Mental Health and Well-being of Students in the Context of Remote Training of Future Translators and Interpreters

Soňa Hodáková
Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, Slovakia
shodakova@ukf.sk

Abstract

The study presents the results of current research in the field of mental health and well-being of university students in Slovakia during the ongoing pandemic situation and the transition to the remote form of learning. In particular, it deals with the psychosocial aspects of remote training of future translators and interpreters. The paper brings the results of quantitative and qualitative analysis of selected factors of distance learning of translation and interpreting students, which affect the course and the outcomes of education, but also the overall quality of students' life. The analyses show that the most important aspects within this context include motivation, social isolation, time management and the opportunities for mental hygiene. The study also stresses the importance of developing students' personal and interpersonal competence as a suitable method for improving mental health and well-being of future translators and interpreters.

1.   Introduction

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been radical changes in various fields, ranging from major shocks to the countries' health care and economic systems to everyday struggles of families. Universities in Europe have also experienced a significant disruption of their functioning and the majority of them have transitioned to distance mode in March 2020.[1] Given that this transition hasn't been systematically prepared over a longer period of time, but can be rather seen as *emergency distance learning* (Hodges et al. 2020), it is necessary to examine its impact on all the actors in various contexts. Besides the technical, didactic or economic aspects, it is, without a doubt, necessary not to disregard the consequences that distance learning and the related circumstances bring with regard to students' mental health and well-being.

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), mental health is "a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively

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[1]

https://eua.eu/downloads/publications/briefing_european%20higher%20education%20in%20the%20covid-19%20crisis.pdf. Accessed on: 14 September 2021.

and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community" (Kim 2012). Mental health is a key term of the overall definition of health. Its definition also emphasises that it is not only the absence of a mental illness or disorder, but a state of physical, mental and social well-being, which allows the individual to be productive, feel positive emotions and enjoy free time, and actively contribute to the life of the community (Kim 2012). The feeling of well-being therefore reflects how people feel, how they act and how they evaluate the overall quality of their life.

The paper focuses on students' mental health and well-being in the time of the pandemic and on the psychosocial aspects that influence mental well-being of students of translation and interpreting (T&I), and therefore, have a potential impact not only on the course and the outcome of the teaching process, but also on the personality, the experience and behaviour of students in a larger context.

2. Mental health and well-being of students in the time of pandemic

With regard to the pandemic's consequences and the transition to distance learning, Doolan et al. (2020) conducted a survey on more than 12,000 university students in Europe in 2020. The results of the survey were grouped into 6 categories: academic life, support networks and mechanisms, emotional well-being, skills and infrastructure needed for studying at home, life circumstances, and adjustment. More than a half (50.74%) of respondents said that their workload had increased during remote learning. Many of the students reported that they performed worse in their studies. This applied mainly to students who did not have appropriate space conditions, a calm place to study and adequate access to study materials; they lacked digital skills and/or stable access to the Internet; they didn't feel sufficient social support or suffered from mental disorders. A startling fact is that almost 13% of students reported that they suffered from mental disorders. The survey didn't show whether the disorders manifested themselves before the outbreak of the pandemic or whether they became evident due to the current situation; however, in general, deteriorated mental well-being was reported mainly by female students, persons who struggled to bear the financial burden related to their studies, respondents with psychological problems, and students with a weaker support of the social environment. Further, more than a quarter of students reported that they were constantly worried about their health. Although the mentioned survey cannot define the origins and the time when students' mental disorders arose, i.e. their possible link to the current situation and preventive measures, the most recent research in the field of psychiatry confirms the overall increase in the prevalence of psychiatric symptoms, depression and anxiety during the pandemic (Rajkumar 2020).

The interest in the condition of students during distance learning becomes apparent also in the Slovak university setting. In the first half of 2021, the Slovak Accreditation Agency conducted a survey titled

Akademická štvrťhodinka (The Academic Quarter).[2] Almost 20,000 students from all Slovak universities participated in this unprecedented questionnaire survey. Although the results showed that the organisation of studies during the pandemic was perceived rather positively by 79% of students, several findings were alarming. As many as 38% of students lacked direct contact with teachers and a third of respondents did not feel as a part of the community of students and teachers from their university. Only 56% of students were spending time with their classmates outside of classes. One third of respondents has even lost motivation to such an extent that they are considering dropping out.

