

Navigating Wartime Realities: Adaptation and Resilience in Ukrainian Social Work Education

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Abstract. This paper explores how Ukraine's Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in social work have demonstrated resilience amidst the ongoing armed conflict. The war has significantly impacted the educational landscape, posing challenges to institutional operations, teaching methodologies, and the preparation of future social workers. The objective of this study is to explore the key factors contributing to both organizational and academic adaptability, thus ensuring that social work education remains relevant and effective in addressing the evolving needs of a wartime society.

A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining a desk review with 12 semi-structured interviews with academic staff from departments and institutes offering programs in 'Social Work' and 'Social Pedagogy'. The study examines how universities have adapted their curricula, teaching strategies, and assessment methods, while also highlighting the role of international cooperation and community-based initiatives.

The results reveal that Ukrainian HEIs have demonstrated significant resilience, utilizing cognitive and behavioral strategies to adapt to the war's challenges. This includes the shift to online and hybrid learning, the use of makeshift classrooms, and the integration of new community-focused missions. Despite these adaptive efforts, the findings also highlight concerns about the long-term sustainability of these changes, particularly in maintaining educational quality and meeting the needs of vulnerable populations. International partnerships have been crucial in supporting these efforts, although disparities between institutions in accessing such resources remain.

This study underscores the importance of resilience in educational systems during crises and offers valuable insights for other higher education institutions facing similar challenges. It calls for a holistic approach to education, one that balances immediate adaptations with long-term strategic planning so that to ensure the continued relevance and quality of social work education in times of conflict.

Keywords: Ukraine, higher education, social work, resilience, wartime adaptation, mixed-methods study.

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Introduction

Data from the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine (MES, 2024b) indicates that 127 *Higher Education Institutions* (HEIs) across the country provide training in the specialty 231 ‘Social Work’ at various academic levels, including undergraduate (Junior Bachelor and Bachelor), graduate (Master), and postgraduate (PhD) programs. Notably, numerous institutions offer multiple programs at the same level, highlighting the increasing importance of social work as a significant field of study and professional practice.

Social work in Ukraine is considered a relatively new profession, emerging in the post-socialist period of the 1990s. Its development was driven by societal transitions, including the shift from a centrally planned to a market economy along with the accompanying social challenges. Over time, the discipline has evolved to address a wide range of social issues, including crises that demand innovative approaches and resilience-building (Semigina and Kokoichuk, 2023).

The Russo-Ukrainian war, which began in 2014 with Russia’s annexation of Crimea and escalated into a full-scale invasion in February 2022, has profoundly affected Ukraine’s social work practice and education. This protracted conflict has inflicted devastating consequences on the nation, including extensive military and civilian casualties, widespread infrastructure destruction, and the displacement of millions of Ukrainians both domestically and abroad (Ukraine Recovery Conference, 2024).

The escalation of the armed conflict in Ukraine also poses a threat to the higher education system, hinders the normal educational process, and affects the sustainability of both higher education institutions on the one hand and educational programs and their capacity to train future professionals on the other hand. This situation affects not only the short-term provision of educational services but also the long-term prospects for stability and recovery of territories (Agapova et al., 2024; Artyukhov et al., 2024; Stoliaryk et al., 2024). This seems particularly important for social work education programs training frontline psychosocial support professionals for war-affected and traumatized individuals, groups and communities.

Despite these challenges, Ukrainian social work educators and institutions have demonstrated remarkable resilience and innovation. They have adapted their curricula, teaching methods, and support systems to prepare students to meet the intensified demands of wartime social services. This transformation offers valuable lessons for other nations and contexts, thus contributing to global knowledge on social resilience.

This paper explores how Ukraine’s higher education institutions in social work have demonstrated resilience amid the ongoing armed conflict. It examines the key factors that contribute to both organizational and academic adaptability, ensuring that future social workers are adequately equipped to meet the evolving challenges of a wartime society.

