Roleplaying simulations for international relations education: Cases of Russian Federation and Uzbekistan

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This article reports upon roleplaying simulations used for teaching and learning subjects in the field of international relations. It is based upon five years of experience gained by the author while teaching in RUDN University in Moscow, Russia, and Webster University in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. The article aims to unravel both the value of roleplaying simulations in teaching international relations subjects, and how this practice correlates with the regional specificity of students in post-Soviet space. The main hypothesis advanced is that due to the peculiarities of traditional higher education processes in the countries of post-Soviet space, and the unique national traits of the students involved, the application of roleplaying simulations has provided additional motivation for the students. It has raised their level of immersion in their education, partially alleviating concerns about under-performance and low interest in the classroom activities among most of the students. The author argues that besides such scenario-based learning being in general a more pro-active way of learning, leading to better performance and overall facilitating competences formation process, it is specifically effective in learning environments that can be characterised as conservative and reactive, which for the most part is the case for post-Soviet space higher education.

Introduction

Ever since the breakdown of Soviet Union, which had its own academic tradition, quite secluded from Western academia, post-Soviet countries have been trying to develop their higher education to match in quality what the universities of EU and US can offer. For some countries, like Russian Federation, the government has been taking pro-active measures to facilitate this process, implementing various grant-based programs to help at least 5 Russian universities enter the top-100 of QS university ranking (Kochegura et al, 2022). Regardless of such ambitions, in terms of the learning process very few things have changed in general since the Soviet Union – especially in the case of innovative pedagogical techniques and approaches to be used in classroom. Traditional class structure in the sphere of humanities in the universities of the post-Soviet space is often based on the traditional structure of 1 lecture – 1 seminar, with minor fluctuations. While seminars allow students opportunities to actively participate, lectures are a time with minimum participation, normally taking the form of the lecturer speaking for the whole duration of the class. This basic educational structure, although quite easy to grasp and perform, does not promote active immersion of the students into the process, and as a result students often end up lacking motivation to pursue adequate performance. The overall interest of students in these subjects turns out to be low, resulting in much lower satisfaction level with the quality of education that they receive (Kuzminov & Yudkevich, 2022).

In order to achieve much higher quality of instruction, contemporary global higher education pedagogy has offered many alternatives in the form of unconventional approaches to course-building and implementation of innovative elements. One of these elements is scenario-based learning via the application of roleplaying simulations. There is one specifically vivid case in this category that has demonstrated the possible gains from using such an approach. Published in *Communication Teacher* in November 2023, it described the application of a scenario-based learning activity, anchored in contemporary culture references to "zombie apocalypse" in the "Leadership" and "Strategic Communications" classes in Australia and Sweden (Srugies, Maslic & Grumley 2024). Despite the obvious differences of the disciplines from international relations, the competencies that educators aspired to form in the aftermath of implementation are comparable: undertaking a large group assignment in a diverse group, strategic planning, decision-making in the context of uncertainty and lack of information. The authors concluded that their activity proved particularly valuable for teaching diverse graduate student groups with a variety of different backgrounds. The activity "was positively received, and all participants suggested keeping it as a team-building exercise that prepared students for tackling complex group assignments" (Srugies et al., 2024).

However, I acknowledge that scenario-based learning about international relations has been around in higher education for some years. Luis da Vinha has outlined the obvious utility of such contextually rich and immersive learning activities in international relations education. Interestingly enough, while Da Vinha's work focused on the fact that explanation of modern events in the field of international relations in recent and not so recent history requires a fair amount of context, especially when we consider ideational factors (Da Vinha, 2021); similar thoughts have been expressed by other practitioners. For example, James Lacey attempted to help his students at Marine Corps War College comprehend the logics of the Peloponnesian war by having them play numerous iterations of Polis in the classroom (Lacey, 2016). There has even been a quite successful attempt by Carolyn Shaw and Bob Switky to systematise the best practices of roleplaying in an international relations classroom (Shaw & Switky, 2018). While in essence offering a number of sample practices that could serve as a foundation for a successful scenario-based activity for students in international relations, the authors also outlined that there really is no specific formula for this (Shaw & Switky, 2018).

Being myself a product of quite a passive educational system, I decided to implement a scenario-based roleplaying simulation as a part of my teaching in the undergraduate courses, "Introduction to international security" (RUDN), and "International security" (Webster). I was teaching in the undergraduate program of international relations at RUDN University in Russia from 2018 to the end of the fall semester of 2022, amounting to 4 years (with the exception of 2020 because of Covid-19 lockdowns). In 2023, after assuming a post with a similar field at Webster University in Tashkent (Uzbekistan), I continued an implementation of scenario-based roleplaying simulation through the spring and fall semesters. Both appointments led to three main outcomes for students: (1) increase in the degree of motivation among the students; (2) improvement in the quality of overall performance; (3) a higher rate of student satisfaction in student evaluations of

teaching. However, student satisfaction happened to be much more significant in the case of Uzbekistan compared with gains that had been observed among Russian students.

