Ukrainian universities at the time of war: From occupation to temporary relocation

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Key points of interest

- The study sheds light on the practical adaptations implemented to navigate the effects of Russia's war against Ukraine, including the shift to a digital educational platform and the decentralisation of the university structure.
- The study underscores the urgent need for intervention and further research into developing effective strategies to protect the rights of university staff and students during war and occupation.

Abstract

Introduction: This paper presents a deep analysis of the impact of the Russian occupation on the activities of Berdyansk State Pedagogical University in Ukraine. This reflection sheds light on numerous challenges faced by the university community under occupation due to the the Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine, particularly emphasizing human rights violations and academic freedom.

Methods: Utilizing a mixed-method approach, this study employs document analysis, online surveys, and semi-structured interviews.

Results: The findings reveal a profound impact of war and occupation on academic and physical freedom. We share the experiences of staff and students during life under occupation, which are filled with fear of violent actions by the occupiers. Berdyansk State Pedagogical University had to adapt to changing conditions, transitioning to a digital educational platform and decentralizing its structure while concurrently fulfilling its third mission: social service and support of the university community and Berdyansk local community.

Discussion: Our research-reflective piece calls for intervention and further research toward developing effective strategies to protect the rights of staff and students of higher educational institutions in conditions of war and occupation. Conclusions provide a critical view of the catastrophic consequences for academic communities and science if timely measures are not taken.

Keywords: war, Ukraine, university, occupation, relocation, educational process, scientific work, higher education.

Introduction

Since it emerged from the Soviet Union on August 24, 1991, Ukraine has transformed into a democratic nation fostering freedoms

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of speech and self-expression. While most of the population is Ukrainian, the nation is also home to diverse indigenous communities, including Tatars, Karaites, Krymchaks, Russians, and Ukrainian Jews, among others. The official language is Ukrainian, but Russian is prevalent in the eastern and southern parts.

On February 24, 2022, a full-scale war erupted with Russia purportedly aiming to "liberate Ukraine from 'Ukrainian Nazis'" and combat "forcible Ukrainization". Ironically, the war ignited in regions predominantly Russian-speaking, rendering the invader's claim baseless. Since the onset, the conflict has engulfed every Ukrainian, instigating drastic alterations in their lives. Early in the conflict, numerous regions faced occupation or severe clashes, unveiling extensive challenges that will persist for years (Astrov et al., 2022; Chumachenko & Chumachenko, 2022).

The aftermath has been devastating, with significant damage to essential infrastructure like medical and educational facilities, a humanitarian crisis and mass migration (Gostin & Rubenstein, 2022; Grossi & Vakulenko, 2022). The population grapples with pervasive psychological distress, primarily due to continual assaults on civilian infrastructures and losing loved ones (Surzykiewicz, 2022; Shevlin et al., 2022).

Despite the broad global discourse regarding the war's repercussions (Dzhus & Golovach, 2023; Chudzicka-Czupała et al., 2023), scant attention is given to the Russian-occupied territories. Limited research addresses the Russian authorities' aggressive strategies in these areas, which warrants further investigation (Malyarenko & Kormych, 2023a; Malyarenko & Kormych, 2023b).

In the article devoted to the occupation of the city of Melitopol, the situation is characterised as follows (Bukrieieva & Afanasieva, 2023):

> In order to suppress the resistance of the population ... the Russian occupation forces have divided the population in these areas groups...: must be eliminated physically; need to be suppressed and oppressed; can be persuaded to collaborate; and collaborators.

In neighboring cities such as Berdyansk, the occupying forces have commandeered educational institutions, imposing Russian academic standards upon the remaining educators (Lopatina et al., 2023). As employees of the Berdyansk State Pedagogical University (BSPU), we have witnessed firsthand the crippling effects of occupation on educational sectors, which are often the most vulnerable during crises (Polishchuk et al., 2023; Petrić et al., 2022).

Despite the war's devastation, safeguarding the fundamental right to education is vital, serving individual intellectual and cultural needs and promoting societal and national progression. Maintaining educational efforts during conflicts can alleviate future repercussions, with recent findings indicating lower post-traumatic stress levels in individuals who continued their education amidst hostilities (Fel et al., 2022).

Nevertheless, wars considerably disrupt educational systems, with studies highlighting consequences such as infrastructure and personnel losses, and diversion of educational resources to military endeavors (Lai & Thyne, 2007). Additional challenges include limited access to resources and infrastructure, targeted attacks on educational facilities, and the shift to makeshift learning environments with restricted internet access (Dobiesz et al., 2022).

Although the COVID pandemic spurred advancements in distance education (Klochko et al., 2020), the war has stifled many of these developments, severely limiting educational activities in conflict zones. The situation ac-

Table 1. The main stages of the research

Stage	Description
Stage 1: Survey of University students and teachers	The survey was conducted in April 2022, i.e., at the beginning of the second month of the full-scale war. The survey involved 110 representatives of the academic staff and 1127 students. Two questionnaires were developed: one for students and one for academic staff (Annex 1). The respondents were surveyed using Google Forms.
Stage 2: Analysis of the current situation at the time of the survey	The current situation was assessed based on the analysis of the collected data and own empirical observations, which helped identify critical problems and challenges university students and academic staff face. The analysis included studying access to educational resources, living conditions, and mental health status. In addition, a thorough monitoring of the university's ability to operate under the current situation was carried out.
Stage 3: Interviewing University students and teachers	For a deeper understanding of the situation's specifics, individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with students (45 respondents) and academic staff (25 respondents). This helped to clarify the information obtained from the survey and gain a more detailed understanding of the problems (Annex 2). The interviews were conducted online using video conferencing software. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring themes and patterns.
Stage 4: Development of strategies to overcome identified problems and needs	Based on the data collected, strategies were developed to address identified problems and needs. These strategies included measures to strengthen the university's resources, support the mental health of students and faculty, and ensure safe conditions.
Stage 5: Analysis of the effectiveness of coping strategy implementation	The primary evaluation method employed is reflective analysis, utilizing the authors' experience as representatives of the management and academic staff of Berdyansk State Pedagogical University. This involved assessing the impact of the implemented coping strategy on the university and its community, studying actions, successes, and failures, and exploring ways to enhance the response to the crisis further.

centuates the harsh realities of war, where fundamental human rights, including access to quality education, are forsaken. This crisis is exacerbated by mass displacements, network disruptions, and a fractured social fabric, amplifying trauma and transforming pedagogical dynamics.

Furthermore, the war has ushered in a dark era characterised by torture and abuse in Russian-occupied territories, posing grave threats to the safety and freedom of students and educators alike and infringing upon their right to a secure and unhampered education.

This article encapsulates the ordeal of Berdyansk State Pedagogical University amidst Russia's full-scale assault on Ukraine, spotlighting the hurdles and perils encountered by the academic populace in occupied zones. It narrates the vital survival strategies employed by the university to uphold educational activities and safeguard lives amidst the tumult. Despite adversities, the university has emerged as a stronghold of hope and resilience, offering psychosocial support and fostering community solidarity while nurturing cultural, scientific, and educational resurgence amidst occupation.