By sharing Ukraine’s experience with the international academic and professional community, this paper aims to enrich the understanding of how higher education systems can adapt to crises, while ensuring that future social workers are enabled to address complex and evolving challenges in times of social and geopolitical upheaval.

Theoretical Framework: Resilience and Adaptation of Higher Education Institutions in Crisis

This study draws on several key concepts related to social work education and its transformations in times of extreme crises.

At its core, the research utilizes the **Resilience Theory** which examines the capacity of social systems, organizations, and individuals to withstand, adapt to, and recover from disruptions (Coutu, 2002; Rutter, 1987). As defined by Van der Leeuw and Aschan-Leygonie (2005), resilience emphasizes the ability of systems to maintain functionality under stress while adapting to new realities. This framework is particularly relevant for understanding how Ukraine's *Higher Education Institutions* (HEIs) have responded to the extraordinary challenges posed by the Russo-Ukrainian war, adapting their academic programs and practices to meet the evolving needs.

The study further builds on the **Organizational Resilience Model** which characterizes an organization's ability not only to endure but also to adapt and thrive under stress (Horne and Orr, 1998; Robb, 2000). This model, rooted in the Resilience Theory, originated in psychology and was later extended to organizational contexts in the 1990s. Xiao and Cao (2017) emphasize the importance of flexibility, adaptability, and innovation for long-term organizational stability and competitiveness. Weick and Sutcliffe (2007) developed a concept of *collective mindfulness* which suggests that organizations must remain attuned to subtle environmental changes, enabling them to respond effectively to emerging crises. This perspective is instrumental in analyzing how Ukraine's HEIs have recognized and responded to the rapidly changing circumstances during the war.

Lengnick-Hall et al. (2011) define organizational resilience as the capacity to respond to risks, manage crises, and undergo transformation for self-development. Their framework identifies three key components: (1) cognitive resilience (anticipating risks and developing strategies), (2) behavioral resilience (cooperative efforts in crisis management), and (3) contextual resilience (building social ties to support organizational viability).

The development of organizational resilience has become a critical issue for institutions to survive and thrive in the face of ongoing crises (Ang et al., 2021; de los Reyes et al., 2021; Price, 2022), including educational systems (Ballantine et al., 2021; Dohaney et al., 2020; Naidu, 2021). The increasing emphasis on organizational resilience in the academic environment – particularly in response to crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and geopolitical upheaval – underscores the relevance of these concepts in understanding how Ukrainian HEIs have adapted to the challenges posed by the war.

Building on these theoretical underpinnings, it is essential to examine the **enablers** and **disablers** that influence the capacity of HEIs to adapt and thrive during crises, especially in the context of war. These factors play a central role in either fostering or hindering the resilience and adaptive capacity of organizations (Prashar, 2024). While the resilience theory provides the conceptual foundation for understanding how systems cope with stress and disruption, the concepts of enablers and disablers offer a practical

framework for identifying and analyzing the internal and external factors that facilitate or obstruct resilience and responsiveness to crisis (Muneeb et al., 2023).

Enablers are elements within an organization or external environment that enhance its resilience and ability to adapt. Tierney's (2003) model introduces four dimensions of organizational resilience: *robustness*, *redundancy*, *resourcefulness*, and *rapidity*. These dimensions emphasize the structural and systemic qualities that enable organizations to maintain functionality, ensure resource availability, creatively adapt to constraints, and respond quickly to restore their core operations. McManus (2008) expands on this with a focus on situational awareness, management of vulnerabilities, and adaptive capacity, further informing how Ukrainian HEIs might have anticipated and managed the risks posed by the war.

Bø Lyng et al. (2022) highlight key forms of adaptive capacity for resilience – coping, aligning, reframing, and innovating – and identify enabling factors such as knowledge, communication, trust, and resource organization. Additionally, Akgün and Keskin (2014) highlight organizational competencies such as social capital, agility, and established work practices that promote resilience. Their emphasis on leveraging both internal capabilities and external resources provides a framework for examining how Ukrainian institutions might have navigated the crisis by mobilizing the already existing resources and networks.

