“University without walls: Ukrainian-Australian reflections on the future of universities in a geopolitically unstable world”

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UNIVERSITY WITHOUT WALLS: UKRAINIAN-AUSTRALIAN REFLECTIONS ON THE FUTURE OF UNIVERSITIES IN A GEOPOLITICALLY UNSTABLE WORLD

Abstract

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has challenged the conventional understanding of the university as an institution inherently tied to a fixed territory and campus infrastructure. This paper adopts a collaborative autoethnographic approach to reflect on how universities transform amid war, forced displacement, and prolonged instability. Drawing on the experience of Berdyansk State Pedagogical University after the occupation of its home city, as well as on reflections developed through Ukrainian–Australian academic dialogue during a series of public lectures and scholarly discussions in Australia in 2026, we examine the reconfiguration of academic life beyond territorial constraints. Rather than presenting results in the form of discrete empirical findings, the study develops a reflexive analytical account of how institutional continuity is sustained through mobility, distributed networks, and relational forms of coordination. The concept of the "university without walls" is advanced as a way of interpreting these transformations not merely as a temporary response to crisis, but as an emergent model of a post-territorial university. The analysis suggests that, under conditions of geopolitical disruption, the defining features of the university shift from physical infrastructure to relational capacities: trust, collaboration, and the ability to maintain academic community across dispersed contexts. By situating lived experience within a broader analytical framework, the paper contributes to ongoing debates on the future of higher education in a world marked by instability, inequality, and global interdependence.

Keywords war, displacement, higher education, mobility, networks, institutional resilience, autoethnography, vignettes, geopolitics of knowledge, academic dialogue

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INTRODUCTION

Geopolitical conflicts have historically affected universities, yet they have rarely challenged the fundamental assumption that a university is inseparable from its physical campus. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 disrupted this assumption on an unprecedented scale. Dozens of higher education institutions were forced to leave occupied or frontline territories, yet many continued operating despite losing buildings, laboratories, archives, and the spatial infrastructure through which academic life has traditionally been organized. In Ukraine, more than forty universities have been relocated since 2014, with a second major wave following the full-scale invasion (Finikov et al., 2025; Porkuian et al., 2023). This represents one of the largest forced transformations of a na-

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tional higher education system in contemporary Europe and opens a broader discussion on the relationship between universities, territory, and the geopolitics of knowledge under conditions of global instability.

These conditions raise an existential question: can a university persist when its physical territory disappears? The Ukrainian experience suggests that it can – provided the institution is understood not as a collection of buildings, but as a network of relationships, practices, and shared intellectual commitments. When campuses become inaccessible, academic communities reorganize around new forms of coordination, mobility, and trust (Falko & Zhukov, 2023; Gurenko & Suchikova, 2023; Orzhel et al., 2024). In this sense, relocation becomes not only a logistical necessity but an institutional experiment revealing the deeper structures that sustain academic life (Orzhel et al., 2023).

This paper examines these transformations through the case of Berdyansk State Pedagogical University, which was forced to relocate following the occupation of its home city in 2022 (Lopatina et al., 2023). Rather than reconstructing a traditional campus, the university developed a "university without walls" model, in which academic life functions as a distributed network across different locations. Teaching, research, and governance continue without a stable territorial anchor (Peregudova, 2023), offering a distinctive perspective for rethinking the relationship between universities and geopolitical disruption.

The idea of a "university without walls" is not new. It emerged in the late 1960s in the United States as an experiment in flexible and socially engaged higher education (Marienau, 1972; Stetson, 1979), grounded in andragogy, critical pedagogy, and constructivist approaches (Knowles et al., 2020; Fosnot, 2013). Over time, it evolved within discourses of open education, digitalization, and the societal role of universities (Harry, 2018; Weinbren, 2015), and was later reframed in strategic debates, notably in the European University Association's vision for 2030 (EUA, 2021). The Ukrainian experience, however, redefines this concept not merely as a pedagogical or strategic model, but as a form of institutional adaptation to war and instability.

Methodologically, the study adopts a collaborative autoethnographic approach. We bring complementary perspectives: institutional leadership within a relocated university, historical-analytical expertise on wartime transformations of Ukrainian higher education, and an external international viewpoint shaped through engagement with global academic audiences. The empirical basis consists of reflections developed during a series of academic events in Australia in February 2026, as well as subsequent exchanges through correspondence and public texts.

