


“University without Walls: Experience of Berdyansk State Pedagogical University during the war”

AUTHORS

Hanna Lopatina 



Natalia Tsybuliak 



Anastasia Popova 



Ihor Bohdanov 

Yana Suchikova 



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Anastasia Popova, Ihor Bohdanov, Yana
Suchikova, 2023

Hanna Lopatina, Ph.D., Associate
Professor, Department of Applied
Psychology and Speech Therapy,
Faculty of Preschool, Special and Social
Education, Berdyansk State Pedagogical
University, Ukraine.

Natalia Tsybuliak, Ph.D., Associate
Professor, Department of Applied
Psychology and Speech Therapy,
Faculty of Preschool, Special and Social
Education, Berdyansk State Pedagogical
University, Ukraine.

Anastasia Popova, Ph.D., Associate
Professor, Department of Social Work
and Inclusive Education, Faculty
of Preschool, Special and Social
Education, Berdyansk State Pedagogical
University, Ukraine.

Ihor Bohdanov, Doctor of Pedagogical
Sciences, Rector, Berdyansk State
Pedagogical University, Ukraine.

Yana Suchikova, Doctor in Technical
Sciences, Professor, Vice-Rector for
Research, Berdyansk State Pedagogical
University, Ukraine. (Corresponding
author)



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SPECIAL ISSUE: ACADEMIC MANAGEMENT IN THE CONDITIONS OF WAR

Hanna Lopatina (Ukraine), Natalia Tsybuliak (Ukraine), Anastasia Popova (Ukraine),
Ihor Bohdanov (Ukraine), Yana Suchikova (Ukraine)

UNIVERSITY WITHOUT WALLS: EXPERIENCE OF BERDYANSK STATE PEDAGOGICAL UNIVERSITY DURING THE WAR

Abstract

This study presents the experience of managing Berdyansk State Pedagogical University in the first year of a full-scale war. The purpose is to analyze the impact of management decisions on the performance indicators of the university in the conditions of temporary occupation and relocation to a new place. The relocation of Berdyansk State Pedagogical University (BSPU) to a safer territory enabled the resumption of educational activities in May 2022, after 53 days of functioning under occupation by Russian troops. University staff decreased by 13%, with 57% moving to Ukraine-controlled territories and 43% remaining in the occupied zone. In addition, the student contingent decreased by 15%. The university's scientific activity during the war decreased for only 9% in publication activity, and funding for science in 2023 increased by 379% compared to 2021. The university continued its third mission of social cooperation by providing humanitarian and psychological assistance and documenting the testimonies of people affected by the occupation. The university community currently exists in a virtual format, with staff and students in different parts of Ukraine and the world. The university must look to the future and overcome existing problems, such as preserving academic potential and student contingent, restoring electronic systems, and continuing pedagogical education.

Keywords

university without walls, relocation, management,
personnel, academic staff, student

JEL Classification

I23, J24, L32

INTRODUCTION

The full-scale invasion of the Russian Federation's military forces into the territory of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, has caused global changes in the life of every Ukrainian, including in education. For example, there are millions of internally displaced persons within and outside the country and constant threat of missile strikes and artillery shelling across the entire territory of Ukraine and in areas of active hostilities. Destroyed or occupied buildings of educational institutions, seizure and destruction of intellectual property are the realities in which Ukraine has been living for a year (Kurapov et al., 2022; Lavrysh et al., 2022; Maryl et al., 2022; McNutt & Hildebrand, 2022; Moroz, 2022).

Berdyansk State Pedagogical University (BSPU) became one of the relocated educational institutions that, due to the city's occupation, remained without walls, lost its material and technical base, part of the staff and students. BSPU has relocated to the front-line city of Zaporizhzhia, where it is now based at Zaporizhzhia National University. The university continues to carry out its activities fully in an online format. This required a rethinking of new conditions, assessment of threats, rapid management decisions, and gaining expe-

rience in unexpected situations (Lopushniak et al., 2022). Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to analyze the impact of management decisions on the performance indicators of the university in the conditions of temporary occupation and relocation to a new place.

