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Adaptation of internally displaced students to new learning environment through innovative methods of open teacher training in war perspectives

Adaptación de estudiantes desplazados internamente a nuevos entornos de aprendizaje mediante métodos innovadores de formación docente abierta en perspectivas de guerra

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Abstract

The article investigates the impact of innovative open learning technologies on training future teachers, particularly those internally displaced in Ukraine due to the war with Russia. It explores the current conditions of these students and how to meet their educational needs through online learning. The successful adaptation of displaced students relies on government's social, legal, and academic support, highlighting the importance of online learning in war response. The methodology involved surveying 437 displaced students from Ukrainian higher education institutions, using various questionnaires. Data on inputs, outputs, and outcomes of online learning programs were collected and analyzed. Both benefits (continuous access to learning, flexibility, low economic cost, access to international programs) and risks (lack of socialization, insufficient technical support, resource imbalance) were assessed. The findings indicate that adaptation challenges are mainly linked to poor living conditions, stress, and changes in learning conditions and curriculum. The study concludes that open learning technologies facilitate the adaptation of displaced students, ensuring educational continuity and adherence to international standards.

Keywords: digital tools, education policy, higher education, socialization, teacher training.

Resumen

El artículo examina el impacto de tecnologías innovadoras de aprendizaje abierto en la formación de futuros docentes, especialmente estudiantes desplazados internamente en Ucrania debido a la guerra con Rusia.



Se investigaron las condiciones actuales de estos estudiantes y cómo satisfacer sus necesidades educativas a través del aprendizaje en línea. La adaptación exitosa de los estudiantes desplazados depende del apoyo social, legal y académico del gobierno, destacando la importancia del aprendizaje en línea en respuesta a la guerra. La metodología incluyó encuestas a 437 estudiantes desplazados de instituciones de educación superior ucranianas, utilizando cuestionarios variados. Se recolectaron y analizaron datos sobre insumos, resultados y efectos de los programas de aprendizaje en línea. Los beneficios (acceso continuo al aprendizaje, flexibilidad, bajo costo económico, acceso a programas internacionales) y riesgos (falta de socialización, soporte técnico insuficiente, desequilibrio de recursos) fueron evaluados. Los resultados mostraron que las principales dificultades de adaptación se relacionan con malas condiciones de vida, estrés y cambios en las condiciones y currículo de aprendizaje. Se concluyó que las tecnologías de aprendizaje abierto facilitan la adaptación de los estudiantes desplazados, permitiendo la continuidad educativa y el cumplimiento de estándares internacionales.

Palabras clave: educación superior, herramientas digitales, política educativa, socialización, formación docente.

1. Introduction

The war in Ukraine caused the enormous damage to higher education system: massive migration of students and teaching staff, break of educational process, decrease of education quality and its transfer mainly to a distance format.

Currently, according to official report of the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, 131 institutions, or 5.5% of all institutions of higher education, have been destroyed or damaged and 17 % were displaced to safer regions of Ukraine.

Therefore, a number of key issues was identified to be addressed immediately: limited access of students and educators to educational materials and learning tools; destruction of infrastructure, including educational facilities; reduce of education quality; threat to life, physical and mental health; safety of all the educational process participants (students, educators, parents); displacement to safe regions of Ukraine; break in the educational process (Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, 2022).

In this context, there is a crucial necessity to study the process of internally displaced students' adaptation and the approaches provided by Ukrainian teacher training universities to support academic activity of the above-mentioned students' cohort.

The research is aimed to study potential risks that internally displaced students faced and actual benefits gained due to the online learning.

Note that potential risks and possible ways of overcoming them are highlighted in recent official documents at the national and international levels, issued by such organizations as the Ministry of Social Policy of Ukraine, the Ministry of Science and Education of Ukraine, Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), International Organization for Migration (IOM), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), etc.

It was found that considerable attention is focused on the issue of complex adaptation of internally displaced students (IDSs) to new conditions, such as socio-economic, psychological and academic.

Most scientists consider socio-economic factor to be the most essential one within successful adaptation that reveals the living conditions of students and their families, the availability of a workplace for classes, financial support of their families (Bilotserkovets et al., 2021).

Based on the Government's resolution, internally displaced students are provided with monthly-targeted assistance to cover their living expenses, including rent and utilities. Additionally, they are ensured by humanitarian aid, such as food kits, clothes, shoes and personal hygiene products provided by the local communities' centers (Report of the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 2022).

