

Unethical behaviour in distance learning: Polish student perspectives

Svitlana Didkivska

Abstract: **Background:** During the COVID-19 pandemic, a transition occurred towards remote learning. This change posed various challenges. One critical issue was the emergence of unethical behaviour. This problem has the potential to impact students' learning experiences detrimentally.

Research objectives: The study explores university students' unethical behaviours in distance learning. Additionally, it seeks to understand the disparity between students' anticipations and the actual issues they face.

Research design and methods: The research employs a qualitative approach where data were collected from 24 Krakow University of Economics students through semi-structured interviews, focusing on their experiences with unethical behaviour.

Results: The study unveils that students anticipate and are apprehensive about unethical behaviour in distance learning, including the sharing of inappropriate content. However, their actual experiences encompass different issues, such as unwarranted distractions. These distractions have a detrimental effect on the learning process.

Conclusions: The study illuminates the incongruence between students' preconceived notions and their real-life encounters with unethical behaviour during online learning. It emphasises the importance of promoting engagement and adhering to ethical standards. Furthermore, the study advocates broadening the research framework to include educators' perspectives, which is essential for a comprehensive understanding.

Keywords: unethical behaviour, distance learning, analysis of distance education, higher education

JEL Codes: I21, I32, D63

Suggested citation:

Didkivska, S. (2023). Unethical behaviour in distance learning: Polish student perspectives. *Social Entrepreneurship Review*, 2, 18–28. <https://doi.org/10.15678/SER.2023.3.02>

1. Introduction

As the COVID-19 pandemic has forced educational institutions worldwide to shift to remote learning, students and educators have faced numerous challenges adapting to this new mode of education. Among these challenges is the issue of unethical behaviour during distance learning, which has the potential to negatively impact the learning experience for students (Ruszaj, 2021, pp. 77–82) and the effectiveness of remote education (Parlangeli et al., 2021, pp. 11–18). For example, there was an increase in dishonest behaviour in online learning, encompassing targeted intimidation and unfavourable views towards teachers when anticipations were not satisfied (Plebańska et al., 2021, pp 1–75). Despite numerous approaches being suggested to tackle these challenges, a research gap exists in comprehending unethical actions in distance education from the standpoint of university students (in this case, students of Krakow Uni-

versity of Economics – KUE). This understanding can offer crucial information for educators and administrators to cultivate secure and efficient learning settings. Accordingly, the research goal is to investigate the types of unethical behaviour experienced by students during distance learning and to understand the discrepancy between student's expectations and their actual experiences of unethical conduct in the virtual classroom. This research aims to answer the following research questions:

How do students perceive unethical behaviour in distance learning?

What are the differences between students' expectations and real experience regarding distance learning?

To answer those questions, data were collected from 24 KUE students through semi-structured interviews, in which they were asked about their experiences with unethical behaviour during distance learning. Research exploring unethical behaviour in distance learning from the perspectives of KUE students adds to the understanding of these issues. It provides insights for educators and administrators to create a safe and effective learning environment. The paper is organised as follows: an introduction initiates the narrative. A concise review of relevant literature follows it. Then, the methodology is outlined. Lastly, the paper presents the results, detailed analysis and discussion.

2. Literature review

The ethical issues in distance learning have been studied long before the explosive growth in popularity associated with the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic (Kitahara & Westfall, 2007, pp. 265–276; Eddy & Spaulding, 1996, pp. 301–394). The use of new communication technologies has led to the adoption of distance education by traditional educational institutes, which has resulted in an increasing demand for learning opportunities and ethical risks connected with them (Simonson, 2012, p. 64). However, the ethical issues associated with distance learning have become a topic of concern. The education industry requires a well-defined set of ethics and values, along with visible legal guidelines, to regulate the exchange and distribution of information (Anitha & Harsha, 2013, pp. 193–201; Braimoh & Osiki, 2009, pp. 49–62). As the industry grows, plagiarism, electronic voyeurism, and licensing have become more prevalent and require further examination (Anitha & Harsha, 2013, pp. 193–201).

