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Role of higher education institutions in Ukraine in developing students' soft skills under martial law conditions

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Abstract. The full-scale russian invasion of Ukraine placed higher education institutions (HEIs) under unprecedented and immense challenges, demanding adaptive responses across all dimensions of academic life. This study aimed to explore how Ukrainian higher education institutions have contributed to the development of students' soft skills during the dual crises of war and the pandemic. To achieve this aim, the research employed a multi-method qualitative design that combined document analysis, NVivo-assisted content coding, and comparative case study methodology. Data sources included institutional policies, national guidelines, international frameworks, and scholarly publications. This triangulated approach enabled an in-depth understanding of how Ukrainian universities conceptualised and implemented soft skills development in response to systemic crisis. Among the major demands, wartime education requires the enhancement of students' soft skills – non technical transferable abilities such as emotional resilience, adaptability, communication, critical thinking, teamwork, and self-management. The article sought to trace the changing role of Ukrainian HEIs in fostering such competencies under conditions of war, forced migration, psychological distress, and digitalised education. Drawing on theoretical insights from 2020 to 2025 regarding institutional strategies that support students' socio-emotional development in online and hybrid learning environments through community engagement and integrative curricular design, the study also pays special attention to psychological services related to inclusion and peer mentoring for student well-being, as well as civic responsibility. It analyses the correlation between wartime academic persistence and the development of soft skills, placing particular emphasis on institutional resilience and innovative leadership. By reviewing these emerging practices in Ukrainian universities, including case examples from several national HEIs, the article offers practical recommendations for integrating soft skills training into the core mission of universities in times of crisis

Keywords: competence; crisis pedagogy; digital learning environment; student development; resilience; employability

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INTRODUCTION

Technological disruptions and socio-political instability, which accelerate the pace of change in global society, have brought with them a heightened focus not only on credentials but also on non-cognitive or soft skills in higher education. Emotional intelligence, adaptability, critical thinking, and collaboration have therefore been consistently identified as important competencies for success in life, employment, and civic engagement in an increasingly complex and uncertain world. The international policy environment has recommended the mainstreaming of such cross-cutting competencies through formal curricula to ensure resilience and inclusion in the face of future challenges. As global crises intensify and compound the pressures already facing higher education institutions (HEIs), soft skills have moved from being a peripheral concern to becoming a core component of educational strategy. In such conditions, competencies support not only student success but also institutional stability and social cohesion. In Ukraine, this imperative has been further heightened by the onset of the full-scale war in 2022.

The simultaneous implementation of martial law, infrastructural damage, and the displacement of both student and faculty populations, who were not psychologically prepared for such levels of stress, required a rethinking of the very foundations of educational continuity plans as well as of the institutional mission itself. In such unprecedented circumstances, what was once regarded as a strategic objective – the development of soft skills – has now become an immediate necessity. The COVID-19 pandemic added further pressure on HEIs to adopt innovative pedagogical models that incorporated self-regulation and digital literacy, alongside the consistent development of soft skills. A.A.P. Cattaneo *et al.* (2022) explained how the digital competence of vocational teachers affects students' learning experiences and the incorporation of transversal skills in remote education. They highlighted the importance of digital competencies – not only for academic success but also for developing collaborative skills in vocational education. This has become increasingly relevant since the shift to online and hybrid models of learning, accelerated by the pandemic. This digital dimension served as a complement to traditional soft skills and orientations, offering a more holistic perspective on student preparedness. Furthermore, the integration of digital expertise with the growth of soft skills has led to blended teaching methods such as flipped classrooms, collaborative online projects, and self-directed e-learning pathways. These innovations have compelled teachers to reconsider the student journey from a skill-oriented perspective and to seek new structures that integrate the emotional, social, and cognitive dimensions of learning.

