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SAFE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT AS A THEORETIC CONCEPT AND ITS PRACTICAL EMBODIMENT IN WARTIME UKRAINE

БЕЗПЕЧНЕ НАВЧАЛЬНЕ СЕРЕДОВИЩЕ ЯК ТЕОРЕТИЧНА КОНЦЕПЦІЯ ТА ЇЇ ПРАКТИЧНЕ ВТІЛЕННЯ В УКРАЇНІ ПІД ЧАС ВОЄННОГО ЧАСУ

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ABSTRACT

Purpose. This study aims to explore different approaches to conceptualize a safe learning environment and its components from physical, psychological, ecological, and informational perspectives. The goal is to investigate institutional strategies and policies vectored to safe learning environment creation and to examine measures taken by the

Мета. Це дослідження має на меті розглянути різні підходи до концептуалізації безпечного навчального середовища та його компонентів з фізичного, психологічного, екологічного та інформаційного погляду. Завданням є дослідження інституційних стратегій і політики, спрямованих на створення безпечного навчального середовища, а також вивчення заходів, вжитих керівництвом Сумського

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management of Sumy National Agrarian University (SNAU), Ukraine, to ensure the safety of students, academics and faculty amidst the martial law.

The **methodology** covers a comprehensive set of theoretical and empirical methods, including the analysis of scientific sources regarding the essence of safe learning environment, its peculiarities in a peaceful period and during the martial law; systematization of SNAU policies and documents in the field of SLE creation, interviews with students, faculty, academia and educational stakeholders. The study described institutional strategies and measurements which were taken in the period from autumn semester 2022 to autumn semester 2025.

Results. The research reveals theoretical aspects and practical approaches to the formation of a safe learning environment in compliance with the rights and norms of physical, psychological, informational, and ecological safety of participants in the educational process. The authors examined inputs, outputs and outcomes of different aspects of safe learning environment, and highlighted university policies and strategies regarding safe learning environment creation in Sumy National Agrarian University.

Conclusions. The conclusion is that creation of SLE in the period of martial law requires a comprehensive approach that will include the following key components: organization and maintenance of security (physical, environmental, psychological, information) of the entire educational infrastructure; ensuring equal access to educational resources, since the conditions of military conflict quite often lead to overlapping access to educational resources, especially for those regions that have suffered the most from Russian aggression; implementation of psychological support and effective psychological and pedagogical interaction.

Keywords: distance learning, educational process, martial law, safe learning environment, university policies and strategies.

національного аграрного університету (СНАУ), Україна, для забезпечення безпеки студентів, викладачів і персоналу університету під час воєнного стану.

Методологія охоплює комплексний набір теоретичних та емпіричних методів, включаючи аналіз наукових джерел щодо суті безпечного навчального середовища, його особливостей у мирний період та під час воєнного стану; систематизацію політики та документів СНАУ щодо створення безпечного навчального середовища, інтерв'ю зі студентами, викладачами, академічним персоналом і стейкхолдерами в освітній галузі. У дослідженні описано інституційні стратегії та заходи, які були проведені у період з осіннього семестру 2022 року по осінній семестр 2025 року.

Результати. У дослідженні розкрито теоретичні аспекти та практичні підходи до формування безпечного навчального середовища з дотриманням прав і норм фізичної, психологічної, інформаційної та екологічної безпеки учасників освітнього процесу. Автори розглянули вхідні, вихідні та кінцеві результати різних аспектів безпечного навчального середовища, а також висвітлили університетську політику та стратегії щодо створення безпечного навчального середовища в Сумському національному аграрному університеті, Україна.

Висновки полягає в тому, що створення безпечного навчального середовища в період воєнного стану вимагає комплексного підходу, який включає такі ключові компоненти: організація та безпека (фізична, екологічна, психологічна, інформаційна) всієї освітньої інфраструктури; забезпечення рівного доступу до освітніх ресурсів, оскільки умови воєнного конфлікту досить часто призводять до дублювання доступу до освітніх ресурсів, особливо для тих регіонів, які найбільше постраждали від російської агресії; упровадження психологічної підтримки та ефективної психолого-педагогічної взаємодії.

