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HIGHER EDUCATION QUALITY IN WAR CONDITIONS: INDICATORS AND RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES

JAKOŚĆ KSZTAŁCENIA WYŻSZEGO W WARUNKACH WOJENNYCH:
WSKAŹNIKI I PERSPEKTYWY BADAŃ

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Abstract:

The article is devoted to the problem of higher education quality ensuring in the conditions of war. The purpose of the article is to identify indicators of higher education quality and to determine the prospects of sociological research on higher education quality using these indicators (in particular, in war conditions). The results of an online survey conducted by "Info Sapiens" on behalf of the School of Political Analytics of the National University "Kyiv-Mohyla Academy" reveal the strengths and weaknesses of higher education quality assurance in Ukraine during the full-scale invasion of Russia. It is noted the loss of students' motivation, the decrease in the professors' demands, the lack of personalized "professor-student" communication, and the lack of understanding by the students of the importance and necessity of such communication, which, according to the author, are certain markers of a decrease in quality.

The quality criteria of higher education are analyzed, set out in "Standards and recommendations for quality assurance in the European area of higher education", as well as developed by the National Agency for Higher Education Quality Assurance (Ukraine). On this basis, the author derives key indicators of higher education quality, which can be used when conducting sociological research on the relevant issues.

Finding out whether the current decline in higher education quality is critical, what consequences it may lead to in the future, whether the situation should not worsen, etc., requires in-depth analysis and complex sociological research (including, using qualitative methodology), using indicators proposed in the article.

Keywords:

higher education, higher education institution, higher education quality indicators, higher education quality criteria, higher education quality

Abstrakt:

Artykuł jest poświęcony problemowi zapewnienia jakości szkolnictwa wyższego w warunkach wojny. Celem artykułu jest identyfikacja wskaźników jakości szkolnictwa wyższego oraz określenie perspektyw socjologicznych badań jakości szkolnictwa wyższego z wykorzystaniem tych wskaźników. Wyniki ankiety internetowej przeprowadzonej przez „Info Sapiens” na zlecenie Szkoły Analityki Politycznej Uniwersytetu Narodowego „Akademia Kijowsko-Mohylańska” ujawniają mocne i słabe strony zapewniania jakości szkolnictwa wyższego w Ukrainie podczas konfliktu zbrojnego, który rozpoczął się w lutym 2022 roku. Odnotowuje się utratę motywacji studentów, spadek wymagań profesorów, brak spersonalizowanej komunikacji profesor–student oraz brak zrozumienia przez studentów wagi i konieczności takiej komunikacji, które zdaniem autorki są pewnymi wyznacznikami spadku tejże jakości.

Kryteria jakości szkolnictwa wyższego są analizowane, określone w „Standardach i zaleceniach dotyczących zapewniania jakości w europejskim obszarze szkolnictwa wyższego”, a także opracowywane przez Narodową Agencję Zapewniania Jakości Szkolnictwa Wyższego (Ukraina). Na tej podstawie autorka wyprowadza kluczowe wskaźniki jakości szkolnictwa wyższego, które mogą być wykorzystane przy prowadzeniu badań socjologicznych nad omawianymi zagadnieniami. Ustalenie, czy obecny spadek jakości szkolnictwa wyższego jest krytyczny, do jakich konsekwencji może doprowadzić w przyszłości, czy sytuacja nie powinna się pogorszyć itp., wymaga pogłębionej analizy i kompleksowych badań socjologicznych (w tym z wykorzystaniem metodologii jakościowej) za pomocą wskaźników zaproponowanych w artykule.

Słowa kluczowe: szkolnictwo wyższe, uczelnia, wskaźniki jakości szkolnictwa wyższego, kryteria jakości szkolnictwa wyższego, jakość szkolnictwa wyższego

Introduction

Relevance of the research. The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, which began on February 24, 2022, led to significant, and sometimes drastic, changes in the functioning of all social institutions of Ukrainian society. Higher education system was obviously affected by war. Moreover, many scientists and experts note that the state of crisis for the Ukrainian education system is permanent, as it has been going on since at least the first year of Ukraine's independence (Agalarova & Sutula, 2018; Pashkov, 2021; Shamrai, 2015; Yaroshenko, 2007), and therefore, theoretically, a full-scale war should have dealt an almost “death blow” to Ukrainian higher education. However, it is obvious that this did not happen, which is evidenced by the actual restoration of the continuity of the educational process, the organization and conduct of the admission procedures, the implementation of full-fledged measures for higher education quality assessing (in the form of academic programs accreditation), etc.

