
Remote learning during the war: challenges for higher education in Ukraine**Olena Galynska**

Faculty of Hotel, Restaurant and Tourism Business, National University of Food Technologies, Kyiv, Ukraine, Associate Professor, PhD in Philology
ORCID: 0000-0001-8755-1099

Svitlana Bilous

Faculty of Hotel, Restaurant and Tourism Business, National University of Food Technologies, Kyiv, Ukraine, Teacher

To cite this article:

Galynska Olena, Bilous Svitlana. Remote learning during the war: challenges for higher education in Ukraine. International Science Journal of Education & Linguistics. Vol. 1, No. 5, 2022, pp. 1-6
doi: 10.46299/j.isjel.20220105.01.

Received: 08 19, 2022; **Accepted:** 10 01, 2022; **Published:** 12 01, 2022

Abstract: This study analyses the challenges the higher education of Ukraine, university students and teachers face in wartime, as well as considers accessibility and effectiveness of remote learning. This is done by examining the National University of Food Technologies and its remote learning experience due to the Russia's aggression in February, 2022. While many universities have similar problems nowadays, every institution has its own unique ones (location of education agents; possibility for teachers to create new courses and/or improve the existing ones downloading the materials and tests; access to resources for the students; access to academic support). Despite the fact that the National University of Food Technologies has already had its own distance platform since 2015-2016 and have been constantly improving it the last 2-3 years especially because of Covid pandemic-2020, the wartime caused a lot of problems preventing access for the students to get a quality education. The research considers the benefits offered by remote learning for the students and teachers, and difficulties connected with low accessibility and even impossibility for both educational agents to continue educational process. On the one hand, study progress is not really feasible or sustainable when students live in situations of war or occupation. On the other hand, the article demonstrates that remote learning is capable of delivering the educational goals of the university to the areas affected by the war.

Key words: remote learning, higher education, consequences of war, students, impact.

1. Introduction

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic that spread globally in 2020, education courses were subsequently offered in fully remote, online format [1; 2]. The pandemic created opportunities for educators to use online learning to prevent students from falling behind academically, but it has created challenges as well. Although many students have benefited from remote learning during the pandemic, those from low-income families have experienced more obstacles that impede academic progress. The pandemic presented great challenges to higher education. Universities had to change their infrastructure to full remote teaching and learning environments in a very short time. Lecturers and students were forced to adjust their established routines and concepts of teaching and learning [3].

Although, Russia's war against Ukraine posed even bigger challenges to the higher education. The next day after the beginning of the Russian full-scale invasion into Ukraine on February 24, the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine recommended pausing the education process in

education institutions at all levels and starting a two-week vacation. Since then, a part of the Ukrainian territory has become temporarily occupied, a number of cities, towns and villages have been turned into active battlegrounds. More than 10 million people have been forced to leave their homes: 6.5 million moved within the country, and 3.9 million went abroad. As of the beginning of June, over 1,900 schools and universities have been damaged or destroyed since Russia's invasion on February 24, according to Ukraine's Education Ministry [4]. Refugees and internally displaced people faced a lot of barriers to education.

However, since March 14, 2022 the education process has begun to resume in the regions where the security situation allowed it. The decisions as to where and how classes should be held were made by regional governments and education institutions. The students who have left their homes can resume their studies in their temporary locations of residence, both in Ukraine and abroad. The education workers who are able to work can do it from anywhere within or outside the country. Those of them who cannot work still keep their jobs and salaries: this was guaranteed by the amendments to education laws introduced on March 20 [5].

2. Object and subject of the research

The subject of the research is remote learning at high schools during the wartime. The object of the research is a description of the conditions and challenges the Ukrainian higher education faces nowadays. The important issue is to analyse the impact of war on the students. The impact and consequences of armed conflicts on education have been described and distinguished based on the researches of the American, British and other investigators.

3. Purpose and tasks of the research

The main purpose of the paper is to give an overview of the higher education situation in Ukraine starting from the end of February 2022 until now. The tasks are as follows: 1) describe the impact and consequences of armed conflicts on education and educational agents, 2) analyse the challenges university students and teachers face in wartime.

4. Analysis of the recent research and publications

The economic, political and social consequences of civil wars are immense. Armed conflicts, their effects and consequences for the community and education have been studied by many researches.

The short and long-term impact of armed conflicts on education and educational agents (students, teachers and students' parents) is investigated in the article "Impact of armed conflicts on education and educational agents". The results of the research show that interruption because of war causes unwillingness to return to education. One of the reasons is the inadequate economic conditions of some families, forcing the students to search for work [6]. The second negative impact of war is damage of the schools and universities as a result of bombing and fires. One more thing is that spending on education is significantly lower and spending on defence is significantly higher. The consequences of armed conflicts were carefully studied by the group of researchers who are sure that consequences of war extend far beyond the direct deaths. In addition to battlefield casualties, armed conflict often leads to forced migration, refugee flows, capital flight, and the destruction of societies' infrastructure. Social, political, and economic institutions are indelibly harmed. The consequences of war, and especially civil war, for development are profound [7].

