How to function as a *Catholic* university during the quarantine?

**Ukrainian Catholic University in a new reality**

*June 18, 2020*

There are basically two things which most clearly distinguish Catholic universities from their secular peers – their commitment to the integral human development of their students and their appreciation of the community both in terms of celebrating a communal way of life and preparing students for service in their communities.

Pope Francis stated, "that educating is not only filling the head with concepts but teaching how to use the three languages: the language of the mind, the language of the heart, the language of the hand." A Catholic university following this philosophy of education could become a life-changing story for young people encountering the world and their role in it with joy, gratitude, responsibility, spiritual strength and freedom.

Another principal vocation of a Catholic university is to celebrate community and contribute to the common good, to make young people learn to strive and work for the good that transcends their private interests and preoccupations. To make it happen, a Catholic university strives to be a community of service par excellence and rediscover what it means to be close to the needy and poor.

That is why the pandemics by forcing the quarantine upon and pushing universities off campus hurts a Catholic university even more than any natural force majeure. How to move online what could be done primarily or even only offline?! *How to organize our work online to achieve the same quality education and still offer community experience and opportunity for the integral human development of our students?*

**Shifting education to the distance format**

After the outbreak of the pandemic in Ukraine, UCU was one of the first Ukrainian universities to respond swiftly to the threat. The transition to online learning was realized within a few days. There were prerequisites for this. All faculty members have been working with the Learning Management System based on the Moodle platform for several years and already have had their courses at least in a basic format in the LMS. We began to prepare for a full online transition two weeks in advance of the quarantine. Considering the rapid spread of COVID-19 worldwide, it became clear that quarantine in schools and educational institutions was inevitable. Therefore, upon its announcement, the education process at UCU did not stop, but gradually changed to another format.
The first step of the emergency transfer to online learning was a series of training sessions and webinars on creating e-courses, conducting videoconferences (webinars), using instruments for immediate two-way communication and group work, and also channels of communication. We also regularly offer for reading a collection of articles by experts in online education. We gather and distribute the reflections of our teachers on successful and interesting decisions in teaching in the distance format.

However, to fully realize the potential of distance learning, it is not enough simply to transfer the course materials and assignments and discussion of themes from classroom to online. All teachers had an experience of teaching courses online. But this is not an experience of teaching a distance course, strictly speaking. After the university went online, the next steps were re-thinking the teaching style for distance format.

In addition, since the Coursera platform announced the possibility of free access to courses and certificates for universities interested in the initiative, within a few days, UCU was among 16,000 university communities around the world that took advantage of the offer and gained free access to educational content.

In recent years, there has been much debate about the quality and efficiency of online education. The statistics shows that only 5–7% of people actually complete online courses and this is an extremely low rate. So, we conducted a survey on students’ experience of distance learning in the second week of quarantine. And 66% of students confirmed that all their courses have been transferred to the distance format, 24% — that part of the subjects have been transferred, and some have been transferred to the format of tasks and assignments. 10% of students stated that some courses had not been transferred, in part practicum classes and internships. However, 68% were highly satisfied with the quality of online teaching.

However, to unveil the possibilities of distance learning, changes are necessary, in both the teacher’s and the student’s worldview. Obviously, the ‘I came to listen to a lecture’ scheme doesn’t work anymore, as it turns out it is not necessary to come to the classroom for that. So, what the quarantine urged our students to learn is to change their mindsets from ‘I am a listener’ to ‘I am the manager of my study.’ This means that the class is not just for the consumption of information, but for its application.
A significantly more serious challenge than transferring the instructional process online was the organization of practicum modules and internships in distance format. In particular, students of the applied educational programs like IT, Sociology, Physical and Occupational Therapy suffered from the loss of access to the practical side of their education as a consequence of the off-site studies. In response to this challenge, the university decided to move the practical disciplines into the next academic year.

Among the challenges which distance learning poses to the university, it is also worth remembering the technical ones: poor internet connection, occasional power outage, a lack of headsets on computers, low power of mobile phones, and therefore it is sometimes impossible to find alternatives to computers. That is why it is necessary for teachers to record and give access to the lectures so that they can be viewed later.

The experience of online learning which UCU teachers and students gained during the quarantine demonstrates some possibilities which digital instruments open before an academic community. Thus, we may introduce a four-day or three-day on-campus training session, and a day or two online so that the student can use that time to work in the field.”

