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W ŁOMŻY

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THE POTENTIAL OF INFORMAL EDUCATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION: THE EXPERIENCE OF THE STATE TAX UNIVERSITY (IRPIN)

ПОТЕНЦІАЛ НЕФОРМАЛЬНОЇ ОСВІТИ У ВИЩІЙ ШКОЛІ: ДОСВІД ДЕРЖАВНОГО ПОДАТКОВОГО УНІВЕРСИТЕТУ (М. ІРПІНЬ)

Summary

The prospects of implementing elements of informal education as an additional component for acquiring professional knowledge by learners in the context of distance learning have been explored. Using the example of a project of informal education implemented for journalism students at the State Tax University (Irpin, Ukraine) in the 2022-2023 academic year, the toolkit, vectors, and principles of engaging students in informal education have been conceptualized. The effectiveness of professional training sessions with media professionals has been determined, and the motivation of trainers to participate in activities for interested youth has been analyzed.

Keywords: communication, friendly personality, higher education, interpersonal communication, journalism, non-formal education, social skills, soft skills

Анотація

Досліджено перспективи впровадження елементів неформальної освіти як додаткового компоненту набуття професійних знань здобувачами в умовах дистанційного навчання. На прикладі проєкту неформальної освіти реалізованого для здобувачів журналістики в State Tax University (Irpin, Ukraine) у 2022–2023 навчальному році осмислено інструментар, вектори та принципи залучення студентів до неформальної освіти, визначено результативність професійних тренінгів із професіоналами медіасфери, проаналізовано мотивацію тренерів до участі в активностях для зацікавленої молоді.

Ключові слова: комунікація, доброзичлива особистість, вища освіта, міжособистісне спілкування, журналістика, неформальна освіта, соціальні навички, м'які навички

Introduction

Informal education is a part of higher education that is implemented outside the traditional formal education system. It can include structured activities that are not necessarily based on the formal curriculum and can take various forms such as seminars, conferences, professional development programs, and industry collaborations. The State Tax University in Irpin, in the aspect of training future journalists, recognizes the value of informal education as a complement to the formal curriculum and meeting the needs of students and professionals in development. By implementing informal education initiatives, the university aims to enhance the knowledge and skills of its students, foster their personal and professional development, and promote lifelong learning. One way of utilizing informal education is through workshops and seminars conducted by industry experts and practitioners.

Aim, subject and research methods

The research objective is to determine the educational possibilities of informal education in terms of alternative learning pathways and skill development, complementing the traditional formal education system. Exploring its potential in higher education can help identify innovative approaches to expanding educational opportunities for students, catering to diverse

learning styles and needs, including support for lifelong learning and strengthening institutional collaboration with stakeholders in the field.

The subject of the research is informal education within the structure of higher education.

The methodological framework of the study is based on the use of general and specific research methods relevant to both pedagogy and social communications. A fundamental approach to this investigation is the case study method, which focuses on the system of training future journalists through a series of individual projects implemented alongside the educational process. These projects form the empirical basis for the proposed research. In the scientific context, the induction and generalization methods were used to assess the effectiveness of the implemented activities. Monitoring of scientific literature helped establish the theoretical foundation of the study. The survey method, conducted through the Google Forms platform, provided specific numerical results from the projects implemented during the 2022-2023 academic year.

Overall, the research on the potential of informal education in higher education, with a focus on the experience of the State Tax University (Irpin), aims to contribute to the development of more inclusive, dynamic, and industry-adapted educational approaches that better prepare students for the challenges of the modern world.

Research results

The turbulent events of the national liberation struggle of the Ukrainian people have led to changes in all spheres of life in Ukraine. Educational institutions and educators have had to react and transform their approaches to teaching. The shift from traditional forms of direct communication, experiential learning, and energy exchange during in-person interactions was initially prompted by quarantine restrictions and later by the realities of war. In response, educators at the State Tax University implemented innovative approaches to the educational process, with a focus on enhancing soft skills. The value of acquiring soft skills is indispensable for future professionals in their professional careers and is highly relevant in the educational process of higher education in Ukraine, particularly in the preparation of future media professionals. Soft skills hold not only educational significance but also ethical value. Successful, knowledgeable, and professional journalists who shape the cohort of word masters today serve as the faces of the profession and serve as role models for career growth for aspiring

individuals. They are not just repositories of knowledge but also conveyors of the meaning of modern journalism studies. Ukrainian journalists who have been tempered in the crucible of war, pandemic-related quarantine restrictions, work on powerful platforms, and their own initiatives are deep, experienced, skillful, and wise. They are carriers of valuable knowledge that they willingly share with interested youth, the future bearers of independent, resilient, powerful, and authentic journalism in our country.

