PREPARING UKRAINIAN SOCIAL WORKERS: ADAPTING HIGHER EDUCATION TO WARTIME REQUIREMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

Social work as a profession and academic discipline began its development in post-socialist Ukraine during the 1990s. According to the Unified State Electronic Database on Education, by 2022, Ukraine had 416 educational programs in the field of Social Work offered across 117 higher education institutions (HEIs). These programs spanned undergraduate (Junior Bachelor and Bachelor), graduate (Master), and postgraduate (PhD) levels. Notably, a single HEI may host multiple programs at the same level, such as Bachelor's programs in Social Rehabilitation, Social Pedagogy, and International Social Work.

As of 2024, 127 HEIs are providing training in the specialty 231 "Social Work". This growth reflects both an increasing interest in the profession and the pressing need for qualified social workers capable of meeting the unique and evolving needs of Ukrainian society. The expansion of social work education highlights the profession's essential role in addressing complex social challenges, particularly in light of ongoing social, economic, and geopolitical changes.

Social work education in Ukraine aligns with the state educational policy, which emphasizes competence-based approaches.

Between 2019 and 2022, the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine adopted specific national standards of higher education for the specialty 231 'Social Work' for each level of higher education. These standards define the competencies and learning outcomes required for social work programs, which all institutions must follow.

Additionally, Ukrainian legislation mandates that social work programs align with occupational standards, which specify the necessary knowledge, skills, and competencies for social workers. As of 2024, there are approximately 25 occupational standards in social work. Most of these pertain to the bachelor's level, and none require a PhD in Social Work. Importantly, the competencies outlined in these occupational standards differ significantly from those established in higher education standards. This discrepancy reveals a gap between the competencies expected in practice and those required for academic qualifications.

As Semigina (2023[1]) noted, the educational programs were characterized by outdated syllabi content, including a lack of modern concepts and methods, the inclusion of obsolete literature, and references to repealed legislation. Furthermore, there was a limited emphasis on field education, offering few opportunities for practical fieldwork and experiential learning. These programs are accredited by the National Agency for Higher Education Quality Assurance and regulated by stringent national educational legislation.

The Russo-Ukrainian war, which began in 2014 with Russia's annexation of Crimea and escalated in February 2022 with a full-scale invasion, has significantly impacted these programs. The conflict has inflicted severe consequences on Ukraine, its people, and its armed forces, resulting in numerous military and civilian casualties and displacing millions of Ukrainians both within and outside the country (Ukraine Recovery Conference, 2024[2]). The demand for social services has increased tremendously, necessitating new approaches and competencies in social work.

Social work education institutions had to adapt to the ongoing war. Some relocated to safer areas, while others shifted to distance learning, especially after the full-scale invasion. The HEIs experienced disruptions in their educational ecosystems (Kurapov et al., 2023[3]; Lavrysh et al., 2022[4]). Simultaneously, the crises caused by the war and martial law stimulated diverse innovations in educational institutions (Cuadra et al., 2024[5]).

This chapter highlights adaptations in Ukrainian social work higher education during armed conflict, emphasizing the profound impact of war

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[1] Semigina T. Social work educational programs in Ukraine: state of the art and challenges of accreditation. *Formation of innovative potential of world science.* Tel Aviv: European Scientific Platform, 2023. URL: https://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4523638

[2] Stronger together: Fostering resilience and social inclusion / Ukraine Recovery Conference. 2024. URL: https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/621f88db25fbf24758792dd8/666c320e56ddce1a0444c91f_Session%202.1%20_URC_2024_Fostering%20resilience%20and%20social%20inclusion.pdf.

[3] Kurapov A., Pavlenko V., Drozdov A., Bezliudna V., Reznik A., Isralowitz R. Toward an understanding of the Russian-Ukrainian war impact on university students and personnel. *Journal of Loss and Trauma.* 2023. Vol. 28(2). P. 167–174. URL: https://doi.org/10.1080/15325024.2022.2084838.

[4] Lavrysh Y., Lytovchenko I., Lukianenko V., Golub T. Teaching during the wartime: Experience from Ukraine. *Educational Philosophy and Theory.* 2022. P. 1–8. URL: https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2022.2098714

[5] Cuadra C. B., Wallengren-Lynch M., Kokoiachuk Y., Rapeli M. Social work students and teachers responding to internally displaced persons' need of shelter in Ukraine in spring 2022: Service learning and recognition. *International Social Work. 2024.* URL: https://doi.org/10.1177/00208728241267868

on pedagogy and the preparation of future social workers, shedding light on the evolving landscape of social work education in Ukraine amidst the ongoing conflict.

1. Theoretical Framework and Research Methodology

This study draws on several comprehensive concepts related to social work education and its transformations in times of extreme crises.

Initially, **Systems Theory** provides a lens through which social work education can be viewed as an integrated system composed of interrelated and interdependent components. This theory emphasizes the system's adaptivity and responsiveness to external changes and can be fully applied to the construction of the educational process (Ballantine et al., 2021[6]; Rapp & Corral-Granados, 2024[7]).

