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NAVIGATING SAFE LEARNING SPACES IN UKRAINIAN HIGHER EDUCATION UNDER WAR CONDITIONS: IDENTIFYING CHALLENGES AND FINDING SOLUTIONS

LUSHCHYK Y. , TSYHANOK H. Navigating safe learning spaces in ukrainian higher education under war conditions: identifying challenges and finding solutions. *This study focuses on the safety challenges faced by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Ukraine during wartime, emphasizing the need for comprehensive measures to ensure the well-being of the academic community and maintain academic continuity. The study uses a mixed-methods approach, combining theoretical analysis with empirical insights. Foundational frameworks are established through desk research, while qualitative methods like interviews and focus group discussions gather firsthand perspectives from stakeholders. As a result, the analysis reveals challenges across different dimensions, including physical, psychological, social, and pedagogical aspects. Physical challenges include infrastructure damage and reduced funding, while psychological challenges encompass fear, stress, and trauma. Social challenges involve disrupted interactions and a lack of inclusivity, while pedagogical challenges cover curriculum adjustments and maintaining academic continuity. The study highlights the importance of prioritizing safety in educational settings during wartime conditions. The interdisciplinary "Concept of Safe Educational Environment" training course emerges as a proactive solution, equipping participants with essential knowledge and skills to pro-*

mote safety and resilience. The article concludes that, given the ongoing war in Ukraine, it is crucial to introduce comprehensive training programs about safety contexts. Such courses can contribute to the national and global discussion on education during crisis situations, offering valuable insights into effective measures that can be adopted to address the challenges faced by educators and students in learning environments under such conditions.

Keywords: educational environment, HEI, interdisciplinary approach, safety, security, training program.

ЛУЩИК Ю., ЦИГАНOK Г. **Орієнтування в безпечному навчальному просторі в українській вищій освіті у умовах війни: визначення проблем і пошук рішень.** Ця стаття зосереджується на дослідженні викликів безпеки, з якими стикаються заклади вищої освіти (ЗВО) України під час війни, наголошуючи на необхідності комплексних заходів для забезпечення стану благополуччя в академічній спільноті та підтримки академічної наступності. У дослідженні використовується змішаний підхід, який поєднує теоретичні й практичні методи. “Кабінетне дослідження” як аналіз різномісних джерел лежить в основі теоретичного підґрунтя статті, а якісні методи, такі як інтерв’ю та обговорення в фокус-групах, використані, щоб узагальнити погляди всіх зацікавлених сторін. У результаті аналізу виявлено виклики для функціонування ЗВО, які охоплюють фізичні, психологічні, соціальні та педагогічні аспекти. Фізичні виклики включають пошкодження інфраструктури та зменшення фінансування, тоді як психологічні стосуються почуття страху, стресу і травм. Соціальні виклики проявляються через порушення взаємодії та відсутність інклюзивності, тоді як педагогічні вимагають коригування навчального плану та підтримки академічної наступності. Дослідження підкреслює важливість пріоритету безпеки в навчальних закладах під час війни. Міждисциплінарний навчальний курс «Концепція безпечного освітнього середовища» презентується як проактивне рішення, оскільки надає його учасникам основні знання й навички для підвищення безпеки та стійкості. У статті робиться висновок про те, що враховуючи війну в Україні, яка продовжується, вкрай важливо запровадити комплексні навчальні програми щодо контексту безпеки. Подібні курси можуть сприяти національній і глобальній

дискусії про освіту під час кризових ситуацій, пропонуючи цінну інформацію про ефективні заходи для вирішення проблем, з якими стикаються викладачі та студенти в освітніх середовищах за таких умов.

Ключові слова: освітнє середовище, ЗВО, міждисциплінарний підхід, безпека, навчальна програма.

