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Prospects for Digitalization of Higer Education in Armenia in the Context of Post-pandemic and Post-war Transformations

[Perspektywy cyfryzacji szkolnictwa wyższego w Armenii w kontekście transformacji postpandemicznej i powojennej]

Streszczenie: Autorzy analizują wyzwania i możliwości cyfryzacji szkolnictwa wyższego w Armenii w kontekście pandemii COVID-19 i następstw 44-dniowej wojny w 2020 r. (Konflikt w Górskim Karabachu, nazywanym w Armenii Artsakh). Celem jest ocena potencjału poprawy konkurencyjności armeńskiego systemu edukacji poprzez transformację cyfrową i hybrydowe modele uczenia się. Badania opierają się na teoriach cyfrowego uczenia się i edukacji hybrydowej, koncentrując się na tym, jak kryzysy, takie jak pandemie i wojny, wpływają na szkolnictwo wyższe. Ponadto autorzy badają, jak przebiega transformacja edukacji w odpowiedzi na te kryzysy. W latach 2020-2023 przeprowadzono serię ankiet, w tym kwestionariusze dla studentów, pogłębionych wywiadami z nauczycielami oraz konsultacjami eksperckimi z szerokim gronem specjalistów w dziedzinie edukacji. Metody te zapewniają ogląd mechanizmu wpływu pandemii i wojny na szkolnictwo wyższe w Armenii. Badanie wykazało, że skuteczność nauczania online i hybrydowego zależy zarówno od czynników obiektywnych (takich jak nowoczesne platformy informatyczne, metody edukacji cyfrowej i systemy monitorowania jakości), jak i subiektywnych (takich jak postawy studentów wobec innowacji cyfrowych i ich adaptacja psychologiczna). Nauczanie hybrydowe wykazało po-

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tencjał większej elastyczności i korzyści ekonomicznych, ale istnieje potrzeba lepszego planowania, infrastruktury i szkolenia w zakresie umiejętności cyfrowych. Wyniki sugerują, że stworzenie nowego środowiska edukacyjnego zoptymalizowanego pod kątem cyfryzacji i kształcenia na odległość może poprawić szkolnictwo wyższe w Armenii. Badania te umożliwiają wgląd w pokryzysową transformację edukacyjną i dostarczają praktycznych zaleceń dotyczących poprawy cyfrowego uczenia się w Armenii.

Summary: This article examines the challenges and opportunities of digitalizing higher education in Armenia in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the aftermath of the 44-day war in 2020 (Nagorno Karabakh Conflict). The aim is to assess the potential for improving the competitiveness of the Armenian education system through digital transformation and hybrid learning models. The research is grounded in theories of digital learning and hybrid education, focusing on how crises, such as pandemics and wars, impact higher education. It explores the transformation of education in response to these crises. The study is based on a series of surveys conducted between 2020 and 2023, including questionnaires for students, in-depth interviews with educators, and expert consultations from a broad range of specialists in education. These methods provide insights into the effects of the pandemic and war on higher education in Armenia. The study finds that the effectiveness of online and hybrid learning depends on both objective factors (such as modern IT platforms, digital education methods, and quality monitoring systems) and subjective factors (such as students' attitudes toward digital innovations and their psychological adaptation). Hybrid learning has shown potential for greater flexibility and economic benefits, but there is a need for better planning, infrastructure, and digital literacy training. The findings suggest that creating a new educational environment optimized for digitalization and distance learning could improve the higher education in Armenia. This research offers insights into post-crisis educational transformation and provides practical recommendations for enhancing digital learning in Armenia.

Introduction

The topic of digitalization in education has been gaining relevance since the mid-20th century due to the rapid development of information technologies. However, in the 21st century, it has become crucial to more deeply study the processes of digitalizing all aspects of human activity. Digital technologies directly influence the formation of what is often referred to as a "new reality" for human existence, transforming key areas of social life such as governance, economics, politics, social interactions, and communication. Klaus Schwab described these global processes of transformation and digitalization as the "Fourth Industrial Revolution", or "Industry 4.0" (IR 4.0) (Schwab K., 2016). Within this context, the digitalization of higher education systems (HES) has become increasing-

ly significant, especially in addressing modern educational challenges and preparing specialists in an era of IT development.