In the context of Ukrainian higher education, which is marked by bureaucratic constraints and fixed educational standards (Semigina et al., 2023[8]), **Systems Theory** facilitates an examination of how various parts of the educational system–such as administration, faculty, students, and curriculum–adapt to the wartime environment. This approach aids in comprehending the holistic impact of the conflict and the systemic responses required to maintain functionality and effectiveness.

Moreover, the concept of ***bifurcation*** (Hazy & Ashley, 2011[9]) becomes relevant when examining how war causes a significant split in the trajectory of social work education. Bifurcation, in this context, refers to the point where educational systems face a divergence: one path leading towards maintaining traditional educational frameworks and the other pushing towards radical transformation and innovation (Shen, 2023[10]). War, as an extreme crisis, acts as a catalyst, forcing educators to explore new methodologies and adapt their curricula to address the realities of conflict.

[6] Ballantine J., Stuber J., Everitt J. The sociology of education: A systematic analysis. Routledge, 2021.

[7] Rapp A. C., Corral-Granados A. Understanding inclusive education–a theoretical contribution from system theory and the constructionist perspective. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*. 2024. Vol. 28(4). P. 423–439. URL: https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2021.1946725

[8] Semigina T. Social work educational programs in Ukraine: state of the art and challenges of accreditation. *Formation of innovative potential of world science.* Tel Aviv: European Scientific Platform, 2023. URL: https://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4523638

[9] Hazy J. K., Ashley A. Unfolding the future: Bifurcation in organizing form and emergence in social systems. *Emergence: Complexity & Organization*. 2011. Vol. 13(3). P. 57–79.

[10] Shen J. The theory of bifurcated educational system and its implications for school improvement. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*. 2023. Vol. 26(2). P. 223–243.

This divergence is seen in how educational institutions navigate between conventional practices and the urgent need for crisis-responsive, trauma-informed, and technology-driven educational models.

As Archer-Kuhn with co-authors (2020[11]), Morley and Clarke (2020[12]), who studied the responses of social work education to the COVID-19 pandemic, pointed out, crises have forced openness to innovation, providing educators with the strength to move forward. Similarly, Latzer and Shklarski (2024[13]) argue that evolving realities necessitate significant curricular adaptations. Ukrainian scholars (Lugovyi et al., 2023[14]; Semigina et al., 2022[15]; Sibruk et al., 2023[16]) ave expressed comparable views, highlighting the significant changes and trends in the educational system prompted by both the pandemic and the ongoing war. At this critical juncture, bifurcation theory serves as a useful framework to assess the choice between preserving existing paradigms and pursuing transformative changes to address the challenges of war.

In this vein, *Social Innovation Theory* explores the development and application of new ideas, practices, or products designed to address social needs and challenges. As noted by Payne (2020[17]), this theory highlights the significance of creativity, collaboration, and the scaling of innovative solutions. Additionally, new approaches introduced in the educational field, particularly those informed by international experience, can lead to more

[11] Archer-Kuhn B., Ayala J., Hewson J., Letkemann L. Canadian reflections on the Covid-19 pandemic in social work education: From tsunami to innovation. *Social Work Education*. 2020. Vol. 39(8). P. 1010–1018. URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2020.1826922

[12] Morley C., Clarke J. From crisis to opportunity? Innovations in Australian social work field education during the COVID-19 global pandemic. *Social Work Education*. 2020. Vol. 39(8). P. 1048–1057. URL: https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2020.1836145.

[13] Social work education and the COVID-19 pandemic: International insights toward innovation and creativity / Latzer Y., Shklarski L., eds. Routledge, 2024.

[14] Lugovyi V., Kalashnikova S., Talanova Z., Vlasova I. Transformation of higher education in Ukraine: Impact of the war and objectives for post-war recovery. *European Journal of Education*. 2023. Vol. *58*(4). P. 611–628. URL: https://doi.org/10.1111/ejed.12584.

[15] Semigina T., Karagodina O., Baidarova O. Global "Corona Crisis" as a Further Challenge for Social Equity. *The Palgrave Handbook of Global Social Problems /* Baikady R. et al. (eds). Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022. URL: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-68127-2_220-1

[16] Sibruk A. V., Lytvynska S. V., Koshetar U. P. et al. Ukrainian education system: war challenges. *Multidisciplinary Science Journal*. 2023. Vol. 5. URL: https://doi.org/10.31893/multiscience.2023ss0502

[17] Payne M. Modern social work theory. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020.

effective and efficient social services for the population (Garthwait, 2015[18]) and social practices to tackle war-induced vulnerability (Revko, 2023[19]).

In the constrained environment of Ukrainian higher education, Social Innovation Theory aids in identifying and analyzing key, though limited, innovations in social work education. It emphasizes how educators and institutions implement creative solutions to meet the pressing needs of students and communities impacted by the war.