**International academic activities**

But even if UCU had been able to find a response that would nullify the negative consequences of the absence of practical lessons and professional internships, in the area of international academic mobility it was impossible to avoid the problems.

We had three types of outgoing students to deal with: those who decided to stay at the host university, those who came back home, and those who were unable to start their mobility program (and had to postpone their mobility until the following academic year). Among these groups we had students who preferred to continue their virtual academic mobility and took online courses while being in Ukraine, and students who wished to interrupt the study process at the host university and continue their regular semester at UCU online. Despite all the turbulence and the high level of uncertainty, we managed to stabilize the situation thanks to close cooperation with our partners.

The main worries of international students at UCU were generally related to travel restrictions and visa deadlines, study budgets, challenges to completing their current studies, and the study format and security measures in the next academic year. UCU introduced a quarantine on March 12, and since then all international students have been sent information and instructions for a possible return home and online distance learning, regardless of location. Fortunately, we did not have a single case where international students canceled or interrupted their studies due to the introduction of quarantine at UCU. They were always in constant contact with UCU’s International Office, UCU program directors, and tutors. Like all members of the UCU community, all international students could also benefit from psychological and spiritual-pastoral support provided by the relevant university units online or by phone.
The results of the student survey shows that 7% of students who stayed abroad or switched to virtual exchange mode continued their studies at a host institution in full accordance with the signed Learning Agreement and 28% of UCU students replied that they had to make slight changes in the study plan. 72% of the exchange students are satisfied by the quality of online teaching at host institutions. 92% of students reported that they did not have significant problems with scholarship payments. At the same time, 50% of students noted that they faced some financial problems and were forced to raise additional personal funds in order to address certain force majeure pandemic and lockdown issues in the host country and fully implement the mobility program.

Service-Learning education

It was a challenge not only to maintain the quality of the instructional process after switching online but also supporting and developing service-learning education, which is one of the priorities of UCU Strategy 2025.

Education today is something more than simply the transfer of knowledge. It is the influence that the educational institution has on the local community and the country in general. There is a great demand for strengthening this interchange, and so for an educational approach directed at forming academic knowledge, practical skills, and an appropriate attitude toward solving problems in the community and together with the community. Throughout the world, this approach is known as “Service Learning”.

Despite the quarantine, a team of UCU faculty and students successfully implemented a pilot academic course and a project according to the logic of the service-learning approach to teaching and learning. The project title is ‘The Asset-Map of Social Services for War Veterans and Members of their Families. There were two deliverables for the project: data visualization and asset-map. The partner organization was a local NGO that provides service to war combatants and members of their families.

There are lots of public and volunteer organizations and municipal organizations that provide services for the war veterans but there is a lack of data about their functioning, systemic updates on it, and thus less effective interaction with the audience in need. So, the motivation was to establish a network of contacts of these institutions and create the accessible platform for finding up-to-date information, e.g. the nearest existing organizations providing specific services to veterans and their families.

The asset map is now accessible for everyone. It will also be promoted via city and regional administrations. There are 76 valid organizations on the map all over the Lviv Region, out of more than 120 registered ones. There is also a data table with systemized information about services for combatants and their families, with all the details and contact info.
Community: psychological counseling and spiritual life

One of the great challenges of the quarantine was supporting the community’s psychological health. To reveal and share your feelings online is significantly more difficult than conducting a webinar of discussion. Therefore, we tried to be open to ideas and requests from the students. More than 20 volunteer graduate psychology students are working as consultants in the UCU Consulting Center. With the beginning of the quarantine, the center moved entirely to an online format. However, the results show that even in the online form, consulting is a reasonably effective way to support students. This turned to be an excellent opportunity for students of all specialties and programs to maintain their mental health and to function better inside and outside the university during these challenging and stressful times. During the center’s work, 340 consultations were held, 20 consultants and 119 clients were involved, 11 supervisions and 2 webinars were conducted to improve counseling.

In general, it is a win-win situation. UCU students have an opportunity to receive quality care for free when they may need it most of all and when many of them would not be able to afford it otherwise. While psychology students receive considerable experience of practical knowledge, accompany fellow-students in their coping with life and education challenges, are more comfortable in looking for a job in the future, and hopefully could start their own practice more easily.