Acute respiratory illness, named as COVID-19, has started in China in December 2019 and spread all around the world. Due to outbreak of the disease more than half of the world countries closed their borders, which made a deep impact on economics and social life of the communities. People were used to sit at home, rarely they could visit shops, keeping social distance with other people on the street and wearing masks and gloves. The crisis impulse has tackled all spheres of life. Society became more dependend on internet, computers and smartphones, with which they could work or study in distance, being at home.Online classes are made available by many educational online sercices for free in order to help students and teachers across the world (Sokołowski M., 2021, pp. 7–22).

The COVID-19 pandemic acted as a catalyst for the digitalization of education, pushing the world toward online learning methods and the active adoption of digital technologies, significantly enhancing the innovative potential of the educational process. The impact of wars on the digitalization process is an even less studied topic. The article examines the problems of digitalization of higher education in Armenia, taking into account the conditions of the epidemiological situation related to COVID-19, as well as the consequences of the 44-Day War of 2020, the armed conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, called the Second Karabakh War (Hayrapetyan L., 2022). The Nagorno Karabakh Conflict "is often considered as one of the frozen post-Soviet conflicts since currently no active combat is taking place" (Askerov A., 2020, p. 55).

Theoretical framework

The effective use of digital technologies in higher education is a critical research topic from both scientific and practical perspectives. The transformation of education under the influence of digitalization is widely discussed in international literature, primarily in terms of the advantages of digital technologies (see, for example, E.G. et al., 2015; Minina V.N., 2020; Li C. et al., 2020). These benefits include student access to educational resources, the ability to create personalized learning projects, increased transparency in educational institutions, optimized collaboration between faculty, students, and other stakeholders, and the development of flexible management structures in education. However, a number of negative consequences of digitalization are also being analyzed (see, for example, Higgins S. et al., 2012). Moreover, studies by various authors analyze the relationship between digitalization and the inclusion of young people in social life. "[…] we have uncritically assumed

that using digital tools would automatically promote social inclusion. […] However, […] access to the digital world is about more than just having a broadband connection. Just like physical spaces and traditional forms of information, modern applications and digital tools can easily exclude young people with disabilities if they are not designed to be accessible to people of all needs" (Moxon D. et al., 2021, pp. 5–6).

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly transformed the mechanisms of higher education systems worldwide. Despite the importance of this issue, the dual impact of the pandemic on HES has not yet been fully explored in the academic literature.

The impact of wars on the digitalization process is an even less studied topic. Key characteristics of post-war societies include demographic challenges, an increase in the number of single mothers and the shift towards "female-dominated" societies, rising crime rates, and a decline in social cohesion and trust (Fiedler C., Rohles C., 2021). However, studies of post-war societies based on the personal recollections of war participants highlight some "positive" aspects of war, despite its many negative consequences:

– A sense of freedom,
– Increased personal responsibility towards oneself and small groups,
– A heightened capacity for critical thinking, as individuals from different social classes and locations interact more during wartime (for instance, rural inhabitants with urban dwellers, students with uneducated individuals, and the wealthy with the poor) (Mysak Y., 2021).

War and armed conflict significantly affect children's and young people's educational outcomes, peer relationships, and overall life satisfaction. Longitudinal studies confirm that exposure to conflict and post-conflict environments can adversely impact the mental health of children and youth. However, protective factors, including family and societal acceptance, can help mitigate the negative effects of war, thereby reducing the risk of mental health disorders (Betancourt T.S. et al., 2019).

Anthropological and ethnographic studies on conflicts in Sierra Leone, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo, as well as the aftermath, reveal distinct characteristics of post-war youth in these regions. These include changes in employment patterns and the practice of "avoidance and silence" (Palmberger M., 2018). An analysis of Bosnia and Herzegovina shows that young people view past wartime events as distressing and threatening, preferring to distance themselves from the political discourse in their current lives (Eastmond M. et al., 2012).

Research on the impact of wars on higher education highlights several critical challenges and trends. Wars and conflicts severely disrupt higher education systems, destroying infrastructure, displacing students and faculty, altering curricula, and exacerbating gender inequalities. For example, universities in Syria, Iraq, Ukraine, and Afghanistan have faced significant challenges in maintaining academic continuity and quality due to ongoing conflicts. These disruptions often lead to a decline in educational standards and access, with long-term consequences for the socio-economic development of affected populations (Mulatedzi C.R., 2024).

