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The impact of COVID-19 on the functioning of legal clinics in Poland

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Abstract

Clinical Legal Education (CLE) is a name that is commonly used to refer to the provision of legal services by or with participation of law students acting if needed under the substantive supervision of a designated tutor. Currently, there are over 20 Legal Clinics in Poland, also known as student legal clinics. Legal services provided as part of this activity are pro bono and are aimed at persons and organizations at risk of social and legal exclusion. The importance of this activity is unquestionable due to its dualistic nature – on the one hand, legal assistance is provided free of charge to the poorest persons and those who are not aware of the possibility of effectively pursuing their rights. On the other hand, the educational aspect is implemented. This is manifested in the involvement of law students in providing legal advice to persons in need. The SARS-CoV-2 pandemic has affected every area of daily living, including the system of free legal assistance. The author describes how the pandemic influenced the functioning of legal clinics in Poland, taking into account the fact that persons using these services are often at risk of not only social but also digital exclusion.

1. Introduction

Clinical Legal Education (CLE) has for many years played a role in promoting access to system of justice among persons at risk of broadly understood social exclusion. This activity also provides students with the opportunity to pursue a practical education program. Thanks to legal clinics, students can experience how the law should be applied in practice, as well as understand and correctly define the barriers faced by many legally unqualified persons. This

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experience takes many forms – in addition to actual legal assistance to persons in need, law students around the world engage in raising the legal awareness of the community about rights through Street Law programs [6], learning professional ethics, or through participation in legal simulations [2]. The knowledge acquired in the course of studies is supplemented with practical skills, which is also conducive to shaping social competences. Speaking of skills, it is worth indicating that the implementation of the clinical curriculum gives students the opportunity to acquire skills in the preparation of written legal opinions in the field of legal language with the use of theoretical knowledge from individual areas of law and the principles of legal ethics, as well as in the correct and logical analysis of the examined legal issues. Students are also able to justify the proposed solutions, and – most importantly – to choose and apply the appropriate mode for the effective performance of a given procedural activity. Active participation in university legal clinics results in deepened awareness of the level of knowledge and skills among students. They are ready to critically evaluate their knowledge and fell the need for continuous personal and professional development. Moreover, among the social competences that students acquire, it is worth mentioning that at a later stage of scientific and professional development, they create and strengthen their conviction about the necessity and importance of professional and ethical behavior as a participant in court and out-of-court proceedings. When comparing students implementing the clinical curriculum with students who follow only the traditional model of education, it is noticeable that the former are much more responsible for their own preparation for work, decisions and actions taken and their effects, including those for the beneficiary and other persons.

Bearing in mind the above, it is worth pointing out that the so-called clinical activity also provides students with the opportunity to develop the skills of performing a legal profession, as well as – by organizing or participating in additional initiatives – to build a network of contacts in the legal profession. An additional effect is often increasing the chances of students to be employed by lawyers supporting the activities of Legal Clinics (LC). It is possible to claim that CLE, at its best, extends students' learning process beyond theoretical knowledge acquired in the course of their studies. Thanks to participation in the work of the LC, they have a chance to "learn to think like a lawyer", which is naturally extended to activities aimed at integrating the interpersonal, analytical, and decision-making skills of students with the values and habits of work in order to create a professional identity [9, 11].

The system of free legal assistance, which has been operating in the international arena for many years, is more and more popular and modernized along with the development of modern technological solutions. Technological progress, as well as the emerging alternative forms of providing free legal assistance, make it necessary to undertake additional activities, going beyond the classic model of providing legal advice by students operating under the so-called student legal clinics. Unfortunately, due to economic barriers, these solutions are not always used successfully and to the extent that they are used, for example, in the daily work of law firms. LegalTech tools are used in legal clinics to the extent allowed by the infrastructure of universities and institutions within which legal clinics are organized. The pandemic has revealed shortcomings in this regard and huge infrastructure shortages. This was manifested, for example, in the use of outdated equipment or deficiencies in access to modern forms of communication.

