

# TRUST AS A COGNITIVE BASE OF SOCIAL COHESION IN THE UNIVERSITY COMMUNITIES

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## ABSTRACT

The present article continues the cycle of the cognitive researches of the phenomenon of social cohesion in education, in particular, in the university communities. It contains the cognitive research of trust and its foundation as the central focus of social cohesion. The purpose of the study is to identify the level of trust which is connected with the social cohesion in university communities, to test the author's questionnaire and to determinate the further steps for the trust enhancement in the educational community. Methods that were used in the study are the author's questionnaire, math analytics etc. There were 196 people interviewed in both universities, among them 31 employees and 85 students of the National Pedagogical Dragomanov University and 33 employees and 47 students of the National University of Life and Environmental Sciences of Ukraine. According to the research results, the level of trust in each university community (as well as in common) was average, excluding some indicators. Although there were some differences between levels of trust of employees of these universities. We can assume that the quite sufficient average level or trust positively characterizes the attitude of employees and students to each other, reflects their readiness for mutual respect and support, acceptance of differences and tolerance etc. Also, the research highlights weak points of social interactions that form the base for further investigations and actions on the social cohesion development.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

This article continues the long term investigations of the complex phenomenon of social cohesion, in particular in education, in the frame of Jean Monnet Module SCEGES (Social Cohesion in Education and Governance: European Studies) which is implementing (2017-2020) in the National Pedagogical University. The social cohesion is very important for education and social

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development accordingly. The social cohesion in education is one of the most perspective direction of social cohesion studies: EU Social Cohesion Policy, Social Cohesion Radar, Social Cohesion Model etc. (Dragolov et al., 2013). The authors research the cognitive mechanisms of the complex social cohesion phenomenon started in the previous research of social cohesion in the community of National Pedagogical Dragomanov University (Nesterova, Dielini and Zamozhskiy, 2019). The Research Centre of Cognitistics has been established at the National Pedagogical Dragomanov University in 2015. The Centre has been managed by the rector of the university - Academician of Academy of Pedagogy Sciences of Ukraine, Prof. Victor Andrushchenko. Prof. Marja Nesterova is the head of the laboratory of social dimensions of cognitistics. The concept of cognitistics highlights the holistic unity of social and

individual, rational and emotional, mind and body in the human cognitive system. Also in the focus of cognitivism, there are cognitive mechanisms of social behaviour and their neurobiological, evolutionary bases (Nesterova, 2015).

At the moment these researches of social dimensions of cognitivism are mainly focused on social cohesion as one of the most important social mechanisms. The Jean Monnet Module “Social Cohesion in Education and Governance: European Studies” (SCEGES) contains not only teaching courses regarding European Social Cohesion Policy and European practice of Social Cohesion in Education but cognitive researches which are conducted under the academic coordination of Prof. Marja Nesterova at the National Pedagogical Dragomanov University. These researches have a practical focus on social cohesion in educational communities (Holden, 2013; Healy, 2019; Sasson, 2019). One of them is the implementation of the Social Cohesion Model at the level of educational communities (Nesterova, Dielini and Zamozhskiy, 2019). At this research, the above Model has been implemented for the social cohesion management of the community of National Pedagogical Dragomanov University. This research reflects and proves the confident role of education in the social cohesion of communities. The authors of the research follow the demand for further investigations. “Thus, the social cohesion in education could be considered from the focus of own connectedness of university community” (Nesterova, Dielini and Zamozhskiy, 2019). We can suggest that the Social Cohesion Model by Bertelsmann Stiftung could be applied directly at the level of educational communities. The Social Cohesion Model has been applied in the university community of National Pedagogical Dragomanov University (Kyiv, Ukraine). The above research of social dimension of cognitive patterns of students and employees has been conducted in the university community to evaluate the real social cohesion level, which was not so confident in the National Pedagogical Dragomanov University. Therefore, the next investigations of the cognitive bases of social cohesion have to be provided (Nesterova, Dielini and Zamozhskiy, 2019).

