

UKRAINIAN-LATVIAN COMPARATIVE STUDIES ON UNIVERSITY EDUCATION: COMMON EUROPEAN VALUES AND CURRENT CHALLENGES

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Abstract. *Knowledge on universal values in general and common European values in particular and their influence on the process of providing university education to current and future generations may become a basis for building a cohesive world community. In that context, university education has an invaluable role to play. To live in peace and harmony for years to come, people should acknowledge and respect the diversity within the global society. This will be possible only if the content of higher education programmes in universities throughout Europe provides the next generations with insight into European and world culture and multiculturalism. This is most evident now when all the nations of the world have expressed their willingness to help each other in combating the Covid-19 pandemic placing the highest value on the person. In this regard, the article is aimed at investigating the problems Ukrainian and Latvian students face as a result of current challenges caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, providing some scientifically backgrounded ways of their overcoming and reducing their negative consequences. The problems whose essence was found out through conducting a web-based questionnaire were generalized by means of content analysis method. Research sample included 109 Latvian students and 98 Ukrainian students.*

Keywords: *common European values, current challenges, Latvian and Ukrainian students, university education.*

Introduction

Since the beginning of the third millenium the contemporary world community has been facing a lot of challenges. Thus, for instance, apart from globalization, anxiety about immigration, low economic growth, demographic changes and rising wealth inequality, increase in consumption, all countries in the world have to confront the Covid-19 pandemic. These challenges can be

overcome by understanding the role and importance of universal human values and common European values in particular as the background of young adults' education, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, by equipping them with profound theoretical knowledge and practical skills necessary to enter the labour market.

After implementing online learning since March 2020, “the initial optimism was gradually diminishing due to the emerging problems with computer hardware, outdated software, difficulties with streaming information (sound, image or video recordings), because not all students had access to broadband Internet and many of them also had older versions of computers...” (Juszczak & Kim, 2020, p. 116). Taking into account these changes that are happening throughout the world and are reflecting adversely on the quality of higher education, more and more scholars are wondering what type of future there is for European societies (Almazova et al., 2020; Reeskens et al., 2020; Sahu, 2020; UNESCO IESALC, 2020; Watermeyer, 2020). In this connection, one of the biggest challenges closely connected with educational systems throughout the world is channeling the efforts of academic institutions to provide all possible ways and means of ensuring quality education for all students and due to pandemic situation ensuring quality online education (Willems, 2019). It will be possible only if the process of online teaching and learning is organized bearing in mind “the instructional design principles that flow from human cognition” (Sweller, 2020, p. 1), otherwise it is unlikely to be effective. Searching for points of convergence in improving quality of higher education and in making access to online education easier for students is one of the major tasks of higher education institutions both in Latvia and Ukraine.

The research and training experience that has already been gained by educators, sociologists, philosophers and psychologists in the field of higher education shows that one of the most perspective and effective ways for providing students with high-quality online education and preparing them for life in the present-day global society is university training based on universal human and common European values such as human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights to them. Knowledge on universal human values in general and common European values in particular and their influence on the process of providing university education to current and future generations may become a basis for building a cohesive world community (Malykhin, Aristova, & Kovalchuk, 2019). In that context, university education has an invaluable role to play. To live in peace and harmony for years to come, people should acknowledge and respect the diversity within the global society. This will be possible only if the content of higher education programmes in universities throughout Europe provides the next generations with insight into European and world culture and multiculturalism. This is most evident now when

all the nations of the world have expressed their willingness to help each other in combating the Covid-19 pandemic placing the highest value on the person. To prove the ideas mentioned we would like to provide some examples obtained by researchers from different countries who investigated the same topic during the previous year. Thus, W. Bao claims that after transition to online learning, Chinese students, on the one hand, experienced some problems connected with the «lack of self-discipline, suitable learning materials, or good learning environments when they are self-isolated at home» (Bao, 2020, p. 114) and, on the other, with the inability of computer servers to host a large number of users and with the shut downs of online educational platform because of overload (Bao, 2020). The problems identified, in M. Bao's point of view, may have an adverse effect on the quality of education. The same idea is expressed by M. Czerepaniak-Walczak (2020). Claiming that «the right to education is the universal right of any person» (M. Czerepaniak-Walczak, 2020, p. 58), M. Czerepaniak-Walczak comes to the conclusion that the closure of academic institutions influences «the most marginalized and vulnerable students, mainly from the poor areas and low cultural capital» (M. Czerepaniak-Walczak, 2020, p. 59) and affects the exercise of right of children, young people and adults to quality education which is considered one of the most important common European values. In this regard, the article is aimed at investigating the problems Ukrainian and Latvian students face as a result of current challenges caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, providing some scientifically backgrounded ways of their overcoming and reducing their negative consequences.