There is no doubt that the epidemic caused by the global spread of SARS-CoV-2 virus affected all countries in the world in a non-obvious way, forcing their representatives to react in almost all areas: social, economic, and legal [1]. The COVID-19 pandemic has surprised all nations of the world. The situation with which we are dealing since March 2020 has had a negative impact not only on the state of health. Apart from the most visible economic or humanitarian crisis, the negative effects of the pandemic are visible in the social, political, and environmental areas. It can be easily said that its negative effects are noticeable in many areas of everyday functioning. It has deepened the existing social shortcomings, and also increased the risk of social or legal exclusion. As a result, it also led to the strengthening of the search for effective and efficient measures, both scientific and social, in order to stop the development of negative phenomena, the effects of which will be felt long after the pandemic ends. The consequences of the pandemic are unpredictable, but it is undisputed that it accelerated the implementation of modern technological solutions and popularized their use in those areas that, until the outbreak of the pandemic, were not affected by advanced computerization or digitization. One of the examples is the operation of university legal clinics which, along with the implementation of distance learning, had to significantly reformat their daily activities.

Moreover, extending the offer of legal clinics with modern technological solutions was associated with the need to ensure the security of personal data processed by students as well as research and teaching staff. Virtual provision of legal support services to clients of legal clinics was often difficult. For this reason, it was necessary not only to implement appropriate procedures or train students and teaching staff, but also to create dedicated e-mail addresses
used to organize on-line meetings ensuring full anonymity of students operating in legal clinics. Considering the validity of the EU regulations on personal data protection, the legal awareness of students as well as coordinators and tutors is generally at a high level. However, it should be remembered that the use of modern technological solutions is associated with a greater risk of violating the security of personal data processed. Therefore, it becomes necessary to deepen the legal awareness in the field of cybersecurity and the risks associated with the implementation of the clinical model of on-line learning.

Looking at the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is possible to say that it had a negative impact not only on the functioning of the justice system, but also on the effective implementation of the right to a fair trial. At the same time, it contributed to the deepening of the risk of legal and social exclusion, which is directly related to the spreading threat of digital exclusion. The main aim of the article is to analyze the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the functioning of legal clinics in Poland. It is based on statistical data from the annual report submitted to the Polish Legal Clinics Foundation associating all legal clinics in Poland. The scientific discussion will focus on research problems related to the functioning of the system addressed to persons at risk, above all, of social and legal exclusion. A supplement to the considerations will also be an analysis of how legal clinics, whose activities are often addressed to persons at risk of digital exclusion, dealt with the need to implement alternative methods of their operation in connection with the implementation of distance learning, and reached the beneficiaries of free legal assistance.

2. COVID-19 and the functioning of legal clinics

In March 2020, the world stood still. We were incredulous about the necessity to implement remote work, believing that in a short period of time everyday functioning would return to its former reality. As a consequence, the unknown has become a new reality, unnaturally forcing the need to take spontaneous actions, often making it difficult to implement the established rules and standards of conduct. Unfortunately, the pandemic left a strong mark on the way in which universities operate, and also became a challenge for the functioning of university legal clinics around the world. The outbreak of the pandemic, the rules related to the need to limit direct contact, as well as systematically introduced and tightened restrictions on staying inside and in public spaces resulted in the transfer of academic activity to the virtual space.