Introduction. In light of recent global events and the ongoing war in Ukraine, the country has suffered significant losses across all areas of society and the economy, including higher education. The destructive impact of the war has been felt through the damage to educational infrastructure, loss of skilled personnel, diminished funding for higher education, and a decline in Ukrainian and foreign student enrollment. Various assessments have been conducted to address these problems, emphasizing the critical need for decisive action to safeguard higher education in Ukraine and increase its contribution to driving socio-economic development (Moshnyaga, 2023; Ivanchenko et al., 2023; Shevchuk & Shvechuk, 2022; Sychenko et al., 2022). Amidst these challenges, it has become essential to ensure safety and security within educational settings, especially during times of war when individuals are exposed to unpredictable and potentially hazardous circumstances. This need is dual in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs): to ensure the safety of all stakeholders while maintaining academic continuity. Moreover, providing a safe and conducive learning environment extends beyond physical safety to encompass psychological, emotional, and socio-cultural dimensions.

However, there is a gap in preparing both academic staff and students to cope, be resilient, and overcome crisis situations, especially given their complexities and multifaceted nature. Therefore, it is crucial to prioritize developing and implementing comprehensive training programs that focus on the concept of a safe educational environment. These initiatives should not only equip educationalists with strategies to handle critical circumstances and the tools to recognize and address potential safety concerns but also empower students to safeguard themselves and their peers, navigate these issues, and uphold appropriate conduct within the educational setting.

Drawing upon experiences from Ukraine and the EU can provide valuable insights and guidance in this endeavor (Tsyhanok & Lushchyk, 2022). Furthermore, fostering collaborative dialogue among faculty members is essential for collectively reimagining and redesigning strategies to safeguard the well-being of all academic community members. By prioritizing the development of a safe educational environment, HEIs can lay the foundation for a resilient and supportive learning environment that endures beyond the current crisis.

This study aims to illuminate the critical aspects of developing and implementing a training course that emphasizes the notion of a safe educational environment from an interdisciplinary perspective with a focus on maintaining safe educational settings within Ukrainian HEIs.

The objectives of the article are twofold: to address the challenges in providing a safe educational environment in Ukrainian HEIs during martial law and describe comprehensively the interdisciplinary training course called “Concept of Safe Educational Environment,” designed as part of the Erasmus+ project Jean Monnet Module in Sumy National Agrarian University (SNAU) and launched in 2023–2024. By considering various dimensions of safety, this course empowers both students and academic personnel to understand, promote, and implement safe educational practices within Ukrainian HEIs.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review. The complex landscape of ensuring safety and security within educational environments necessitates a thorough examination of the theoretical framework underpinning interdisciplinary approaches. This framework must encompass various essential concepts, including safety, security, the educational environment, and the development of comprehensive training programs.

Etymologically, the term “security” derives from the Latin expression “sine cura,” which is translated to “lack of care” or “lack of worries” (Palczewska & Pilarski, 2022).

According to Merriam-Webster, security is defined as the quality or state of being secure, encompassing freedom from danger, fear, or anxiety. This comprehensive understanding of security extends beyond physical safety to include psychological and emotional well-being, as well as considerations such as job security. Similarly, safety is regarded as synonymous with security and is characterized as the condition of being protected from experiencing or inflicting harm, injury, or loss (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, n/d).

Safety, as delineated by the Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English (1995), denotes the state of being protected from danger or harm, with security referring specifically to protection from intentional attacks or attackers.

Nas (2015) further elaborates on this distinction, defining safety as being away from hazards caused by natural forces or human errors randomly, while security pertains to protection from hazards deliberately caused by humans.

However, within educational environments, the demarcation between intentional and unintentional threats can be blurred, presenting unique challenges (Savolainen, 2023). Therefore, modern approaches to understanding safety and security recognize their interrelated yet distinct dimensions. In this paper, we align with scholars who adopt the term “safety” as a comprehensive umbrella concept, acknowledging the complexities and multifaceted understanding of the phenome-

non. In a broader context, safety encompasses the certainty of existence, survival, possession, and the functional development of an entity, often resulting from the absence of threats and their proper perception. Additionally, safety may arise from the creative endeavors undertaken by an entity to mitigate potential risks and ensure well-being (Zajac, 2009).

Zięba (2005) expands on this notion, highlighting the multifaceted nature of safety, which encompasses political, military, economic, technological, ecological, social, and humanitarian factors, alongside preserving national identity and fundamental civil rights and freedoms.

By prioritizing safety as a holistic concept, educators and stakeholders can effectively navigate the complexities of ensuring the well-being and security of all academic community members, regardless of intent or circumstance.