The social cohesion as a social phenomenon is based on the set of individual and collective values, which help to integrate modern, diverse societies (Bachtler and Mendez, 2016; Healy, 2019). The modern

education is based on the values too (Blum, 2014; Grierson, 2018; Healy, 2019). The common conclusion is that values are the drivers of human behaviour and they should occupy the significant space of all social innovations i.e. education, in particular (Social Cohesion and Education). These are the main principles of Values-based Education:

- “Values Consciousness” - thinking about and reflecting on values inside and outside the educational dimension and behaviour changes);
- “Wellbeing” - development of empathy and responsible personal behaviour;
- “Agency” - capacity to make choices, to act on them independently and to enact values in a real and deeply engaging way;
- “Connectedness” - through shared goals and practices in Values-based Education, which leads to the development of mutual feelings of respect, trust and safety; and varied opportunities for collaboration. (Values-Based Education).

One of the key values for social cohesion, concerned on “connectedness” (which is an often mentioned parameter of the social cohesion level) is trust as a not only key-value but a social phenomenon. The trust could be considered as a cognitive evolutionary mechanism of connectedness and cohesion in the various social groups. One of the definitions of social cohesion as a complex societal phenomenon includes “the level of trust and understanding of shared principles among groups in a society” (Roberts-Schweitzer, E., Greaney, V., and Duer, K, 2006). The Social Cohesion Model by Bertelsmann Stiftung also includes trust as main domains for the definition of social cohesion. Bertelsmann’s approach marks trust in the right way in the main domains of the Social Cohesion Model. For this research authors focused on two domains - “Social Relations” and “Connectedness”. The domain “Social Relations” includes trust in people and domain “Connectedness” includes trust in institutions (Dragolov et al., 2013).

So, the trust could be considered as the central element and cognitive base of social cohesion (Budnik, 2018). Without the ability to trust other people and institutions, as well as without understanding the need to justify the reasonable expectations of partners, effective social interaction is problematic.

## 2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Our methodology continues and develops the Bertelsmann Stiftung Social Cohesion Model approach. The Model of Social Cohesion by Bertelsmann Stiftung consists of three domains of social cohesion and their respective dimensions. At the cognitive research of the social cohesion in education, which have been conducted in the National Pedagogical Dragomanov University, it has been investigated that trust is the most important and weak point of Social Cohesion Model (Nesterova, Dielini and Zamozhskiy, 2019). So, the original investigation is exactly focused on this important value and very important parameter of social behaviour at the same.

The description of the questionnaire is in Table 1.

**Table 1.** The dimensions of trust

Level of analytics	Category	Conceptualization
Functional (F)	Trust as the personal characteristic (TC)	Psychological tendency of a person to trust others.
	Trust to the close circle of colleagues (TCC)	Showing trust to those, with whom someone have good communication.
	Trust to the organization (TO)	Non-personalized manifestation of trust as attribution of belonging.
	Trust to the leaders (TL)	Trust, legitimized by the recognition of the particular typesetting of qualities.
Meaningful (M)	Contract trust (CT)	Trust as the investment-compensatory mechanism for social interaction.
	Communication trust (CmT)	Trust as the essential basis of effective communication.
	Competent trust (ComT)	Rationally-based form of trust.
	Moral and ethical trust (MET)	Trust as the accordance to the moral ideal and duty.
	Environmental trust (ET)	Trust as the precondition for the stability of the social system.

At this research we have analyzed the level of trust in the university communities of National Pedagogical Dragomanov University (NPDU) and National University of Life and Environmental Sciences (NULES): employees of the above universities (mostly lecturers) and students. The aim of the research is to identify the level of trust in the above communities and to mark the weak points in the domains of trust for further strengthening of it by appropriate training and other social and educational tools.

As we have mentioned earlier, the original methodology of the research and the questionnaire continue and develop the Bertelsmann Stiftung Social Cohesion Model on to the two important domains: "Social relations" and "Connectedness". Both domains contain various dimensions of trust. The "Social relations" domain covers trust in people and the "Connectedness" covers trust in institutions (Dragolov et al., 2013). So, we have continued the investigation of these domains from the Social Cohesion Model.