The potential and prospects of implementing informal education tools in various aspects have been explored by researchers. For example, the research study by T. Ternavska and I. Voloshchuk [4, p. 175-183] focuses on the communicative aspects of informal education for higher education students during a state of war. The subject area of informal education in the context of social sciences has been analyzed by L. Kordić, R. Željko, and D. Papa [2, p. 163-176]. E. Čičmancová and M. Šotek [1] examine informal education as a tool for marketing communication in higher education. A. Mouta and A. Roseira [3] analyze the long-term effects of implementing activities within the framework of the specific informal education project "U.DREAM," initiated in 2012. Other research investigations have also contributed to the scientific understanding of the topic, and their findings will be relevant to the development of the theme in the context of large-scale warfare.

The combination of shared experiences by guests and the desire to acquire new knowledge on the eve of entering the cohort of media professionals instills a synergy of love for justice, the desire to convey truthful, objective, and reliable information, and to live in an informational environment rather than merely work in it, actively contributing to shaping its best practices and achievements. Understanding such needs and tasks that lie ahead in the educational process leads to the incorporation of a special educational format within the journalism field's curriculum structure, involving guest meetings, training sessions, and exchange of experiences with media practitioners who, in their communication with their junior colleagues, expand the knowledge and skills acquired by the students while mastering the approved curriculum.

The educational and professional program for applicants for the first (bachelor's) level of higher education in Journalism and Public Relations, as well as the educational and professional program for applicants for the second (master's) level of higher education in Economic Journalism at the State Tax University is built with an optimal focus on the practical applied component, which is provided by a sufficient number of hours of practical training. The focus on the acquisition of professional skills by applicants for the first (bachelor's) and second (master's) level of higher education is strengthened by systematic work on organizing and

conducting guest lectures, master classes and trainings from practicing journalists, Ukrainian media professionals who are involved in the educational process on a systematic basis through electronic means of communication.

In the calendar year 2022 alone, journalism students of the State Tax University had the opportunity to communicate with media professionals, asked specific questions in a personal conversation with more than twenty specialists from Ukraine and other countries, and over the past three academic years, more than fifty such meetings have been organized. The journalists shared their experiences from their own work on various platforms: television, radio, YouTube, podcast services and resources. Dozens of hours of specialized conversations, many professional life hacks from professionals, and inspiration for applicants, which in some cases continued with the establishment of cooperation and communication directly between applicants and guests.

Thus, on October 5, 2022, a TV presenter, media manager, Honored Journalist of Ukraine, and YouTube blogger, author of the popular information telegram channel of the same name Vasyl Klymchuk came to a virtual visit to future journalists, as well as students of other specialties who had the opportunity to join the conversation live [7]. He is a renowned Ukrainian journalist with many years of experience in the profession in various positions (since 1992, he has been a program host at Ukrtelefilm on UT-3, in 1994, a special correspondent for the State Television and Radio Company of Ukraine, then head of the editorial office, general producer and host of the show "Good Morning Ukraine! " on the Era TV and Radio Company, founder of the Kraina OnLine project, author and host of the Early Morning project on the Kyiv State Regional TV and Radio Company; since 2012, Director of the Rada parliamentary TV channel, General Director of the Ukrainian Fashion TV channel, General Producer of HDFASHION and IDFASHION TV channels; host of the programs "Kyiv Live" and "60 Minutes with Vasyl Klymchuk" on the TV channel "KYIV"; currently the author of the author's YouTube channel "Vasyl Klymchuk") sincerely and openly answered a variety of questions from the audience, the guest's desire to share his own experience, warn against possible mistakes and orientate on promising vectors of further professional activity was felt.

We talked about the prospects of service journalism with Zhanna Reshetytska, a culinary blogger (500K subscribers). The conversation had a technically oriented vector, as the applicants present at the meeting were interested in the organizational component: cameras, lighting, image stabilization, editing and post-production. Like all the guests without exception, Zhanna advised her younger colleagues to try their hand at the type of content that is closest to

everyone, and also assured them that it was unacceptable to change their own beliefs. After all, the guest herself left her own channel with half a million subscribers, which she ran in Russian, and started working on several new Ukrainian-language resources [9].

The conversation with Dmytro Palchykov, a profound and inspiring podcast author and head of the audio sector at The Ukrainians online magazine, convinced the audience of the prospects for podcasting in Ukraine, inspired several journalism students to launch their own audio initiatives, but the main thing, according to the guest, is to start working on something you like, and if you are sincere, the audience will support and appreciate you [12].