Through this research, we endeavor to document and analyze the narratives of individuals who have endured violence in occupied Berdyansk, aiming to develop effective coping and safety strategies to preserve the university community. Our approach intertwines personal reflections, war narratives, and academic analysis through surveys and interviews, offering a comprehensive portrayal of the situation as we actively participate in the unfolding events.

This study is a crucial resource for the Ukrainian and international academic communities, pioneering an in-depth exploration of the impacts of war and occupation on higher education, focusing on preserving academic integrity and safeguarding students and educators from torture and abuse.

Research Methodology

This study utilises various methodological approaches to deeply understand the challenges of war and occupation, primarily focusing on safeguarding the university community's life and health in occupied Berdyansk. The Berdyansk State Pedagogical University (BSPU) prioritised resuming the learning process and exploring remote technologies for student participation in this critical time. We also examined the academic staff's research activities during martial law and occupation and collected testimonies of violence and rights restrictions on university students and staff in occupied Berdyansk. Additionally, we analyzed the temporary relocation of the university to Ukrainian-controlled areas. We assessed the effectiveness of adopted coping strategies during martial law, although data collection was limited due to communication issues in Russian-occupied territories. The main stages of the research are presented in Table 1.

Through reflective experience, the research addressed the question: "How can a university best respond to the war to safeguard the academic community and fulfill its mission?".

Since this research involved highly confidential information and could put participants at risk, all participants are anonymous, and any collected data that may threaten people's lives will be immediately destroyed upon completion of this research.

Situation Analysis (Retrospective)

National Context

As of February 24, 2022, 336 higher education institutions of various profiles and directions were operating in Ukraine, with 1,335,690 students enrolled[1]. The full-scale war impacted the activities of every university (Kozmenko et al., 2023). For approximately two months of the full-scale war, 10% of higher education institutions were located in Ukraine where active military actions were/were taking place or were under temporary

1 Official Information Source: *Mon.gov.ua*, available at: https://mon.gov.ua/ua/news/opublikovano-strategiyu-rozvitku-vishoyi-osviti-v-ukrayini-na-2022-2032-roki (accessed 15 March 2022) [In Ukrainian].

occupation, besieged (blockaded)[2]. On February 25, 2022, following the recommendations of the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine (MoES), the educational process in all educational institutions was suspended, and a two-week vacation was declared - from February 25 to March 12, 2022. In the same letter, Minister Serhiy Shkarlet called on educators not to panic and follow the recommendations of state[3]. After the forced vacations, the MoES recommended starting the educational process depending on the security situation in the regions in a remote or mixed format[4]. Thus, as of March 22, 2022, higher education institutions in 15 regions of Ukraine had the opportunity to resume the educational process; HEIs partially resumed work in 2 regions, universities in 4 regions continued to be on vacation, and only in one region HEIs did not work[5]. As of March 30, 2022, the educational process was resumed in 17 regions of Ukraine, HEIs partially resumed work in 3 regions, and universities in 3 regions were on vacation[6]. As of April 14, 2022, in each region of Ukraine, HEIs resumed the educational process in a remote or mixed format, as well as in consultation mode and independent student work. Only in two regions were institutions forced to continue to be on vacation[7].

Local Context

Berdyansk was seized on the fourth day of the war (Figure 1). On February 27th, Russian troops entered the city. From their windows, people witnessed an abundance of military equipment marked with the letter "Z". In those days, few dared to venture outside. Everyone was waiting to see what would happen next. The city administration continued to function in the initial days, though the city management had to relocate to other buildings, the locations of which were kept confidential. The city was still resonating with the sounds of alarm sirens, and the city mayor was coming live on social media every evening to report on the situation. Concurrently, city activists, including academic staff and students, staged peaceful protests, chanting "Berdyansk is Ukraine", singing the national anthem, and holding Ukrainian flags. Then the city fell silent. Peaceful demonstrations were dispersed by the occupiers using force. Professors from our university shared their recollections of that day in interviews:

2 Official Information Source: *Mon.gov.ua*, available at: https://mon.gov.ua/ua/news/sergij-shkarlet-ya-nedopushu-osvitnogo-maroderstva (accessed 04 May 2022) [In Ukrainian].

3 Official Information Source: *Mon.gov.ua*, available at: https://mon.gov.ua/ua/news/sergij-shkarlet-vsim-zakladam-osviti-rekomendovano-pripiniti-osvitnij-proces-ta-ogolositi-kanikuli-na-dva-tizhni (accessed 25 February 2022) [In Ukrainian].

4 Official Information Source: *Mon.gov.ua*, available at: https://mon.gov.ua/ua/news/osvitnij-proces-mi-mayemo-zapustiti-prinajmni-hocha-b-u-tih-regionah-de-na-sogodni-ce-mozhlivo-i-bezpekova-situaciya-dozvolyaye-sergij-shkarlet (accessed 08 March 2022) [In Ukrainian].

5 Official Information Source: *Mon.gov.ua*, available at: https://mon.gov.ua/ua/news/sergij-shkarlet-povidomiv-yak-zdijsnyuyetsya-osvitnij-proces-u-zakladah-pto-fpo-ta-zvo (accessed 22 March 2022) [In Ukrainian].

6 Official Information Source: *Mon.gov.ua*, available at: https://mon.gov.ua/ua/news/sergij-shkarlet-rozpoviv-yak-vidbuvayetsya-ponovlennya-osvitnogo-procesu-v-regionah-de-ce-mozhlivo-ta-dozvolyaye-bezpekova-situaciya (accessed 30 March 2022) [In Ukrainian].

7 Official Information Source: *Mon.gov.ua*, available at: https://mon.gov.ua/ua/news/bilshist-zakladiv-profesijnoyi-fahovoyi-ta-vishoyi-osviti-zdijsnyuyut-navchannya-u-regionah-de-ce-mozhlivo-ta-dozvolyaye-bezpekova-situaciya (accessed 14 April 2022) [In Ukrainian].

Figure 1. Map of occupied territories in Ukraine as of February 27, 2022.

P1: "On the last day, when we were at the protest, about 30 armed soldiers of the Russian regime gathered around us. We also numbered around 30, but predominantly women. <…> We continued to protest on the square, singing Ukrainian songs. That is when they began detaining us. I was miraculously not detained, but several guys from our group were captured and taken to the basement. Later, I spoke to one of them, and he recounted how he was interrogated for four days."

P2: "Occupation, as a phenomenon itself, is terrifying. I remember walking to the market and on sidewalks where people with guns stood on both sides. Their gun was so close to my leg that I could feel its coldness. I was thinking about who they were, coming onto my land, and now I must live by their rules."

People began to be persecuted at every turn:

P3: "I perhaps can't recall the details, but things kept worsening. Initially, there was such tension when we had to close the windows, not turn on the lights, and pretend we weren't there, that we were hiding in our own homes and didn't have the right to listen to Ukrainian news, dress in blue and yellow [colors of the Ukrainian flag - authors' note], because they could take you away."

