Subjective Well-Being of International Students in the Specific Context of Pandemic (COVID 19)

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ABSTRACT

Students' well-being and life satisfaction have been important trends in research and practice over the last decades. Often students, who come to study to another country encounter several challenges in the process of integration. Within the framework of the current research international students' subjective well- being was explored, as well as the problems they encountered within the integration in Latvian higher education institutions (HEIs) were examined.

The paper introduces the selected results of the research focusing on support provision to higher education system to foster the integration of international students of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds in Latvian higher education space in view of the internationalization of higher education. The COVID-19 pandemic rapidly and just within weeks has led to the unprecedented health and socio-economic crisis worldwide. It has obviously impacted the entire higher education sector around the world. Therefore, the aim of the study was to explore the strengths and challenges related to the integration of international students of diverse backgrounds in the Latvian setting in the context of COVID-19 pandemic.

The research was conducted in the framework of the project "Multilingual and Multicultural University: Preparation Platform for Prospective International Students" (No. 1.1.1.2/VIAA/1/16/019) co-funded by ERDF.

Introduction

In December 2019, an outbreak of pneumonia of unknown origin occurred in Wuhan, China. On 9 January 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) officially announced the discovery of a novel coronavirus: SARS-Cov2. This new virus is the pathogen responsible for this infectious respiratory disease called COVID-19 (Coronavirus Disease). COVID-19 spread quickly around the world and was declared a pandemic by the WHO on 11 March 2020. The emergency was announced in Latvia on 13 March 2020. As of 1 April 2020, already more than 3.4 billion people, representing 43% of the world population, were in lockdown in more than 80 countries and territories around the world [1]. Apparently enough, the lockdown and social distancing measures had a very serious impact on higher education and international students worldwide, which makes a specific focus within this research.

The unprecedented situation has impacted the whole world – both individuals and the global society at large. The health crisis has led to the severe economic, cultural and social crisis. One of the impacts (still multifaceted) considered within this paper is the dramatic impact of the crisis on Higher Education sector (HE) in Latvia and worldwide.

Initially, the selected study results introduced within this paper were collected in the framework of post- doctoral research project "Multilingual and Multicultural University: Preparation Platform for Prospective International Students" (No. 1.1.1.2/VIAA/1/16/019) co-funded by ERDF. The overall objective of the project was to

contribute to successful integration of prospective international applicants through the development of the integration framework addressing the language and cultural needs for the studies in Latvian higher education institutions. The research problem was determined by the indispensable and urgent necessity to explore the potential and the actual state of internationalization process implementation in the sector of higher education in Latvia placing integration of international students of diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds in the Latvian education space as the main research focus. Therefore, the ultimate vision of the project was to create structured, innovative framework for the integration of potential international students in Latvian higher education learning space. It is crucial to highlight that due to unprecedented situation, it was of fundamental importance to expand the research framework including the new data necessary to address the research problem from the different contexts and perspectives, which would become the international platform for global quality higher education provision in the crisis and post-crisis world. Furthermore, it was necessary to update the conceptual framework and provide operational frameworks for the implementation of the overall goal of the project – to contribute to the successful integration of prospective international applicants providing the preparation and integration framework for the study process in Latvian higher education institutions in view of the new crisis and post-crisis context. The synergy of all the results (paying special attention to crisis management in HE) will serve as the basis for the elaboration of the Latvian internationalization scenario in the crisis times providing the framework for the effective integration of an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education, in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff, and to make a meaningful contribution to society [2] paying special attention to the integration of international students in Latvian HEIs during the crisis and post-crisis times.

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to the urgent necessity to start working on the various impacts of COVID-19 pandemic at the local level.

However, it was apparent enough that international and global perspectives on COVID-19 pandemic crisis should be set as the global platform to analyse the various impacts of COVID-19 for the immediate, short medium- and long-term actions. In addition, the analysis of external practices studying the pandemic impact and possible solutions are being conducted with the aim to ensure that the final project outcomes benefit fully from the initiatives that have been carried out and are ongoing in both Europe and beyond (e.g., Beijing International Studies University) being the strategic partner of the University of Latvia in China).

Apparently enough the future of higher education should undergo rapid changes within the limited timeframe. The lessons learnt should be rethought and must guide future developments to meet the needs of the new reality all the stakeholders had to face.

To proceed, the research question underlying the research project was formulated as follows – what support should be introduced to higher education system to foster integration of international students of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds in Latvian higher education space in view of the internationalization of higher education. Since upon the project launch in October 2017, it was impossible to predict what transformation HE sector would undergo and what actions should be taken to ensure the reliability of research results, various changes were introduced into the initial project implementation plan due to the unprecedented situation caused by COVID-19 pandemic.

