






“Ukrainian universities in new realities: Strategies for preserving academic potential during the war”

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SPECIAL ISSUE "UKRAINIAN UNIVERSITIES IN NEW REALITIES: 10 YEARS OF WAR"

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UKRAINIAN UNIVERSITIES IN NEW REALITIES: STRATEGIES FOR PRESERVING ACADEMIC POTENTIAL DURING THE WAR

Editorial Article

The war in Ukraine has been ongoing for 10 years, reshaping the lives of people, communities, institutions, and worldviews. The occupation of Crimea and significant parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions in 2014 marked the first wave of shocks for Ukraine's higher education system. The massive relocation of universities from these regions signaled the beginning of a new reality. During this time, frontline regions actively demonstrated their dedication to Ukraine.

Universities transformed into volunteer hubs, collecting supplies, provisions, and protective equipment for the front. Students, faculty, and other staff became volunteers and joined the war effort.

At the beginning of 2022, Russia's full-scale invasion brought a new wave of challenges to Ukraine's higher education. The destruction of infrastructure, the relocation of universities, the loss of academic staff, and the disruption of academic activities dealt severe blows to the educational and scientific communities (Moroz, 2022). Russian aggression has led to the destruction of nearly 1,500 buildings of scientific and educational institutions, and the amount of damaged scientific equipment is approaching a thousand units.

However, equipment can be replaced and buildings rebuilt. The most tremendous loss is the people engaged in science and teaching. Instead of conducting research and educating young professionals, they are now fighting, have become refugees, or are internally displaced persons (Liverpool, 2023). Many of them have far fewer opportunities to pursue their calling if any opportunities remain at all.

The full-scale war has triggered a new wave of university relocations. Each institution chose its own path: some moved closer to home, some to the capital or western regions, and some were forced to relocate twice.

At the same time, with the onset of large-scale aggression, Ukraine received significant support from the international community (Chhugani et al., 2022). The world has provided Ukrainian scholars with refuge, temporary and permanent academic positions, non-resi-



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dent scholarships, and free access to scientific databases. For example, the Research4Life (R4L) program allowed Ukrainian scientists to publish their works in open access for free, which greatly enhanced international collaboration and fostered the development of open science.

In parallel, changes occurred in the positioning and activities of Ukrainian scholars on two levels: personal and external. On a personal level, Ukrainian scientists gained confidence in their abilities and shed their inferiority complex. Universities embraced the principle of building durable partnerships instead of competition, demonstrating adaptability and resilience. On an external level, the international community shifted its perception of Ukrainian researchers, recognizing them as equal and valuable partners capable of contributing new ideas and initiating innovative collaborations.

The global narrative about Ukraine has also changed. If at the beginning of the full-scale war, the main slogan had been “Pray for Ukraine,” within a few months, the world declared: “Be brave like Ukraine.”

The war in Ukraine is far from over. Fatigue is becoming palpable. Global attention is gradually shifting to other challenges and domestic problems, but our fight continues. We cannot afford to tire – our enemy shows no signs of retreat. Today, Ukraine is defending not only its borders but also the global values of freedom and democracy.

If you have any doubt about this, open the pages of this special issue. Read every article, share them with colleagues, and discuss them at your kitchen table. Amplify the voices of freedom – speak up, write, and act, for silence is complicity.

This special issue continues the initiative launched in 2023 when the first special issue was published. It was dedicated to university management during wartime and featured cases reflecting the initial experience of resistance, adaptation, and survival of higher education institutions during unprecedented challenges (Kozmenko et al., 2023).

This current special issue, “*Ukrainian Universities in New Realities: 10 Years of War*,” explores the impact of the war on Ukrainian universities through a new lens – the accumulated experience, long-term resistance, and emerging challenges.

We, the two guest editors of this issue, are acting vice-rectors of two universities. The first is located in a frontline area and continues to operate under constant threat and daily shelling (Nifatova et al., 2023). The second is a university relocated due to occupation that adapted to new conditions and continues to carry out educational and scientific activities (Suchikova, 2024).

