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Strengthening Social Responsibility: Ukrainian Universities' Third Mission Amidst War

Abstract

This study explores the challenges and prospects of implementing the Third Mission (TM) of Ukrainian higher education institutions (HEIs) amidst the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. Utilising a qualitative research approach, data were collected from eight Ukrainian HEIs participating in the Erasmus+ project "Community Universities: Strengthening Cooperation". Findings reveal a lack of legislative clarity regarding TM, hindering its uniform implementation across institutions. Despite this, Ukrainian universities strongly commit to community engagement, with collaborative efforts to address societal needs. The study highlights the urgent need for legislative strengthening of TM and enhanced collaboration with communities to bolster the resilience of HEIs in conflict-affected contexts.

Keywords: *third mission of the university, social mission, institutions of higher education, Russian-Ukrainian war*

Introduction

In the modern world, the role of universities extends well beyond mere knowledge transfer. This expanded role is often called the third mission of universities (hereinafter: TM). Among various perspectives on TM, we find Scott's (2006) formulation particularly compelling, as it underscores the contemporary mission of universities based on fostering relationships with local communi-

ties through knowledge and technology transfer, entrepreneurship, and local development. TM complements the traditional functions of universities and plays a pivotal role in advancing education and science and societal progress as a whole. Universities engaged in TM serve as hubs for socio-economic development in their regions and contribute to post-war recovery through knowledge dissemination (Blasi et al., 2019), research tailored to the needs of local communities and society (Stolze & Sailer, 2022; Godonoga & Sborn, 2023), and the facilitation of technology transfer from academia to practical applications. It includes fostering innovation, supporting entrepreneurial ventures, incubating start-ups, facilitating commercialisation efforts, and cultivating an entrepreneurial university culture (Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020). Additionally, universities can collaborate with other research institutions to address pressing global challenges while promoting lifelong learning (Dollhausen & Jütte, 2023; Thomas et al., 2023). The multifaceted nature of the social mission of universities precludes a one-size-fits-all approach to its explanation and definition.

In Ukraine, TM is not explicitly regulated by state legislation, leaving each higher education institution autonomous in conceptualising and implementing the social mission. This autonomy challenges execution and evaluation (Orzhel, 2022). Moreover, Ukrainian universities encounter specific challenges in implementing TM practices, particularly after the Russian-Ukrainian war. These challenges impact the quality of higher education and necessitate increased involvement of the university community in wartime efforts and post-war community reconstruction (Anishchenko et al., 2023). TM holds the potential to facilitate conflict resolution, societal rebuilding, and addressing humanitarian needs (Callado-Muñoz et al., 2022; Petrushenko et al., 2023). Additionally, community needs assessment methods encompass research, labour market analysis, and stakeholder engagement, tailored to address post-war qualification gaps (Semigina & Balanyiuk, 2023). Therefore, it is imperative to examine how Ukrainian universities are navigating the challenges posed by the post-war landscape and leveraging the principles of TM to contribute to societal recovery and development.

Our research was conducted within the Erasmus+ Structural Capacity Building project "Community Universities: Strengthening Cooperation (UNICOM)" framework. The overarching goal of our paper is to explore the implementation of the Third Mission of Universities through community collaboration in the context of war. Ultimately, our study seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on the role of higher education institutions in promoting resilience and sustainable development in conflict-affected areas.

Research Methodology

Research Background

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine's territory by Russia in February 2022 has significantly impacted the operations of universities. Many universities experienced a loss of both students and staff, who sought refuge in European countries in search of safety. This exodus has resulted in reduced university personnel and a decline in the quality of higher education. The educational process has been disrupted, with universities either conducting classes under the constant threat of rocket attacks in bomb shelters or resorting to distance learning in territories temporarily occupied by Russian forces. The active hostilities have also caused extensive damage to the infrastructure of higher education institutions (HEIs).

Simultaneously, the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine is working on changing legislation governing higher education, posing additional challenges for universities. Proposed laws aim to reorganise and consolidate universities and change the list of fields of knowledge and specialities. These changes complicate the implementation of the third mission by Ukrainian HEIs. While reforming the national higher education sector aims to accelerate Ukraine's integration into the European educational and scientific space and enhance its innovative potential, social orientation, efficiency, and competitiveness, there is a lack of attention to cooperation between universities and communities.