Within the project framework, the following key stages have been expanded:

• The initial stage – to explore and analyse theoretical literature on higher education internationalization, international curricula, cultural peculiarities and other relevant themes with the aim to build theoretical grounds for the implementation of the project – was expanded by including the data on crisis management in view of the necessity to adjust to the new reality taking into account all the aspects relevant to foster

qualitative education delivery in the crisis/post-crisis situation in Latvia and world-wide;

• The stage – to map the challenges rooted in the new direction of Latvian HE towards the international learning space as they unfold in Latvia and identify the needs in terms of support provision for international students within the dimension of internationalization was modified by mapping the new challenges related to COVID-19 pandemic crisis;

• To identify the strategies appropriate for the Latvian type of setting (internationalization scenarios) for providing quality support in the relatively new and complex multilingual and multicultural space of Latvia, which has led to even more challenges for the international students to deal with within the crisis and post-crisis multilingual and multicultural learning space;

• To design a comprehensive framework for the integration of international students of diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds to facilitate the implementation of the higher education internationalization process in Latvia in the crisis and post-crisis reality;

• To work out recommendations for Latvian HEIs to cope with challenges rooted in the new direction towards the global academic environment in the context of internationalization of higher education in the specific context of crisis and post-crisis situation.

Literature Review

It is apparent that international students frequently face several challenges within the process of their integration and learning in the new host country multilingual and multicultural learning space. At the same time, they get numerous opportunities when they come to study to another country. The studies of on international students' well-being by Ramia, Marginson, Sawir (2013) highlight the necessity to compare the experience of local students with that of international, as it usually differs in many crucial aspects [3]. Furthermore, given the unprecedented situation caused by the global pandemic crisis worldwide, the challenges

international students face during these complicated time should be reviewed to elaborate the specific support strategies focusing specifically on crisis management schemes in HE focusing on the fundamental values of international inclusive education in the crisis and post- crisis times.

Research on the international students' well-being has frequently reported on the students' struggles as concerns adaptation in the host country environment [4, 5]. These are obviously language-related difficulties (both the language of instruction and a local language), difficulties related to functioning in the new academic culture, financial problems, lack of social support, loneliness and homesickness, challenges related to the necessity of functioning in the multilingual and multicultural environment and many others, which should definitely be addressed in a holistic way, as these issues can be serious enough to limit students' chances of educational success.

The issue of foreign language proficiency is still one of the major concerns and reported as an important barrier to successful international studies experience, which is apparent given that "language is one of the most important differences between cultures, and can be a major barrier to migrant adaptation" [4: online]. Therefore, international students must learn fast and adjust rapidly. "Many international students face the challenge of constructing complex ideas and arguments in the language they are still learning" [6: 43]. It should also be highlighted that apart from proficiency in English as a global language and lingua franca, students having a basic knowledge of the host country's slang and colloquialisms were reported reducing feelings of alienation, loneliness and homesickness. Thus, that brings to the idea that international students experience the highest stress level among both international and local students. However, these are not only language difficulties which are most significant in the process of international students' integration in the new environment [5].

International students often have difficulty adjusting to social and educational expectations, which can lead to a snowball effect resulting in students' failure and lack of capacity to deal with

it [6]. Therefore, international students need to be prepared for failure, i.e., failing an assignment, failing a subject [5]. It is crucial for students to understand and explain beforehand that failure is a possibility, and if it occurred "then it was not the end of the world and often as assignment could be re-submitted or at worst a subject studied again the following semester" [5: 24]. Apparently enough, academic performance is one of the major challenges international students frequently encounter. The international students often "experience significant academic adjustment difficulties", and "the academic needs of international students are often poorly understood within institutions" [4: online].

Another challenge for international students can relate to their status of non-citizen: this can lead to social isolation and loneliness. "It is difficult for non-citizen international students to exercise political agency, especially without an explicit guarantee for comprehensive rights" [3: 5]. Given that many international students need to work to cover their daily expenses, "the international student experience was also distinct because their visas limited them to only 20 hours work a week during a semester. This not only limited their earning powers, it rendered them especially vulnerable to exploitation by employers" [3: 10]. In addition, "forming friendship with local students had proven harder than expected", since local students "tended to self-segregate" and "saw no need to move out of their comfort zone" [3: 11]. This might be the reason why international students prefer to isolate themselves from the locals.