P4: "There are many fears here. The fear that they will come for you, the fear that they will ask you in which country you live. I know that I live in Ukraine, but you can't tell that to the people who will come. You have to say what they want to hear."

Due to the occupation, Berdyansk was on the verge of a humanitarian disaster: food, medicines, and hygiene items were not being delivered to the city:

P5: "There were three of us and no bread. There was nothing left to eat. I went to the store, saw a queue with lots of people and a representative of the occupation authorities was standing nearby. I turned to him and said: "Listen, I need at least one loaf of bread per person." But he replied: "No, only two loaves of bread per family." And I felt so bitter in my soul. I thought: "My God, what will happen next?"

In addition, from the first days of the full-scale war, the gas pipeline was damaged, and the city was left without a gas supply. This led to an increase in the need for citizens in electrical appliances for cooking and heating. From the testimonies of academic staff collected during interviews:

P6: "When our electricity was cut off, followed by the water, it became hard. We hung lanterns on the chandelier at home so that we could somehow have breakfast and dinner."

P7: "I would rather call it survival because they turned off the heating in our building, and it was 3 degrees Celsius in our apartment."

Due to the closure of banks and supermarkets and the halt in cash deliveries to the city, having cash on hand became a significant necessity:

P8: "I had to stand in line for hours at night at the ATM. We had money on the card, but there was no opportunity to pay with a card."

The situation in the occupied cities of Ukraine is brutal and uncompromising. The danger exists not only for journalists and activists but also for ordinary people who have not switched sides with the Russian occupiers. The situation is further complicated by the presence of many "collaborators" who have agreed to work for the occupying power. They watch over acquaintances, friends, and former colleagues and hand them over to the occupying authorities:

P9: "You fear not so much the enemy as those who have switched to their side and know you well. They can betray you, and it's scary because they were once your colleagues, friends."

University context

1. University in the early days of Russian occupation

On February 24, 2022, Berdyansk State Pedagogical University (BSPU), a venerable institution in southeastern Ukraine, found its community of 4,195 students and staff at the heart of looming danger. In a potent symbol of an attack on the nation's cultural and ideological identity, the occupiers prioritised tearing down the Ukrainian flag at the university shortly after entering Berdyansk on February 27. The leadership suspended educational activities to safeguard the BSPU community, restricting building access. Only the management ventured to the university buildings amidst the unfolding crisis. Armed soldiers came to the university a few days after the start of the Russian occupation. They went to the rector, took him out of the university, put him in a car, put a bag over his head, and took him away for "communication". From the rector's memories:

"I was talked to for more than an hour by representatives of the Russian special services. They asked questions: 'What is your attitude towards the Soviet Union, the red flag, the victory?' I spoke about how our Ukrainian people will not support them. They can capture territory. But they will be unable to subdue the Ukrainian yearning for freedom."

The occupiers tried to persuade the rector to head the "new" Russian university in Berdyansk. After receiving a categorical refusal, they still let him go.

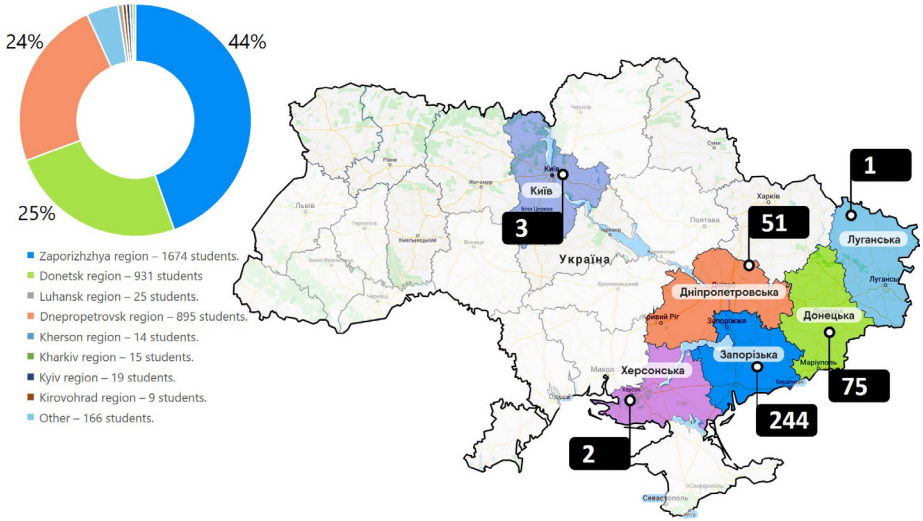
From then on, it became clear that being in the university building was dangerous. We, the academic staff and management of the university, began to meet simply in the park. This was university management in the park on a bench under the open sky. It should be noted that at this time in the city, the occupiers had turned off mobile communication and the Internet. So, we agreed every day about the time and place of the meeting. All academic staff were on forced vacations, and students were on holiday. Before us, there was a task of making immediate decisions regarding preserving the university and restoring its work.

2. The contingent of students in the first months of the war

In adherence to the Ministry of Education and Science's guidance, the university endeavored to resume the education process, safeguarding the students' uninterrupted right to higher education during the occupation. This entailed a meticulous evaluation of available assets, including personnel, facilities, and communication avenues, amidst substantial constraints posed by the ongoing communications breakdown in regions affected by active combat or temporary occupation. Notably, a significant portion of Berdyansk State Pedagogical University's student body was situated within these precarious zones (Figure 2).

These data indicate that potentially about 70% of the total BSPU student body was forced to hide in shelters from hourly rocket attacks or seek refuge in safer areas of Ukraine or abroad.

Figure 2. Distribution of BSPU student body by regions of Ukraine.



During the period of BSPU operation under occupation (end of February - April 2022), despite the war, the change in the student body was insignificant: 10 students were expelled from the university, and 14 took academic leave. However, this figure, at that time, did not reflect the actual situation since it was impossible to establish contact with 193 students during two months of full-scale war.

3. Access to the Internet and information sources
Information became a rare asset shortly after the war's onset, with the severing of internet and mobile networks plunging Berdyansk into an isolating information void due to nearby combat activities. Without conventional communication channels, residents gravitated towards improvised hubs like humanitarian headquarters, spontaneous markets, and the central square for fragmentary updates, fostering a breeding ground for uncertainty and rumors. The city's outskirts bore witness to the relentless conflict, with the sounds of distant explosions punctuating the otherwise silenced atmosphere. Amidst this communication blackout, which witnessed gaps lasting up to ten days, Russian propaganda infiltrated the city's channels, perpetuating a narrative of relentless and unfounded accusations against "Ukrainian Nazis".

> *R 10: "The most terrifying thing was, at that moment, when I started to understand that they brainwashed me very badly. You don't even suspect the force with which they are pressuring you. There were no more Ukrainian channels, almost no communication, and blackouts, and you have one television, where there were only Russian channels, and there was radio, where they kept repeating the same thing. You no longer understand where the truth is and where the lie is. This is the most terrifying thing because you start to lose your mind."*

In April 2022, a survey on internet access revealed significant hurdles in reinstating the education process at BSPU amidst the ongoing conflict:

- A notable proportion struggled with unstable internet connections: 36.1% of students and 39.1% of teachers.
- Many reported sluggish internet speeds: 37.5% of teachers and 25.4% of students.
- A minority had access to quality internet: 26.4% of students and 35.5% of teachers.

