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Navigating Education in Times of War: a Vice-Rector's Perspective from Ukraine

Foto: Mariya Vornyk

As Vice-Rector for International Affairs, Marija Vornyk oversees the Academy's international activities and aims to integrate the institution into the global university community. Her work ensures that the Academy gains access to additional opportunities for accelerated devel-opment within the framework of the Bologna process and European integration. She also facilitates collaboration with international organizations, founda-tions, and universities on various international initiatives. Furthermore, she engages academic staff and students in international projects, leads student self-governing bodies in organising international activities, and works with other departments to coordinate international seminars, webinars, and conferences at the Academy. Additionally, she prepares reports for the Academic Council meetings on the status, challenges, and future directions of the Academy's international endeavors.

How has the ongoing conflict affected the overall teaching and learning environment at your university?

Mariya Vornyk: The war has had a profound impact on the teaching and learning environment at our university. Many students and faculty members have been directly affected, experiencing personal loss or displacement. This has fostered a pervasive sense of fear.

In addition, the war has disrupted normal academic activities, leading to the cancellation or postponement of many classes due to safety concerns and logistical challenges. The ongoing conflict has also restricted access to resources and educational materials, making it difficult for students and faculty to participate in meaningful teaching and learning.

Overall, the war has created a challenging and stressful environment for both students and faculty at our university, making it difficult to focus on academic pursuits and achieve educational goals.

What measures have been implemented to ensure the safety and well-being of students and staff during this time?

To ensure the safety and well-being of students and staff during the war, our University has implemented a comprehensive set of measures addressing various aspects of security, emergency response, mental health support, remote learning, and communications.

For physical protection, an alarm notification system and three shelters have been established: two in the main building and one in the dormitory. These shelters are equipped with a medical center, beds, bathrooms, an additional exit, a ventilation system, as well as desks and chairs for holding classes, exams, conferences, and other activities during an alarm.

Our University has developed and implemented detailed emergency response plans for evacuation, sheltering in place, and maintaining effective communication with students and staff. In addition, the University has expanded its counselling services to provide emotional support for those experiencing stress, anxiety, or trauma as a result of the war. Mental health professionals offer individual counselling, group therapy, and other resources to help students and staff cope with the challenges they are facing.

In response to the disruption caused by the conflict, our university has transitioned to remote learning options that allow students to continue their education safely from home. Online classes, virtual office hours, and digital resources have been made available to ensure uninterrupted learning.

By implementing these measures, our university is prioritising the safety and well-being of our community members during this challenging period of conflict.

Teaching during war

How have you adapted your curriculum to address the challenges posed by the war, both in terms of content and teaching methods?

The curricula have been adapted in several ways: a flexible study schedule has been implemented, blended learning has been introduced, and educational components can be completed independently at the teacher's discretion. In addition, deadlines for students' independent work have been extended, and educational platforms are being utilized to the fullest extent possible.

Can you share any specific strategies or technologies that have been effective in maintaining educational continuity?

Maintaining educational continuity in war-affected areas is challenging, but several strategies and technologies have proven effective. One key approach is distance learning, which involves the use of online platforms, educational apps, or videoconferencing tools to help students continue their studies even when they are unable to physically attend school due to conflict or displacement. Leveraging mobile technologies, such as smartphones and tablets, to deliver educational content and resources is particularly useful in areas with limited access to traditional educational facilities.

In addition, the use of interactive educational content, such as educational games and simulations, can engage students and make learning more accessible and enjoyable. These strategies and technologies have been instrumental in maintaining educational continuity in conflict-affected areas, enabling students and educators to continue their learning journey despite the challenges they face.

What support systems are in place for students who are directly affected by the conflict, such as those who have been displaced or are experiencing trauma?

According to academic psychologists, psychological support systems commonly used for students affected by conflict, displacement, or trauma typically include the following components:

1. Counselling support: This includes individual sessions where students can discuss personal difficulties, stress, or traumatic events.

2. Crisis support: For situations where students are in crisis—such as following a traumatic event or difficult personal situation—emergency psychological assistance is provided through established procedures.

3. Correctional and developmental classes with training elements: These classes are beneficial for students seeking support from peers who have experienced similar

challenges. They provide a space to share experiences, develop strategies for managing emotions, build self-esteem, and find resources.