In this article I will argue that the application of scenario-based roleplaying simulations in an undergraduate international relations program is particularly effective in an academic environment characterised by passive approaches to instruction and consequent non-involvement of the students in their learning process. Also, this article is aimed at providing useful techniques and sharing best practices with educators in the field of political science and international relations in particular.

Theory and rationale of scenario-based learning

As Errington (2011) suggested, knowledge is often believed to be impossible to internalise without contextual connections. This is particularly important in the field of international relations, where experiences and competencies can appear to be illusive and unachievable in a purely academic environment. While there is some truth to that, given the specific nature of the field, this is also true to some extent for all of the social sciences. This can be overcome by the simulation of a real-world scenario to which students can relate - a mechanism being actively used for both education and research (Eremin, 2022). Both Parviz (2020) and Andrews et al. (2015) agreed on the fact that a relatable scenario, either anchored in a real-world event or in elements of contemporary culture, can provide additional levels of enthusiasm for the student to take a more pro-active part in group activities, search for collaborative solutions, and generate genuine interest in the subject. This also helps reduce stress, which at times can be a significant restricting factor, limiting the degree of student involvement in the education process and leading to under-performance (Pascoe et al, 2020).

In terms of international relations specifically, roleplaying simulations can contribute to the formation of competencies and skills such as stress management, conflict management, diplomacy and diplomatic communication, building relations within the team, analysis capacity and decision-making (Cercel, 2022; Shaw & Switky, 2018). All of these have a direct relevance to the field of international relations, and diplomatic service in particular. There are other possible skills and competencies such simulations can help form, based on the activity design and the targets the instructor has set (Eremin, 2022).

In the case I am reporting, the scenario-based learning in the form of a roleplaying simulation was believed to be especially effective, given the generally conservative instruction practices and learning environment in the countries in a post-Soviet space.

Peculiarities of higher education in Russia and Uzbekistan

There are some regional and country specific factors about higher education in Russia, Uzbekistan and post-Soviet space in general that have to be taken into account when seeking to shed more light on potential gains from scenario-based learning in general, and in international relations education in particular.

Some specific features of Russian higher education arise from the heritage left from the Soviet era. Some of the key research and educational institutions in the country have remained since the Soviet time and even some of the academics employed at professorial level positions have either been educated in the Soviet higher education system, or started their work and were formed as higher education professionals in it. This helps the legacy of a totalitarian educational system to persist and manifest in a predominantly conservative and even reactive Russian higher education. Of course, recently some attempts to revise and modernise outdated research and educational practices can be observed in a variety of Russian universities, but as Anatoly Oleksiyenko has wistfully noted, both legacy-holders and innovators are unable to shed their paternalistic and colonial philosophy of education (Oleksiyenko, 2021). But even with the partially successful attempts to liberalise academic environments, such innovators are often significantly constrained by both excessive administrative control and abundant legislative limitations. As Oleksiyenko noted, innovation in the higher education sphere in Russia almost inevitably leads to the value clashes and consequences that can be defined as unwanted by the university administrations in the contemporary context of rapidly closing space and strict censorship (Oleksiyenko, 2022).

A comprehensive evaluation of the Russian higher education has been also provided in the work of Maria Yudkevich and Yaroslav Kuzminov, former provost and rector of Higher School of Economics respectively. Having studied higher education within one of the most prominent and modernised educational facilities in Russia, the authors suggest that Russia's higher education system is deeply rooted in the contemporary state of Russian society. Considering that Russian higher education is dominated by state universities, the influence of the political elites on shaping higher education is profound and decisive. While the authors name about 50 different Russian universities that are somewhat competitive in the global arena, they concluded that even top Russian universities rarely compare with Western mid-level universities (Kuzminov & Yudkevich, 2022). It is also important to note that university education does serve a somewhat different purpose – Russian universities rarely are aimed at "forming the elites", but rather offer a certain social function. In other words, the lack of higher education serves as a marker of societal failure, and in that matter Kuzminov and Yudkevich outlined that only top Russian universities would correlate with Western university-level education, while mid-level ones correspond to the role of US community colleges (Kuzminov & Yudkevich, 2022). For the male population, higher education also serves as a legitimate excuse from mandatory conscription for one or two years of military service.