These findings underscored the technical challenges, disorientation, and trauma that students and faculty faced in the turbulent backdrop of full-scale war and occupation:

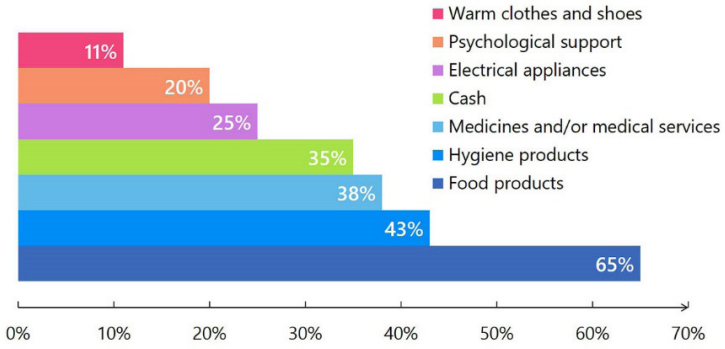
> *R11: "During the month I was in occupation, the scariest thing was the lack of information, total isolation, the information blockade. You know, you can probably survive the lack of some products in the store, but not an information blockade."*

> *R12: "The silence of occupied cities, isolation from the world and each other is paralyzing. It's scary to see the horrors of war, but it's no less scary to see nothing, hear nothing, and not have the opportunity to speak when you are filled with different emotions."*

Moreover, the occupation hindered the functionality of the university's website, a vital tool housing critical educational resources, including Class schedules, Syllabuses, and Repositories, among others.

4. Dormitory
As of February 24, 2022, 120 students lived in the university dormitory, and as of February 27, 2022 (occupation by Russian troops) - 53 students, of which 20 were orphans. The

Figure 3. The needs of students who lived in the dormitory during the occupation period



others were students who had relatives in regions occupied since 2014.

Monitoring students' needs in the dormitory revealed that students felt the most significant lack of appliances for cooking, food, and hygiene products (Figure 3).

During the occupation, the students in the dormitory displayed notable solidarity, supporting one another materially and emotionally, showcasing a distinctive national characteristic of Ukrainians – resilience in the face of adversity. Despite the lesser concern for warm clothing and psychological help, the urgent needs that arose necessitated immediate solutions. Many attempted to flee to safer regions, aided financially and materially by the faculty.

However, the lack of a sanctioned humanitarian corridor posed a significant risk to the student population, with no assurance of safe passage to secure areas in Ukraine. Tensions heightened drastically on March 24, 2022, following the bombing of the "Saratov" vessel near the BSPU student dormitory, instigating a brutal search operation by Russian forces. This incursion saw students and Mariupol refugees violently evicted from their rooms, assembled, and interrogated for particular tattoos, with ruthless scrutiny of personal phones leading to physical and psychological torment for individuals found with Ukrainian symbols:

R 13: "Probably, the greatest fear I felt when the invaders broke into the dormitory. Of course, it was terrifying when I found out about it because I understood that these people didn't come in peace."

R 14: " I couldn't contact my friends for some time… I was scared because I couldn't determine if the person was alive or if everything was okay."

The student the invaders beat that day needed more than a month for physical rehabilitation. This hazardous situation led to the need to organise the emergency relocation of all students from the university dormitory to safer places. Therefore, teachers' homes became temporary shelters for these students. However, this did not solve the general problem of ensuring the safety of university students:

R 15: "The scariest thing is that you constantly meet soldiers on the street who, depending on their mood, can stop you and search you. I had such an experience when

they stopped me, checked my documents and phone, and searched my belongings. And all this happened under the muzzle of a gun. It was a terrifying feeling when you looked and didn't know what to do, or how to act in such a situation. I was trembling with fear then, but I told them I was cold because I did not want to show them my feelings."

R 16: "The scariest thing about the occupation is the restriction of your abilities. Before the war began, before the occupation, we peacefully visited various shopping centers, walked around, and studied freely and calmly. However, now , there are people in uniform at every turn and not with our flag. You need to leave the city, and there are also problems with leaving. These restrictions are tough for me."

R17: "The scariest things are probably two things. Firstly, it's eavesdropping. There are many rumors about phone eavesdropping, so they can take you somewhere, beat you up, or kill you. Secondly, it's scary that they will take you into the ranks of the Russian army. I am of such age that I am already subject to be conscripted into the army. I once saw a car driving by with young boys who were taken into the Russian army."

R 18: "The scariest thing was the fear that the military would get to us, find some information in the phone, some channels. I saw with my own eyes how they stopped a family and checked, even the phone of a 7-year-old child. And you understand that you don't know what to expect from these people. You don't know with what intentions they are doing this."

In the context of our research, it is essential to study a specific case from Berdyansk, which reflects the overall picture of the challenges faced by young people from the occupied territories of Ukraine.

On June 24, 2023, Vladimir Rogov, a representative of the occupying authority of the Zaporizhia region, reported the death of two Ukrainians, calling them "terrorists". The deceased were two 16-year-olds from Berdyansk - Tigran Oganesyan and Nikita Khanganov[8].

According to Ukrainian human rights activists, the teenagers were killed by snipers. It is also noted that half a year before the murder, the teenagers survived a series of persecutions, including the kidnapping and torture of Tigran in the local police department[9].

The lawyer who provided legal assistance to the Oganesyan family also spoke about the boy's torture after being kidnapped by Russian security forces[10]. According to the lawyer, the teenager was under challenging conditions; he was beaten, a taser was used, and a mock execution was staged for intimidation. Before his death, Tigran managed to record and send a video to the network.