The study argues that the Ukrainian case reflects more than temporary adaptation. It demonstrates the emergence of a post-territorial university – an institutional form defined less by location than by relational infrastructure, mobility, and shared intellectual purpose. While shaped by extreme conditions, this experience offers broader insights for higher education systems facing increasing instability driven by geopolitical conflict, climate crises, and technological change. In this perspective, the university is approached not only as an educational institution but as part of the geopolitics of knowledge and the globalization of academic networks. The Ukrainian–Australian academic interaction illustrates how localized experience can enter global dialogue and inform broader reflections on the future of universities. Reflecting on this experience through collaborative autoethnography, the study contributes to debates on the geopolitical future of higher education.

1. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH: COLLABORATIVE AUTOETHNOGRAPHY IN INTERNATIONAL ACADEMIC DIALOGUE

We employ a collaborative autoethnographic approach to examine the transformation of the university under conditions of war and forced relocation. Autoethnography is increasingly used in higher education research as a method that connects the personal experiences of participants with the analysis of broader social and institutional processes (Anderson, 2006; Beresford-Dey et al., 2024; Chang et al., 2013). In this study, the approach is extended through collaboration among authors who occupy different positions within the shared experience being analyzed.

The collaboration emerged from a series of events that themselves became part of the research material. In 2025, the Australian higher education analyst and publisher Tim Winkler encountered publications by Yana Suchikova devoted to the concept of the "university without walls." This initiated a professional dialogue about the lessons that the experience of Ukrainian universities during the war might offer to the global higher education system.

As a result of this interaction, in February 2026, Tim Winkler organized and moderated a series of academic events in Australia. These included the Universities Without Walls symposium at the National Museum of Australia in Canberra, a public lecture at the University of Melbourne, and several meetings with researchers, university leaders, and media representatives. An additional component of the program was a presentation at the Melbourne headquarters of Online Education Services (OES), which demonstrated the interest of the professional educational services sector in the concept of the university without walls. Over the course of a week, Professors Suchikova and Lyman presented the results of their research and the experience of a relocated university to more than five hundred participants across different academic events.

This week became an intensive space of academic dialogue between scholars working within a higher education system directly affected by war and representatives of a more stable academic environment. Discussions during the events, conversations between them, and the subsequent exchange of reflections after the visit collectively formed the body of material that underpins this joint analysis.

The empirical material consists of several interconnected sources. First, it includes our written reflections prepared after the trip. These reflections were shared among us via email and further developed through subsequent discussions on digital communication platforms. Second, the analysis draws on public lectures and presentations prepared for the Australian academic events, in which the experience of a relocated Ukrainian university was articulated. Third, the study considers public analytical texts by Tim Winkler published on the international platform Future Campus, which reflect an external interpretation of the Ukrainian experience within broader global discussions about the future of universities.

The combination of these materials allows the study to examine not only the process of institutional transformation itself, but also how this experience was communicated, interpreted, and reinterpreted within an international academic dialogue.

To preserve the reflective nature of the material, the study includes short textual excerpts from our reflective notes presented in the form of vignettes. Within the tradition of autoethnography, vignettes serve a dual function: they convey the immediacy of lived experience while also acting as analytical entry points into broader discussions of social and institutional processes (Pitard, 2017; Huber, 2024). In this study, these fragments not only illustrate the participants' personal experiences but also demonstrate how individual reflections gradually evolved into shared interpretative knowledge.

At the same time, the chosen approach has several limitations. First, autoethnography inevitably relies on the subjective experiences of researchers, which may influence the interpretation of events. Second, the temporal scope of the analysis is relatively short and centers on a single week of inten-

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sive interaction. Third, the emotional and symbolic effects of this encounter – particularly the atmosphere of solidarity, mutual support, and a certain sense of inspiration that often accompanies intensive international academic exchange – may also shape the tone of the reflections.

We explicitly acknowledge these limitations. However, the reflective nature of autoethnography allows them to be understood not only as methodological constraints but also as part of the research material itself. In this sense, lived experience, emotions, dialogue, and mutual learning among participants become important elements for understanding how knowledge about universities in times of crisis is produced, circulates, and evolves within the global academic space.

2. GEOPOLITICS OF DISTANCE: WHEN DIFFERENT ACADEMIC WORLDS MEET

Yana's vignette

"Ukraine and Australia lie almost on opposite sides of the planet. When we departed from Kyiv, it was winter; when we landed in Sydney, it was summer. By the time we returned to Ukraine, spring had arrived, while Australia had already entered autumn. Our time zones are separated by nine hours. Yet geographical distance is only a superficial dimension. There is another one – historical. Ukraine lives in a state of war, where each day is measured by air-raid sirens and news from the front. Australia is an island continent that has lived for decades under conditions of geopolitical stability."