On the other hand, disablers (barriers) are factors that hinder resilience by restricting an institution's capacity to effectively respond to crises. Recent studies by Shaya et al. (2023), Ungar (2021), and Young et al. (2024) demonstrate that these barriers may include limited financial resources, inadequate infrastructure, lack of strategic vision, and systemic obstacles that obstruct decision-making and innovation, as well as their personnel's fear which hinders the collective adaptability and response efforts of an institution.

Together, these theoretical perspectives offer a comprehensive framework for studying the resilience and adaptive capacity of Ukraine's higher education institutions, particularly those training social workers. By applying the principles of organizational resilience – such as flexibility, adaptability, and resourcefulness – this study explores how Ukrainian HEIs have navigated the challenges posed by the Russo-Ukrainian war.

Methodology

This study employed a **mixed-methods** approach combining qualitative interviews and desk review to explore the adaptation of social work education in Ukraine's *Higher Education Institutions* (HEIs) during the wartime context.

The primary data collection method consisted of **semi-structured interviews** with academic staff from departments and institutes offering programs in 'Social Work' and 'Social Pedagogy'. The survey was conducted from May to June 2024, with the aim of gaining insights into how social work education institutions in Ukraine are responding to the challenges brought about by the war. The interview guide was designed with key questions focusing on several critical areas: responses to the war, adaptive coping

mechanisms, resilience factors, changes in educational processes, and perspectives on the future of social work education. Given the ongoing challenges posed by the war, interviews were conducted remotely, via phone and *Zoom*, lasting between one to two hours each.

The study purposefully included participants from nine regions and 12 higher education institutions across the entire territory of Ukraine to ensure geographical diversity and capture a broad spectrum of experiences, particularly from universities affected by occupation, displacement, or proximity to the active conflict zones. A total of 12 individuals took part in the study, including eight department heads and four faculty members. The participants were selected by using purposive sampling based on their active involvement in the organization and delivery of social work education during wartime, thereby ensuring representation from both administrative and academic perspectives.

All participants were informed about the purpose, procedures, and voluntary nature of the study prior to participation. Informed consent was obtained from each participant, with assurances of confidentiality, full anonymity, and the right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Given the sensitive context of the ongoing war and institutional vulnerability, particular attention was being paid to ensuring that participation would not pose any personal or professional risk. Data were collected and stored in accordance with ethical standards and the applicable institutional guidelines.

The desk review included an analysis of reports, academic publications, and other relevant documents, **which complemented the empirical data by offering contextual insights into policy shifts, institutional responses, and broader trends in social work education during the armed conflict.** This method provided a broader understanding of the landscape of social work education during the wartime years in Ukraine.

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze all the collected data, both from the desk review and interviews. This approach allowed for the identification of recurring themes and patterns related to the adaptation of social work education in response to the war. The analysis focused on both the challenges faced by institutions and the innovative approaches introduced to maintain the resilience of the educational system. Through this method, the study explored the factors influencing the adaptability and resilience of Ukraine's social work education programs during the ongoing armed conflict.

Key Findings

The resilience of social work education programs in *Higher Education Institutions* (HEIs) during wartime is shaped by a complex interplay of different **factors**.

1. Physical unsafety and mental health issues. The resilience of *Higher Education Institutions* (HEIs) during wartime is significantly impacted by the pervasive physical unsafety and the associated mental health challenges.

Persistent physical threats from shelling, missile attacks, and drone strikes have caused extensive **damage to infrastructure** and disrupted academic activities. Accord-

ing to the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine (MES, 2024a), as of December 12, 2024, 3,798 educational institutions, ranging from kindergartens to universities, have suffered damage due to bombing and shelling, with 365 being destroyed. This destruction is not confined to the direct frontline, but actually extends across many regions, reflecting the widespread reach of strikes with ballistic missiles and drones.

