

## Universities and Re-Construction of Cities: the Role of Research and Education

*Report of the World Café Sessions*

### **Table 9: The Role of Digitally Enhanced Education in Enhancing: The Resilience of a HEI and a University Community**

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The discussion of the table 9 was focused on the resilience of students, faculty members and administrators of HEI during and after the Covid pandemic, and in the case of Ukraine, during the Russian invasion. The pandemic brought its challenges, however accelerated the processes of mastering new digital skills and tools, which literally helped Ukrainian HEIs to be somehow ready for the challenges of the war.

The pandemic forced the institutions to organize materials online, to get used to remote education (digital skills, open courses, acceptance of credits obtained online outside the academia, purchase of Zoom accounts, etc), that finally was more than necessary during the war period. In the first few weeks of the Russian invasion everything got frozen, however, many HEIs started their online classes already after 3 weeks. Most of the learners noted that access to education in the time of war is a “glimpse of normality”, something that helps to keep on mentally, gives hope that life is not finished and will get back to normal someday. Statistics of the Ukrainian online educational platform EdEra says that people studied even at night, from the underground shelters being under occupation.

It is a unique experience that should be investigated as no country is secure from the war nowadays. Some keywords are fundamental to try to understand this phenomenon of higher education in the times of war, playing an important role in this difficult period:

- Flexibility (of an individual, group, community, institutions and organizations, government);
- Goodwill (volunteering/collaboration, donations);

- Resources and support (from stakeholders, including business, international partners);
- and finally, a strong national resilience based in the sense of unity (morale, mood, values, motivation).

All these aspects are important to guarantee the fulfillment of one of the main missions of the university, which is to educate the students and support them psychologically, for example. The role of a teacher in the first months of the war has shifted totally towards mentorship, comforter, and a source of potential help. The continuity of education during crises, such as pandemic or war, is fundamental to keep the sense of community, an important sense of “normality”. The psychological consequences are still to be understood, and HEI must pay attention to this.

During the discussions, it was pointed out that digital tools are complicated for older faculty, mainly. However, in extreme cases like war, they somehow manage to use the tools, e.g. using the help of their younger family members.

A massive support in Ukraine came out from the business community – national and international – access to software and data storages online, grants, online guest lectures (e.g. Ukrainian Global Faculty), cooperation of mobile operators for the sake of stable cellphone and Internet connection. Cheap Internet access as well as good coverage even in remote areas allowed Ukrainian HEIs to keep connections with their students and teachers even under occupation. We should understand more how the new generation think and socialize, to provide important help to them. How to keep the sense of community with online and blended schemes?

Many people collaborated to train fellow faculty members on how to deal with digital tools and the adaptation of classes to the new context. Ed tech companies combined their forces with the governmental institutions to launch online kindergarten, school and launch applications helping to navigate in the information. Non formal education (creative and interesting ways of teaching soft skills) also is an important tool to handle difficult situations, especially to build social connections and ease the technological fatigue people may experience from being closed in the shelter for long and having only online communication.

The online world has, on the other hand, many challenges that were also discussed. How to accommodate the issue of asynchronous classes, recording of the activities for diverse audiences, and how to train online ethics to all students. There are many resources online, but not everyone

is aware of them, and which ones are reliable. The issue of the massive need for training critical thinking skills, methods of counteraction of propaganda and misinterpretation of facts and history, consequences of manipulations with the information were stressed as well.

The core conclusion of the table discussion is that if the educators do not educate citizens, social media will do, while social media are now full of disinformation and propaganda. Higher education is very much responsible for keeping societies from wars.