

STUDYING LAW IN TIMES OF CORONA

THE SHIFT FROM CAMPUS TO HOME OFFICE – A STUDENT'S PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

In March 2020 the Covid-19 pandemic changed life circumstances drastically for everyone. Exactly one year ago the university had to shift from campus to the internet. This led to huge alterations in how professors lecture and how student university life takes place. After this year, it is time to evaluate the changes and put them into perspective. This means recognizing the benefits of technology to legal education instead of seeing the current situation as a replacement that disappears as soon as a return back to campus is possible.

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I. INTRODUCTION

At this moment, as of March 2021, universities are approaching their third online semester, meaning this situation has already lasted for over a year. But what happened in this year at law schools? How did online university evolve in this relatively short but eventful time? This contribution will focus on a student's perspective and draw conclusions from personal experiences as well as from a survey conducted by the University of Mainz. The survey examines the digital summer semester of 2020 from the students' and the professors' perspectives.¹ In reviewing the student experience and survey data, both the negative and positive examples should be highlighted. Only transferring what worked on campus to online teaching will not be enough. The special unchangeable circumstances universities, students and professors are facing right now should fuel the desire to not only 'make this work' but actively take part in setting new standards for law school education. In conclusion, students as well as professors, are interested in making the most out of this situation.

II. COMPARISON OF UNIVERSITY PRE - COVID-19 AND NOW

On 24th of March 2020 the University of Mainz went into emergency operations mode due to the Covid-19 pandemic for the first time.²

Before that, going to law school looked quite different. Professors lectured on a specific topic in lecture theatres on campus and students participated in those lectures by answering and posing questions and taking part in discussions. Those lecture courses are divided up into sections based on the students' skill level ranging from beginner to advance in the three main fields (criminal law, civil law and public law) which are completed by passing an exam and a term paper. Prior to Covid-19, students would primarily study and work on assignments in the library.

The University of Mainz has been in emergency operation mode since the 21st of December 2020 which has just recently been extended until April 18, 2021.³ Most certainly classes will not take place on campus until fall 2021. During this time between the two lockdowns the University followed a hybrid concept. This hybrid concept included access to libraries, study places and enabled that exams, practical lab courses and other specific courses could take place on campus.⁴

This was changed as soon as the University had to leave the so called limited standard operations. At the moment the campus is closed to the general public, some libraries are accessible to borrow books and courses with essential practical components take place on campus, if online replacements are not possible. Not only the students but also the university's employees should work from home wherever possible.⁵

Concerning law school, this means all classes were held online since the first semester of dealing with

¹ Schmidt, Schmidt, Becker Ergebnisse der Befragung Lehren und Lernen im „digitalen“ Sommersemester 2020. A summary of the results and the evaluation (university members access only) can be found under (last visited March 23, 2021).

² <https://corona.uni-mainz.de/news/> (last visited March 23, 2021).

³ <https://en.corona.uni-mainz.de> last visited March 23, 2021).

⁴ <https://lehre.uni-mainz.de/2020/07/09/winter21/> last visited March 23, 2021).

⁵ <https://corona.uni-mainz.de> last visited March 23, 2021).

Covid-19. The tools primarily used by students and professors are LMS (Learn-Management-System) and Microsoft Teams. Further, in terms of law school exams not all of them could be taken on campus. Rather, these exams were transferred online formats. But what exactly does this mean for a law student and how has it affected their day-to-day? This is something I explore in the next section by detailing my daily routine.

III. A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A LAW STUDENT

This morning I woke up at 7:00 am, which is quite early for me. It's harder to get up and start your day when you don't have any appointments and a long day of no interactions and studying by yourself ahead. It feels as if the world has stopped turning and the concept of time has become unreal. Every day is the same and has become quite interchangeable with the next one.