Research Sample

The research sample comprises eight Ukrainian HEIs that are partners of the Erasmus+ KA2 CBHE Universities – Communities project consortium. Table 1 provides data on the universities involved in the project

Table 1. Characteristics of the Universities Participating in the Research

Total Quantity	N=8
Institution affiliation	
State Institution	7
Private Institution	1
Location of HEI's	
Kyiv region	2

Total Quantity	N=8
Lviv region	1
Donetsk region	1
Zaporizhzhia region	1
Sumy region	1
Vinnytsia region	1
Kharkiv region	1
Number of students (including postgraduates)	
3000 – 5000	2
5000 – 10 000	2
10 000 – 20 000	3
more than 20,000	1

Two of the surveyed universities were forced to relocate to safer areas, with one university undergoing relocation twice.

Instruments and Procedures

The research employs a qualitative methodology.

Participants from Ukrainian and other universities involved in the project collectively developed a list of questions about TM in Ukrainian HEIs during times of war. This list comprised over 40 open-ended questions and sample TM case studies.

Subsequently, focus groups consisting of university staff were convened at each institution. A university representative then inputted the consolidated results of these discussions into the Google Form, which included expanded responses.

Data Analysis

The processing and analysis of results presented in this paper aim to address the following research questions:

1. Given the absence of legislation regulating it at the state level, how do Ukrainian universities conceptualise and prioritise TM?
2. What are the unique aspects of cooperation between universities and local communities?
3. What challenges do Ukrainian universities encounter in implementing TM during times of war?

Results

Conceptualising TM Values

Ukraine lacks comprehensive legislative support for the implementation of TM. There is no clear legal framework defining TM's concept, tasks, and functions or mandating compliance for Ukrainian universities. While some Ministry of Education and Science by-laws outline TM's traditional values, its institution-alisation remains low. Ukrainian HEIs, aligning with European trends, attempt to incorporate TM into their regulatory and strategic documents. However, this approach results in varying interpretations of the social mission among universities, influenced by factors such as location, context, profile, and sub-ordination (Table 2).

Table 2. "Third Mission" as Defined in Strategic Documents of Surveyed HEIs

HEI's region	Definition of TM in the institution's strategy
Donetsk region	"… third mission is usually understood as the range of activities of the university that can be useful for society, community, a certain region or industry, and in particular for those who interact with the university…"
Sumy region	"…its contribution to the development of communities and society, to be-come a centre of public activity, a powerful information resource for the community and local self-government bodies..."
Kyiv region	"… third mission is part of the general mission – support for the sustaina-ble and innovative development of Ukrainian universities to increase their impact on social progress and the formation of a modern Ukrainian state in the European and world community..."
Kyiv region	no answer to the question
Lviv region	"… third mission is promoting the socio-economic development of society, generating changes necessary for the city, region, country and the world", "creating innovative educational-scientific, information-communication, and social infrastructure by opening new specialities, implementing inno-vative educational programmes with the involvement of interested parties and with taking into account the needs of the labour market..."
Vinnytsia region	"…to bear social responsibility to society for the quality of training of higher education applicants, effective organisation of continuous post-graduate education, the level of scientific developments, implementation of the university's achievements…"
Zaporizhzhia region	"...We are still working on the definition of this concept..."

HEI's region	Definition of TM in the institution's strategy
Kharkiv region	"...Today, the university's mission is to serve society, be useful to society, meet public expectations, and fulfil its social responsibility..."

Based on the findings of our qualitative study, the surveyed universities articulate a range of values associated with the social mission, as depicted in **Figure 1.** The predominant values emphasised by these institutions include transparency and honesty, social responsibility, cooperation and partnership, innovation, entrepreneurship, and tolerance. Among the perceived advantages of engaging in TM initiatives are the enhancement of the institution's image and attractiveness to prospective students (n=4), the establishment of partnerships with local communities (n=5), contributions to sustainable development (n=4), the embodiment of the concept of a socially responsible university (n=4), the establishment of science parks as innovation incubators with commercial potential (n=4), the promotion of social design modelling and human capital development (n=3), collaboration with stakeholders (n=5), knowledge transfer activities (n=5), internationalisation efforts (n=3), and providing services to society (n=3).

