








“Crisis response strategies of universities during the ongoing war: Beyond experience and responsibilities”

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SPECIAL ISSUE "UKRAINIAN UNIVERSITIES IN NEW REALITIES: 10 YEARS OF WAR"

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CRISIS RESPONSE STRATEGIES OF UNIVERSITIES DURING THE ONGOING WAR: BEYOND EXPERIENCE AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Abstract

Extraordinary threats of the large-scale stage of the Russian-Ukrainian war challenged the resilience and capability of all higher education institutions. However, their influence varied with location, infrastructure damage, internal capacity for changes and academic community resilience, external support, and solidarity initiatives. The purpose of this study is to assess the implementation of crisis management decisions and the formation of a crisis response strategy for a university in wartime (on the example of Kherson State University). The assessment draws on thematic analysis, the case method, statistical data analysis, and a survey of academic community members in 2023 (664 students and 150 staff), which focused on identifying a vision of the university's values and strategic priorities. It showed the priorities of ensuring education quality and research, expanding international cooperation, diversifying funding, and strengthening cooperation with external stakeholders, including employers. The analysis of the university management's actions in 2022–2024 demonstrated that the university transitioned from a resistance strategy (2022) as the first situational response to the large-scale invasion and occupation to a resilience strategy and the return to progressive development in the years ahead. The paper concludes that successful crisis management follows the key principles: flexibility, value orientation, and scaling up. It offers management guidance for developing a crisis response strategy that can be adapted to the unique needs of other universities: a comprehensive analysis of the crisis situation, crisis communication, planning of resource maintenance, and transparent and participatory decision-making for crisis management based on values and ethical implications.

Keywords

war, displaced university, crisis management, decision-making, crisis response strategies, higher education institutions

JEL Classification

D81, D91, I23

INTRODUCTION

Constant "certain uncertainty" became a narrative to describe the routine of academic communities in Ukraine in wartime conditions. An unprecedented crisis of the large-scale military invasion has been tasting the resilience of the Ukrainian education system for almost three years. The absence of quality education leads to uncertainty about the future and limits personal and collective progress. Salha et al. (2024) consider war as a 'lifetime and life-wide status' that shapes unique educational scenarios and strategies at both the individual and collective levels. War changes the management of education, adding new priorities, strategies, and types of decisions to traditional management and administrative approaches.

Anti-fragility in the daily uncertainty of martial law is becoming a key quality of people, communities, and institutions. This is even more

important in the context of countering hybrid threats (Jasper, 2023), generated by the synergistic effect of both military (direct hostilities, aggression, occupation, terrorist attacks) and non-military means of influence (diplomatic, informational, economic, financial, trade, or social). The narratives of (in)vulnerability of academic communities are being updated daily with new evidence of educational resistance and resilience in the face of external and internal challenges – universities continue to function under occupation, in conditions of displacement, active hostilities (Spivakovsky et al., 2023), ‘without walls’ (Lopatina et al., 2023), and under the daily threat of shelling and destruction. Reforms in Ukraine’s higher education system, which also offer a variety of crisis decisions to wartime challenges, but require scaling up at the level of individual HEIs, add to the current extremes. More than 10 years of Russian military aggression and three years of large-scale invasion show that it is crucial not only to respond promptly to the daily challenges of wartime but also to have strategic guidelines and plans for the preservation of universities.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Decision-making in management is a process and the result of choices made by managers within their authority. It plays a crucial role in the management of any business and is a critical factor in its success and sustainable development (Zaika & Shaforenko, 2024). Studies of the role of colleges and universities as far back as World War II (Marston, 1954) have shown a sincere desire of educators not only to remain stable but also to ‘serve the nation in time of war with the full force of their institutions.’ Ukrainian universities have faced the extraordinary challenges of occupation, active hostilities, and displacement (Spivakovsky et al., 2023; Tsybuliak et al., 2024) and have often been forced to model and implement crisis decisions (Gladushyna, 2019; Nestulya et al., 2023; Kravchenko et al., 2023) that go to some extent beyond traditional algorithms and prescribed management powers. For universities located in war zones or occupied territories, the general negative background is a significant decline in population and destructive processes of forced migration, including the outflow of young people (Malchykova & Pylypenko, 2023). Additional serious challenges to the ability of displaced universities to organize and maintain core business processes are the loss of material and technical facilities and financial stability, geographical dispersion of the academic community and administrative staff, the difficult security situation, and the lack of a complete physical infrastructure (Spivakovsky et al., 2024).