The subject of this study is the phenomenon of trust as one of the cognitive bases and fundamental components of social cohesion. The research methodology involves the differentiation of two levels of articulation of trust: functional (algorithms and techniques of implementation) and meaningful (procedures of understanding and interpretation). At the functional level, the phenomenon of trust is determined according to the destination of this activity: subjectivity, community, organization/institution, management. The meaningful level of trust shows different ways of its conceptualization. The differentiation of trust into contractual, communication and competent has been initiated by Reina, D. S. and Reina, M. L. (2007). However, these authors were convinced, that the content of trust is not limited by these motivation components.

Therefore, the understanding of trust as a moral, ethical, and environmental motivation of social relations we add to the previous considerations. So, contractual trust is a kind of investment-compensatory mechanism of social interaction, when the manifestation of trust is an advance for establishing emotional-positive relations; communication trust is intended for the process of information exchange; a competent kind of trust implies recognition of a partner's professionalism; the moral and ethical content of trust consists in recognizing it as value, as an example of good behavior; environmental interpretation of trust comes from understanding society as a system

that seeks for stability and balance, that is a society, in which to trust and to justify trust is appropriate, natural and rational. The main positions of this model are presented in the table.

We consider the functional level of trust in 4 directions: as the psychological quality of a person, as the confidence to colleagues, as faithful to the institution and as reliance on its management. Each of the directions is represented by 5 questions; in total there are 20 questions per block. So far as the level of practical implementation is more important for the study and diagnosis of social cohesion, more questions related to functionality. The meaningful level of trust we explore in the questionnaire with 5 questions, one for each of the varieties. This level is important more not for the diagnosis, but for further correction and impact activity in educational management.

The questionnaire has been prepared in accordance with the study of trust in society and has been adapted to the educational dimension. So, we aim to identify which functional and meaningful manifest of trust takes place in particular educational environments, and which components of trust are weak. In our case, we interviewed employees and students of the National Pedagogical Dragomanov University (Kyiv, Ukraine) and National University of Life and Environmental Sciences (NULES). The greater the level of trust in the working relationship, the greater the level of cohesion.

All 25 questions of the questionnaire are evaluated on a scale of 1 to 7, where 1 – “completely disagree”, 2 – “disagree”, 3 – “rather disagree”, 4 – “difficult to answer”, 5 – “rather agree”, 6 – “agree”, 7 – “strongly agree”. The scale of evaluation of the results is divided into three levels: low, average and high degree of trust. According to the proposed options, the answers 1 “absolutely disagree” and 2 “disagree” show a low level of trust, options 3 “rather disagree”, 4 “difficult to answer”, 5 “rather agree” to the average level of trust, 6 “agree” and 7 “absolutely agree” show a high level of the respondents’ trust. In reverse questions, the rating scale is inverse.

There were 196 people interviewed, among them 31 employees and 85 students of the National Pedagogical Dragomanov University; 33 employees and 47 students of the National University of Life and Environmental Sciences.

### 3. RESULTS

In continuation of our study of trust as a cognitive base of social cohesion, we present in Table 2 analysis of trust as its main component. The research has been conducted on 196 respondents.

The data have been analyzed using mean (average score) and standard deviation ( $\sigma$ ). It allows to see the degree of deviation of the values from the average and evaluate the reliability of the results.

**Table 2.** Results of trust measure in the university community

Domains	Mean	Stand. deviation
Trust as the personal characteristic	4,35	1,25
Trust to the close circle of colleagues	4,75	1,30
Trust to the organization	4,69	1,50
Trust to the leaders	4,48	1,48
<b>Functional</b>	<b>4,57</b>	<b>0,16</b>
Contract trust	4,72	1,59
Communication trust	5,02	1,63
Competent trust	4,71	1,48
Moral and ethical trust	4,51	1,44
Environmental trust	4,91	1,49
<b>Meaningful</b>	<b>4,77</b>	<b>0,18</b>

According to the results of our research, we can see that on the whole, the level of trust in the university community is average, and almost all domains tend to the top measure of average. Every domain has the level more than 4,5 (except “Trust as the personal characteristic” – the average score of 4,35 and “Trust to the leaders” – the average score of 4,48). But in the case of “Communication trust” we have the higher value (the average score of 5,02). This means that respondents in the university community have an average level of trust. These values cover both analyzed universities - NDPU & NULES, and analyzed groups - employees and students.