From 12 March 2020, de facto, distance learning has been implemented in the whole territory of Poland. The concept of e-learning can be defined as learning facilitated and supported by the use of information and communication technologies [12]. On-line or e-learning legal education involves the use of information, communication, and instructional technologies. The aim is to improve the learning process of law students and to provide teachers, and in the case of legal clinics – coordinators and tutors – with tools for teaching law (such as the Moodle or Blackboard Learn platforms) [10]. The functioning of the education system units has been temporarily limited. This meant that during this period, kindergartens, schools, and educational institutions, both public and private, could not conduct didactic and educational activities. This included also temporary limitations of the functioning of some entities of the system of higher education and science due to the prevention, counteraction and combating COVID-19. Practically from the second half of March 2020 to 30 September 2021, studies, postgraduate studies, and other forms of education at universities supervised by the minister responsible for higher education and science, as well as classes as part of the education of doctoral students at universities and other entities, were generally conducted with the use of distance learning methods and techniques, regardless of whether it was provided for in the curriculum of a given type of education. As a consequence, universities and other entities providing education (including doctoral student education) could conduct in their main locations or branches: a) only those classes that could not be conducted with the use of distance learning methods and techniques; b) classes provided for in the study program to be conducted in the last year of first-cycle, second-cycle and long-cycle studies. However, it was important that the decision on the method of conducting education was made by the rector of the university or the head of other entity providing doctoral student education who determined the conditions for the implementation of classes and the use of the infrastructure of the university or other entity, respectively, ensuring the safety of persons conducting classes and participating in them. Due to the pandemic situation and distance learning at universities, many legal clinics initially suspended or significantly limited personal consultations. Ultimately, the activity of legal clinics depended on the regulations introduced at individual universities and higher education facilities concerning distance learning. This activity had to be in line with the recommendations of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education on education conducted with the use of distance learning methods and techniques.
While performing a detailed analysis, it is worth pointing out that in Poland in the next two academic years (i.e., 2019/2020 and 2020/2021), during which we were dealing with a state of epidemic threat or epidemic, there were 27 legal clinics in 17 cities in Poland. From the perspective of the last 4 years of operation of legal clinics, the largest decrease was recorded in the 2019/2020 academic year, i.e., 42.3% fewer cases were received by all university legal clinics in Poland. The downward trend has been noticeable since the 2011/2012 academic year, however, the decline in cases ranged from several to 25%. In the 2019/2020 academic year, which was connected with the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, a drastic decrease in cases accepted by clinics from October 2019 to June 2020 was noticeable. Unfortunately, this trend continued in the next academic year, i.e., 2020/2021 (there was an approx. 24% decrease in cases compared to the previous academic year). When analyzing the last three academic years, it is noticeable that in 2019-2021 the number of cases was only 92 more than in the 2018/2019 academic year. It seems that the reason for this state of affairs was primarily the implementation of distance learning, the absence of both students and teachers at universities and difficulties in reaching potential clients. This is confirmed by the statistical data on the number of students and teachers involved in the work of university legal clinics. In recent years, there has been a noticeable decline in the percentage of the number of students involved in the work of legal clinics. There can be many reasons for this, including competitiveness of the labor market, as well as the fact that currently students start their professional practice faster by cooperating with law firms and other institutions, where they verify in practice the theoretical knowledge acquired during their studies. Nevertheless, when comparing the statistical data over the past years, a constant downward trend is noticeable, starting from the 2016/2017 academic year (at that time there were 1,886 students in the clinics, and in the last academic year, i.e., 2020/2021, it was 1,075). Every year, there is a decline of about 20-24% of students involved in the work of legal clinics. In the case of teachers, in the 2020/2021 academic year, this number decreased by more than a quarter compared to the previous year. It seems that the main reason is also the decline in the number of cases and the reduced need for substantive support of such a large number of persons. Detailed statistical data covering the last four academic years of operation of legal clinics in Poland are presented below.

| Table 1. Data from the annual Reports of the Polish Legal Clinics Foundation [13] |
|---------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Number of existing Legal Clinics | 27              | 27              | 27              | 27              |
| Total number of cases accepted  | 5 752           | 4 414           | 2 547           | 1 959           |
| Total number of students involved | 1 889          | 1 636           | 1 219           | 1 075           |
| Total number of teachers involved | 325            | 372             | 318             | 254             |
| Average number of students per one tutor | 6              | 4               | 4               | 4               |

