

Under Fire: Developing Micro-Level Partnership Practices Between a Ukrainian and United Kingdom University as a Rapid Response to Threats to Higher Education During Military Invasion

Gareth Dart, University of Worcester, United Kingdom
Ann Kulynyak, Ternopil Volodymyr Hnatiuk National Pedagogical University, Ukraine

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Abstract

This research uses a case study design (Creswell and Creswell, 2022) to engage in a framework of reflection-in-action (Schön, 1983) exploring the implementation and impact of a series of small-scale micro-level events initiated between departments of education at a Ukrainian and UK university. This was as a response to the challenges faced by Higher Education Institutes (HEI) in Ukraine resulting from the major escalation of aggression by the Russian State on February 24th, 2022. The research briefly analyses current literature on the impact of recent conflict on HEIs globally, noting that much of it appears to focus on the immediate recovery phase post-conflict opposed to the current impact where Ukraine is still, literally, under fire. The impact of conflict on Ukraine HE generally and the particular HEI is discussed. Three of the ‘micro-level’ initiatives are described and analysed through a narrative process between the authors (Buckler and Moore, 2023; Cohen et al, 2017). These initiatives are: a digitally curated common-interest data-base; a digitally shared series of module sessions; a webinar engaging Ukrainian school teachers supporting UK school teachers who have Ukrainian refugees in their class; and this collaborative research. Possible lessons for the two HEIs and others in similar positions that require rapid response are discussed. Namely, the need to identify interventions that legitimately avoid stringent quality processes that UK universities operate within, the need to recognise and utilise student skills, and the advantage of a working relationship that recognises the importance of effective intercultural skills.

Keywords: Conflict, Higher Education, Ukraine, United Kingdom, Universities

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Introduction

Using the experience of two university departments working in partnership, the Social Work Department, Ternopil National Pedagogical University Ukraine (TNPU) - and the Department for Education and Inclusion, University of Worcester (UW), UK, this field note applies a form of reflection-in-action (Schon, 1987) regarding responses to the threat and challenges resulting from the increased aggression of the Russian state towards Ukraine since February 24th 2022. In particular, it examines a number of what we call micro-level, informal, activities formed at an individual staff level, independent of formal internal or inter-institutional agreements. The paper begins with a brief discussion of the existing literature on Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in recent times of conflict. It then presents a summary of the current crisis in Ukraine, with a particular focus on the impact on the Higher Education (HE) sector. A brief discussion follows of ‘reflection-on-practice’ as a suitable methodological framework for exploring this recent and evolving project. It continues with a brief overview of the two universities and their responses to the crisis with a focus on TNPU as the site of stress. The activities that have taken place so far are discussed, and tentative lessons drawn as to what both partners have learned from the engagement.

Higher Education in Conflict – Recent Experiences Globally

Unfortunately, there is a necessary and growing literature examining challenges that arise for HE in a space of conflict. For example, limiting the discussions to the last decade only; Afghanistan (Darwish and Wotipka, 2022; Couch, 2020), Cote d’Ivoire (Johnson and Hoba, 2015), Libya (Milton, 2022), Sri Lanka (Russell, 2022) and Somaliland (Kester, 2021).

Much of this research analyses the role of HEIs in rebuilding in the post-conflict period. For example, Darwish and Wotipka (2022) examine the impact of conflict on education, including HE, and note, inter alia the problems caused by the destruction of infrastructure, decreased time spent on learning, the limiting of finances directed to education, the reduction of average years of education and the concomitant reduction in attainment. They also highlight problems caused by displacement and migration, “leaving a country with less-qualified teaching staff and a loss of the academic community” (p. 6). They note that gender impact is dependent on local circumstances: in some cases, females are more affected and in others, males, as they enlist in the military or enter the labour market.

However, there is less direct discussion of HE directly in the line of conflict. Pherali and Lewis (2019, p. 730) note that,

Research into the nexus between higher education and violent conflict is underdeveloped. Attacks on HE are not only damaging to the existing system of provision, but also have an enduringly debilitating impact on national capacities to recover from and reconstruct after conflict.