With all that taken into account, one can consider that the realities of higher education in Russia are not really favourable for instructional innovation – such an environment encourages classical approaches with little or no interest in the degree of engagement of students in the process. Traditionally, Soviet education was based on the principle that involvement of the student into the process is the responsibility of the student and not the professor. This is a direct result of the promotion of "long distance of power" principle, which is traditionally relevant for autocratic regimes (Auzan et al, 2023). These challenges are, however, not unique to the Russian Federation, and can be observed in some degree

in a number of other post-Soviet states, like Georgia and Ukraine. In some of these countries, the aim of de-Sovietisation of education is directly linked with promoting innovative approaches to instruction and overall modernisation in the sphere of higher education (Oleksiyenko, 2019). While the challenge is acknowledged by Russian scholars and educators, it is however not linked as much to de-Sovietisation rhetoric, but is formulated in the dichotomy of "research university vs. educational university" (Lovakov, 2022).

Higher education in Uzbekistan, even though also being affected by a common post-Soviet heritage, has its own culturally peculiar constraints. For instance, just as in many other post-Soviet countries, here the lack of higher education will most definitely be socially perceived as lack of success. This underlies the significance and high demand for higher education in the country. But unlike Russia, here the population median age is very young, and due to marital traditions families tend to have from 4 and up to 8 children, which eventually causes high demand in all the levels of education from preschool and up to university (Table 1 and Figure 1).

Table 1: Population in Uzbekistan by age
(Uzbekistan, Demography. Statista Market Insights, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, National Statistical Offices)

	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027	2028
0-14 Years	6.28	6.49	6.70	6.88	7.01	7.08	7.09	7.07	7.04	7.03	7.04
15-24 Years	5.55	5.42	5.31	5.23	5.21	5.25	5.35	5.46	5.57	5.69	5.83
25-34 Years	5.96	6.03	6.06	6.06	6.03	5.97	5.88	5.78	5.65	5.52	5.39
35-44 Years	4.34	4.47	4.61	4.77	4.93	5.09	5.24	5.38	5.53	5.67	5.78
45-54 Years	3.29	3.34	3.39	3.46	3.54	3.63	3.72	3.82	3.93	4.03	4.14
55-64 Years	4.53	4.63	4.73	4.83	4.92	5.02	5.13	5.24	5.36	5.45	5.50
65-74 Years	1.65	1.76	1.86	1.94	2.03	2.13	2.21	2.29	2.36	2.42	2.48
75+ Years	0.85	0.86	0.87	0.91	0.95	1.00	1.06	1.12	1.19	1.25	1.33

In Russia there is a wide web of state-certified educational facilities of regional and federal significance that can potentially suit a wide range of population financially, whilst Uzbekistan experiences a significant shortage of higher education institutions, creating a niche for uncertified diploma mills that appear by the day A number of private universities in Uzbekistan work without a state licence (Uznews.uz, 2021). Obviously, rapidly appearing educational facilities with diplomas that are not recognised anywhere in the world, cannot offer any quality of instruction (Saida, 2023). Such conditions of high demand and low supply create a peculiar higher education market, where several thousands of students do not have enough places in the universities to study, and have to wait for next year to try their luck again The number of applicants admitted to universities for 2023/24 has been revealed by UPL (2023).
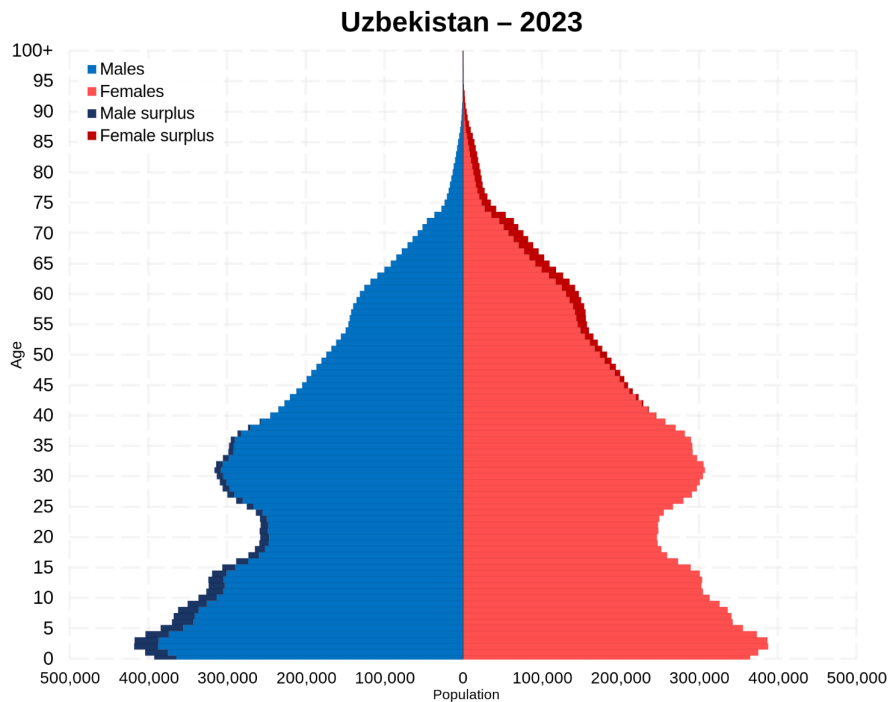
Figure 1: Uzbekistan population pyramid
(Uzbekistan population pyramid. Open data portal of the republic of Uzbekistan. URL:
https://stat.uz/uz/matbuot-markazi/qo-mita-yangiliklar/34140-demografik-holat-2022-
yil-yanvar-sentabr-2 (accessed 4 December 2023)