The procedure of obtaining temporary housing is regulated by the Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine. It emphasizes that internally displaced persons (IDPs) can be provided with existing houses and dormitories reconstructed at the expense of the government or with the monetary compensation that is provided to the owners of apartments who ensured shelters to these persons. However, there is the urgent need in developing conceptual state programs aimed at meeting the housing needs of IDPs, especially whose houses were completely destroyed, by means of lending or compensation for the cost of lost housing (Decree of Cabinet of ministers of Ukraine No. 495, 2022).

According to the Resolution of the Ministry of Reintegration of the Temporarily Occupied Territories of Ukraine, government targeted support is provided to students of higher education institutions or vocational education and training institutions in the form of financial support of their studies (preferably long-term loans), free or subsidized accommodation in student dormitories, free access to the Internet, social scholarships, etc. (Ministry of Reintegration of the Temporarily Occupied Territories of Ukraine, 2022).

Another important issue to consider is the problem of psychological adaptation. In most cases it is caused by the feeling of insecurity and helplessness, fear of changes (new friends, new learning environment, new living conditions), guilt, alienation and isolation from local peers, break in studies that brings to psychosomatic disorders and lack of motivation to study (Trubavina, 2015).

Government authorities together with public organizations have identified a number of steps aimed at overcoming the problem of psychological risks of IDS.

Thus, the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine has developed a document "On providing psychological support for participants of educational process in the conditions of martial law in Ukraine". It obliged education institutions to create ICT based conditions to provide medical, psychological, and pedagogical rehabilitation of the educational process participants in the form of online consultancy "Cabinet of a psychologist or social educator" (based on the websites of education institutions) or provide information support about the available sources of consultancy (Facebook messenger page, Telegram channel chat, etc.).

The "Ukrainian Foundation of Public Health" together with the international organization "Health Right International" developed a guide of defined algorithm of actions for the public and non-public sector specialists (social workers, psychologists, teachers and volunteers) on providing psychosocial assistance to IDSs.

The problem of academic adaptation deserves special attention, in particular, the following issues such as academic mobility of students, teaching staff, higher education institutions; development of new curricula; adaptation to a new educational environment; language adaptation; studying during air alarms; offline training; lack or unstable Internet connection; lack of appropriate mobile devices; failure of online platforms of education institutions; digitalization processes issues such as inability to keep or create electronic curricula, electronic registers (mostly of relocated universities) (Bilotserkovets & Hubina, 2019).

Thus, the program document "In the Face of War, a Year of Action in Ukraine" emphasizes on significant financial support of international organizations, in particular, UNESCO. On the initiative of UNESCO and its 25 partners such as the Global Education Coalition, including Coursera, EdX, Khan Academy and Amazon Web Service 650 education institutions were provided with electronic devices and introduction of modern online platforms into Ukrainian educational process (UNESCO, 2023)

The Ministry of Digital Transformation launched the "Wi-Fi in shelters" project. Due to this project 2 thousand education institutions were connected to the Internet in shelters.

Another project "Open online platform United Ukrainian University (UUU)" launched by the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, Coursera and edX companies provided free access to their "Online University" catalogs for all Ukrainian universities (Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, 2023).

Depending on the territorial location of the educational establishments (non-controlled/liberated territories), the educational process was resumed at different rates. Thus, most of students did not manage to complete the curriculum on time. Therefore, the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine facilitates the reorganization of the educational process by: adjustment of educational programs; an adaptation of a significant number of courses; a change in their content, evaluation criteria; a reduction of task volumes; an extension of the deadlines for material submissions. In most territories, the educational process was provided online in synchronous or asynchronous mode. In safe areas a small percentage of higher education institutions provided offline learning that also caused certain difficulties, for instance, language issue. The reason is that the North of Ukraine is mostly inhabited by Russian speaking while the West of the country by Ukrainian speaking people. Therefore, it caused certain difficulties for IDPs, such as misunderstanding while studying or communicating with home citizens (Boichenko et al., 2022).

The problem of relocation and evacuation of universities deserves considerable attention. It concerns mostly the educational establishments in the zones of active hostilities, such as Kharkiv, Chernihiv, Sumy, Donetsk (and its regions), Mykolaiv, Luhansk. The providing of learning process was based on the Law "On Amendments to Certain Laws of Ukraine Regarding State Guarantees in the Conditions of Martial Law or State of Emergency" (UKRAINE LAW, 2022). Most higher education institutions announced the admission of students with the IDPs status. They proposed teaching vacancies to evacuated (from war zones) specialists. Studying was available within the framework of academic mobility in Ukrainian universities. In addition, during the martial law universities recognized learning results (ECTS credits) obtained within the framework of formal or informal education, and, at the decision of the department the transfer of educational components to other semesters was allowed. A common practice was the work of students according to an individual plan. Additionally, students had the right to take academic leaves with the option of keeping a place in the dormitory, if necessary (Chystiakova et al., 2022).