1. RESULTS

1.1. A brief description of the institution as of February 24, 2022

BSPU is one of southeast Ukraine's oldest and most influential higher education institutions. As of February 24, 2022, it had around 5,000 students enrolled in undergraduate, graduate, and postdoctoral levels. The university consists of six faculties:

- Faculty of Philology and Social Communications;
- Faculty of Psychological and Pedagogical Education and Arts;
- Faculty of Preschool, Special and Social Education;
- Faculty of Physics and Mathematics Education, Computer Technologies and Labor Training;
- Faculty of Economics and Humanities;
- Faculty of Physical Training.

In total, 46 educational and professional programs are implemented at the bachelor's level of higher education, 23 at the master's level, and seven at the postdoctoral level.

BSPU is located in the city of Berdyansk in the Zaporizhzhia region. This city was occupied by Russian troops in the first days of the war, namely on February 27, 2022. Consequently, the entire BSPU university community was under direct threat almost from the first days of the war.

1.2. University management

1.2.1. Phase 1. Reaction

On 24 February, the educational process was suspended in all educational institutions in Ukraine.

Also, there was a need to make immediate managerial decisions with clear instructions to provide practical information for preserving the life and health of the university community, particularly helping students living in dormitories. Thus, university administration prohibited academic staff visiting the university buildings, except for the university leadership and security personnel, and provided necessary everyday support (food, drinking water, medicines, hot tea, etc.) for students who stayed to live in dormitories. Because the city was on the brink of a humanitarian, economic, and ecological crisis, with no gas supply, often no water or electricity, and no food products, hygiene products, or cash (Malyarenko & Kormych, 2023). No one knew what needed to be done, so the initial phase of accepting the war was marked by fear and anxiety for university management.

1.2.2. Phase 2. Immediate management decisions

The second phase of crisis management involved emergency measures. In the conditions of temporary occupation, administrative decisions aimed to ensure timely payment of wages, preserving primary and statutory documents and the university website, etc. Moreover, an important issue that needed to be addressed was the organization of the educational process, as indicated by the survey results of the students' readiness to resume the educational process conducted in March-April 2022; most students (85%) responded that they wanted to start learning immediately. However, the university management did not understand how to operate in the legal field of Ukraine in occupied Berdyansk. Therefore, an active campaign was launched to inform students about the possibility of academic mobility with subsequent recognition of learning results, which 98 students took advantage of.

After all the main measures complied with government decisions, the relocation process of the university started, understanding the danger. Therefore, under the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, on April 20, 2022, a decision

was made to temporarily relocate the university to a Ukraine-controlled territory in the city of Zaporizhzhia based on the Zaporizhzhia National University (Order of the Ministry of Education and Science No. 357 dated April 20, 2022).

There was no possibility of organizing the evacuation or coordinating this process; the university administration could only take out statutory documents and seals. The chance to leave for the Ukrainian-controlled territory was through the town of Vasylivka. People called this route the "Road of Death": every 10-20 km, there were russian checkpoints for a thorough inspection of vehicles and personal belongings, mined shoulders, blown up cars, and shelling. That is why teachers often left even without their laptops. In front of Vasylivka, people waited for the right to leave for up to 10 days in the open air, often without food or water.

The temporary relocation of the BSPU and the availability of statutory documents allowed the university to function in a new location, enabling the educational process to be resumed in a state of war from May 2, 2022. Thus, for 53 days, the activities of the BSPU were carried out under conditions of occupation by russian troops.

1.2.3. Phase 3: University without Walls: Managing and planning for a new reality

The temporary relocation of the university means re-registration at a new location and transferring the site to cloud storage. Since the city of Zaporizhzhia is located on the front line and suffers daily shelling, an administrative decision was made not to require university staff and students to be present in Zaporizhzhia due to the inability to guarantee safe conditions. The BSPU community is spread worldwide, with many having moved from temporarily occupied territories and territories of active hostilities to those controlled by Ukraine. Some remained in the occupation but continued to work in the Ukrainian higher education system through distance learning technologies.