American researches consider two main aspects of war impact. The first, it destroys a state's system of education through the loss of infrastructure and personnel. Second, a less deleterious cause may be the drawing away of funds for increased military expenditures to fight the war [8, p. 277]. Other scientists studied the effects of armed conflicts on educational attainment and inequality. They

outlined such effects of war conflict as damaged school infrastructure, loss of human capacity, and the risks to safety and security of students and staff in a situation of active conflict; conflicts undermine educational opportunity [9, p. 2-3].

The British researcher Patricia Justino in her investigation of the violent conflict impact on individual educational outcomes pointed to long-term destructive effects of wars. They break social cohesion, destroy infrastructure and create political instability and insecurity in property rights. Moreover, wars have negative impact on education, labour and health of individuals and households. The researcher describes the microeconomic impact of war on civilian populations as well that can be substantial and persistent. Not only do people living in war zones suffer injuries, death and have their property destroyed, they may also be displaced from their homes and lose their means of survival [10, p. 3].

The long-term effects of war exposure on civic engagement were studied by Joan Barceló who defined short-term and long-term effects of war [11].

A lot of attention was paid to the factors contributing to student academic underachievement in war and conflict and students' mental health [12; 13]. Low academic achievement is found to be associated with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). According to the results of study, students living in war conditions experience multiple traumas and stressful conditions which can severely challenge their development, mental health, memory and academic functioning. All students exhibited symptoms of traumatic stress, had considerable problems with the cognitive process of learning and lacked basic study techniques. They experienced a considerable weakening of their natural social support system through lack of care, safety, or stability at home.

5. Methods of the research

Research as a systematic method discovers new facts or confirms and supplements previously conducted researches. Remote learning in the article is viewed from the theoretical point of view. Our theoretical survey includes observation method. Through observation it is necessary to reveal different aspects of the research problem that we explain, because observation serves to delimit the research area.

Using the qualitative exploratory research method, this study aims to explore ways of providing higher education to the university students, and to identify the challenges facing their implementation. The method of explanation proceeds from the general understanding of the benefits offered by remote learning during the Russia's war in Ukraine to the difficulties to deliver the quality higher education to the students living in the areas affected by the war.

6. Discussion

According to the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack – which includes United Nations agencies and non-governmental organizations such as Human Rights Watch – there has been a pattern of attacks on students and teachers in at least 27 countries around the world since 2013. State security forces and non-state armed groups have targeted students, teachers, academics, teachers' unions and education institutions for political, military, ideological, ethnic or religious reasons. These attacks have included killings, enforced disappearances, abductions, forced exile, imprisonment, torture, maiming, destroying educational buildings and materials, sexual violence, and recruitment, as well as the military use of schools. During armed conflict, government or opposition forces use schools and universities as bases, barracks, observation posts, storage for weapons, detention and interrogation centres [14].

According to *Education under Attack 2022*, a report published by the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA), more than 9,000 students, teachers, and academics were harmed, injured, or killed in attacks on education during armed conflicts worldwide over the past two years. More than 5,000 separate attacks on education facilities, students, and educators, or incidents of

military use, took place in 2020 and 2021, a significant increase over the previous two years. And over a thousand schools and universities have been damaged in Ukraine since February 24, 2022, according to Ukraine's Ministry of Education and Science and civil society groups.

According to the May brief "Education: Impact of the War in Ukraine (May 2022)" the war in Ukraine has resulted in more than 6 million Ukrainians to flee to neighboring countries. This includes nearly 665,000 students (16% of total number of enrolled students) and over 25,000 educators (6% of total educators in the country). Displacement has had a significant impact on education service delivery, along with damage and destruction of educational facilities [15]. No doubt that all agents of education are affected in these circumstances: students, teachers, the university environment, infrastructure, curriculum, and families. As the student is the key component of the education process, we analyse the impact of war on the students. In Ukraine the student-centered approach in teaching has been paid much attention lately. It makes students co-creators of their own education, engaging them in decisions how, when and what they learn. In doing so, student-centered learning helps the university prepare students not only with academic knowledge, but also with the important skills of creativity, collaboration, adaptability, self-direction and others. Remote learning (e.g. in times of Covid-19 pandemic) may limit to some extent the development of these skills, and the war implies a serious alteration in the development of students' skills. However, from the other hand, it provides the opportunity for students to get the education in unstable, difficult and often even dangerous conditions. The special feature of such an emergency remote education is that it is an unplanned practice, with no option than to use any kind of offline and/or online resources that may be at hand.

