




Empowering Psychological Resilience: Evaluation of Training

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Abstract: *Psychological resilience is a positive psychological adaptation in times of challenges and crises. Many training programmes focus on psychological resilience. The training programme "Manual: Step by step from trainees to trainers and supporters in student peer support network" is developed within the project "Enhancing digital and psychological resilience through peer networking in the online environment in times of crisis". The sub-programme A focused on psychological resilience, well-being, stress, and social support. The paper presents this sub-programme and discusses the programme structure. The sub-programme A was realized as hybrid and on-site and in four languages (English, Italian, Polish, and Serbian). The main goal is to evaluate the A sub-programme realization. The programme evaluative questionnaire was developed. The comparison of the sub-programme realization in English as a medium of instruction (80 trainees in the international pilot training realized at three universities, the sub-programme evaluated by 32 trainees) and Serbian as a medium of instruction (37 trainees in the national training realized in two groups, the sub-programme evaluated by 31 trainees) is presented. Trainees from both groups evaluated the A sub-programme with high grades; however, trainees trained in Serbian evaluated the A sub-programme higher (trainees in English: $M=4.40$; trainees in Serbian: $M=4.82$). Trainees rated the A sub-programme's particular aspects as highly useful to develop skills for peer support and recommended it to other students/ participants.*

Keywords: *psychological resilience; enhancing resilience training; English as a medium of instruction; programme evaluation; DigiPsyRes.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Psychological resilience is a positive psychological adaptation in times of challenges and crises. According to the APA Dictionary, "resilience is the process and outcome of successfully adapting to difficult or challenging life experiences, especially through mental, emotional, and behavioral flexibility and adjustment to external and internal demands" [1]. It is the focus of many educational skills training programmes and is considered in the context of psychosocial support. In the paper, the evaluation of the programme of empowering resilience in the context of peer support is considered.

The training programme "Step by step from trainees to trainers and supporters in the student peer-support network" is developed within the project "Enhancing digital and psychological resilience through peer networking in the online environment in times of crisis – DigiPsyRes" [2]. One of the parts of this programme is

sub-programme A "Psychological resilience, wellbeing, and support" [3].

1.1. Psychological Resilience and Well-being

The review of definitions reveals that the concept of resilience transcends the boundaries of academic disciplines and represents an area for interdisciplinary inquiry [4].

Garmezy, as one of the founders of research on resilience, defined resilience in the following way: "resilience is designed to reflect the capacity for recovery and maintained adaptive behavior that may follow initial retreat or incapacity upon initiating a stressful event" [5].

According to Ungar [4] "Resilience is the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to resources that sustain well-being, the capacity of individuals' physical and social ecologies to provide these resources and the capacity of individuals, and their families and communities to negotiate culturally meaningful ways for resources to be shared".

The construct of resilience is “dynamic, complex in nature, and conceptualized as multidimensional” [6]. As part of the DigiPsyRes project [7] several review papers on the definitions of resilience have been considered [8, 9, 10]. A common understanding of resilience stands out as the capacity of an individual (personal strength) that is activated in stressful situations and allows for overcoming stress and reestablishing well-being and balance.

Resilience is both a capacity and an active process encompassing a person’s flexibility in response to changing situational demands, and the ability to bounce back from negative emotional experiences. It involves behaviors, thoughts, and actions that anyone can learn and develop.

Resilience is a “construct connoting the maintenance of positive adaptation by individuals despite experiences of significant adversity” [12].

For people without professional groups, the concept of well-being means “the values of mental health, feeling valued, work-life balance, and the notion of inner harmony” [13]

According to the APA Dictionary well-being is “a state of happiness and contentment, with low levels of distress, overall good physical and mental health and outlook, or good quality of life” [1]. Two conceptions of well-being are considered. Based on the hedonic approach, a person has high subjective well-being if dominantly experiences positive moods and emotions, and less often unpleasant emotions, and vice versa; the person has low subjective well-being if rarely feels happiness, but often experiences negative emotions. The eudemonistic conception of psychological well-being emphasizes the need for people to live in accordance with their true nature, to grow, develop, and realize their potential [3].