It is expected that in a situation of war, when people lose their lives, homes, relatives, and peace, are forced to become internally displaced persons or refugees, when millions of people cannot provide for even their primary needs, the issue of education recedes to the second, third, etc. place. Such a loss of relevance, indeed, could become the collapse of the education system. But is this actually happening? What is happening,

in particular, in higher education? After all, the post-war and subsequent future of Ukrainian society depends on the quality of higher education during the war. The search for an answer to the question regarding higher education quality certainly requires a complex sociological study, the object of which would be key stakeholders (students, professors, representatives of the university management and administration).

Degree of problem research, undisclosed aspects, the purpose of the article. It should be noted that, in general, the issue of education quality is sufficiently studied in Ukraine and in the European scientific space as a whole, since the improvement of quality is always the goal of any educational reforms and changes. The concept of the education quality is multifaceted, and therefore the following aspects of it are revealed in special scientific literature: philosophical (V. Kremen, O. Subetto, R. Shmatkov, etc.) (Kremen, 2003; Kremen, 2010; Subetto, 2000; Shmatkov, 2009); management (V. Viktorov, N. Zhitnyk, L. Oderii, L. Petrenko, L. Sushentseva, etc.) (Viktorov, 2005; Management of the education quality, 2018; Oderii, 1995); pedagogical (V. Verbets, S. Honcharenko, O. Lokshina, O. Lyashenko, S. Nikolayenko, etc.) (Verbets, 2011; Honcharenko, 2006; Lokshina, 2006; Lyashenko, 2005; Nikolayenko, 2006). Undoubtedly, these scientists made a significant contribution to the development of ideas about the quality of education, conceptualized the concept of “quality of education”, substantiated the

need for a further scientific study of this concept, etc. However, the analysis of the above-mentioned literature shows that the issue of empirical operationalization of the “quality of education” concept is insufficiently treated. In principle, we understand that such operationalization is the task of sociology rather than philosophy, psychology and management sciences. Despite the high development of the sociology of education, we see that the problem of education quality is not sufficiently treated. A significant contribution to the development of this problem was made by the Ukrainian sociologist Svitlana Shchudlo, who proposed a sociological interpretation of the concept of “education quality”. Based on her own research, she proved the need for sociological intervention in the development of higher education quality problem and the sociological justification and support of reforms taking place in higher education (Shchudlo, 2012).

If we consider the issue of education quality precisely in the context of such significant social upheavals as the war, then this issue looks completely unsolved. Modern sociological literature does not contain scientific information relevant to the task of revealing this issue.

In view of the above, the purpose of the article is to identify indicators of higher education quality and to determine the prospects of sociological research on higher education quality using these indicators (in particular, in war conditions).

Main results of the study

The Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine interprets the quality of education as “a set of educational process characteristics that determine the consistent and practically effective formation of competence and professional awareness. This is a certain level of knowledge and skills, mental, physical and moral development, which the graduates of the educational institution achieved in

accordance with the planned goals of education and upbringing” (Quality of education).

It should be noted that the processes of reforming the Ukrainian higher education system in matters of quality are based on European standards and relevant directives and documents. In particular, such a document as “Standards and recommendations for quality assurance in the European area of higher education” contains a number of key provisions regarding the quality of teaching and learning in higher education (Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, 2015, p. 9). According to this document, a higher education institution should make efforts to develop an internal quality system, which includes:

1. Development and implementation of a clear quality assurance policy, involving external parties;
2. Development and approval of own academic programs. These programs must be designed in accordance with established goals and expected learning outcomes. The qualification obtained as a result of mastering the program must be clearly formulated and explained;
3. Ensuring student-centered learning, teaching and assessment, encouraging students to actively participate in the creation of the educational process;
4. Clear definition and publication of rules regarding all phases of the student cycle, such as enrollment, training, recognition of qualifications and certification;
5. Ensuring high competence of teachers, applying fair and transparent procedures for the selection and development of the teaching staff;
6. Ensuring sufficient financing of educational and teaching activities and the availability of adequate and publicly available educational resources and student support;
7. Establishing, ensuring, institutionalizing procedures for collecting, analyzing and using the necessary information for effective management of educational programs;