The above-mentioned statistical data also influenced the actual functioning and operation of legal clinics. It should be emphasized that as many as 6 out of 27 (i.e., approx. 22%) university legal clinics suspended their activities. This suspension took various forms and was not directly related to the cessation of any activity. In the vast majority of cases, it was connected with the failure to start recruitment to the clinic and, consequently, the failure to provide legal advice in the classic model. The resignation from the recruitment to the legal clinic and from conducting theoretical classes seems to be a fairly significant threat to the further functioning of legal clinics and the activation of students in the future. Of course, there were also situations in which legal clinics did not provide any legal advice, or it boiled down to providing several pieces of advice during the academic year. However, this was caused by a lack of clients and not the cessation of operation. Lack of activity in the field of recruitment, providing legal advice and conducting theoretical classes may result in the assessment that such clinics did not function to any extent. During the meeting of representatives of all legal clinics in Poland in the first quarter of 2022, information was obtained according to which in the case of the six legal clinics that suspended their operations to a predominant extent, this suspension was a temporary situation, and currently classes are being conducted, and student recruitment has been launched. The absence of students in the legal clinics was often caused by the fact that due to the implementation of distance learning, these students went to their hometowns. It is undisputed that the mobilization of students and the organization of clinical learning in the remote formula is very difficult, although it is not impossible. Certainly, customer-focused communication can be more difficult when it is done remotely. Everyone involved in the clinical learning process,
from students, coordinators, and tutors to clients, must face the fact that remote communication, although apparently simpler, in practice may be more difficult and time-consuming.

For this reason, while working to make the telephone or virtual communication of clients with students as effective as possible, clinic supervisors should pay special attention to the priorities and goals of the clinical program, as well as how to communicate with the beneficiaries of legal advice. It is also important to emphasize how to communicate with the client and to sensitize students to the needs and concerns of clients, especially those who do not have contact with modern technologies in their everyday life [3, 4]. The implementation of remote communication with clients of legal clinics also affects students who may feel a certain level of uncertainty and unfamiliarity with the organizational solutions used so far. On the other hand, the coordinators and tutors of legal clinics are also required to constantly respond to situations that they did not have to deal with in the traditional, stationary model of functioning of legal clinics. Such situations were noticeable especially in those universities where hybrid teaching was implemented (i.e., partially remote), or where, due to the disclosure of COVID-19 in one of the students or academic teachers, the entire exercise group or year group was directed to distance learning (e.g., implementation of hybrid duty hours).

There is also no doubt that building relationships with clients is a challenge in many situations. In particular, it is difficult in the case of distance conversations (over the phone or via ZOOM or MS Teams). Issues related to the often-limited access of clients to the Internet play an important role in making the best use of digital platforms and ensuring their effectiveness for clients. For this reason, it is extremely important to have skills in the most effective use of digital platforms and to ensure the effectiveness of their functioning from the perspective of clients of legal clinics [4]. COVID-19 has forced legal clinics to review available and used tools for distance learning. While the universality of access to the Internet is not questioned, in the case of employees of legal clinics and students, it was necessary to use their own equipment. Another obstacle was the imbalance observed between students in terms of the freedom to use modern tools. This, in turn, prompted the claim that the use of innovative technological solutions in legal education seems to be a way to go beyond the current model of traditional teaching, including clinical teaching of law. The pandemic naturally emphasized that creating a systemic approach to law and technology in the legal curriculum is an extremely important issue [5]. Effective implementation of this type of teaching and presenting possible solutions to students improves their qualifications and increases the level of skills as well as develops social competences. It is a very important element of the practical curriculum, which is particularly important in the professional work of a lawyer.