To proceed, given all these challenges international students encounter, it is crucial to review the students' expectations and build the international programmes taking into account also the students' views, which would definitely add to quality education provision , as international students might not be satisfied with HEI service quality: the experience gained might be disappointing. Roga, Lapiņa, Muursepp [7: 927] refer to the research on evaluation of students' satisfaction in the field of HE services. According to the research findings, to measure the level of students' satisfaction, the following criteria should be taken into account: internationalisation; marketing and support; access and approachableness; international students and staff; academic reputation; location and logistics; accommodation and scholarship; sports reputation and facilities; safety and security [7].

The 2020/2021 academic year is approaching too fast and higher education institutions worldwide are rapidly considering and reviewing the existing practices within education practice, urgent multifaceted support is necessary not only for the students, but also for the staff and others in the wake of the coronavirus crisis. In Latvia (and beyond), all these challenges are being considered within all the educational cycles and at different levels (e.g., pre-school, school, higher education, etc.). Given the limited time available to adjust to the new reality, much effort should be put to address the aspects mentioned above, e.g., discovering an unknown territory; traditions; availability and quality of a certain study programme; international recognition; credit recognition; scholarship availability; low tuition fees; job opportunities after graduation, etc.

Apparently enough, not all the stakeholders involved can foresee the future even within a year timeframe, strategic planning, risk management, which obviously must be flexible, will be critical components of any higher education institution.

Methods

The theoretical and empirical research framework was developed in the pragmatic paradigm applying mixed-method research (MMR) strategy utilizing both quantitative and qualitative research methodology in accordance with the core idea of the philosophical approach defined as "the meaning of a concept consists of its practical implications" [8: 28]. The multi-strategy (mixed method) [8] approach to research project design was chosen, as, for the research purpose, a substantial amount of qualitative data as well as quantitative data were necessary. The chosen approach was appropriate for it allowed the researchers to combine research methods and use more than one research strategy.

Methodology

Within the pragmatic paradigm which underlies the chosen methodology, the utilization of MMR serves as a framework which uses both qualitative and quantitative methods to address distinct specific questions (e.g., work packages on the conceptualization of the phenomenon of internationalization vs curriculum and syllabus development) to contribute to the same overall goal of the project. Within the MMR study designed, the combination of qualitative and quantitative data from different samples of respondents (e.g., Chinese students, lecturers and education experts collected at BISU in March, 2018, international students of diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, lecturers, education experts of Latvian, Turkish and Lithuanian HEIs) to address a single goal, combining qualitative and quantitative evidence is being applied considering both data sets in an integrated approach. MMR allowed the project Consortium to study the phenomenon of internationalization from different perspectives combining the rich insights on the complex phenomena from qualitative study, with the standardized, generalizable data generated through quantitative research allowing to resolve the provisional challenges rooted in the weaknesses of each approach. To achieve the objectives of the first project stage, the theoretical research of trends and perspectives within the research on the conceptualization of higher education internationalization, social and intercultural aspects in the conceptualization of international higher education, conceptualization of the curriculum/ international curriculum, learning technologies, research methodology in education; approaches to research; data processing and interpretation, etc. In addition, to state the impact of COVID-19 on all the above-mentioned aspects content analysis of theoretical sources as a research method was applied. Other significant information sources used for the research purpose included the national normative acts and regulations of the Republic of Latvia, statistical data provided by the Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, as well as EU documents, homepages of higher education institutions

and other relevant documents. To achieve the objectives for the second and third project stages,

survey, action research and narrative analysis were chosen as approaches to research design. The following data collection methods were used: questionnaire, focus- group discussion, interviews, documentary analysis, narratives.

Within the empirical research stages, the purposive sampling was performed. Due to the reason that the research aimed to obtain complex and full-fledged data, the sample for the empirical research is constantly expanding. So far, it comprises 124 students of diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, 10 education experts including the international teachers to explore the peculiarities of their integration in the Latvian environment, 5 experts participating in the focus-group discussion.

The implementation of the research was expected to lead to the: identification of the strengths and challenges related to the integration of international students of diverse backgrounds in the Latvian setting in the context of COVID-19 pandemic; identification of possible ways to meet these challenges by identifying examples of successful practice in different settings as well as identifying issues that need to be addressed in the case of Latvia to face the new challenges emerging in the crisis and post-crisis situation; identification of a set of quality criteria and reference points that should characterize study programmes in the multilingual and multicultural learning space, which can be applied to the Latvian HE setting in the crisis and, hopefully, post- crisis situation; identification of the reference points aimed at qualitative preparation of international students within the multilingual and multicultural learning space aimed at facilitating successful integration in a particular type of setting (Latvia) within the perspectives of crisis/post-crisis support provision. Within the narrative research, narrative analysis as a research method was chosen in order to attain a condensed and broad description of the phenomenon of internationalization and the peculiarities of integration in the Latvian environment in the pandemic situation as appeared in the narratives of particular target audiences. The implementation of this research stage allowed to identify the gaps in the knowledge gained during the previous research stages.