8. Systematic publication of clear, accurate, objective, relevant and accessible information about academic programs.
9. Current monitoring, periodic review, improvement of academic programs, ensuring their compliance with the specified goals, needs of students and society. Public notification of any changes (planned or implemented).
10. Carrying out (on a cyclical basis) the process of external quality assurance.

The leading role in specifying the concept of higher education quality was played by the National Agency for Higher Education Quality Assurance (NAQA) – a permanent collegial body authorized by the Law of Ukraine “On Higher Education” to implement state policy in the field of higher education quality assurance (Charter of the National Agency for Higher Education Quality Assurance, 2019, p. 3). Considering the above EU standards, the following criteria (Regulations on academic programs accreditation..., 2019) for evaluating the quality of academic programs have been developed by NAQA (in this article, we will allow ourselves to shorten the interpretation of the criteria, since their full disclosure is not the objective of this article):

1. Design and goals of the academic program (clearly formulated goals that correspond to the mission and strategy of higher education institution, as well as the needs of interested parties and trends in the speciality, labor market, industry and region);
2. The structure and content of the academic program (compliance of the academic program scope with the state standard in ECTS credits; compliance of its content with the speciality subject area and the corresponding professional standard requirements (if available); clarity and logic of the academic program structure, which provides for the formation of an individual educational trajectory of the student; sufficient practical training; provision of soft skills, etc.);
3. Access to the academic program and recognition of study results (clarity, comprehensibility,

- transparency of the rules of admission to study on the academic program; absence of discriminatory provisions; consideration of the peculiarities of the academic program itself, etc.);
4. Learning and teaching on the academic program (compliance of the forms and methods of learning with the goals and outcomes of the academic program; awareness of the educational process participants regarding all key aspects of the academic program; a combination of learning and research; timely updating of the topics dealt with within the educational courses’ program; internationalization of educational activities);
5. Control measures, evaluation of applicants for higher education and academic integrity (clarity, comprehensibility, transparency, publicity of control forms, criteria for evaluating applicants, rules for conducting control measures; compliance of attestation forms with state standards; clarity and comprehensibility of policies and procedures for compliance with academic virtue, etc.);
6. Human resources (correspondence of the academic and/or professional qualifications of professors to the academic program goals and outcomes; transparency and fairness of procedures for the competitive selection of professors; involvement of employers and industry experts in the implementation of the educational process and/or in classes; stimulating of professors’ skills development);
7. Educational environment and material resources (relevance of financial, material and technical resources; educational and methodological support of the academic program; open access of students and professors to the appropriate infrastructure and information resources necessary for learning and teaching; safety of educational environment; sufficient conditions for the realization of the right to education for persons with special educational needs; the presence of clear and understandable policies and procedures for

resolving conflict situations (in particular, related to sexual harassment, discrimination and/or corruption, etc.);

8. Internal quality assurance of the academic program (consistent compliance with the procedures for development, approval, monitoring and revision of the academic program; involvement of students, employers, graduates and other stakeholders in the review of the academic program and other procedures for ensuring its quality; availability of mechanisms and procedures for timely response of the educational institution to identified deficiencies in the academic program and/or educational activity; taking into account the results of external quality assurance, etc.);
9. Transparency and publicity (the existence of clear and understandable rules and procedures regulating the rights and obligations of all participants in the educational process; publication (on the university website) of all documents and other information related to the educational program, its content and the implementation process;
10. Learning through research – refers to academic and scientific programs for the preparation of doctors of philosophy (compliance of the academic and scientific program content with the interests of PhD-students; provision of opportunities for conducting and testing the results of PhD-students scientific research, as well as for their involvement in the international academic community, research projects, compliance with the principles of academic integrity.