The globalization of higher education is often described through the language of mobility, international partnerships, and the circulation of knowledge, reflected in the growth of academic mobility, international research networks, and transnational educational programs (Altbach, 2004). From this perspective, the academic world appears as a space of relatively free exchange of ideas, researchers, and institutional models. Yet such representations often obscure the profound geopolitical asymmetries in the conditions under which universities operate across different regions of the world.

Russia's war against Ukraine has sharply intensified this asymmetry. Ukrainian universities operate in an environment characterized by constant danger, destruction of infrastructure, mass displacement, and sustained psychological pressure on academic communities (Moroz, 2022; Suchikova & Danko, 2025; Suchikova & Nazarovets, 2025; Tsybuliak et al., 2024a, 2024b). At the same time, universities in countries with more stable political and institutional environments, including Australia, function in a markedly different context, where the principal challenges relate not to physical security or infrastructural destruction but to transformation of higher education, funding models, digitalization, and the evolving societal role of universities.

In this context, the encounter between Ukrainian and Australian academic actors during the series of events organized in February 2026 became more than an episode of international academic collaboration. It evolved into a point of intersection between two distinct geopolitical regimes, shaping the contemporary existence of universities.

Igor's vignette

"Australia became the 57th country I visited, but the first in the southern hemisphere. When we left Kyiv, it was minus twelve degrees Celsius and winter. In Australia, we arrived in summer. After a country engulfed in war due to an attack by an aggressive neighbor, we found ourselves in a peaceful country that does not have a single land neighbor at all. Even the abbreviations of our countries seemed like mirror images: UA and AU."

This symbolic "mirroring" of the two countries – Ukraine (UA) and Australia (AU) – reveals an important feature of the contemporary geopolitics of knowledge. Within the globalized academic space, universities may be closely connected intellectually while simultaneously existing under radically different conditions of security, stability, and access to resources.

Precisely for this reason, the globalization of higher education does not imply the equalization of

academic realities. On the contrary, it often makes these differences more visible. The war in Ukraine has served as a reminder that universities may find themselves in fundamentally different circumstances: from relatively stable systems discussing long-term reforms in governance or funding to institutions that must simultaneously maintain the educational process, support the psychological resilience of their communities, and physically ensure the safety of their staff and students.

Yet it is this asymmetry that creates the potential for new forms of academic dialogue. When the experience of a university operating under wartime conditions enters more stable academic systems, it begins to function as a kind of "analytical mirror." Through it, structural issues that often remain hidden in peaceful systems beneath layers of institutional inertia become more visible.

In this sense, the globalization of the academic space can be understood as a process of translating experiences across different historical and political contexts. The experience of Ukrainian universities during the war is gradually becoming part of a broader academic discussion about how higher education institutions can function under conditions of radical instability.

Such translation of experience requires particular attention to the ways in which it is communicated. Narratives about war in academic contexts inevitably balance between two extremes: excessive dramatization, which may turn a complex institutional story into an emotional narrative, and excessive technocratic abstraction, which diminishes the human dimension of the experience. This tension has been widely discussed in studies of the ethics of witnessing, which emphasize the difficulty of representing traumatic experience without either sensationalizing it or reducing it to abstract analysis (Felman & Laub, 1992; Oliver, 2001; Frank, 2013).

Tim's vignette

"…as I took them from event to event I did ask myself how often it was fair to ask them to retell aspects of their story. We had a great dialogue and I was convinced they shared my belief that it was necessary to do so. Would audiences attend a seminar on operating models for universities without such a backstory? Would people give money to our campaign to buy small power banks for students suffering blackouts if they didn't understand the struggle? Considering the emotional and mental toll of storytelling and how robust people are when telling their story is obviously critical to consider. Considering the balance of human recount and organizational/ policy insight and analysis is also critical to consider, if you want the story to be heard."

This dilemma illustrates that within a globalized academic space, knowledge circulates not only in the form of theoretical concepts or empirical data. It is also transmitted through narratives, personal stories, and symbolic events that make complex processes intelligible to international audiences. Such processes of knowledge circulation are characteristic of the globalized higher education system, in which academic ideas spread through networks, communication, and institutional interaction (Marginson, 2016). In this sense, academic communication includes elements of what Jean-François Lyotard described as "narrative knowledge," through which social experience acquires meaning and is transmitted across cultural and institutional contexts (Lyotard, 1984).

In the case of relocated Ukrainian universities, such narratives play an important role in drawing international attention to the challenges faced by academic institutions operating under crisis conditions. At the same time, they create new challenges: how to speak about war without reducing the university to a story of loss, and how to maintain attention to the institutional innovations that emerge in response to the crisis. In this sense, narratives serve not only a representational function but also an epistemic one, helping to make complex institutional processes understandable to broader audiences (Dahlstrom, 2014).