The impact is starkly evident in regions such as Donetsk and Kharkiv, where 32 universities have been damaged in each, while other areas, including Kherson, Dnipro, and Kyiv City, have also faced significant destruction.

It is also worth noting that 31 higher education institutions have been **officially re-located** by 2024, with many undergoing multiple relocations since 2014. These relocations, initially necessitated by conflicts in Donetsk, Luhansk, and Crimea, have expanded to include institutions from Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions following the full-scale invasion (MES, 2024b).

The forced displacement of universities and the migration of some students and faculties abroad have compounded new challenges, highlighting the need for agility and rapidity in decision-making to sustain educational processes under dire circumstances (Lopatina et al., 2023; Sibruk et al., 2023).

Beyond the physical destruction caused by persistent missile and drone attacks, other challenges, such as **regular blackouts** and the **lack of essential utilities like electricity, heating, and internet connectivity**, have compounded difficulties for students and faculties alike. These disruptions have forced universities to adapt in unprecedented ways, such as shifting to asynchronous and mobile-friendly learning formats, conducting classes during daylight hours to conserve energy, utilizing offline resources and printed materials, and establishing learning hubs with generators and internet access so that to ensure continuity in education.

The psychological toll on university communities has also been immense (Kurapov et al., 2023). Recent research by Panok and Kulish (2024) evidences the significant **deterioration of mental health** across Ukraine's population, attributing it to the prolonged, three-year exposure to stress, which negatively affects cognitive functions and fosters demotivation. Leshem et al. (2025) refer to this as a "shared traumatic reality," emphasizing the collective psychological burden faced by communities under persistent threat. So, the mental health challenges faced by university communities are not only individual but also collective, with the trauma and stress permeating through entire academic ecosystems. This shared psychological burden has been exacerbated by the constant uncertainty, disruption of daily life, and the drastic shifts in teaching and learning environments. Informants provided vivid illustrations of these difficulties. For instance, one participant from a relocated institution noted: *"Even during air raid alarms, the collective presence of students in shelters acted as a form of therapy, helping them cope with stress and anxiety."* Another participant from a southern region shared the challenge of conducting exams online from cafés due to power outages at home. A respondent from a region under occupation recounted how students would climb hills at night to access Ukrainian network coverage and communicate with instructors. A participant from the

capital city reflected on how safety became the overarching priority, necessitating flexibility and rapid adaptation in educational practices to integrate security measures.

These examples underscore the extraordinary efforts of HEIs to persevere under conditions of physical insecurity while addressing the complex mental health challenges faced by their communities (Dembitskyi et al., 2025). Despite these adversities, universities have demonstrated remarkable agility, swiftly reconfiguring their operations and leveraging community efforts to clear rubble or repair minor damage.

2. Diversification of learning models. In February 2022, at the onset of the full-scale invasion, Ukrainian universities rapidly shifted overnight to **online learning**. As the security situation in different regions evolved, HEIs gradually reintroduced offline and hybrid learning formats, depending on the local safety conditions.

Education was delivered through asynchronous online, synchronous online, and hybrid models, considering the security situation, available resources, and the life circumstances and specific needs of students. As one respondent noted, *“The educational process was conducted in various formats, depending on the capabilities of the students <...>.”* The informants highlighted that the transition to remote learning occurred without significant difficulties, largely due to prior experience in organizing such formats during the COVID-19 pandemic. Both faculty members and students had already developed skills in distance learning and the use of educational technologies such as *Moodle*, *Zoom*, *Microsoft Teams*, and *Google Meet*. Furthermore, even before the full-scale invasion, Ukrainian universities had established departments responsible for distance learning, e-course certification, and licensing. As one respondent shared: *“We were already prepared for this. During the pandemic, everyone learned how to work with distance learning technologies. Moreover, even during in-person classes, teachers continued developing certified e-courses and maintaining electronic journals.”*

Chuiko et al. (2024) highlight innovative practices for social work students during the war, integrating theory and practice through community-oriented learning led by student self-governing bodies and educational centers. This approach has enhanced practical education, prompting discussions on increasing hands-on learning hours, practice-oriented courses, and professional involvement in teaching.