Methodology, Participants

In this study, the participants were 109 Latvian students from Rezekne Academy of Technologies (Rezekne, Latvia) and 98 Ukrainian students from Kyiv National University of Technologies and Design (Kyiv, Ukraine), Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv (Kyiv, Ukraine), National Aviation University (Kyiv, Ukraine), Kamyanets-Podilsky Ivan Ohienko National University, (Kamyanets-Podilsk, Ukraine). The survey was conducted in October-December 2020.

Instrument and Procedure

The team of researchers developed a web-based questionnaire. The choice of the web-based questionnaire was explained by the fact that after implementing physical-distance measures including the closure of higher education institutions is was considered one of the most relevant methods for collecting data. The web-based questionnaire was designed to investigate the problems Ukrainian and

Latvian students faced as a result of current challenges (the Covid-19 pandemic) and contained open-ended questions. Open-ended questions were used mainly because of the need to understand if the problems encountered affected the exercise of research participants' right to quality education which was considered one of the most important common European values and if there were some positive changes which made it possible to provide some scientifically backgrounded ways of overcoming current challenges and reducing their negative consequences. Ukrainian and Latvian students were asked to answer the following open-ended questions:

1. *Can you list all the problems and difficulties you face as a result of the transition of the face-to-face learning in the online learning format and explain what way they influenced your academic performance?*
2. *Can you list positive changes connected with transition of the face-to-face instruction in the online learning format and explain what way they influenced your academic performance?*

Table 1 demonstrates the socio-demographic information about Ukrainian and Latvian respondents.

Table 1 Socio-demographic Information about Ukrainian and Latvian Respondents

<i>Ukrainian respondents</i>			<i>Latvian respondents</i>		
<i>Variable</i>	<i>Number (N=98)</i>	<i>Percentage (100%)</i>	<i>Variable</i>	<i>Number (N=109)</i>	<i>Percentage (100%)</i>
<i>Gender</i>			<i>Gender</i>		
Male	16	16.33	Male	11	10.09
Female	82	83.67	Female	98	89.91
<i>Bachelors</i>			<i>Bachelors</i>		
First year	44	44.90	First year	41	37.61
Second year	10	10.20	Second year	15	13.76
Third year	16	16.33	Third year	18	16.51
Fourth year	9	9.18			
<i>Masters</i>			<i>Masters</i>		
First year	4	4.08	First year	14	12.84
Second year	5	5.10	Second year	13	11.93
<i>PhD students</i>			<i>PhD students</i>		
First year	2	2.04	First year	2	1.84
Second year	6	6.12	Second year	4	3.67
Third year	2	2.04	Third year	2	1.84
Fourth year	–	–			

Source: own study
N=207

Data Analysis

The data from the web-based questionnaire which contained expanded answers to the open-ended questions were generalized by means of content analysis method. The use of content analysis method enabled the researchers to indentify ten problem categories and eight categories connected with positive changes which ultimately enabled to provide some scientifically backgrounded ways of overcoming current challenges and reducing their negative consequences. The calculation of descriptive statistics helped researchers inteFrprete the percentage distribution obtained.

Results

The obtained results regarding the problems Ukrainian and Latvian students face as a result of current challenges (the Covid-19 pandemic) are demonstrated in Table 2.

Table 2 Problems Connected with Current Challenges (the Covid-19 Pandemic) according to Ukrainian and Latvian Students

Groups of respondents (N=207)	Categories									
	Internet quality (N)	Weak digital infrastructure (N)	Study-related stress (N)	Lack of in-person interaction (N)	Academic mobility restrictions(N)	Deterioration of emotional well-being (N)	Lack of immediate feedback (N)	Sense of insecurity (N)	Health problems (N)	Material well-being (N)
Ukrainian students (N=98)	78	58	34	73	26	14	47	30	20	43
Latvian students (N=109)	69	51	19	52	28	8	21	–	7	22

Source: own study
N=207

Figure 1 summarizes and compares Ukrainian and Latvian respondents’ opinions on problems connected with current challenges (the Covid-19 pandemic).

