THE POST-PANDEMIC UNIVERSITY CULTURE - STUDENTS' PERCEPTION

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Abstract

Culture of an educational institution encompasses a set of norms, beliefs and behaviours evident in a powerful network of rituals and traditions, norms and values that affect every corner of the organization. In the university context, it is perceived as the way of living that is co-created by the community members - their opinions, ideas and habits. The period of the forced social isolation has made many students struggle with developing personal connections and brought them in danger of developing a sense of isolation and disconnection. When moving forward from the lessons learnt in the online university courses, building a sense of community has proven to be one of the greatest challenges.

Therefore, this qualitative study aimed to explore how students in their freshman year tend to perceive the university culture after joining the on site classes. For that purpose, Hargreaves's model of institutional culture, which describes culture in terms of its expressive domain and instrumental domain, was adapted to the context of higher education and applied in focus groups discussions among students of Pedagogy and Psychology (University of Tuzla, Bosnia and Herzegovina). The results show that students recognize the need to increase social cohesion at the university courses while providing engaging and innovative teaching methods that would facilitate learning and create supporting personal relations between students (and the teaching staff).

Keywords: *culture types, social cohesion, social control, relations, university courses*

INTRODUCTION

The pandemic has undoubtedly affected the notion of education and its practices on all levels of the education system. At the university level we experienced the so-called emergency remote teaching (Hodges et al., 2020), while having to perform all types of teaching (lectures, seminars, practice) – *online*. Before the pandemic, online education was a well-designed addition to *on site* teaching, whereas the unprepared online teaching lacks didactic approach and the necessary lesson planning.

Other levels of education were even less prepared for the lockdowns. According to Varga (2022), educational institutions went through several phases while facing multiple challenges: making ICT available to students from low-income families; instructing students on how to use applications such as Zoom, Google Classroom, Microsoft Teams etc.; suppressing the dominant emotion of fear and replacing it with the motivation to learn; dealing with one's own trauma and students' trauma; overcoming feelings of isolation in synchronous and, even more so, asynchronous classes; establish relationships (teacher-student relations, peer relations). In hindsight, we can now claim that teaching without face-to-face communication has hindered educational institutions to fulfil their social function of teaching new generations how to live together. Students themselves report on unfavorable experiences due to technology-induced alienation (Yates et al., 2020), lower quality of education process due to the lack of clarity and comprehensibility of online instruction (Ristić Dedić & Jokić, 2021). Nevertheless, students also report they felt the support and the encouragement from their teachers in the learning progress (*Procjena (...),* 2020).

This disruption in education have put unprecedented problems, expectations, pressures and responsibilities upon all actors of education process: leaders, teachers and experts (Bilić et al, 2022). They worked together to provide the best *possible* education for students learning in the *impossible* circumstances. There have been several key issues recognized in the process: mutual helping, motivating and supporting, which all contributed to better interpersonal relations, building of community and respecting one another. Student voice is the key to understanding as to what has actually been achieved (Peko et al. 2014), due to the fact that students are interwoven in the culture co-created at the university. Therefore, this study investigates student perspective on the university culture they are immersed in and that they contribute to.

POST-PANDEMIC CHALLENGES IN EDUCATION

The previous years have made an impact on the university teaching so that the educational practices that lie ahead come into focus of scientific research. The disruption caused by the pandemic has made the importance of the relational pedagogy more visible, as one of the ma-

jor trends in the theory of education at the beginning of the 21st century (Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004; Sidorkin, 2023). In the post-pandemic day-to-day experience in the educational institutions, the issues in the relations between the participants of the educational process are becoming increasingly pronounced, and the need for connection and cooperation is emphasized (Buljubašić Kuzmanović, 2016).

When moving forward from the lessons learnt in the online university courses, building a sense of community has proven to be one of the greatest challenges. A sense of community (SoC) refers to membership, influence, integration and emotional connection between students (and teachers), which aids learning by providing safe socio-emotional environment (Stephenson, 2019; Yildiz, 2020). When it comes to developing online sense of belonging, Trespalacios & Uribe-Florez (2020) report that virtual classrooms have the potential to develop a sense of community if there is recognition of membership, willingness to rely on other members of the community, interaction among students that is either task-driven or socio-emotional in origin, and classmates should have similar expectations and share common goals (learning). Consequently, perceived homogeneity is effective to group cohesion and interaction. Still, many students struggle with developing personal connections and are in danger of developing a sense of isolation and disconnection instead (Tayebinih & Puteh, 2012). Therefore, teachers must be aware of this difficulties since they can be an influential factor in the process of building a sense of community (Pilcher, 2016).