High demand for education in Uzbekistan is also caused by an important social factor - immigration. Most of the young people polled here today do not want to stay and live in their home country, but want to immigrate - preferably to Europe (Abdulloev et al., 2020). For many of them, higher education is perceived to significantly facilitate the process, be it through finding employment or via continuing education in a postgraduate program. In terms of creativity of instructional approaches, Uzbek educators face similar challenges, as noted in the case of Russia (Khadjieva & Ismailov, 2022). This is explained partially by the unfavourable political environment, since until 2016 there were significant restraints on liberty and freedom under the almost totalitarian rule of Islam Karimov. After 2017 there was a significant liberalisation in all spheres of the society, including lifting bans on travel by ordinary people, but at this point the contemporary political regime still remains an autocracy. Due to excessive bureaucratic control in the sphere of higher education, Uzbek instructors experience difficulties in implementation of innovative approaches that fall outside of the traditional post-Soviet higher education structure.

Conditions in the two post-Soviet countries in this study provide researchers with a set of problems that are directly related to the lack of motivation among students. For many Russian students, where higher education is a socially set norm, university tend to be a

tiring necessity rather than a meaningful choice. Quite often students hate to choose educational program not based on their passion or desire, but based on the availability, which depends greatly on financial capabilities, number of scholarships and geographical location (which is also most often economically mandated) (Kuzminov & Yudkevich, 2022). As a result, a significant proportion of students fail to find their education process meaningful and do not get involved in the learning process, ensuring only minimal grade requirements for graduation. In Uzbekistan there is also a profound problem with motivation, involvement and performance among students (Saida, 2023), but there is a substantial difference from the case of Russia: surprisingly, female students tend to outperform male students. This theoretically can be explained by the fact that culturally male students in a Muslim patriarchal country like Uzbekistan are by definition more entitled and parents tend to invest more resources in them. Girls, on the other hand, are often perceived not as significant and are rarely invested in the same manner as boys, thus having to prove their worth more often (Smagina, 2020).

All this creates significant challenges in Russian and Uzbek higher education and a demand for educational approaches that would boost the degree of involvement of these students, providing some additional immersion and motivation in the classroom, regardless of the field of study or educational program.

Procedures and evaluation methods

In this case instead of using wargames with strict rules and limited amount of decision options, we preferred a system that cherished more freedom of action, similar to the popular "Dungeons and Dragons" system, where the student would be more motivated to embrace a certain role of a diplomat and a decision-maker. In this system the instructor is normally required to take an active role not just as simply a moderator, but also as an interpreter and evaluator of the actions carried out by the students.

Briefing

The application of a scenario-based roleplaying simulation comprised several stages. The first one is briefing, where students were given an explanation of the structure of the activity, its rules, a proposed scenario, and specific materials for preparation. Briefing normally happened during a lecture either a week before the activity, or in rare cases three days before the activity, so the participants could have enough time for preparation. As a process, briefing was carried out with a PowerPoint presentation reflecting upon the basic rules and the scenario itself, while also specifically outlining the roleplaying nature of the assignment in order to maximise the immersion for the simulation. For the sake of upholding a decent level of roleplaying, students were encouraged to wear a more formal attire (if possible) for the day of the activity, but otherwise no attempts to encourage or discourage certain patterns of behaviour were made, to ensure a free choice environment. On top of that, given a known degree of authoritarian rule in both Russia and Uzbekistan, the scenarios deliberately evaded any potential sensitive topics, focusing more on the international relations matters and brokering trade agreements and similar accords between the participating groups.