The concept of the University without Walls has evolved from a mere metaphor to a reality (Suchikova & Tsybuliak, 2023). It is a world-renowned practice of organizing the educational

process, where university staff and students can be separated by time and space yet still communicate effectively (Goldschmid, 1976; Neame et al., 1999; Stoddart et al., 2006). This university format was piloted in 1971 as part of the University of Massachusetts experiment. The report by The European University Association, "Universities without Walls: A vision for 2030" (The European University Association, 2021) states, "Key to success will be universities that are open, enforcing the vision of universities without walls, engaging deeply with other parts of society while firmly rooted in their values." The world has been developing this concept for over 50 years (Dallmann, 2021), and BSPU has successfully implemented it in months.

A permanent online communication system was introduced based on vertical and horizontal principles to consolidate the university community. Regular meetings are held between students and the university's deans and rectors. A unique format was introduced: an online holiday camp, allowing daily communication with students. Cross-departmental meetings and working groups were established to address urgent issues involving academic and non-academic personnel to ensure close interaction between university staff. The educational process was restored using distance learning technologies in a synchronous-asynchronous format, and the management of the University without Walls in a state of war aimed to solve new problems and challenges:

- personnel turnover;
- decrease in the number of students;
- lack of material and technical base for educational and scientific activities;
- organization of the introductory campaign;
- financial support; and
- activities of a pseudo-university in a temporarily occupied city.

Thus, a new transitional strategy was developed and approved to ensure the activities and development of the university during the war and in the post-war recovery period.

1.3. University staff

At the start of the war, BSPU’s staff comprised 433 people, of which 249 were the academic staff. By December 31, 2022, the university team had decreased to 376, with 227 being academic staff (a 13% decrease due to various reasons) (Figure 1). Some of them had found new jobs in their new residence, while others were dismissed due to threats and intimidation from the occupiers. A few had even collaborated with the occupation authorities in Berdyansk and began to work at the newly created pseudo-university. It should be noted that such cases were rare in BSPU – 6% among academic staff and 14% among non-academic staff.

Monitoring of those who left the occupation was carried out every week. Anyone who manages to escape Berdyansk reports this to the head of the personnel department. As of December 31, 2022, 57% of the university’s employees left for

the territories controlled by Ukraine, and 43% are still under occupation. Most non-academic staff (59%) remained in the occupied territories. Although most academic staff (54%) moved to the territories controlled by Ukraine, another 13% went abroad. Slovakia, Canada, Poland, Georgia, Czech Republic, Germany, Great Britain, Bulgaria – this is an incomplete list of countries where university employees live.

The relocated university faced the issue of not all employees being able to work remotely, with only 77% able to do so; 16% of them were still in the occupied area, 10% went on leave, and 4% had their work contracts suspended. In addition, three employees were in the Armed Forces of Ukraine.

It should be noted that it is almost impossible to leave the occupied Berdyansk, with the city being completely closed off for entry and exit since March 1, 2023.