3. COMMUNICATING WAR: THE ETHICS OF ACADEMIC STORYTELLING IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT

Tim's vignette

"Heroization is necessary, but recognition of its flaws and limitations are also necessary. The war which is increasingly rarely on our TV screens and

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the vast statistics of lives lost or impacted by the war in Ukraine makes it almost impossible to grasp, particularly from so far away. Focusing storytelling on the lives and experiences of people like Yana and Igor is the only way to start to convey the impact of the war in an account that people can engage with and digest. However, as they point out, firstly their experience is common to many in Ukraine, and secondly, the achievements of their university are wonderful, but at the same time staff risk burnout – so it is critical not to romanticize the chronology and milestones of the university."

The globalization of the academic space implies not only the circulation of ideas but also the circulation of experiences. Yet experience – especially the experience of war – is not neutral knowledge that can be easily transferred across contexts. It requires translation: intellectual, cultural, and ethical.

In the case of Ukrainian universities, this translation is associated with a complex dilemma. On the one hand, the context of war is essential for understanding the scale of transformations that academic institutions are undergoing. Without this context, the story of a university without a campus or of systematic wellbeing support programs for academic staff would appear merely as a technical institutional innovation. On the other hand, excessive focus on traumatic experience may reduce the university to a narrative of loss or heroism, overshadowing the complex intellectual work that underlies institutional change.

This tension between context and content is typical of communicating crisis experiences within the global academic space. Audiences located far from conflict zones often need human stories in order to grasp the scale of events. At the same time, academic discussion requires analytical distance and conceptual reflection.

Tim's vignette

"Find the right slice. After four years of war and running a university in extraordinary circumstances, both Igor and Yana have a massive number of stories, statistics, and insights. However, audiences have time and attention for only a tiny fragment of those. Finding the right fragment to fairly represent aspects of Igor and Yana's life while also hooking the interest of the audience is essential to success. This means refining, curating, and presenting tailored versions to individuals, audiences, and interviews. In another language. Also collaboration in finding the right yarns to re-tell, not just blindly pursuing my gut."

Thus, storytelling in the global academic environment performs a dual function. It must render complex experiences understandable to international audiences while simultaneously avoiding the transformation of those experiences into symbolic narratives that simplify or romanticize reality.

In this sense, communicating the experience of war within academia is not merely a matter of media representation but also an ethical question. It requires a constant balancing between the emotional power of personal narratives and the analytical precision of institutional analysis.

Media platforms operating within the field of higher education play a particularly important role in this process. They create a public space in which academic stories gain broader resonance and begin to influence discussions about the future of universities.

Yana's vignette

"We often speak about science as a system of knowledge, institutions, and policies. Yet in reality, it also exists as a public discourse – a space in which the language is formed through which society thinks about universities, research, and the future.

Future Campus is not simply journalism. It is the creation of a space. When a media platform emerges that is capable of speaking about education in a systematic and professional way, it gradually begins to shape the agenda — both for universities and for policy. The voice of a scholar becomes influential only when it enters a broader ecosystem of public communication. Science in itself produces knowledge, but only through strong media and public platforms does that knowledge begin to influence societal decisions."

Such platforms allow the experiences of individual universities to move beyond a local context and become part of a global academic conversation.

Igor's vignette

"…I got to know in person dozens, if not hundreds, of wonderful Australian educators and scientists, many of whom began their conversation with the words: Yana and Igor, we already know you thanks to Tim's publications."

In the case of relocated Ukrainian universities, media texts, interviews, and public lectures have become important mechanisms for communicating experiences of institutional transformation under conditions of war.

Igor's vignette

"Another interesting comparison that did not give me peace: in Australia, there are a little more than 40 universities. And in Ukraine, there are almost as many universities that were displaced due to the war. I spent 7 months last year traveling to monitor the specifics of these universities, interviewing the management of each of them. So I imagined that in the same mode, in 7 months, I could get acquainted with the working conditions of every Australian higher education institution."

Notably, this experience is beginning to circulate not only within specialized academic media but also through broader public channels. On the fourth anniversary of the occupation of Berdyansk, the Australian national broadcaster ABC (Australian Broadcasting Corporation) aired a radio conversation devoted to the history of Berdyansk State Pedagogical University and the experience of its relocation.

Igor's vignette

"A special flavor was added by the fact that within the 7 days of our Australian visit, three significant dates for me occurred at once: the fourth anniversary of the moment my family and I left my hometown of Berdyansk (perhaps forever, although I don't want to believe it); the fourth anniversary of the beginning of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine; the fourth anniversary of the occupation of Berdyansk. And it is very symbolic and invaluable that on the day of the last of these anniversaries, the program that Yana Sychikova and I recorded about Berdyansk was broadcast on ABC."