As it was mentioned, the higher point has the domain “Communication trust”. This result means that for the whole interviewed people this domain of trust is the main

motivation and the most important one. We have also received the high average point of the domain - “Environmental trust” (the average score of 4,91, which means that this form of trust is formed from the ecological attitude towards others and acceptance of it in return. Nowadays people understand the necessity of ecological behaviour and trust that others do the same as well.

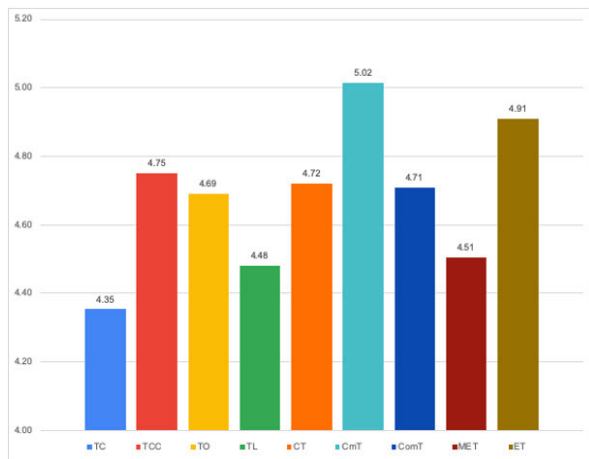
We have analyzed the difference between “Meaningful” and “Functional” and concluded that “Meaningful” has the higher value (the average score of 4,77) than “Functional” (with the average score of 4,57), but this difference is not significant.

The least value of “Trust as the personal characteristic” means that representatives have such quality by their nature, by their subjectivity, without rational evaluation. The respondents less trust to others at a whole than to the close circle of colleagues or to the organization, or to the leaders.

The result of “Trust to the close circle of colleagues” (the average score of 4,75) shows that people trust their close colleagues more than the organization (the average score of 4,69) or leaders (the average score of 4,48).

But, despite the difference in results, we see that they all have the same level of trust – the average level.

The results of the measurement of the domains of trust in the university community are shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Results of trust in the university community by domains

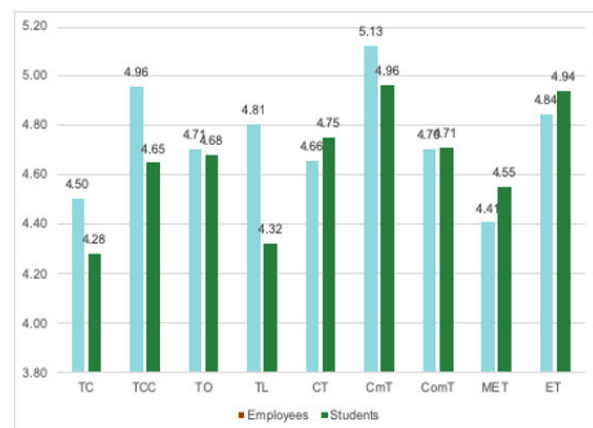
To deepen our research, we have analyzed if there is a difference between groups of respondents. First of all, taking into account the specific of the educational sphere, we have investigated employees of both university (64 people) and students (132 people). It allows to make a conclusion about the difference in trust

as a construct between this two groups.

The results of the research are presented in Table 3. As it is seen, there is no significant difference in results. For better data presentation see Figure 2.

**Table 3.** Results of the evaluation of the employees’ and students’ trust

Domains	Employees		Students	
	Mean	Stand. deviation	Mean	Stand. deviation
TC	4,50	1,28	4,28	1,23
TCC	4,96	1,18	4,65	1,35
TO	4,71	1,51	4,68	1,49
TL	4,81	1,44	4,32	1,47
<b>Functional</b>	<b>4,74</b>	<b>0,17</b>	<b>4,48</b>	<b>0,18</b>
CT	4,66	1,47	4,75	1,53
CmT	5,13	1,61	4,96	1,64
ComT	4,70	1,28	4,71	1,56
MET	4,41	1,42	4,55	1,45
ET	4,84	1,38	4,94	1,54
<b>Meaningful</b>	<b>4,75</b>	<b>0,24</b>	<b>4,78</b>	<b>0,15</b>



**Figure 2.** Comparison of social cohesion between all respondents and employees by dimensions

As it is shown in Table 3 and Figure 2, values for the analyzed groups are almost the same. All of them have an average level, except of “Competent trust” (with the average score of 5,13) of employees (mostly lecturers), that

is tend to top average of trust. It means that employees' trust depends on the competence of personality, whom they communicate with.