3. Psychosocial aspects of remote training of translation and interpreting

At the beginning of 2021, students from all Slovak universities offering programmes aimed at preparation of future translators and interpreters participated in a survey focused on several aspects of remote training (Hodáková – Perez 2021b). The quantitative and qualitative survey focused on key procedural, technical and psychosocial factors that play a role in the course and the outcomes of the education of T&I students.

In the pilot phase, the research was conducted through a focus group (semi-structured group interview with a small sample of students). It was followed by collecting data via online questionnaires distributed to Slovak universities which enabled the identification and analysis of various aspects at three primary levels: procedural factors (methods and forms of teaching, evaluation methods, etc.), technical factors, and psychosocial factors. Overall, 208 T&I students participated in the survey. Since one of the aims was to compare remote and in-person learning, both bachelor and master degree students (from all years of study) participated in the survey, except for first year students, who, at the time of conducting of the survey, completed only one semester of their studies and exclusively in the remote form (cf. Figure 1).

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[2] https://www.vysokeskoly.sk/clanok/vysledky-studentskeho-prieskumu-akademicka-stvrthodinka. Accessed on: 15 September 2021.
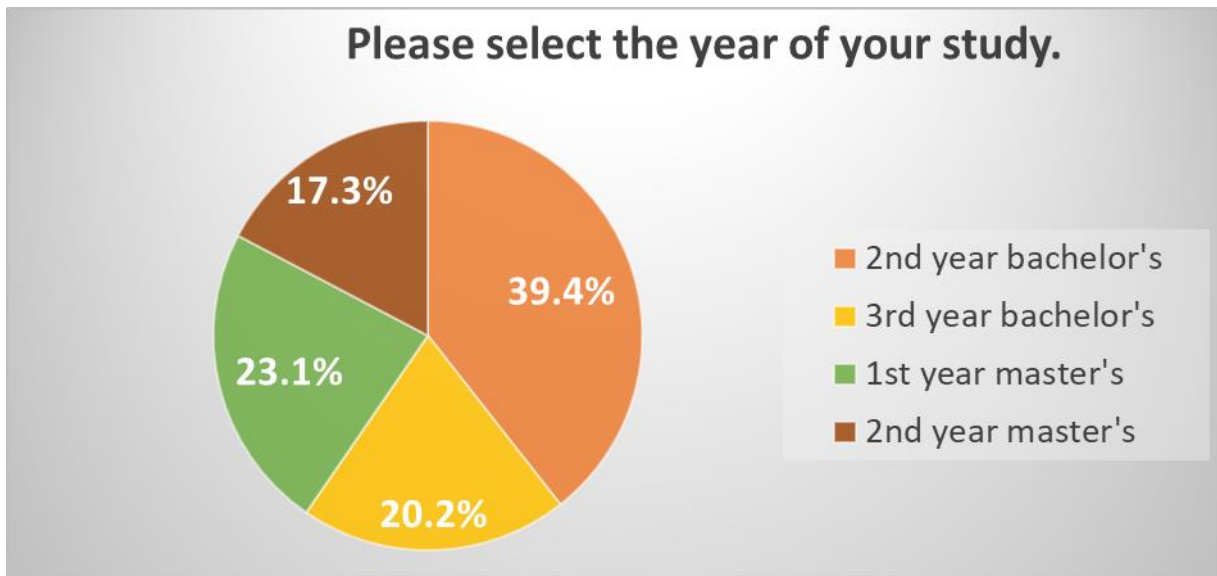
Figure 1. Questionnaire survey research sample

The paper focuses primarily on the psychosocial aspects which influence mental well-being of students, and therefore, have a potential impact not only on the course and the outcome of the teaching process, but also on the experience, personality, and behaviour of students in a larger context.