At the same time, the process of communication transforms not only the audience but also the participants in the conversation themselves. When researchers are repeatedly asked to explain their experiences to different audiences, these experiences gradually acquire new interpretations and conceptual frameworks. Personal experience becomes analytical material, while a local story becomes part of a broader discourse about the future of universities in an increasingly unstable world.

In this sense, storytelling ceases to be merely a tool of communication. It becomes a mode of knowledge production. Through public lectures, media texts, and international discussions, the experience of a particular institution is transformed into a source of insights that may be relevant for other higher education systems. This process can be interpreted through the lens of approaches to the co-production of knowledge, which emphasize that knowledge is generated not only within academic research itself but also through public debates, institutional practices, and social interaction (Jasanoff, 2004).

Yana's vignette

"Over those days, my tongue gradually began to loosen – I was no longer afraid to communicate in English and could produce more or less coherent thoughts. But Tim added another challenge: a live broadcast on national radio in Melbourne. We walked there on foot, admiring this city that seems to contain the culture of the whole world. Yet my thoughts were already in the radio studio – would I even be able to squeeze out a simple greeting?

Igor asked Tim whether he could translate for me and convey my thoughts. The answer was categorical and unequivocal: 'No. This is radio. And I know Yana will manage.'

This is real maturity. Yes, we are certainly not children; we are adults and professionals. But does maturity come to everyone? What does it look like? How is it defined? Tim's response was no longer about the initial credit of trust he had given us. It was the language of responsible work. We were not there simply to talk. The three of us

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were carrying meaning. We were responsible for our rhetoric – and for the words we would find to express it."

Professional maturity in public communication is determined not so much by the level of experience or formal status as by a willingness to assume responsibility for one's own voice in the public sphere. In situations where knowledge and experience are presented to broader audiences, delegating this voice to others often proves either impossible or ethically problematic.

In such contexts, language ceases to be merely a tool for transmitting information. It becomes a mechanism for representing meanings, institutions, and communities. Accordingly, public speaking – especially within a media environment – requires not only communicative competence but also an awareness of responsibility for shaping the narratives that enter public discourse.

For this reason, the ethics of academic storytelling acquired particular importance. It determines not only how a story is told but also what forms of knowledge about universities in times of crisis become available to the global academic community. In this context, intercultural dialogues become especially revealing, as different historical experiences open possibilities for rethinking the ethical foundations of academic practice.

During our visit to Australia, one such moment emerged in a joint podcast with Professor Maree Meredith, a strategic adviser on Indigenous affairs in Australia and a representative of the Bidjara people. The conversation explored how the experiences of different communities – from Indigenous peoples to societies living under conditions of war – shape global ethical approaches to data governance and knowledge production. Such dialogues demonstrate that global academic interaction involves not only the exchange of research findings but also a mutual re-examination of the ethical principles that determine how knowledge is created, circulated, and used across diverse geopolitical contexts (Suchikova & Nazarovets, 2025).

4. POST-TERRITORIAL UNIVERSITY: MOBILITY, NETWORKS, AND INSTITUTIONAL RETHINKING

Yana's vignette

"Some time has passed since Igor and I returned from Australia. During that time, I have been home (or rather, in the place where I currently live) for only one day. My life continues to be measured in kilometers and suitcases. As I write these first lines of my reflection, I am on a train to Zaporizhzhia – the place where our university officially exists. I will spend the next two weeks there. Then Kyiv, Warsaw, Kyiv again. And only after that home – no, not home, but the place where my rented apartment is now. The place where I change suitcases before setting off somewhere again.

This is the price of a university without walls. We must keep moving, chasing events, people, time, experiences, impressions…"

Traditionally, the university has been understood as an institution deeply rooted in a particular place (Finikov et al., 2026). Its history, symbolic capital, and even academic identity have typically been closely tied to a specific territory: a city, a campus, its architecture, and the surrounding local community. In this sense, the university has long functioned simultaneously as an intellectual and a spatial institution.

Russia's war against Ukraine has called this basic assumption into question. Following the occupation of a number of cities, dozens of Ukrainian universities have been forced to continue operating without access to their own campuses. For many of them, this has meant not simply a physical relocation but a fundamental reconsideration of what constitutes the institutional core of a university.

The experience of relocated universities demonstrates that when territory is lost, academic institutions are compelled to reorganize around different principles. If previously the campus functioned

as the central coordinating space of academic life, this role is increasingly assumed by communication networks, digital infrastructure, and the mobility of academic communities (Suchikova, 2024; Finikov et al., 2026).