Student practice has become more flexible and accessible. A respondent from Kharkiv noted: *“Students can now do their practice in their place of residence, expanding practice bases to include community organizations and international services.”* Similarly, in Kyiv, students adapted by using tools like video case analysis and mentoring.

To address the challenges of distance learning and safety, HEIs adapted assessment methods, such as extending the deadlines and creating individualized, practice-oriented tasks so that to maintain academic integrity. These adjustments ensured that students could continue gaining meaningful, real-world experience despite the ongoing war.

As outlined above, at the initial stage of the full-scale invasion, Ukrainian higher education institutions quickly adapted to online learning, leveraging previous experi-

ences from the COVID-19 pandemic. This adaptability highlighted the importance of preparedness and the capacity for rapid response in times of crisis.

By December 2024, Ukrainian HEIs were operating under a variety of formats, again influenced by regional security guarantees. In those areas where safety was ensured, universities continued in-person teaching with reinforced safety measures, including the installation of bomb shelters within academic buildings. The presence of these shelters, however, demands additional resources, including the continuous availability of energy sources such as generators to ensure the learning process continues during frequent power outages. This diversification in learning models, while necessary, places significant strain on the already limited resources, requiring constant adaptability and resilience from both educational institutions and their communities.

At the same time, research (Lavrysh et al., 2022; Marchuk, 2023; Nikolaiev et al., 2023) highlights a **decline in the quality of education**, particularly due to the shift to a hybrid learning format, which made it difficult to fully conduct certain important forms of work, as well as the loss of faculty members. The loss of experienced instructors and challenges in organizing practical sessions led to a decrease in the effectiveness of the educational process, posing a significant challenge for higher education during the war.

As traditional educational formats faced disruptions, universities and other educational institutions increasingly focused on delivering flexible, accessible, and relevant learning experiences outside of the formal frameworks. These programs were designed to address immediate social needs, develop practical skills, and provide opportunities for students and the broader community to acquire new knowledge in a variety of fields, particularly in response to crisis conditions.

Olena from Sumy noted, *“Universities are knowledge transfer hubs, while social work is a dynamic profession that depends on time and conditions. If regular training for students, practitioners, and the general population is not conducted, we risk losing critical time to respond to emerging social issues. Short-term training programs are a way to provide prompt education without requiring extensive changes to formal curricula, making them more resource-efficient.”*

From interviews with informants, many social work departments have introduced training programs focusing on the mental health, resilience, recovery, self-support, and self-preservation for not only social work professionals, but also other interested individuals. These courses can be formalized, and they often count as professional development, specific academic components, or parts thereof.

Compared to the traditional educational programs, these courses are more flexible, responsive to societal needs, cost-effective, and intensive. They also allow for the involvement of guest lecturers. One of the department heads noted, *“We don’t have the luxury of years to develop or study new technologies and intervention methods – we need to address situations and their challenges as if they were urgent yesterday.”*

To sum up, despite the ongoing challenges, Ukrainian higher education institutions have demonstrated remarkable adaptability during the war by diversifying the learning models to include asynchronous, synchronous, hybrid, and informal formats. This flex-

ibility, though resource-intensive, ensures continuity of education, addresses immediate social needs, and supports student and professional development in crisis conditions.

3. Expansion of international academic cooperation. Based on the desk review and the conducted interviews, it can be stated that the war has acted as a catalyst, prompting Ukrainian *Higher Education Institutions* (HEIs) to significantly intensify their involvement in international academic projects. These initiatives have provided crucial support in addressing the immediate needs while fostering long-term development. Regular collaboration with both Ukrainian and international partners has proven essential for aligning educational programs with the needs of practice, and student expectations, while ensuring quality assurance (Stepanenko, 2024).