4. Quantitative analysis of psychosocial factors from the viewpoint of T&I students

The majority of students reported that distance learning entails a bigger psychological burden. 54.8% of students fully agreed and 22.6% of students mostly agreed with the statement: "I have to expend more mental energy during classes." On the other hand, 12.5% of students mostly disagreed and 10.1% of students fully disagreed (Figure 2).
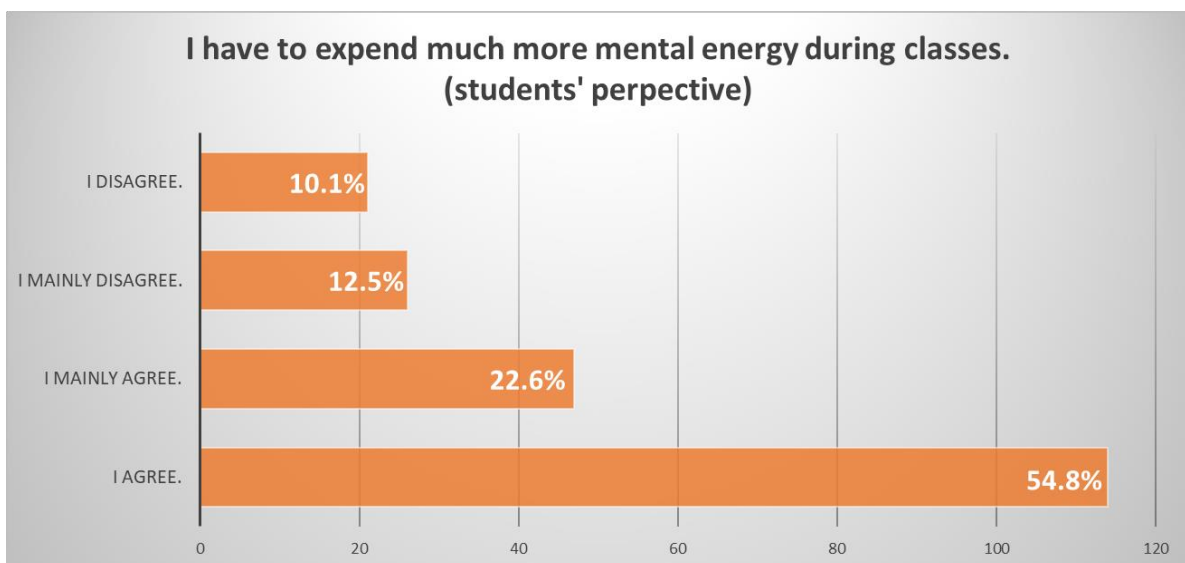

Figure 2. "I have to expend more mental energy during classes."

The findings of the questionnaire survey showed that the majority of T&I students struggled to maintain enough motivation during remote training. Only 14.4% of students fully agreed and 29.3% of students mostly agreed with the statement: "I am able to maintain enough motivation for education." On the contrary, 27.9% of students fully disagreed and 28.4% of students mostly disagreed with this statement (Figure 3).
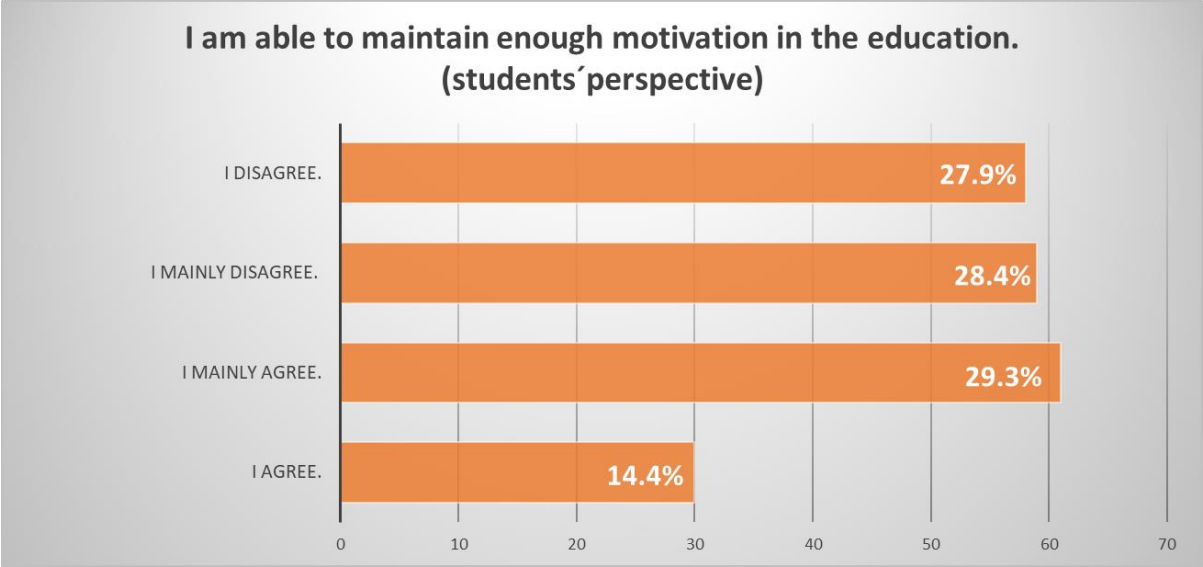