In this context, a phenomenon emerges that can be described as the post-territorial university. This does not imply a complete abandonment of physical space. Rather, it reflects a shift in institutional logic. The university ceases to function primarily as a territorial structure and increasingly operates as a network of people, practices, and relationships distributed across space.

Yana's vignette

"Before the war, I had never imagined my life in any other place. I felt deeply rooted in this land – and in the university where I studied and where I have worked for twenty years."

This transformation has not only organizational but also deeply existential dimensions. For many academics, the university has formed part of their personal biography, closely linked to a specific place and a particular local academic culture. The loss of territory, therefore, represents not only an institutional challenge but also a process of rethinking one's professional identity.

At the same time, the experience of Ukrainian universities demonstrates that the institutional viability of a university does not necessarily depend on its physical infrastructure. Despite the loss of campuses, teaching activities, research, and systems of academic self-governance continue to function. This becomes possible through the mobilization of other resources: trust within academic communities, digital technologies, international partnerships, and new forms of organizational flexibility.

Tim's vignette

"Vulnerability can help drive agility. Professor Sychikova and Lyman's lives are defined not by dispossession, but rather by what they have achieved, learned, and shared through necessity and reinvention since their homes and campus were occupied. The fear of losing the status, incomes, fancy campuses and busy work of meeting and jockeying with each other can be crippling, preventing action. We don't necessarily need to ditch campuses, but we do need to be able to see beyond them and step away from the trappings of position, stratification and status entrenched in every echelon of our institutions long enough to occasionally regain touch with solutions that would better serve and satisfy community. Lack of bandwidth to recognize the emerging challenges of lower cost knowledge delivery platforms, better solutions to social license, and kinder, more effective ways of forging internal institutional cohesion and effectiveness is a problem."

In this sense, war – despite its destructive force – functions as a form of analytical test for the university as an institution. It exposes the difference between the material shell of the university and its social core. When the physical campus disappears, it becomes evident that the university exists first and foremost as a community of people united by a shared intellectual mission.

This experience has broader implications for understanding the geopolitics of higher education. In an increasingly globalized world, universities are more frequently confronted with situations that undermine their territorial stability, including wars, climate disasters, political conflicts, and economic crises. The Ukrainian case demonstrates that such disruptions may lead not only to the destruction of institutions but also to the emergence of new models of institutional functioning (Orzhel et al., 2023).

Thus, the concept of the "university without walls" opens a wider discussion about how academic institutions can operate under conditions of growing global instability (Suchikova & Tsybuliak, 2023). In this context, mobility and networked interaction cease to be merely additional characteristics of contemporary academia. They gradually become its structural foundation.

This shift can be interpreted through the so-called mobility paradigm, which proposes that social institutions should be understood not as stable entities anchored in a single place but as elements of continuous flows of people, knowledge, and practices (Sheller & Urry, 2006). Within this framework, mobility is viewed not as an exception or a

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temporary condition but as a normal mode of organizing contemporary social systems.

At the same time, this transformation resonates with the concept of the network society, in which key social functions are increasingly organized through distributed networks of interaction rather than through singular localized centers (Castells, 2023). From this perspective, the university can no longer be understood solely as a territorially anchored institution but rather as a networked form of organizing academic life. A university is not necessarily a place where people gather; increasingly, it becomes a process through which individuals sustain an intellectual community despite spatial dispersion.

5. MUTUAL LEARNING: UNIVERSITIES IN A WORLD OF GEOPOLITICAL INEQUALITY

Yana's vignette

"Perhaps one of the main lessons of this trip is that globalization is not only about the movement of goods, people, or information. Above all, it is the capacity of different historical experiences to enter into dialogue. When a university from a country living in a state of war and an academic community from a peaceful continent begin to discuss shared questions of education, science, and human responsibility, geography loses its defining role."

In global discussions about higher education, the experience of universities operating under crisis conditions is often framed as a source of "lessons" for other systems. Yet such a perspective can be overly simplified. It assumes a one-directional flow of knowledge: from the "crisis" context to more "stable" academic systems.

In reality, international academic interactions are far more complex. The dialogue between Ukrainian and Australian academic communities during the events described above demonstrated that learning is inherently reciprocal. Different academic systems not only exchange experiences but also enable one another to re-examine their own institutional practices from new perspectives.

Tim's vignette

"Yana and Igor work in an extremely high-risk environment, but aren't looking to earn points for exceptionalism. Instead, they were much more interested in documenting experiences, refining models, and looking for insights that can be shared with the wider world."