In the case of RUDN University, the groups were as follows: Russia, China, European Union and Turkey. At Webster University the groups were slightly changed for the students to be able to relate to the scenario: Turkey was substituted by Uzbekistan. Each of the states (groups) has their own national interests in general, and regarding energy security in particular. In addition to the information provided to the students within the scenario description, they are also encouraged to perform additional research on the topic before the activity to be more competitive in the process.

The activity

The second stage is *the activity* itself, simulating diplomatic talks and agreement signing process. The scenario was based on the narrative of great power rivalry and energy security, where countries and supranational entities try to pursue their agenda and maximise their gain in relation to all the other teams. The main traits of the scenario are those resembling real diplomacy – circumstances of uncertainty and lack of trust towards the participants from the other groups. If the team acts in the spirit of the scenario and contributes to its main goal – they receive 1 point for each such action. While the grading system is transparent and evident to the participants regarding their own team, for the purposes of keeping the atmosphere of uncertainty they had no knowledge of the grading system of other groups, motivating them to pursue active participation even when being ahead, or not giving up even when being significantly behind their competitors.

Procedurally, the activity has several phases. The first one is the opening statements of all the groups, then came the official negotiation phase, where all the groups took turns exchanging statements and replying to the other statements and proposals, as it would normally happen during multilateral negotiations. After that, there is a so-called "behind-the-scenes negotiation" phase, where students could stand up from their seats and roam the roam freely and have unrestricted private conversations with the representatives of other teams, which added an additional layer of strategy to the negotiations and contributed to the atmosphere of uncertainty and lack of trust in opponents. After that students entered the final proposition phase, where they provided all the other groups with their final offers on what they have been discussing before, and right after that the "showdown" phase followed: students find out who will or will not sign the proposed agreements and receive their final points on being or not being able to ensure the best interest of the nation they represented.

Debriefing

After the activity is finished, the final stage is *debriefing*, where the instructor explains the results, reveals the evaluation mechanism for each group, discusses the course of the activity and outlines particularly outstanding and interesting actions undertaken by participants. In order to do that, the instructor makes private notes and keeps a record of noteworthy actions through the activity. For the activity at hand, this included dedication to the role, including certain cultural aspects that might not have direct relevance to the scenario or activity itself, but contribute to the overall degree if immersion; or particularly

outstanding strategy moves, exemplary diplomatic communications or exhibition of good factual knowledge. All these led to the acquisition of extra points in addition to the standard rules, similar to "Inspiration" technique in "Dungeons and Dragons" roleplaying system, where it is known to promote and reward creative and uncanny moves of the participants. While students were generally notified about this mechanism prior to the activity, no specific description of desirable behaviour was given, in order to ensure that their actions would be mandated by their own considerations over instructors' expectations.
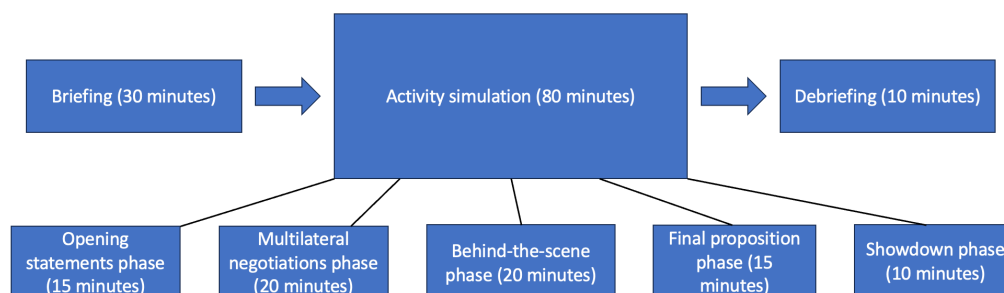

Figure 2: The structure of the scenario-based activity

To outline the efficiency of the implementation of the scenario-based activity, we have utilised a combination of surveying the students and an analysis of their overall performance in class. In order to make the experiment more valid, in both the Uzbek and Russian university cases we had control groups, where the activity was not utilised, to serve as reference point for the rest of the academic groups. In RUDN University the activity was used in the class named "Introduction to international security studies", which had been taught to third year undergraduate students during spring semester. Every year there were 6 groups of 20 people each involved in the course: in 4 of them the activity was utilised, and the other two had a classic class structure without any scenario-based learning elements. In 4 years of the application of the activity, we had overall of 320 students participating in the scenario-based roleplaying simulation, and 160 students have been members of control groups.

