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CASE STUDY OF THE ROLE OF THE DISTANCE LEARNING STUDY COURSE “PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT” ON THE STUDENT PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT AT THE COLLEGE OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION

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Abstract

An important aim of higher education is not only to equip people with new skills, knowledge, and competencies but also the personal development of students. In the past decades, personal development planning is becoming more popular. Personal development planning is a method of recording achievements, identifying strengths and areas for improvement, reflecting on progress, and setting clear goals and action plans

The purpose of the article is to analyze the implementation of the new E-learning course “Professional development” for the short-cycle higher education study program students at the College of Business Administration. Sample: 24 students of the study program “Law”.

Method: a thematic analysis of the achieved study results by evaluating the feedback provided by 24 students who completed the course on the progress and benefits of the course.

Results: The thematic analysis of student reviews showed that the purpose and the results of the study course have been achieved. Although the reviews of some students indicate resistance to the awareness of the personality situation, the structure and organizational form of the course contribute to the successful overcoming of resistance and help to solve the issues of personal growth at the level of “depth” and complexity appropriate for the student.

Keywords:

Personal development, distance learning study course

Theoretical background for personal development planning

Higher education has different aims. The most important ones are to equip people with new skills, knowledge and competencies, also according to the needs of the job market (Cheng et.al., 2021). But very important aim that is not mentioned so often is also the personal development of the students, with “personal development” understanding not only developing academic and professional knowledge but improving the personality of the student. This aspect of higher education has been analysed in several research papers so far. Edmunds and Richardson have developed the heuristic model of learning and development in university students (Figure 1). This model shows that different concepts of learning and approaches to studying (study activities carried out by students) lead not only to acquiring academic knowledge but also to personal development and changes in their personalities.

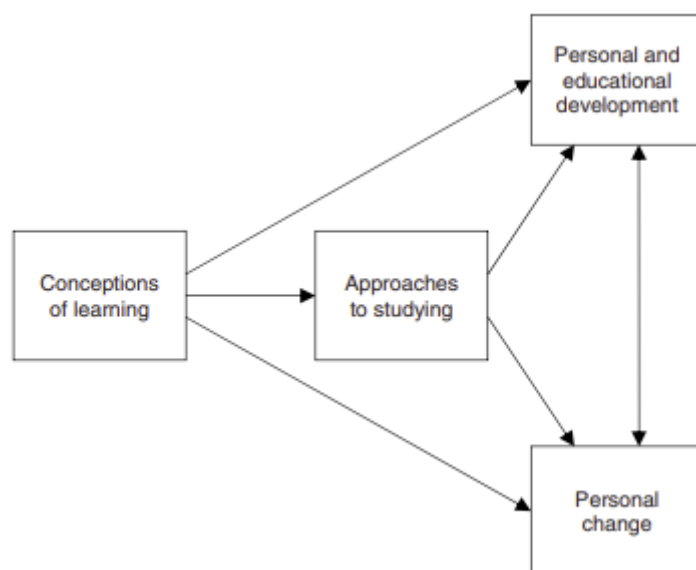


Figure 1. Heuristic model of learning and development in university students (Edmunds & Richardson, 2009).

More and more higher education institutions nowadays come to the conclusion that personal development planning is an integral tool in placing the responsibility to analyze, track, and continuously develop academic skills as well as soft skills directly in the hands of the students (Kahl & Sundram, 2014). Personal development planning is a method of recording achievements, identifying strengths and areas for improvement, reflecting on progress and setting clear goals and action plans (Kumar, 2009). Previous research has shown positive impact of personal development planning on the achievements of the students (Strivens & Ward, 2010). Personal development planning is connected with soft skills. Stek emphasizes the importance of soft skills in higher education - in order to thrive in the twenty-first century, students need more than traditional academic learning. They must be adept at collaboration, communication and problem solving, which are some of the skills developed through social and emotional learning. Coupled with mastery of traditional skills, social and emotional proficiency will equip students to succeed in the swiftly evolving digital economy (Stek, 2022).