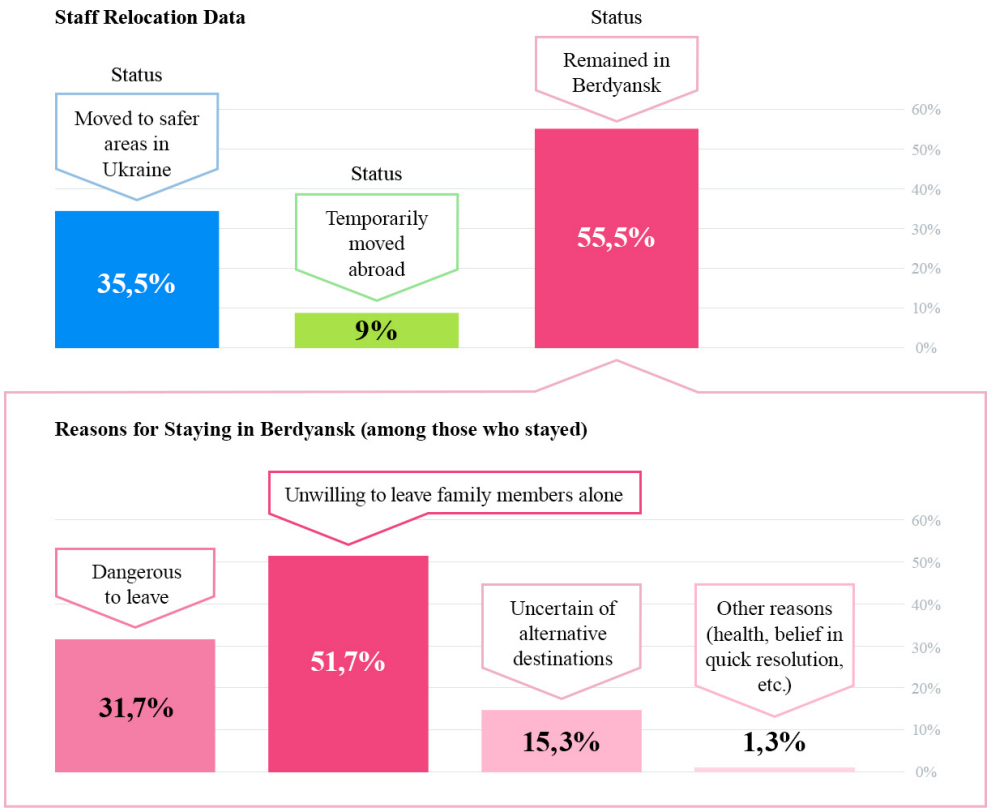
Tigran and Nikita were not students at the Berdyansk State Pedagogical University, as they were still at school; perhaps next year, they would have entered our university.

8 «This is death, guys. Glory to Ukraine!» What is known about the killing of 16-year-old partisans in occupied Berdyansk. New Voice. Ukraine, available at: https://nv.ua/ukraine/events/tela-ubityh-tigrana-ogannisyana-i-nikity-hanganova-v-berdyanske-tak-i-ne-otdali-ih-roditelyam-50335328.html (accessed 25 July 2023) [In Ukrainian].

9 "Beaten, simulated execution". Human rights defenders report on the persecution of teenagers in occupied Berdyansk. Radio Freedom, , available at: https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/novyny-pryazovya-berdyansk-pidlitky-zahroza/32432934.html (accessed 25 July 2023) [In Ukrainian].

10 "This is death, guys, goodbye! Glory to Ukraine!", - the last words of Berdyansk teenager Tigran Oganesyan before being killed by Russian occupiers. VIDEO Source: https://censor.net/ru/n3426948 (accessed 25 July 2023) [In Ukrainian].

Figure 4. Staff Relocation Trends and Underlying Reasons for Staying in Berdyansk During the Occupation Period



However, this tragedy with the Berdyansk teenagers shows that the study and analysis of the situation with the persecution of young people in the occupied territories are vitally necessary to develop effective global protection strategies.

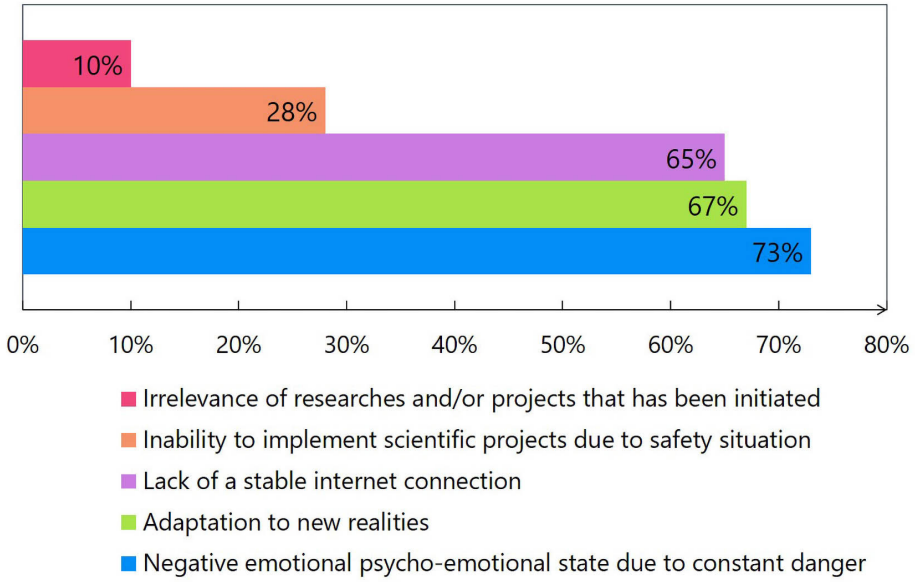
5. Academic Staff

In April 2022, an in-depth analysis was performed to assess the capacity of the BSPU's academic staff to reinstate the educational process and scrutinise the staff members' prevailing security conditions. The war impacted a substantial segment of the academic staff, necessitating relocations to ensure safety Among those who opted to stay in Berdyansk, the rationales behind their decisions were varied (Figure 4).

Furthermore, the BSPU confronted formidable barriers in fostering another pivotal facet of its mission: the progression of scientific research. The main obstacles were:

- The threat to life, health, and safety;
- Change of priorities and loss of relevance of started or planned scientific projects;

Figure 5. Subjective reasons for the decline in scientific activity of the academic staff during the Russian occupation



- Inability to implement scientific projects due to limited access to material and technical resources;
- Inability to participate in international programs to support science and innovation.

The BSPU's academic staff survey highlights a pronounced dip in scientific activity during the occupation, with analyzed responses delineating the principal factors driving this downturn (Figure 5).

Among other responses, there were also mentions of a decrease in family income, prompting the search for additional (non-scientific) sources of income, lack of conditions for practical work (living conditions, technical conditions), etc.

At the same time, security issues came to the forefront for those academic staff who remained to live in Berdyansk.

R19: "Then, after a month, maybe two, while the occupiers settled in, they appointed a new government, they started to identify pro-Ukrainians [citizens with a Ukrainian position - note by the authors] and university teachers working for Ukraine. So, we started to hide. I had to live in different apartments. I moved from one to another so they wouldn't find me."

R20: "There was a moment when I was still in Berdyansk. My friends called me and said that in 20 minutes I should not be at home and I should not appear there anymore because the occupiers were looking for me. We gathered very quickly and found where we could live with acquaintances. From that moment, I hardly left their house."

These fears are not baseless. The occupying power held three employees of our university captive for almost half a year. They also

took three female teachers "for a talk", forcing them to write a resignation letter from our university and to be photographed with the Russian flag. From the testimonies of one of the affected teachers (fortunately, she was able to leave Berdyansk and can talk about it):

> *R21: " And then there was a knock at the door…and I understood they came for me… They took us to the commandant's office… During the interrogation, I answered very sharply in Ukrainian. And this same commandant said, 'If you keep answering like this, we will take your daughter away. Russia is big; you won't find her anymore. We will mobilise your husband, and your mother will also be placed somewhere, and you won't find her, and you will go very far away.'"*

6. Azov State Pedagogical University - a fake university within our university's walls

An additional problem that has arisen for our university is the attempt by the occupying power to imitate the university structure by establishing the so-called "Azov State Pedagogical University," whose leadership has been transferred to a former employee of the Berdyansk State Pedagogical University. They are using the buildings and equipment to conduct an educational process that requires recruitment and hiring of staff, as well as student enrollment. The occupiers use intimidation, deception, and coercion to achieve this goal. Teachers become targets of armed visits to their homes, forcing them to work for the newly established institution under threat of deportation or imprisonment.