In Webster University in Uzbekistan, the span of the experiment has been significantly smaller – in the two semesters of 2023 we have managed to have only 8 groups in the international security class (each of no more than 25 students), 6 of which had the activity, and 2 served as a control group. That brings up to 100 Uzbek students participating in the activity, and 50 students to serve as a reference point for the analysis. In addition to the overall numbers, it is important to indicate that the group sizes were quite large for such activities, but in the post-Soviet space, sizes of academic groups tend to be quite large. While Webster university had a strict limit of 25 people per class, Russian and Uzbek public universities are not as strict and quite often some academic groups can reach as many as 35 people per class or section. Potentially, this can be avoided either by adding more teams into the activity, or by a well-detailed structuring of the participants'

functions, ensuring their participation at particular stages of the simulation. However, this can lead to an increased duration of the activity, which can be a problem in a university environment.

An important part of evaluation for the scenario-based learning activity is measuring student satisfaction. Here, the surveying process in the Russian University and at Webster University in Uzbekistan was approached differently, given the peculiarities of administrative character of these institutions. At Webster, student evaluation is an essential part of educational process. Students received a link to an online poll, where aside from the mandatory questions on the general course satisfaction they also received questions specifically about their experience with the scenario-based learning activity. In the Russian Federation, however, such mechanisms rarely exist and have to be implemented as a personal initiative of the instructor. Evaluation at RUDN was conducted by a paper-based poll handed out by the instructor at the end of the course. In both cases polls were voluntary and anonymised.

Given that the claim of this study that scenario-based activities enhance involvement and participation, we also compared a specific component of the grade between the groups – participation points. A factor significantly facilitating the comparison of the data was that in both RUDN and Webster the courses were thematically similar, had been based on the same material and used a similar 100 points (or 100%) grading system. This facilitated evaluation of the utility of the scenario-based activity, and moreover, run comparisons between the academic groups in Russia (RUDN University) and Uzbekistan (Webster University). The way the effects on performance were measured was simply comparing average median performance in percent by the participating groups and comparing them with the control groups through the different years and environments of the experiment. Even though the final grade is based on many assignments, all of them were similar for all the groups with the exception of the roleplaying scenario-based simulation activity, which was substituted for the control group with a more usual assignment in a form of preparing a research paper.

Case of roleplaying simulation in a Russian university

To formalise the procedure, we have given the academic groups specific codes: G1, G2, G3 and G4 are the groups that every year have the activity, while G5 and G6 are always the control group. These codes are not aligned with actual administrative codes for the academic groups and are not communicated to the students, being needed only for evaluation purposes. Here I address two specific sets of evaluation data - overall median performance of the academic groups that both have and do not have the scenario-based simulation; and the overall student satisfaction evaluation of the course.

For the purposes of evaluation of academic performance I took median results for participating students groups and for control groups, for each year. A median was also calculated for all years or all semesters of implementation (Figures 3 and 4).

Student satisfaction was measured at the end of the course, so the students would not focus too much on the activity, but would rather consider the quality of the whole course with that activity included. To do that, a paper-based polling was conducted on the last day of the class alongside with issuing final grades. In the poll students were asked to evaluate the overall quality of the course from 0 to 100, and then were offered scope to write a comment or a suggestion. The poll was anonymous and students were required to stack their replies in a pile before submitting all to the professor in order to avoid any concerns among the students. Students were also notified about the nature of the poll, as well as being assured it would not have any impact on their final grade or the relations with the professor for the course.
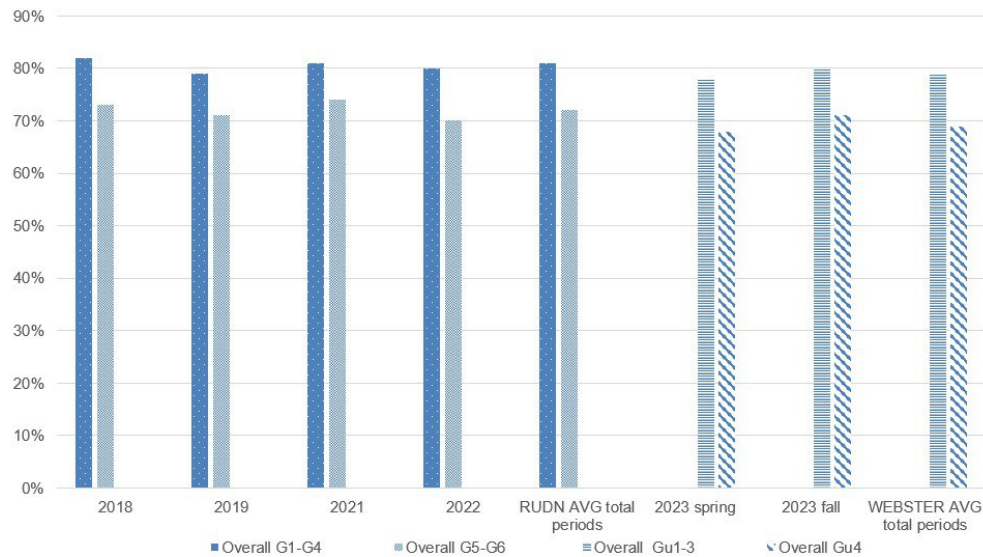

Figure 3: Median performance of participating and
control groups in RUDN and Webster Universities.