Ukraine finds itself in this ‘live’ conflict and whilst there are already discussions as to how partnerships between Ukrainian HEIs and UK partners might help rebuild society post-conflict (Morrice, 2022), this paper involves itself in the fearful, disrupted present when TNPU is experiencing such impacts as described by Russell (2022, p. 899), “Key infrastructure can be destroyed, with ... universities in some cases becoming battlegrounds ...” Although TNPU is too far west in Ukraine to be the site of ground battles, this has happened to HEIs in the east of the country and TNPU itself has been increasingly impacted by long-range missile strikes,

which pose not just an immediate threat to life and property, but hamper the provision of electricity, communications services (including internet), water, etc.

A brief overview of the literature on the impact on HE of conflict demonstrates a growing body of work but most is focused on post-conflict recovery and the role of HEIs in assisting such recovery. There appears to be less on the immediate, ongoing, impacts in the immediate time of conflict though the description of the response at TNPU later in this paper provides rich evidence of such.

Reflection-on-Practice

This paper is written whilst conflict is in process and there appear to be no solution or resolution on any near horizon. We reflect on some simple, low-level, ‘micro-interventions’ with the aim to share with other interested parties and to consider what lessons we might learn as we seek to develop such interventions further. As this is an ongoing and developing set of practices, we invoke the use of Schön’s notion of reflecting in-practice (i.e., whilst an event is in process) rather than a reflection on-practice (after the intervention) (Schoen, 1987). Barab and Kay (2001) postulate that by so doing the practitioner is better able to understand the context and learning experience and thus enhance the effectiveness of practice within these. Reflection-in-action can be viewed as a process of interaction encouraging a simultaneous “doing and reflecting at a competence level in which the practitioner reflects on experiences and adjusts their practice according to the development of a situation” (Tannenbaum et al, 2011, 250).

Developing this further, Ng et al (220, p. 313) note that, “Reflective practice is a way of practising in indeterminacy that involves drawing upon personal and experiential knowledge in addition to scientific knowledge to solve messy problems in practice.” The phrases ‘practising in indeterminacy’ and ‘to solve messy problems in practice’ are rather understated when such indeterminacy and messiness involve (for example) the need to flee a learning situation because of a potential missile attack, but such events themselves offer crucial if unsought for, learning opportunities.

Shutte (2018, p. 177) offers a notion of reflection-in-practice useful in conceptualising what we, in a limited way, seek to achieve via our micro-interventions.

... The 'reflection' involved in 'practice', is best understood as a dialogue between different partners, whether individuals or groups. Such reflection ... can ... uncover values embedded in the practice which, however limited the practice, can have a wider, even universal, scope.

As this paper draws on an analysis of our own practitioner-narrative discussions (Buckler and Moore, p. 2023), we use our own names when necessary in the text below (Ana, TNPU; Gareth UW).

The War in Ukraine

The war that started in Ukraine in 2014 with military actions in Donetsk, Lugansk, and the annexing of Crimea, damaged all spheres of life. After the escalation in February 2022 almost all northern, eastern, and some central regions of Ukraine suffered the direct attack of Russian troops and weaponry. The rest of the country has not been spared either as there are numerous missile and bombing attacks from the air. The Russian war against Ukraine has caused the

largest wave of refugees since World War II (Shevchuk and Shevchuk, 2022). Five million are displaced internally and seven externally, four million of whom registered for temporary protection in Europe (Ukrinform, 2023). Not only do people suffer, but infrastructure too. Some cities are totally ruined, others to varying degrees. This leads to ecological, social, and humanitarian catastrophes (Pantuliano, 2022). Naturally, the Higher Education system is also engulfed in this human-made disaster.

The Impact on Higher Education in Ukraine

Ana considers the ways the war fundamentally affects the quality of education, including HE. Her observations reflect many of the issues discussed in the brief literature review above. The most important and the most difficult challenge for HE in wartime is to continue to provide services and ensure safety for all participants in the educational process. At the same time, HE faces many challenges:

- Occupied and ruined infrastructure: most of the HEIs located in cities that suffered massive attacks are totally ruined. All HEIs from temporarily occupied territories were relocated. HEIs in western and central regions of Ukraine fared somewhat better though nowhere in the country is out of range of missile strikes or immune from the disruption of basic services.
- Absence and creation of a ‘safe’ environment for the provision of educational services: HEIs provide possibilities to study offline, online (synchronously and asynchronously), or in a mixed format. However, students studying online and on campus, due to intermittent power, lose the opportunity to study systematically.
- The quality of the education process deteriorates in war. The curriculum and content are adapted to conditions, decisions are made immediately. Many topics and tasks are set for students’ self-study. HEIs pay more attention as to how to organise work and less to the quality.
- Retarded growth of knowledge: infrastructure is ruined, electricity is intermittent, staff and students are among refugees or internally displaced persons.
- Financial problems: lack of support from the state and inability to earn money hinder processes. Only the most important fields are financed. The outflow of Ukrainian and foreign students also affects the financial situation of institutions.
- Motivation: even if students can continue studying, many are in danger of losing motivation and lack the morale to study. Staff is on the verge of professional burnout due to constant stress and the criticality of the situation. For all, this can have long-term consequences, including under-skilling and under-education for careers in the post-war period.

No matter how unfortunate it may sound, war provides opportunities as well as threats. Shevchuk and Shevchuk (2022) posit the following: the development of international academic mobility for teachers and students (though no longer for males), intensive implementation of IT, the application of flexible learning, cooperation between Ukrainian and foreign HEIs, implementation of lifelong education, the introduction of full-fledged distance education as a mode. Further, for students: the opportunity to study and work at the same time (obtaining practical experience), and for teachers, to work in educational and other fields (enhancing transfer of practical experience to students), improvement of the territorial organization of HE in Ukraine (relocation of HEIs from territories where active hostilities are taking place to large cities) and the opportunity to reveal and deal with organizational problems in HE.

The Partnering Universities

Ternopil Volodymyr Hnatiuk National Pedagogical University (TNPU) is located in Ternopil, western Ukraine. It has a key role in providing education for future teachers as well as a broader offer in the sciences and humanities. It achieved the full status of University in 1997. It is one of the biggest pedagogical universities in Ukraine. It incorporates 10 faculties, the University Preparation Centre and the Postgraduate Education Centre, running 128 educational programs (EPs) at Bachelor, Master and PhD. In 2022, there were 812 associate professors and assistants, and just under 6000 students. Half the EPs have a pedagogical profile. Students represent all regions of Ukraine. There are a small number of international students.

The University of Worcester (UW), is an institution borne out of conflict. It was formed in 1946 at the end of the Second World War as an emergency teacher training college when teachers were in short supply. Its purpose was to ‘win the peace through education’ (UW, 2019). In 2005 it was granted full university status. It currently has approximately 10000 students studying full and part-time programmes. Education, Healthcare and Sports Studies remain key elements of its offer, but it also maintains a wider range of degrees in the arts, humanities and sciences. A new School of Medicine to train doctors and other medical staff is due to open in September 2023. Recent years have seen a dramatic increase in international students, particularly at Masters level in Business, Health and Education courses.

The Nature of the Response – Ternopil National Pedagogical University (TNPU)

The war that started in 2014 escalated dramatically on the 24th of February 2022. This coincided with the beginning of the second semester at the University. All students were on campus at that time. As a result of the invasion TNPU closed to students for two weeks. Students were sent home and the university management developed an action plan. After two weeks, everyone returned to studying and working online.

From the first days of the war, the university rapidly provided a range of services beyond its educational remit. TNPU hostels became shelters for many refugees from places of more active hostilities. The campus became one of the biggest volunteer hubs in the town, providing support for refugees with food, clothes, medicine, children’s items, equipment and services for people with disabilities, as well as gathering and distributing supplies for soldiers (clothes, medicine, cars, etc.). The Volunteer Center continues working. Staff and students, outside of their normal academic commitments are the main volunteers there.

Staff and Masters students from the Department of Psychology and Department of Developmental Psychology and Counseling volunteered their services in the Socio-Psychological Service Center at TNPU to provide psychological support to refugees, staff and students.

Staff of the Department of Social Work and Management of Sociocultural Activity and the Department of Special and Inclusive Education became volunteers at railway and bus stations, focal points for large numbers of internal refugees, providing social services and emergency care to people in need.

Ukraine had been forced to adapt rapidly to the Covid crisis of 2020 (Okulich-Kazarin et al, 2022). Ironically, this left the university well-prepared for the subsequent escalation in military aggression. On the 24th of February 2022, TNPU had a good material and technical base, a

well-qualified scientific and pedagogical staff used to working in crisis conditions, and a good understanding that the educational process should continue and how that could be achieved NAQA (2023). Implementing the TNPU strategy from the 2020 time of Covid-19 helped to ensure the continuation of provision of educational services as the war commenced. Appropriate approaches for the development of the digital environment of the University were implemented. The University is an ecosystem divided into profile clusters: technologies, education, science, and management and marketing (Henseruk et al, 2021). It allows for the continuation of all pedagogical and managerial processes to work distantly. At the end of 2020, all EPs at the University were present on the Moodle platform. That allowed for the continuation of distance education (Falfushynska, 2021).