As Ukrainian sociologist S. Shchudlo noted, “...Sociological interpretation of the education quality should be integral, cover both procedural and effective characteristics, ... should characterize the compliance of education with current and future (projected) expectations, needs, goals, requirements, norms (standards) of all participants of the educational process – the state, society, employers, professors, students. This approach

requires a research analysis of the interaction of various social communities involved in the educational process, since it is successful interaction that becomes a guarantee of quality” (Schudlo, 2021, p. 45–46).

In view of the above criteria, considering the specifics of the actual sociological interpretation of education quality, we formulated key indicators of higher education quality that can be used when conducting a sociological study on the relevant issues:

1. Relevance of the academic program (Does the academic program meet the needs of the industry, the challenges of the time, and the applicants’ vision of their future? Are the applicants disappointed that they entered this particular academic program, this particular speciality?);
2. The dynamism of the academic program (What are the factors that lead to revision and updating of the academic program? How systematic are the procedures for revising and updating the academic program?);
3. Involvement of representatives of all stakeholder groups in the review and update procedures (Are students, professors, employers, industry experts, graduates, etc. involved in the procedures of academic program review and update? If so, in what forms? Are their suggestions considered?);
4. Content, forms, and methods of learning (What forms, methods, etc. are used to teach? Are students satisfied with these forms and methods, as well as the learning outcomes? Are students satisfied with the content of the courses they study? If satisfied/not satisfied, then what do they like/dislike? Do students participate in scientific activities? How does the practical training of students take place? Are they overwhelmed by such practical training? Do the students participate in non-formal education?);
5. Fairness, comprehensibility, and transparency of the procedures/rules of the academic program admission, as well as current and final

control and certification (Was the academic program admission fair or unfair? What are the forms and methods of current and final control, as well as forms of certification of applicants? Are they relevant and fair? How clear are the criteria and the evaluation system? Did the participants of the educational process encounter cases of discrimination and/or corruption, unfair treatment?);

6. Professors' teaching skills and their commitment to the courses they teach (Are the professors sufficiently qualified to provide high-quality teaching of their courses? Do they engage in scientific work? Do they implement their own scientific developments in the courses they teach? What teaching methods do the teachers use (traditional/innovative)? Do teachers update (and how systematically) the content of the courses they teach? Is the content of the courses interesting for students? Are industry experts involved in the teaching?);
7. Organization and accessibility of the educational environment (Do the participants of the educational process have physical access to the educational environment? If not, how does the educational institution provide online access to the educational environment and its resources (libraries, databases, computer programs necessary for learning, etc.)? How do dean's offices, departments, and other units of the university, as well as such bodies as Student Government, etc., implement their functions?);
8. Implementation of procedures for education quality ensuring (Are planned accreditations of academic programs carried out? If so, which structural divisions and persons are involved in the procedures for accreditation preparation? What are their responsibilities? How effectively do they cope with these responsibilities?);
9. Systematism and dynamism of the university website work (How often is information updated, including information about

educational programs? What information is usually presented on the university website, as well as on the pages of the dean's office, departments, etc.? What difficulties arise with presenting information on the website? Which department, etc., is responsible for the technical issue of presenting information on the university's website? How effectively do they perform their functions?);

10. Scientific component of the educational process (Do "Scientific Schools" function? Is scientific research carried out at the request of the state or other stakeholders? What are the main scientific achievements of the university/faculty/department? Is there research cooperation with foreign institutions? Are conferences held at the university? Does the university have its own scientific journals? Are the applicants involved in the scientific research of the university/faculty/department? Do students and professors participate in scientific events (conferences, etc.) and scientific research?).

The indicators defined by us and given above are universal, that is, those that can be used both in wartime and in the postwar period, including for the purpose of comparative studies within one country (quality dynamics) and between different countries of the European Union (since it is based on European quality standards).

First, the COVID-19 pandemic, and then the full-scale invasion of Russia could not stop the educational process in Ukraine, however, all this called into question the quality of implementation and results of this process. From a sociological point of view, despite the very difficult circumstances of wartime, the issues of the education quality cannot be neglected, since the speed of recovery of our country in post-war times depends on the quality of education in the existing war conditions.