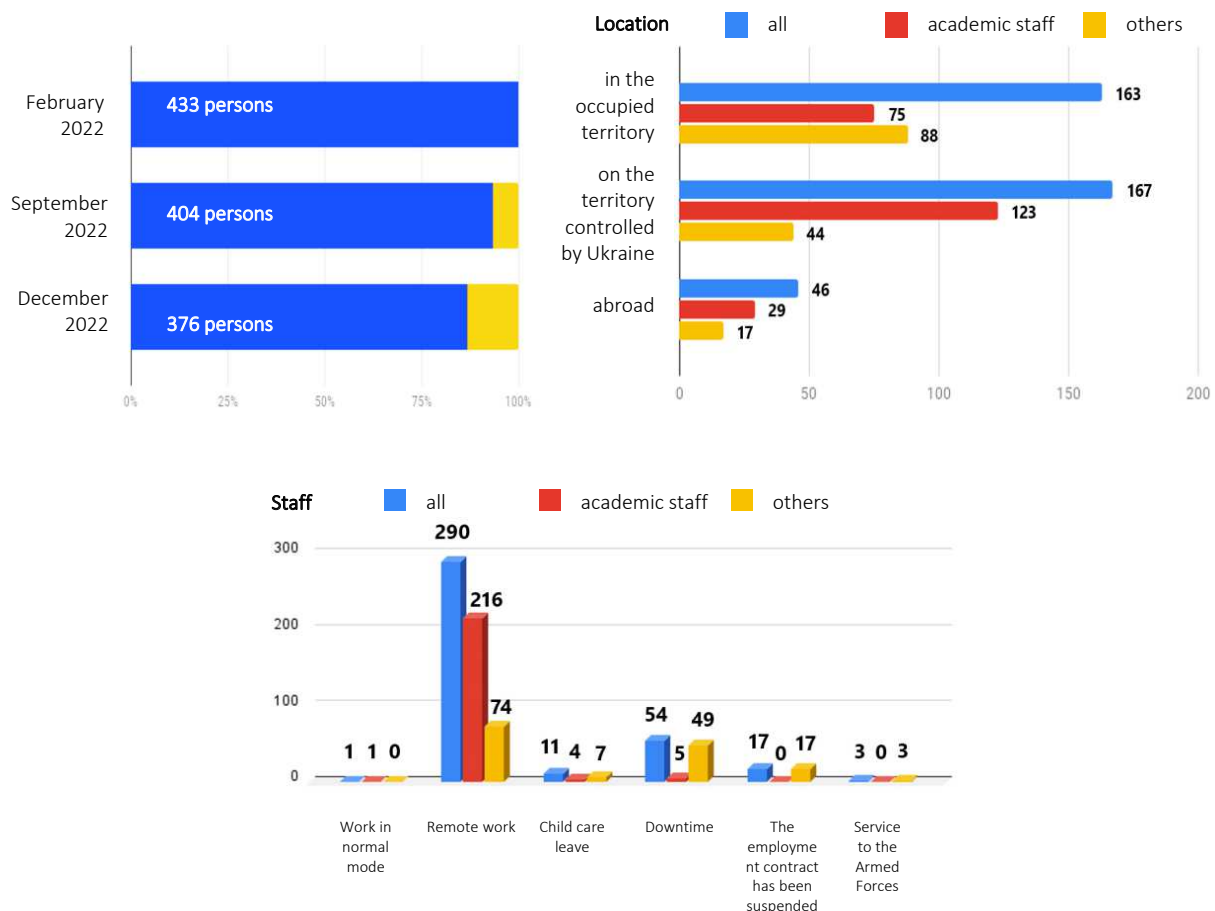


Figure 1. BSPU staff

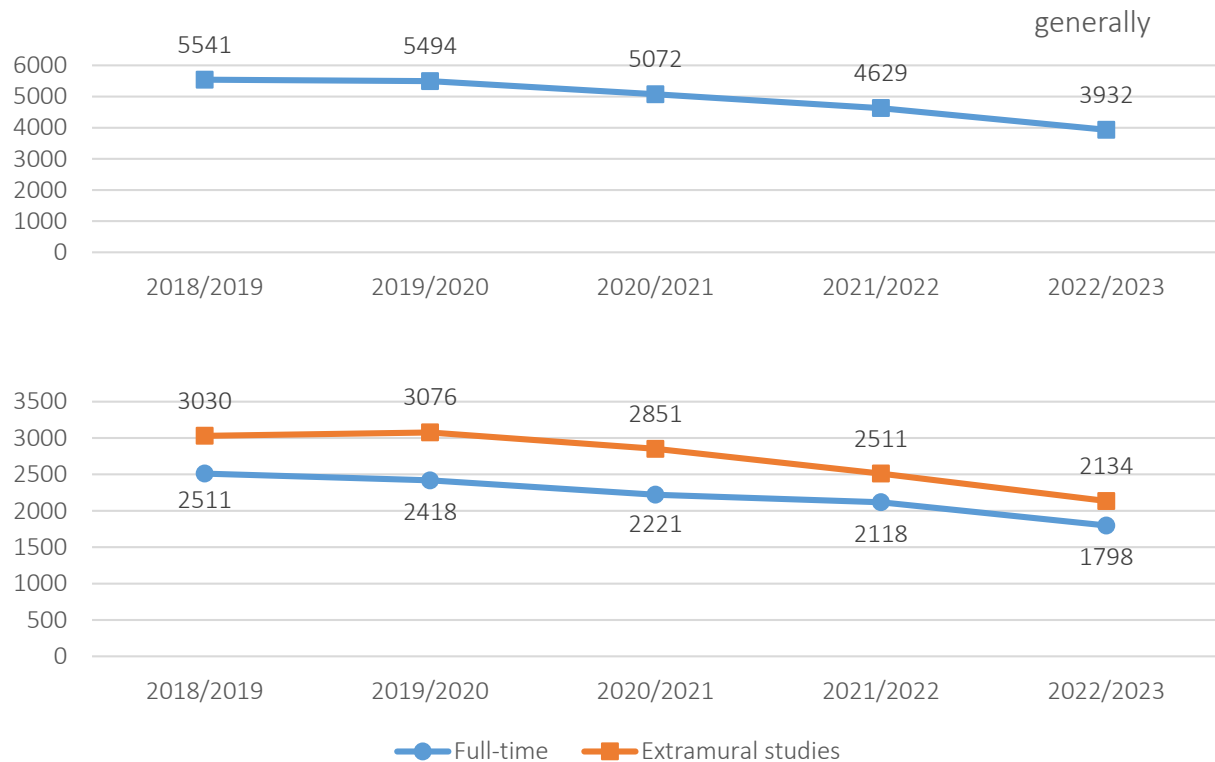


Figure 2. Contingent of university graduates

1.4. Students contingent

The higher education student contingent of BSPU in the 2021–2022 academic year numbered 4629 people. By December 2022, the student contingent has decreased by 15% (Figure 2). The student population has decreased due to difficulties recruiting students to relocated universities. Many potential applicants remained in occupied Berdyansk and feared threats from occupiers, causing them to opt for a pseudo-university.

The postgraduate student contingent in the 2020–2021 academic year numbered 27 people, and in the 2021–2022 academic year – 29 people. Today (2022–2023 academic year), 28 postgraduate students are studying in the BSPU, seven of whom have taken academic leave. Thus, it can be concluded that the postgraduate student contingent was successfully preserved in full.

To organize students' graduation, the issuance of diplomas, and the admission campaign for 2022, a decision was made to localize part of the university staff (around 30 people) in Zaporizhzhia from May to October. Diploma defenses were held

online. Diplomas were issued in Zaporizhzhia to graduates who could come, while others received an electronic copy of their certificates.

To organize the admission campaign, the university closely collaborated with the humanitarian centers of territorial communities and education departments of the city and Berdyansk district. This allowed for a full intake of students: 598 for bachelor's degrees and 733 for master's degrees.

1.5. Scientific activity of the university

Science is one of the most vulnerable aspects of university activity, as it requires significant resources, inspiration, and internal motivation (Arbuzova, 2023; Kozmenko & Ostapenko, 2022; Cumming, 2022). To monitor the scientific effectiveness of university academic staff, three rounds of surveys were conducted in April, July, and December (Suchikova, 2023). As a result, the main obstacles to activating the scientific activity were identified, and an emergency action plan was developed. To initiate the publication activity of academic staff, a free university professional publication was issued. In addition, several seminars