In Ukraine, the situation is shaped by the realities of a full-scale war under martial law. N. Ivanenko (2024) highlighted how Ukrainian universities faced immediate challenges in maintaining educational continuity amidst the displacement of students and staff and the destruction of

infrastructure. O. Zakhochai *et al.* (2024) presented digital transformation as critical in this context, noting that it provided a sustainable framework for HEIs during crises. O. Spivakovsky *et al.* (2025b) further emphasised how displaced universities digitally adapted to support students in both academic progression and soft skills development. The intersection of emergency pedagogy with trauma-informed teaching and educational resilience has made the Ukrainian context particularly complex. This environment represents high stakes for both social survival and soft skills development; in such a setting, soft skills helped maintain moral clarity and psychological stability. Ukrainian universities have therefore initiated the redesign of their missions based on humanistic principles such as compassion, responsibility, and solidarity, in order to provide students with an identity aligned with wartime realities. This has created a new challenge for HEIs: to promote civic and socio-emotional competence in wartime, when students are directly affected by conflict and upheaval. While these are critical competencies, there has been little research on their development in Ukraine during martial law. This gap underlines the need for appropriate institutional strategies that, while ensuring academic continuity, also foster psychological resilience and civic responsibility. A. Ramskyi (2023) emphasised that wartime digitalisation – particularly in the area of communication strategies – was not a technical stopgap but an important means of maintaining institutional and social cohesion within Ukrainian HEIs. Similarly, A. Androshchuk (2022) described how the convergence of war and digital transformation has been redefining the role of higher education by compelling institutions to foster not only learning but also societal resilience.

This broadened understanding of institutional resilience in crisis contexts reiterates the fact that digital higher education systems can serve as lifelines during emergencies. It also highlights the lack of context-specific studies on how HEIs can effectively foster soft skills during conflict by translating global insights into practice in line with Ukraine's unique circumstances. This study aimed, therefore, to analyse the institutional strategies of Ukrainian HEIs aimed at fostering students' soft skills between 2020 and 2025, with a focus on how these efforts respond to the challenges of war, forced migration, and digitalisation.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study employed an interpretive qualitative research approach aimed at identifying how Ukrainian HEIs facilitated the development of students' soft skills amid dual crises – the COVID-19 pandemic and the full-scale Russian invasion – between 2020 and 2024. It combined document analysis with a comparative case study design under constructivist epistemology, on the assumption that educational practices are situated, evolving, and adaptive even amid systemic disruptions. The research moved beyond description to examine the rationales, contexts, and potential for transformation of practices under wartime constraints.

Data collection took place in several stages to allow for both breadth and depth of analysis. First, an extensive desk review was conducted to capture relevant policy documents and strategic institutional communications that explicitly or implicitly referenced soft skills development in Ukrainian HEIs, alongside academic research articles, international frameworks, and project reports. Over 120 documents were identified and screened initially; a final sample of 65 documents was selected based on three criteria: explicit reference to student-centred or competence-based education; production during the period 2020-2025; and public availability to ensure transparency and replicability. Sources comprised national legislation, ministerial recommendations, internal university policies, conference proceedings, and frameworks developed by international organisations – including OECD, UNESCO, the European Commission, and the World Bank. Institutional documentation was retrieved from the official websites of Ukrainian HEIs, with emphasis on classical, pedagogical, technological, and relocated institutions. Examples included: OECD (2021); UNESCO (2021); European Commission (2020). Institutional documents included the Strategy of Digital Transformation under Martial Law of Kherson State University (2022), Methodological Recommendations for Providing Psychological Support to Participants in the Educational Process (n.d.) of Borys Grinchenko Kyiv Metropolitan University, and the Self-Assessment Report of National Agency for Higher Education Quality Assurance (Ukraine) (2021).

The selection of sources also followed a purposive sampling logic, balancing normative policy texts with situated institutional narratives that reflected bottom-up responses. Particular care was taken to include a variety of genres – from formal regulations to reflective blog posts by university staff – in order to capture both policy intent and lived implementation realities. For example, N. Sulaieva (2023) described how “teaching under sirens” required spontaneous restructuring of group assignments and asynchronous feedback loops to maintain student participation and emotional balance. Similarly, O. Zabrodska (2023) provided narrative accounts of adapting teaching goals towards civic responsibility and stress management. These documents were especially useful in mapping tacit pedagogical shifts that may not be visible in official policy texts. Documents were analysed not only for content but also for tone, discourse patterns, and implicit value structures framing soft skills development. To improve analytical clarity, documents were categorised by function (normative, strategic, operational), format (text, table, visual), and institutional origin. A significant focus was placed on documents produced by groups operating in high-risk or displaced regions such as Mykolaiv, Kharkiv, Donetsk, and Zaporizhzhia. Diversity of topics was ensured by including samples from both large multidisciplinary universities and smaller specialised institutions. The classification of the analysed documents by function, type, and institutional origin is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Classification of analysed documents by function, type, and institutional origin