According to Berry (2017), teachers should provide social and emotional support through interpersonal communication, while creating a personalized learning experience, and providing frequent checking in. Haar (2018) suggests dynamic discussions, encouragement of expression of opinion and timely and appropriate feedback. Also, learning environments that produce high sense of community include: high levels of interaction between students and teacher, active roles for learners, prompt feedback, student cooperation in learning together (Shea et al., 2006). There are numerous strategies that teachers can apply to contribute to more a cooperative community within a university courses.

CULTURE OF EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

Each community shares its culture. Similarly, each institution has its distinctive features and educational institutions are no exception. Institutions on all levels of education system (nursery, kindergarten, pre-school, primary school, secondary school, higher education), are recognizable in their similarity, but simultaneously create their own culture that is unique in that point in time.

Although the non-material culture is intangible, it demonstrates the values shared among students, teachers and other university employees. It is defined as a set of norms, beliefs and

behaviors evident in a powerful network of rituals and traditions, norms and values that affect every corner of the organization (Patterson, 2006). In the university context, Brust Nemet & Mlinarević (2016) see it as the way of living that is co-created by the members of certain communities; their attitudes, ideas and habits. Vrcelj (2018) detects that the university culture can be sensed in the building, as it affects all relationships. To understand the relations within the institution, it is important to know the basic features of the culture that prevails within it. Its positive correlation with the students' academic success has already been proven across various education systems (e.g. Stoll, 1999; Sumarni, 2017; Ghanad & Hussin, 2019).

The theoretical background for this study refers to the two-dimensional model of institutional culture introduced by Hargreaves (1995), which focuses on social cohesion as opposed to social control, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. 2D model of the educational institution culture (Hargreaves, 1995: 27, adapted)

The derived typology discriminates between four types of culture within educational institution: A) survivalist culture (low on social cohesion – low on social control); B) formal culture (low on social cohesion – high on social control); C) welfarist culture (high on social cohesion – low on social control); D) hot house culture (high on social cohesion – high on social control). The model is intended to be used in internal evaluation conducted by the very contributors to the culture. Even though the model was first introduced over two decades ago, it remains to be a useful tool in culture assessment (Varga et al. 2020). Building on this model, and the pandemic education experiences, this study focuses on the post-pandemic culture in university setting that has undergone many challenges during the pandemic.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Aim

The purpose of this study was to determine how students perceive culture of the institution after returning to the university and to on site face-to-face teaching model at the beginning of their studies. More precisely, the research aim was two-fold: a) to describe student perception of actual and desired university culture in terms of social control and social cohesion and b) provide recommendations on the necessary improvements of the detected university culture.

Participants

There were two groups of students enrolled in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, (University of Tuzla) who took part in the study: students of Pedagogy (N=21) and students of Psychology (N=20). The total of 41 students were divided into two focus groups with the first one consisting of 21 first-year university students majoring in Pedagogy, and the second group consisted of 20 first year students majoring in Psychology.

Method and Procedure

For the purpose of this qualitative study, the Hargreaves' (1995) model of the culture of an educational institution was used in focus groups to assist participants in making detailed and consensus-based assessments of university culture. The focus groups were set up at the beginning of June 2022 during the regular classes. The procedure was as proposed by Hargreaves (1999):

1. Participants of each focus group were divided into small groups of 4 members (1 group had 5 members).

2. Each participant received 4 cards in different colors, each describing one type of university culture without naming it (see Appendix).

3. The group discussed and agreed on the one card that best describes their university culture.

4. Each group was given a 8x8 table with the same colors indicated in the corners (no terminology).

5. The members of the group agreed and marked the field of the *current* position of the university culture in the table.

6. The members of the group agreed and marked the field of the *desired* position of the school culture in the table.

7. The tables are collected and the results are combined in one table.

8. The overall results are discussed with the participants of focus groups.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Culture assessment made by the Pedagogy students

The first group of participants (N=21) were the first-year students majoring in Pedagogy with relevant studying experience at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. Table 2 shows student perception of the current (marked as O) and desired university culture (marked as X) at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences.