It is remarkable, that "Trust to the close circle of colleagues" and "Ecological trust" have higher results than others domains (the average score of 4,96, the average score of 4,84 respectively).

Also, we have analyzed students of NPDU and NULES and received almost the same results: all trust domains meanings are at the average level. At the same time, "Environmental Trust" is higher than its meanings for employees (the average scores of 4,94 and 4,84 accordingly). It reflects the importance of this area for students and their acceptance of this domain.

Figure 2 shows also the difference between employees' attitude to the "TCC" and students' lower value of this domain. As well as domain "TL" – the difference between them is almost 0,5. We suppose, that these results depend on the age of the interviewees and their perception of leaders or colleagues.

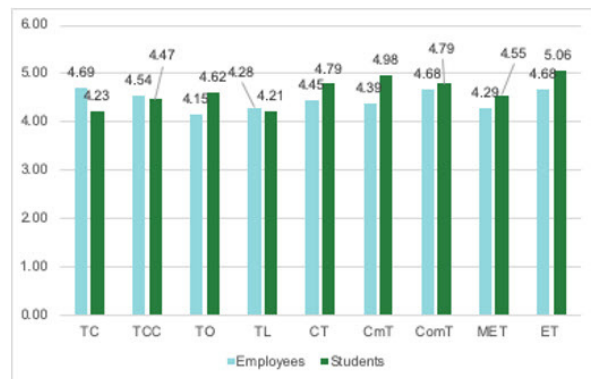
We have investigated, that for students are more important "CT" and "MET" domains (the average scores of 4,75 and 4,55 respectively). By employees, these domains meanings are at the lower level.

We have researched separately communities in the both universities. The first one was the NPDU. We have compared employees' and students' level of trust within this university community. The number of respondents was 116 (31 employees, 85 students).

The results are presented in Table 4 and Figure 3.

**Table 4.** Results of the measurement of employees' and students' trust in the university community of the NPDU

Domains	Employees		Students	
	Mean	Stand. deviation	Mean	Stand. deviation
TC	4,69	1,19	4,23	1,34
TCC	4,54	1,30	4,47	1,43
TO	4,15	1,50	4,62	1,69
TL	4,28	1,45	4,21	1,63
<b>Functional</b>	<b>4,42</b>	<b>0,20</b>	<b>4,38</b>	<b>0,17</b>
CT	4,45	1,52	4,79	1,69
CmT	4,39	1,47	4,98	1,85
ComT	4,68	1,38	4,79	1,70
MET	4,29	1,42	4,55	1,67
ET	4,68	1,40	5,06	1,68
<b>Meaningful</b>	<b>4,50</b>	<b>0,16</b>	<b>4,83</b>	<b>0,18</b>



**Figure 3.** Comparison of employees' and students' trust in the university community of the NPDU.

We could observe that the values of trust domains are almost at the same level for each group of respondents in the NPDU. But we have to notice some key points:

1. For employees, there is more important the domain "TC" than for students (average scores of 4,69 and 4,23 respectively).
2. For students, it is more significant

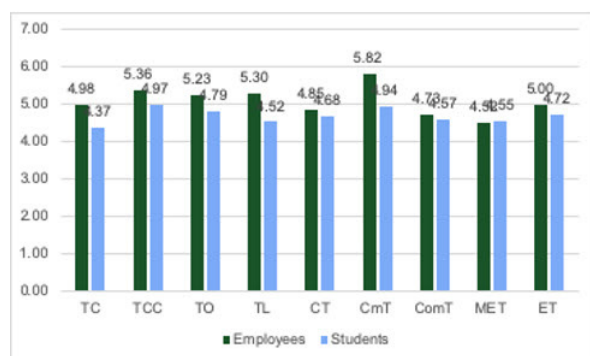
“CT” (the average score of 4,98) and “ET” (the average score of 5,06), the last one has reached the higher point among others domains and can be characterized as the top average.

