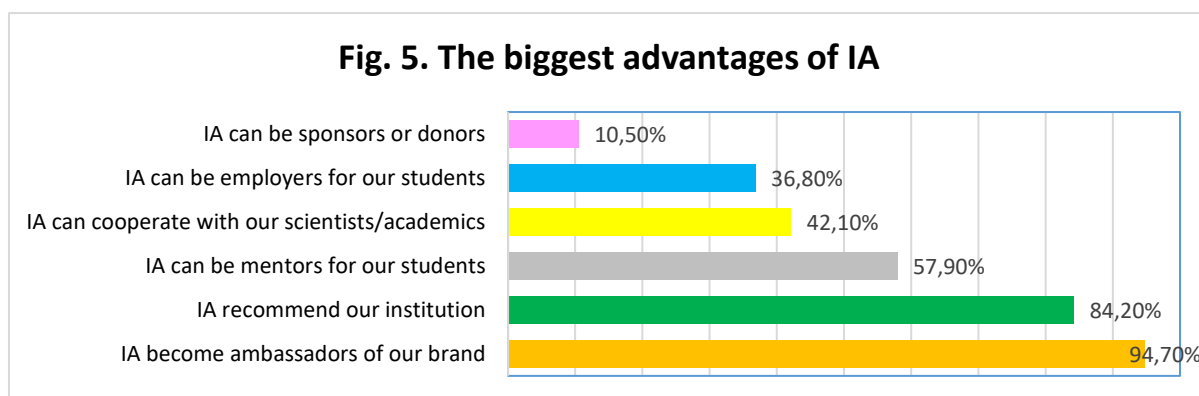
Table 2. Problems hampering developing IA relations

Rank	Problem	Frequency (%)
1.	Lack of a systematic approach to IA at Polish HEIs	47,4%
2.	Current problems related to the pandemic and high uncertainty	42,1%
3.	Lack of sufficient IT tools	42,1%
4.	Insufficient financial resources	36,8%

5.	Insufficient human resources to pursue IA relations	36,8%
6.	Insufficient understanding for IA among our scientists & academics	21,1%

This question had a broader scope and did not only focus on the pandemic-caused problems. Polish stakeholders claim that difficulties in developing IA relations result not from one particular factor, but have a multidimensional character. Such an interpretation is based on a quite even distribution of results of the Question 6. Five problems were pointed out with a similar frequency ranging from 36,8% up to 47,4%. The most common problem is the lack of systematic approach to IA at Polish HEIs. It demonstrates that IA relations is still not a very established and prioritised topic. The second problem was the pandemic and high uncertainty (42,1%), which confirms previous findings about the serious effects of the COVID-19. Three other major problems were related to insufficient resources: IT, financial and human. Partially, this may confirm a hypothesis that IA relations are not at the top of the agenda of university management, yet. Therefore, resources allocated to these activities are not adequate to the needs.

7. What are the biggest advantages of pursuing IA relations?



As regards advantages of IA relations, two crucial benefits are related to marketing aspects and university brand promotion: 1) IA become ambassadors of a HEI (94,7%); 2) they also pursue word of mouth marketing (84,2%). Two other benefits are linked with possible educational or scientific engagement of IA (providing mentoring for students, scientific cooperation in the future). It is striking that alumni are not necessarily expected to contribute financially (only 10,5% answers). In this aspect Polish cultural context significantly differs from the American.

8. Recommendations, especially for NAWA, concerning future IA programmes/activities.

Table 3. Recommendations for the IA Programme or IA activities

Recommendation	Number of similar answers
Maintain IA programme (4 opinions) or offer more IA programmes (1 opinion)	5
Focus on online activities and social media	3
Increase funding for a single project, relax some financial rules	1 + 1
Disseminate by NAWA best practices and success stories as regards IA	1
Support a systemic approach starting with activities targeting foreign students	1
Combine NAWA alumni network with IA programme	1

Generally, the recommendations were very positive. Five respondents requested maintaining the programme or intensifying it (offer more programmes). Some of them, in the comments, mentioned that the IA Programme was a needed and well-devised tool. Additionally, focus on online activities and social media was recommended by three respondents.

Conclusions

The study indicated that the COVID-19 caused serious problems for IA projects in Poland. Almost $\frac{3}{4}$ of the respondents estimated the negative effects of the pandemic as very high or high. The most severe difficulties were related to high uncertainty, impossibility to organise physical meetings with IA or facing internal turbulences in functioning of the HEI.

The most common reaction to the pandemic – according to Polish stakeholders – is virtualisation and digitisation of activities related to IA. Operations and tools based on online solutions and content are deemed as the most effective in the pandemic situation. Especially preferred by the project coordinators are the social media, webinars, webpages or apps. Consequently, it can be expected that physical meetings, fairs and conferences will lose their popularity in IA projects, at least in the nearest future. They are going to be replaced by various online and IT-based activities. This trend towards virtualisation and digitisation of IA relations during the pandemic is the key finding of the study.

Despite the difficulties caused by the COVID-19, almost 85% of respondents claimed that they would once again engage in the IA project even if they had known that the conditions for the international relations will drastically change. This result proves the need for IA activities even in difficult times. According to Polish stakeholders, two key benefits of pursuing IA relations consist in their marketing potential (IA become ambassadors of a HEI brand and they also pursue word of mouth marketing). The problem is, however, that IA relations seem to be underestimated by the top management of Polish universities and a systematic approach

towards IA relations is still lacking. This finding may be interpreted as a hint that IA relations are rather in the preliminary phase and require further development and promotion.

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