Figure 3. "I am able to maintain enough motivation in education."

More than 60% of students think that social isolation due to the pandemic negatively impacted their performance during their studies. 37.5% of students fully agreed and 23.6% of students mostly agreed with the statement: "Social isolation influences my performance negatively.". On the contrary, 18.3% of students fully disagreed and 20.7% of students mostly disagreed with the statement on the negative impact of social isolation (Figure 4).

Social isolation influences my performance negatively. (students' perspective)

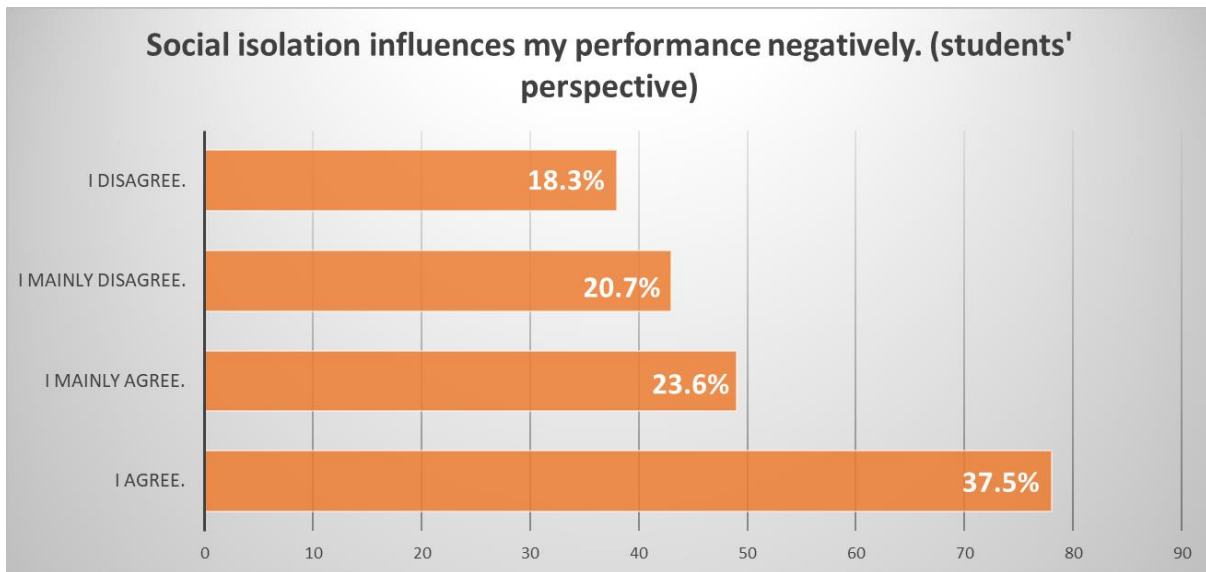|	
I DISAGREE.	18.3%
I MAINLY DISAGREE.	20.7%
I MAINLY AGREE.	23.6%
I AGREE.	37.5%

Figure 4. "Social isolation influences my performance negatively."

The quantitative analysis of the psychosocial factors reported by T&I students in the questionnaire showed that the majority of them must expend more mental energy during distance learning. Most students also struggle to stay sufficiently motivated during distance learning. Likewise, the majority of students consider that social isolation due to the cancellation of in-person training (among other things) negatively reflects on their study performance.