With the onset of the full-scale Russo-Ukrainian war, *ERASMUS+*, the European Union's program for education, training, youth, and sport, significantly expanded its funding for Ukraine, particularly through mobility initiatives (ESN, 2022). These projects have provided Ukrainian universities with invaluable opportunities to enhance international cooperation, foster cross-border academic exchanges, and offer students and faculty access to a broader range of educational experiences.

As one respondent emphasized, *"To meet the demands of practice and the expectations of students, educators must continuously enhance their professional expertise through training, academic mobility programs, and participation in experience-sharing initiatives."*

International collaborations have expanded to include projects focusing on mental health, trauma recovery, and resilience – which are issues directly relevant to the current context. Many HEIs report strengthened partnerships with foreign universities and international organizations, resulting in grants for research, joint programs, and mobility opportunities for students and faculties.

Moreover, Ukrainian universities have increasingly integrated into international scientific and expert communities, sometimes in informal formats (Gusak et al., 2024a). This integration has provided invaluable support during challenging times. For example, an academic shared that *"In 2022, our department received free membership for two years in the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) due to participation in regular meetings aimed at supporting Ukrainian scholars in social work. This is crucial because membership fees are relatively high compared to the salaries of Ukrainian educators, and the university cannot afford to cover the cost."*

These initiatives not only offer immediate relief and opportunities but also strengthen the contextual resilience and social capital of Ukrainian higher education, laying a solid foundation for its long-term development within the global academic landscape.

4. New social services and demand for new competencies. The war in Ukraine has not only heightened the need for new social services but has also emphasized the increasing demand for new competencies among social work professionals and educators. With support from international organizations, social workers in Ukraine are actively adapting

their professional strategies to address the challenges posed by the ongoing conflict.

The desk review (Better Care Network, 2023; Ministry of Social Policy of Ukraine, 2024; Romaniuk et al., 2024; Semigina and Stoliaryk, 2024) reveals that, between 2022 and 2024, a variety of new social services were introduced, and several governmental social programs were enacted to respond to the evolving needs of the population. A key strategy involves empowering communities to achieve self-sufficiency and sustainability by utilizing their inherent strengths and local knowledge to provide social support.

Among the most significant initiatives is the establishment of community resilience centers which offer comprehensive psychosocial support to vulnerable individuals, families, and groups facing difficult circumstances such as displacement, trauma, and loss. These centers function as crucial hubs for mental health support, crisis intervention, and resilience-building, providing both immediate relief and long-term strategies for recovery. Another important innovation is the development of services for ex-combatants and their families.

To effectively implement these initiatives, specialized competencies – such as trauma-informed care, crisis intervention, and advocacy – have been prioritized. As a result, social work education must focus on developing these skills. Additionally, addressing stress management and sustaining professional resilience has become an urgent concern for Ukrainian social workers (Gusak et al., 2024b).

Informants underscored the need for educational adaptation in social work programs so that to meet the emerging challenges. For instance, one professor emphasized that *“the war has necessitated the development of skills to adapt both physical environments and public consciousness to create barrier-free conditions for reintegrating traumatized individuals into community life.”* Similarly, another respondent highlighted the importance of aligning with the global standards by stating that *“Humanitarian catastrophes require future social workers to understand and adhere to international standards of social protection and humanitarian assistance.”*

The findings also indicate a growing demand for interdisciplinary approaches in social work education. As one respondent from an institution originally based in an occupied region noted, *“Integrated social services necessitate interdisciplinary programs that combine social sciences, medicine, psychology, and law to address multifaceted issues. Such programs represent an innovative direction for Ukraine.”* This perspective, shared by a member of the administrative staff, underscores the perceived need for more holistic and cross-sectoral training models in response to complex wartime and post-war realities.