Our study also draws on key publications addressing **social work in both short-term and protracted conflict settings** (Goelitz, 2023[20]; Ramon, 2008[21]; Semigina, 2017[22]). These works emphasize that social workers are often on the front lines during times of community trauma, where they not only support affected individuals but also experience the trauma themselves. This overlap can blur the boundary between the social workers' personal experiences and those of their clients, creating unique emotional and professional challenges (Столярик & Семигіна, 2024[23]).

Such circumstances have profound implications for social work education. Training programs must address the dual role of social workers as both caregivers and individuals impacted by the same traumatic events. This requires curricula that focus not only on professional resilience and coping strategies but also on fostering self-care and emotional intelligence (Aburn et al., 2016[24];

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[18] Garthwait C. L. Social work education: A vehicle for innovative practice. *International Journal of Social Science and Humanity*. 2015. Vol. 5(9). P. 798.

[19] Revko A. The role of education in the social entrepreneurship ecosystem development in Poland and Ukraine. *Studia Regionalne i Lokalne*. 2023. Special Issue. P. 89–100.

[20] Shared mass trauma in social work: Implications and strategies for resilient practice / Goelitz A., ed. Routledge, 2023.

[21] Social work in the context of political conflict/ Ramon S., ed. Birmingham: Venture Press, 2008.

[22] Semigina T. Frustrations or moving forward? Ukrainian social work within the 'hybrid war' context. *European Journal of Social Work*. 2017. Vol. 22(3). P. 446–457. URL: https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2017.1366432.

[23] Столярик О., Семигіна, Т. Голоси стійкості: рефлексії українських соціальних працівників у час війни. *Social Work and Education*. 2024. № *11*(1). C. 7-22. URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.25128/2520-6230.24.1.1

[24] Aburn G., Gott M., Hoare K. What is resilience? An integrative review of the empirical literature. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*. 2016. Vol. 72(5). P. 980–1000. URL: https://doi.org/10.1111/jan.12888.

Patel et al., 2017[25]; Van Breda, 2018[26]). Incorporating these elements helps future social workers navigate the complex emotional landscapes they encounter in conflict zones and build the necessary skills to manage their well-being while effectively supporting their clients.

The **objective** of the study was to explore the specific experiences and challenges faced by academic staff involved in training social workers and social pedagogues during the full-scale war in Ukraine. The research aimed to identify key adaptive strategies, resilience factors, and changes in educational processes, as well as to assess the implications of these changes for the future of social work education in a crisis context.

The research was conducted from May to June 2024. It was based on semi-structured interviews with academic staff from departments and institutes training students in "social work" and "social pedagogy".

The interview guide featured key questions focusing on responses to the war, adaptive coping mechanisms, resilience factors, changes in educational processes, and the future of social work education.

Spanning nine regions and 12 institutions across Ukraine, the study ensured diverse experiences, including universities affected by occupation and conflict. Participants included eight department heads and four faculty members. Interviews were conducted via phone and Zoom, and lasted from one to two hours each.

Thematic analysis was applied to identify recurring themes and patterns. This method facilitated the exploration of how social work education is adapting to the wartime context, focusing on both the challenges faced and the innovations introduced in response to the crisis. The themes were derived manually without the aid of any software.

The research strictly adhered to **ethical principles**. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the interviews. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, their right to withdraw at any time, and the measures in place to ensure confidentiality. To protect participants' privacy, all responses were anonymized, and sensitive information was handled in accordance with best practices in research ethics. Participation was voluntary, and interviewees were assured that their identities would not be disclosed in any published material.

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[25] Patel S. S., Rogers M. B., Amlôt R., Rubin G. J. What do we mean by 'community resilience'? A systematic literature review of how it is defined in the literature. *PLoS Currents*. 2017. Vol. 9. URL: https://doi.org/10.1371/currents. dis.db775aff25efc5ac4f0660ad9c9f7db2.

[26] Van Breda A. A critical review of resilience theory and its relevance for social work. *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*. 2018. Vol. 54(1). P. 1–18. URL: https://doi.org/10.15270/54-1-611.

2. Key Themes

Rapid Adaptation and Educational Adjustments to the Full-Scale War

Ukrainian society, including the academic and student communities, was unprepared for the full-scale invasion of Russian troops into Ukraine, which occurred at dawn on February 24, 2022. Higher education institutions lacked ready-made response plans for such crisis situations, relying primarily on media sources for information. Communication with students and staff was carried out through telephone connections and social networks where possible. By 9:00 AM, university administrations had published information on their official websites and corporate emails, announcing the suspension of the educational process until a better solution could be found under the circumstances.

One respondent described the initial chaos:

"...we woke up to explosions nearby. Everyone was glued to their televisions and internet networks, waiting for instructions on how to proceed... the educational process was suspended for two weeks, and then the organization of 'new' learning began…".

This quote encapsulates the immediate confusion and subsequent adaptations made by educational institutions in response to the crisis.