3. COVID-19 and changes in the provision of services by Legal Clinics and taking new initiatives

The pandemic has put pressure on the functioning of the system of justice, the legal system, and the activities of legal support service providers in various ways. In each of these areas, there was a noticeable change in the approach and reaction to the constantly emerging new needs, although these were not actions that were an immediate response to the emerging needs. It is possible to put forward a rather risky thesis, according to which the pandemic exacerbated the crisis in the functioning of the system of justice and had a negative impact on the legal awareness of the society. Disinformation as well as fragmentation of legal regulations created to counteract the spread of COVID-19 contributed to the popularization of the negative perception of the functioning of the legal industry. Looking from the perspective of universities and legal clinics – it inhibited the development of free legal counseling activities. It is noticeable that the needs of clients are different and more acute, and the challenge is to ensure the safety of students providing legal advice in a new, computerized formula. The uncertainty caused by the pandemic created very serious challenges related to maintaining the coherence and harmonization of activities addressed to persons who, due to their life situation, are under very high social pressure. In practice, most legal clinics had to deal with the need to organize work individually, while using the available infrastructure of universities with often minimal resources.

The pandemic limited the possibilities for students and supervisors to work face-to-face with clients, which required a shift to remote service delivery via telephone and digital platforms (e.g., Zoom and MS Teams). These activities also had a mobilizing effect on coordinators and tutors of the clinics in managing the relevant sections or legal clinics and in implementing decision-making processes important for the development of the clinic [4]. Considering the above, it can be concluded that the fundamental change is undoubtedly the introduction of on-line services and the use of technology to avoid face-to-face contact. This was manifested, inter alia, in the modernization of websites of legal clinics, enabling the clinic's client to submit an electronic form, in the updating and greater intensification of activities via social media (e.g., Facebook or Twitter), organizing on-line meetings ensuring the
anonymity of students providing legal assistance due to the inability to identify them. All these solutions contributed to the preservation of legal clinics and enabled their continued operation. This will certainly have a positive impact on the development of internet partnerships. At the same time, the services provided became more flexible and the network of cooperating entities developed. The activities of legal clinics also focused on developing the virtual options. This was conducive to the integration of legal circles and universities. This is a natural response of clinics to the pandemic. They have enormous potential to contribute to wider collaboration with other service providers. The benefits of the cooperation undertaken relate to the importance of building trust, effective communication and understanding that cooperation is a time-consuming process that requires a compromise.

The time of the pandemic, in which access to offices and other points where free legal assistance was provided was limited, became de facto an opportunity for university legal clinics to implement online activities with greater freedom. This was due to the infrastructure with which universities were relatively quickly equipped (e.g., MS Office 365, or ZOOM), as well as greater freedom in overcoming the boundaries of the previous formalism. Due to the implementation of distance learning, teachers and students could use Internet programs and applications (e.g., MS Teams), which allowed to avoid the need to rely on private telephones. Clinicians successfully benefited from the support of universities, gaining flexibility in offering hybrid and remote classes. On the other hand, the lack of communication or its difficulties or problems with maintaining a sense of community could have a negative impact on the way clinical learning is conducted. These problems are confirmed by the above-mentioned suspension of activity of 22% of legal clinics in Poland.

By analyzing the activities of legal clinics, taking into account the experience of the Legal Clinic of the University of Szczecin and other legal clinics in Poland, it is possible to conclude that the COVID-19 pandemic has become an opportunity not only to rethink the existing structure, but also to reorganize it. There has been an increase in the possibilities of running legal clinics in the virtual space, but also the need to look for new solutions. The period in which the possibility of direct contact was gradually restored became an excellent opportunity to implement the so-called mobile shifts and establish permanent cooperation with entities directing their activities to recipients who are also potential beneficiaries of services provided by legal clinics (e.g., seniors associated in senior academies or persons under the care of associations and organizations supporting families with domestic violence problems). As a consequence, the field of activity has been expanded to include areas where legal activity, not only in the field of counseling, but also education, was overlooked or even neglected. These actions are absolutely positive. It should not be forgotten that legal education, both theoretical and practical, has traditionally been based on personal learning. Due to the transfer of the clinic’s operation to the virtual space in the national arena, many conferences and seminars were organized, devoted not only to the situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. They concerned the current legal situation and current problems. Legal clinics have started looking for beneficiaries of their activities among persons who are not at risk of digital exclusion, who move freely in the virtual space. Also, cooperation with schools under the so-called Street law was held remotely in many clinics, which did not destroy the previous years of practice and cooperation.