Case study: implementation of the E-learning study course “Personal development”

The study course "Personal development" was created and implemented in the short-cycle professional higher education study program "Law" from March 1, 2021 to February 28, 2023 at the College of Business Administration. Its total amount is 1.5 ECTS or 80 academic hours, the implementation of which is divided evenly into 4 modules from the first to fourth semester and the volume of each module is 20 academic hours.

The structure and content of the study course was developed in accordance with the "Quality Matters" international e-study environment and content quality standards (Quality Matters, 2023), and in this process, the study course instructor (with education and experience in psychology and pedagogy) cooperated with the e-study methodologist. In order to ensure acquiring of the planned learning outcomes, each study module included:

1. an introduction to the study course;
2. two online lessons,
3. theoretical materials,
4. individual, pair and group exercises and their descriptions,
5. video clips with exercise rationale and sample demonstrations.

During the course, throughout the study semester as an additional resource, the students were provided with the opportunity to receive individual counselling by writing their questions to the course instructor by e-mail.

In order to pass the study course, students had to complete 3 consecutive tasks in each module and submit a self-reflection work according to the defined criteria.

In the first module "My goals, my ideal self", students had to complete:

1. the task "My goals in personality development" with the following learning outcomes: understand how the human psyche works; identify and define their goals for the next year and beyond, integrating their knowledge about positive personality thinking; carry out self-reflection of their feelings, thoughts, goals;
2. the task "My goals and my strengths", with the following learning outcomes: evaluate the experience of the manifestation of one's strengths in various challenging situations; to be aware of the positive resources of one's character when faced with challenges; to define new goals for the coming year; to self-reflect on one's feelings, thoughts, goals;
3. the task "My Ideal ME", with the following learning outcomes: plan the development of themselves in a certain period of time according to the auxiliary scheme, connecting it with their understanding of personal development, strengths, and existing and planned resources.

In the second module of the study course "Positive thinking", students had to complete:

1. the task "Positive past - positive future". Planned learning outcomes: to identify and define their strengths, transforming future concerns; to recognize how past positive experiences can be applied to future events; make a real future situation-oriented, group-supported story of their own experience;
2. task: "Positive focus" with the following planned learning outcomes: select and modify perceived information by sorting it; connect the perceived negative, disturbing information with the filter of positive thinking; evaluate and vary different types of objects of focus of attention, which allow forming a positive focus; adapt surrounding objects or memory images as objects for their perception; organize their positive thinking process;
3. task: "Re-framing, or paraphrasing of thinking and speech" with the following planned learning outcomes: choose the new style of thinking - positive or at least transformative; identify what is and is not a positive way of thinking and how to work with it; modify their speech from negative to positive or at least understand the transformative method; demonstrate transformative thinking-speech in real situations.

In the third module of the study course "Social and emotional competence", students had to complete:

1. the task "My emotional self-regulation" with the following learning outcomes: concentrate and maintain attention; plan and make a responsible decision about one's behaviour; regulate one's emotional expression in contact with other people in the group; suppress impulses long enough to consider what to do in the next moment, action, being able to find a suitable alternative to one's actions; choose constructive actions that take into account issues such as ethics, safety and other people's social and cultural expectations;
2. the task "Strengths of internal conflict prevention", with the following learning outcomes: apply and analytically evaluate the experience of one's conflict prevention strengths in various conflict challenge situations; to be aware of the positive resources of one's character when faced with a conflict, when internal anger or irritation can develop into an open conflict; be able to choose specific strengths from the list based on the experience gained in the exercise; to self-reflect on one's feelings, thoughts, goals;
3. the task "Non-violent or respectful communication", with the following learning outcomes: better engage in positive communication; create a dialogue according to the 4-step non-violent communication method, being able to provoke positive reactions from other people; develop their empathy abilities, feeling the needs of the other conversation partner and their own emotions; manage conflicts using the ability to understand the other's feelings in a given situation.