Higher education institutions (HEIs) in Ukraine became crucial guarantors of student safety. Academic staff was tasked with determining each student's location and threat level, as well as providing information about available support through various communication channels. One respondent from a university in Melitopol highlighted the gravity of the situation:

"...there was a humanitarian catastrophe the day after the occupiers entered the city–markets and shops stopped working, communication was unstable... We were responsible not only for ourselves and our families but also for our students: we had to establish contact with each student, determine their location, assess the safety of their environment, and address their basic needs…".

Despite the uncertainty and frequent threats, both academic staff and students showed remarkable resilience. They overcame numerous challenges through adaptive coping mechanisms that allowed them to continue functioning under extraordinary circumstances. One respondent from Odesa described the initial resistance to resuming education but later recognized its value:

"...when the decision was made to return to the educational process, everyone protested, but now I understand–it was the right decision because communication energized us...".

In Lutsk, the emphasis during the early days of resuming education was on mutual support and communication rather than traditional lectures:

"...the first classes didn't start with lectures but with the familiar question for Ukrainians, 'How are you?'... At that time, it seemed more important... Everyone was in a state of 'this will end in 2-3 days,' and we all understood that to speed it up, we needed to work harder and better than before the war...".

Overall, adaptive coping mechanisms involved maintaining communication, mutual support, and a flexible approach to the educational process. These strategies helped mitigate the psychological impact of the conflict and fostered a sense of community and resilience among both staff and students.

Universities also provided humanitarian aid and helped staff secure life insurance contracts. Regular communication between university leadership and all organizational levels ensured that support and assistance were constantly available.

Moreover, universities established crisis support mechanisms focusing on well-being, social, and mental health. Psychological services offered crisis counseling, mental health recovery, and self-help training. Student self-support services like "How Are You?" in Lviv, the student help desk in Poltava, and the Social and Cultural Development Center in Melitopol were actively engaged.

Resilience was further bolstered by strong patriotism and belief in victory. One respondent from Melitopol highlighted how students demonstrated their patriotism by participating in pro-Ukrainian rallies despite the risks. Another from Lutsk noted:

"...we weren't afraid–we acted, not because of the circumstances but despite them...".

Volunteerism played a crucial role in maintaining morale. In Lviv, the initial days were sustained by volunteering efforts, from assisting internally displaced persons at the train station to university-based activities like setting up shelters, making volunteer nets, and collecting humanitarian aid.

Mobilization efforts also united communities. In Kyiv, after a blast damaged part of the university building, everyone came together to repair it. In Lviv, when a social work student was severely injured on the frontline, the entire faculty mobilized to raise funds for his treatment and rehabilitation.

These combined efforts of universities in ensuring safety, providing essential support, and fostering a strong sense of community and purpose were critical in maintaining resilience during these challenging times.

The format of the educational process had to swiftly adapt to the challenges posed by the war, including direct threats to the population's lives and mass migration of students and university staff abroad. After a two-week hiatus, education resumed using distance learning technologies. This

approach, while beneficial in terms of accessibility, also presented challenges, especially regarding connectivity with Ukraine.

For instance, participants noted that both students and staff could participate in the educational process from anywhere they were at the time. However, this transition also brought challenges, particularly in maintaining connections with Ukraine. For example, after March 18, education resumed with invitations extended to staff and students who could participate under their current circumstances. Many had migrated abroad, facing unstable connections.

One respondent highlighted the difficulties faced by some educators teaching remotely from Egypt. To bypass restrictions, they used VPNs to access Zoom, risking exposure to cyber-police scrutiny.

This adaptation underscored the resilience and determination of educators and students to continue the educational process amidst challenging circumstances, leveraging technology while navigating legal and logistical hurdles.

The educational process adapted to asynchronous, synchronous, and hybrid formats, considering the security situation, capabilities, and resources of higher education institutions (HEIs) and the sensitive needs of learners. This flexible approach was crucial amid ongoing armed conflict and its impact on civil infrastructure and HEIs.

During the war, education faced challenges beyond regular shelling of civilian infrastructure, including HEIs, which necessitated suspending classes and seeking shelter. Regular blackouts further complicated matters, as they disrupted essential services like heating, lighting, and internet connectivity necessary for educational continuity.

Despite these adversities, universities persisted in their operations, adapting to the circumstances. For instance, observations highlighted that communal presence among students during air raids provided a specific form of therapy, aiding in stress and anxiety management. HEIs endeavored to maintain operations under difficult conditions, sometimes conducting exams online in neighboring cafes where electricity was available.

In occupied territories, repression intensified with equipment confiscations and communication disruptions. Students resorted to seeking high points in communities to access Ukrainian network signals, enabling them to inform instructors of challenges or submit assignments.

The priority remained ensuring safety, necessitating flexible adaptations to educational processes within secure parameters.