It should be noted that all of the above-mentioned factors and their perception by the students are, to a large extent, subjective, and are influenced not only by the exterior circumstances related to the pandemic measures and transitioning to the remote form of learning, but also largely reflect the individual circumstances of students (family environment, spatial and technical equipment, social environment, health condition, etc.). Last, but not the least, the evaluation reflects students' mindset and qualities (studiousness, systematicity, anxiety, ability to manage workloads, etc.). All of these elements also play a role in the overall perception of this critical period, i.e. whether the crisis situation is seen as a challenge and an opportunity to acquire new skills, learn new methods, and discover its positive side, or whether it constitutes an obstacle that is very difficult to overcome.

5. Qualitative analysis of psychosocial factors from the viewpoint of T&I students

Both of these tendencies can also be found in the students' answers to open questions of the questionnaire survey. The qualitative analysis of psychosocial factors in the questionnaire allowed for collecting of both positive and negative approaches to remote training from the students' perspective, with answers ranging from a strictly positive approach to a strictly negative one. Nevertheless, the majority of students put the

situation somewhere between these two extremes, i.e. they see both the inconveniences and the benefits.

Examples of a rather positive approach to distance learning of translation and interpreting from students' perspective[3]:

"I perceive as a positive that I managed to become more efficient due to distance learning. I could use the time saved by not travelling to prepare and engage in my own activities which allowed me to relax and gain new energy".

"For me, distance learning is a great positive. For example, because I suffer from social anxiety disorder and in-person learning is extremely stressful for me, but also because now I have more time for myself as I don't have to travel back and forth between my house and the dormitory, I can develop my hobbies during studies and work on myself, which was impossible to do all during in-person learning (at least in my case)."

"positives: technical support (reliable online space), empathic approach of teachers, helpfulness of classmates (study materials), events organised by the university".

"I personally evaluate distance learning rather positively. I save time by not commuting and one could say that one is much more productive and also has more free time. I think that distance learning is particularly beneficial for the last year students as thanks to this form of study, it was possible to better manage both work and studies. Although, there are definitely some negatives as well. I believe that with appropriate organisation of time, it was eventually manageable."

"Everything is basically the same as in in-person learning, of course except for the lack of direct contact. Technology causes problems to most teachers (but also students). However, in general, distance learning saved me a lot of time as I don't have to commute to school and I feel less stressed."

"Another positive of distance learning is the reduction of stress. It is related to the absence of students at real, physical workplace. In home environment, the student feels more relaxed (of course, there are also exceptions), and in many cases, he/she doesn't need to have the camera turned on in online classes so he/she can't be seen. All of this lifts a burden from the student and he/she can feel calmer."

"I was satisfied with distance learning – classes were held just as at school, with the difference that I was sitting alone at my computer and not in class with my classmates :) The teachers were always helpful and

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[3] All of the given examples are literal translations of students' answers (from Slovak into English).

understanding and there never were any serious complications. I see as a negative that I didn't enjoy the distance form of study as much as I would in class and I had to motivate myself more, but one could become used to that."

"Distance learning is great, I don't think that the quality of studies decreased, quite the opposite, I have more time to prepare for specific subjects, I don't lose time going to the faculty and back home, I feel more motivated and I have more energy and desire to study".

Examples of a rather negative approach to distance learning of translation and interpreting from students' perspective:

"Missing social contact, technical issues, eye strain and the body aching after spending all day sitting in front of the computer, we are missing the real experience of interpreting – under normal circumstances, we would be in the interpreting booths, now we don't have the opportunity to use them and to become familiar with the technical equipment. The teachers are nervous because they don't see us, they don't have direct feedback, which is quite understandable."

"I definitely miss longer breaks between online classes; personally, I find it physically and mentally demanding to have 6-8 classes without a break (or with breaks 5/10/15-minute-long".

"issues with Internet connection in a village are stressing me out extremely because they disturb my concentration, it is difficult to understand what the teachers say, and it costs a lot of energy. Moreover, I feel like the workload has increased (a lot more presentations and papers), and what's more, everything has to be done at the computer (both homework and assignments), focusing all-day so much on the computer screen is very exhausting especially when one has to be alert and pay attention to who sends or makes available what and when".

"The worst for me is the mental fatigue".

"negatives: closed libraries and study rooms, absence of personal contact (student – teacher, student – student), the need to expend more mental energy".