With each meeting and acquaintance, we enrich ourselves and become only stronger, more skillful and more confident in the right choice of our professional path, and guests are a great guide for making this choice. Other guests who responded to the invitation to meet with the students included Oleksii Umanskyi [10], founder of the first Internet radio in Zakarpattia, Radio Yeden, PhD, director of the Cyber Media Track media analytics center, speaker at the school of the MP's assistant, lecturer at the Ukrainian School of Government, member of the National Union of Journalists of Ukraine (NUJU), media and cyber expert, crypto expert Anastasia Kondryko [8], host of the programs "Kyiv. Morning", "Kyiv. Day Off" and "Doctor Knows" on the Kyiv TV channel Maryna Zaderko [11], travel blogger, sound engineer, musician, traveler Serhiy Nahornyi [13], and others.

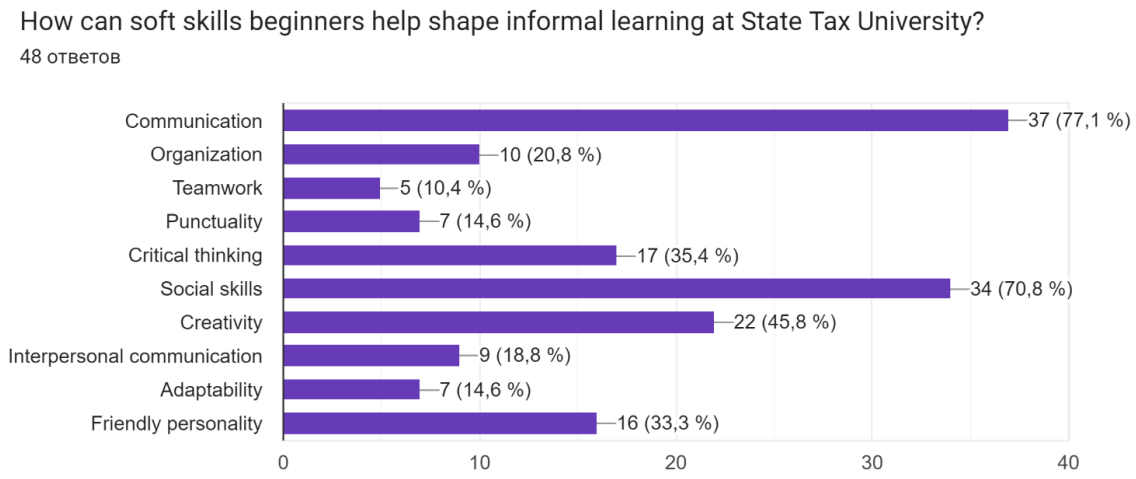
Meetings at the graduate-student level are important for the transfer of experience. Thus, on November 1, 2022, a lecture was given by Olha Katsan, a graduate of the State Tax University, a master's student at the School of Journalism, a journalist of the Small Stories of the Great War project, and an author of materials for online publications, on the topic "Interviews from the War: How to Hunt the Dragon Expert."

The professionally oriented approach to holding guest meetings is based on its maximum practical orientation, so its implementation involves the direct participation of students, who each time compete in a friendly competition in the skill and ability to conduct a conversation with a guest. The meeting with each guest is prepared and conducted by journalism students of different courses, which additionally gives them the opportunity to deepen their professional competencies, as communication with a famous guest, moderating a conversation with the audience in real time is a great experience for everyone not only to overcome their own excitement, but also to feel the responsibility, level of preparation, expectations and results of such meetings.

For the convenience of all those present, each meeting is broadcast online on the YouTube channel "Journalists in the STU" [6], so the practical orientation of the work of each

moderator and participant is undoubtedly important. Pedagogical reflection and the effectiveness of the projects implemented are evaluated by the organizers through a final survey on the training course at the end of the academic year. The survey, conducted by filling out a questionnaire by students using the Google Forms service from July 19-30, 2023, covered respondents studying in the 1st-4th years of the specialty "Journalism", as well as master's degree students of the relevant profession at the State Tax University, with a total number of 49 participants. For all participants, the event becomes a starting point for preparing a meeting plan for the next academic season (Table 1).