The results for the whole university community reflect the sufficient level of trust inside the university community that is tended to the top average in some domains.

We have investigated the evaluation of the level of trust in the NULES community as well. The results are presented in Table 5 and Figure 4.

**Table 5.** Results of the measurement of employees’ and students’ level of trust in the university community of NULES

Domains	Employees		Students	
	Mean	Stand. deviation	Mean	Stand. deviation
TC	4,98	1,19	4,37	0,99
TCC	5,36	1,30	4,97	1,11
TO	5,23	1,50	4,79	1,02
TL	5,30	1,45	4,52	1,10
<b>Functional</b>	<b>5,22</b>	<b>0,20</b>	<b>4,66</b>	<b>0,20</b>
CT	4,85	1,52	4,68	1,19
CmT	5,82	1,47	4,94	1,17
ComT	4,73	1,38	4,57	1,27
MET	4,52	1,42	4,55	0,92
ET	5,00	1,40	4,72	1,20
<b>Meaningful</b>	<b>4,98</b>	<b>0,45</b>	<b>4,69</b>	<b>0,14</b>



**Figure 4.** Comparison of employees’ and students’ trust in the university community of NULES

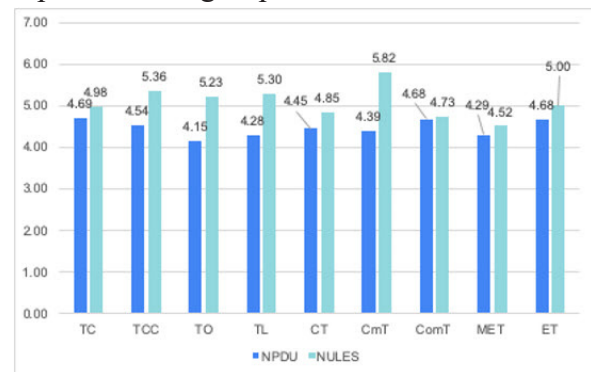
We have received quite different data for the NULES. There are more values which have higher points and we estimate them as top average level of trust.

Mostly it is concerned employees and functional group which average score is equal

5,22. That shows higher average level of trust to the colleagues, organization and leaders, as well as almost high level of “Communicative Trust” (average score of 5,82). That can be explained by their work specifics. Lecturers understand that communication is one of the tool of their efficient work, so they motivate to communicate as successful as possible.

We have researched students’ level of trust. It is at the average level without any sufficient deviations.

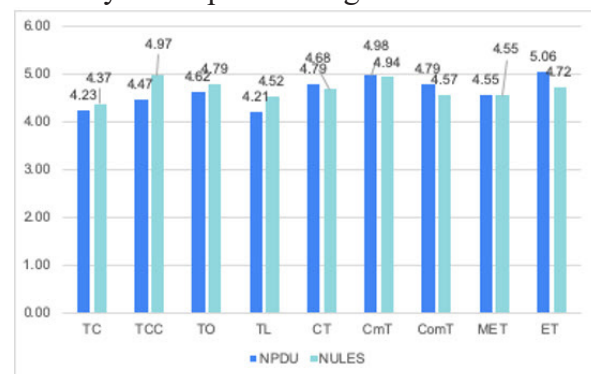
Figures 5 and Figure 6 present the comparison of trust domains for all representative groups from both universities.



**Figure 5.** Comparison of trust domains between employees of the NPDU and the NULES

We have compared the results between employees of two universities and noticed that they had a little difference in values: NULES has one that is almost high level (“CT” with the average score of 5, 82 for the NULES against of the average score of 4,80 for the NPDU), some others (“TCC”, “TO”, “TL”, “ET”) are at the top average, and some of them at the same level as for the NPDU. On a whole, it has not been detected the significant difference between universities.

Figure 6 presents similar results, contrary to the previous figure.



**Figure 6.** Comparison of the various trust domains between students of the NPDU and the NULES

Students in both universities have almost the same level of trust. In one case the result of NULES is higher (“TCC”, the average score of 4,97 for NULES against the average score of 4,47 for NPDU). For other domains conversely, (“ET”, the average score of 5,06 for NPDU against 4,72 of NULES).