The first cup of coffee sits next to my laptop as I'm checking my e-mails, notifications on Microsoft Teams, and whether there's any announcements on LMS about my exams taking place or still being postponed to an unknown date without providing any further information. After that I check up on the tasks, I still have to finish this week. For my communication studies course, I have to complete weekly assignments in order to pass. However, this is not the case in law school classes and has not been before.

Submitting papers is usually followed by watching pre-recorded lectures that have been uploaded to LMS by the professors. Sometimes they're just 30 minutes long instead of the 90 minutes intended and you can definitely tell which professor is not enthusiastic about having to hold their lectures like that. The atmosphere has changed, everything feels weird and off. Asking the student next to you when you were not able to follow the class has become rewinding the last 30 seconds. Talking to your professor has now become writing an e-mail and hoping for an answer. Raising your hand in class to make a point or discuss a matter now has become writing in the chat or in an asynchronous discussion room. Making new friends and getting to know people has become nearly impossible. You just don't grab a coffee or lunch together after your lecture. I rarely know who I'm taking classes with, turning on the camera when nobody else does is scary and the inhibitions to start a conversation with someone you have neither seen nor talked to in your life before are immense. Online university is a quite lonely world right now that has been stripped off all social aspects you associate with and expect from going to university.

Feeling frustrated I decide to go for a run to clear my head and see something other than my own four walls. Going outside usually makes me feel better.

Back to my workspace it is, with another cup of coffee and a little bit more motivation. With the help of setting timer I spend the afternoon being quite productive until I stumble over a problem that occurs on the regular. As a law student, you depend on books to study. These books are quite expensive and updated frequently, so in times before the pandemic, I would usually study at the library. I chose the library, not only for the atmosphere but also for easy access to the most recent edition of the books. With libraries being closed now, my apartment has become my workspace. This means I mainly have to rely on online sources or borrow these books from the library. In theory, this sounds like a good alternative, which provides you with the literature you need. But in reality, this is simply not the case. Access to study and case books online is rare and the number of books available to borrow just can't

supply all the students. And surprise, the book I need is not accessible online. This means a trip to the library in the next few days.

Slightly frustrated and tired I end my day by closing the laptop. Sitting in front of the computer all day may not sound exhausting, but it definitely is. Spending your time at online university is a quite passive and lonely activity, so it is not as fulfilling as spending your day on campus and ending it by going home and not by closing your laptop.

The frustrating and tiring part of this is not that the world is enduring a pandemic at the moment and therefore everyone has to restrict their lives to a certain extent. It is the feeling of being left alone in those times, where compassion, dedication, and flexibility are much needed from professors as well as students. This situation is new and uncomfortable for everyone – we were not prepared for this. Nevertheless, living with a knock-off version of lecturing as prerecorded videos on a platform should not be a long-term solution.

IV. THE DIGITAL CAMPUS

A. Survey on the digital summer semester 2020 at University of Mainz

After the first semester online due to the Covid-19 pandemic the University of Mainz conducted a survey on the digital semester: summer 2020 targeting students and professors. The evaluation shows interesting findings I want to address.

Overall, the communication between students and professors has declined.⁶ This lack in interaction has caused the students to wish for more communication, feedback and less self-study.⁷ Both students and professors stated that the workload in the digital summer semester 2020 was higher than before.⁸ Also nearly half of the professors and more than half of the students didn't have any prior experience with online university.⁹

B. Overview of tools and teaching styles

As already mentioned, every professor has used their own approach when shifting their university courses from campus into the virtual world. The most common approach used by professors is to pre-record the lectures and uploading them as a video podcast for the students to watch. Other professors offer virtual meetings to discuss the provided input and answer questions that may arise, but this is not the general practice. Questions are rather answered in forums or by e-mail. In addition to that, a few other tools on LMS can be used. This includes a voting tool, discussion forums, test tools to self-check your knowledge and uploading extra material. To sum up, there is a wide range of formats a professor can use and incorporate in their teaching concept.

