

The Resilient Garden: Supporting Academia in Crisis

Anastasiya Leukhina, Anastasiia Lutsenko, Natalia Otrishchenko, Natalia Tsybuliak and Daria Yashkina

The Ukrainian case reveals an important dilemma for international higher education: programs that protect scholars at risk may weaken home academic systems if they support individuals without sustaining the institutions, teams, and professional relationships around them. Drawing on evidence from an international support scheme working with scholars from Ukraine, this analysis argues for mobility designed as connection rather than extraction.

A garden cannot be preserved by rescuing a few individual plants while neglecting the soil, irrigation system, and connections among roots. This metaphor, developed during a discussion within the [Ukraine Research Network@ZOIS](#) (UNET), captures a policy dilemma that extends far beyond Ukraine: how can international higher education protect scholars at risk without weakening the academic ecosystems to which they belong?

The scale of the challenge is global. Scholars at Risk's [Free to Think 2025](#) report documented 395 attacks arising from 328 verified incidents in 49 countries and territories between July 2024 and late June 2025. The contexts are not interchangeable. War, repression, forced displacement, and restrictions on academic freedom affect higher education differently in places such as Gaza, Syria, Ukraine, and other conflict-affected settings. Yet these distinct contexts raise a shared design question: what happens when support systems rescue individuals but do not sustain the teams, institutions, and professional relationships around them? Does international assistance preserve only individual careers, or does it also sustain the academic relationships needed for future recovery?

Emergency support is necessarily organized around individuals. Fellowships, visiting positions, and temporary affiliations can provide safety, income, and the ability to continue working. These are meaningful achievements. But the indicators most visible to funders and host institutions—placements, fellowships, and individual outputs—do not capture what happens within home systems. When an emergency becomes prolonged, a model built for rescue may leave the home academic sector weaker if it does not also preserve departments, research groups, and mentorship chains.

The Ukrainian Case

Ukraine is not a universal template for understanding academic life during war, but the Ukrainian case does make visible a structural problem that may arise, in different forms, in other prolonged crises. Evidence from the Ukrainian case shows that individual scholars have been dramatically affected by the

current conflict but also indicates that the disruption extends far beyond individual mobility. [UNESCO](#) reported that, by January 2024, 12 percent of Ukrainian academics had been forced to emigrate or relocate internally. It also documented 1,443 buildings belonging to 177 public scientific institutions that were damaged or destroyed. These losses affect not only careers but also laboratories, departments, doctoral supervision, archives, and professional communities.

Physical safety should not be mistaken for recovery. Indeed, our recent study of Ukrainian academics found that, of all staff sampled, external migrants reported the highest level of emotional exhaustion (67 percent, compared with 52 percent of internal migrants and 53 percent of those who had not moved). These findings complicate a simple division between scholars who leave and those who remain. Scholars abroad may be physically safer but face temporary contracts, repeated applications, family separation, and uncertain career paths. Scholars who remain sustain teaching, supervision, administration, and research under disrupted conditions. Both groups belong to the same academic landscape, and the resilience of that landscape depends on maintaining relationships across locations.

When Rescue Becomes Extraction

Indeed, the risk of emotional exhaustion is not mobility itself, but mobility disconnected from home academic ecosystems. Individual fellowships are indispensable: they protect careers and, in some cases, lives. Yet prolonged, atomized support can unintentionally cause stress for individuals and weaken the institutions that scholars may later help rebuild. This argument should not be read as evidence that fellowships themselves cause institutional decline. Rather, it identifies a blind spot in how their success is often assessed: home-side effects remain less visible than the outcomes of individual placements.

The risk goes beyond conventional brain drain. When key scholars become detached from their home departments and research teams for extended periods, mentorship chains, doctoral training, institutional memory, and disciplinary

communities may erode. The danger is especially acute for mid-career scholars, who often hold together research groups and supervise emerging generations of academics. Meanwhile, colleagues who remain inside the affected system carry growing teaching, administrative, and emotional burdens.

Designing Support as Connection

The implications are significant. Most importantly, the evidence suggests that international assistance should be designed around the relationships that sustain academic life. The unit of support should expand beyond the displaced individual to include the academic relationship: scholar and home institution, scholar abroad and home-based team, host university and home department, funder and field of study. Paired or dual grant schemes could link scholars who remain in crisis-affected settings, displaced scholars, and international partners. Instead of supporting individuals in isolation, programs could strengthen joint teams across locations.

Such grants could fund shared supervision, coauthored research, guest teaching, methodological training, digital infrastructure, research assistants based in the home country, and small grants for home-based teams. Fellowships could also include resources to maintain collaboration with home institutions and to support junior colleagues. In this way, mobility would strengthen rather than unintentionally drain the academic ecosystems scholars may later help rebuild, while also providing crucial emotional support for those who do migrate.

Evaluation should change accordingly. Success cannot be measured only by the number of scholars placed abroad or publications produced during a fellowship. Programs should also ask whether supervision continues across borders, whether home-based teams retain capacity, whether hidden labor is recognized, and whether scholars have realistic pathways to reconnect with or return to their institutions.

Support should also be longer, clearer, and less administratively exhausting. Very short fellowships can create a cycle of repeated uncertainty and reapplication. Longer schemes, transparent renewal rules, career advice, and realistic information about future opportunities would reduce pressure on scholars and improve planning for both home and host institutions.

Fair collaboration also requires recognition of hidden labor. Scholars who remain in crisis-affected countries often provide field access, language mediation, contextual interpretation, logistical coordination, and informal support for international projects. This work should be explicitly budgeted and credited. Scholars in affected systems should be recognized as intellectual partners, not treated primarily as sources of local access or logistical assistance.

Cultivating the Ecosystem

The resilient garden metaphor challenges two inadequate narratives. The first is the heroic narrative, in which researchers affected by war are expected to remain endlessly resilient. The second is the rescue narrative, in which international support is framed as a one-way intervention focused primarily on individuals. A garden requires shared labor, local knowledge, long-term care, and attention to conditions that are not always visible above the surface. For international support initiatives, sustaining the garden means sustaining the soil: institutions, teams, disciplines, mentorship structures, and professional communities. It means supporting the roots through stable funding, psychological sustainability, fair collaboration, and pathways for reconnection or reintegration.

The Ukrainian case does not provide a universal template for other crises. It reveals, however, a broader principle: in prolonged emergencies, success should be assessed by the relationships preserved and the academic ecosystems sustained.

Anastasiya Leukhina is scientific coordinator of UNET at the Center for East European and International Studies (ZOiS). Email: anastasiya.leukhina@zois-berlin.de.

Anastasiia Lutsenko is a doctoral fellow at the Max Planck Institute for Innovation and Competition, Germany. Email: anastasiia.lutsenko@ip.mpg.de.

Natalia Otrishchenko is a researcher at the Center for Urban History of East Central Europe, Ukraine, and a UNET alumna. Email: n.otrishchenko@lvivcenter.org.

Natalia Tsybuliak is an associate professor at Berdiansk State Pedagogical University, Ukraine, and a UNET alumna. Email: nata.tsibulyak@gmail.com.

Daria Yashkina is a senior lecturer at V. N. Karazin Kharkiv National University, Ukraine, and a UNET alumna. Email: dariayashkina@karazin.ua

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