As the pandemic began, the issue of unscrupulous conduct intensified owing to the substantial influx of individuals involved in this learning method. Unethical conduct has been observed online during leisure time and educational pursuits, involving heightened activity and targeted harassment towards specific individuals, as well as avoiding communication altogether. These social threats, along with others, have the capacity to result in marginalisation, exclusion, and even self-imposed isolation (Ruszaj, 2021, pp. 77–82). Furthermore, as students spent more time in remote learning, their expectations regarding using modern digital tools and attractive educational materials grew. In cases where these expectations were not met, various negative attitudes towards teachers were observed, sometimes even leading to the use of unethical student strategies, for example, cheating or total ignoring the lecture while being logged in (Plebańska et al., 2021, pp. 77–82). Consequently, there have been more attempts to bring this issue under control, ranging from creating new equipment to track students' eye movements during lessons to monitor their behaviour (Yadav & Rao, 2022, pp. 701–708) or to analysing previous experiences and existing situation (Amalaha, 2021, pp. 19–26; Smolinski et al., 2022, pp. 551–556).

3. Research method and material

The research methodology involved collecting data from 24 KUE students through semi-structured interviews (Adeoye-Olatunde, 2021, pp.1358–1367), which allowed the researcher to ask semi-structured questions related to the research topic while also providing flexibility to explore new avenues of inquiry (Magaldi & Berler, 2021, pp. 4825–4830). In the course of the discussions, interviewees responded to a variety of inquiries about their involvement with remote education. These included inquiries such as, “Have you encountered unethical behaviour of students during distance learning?” and “What do you consider unethical behaviour during distance learning?”.

The interviews were conducted remotely using video conferencing software and then transcribed for further analysis. The transcripts were then subjected to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2023, pp. 1–6), which involved identifying patterns and themes in the data and grouping them based on their similarities. Thematic analysis is a widely used qualitative data analysis technique that involves a systematic and iterative process of coding and categorising data to identify patterns and themes. This method allowed the researcher to explore the data in-depth, identify critical issues and themes, and draw meaningful conclusions (Braun & Clarke, 2023, pp. 1–6).

The responses were classified into three categories: N, H, and P. The N category included responses from participants who had never personally encountered the behaviour but considered it unethical. The H category included responses from participants who had not personally encountered the behaviour but had heard about it from other sources and considered it unethical. Finally, the P category included responses from participants who had personally encountered the behaviour and considered it unethical. This study helped scientists identify the most common types of immoral behaviour encountered by students during online learning, as well as the unacceptable behaviour they consider unacceptable.

4. Results

4.1. N category

The N category presents the data collected from students of KUE who had not personally encountered unethical behaviour during distance learning but considered it to be a possibility and had a total of 18 responses (Table 1). The data is categorised according to different types of unethical behaviour, and the percentage of responses for each category is also specified.

Table 1. Unethical behaviour vision from participants who had never encountered it personally

Types of unethical behaviour	Example quotes from students	% of responses
Inappropriate content	“Providing inappropriate content to the teacher”, “everyday activities that were transferred to lectures”, “shouting into the microphone”, and “if someone had the mic turned on by accident and said something they shouldn’t”.	25.0
Interrupting classes	“And then it’s unethical behaviour for me; it interferes with conducting classes at all, for example, like this or some kind of uncultured talking to lecturers.” “It’s unethical for me to sabotage a lesson or class, something like that, interrupting the teacher”.	20.8

Types of unethical behaviour	Example quotes from students	% of responses
Not paying attention	"Unethical is ignoring these (studying) activities and, for example, make dinner during this time or play on the computer", "the teacher does not even know if the student is working and not just relaxing with the help of his phone".	8.3
Cheating	"Well, it's obvious that it's easier to cheat because everyone is sitting in their room, and in fact, even with the webcam on, you can do it".	8.3
Alcohol drinking	"Drinking alcohol during online lectures, I suspect that something like this could have happened in the past".	4.2
Lying in bed during classes	Watching exercises in bed instead of actively participating.	4.2
None at all	No encountered unethical behaviour.	4.2

Source: own work.

The category "Inappropriate content" gained the most responses, highlighting situations such as sharing unsuitable materials with teachers, forgetting to mute the mic, raising one's voice into the microphone, and uttering crude comments. The "Interrupting classes" category obtained five responses, outlining cases like disrupting online lessons or showing disrespect to educators during virtual classes. The "Not paying attention" category received two responses, exemplifying instances like neglecting online assignments and lacking focus during virtual classes.

The "Alcohol drinking" had merely one response, which pointed out the act of consuming alcoholic drinks during digital lectures. "Cheating: had two responses, both touching upon acts of deceit during online assessments or tasks. On the other hand, the "Lying in Bed During Classes" category had only one response, mentioning that some students choose to watch lessons in bed instead of engaging actively.