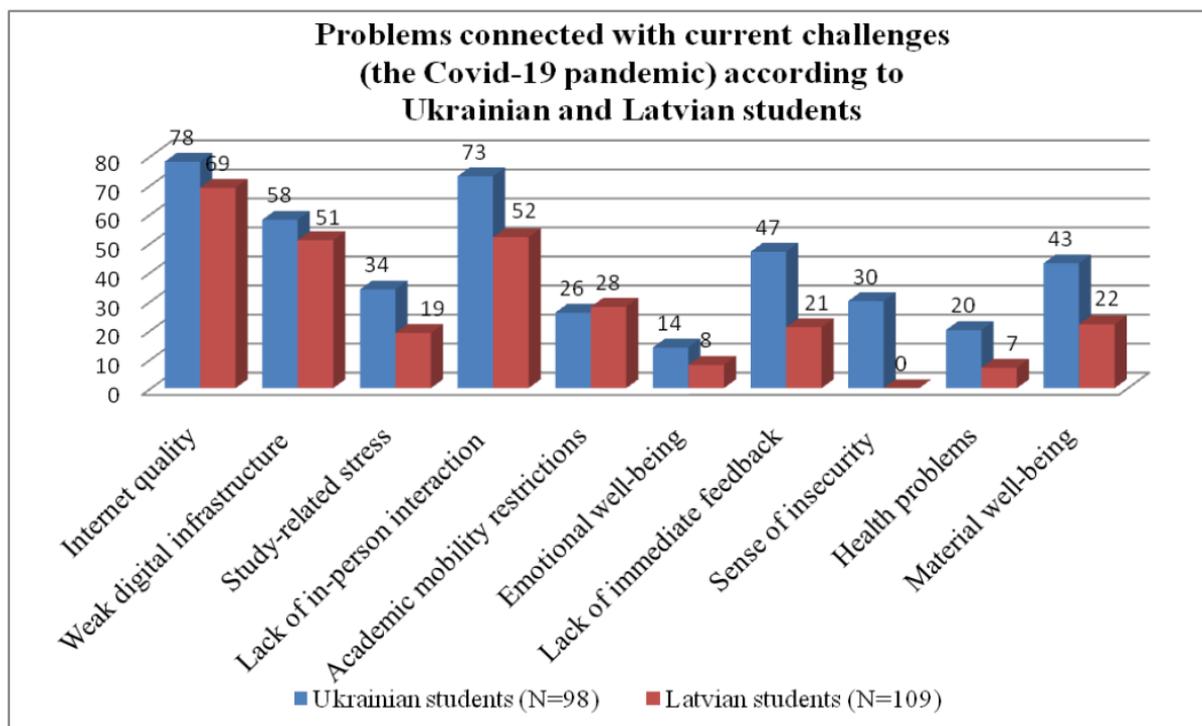


Figure 1 Comparison of Opinions on Problems Connected with Current Challenges (the Covid-19 Pandemic) among Ukrainian and Latvian Respondents

According to the obtained results, 79.59% of Ukrainian respondents and 63.30% of Latvian respondents mentioned that the one of the main problems they faced was the quality of the Internet. Poor Internet quality made it almost impossible for many Ukrainian and Latvian students to join online lectures, seminars, workshops and to use various telecommunication apps in real time. What is more, they found it difficult to submit their homework and various assignments on time. In terms of the Covid-19 pandemic, this problem significantly restricts the quality of Ukrainian and Latvian students' training, affects their academic performance and the exercise of their right to education. For 59.18% of Ukrainian respondents and 46.79% of Latvian respondents the weak digital infrastructure of higher education institutions and the lack of a single open-source learning platform became a serious problem for equipping them with necessary knowledge and skills. Replying to the questions, 14.29% of Ukrainian students and 7.34% of Latvian students claimed that their emotional well-being had been deteriorated. Most of them associated it with the increased workload and the necessity to do much work independently. 74.49% of Ukrainian students and 47.71% of Latvian students believed that the physical-distancing measures imposed violated their right to freedom of movement. And although they understood the severity of situation, they were very concerned that they could not communicate with their peers in person. The obtained results clearly show that