Nº	Function	Type	Origin (Institution/Source)
1	Strategic	Internal institutional strategy	Kherson State University (2022)
2	Operational	Policy brief	Borys Grinchenko Kyiv Metropolitan University (Methodological recommendations..., n.d.)
3	Normative	National policy framework	National Agency for Higher Education Quality Assurance (Ukraine) (2021)
4	Normative	International framework	OECD (2021)
5	Normative	International framework	UNESCO (2021)
6	Strategic/Analytical	Research and evaluation report	World Bank (2025)
7	Operational	Self-assessment report	Mykolaiv National University
8	Operational	Instructor blog posts	Borys Grinchenko Kyiv Metropolitan University
9	Strategic	Conference proceedings	Selected Ukrainian HEIs
10	Operational	Online learning platform data	Moodle/Teams/Zoom-based student projects

Source: compiled by the author

To analyse the impact of the crisis on higher education institutions, a crisis exposure matrix was developed. The contextual mapping of source origins enabled the construction of this matrix, through which patterns of institutional adaptation could be associated with geographical and infrastructural stressors. Six universities were selected to examine the patterns of adaptation of educational institutions to the crisis: Kherson State University, Mykolaiv National University, Borys Grinchenko Kyiv University, Zaporizhzhia Polytechnic Institute, Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, and Sumy State Pedagogical University named after A. S. Makarenko. These institutions were

located in different regions of Ukraine and experienced varying intensities of crisis impact. Their selection made it possible to assess institutional responses to a wide spectrum of crisis factors – ranging from active hostilities to pressure on the educational process in the capital and border areas. The criteria for selection included regional vulnerability, the extent of the conflict’s impact on institutional activities, and the current operational status (full functionality, partial relocation, or functioning under threat).

An additional NVivo qualitative content analysis was conducted using version 12 of the software, through systematic coding of themes and recurring categories. First,

inductive open coding generated a primary codebook that covered adaptability, collaboration, emotional resilience, civic competence, digital literacy, and self-directed learning; in total, more than 700 references were coded across the dataset. Subsequently, axial coding grouped these into institutional strategies, pedagogical tools, and embedded values. Three broad categories emerged: crisis-responsive curricular integration of soft skills; support mechanisms for psychological and social resilience; and frameworks for student engagement and civic action in emergencies. The evolving coding scheme was validated through peer review by an independent researcher, with intercoder agreement exceeding 85 per cent; any differences were resolved by consensus. Throughout the coding process, memo-writing and analytic journaling were used to track emerging interpretive insights, paradoxes, and shifts in meaning. NVivo queries, such as matrix coding and word frequency counts, were employed to triangulate qualitative impressions with surface-level textual patterns. This allowed the research to move from descriptive clustering to the articulation of deeper conceptual models of institutional transformation. To enhance the meaning of the themes discussed, the study also used a multiple-case approach. Three Ukrainian universities were selected from different institutional types and regions, with varying degrees of wartime disruption:

- 1) Pavlo Tychyna Uman State Pedagogical University in Central Ukraine. This pedagogical university implemented formative assessment based on student-centred learning and the integration of soft skills within teaching practicum;
- 2) Vasył Stus Donetsk National University, relocated to Vinnytsia, offered models of hybrid instruction and civic-oriented volunteering activities as co-curricular support for displaced students;
- 3) Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv was chosen as a metropolitan classical university where the institutionalisation of soft skills development occurred through its digital transformation strategy and online project-based learning initiatives.

