Challenges of Ukrainian Higher Education in Times of War

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Abstract
Ukrainian higher education is facing unprecedented challenges due to Russia's ongoing military invasion of Ukraine. Universities are striving to adapt to the new realities, maintaining their commitment to providing quality education while prioritizing safety of all the participants of the educational process. Educational losses get worse and have a negative impact on the country's human capital and its economic well-being.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which began on February 24, 2022, has significantly impacted various aspects of Ukrainian society, with higher education facing unique and huge challenges. Educational institutions, forced to adapt to restrictions and threats of pandemic times, are now facing the task of guaranteeing safety, continuity, and accessibility of education in the most difficult circumstances of the ongoing military conflict. In the first days of the full-scale invasion, the educational process at higher education institutions (HEIs) was suspended, and a two-week vacation was announced. Many students and staff were forced to move to safer regions of Ukraine or beyond, and some actually remain in the temporarily occupied territories. During the 2022 relocation, 131 tertiary education institutions moved to other regions, with a total number of 91,000 students and over 11,000 faculty. These institutions are usually hosted in just a few rooms of their partner educational institutions. Meanwhile, faculty and students continue to work and study remotely, regardless of their physical location. According to available data, 665,000 higher education and school students (16 percent of the total number) and 25,000 educators (6 percent of the total number) left the territory of Ukraine. As of the start of the 2021–2022 academic year, over 76,000 foreign citizens from more than 150 countries were enrolled in Ukrainian HEIs, but with the outbreak of the full-scale war, most foreign students were forced to leave Ukraine.

According to the interactive map of the Ukrainian ministry of education and science, 3,798 education institutions have suffered bombing and shelling throughout the country since February 24, 2022, and 365 of them have been destroyed completely. 63 institutions of higher education were badly damaged or completely destroyed. The Mykolaiv, Kharkiv, and Chernihiv regions suffered the highest losses, with 25, 23, and 12 HEIs destroyed respectively.

The level of public funding of higher education was reduced by 10 percent after the start of the full-scale armed aggression. In 2022 and 2023, the ministry of education and science did not distribute performance-based funding, a policy instrument which was introduced in Ukraine in 2019. The lack of funding for the research activities at HEIs is considerable. In 2023, the ministry of education and science cut funding for fundamental (by nearly 60 percent) and applied research, scientific and technical development (by nearly 70 percent), and for all research by young scientists (by nearly 80 percent).

Educational Losses of the Higher Education Sector
In 2022, the absolute majority of Ukrainian universities had to deal with geographically dispersed students and staff, and switched to distance or mixed forms of education. Displaced universities are grappling with the task of assisting displaced students in continuing their studies, often requiring innovative solutions such as online and remote learning. HEIs in safer regions had to return to a hybrid format and adapt their educational process to new conditions in order to ensure safety and security for students and faculty. As a result, they had to arrange shelters, but not all of them can accommodate all of their students.

A month after the introduction of the martial law, on March 24, 2022, the Verkhovna Rada—the Ukrainian parliament—adopted a law introducing a new HEI admission procedure. This simplified procedure made it possible to enroll into undergraduate programs upon the completion of the online National Multidisciplinary Test (NMT) rather than the paper-based External Independent Testing (EIT). The procedure expanded entry opportunities for individuals from territories with active hostilities or nearby settlements. Furthermore, to give the school graduates who were forced to move abroad a

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chance to enter Ukrainian HEIs, temporary examination centers were established in 46 cities of 26 countries, where 23,098 young people took the NMT. Likewise, paper-based admission tests for master programs were replaced with digital testing in 2022 and 2023.

The major decline in the quality of higher education in Ukraine pertains to restricted access to academic pursuits. As a report of the Grinchenko University Think Tank indicates, a significant share of surveyed students—47 percent—claimed that the quality of education in their academic programs remained unchanged, while 38 percent reported a slight deterioration. While the primary concern in the spring of 2022 was to establish safe conditions, the fall brought new challenges such as blackouts, disruptions in electricity and heating supply, and unstable Internet access, which exacerbated the remote learning crisis in Ukraine.

In the fall semester of 2022–2023, students, faculty, and administrative staff were confronted with the need to be exceptionally motivated and efficient during specific intervals when they had access to electricity and Internet. Distance learning is far from suitable for all areas of education, and some specialists simply cannot be trained in this way.

The emotional toll of war cannot be overlooked either, and universities in Ukraine are struggling with the deteriorating mental health and well-being of their students and staff. Uncertainty, fear, and trauma associated with living in a conflict zone significantly impact academic performance. According to an online survey of students, faculty, and staff of Ukrainian HEIs who remained in the country, 97.8 percent of the respondents said their psychoemotional state had worsened and reported struggling with such complaints as depression (84.3 percent), exhaustion (86.7 percent), nervousness (84.4 percent), loneliness (51.8 percent) and anger (76.9 percent). There are students and faculty in different circumstances: some are in occupied and unoccupied territories, some have no contact, some have moved within Ukraine, and some have relocated abroad. Some of the academic staff collaborated with the aggressor, some resigned out of fear of captivity, and others have been held captive for months. HEIs students and staff who find themselves in the temporarily occupied territories are confronted with a markedly disparate environment. They fight with an array of adverse psychoemotional factors akin to their counterparts living in the territories under Ukrainian control.

Ukrainian Higher Education Survived

It is imperative to acknowledge that, despite ominous trends such as infrastructure destruction, displacement of students and faculty, student, and staff loss, security concerns, cyber threats for universities' information systems, financial strains, organizational issues, and students' and staff's mental health and well-being, Ukrainian HEIs persist in functioning and providing educational services. Having conducted two rounds of admission, continuing to fulfill their missions during the 2022–2023 and 2023–2024 academic years, Ukrainian universities are still facing crucial challenges. These challenges, stemming from quarantine restrictions and exacerbated by the war, primarily revolve around the imperative need for well-organized distance learning in both synchronous and asynchronous modes. This involves adapting academic courses, programs, and task types, evaluation systems, schedules, teaching methods, etc. The Ukrainian system of higher education has survived, despite having suffered significant losses due to Russia's military invasion. The authorities partially managed to stabilize the higher education system in the difficult conditions of the ongoing armed conflict. The cohesion of the Ukrainian educational community, the motivation to continue teaching and learning, and the sufficiently effective internal policy of Ukrainian HEIs were of great importance in this process. There is also an invaluable input of the international community in providing assistance to Ukrainian educators.

The resilience and determination of students and faculty, coupled with support from the global academic community, are crucial in overcoming war challenges and rebuilding a stable and vibrant higher education landscape in Ukraine. Now is the time to focus on assessing educational losses and supporting further development of the Ukrainian higher education system.

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