It should be noted that a certain indicator of quality is the fact that some Ukrainian universities, in particular those that are like "flagships"

of national higher education (Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, V.N. Karazin Kharkiv National University, and others), despite extremely difficult conditions and the circumstances caused by the war did not stop them from fully evaluating the quality of their academic programs by conducting full accreditation expertise. Although, they had the opportunity to postpone the full accreditation expertise, at least until the end of the war.

However, for a complete understanding of the situation with higher education quality in Ukraine during the war, the given fact is not enough. The question of quality requires a complex sociological study and measurement according to all the indicators that we have given above.

It should be noted that certain sociological investigations, based on the results of which it is possible to draw some conclusions regarding higher education quality during the war, have already been implemented. In particular, the results of an online survey conducted by School of Political Analytics of the National University “Kyiv-Mohyla Academy” and “Info Sapiens” (with the financial support of the “Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom” Representation in Ukraine) under the leadership of the director of the School, PhD in Sociology Anna Osypchuk are of great interest. Data collection took place from June till July 2022. The respondents were students who are currently studying at universities or were studying before the start of the full-scale invasion of Russia¹. The vast majority of respondents at the time of the survey were in the same settlement as before the start of the full-scale invasion (62.23%), while 21.25% changed their place within Ukraine and 16.52% were abroad (Vyshcha osvita v umovakh viiny ochyma studentiv, 2022).

¹ The sample size is 12,019. The sample includes students of thirty universities representing all regions of Ukraine (except the occupied territories), with proportional filling by university, without stratification by specialty and courses.

The study included several blocks of questions related to: general issues of the renewal of education since the beginning of the full-scale invasion; the organization of education and students' attitude to education, their moral and psychological state, their material support, technical and other conditions of education; the quality of teaching; the quality of work administration of higher education institutions; migration attitudes of students; practices of involvement in non-formal education and participation in academic mobility during the war, etc. The full presentation of the research results can be found on the website of the School of Political Analytics. We will focus only on those key points that we consider to be certain “markers” of the quality of higher education, as well as those that deserve the attention of sociologists in the perspective of further research.

The study did not aim to assess the quality of high education as such. It had other goals. Therefore, the quality indicators highlighted earlier in this article either do not work at all or work only partially in this case. Nevertheless, the emphasis on some of the research results in the context of the issues of this article, in our opinion, is appropriate, because it allows us to make certain assumptions about the state and quality of higher education during the war, and therefore to specify the problematic issues that determine the perspective of sociological research on higher education quality.

It is necessary to emphasize that about 97% of the respondents confirm the renewal of studies at the university after the full-scale invasion of Russia. Among those who did not confirm, the majority are students who are completely unaware of what is happening in their university. About 98% resumed their studies immediately after the relevant order from the university or later, and about 2% noted that they did not resume their studies.

It is noteworthy that 58.11% of the respondents confirmed that it was more difficult for them to concentrate on their studies than before the start of the full-scale invasion, while only 18.56%

noted that their concentration on studies had not changed at all or had hardly changed. In addition, almost a third of students (31.63%) now think more often about whether it is worth continuing their studies at the university at all. Undoubtedly, such conditions and attitudes are inevitable consequences of war, but at the same time, they are certain markers of a decrease in motivation to study, which, most likely, has a negative effect on higher education quality in general.

On the positive side, the war did not affect the attitude of the vast majority of students towards the speciality they entered. About 83% do not plan to change their speciality, 10.26% hesitate to answer, although about 7% still have a more or less stable intention to change their speciality. It is also positive that continuing to study at the university, despite all the negative circumstances associated with the war, is a conscious decision of the vast majority of surveyed students (about 81%), which is not related to the pressure of their parents. In addition, about 74% disagree with the fact that there is no point in getting a higher education during the war (about 54% of them strongly disagree).

Mostly, students have sufficient conditions for studying. Although 19.33% noted that the conditions have worsened, and therefore it is almost impossible to study. Despite this, for 46.06% participation in online classes is problematic, and for 9.26% it is not possible at all, which is a rather alarming fact that indicates a significant decline in higher education quality, because it turns out that a little more than 55% of students have little or do not have opportunity to either see or hear the professor, and therefore their studies turn into continuous independent work, which, taking into account the high level of anxiety and the decrease in motivation due to the war, is qualitatively performed by a minimum number of students.