Ключові слова: дистанційне навчання, освітній процес, воєнний стан, безпечне навчальне середовище, університетська політика та стратегії.

INTRODUCTION

No doubt, safety of learning environment is critical for positive outcomes of every student and teacher. But in the conditions of a full-scale military invasion the problem of the safety of each participant in the educational process is getting vital. Apparently, nowadays the security component of the educational process is mainly associated with

real threats of the use of military force, missile strikes, shelling and bombing, etc. Nevertheless, educational institutions face various challenges and dangers that can affect the safety of participants in the educational process and the learning environment, including health threats, environmental problems, technological risks, cybersecurity, as well as social and psychological aspects, such as bullying, violence, etc.

The Law of Ukraine “On Complete General Secondary Education” (2020) states that an educational institution must create a safe educational environment in order to ensure proper and safe conditions for learning, upbringing, and development of students. The Concept of Safety of Educational Institutions for 2023-2025 (2023) states that administrations of educational institutions should take into account all aspects of caring for life and safety of people, who are involved in learning process.

This article is **aimed** to explore various approaches to conceptualize safe learning environment and its components from physical, psychological, ecological, and informational perspectives, as well as to examine activities taken by the university management for providing safety of students, academics and faculty during military conflict.

Objectives of the study included the study of scientific sources that regard safe learning environment as a pedagogical phenomenon and investigation of institutional strategies and policies vectored to safe learning environment creation, that had been applied in war period by the authorities of Sumy National Agrarian University (SNAU), their potential challenges and actual benefits, measured on the basis of official documents analysis.

METHODOLOGY

This study applies a mixed-methods approach that combines theoretical and empirical methods to address the objectives outlined. Numerous scientific sources were studied to point out approaches for conceptualization of safe learning environment (SLE) as a pedagogic phenomenon from different aspects, namely, its physical, psychological, informational, and ecological aspects. Recent researches in Ukraine and abroad were investigated to regard the essence of safe learning environment, its peculiarities in a peaceful period and during the martial law, culture of safety and its nationally dependent diversity, classroom management and educational policies.

On the other hand, empirical methods involve qualitative approaches such as interviews with students, faculty, academia and educational stakeholders. Sumy National Agrarian University (SNAU) is situated in the close proximity (about 30 kilometers) to the front line of military actions since 2022 (the beginning of a full-scale Russian invasion to Ukraine), nevertheless it didn't stop its educational process due to the complex of institutional strategies and measurements, taken by the university authorities and faculty. The described institutional strategies and measurements were taken in the period from autumn semester 2022 to autumn semester 2025.

The authors used analysis and systematization of the university policies and documents in the field of SLE creation. Measurement was performed toward the chosen indicators: inputs (strategies, policies and programs that are applied in SNAU); outputs (various activities carried out in safe learning environment agenda of the university); outcomes (SLE creation in the university through the interviews). A sample of 40 second-year undergraduate students – the participants of the Erasmus+ Jean Monet Module projects “EU strategies extrapolation for boosting students' media literacy in Ukrainian HE” and “The linguistic dimension of the notion “security” as the key component of the concept of a safe educational space: the European experience, 20 representatives of academic

and faculty staff, the university administration, and 10 representatives of educational stakeholders, was determined for the survey. The participants voluntarily got involved in it. Through semi-structured interviews the respondents were encouraged to share their experiences, concerns, and recommendations regarding the creation of safe educational environment.

RESULTS

1. Safe Learning Environment as a scientific concept

Modern researchers have interpreted educational environment as a part of life-social space of a person, which is manifested in the totality of all institutional and pedagogical factors that directly or indirectly affect the personality in the processes of learning, upbringing and development (Fox, 2009; Gayle et al., 2013; Prashanti & Ramnarayan, 2020).

Although educational institutions are socially envisioned as secure spaces for young generations to learn and develop, there is growing anxiety about learning environments being subjected to violence, associated with delinquent activities of criminal gangs and bullying. Aggressive and deviant behavior among students were proved to be factors that negatively impact learning outcomes, cognitive abilities of students, school psychological climate, and attendance of classes (Azeredo et al., 2015; Elipe et al., 2015).

