

Higher Education Institutions in Ukraine during the Coronavirus, or COVID-19, Outbreak: New Challenges vs New Opportunities

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Abstract: In a matter of weeks the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has changed students' way of learning across the globe. These changes let us envisage how education can modify for better or otherwise for worse over the long term. COVID-19 2019/2020 has encouraged Higher Education Institutions in Ukraine to make innovative decisions in a relatively short period of time. To provide distance education in Ukrainian universities during the quarantine there have been introduced offline and online courses through various web servers, platforms, resources, and social media: Moodle, Zoom, Skype, Viber, Telegram, Messenger, Google-class etc. The summarized results of the questionnaire among Ukrainian students provided an opportunity to identify difficulties and benefits of introduced distance-learning. The sources to provide the information for this work included regulations issued by public authorities in Ukraine (Head of State, executive and legislative bodies) as well as directives to administrations of Ukrainian higher education institutions.

Keywords: *pandemic; distance education; university; Ukraine.*

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1. Introduction

“As a result of declaration of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic well over a billion and a half young people are now unable to attend classes because of nationwide education institution closures in 165 countries”, UNESCO Director-General Audrey Azoulay informed. Taking into consideration unprecedented uncertainty that was caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and its likely continuation for a long period of time, the goal to analyse the problems and ways of their solution in higher education institutions in Ukraine during the pandemic has been set. Ukrainian experience may appear useful for the educational community when developing pandemic response and management plans.

2. Literature review

Nowadays there are only few publications about the impact of the 2019/2020 pandemic on different areas of social, economic and political life worldwide. In the higher education sector, the research by G.Tam & D.El-Azar into the implementation of innovative technologies and formation of public-private educational partnerships in education during the pandemic deserves consideration (Tam & El-Azar, 2020).

In this paper the main references include regulations issued by the parliament (Law of Ukraine, 2018), the President (Presidential Decree, 2020), the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine, the Cabinet of Ministers (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, 2020) and the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine (Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, 2013; Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, 2016; Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, 2020); directives for rectors of Ukrainian universities (Hryhorii Skovoroda Kharkiv National Pedagogical University - <http://hnpu.edu.ua>; Ternopil Volodymyr Hnatiuk National Pedagogical University - <http://tnpu.edu.ua>; Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv - <http://www.univ.kiev.ua/ru/>).

3. Results

In Ukraine, the first reaction to the coronavirus for higher education institutions was in the letters from the MES, which recommended universities to provide distance learning for students from China and Southeast Asian countries (Tam & El-Azar, 2020). These security measures were taken in response to the letter from the Secretary of the National Security and Defense Council (Decree of the President of Ukraine, 2020). As

officials claimed, those measures should ensure the continuity of the educational process and let us take into account all circumstances related to the coronavirus situation (2019-nCoV).

At the present time (February – early March 2020) Ukrainian students continued their studies according to the usual schedule, but in the middle of March, following the Decree of the President of Ukraine (Decree of the President of Ukraine, 2020), the Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, 2020) and the letter from the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, University administrations issued the orders, which provided: the establishment of coordination councils / teams to ensure full-scale institutions' operations during the pandemic; switching over to distance learning technologies for undergraduate, graduate and postgraduate students; prohibition of holding educational, cultural, sports and other mass events; prohibition of sending doctoral students and teaching staff to business trips both throughout the territory of Ukraine and abroad. In addition, dormitory permit system monitoring has been strengthened.

Thus, the coronavirus outbreak predetermined the first challenge for the Ukrainian society in general, and for educators in particular, i.e. the demand for "social distance". From 23.03 to 26.03.2020 the department of political, social and cultural studies at H.S. Skovoroda Kharkiv National Pedagogical University carried out a survey where it offered Ukrainian higher education institution students and lecturers online questionnaires regarding socio-economic issues during the coronavirus pandemic. From 27.03 to 29.03.2020, 2789 filled-in questionnaires were processed. Respondents selection was randomized. The essential selection criteria were studying or teaching at Ukrainian higher education institutions. The availability of two subgroups aimed at the representativeness of the survey, which is crucial: students were aged 17-23 and belonged to the students' community, lecturers included the faculty staff of Ukrainian higher education institutions. The margin of error was up to 5%.

The summarized findings of the questionnaire survey among Ukrainian students show young people's high level of civic responsibility, as they answer the question "Do you follow the instructions and stay at home?" 82% said "yes", 12% said "I meet friends from time to time" and only 3% said "I haven't changed my habits". At the same time, being asked: "Are you ready to join social campaigns?", 56% confirmed their determination to volunteer during the quarantine.

The next challenge was the requirement to continue the training process and switch from full-time / part-time to distance learning almost

immediately. Despite the fact that in most Ukrainian universities, the elements of distance learning had been introduced into the educational process (mainly offline), online seminars on distance learning had been held annually at various higher education institutions, distance universities training centres had worked, but in the transition to distance learning during the quarantine many issues have been raised.

The questionnaire among Ukrainian students and lecturers on the application of distance learning during the quarantine revealed the following:

1. Technical issues. The reality has shown that not all higher education institutions have been technically prepared. Consequently, lectures and seminars were replaced by conference calls, teachers used Google Classroom service to create subject sites, knowledge was assessed via word-document tests, preparation and presentation of projects was performed via Skype, new platforms, resources and social networks that came in handy: Moodle, Zoom, Skype, Viber, Telegram, and Messenger. Teachers started using external distance learning systems (such as Prometheus) as additional material.

2. Psychological problems. Students noted: the lack of live communication; inability to retake missed practical classes; considerable increase in tasks; lack of time to complete tasks; obligation to carry out their family duties of controlling / taking care of younger siblings, since schools were closed while online classes were held; limited access to the computer, as parents were also transferred to remote work.

According to the lecturers, they faced such psychological problems: inability to have individual counselling for students; increase in time for correspondence with students, because online courses have more detailed homework description than the usual classroom lessons.

Among the positive aspects of using distance learning Ukrainian, lecturers and students (according to the survey results) indicated that:

1. The quality of distance education is not inferior to the quality of face-to-face training, as modern teaching aids are used.

2. Students point out the positive impact of distance learning: the development of discipline and self-organization; offline training mode makes it possible to get education at a convenient time and place; equal access to education regardless of place of residence, health or social status, etc.

3. Teaching staff point out the updated role of the teacher, who becomes a mentor-advisor coordinating the process of learning, constantly improving the courses he or she teaches and enhancing creativity and skills in accordance with improvements and innovations.

The results of the survey showed that faculties of humanities and nature studies as well as technical and mathematics faculties in the Ukrainian universities adapted to the situation quite quickly. The most difficult situation is for specialties requiring vast space, special conditions and professional equipment: physical education and sports, choreography, musical art etc.

4. Conclusion

Thus, introduction of the quarantine during the coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic identified not only new problems in higher education institutions of Ukraine, but also new challenges and new opportunities for post-secondary education institutions from three perspectives:

- for students, it is the time for self-discipline and self-education;
- for teachers, it is the experience of mastering the latest methodology and tools of distance learning;
- for structural units of universities in general, it is hands-on testing of the technical capabilities of distance learning; defining a clear strategy of distance learning where students not only acquire knowledge, but also collaborate with teachers in feedback mode; the awareness of the need of quick updating the content for learning at home has been brought.

Further research into the operations of higher education institutions during the pandemic should be dedicated to analysing organizational work of administrations and subdivisions, students' training process, dormitory functioning, communication links, as well as psychological and medical care.

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