"Academic solidarity and digitization: Management of a displaced university"

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NUMBER OF REFERENCES	NUMBER OF FIGURES	NUMBER OF TABLES
40	3	1

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ACADEMIC SOLIDARITY AND DIGITIZATION: MANAGEMENT OF A DISPLACED UNIVERSITY

Abstract

This study aims to generalize and systematize the experience of Kherson State University (Ukraine) in times of war under temporary russian occupation of Kherson city and the university displacement. All these factors have designed new practices of management and strategic development. The key issues of stability and resistance to the challenges of war of the university's community are rethinking the university strategy and the solidarity of national and international academic institutions, local city and state government, civil society, and businesses. The study shows that the primary mechanism of university functioning in occupation and displacement is total digitization of all processes and enhanced social communication of the university community (e.g., transition from partial to total digital document turnover and active use of social media and internet communications in the strategy of crisis communication and university's community support). Speed-up of digital transformations and distance educational technologies of teaching in synchronous and asynchronous formats (in conditions of unstable internet connection and energy supply) ensured the high quality of the educational process.

The personal values of university students and staff (resistance to the invaders (occupants), rejection of collaboration, and volunteer activities) and results of the enrolment campaign in 2022 (1037 entrants) demonstrate the benefits of perennial university activities in the context of national identity development. These also highlight perspectives of the university to form the human capital of Kherson region in general and intellectual elite in particular.

Keywords	higher education, war, displaced university, educational resistance to war, Kherson State University
JEL Classification	M14, I23, J61

INTRODUCTION

War, occupation regime, and political violence significantly affect all spheres of human life (Makeiev et al., 2017; Golańska, 2022). In a socio-cultural dimension, institutions become the objects of primary occupation due to their ability to become the centers of educational activity that form a national identity and patriotic education. According to Vaskivska et al. (2023), russia promotes ideological and propaganda narratives by means of education in order to create the outlook necessary for the authoritarian state.

Higher education is traditionally provided by three constituents: education, science, and social values (Ashida, 2023). Due to globalization, education covers communication and partnership functions for sustainable human development (Lafferty & Meadowcroft, 2000; Rumbley, 2020; Zhou et al., 2020) and transnationalization of education (Beerkens, 2002). As a result, universities become critical social actors in promoting human values and global solidarity (Gaidano et al., 2020). Anderson (2004) found that universities also play a leading role in constituting social elites, especially in the epoch of nationalism and democracy growth.

Considering the unique role of education in society, it has become a strategically important task at full-scale war to provide continuous work for universities and overcome existing management, financial, social, and psychological challenges of war. At the beginning of 2000, UNESCO initiated a range of research focusing on better analysis and understanding of the general reasons, methods, and circumstances of military attacks on education (O'Malley, 2010). It has been proved that it is essential to understand not just possible mechanisms of precise monitoring and reporting in this sphere but also the strategies of preventing and reacting and their effectiveness. Unfortunately, military attacks have become a reality for the Ukrainian educational system for almost a decade (Dodonov, 2016; Kurylo et al., 2019; Zakharova, 2020; I. Shevchuk & A. Shevchuk, 2022).

Kherson region experienced the fastest full-scale occupation in this current stage of the russian-Ukrainian war. Kherson has become the only regional city center occupied since the very first day – February 24, 2022. International (The World Bank, 2022) and Ukrainian (Shkarlet, 2022) analytical reviews demonstrate a general overview of the challenges of war and their consequences for higher education in Ukraine. However, each university has its unique experience, considering many external and internal factors that influence its functioning.

Given that, this study aims to generalize and systematize the experience of Kherson State University functioning in the conditions of a full-scale war, temporary occupation of Kherson, and displacement.

1. RESULTS

1.1. Key challenges at the beginning of the war for Kherson State University

In 2014, for the first time in the history of its independence since 1991, Ukraine suffered military invasion and occupation of its territories from the side of another country. However, during its 100-year history, Kherson State University faced war actions and occupation several times. The university was founded in 1917 on the base of Yuriivskyi institute for teachers, displaced during the First World War; it was multiply reorganized between the World Wars. Since 1935, it has functioned as N.K. Krupska Kherson State Pedagogical Institute (Belyaev et al., 2007).