That is why a number approaches were applied to highlight the points, crucial for providing security of learning spaces. Among them, Fox (2009) conceptualized “safe learning environment” (SLE) in the context of tasks of faculty, essential safe educational environment creation in the campus of higher educational institution. Hunter (2008) identified the following components of a SLE: physical aspects as the characteristics of the space that protect the body from harm; psychological aspects that prohibit discriminatory actions, expressions of intolerance or policies of injustice; informational aspects that determine the degree of familiarity and comfort in the educational space; ecological aspects of space safety that eliminate risks on the part of participants in it. Kibriya and Jones (2021) suggested the technology for forming a SLE, which is based on the idea of organizational and activity planning; definite steps for constructing a physically and psychologically safe educational environment were proposed. The other scholars (Bačová, 2024) believed that the SLE should be created as a system of influences and conditions for the formation of personality in the social and spatial-subject environment.

Many scholars investigated safety of learning environments from various perspectives, e.g., Kempen, Labuschagne, and Jama (2024) analysed educational spaces from health and safety perspective. Bara (2022) studied violence in learning institutions and its long-term consequences. Alfano and Goerlach (2022) pointed out the negative impact of school violence victimization on social media. Hepburn, Beamish, and Alston-Knox (2021) regarded educational safety and classroom management from an organisational perspective, while Hardie et al. (2022) investigated it more from psychological and cultural angles. Moreover, views of scientists on the culture of secure education, the conception of opposition to violence (people should say “no” to violence and cruelty, bullying, on the other hand, constructing peaceful non-violent communication and mediation in education, teaching soft skills, psychological resilience and financial literacy (Opanasenko & Novikova, 2022).

Besides, as Domalewska et al. (2021) stated, a person’s subjective view on safety is greatly impacted by the national culture along with educational institution values. They studied cultural background influence on learners’ opinions about safety. Comparing opinions

and ideas of Polish and Vietnamese students on school safety, it was found out that organisational safety culture and atmosphere might differ significantly between these two cultures, as e.g. whereas Polish students highly evaluated such teachers' qualities as respectfulness, supportiveness, nor judgmental and encouraging attitude, Vietnamese students praised a more authoritarian behavior of a teacher, who could be able to support a safe space for learners.

Indeed, classroom management is one of the key points in SLE creating, however, in practice it is a complicated and challenging task. Australian Education Research Organisation (2023) reported about Australian teachers claims on disrupted classrooms, problems with dealing with students who talked out of turn, interrupted teachers, used mobile phones inappropriately, did not concentrate in class, behaved rudely and provoked other students, avoided schoolwork, were late for class etc., thus effecting the learning process in a deteriorating way.

Concurrently, any educational culture insist on treating students with respect, giving equal opportunities for self-disclosure, allowing peer assistance, and not discriminating between them, ensuring the approachability of the teacher and willingness to listen to the student voices, cherishing diverse opinions and attending student needs in individual level (Hepburn et al., 2021). Nevertheless, Gillen et al. (2011) proved SLE that should not be interpreted as a problem- and conflict-free space, yet a conflict here means the diversity of views and attitudes, free circulation of ideas, potential disagreements that provoked critical thinking as natural components of the learning process.

In this aspect psychological safety was described as an important factor used to encourage learners' stepping outside their comfort zone and expressing themselves openly and honestly. If students are not academically challenged, they cannot make the expected progress, because they need to feel emotionally safe and be open to having their ideas critically evaluated by others in the classroom (Hardie et al., 2022).

The concept of physical security, as an object of investigation of many scientists, is often regarded as a set of measures aimed at avoiding dangers, minimizing risks for life and health, protection from injuries and wounds, ensuring safe conditions for all participants in the educational process, ensuring water supply, food and medical care. As all other SLE aspects, it is closely connected with the situation in the country in general. Until recently, physical security was considered only from the point of view of protection from man-made, natural and social influences, however, with the introduction of martial law on the territory of Ukraine, the protection of students from the consequences of military actions has become important. The organization of physical security in current conditions involves a set of measures aimed at minimizing the risks of injuries from firearms and artillery weapons, explosions and missile attacks (Lokshyna et al., 2022). The main goal of teachers' activities in the case of danger is to preserve the life and health of students.