Thus, the study of the scientific sources and official documents proved that implementation of online learning technologies enabled the covering of numerous students' problems such as socio-economic, psychological and academic. ICT facilitated successful adaptation of learners to the new living and learning conditions giving them the opportunity to continue their studies.

2. Research methodology

This study was conducted with a qualitative research approach. Thematic analysis revealed two research questions:

1. What are the main difficulties that affected adaptation of internally displaced students to new living and learning conditions?
2. How did innovative open learning technologies facilitate learning of internally displaced students?

The study involved internally displaced undergraduate and postgraduate students of Ukrainian HEIs (mainly from Sumy, Kharkiv, Chernihiv, Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, Mykolaiv regions). Note that some students were individually displaced to safer regions of Ukraine while their HEIs still function in the regions of destination and some students had to relocate because their HEIs were relocated. The total number of respondents was 437 people. Among the respondents there were IDSs from such relocated Universities as V.N. Karazin Kharkiv National University (Poltava), Berdiansk State Pedagogical University (Zaporizhzhia), Donetsk National University (Vinnytsia), Kherson State University (Ivano-Frankivsk), SHEI "Donbas State Pedagogical University" (Dnipro), State Institution "Luhansk Taras Shevchenko National University" (Poltava) etc.

The main method of collecting data was survey of internally displaced students by using different questionnaires (structured, unstructured (open-ended), quasi-structured (with "other variant" among alternatives), ranging the importance) to determine the main problems of their adaptation to new living and learning conditions from socio-economic, psychological, and academic perspectives. Data on the inputs, outputs and outcomes of online learning programs from both official documents and questioning participants was collected and measured.

The questionnaires were designed in Google Forms and distributed among participants through social networks, groups in Telegram, Viber, WhatsApp, sent to emails of Ukrainian higher education institutions that were relocated due to the war.

Each questionnaire contained from 10 to 15 questions. The respondents were asked to indicate the level of difficulty they had experienced with each issue, using a 10-point scale with responses ranging from 1 (no difficulty) to 10 (extreme difficulty). The major issues indicated by the internally displaced students are summarized in Table 1. The IDSs were also asked to share their views on the ways of adapting to new living and learning conditions as well as experience and outcomes of using online learning technologies.

3. Research results

The empirical findings indicated that internally displaced students had to cope with different issues while adapting to the new living and learning conditions.

Table 1.

Socio-economic, psychological and academic aspects of problems that the participants of the survey met in the process of adaptation to new living and learning conditions

Aspect	Problem	% of IDSs met
Socio-economic	<i>Bad living conditions</i>	9
	Had to share room with many people	5
	Poor Internet-connection	23
	Blackouts	37
	Lack of food	6
	Lack of money	8
Psychological	Lack of devices for e-learning	11
	Lack of motivation to study	17
	Socialization problems	12
	Emotional disorders	14
	Psychosomatic disorders	3
	Procrastination	9
	Fear, helplessness, insecurity	18
	Language problems	5

Academic	New learning environment, including virtual learning environment	23
	New educational program	7
	New academic disciplines	7
	Need to define and eliminate academic differences/transfer credits	8

The analysis of the internally displaced students' responses to the questionnaires revealed different scenarios of continuing learning for IDSs:

1. IDSs changed place of living but didn't change affiliation.
2. IDSs changed place of living and changed affiliation.
3. IDSs changed place of living because their HEI was relocated from temporarily occupied territories.

Being internally displaced, students of Ukrainian higher education institutions faced socio-economic, psychological and academic difficulties. At the very arrival to new places of living IDSs reported on bad living conditions (9 %), need to share room with 20 or more people (5 %) and lack of devices (11 %) which complicated the process of e-learning. They had complications with socialization (12 %), Ukrainian language communication (5 %); 14 % of the internally displaced students who had been interrogated, had pointed out certain kinds of emotional disorders.

Having been asked: "Do you have difficulties communicating with local residents?" 95 % of students answered that they had mainly no problems, while 5 % of respondents found it difficult to use Ukrainian language in everyday life. As one student reported:

In our university, the learning process was conducted in Ukrainian because it's a state language, however, in everyday life we mainly used Russian due to our regional specificity and close location to the border. At first, it was very difficult to use the Ukrainian language in a non-academic environment. It seemed that everyone was looking at you, and you were starting to get stressed, nervous.

Some internally displaced students reported that they had to change affiliation (27 %), in particular after getting bachelor's degree and applying for the next stage – master's degree. The most acute problem for this category of respondents (5 %) was impossibility of obtaining original documents from the previous place of study (occupation by Russian troops, destruction of campuses, etc.).