It is also worth emphasizing that the standards of operation of legal clinics, which, inter alia, make it impossible to provide advice over the phone, are still in force. This is justified, most of all, by the lack of sufficient legal qualifications of the students on duty. For this reason, the mobilization in terms of reaching the beneficiaries of free legal advice was focused on increased promotion and use of various types of mass media – from online tools (publishing articles, submitting notes to non-governmental organizations supporting socially and legal excluded persons, performing information activities with the use of social media profiles), through radio and television broadcasts, to handing out leaflets in places where direct contact was limited but not completely turned off (e.g., churches, medical clinics, and support centers).

However, it is important to keep in mind that the COVID-19 pandemic has not eliminated the need for personal contact. From the perspective of the Legal Clinic operating at the University of Szczecin, I can say that with the return to traditional teaching, and consequently – the organization of traditional duty hours – the number of cases that clients report to the clinic has increased significantly. In the 2019/2020 academic year, it was just a few cases, and just in the first semester of the 2020/2021 academic year, this number was 36, and at the time of submitting the article for publication – over 120. Adequate motivation of students, organization of many training opportunities to develop the so-called soft qualifications could have had a positive impact on the increased number of students willing to follow the clinical curriculum in the post-COVID reality. This, in turn, has a positive effect on, for example, extending the
working hours of legal clinics, which in turn is crucial to reaching more clients. Extending the hours of operation, but also introducing the possibility of on-line communication with a legal clinic (introduction of electronic forms for client applications) increases the competitiveness of university legal clinics. In addition, the goal is also to meet the growing demand from beneficiaries of free legal advice, for whom it is impossible to come to the clinic, and for whom virtual contact and meetings are of key importance.

There is no doubt that the pandemic influenced not only the reorganization of the general principles of operation of legal clinics, and the use of modern forms of remote communication, but also the reconstruction and modernization of the infrastructure of legal clinics. The pandemic revealed many shortcomings not only in terms of current equipment. One of the biggest shortcomings revealed during the necessity to manage cases remotely and signaled by representatives of legal clinics was the lack of a system enabling efficient case management. The need to implement such solutions is primarily aimed at improving legal assistance services by streamlining the process of collecting, storing, using, and reporting data. What was and, in many cases, still is problematic was the lack of tools facilitating better communication, cooperation and reporting among coordinators and tutors as well as students involved in the work of legal clinics. In practice, managing the clinic’s affairs boiled down to creating ad hoc solutions, while using the possibilities of the implemented distance learning tools. Those were, most often, applications offered as part of MS Office (Teams, Forms, Planner). It is therefore possible to conclude that COVID-19 not only highlighted the shortcomings in this area, but also motivated representatives of legal clinics in the search for new opportunities to create a dedicated case management system. Undoubtedly, such a system should, in the first place, enable effective management of all types of cases. It should also simplify reporting, automate the processes of document circulation and gaining access to a given case to the maximum extent. Considering the above, it is possible to conclude that the pandemic has updated the need to professionalize activities within legal clinics not only in the modernization of infrastructure, but above all in the implementation of the case management system. Almost two years of distance learning was a great stimulus to intensify the search or start activities aimed at developing an application or system ensuring efficient management of the clinic's affairs and all activities conducted in it. Taking into account the free-of-charge nature of the activities in question, the process was often associated with the necessity to search for external sources of financing. Another solution is to establish cooperation with units creating this type of technological solutions and obtain the necessary support.

4. Summary

With successive waves of the pandemic, remote service delivery measures lasted much longer than initially anticipated. This situation influenced not only the organization of the work of legal clinics, but also the need to reorganize them, and often – to answer the question of where the contemporary model of university legal clinics is heading. Undoubtedly, the COVID-19 pandemic has also forced legal clinics to seek effective measures and rules of conduct. Throughout the undoubtedly difficult time, the management of legal clinics has been introducing innovation, at the same time adapting the ways of working to the demanding reality. The most important thing was to maintain and still allow the beneficiaries of free legal assistance access to legal clinics. On the one hand, the use of digital solutions has never been easier than during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, it should not be forgotten that the addressees of the activity of legal clinics are often the elderly, deprived of the possibility of accessing the Internet and digital services. This naturally forced the necessity to undertake new initiatives, establish cooperation and increase promotion in areas where the use of traditional methods of communication was more effective.