Results and Discussion

Within this research stage, survey was applied as an approach to research design applying questionnaire, interview and focus group discussion as the data collection methods.

The data were obtained from 124 responses of international students from three Latvian higher education institutions (two public universities and one private higher education institution), two Turkish higher education institutions (public university) and one Lithuanian higher education institution (public university, 10 education experts (five experts from Latvian higher education institutions, two experts from Turkish higher education institutions, two experts from the Russian Federation higher education institutions and one expert from Lithuanian higher education institution), and in the framework of focus-group discussion with five education experts from Latvia.

Within the survey framework, the focus was put on extracting the data on the most significant challenges encountered in light of the unprecedented crisis, identification of the possible solutions to resolve the problems regardless of the situation, e.g., what the potential opportunities and changes introduced to the higher education system may soften the consequences of the crisis and foster the sustainable qualitative education delivery in the future. The profile of respondents aimed to cover broad target audience and stakeholders starting with students (being the focus of the research) and up to faculty members, directors of study programmes and representatives of international offices.

Discussion

It was not surprising that the data obtained revealed that everyone had been affected by COVID-19 in every life aspect – both professional and daily routine. 87 % of the international student respondents stated that all campus activities had stopped, which had led to the increasing unsafety and loneliness feelings given that the situations were also untransparent and unsafe in their home countries worldwide. Replying to an open question, one of the

respondents confessed that he felt "very worried about his family in Central Asia, which makes me feel stressful every time I wake up in the morning" (R13). Another respondent stated that they were scared that they would not be able to "get any safety equipment and this is what disturbs from the real study process" (R45). The subjective well-being was very negatively impacted by the necessity for isolation. Given that it has been a new experience for every individual, it is apparent that it might have become very strong psychological pressure for many of them. Despite the fact, that the faculty and the administration of all the institutions reported about their readiness to provide extra support measures to deal with this unprecedented situation, within the interviews with students, seven out of 10 respondents confessed that they agreed upon the necessity to develop a unified plan for crisis support provision, which was rather fragmentary at that moment. Both the interview respondents and participants of the focus-group discussion agreed on the point that, unfortunately, it was the matter of time and thorough research into the new challenges which would work for the transparent and qualitative crisis management strategy, while international students were those who were affected even more being away from their home environment. Although all of the institutions claimed to have infrastructure to communicate with their students and other stakeholders (e.g., staff), it appeared to be a very challenging task to ensure proactive and effective communication during the unprecedented and unpredictable situation given the fragmentarily and unclear messages communicated to the society worldwide.

Furthermore, the data highlight that COVID-19 had affected teaching and learning, given that classroom face-to-face education had been replaced by distance teaching and learning. Despite the previously stated fact that the phenomenon of online education was not new for the majority of higher education institutions, this rapid shift did not come smoothly for the majority of the students reporting the limited access to technical infrastructure and in numerous cases inability to ensure the necessary personal study equipment for all the students and staff members. This issue must be considered at various levels

starting with the institutional level and up to the state one to ensure the accessibility of the necessary resources for everyone. In addition, pedagogy for distance learning should be reviewed and elaborated for various subject fields and within all education cycles given that the new reality should be able to respond to all the needs of both students (international and local) and faculty members in view of not only the necessity to address the technicalities, but also the person or the student and the educator as the focus of the teaching and learning process with all the other crucial aspects (e.g., economic, social, psychological, etc.), which should be primary in searching for solutions to resolve the situation and be ready to handle all these challenges in the future.

In addition, the issue of international student and staff mobility was discussed in an unsurprisingly negative light. It is one of the significant benefits of international education and added value to the experience of the pre-pandemic higher education delivery and implementation. So far, given the unpredictable consequences of the crisis, the only positive solution put forward within the expert discussion was the use of digital solutions and all its tools through the acquisition of more and more digital solutions for educational and daily purposes. This way education experts from the four countries involved in the research reported to be either arranging or participating in the so-called virtual mobility and other virtual events (e.g., conferences, seminars, collaborative learning activities and workshops). Most respondents claimed that as concerns the aspect of scientific communication opportunities, they would rather describe their experience as successful. However, it should be emphasized that most of the respondents highlighted the benefits of face-to-face communication which was impossible within the digital environment (e.g., socializing face-to-face with colleagues, learning about other cultures being inside another cultural environment, etc.).