Table 2. *Current and desired culture in the first focus group (N=21)*

						x x
				x		
		o				
x	o		o			
		o	o			
						x

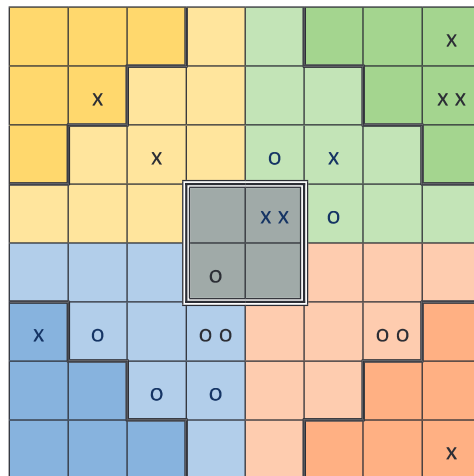o = current culture   x = desired culture

Students concentrated their perception of the current culture in the lower left quadrant, which is described as an institutional culture type A - a survivalist culture (Hargreaves, 1995:28). Their views are consistent and answers are concentrated in the middle area of the table. According to Hargreaves (1995), this type of culture is characterized by low social cohesion and low social control, which means that there is a weak connection between the teaching staff and the students, mostly present through lessons delivery with plenary interaction about the content. The students and the teaching staff do not exchange the emotional content (students' worries, or what they are proud of, their ideas on the lesson structure, etc.). There is weak social control and the exam scores are solely student responsibility. Students feel overwhelmed with the learning load, do not see the point of reading all material and preparing all the papers, and in situations of overload they tend not to overstress. Teachers, especially the external associates, feel isolated, with weak connection to the institution or full-time teaching staff. Cooperation between professors and their assistants is weak and official. The strong support is visible among students (among peers), especially in case of students with certain mental challenges (diagnosed anxiety or other health challenges). This is emphasized especially after the COVID-19 pandemic. The motivation is extrinsic and it is influenced by the grading system and prizes for the excellence for the high performing students. Yet, students are not motivated with this and the aim to fulfil teachers' expectations is not their top priority.

The desired culture chosen by three groups of students is positioned in the upper right corner of the table, and is known as institutional culture type D, i.e. hot house culture, and one group opted for type B, i.e. traditionalist culture, and another group chose type A, i.e. survivalist culture. The majority of students would like the university to have culture characterized by high level of social cohesion and high level of social control, which is diametrically opposite to the current culture. This means that student desire to have more relaxed relationship with the professors, more relaxed atmosphere, tending to democratic style of leadership within the institution. Students also desire to have more meaningful engagement in the teaching process, different learning experience than just listening and offering the opinion during the class. Students also wish to see their professors in team work and cooperating across different courses.

Culture assessment made by the Psychology students

The second group of participants (N=20) were the first-year students majoring in Psychology with the relevant studying experience at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences to evaluate the culture of the institution. As shown below (Table 3), participants' current view on the institutional culture is concentrated in the middle area of the table, combining the features of type A (survivalist culture), type B (traditionalist culture) and type D (hot house culture). This means that strong emphasis is on the performance and the excellence results, with low tolerance of failing. There is a pressure to participate actively and there are high expectations. Even though these are explained from the perspective of two different culture types, the type A and the type B, when it comes to the social cohesion, it is resulting in high tension and poor connection between students and between teaching staff, and the institution does not facilitate social relationships that occur informally between the students. In the institutional culture type D, there is more competitiveness among staff to innovate, to reach higher results.

Table 3. *Current and desired culture in the second focus group (N=20)*

						x
	x					
		x	o			
			x x	o		
		o			o o	

o = current culture   x = desired culture

Student views on desired institutional culture are dispersed between institutional culture type C (welfarist culture) and the institutional culture type D (hot house culture). More precisely, their choices were placed in the middle of the table, in the very corner and in the fields in between. Both types of university culture are characterized by high level of social cohesion promoting cooperation between students and teachers, as well as student-student cooperation and teacher-teacher cooperation. The difference is the amount of control applied. Three groups of students expressed their wish for a more controlled environment with a constant strive to change and innovate the existing practices (type D). Two groups within the focus groups wished for a less controlled university culture with more emphasis on subjective well-being and pleasant emotional climate than on learning outcomes.