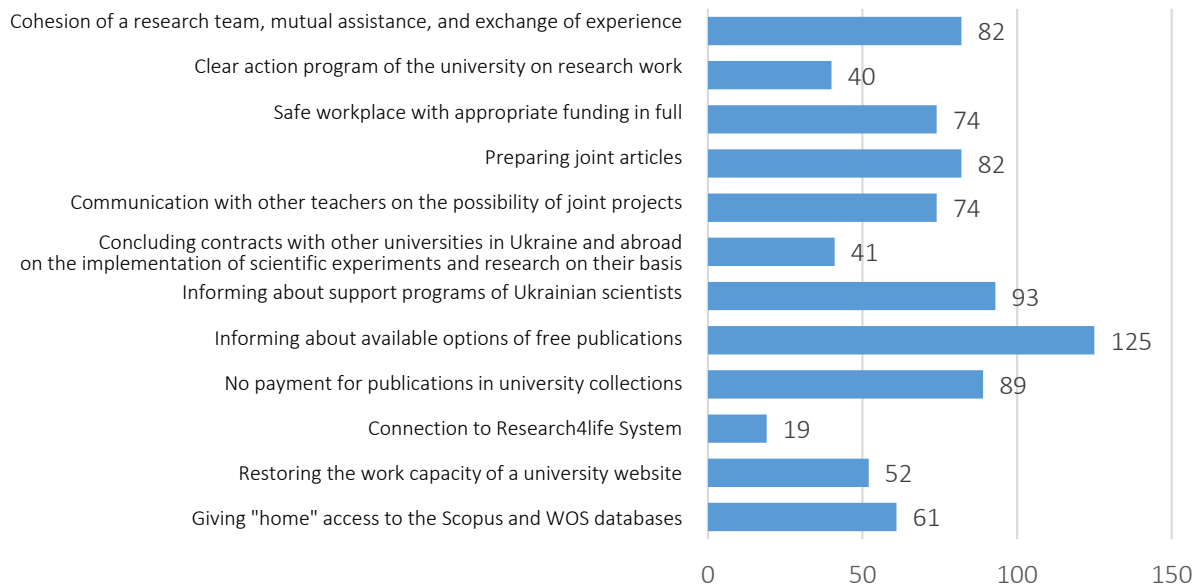


Figure 3. Respondents' answers to the question "Choose the most relevant and effective response tools to new challenges on research activities during the war"

and training were designed and piloted to further boost academic staff and students' grant and project activities (Figure 3).

Additionally, the OpenDoors project "ProScopus" was launched, and the Center of Teaching Excellence "ArsDosendi" introduced the new module "Scientometrics. First steps". To provide university academic staff with prompt information about available scientific opportunities, a Telegram channel called "Science. Reload" was created. Support enabled university

academic staff to swiftly restore their scientific activity (Figure 4).

It was expected that the months of occupation, loss of material and technical base, university relocation, and academic staff's active migration would significantly impact publication activity (Figure 5). However, analysis of Scopus and Web of Science databases revealed a decrease of only 9%. Ukrainian academic staff remained proactive and responsible (Suchikova et al., 2023), allowing them to look for new opportunities during the war.



Figure 4. Respondents' answers to the question "What steps of the scientific department do you consider appropriate for further "reboot" of research activities?"

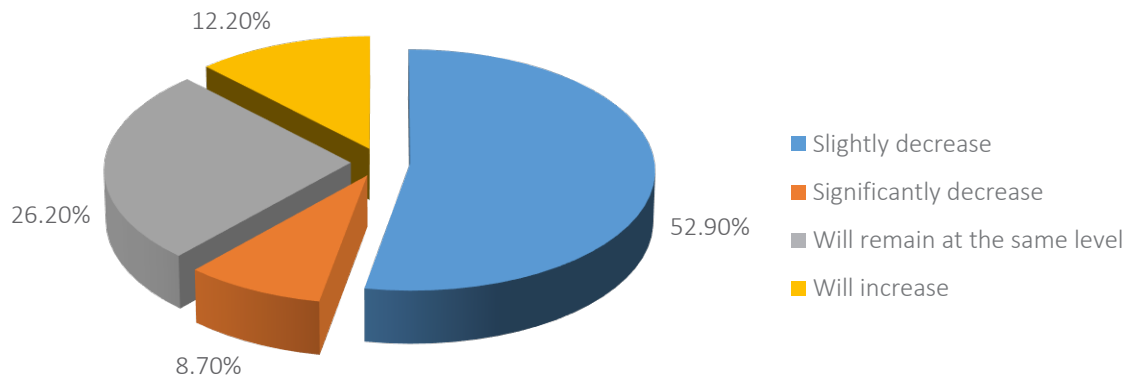


Figure 5. Respondents' answers to the question "How can you evaluate the effectiveness of scientific activity at the university at the end of 2022?"