The analysis of the overall performance among the RUDN groups, as indicated in Figure 3, suggests that the application of the scenario-based activity has had measurable effects on the participating groups (G1, G2, G3 and G4). The median increment for the whole duration of the experiment in RUDN University is 9% (81% for G1-G4, 72% for G4 and G5). Given that the other parts of the courses were implemented the same for all groups, and that the groups were always randomly assigned, this result is specifically represented by the implementation of the scenario-based roleplaying simulation.

Another important factor that interprets the impact of the activity implementation is student satisfaction, which correlates well with the average median performance. As indicated in Figure 4, the overall median satisfaction rate for the groups G1-G4 at RUDN University is 85%, while non-participants at G5 and G6 have provided a median score of 74%. An 11% increment demonstrates a significant boost in student satisfaction, given that the only difference was the use of scenario-based learning.
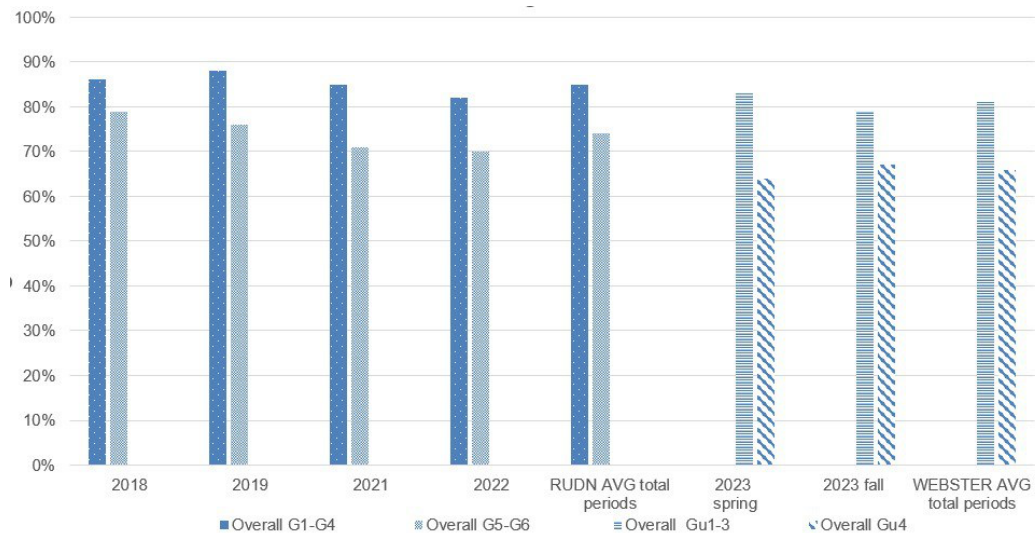
Figure 4: Evaluation of median student satisfaction at RUDN and Webster Universities

Regarding comments from students, most were written by the groups that experienced the activity. A frequent comment that was encountered 14 times over the 4 years of RUDN implementation was suggesting to hold similar activities more often through the course. 19 other comments outlined how much they liked the activity, but had no specific suggestions in that regard. A peculiar finding is that control group students left no comments or suggestions, except for one that outlined dissatisfaction with the format of lectures. This might be explained by the fact that for control group students it was a normal course with no specific disadvantages compared to the other courses they had taken. Overall, we can assume that this outlines higher rates of approval and satisfaction that students at RUDN had for the implementation of a scenario-based learning activity.

Case of roleplaying simulation in an Uzbek university

The same system of evaluation was used in the case of Uzbekistan, but with fewer groups involved. For convenience of the reader, these were assigned Gu1, Gu2 and Gu3 indicators for the participating groups and Gu4 for a control group for both of the two semesters of data collection. While performance was evaluated exactly the same way, a slight difference was present in the evaluation of overall course satisfaction - it was done online as a part of a voluntary student course evaluation, with the addition of a similar question as used in the Russia case, so that Uzbek students also had an opportunity to post any suggestions for the course they felt were needed. The biggest challenge in this regard was ensuring an adequate response rate, which traditionally has been a problem in Webster University in Tashkent. Even though the response rate was much higher than normal, it was only 54% for the control groups and 61% in the groups that had the scenario-based activity.