The statistics showing that 6 out of 27 legal clinics in Poland (22%) were forced to suspend their operation is not very optimistic. Importantly, these were the centers with a tendency to operate fairly efficiently over the years, both from the perspective of the number of students and tutors operating in legal clinics, and the number of cases received. These data show that the introduced limitations resulting directly from the need to keep social distance also limited the effectiveness of counseling activities. Fortunately, in the current academic year, these clinics returned to their traditional functioning, which means that legal advice is still provided in 27 places all over Poland. It should also be emphasized that many clinics have successfully used modern technological solutions, modified the way they function and established cooperation with other organizations or legal self-governments. It seems that the improvements implemented at these clinics will also remain in the time following the end of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic.

Looking to the future of the functioning of legal clinics, it is possible to say that the solutions implemented during
the pandemic and the cooperation established during the pandemic will also be maintained. The transition to on-line teaching and services forced by the pandemic makes it possible to use technology to reshape the organizational structure of the clinic and to rebuild the principles of its operation. Both the continuation of close cooperation with lawyers and other organizations supporting legal clinics should be maintained. It is possible to state with a high degree of probability that both virtual and hybrid learning will continue in the future [8]. On the one hand, we are dealing with the precedent nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, forcing the implementation of a modern teaching model in traditionally operating legal clinics. On the other hand, the need to modernize teaching methods existed before, but without the implementation of appropriate educational tools it was not possible. Currently, it is increasingly emphasized that the use of modern technological solutions in education, as well as the work of a lawyer, is an indispensable practical skill [8]. It seems that in this regard the pandemic had a positive impact on the current way of implementing clinical legal teaching.

In conclusion, it seems reasonable to make a positive assessment for every, even the smallest, initiative taken by the authorities of legal clinics to mitigate the negative impact of COVID-19 on their functioning and the provision of free legal assistance. The pandemic contributed to unprecedented changes, confronting the authorities of legal clinics with difficult decisions and the need to adapt to new circumstances. It seems that this experience, although initially weakened the activities of legal clinics in Poland, ultimately strengthened them. The clinics strengthened their weak sides, became active in the national field by organizing joint ventures, and moreover – they modernized the current model of functioning of legal clinics in Poland. It seems that preparing written legal opinions and conducting seminars with students is currently the basic activity of legal clinics, but not the only one. This is evidenced by the large number of initiatives and organized events. It should also be emphasized that persons at risk of digital exclusion, preferring personal contact, found it difficult to accept the attractive, as it seems, possibility of online contact. On the other hand, the offer of on-line legal assistance is extremely beneficial for persons who lived in places distant from a given legal clinic or had difficulties in reaching the head office of the legal clinic. The inability to participate in the free legal assistance system also marginalized and adversely affected their legal situation. For this reason, the implementation of modern technological solutions and on-line consultations or electronic customer application forms to legal clinics during COVID-19 should be maintained. These solutions should not only constitute an alternative form of client contact with students, but also become a used form of communication between students and coordinators and tutors, as well as in student-student relations. For this reason, it is hoped that the situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic ultimately had a positive effect on refreshing the potential of clinical activity, going beyond the traditional model of free legal advice, and improving the current model of education. Although the impetus for changes in clinical legal education were the tragic events related to the COVID-19 pandemic, it resulted in a creative development of legal clinics. As a result, apart from the discussed changes taking place in Poland, in the future – following the example of European countries – other solutions may be implemented, such as online legal clinics, smartphone applications, or the ongoing use of virtual reality. Students, who have the opportunity to engage in more initiatives offered online, may also benefit from a better assessment of their clinical activity.

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