Finally, a single response suggested that no unethical behaviours have ever been encountered in distance learning environments.

4.2. H category

Table 2 presents the data from the H category (in total 13 responses), which includes responses from students who have not personally encountered unethical behaviour during distance learning but have heard about it from various sources, such as friends or the media.

Table 2. Unethical behaviour vision from participants who heard about these facts from different sources

Types of unethical behaviour	Example quotes from students	% of responses
Interrupting classes	"It is simply letting people who do not belong to a given group into classes, which creates such a bad atmosphere, especially if these people interfere with conducting classes", "Inappropriate content, such as from a teacher to students, such as from a student to a teacher are disturbing and interrupt classes".	20.8
Not paying attention	"Some students just had the microphone on and had the professors' lectures sound off, and he was just talking with someone, so he just didn't hear what professors were telling him".	16.6

Types of unethical behaviour	Example quotes from students	% of responses
Inappropriate content	"There were situations when someone forgot to mute the microphone and flew some unpleasant word".	8.3
Cheating	"Cheating (I don't know exactly, possibly during some exams or something)".	4.2
Disrespect	"I've heard about situation with disrespect to teachers and lack of respect for teachers during lecturers discourages them from engaging more in their work".	4.2

Source: own work.

The most common type of unethical behaviour reported was interrupting classes, with five responses. Students mentioned cases where individuals who were not part of the class entered the online classroom and shouted obscene things, or someone was transferring inappropriate content, thus disturbing the conduct of classes. One student stated that it is unethical to interrupt teaching. At the same time, another emphasised the importance of not allowing people who do not belong to a given group into classes, as it creates a bad atmosphere.

Four responses were related to not paying attention during online classes, with students reporting cases where their classmates would sit on their phones, play games, or not listen to what was happening and instead talk to someone else. Inappropriate content was mentioned in two responses, with one student reporting situations where someone forgot to mute their microphone and said something vulgar or unpleasant. The other referred to situations where there were vulgar or inappropriate situations on the cameras.

Finally, there were single mentions of cheating, disrespect towards teachers, and lying in bed watching online exercises during class.

4.3. P category

Table 3 provides information on the types of unethical behaviour that participants in the P category personally experienced during distance learning. The participants reported a total of 9 incidents of unethical behaviour that they encountered during distance learning.

Table 3. Unethical behaviour vision from participants who heard about these facts from different sources

Types of unethical behaviour	Example quotes from students	% of responses
Not paying attention	"So, it's simply not following the lecture because everything that can distract them (students) is there, and the professor can see it. That's how you actually might form ideas to do something else and not pay attention to the class...", "As we have distance learning someone, when teachers split us into the group, and some students may just mute themselves and do nothing", "...sit on the mobile without paying attention to what is happening in class...", "Sometimes people might completely ignoring the lessons, do other things".	16.6
Inappropriate content	"There were off-topic discussions between lecturers and students about their views; I think it was very unethical because it disrupted classes and simply brought private views to the whole lesson, which in my opinion should not take place...", "Some students were making jokes while lessons...", "Yes, it was rather a little thing that someone didn't turn off the microphone and there was such an Echo, and it was just so noticeable and disturbing".	12.5

Types of unethical behaviour	Example quotes from students	% of responses
Interrupting classes	"People joining meetings before/without permission and making jokes. They disable stuff".	4.2
Disrespect	"Simply showing disrespect to people participating in a lecture with different kinds of actions..."	4.2

Source: own work.

The primary form of misconduct observed by the participants was a lack of focus during virtual lessons. Examples included students being preoccupied with their phones or other gadgets, silencing their microphones and failing to participate, or entirely disregarding the class.

The second most frequently mentioned unethical behaviour involved inappropriate content, with three responses describing instances such as irrelevant conversations between students and instructors about personal opinions, which could occur even in physical classrooms. Additionally, forgetting to mute microphones, which may disrupt the class but is usually accidental and can be quickly resolved with a single click once brought to attention during the lecture.

One individual mentioned the fact of disruption in class due to students joining meetings without authorisation and making jokes. Lastly, a participant reported witnessing disrespect from a fellow student towards others attending the lecture, as the person in question deliberately engaged in various types of inappropriate behaviour.