During the Second World War, it had to stop education and all other processes for almost three years – from August 19, 1941, to March 20, 1944. During the occupation, the university lost all its facilities and equipment at education and special laboratories, a library with one thousand books, a 3-storeyed educational building, a canteen, special apartments for academic staff, and two dormitories. The university's main building was used as a horse stable (Belyaev et al., 2007). Education technologies of that time could not

provide distance education; moreover, most male students and lecturers were mobilized. In the postwar time, the institution resumed its work. Its progressive development enabled the establishment of Kherson State Pedagogical Institute in 1998, and in 2002 Kherson State University was created. Before the war, Kherson State University functioned as a classical institution with multiple educational fields, providing education on different specialties and educational programs (more than 120) for undergraduates, graduates, and postgraduates (Kherson State University, 2022).

On February 24, 2022, a full-scale russian-Ukrainian war started and is still ongoing. Almost 20% of the Ukrainian territories were occupied for various periods. As a result of the russian aggression in 2022, 94% of Kherson region was occupied on the first day of the war. According to the tactics of the occupants, the Donetsk scenario of occupation has been implemented (Mykhailova, 2022), namely, an urbicide with a selective terror of the population with the motto of the fight against "Nazism," economic depression of cities, and forced people's evacuation.

During the full-scale occupation of Kherson, the university faced the following significant challenges (Malchykova & Pylypenko, 2022):
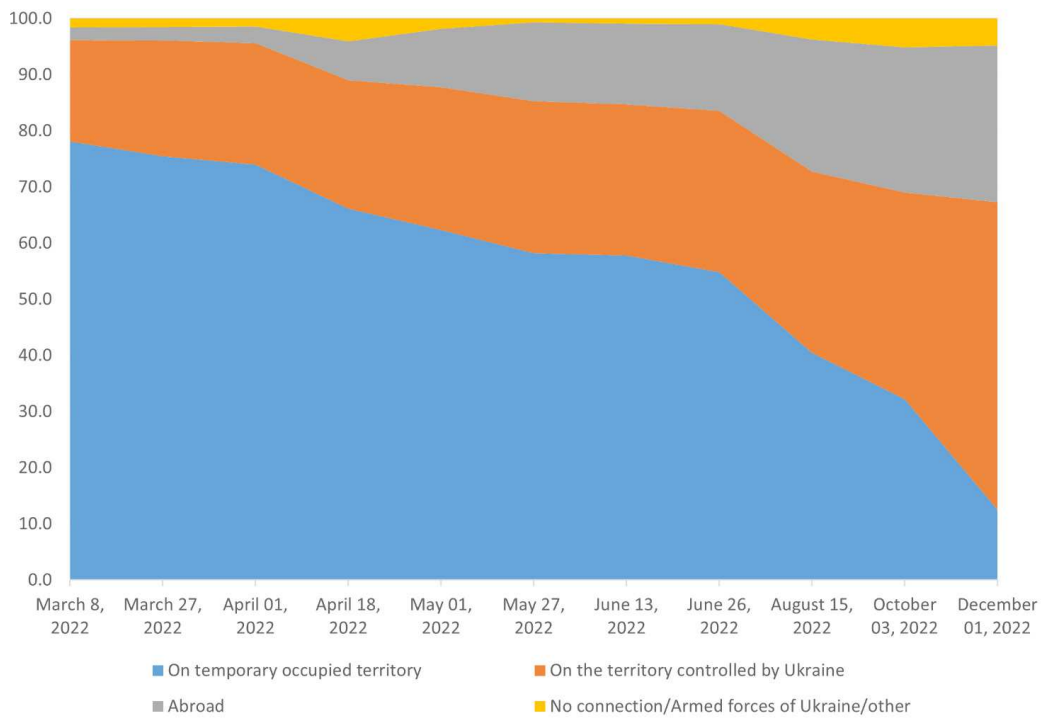
Figure 1. Relocation dynamics of Kherson State University students (%), 2022
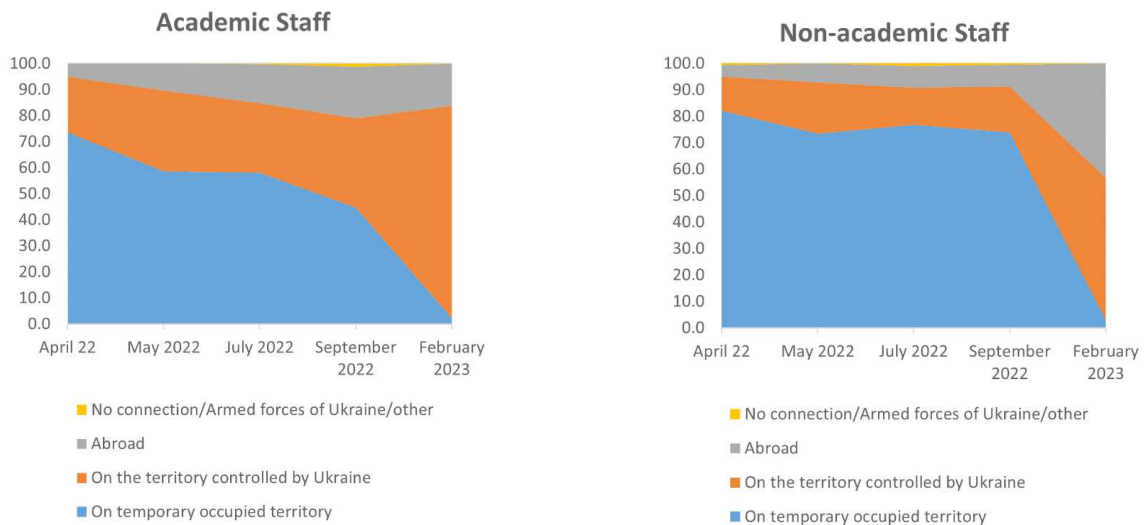
Figure 2. Relocation dynamics of the Kherson State University academic and non-academic staff (%), 2022