Further Evolution of Educational Programs Amidst War
In wartime, Ukraine's bachelor and master educational programs have swiftly adapted to meet the demands of local communities and respond effectively to situational challenges. For instance, updates to program

content have been substantial, focusing on integrating knowledge pertinent to new client groups and advanced tools for social work interventions. These changes, though not always reflected in course titles, are clearly visible in the enriched content of various disciplines. Since 2014, there has been a deliberate integration of specific components and topics related to armed conflict and its aftermath, reflecting the role of social workers as agents of change in these dynamic contexts.

According to interviews, some universities have maintained educational disciplines rooted in general social work technologies and methods rather than targeting specific groups or emerging situations. This approach poses challenges in anticipating future needs and vulnerabilities amid evolving societal conditions.

As a result, educational programs are increasingly oriented towards societal needs, with universities actively embracing their role in benefiting communities. Graduates are equipped not only with theoretical knowledge but also with practical skills, including a nuanced understanding of local contexts and the professional challenges they may face.

The full scale invasion was a critical point, influencing the specialization of educational programs, their components, and the content of specific disciplines. From answers of interviewed academics, this shift has prioritized directions crucial in wartime conditions:

- ***Recovery and Rehabilitation***: Educational programs now prioritize preparing future social work professionals to actively participate in the recovery and post-war rehabilitation efforts of individuals, families, and communities affected by conflict. This includes training in strategies to restore social cohesion, rebuild community infrastructure, and support the mental and physical health of those impacted.

- ***Crisis Social Work:*** There is a heightened focus on equipping social work students with specialized skills to manage crises resulting from large-scale population movements triggered by wars, natural disasters, and technological catastrophes. This training emphasizes rapid response, community resilience building, and adaptive decision-making in unpredictable and high-stress environments.

- ***Trauma and PTSD Social Work:*** Educational curricula now emphasize comprehensive support for all segments of society experiencing trauma due to conflict. This includes training in trauma-informed care, methods to address post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and interventions aimed at promoting healing and resilience among affected individuals and communities.

- ***Trauma-Informed Education:*** Programs are incorporating modules to educate social work students on preventing professional burnout, promoting self-care practices, and fostering resilience. These components address the unique challenges faced by social workers dealing with high-

stress environments and demanding client caseloads, ensuring sustainable and effective service delivery.

- *Clinical Social Work:* There is an expanded emphasis on clinical social work practices to meet the growing needs of traumatized populations. This includes training in clinical assessment, therapeutic interventions, and case management tailored to address complex psychological and emotional challenges arising from conflict-related trauma.

- *Mediation and Conflict Management*: Educational programs are now preparing social work professionals to effectively mediate and manage conflicts arising from identity-based tensions, political divisions, and cultural differences exacerbated by conflict. This training equips practitioners with skills in conflict resolution, intercultural dialogue, and peacebuilding to foster community reconciliation and social cohesion.

- *Social Inclusion*: In response to conflict-induced changes and disabilities among social groups directly involved in combat and civilian populations affected by shelling and displacement, educational programs focus on adapting physical environments and societal attitudes. This aims to create inclusive conditions for the reintegration of affected individuals into community life, promoting equity and participation.

- *Human Rights, Social Protection, and International Humanitarian Standards:* There is an increased emphasis on educating future social workers about international human rights frameworks, social protection mechanisms, and humanitarian standards. This knowledge equips professionals to advocate for and uphold the rights of vulnerable populations affected by humanitarian crises, ensuring ethical and effective intervention practices.

Respondents noted,

"...current events in Ukraine impose new demands on future social work professionals, who will serve as frontline workers in the recovery of individuals, families, and communities, providing post-war rehabilitation";

"...our Master's program addresses the challenges of war by including disciplines aimed at restoring, supporting, and preserving social and psychological health".

These adaptations underscore the critical role of social work education in preparing professionals to address the evolving needs and challenges of populations affected by conflict, emphasizing new knowledge and practices essential for effective intervention and support.

The experience of HEIs indicates that the war has significantly influenced the structure of student internships, making them more student-centered and adaptable to situational needs. There has been a notable emphasis on mobility in internship placements, allowing students to intern in locations convenient to them. This expansion has been facilitated by new partnerships with civic organizations and international services.

Additionally, student volunteerism plays a pivotal role in enhancing internships by providing practical relevance to future careers and boosting professional motivation. This integration not only prepares students better but also increases their prospects for employment post-graduation. As emphasized by a respondent from Odesa National University,

"Volunteering allows students to immerse themselves in the realm of their future professional activities, influencing their professional motivation and the likelihood of future employment."

So, the internship evolution prioritizes mobility in internship placements, enabling students to intern conveniently and effectively.

It can be stated that social work educational programs demonstrate a certain degree of flexibility and sensitivity, yet withinin strict requirements and highly regulated academic landscape.

Development of Informal Education

In Ukraine, the importance of informal (non-degree) education programs for social workers cannot be overstated. As the field continues to evolve amidst dynamic social challenges, these programs serve as vital tools for enhancing professional competencies, responding swiftly to emerging issues, and equipping practitioners with the latest methodologies and interventions.