5. Discussion

The N category (Table 1) shows students' expectations and fears towards unethical behaviour during distance learning, as respondents had to use their imagination to describe potential situations that might happen. Students expressed their worries about inappropriate content being shared during online classes and potential interruptions or disrespectful behaviour towards teachers. Additionally, some students reported concerns about cheating during online exams or activities. The responses indicate that learners recognise the possible hazards and obstacles associated with remote education, expressing concern over preserving the quality and authenticity of their learning journey. The responses also highlight the importance of creating a safe and respectful learning environment in the virtual classroom and implementing measures to prevent cheating and ensure academic honesty.

The H category (Table 2) displays data regarding notable instances of unethical conduct likely to be encountered in the students' informational sphere. The students' familiarity with these matters implies an awareness of the possibilities for unethical actions within digital learning settings. It also signals that students are attentive to news and media channels, which could influence their understanding of appropriate behaviour. Moreover, their responses could emphasise areas of worry for students, as being informed about such misconduct may increase their chances of experiencing it or witnessing it in others. Overall, the answers in this table suggest that students are attuned to the potential for unethical behaviour during distance learning and may actively seek out information on the topic.

The P category (Table 3) presents a more concrete and tangible perspective on the unethical behaviour experienced by students during distance learning. These situations have actually

happened to students and have affected their learning experience. The responses in Table 3 suggest that unethical behaviour during distance learning is not just a theoretical possibility but a real problem that students face. The fact that the most common types of unethical behaviour are related to not paying attention and inappropriate content indicates that students are encountering distractions and disruptions that are affecting their ability to learn. This suggests a need for more effective measures to ensure students remain engaged during distance learning, such as better monitoring of student activity or more engaging teaching methods.

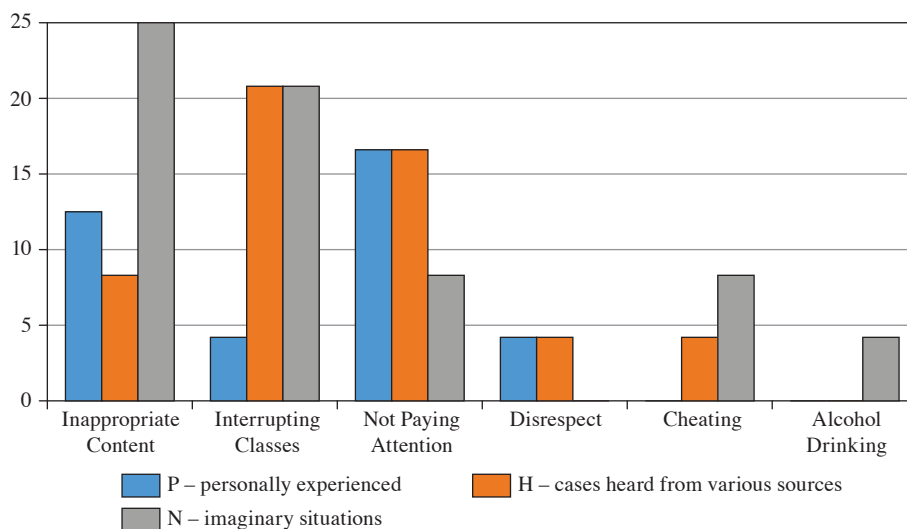


Figure 1. Comparing categories of unethical behaviour

Source: own work.

There is also a visible difference between students' expectations and the actual situation regarding unethical behaviour (Figure 1). We can see that few students actually have any intentions to interrupt the educational process or disturb others while lecturing. Still, quite often, they lose concentration, fall out of learning, or forget that not turning off the microphone might confuse other students or teachers.

The study shows that students have a good understanding of what appropriate behaviour is during online classes and are generally respectful of the learning environment. Moreover, this implies that teachers ought to persist in underlining the significance of suitable internet conduct and furnish students with explicit rules and standards to abide by to maintain a learning atmosphere that is both courteous and favourable for acquiring knowledge.

In light of the findings of this study, several important implications for educational stakeholders emerge. Firstly, there is an apparent need for educational institutions to craft and implement comprehensive codes of conduct explicitly tailored to the online environment. These guidelines should encompass definitions and ramifications of unethical behaviour, offering educators and students a clear understanding of the expectations during distance learning. This measure establishes a foundation of accountability and acts as a deterrent against transgressions.