The occupying power actively destroys local educational resources, labeling them as extremist, and openly boasts about it on social media. They actively establish contact with students, offering education "At Berdyansk University". When asked about the specific university, they respond ambiguously, trying to confuse the students.

This situation underscores the importance of countering information influence in the context of occupation and preserving and protecting authentic educational institutions and their image.

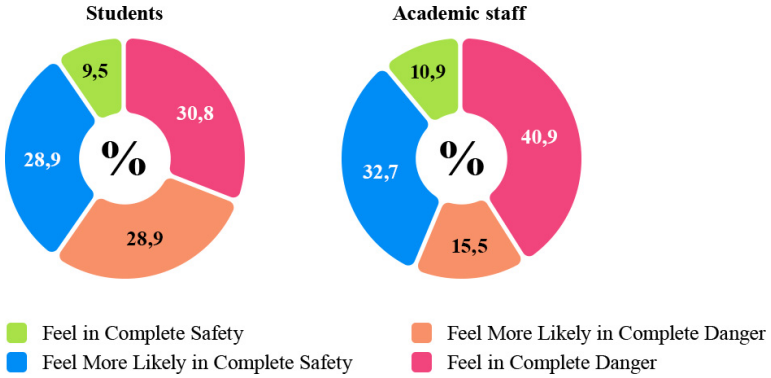
7. "Road of Death – Road of Life". Leaving occupied Berdyansk

Another significant challenge is the transition from occupied cities. "Every day, approximately 1036 people are leaving the occupied territories," - such messages were regularly encountered in the information space of Zaporizhzhia and Ukraine. This reflects the large-scale migration processes when thousands of citizens living in Russian-occupied territories are forced to leave their homes and relocate to non-occupational regions. Moving from occupied territories is often accompanied by significant risks and trials that include, but are not limited to, the danger of shelling and insufficient food and water. The journey that took 2 hours in peaceful times now sometimes takes two weeks for some force-displaced persons. The occupiers deliberately create queues of cars to serve as a "human shield" and keep hundreds of people for weeks at checkpoints:

> *R22: "We spent the night at a gas station, which was already destroyed then. They drove us all into this gas station. They didn't let us out of the cars at night or allow us to turn on our phones because we were human shields. That night they were shooting at Ukrainian villages from our location. All night we saw these rockets flying out. It was terrifying to see."*

Thus, the documentation of the process of leaving occupied regions highlights the dif-

Figure 6. Perceived Personal Safety Among BSPU Students and Academic Staff (April 2022)



ficulties and challenges faced by displaced persons, but at the same time, it testifies to the importance of free migration and the need for further understanding of this phenomenon in the context of military occupation:

> *R23: "It was tough. Russian soldiers walked around with guns, looking at who was in the car. Three soldiers approached us, one holding a grenade in his hands. I said that we had children and elderly people. He said that everyone said so and shoved the grenade into the car where there was a child. It was terrifying. My son still remembers this because it was terrifying."*

> *R24: "Picnic on the roadside. This is how thousands of families spend several days during the evacuation from the occupied territories. <…> No country has the right to force people to flee their homes, spend the night in the field under shelling, and feel like they are on the world's edge."*

One such road "Berdiansk-Vasylivka" people began to call the "Road of Death", because not everyone survives the transition. Others call it the "Road of Life", symbolizing freedom. It is worth noting that this road is now closed to exit; leaving the occupied territories to Ukraine is impossible. People who remained under occupation were hostages:

> *R25: "We had one attempt to leave the city… But we were not allowed to leave, although we wanted to so much. I see this checkpoint, my freedom; we all leave this hell. But no, we were turned back. And we turned back and returned."*

Ways to overcome identified problems and results

Preservation of life, health, and psychological support

During the ongoing conflict and temporary occupation of Berdyansk, the BSPU found itself navigating unprecedented challenges, necessitating swift yet judicious decision-making to establish priority goals and adapt to the uncertainties. To gauge the prevailing sentiments regarding personal safety in April 2022, surveys were conducted amongst both students and teachers (Figure 6).

In response to the challenging conditions faced during the occupation, the university provided dormitory students with social, psychological, and emotional support. This support included provisions like food and hygiene products and distributing essential information related to safe behaviour, first aid, information hygiene, stress management, and response protocols for various emergencies.

Ensuring the activity of the university and the educational process

Ensuring the activity of the university and the educational process

Under the conditions of Russian occupation, the activity of the university was effectively blocked. A survey of students was conducted on the desire and ability to study in conditions of martial law and occupation of Ukrainian territories. Almost all students (85%) indicated they wanted to continue their studies, despite several problems and obstacles (Figure 7).

In response to the challenges posed by the occupation, the university extended the student's forced holidays from April 3 to May 2, 2022, with teachers taking their annual paid leave simultaneously. During this hiatus, efforts were made to keep students informed of possible educational alternatives, including attending courses at other institutions or non-formal/informal education with the prospect of later accreditation of the acquired knowledge. Despite the inability to centralise communication through the university's website, faculty deans, group curators, and teachers leveraged existing channels to maintain contact with students and disseminate crucial updates.

By its autonomy rights as defined by the Law of Ukraine "On Higher Education" (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 2014) and following the recommendations of the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, BSPU took essential steps to preserve the life and health of the university community and the identity of the university itself. With the consent of the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, a decision was made to temporarily relocate to the territory controlled by Ukraine from April 20, 2022[11] to the city of Zaporizhia based on Zaporizhzhya National University, i.e., BSPU has been operating under the conditions of occupation by Russian troops for 53 days. The temporary relocation of BSPU allowed the resumption of the educational process under martial law conditions from May 2, 2022.

In addition, a new transitional strategy for Berdyansk State Pedagogical University was

11 Order of the Ministry of Education and Science dated April 20, 2022 No. 357

Figure 7. Monitoring of the motivation of BSPU students to study in conditions of martial law in April 2022.

✓ High motivation	➢ Low motivation
✓ "I want to study very much, but we have to constantly move around together with my family, looking for a safe place to live"; ✓ "I want to study, but the internet is very bad, I can only write messages to my friends and family"; ✓ "I want to study, but my thoughts are all about the war"; ✓ "I want to study, but I spend most of my time in a bomb shelter because of the constant danger"	➢ "I can't think about studying now, because my family is in Mariupol, I'm very worried about them"; ➢ "I watch the news all the time, it's more relevant than studying"; ➢ "I study Russian philology, and now I have an aversion to my chosen profession"; ➢ "I have to work all the time to support my family"

developed and approved, aimed at ensuring the operation and development of the university during the war and in the post-war recovery period.