the introduction of physical-distancing measures including the closure of higher education institutions in both countries and the replacement of face-to-face instruction by online learning greatly contributed to the sense of insecurity among Ukrainian respondents (30.61%). This was not true in the Latvian students' responses (0.00%). The closure of borders also had adverse consequences on higher education since many students were unable to take part in academic mobility programs in person. This information was indicated in responses of 26.53% of Ukrainian respondents and 25.69% of Latvian ones. In this regard, taking into account the fact that university education is also designed to create favorable conditions for positive cooperation of students with their peers from different countries, we believe that providing students with online programs of academic mobility universities develop their intercultural competences and realize their right to gain quality higher education fully. 47.96% of Ukrainian respondents and 19.27% of Latvian respondents stated that the lack of immediate feedback on the work done had a negative impact on their academic performance. They explained that it was very difficult to correct something quickly or to understand what was wrong because you could not immediately consult you university lecturer in person (due to time limitations or Internet connection problems). Moreover, after you had to wait for lecturer's remarks for a definite period of time, it was not always clear what he/she wanted and you again had to wait in order to ask questions that concerned you most. 20.41% of Ukrainian respondents and 6.42% of Latvian respondents indicated that they had started suffering health problems (mostly impairment of vision, headaches, cervical osteochondrosis) because of spending too much time in front of computers. One more thing that caused a heavy impact on the right of students to university education was poor material situation. We found out that 43.88% of Ukrainian students and 20.18% of Latvian students had to share a computer with a younger brother or sister. Some respondents also indicated that the capacity of their computer was not enough for downloading programs they needed etc.

Apart from the problems Ukrainian and Latvian respondents faced as a result of the transition of face-to-face instruction to online learning, the survey made it possible to identify some positive changes that helped researchers provide some scientifically backgrounded ways of overcoming educational problems caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and of reducing their negative consequences. The research findings concerning the positive changes connected with current challenges (the Covid-19 pandemic) are given in Table 3.

Table 3 Positive Changes Connected with Current Challenges (the Covid-19 Pandemic) according to Ukrainian and Latvian Respondents

Groups of respondents (N=207)	Categories							
	Organizing guest lectures (N)	More time for family (N)	No positive changes (N)	Improvement of personal time management (N)	Accessibility of free online course (N)	Expanded scope of cooperation (N)	Improvement of media literacy (N)	Improvement of digital competence (N)
Ukrainian students (N=98)	57	47	7	19	60	38	25	68
Latvian students (N=109)	69	31	–	6	41	29	23	84

Source: own study
N=207

An illustration of comparison of Ukrainian and Latvian respondents’ opinions on positive changes connected with current challenges (the Covid-19 pandemic) can be seen in Figure 2.

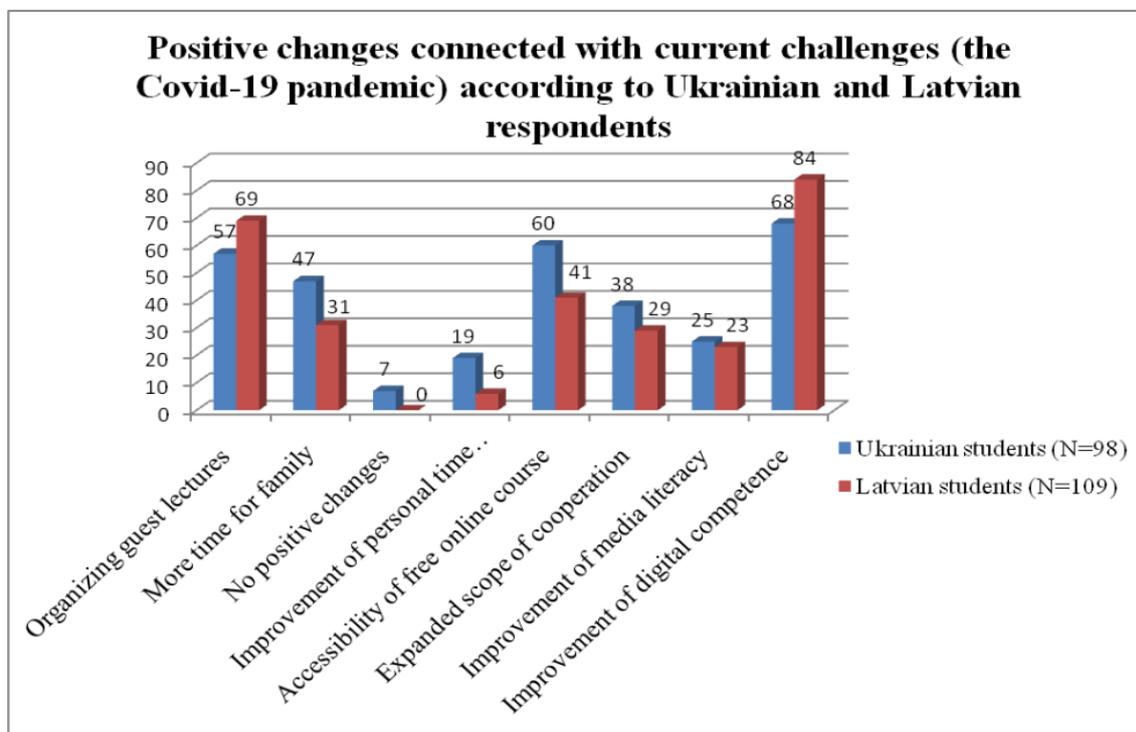


Figure 2 Comparison of Opinions on Positive Changes Connected with Current Challenges (the Covid-19 Pandemic) among Ukrainian and Latvian Respondents