1.2. Empowering Resilience and Well-being

Psychological research demonstrates that the resources and skills associated with more positive adaptation (i.e., greater resilience) can be cultivated and practiced [1].

Resilience research shows how individuals develop successfully despite the risk of mental illness and adverse living conditions.

Individual well-being is based on the five pillars (according to the Seligman’s PERMA model [3, 14, 15, 16]):

- **Positive emotions** (the ability to remain optimistic about one’s past, present, and future).
- **Engagement** (in activities that keep our mind on the present and, ideally, in a state of “flow”).
- **Relationships** (strong and loving social connections with others).

- **Meaning** (a sense of greater purpose, spirituality, or religion).
- **Accomplishment** (having goals and ambitions).

Therefore, relationships as important tools for resilience support! And “developing resilience is a personal journey” [1].

1.3. Educational Interventions on Psychological Resilience and Well-being

Educational interventions to enhance resilience and well-being have gained increasing attention in recent years, during and after COVID/19 pandemic, recognizing the critical role of mental health in academic and personal success. There is growing evidence in favor of resilience and subjective well-being as decisive psychological variables in the prediction of school engagement and perceived performance [17]. These interventions are designed to equip students with the skills and tools needed to cope with stress, adversity, and challenges, thereby fostering a more positive and productive learning environment.

There are many programs aimed at enhancing resilience in pre-university education (for example, The Resilience Project [18], Resilience and Well-Being training for teachers [19], RISE – Resilience in Schools and Educators [20]). Programs can be divided into several categories, depending on the main approach: mindfulness and meditation programs; programs based on SEL (Social and Emotional Learning; Primary SEAL -Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning); programmes based on Cognitive-Behavioral interventions; and programmes based on Positive education [21, 22]. Some programmes were designed for the higher education students and staff. For example, Mexico's Universidad Tecmilenio has aimed to enhance the well-being of its students and staff and it was based on the Positive education approach. Inspired by the PERMA model, which posits that well-being and happiness can be learned and measured, they added two elements: physical well-being and mindfulness, as well as character strengths, creating their “well-being ecosystem.” This model was integrated into the university's entire organizational ethos and culture. As a result, students showed significant improvements in PERMA measures, mindfulness, and gratitude after a positive psychology course compared to their pre-test scores. Students with full exposure to the well-being ecosystem outperformed those with partial or no exposure in average grades, positive emotions, engagement, relationships, and achievements [23].

1.4. Enabling people to support resilience development

The training programme: “Step by Step from trainees to trainers and supporters in student peer

support network” is developed as a part of the development of the student peer supportive network in the project DigiPsyRes.

The main goals of this programme [3]:

- The introduction of a peer support network and the training of teams for support (students and staff).
- Extended support to students to develop and implement the students’ peer support network in resilience development.

Table 1. Structure of the programme “Step by step from trainees to the trainers and supporters” [3]

Programme Step by Step	E-courses	Duration of e-course	Training workshop (insite) / duration
Pre-training activities: 3 h	e-course Pre-training day	3 hours	no
A programme: 9 h	e-course A	3 hours	6 hours
B programme: 10 h	e-course B	4 hours	6 hours
C programme: 14 j	e-course C	8 hours	6 hours
Post-training activities: 4	e-course Post training	4 hours	no
40 hours		22 hours	18 hours

The sub-programme A focused on highlighting psychological resilience and social support.

Aims of the sub-programme A: to introduce students to key features of psychological resilience, wellbeing, and support focused on peer networks.

Objectives of the sub-programme A:

- To introduce the constructs of psychological resilience, wellbeing, and support, their place in general psychological and social functioning, and the ways to enhance them;
- To develop self-awareness in terms of self-resilience, stress and coping, as well as seeking social support [3] (DigiPsyRes, 2024, p. 25).

The sub-programme A comprises four thematic parts:

- Psychological resilience, wellbeing, and mental toughness,
- Stress;
- Wheel of life;
- Social support.

The sub-programme A consists of e-course and on-site training workshops. Both components of the programme were developed in four languages: in English as a medium of instruction for trainees from three countries, and in Italian, Polish, and Serbian for the partners and participants from three universities: University of Kragujevac in Serbia, University of Kazimierz Wielki in Bydgoszcz in Poland, and University of Foggia in Italy.