DISCUSSION

In order to interpret the sum of the obtained data, one must turn to the explanations linked to their placement. The corner placement in a quadrant represents an extreme position in the four culture types, the central placement represents the ideal culture, whereas the placement between the extremes and the ideal is considered to be optimal (Hargreaves, 1995). The Hargreaves' quadrants with the combined results of all groups are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. *Current culture and desired culture perceived by all participants*

o = current culture   x = desired culture

Even though students differently perceive the existing university culture, most groups agreed to put the mark in the lower half of the chart that describes the types of university culture that are low on social cohesion. More precisely, Pedagogy students mostly chose the type A (low on social cohesion, low on social control) while the Psychology students also opted for type B (low on social cohesion, high on social control). This tells us about low expectations for academic achievement, boredom and distance from learning, low professional satisfaction of pro-

fessors and assistants, low support from management for employees. In addition to all that, there is a low level of connection between students and between students and employees.

Such findings are consistent with the study by Ladson-Billings (2021), who claims that the greatest post-pandemic challenge in education relates to dealing with feelings of alienation, stating that the pandemic exposed many educational disparities and that we need to fundamentally rethink education and consider the pandemic as an opportunity to restart, or more precisely re-set, education using a more robust and culturally centered pedagogy.

The second part of the analysis refers to the desired institutional culture, and the majority of responses of the groups are in the quadrant of institutional culture type D or hot house culture: three responses in the extreme part, one in the optimal part and two in the ideal part. This tells us that students want to be engaged in the university life, that they expect innovations and various teaching methods, and want cooperation and equality. However, this also means "a high level of expectations and control of the achievements of employees and students, closeness and togetherness of teaching staff and students, which passes into control and interferes with freedom of expression, individuality and autonomy" (Hargreaves 1995: 28).

Unlike the participants who desire higher level of control in the university culture, Beetham et al. (2022) warn against the "dominant datafication discourse" in the surveillance practices. The authors argue that the pandemic speeded up the datafication of higher education, while the urgent shift to emergency remote teaching, and the necessarily hurried decision making in the first days and weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic, meant that existing checks and barriers to technology adoption and digital learning were often set aside. Consequently, the Covid-19 global pandemic has both exacerbated these practices and made them more visible. A controlling culture is introduced with the intention to solve the perceived problems (such as student progress, student engagement, plagiarism, etc.). Although well-intentioned, the use of these tools can have consequences for staff and student privacy, and for relations of trust.

By opting for a hot house university culture, students demonstrate their desire for changes and innovation. According to Mincu (2022), in order to innovate, one must transform the education and local pedagogical cultures. Transformation of this kind (systemic change, improvement, and reform) will occur when structural and organizational conditions are in place in a range of different settings, as documented effective practices suggest in both academic and development-oriented NGO research.

Students in post-pandemic era also desire a culture that is less controlling and more human-oriented, which is in line with Mangla's (2021) observations: students work more effectively when they feel like they belong to a team, and team members share knowledge, have a deep understanding of their roles, have mutual trust and collaboration, and should responsibly work towards attaining the requisite outcomes. When highly motivated, students tend to be more successful, regardless of the country they live in.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The previous years have made an impact on the university as we know it, and therefore this paper focuses on the educational practices that lie ahead. Students of Pedagogy and Psychology were asked to negotiate in groups their perception of the university culture. They describe the university culture to be predominantly characterized by low social cohesion, which they would like to change. They also notice the low level of social control, which they would like to substitute with a more controlled environment. Their perception and expectation rarely overlaps, so it can be concluded that students answers call for the transformation of the existing practices that build up the current university culture.

Generally, in order for quality-promoting endeavors such as change, improvement, and reform to produce a transformed education, several assumptions are indispensable (Mincu, 2022):

(a) recognize the larger context as crucial, alongside university architecture and processes,

(b) define what quality education means across a variety of country contexts and with regard to specific structural arrangements and pedagogical cultures,

(c) distinguish the degree and type of autonomy for universities and teachers, and estimate the effectiveness of their mixed interactions,

(d) understand and cope from a change perspective within a variety of university cultures,

(e) recognize the structural limitations faced by the leadership, as well as the margins to produce local, gradual improvement that can pave the way to radical transformation, and

(f) start any significant change at the university level, in the interaction of leaders and teachers.

Based on the collected data about the post-pandemic university culture from the student perspective, we propose the following:

(a) open the space for the continuous dialogue about what constitutes high quality teaching at the faculty or within the departments.

  This qualitative process should involve students, teaching staff and the administration staff.

(b) derive clear descriptions of quality teaching and students' engagement

  Those descriptions, based on the consensus, should be introduced in each course with as much as possible multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approach - at least one practice during the academic year. This can be allocated into the third mission of the university and contribution to a community surrounding the university;

(c) ensure collaborative practices/projects of students and teachers (e.g. project-based learn-ing or service-learning which ensured participation, deeper learning, skills building, and research);

(d) create a daily schedule of classes with enough space for student's direct work experience, practice, experiential learning that can be reflected upon and learned from;

(e) initiate this process of workshops about the institutional culture in other departments and in every academic year. This will bring the awareness, reflection, ownership and po-tential steps to increase the social cohesion.