This perspective highlights an important principle: the experience of crisis should not be transformed into a symbolic resource for heroization. Its value lies primarily in its capacity to generate knowledge that may be useful for other institutions.

Igor's vignette

"Now for the main thing: Australia gave me a true friend, Tim Winkler. Literally a day after our return, Tim, apologizing for not communicating with us promptly during our journey back, wrote that his phone had broken. When we expressed our regret about this, he literally wrote: "No problem! I have a new view on life after 7 days with Yana and Igor. Better perspective." For me, these words are priceless."

Another important dimension of mutual learning concerned the reconsideration of time and resources in the functioning of universities. Academic institutions operating in stable systems often possess the capacity to postpone institutional changes, plan reforms years in advance, and maintain complex administrative structures. Universities functioning in crisis conditions rarely have such a luxury.

Yana's vignette

"In Ukraine, there has long been no culture of one's own time. Academic staff carry extremely heavy workloads, and the ethics of time outside work has rarely been considered. With the beginning of the war, this problem intensified even further. A clear expectation emerged: 'availability 24/7.' At a certain moment, this was necessary. But it must not become the norm.

Every phone call, message in a messenger, or email requires resources. And resources cannot be borrowed indefinitely. I increasingly raise this issue in meetings — we must learn to respect time. We need a new ethics of time. Already exhausted by nighttime air-raid sirens and the sound of drones outside our windows, we have no time left for ourselves in the early morning or late evening hours.

…Australia knows how to live differently. We must learn this as well. Especially now, when the fifth year of the full-scale war has begun, and we may still want to borrow resources, but there is simply nowhere left to borrow them from."

Time is not only a physical quantity but also a social construct that reflects cultural norms of organizing work, responsibility, and personal boundaries. Academic institutions often operate within regimes of constant availability, where communication through digital channels effectively erases the boundary between professional and private time.

This aspect is particularly significant within contemporary discussions about the well-being of academic staff and students. The war has made the problem of exhaustion within academic communities highly visible (Suchikova et al., 2024). Surveys of academic personnel in Ukrainian universities indicate that 44.3% of respondents demonstrated moderate to severe anxiety according to the GAD-7 scale (Tsybuliak et al., 2024c). Nearly one-third reported moderate or severe depressive symptoms on the PHQ-9 scale (Tsybuliak et al., 2026), and the proportion of respondents experiencing high levels of emotional exhaustion increased across three waves of data collection from roughly half of the sample to nearly 70% (Tsybuliak et al., 2025). Moreover, pronounced anxiety was particularly concentrated among those who frequently consider leaving academia (Suchikova et al., 2024).

At the same time, the problem is by no means unique to war-affected or crisis regions. The Australian University Staff Wellbeing Census (Dollard et al., 2026), which surveyed nearly 11,500 employees across 42 universities, likewise revealed a systemic crisis of psychosocial safety. According to the report, 44% of respondents work in environments characterized by very high risk according to the Psychosocial Safety Climate indicator, and the authors explicitly describe the situation as a sector-wide public health concern that threatens the sector's ability to deliver high-quality education, research, and student experience.

From this perspective, academic exhaustion should be understood not as an individual weakness nor solely as a consequence of extreme circumstances, but as a structural indicator of how effectively university systems protect the people who sustain them. Psychosocial safety therefore needs to be considered not merely as an additional wellbeing initiative but as a matter of institutional governance and resilience.

These questions became a distinct focus of discussion during the public lecture "University without walls: Wellbeing lessons from Ukrainian war zones," held at the University of Melbourne in February 2026. The event was opened by Professor Marek Tesar, who in his work conceptualizes the university as a relational and ethical space shaped through interactions among people, practices, and experiences (Tesar et al., 2021). During the subsequent panel discussion with Australian scholars specializing in wellbeing and trauma-informed education, participants reflected on how the experience of relocated Ukrainian universities highlights the role of wellbeing as an institutional condition of academic continuity. In this discussion, wellbeing was framed not as a supplementary element of the educational process but as a fundamental prerequisite for the functioning of university communities under conditions of prolonged crisis. The exchange demonstrated that the issue of psychosocial safety resonates far beyond crisis contexts, including in more stable higher education systems where questions of workload, emotional exhaustion, and organizational culture are increasingly entering public debate.

Igor's vignette

"Today, in the middle of the night in Kyiv, I woke up as usual from powerful explosions outside. And I could not fall asleep for several hours while the windows were shaking from the detonations. But my thoughts were about Australia: there was a smile on my lips. After all, no matter what happens next, my life already includes Australia, Tim, and all the wonderful people we met during our trip."

