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UNIVERZITA, KTORÁ PODPORUJE BEZPEČNOSŤ V INTERKULTÚRNOM PROSTREDÍ

A UNIVERSITY THAT FOSTERS SAFETY IN AN INTERCULTURAL ENVIRONMENT

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Abstrakt: Článok prezentuje výsledky analýzy existujúcich zdrojov týkajúcich sa bezpečnosti v medzikultúrnom prostredí na Univerzite Mikuláša Kopernika v Toruni (Poľsko). Cieľom analýzy je identifikovať inštitucionálne základy a stratégie implementácie opatrení na zabezpečenie bezpečnosti a tým aj blahobytu akademickej obce. Prijaté iniciatívy (inštitucionálne a strategické) sú v súlade s filozofiou sociálne zodpovednej univerzity, ktorá sa v oblasti bezpečnosti opiera o tri piliere: prioritu bezpečného a rovnocenného prostredia, integráciu prostredníctvom aktívnych programov a dôležitosť aktívneho partnerstva.

Kľúčové slová: bezpečnosť, blahobyt, akademické a multikultúrne prostredie, Univerzita Mikuláša Kopernika v Toruni.

Abstract: This paper presents the results of an analysis of existing sources concerning safety in an intercultural environment at Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń (Poland). The aim of the analysis is to identify the institutional foundations and implementation strategies of activities that support safety and, consequently, the well-being of the academic community. The initiatives undertaken (both institutional and strategic) align with the philosophy of a socially responsible university, which bases its approach to safety on three pillars: prioritising a safe and equal environment, integration through active programmes, and active partnerships.

Keywords: safety, well-being, academic and multicultural environment, Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń.

Introduction

Modern universities extend beyond explicit and traditional functions of education, increasingly fulfilling new, previously latent roles: absorption, anomie, segmentation, and new client groups (Góralaska, 2003). In particular, the emergence of new client groups, combined with living and studying in turbulent and uncertain times, requires higher education institutions to undertake innovative actions aimed at strengthening both physical and psychological safety and, consequently, enhancing the well-being of the academic community. Research on the well-being of the Nicolaus Copernicus University (NCU) community during the COVID-19 pandemic (Przyborowska et al., 2022, pp. 303–328) revealed that students reported the lowest levels of well-being across all examined dimensions (general; relational; health, sense of safety, satisfaction; emotional). They were followed by doctoral students and non-academic staff, while academic teachers demonstrated the highest levels of well-being. The pandemic and other events and phenomena, such as disinformation, cyberattacks, hybrid threats, and the increasing risk of extreme weather events, have generated widespread anxiety and disrupted the sense of safety on a global scale.

In this context, the role of universities in transmitting knowledge and in developing skills and social attitudes that contribute to fostering both personal safety and the safety of the academic community is becoming increasingly important. This paper analyses the structures and strategies implemented at Nicolaus Copernicus University (NCU) in Poland that are aimed at creating a safe environment for a diverse student community. The NCU approach is grounded in the philosophy of sustainable development and the social responsibility of universities, with a strong emphasis on well-being and social cohesion. The analysis demonstrates that the effectiveness of the NCU model lies in the synergy between institutional safety guarantees and proactive support and integration programmes, which together create an ecosystem conducive to students' academic and social development.

2. Institutional frameworks ensuring safety

The contemporary academic environment requires formal institutional structures to ensure safety, including equality and fair treatment for all members of the academic community. Accordingly, over time, NCU has established successive positions within its administrative structure to oversee and expertly shape the conditions of study and work that support the well-being of the academic community.

First, the Academic Ombudsman was appointed, serving a dual role: mediating conflict situations and providing legal advice. The Ombudsman's presence ensures that all students and staff have access to impartial support, establishing the foundation for institutional trust and the maintenance of procedural justice.

Next, the Deputy Rector for Equal Treatment was appointed, demonstrating the importance that Nicolaus Copernicus University attaches to the promotion of equality (including gender equality) and the prevention of discrimination. The primary aim is to ensure that the University becomes increasingly diverse and community oriented.

Drawing on the cooperation and experience of the Academic Ombudsman and the Deputy Rector for Equal Treatment, a proposal was submitted to establish the Deputy Rector for Counteracting Mobbing. This position has been in operation at NCU since the 2024/2025 academic year.

In the meantime, the Deputy Rector for Safety was appointed. The Deputy Rector works in cooperation with the Specialist for Defence Affairs, Civil Protection, Civil Defence, and Crisis Management to promote attitudes and activities that enhance safety, prevent threats, and provide assistance in the event that such threats arise.

The activities undertaken by the aforementioned specialists are grounded in the philosophy of sustainable development and the university's social responsibility, which are also overseen by Coordinators appointed by the Rector (for Sustainable Development and for the University's Social Responsibility). Further information on the institutional framework ensuring safety is available at: <https://www.umk.pl/wsparcie-mediacje-bezpieczenstwo/>

3. University Centre for Support and Personal Development as an institution initiating and integrating safety-enhancing activities

A meta-analysis of studies conducted in academic environments between 2018 and 2024 indicates that the global academic community experiences an alarmingly high prevalence of mental health issues. These primarily include anxiety and depressive disorders, as well as elevated stress levels, and, in the case of academic staff, professional burnout (2024, p. 8). The COVID-19 pandemic

prompted open discussions about mental health challenges and the need for institutional support. This, in turn, provided the impetus for establishing the University Centre for Support and Personal Development (UOWiRO) at NCU in 2020.