Cross-case synthesis focused on how institutional vision, leadership discourse, and infrastructural readiness influenced the depth and durability of soft skills integration. Special attention was given to cross-sectoral collaborations (e.g. partnerships with NGOs or local governments) that expanded the scope of soft skills learning beyond traditional curricula, embedding it in service learning, volunteering, and digital co-creation. Triangulation techniques were applied throughout the study to enhance validity. Policy texts, institutional statements, external evaluations, and scholarly publications constituted data sources whose converging

themes were noted against interpretive bias. Intra-researcher reflexivity was facilitated through memo-writing, which helped track emerging insights and contextual anomalies. The study fully observed ethical standards. Since no personal or confidential information was collected, sources of information were available on official platforms, making the process transparent and repeatable. This research used documents, publications, and institutional materials freely available in the public domain. There was no contact with any individual; hence, no interviews or surveys were carried out that would require informed consent or any kind of ethical approval from an institution.

The method aligned with the basic guideline of ALLEA (2017) by being honest, accountable, and careful in research. In particular, it fulfilled the guideline stating that researchers must ensure the fair and proper handling of data with respect to confidentiality, intellectual property rights, and responsible dissemination. The study also followed the World Health Organization (2015) guideline on ethics in using public data for research, which states that it is ethical to use documentary sources in noninterventional research as long as no personal data are involved and institutional materials are not misrepresented. Accordingly, ethical compliance was ensured by relying solely on publicly accessible institutional reports, policies, and publications; clearly documenting selection criteria and data coding procedures; properly attributing and citing every source; and avoiding any misrepresentation or manipulation of institutional narratives. Therefore, the study adopted international best practices in documentary inquiries that were ethically valid and methodologically transparent.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

An examination of the modern shifts in Ukrainian HEIs during the twin crises of the COVID-19 pandemic and the full-scale Russian invasion (2020-2025) revealed a return to approaches of developing skills that had gradually shifted from unspoken curricular side effects to explicit learning goals. As organisational documents and academic sources indicated, online tools, crisis management, purposeful action, and wellness programmes contributed to building students' flexibility, teamwork, community involvement, and emotional strength. This aligned with broader international research and provided a basis for cross-contextual comparison. It also confirmed that Ukrainian HEIs, despite wartime limitations, demonstrated institutional creativity in transforming global trends into actionable educational practices. In Table 2, information on how HEIs from different regions experienced and responded to varying degrees of crisis intensity is summarised.

Table 2. Crisis exposure matrix: Patterns of institutional adaptation in relation to crisis intensity

Institution / Region	Exposure to Crisis	Institutional Status	Adaptation Focus
Kherson State University	High (occupied/displaced)	Relocated	Digital governance, student co-leadership, civic volunteering
Mykolaiv National University	High (borderline combat)	Partially relocated	Emotional resilience, reflective pedagogy, social responsibility in coursework

Table 2. Continued

Institution / Region	Exposure to Crisis	Institutional Status	Adaptation Focus
Borys Grinchenko Kyiv University	Moderate (capital-based)	Stable but pressured	Psychological support systems, hybrid peer mentoring, digital service learning
Zaporizhzhia Polytechnic	High (combat-prone zone)	Functioning under threat	Crisis-informed curriculum, teamwork in virtual project tasks
Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv	Low (capital centre)	Fully operational	Internationalisation, soft skills accreditation, inclusive LMS integration
A. S. Makarenko Sumy State Pedagogical University	Medium (bordering russia)	Vulnerable but stable	Cross-border civic learning, digital resilience education

Source: compiled by the author

For instance, high-risk institutions such as Kherson State University and Mykolaiv National University demonstrated significant restructuring of governance, emphasising student co-agency and community outreach. In contrast, institutions in relatively stable zones (e.g. Kyiv) prioritised psychological support and soft skills accreditation systems. The typology showed that adaptation was not uniform but context-sensitive, reinforcing the link between localised stressors and differentiated institutional strategies. The patterns of adaptation strategies indicated that institutions facing the most severe and immediate threats (e.g. Kherson and Mykolaiv) focused on survival and community-oriented skills, such as civic volunteering and social responsibility. This suggests a direct correlation between the severity of the crisis and the prioritisation of skills essential for immediate survival and social cohesion. Furthermore, institutions in medium-risk zones (e.g. Sumy) developed strategies related to their vulnerable position, indicating a focus on long-term stability and continuity despite geographical proximity to the conflict. This demonstrates a proactive approach aimed at ensuring the educational process continued securely. Conversely, institutions in low-risk zones (e.g. Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv) were able to shift their focus towards enhancing their offerings, aligning educational goals with global standards and strengthening their competitiveness on the international stage. This reflects a move from reactive, crisis-driven adaptation to a more strategic, future-oriented development.