Figure 1. Values of TM in the opinion of the surveyed HEIs (n=8)
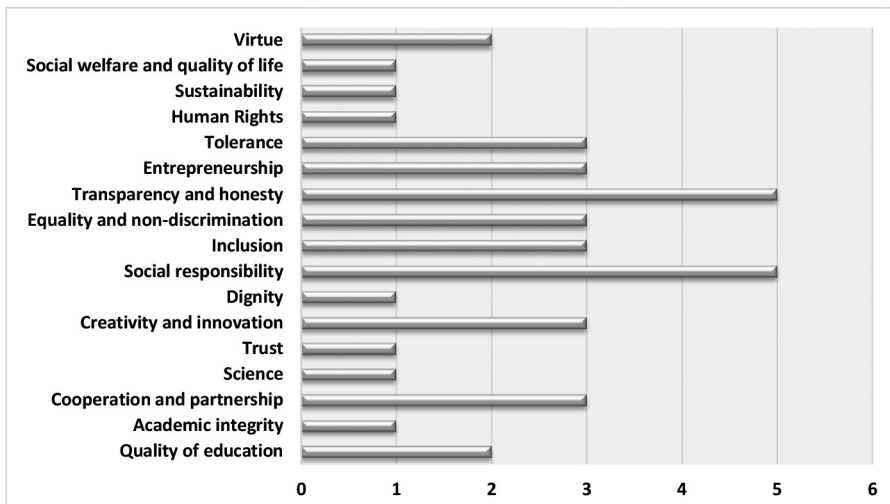
Notably, state funding specifically designated for supporting TM initiatives is not available. Instead, some universities utilise funds from their own budgets to finance TM projects. These initiatives are often funded partly from the

institution's budget and partly through external grants. Additionally, our study identified instances of TM implementation through voluntary contributions and the allocation of human resources.

So, universities demonstrate a commitment to societal engagement, as evidenced by their emphasis on transparency, social responsibility, and innovation and their efforts to integrate TM into their strategic initiatives.

University-Community Cooperation in Wartimes

The research identifies common and distinctive aspects of collaboration between universities and communities, summarised as follows:

1. *Partnership Agreements:* Six universities have established cooperation agreements with regional communities. For instance, a university in the Sumy region collaborates with various local entities, including the Agency for Regional Development and charitable organisations.

2. *Participation in Socio-Economic Development Projects*: Seven universities actively participate in national and regional projects aimed at socio-economic development. For example, a university in the Donetsk region engages in volunteer activities to address the needs of vulnerable populations.

3. *Research on Regional Development Indicators:* Seven universities conduct research to assess socio-economic and environmental indicators of regional development. Additionally, four universities have established science parks and business incubators to support innovation and entrepreneurship.

4. *Engagement with Local Authorities:* Four universities work with expert groups at local or regional administrations, ministries, and presidential offices. For instance, a university in the Lviv region provides free legal assistance to the community in collaboration with the office of the President of Ukraine.

5. *Community Needs Assessment Methods*: Various methods are employed to assess community needs, including joint research, labour market analysis, and consideration of policy trends and regional development strategies.

6. *Focus Areas of Community Needs:* Identified community needs include social protection, national security, employment, socio-economic development, ecological sustainability, healthcare, human rights, education quality, lifelong learning, and mental health resilience.

7. *Contextual Influence on University Activities*: Universities adapt their activities based on the military context. For example, institutions in conflict-affected regions prioritise activities such as post-war reconstruction,

security enhancement, healthcare improvement, and human rights advocacy. The university in the Zaporizhzhia region, which faced the challenges of the occupation, works on the national unity of the community, strengthening national identity. At the same time, the HEI in the Lviv region, which is locally located far from the front line, has such priority areas of cooperation with the community as the promotion of commercialisation of research and preservation of the historical and cultural heritage of the region.

8. *Forms of Collaboration:* Collaboration between universities and communities includes partnership agreements, educational and scientific events, community development projects, educational services, research initiatives, supervisory boards, and pro bono services.

Overall, university-community collaboration plays a vital role in addressing diverse needs and challenges arising from the armed conflict, with initiatives tailored to each region's specific contexts and priorities.