1.5. English as a medium of instruction

English as a medium of instruction (EMI) is the term that describes any form of formal education in which teaching is carried out in English. EMI refers to “the use of the English language to teach academic subjects, other than English itself” [24], usually without an explicit focus on language learning or specific language aims [25].

Four core criteria, usefully extracted from the literature, which are used to describe what is considered prototypical EMI settings include the following [26]:

- English is the language used for instructional purposes;
- English is not itself the subject being taught;
- Language development is not a primary intended outcome;
- For most participants in the setting, English is a second language (L2).

Many non-prototypical EMI practices, which are excluded from core criteria, should be addressed [24]. Firstly, the term 'instructional' may be seen as downplaying the interactive nature of knowledge creation between teacher/trainers and learners/trainees, co-construction of knowledge, teacher/trainer and peer support, and interactional student-centered approach. Furthermore, the perspective that English is not the object of study in EMI artificially separates thinking from language and ignores the role of language as a meaning-making tool. Language is not just a means for individuals to formulate ideas and communicate them but is also a means for people to think and learn together [27]. Additionally, in theory, EMI does not aim to enhance English language skills. However, in practice, English proficiency is a key reason why many participants enroll in this kind of programme. Lastly, although English is a second language for EMI participants, we should bear in mind that these learners/trainees create new intercultural spaces where their native language, multilingual skills and trans-lingual practices may be employed to navigate complex conceptual knowledge and, simultaneously, help them to bond emotionally and interpersonally with their peers.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A very important element of the development and implementation of different training and courses, and for the DigiPsyRes project as well, is the evaluation of the effectiveness of implemented programmes.

The main goals of this paper are:

- to present an evaluation of the A sub-programme realization;
- to compare the sub-programme realization in English as a medium of instruction and in Serbian as a medium of instruction.

2.1. Variables

Evaluation of the sub-programme A (e-course and training).

Type of training:

- international training – English as a medium of instruction and online communication between groups;
- national training – Serbian as a medium of instruction, separate activities of the groups.

2.2. Method and techniques

An investigation of how participants evaluate the programme (e-courses and trainings) was realized by the Evaluation Questionnaire. The questionnaire was developed as a part of the project activities and consists of 55 items (questions). A part of the questionnaire was used for the evaluation of A sub-programme (see 12 items for evaluation of A sub-programme in Table 2). The evaluation included evaluation of teaching materials, applied e-tools, complexity of tasks and activities, way of implementing training, development of e-course, and teaching communication.

2.3. Sample and procedures

In the international sub-programme A, realized at three universities in three states (University of Foggia, Italy; University of Kragujevac, Serbia, and University of Kazimierz Wielki, Bydgoszcz, Poland – partners in DigiPsyRes project) in three countries, 80 trainees were enrolled, and 35 of them evaluated this sub-programme. In the national sub-programme A, at the University of Kragujevac, 37 trainees were enrolled, and 31 of them evaluated this sub-programme.

The comparison of the sub-programme realization in English as a medium of instruction (80 trainees in the international pilot training realized at three universities, the sub-programme evaluated by 35 trainees) and Serbian as a medium of instruction (37 trainees in the national training realized in two groups, the sub-programme evaluated by 31 trainees) is presented.

Sub-programme A for international groups was realized synchronously, at the same time, in a hybrid format (on-site and online between five groups in three universities) on December 18, 2023, at: the University of Kragujevac in Serbia, University of Kazimierz Wielki in Bydgoszcz in Poland, and University of Foggia in Italy. We should bear in mind that English was the second language for all participants who were exposed to the training in EMI.

Sub-programme A for national groups was realized in two terms: March 21, 2024. for trainees at the Faculty of Technical Sciences in Čačak, and March 25, 2024, for the trainees at the Rectorate of the University of Kragujevac – Faculty of Arts and Philology.

The sub-programme A was realized as hybrid and on-site and in four languages (English, Italian, Polish, and Serbian). This paper focused on the sub-programme A realization in two languages: English as a medium of instruction in the international training groups, and Serbian as a medium of instruction in the national training groups.