A number of authors have explored the intersection of safety and security with educational environments, each offering thought-provoking and valuable insights into this complex relationship (Bondarchuk et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2007; Martikainen, 2016; Piispanen, 2008; Rund, 2002; Savolainen, 2023; Senkus, 2020; Tsyhanok & Lushchuk, 2022). According to their studies, safety within the educational realm encompasses a broad spectrum of elements, ranging from psychological comfort to physical security. For instance, Martikainen focuses on educational safety and security management from an organizational lens (Martikainen, 2016). Jones et al. (2007) have delved into educational institution space from a health and safety perspective, emphasizing the physical aspects of learning environments and their impact on student well-being.

Safety is considered a crucial psychological characteristic of the educational environment, and a psychologically safe educational environment is a condition for the personal growth of the subjects of the educational process through their interaction free from manifestations of psychological violence; referential significance and involvement of each subject in the construction and maintenance of psychological comfort of the educational environment; human centrism, humanistic orientation, etc. (Bondarchuk et al., 2020; McClintock et al., 2021).

Rund (2002) emphasizes the institutional responsibility for ensuring the learning environment's safety, highlighting the need for proactive measures to address threats and potential hazards within educational settings. In a safe educational space, individuals have the freedom to engage in teaching, learning, and work without fear of discrimination, intimidation, or harm to their physical and emotional well-being. A safe campus is one that not only responds to threats and potential risks but also proactively monitors and evaluates the various dimensions of the environment, making adjustments as necessary.

From a comprehensive perspective safe educational environment covers psychological, social, pedagogical, and physical dimensions (Piispanen, 2008).

The psychological dimension encompasses the mood and atmosphere of learning, while the social dimension includes interactions among teachers, students, and other learning community members. The pedagogical dimension relates to teaching methods and materials, while the physical dimension pertains to the spaces where teaching and learning occur. In other words, one can argue that a safe learning environment encompasses a harmonious blend of psychological, social, pedagogical, and physical elements, where both the institution and its members are safeguarded against potential harm or danger (Piispanen, 2008).

By adopting an interdisciplinary approach, this study seeks to provide a holistic understanding of safe educational practices and facilitate their effective implementation within Ukrainian HEIs.

Methodology and Methods. This study uses a mixed-methods approach that combines theoretical and empirical methods to address the objectives outlined. The methodological design is structured to effectively explore the challenges of ensuring safety in Ukrainian HEIs during martial law and comprehensively describe the interdisciplinary training course “Concept of Safe Educational Environment.”

Theoretical methods include desk research, which thoroughly reviews literature from academic journals, government publications, and international organizations to establish theoretical frameworks on safety, security, and educational environments. By synthesizing and critically analyzing theoretical perspectives, this study establishes a foundation for interpreting findings and elaborating the interdisciplinary training course.

On the other hand, empirical methods involve qualitative approaches such as interviews and focus group discussions. This method collects firsthand insights from academic staff, administrative personnel, and students within Sumy National Agrarian University (SNAU), Ukraine. Through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, participants are encouraged to share their experiences, concerns, and recommendations regarding the interdisciplinary training course “Concept of Safe Educational Environment.” To ensure diverse perspectives are captured, purposive sampling is used. Thematic analysis is then applied to interpret the qualitative data obtained.

Combining insights from desk research with empirical findings, a comprehensive understanding of the challenges associated with creating a safe educational environment and the opportunities for providing one in Ukrainian HEIs has been achieved. Ethical guidelines were strictly followed to ensure the confidentiality and well-being of all participants. This methodologically rigorous approach generates valuable insights into safe educational environments that can be used to support the development of effective training programs.

Results and Discussion. When it comes to ensuring a safe educational environment in Ukrainian HEIs during martial law, many challenges need to be addressed.

Analysis of the interview data revealed several key themes and sub-themes related to safety and security within educational settings, including physical, psychological, social, and pedagogical dimensions. These themes underscore the complex interplay of factors influencing the safety and security of students, faculty, and staff within HEIs and highlight the need for holistic approaches to address these challenges effectively.

Challenges related to the physical dimension in a safe educational setting include a wide range of issues such as infrastructure damage, reduced funding and resources, concerns about community safety, infrastructure integrity, access to educational facilities, and emergency preparedness.