As the full-scale Russo-Ukrainian war contined, HEIs introduced a range of short-term and long-term educational programmes. These programmes are designed not only to meet the educational needs of students and practitioners but also to address emerging societal challenges promptly. An educator from Sumy State University emphasizes the critical nature of continuous education, stating that timely training is essential for responding effectively to evolving social issues without delay, making short-term educational programs a cost-effective solution for rapid skill acquisition.

Across various social work departments, specialized educational initiatives have been introduced to address mental health, resilience, recovery, self-support, and preservation. These programs serve social work professionals and other interested parties. Notable examples include:

- "Art Therapy in the Social Sphere" at Bohdan Khmelnytskyi National Pedagogical University,
- "Veteran Social Work" and "Social Support for Persons with Disabilities" at Lesya Ukrainka Eastern European National University,
- "Community Resilience Development" at Pavlo Tychyna Uman State Pedagogical University,
- specialized training for candidate caregivers at Ivan Franko National University of Lviv.

These educational initiatives are integrated into formal and informal educational frameworks, serving as components of professional development

or standalone educational modules. They are characterized by their flexibility, allowing rapid adaptation to societal demands, economic efficiency, intensive learning formats, and often feature contributions from guest lecturers.

Reshaping Social Work Research in Ukraine's HEI

Transformations in research and expert activities within Ukrainian universities reflect significant developments in the field of Social Work, which is relatively new in the country, with the first PhD programs established as recently as 2017. The ongoing war and its profound impact on the population have reshaped academic demands and priorities, particularly in terms of research agendas within educational institutions. Both students and academic staff emphasize that research directions are intricately linked to issues arising from the armed conflict and its aftermath. This has presented various challenges, including the need to ensure the relevance of research topics in wartime conditions, difficulties in accessing research samples due to physical constraints, and the absence of appropriate research tools.

For instance, educators from Odesa National University have innovatively tackled these challenges, as illustrated by a graduate student's research on social stigma among disabled war veterans. The lack of suitable measurement instruments prompted the development and validation of novel methodologies to complete the study effectively.

Despite these obstacles, Ukrainian universities remain committed to accommodating the educational and professional backgrounds of students when selecting research topics. The establishment of research centers focusing on national issues related to war, post-war recovery, and reconstruction efforts underscores their dedication. As noted by a respondent from Ivan Franko National University of Lviv, faculty members are actively engaged in projects funded by the National Research Fund of Ukraine, specifically targeting the development of post-war social services.

There is a growing demand for research contributions from governmental bodies, civil society organizations, and international funds. Moreover, collaborative international interuniversity research initiatives are leveraging Ukraine's unique experiences gained during the war, positioning the country as an experimental hub of interest for European counterparts.

In sum, these developments highlight how Ukraine's research community has persevered and thrived amidst adversity, showcasing professionalism, ingenuity, and specialized expertise within specific departments and institutes. The role of social work departments as expert environments within academia is increasingly pivotal, fostering advancements through research, education, and practical application in social service delivery. This evolution not only enhances the academic landscape of social work education but also underscores Ukraine's growing prominence as a center for innovative research in challenging socio-political contexts.

War-Induced Incremental Innovations: Challenges and Future Directions

Despite the ongoing war in the country, the requirements for the educational process and educational programs have not changed. Teachers continue to fulfill the same scope of professional duties and academic standards as they did before the war. Alongside existing responsibilities, new ones have been added, including supporting students studying from abroad, accommodating sensitive trajectories of students, and dealing with difficulties in accessing reliable sources of electricity and stable internet connections.

The majority of respondents pointed out that Ukraine's HEIs strive to maintain legitimacy and meet the demands of the wartime context while adhering to rigid standards.

It is worth mentioning that public discourse often leans towards a mythologized notion of returning to a pre-war state, but it is increasingly clear that neither social work nor social work education can revert to their previous conditions. This recognition underscores the necessity of embracing change. As noted by educators, the experience of conflict has forced a reevaluation, emphasizing the need to adapt and learn from the lessons presented.

Looking forward, there is a call for innovative approaches in Ukraine's social work education. This includes the development of interdisciplinary educational programs to meet the growing demand for comprehensive social services. A respondent, Bohdan Khmelnytsky Melitopol State Pedagogical University explained this in the following way:

"...we are witnessing rapid growth in integrated social services, which requires the development of educational programs at the intersection of specialties and scientific fields. This will help create sensitive and competitive educational programs..."

Additionally, the adoption of dual education models is considered essential for effectively preparing future social workers. This approach necessitates specific decisions and regulatory frameworks within governmental educational policies. As articulated by a respondent from Taras Shevchenko National University in Kyiv:

"It would be beneficial to establish mechanisms for compensating stakeholders who host student internships. This would increase their motivation to participate in educating students, and the implementation of dual education would better prepare future social workers for employment without interrupting their academic progress."