These insights highlight the significant role of HEIs in adapting their curricula to respond to the current needs and anticipate future challenges, ensuring that the social work profession remains responsive and resilient in the face of ongoing adversity.

5. Relations with communities. During the war, HEIs have become centers for social dialogue, expert consultation for local governments, knowledge transfer, countering disinformation, and innovation for rebuilding the country (Stoliaryk et al., 2024). The

third mission of universities – that of supporting societal development, addressing social issues, and fostering civic culture – has gained particular importance.

Educational programs have adapted quickly to the needs of their communities and the situational challenges of war. As one faculty member from a northeastern region explained: *“The updating of the educational program content occurred naturally, even if not always reflected in the course titles, it is evident in the disciplines’ content.”* This aligns with the university mission to orient their activities to local demands, by training specialists with skills for real-world challenges.

Many HEIs have launched research projects focused on war-related topics, post-war recovery, and community rebuilding. One of our informants highlighted a project funded by the National Research Foundation of Ukraine which addresses the development of post-war social services. This shift has made social work education increasingly practice-oriented and responsive to community needs.

Additionally, volunteer hubs at universities, involving both faculties and students, have played a critical role in supporting the war-affected populations. One informant from a western Ukrainian institution shared: *“In the first days of the war, we morally supported each other through volunteering – helping IDPs at the train station, creating shelters, weaving nets, and collecting humanitarian aid.”* These efforts have strengthened community cohesion, improved mental health, supported vulnerable groups, and promoted local employment (Lyakh et al., 2024; Chuiko et al., 2024; Kravchenko, 2024).

Thus, the resilience of HEIs during the war is reflected in their ability to adapt, innovate, and actively engage with their communities. By aligning research, education, and volunteering with societal needs, universities have reinforced their role as agents of social change and community resilience.

6. Sustaining educational standards. While the pre-war standards of higher education in Ukraine have remained unchanged, their application in the current context highlights the resilience and adaptability of both educational institutions and the bureaucratic accreditation system. Our informants pointed out that, while these established standards provide a stable framework, their rigid structure can be a challenge in times of crisis: *“The accreditation system, grounded in standards developed before the war, limits our ability to innovate or quickly adapt to the needs of the moment.”*

Nevertheless, Ukrainian HEIs have demonstrated significant adaptability within the constraints of these standards. An informant noted, *“We continue to follow these standards, but we’ve found ways to modify the way we implement them, allowing for more flexibility in our teaching and support of students under these conditions.”* This capacity to adapt while maintaining essential educational benchmarks reflects the resilience of the Ukrainian higher education in responding to the evolving challenges posed by the war.

Discussion and Conclusions

The findings from this study provide a comprehensive view of the resilience of Ukrainian *Higher Education Institutions* (HEIs) during wartime, while focusing specifically on social work education. The physical threats to HEIs and the widespread psychological impact on academic communities highlight the interconnectedness of cognitive, behavioral, and contextual resilience, as proposed by Lengnick-Hall et al. (2011). On one hand, HEIs' ability to adapt to the infrastructure damage and displacement demonstrates strong cognitive and behavioral resilience. On the other hand, the significant psychological burden, as noted by Panok and Kulish (2024) and Leshem et al. (2025), challenges contextual resilience by undermining social bonds and trust, which are essential for collective action.

The proactive measures taken by universities – such as using bomb shelters as make-shift classrooms or conducting exams under challenging conditions – illustrate the behavioral resilience discussed by McManus (2008). These efforts highlight the importance of situational awareness and rapid decision-making. However, they also reveal the limits of resilience in the face of prolonged crises. While universities can maintain operational continuity, the long-term sustainability of these efforts depends on addressing underlying mental health challenges through institutional support systems and external interventions (Tashkinova and Ponomaryova, 2024).