During times of war, the physical infrastructure of HEIs is often damaged, leading to economic instability and reduced funding. This can compromise the safety and functionality of educational facilities. Additionally, faculty members, administrative staff, and students may face a variety of risks, ranging from life-threatening situations to violence, intimidation, and forced displacement. This can make it difficult or unsafe for them to engage in educational activities, particularly for those residing in areas directly affected by war.

To ensure the safety of students, faculty, and staff, it is essential to prioritize the structural integrity of buildings, facilities, and equipment. Emergency preparedness and response protocols must also be in place to address potential threats arising from martial law situations, including active shooter situations and bomb threats. This involves training and exercises to help students, faculty, and staff become familiar with emergency procedures and evacuation routes. It is also vital to coordinate with local authorities to ensure a collaborative response to crises.

In terms of the psychological dimension, risks to life security, the threat of violence, the disruptions to daily routines, and the pervasive atmosphere of instability during martial law can significantly impact the well-being of the academic community, mood, and backdrop of learning within HEIs. Fear, stress, and trauma resulting from security threats and uncertainty can cause anxiety, psychological distress, and even depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), affecting the ability to focus and engage in teaching and learning activities effectively, as well as academic performance and overall educational experience.

There are several challenges related to the social aspect of education under war conditions. The lack of trust within the community, disrupted interactions, and inclusivity issues are some of the significant challenges. The delivery of educational services is hindered due to the effects of war, making it difficult for students to access regular academic activities such as classes, exams, research projects, and

extracurricular activities. The displacement of students and faculty, damage to educational infrastructure, and logistical challenges can all pose obstacles to the continuity of education. Additionally, martial law imposes restrictions on movement, gatherings, and communication, which can hinder social interactions and affect the learning environment. As a result, students may find it challenging to participate in curricular and extracurricular activities, communicate with peers offline, or engage with faculty outside of formal classroom settings. The pressures of warfare and safety concerns can also strain trust and frustrate collaboration, making collective problem-solving more difficult.

Martial law and increased security risks can make it even more difficult for vulnerable groups in HEIs to feel included. These groups may cover people with disabilities, LGBTQ+ individuals, ethnic minorities, and other underrepresented communities, as well as internally displaced persons, refugees, and others. The challenges and threats associated with martial law (such as curfews, restricted movement, and heightened security measures) can further isolate these groups and make it difficult for them to access educational resources and support systems. Additionally, the atmosphere of uncertainty and fear under war conditions can lead to discrimination and prejudice, creating even more barriers to inclusion and a sense of belonging.

Challenges in providing safe educational environment in the pedagogical realm under war conditions cover adaptation of teaching practices, curriculum adjustments, maintaining academic continuity, student engagements etc. Faculty must navigate the challenges of delivering high-quality education despite the constraints. This often involves adapting teaching methods, such as transitioning to online learning platforms or incorporating asynchronous delivery formats, to accommodate disruptions to the academic calendar and ensure continuity of instruction. Moreover, teaching methods and materials may need to be adapted to address students' psychological and emotional needs during times of strengthened security concerns. This includes providing resources on trauma-informed pedagogy, conflict resolution strategies, and techniques for fostering student resilience and coping skills.

Changes in the sociopolitical landscape necessitate curriculum revisions corresponding to emerging issues and equip students with relevant knowledge and skills. Faculty may need support in updating course materials, integrating current events into lessons, and fostering critical thinking and civic engagement.

Ensuring student engagement, motivation, and academic continuity during warfare is challenging due to security issues and infrastructure damage. Faculty must innovate teaching methods for remote or blended learning, tackling uncertainties around student participation and assessment. Flexibility, supportive learning, timely feedback, and resilience are crucial for providing a safe educational environment.

Thus, the importance of fostering a safe educational environment cannot be overstated, as it directly impacts the well-being, learning outcomes, and overall academic experience of students and faculty. Also, an interdisciplinary approach is required to address physical, psychological, social, and pedagogical challenges that arise in warfare conditions. In response to this imperative, the training course “Concept of Safe Educational Environment” was developed as part of the Erasmus+ project Jean Monnet Module at Sumy National Agrarian University SNAU with the aim of providing comprehensive multi-skilled training on this critical topic.