Despite these challenges, there is notable resilience among educators and students who strive to continue their education amid conflict. International cooperation and support from global educational organizations play a vital role in maintaining educational opportunities and aiding the recovery and rebuilding of higher education systems in war-affected regions. These efforts are essential not only for immediate recovery but also for fostering long-term stability, peace, and growth in these societies (Kayyali, 2024).

In this context, the digitalization of higher education emerges as a crucial factor contributing to the stabilization of educational systems.

Methodology

The article presents the results of longitudinal studies conducted from early 2020 to the end of 2023 in Armenian universities. These studies included online student surveys, in-depth interviews with faculty members, and a series of expert surveys involving a wide range of specialists in the field of education. A total of four stages of research were carried out. The aim of these studies was to identify the specific features of accelerated digitalization in education, analyze the possibilities and limitations of both online and in-person learning formats, as well as explore the potential for their combination.

In Armenia, quarantine measures were introduced on March 16, 2020, leading to the complete transition of the higher education system to online learning. Four distinct phases of transformation in the learning formats of Armenian higher education can be identified. The first phase corresponds to the first half of 2020 and is characterized by the full shift to online learning. The second phase relates to the second half of 2020, marked by the initial attempts to implement hybrid learning formats. The third and fourth phases correspond to the first and second halves of 2021, respectively, and are characterized by the continued development of hybrid learning in Armenia's higher education system.

The goal of the conducted research was to analyze and summarize the experience of transitioning to online education, assess the challenges and consequences of the digital transformation of universities in Armenia. In the spring of 2022, in-depth interviews with faculty members and expert interviews were conducted, along with online surveys of students using a formalized questionnaire. The experts included leading specialists in the field of higher education in Armenia, as well as administrators responsible for managing the educational process at Armenian universities. A total of 10 experts participated in the study. The sample size for the online survey of Armenian students was 152 participants. A "river-sample" technique was used to create the student sample, which does not necessarily guarantee the representativeness of the sample. Nevertheless, the quantitative data collected reflects the main trends within the student community, and comparative data analysis suggests that the sample can be considered representative.

The survey among Armenian students focused on questions related to online and in-person learning formats, aiming to understand their attitudes towards digital technologies in the educational process, distance learning, and the key difficulties and problems they faced during online learning. The goal was also to develop solutions to these problems in the future. The questionnaire contained 31 questions, seven of which presented statements where students had to express their agreement, disagreement, or uncertainty. These questions helped gather information about how students perceive the impact of digital technologies, and how they evaluate the pros and cons of these technologies not only in education but in other areas of life as well. The remaining questions aimed to assess students' levels of digital literacy and culture, as well as their readiness to use internet technologies in their educational activities. Respondents could choose from the provided options or add their own. Participation in the survey was anonymous and voluntary.

Results and discussions

The 44-day war in 2020 influenced how Armenian youth perceive digital and information technologies within higher education. While pre-war higher education challenges for young people largely centered around issues of unemployment and the mismatch between educational content and labor market demands, in the post-war period, mental health concerns, the relevance of education to survival, and coping with stress and trauma became more prominent.

Moreover, higher education has gained greater significance in the eyes of youth compared to the pre-war period.

"We need to realize all this again. That we need to be more prepared for life through education: we need to be more educated in all respects. Even if a situation arises where there is no driver's license, but if there is the ability to drive a car, then if necessary, a person will be able to drive a car or use a weapon, and this will save their life. We have many educational needs:there are problems with the quality of education, modernization of educational content, low level of participation in non-formal education programs, lack of public education services".

Personal interview, male, 20 years old, city

"Psychological conversations are important, there are many doctors, they should talk to war veterans. There are cases of deviations after the war. Education should also include a psychological component"

Group discussion, male, 18–22 years old, city

"We have encountered so much fake news that education should also include training on how to use the Internet correctly, how to distinguish between truth and lies"

Personal interview, female, 27 years old, city

While there was a higher level of student disengagement in the pre-war higher education system, in the post-war period, students have become more engaged in their education, viewing it as a tool for overcoming both material and mental challenges in everyday life.