1) militarization of the city, total destruction of social institutions and administration services, violation of human rights and norms of international humanitarian rights;

2) lack of humanitarian aid and total deficiency of living essentials: bread and milk products, household chemical goods, facilities for personal hygiene, all types of petrol, medication, etc.

3) no access to Ukrainian mobile communication and media, total occupation of the informational space;

4) university's displacement, fake clone-university in the premises of Kherson State University, occupation of the university's buildings, damage and misappropriation of the university's symbolic artifacts and personal things of university staff;

5) mass evacuation from the occupied city abroad or to the territory controlled by the Ukrainian government and military through uncoordinated "corridors," with all possible risks for any person.

The overall influence of all these challenges during martial law and city's occupation led to risky decisions about the individual evacuation; Figure 1 shows the general map of students' relocation and Figure 2 – academic and non-academic staff of Kherson State University.

1.2. Main stages of Kherson State University functioning in the conditions of occupation and displacement

All challenges forced the university administration adapt its strategy to the martial law conditions and optimize all operations. Ukraine had already had the experience of universities' functioning in occupation and temporary relocation from the territories of Donetsk and Luhansk regions and the Crimea in 2012 (Dodonov, 2016; Kurylo et al., 2019; Zakharova, 2020), but the realities of 2022 were definitely unique.

The full-scale invasion, active military operations, and urbicide in all its dimensions (Clements-Hunt, 2022; K. Mezentsev & O. Mezentsev, 2022) determined absolutely new experience and new views of the institutions' functioning (Budnyk et al., 2022; Shkarlet, 2022; Lavrysh et al., 2022; Trofymenko, 2022).

The university's functioning in the conditions of martial law dating 2022 can be characterized via a few stages. On February 24, 2022, at the beginning of the full-scale invasion of russian troops into the territory of Ukraine, the educational process at Kherson State University was temporarily interrupted due to the Decision of the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine. As a result, academic and non-academic staff were transferred to distance work.