The online format has also set particular tasks before the university’s chaplains: how to remain with the person spiritually, even at a distance? Though at first this looked difficult, the UCU Pastoral Department quickly mastered creative new methods and is constantly creating new online projects.
The most successful initiatives are the following:

- online broadcast of liturgical services
- daily prayer of the UCU community
- the blog “Not-theological discussions” – this is a project in which one of the priests, on the example of casual, historical, natural and cultural phenomena and events, talks briefly about the word of God. As measured by followers, this project became one of the 10 most interesting theological blogs in Ukraine.

- the blog “Christian or Hooligan?” challenging young people in a playful manner about the controversial issues of faith and life of the faithful in a contemporary society
- spiritual counseling by telephone — under the quarantine each person from the community can talk about his or her spiritual needs with chaplains of the university.

**Emmaus Center**

Two decades before the pontificate of Pope Francis, UCU made prophetic gestures of showing and affirming the value and gifts of people with special needs and mentally handicapped people by integrating them into its academic and student life, serving them in different ways, making their voice sound louder in the society.

UCU is a home for the Emmaus Center (https://emaus.ucu.edu.ua/en/) which strives to promote an inclusive society in which every person with special needs is valued and accepted. The inconveniences caused by the quarantine gave many people the possibility to understand how people with special needs feel in everyday life, suffering physical isolation and difficulties with, or even total absence of, social communication.
Realizing how disturbing the current situation is for families of people with special needs, Emmaus organized a webinar for parents of children with special needs to overcome anxiety. In addition, several seminars for specialists in correcting the problem behaviors of children with autism and children with hyperactive attention deficit disorder were also successfully held. By conducting seminars online it was possible to attract a wider category of people and build cooperation with geographically distant partners.

Among the projects which suffered most as a consequence of the quarantine were socialization activities and the friends’ job-seeking. The job placement project shifted the emphasis from actively expanding the circle of employed people with mild mental disabilities to strengthening the support of those already employed (there are more than 30 of them), as in quarantine there are various issues with changes in working conditions. We are working to ensure that our experience can be disseminated as much as possible, regardless of circumstances: we are preparing a manual on the job placement project, working on a new issue of the journal, filling the site and social networks with useful content, etc.

**Fundraising in the time of the pandemic**

In a sense, UCU is the country’s most public university. Without any government support but with wide direct support of many benefactors from all over the world, UCU generously gives back to the young people and community and contributes in their service to the society on behalf of the University ([https://ucu.edu.ua/en/news/universytetyak-sotsialnyi-lift/](https://ucu.edu.ua/en/news/universytetyak-sotsialnyi-lift/)).

So, for our Development Department, the top priority was communication with our existing donors. In the first week of the quarantine, we started learning from different resources (webinars, articles, interviews) what would be good to do and what would not be good to do. We used this knowledge to build a communications strategy for this time of crisis. We developed a special message about the situation at the university and how the crisis has affected the academic process and the operations of the university. We started calling our donors to check on how they are doing and invited them to join UCU online through services, prayers, reflections and webinars.
We also started discussing how we can transition our in-person fundraising events to online events. That was almost like ‘reinventing the wheel’ all over again, with a lot of discussion and thinking through different details. An online format brings some advantages (e.g., breaking borders), but at the same time it has some big downsides (e.g., losing the atmosphere of a community event). We are trying to find a balance.

As part of fundraising activities, UCU recently held Ukraine’s first online charitable meeting. Thanks to the online format, not only benefactors in Ukraine were able to participate in the event but also Ukrainians from the diaspora. More than 200 families from New York, Toronto, and Melbourne spent an evening with UCU. As a result of the charitable event, UCU raised funds for 62 student need-based scholarships.

Conclusions

Students and faculty miss the campus very much. It is extremely difficult to substitute for on-site learning experience and offer full experience of community life and opportunities for the holistic development of students.

But the unprecedented times require the unprecedented actions. Returning to 'how it was before' would be a step backward. We have to reconsider and even reinvent our methods of teaching, implementing projects, applying for grants, or fundraising. These new skills and experiences which we have gained and continue to acquire during the quarantine should not be lost and should find their place in our professional life afterwards. The new reality prompted us to look for more flexible, less expensive, technologically savour, and innovative ways to perform traditional tasks. Each faculty and staff member should use this opportunity of crisis and improve at least one of his or her current processes in the next semester, and then pick up a new one for the next transformation. During this time of the quarantine we realized very strongly that UCU is not only a teaching but also very much a learning University.