Despite the fact that a very large part of students (more than 55%) do not have the full opportunity to participate in online classes, only 10.39% complain about the significant learning

impairment after the full-scale invasion of Russia. Along with this, about a third (31.47%) believe that they can study more or less qualitatively, the same as before the full-scale invasion, while about 47% admit that they cannot maintain the pre-war level of the quality of their education. In addition, about half of the respondents believe that the deterioration of the education quality during the war is justified. Strongly disagree and rather disagree with this statement 11.01% and 12.36%, respectively.

The vast majority of students note that the professors' interest in teaching has not changed at all or has hardly changed since the beginning of the full-scale invasion. However, the share of those who notice a decrease in professors' interest is significant (21.62%). The majority of students claim that professors adapted the content of their courses to new conditions, and even became less demanding, however, most of the students do not consider this as a factor that negatively affects the quality of their education.

Only 2.61% of surveyed students (313 people) at the time of the survey were participants in academic mobility, however, they have real grounds for comparing the quality of education in Ukrainian and foreign higher education institutions. Against this background, it is striking that 53.23% of them have a strong intention to return to Ukraine and only 14.3% would like to continue their studies at a foreign higher education institution. No less positive is the fact that among all respondents, about a third show a strong intention to return to Ukraine if they have or will have the opportunity to study abroad, and 21.56% do not plan to go abroad at all, 23.69% would try abroad find a job and gain experience, and the total part of those who wish to stay abroad for other than educational or work purposes, enroll in another program abroad, take part in another international mobility program is slightly higher than 5%.

The attitudes of our students, which are not directly related to education, are extremely important, including in view of the prospects for higher

education development. So, about 71% of the surveyed students claim that after the start of the full-scale invasion, they realized that they want to live in Ukraine. Although there are some who, after the start of a full-scale invasion, began to think more often about leaving Ukraine forever (15.41%).

Conclusions

Based on the given results, the following conclusions can be drawn:

- Ukrainian higher education institutions more or less quickly adapted to wartime conditions and implement the educational process, despite all the negative circumstances;
- among the applicants, those who, with the beginning of a full-scale invasion of Russia, were not disappointed with the national higher education, their speciality and their professors, and retain confidence in the need to continue their studies, significantly prevail;
- the vast majority of applicants have a positive vision of Ukraine and its future, do not plan to leave the country and, if they do (or are already abroad), then temporarily – obtain additional competencies (educational and/or professional);
- a large part of the students of the acquisitions are in a state of heightened anxiety, which prevents them from concentrating on their studies and studying as well as they did before the start of the full-scale invasion of Russia;
- professors try to conduct classes at the appropriate level of quality. However, they not only adapted the content of their courses to the new conditions but also somewhat lowered the requirements;
- more than half of the students do not have the opportunity to attend online classes, and therefore personal communication with professors is reduced to a minimum, that is, “teacher-student” social interaction does not take place. Along with this, the vast majority

of students consider the study conditions “normal” and quite sufficient (only 19.33% do not think so!), and therefore it turns out that they do not consider personal communication with the professors as a necessary condition for the quality of their education.

The last three points in the given list should be considered as markers of a decline in the high education quality. Let’s emphasize that in a war situation, such a decrease is more the norm than a deviation. However, the loss of students’ motivation (and, most likely, professors’ motivation as well), a decrease in the professors’ demands, the lack of personalized “teacher-student” communication, and the main misunderstanding by students of the importance and necessity of such communication are negative symptoms. Finding out whether the current decline in higher education quality is critical, what consequences it may lead to in the future, whether the situation should not worsen, etc., requires in-depth analysis and new sociological research (including the qualitative method proposed in this article, the object of which were methodology), using the indicators representatives of key groups of stakeholders: students, professors, representatives of the university management and administration. In our opinion, such sociological research should not be postponed, because the existing symptoms are very alarming.

In addition, today Ukraine is faced with another important problem – a power outage. The blows of the Russian aggressor on critical infrastructure are, at the same time, blows on the economy, on the mental health of Ukrainians, as well as on the education system. Undoubtedly, the so-called “blackouts” will further harm the education system, which shall require separate investigation and research.

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