Thus, according to the quantitative analyze we have concluded that there was no big discrepancy in values. The mean and standard deviation indicate the reliability of the results.

#### 4. DISCUSSIONS

This research contains the features of both quantitative and qualitative analysis. The methods, tools and types of collected data fulfil criteria of quantitative research. But one of the purposes of research suits the criteria of qualitative analysis - to understand and interpret social interactions. The obtained results also fulfil the criteria of qualitative research. They are aimed to make conclusions from the collected data but not to test some previous theory (Apuke, 2017).

The obtained results allow to suggest that the level of trust among students and teachers of the National Pedagogical Dragomanov University (NPDU) and the National University of Life and Environmental Sciences of Ukraine (NULES) is at a stable average level, with slight fluctuations. Higher indicators of trust are present in relation to a close circle of colleagues at the functional level among all respondents, and at a meaningful level, consistently high indicators of environmental trust. This indicates that the universal foundation of trust as a necessary element of the social system is familiar and accepted by respondents as an unconditional value. According to the previous research based on the Social Cohesion Model, trust is one of the key factors of social cohesion, in particular, in the educational community. Obtained results show the appropriate correlation between the level of trust and level of social cohesion at least at the National Pedagogical Dragomanov University (Nesterova, Dielini and Zamozhskiy, 2019).

The indicators of “Trust to the organization” and “Trust to the leaders” are quite different for the NPDU and NULES. Perhaps, it’s the result of the specific features of the NPDU’s management. In general, the levels of “Trust to the organization” and “Trust to the leaders” are higher among

employees than among students. Probably, it could be explained by the stronger work communications.

At the same time, the stable averages in various spheres of the questionnaire regarding the understanding of trust indicate the absence of an active life position, inertia and low initiative. In this case, a vicious circle is obtained: a low level of trust defines a low cohesion of the community. It could be caused by various reasons which demand more deep and detailed investigations. We can presume that specifics of the university’s management and organizational climate are quite important for the level of expectations, self-realization and cohesion of the university community members. It will be a matter of further researches.

Application of the research results can be useful for the development of social and emotional intelligence among teachers and students, who, in turn, are able to transmit new and productive interaction practices that are based on trust and cohesion. One of the main results is the practical strengthening of the trust in the university communities because of people’s awareness of what the trust means. Free discussions about various aspects of trust, “a common language of trust” will increase the understanding of cohesion processes and will increase the real level of trust in organization (Reina D.S. and Reina M. L., 2007). So, this research will sufficiently impact to the social cohesion development in the university communities of NULES and NPDU. Also, it will launch the effective communication processes because of internal discussions about the questionnaire and obtained results.

#### 5. CONCLUSIONS

Trust could be considered as central element and cognitive base of social cohesion. Without the ability to trust other people and institutions, as well as without understanding the need to justify the reasonable expectations of partners, effective social interaction is problematic.

The study of trust in its functional and meaning keys is important and perspective for the implementation of methods of increasing social cohesion both in the educational space and in society as a whole. The questionnaire showed that the level of trust as a psychological tendency, trust to the organization and leaders is much lower, than trust to the close circle of



colleagues. This indicates that the basis of trust is most often the experience of interpersonal interaction, and not the values and goals of joint activities. At the same time, the study of trust at a substantive level demonstrates that the respondents have a fairly clear understanding of the significance and role of this phenomenon for the existence of society. Trust as a form of social contract, as a basis of communication, as recognition of authorities and moral ideals, as a kind of balance of the contradiction of different interests - all these values are familiar and approved by both employees and students of both universities.

The cognitive aspects of trust are necessary for monitoring, analytics and related corrective actions. The level of trust is directly correlated with the level of social cohesion in the university communities. The indicators of cohesion are based on the ability and willingness to trust and to realize the expectations of others. This problem is especially significant in the educational environment, since the process of obtaining new knowledge, its understanding and application requires trust in the era of the annihilation of traditional values and the aggressive nature of the information environment. The long-term study of social cohesion and the above research as one part of it will improve the level of trust (and social cohesion accordingly) because of the awareness of the structure of trust and wide and open discussions in this matter in the university communities.

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### Conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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