⁶ Schmidt, Schmidt, Becker Ergebnisse der Befragung Lehren und Lernen im „digitalen“ Sommersemester 2020 16-17 (<https://www.zq.uni-mainz.de/ergebnisse-der-studierenden-und-lehrendenbefragung-im-ss-2020/>) (last visited March 23, 2021).

⁷ See supra note 6, 39.

⁸ See supra note 6, 20-21.

⁹ See supra note 6, 28-31.

C. What works, what doesn't and what is promising?

Several universities have provided guides on structuring classes in consideration of the altered teaching situation.¹⁰ These articles mostly focus on how student activation could work in an online setting.

Transferring what worked on campus to a virtual platform is discouraged from, as the students remain passive and the professor-student-connection can't properly develop.¹¹ Rather than that incorporating the tools provided on the university's platforms in the class concept and carefully evaluating whether synchronous and asynchronous courses are suitable is advised. Asynchronous courses like prerecorded lectures are suitable for acquiring basic knowledge on the particular topic. A deeper knowledge then can be gained by hosting synchronous courses including discussions, questions and answers and in general: human interaction.

To further activate the students and guide them with their self-study tools on the virtual learning platform like voting, self-tests or discussion forums can be very helpful. The crucial point here is to implement these tools in the course concept with thought; otherwise the sheer amount of unknown and new tools can be overwhelming and lead to the contrary of the desired effect. Therefore, the course concept should be planned carefully in consideration of benefits and risks of each tool and offer a tailor-made solution to face the complex challenges of online university. The crucial chance in shifting to the digital campus is the possibility to individualize and cater to the different needs of each course.

The process of implementing these individual concepts could also benefit from teamwork between professors and students. Having to adapt to a situation like the current one with little to no experience in online teaching needs the parties affected to communicate their needs, exchange what works and what doesn't from each perspective and develop ideas together. Teaching is a topic that not only concerns students as well as professors but is dear to them – so why not come together and benefit from the different experiences, ideas and skillset? Learning from each other will shape the future of law school.

V. CONCLUSION

Transferring university from campus to the internet forced some change in the way of teaching at law school. These valuable experiences should not only be seen in context in the pandemic – the learnings need to be applied to teaching law in general. It is about time to put, “chalk and talk” in the past and adapt to the needs of both professors and students. University is not only a place for studying but also for learning from each other.

¹⁰ See amongst other: Universität Potsdam Studierende online aktivieren – Unsere Tipps für die digitale Lehre (<https://www.uni-potsdam.de/en/zfq/lehre-und-medien/online-lehre-2020/studierende-online-aktivieren>) (last visited March 23, 2021); Universität Hamburg Digitale Lehre in Corona-Zeiten: Denkanstöße und Praxistipps (<https://www.jura.uni-hamburg.de/media/lehrprojekte/think-tank/digitale-lehre-in-corona-zeiten.pdf>) (last visited March 23, 2021); LMU München Tipps für die digitale Lehre (<https://www.multiplikatoren-projekt.peoplemanagement.uni-muenchen.de/downloads/digitale-lehre/tipps-fuer-digitale-lehre.pdf>) (last visited March 23, 2021); Hanke & Holländer Aktivieren statt Belehren (<https://www.b-i-t-online.de/daten/aktivieren-statt-belehren.php>) (last visited March 23, 2021).

¹¹ Hanke & Holländer Aktivieren statt Belehren (<https://www.b-i-t-online.de/daten/aktivieren-statt-belehren.php>) (last visited March 23, 2021).

It is crucial for good teaching to constantly rethink old ways and adapt to new surroundings. A change in law school was long overdue, the need for new innovative concepts was not just sparked by the pandemic but made visible.

A crisis has an innate potential for innovation. The Covid-19 pandemic has marked the kick-off of rethinking teaching law. The spark for innovation has been lit – now it is on students and professors to work together and see this as a chance to bring law school to the present.