These cases are not unique, as every Ukrainian university today demonstrates resilience, adapting to extraordinary conditions, and continues the fight for the right to exist and develop. However, through the lens of this experience, the global academic community can better understand the scale of challenges faced by Ukrainian higher education and join the collective fight to preserve academic values and the future of science.

1. SUMY NATIONAL AGRARIAN UNIVERSITY: LEADERSHIP ON THE FRONTLINE

Sumy National Agrarian University (SNAU) is a remarkable example of a higher education institution continuing to operate under the constant threat of shelling and missile attacks. Located in a border region, it faced numerous challenges from the war's outset: infrastructure destruction, safety risks for students and staff, and the need to ensure an uninterrupted educational process. Just 30 kilometers from the border, enemy troops entered Sumy on the first day of the full-scale war. The initial street battles between the city's defenders and the occupying forces occurred just meters from the university's main building. At that time, the university's primary task was ensuring student safety. Over 500 students, including approximately 170 international students, remained in dormitories. Many others lived in different areas of the city. The university's international office worked actively with various embassies during those times. Student evacuations were necessary, but agreements to organize "green corridors" could not be reached. It was not until March 9, 2022, that the first buses carrying students could leave the city, marking the beginning of a large-scale evacuation, including many local residents.

At that time, everyone wanted to believe the war would end soon, but common sense suggested that such a neighbor necessitated a fundamental change in the university's operational structure. Timely understanding and swift responses to the challenges allowed the university to withstand these nearly three years and achieve significant development across many areas.

The university's infrastructure and colleges sustained substantial damage: missiles damaged parts of academic buildings, dormitories, and research greenhouses. Some facilities were occupied and looted by enemy forces. In response, SNAU intensified its international collaboration, resulting in support, grants, business aid, and charitable contributions. These resources enabled the rapid restoration of damaged facilities and ensured safe conditions for students. At this stage, the unique role of female faculty members who relocated abroad became evident. They secured grants and scholarships at foreign universities and became true ambassadors for SNAU. Universities in Germany, Switzerland, the UK, France, Spain, and other countries, many of which learned about SNAU for the first time, have now transitioned into full-fledged partners.

SNAU actively leverages opportunities for international cooperation. For instance, it launched a dual-degree program in "Sustainable Agriculture and Food Security" in collaboration with the Royal Agricultural University (UK), accredited by a German accreditation agency in 2024. Even before the full-scale invasion, the university focused significant efforts on adapting programs for international students, enabling not only the retention of their enrollment but also its growth, placing SNAU in the top 10 Ukrainian universities in this regard.

It is also worth noting the university's intensified scientific activity during this period as a response to the war's consequences. SNAU has become a scientific partner for major demining organizations such as The HALO Trust and APOPO, conducting soil analyses and training qualified personnel. The university received additional funding to establish a laboratory for ecological agriculture, enabling students and researchers to conduct innovative studies on the state and quality of war-affected soils.

During the full-scale invasion, campus safety was prioritized. The university equipped shelters capable of accommodating over 2,000 people and modernized classrooms to meet contemporary examination standards. Large agribusinesses and regional authorities actively participated in these processes. Focusing on digital transformation, including creating the E-SNAU mobile application, allowed students to access educational materials even during remote learning.

SNAU plays a vital role in training specialists for the agricultural sector, which will serve as a cornerstone for rebuilding the country's economy after the war. The university developed new educational pro-

grams aligned with European standards for sustainable development. These programs enable students to master modern technologies essential for the efficient use of resources and improving the productivity of agricultural production.

SNAU exemplifies resilience, adaptability, and an innovative approach to managing an educational institution during wartime.

2. BERDYANSK STATE PEDAGOGICAL UNIVERSITY: A UNIVERSITY WITHOUT WALLS

Just days after the full-scale invasion began, Russian forces occupied Berdiansk. On February 27, 2022, the Ukrainian flag was removed from the university building, serving as a stark reminder that the destruction of culture and identity was one of the aggressor's primary goals. The occupation forced the university to relocate to Zaporizhzhia. Deprived of its campus, laboratories, and usual academic rhythms, it rose to the challenge by transforming into a "University Without Walls" (Lopatina et al., 2023). This model was built on resilience, creativity, and collaboration that transcends physical limitations.