The Nature of the Response – The University of Worcester (UW)

The sudden escalation of aggression by the Russian state led to a rapid response within the university in terms of the expression of moral support for the people of Ukraine and its HE sector, but also at a very practical level. For example, various funds and collections were set up to procure and supply much-needed medical supplies to the people of Ukraine who found their access to medicines needed for conditions such as diabetes suddenly curtailed. The university offered large parts of its student accommodation as emergency housing for Ukrainian refugees over the summer, although that offer was never taken up. English classes for TNPU staff were held online in July 2022 and in October 2022 a memorandum of understanding between the universities was signed. To provide a focus for partnership working it was decided initially to form links between those departments at each university which have a focus on education.

Joint Responses

We briefly describe and discuss three micro-level activities between the Department for Pedagogy and Psychology, TNPU and the Department of Education and Inclusion, UW. We use the term ‘micro-interventions’ as they are of a scale capable of implementation through actions at each university that legitimately avoid protracted institutional procedures in terms of management processes needed to implement deeper level changes to courses and practices. Such processes, which while helping to maintain quality standards, can be detrimental to a fleet of foot response necessary in emergency situations such as discussed in this paper.

1. *Sharing of Interests*

The authors set up a document, shared in the cloud, that allowed staff from TNPU, to indicate their interests in cooperation, and UW staff to indicate which of these they felt able to respond to. The authors applied a system of numbering to allow for easy cross-referencing. A short extract, with names and various details redacted, is provided in Table 1 indicating how this works.

Initial suggestions from TNPU						
<p>A. <u>Fields of possible cooperation (projects/research, etc):</u> A.1 Physical Education and Sports, Olympic education... (plus 14 further items of a project/research nature)</p> <p>B. <u>We are interested in lectures in:</u> B.1 Physical Education and Sports... (Plus 12 further...)</p> <p>C. <u>We would like to receive assistance/professional development in:</u> C.1 Exchanging experience on the educational process... (plus 8 further...)</p> <p>D. <u>Other cooperation possibilities:</u> D.1 Cooperation in Postgraduate Certificate Programs, Cooperation in making courses for bachelor programs. Etc.</p>						
UW offer in response to the TNPU ideas above -						
<p>Feel free to add/edit. Put yourselves in groups if you wish to explore working on something as a team. The TNPU colleagues can also see this so they will contact you to discuss taking ideas forward. Do get in touch with me [Gareth] if you want to discuss anything further.</p> <p>Cross-referenced to the TNPU items in sections A - D in the list provided by TNPU above (Indicative, not exhaustive). Feel free to enter further possible items.</p>						
Name	Contact details	Areas of academic interest	A. Possible cooperation	B. Lectures	C. Assistance/ prof. Dev.	D. Other
yyy	yyy@uw.ac.uk	HE Pedagogy		B.6		D.1
xxx	xxx@uw.ac.uk	Educational identities of teachers and pupils	A.8, A.10		C.9	D.5, D.6

Table 1 – Exploring potential areas of cooperation.

2. *Participation in Module Sessions*

Gareth was teaching a face-to-face module for second-year undergraduates in semester one (September 2022) on the theme of special and inclusive education in the global context. It explores various global statements and policies and how far these are reflected and enacted in individual countries. Thanks to the experience of both HEIs in responding to Covid it was relatively easy, with the permission and active agreement of the UW cohort of students, to include TNPU students via Microsoft Teams in various of the sessions.

3. *Joint Webinar*

There are many children from Ukraine in UK schools because of the conflict. A member of the administration team in the School of Education UW had observed the small, rural school his children attend trying to adjust to accommodate some of these Ukrainian children. In response, the authors organised a webinar in which Ukrainian teachers in schools in Ternopil known to TNPU, presented on various aspects of the Ukrainian school system (curriculum, pedagogy, expectations of staff, parents and children at school). UW invited local partner schools to attend. Over 20 attended including two from a partner university in the Netherlands. After the webinar, Gareth set up a Yammer group inviting all participants to join. A recording of the webinar was provided in the Yammer space, alongside various other materials made available by the Department of Education, UK (DFE, 2022) regarding supporting Ukrainian children in UK schools.