4. Emotional support: Psychologists help students develop strategies for managing emotions, stress, and anxiety that may arise from difficult life circumstances.

5. Psycho-educational component: Students are provided with information about the psychological aspects of stress, trauma, and coping mechanisms to help them better understand their internal reactions and ways to overcome challenges.

6. Coordination with other services: The psychologist collaborates with other institutional services, such as health services, to ensure a comprehensive approach to supporting students' physical and psychological needs. This may include liaison with external psychological support centers.

These psychological support systems aim to provide students with the necessary assistance to cope with the emotional and psychological challenges that may arise from difficult life circumstances.

How has the war affected student engagement and participation in classes, and what steps are being taken to mitigate any negative effects?

The impact of war on student engagement and participation in classes can be significant because conflict can disrupt educational systems, displace students, and create barriers to learning. War can affect student engagement and participation in different ways:

War often leads to the displacement of families and communities, forcing students to leave their homes and schools. This disruption can lead to lower attendance and participation as students struggle to adapt to new environments.

Exposure to violence and conflict can have a serious impact on students' mental health, increasing stress, anxiety, and trauma. These psychological effects can make it harder for students to focus, engage, and participate in their studies.

In conflict-affected areas, access to educational resources such as textbooks, technology, and qualified teachers may be limited or disrupted. This lack of resources can affect students' engagement and participation in class.

To address the negative effects of war on student engagement and participation, several steps are being taken:

- Provide psychosocial support: Schools and organizations provide counselling and mental health services to help students cope with the emotional impact of war and trauma, which helps them engage more effectively in their studies.

- Offering flexible learning opportunities: Flexible learning options, such as distance learning programs or alternative schedules, can help meet the needs of displaced students and those facing disruptions in their education.

- Teacher training: Teachers are trained in trauma-informed teaching methods and strategies to support students affected by conflict, which can improve their ability to engage and motivate students in difficult situations.

- Working with local communities and parents: Understanding the needs and concerns of local communities helps schools adapt their approaches to better address the challenges faced by students affected by war.

By taking these measures and focusing on the well-being and educational needs of students in conflict-affected areas, efforts are being made to reduce the negative impact of war on student engagement and participation in class.

What role does international collaboration play in your current teaching practices, and how can foreign institutions support your efforts during this challenging period?

International collaboration is crucial in today's teaching practices. It brings diverse perspectives, experiences, and knowledge into the classroom, enriching the learning experience for both teachers and students. By working with educators from different countries, I gain insight into various teaching methods, cultural practices, and educational systems. This helps me adapt my teaching approach to better meet the needs of a diverse student population and promotes global awareness and understanding among our students.

In addition, international collaboration provides opportunities for professional development, networking and the sharing of resources and best practice. These opportunities ultimately improve the quality of education I am able to provide.

Now let us think about schools and school leaders. How are they coping with the challenges at this time?

School leaders in areas affected by war face many challenges, and their responses depend on the specific circumstances. Some common strategies include:

- **Ensuring safety and well-being:** School leaders prioritize the safety of students and staff by implementing security measures. These may include establishing safe zones within the school, conducting regular safety drills, and working with local authorities to monitor and address potential threats.

- **Provide emotional support:** Understanding the emotional and psychological impact of war, school leaders offer counselling services and trauma-informed support. They provide resources to help individuals cope with the stress and trauma caused by conflict.

- **Maintaining educational continuity:** Despite the disruption caused by war, school leaders work to maintain educational activities going. This may involve adapting the

curriculum to reflect current events, offering distance learning options, or setting up temporary learning spaces in safer locations.

- **Collaborating with community stakeholders:** School leaders work closely with parents, community leaders, NGOs, and other organizations to address the needs of students and ensure access to essential resources such as food, health care, and shelter.

- **Advocating for protection and rights:** In the midst of conflict, school leaders advocate for the protection of schools as safe places for learning and for the right to education for all children, regardless of the circumstances.

Overall, school leaders in war-affected areas must navigate complex and often unstable situations while focusing on the safety and well-being of their school communities and striving to maintain a sense of normalcy and hope for the future.

Thank you for taking the time for this interview. I wish you and your colleagues all the best.

Autorin

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