However, some departments continued to work in person and ensured the university's functioning and the volunteer center's coordina-tion, supplying the shelters on the university's premises, which became a temporary home for the university staff and citizens of Kherson. At the beginning of March, more than 800 people were simultaneously in the university's shelters (Spivakovskyi et al., 2023; Shemelynets et al., 2023). The university mainly focused on volunteer activities. At the same time, Kherson State University prepared to resume its activities in the new conditions of martial law.

Before the russia's full-scale invasion, Kherson State University has already resumed in-person and hybrid formats of education after the pandemic restrictions (Spivakovskyi et al., 2023). It was made due to the high level of staff's and students' vaccination and innovative decisions to create classes for a hybrid education format. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the technologies for distance education have become essential. Therefore, in martial law conditions, the city's occupation, and everyday challenges, it was possible to renew the education online.

At the same time, considering the conditions of martial law, occupation, and specificity of the students and staff relocation (to other Ukrainian regions or abroad), the renewal of education activities became possible only owing to the digital educational resources, multiple synchronous and asynchronous educational approaches and digitization of university's processes in general.

In addition, the university launched many altruist practices and academic solidarity initiatives focusing on the support of the university community. However, russia has totally ignored international humanitarian law, not regarding the fact that human rights should be ensured (Durhin, 2016). At the same time, the actions of the occupants were based on the principles of collective punishment (Clements-Hunt, 2022) against the civil population and critical life infrastructure.

Given that, since the first days of the war, the community of Kherson State University has been engaged in charity and different types of volunteer activities:

- volunteer help and interaction (money transaction, sharing of food and medication);

- interaction with Kherson, Ukrainian, and International volunteer centers;

- volunteer movement coordination;

- volunteer informational and communication support – providing free internet access in the conditions of its absence or limit, established by occupants;

- support of elderly people to master digital technologies.

The second stage (from March 28 to June 14, 2022) is the total renewal of the educational process in the distance format and relocation (since April 20, 2022) of Kherson State University to the premises of Vasyl Stefanyk Precarpathian National University in Ivano-Frankivsk.

Overall, as of August 1, 2022, 29 Ukrainian institutions and 64 separate structural department units of the institutions have been relocated since 2014 (when the first wave of relocation occurred). These relocations were determined by creating a safe educational environment for the students and university staff from the regions where active military actions were held (Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson regions, and some territories of Zaporizhzhia and Kharkiv regions) (Shkarlet, 2022).

At this stage, consolidated decisions considering the relocation of Kherson State University were made by labor collectives of both (relocated and host) universities. However, the actual activities of the university were performed in two offices – in Kherson and in Ivano-Frankivsk. The main reason that was predominant for the decision to relocate the administrative office into the territory controlled by Ukrainian authorities was the necessity to provide a safe and stable system of administration of all business processes of the university, which was impossible to do on the temporarily occupied territory of Kherson.

Besides, Kherson State University could not access the treasury accounts and EDEBO (United State Digital Base of Education) in Kherson, as the access was limited due to security and personal information protection. Thanks to the relocation of Kherson State University to Ivano-Frankivsk,

it became possible to fulfill all financial requirements for the students and the university staff.

A system of differentiated salaries payment was introduced, ensuring university's financial stability. This means that the salary amount of the university staff depended on the ability to accomplish tasks and duties, i.e.: suspension, forced stoppage, or full-time job. To quickly adapt to the new realities and avoid personnel deficiency and shortage of staff who could ensure administrative, organizational, financial, and other vital functions for the university during martial law, several job functions of 20 personnel members were changed.

The educational process was uninterrupted due to distance learning and synchronous and asynchronous education. In addition to that, new practices for educational process administration were initiated, i.e., monitoring of students' location, monitoring of students' involvement in completing tests and final attestation, monitoring of classes (lectures and seminars) held in synchronous and asynchronous regimes, and monitoring of effectiveness and the quality of materials added for the distance courses on the university's platform.

An extensive social media network (Telegram, Viber, WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram) was one of the most potent tools for stabilizing the situation. In martial law, all university channels (like KSU_Talks_community with almost 2000 members, including students, academic, and administrative staff) became the main source of twenty-four-hour communication and support. The experience of extensive everyday use of social media (Taylor & Kent, 2007; Cheng, 2018) and internet communication (Perry et al., 2003) as an effective strategy for crisis communication, crises support of the university's business processes (McGuinness & Marchand, 2014) proved high efficiency of these digital tools.