Some internally displaced students who changed affiliation and had to continue their studies within the same degree (mainly bachelor) indicated the difficulties caused by introduction of a new curriculum (7 %) or new academic disciplines (7 %). Common problems were associated with the need to define and eliminate academic differences/transfer credits. One respondent explained:

As I have understood from the syllabus of the academic discipline I have already studied it, but under slightly different title, and the number of credits does not coincide too. I would rather spend my time on learning other disciplines that I haven't studied before, but we don't have such mechanisms to transfer these credits here.

Many internally displaced students faced the problems connected with adjusting themselves to new learning environments, including virtual learning environment (23 %). Some of them revealed certain degree of stress caused by the need to quickly immerse in new virtual learning environment:

"Having used to Moodle with all its functions, it was difficult to get used to Microsoft Teams".

*"We haven't used LMS at the previous place of study and my laptop is too old to install necessary software".
"All the teaching was conducted through video conferencing, I have live communication with my university teachers and group mates, but now I have only assignments in Moodle. I miss it so much".*

Being asked about the benefits of online learning technologies, the internally displaced students pointed out:

"Due to online learning, I can stay in a safe place (my home) during the air alarms without breaking the learning process".

"It is very convenient to use email to send my course work to the teacher as you need not to look for the printing office to print it somewhere in the town that can be dangerous for my life especially during the air alarms".

"I like the idea of using messengers such as Telegram, Viber, WhatsApp because you can easily get in touch with your teacher or tutor to get some additional assistance or with your group mates, for instance, to know any information about our common friend who suddenly stopped communicating and disappeared".

According to the respondents' answers we could identify the following online learning benefits:

- opportunity to continue studies while moving to safer place of living;
- intensification of the academic mobility;
- ensuring high quality of educational services;
- gaining international experience in the academic field;
- flexibility;
- larger academic freedom, etc.

Thus, the survey determined the following rate: socio-economic sphere had caused certain problems for 37 % of the internally displaced students, 43 % of the participants had undertaken psychological challenges, 38 % of the respondents had met difficulties in the academic sphere.

3. Discussion

The socio-economic aspect of adaptation regards internally displaced students' adjustment to the new surroundings. It is determined by the need to get used to new living conditions, changes in rhythm of life, stress factors of the new social environment, change in eating habits due to lack of money/usual food, etc.

The psychological aspect of adaptation refers to the internally displaced students' need to cope with stress of losing their close people, their homes, fear, helplessness, insecurity. As a result, internally displaced students experienced low motivation to study, procrastination, emotional and psychosomatic disorders. The main factors that influenced the process of successful psychological adaptation are identified as need for continue learning activities in a new academic environment, separation from the family and the usual social surrounding, feeling of loneliness. Language adaptation became the problem for students from north-eastern regions of Ukraine, who did not use the Ukrainian language in everyday life.

While analyzing the problems of academic adaptation, special attention should be paid to new learning environments, in particular e-learning environments. Different HEIs use different LMS to organize online learning. The most frequently used are Moodle, Google Classroom and Microsoft Teams. At the same time, being relocated, the Universities had to change the platform or organize alternative way of providing educational services – using messengers (Telegram, Viber, WhatsApp, etc.), video conferencing tools

(Zoom, Google Meet, Skype, etc.), email, etc. The internally displaced students had to adjust themselves both to new technical and academic requirements. IDSs who changed affiliation had to adapt to new curriculum, new rules and processes of assessment, testing and examination.

Despite some difficulties IDSs experienced while adapting to new online learning platforms, online learning technologies themselves facilitated students' adaptation to new learning and living conditions. The positive impact of online learning technologies on teaching and learning internally displaced students is evidenced by international studies (Gillett-Swan, 2017; Lwin & Sungtong, 2022; Bawa & Bayaro, 2017). Though the above studies were conducted in different contexts and were not related to the war in Ukraine, we can trace the common features: accessibility, flexibility, mobility, larger academic freedom of internally displaced students, etc.

4. Conclusions

Adaptation of internally displaced students is a complex process that can be successful only in the case of creating supporting learning environment and favorable conditions for living and learning. The study revealed that most difficulties in adaptation of internally displaced students for new living and learning conditions are caused mainly by psychological problems, as well as the peculiarities of the surrounding environment, in particular – communicative. Also, the findings of the study proved that to achieve the successful adaptation of internally displaced students to learning in new academic environment, the whole range of academic and social programs should be implemented. In this context online learning technologies are a powerful tool that contributed to continuous studying process of internally displaced students, the intensification of their academic mobility, ensuring international standards for the high quality of educational services and gaining international experience in the academic field.

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