In the fourth module of the study course "Vitality", students had to complete:

1. the task "Vitality and my values", planned learning outcomes: determine values that help overcome challenges; to understand the solution of the problem situation according to the value approach; integrate the positive thinking skills learned so far in the context of values; to create a new focus for self-reflection - a hierarchy of values;
2. exercise "Vitality in thinking: 7-step skills", planned learning outcomes: use the "Life force in thinking" exercise and creatively use the 7-step approach to solving difficult situations; understand the connection

between positive thinking and vitality - the ability to overcome difficulties and accept challenges; focus and sustain attention and focus persistence; to plan and make a responsible decision about one's behaviour; choose constructive actions;

3. task "Conclusions about the entire course as a whole", planned learning outcomes: create a balanced and analytical summary of the knowledge and skills acquired in the tasks of all 4 modules; evaluate the change in their emotions and attitude towards certain tasks and the growth of their personality, the usefulness of the given tasks in the context of their goals and professional career; identify their positive thinking and personal growth resources in summary; analytically and concentratedly connect their experience in the practice of personal development with life goals that are currently important in their life; to conclude the most important thing about the growth of certain aspects of one's personality during the course.

By providing the students with the opportunity to model the quality of their work and the transparency of the tasks, task assessment criteria were developed and explained to the students. The self-reflection submitted by the students after completing each task was evaluated according to the following criteria: volume (weight 15%); message (weight 15%); discussion of concepts (weight 30%), and understanding of the topic included in the task (weight 40%).

The analysis of the impact and role of the course

The thematic analysis of the achieved study results was carried out by evaluating the feedback provided by 24 students from study program "Law" who completed the course between March 2021 and February 2023. At the end of the course, students wrote an assignment where they gave their subjective opinion about the knowledge and skills acquired during the course, illustrated examples of how the knowledge and skills learned in the course affected their lives: relationships, behaviour, thinking, professional field. The answers were divided into four large groups: acquired knowledge, acquired skills, the impact of taking the course on the future, and others. The "other" section included analysis of students' comments on the structure and form of the course and evaluation of the instructor's work.

Collecting information about how the students acquired new knowledge during the learning experience, it can be concluded that most students emphasized that they had already encountered psychology literature earlier in their lives, both about setting goals, positive thinking and recognizing emotions, and determining the strengths of their personality. However, several students emphasized that for the first time, they managed to connect this literature directly with their lives. Students wrote: "you hear about it at every step, but this course made me stop and listen to myself, made me make this transformation in myself", "the information about respectful communication and the steps of the conversation structure improved my understanding of effective communication". Students who had previously studied psychology or pedagogy indicated that this course updated and supplemented their previous knowledge. None of the students expressed the opinion that the knowledge to be learned in the course was not relevant.

Despite the fact that the course is designed as a standard course, each student has found exactly the topic, exercise, and explanation necessary for their personal development. Common in the feedback about the benefits of the course is the conclusion of each student about identifying an important individual situation for him, which is characterized by the words "I understood": "I realized that I am not so crazy, I am aware that I have many positive qualities and strengths", "I realized that I was emotionally unstable after giving birth, and I worked with it", "I have always looked for confidence in myself and my abilities - I have understood the most important thing, that in interaction with this course it gradually emerges, only this path requires a continuous learning process", "I understood, I am emotionally exhausted, tired and unhappy", "I understood that working with myself is difficult, but the time devoted to yourself, to organizing yourself, to understanding yourself is important and should not be "thrown" aside".

The quotes show that the topics and form of implementation of the course have promoted situational awareness among students, and within the course they were offered not only to read literature, but also to use practical methods, tools and exercises, and the instructor gave advice for identifying their own resources and solving situations. Different students highlighted different exercises for development tasks, the learning and use of which have given them useful skills and led to important conclusions. Students mentioned very different things as their

practical benefits: skills in setting goals, developing positive thinking, building relationships and getting to know themselves. The feedback confirms the fact that each student has found a method or tool suitable for his individual situation: "knowing the current situation and my resources has increased my productivity", "I used the method of deep analysis, made lists of goals and described the course of action in detail to make it easier to achieve the goal", "I want to note Seligman's optimistic way of thinking as a lifestyle habit - I have also implemented it in my everyday life", "I learned to listen to my in the body and understand emotions better in a moment", "I have become aware of my strengths, which are also appreciated by my colleagues at my workplace, because I can do everything I set my mind to".