Access to e-learning software for synchronous and asynchronous learning

Amid the occupation of Berdyansk and the ensuing campus access restrictions at BSPU, a pivotal transition was initiated - the migration of the website to the cloud, facilitated by cloud technology specialists from EPAM, who offered their services pro bono. This intervention enabled the resumption of the educational process on May 2, 2022 (Suchikova, 2023). Nonetheless, challenges like unstable internet connections hamper the smooth conduct of online classes. To minimise these negative factors in the educational process, a "synchronous-asynchronous" learning format was introduced. It involves both the conduct of online courses using distance education technologies and learning without real-time interaction or with a delay in time.

Intensification of scientific and research work

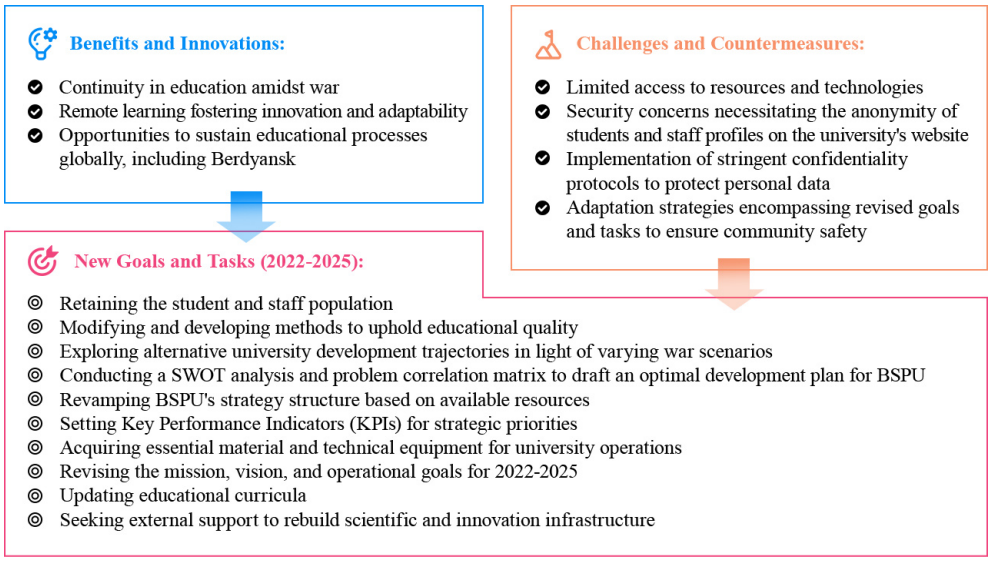
Science is one of the most vulnerable institutions during a war, as it requires significant time, human, financial, and material resources, creative inspiration, intellectual concentration, and complete immersion. Being under constant stress and even fear hinders and often makes scientific activity impossible (McNutt & Hildebrand, 2022; Moroz, 2022). Understanding this, the governments of many countries, scientific institutions, and orgnisations have expressed their support for Ukrainian scientists and provided free tools and databases for the free use of their products. Thanks to this, BSPU, like other universities in Ukraine, managed to gain access to electronic collections of books and journals opened. Information to the scientific community about available competitions, opportunities for free publications, emergency scholarships, support programs, etc., was provided through the Facebook page of the BSPU scientific department, as well as at operational meetings online. Evaluating the quantitative and qualitative increase in the effectiveness of scientific research activities of teachers in wartime requires much more time and deserves separate attention (Suchikova et al., 2023a; Peregudova, 2023). The university's scientists could partially adapt to the realities of war and begin active scientific activity (Suchikova et al, 2023b). Of course, the war will have critical consequences for university science, and the efficiency of scientific research activity will have a negative dynamic.

University without walls

In response to the unprecedented challenges of wartime, the university has swiftly transitioned to a resilient "University Without Walls" model, spearheaded by innovative digital strategies that facilitate continued education and community support at multiple levels (Suchikova & Tsybuliak, 2023). Despite facing certain limitations, such as restricted access to specific resources, the shift to a remote learning environment has fostered innovation and adaptability, enabling the scattered academic community, including a significant faction in Berdyansk, to persist with their educational pursuits.

In alignment with the ongoing commitment to safeguarding the community during the occupation, the university has enacted stringent measures to maintain anonymity and secure personal data, evident in the modifications observed on the official website. These steps, albeit limiting the openness, are critical in safeguarding the identities of students and staff, reinforcing the unwavering resolve to

Figure 8. Adaptive Strategies and Protective Measures: Navigating the 'University Without Walls' during the war



protect its academic community amidst evolving challenges.

Figure 8 delineates this strategic approach and the attendant goals for ensuring a secure and progressive educational journey in the forthcoming period.

The third mission of the university

Today, our activity is focused on fulfilling our "third mission" - social service and community support. Primarily, in cooperation with regional and local authorities and social institutions, the university has focused on uniting the community under temporary occupation (Bohdanov, 2023; Suchikova & Kovachov, 2023). This was especially important for maintaining a sense of community and supporting mental health. Students and academic staff have become active volunteers. Several events were initiated and conducted to support the local and regional community, including public online lectures, organizing leisure activities for children, providing free psychological assistance, and charitable conferences. In this way, the university has demonstrated its ability to adapt to new circumstances and actively assist those who need this help the most, remaining faithful to its values and mission, regardless of circumstances.

Discussion

War never chooses its victims. It affects everyone who finds themselves in its path, turning routine life into a daily struggle for survival. Moreover, universities are no exception. In the context of aggressive actions and occupation in Ukraine, academic communities have experienced extraordinary hardships and different kinds of torture. The Russian occupation creates an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty among the university community. Those who could not leave the occupied city can be subjected to various forms of pressure, from intimidation and threats to physi-

cal torture.

Unfortunately, what is observed in Ukraine is not unique to this country or this conflict. Universities and their communities routinely encounter similar challenges in war zones and regions marked by high levels of violence. Human rights violations, including abuses and torture, are pervasive in such environments.

The current research raises new questions and highlights issues requiring further scientific investigation and global recognition. It is crucial to focus on developing more effective strategies for safeguarding the rights of workers and students at higher education institutions in such conditions, as well as defining the role of the international community in responding to these challenges.

In light of these findings, the academic community, civil society orgnisations, international entities, and governments must take more active measures in protecting the rights of the academic community in times of war and occupation. Immediate intervention and additional scientific research are imperative, as failing to act can lead to devastating consequences for academic communities and science.

Conclusions

In this study, we analyzed the profound impacts of the current war and occupation on Berdyansk State Pedagogical University operations. Drawing from personal narratives and testimonies of staff and students, severe human rights violations and threats to academic freedom were highlighted, including episodes of violence perpetrated by occupying forces.

The wartime context demands immediate, adaptable, and informed decisions from the university administration to protect the educational community and maintain the institution's unique identity.