Digitalization also plays a pivotal role in transforming education, with proposals to expand access through licensed distance learning programs accessible around the clock. These initiatives aim to enhance flexibility and responsiveness in educational delivery, addressing current limitations while aligning with global trends in educational innovation.

In conclusion, navigating these challenges requires a forward-looking approach that acknowledges the transformative impacts of conflict while leveraging opportunities to innovate and strengthen Ukraine's social work education system.

3. Discussions

The onset of war, a profound and complex emergency, marks a pivotal moment for social work education, disrupting peacetime norms and reshaping educational practices and priorities. This transformative event compels substantial changes to curriculum design, teaching methodologies, and institutional strategies. As noted by McLaughlin, Scholar, and Teater (2020[27]), such upheavals prompt enduring shifts within social work education, highlighting the necessity for intentional reflection on emergent issues and a proactive stance towards future crises.

At the same time, analysis reveals that many dissertation studies in social work remain focused on topics approved before the onset of the full-scale war and often fail to address the current needs of society (Семигіна, 2024[28]). Furthermore, the state standards for higher education in the Social Work specialty have remained unchanged and do not adequately reflect contemporary competencies.

In this context, the concept of 'incremental innovations' in social work education, as articulated by Zuchowski with co-authors (2018[29]), is especially relevant to the situation in Ukraine. Incremental innovations refer to small, gradual improvements that are implemented step-by-step within existing frameworks, rather than through radical, sweeping changes. These incremental adjustments may seem minor in isolation, but collectively, they contribute to substantial long-term improvements. In the face of ongoing challenges, such as those posed by the war, these smaller innovations enhance the overall adaptability and resilience of educational systems.

By promoting continuous, small-scale advancements, Ukrainian social work educators can foster an environment that values innovation, even

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within constrained conditions. As Fuad et al. (2022[30]) highlight, this gradual approach not only improves immediate responses but also cultivates a sustainable culture of innovation that benefits both students and the broader educational landscape over time. Thus, incremental innovations offer a pragmatic path forward, balancing the need for urgent change with the capacity to maintain stability amid ongoing uncertainty.

Findings from this study, along with relevant scholarship from Ukraine and beyond (Палатна та Семигіна, 2024[31]; Столярик та Семигіна, 2023[32]; Campbell, 2021[33]; Gusak et al., 2024[34]; McKendrick & Finch, 2017[35]; Paul, 2023[36]; Seifert, 2021[37]; Sonnenberg & Ghaderi, 2021[38]; Stoliaryk & Semigina, 2024[39]) offer critical insights for social work education amid conflict.

Foremost, the impact of war necessitates a comprehensive reassessment of educational priorities. The profound social, economic, and psychological

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challenges of conflict compel social work educators to reevaluate core competencies and skills required to serve war-affected individuals and communities. This realignment demands an emphasis on crisis intervention, conflict resolution, and resilience-building strategies within curricula. Additionally, educators must prioritize self-care and mental health resilience for students and practitioners engaged in frontline social work, who face significant emotional (Chuiko et al, 2024[40]).

In further adaptations of social work professional education, special attention should be directed towards **trauma-informed care**. This approach equips future social workers with essential skills for recognizing and addressing the complex impacts of trauma, which are especially prevalent in war-affected populations. By embedding trauma-sensitive practices into curricula, educators can ensure that practitioners are better prepared to foster resilience and provide compassionate, effective support to individuals and communities impacted by the war.

The key competencies required for social workers to provide effective trauma-oriented social support include expertise in evidence-based approaches such as cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), trauma recovery models, trauma-risk management, and Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) therapy. Additionally, proficiency in mindfulness-based therapies and the ability to apply a strengths-based approach are essential (Столярик & Семигіна, 2024[41]). These competencies enable social workers to address the multifaceted impacts of trauma, promote resilience, and empower clients to rebuild their lives. By incorporating training in trauma-informed approaches, future social workers can be better equipped to address the complex needs of trauma-affected populations, ensuring effective and compassionate support in both crisis and recovery contexts.

The integration of **the service-learning model** (Cuadra et al., 2024[42]) also proves invaluable, bridging academic theory with hands-on application. This model allows students to engage directly with communities, building practical

[40] Chuiko O., Shkuro V., Semigina T. Continuities and Innovations in Social Work Practice Education in Ukraine: Lessons from the Pandemic and War Context. In: Guidi R., Spatscheck C., eds. *Social Work Practice Education Beyond the Pandemic: Comparative Perspectives on Continuities, Adaptations and Innovations*. Cham: Springer, 2024. P. 105–117. URL: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-66559-2_8.

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skills while deepening their understanding of the complexities involved in working within conflict zones. When combined with trauma-sensitive approaches, service learning strengthens the capacity of social work programs to address wartime challenges, ensuring that future professionals are equipped to manage the increasing demands on social services.

Moreover, war and other extreme situations act as catalysts for innovation and experimentation within social work education. Educators and institutions are compelled to explore new methodologies and approaches to effectively prepare students for the multifaceted challenges of social work in wartime. This includes the integration of technology-driven learning platforms, which offer flexibility and access to critical training despite disruptions.