M.M. Robles (2022) and N.N. Nguyen *et al.* (2023) stressed that emotional intelligence, adaptability, and teamwork were prerequisites for employability in modern economies. OECD (2021) and UNESCO (2021) similarly called for embedding such transversal competencies into formal educational systems to prepare future-ready learners. The need for self-regulation and digital literacy in response to remote learning has also been validated by S. Manca & M. Delfino (2021) and N.N. Nguyen *et al.* (2023), who emphasised psychological resilience as an educational goal under pressure. In the Ukrainian context, S. Semerikov *et al.* (2023) highlighted increased student psychological stress during martial law and advocated for more flexible learning environments. Likewise, N. Ivanenko (2024) and S. Semerikov *et al.* (2023) pointed to the necessity of structural adaptation by HEIs to provide continuity and student

support amid war-induced disruption. At the beginning of the period under review, digital learning environments were perceived as a survival strategy and later as platforms that supported project-based learning and virtual teamwork, with remote servicelearning fostering soft skills. In this context, Ukrainian universities introduced Moodle, Zoom, and Microsoft Teams not only to ensure continuity of education but also to ignite student agency and engagement through interactive tasks and group research, thereby recreating real-world collaboration via synchronous online discussions and strengthening interpersonal and digital communication skills. A. Prykhodko *et al.* (2025) demonstrated how such a redefinition of governance took place through participative digital tools, where shared decision-making enhanced students' leadership capacity as well as self-regulation.

The digital transformation underlined the need for faculty development programmes in digital pedagogy, which were implemented in several Ukrainian HEIs to enhance educators' expertise in remote teaching. As A. Kurapov *et al.* (2023) described, these initiatives not only improved teaching effectiveness but also generated new forms of assessment that fostered students' critical thinking and collaborative skills in virtual settings. Such institutional capacity building acted as a fulcrum in delivering quality education during adverse conditions. These developments aligned with international frameworks such as the European Commission (2020), which called for inclusive, digitally supported pedagogies and emphasised soft skills such as collaboration and adaptability as part of the digital competence portfolio. In particular, institutions that adopted gamification, flipped classroom formats, and asynchronous discussion boards contributed to the operationalisation of the plan's strategic priorities. From a systems perspective, those developments represented not merely reactive efforts but an active reshaping of pedagogical intent towards learner-centred approaches that prioritised long-term resilience. Quantitative evidence from T. Matusevych *et al.* (2024) validated these institutional narratives. Their comparative study of Polish and Ukrainian students revealed a marked increase in indicators of academic resilience among Ukrainians – perseverance, problem-solving, and emotional control – after prolonged exposure to wartime remote education. This appeared to be strongly related to the pedagogical

redesign of assignments into autonomy-based models with peer mentoring and reflective portfolios. In other words, the innovations did not just fill the gap created by the lack of physical presence but also created space for metacognitive growth as well as self-managed learning, which lies at the heart of resilience as a soft skill. Moreover, the longitudinal data collected by Y. Lavrysh & V. Lukianenko (2024) showed that students who took part regularly in collaborative online projects demonstrated statistically significant improvements not only in academic resilience but also in empathy and intercultural communication – skills crucial for building social cohesion in post-conflict contexts. Such findings underscored the multidimensional effects of digitally mediated learning communities on soft skills development during prolonged crises. The Ukrainian case illustrated that innovation under pressure could yield sustainable changes in educational delivery and outcomes. These conclusions were consistent with international findings. For instance, T. Tang *et al.* (2020) demonstrated that project-based and collaborative learning settings promoted students' creativity and critical thinking through playful, design-driven tasks. J. Lamri & T. Lubart (2023) emphasised the importance of balancing soft and hard skills in educational design and institutional reform. I. Urkia-Basterra *et al.* (2025) further identified work-based learning as an effective platform for transversal competence growth, especially when paired with mentoring and reflective tools. This resonated with UNESCO (2021), which framed education as a public good and called for socio-emotional learning and solidarity in educational design. Universities that incorporated volunteerism, peer mentoring, and civic engagement fulfilled this vision in practice, anchoring identity and agency within broader community-based learning.