Accordingly, the functioning of an educational institutions should be based on the main aspects of physical security: premises, infrastructure and shelters, verification and systematic control over compliance with the requirements of building and sanitary norms and rules, as well as systems for preventing and protecting against dangerous situations; equipment of protective structures and relevant premises, organization of access to drinking water and food; evacuation plans, development of an algorithm of actions in case of dangerous situations, etc. (Kaidanovska & Dumnych, 2023).

Yet, in peaceful countries other points are more essential, e.g. Nichols and Monea (2022) investigated laying out of data-driven surveillance (i.e., dataveillance) technologies in

educational institutions, which are increasingly being used as a strategy to reduce security risks. The authors point out that the sense of safety that educational environments derive from these technologies often comes at the expense of the actual well-being and privacy of learners. They conclude with suggestions for how educators can reduce their reliance on data-tracking without compromising students' safety. In this point physical security correlates with Information and Communication Technologies implementation into the agenda of learning environments.

The most current approach to conceptualizing SLE is informational security. It is obviously important nowadays, as the use of information and communication technologies in the educational environment has a broad and powerful impact on the development of the individual. At the same time, there are certain negative aspects of the impact of information on the individual as a whole and the modern educational environment in particular: lack of proper mechanisms for controlling the quality of information that is available through telecommunication technologies.

This leads to the spread of a large amount of unreliable (false) information in the educational space; uncontrolled dissemination of information with aggressive content, which directly affects the spread of violence, bullying, cyberbullying and other negative social phenomena (Chen et al., 2026).

Ecological safety is a state that guarantees the prevention of deterioration of the ecological situation, the preservation of ecological balance and absence of threats to life, health and sustainable development of people in it, according representatives of the Copenhagen school (Buzan et al., 1998). The main components and principles of ecologically safe learning space, as well as the set of policies and measurements, performed by the institution's authorities, include health protection, prevention of danger to learners, academia and faculty, reduction of their possible chronic diseases due to pollution; environmental protection of campus, preservation of atmospheric air, water resources, soils, flora and fauna; technological safety by creation of environmentally safe technologies, purification from radionuclides, waste disposal, normative regulation.

Ecological security is also regarded as a basis of ecological consciousness in the structure of public consciousness. So, the other essential vector of faculty's activities is the formation of learners' ecological culture, as a set of various forms of activity in which ecological thinking is externally reflected. Eventually, every educational institution is responsible for establishing core values and promoting a deep understanding of environmental responsibility, understanding of nature, human resources potential and sustainable development of society (Cvetković et al., 2024).

Therefore, the analysis of scientific sources demonstrated theoretical aspects and practical approaches to the formation of a secure learning space in compliance with the rights and norms of physical, psychological, informational and ecological safety of each participant in the educational process.

2. Practical Measurement for Safe Learning Environment Creation in the Midst of War

The survey was concentrated on the analysis of inputs, outputs and outcomes of different aspects of safe learning environment, in particular its physical, psychological, informational, and ecological aspects, and examination of university policies and strategies regarding safe learning environment creation, see Table 1.