In particular, 27.7% of respondents noted professional education as the main factor in employment, knowledge of foreign languages - 27.3%, interestingly, 27.6% of respondents named appearance, but only 12.4% of young people noted the factor of personal connections, whereas in pre-war realities more than 67% of respondents named personal connections as the main factor in employment. A particular emphasis has been placed on the relevance of higher education to modern information technologies, and one of the primary concerns for post-war youth is the need for education in media literacy.

First of all, it should be noted that the accelerated digitalization of higher education from March to May 2020 faced five main types of problems: technical, economic, pedagogical, physical, and psychological. Initially, digitalization was almost exclusively associated with the transition to online learning formats (so-called "e-learning"), which by no means implied the full digitalization of higher education in accordance with the aforementioned components. On the contrary, according to the results of the research, the traditional form of education was merely adapted to the new online learning format. As a result, the initial reac-

tions from both faculty and students were quite negative toward online learning formats.

Among the objective factors contributing to this negative assessment, the primary issue was the technical aspect, namely: the insufficient preparedness of technical resources for conducting online learning, the lack of adequate material, technical, methodological, and software support, including weak internet connectivity, insufficient technical capacity, the lack of platforms ready for online learning, and the lack of skills in using technical tools among participants in the learning process. It is particularly important to emphasize that at the time, participants in online learning placed significant importance on the absence of digital platforms for live interaction between students, as well as between teachers and students, outside of the time allotted for lectures or seminars. Technical problems were, therefore, at the forefront of issues related to online learning formats.

The technical problems were closely linked to economic ones, particularly the lack of funding for organizing online learning and acquiring and using digital information technologies.

A number of pedagogical problems were also highlighted, related to the insufficient readiness of the educational process for online learning. These included the lack of prepared digital teaching materials, curricula, standards, regulations, and procedures for implementing online learning, as well as the absence of necessary skills for teaching and attending classes in the virtual space.

Physical and psychological issues experienced by participants during the organization of online learning should not be underestimated either. Respondents identified the main physical problems as the lack of physical activity, the sedentary lifestyle associated with sitting for several hours in front of a screen during online learning.

Psychological problems were mainly associated with students' and the majority of teachers' rejection of forced self-isolation and the abandonment of their normal way of life and forms of communication. Additionally, psychological problems included the inability of participants in the educational process to effectively organize interaction and communication in the virtual space, and the lack of motivation for active participation in the learning process.

Nevertheless, despite the aforementioned problems, the epidemiological factor accelerated the adaptation of universities to the transition to digital platforms, and by mid-2020, many of these problems had been resolved. From September 2020, hybrid learning formats, which combined online and in-person learning, began to be implemented in Armenia's higher education system. By early 2021, most of the leading universities in the country had created online platforms to support online learning, mainly

based on Moodle and Google Classroom platforms. Platforms for online communication during distance lectures and meetings, such as Zoom, BBB, Google Meet, and Microsoft Teams, were also mastered and widely used. Moreover, information technologies such as Padlet, Ezvid, and Tricider began to be used in the learning process, incorporating competitive technologies, communication skills development, self-presentation, and cognitive analysis skills into online learning. Positive assessments of online learning increased, along with the motivation for its implementation.

According to respondents, online learning had certain economic benefits, including reduced transportation costs (both in terms of time and money), decreased equipment wear and tear, and less need for maintaining classroom infrastructure. Respondents also highlighted organizational advantages, such as the ability to schedule online meetings based on the convenience of the participants. In some cases, increased motivation and interest in participating in online classes were noted.

Meanwhile, hybrid learning formats also helped address the lack of live interaction between teachers and students, which is a crucial factor in organizing any form of higher education. From September 2020 to May 2021, hybrid learning became increasingly widespread as the primary form of education in the country's universities.

Among the hybrid learning models in Armenian universities, the so-called Enriched Virtual model, which offers a flexible combination of online and in-person learning for each course, gained the most popularity. The Lab Rotation model, which alternates online and in-person learning for the entire group within a single subject, was also implemented in some universities. The Flipped Classroom model, where theoretical preparation is done online and practical reinforcement occurs during in-person classes, also found use. Other hybrid learning models, such as Station Rotation (where a group is divided into subgroups and the instructor works with each subgroup in a sequential online and in-person format), Individual Rotation (where the instructor works with each student individually online and in-person), Flex (a flexible model allowing independent preparation by students with individual discussions of key issues online with the instructor), and A La Carte/Menu (offering additional online courses alongside in-person education), did not gain significant traction in Armenian universities.