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This image symbolically concludes the story of mutual learning. The geographical distance between academic worlds remains vast, yet global academic networks enable the creation of intellectual and human connections capable of bridging that distance.

It is precisely these connections that become one of the key preconditions for the resilience of universities in a world where geopolitical instability increasingly shapes the conditions under which academic institutions exist.

6. LESSONS FOR UNIVERSITIES IN A WORLD OF GEOPOLITICAL INSTABILITY

The experience described here extends beyond the specific case of relocated Ukrainian universities. It raises a broader question about how universities should function in a world where geopolitical stability can no longer be taken for granted. Wars, climate disasters, technological disruptions, and political conflicts increasingly affect academic systems. In this context, the Ukrainian experience allows several broader lessons to be formulated for universities in the global landscape.

The first lesson concerns the need to rethink the institutional nature of the university itself. Traditionally, universities have been understood as territorially anchored institutions connected to a specific campus and local infrastructure. Contemporary crises, however, demonstrate that the viability of a university depends less on its buildings than on its capacity to sustain an intellectual community, coordinate academic activity, and maintain trust among its members.

The second lesson relates to institutional flexibility. University systems have historically been built around stability and predictability. Yet the contemporary world is increasingly characterized by unpredictable disruptions. This implies that universities must be designed not only for stable conditions but also for the possibility of rapid adaptation to crisis situations. Institutional flexibility is therefore no longer a temporary response but gradually becomes a defining characteristic of modern academia.

The third lesson concerns the role of academic communities. The resilience of a university depends not primarily on material resources but on the condition of the people who constitute it. In this respect, questions of psychosocial safety, academic solidarity, and cultures of mutual support acquire strategic importance. The exhaustion of academic communities can lead to gradual institutional erosion even in situations where formal structures remain intact.

The fourth lesson highlights the growing importance of ethical governance of knowledge and data. In contemporary conflicts, information, research data, and institutional memory become vulnerable resources. This means that issues related to their preservation, security, and responsible use must be considered part of academic responsibility and global scientific ethics.

Finally, the fifth lesson concerns the role of international academic interaction. Within a globalized system of higher education, universities increasingly function less as isolated national institutions and more as interconnected participants in transnational academic networks. The exchange of experience between different academic systems helps reveal structural vulnerabilities of contemporary academia and contributes to the development of new models of institutional resilience. In this sense, geopolitical crises also create spaces for mutual learning and for rethinking the role of universities within the global academic environment.

Taken together, these lessons emphasize that universities of the twenty-first century must cultivate the institutional capacity to operate under conditions of increasing global instability.

CONCLUSION

The Ukrainian–Australian academic dialogue analyzed in this paper opens a broader perspective for rethinking the role of the university. In conditions of increasing geopolitical instability, the university can no

longer be understood solely as a territorially anchored institution tied to a campus, local infrastructure, and spatial stability. The Ukrainian experience of war, interpreted through dialogue with the Australian academic environment, provides an opportunity to reconsider the nature of the university in a globalized world.

A key outcome of this analysis is the understanding of the university as a relational and networked form of organizing academic life, whose resilience depends not only on material resources but also on the capacity to sustain connections, trust, intellectual collaboration, and the co-production of knowledge across borders and asymmetrical contexts. In this sense, geopolitical disruptions reveal the foundations of the university that often remain invisible under conditions of stability.

At the same time, the study demonstrates that the globalization of academia cannot be reduced to mobility, internationalization, or the circulation of ideas within a neutral space. Rather, it unfolds in conditions marked by profound inequalities of experience, resources, and security. For this reason, the interaction between Ukrainian and Australian participants is presented here as a form of mutual learning through which new understandings of the future of universities become possible.

The study therefore argues that the future of the university should be conceptualized not through the category of territorial permanence but through the categories of relationality, mobility, ethical responsibility, and the capacity to function under conditions of global instability. From this perspective, the university appears as an institution undergoing a profound process of geopolitical rethinking.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

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Investigation: Yana Suchikova, Igor Lyman, Tim Winkler.
Methodology: Yana Suchikova.
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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The materials supporting this article include publicly available presentations delivered during the symposium and public lecture that informed the reflections presented in the study. These materials are available in the Zenodo repository:

- University without walls: Wellbeing lessons from Ukrainian war zones (Suchikova, 2026).
- After the Campus. University Without Walls: Wellbeing Lessons from Ukrainian War Zones (Suchikova & Lyman, 2026).

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- Additional contextual material includes the article by Tim Winkler, What We Learned (Winkler, 2026).

The study also draws on the authors' reflective notes and correspondence developed during and after the academic events described in the study. These materials are not publicly available but may be shared in the future as part of ongoing research and documentation of the project.

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