Table 1

University policies and strategies regarding safe learning environment creation

Physical Safety	Inputs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – The educational process at SNAU was carried out in a blended format: lectures were held online on Zoom or Google Meet platforms, practical classes and laboratory work were held in classrooms, but during air raid alerts the classes were transferred to the shelters. – The students who lived abroad, or in the areas where hostilities were taking place, or in an occupied territory, studied remotely in synchronous (on Zoom or Google Meet platforms) or asynchronous mode (on Moodle platform). – In the case of some emergencies due to hostilities, the educational process took place remotely via Moodle platform. – Construction of a multifunctional shelter in accordance with the norms of inclusiveness and barrier-freeness with classrooms provided with Internet access and multimedia technologies. The accommodation included a study area, a dining area, and a recreation area, a sports room, a first aid station, and a water closet adapted for people with disabilities as well. – Application of purchased portable charging stations EcoFlow DELTA as well as a generator provided by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. <p>Source: (SNAU, 2025) Report of the Rector of Sumy National Agrarian University for 2025 (https://snau.edu.ua).</p>
	Outputs	<p>Thanks to Zoom, Google Meet, and Moodle online platforms as well as to the shelters and portable charging stations, the students had the opportunity not only to continue their study during the martial law and emergency or planned power outages, but also to participate in webinars, conferences, and free time activities during air raid alerts.</p>
Psychological Aspect	Inputs	<p>Social and Psychological Service at SNAU Its activities were aimed at ensuring psychological comfort, social protection, and personal development of all participants in the educational process.</p>
	Outputs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Creating a favorable supportive learning environment based on tolerance and mutual respect – Quest aimed at supporting the psychological state of students within the framework of an all-Ukrainian mental health support programme “How are you?” – Trainings on learning effective self-help techniques that help to cope with stress and maintain mental health – Individual and group counseling of students, faculty, and staff to overcome stress, anxiety, personal and interpersonal difficulties – Trainings, discussions, lectures on the prevention of bullying, violence, suicidal behavior, etc.
Information Safety	Inputs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – A training course “Major EU practices on media literacy for boosting students’ critical thinking in the frame of the target language learning” within the implementation of the Erasmus+ Jean Monnet Module project “EU strategies extrapolation for boosting students’ media literacy in Ukrainian HE” (EUSELENA– ERASMUS-JMO-2022-HEI-TCH-RSCH) (https://jm.snau.edu.ua/euselena/). – During teaching the course, significant attention was paid to issues of disinformation, mechanisms for detecting fakes, security in the information space, and information hygiene.

Outputs	<p>Students learned about manipulative technologies on television, in print media, and on social media; learn to distinguish between disinformation, fakes, and manipulation; gain knowledge about digital etiquette and the rules of social media culture during wartime, etc.</p> <p>After completing the course, students gained a set of various competencies, namely:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – awareness of media safety, media ethics, and the culture of communication within the media environment; – ability to apply acquired knowledge and skills to create a safe media environment and interact with its objects and participants through critical thinking; – the ability to refute fake content and false information, as well as counter disinformation and negative propaganda in wartime.
	Ecological Aspect

Outputs

As a result, the course participants presented a wide range of project topics – from climate plans of several cities to analysis of the impact of climate change on various sectors of the economy.

In particular, the analysis of climate risks was carried out for some regions and cities not only in Ukraine but also in the world, and recommendations were formulated regarding actions to combat climate change and adapt to it at different levels (international, national, regional, and individual).

The students learned to renovate the quality of soil contaminated by the war in Ukraine.

The scientists of SNAU were engaged in research and restoration of soils affected by military actions in cooperation with the specialists of Royal Agricultural University. They improved their qualifications on the basis of this educational institution, as well as at Bern University of Applied Sciences (Switzerland).

A laboratory “Soil Quality Assessment” has been created where the scientists and students of SNAU are able to conduct high-precision research using modern equipment, which allows for detailed analysis of soil composition for heavy metal content, that is important for assessing their ecological status and suitability for agricultural use, as well as implementing innovative solutions in the field of soil science and ecology.

ENVEA device (made in France), model CAIRNET, provides monitoring such pollutants as sulfur dioxide, nitrogen dioxide, carbon monoxide, PM10, PM2.5, volatile organic compounds, and ozone in 5 cities of Sumy region.

More than 300 trees grown by SNAU students have already been planted in Sumy.

DISCUSSION

The outcomes of the study proved, that physical safety is an integral and even leading component of the protection and well-being of students during military conflicts (Zamir & Kostikova, 2025). War conditions create special challenges and threats to physical safety, especially in the context of the activities of educational institutions, where a large number of students are concentrated. Regardless of the form of organization of the educational process (blended, distance, or full-time), the administration of an educational institution must systematically monitor compliance with a safe educational space in accordance with regulatory documents (Horikhovskiy & Ohanesian, 2022).

Most respondents agreed that in the conditions of the direct threat to students' and faculty's lives, if the campus is situated in close proximity to the military frontline, the only possible decision is online educational process. The distance learning format provides students with the opportunity to continue their education in Ukraine, regardless of their place of residence, including abroad (Kostikova et al, 2025). Distance learning prevails in the east and south of Ukraine, blended learning in central and northern Ukraine, blended learning in cities, and face-to-face learning is more common in rural areas in western Ukraine (Lokshyna et al., 2022).