One of the university's primary activities has become studying the impact of the war on Ukrainian educational institutions and society as a whole (Suchikova & Tsybuliak, 2024). Thanks to this focus, Berdyansk State Pedagogical University (BSPU) has become a global leader in research on the Russia-Ukraine war and its consequences for higher education and science in Ukraine. Its faculty are engaged in research on:

- Building barrier-free and inclusive educational environments that address the new challenges of war.
- The role of universities in the reintegration of communities in de-occupied territories, including social adaptation and the restoration of educational infrastructure.
- Mechanisms for encouraging youth to return to de-occupied territories through educational programs and economic initiatives.
- Support for early-career researchers by creating conditions for developing young scientists.
- Psychological aspects of migration and internal displacement, including studies of the needs and challenges displaced persons face.

The university actively integrates the principles of open science, allowing it to become a key player in academic innovation. Through international partnerships, Ukrainian researchers at BSPU collaborate in global teams, opening new horizons for science.

BSPU's experience demonstrates the power of resilience and adaptation. It symbolizes how universities can not only survive under extraordinary circumstances but also become leaders of change, preserving the values of academic freedom and democracy.

The cases of the two universities presented here reflect their difficulties and the new opportunities that emerged from the necessity to adapt.

This special issue features research that examines the war's broader impact on various aspects of university operations, from the mental health of the academic community and risks to stability to innovations

in teaching, digital transformation, and sustainable development. Despite the diversity of topics, all the articles share a common goal: analyzing challenges and finding ways to overcome them to ensure the resilience of Ukrainian universities.

One key research area focuses on the mental health of faculty and students. Tsybuliak et al. (2025) analyze how institutional support for mental health contributes to the stability of faculty career prospects, particularly through improving access to self-help resources and fostering a supportive culture. This aspect is complemented by Glazkova et al. (2025), who explore the barriers to online education for displaced universities, emphasizing challenges related to the digital divide, motivation, and psychological stress among students and faculty.

Another vital aspect is managerial decisions and strategic leadership during crises. Petryk et al. (2025) investigate how administrators' leadership qualities enabled displaced universities to adapt to new conditions and maintain effective operations. Similarly, Spivakovsky et al. (2025) examine universities' crisis management strategies, offering approaches for navigating unpredictable challenges. These studies underscore how flexibility and strategic thinking are key elements for overcoming crises.

Research on risks to university stability is also critical. Doronina et al. (2025) classify the main risks – financial, personnel, and social – and propose proactive tools to mitigate them. Concurrently, Sych et al. (2025) highlight the role of displaced universities in rebuilding the economy and human capital, emphasizing the importance of preserving these institutions for Ukraine's post-war recovery.

Plastun and Kozmenko (2025) delve into systemic Russian attempts to seize Ukrainian universities and their resources, including intellectual property, repurposing them for propaganda and assimilation in occupied territories. The authors emphasize the need for international resistance to such actions and propose concrete measures to protect academic integrity.

Other articles in this issue focus on transforming educational processes and integrating innovations in teaching, particularly the role of digital technologies in supporting educational resilience during the war. They also examine universities' contributions to achieving sustainable development goals, integrating these principles into curricula, and ensuring that institutions provide key future skills critical for economic recovery and innovative growth.

Each article contributes to understanding how the war reshapes higher education while underscoring the unique resilience of Ukrainian universities. This not only fosters academic dialogue but also lays the foundation for long-term research in this field, which is vital not only for Ukraine but for the global academic community.

Each article is more than just an academic text. It features the voices of those who confront the challenges of war daily, proving that universities remain centers of knowledge, innovation, and hope even in the most challenging conditions. These studies open the door to a deeper understanding of the impact of war on higher education and science, forming the basis for a wide range of future academic inquiries in this domain.

We invite you to immerse yourself in these stories and share the experiences of those who not only survive but also transform contemporary science, opening new opportunities for collaboration, adaptation, and progress. Let this issue inspire researchers, educators, and administrators worldwide, calling for action from those who believe in the power of knowledge and the human spirit.

Read, share, and act. Let this special issue inspire you to amplify the voices of freedom, for science knows no borders, just as our shared commitment to truth, freedom, and justice knows no bounds.

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