The study of the effectiveness and potential of e-learning in war zones demonstrated that e-learning is capable of delivering the educational goals of higher learning institutions to the areas wrecked by wars. In opinion of the article's author, e-learning offers students a safe learning environment, engaging platforms, and most importantly, a quality education [16]. Besides, the results indicate that there is no statistical or practical difference between online and face-to-face learning with respect to student performance, however, we partly agree with such a conclusion.

It is necessary to point out that students of the National University of Food Technologies are those living in all regions of Ukraine. Thus, as the eastern and southern regions were often bombed, the access to remote learning was limited and sometimes impossible. The students could return to their study when they had the Internet access and possibilities. As a result of this and some other factors one can observe a decrease of academic performance at the end of the spring semester. Some students claimed they felt alone which was a deciding factor in dropping their performance. That is why teachers and department staff tried to support their students and create a sense of community. To provide that, the university distance platform was used, as well as other possible means of connection and communication (Zoom conferencing, e-mails, Viber, Telegram and others). Moreover, the university provided the opportunity for students and teachers to attend different webinars with psychologists who discussed the difficult and stressful situations connected with war.

Time management is an important factor that makes students abandon distance learning. Many students of the university started volunteering, working and helping the army at the very beginning of Russia's aggression. They state that finding the time to complete their studies was a challenge.

Another of the main consequences which derive from armed conflicts are the psychological and mental disorders students can suffer during and after the war conflict. Very often students suffer from at least one form of trauma, among the most common of which are depression, sorrow, irritability, distraction, emotional instability, aggression, sleeping difficulty, nightmares, isolation, symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder, nervousness, loss of the ability to concentrate and passivity. That is why the important role of teaching staff and department staff was not only to teach, coordinate and organize the students, but also provide psychological support, encouragement and advice.

No doubt that now Ukrainian students are facing a lot of challenges in continuing their education. These challenges can be categorized into two main factors: psychological and security-related.

Psychological challenges. Being exposed to war, death, and displacement from home are considered to be the most damaging factors for the development of adolescents (17-19-year-old

students) who are highly susceptible to psychological trauma. In addition, the trauma has long-term effects and causes psychological problems. Consequently, many psychological problems are associated with negative expectations about the future and have a large negative impact on education and learning capability. According to the research which presents the data of the American Psychiatric Association, major depressive disorders (MDD), high levels of emotional distress, conduct disorders (CD), attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorders (ADHD) are among common symptoms of war trauma known as PTSDs (Posttraumatic Stress Disorder) [17, p. 574]. Those students who experience traumatic events develop a feeling of helplessness, isolation, and depression.

Security challenges. Internally displaced refugees who relocate because of losing their homes which have been damaged or completely destroyed move to other localities inside their country, are also considered at risk. They face the same problems as other refugees. Host localities are often unable to handle the arrival, accommodate and provide support for the large numbers of refugees causing tension in the community.

In our opinion, higher education as a tool to economic development and social stability is able to reduce the negative effects that students experience due to the war conflict, and provides them with the hope of a positive future. Education helps the university students to be more confident and motivated.

7. Perspectives for further research

Further researches will be devoted to a further and deeper understanding of the consequences of the war conflicts on higher education, as well as explanation of the so-called institutional challenges which the students often face, especially those leaving Ukraine as refugees (for instance, language barrier).

8. Conclusion

To conclude, we can say the Russian war is now a part of our daily life which strongly restricts the possibilities of education access for many Ukrainian students. It has caused many problems that are threatening the whole higher education system. Thousands of Ukrainian students are out of the universities. Many universities are unsuitable because they have been destroyed.

The task of the university staff was and remains to try to meet the needs of students in war, and to act accordingly providing quality education. The current imperative need was to keep students engaged and enable them to successfully complete the 2022 academic year. As the situation of the last months has demonstrated, the war and remote learning confidently came into our lives. To evaluate the quality of the last one is difficult enough but possible. Study disruptions due to war have persistent negative effects on learning because they impact all elements of a student's opportunity to learn (less time spent on learning, lower quality of instruction via remote/online modalities, leading to less content covered during instruction; as a result, students' lower academic performance). At the same time we can say that remote learning has its positive sides. The valuable experience is worth studying and developing. We need to adequately assess the drawbacks, take into account possible risks and find out the tools and mechanisms to reduce destructive consequences of the war.

This war became an enormous challenge for higher education of Ukraine, for students and teachers. A lot of things were reevaluated. Remote learning offers the students optimum learning environment, using the distance platform and other tools. And what is very important, remote learning provides a quality education in wartime at the National University of Food Technologies.

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