Table 1. Soft skills that help shape non-formal education activities at the State Tax University (%)
Source: Own research on the Google Forms platform, State Tax University https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSfaihSSWmt2zfwcuSPdVGbKMC7eZrwtRQOBI3b9deI2_PU07g/viewform?usp=sf_link, date of access 30.06.2023



According to the world-famous online educational platform Coursera, the research company Wonderlic has estimated that 93% of employers consider soft skills to be crucial for making employment decisions. Meanwhile, monitoring of the LinkedIn 10 social network made it possible to formulate the basic criteria that employers use when choosing an employee. These include: communication, organizational skills, punctuality, critical thinking, socialization, creativity, interpersonal communication, adaptability to different working conditions and friendliness [5]. The results of a survey of journalism students of the State Tax University based on the results of work in the 2022-2023 academic year demonstrated not only interest in this form of acquiring professional knowledge, broadening horizons and communication competencies, but also determined the prospects of non-formal education in the context of

developing communication skills (77.1%), including digital etiquette, interviewing, engaging in conversation, supporting social activity and reflecting on the results of events.

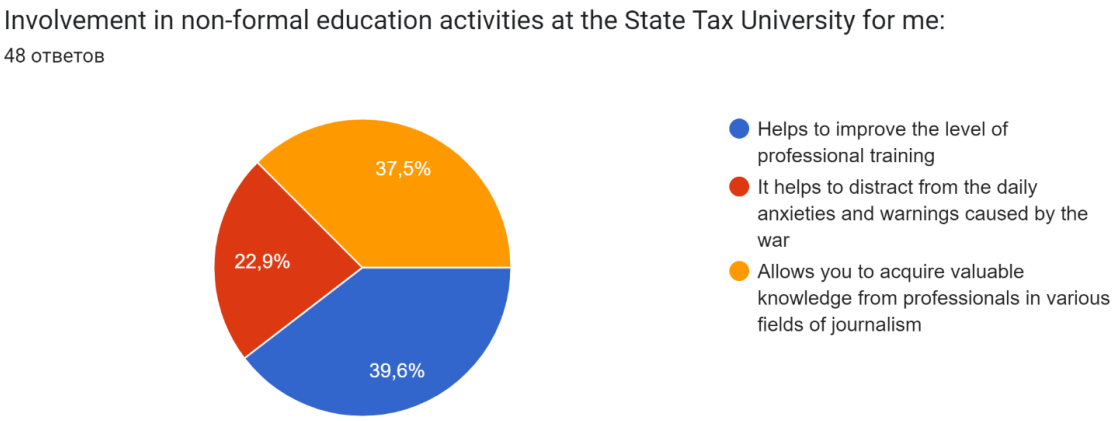
10.4% of the respondents noted the establishment of teamwork during the preparation, conduct and summarization of joint activities, as this way they were able to establish interpersonal communication in the extracurricular format, as well as interpersonal communication (18.8% of respondents). It is worth noting that in the context of several years of distance learning, personal connections not only in the dimension of student-teacher, but also as part of linear communication between students of different courses and even within academic groups are deformed, connections lose their elasticity and become formalized. Performing common tasks outside of class time, organizing events, including in the digital dimension, initiates the establishment of communication platforms, actualizing the communication on a close, meaningful, substantive level. Thus, involvement in common tasks, even in conditions of geographical dispersion, actualizes the need for and strengthens ties between members of academic groups.

The development of creative abilities of journalism students (70.8%), their adaptability (14.6%), along with critical skills (35.4%) and teamwork (33.3%) are equally important for the full development of competitive and integral media professionals in the labor market, which are especially important in the context of distance learning, when, in addition to educational components, teachers and university administrators face an equally important task of compensating for the lack of personal communication and offline communication.

In addition to physical dispersion and digital platforms that are atypical for the educational process, a separate challenge faced by the university's teaching staff is to help students adapt to the new living conditions of Ukrainians. Daily shelling, a sense of anxiety about relatives, friends who risk every day on the front line, relatives who are in the occupied territories, or even when students personally engage in the educational process while under occupation and ask those attending classes to remove from the camera's field of view any means of identifying national symbols (colors, flag, coat of arms of Ukraine), the identification of which may threaten physical violence against those deprived of their rights and freedoms under occupation - all this necessitates social adaptation and support for young people. Born in an independent country, brought up as free people on their own land, Ukrainians aged 18-22 live, grow, and form as individuals and professionals under daily stress, but the worst part is getting used to this life, adapting to the airborne anxieties and threats they face, losing vigilance and sensitivity to the daily threat to their own and their families' lives. That is why the maximum efforts of teachers aimed at preserving the traditional lifestyle typical for young people of

student age, returning to active student life, updating professional aspirations and prospects for the restoration of the Motherland, fighting on the information front and making their own efforts to win it actualize another task of non-formal education, which is used at the State Tax University of Irpin, which suffered during the occupation of Irpin. The results of a survey of students who participated in non-formal education activities during the year showed that 39.6% of respondents found it effective in improving their professional skills, and another 22.9% noted the effectiveness of such activities in distracting from the daily anxieties and concerns caused by the war. Undoubtedly, for the majority of respondents, such activities are a productive platform for gaining valuable knowledge from professionals in various fields of journalism (37.5%) (Table 2).