To accelerate digital transformation, the following steps were implemented:

- fast and complete transfer of all digital services to the servers of Vasyl Stefanyk Precarpathian National University and other cloud servers;

- backups of infrastructure sources, services, and their saving in safe storages, with their future upload on other servers;

- transfer of personal corporate emails to the local server of MS Exchange and Google Workspace;

- use of KSU24 service for ensuring the digital processes of the university, including digital document flow via Google Workspace tools and KSU24 e-service;

- transfer of the informational and analytical system of the university to the servers of Vasyl Stefanyk Precarpathian National University and creation of a new model of the interaction of its internal components;

- organization and insurance of safe access to the digital tools and platforms, as well as an information exchange between all the staff who work remotely;

- provision of students, academic, and non-academic university staff with licensed software;

- transfer of the whole infrastructure from the servers of Vasyl Stefanyk Precarpathian National University to Azure cloud servers;

- creation of a new mechanism of interaction with all system components for continual work.

Maintenance, protection, and transfer of the university's digital infrastructure have become critical issues for the stable running of the institution. All these tasks were completed within this period in the occupied Kherson. The total amount of Kherson State University digital space was approximately 20 TB. Most information was located on the servers in the premises of Kherson State University: personal data, corporative email, documents, digital tools, software, the system for distance learning (virtual university, KSUonline), university's academic journals, official website, websites of the university's departments, a virtual museum, and other digital services – 24 sources on the whole.

At this stage, the information was transferred to the digital cloud servers. After Kherson State University's administration office was temporarily relocated to Ivano-Frankivsk, this information was transferred to two servers, given by Vasyl Stefanyk Precarpathian National University.

One of the biggest challenges was the final attestation for Bachelor's degree students. However, it was successfully organized with the help of distance technologies, flexible schedules, and synchronous studies with video recordings. One of the most outstanding results of that period was that 935 Bachelor's students managed to pass their final attestation, considering external and internal difficulties, war, occupation, evacuation, and all other challenges they had to face. Equally important is that in December 2022, a final attestation for Master's degree students was accomplished, and 337 passed it successfully.

During this second stage, international activities have also become of primary importance and ensured the stable functioning of the university during the period of its displacement:

- encouragement of academic and non-academic staff of the university to join international scientific and educational grant programs;

- development of the capacity of university's departments to master and engage in the opportunities of international academic mobility;

- internalization of educational programs via implementation of academic mobility and double degree diploma programs.

One more innovative project was a foreign language education office that allowed university students and academics to learn English for educational and scientific purposes.

The third stage (from June 14 to November 11, 2022) was when the university premises in Kherson were occupied by a russian pseudo-administration. As a result, university staff had no physical access to its infrastructure. During this period, all academic and non-academic staff had to work remotely, according to the rules of Ukrainian legislation.

Table 1. Comparative analysis of the enrolment at Kherson State University, 2020–2022

Level of education	2020 (as of December 1, 2020)	2021 (as of December 1, 2021)	2022 (as of December 1, 2022)	2022 in comparison to 2021
Bachelor's degree (based on completed full secondary education)	807	709	390	−319
Bachelor's degree (based on previously obtained higher education degree)	202	195	98	−97
Master's degree (including fully completed secondary education, specialty 222 Medicine)	569	427	529	+102
Ph.D.	17	18	20	+2
Total	1595	1349	1037	**-312**

However, there were some negative tendencies among the university staff. First, some personnel decided to retire due to forced evacuation. Second, some academics and staff members became collaborators, i.e., they used new social and political conditions for their social mobility or career ladder, as they did not plan to escape the country or the city (Zubchenko, 2022). Overall, the number of university staff members who became collaborators is 19, making up 6.7% of the total university staff. The university commission that aimed to reveal the facts of collaborative activities discovered such practices. Although most decided to resign on their own will, three of them were fired because of the indisputable evidence of their collaborative actions, i.e., teaching and providing standards of education of the occupational authorities (Kherson State University, 2022).