Key challenges include:

- Safety and security of the academic community in a torture environment;
- Hindered university operations during the occupation;
- Significant setbacks in reviving educational activities due to disrupted internet and communication services;
- Challenges in restoring critical website functionalities amidst occupation;
- The vulnerability of research endeavors in conflict settings requires conducive psychological environments.

In light of the unprecedented crisis experienced personally by the staff at the Berdyansk State Pedagogical University, we underscore that a university is not just a building but a vibrant community, a family that radiates an incredible synergy amidst adversities, including the torturing environments imposed by occupying forces that render life unbearable in occupied regions. This reflection is, unfortunately, echoed by numerous higher education institutions in Ukraine and globally.

The ongoing atrocities in Ukraine are a grim reminder that humanity must gear up to mitigate the ramifications of war on the bastions of education and science, which are essential in fostering societal development. Such events should never recur, necessitating preparedness to shield universities from military conflicts and violence.

The study advocates for urgent interventions and continued research to develop robust mechanisms that protect the university community from the dire consequences of war and occupation, with a significant emphasis on preventing physical abuse and torturing environments witnessed in the occupied territories. It is a genuine call to the global academic community, civil societies, international entities,

and governments to escalate their efforts to safeguard the rights of individuals involved in the educational processes under occupation, highlighting the potentially catastrophic consequences without significant countermeasures. Hopefully, this initiative will significantly stimulate international dialogues on education, human rights, humanitarian law, security strategies, and international relations, fostering productive implementations in theoretical and practical domains.

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Annex 1

Survey for Students

General Questions

1. Form of study
2. Course
3. Location at the time of the onset of full-scale war

Questions Regarding Safety

4. Did you change your location?
   - Yes
   - No
5. Evaluate your subjective perception of personal safety
   - Feel in complete danger
   - Feel more likely in complete danger
   - Feel more likely in complete safety
   - Feel in complete safety
6. If you stayed at your usual place of residence, specify the main reason (open-ended question)
7. Rate your level of stress and anxiety in the first months of the war on a 5-point scale, where 1 is low and 5 is very high
8. Rate your current level of stress and anxiety on a 5-point scale, where 1 is low and 5 is very high

Questions Regarding Education

9. Rate your readiness to resume education under martial law on a 5-point scale, where 1 is no readiness and 5 is always ready
10. What learning formats are available to you?
    - Synchronous online learning
    - Asynchronous online learning
11. Evaluate the quality of your internet access on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is very poor and 5 is very good
12. Which communication tools do teachers use most often? (Multiple answers possible)
    - ZOOM
    - Moodle
    - Telegram
    - Viber
    - Email
    - Social networks

13. What is your motivation for studying? Rate on a 5-point scale, where 1 is low and 5 is very high
14. What factors most affected your studies since 02/24/2022? (Multiple answers possible)
    - Emotional state
    - Adaptation to new realities
    - Lack of stable internet connectivity
    - Irrelevance of education
    - Importance of education for post-war recovery of Ukraine
    - Proactive stance (patriotism)

Questions Regarding Support

15. What support from the university is currently most important to you personally?
    - Safety and psychological support
    - Access to information and resources
    - Technical support
    - Social support
16. Which opportunities for students in Ukraine that appeared during the war have you utilised? (Multiple answers possible)
    - Internal mobility programs
    - External mobility programs
    - Participation in online seminars
    - Not used
17. What helps you counteract stress and anxiety? (Open-ended question)

Survey for Teachers

General Questions

1. Faculty
2. Scientific Degree

Questions Regarding Safety

3. Has your location changed since 24.02.2022?
    - Yes
    - No
4. If you stayed at your usual residence, indicate the main reason. (Open question)
5. Evaluate the subjective perception of your own safety:
    - Feel in complete danger
    - Feel more likely in complete danger
    - Feel more likely in complete safety
    - Feel in complete safety

Questions Regarding Continuation of Activities

6. What is your attitude towards the educational process under conditions of a full-scale war, where 1 is negative and 5 is positive?
7. Has the quality of your work changed after the full-scale invasion?
   - Yes
   - No
   - Difficult to answer
8. What are the greatest difficulties you have with organizing the educational process?
   - Technical problems
   - Adaptation to new challenges
   - Ensuring cooperation and communication with students
   - Psychological difficulties
   - Support from the administration
9. Which formats of working with students are available to you:
   - Synchronous online learning
   - Asynchronous online learning
10. Evaluate the character of your internet access on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is very poor and 5 is very good
11. What digital communication tools with students are currently available to you? (Multiple answers possible)
    - ZOOM
    - Moodle
    - Telegram
    - Viber
    - Email
    - Social Networks
12. What is your motivation for teaching? (Open question)
13. Do you have enough resources for scientific work?
    - Yes
    - No
    - Cannot think about scientific work
14. Which factors most influenced your scientific research activity since 24.02.2022? (Multiple answers possible)
    - Emotional state
    - Adaptation to new realities
    - Lack of stable internet connectivity
    - Irrelevance of initiated research
    - Impossibility of conducting research
    - Proactive stance (patriotism)
    - Questions Regarding Support

15. What support for teaching activities is currently most important for you personally?
    - Safety and psychological support
    - Access to information and resources
    - Technical support
    - Social support
    - International support
16. Evaluate your scientific productivity in 2022 compared to 2021.
    - Decreased
    - Increased
    - At the same level
17. What opportunities for Ukrainian researchers have you utilised that emerged during the war? (Multiple answers possible)
    - Mobility programs
    - Grants
    - Opportunity for free article publication
    - Did not utilise
18. What support for research work is currently the most important for you personally? (open-ended question)

Annex 2

Guideline Questions for the Interview

1. Life situation before the war

1.1. Briefly tell about yourself and your life before the war (points to focus on: what year of study you are in, age, where are you originally from, where did you live before the war in Berdyansk).

2. Beginning of the war

2.1. Talk about the beginning of the war. (points to focus on: where were you at that moment? Who was with you?)

2.2. Tell us what was the most terrifying for you personally when troops were seizing the town (focus on emotions: fear, anxiety).

2.3. Tell us what helped you to endure during the first days.

3. Occupation

3.1. Tell us what was the scariest thing for you personally during the occupation.

3.2. Tell us what concerned you the most? What problems did you encounter?

3.3. Describe your typical day during the occupation (points to focus on: what did you do? What were your feelings?)

3.4. What event or situation do you remember the most during the occupation?

3.5. How did the occupation affect you? What emotions, feelings, and thoughts did it evoke in you? Describe the social moods and emotions in your community.

3.6. Tell us what helped you to endure.

3.7. Did you personally or your surroundings encounter acts of abuse, restriction of freedom, intimidations, or other forms of danger during the occupation? Tell us about your experience or testimony.

4. Life after the occupation (if you moved out)

4.1. Tell us about your evacuation (points to focus on: Was it difficult to make the decision to evacuate? Who among relatives, friends, acquaintances went with you? Why? How long did it take you to leave? How was the journey? What difficulties did you encounter on the way?)

4.2. Tell us about what worries you the most now. What problems are you facing?

4.3. How does life personally differ for you not at home, but in the controlled territory (or abroad) compared to life during the occupation?