The rapid shift to online and hybrid learning formats exemplifies the agility and resourcefulness of Ukrainian HEIs, aligning with Tierney's (2003) dimensions of organizational resilience. The ability to transition to remote learning, aided by prior experience during the COVID-19 pandemic, underscores the significance of redundancy and resource availability in building adaptive capacity. However, the findings also indicate a tension between the flexibility required for sustaining educational processes and the potential decline in the educational quality, particularly regarding the practical and experiential learning components.

During the war, Ukrainian HEIs embraced their 'third mission' by becoming centers for community support, knowledge transfer, and innovation. Their swift response to community needs demonstrates how universities can serve as platforms for addressing complex societal challenges.

A critical issue is that of finding a balance between short-term adaptations and long-term strategic planning so that to maintain educational standards. The increase in informal and short-term training programs, while addressing the immediate needs, raises concerns about their alignment with formal educational frameworks and the professional readiness of the graduates (Karagodina, 2024). This suggests that, although diversification is essential under crisis conditions, it must be accompanied by the appropriate mechanisms so that to ensure the integrity and coherence of educational outcomes.

The expansion of international academic cooperation, accelerated by the war, has become crucial for fostering resilience in Ukrainian HEIs. Participation in programs like *ERASMUS+* and partnerships with international organizations has provided essential

financial, technical, and emotional support, consistent with Akgün and Keskin's (2014) emphasis on leveraging external resources. These collaborations have helped maintain educational processes and enhanced the global integration of Ukrainian universities, promoting innovation and knowledge exchange. However, reliance on international support raises concerns about the sustainability and equity of these partnerships. While larger and more established institutions may have better access to international networks, smaller or more isolated universities may struggle to obtain similar opportunities, thus further exacerbating the already existing inequalities within the higher education system. This highlights the need for coordinated national strategies to ensure fair distribution of international resources and allow all institutions to engage in global collaborations.

The study's findings align with broader resilience theories, emphasizing the dynamic interaction between enabling and disabling factors that shape an organization's adaptive capacity. The identified **enablers** – such as prior experience with online learning, community-based practices, and international cooperation – demonstrate the importance of leveraging the existing strengths and resources. These factors illustrate how Ukrainian HEIs have used their cognitive and behavioral resilience to navigate unprecedented challenges.

Conversely, factors such as damaged infrastructure, staff safety concerns, and systemic weaknesses underscore the urgent need for structural educational reforms. Tackling these **disabling factors** requires a coordinated approach which involves universities, government agencies, international organizations, and the wider academic community to address the underlying causes of institutional fragility.

Ukraine's higher education institutions have demonstrated remarkable adaptability during wartime, thus offering valuable **lessons for universities worldwide**:

- *Agility in Technological Adaptation.* The rapid shift to online and hybrid learning ensured continuity. International institutions should invest in digital infrastructure and faculty/student digital literacy with the objective to enable swift transitions in crises.
- *Community and Global Support Networks.* Ukrainian HEIs have embraced their role as community support hubs. International universities can learn from this by strengthening community ties and leveraging global partnerships to enhance resources and impact during crises.
- *Interdisciplinary Collaboration.* The crisis led to increased interdisciplinary approaches, particularly in social work and healthcare. International academia should design flexible interdisciplinary programs to address complex challenges in emergencies.
- *Balancing Flexibility with Sustainability.* Short-term training programs addressed immediate needs but raised concerns about quality. International institutions should balance rapid response with maintaining academic standards to ensure long-term educational effectiveness.

- *Leveraging International Cooperation.* Ukrainian HEIs gained vital support through international partnerships. Global institutions can benefit by cultivating strong international networks for resource sharing, knowledge exchange, and mutual support during crises.
- *Mental Health Support Systems.* The psychological impact of war on university communities highlighted the need for robust mental health support. International universities should prioritize mental health infrastructure to support students and staff during crises.

The lessons from Ukraine's experience offer valuable insights for global higher education systems. Adaptability, mental health support, flexibility with quality education, and international cooperation are crucial strategies for resilience in times of crisis. The findings underscore the importance of preparing educational institutions to continue serving their communities under challenging circumstances.

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