The course content and structure, supported by the handbook “Concept of Safe Educational Environment” (Berestok et al., 2024), encompasses seven topics, each delving into critical aspects relevant to establishing and maintaining safe educational environments. They include: 1. Safe Educational Environment; 2. Psychological Aspect of Safe Educational Environment; 3. Ecological Aspect of Safe Educational Environment; 4. Information Safety of Educational Environment; 5. Main Components of Safety/Security Paradigms; 6. Safe Educational Environment: Regulation and Legislation; 7. Language Learning Strategy within a Safe Educational Environment. The highlighted themes provide course participants with a comprehensive understanding of safety needs, psychological well-being, ecological sustainability, information security, regulatory frameworks, and linguistic dimensions pertinent to safe educational environments. By integrating diverse disciplinary perspectives, the course fosters critical thinking, promotes intercultural communication, and supports European integration efforts within Ukrainian HEIs.

Participants in the “Concept of Safe Educational Environment” training course gain a diverse range of knowledge essential for promoting and implementing safe educational practices. The course’s interdisciplinary nature equips them with a comprehensive awareness of safety from psychological, ecological, informational, regulatory, and linguistic perspectives. For example, this covers understanding the fundamental safety components within educational settings, such as safety needs, psychological safety, and environmental hazards. Moreover, participants gain knowledge of legal frameworks governing safe educational practices, strategies for fostering a culture of safety and inclusivity, and insights into the European experience in creating safe educational environments. They also develop an understanding of the relationship between language policy, cultural consciousness, and the promotion of safe educational environments in the era of globalization.

The course employs a wide variety of methods to ensure effective learning experiences for all participants (Berestok et al., 2024). Lectures provide foundational knowledge and theoretical frameworks, while presentations help visualize key points and encourage interactive learning and discussion. Real-life scenarios and case studies are used to contextualize concepts and encourage critical thinking

and problem-solving skills. Group discussions promote collaborative learning and allow participants to explore diverse perspectives on safety-related issues. Debates encourage critical analysis and argumentation. Role-playing exercises and simulations immerse participants in realistic scenarios, enabling them to apply theoretical knowledge in practical contexts and develop decision-making skills. Similarly, group projects and collaborative activities promote teamwork, critical analysis, and creativity. The course also utilizes online resources, multimedia materials, and interactive tools to correspond to diverse learning styles and facilitate self-directed learning, thereby fostering flexibility and in-depth inquiry into the safety themes. Such integration of various educational strategies aligns with previous research (Bilotserkovets et al., 2023; Lushchik et al., 2022), encouraging interactive collaboration and student engagement and creating an interactive and dynamic learning environment.

Conclusion. Amidst ongoing conflict and martial law in Ukraine, safeguarding educational environments has become paramount. The impact of war transcends physical destruction, posing unprecedented challenges to HEIs and academic continuity. This study illuminates the multifaceted challenges across physical, psychological, social, and pedagogical dimensions, emphasizing the urgent need for comprehensive measures.

This research provides a novel contribution to exploring safety in HEIs during wartime, an area that has not been sufficiently investigated. By synthesizing theoretical insights with empirical findings, this study offers a nuanced understanding of fostering safe educational environments, contributing to the national and international discourse on education under warfare.

The interdisciplinary “Concept of Safe Educational Environment” training course represents a timely effort to address these challenges proactively. Participants gain vital knowledge, skills, and competencies to promote safe educational practices. From grasping safety fundamentals to navigating regulatory frameworks, they acquire a comprehensive toolkit for safety in educational settings. Furthermore, innovative teaching methods – from lectures to role-playing exercises – ensure engagement and effective learning outcomes. By fostering collaborative dialogue and leveraging online resources, the course caters to diverse learning styles, promoting continuous learning.

As Ukraine has been suffering but navigating unprecedented war aggression, prioritizing comprehensive training programs like the “Concept of Safe Educational Environment” is essential. Ukrainian HEIs can thus establish a resilient learning environment, fostering academic excellence and community well-being amidst conflict challenges, while also contributing valuable insights to the global conversation on education in times of war.

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