Such transformation of university culture should be implemented gradually over the course of several academic years with an annual check of the perception of the institutional culture by students and employees. This research initiated the dialogue between students and active lis-tening to each other's views on the university culture, but views of all students (and teachers) may differ from the culture perceived by students that took part in this study. Further research should thus include triangulation of all contributors to the university culture.

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POSLIJEPANDEMIJSKA SVEUČILIŠNA KULTURA IZ STUDENTSKE PERSPEKTIVE

Sažetak

Kultura odgojno-obrazovne ustanove uključuje čitav normi, uvjerenja i ponašanja koja doprinose snažno isprepletenim ritualima i tradiciji, pravilima i vrijednostima koje utječu na svaki aspekt ustanove. U sveučilišnom kontekstu kultura se tumači kao način življenja kojega zajednički stvaraju članovi akademske zajednice, i to svojim stavovima, zamislima i navikama. Razdoblje prisilne socijalne izolacije dovelo do toga da su mnogi student međusobno teško uspostavljali povezanost, zbog čega su se mogli osjećati odsječenima od društva. Ako osvijestimo lekcije naučene tijekom održavanja online nastave i krenemo dalje, nužno je imati na umu da se jednim od najveći izazova pokazala izgradnja zajednice koja dijeli kulturu i osjećaj zajedništva.

Zbog navedenog se ovo kvalitativno istraživanje usmjerilo na otkrivanje kako studenti prve godine studija percipiraju sveučilišnu kulturu nakon što su se vratili na nastavu koja se održava na fakultetu. U tu je svrhu modificiran Hargreavesov model institucionalne kulture, koji kulturu ustanove opisuje u dimenzijama ekspresivnosti i instrumentalnosti, te je primijenjen na fokus grupama sa studentima pedagogije i psihologije na Sveučilištu u Tuzli (BiH). Rezultati pokazuju kako studenti prepoznaju potrebu povećanja socijalne kohezije na sveučilišnim kolegijima uvođenjem inovativnih metoda poučavanja koje uključuju suradničko učenje i stvaranje podupirućih odnosa među studentima (i profesorima).

Ključne riječi: *međuljudski odnosi, sveučilišni kolegiji, socijalna kohezija, socijalna kontrola, tipovi kulture*

Appendix: Cards with the original texts modified for the university context

RED CARD: We consider ourselves a very disciplined faculty that places emphasis on traditional values. The dean has high expectations of the faculty and students. It is important that students learn and achieve good results in exams. We are proud of the successes of the faculty in the academic sense, but also in sports, music, and fine arts. We expect students to be independent and confident, regardless of their background. It is clear what we stand for. It is normal that we are skeptical of new ideas and believe more in previously tried and tested methods.

YELLOW CARD: We pride ourselves on being a college that cares about people. For us, education is the achievement of individual development, not just passing an exam. We have a relaxed and friendly atmosphere where students have room for development, progress and learning. Creating a stimulating environment is very important to us; life skills are at least as important as high grades. Employees are committed to a philosophy of education that places the students at the center. Relations between teachers and teachers and students are very good. The dean is decisive, but not bossy; decisions are made in such a way that everyone cooperates and participates.

GREEN CARD: Our faculty is a modern place focused on the future and progress. All employees and most of the students are very committed to the college and devoted to education. There is a lot going on – innovative ideas for learning and teaching are constantly being tried or discussed in the classroom and there are lots of extra-curricular activities. Teaching staff are interconnected and often work in teams. Relations between professors and assistants and students are very good. There are high expectations from students in terms of academic success, their behavior and personal development. The dean does not place himself above us, but we all know what is expected and when we have failed.

BLUE CARD: Currently, our college is not doing very well. There are many problems that are not being solved. The dean is trying to change that, but there are too many issues - bad behavior, no motivation, poor grades, lack of money, no support from the local community, frequent conflicts. Many students are bored and feel alienated. The teaching staff is mutually divided into groups, among which there are tensions, with low level of cooperation. There is a large number of teaching staff who are leaving the college and those who are coming in. It is difficult to find replacements for absent professors. I guess we could be described as a failed faculty. It seems as if we live a day by day.