"Home environment vs school environment – at school, I have more peace, room to concentrate, at home, there is often noise, not only in the house, but also on the street (construction work etc.). I definitely miss socialisation and my student group, and also accessibility of e. g. library services (I come from a small village, the closest town library certainly can't fully satisfy my needs, besides that, I have a problem getting there in the first place."

"I have bad experiences, I am demotivated to continue my studies".)

"In-person learning can sometimes seem demanding, not only in terms of time, but it is the real form of study which brings the feeling of satisfaction. This feeling is missing in distance learning or is present only to a limited extent compared to in-person learning. In in-person learning, there are simply many factors which are lacking in distance learning. For example, meetings in person and interaction with students and teachers, more effective learning (at least in practically oriented subjects) and the feeling of a job well done. Experiences and memories are created. Life is about fully living, not only surviving, as is the case in distance learning."

"Negatives: I am always in one room, headaches and eye strain, mental fatigue, loss of motivation."

"As for the negative side, I can't overlook mental health which is, at least in my case, going downhill, even though I didn't expect it as an introvert, but I experience states of anxiety, nervousness, even depression, and it is difficult to cope with it when all personal interaction is forbidden."

"I am definitely not as productive during distance learning as I am during in-person learning"

"overall – it is terrible, the reasons are always the same – isolation, headaches and eye strain due to the use of technology, impossibility to gain sufficient knowledge – but mainly the isolation."

"Demotivation acquired a new dimension, same as the fear of speaking in front of people. For example, I had to start taking pills. The contact is lacking."

"It is difficult for the psyche. When we go to school normally, there is at least some balance between fun/relax and stress. Now it is only the stress. Weekends have lost their purpose. Every day is a school day. We don't know how to "switch off". Social contact is restricted. We haven't seen the people who we were used to seeing almost every day for almost a year. It is sorely lacking. We are missing life. Our value as humans is now connected only to school and to whether we succeed."

In the questionnaires, many students evaluated various aspects of distance learning from a complex perspective – for example the organisation and the course of the teaching process by the university and individual teachers, but also their own experience of the situation, emphasising the positives, but also mentioning the negative sides of distance learning. In cases like these, it is not possible to definitely determine whether they perceive the situation mostly positively or mostly

negatively, setting aside specific aspects which they find beneficial in remote mode and those which are problematic. We provide the following examples:

"I am positively surprised by the quality of distance learning; at the beginning, I was worried whether I will learn something in that form of study. However, I must say that the teachers are doing their best, we are not missing anything. What I see as a problem is finding some free time and not thinking about school. Because we are at home, we study at home, we function in our family, everything simply takes place at home. I feel like I am constantly thinking about school, like I didn't have time for anything else. I have to add that I prepare much more for the classes, but I also believe that the workload is higher. I also often experience states of mental strain. Being connected online makes a big difference when compared to physically in class at school, I feel like it consumes much more of my mental energy and when we have 8 classes in a row, at the end of the day, I can't even remember my own name. Of course, it is not only due to online learning, it is a mixture of all that is happening around us."

"For me, personally, distance learning is not that big of an issue. On the contrary, I find it beneficial because I am able to stay on top of things and I am not afraid to speak in class. Despite this, I must say that as much as I didn't want to get up and go to school, now I'd give anything to be able to do so. Socialisation is what perhaps everybody is missing, even though today's technologies help us to be in touch with our classmates or teachers every day. It is difficult to mutually motivate ourselves when we are all sitting at the computers within four walls. I am currently in the last year of my studies and I am writing my master's thesis. I managed to write my bachelor's thesis quickly and without any problems. But it is extremely difficult and entirely demotivating to sit at the computer after several online classes. It is not really about the lack of resources, especially the book resources, but more about the psychological side."

"I evaluate positively that I didn't need to go from one class to another, which saved me a lot of time. However, I think that distance learning went smoothly, but I missed the feedback in some classes. I also evaluate negatively that we had much more work during the semester than under normal circumstances when we had in-person learning. And I evaluate most negatively the impact of distance learning on students' mental health, self-discipline, etc."

"On the positive note, I can make better use of the time between classes than just sitting in the hallway waiting for the class. I am more active in class because I see that the teacher is making an effort and I feel bad when there is silence after his/her question (it also happens in in-person learning, but I am more aware of that now). And I am more in touch with my classmates. I even started to talk to those with whom I had

hardly communicated before. And the negative… It bothers me that there is more cheating on the tests. I also can't take a break and relax because there is no transitioning between school and home. I was under pressure at school, and when I got home, the stress faded away. But now school and home are the same place, and that's why stress is always present."