Evaluation of the whole programme (three sub-programmes consisting of training and e-courses) at the end of all activities (after training and after completing activities in e-courses) is realized by the questionnaire in the Post-training e-course in Moodle LMS.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The comparison of the sub-programme realization in English as a medium of instruction in the international pilot training groups, evaluated by 32 trainees, and the sub-programme realization in Serbian as a medium of instruction in the national training groups, evaluated by 31 trainees, is presented.

The evaluation of sub-programme A (e-course and training) was realized by the questionnaire used for the final evaluation of the programme Step by step. It included an evaluation of the different aspects of sub-programme A, taking into account the participants' perception of the delivery of the training and e-courses, and their assessment of the knowledge and skills they may have acquired following the training and realization tasks in e-course A (Table 2). The lowest grade of sub-programme A (common sample consisting of participants of international training in English as a medium of instruction and participants of national training in Serbian as a medium of instruction) is 2.17 (on a scale of 1-5), and the highest is 5. An average score of 4.60 was obtained.

Table 2. Evaluation of A sub-programme (e-course plus training) by the international training groups and Serbian training groups

	Items	Min	Max	Mean	St. dev.
A01	The content and activities of the A e-course and A training are connected and harmonized	2	5	4.58	.78
A02	Lessons in the A e-course are useful for the A programme outcomes.	2	5	4.66	.69
A03	The tasks in e-course A were well designed and realistic.	2	5	4.58	.72
A04	The workshops in the A training were dynamic and well-designed.	2	5	4.61	.74
A05	The leading trainer from A training and facilitator/trainer in my group coordinated activities and encouraged the work of the group.	3	5	4.75	.59
A06	I am satisfied with the exchange of ideas in remote online mode in A training between groups.	1	5	4.51	.84
A07	Evaluate the quality of the lessons in e-course A with a grade (from 1 – very poor to 5 - excellent).	2	5	4.48	.80
A08	The A programme contributed to my better understanding of psychological resilience,	3	5	4.64	.62
A09	The A programme contributed to my better understanding of the most frequent stress	2	5	4.63	.67
A10	The A programme contributed to recognizing reactions to stress (physiological, emotional, cognitive, behavioral).	2	5	4.58	.72
A11	The A programme contributed to developing my self-awareness in terms of my own resilience, stress and coping, and well-being.	2	5	4.61	.76
A12	The A programme contributed to developing my self-awareness in terms of seeking social support.	2	5	4.60	.74
	Evaluation of the sub-programme A	2.17	5.00	4.60	.63
Min – the smallest average value ((Participant score / N of items). Max – the highest average value (Participant score / N of items). Mean – average value (Sum of participants scores / N of items / N of participants).					

Trainees from both groups – international trainees' group and trainees at the University of Kragujevac – evaluated the A sub-programme with high grades (M=4.60). Trainees perceived A sub-programme similarly generally uniformly, with relatively small deviations: the standard deviation of the evaluation of programme A as a whole is 0.63.

However, trainees trained in the groups in the national language (Serbian) evaluated the sub-programme A higher (M=4.83) than the trainees from the international pilot training groups (M=4.40) (Table 3, next page). The results of the comparison obtained by ANOVA are supported by the comparison tested using the t-test.

The trainees rated the A sub-programme's to engage in a fruitful discussion about particular aspects as highly useful to develop skills for peer support and recommended it to other students/participants. The training in the national (Serbian) language was rated with better grades than in English, which is expected.

The most obvious differences were in the quality of group exchange, harmonization of activities between e-course and in-person training, and in

contribution of the training to personal development (self-awareness, stress, resilience and coping, and well-being).

Also, the contribution of sub-programme A to skills of seeking social support was marked as very high in the national training. The difference in the perceived quality of the exchange of ideas between the groups at three universities and three countries, which was significantly lower within the group exposed to EMI, may be ascribed to the different levels of English language proficiency among the participants and groups at three universities (English was the second language to all trainees). The different levels of proficiency potentially hindered the interaction between the Italian, Serbian, and Polish groups. The differences in the perceived contribution of the training to personal development and to skills of seeking social support, which were significantly lower within the group exposed to EMI, can be attributed to the fact that personal development topics and seeking social support skills are easier to process and acquire in one's native language.