Another salient implication relates to the prevalence of inattention among students in the virtual classroom. Traditional teaching methodologies may not be as efficacious in engaging students through the screen as they are in physical settings. Consequently, institutions and educators must explore and integrate innovative teaching approaches, such as interactive assignments, polls, and quizzes, to captivate student attention and participation. Moreover, technology could be a double-edged sword, simultaneously presenting challenges and solutions. For instance, while technology facilitates distance learning, it potentially enables dishonesty during examinations. Educational institutions can use AI-driven proctoring tools or attention-monitoring software to counter these challenges. Additionally, furnishing educators with training and resources to effectively wield technology for instruction can be highly beneficial.

Furthermore, a culture of ethics should be actively cultivated within the online academic community. This can be achieved through conscientious efforts by educators to instil the importance of ethical conduct through discussions, seminars, or dedicated curricular modules. As ideals of conduct, educators should exemplify the ethical standards they seek to inculcate in their students. Recognising the potential repercussions of unethical on students' well-being, providing support systems is indispensable. Institutions should establish anonymous reporting channels to protect the mental health and safety of the students.

Instituting feedback mechanisms and a culture of adaptability is another critical implication. Continuous monitoring of the effectiveness of policies through surveys and feedback from the academic community is imperative. Institutions should demonstrate flexibility in making necessary adjustments to policies and strategies based on feedback. Beyond the confines of educational institutions, policymakers bear a critical responsibility. There is a pressing need for a robust legislative framework that safeguards students and preserves the integrity of educational processes in the virtual milieu. This entails enacting and enforcing laws pertaining to cyberbullying, academic dishonesty, and digital rights. Lastly, the global nature of distance learning necessitates international cooperation. The exchange of best practices, policies, and tools among educational institutions across borders is pivotal. Such collaboration paves the way for developing more standardised and universally applicable ethical standards in distance learning.

In sum, the path towards ethical distance learning demands concerted efforts from educational institutions, educators, students, and policymakers. Through a multifaceted approach that integrates policy development, innovative pedagogy, technological solutions, and international collaboration, the pursuit of a more ethical and conducive learning environment can be actualised. However, it is imperative to prioritise enhancing students' concentration as the foremost initiative. The data reveals that the most prevalent issue students actually encounter is a lapse in attention. Addressing this issue is fundamental to the overall efficacy of distance learning.

6. Conclusions

The article sheds light on the various types of unethical behaviour experienced by students during distance learning. The study found that inappropriate content, interruptions, and not paying attention were the most common types of unethical behaviour reported by the students. The data also showed an inconsistency between student expectations and actual experiences. While students had fears and expectations of unethical behaviour, their situations were different. Overall, the study suggests that the most significant challenge for stu-

dents in distance learning is maintaining concentration and focus during classes. Teachers and organisations must create methods that maintain student involvement in virtual lessons while also upholding moral principles and ethical standards. By understanding the types of unethical behaviour experienced by students and addressing them proactively, institutions can create a safe and effective learning environment that promotes academic integrity and student success.

One of the constraints in interpreting the study's findings is the small sample size, which consisted solely of 24 students from the Krakow University of Economics. As such, the insights derived may not fully encapsulate the diversity of experiences across different institutions or geographies. The student population's characteristics at KUE might have a distinct set of cultural, academic, or social traits that impact their perceptions and experiences. To increase the applicability of these findings, it is important to consider using a broader sample encompassing multiple stakeholders, institutions and a more diverse set of demographics.

Another noteworthy limitation is that the study uses data collected through semi-structured interviews, which is a kind of self-reported data. The inherent nature of self-reporting could mean that responses may be influenced by social desirability bias, where students may tend to give socially acceptable answers. Moreover, the students' recollections of experiences might not always be precise. The study also lacked the perspective of educators, which could have provided a more holistic understanding of unethical behaviour in distance learning. Future research could bolster the reliability and depth of insights by incorporating various data sources and including the viewpoints of both students and educators.

Further research studies exploring unethical behaviour in distance learning will greatly benefit from incorporating the teacher's perspective. By broadening the scope to include both sides of the educational process, researchers can better understand the challenges and opportunities presented by this increasingly prevalent mode of instruction.