The answers show that many students considered time saving to be the greatest positive of distance learning. In terms of mental well-being, the fact of not having to travel in order to fulfil their school duties and, in some cases, save several hours a day allows many students to organise their studies and specific assignments more effectively or to engage in their free time activities, relax and the overall mental health.

At the same time, many students appreciate the effort invested by the teachers to provide them with an adequate alternative to in-person learning and are more confident that knowledge, skills and competences acquired in remote training are comparable to the outcomes of in-person learning. Elimination of fear of insufficient quality of education can also contribute to students' mental well-being.

One of the positive things which also appeared in students' answers was the possibility to eliminate fear of speaking in a group, in front of the teacher and the classmates. This advantage is offered by distance learning in asynchronous form (e.g. watching video lessons, answering exercises) during which the direct contact with other participants is lacking or in synchronous form (e.g. participating in online classes, video conferences, chats) when students have their cameras turned off, don't feel the physical presence of others, and can't see each other's faces.

In our survey, students consider social isolation, loss or radical restriction of social contacts as the greatest negative of distance learning, they are afraid that they are missing out on the experiences of student life. Isolation in a limited and monotonous, mostly home environment is also associated with the feeling that work (school) life and private life are not separated, some students do not find room for a good rest, they lose motivation, their ability to concentrate decreases. In such cases, there may also be a risk of an outbreak of more serious mental health problems or worsening of existing ones.

6.   Discussion and conclusion

The results of current surveys show that after transitioning to remote form of learning, it is necessary to address students' mental health and mental well-being to a greater extent. These have an influence not only on the course and the outcome of education, but also on the overall quality of their life.

The analysis of the findings of the survey carried out in early 2021 on T&I students at all Slovak universities which offer a T&I study programme confirms that in general, students evaluate the organisation of studies and the amount and the quality of acquired knowledge and skills positively (Hodáková – Perez 2021a). Another benefit that they see is the

time saving since they do not have to commute to school. Due to this fact, they gained the opportunity to better organise their time and duties and also engage in free time activities, i. e. those students who master the principles of effective time management also meet a prerequisite for better mental hygiene. For some students who suffer from e.g. social anxiety or fear of speaking in public, limited direct contact entails lower levels of burden and fear of actively participating in the training process, and therefore, evaluate it positively.

However, overall, the majority of students must deploy more effort and mental energy in remote learning, while struggling to maintain sufficient motivation and due to social isolation, they experience worsened study performance, concentration issues, overall discomfort, feelings of tension, sadness and in some cases, they even experience states of anxiety or think about dropping out.

It is quite natural that the experience of a new (crisis) situation is different for each student. What is an advantage for one student can be stressful for another, depending on many external and internal factors. Teachers of translation and interpreting are primarily responsible for developing students' linguistic, cultural, technical, and translation competences. However, if we get an idea of the aspects which can potentially negatively affect students' experience and worsen their mental health and well-being, it gives us the opportunity to work with these aspects in a targeted manner and to draw attention to their importance when teaching translation and interpreting.

The current competence models of the translator (e. g. the EMT Competence framework 2017) single out and define the so-called personal and interpersonal competence of future translators. In terms of this competence, it is recommended to also develop the ability to self-evaluate, to mediate the principles of effective time management, the principles of working in a group, communication, etc. We believe that more frequent teamwork, group projects, collaboration on translation and interpreting assignments and collaborative learning can be suitable methods not only for developing the personal and interpersonal competence, but can also to some extent replace the lacking social contact and increase opportunities for interaction and communication among students.

The teacher also has the opportunity to actively facilitate students' personal development in terms of dynamic personality characteristics (e. g. motivation) by using constructive feedback, strengthening students' autonomy and self-regulatory mechanisms, using procedures to increase their positive approach to education, strengthening their sense of competency, etc. (Hodáková 2021). Although it is undoubtedly a challenging task that requires a high degree of empathy and commitment from the teacher, we believe that in this way, the teacher contributes not only to improving the mental well-being of their students, but also of their own.

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