Reflections in Practice

1. Sharing Interests for Cooperation

The use of a table, carefully cross-referenced, hosted in the cloud, offered a quick means of gathering information. Currently, despite the initial enthusiasm from TNPU in suggesting ideas for cooperation and a strong response from UW staff, only the items discussed in this paper have come about. Considering why this might be, the authors postulate that the early energy and enthusiasm of the TNPU staff were soon overshadowed by the necessary exigencies of surviving in a context under direct attack from missile strikes and coping with the day-to-day stress caused by intermittent water, electricity, and internet supply. Pherali and Lewis (2019, 740) speculate that,

Academics from the West might subconsciously expect outcomes beyond the capacity of partner organisations in conflict-affected contexts. This may be reflected in terms of meeting deadlines ..., quality of outputs ... and levels of communication between partners during a given project.

There is no evidence of this at UW but it reminds coordinators of such initiatives to communicate clearly to all what the stresses and strains are and how these might affect take-up and engagement.

One advantage of the document is that it provides a very clear view of possible future work. The authors will revisit this information and suggest progress that might be made in the coming academic year in a limited number of areas.

It is interesting to note that section D in the table above proposes “Cooperation in Postgraduate Certificate Programs, Cooperation in making courses for bachelor programs. Etc.”. Early in 2023 various opportunities arose in the UK HE sector for universities to bid and apply for funding to develop such cooperation and course development. However, there was little capacity in the DEI/UW to be able to invest in such speculative bids. This demonstrates a challenge that will be familiar to many of the smaller, teaching focussed HEIs in the UK. Nevertheless, the micro level initiatives demonstrated in this paper could provide good evidence for future, larger scale bids.

2. Shared Module Sessions

This proved to be highly useful for all. The students were able to practice their skills in communicating with international colleagues. In the case of the TNPU this involved the medium of English. The UW students demonstrated the use of translation facilities in the Microsoft Teams space. Both groups actively explored and compared policies and practices that support learners with SEN in each country. The UW cohort experienced for themselves the challenges their TNPU colleagues faced in trying to maintain their studies. Indeed, the increasing rate of missile strikes meant the final two planned joint sessions had to be abandoned. The UW students commented on these experiences in the following semester, noting it had been a significant experience for them in understanding the reality of the situation for Ukrainian students. The authors will consider similar possibilities and how they might be made more effective. The necessity to prepare the student cohorts for eventualities arising out of conflict is clearly important.

3. The Webinar

It was clear from the webinar feedback that UK participants found this to be a very valuable event. They learned useful background information about their new students' previous experiences prior to coming to the UK, and were also able to ask and discuss very specific questions about individual cases. The Ukrainian teachers expressed their appreciation for the way UK schools and staff had taken in the pupils and were pleased to be able to offer support and become involved directly. It was clear they were having to deal with a very adverse situation. It was touch and go as to whether the webinar would proceed as there were major power cuts in the city that day and the internet was limited to one area. We alerted the UK participants to the fact that an air raid warning would mean the webinar being cancelled whilst still in progress. It was salutary to see one of the presenters losing her lighting halfway through and another having to constantly switch between laptop and smartphone to try and maintain a signal.

The original Yammer posting containing the recording of the event received over 700 visits. However, the hope that this space would continue as a place for shared and ongoing discussions between parties was not realised. It would be interesting to know why this is and whether an alternative digital space might be more useful. Maintenance of such spaces appears to be a common issue and the need for time to be set aside over time should be taken into account (Beales, 2016).

Conclusion

A review of the literature indicates there is little discussion of HEIs in the immediate time of conflict. It would be worth engaging in a broader, systematic collection of data from academics, administrators and students in Ukraine documenting their day-to-day experiences. Our reflection in practice shows us that engaging in low-level, micro-events, run via the goodwill of engaged staff and students, independent of broader managerial systems, can offer tangible pedagogical and moral benefits to participants. They might lay the foundations, through the accumulation of understanding, experience, and the construction of relationships, to build longer-lasting and deeper collaborations rooted more firmly in formal partnership and quality frameworks.

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Contact email: gareth.dart@southwales.ac.uk