Additionally, fostering cross-disciplinary collaborations enhances students' problem-solving skills and broadens their understanding of complex, crisis-driven environments. Community-based participatory research methods are also being increasingly utilized, allowing students to engage directly with affected populations, thereby enhancing their practical skills and building resilience for future professional challenges.

These innovations often extend beyond immediate wartime applications, creating a legacy of enhanced preparedness and resilience within social work education. By embedding these advancements into their programs, educators ensure that future professionals are well-prepared to address a broad range of crises, from natural disasters to complex emergencies, with competence and empathy.

The **bifurcation** induced by war in social work education brings to the forefront **ethical imperatives and dilemmas** that practitioners in conflict zones must navigate. In such contexts, issues like neutrality, human rights advocacy, and cultural sensitivity become intensified. These heightened concerns directly shape both the educational discourse and the development of practice guidelines. Educators are tasked with guiding students through these complexities, ensuring they grasp the critical importance of social justice, equity, and human dignity–values that are essential for social workers, particularly in conflict and post-conflict settings.

Lastly, the **bifurcation** brought about by war also prompts critical reflection on the role and responsibilities of social work institutions in crisis response. Institutions are not only expected to uphold academic and professional standards but are also required to cultivate **adaptive leader-ship**, build organizational resilience, and establish governance structures that can effectively respond to rapidly changing environments. This dual responsibility–addressing immediate crises while maintaining long-term educational goals–pushes institutions to rethink their frameworks, ensuring that they remain responsive while adhering to ethical principles that guide the profession.

Additionally, the focus on incremental innovations, as opposed to sweeping changes, provides a practical, sustainable path forward. This approach ensures adaptability and resilience, preparing social work professionals to face not only the immediate demands of war but also future crises. Educators and institutions, meanwhile, must navigate heightened ethical concerns, such as the importance of neutrality and cultural sensitivity, which are critical in supporting human dignity and social justice in these challenging contexts.

The convergence of these elements fosters a progressive and resilient framework for social work education, one that responds effectively to the current needs while building a foundation for future challenges in the profession.

Several **limitations** should be noted. First, the sample size, while diverse in terms of geography and institutions, was limited to 12 institutions, which may not fully capture the breadth of experiences across all social work education programs in Ukraine. Second, conducting interviews remotely (via phone and Zoom) may have affected the depth of the data collected, as the absence of face-to-face interaction can sometimes limit rapport and spontaneous insights. Lastly, the ongoing conflict situation posed challenges for scheduling and conducting interviews, potentially leading to the exclusion of some valuable perspectives.

CONCLUSIONS

In essence, war serves as a pivotal moment for social work education, highlighting its transformative potential and the urgent need for proactive changes and innovation.

The disruption caused by conflict compels educators, institutions, and practitioners to rethink traditional approaches and embrace new methodologies that can better prepare future social workers for the complex realities of crisis intervention and post-conflict recovery.

The ongoing adaptation of social work education in the context of war in Ukraine highlights several key priorities. Trauma-informed care becomes essential, equipping students and practitioners to recognize and address the deep, often complex impacts of trauma within conflict-affected populations. The emphasis on service-learning models also adds value, as students apply theoretical knowledge directly to real-world situations, gaining insights into the intricacies of frontline social work in conflict zones.

Beyond immediate crisis response, the ongoing evolution of social work education during conflict represents an opportunity to establish more resilient, responsive, and ethically sound systems that can endure and thrive in post-conflict recovery efforts. This adaptability not only supports societal healing but also enhances the profession's capacity to address future crises effectively.

Future research should delve deeper into the efficacy of these adaptations, exploring trauma-oriented methodologies and their long-term impact on both education and practice. Comparative analyses across conflict-affected regions and innovative studies on the integration of technology in education could offer valuable pathways for global knowledge exchange and further strengthening of social work's role in building peace and resilience.

SUMMARY

This paper examines the transformative impact of armed conflict on social work education in Ukraine, based on interviews with academics from Ukrainian institutions. It explores the significant challenges and adaptations that have reshaped social work pedagogy and practice in response to the ongoing war. Traditional classroom-based learning has been disrupted, leading to a shift towards new educational models. Concurrently, curricula have been revised to address urgent issues arising from the armed conflict, such as trauma, displacement, and humanitarian response.

We detail several innovative strategies adopted to navigate these changes, including the heightened demand for short-term non-formal education programs. These programs are designed to equip students with practical skills essential for addressing the complexities of war-related social work. The study also discusses how these adaptations reflect broader trends in social work education and highlights the resilience and resourcefulness of Ukrainian institutions.

This case study provides valuable insights for the international social work community, demonstrating how educational systems can rapidly adapt to offer crucial support and training in extreme conditions. The experiences of Ukrainian social work education offer important lessons in resilience and innovation, contributing to the preparedness and effectiveness of future social work practitioners in conflict zones and beyond.

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