At the Centre, individuals can access psychological and psychiatric consultations. These services are most frequently used by students – approximately five hundred per year – who receive a total of around 1,500 hours of consultations, a portion of which is referred to psychiatric care (about four hundred hours annually).

Based on an analysis of the academic community's needs, University Centre for Support and Personal Development organises campaigns on a variety of topics relevant to the NCU community. These campaigns employ diverse methods of information dissemination and education, with a particular emphasis on the prevention of risky behaviours. Between 2023 and 2026, the following campaigns were conducted:

1. *Move! At Your Desk* – a health campaign promoting physical activity through exercises led by an instructor at the desk.
2. *Don't Disappear* – a mental health prevention campaign during which all sixteen faculties of NCU were visited with presentations, leaflets, and a wheel of fortune.
3. *Be Yourself - Diversity and Inclusion* – an equality campaign in which stickers were distributed for doors and pins for ambassadors bearing the campaign slogan.
4. *From Burnout to Passion* – a professional burnout prevention campaign presenting the results of a study conducted at NCU and offering workshops for staff.
5. *Feel Safe* – an informational and educational campaign conducted in cooperation with the Police and Fire Service, complemented by ongoing training sessions.
6. *Your Move* – an addiction prevention campaign (currently in preparation).

Further information on University Centre for Support and Personal Development activities can be found at: <https://wsparcie.umk.pl/>

In implementing its campaigns, the Centre collaborates with individuals responsible for the University's institutional safety framework (as described above). In this way, activities are integrated to provide comprehensive support to the academic community.

Additional support is offered to students with disabilities, including scholarships, transportation, assistive learning devices, teaching assistants, and integration meetings (<https://bon.umk.pl/>). Feedback from participants in University Centre for Support and Personal Development initiatives indicates that their sense of safety, and, consequently, their overall well-being at NCU, gradually increases over time.

4. Strategic initiatives for intercultural dialogue

Institutional safeguards provide a solid foundation for the development of an authentic academic community. Only within such a well-established sense of safety can this community freely cultivate open intercultural dialogue.

The strategy of Nicolaus Copernicus University directed towards international students rests on two pillars: structured programmes that promote interaction and individualised, adaptive support. Support and integration programmes are provided by the Copernican Integration Centre (Kopernikański Ośrodek Integracji - KOI)⁴. The Centre serves as a platform for promoting direct interactions between Polish and international students. Through the organisation of workshops,

⁴ The Copernican Integration Centre was established on the occasion of the 550th anniversary of Nicolaus Copernicus's birth as a joint investment by the City of Toruń and Nicolaus Copernicus University. It is open not only to students but also to the residents of Toruń.

meetings, and events dedicated to cultural exchange, KOI actively breaks down barriers and builds social capital, which forms the foundation of a genuinely integrated community. Moreover, Copernican Integration Centre offers distinctive infrastructure conducive to integrative activities, including shared social spaces in the basements of a former water pumping station, quiet study rooms located in the tower, and a thoughtfully designed outdoor environment featuring a gazebo, hammocks, and a community garden.

A complementary component of the inclusive strategy is a system of direct support for international students, coordinated by the International Point. This unit provides comprehensive assistance in key areas of adaptation, including legal matters, housing, and general orientation to university life. Ensuring this fundamental support constitutes a strategic investment in students' academic and social success, enabling them to focus on their studies and on building relationships. The activities of KOI are supported and further expanded by the Academic Centre for Culture and the Arts "Od Nowa" and the Student Activity Centre "Kotłownia."

The University also invests in targeted education to equip students with the skills needed to function in a diverse environment. Workshops on intercultural communication and mental well-being provide students with tools to navigate multicultural settings effectively. This is essential for building lasting relationships and managing the challenges of academic life.

The activities of Nicolaus Copernicus University take place within a broader European context. The University actively participates in programmes that promote student mobility and multicultural engagement, such as Erasmus+ and the YUFE alliance (Young Universities for the Future of Europe). These initiatives not only enrich the academic environment but also function as deliberate strategic instruments, reinforcing the University's international character and exposing students to global perspectives.

Together, these multi-layered efforts form the NCU's comprehensive integration strategy.

Conclusions

The case study of Nicolaus Copernicus University demonstrates how a strategic, multi-dimensional approach can effectively promote safety and integration within the academic environment. The model implemented at NCU is based on a harmonious combination of institutional frameworks and support programmes, fostering a supportive and inclusive organisational culture.

The core pillars of the NCU's strategy are:

1. Prioritising a safe and equal environment: Creating a safe space supported by formal structures that ensure equal treatment.
2. Integration through active programmes: The University deliberately leverages educational, social, and cultural initiatives to foster connections among diverse student groups, transforming diversity into community strength.
3. Active partnerships: NCU recognises that its mission extends beyond the campus and actively engages with the city, local organisations, and international partners to strengthen support systems and social bonds.

The example of Nicolaus Copernicus University illustrates how higher education institutions can successfully balance academic objectives with social responsibility, contributing to the development of genuinely inclusive societies.

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