A thematic analysis of students' comments about whether and how taking the course has an impact on their future clearly shows that it is positive. The reviews mention that the acquired competencies will help to navigate various difficult life situations, they will be used to understand and accept other people's behaviour and reactions. Students noted that what they have learned will help them build more successful relationships, avoid conflicts, manage their emotions in difficult situations, and constructively approach the goals they have achieved. Many noted the role of identifying and realizing the values of their life in making future decisions and defining their life position: "it will definitely help in leading teams, because motivation and psychological support are a priority in the workplace", "the change in the way of thinking, the learned positivity, which I am still learning little by little, makes me feel myself and helps me understand that priorities in life tend to be very different from society "affixed" seal".

Although some students mentioned in their reviews that at first they perceived the exercises as an easy way to pass the time and did not understand the meaning of the exercises, later they often resisted the execution of various exercises and performed them carelessly, however, during the course of the first module, the resistance was overcome: "I have two higher educations and more than 20 years of work experience, and I have also studied psychology, but none of the studies had such a well-modelled system for self-knowledge and personal growth". Often, students mention the support of other students and the opportunity to get acquainted with their life situation and its reasons as a factor that successfully overcomes resistance and motivates them to complete the course: "group work made me understand and feel in unfamiliar situations and understand that not only I see my problems in such a pessimistic light, the experience of others makes you look at yourself from a different point of view".

The students admit that this course has stimulated their personal development and "gave the 'drive' to read more and more deeply and to learn in practice various possibilities and ways of self-development". Many write that they are aware of personal development as a continuous process, and the course has been a good incentive to actualize it: "my personal growth must be continuous. You have to find strength in yourself, the desire to transform yourself, develop and never give up". Students often note the important role of the course instructor's personal experience and professional teaching in stimulating learning motivation for successful course completion.

During the course, the students' attitude towards soft skills and the importance of their development in the field of professional activity has changed. The acquired skills and conclusions will help to make decisions not only in private living space and relationships but most mention the fact that the competencies learned in the course will help to build harmonious relationships and a career at work. The students' comments create confidence that the promotion of personal development during higher education is an essential factor that also contributes to the recognition and purposeful use and development of professional competencies: "we expect from formal education knowledge of external affairs in our chosen professional field. However, multifaceted self-understanding is necessary for the effective application of professional competences. Thank you for allowing me to come to such an important conclusion".

Conclusions and discussion

The authors conclude that the form of a distance learning course is also suitable for promoting personal development, and despite the fact that the course is designed in a standard form, each student can individually find and work with materials in accordance with their personal relevance and readiness. The thematic analysis of students' reviews showed that the purpose of the study course has been met and the results of the study course have been achieved.

Positive thinking, managing emotions, setting goals, identifying one's strengths, developing concentration, identifying and prioritizing one's values, understanding and accepting diversity are the main skills that students indicate as benefits of taking the course.

Although the reviews of some students indicate resistance to the awareness of the personality situation, the structure and organizational form of the course contribute to the successful overcoming of resistance and help to solve issues of personal development at the level of "depth" and complexity appropriate for the student.

Promotion of students' personal development, using the content and form of the specific study course, helps to successfully implement the mission of the College of Business Administration by improving not only the quality of students' professional, but also personal life.

The course instructor's professional competence and personal charisma are of critical importance in the implementation of the "Personal development" study course, which is made up of both knowledge in psychology and successful practical experience in group and individual counselling and life activities.

During the research, the authors identified two key elements where further research and analysis is necessary. At first, it is necessary to analyse the ethical aspects of this study course, taking into account that students with different previous experiences and also possible psychological diagnosis can take part in the course, and it is important to draw a boundary not to intervene too much in the personal life of the student. Secondly, it would be necessary to make a longitudinal study, for example, to make a survey for these students 2 or more years after finishing this course. It would give a possibility to evaluate the long-term impact of this study course on the professional careers and lives of the students.

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