HEIs' Third Mission in War: Challenges and Prospects

Implementing the TM during wartime presents numerous challenges and avenues for development, as evidenced by our research findings. The TM endeavours of Ukrainian universities are profoundly influenced by the multifaceted challenges arising from the ongoing conflict, including environmental safety concerns (n=7), demographic shifts (n=4), internal and external migration dynamics (n=6), territorial occupation (n=3), and the widespread physical and psychological trauma experienced by the population, resulting in the proliferation of socially vulnerable groups (n=8).

A critical impediment to effective TM implementation stems from the absence of standardised definitions within Ukraine's regulatory and legal frameworks (n=8), hampering integration into institutional policies and hindering targeted funding efforts. This deficiency affects the availability of material resources (n=6) and undermines motivation and awareness levels among HEI personnel regarding the significance of fulfilling the third mission's tasks (n=7). Moreover, organisational policies within higher education institutions are often characterised by passivity and conservatism (n=4), limiting the adoption of innovative initiatives and stifling staff initiative.

The ramifications of the armed conflict have exacerbated human resource shortages within universities, with significant migration of staff and students abroad as refugees or relocation within the country to safer regions, territorial occupations, forced deportations to Russian territories, and nationwide conscription efforts (n=7). Amidst these challenges, universities emphasise the

necessity for clear assessment criteria pertaining to the third mission (n=1), highlighting the difficulty in discerning institutional activities from their inherent social function.

To address the identified challenges is crucial for Ukraine's universities to effectively fulfil their social responsibilities and navigate the complexities of TM implementation during wartime.

Discussion

This research underscores the remarkable resilience of Ukrainian universities in upholding their social mission amidst the immense challenges of war. A key finding is the unprecedented emphasis placed on transparency, social responsibility, partnership, innovation, and entrepreneurship during the protracted armed conflict. This wartime reorientation of the social mission is a novel contribution to understanding university social responsibility in conflict zones.

The multifaceted impact of the conflict, with its physical devastation and mass displacement, presents formidable challenges. Ukrainian universities are uniquely positioned to address these wartime exigencies, tackling issues like conflict-induced vulnerabilities, national security needs, employment disparities, and healthcare needs. This wartime focuses on immediate societal needs and sheds light on a new dimension of the social mission that goes beyond traditional components and directly addresses the consequences of extremes.

However, the study shows that the war has also exposed pre-existing obstacles within Ukrainian HEIs. Entrenched policies hindering innovation and the lack of clear evaluation criteria for the social mission are significant challenges. Highlighting these internal limitations is another novel contribution of this research, as it underscores the need for adaptation within universities facing wartime pressures.

By adopting innovative strategies and advocating for a strengthened regulatory framework, Ukrainian HEIs can navigate these challenges and continue to play a pivotal role in fostering societal well-being and resilience. This research emphasises the importance of financial support for wartime social mission initiatives and incentivises their adoption. These are crucial considerations for universities navigating similar contexts of extreme situations, including conflict-stricken environments and subsequent recovery.

Ukraine's experience offers valuable lessons for other countries facing conflict. The importance of legislative clarity for wartime social responsibility, robust community engagement, and addressing war's multifaceted impacts on higher education are all crucial takeaways. This research is a compelling

example of how universities can enhance their resilience and societal impact globally in tumultuous contexts.

This research also opens doors for further exploration. Studying the specific innovative strategies adopted by Ukrainian universities and their effectiveness in wartime contexts offers valuable insights. Additionally, investigating how universities can overcome pre-existing obstacles during wartime and develop clear evaluation criteria for their social mission can provide crucial guidance for future adaptations.

Conclusions

This study underscores the imperative for institutionalising the Third Mission (TM) within Ukraine's higher education legislative framework. The current lack of legislative clarity regarding TM impedes its consistent implementation across Ukrainian universities, resulting in disparate approaches to its realisation.

Despite these challenges, Ukrainian universities exhibit a robust commitment to community engagement, serving as catalysts for collaborative problem-solving and regional development initiatives. This collaborative spirit is evident through diverse forms of cooperation, including joint research endeavours and active community involvement in institutional governance structures. However, the effectiveness of these collaborative endeavours is constrained by the enduring disruptions caused by the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war.

Addressing these challenges necessitates legislative reinforcement of TM, ensuring dedicated financing, fostering HEI commitment to its implementation, and bolstering collaboration with local communities. Such measures are essential for enhancing the resilience and effectiveness of Ukrainian HEIs amidst the exigencies of war and in fulfilling their broader societal responsibilities.

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