Eight academic staff members confirmed the scientific status of associate professors, and two became professors. As the university could not use its own laboratories, scientists conducted research in laboratories and scientific centers worldwide.

According to the general fund, funding for science will double in 2022 (by 210%). In 2023 – by 180% compared to 2022 and by 379% – compared to 2021. There was, however, a decrease in terms of the special fund: by 45% compared to 2021. This is understandable since most grant programs were frozen (Irwin, 2023). The performance of scientific services and farm contracts was complicated, if not impossible, under existing conditions.

1.6. Financial and economic activity

In 2022, the university's special fund comprised 19% of the entire budget. Therefore, even though the university's budget decreased by 17%, the salary, scholarship, and other payments were made in 2022 in full and on time.

In February 2022, on the eve of the war, a large-scale renovation of almost all buildings was completed at the university. The material and technical base was fundamentally updated, and scientific and multimedia equipment was purchased. Unfortunately, in the same month, the university lost everything.

Today, the university purchases new computer equipment, ensuring the continuity of education and operation after the return to deoccupied Berdyansk. Unfortunately, it is now difficult to

predict the timing of the return and estimate the final damages. In general, the assets lost at their original cost amount to about UAH 100 million. Therefore, the replacement value is challenging to calculate today. However, it should also be understood that university buildings are generally invaluable. For example, the main building of the BSPU is a monument of history and architecture of national significance. Today, this building is one of Ukraine's ten most beautiful universities.

1.7. The third mission of the university

One of the critical missions of the university is the "third mission" (Thomas et al., 2023; Westermann et al., 2022). The cooperation between the University and regional and local authorities, public organizations, and social institutions aims to unite the community that found itself under the temporary occupation of Russian troops. Depending on the phases of war acceptance, the implementation of the university's third mission and volunteer initiatives of the university community had different contexts. These included:

- providing humanitarian assistance to a dormitory and apartment-renting students without family or external support;
- participating in activities such as collecting and processing appeals, providing psychological aid, preparing food, and settling Mariupolians;
- joining the work of centers and hubs, distributing medicines, preparing food, weaving

ghillie suits, and serving sandwiches and coffee on the roads of the Dnipropetrovsk region;

- conducting online lectures, organizing permits for children temporarily moved to Zaporizhzhia;
- offering free online psychological support;
- holding conferences with proceeds partly allocated to the Armed Forces of Ukraine, who protect the Zaporizhzhia direction and contribute to the de-occupation of the city where the University was located before relocation;
- documenting the testimonies of people who experienced temporary occupation to specify the crimes against humanity as part of grant programs activities Documenting Ukraine (IWM) and Isolation Zmina 2.0;
- organizing or participating in charity fundraising for various military or charitable needs; connecting the local population and internally displaced persons of the region abroad through multiple means such as social media channels in messenger, clubs, and meetings of interest, as well as organizing peaceful rallies in support of Ukraine.

Although the university community – Berdyansk Territorial Community – is now scattered around the world, almost everyone needs to remain attentive to the fate of their “little” Motherland, striving to unite around a common goal – the victory of Ukraine.

1.8. Real vs. fake: Informational resistance to russian pseudo-university activities

Another challenge faced by the university community of BSPU is creation of a fake university, “Melitopol State University,” by the occupying authorities. In the temporarily occupied city of Berdyansk, the occupiers opened the “Humanities Faculty of Melitopol State University,” where they provide education based on russian standards. The occupiers use all the university buildings and modern scientific and technical equipment. The pseudo-faculty is headed by a former BSPU employee.