At the level of organisational response, different leadership styles at displaced or affected institutions also played a role. O. Spivakovsky *et al.* (2025a) narrated the crisis response at Kherson State University through agile directives, involving discussions with members and civic engagement, which helped pull students into volunteering activities and governance participation as well as educational initiatives relating to the community. From these situations emerged soft skills such as civic responsibility and ethical reasoning; stress tolerance and value-based crisis management, which therefore proved to be indirect but powerful educational tools. Further alignment could be found with OECD (2021), which emphasised adaptability, autonomy, and reflexivity as key pillars of educational quality. Ukrainian HEIs that implemented reflective portfolios, open digital badges, and peer-based assessments exemplified this agenda by turning resilience from an abstract goal into a practical outcome. At this level, soft skills were not simply outputs of educational design but prerequisites for continuity itself. Service-learning projects, particularly in programmes of management and social sciences, provided an additional crucial space for transformation. A.L. Kenworthy & S. Opatska (2023) documented how such initiatives during wartime enabled students to address real challenges

facing communities through local and virtual engagement. These experiences – civic solidarity and ethical decision-making – created complex soft skills such as empathy, collaborative problem-solving capacity, and strategic communication. Learners who participated in service activities with internally displaced persons (IDPs), digital literacy support, or local aid coordination reported enhanced motivation and a stronger sense of purpose; however, internalisation of soft skills was best interpreted through experience-based learning models.

Another study conducted by I. Kostikova & T. Viediernikova (2023) showed that those servicelearning interactions acted as a means of psychosocial support, allowing students to process trauma individually while bolstering leadership and organisational abilities. The qualitative research they undertook with programme participants demonstrated how reflective journals and group debriefings became part of making soft skills more tangible while strengthening community resilience. In addition to institutional strategies, individual educator narratives provided critical insight into how soft skills were cultivated in practice under crisis conditions. For example, a series of blog entries authored by instructors, N. Sulaieva (2023), documented the use of reflective journaling, real-time student polls, and online peerfeedback practices to promote empathy and self-regulation in hybrid classes. Those informal writings highlighted not only technical improvisations but also the emotional labour involved in fostering socio-emotional development during air raids and blackout schedules. Likewise, O. Zabrodskaya (2023) emphasised the importance of civic framing in coursework, where ethics, volunteering, and local problem-solving were embedded into learning objectives. Such accounts illustrated how lived frontline realities directly shaped pedagogical priorities and how teachers, even in under-resourced environments, actively reconstructed soft skills objectives through storytelling, peer debriefings, and project-based learning.

These informal sources revealed the emotional and moral labour of educators and their strategies to anchor pedagogical value amid chaos. They showed how teacher autonomy and reflective practice could serve as engines of resilience and curriculum transformation. Another key factor was how those efforts connected with the soft skills ecosystem. The connection between psychological safety and educational engagement emerged as a central insight from the data. Y. Suchikova *et al.* (2024) noted that although burnout and anxiety persisted among academic staff and students during the conflict, targeted psychological support systems – such as peer circles, teletherapy, and digital support groups – had received feedback indicating enhanced emotional resilience and social bonding from participants. That setting helped to stabilise psychological well-being, enabling the development of emotional intelligence, self-awareness, and interpersonal support – qualities, which also strengthened adaptability in the long term. In this way, focused efforts encouraging mindfulness and stress relief were added to curricula

and extracurricular activities at several HEIs, as shown by the studies of T. Volotovska *et al.* (2024). Those efforts not only reduced anxiety but also improved students' self-regulation and empathy, making a positive contribution to their overall soft skills profile during the ongoing crisis. What those patterns suggested was that Ukrainian HEIs had not merely responded tactically, but strategically re-imagined education through a soft skills lens. Initiatives were rarely isolated; rather, they produced cumulative effects when pedagogical redesign, student involvement, and psychological support were aligned. Particularly effective were those institutions that managed to connect service-learning to broader institutional missions and digital platforms to inclusive student practices. The war-accelerated integration of online project work, intercultural dialogue, and volunteer service created layered learning spaces that transcended disciplinary boundaries. Soft skills thus moved from theoretical intentions to applied, measurable results within educational practice.