References

- Adeoye-Olatunde, O. (2021). Research and scholarly methods: Semi-structured interviews. *Journal of the American College of Clinical Pharmacy*, 4(10), 1358–1367. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jac5.1441>
- Amalaha, K. (2021). Ethics in e-learning. *Research Focus*, 3(1), 19–26. <https://doi.org/10.36068/1>
- Anitha, C. & Harsha, T. (2013). Ethical perspectives in open and distance education system. *Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education*, 14(1), 193–201. <https://dergipark.org.tr/en/pub/tojde>
- Braimoh, D. & Osiki, J. (2009). Creating a Firewall against Unethical behaviours in open and distance education practice. *Ethical Practices and Implications in Distance Learning*, 49–62. <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-59904-867-3.ch005>
- Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2023). Toward good practice in thematic analysis: Avoiding common problems and be(com)ing a knowing researcher. *International Journal of Transgender Health*, 24(1), 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.1080/26895269.2022.2129597>
- Eddy, J., & Spaulding, D. (1996). Internet, computers, distance education and people failure: Research on technology. *Education*, 116(3), 391–394. <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A18434928/AONE?u=anon~4d2dc1b6&sid=googleScholar&id=c22e600b>
- Kitahara, R. & Westfall, F. (2007). Promoting academic integrity in online distance learning courses. *MERLOT Journal of Online Learning and Teaching*, 3(3), 265–276. https://jolt.merlot.org/Vol3_No3.html
- Magaldi, D. & Berler, M. (2021). Semi-structured interviews. *Encyclopedia of Personality and Individual Differences*, 4825–4830. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-24612-3_857
- Parlangeli, O., Palmitesta, P., Guidi, S., Di Pomponio, I., Bracci, M., & Marchigiani, E. (2021). Social distancing, stress and unethical behaviour: A study on Italian university students in the first period of isolation due to COVID-19. In Goonetilleke, R.S., Xiong, S., Kalkis, H., Roja, Z., Karwowski, W., Murata, A. (Eds.), *Advances in Physi-*

- cal, *Social & Occupational Ergonomics. AHFE 2021. Lecture Notes in Networks and Systems* (pp. 11–18). Cham: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-80713-9_2
- Plebańska, M., Szyller, A., & Sierńcewska, M. (2021). *Raport. Co zmieniło się w edukacji zdalnej podczas trwania pandemii*. Wydział Pedagogiczny UW. [https://kometa.edu.pl/uploads/publication/1186/77a7_A_Raport%2011%202021-marzec%20\(1\).pdf?v2.8](https://kometa.edu.pl/uploads/publication/1186/77a7_A_Raport%2011%202021-marzec%20(1).pdf?v2.8)
- Ruszaj, Z. (2021). Szanse i zagrożenia w edukacji zdalnej. *Edukacja – Terapia – Opieka*, 3, 77–82. <https://doi.org/10.52934/eto.136>
- Simonson, M. (2012). Ethics and distance education. *Distance Learning*, 9(1), 64. <https://www.proquest.com/openview/e56f6533d5ae7c0ba6e4cd0ee6fc93a8/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=29704>
- Smolinski, P. R., Kowalik, J., & Winiarski, J. (2022). Diversity of students' unethical behaviours in online learning amid COVID-19 pandemic: An exploratory analysis. In Themistocleous, M., Papadaki, M. (Eds.), *Information Systems. EMCIS 2021. Lecture Notes in Business Information Processing*. Cham: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-95947-0_39
- Yadav, B. & Rao, M. (2022). 2nd FICR International Conference on Rising Threats in Expert Applications and Solutions. In Rathore, V. S., Sharma, S. C., Tavares, J. M. R., Moreira, C., Surendiran, B. (Eds.), *Rising Threats in Expert Applications and Solutions. Lecture Notes in Networks and Systems*. Singapore: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-1122-4_73

About Author/s

Svitlana Didkivska*, MSc

Doctoral school, Management

Krakow University of Economics

ul. Rakowicka 27, 31-510 Kraków, Poland

e-mail: d2023@student.uek.krakow.pl

ORCID: 0000-0002-4004-6631

* Corresponding author.

Acknowledgements and Financial Disclosure

The article presents the result of the Project no 045/ZII/2023/POT financed from the subsidy granted to the Krakow University of Economic.

Conflict of Interest

The author declare that the research was conducted without any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Copyright and License



This article is published under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) License <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>

Published by Krakow University of Economics – Krakow, Poland



Ministry of Education and Science
Republic of Poland

The journal is co-financed in the years 2022-2024 by the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Poland in the framework of the ministerial programme "Development of Scientific Journals" (RCN) on the basis of agreement no. RCN/SP/0391/2021/1 concluded on December 9, 2022 and being in force until December 8, 2024.