When planning and organizing the educational process in educational institutions during the martial law period, it was necessary to take into account the peculiarities of each specific region, namely: proximity to the occupied territories, equipment and a permanent connection to the Internet for organizing the educational process; whether students have devices for using digital technologies and a permanent connection to the Internet for organizing the educational process (Holubnycha et al., 2024). Recently, due to planned and emergency power outages, it is very difficult to plan a lesson so that every

student can join in. Everyone is at home, and according to the outage schedules, at certain times some students have electricity and the Internet, while others do not. Another obstacle to the educational process is the “air alarm” signal. At this time, learners are in shelters and cannot attend lessons for safety reasons.

In the current realities of martial law and the transition of most educational institutions to a distance learning form using the web space, modern information space opens up wide opportunities for searching for any information and personal information about a person in particular, which does not contribute to the formation of a sense of security and the experience of psychological comfort and security of the individual in the modern information society (Belano & Aclao, 2025). Nowadays, a person is unlikely to be able to remain a ‘mystery’ for others, given the wide possibilities of the modern media space, Internet, social networks, etc. (Shin & Lee, 2025).

The wide opportunities that open up for establishing various kinds of communicative connections can often have negative consequences in our time, namely, falling under the influence of psychological manipulations, influencing the consciousness of the individual. Therefore, today the issues of psychological safety of the individual in the media environment are becoming increasingly relevant. This is especially important when it comes to adolescents and young people (Bilotserkovets et al., 2021).

All participants of the project admitted another crucial issue, a strong emotional impact that the military conflict, stress and experiences have caused on learners and academia. They agreed that the important role in the process of creating a psychologically safe environment is played by the administration, the psychological service of the educational institution, the activities of the entire teaching staff and each teacher in particular. In this regard, it becomes important to have specially organized training for a faculty who will be able to model and design an educational environment where the student’s personality will function freely, where all participants in the educational process will feel protected, emotional comfort, meet basic needs, and maintain and strengthen mental health. And it is possible only if the general culture of the educational institution is based on respect for the individual; a friendly and positive attitude; trust in relationships; dialogue, interaction, and mutual respect; distributed leadership; principles of social partnership, namely, equality of parties, voluntary acceptance of obligations, mandatory fulfillment of agreements (Hardie, 2022).

Environmental safety has become particularly acute due to the deterioration of the environmental situation in Ukraine, because parts of our lands, especially in the eastern territories (Donbas), and over the past year in the northern territories (Slobozhanshyna), as well as in the southern regions (The Black Sea region, Tavria), have become practically unusable (Dolzhenkova & Nazarenko, 2024). Regarding ecological safety as an essential part of national security (Kalda et al., 2023) and taking responsibility for it, the discipline “Environmental Safety” is taught to SNAU students.

After completing the course, they are able to determine the conditions for the formation of danger in all components of the natural environment under the influence of natural and anthropogenic factors, and find out the methodology for assessing and mitigating risk situations and sources of risk associated with natural and man-made phenomena, social and professional human activities.

CONCLUSIONS

Therefore, it was revealed that the evolution of the concept of “safe learning environment” (SLE) has been influenced by significant cultural, legislative and societal conditions. Eventually, it has referred to physical protection, prevention of accidents,

crimes, and emergencies in an educational institution. However, over time, it has been recognized that safety goes far beyond physical measures and today the discourse around this concept has expanded to the terminology of a SLE, which includes psychological, ecological and digital safety, a supportive environment where students can feel comfortable and non-discriminatory.

Creating SLE in the period of martial law is pivotal for the academic success and personal well-being of students and requires a comprehensive approach that will include the following key components: organization and maintenance of security (physical, environmental, psychological, information) of the entire educational infrastructure; ensuring equal access to educational resources, since the conditions of military conflict quite often lead to overlapping access to educational resources, especially for those regions that have suffered the most from Russian aggression; implementation of psychological support and effective psychological and pedagogical interaction.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors declare that *Tetiana Fomenko* is a member of the journal's Editorial Board but was not involved in any aspect of the editorial or peer-review process for this manuscript, including the publication decision.

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