Both the staff and students reported on the significant challenges related to the formal part of the study process. The staff reported on the concerns about the implementation of, for instance, examinations in the new form and shape. Given a very limited time for the consideration

and development of new specific formal procedures, such as examinations, has led to the necessity to work on their own way of carrying out such procedures which may neither be research and practice based. To tackle this situation, research-based practices should be in focus and exchanged worldwide to access the best practices. Meanwhile, substantial variations were reported by students even enrolled within one study programme, which points to the necessity to consider the question at least at the institutional level starting from the bottom-up approach.

In addition, it is a widely-reported case that the impact of COVID-19 on the academic agenda of the staff (cancelled international travel, cancelled annual international scientific conferences, scientific projects at risk) directly affect the academic activities of students who are frequently actively involved in the implementation of such professional and academic activities, e.g., "I am desperate about the topic of my BA, as now it seems that it is completely out of place. I have already invested so much time and effort and no one can be of help as how to change the direction of my research in view of this horrifying situation" (R24). It should be emphasized that these are not just unique cases, as most of the respondents reported to be concerned about further implementation of their initial research projects. Apparently enough, numerous research fields have encountered urgent necessity to adjust their initial plans and strategies to meet the needs of the transforming reality.

To proceed, the substantial well-being of international students has been negatively impacted by their inability to engage in community activities. Given that international students would generally build their positive daily communication platforms through community activities initiated either at the faculty campuses or the special interest groups created by themselves or volunteers, their daily routine had changed dramatically leading to the urgent necessity to look for alternative ways of tackling daily problems, e.g., "What gives me power to go on here is being busy with sports and visiting events organized by international clubs. While they are considering other options, I start feeling a bit depressed and out of place, which makes me

consider the option of leaving for home when I will be given this opportunity" (R75). Community engagement is also crucial for the staff alongside with every single individual. One of the experts reported on "feeling a bit frustrated without the obvious common-sense vision that everything will be alright in the end" (R3).

For the Latvian context, it was also crucial to compare the data collected during the pre-pandemic period, which were initially intended for building the comprehensive framework aimed at fostering the successful integration of international students in Latvian HEIs, with the data collected during the crisis situation. Apparently enough, the research sample is constantly expanding given the transforming situation.

The data gained from the comparison of both sets (pre-pandemic period and pandemic period) clearly reveal the trend towards two types of choices students give preference to – students who have made choice to stay in the host country and those who have given preference to the option to return back home. In general, both groups have reported on the drawbacks and challenges associated with the decisions they had taken. Travel restrictions and challenges related to completing their degrees in the host country institutions were most highlighted ones. The respondents stated different reasons for making their decisions. However, the most frequently reported reasons were the family pressure and the feeling of unsafety, e.g., "It is not my decision, that's for sure – this is the panic of my parents which made me give up and leave for home. I do regret, as I now have to review all my plans and the feeling of uncertainty is doing it even worse" (R11). Students, who decided to stay in the host country substantiated their choice by the relative safety of the place of stay as concerns COVID- 19 (Latvia and Lithuania) in this case. It should be specifically highlighted that students from all countries of origin marked the Baltic countries as a relatively safe place to stay and study. Still, most students from both data sets reported the feeling of uncertainty about the further education provision and implementation in this rapidly "changing world" (R56).

Comparing the pre-pandemic and pandemic data sets, the trend towards the changes of life plans and vision was predominant for most of the respondents. The subjective well-being and its exploration had taken a completely different approach. During the pandemic period, the respondents reviewed and considered all their daily needs and routines from a totally different perspectives, which might be an obvious trend towards the significant change of values paradigm.

Conclusion

To address this complexity and even more uncertainty the world has encountered, the ongoing research on the higher education internationalization strategies in the crisis/ post-crisis world, international students and staff within the new reality and the related issues should become the focus within interdisciplinary research fields.

Highlighting the visible trend of international students changing their study plans, it is of primary importance to focus on the strengths and areas of each higher education institution to work on in meeting the needs of international students during these challenging times exploring how international students are responding to the coronavirus crisis and their vision on the crisis and post-crisis education and tailor institutional strategies and communications based on these insights.

Given that online learning is not a new phenomenon, it has become a fundamental necessity during the global COVID-19 crisis. It is apparent that it may become a compulsory component within education practice. Therefore, it is high time to review the existing online teaching and learning strategies which have always been complimentary rather than obligatory to include the aspects aimed at enhancing quality education delivery meeting the needs (academic, psychological, etc.) of all students.

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