The occupiers had to recruit staff and students to establish the educational process. Some employees consciously cooperated, while others succumbed to the typical psychological pressure methods used by russian agents: intimidation, deception, and coercion. The occupiers continue to come to the homes of BSPU academic staff who are still in Berdyansk with weapons. The last known fact of the detention of two members of BSPU academic staff by the occupiers occurred at the end of December 2022. The occupiers forced the academic staff to work for the pseudo-university and threatened their lives. Fortunately, they managed to escape from occupied Berdyansk and continue to work at BSPU.

The destruction of the library fund is a significant loss for BSPU. The pseudo-university leadership does this publicly, demonstrating video clips on social media and social networks to exert psychological pressure on the temporarily occupied community. However, they do the most damage to the university’s image, as they often present their pseudo-university as the Berdyansk University. Pseudofaculty staff call BSPU students and invite them to study at the “Berdyansk University,” arguing that “russia is here forever!” and “Online learning is not real learning.” Therefore, the university leadership has developed and implemented a program to promote the positive image of the real Ukrainian university and protect students from the influence of the occupying authorities.

1.9. What is next?

Overcoming the consequences of war is a long and difficult process (Dobiesz et al., 2022; Mosek et al., 2011). University management must look to the future and be aware of existing problems that complicate the activity and impede the university’s development. For example, losing university servers led to moving the website to the cloud. EPAM helped search for a cloud environment and sponsors. Still, due to the limited volume allocated, it was impossible to deploy critical elements like the repository, corporate mail, and electronic document management system. This task is operational and urgent. In addition, due to the lack of corporate mail, obtaining administrative rights in the Scopus database is impossible. Questions remain about preserving the academic potential and stu-

dent contingent, and thinking about the 2023 admission campaign is necessary, which is expected to be even more difficult than in 2022 for relocated universities.

At the state level, it is essential to consider preserving pedagogical education and universities. First, there is a severe shortage of teachers, which will primarily affect the occupied territories. After de-occupation, restoring the activ-

ity of schools will be necessary (Ma et al., 2022). This highlights the global nature and complexity of the situation. Secondly, the war has shown the importance of raising a patriotic spirit among the younger generation. Teachers are responsible for educating youth on patriotic values, increasing their awareness of the culture, history, language, and national identity, and preserving the values corresponding to Ukrainian Constitution and legislation.

CONCLUSION

An essential prerequisite for the stabilization of the activities of the relocated Berdyansk State Pedagogical University was the renewal of its development strategy, based on a qualitative analysis of the new conditions of university management through a three-phase reaction: the primary reaction, the adoption of management decisions, and the planning of a new reality.

The main measures of these management decisions were the directness and transparency of university management. No matter how complex the situation was, this created a sense of presence and safety for the entire university community. Moreover, the university strives to increase the tools for internal and external communication and support the university community, the whole community, and society through constant communication, information, explanatory work, and the dissemination of information.

After 53 days of operating under occupation, Berdyansk State Pedagogical University resumed its activities as a University without Walls. During the year, the university lost 15% of its total student body and 13% of its employees, while its funding decreased by 17% compared to 2021. In addition, its publication activity decreased by 9%. However, due to its anticrisis management decisions, the university could maintain its autonomy, restore all types of activities, and rally its community.

The possibilities of post-war restoration of the Ukrainian higher education system at the national level, as well as the assessment of the results of the pioneering case of the relocated BSPU, can become the subject of further research in this direction.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Conceptualization: Yana Suchikova.

Data curation: Hanna Lopatina, Natalia Tsybuliak, Anastasia Popova, Ihor Bohdanov.

Formal analysis: Yana Suchikova.

Funding acquisition: Anastasia Popova, Ihor Bohdanov, Yana Suchikova.

Investigation: Hanna Lopatina, Natalia Tsybuliak, Yana Suchikova.

Methodology: Anastasia Popova, Yana Suchikova.

Project administration: Yana Suchikova.

Resources: Yana Suchikova.

Supervision: Ihor Bohdanov.

Visualization: Yana Suchikova.

Writing – original draft: Hanna Lopatina, Natalia Tsybuliak, Anastasia Popova, Yana Suchikova.

Writing – review & editing: Ihor Bohdanov.

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