Thus, 58.16% of Ukrainian respondents and 63.30% of Latvian respondents indicated that one of the positive changes that happened during coronavirus crisis was the increase in the number of various guest lectures. In respondents' opinion, organization of guest lectures enabled them to improve their intercultural competence, to become more tolerant, to take more than one perspective and not to be afraid to articulate their point of view. 47.96% of Ukrainian students and 28.44% of Latvian students mentioned that the imposition of restrictions on movements enabled them to spend more time with their family members and to understand the value of family communication. 7.14% of Ukrainian respondents did not feel any positive changes. For 19.39% of Ukrainian students and 5.56% of Latvian students the transition to online learning was the time for improving their personal time management since they had to learn how to organize their time effectively. 61.22% of Ukrainian respondents and 37.96% of Latvian respondents indicated that they could enlarge their theoretical knowledge and improve their practical skills doing free online courses. 38.76% of Ukrainian students and 26.61% of Latvian students believed that the use of various telecommunications apps expanded the scope of cooperation between peers, enabled them to network and discuss some issues with peers from different groups. 25.51% of Ukrainian students and 21.29% of Latvian students managed to improve their media literacy. They explained that the need to process huge amounts of information on the Internet taught them to apply critical thinking in order to recognize fake news and to select the most relevant information. One of the greatest achievements for 69.39% of Ukrainian students and 77.06% of Latvian students was the improvement of their digital competence. This enabled them to use advanced information technologies for communication and study.

Recommendations and Conclusions

The results of the research clearly show that despite numerous educational problems Ukrainian and Latvian students had to face as a result of introduction of physical distancing measures including the closure of higher education institutions, their negative consequences can be reduced. Analysis of the survey results and corresponding findings made it possible to provide some scientifically backgrounded ways of overcoming current challenges caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and reducing their negative consequences:

1. The use of present-day information technologies holds the promise of inviting guest lecturers from different countries regardless of their location and organizing guest lectures, online conferences, webinars and various e-discussions. Thus, the borders are becoming increasingly blurred and this way of online instruction allows knowledge to be disseminated more widely. Moreover, the use of different telecommunication apps offers new opportunities for giving binary

lectures and workshops by experts from two countries. It allows students to expand their professional expertise and to enlarge their knowledge of various cultures.

2. Improvement of online learning platforms and university's digital infrastructure enables university lecturers to use various online teaching and learning methods in order to equip students with a wide range of competences necessary for succeeding in life, to improve the communication between university lecturers and students, to engage students in informal learning activities. Moreover, the obtained results showed that the sudden transition of face-to-face instruction to online learning influenced students' desire to develop their digital skills and enhanced their motivation to improve the level of their digital competence.

3. For those who have ongoing Internet connection problems, the opportunity to re-do a poor assignment, to give an extension per term can positively influence the academic performance, improve the motivation to study and reduce the level of stress and anxiety. In this case questions remain, however, regarding the students' academic dishonesty and how to fight it.

4. Taking into account the fact that university lecturers along with students found themselves in a completely new situation and did not have the advanced digital skills or detailed knowledge of how to teach students in online mode only, universities should promote online training courses for university lecturers to develop their digital competence, to combine various forms, methods and means of online instruction for those who do not have proper Internet access, to instruct them how to use different online teaching and learning methods and free telecommunications apps, to film and disseminate video-lessons among those students who have no opportunity to join online classes in real time. This will help university teachers feel more confident in providing students with theoretical knowledge and practical skills, create favorable conditions for teacher-teacher interaction and strengthen the bond of trust between colleagues.

The study confirms that university education based on such cultural values as peace, tolerance and openness to others, cultural diversity, social equality, progress and innovation, will contribute greatly in training a generation of students imbued with humanistic values. What is more, the present day university education can play an invaluable role in providing the next generations with insight into European and world culture and multiculturalism.

To sum up, although the problems which arose during the coronavirus pandemic have affected the exercise of Ukrainian and Latvian students' right to quality education, we state that the systems of higher education in both countries responded promptly to all the changes connected with the transition of face-to-face instruction to online learning, tried to prevent the decrease of educational

level and to provide equal opportunities by making full use of their educational resources.

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