A high level of patriotism of the staff of Kherson State University can be demonstrated using such numbers: five Vice-Rectors and nine Deans – none of them agreed to collaborative interaction. Among 30 chiefs of the departments, only one person became a collaborationist.

Next, one of the biggest challenges was the enrolment campaign in 2022. However, thanks to the civil initiatives and total support of the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, the admission was held with many innovations. First of all, this referred to the privileged categories of the entrants and entrants from the dangerous territories, who were allowed to enter the university on the results of their entrance exams instead of passing a national multisubject test (for the state-funded studies) or their motivation letter (in case of fee-based studies). Second, the entrance exams were held via distance technologies, and documents were submitted remotely.

As a result, although the number of university entrants decreased, the enrolment in 2022 was successful (Table 1), especially considering the realities of martial law and the conditions of the university's functioning in general. Furthermore, it was remarkable that among the total number of entrants, 85% are from Kherson region (Spivakovskyi et al., 2023). Such results demonstrate the true values of the youth and reflect the achievements of the long-lasting activity of the regional education system.

The fourth stage (from November 11, 2022, to the present) started since Kherson's de-occupation. The university had to develop the "route map" of returning to Kherson, inventorying primary documents and capital equipment, and resuming activities of some departments and services in the premises of Kherson State University directly in Kherson. However, after the de-occupation of the right-bank side of Kherson and Kherson region, the situation became more complicated because of even more cruel "post-occupation" urbicide caused by constant shelling, bombarding of infrastructure, further changes in the demographic situation, and the overall decrease in the psychological and emotional condition of the city citizens.

Overall, full-scale military activities, long-lasting occupation, and forced evacuation greatly affected the psychological and emotional condition of all the participants of the educational process (Figure 3). Babury and Hayward (2013) revealed that universities play a substantial role in the preservation of the human capital of the country; they influence the constructive reactions to physical losses of war and crises of psychological health in the conditions of minimal human and financial resources.
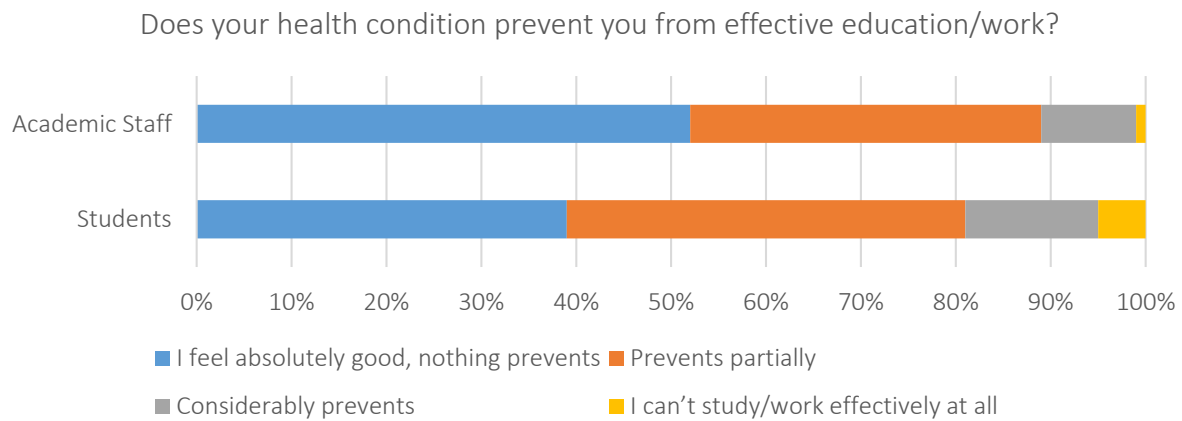
Does your health condition prevent you from effective education/work?

Figure 3. Psycho-emotional condition of the participants of the educational process
at Kherson State University, 2022

1.3. Basic mechanisms of successful functioning of Kherson State University in conditions of displacement

Partnership, academic solidarity, innovative digitization of education, and enhanced communication were the fundamental mechanisms that determined the stability of the university and its ability to adapt to multiple external threats and internal challenges and business processes during martial law. Academic solidarity initiatives are considered to be not just the basis of innovative models of achieving global educational goals on the principles of cooperation and solidarity (Tetrevova & Vlckova, 2018; Gaidano et al., 2020; Gunn, 2020), but they are believed to be valuable for international partnership in the whole European educational field.