Among the challenges during this phase of hybrid learning, the following issues were highlighted:
- Insufficient development of new educational standards that ensure an effective balance between online and in-person learning;
- Insufficient development of principles for monitoring the quality of blended learning;

- The need to create technical platforms that facilitate more person-alized interaction and exchange of opinions during online learn-ing;
- Inadequate attention to the psychological mechanisms of student and teacher adaptation to the constant shifts in learning formats within the hybrid model (the "fatigue effect" from constant chang-es in educational approaches).

Many of the mentioned issues remain unresolved. However, starting in September 2021, a special hybrid learning format began to be imple-mented in Armenian universities, where priority was given to in-person learning, with a formal requirement to maintain activity on virtual educa-tional platforms. In other words, the hybrid model often became a formal procedure, where the benefits of online and in-person learning were not fully realized. This hybrid learning model could be conditionally referred to as a "formal-procedural" one, where the additional burden on teachers involved maintaining online educational platforms, duplicating assign-ments and programs on virtual information platforms, and simulating re-porting activities, while students lacked sufficient motivation to actively engage with these online platforms.

Conclusion

The findings of the study suggest that while the hybrid model of ed-ucation has undeniable advantages, there are still many unresolved is-sues related to its implementation. Introducing a hybrid learning model in higher education enhances the competitiveness of the entire system, breaking down geographical and temporal barriers, offering economic, organizational, and educational benefits, and preparing professionals equipped to meet the demands of the modern labor market.

However, the lack of thoughtful planning and the underdeveloped strategies for implementing hybrid education lead to several problems. This results in one of the least productive models, where the real po-tential for effectively combining digital and face-to-face teaching tech-niques – widely regarded as promising – remains untapped. Instead, the educational process becomes more bureaucratic, and both teachers and students lose motivation to engage in a productive learning experience. Despite these challenges, it is likely that hybrid learning holds the key to the future of education. These models warrant closer scrutiny to un-derstand their long-term impact and to develop methods for organizing them more efficiently.

Moreover, despite the complexities and shortcomings of introducing digital technologies into higher education, we can draw a significant con-

clusion from the study: post-crisis youth place even greater emphasis on the importance of digital literacy and media education.

Today's students possess at least a basic level of digital literacy and adapt well to modern digital environments. They are eager to learn and grow; however, they often require guidance from educators in mastering specific skills. This, in turn, necessitates continuous professional development for teachers, who must be proactive and open to new approaches. As the generation that grew up in the digital era tends to acquire "fast" information (from the Internet, Wikipedia, etc.) without always discerning between what is essential and what is not, there is a growing need for deeper, more structured teaching of subjects related to digital literacy and cybersecurity. Addressing the digital divide may also require more personalized approaches to education.

One particular risk associated with the use of digital technologies, especially AI and neural networks, is the increasing availability of tools like "ChatGPT" and other AI systems, which allow students to easily create essays, reports, write basic code, and more. These tools follow specific algorithms, and with the right prompt, students can generate complete assignments. Given how rapidly this side of digitalization is evolving, it is important to understand how to guide students in using these tools responsibly. It may even necessitate a rethinking of how essays, reports, theses, and articles are written to prevent a rise in academic dishonesty. Instead of avoiding these new technologies, educators should actively engage with them, showing students how to use these tools positively to enhance their learning experience.

Modern students, with their aptitude and willingness to learn online (through mobile access to coursework, online classes, and interest in learning from instructors abroad), as well as their simultaneous lack of real-time interaction with peers and professors, drive the demand for hybrid learning formats. Most experts who participated in the survey agree with this. Therefore, the most acceptable formats for students are those that combine in-person and online learning. To deepen our understanding of how digital technologies and remote education affect modern students, additional research is needed, with a clear differentiation between fields in the social sciences, humanities, and natural sciences. This will help create a tailored approach for each discipline, recognizing their unique characteristics.

Armenia is steadily advancing the digitalization of higer education trough a comprehensive goverment strategy (Digitalization Strategy of Armenia, http//escs.en/news), modern infrastructure, international partnerships, and collaboration with the private sector. The main challenge remains the effective integration of these initiatives into the daily operations of universities (Yerevan State University, www.ysu.am/en/kpiuhe), and the monitoring of their impact on the quality education.

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