Table 2. The value of participation in non-formal education activities at the State Tax University for students of journalism in the 2022-2023 academic year (%)
Source: Own research on the Google Forms platform, State Tax University https://docs.google.com /forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSfaihSSWmt2zfwcuSPdVGbKMC7eZrwtRQOBI3b9deI2_PU07g/viewform?usp=sf_link, date of access 30.06.2023



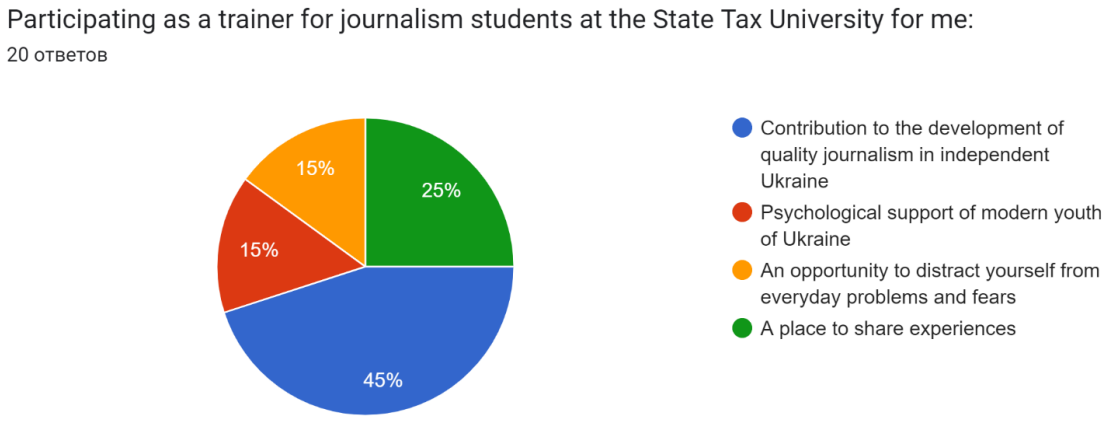
Participation as trainers in exclusive workshops for journalism students during the quarantine restrictions and later the war in Ukraine for media professionals in various fields can also be considered part of their psychological support. Thanks to communication with a motivated audience of promising media professionals, they experienced emotional uplift, found solace, and were distracted from their daily worries.

Inviting trainers to participate in exclusive training sessions for mentors is a free activity, as the state educational institution is not able to financially motivate trainers. Nevertheless, during the three-year period of invitations, the organizers did not receive a single refusal to participate, and moreover, none of the participants even asked about the system of

payment for their work. The cohesion and motivation of Ukrainians, the desire to support and help has united the nation to such an extent that wherever we are scattered during the war, personifying ourselves as a representative of the nation, a part of it, everyone in their place wants to help, to be useful to the public, to contribute to its future. Thus, representatives of the diaspora, sometimes Ukrainians born in other countries, who have realized themselves in the media and are powerful players in the national media space despite the distance, agreed to participate in the events.

As part of the survey, which was implemented by questionnaire during the 2022-2023 academic year, after meeting with students, we asked the speakers to fill out a short feedback questionnaire. As a result, 20 media professionals were interviewed, and we rely on the results of their responses to draw conclusions about the effectiveness of the work done and the prospects for their progress in the next period. The questionnaires filled out by the trainers at the end of the year's meetings showed that participation in non-formal education events is a contribution to the development of quality journalism in independent Ukraine (45%), psychological support for modern Ukrainian youth (15%), an opportunity to escape from everyday problems and fears (15%) and a platform for sharing experiences (25%). (Table 3).

Table 3. The value of involvement in non-formal education activities at the State Tax University for media trainers, stakeholders of the Journalism specialty in the 2022-2023 academic year: (%)
Source: Own research on the Google Forms platform, State Tax University https://docs.google.com /forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSfaihSSWmt2zfwcuSPdVGbKMC7eZrwtRQOBI3b9deI2_PU07g/viewform?usp=sf_l ink, date of access 30.06.2023



Conclusions

In this way, receptive at the level of presenters and the audience, guest meetings are a promising format for transferring experience, establishing interaction on the student-

profession/professional axis; a receptive, productive and effective tool for developing soft skills in conditions of forced remote work. The productivity and effectiveness of such measures have been confirmed by the students of the State Tax University, who have received positive feedback and promising plans to switch to the offline format at the slightest opportunity to return to the traditional conditions of the educational process.

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