Beyond the institutional level, Ukrainian HEIs also drew inspiration from international policy frameworks. The way they interpreted and localised global recommendations further shaped how soft skills became integrated into crisis pedagogy. An important layer of that analysis involved linking institutional practices with international frameworks that indirectly shaped national educational responses. For example, the OECD (2021) call for future-ready and inclusive education found expression in the digital inclusion strategies adopted by institutions such as Kherson State University. The deployment of open-source platforms and LMS tools in wartime reflected the OECD's emphasis on literacy in a digital world, contextualised within wartime resilience. Similarly, UNESCO's (2021) humanistic perspective on education – grounded in equity, solidarity, and well-being – could be traced in initiatives by Borys Grinchenko Kyiv Metropolitan University to develop peer-support networks and digital psychological services. Those efforts not only paralleled UNESCO's agenda but anchored it in trauma-informed realities. The three case universities providing deeper insights were examined through institutional documents and publicly available reports. At Pavlo Tychyna Uman State Pedagogical University, institutional self-evaluation materials highlighted the use of formative assessment, reflective journaling, and interdisciplinary micro-projects, including classroom simulations, as strategies to cultivate empathy, feedback literacy, and self-regulation among pre-service teachers. At Vasyly Stus Donetsk National University (2025), the university's relocation experience was reflected in its hybrid learning models, which facilitated not only academic continuity but also civic volunteering activities, especially with IDPs, where teamwork, ethical reasoning, and communication skills were prioritised. Faculty reports described improvements in student self-organisation, with peer-designed action plans and mentorship circles forming key elements of this transformation. Meanwhile, the digital transformation

strategy at Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv placed soft skills modules within learning management systems, supported group-based capstone projects, and incorporated digital storytelling formats. Those platforms supported student development in resilience, collaborative problem-solving, and intercultural communication through fully virtual environments. These institutional cases demonstrated how displacement status, mission orientation, and digital infrastructure shaped differentiated yet converging pathways to soft skills integration. Importantly, graduate tracking and portfolio-based quality assurance mechanisms were used to measure progress.

The analysis of Ukrainian education governance under stress highlighted the need for adaptive leadership and blended delivery. That was evident in the institutional response strategies observed in relocated universities, particularly through the creation of hybrid civic-volunteering projects. Such efforts translated high-level international discourses into localised action, integrating soft skills as practical, context-sensitive outcomes. In this way, the Ukrainian HEIs served as nodes of translational adaptation – where global policy narratives were pragmatically embedded into university culture and student development frameworks. That underscored the dual nature of soft skills development: both globally framed and locally enacted. Further evidence of this was how institutional leaders and teaching staff began to integrate soft skills assessment into accreditation materials and quality assurance cycles, especially regarding resilience, civic engagement, and collaboration. Although not yet systematically embedded at the national policy level, such institutional initiatives indicated a growing trend of embedding soft skills as core outputs within strategic planning. That process appeared especially impactful in those HEIs that were geographically or structurally vulnerable, suggesting that constraints themselves acted as a driver of educational innovation. These findings indicated a developing model of higher education in crisis that saw soft skills as both outputs and strategies. Interpersonal, civic, and adaptive competences – not at all supplemental or peripheral – became ingrained in the very mechanisms by which HEIs dealt with uncertainty and disruption. In that hostile wartime setting, paradoxically, educational intentionality was strengthened in relation to student agency, empathy, collaboration, and leadership. For digitalised universities with inclusive governance and pedagogical agility, that integration was smoother. Even less well-resourced institutions fared better in advancing social and emotional learning through human connection and community responsibility. The practice of Ukrainian HEIs from 2020 to 2025 showed much more than just a reactionary involvement, demonstrating instead the shaping of a pedagogical paradigm where soft skills sat at the very core of academic integrity, social contribution, and student success. It provided a valuable model for unstable educational systems around the world seeking to understand how hardship could be turned into deep and transferable learning when engaged with strategically.