The following international and all-Ukrainian initiatives have been implemented by Kherson State University during the occupation and martial law:

- the project "Academic Bridge" united scholars from different countries and continents to support academics during war and occupation;

- financial aid provided by international donors was essential for supplying food, medication, and life essentials for the staff and students of the university;

- international grants were offered for scholars who left their homes and needed financial support to continue their scientific work;

- programs of academic mobility and double degree diplomas helped to provide students with the facilities for education, as access to the premises of Kherson State University in Kherson was not possible;

- humanitarian aid of a different kind from Ukrainian institutions for the university's relocated staff, academics, and students who left in Kherson.

Fast digital transformation of academic institutions became prominent (König & Sokolovska, 2022) not only for ensuring continuous and qualitative processes but essential for the support of the whole university community.

Among the results of Kherson State University, the following can be admitted:

1. Extension of partnership with Microsoft company and obtaining the license M365 for each student and each member of academic and non-academic staff;

2. Receiving sponsor's help from the Microsoft company for placing the digital infrastructure of the university in the cloud space MS Azure IT for the total amount of 16 500$.

3. Obtaining a free license for Udemy, Coursera, Labster, and Physiopedia Plus platforms.

4. Receiving 300 free Zoom for Education licenses for the academic staff enables them to record the courses by any gadget. Such a license allows 300 to 1000 participants at one conference if necessary.

5. As of March 14, 2023, 4.33 TB of video content (recordings of lectures and seminars, recordings of exams) has been uploaded to the university's digital archive.

Owing to implemented cases, not regarding the displacement and challenges of martial law, Kherson State University managed to preserve its leading positions in the educational and scientific fields of Kherson region. It continues to implement its strategic priorities:

- meet the actual and perspective educational needs of students through their ability to build individual educational trajectories;

- constant growth of the quality of education;

- development of scientific research based on the principles of open science and commercialization of the achieved scientific results;

- modernization of innovative digital infrastructure of the university;

- partnership and cooperation of the university community.

Even though a possible discussion, a displaced Kherson State University and its adaptation to martial law and occupation conditions determined new strategic priorities for its development. This also underpinned revolutionary changes in the institutional archetype of higher education (Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, 2020), which means it is passing away from a standard classical university (a generator of interdisciplinary knowledge) to a digital university with the capacity for scaling its practices. As a result, the university's educational programs focus on flexibility, educational digital platforms, automated support, and easy access. The conditions of the university's success are the digitalization of all educational processes, great scaling of its activity, internalization, and international partnership.

CONCLUSION

This study focused on the specificity of functioning and new management practices of Kherson State University during a full-scale war, temporary occupation, and forced displacement. As a result, the key factors underpinning the stable functioning and resilience of the university have been revealed. Furthermore, the findings highlighted the significant role of reinterpreting the university strategy and its role in society. As a result, the academic solidarity of the university staff, national and international cooperation, and interaction of the city and state self-government bodies, civil community, and businesses became dominant.

These factors also became determinants for administrative decisions, underpinning the academic resilience. It is considered necessary not only at the level of the university community but also at the regional level.

Total digitization of all business processes and social communication of the university staff has become the critical mechanism ensuring the university's functioning during occupation and displacement. The following digital transformations have been foregrounded:

- total digitization of document turnover;

- the use of social media and internet communication as a strategy of crisis communication and support of the university community;

- acceleration of the digital transformation of educational resources and implementation of distance educational technologies;

- introduction of synchronous and asynchronous formats of education.

The main values of the members of the educational process of the university, i.e., resistance to occupants, rejection to become collaborationists, volunteer activities, and the mood of the youth, supported by the results of the enrolment campaign, reflect the effectiveness of long-term university activities in the framework of national and regional identity formation. It also ensures perspectives of the institution to shape the human capital of Kherson region in general and its intellectual elite in particular.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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