As shown in Figure 3, the participating groups (Gu1, Gu2 and Gu3) have also enjoyed a steady and considerable increment of performance, just like in the Russian case. In the case of Uzbek students, the increase in median performance over both semesters was slightly higher at 10% (79% for Gu1-3, 69% for Gu4). Given a good similarity between the higher education environments and a significant leftover common heritage in Russian Federation and Uzbekistan, the fact that the increment in both cases the increment is almost the same is not surprising.

Figure 4 shows that the median degree of student satisfaction is also significantly higher with the Gu1-Gu3 (81%) as compared to the Gu4 (66%), netting an impressive increment of 15% between participants and non-participants.

With comments, Uzbek students have shown a different trend compared to Russia. There were only 2 replies suggesting to hold the scenario-based activity more often through the course, and 1 comment positively evaluating the activity, but having no specific suggestions. No other comments have been left with the participating groups, but the control group through the course of two semesters left more comments with what can be assessed as negative evaluation of some aspects of the course. For instance, 5 comments suggested that the course was not engaging enough, and two comments specifically referred to lectures being "boring" and suggested implementation of more entertaining activities in class. With the fact that both control groups had lower levels of performance and student satisfaction, we can assume that this has motivated the representatives of these groups to express their attitudes more actively, especially when they were not positive enough.

Overall results and interpretation

Even though the span of the experiment was significantly different for the cases of Russian and Uzbek universities, similar trends may be discerned, not unexpectedly, given that learning environments in both countries appear to share considerable similarities. In both cases, the performances and the student satisfaction rates are noticeably higher in the groups that experienced a roleplaying scenario-based simulation, compared with the control groups which had followed a traditional class structure of 1 lecture and 1 seminar. In terms of performance, the overall increment of performance is comparable between the Uzbekistan case (10%) and the Russian case (9%), as well as the median levels of performance itself. Student satisfaction though was a bit different: 11% increment in the case of a Russian university compared to 15% increment in Uzbekistan. The overall level of satisfaction also appeared to differ - while the difference with participating groups was just 4% in favour of the Russian university case, the control groups had a difference of 8%, once again in favor of the RUDN university case. With that in mind, it must be outlined that the control groups in Webster University in Uzbekistan displayed the lowest degree of median satisfaction with the course overall, especially among the control group. This, of course, may lack reliability due to the relatively low response rate compared to the Russian case, where structurally the polling was harder to avoid. Also people may be more likely to participate in polling and expressing their opinions after having negative experiences, in comparison to being fully satisfied (Moy & Rinke, 2012). In other words,

students with lower levels of satisfaction might have had more incentive and motivation to participate in polling, and more satisfied students could potentially have avoided the evaluation of their satisfaction with the course.

Conclusion

Scenario-based learning is by no means a new phenomenon; it is quite widely used by instructors in Western universities in various undergraduate and postgraduate educational programs. But in the post-Soviet space, particularly in the countries like Russian Federation and Uzbekistan, this approach is significantly underrated and almost never used, even though it has been shown in my research to be capable of increasing the degree of students' involvement in the education process, helping to boost their performance, and raise satisfaction with the course. A 6-semester experiment that has been carried out by the author in two universities in Russia and Uzbekistan has shown that some of the challenges that are considered traditional for higher education spheres here can be surpassed with application of innovative approaches. Redesigning instruction delivery in favour of more engaging classroom activities, like scenario-based roleplaying simulations, can be a valuable tool in the hands of university educators.

A scenario-based roleplaying simulation mimicking a great power negotiation process has proved to be a highly satisfying activity for undergraduate students in the international relations program both at RUDN University and Webster University. The fact that the scenario utilised in the simulation was anchored in real-world contemporary events has made it easier for the students to relate to the activity and actively engage in it. As the result, students received valuable experiences of diplomacy, negotiation, and decision-making, which helped them form competencies, which are a part of the course outcomes. Despite the fact that the experiment was conducted solely on international relations undergraduate students, utilisation of such simulations can be equally effective in the other fields in humanities and social sciences.

Aside from that, it is important for Russian Federation and Uzbekistan to consider revising their higher education policies, lifting at least some of the constraints that tend to hold university instructors back in their creativity. Liberalisation of the laws and regulations that have impact on higher education in these countries can potentially help foster a much more favourable environment for the development of overall quality of instruction and pedagogy in the post-Soviet space states.

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