CONCLUSIONS

This article highlighted the experience of transformation in Ukrainian higher education institutions during two periods of crisis – the COVID-19 pandemic and the full-scale Russian invasion – which emphasised the purposeful role of soft skills. Traditionally, rather than falling apart under such pressure, those institutions redesigned their teaching, governance, and student support to build resilience and adaptability as civic competences. Digital spaces shifted from improvised emergency tools to structured environments for collaborative learning and reflection. Universities re-purposed LMS and videoconferencing systems to support project work as well as group interaction, which strengthened digital literacy, teamwork, and communication skills. The redesign of assignments fostered self-regulation, while peer mentoring enhanced academic resilience alongside emotional growth. Inclusive leadership and participatory decision-making at the governance level allowed students to practise civic responsibility and ethical reasoning. Wartime service-learning, volunteer management, assistance to the displaced, and digital support created practical settings for the development of empathy, problem-solving abilities, and strategic communication.

Innovation was pronounced among HEIs in Ukraine, including those under occupation or displacement. Those experiences brought about a realisation that soft skills were

at the core, not the periphery, of educational continuity and social sustainability during crises. The Ukrainian case informed crisis-responsive pedagogy worldwide, proving that, notwithstanding the extremity of circumstances, institutions could nevertheless foster human-centred learning environments that inculcated in students competences that were portable and future-oriented. Future research should analyse how such practices can be systematically embedded into the fabric of national education policy, and how their outcomes can be measured in terms of long-term institutional transformation and student well-being. Future studies should focus on assessing the long-term transferability of soft skills developed during crisis education into students' professional and civic lives, as well as evaluating the sustainability of wartime educational innovations within post-crisis institutional strategies.

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Роль вищих навчальних закладів України в розвитку м'яких навичок студентів в умовах воєнного стану

Анотація. Повномасштабне вторгнення росії в Україну поставило вищі навчальні заклади (ВНЗ) перед безпрецедентними і величезними викликами, що вимагали адаптивних відповідей у всіх сферах академічного життя. Мета цього дослідження полягала у вивченні того, як українські вищі навчальні заклади сприяли розвитку м'яких навичок студентів під час подвійної кризи війни та пандемії. Для досягнення цієї мети в дослідженні було використано багатометодний якісний дизайн, що поєднував аналіз документів, кодування змісту за допомогою NVivo та методологію порівняльного аналізу випадків. Джерелами даних були інституційні політики, національні керівні принципи, міжнародні рамки та наукові публікації. Такий тристоронній підхід дав змогу глибоко зрозуміти, як українські університети концептуалізували та реалізували розвиток м'яких навичок у відповідь на системну кризу. Серед основних вимог освіта в умовах війни вимагає вдосконалення м'яких навичок студентів – нетехнічних переносимих умінь, таких як емоційна стійкість, адаптивність, комунікація, критичне мислення, робота в команді та самоуправління. Стаття мала на меті простежити зміну ролі українських вищих навчальних закладів у формуванні таких компетентностей в умовах війни, вимушеної міграції, психологічного стресу та цифровізації освіти. Спираючись на теоретичні висновки за період з 2020 по 2025 рік щодо інституційних стратегій, що підтримують соціально-емоційний розвиток студентів в онлайн та гібридних навчальних середовищах через залучення громади та інтегративне проектування навчальних програм, дослідження також приділяє особливу увагу психологічним послугам, пов'язаним з інклюзією та наставництвом однолітків для благополуччя студентів, а також громадянською відповідальністю. Воно аналізує кореляцію між академічною наполегливістю в умовах війни та розвитком м'яких навичок, приділяючи особливу увагу інституційній стійкості та інноваційному лідерству. Розглядаючи ці нові практики в українських університетах, включаючи приклади з декількох національних вищих навчальних закладів, стаття пропонує практичні рекомендації щодо інтеграції навчання м'яких навичок в основну місію університетів у кризові часи

Ключові слова: компетентність; кризова педагогіка; цифрове навчальне середовище; розвиток студентів; стійкість; працевлаштування