Table 3. Comparison evaluation of A sub-programme (e-course plus training) between I - international training groups and national training groups

	Items	Inter-national groups	National Serbian groups	F	sig.
A01	The content and activities of the A e-course and A training are connected and harmonized	4.34	4.84	7.55	.008**
A02	Lessons in the A e-course are useful for the A programme outcomes.	4.46	4.87	6.73	.012*
A03	The tasks in e-course A were well designed and realistic.	4.43	4.75	3.45	.068
A04	The workshops in the A training were dynamic and well-designed.	4.40	4.84	6.56	.013*
A05	The leading trainer from A training and facilitator/trainer in my group coordinated activities and encouraged the work of the group.	4.63	4.87	3.05	.086
A06	I am satisfied with the exchange of ideas between groups.	4.17	4.87	13.98	.000**
A07	Evaluate the quality of the lessons in e-course A with a grade (from 1 - very poor to 5 - excellent).	4.29	4.69	4.38	.040*
A08	The A programme contributed to my better understanding of psychological resilience,	4.51	4.78	3.20	.078
A09	The A programme contributed to my better understanding of the most frequent stress	4.46	4.81	4.98	.029*
A10	The A programme contributed to recognizing reactions to stress (physiological, emotional, cognitive, behavioral).	4.37	4.81	6.81	.011*
A11	The A programme contributed to developing my self-awareness in terms of my own resilience, stress and coping, and well-being.	4.37	4.88	8.18	.006**
A12	The A programme contributed to developing my self-awareness in terms of seeking social support.	4.37	4.84	7.48	.008**
	Evaluation of the sub-programme A	4.40	4.83	8.44	.005**

Min – the smallest average value ((Participant score / N of items). Max – the highest average value (Participantscore / N of items). Mean – average value (Sum of participants scores / N of items / N of participants).
F – Fisher coefficient. **p<0.01; *p<0.05

The study found no statistically significant differences in how trainees perceived the task design and its realistic features between those trained in EMI and those trained in Serbian as a medium of instruction. A similar result was recorded for the trainees' perception of trainers/facilitators' ability to coordinate activities successfully and encourage the work of the group. Also, there were no significant differences in how the two groups perceived the A-programme's contribution to understanding psychological resilience.

We will now give a few qualitative observations from both international and national trainings. Activities that were best received by the participants were breathing exercises, after being a bit skeptical at the very beginning. Muscle and mind relaxation as well as heightened awareness were reported after this exercise. "The Weight of Fears" activity was one of the most interesting and valuable, helping participants the power of cognition in coping - how changing perspective on stress could help alleviate it. The Wheel of Life was done online by the participants, during pre-training. This activity unveiled their level of satisfaction with various aspects of their lives. Discussion followed about their insights on how to make balance and improve satisfaction in those

areas that were not highly marked. They highlighted the issues of social exactions regarding personal goals and various aspects of life – the pressure they feel from society to devote time to certain aspects of life that they do not "feel" as truly important.

4. CONCLUSION

Psychological resilience is a crucial aspect of mental health. Strengthening the psychological resilience of university students is a key objective of the university's support initiatives. The A training sub-program "Psychological Resilience, Well-being, Stress, and Social Support" is designed as part of the broader "Step by Step from Trainees to Trainers and Supporters in Student Peer Support Network" programme, aimed at developing an international peer support network among university students. The trainees on the sub-programme A, who were trained in groups in the English language (in which students and university staff from three universities in three countries participated) and in the Serbian language (organized for students and university staff as well), evaluated the programme. Their programme perception and evaluation confirmed its usefulness for understanding and strengthening psychological resilience.

There is a paucity of research that considers the comparison between students/trainees' perception of EMI and non-EMI programmes (the programmes that are realized in native languages), though some recent research [28] focuses on the differences between these two types of programmes in terms of students' motivation and engagement in learning English in the fields of international business, computing, journalism and mass communication, and tourism. The strength of the present study is that it compares the students' perception of training in EMI and non-EMI (Serbian as the native language) settings. The fact that this is done in the highly specific training programme of psychological resilience makes the research even more unique, particularly in the Serbian HEI context.

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