The general theory of decision-making in crises usually combines the strengths of coping theories (Carver et al., 1989) with decision-mak-

ing research (Hittle & Moustafa Leonard, 2011; Bernhardsdóttir, 2015; Balomenos et al., 2023) to predict the responses that people choose in negative circumstances. In this case, the process of responding to negative events has three main stages (Sweeny, 2008): (a) assessing the severity of the negative event, (b) identifying response options, and (c) evaluating response options. Cosentino et al. (2020) substantiated that urgent decision-making in extreme circumstances is associated with the general preference for intuition or deliberation, cognitive reflection and response to highly conflicted personal moral dilemmas, and sometimes even the use of intuition within the framework of limited rationality and emotional intelligence (Preda & Stan, 2023). Notably, urgent decision-making based on rationality was positively associated with cognitive reflection and a utilitarian way of dealing with highly conflictual personal moral dilemmas. The theoretical basis for crisis management is also formed by Marchau et al. (2019), Balomenos et al. (2023), and Paton et al. (2024). They generally define the sequence of development and implementation of crisis decisions in extreme situations and under the influence of threats of various types and scales, including the directions of the EU’s crisis response to the events in Ukraine after the first stage of Russian aggression (Natorski & Pomorska, 2017).

Decision-making in the military context is a topic that has long been actively discussed through the lens of complex systems theory (D’Alessio et al., 2024a). For almost a decade now, decision support systems based on networked information systems have been tested in general military practice to improve the performance of individual de-

cision-making (Godé & Lebraty, 2013). However, guiding academic teams through a crisis requires completely different strategies and consideration of other factors (Ahmed et al., 2022) and research findings (Hamamcioğlu, 2020; Weaver, 2023) show contradictory results regarding the effective handling of crises by university administrations.

Mylott (2023) identified four main findings related to the phenomenon of university rectors' decision-making strategies in crisis:

- (a) university rectors made decisions in an inclusive and participatory manner, taking responsibility for their choices,
- (b) rector's decision-making can be influenced by a wide group of influential individuals and institutions that need to be recognized and planned for in the decision-making strategy,
- (c) communication was a critical factor in the overall success of the decision-making strategy, and
- (d) evaluation of the outcomes of the decision-making strategy.

These findings, in line with those of Liu et al. (2022) and D'Alessio et al. (2024b), indicate that the psychological, moral, ethical, and value-based qualities of both the leader and team members are of paramount importance. Liebowitz (2021) emphasizes that best practices in crisis communication have a threefold purpose: to build, maintain, or restore trust, to inform stakeholders about the risks, and to reach an agreement on how to manage and control the risk. Different objectives, audiences, and media require different communication strategies and practical tools, but the authors propose a universal approach based on seven pillars. This approach is also useful for crisis communication in times of war.

In general, university governance is capable of adapting to the needs of the moment (Tinterri et al., 2023), so governance norms and policies should be evaluated in the context of historical events, as confirmed by the case studies of Bowen and Tobin (2015). In this sense, the content, focus, and value orientations of crisis management

of higher education institutions and strategies for responding to crisis situations, which sometimes go beyond the limits of autonomy and authority, are of paramount importance. The most successful approach is a rational combination of different types of decisions in crisis management. This approach is aptly described by the term 'cautious risk-taking' (Edelson, 2009).

The analysis has shown that the scientific discourse on the problems of crisis management of academic communities in the context of ongoing military conflicts is rather limited. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to assess the implementation of crisis management decisions and the formation of a crisis response strategy for a university in wartime (on the example of Kherson State University (KSU)).

2. METHODS

The study was conducted using online information collection tools, thematic analysis, case study, and statistical methods, as well as a personal reflection on the authors' administrative experience of working in the context of active hostilities, occupation, and displacement. The case study was identified as the most applicable qualitative research method, which enables an integrated situation assessment in the actual context. The case study type, such as an intrinsic case study, provided an in-depth analysis of KSU's crisis management practices, systematized the challenges faced by the academic community in wartime, and assessed the effectiveness of crisis management decisions and the university's crisis response strategy. The thematic analysis identified the research's main strategy and enabled the interpretation of transformations in the crisis response strategy, the modeling of effective management actions, and the identification of the principles of a successful crisis response strategy that helps ensure informed decision-making in extraordinary wartime period.

The study is based on the materials of discussion platforms of administrative staff and collegial bodies of the university in wartime (Academic Council, staff conference, Scientific and Methodological Council) from March 2022 to December 2024, as well as on open data on the

university's activities, which are publicly available on the KSU website and in the annual reports of the rector. In the process of developing crisis decisions, the university's academic community was surveyed in January–February 2023. The sample reliably represents it, covering 150 employees (20.4% of all KSU employees at their main place of work) and 664 students (21.2% of the total number of students). Among them, 518 students of bachelor's, 110 master's, and 36 research degrees took part in the survey; the share of full-time students was 79.1% and part-time/evening students constituted 20.9%. The questionnaire survey of students aimed to determine the priority areas for improving the university's activities in the eyes of the students. The survey of first-year students (137 respondents) included a questionnaire to assess the attractiveness of KSU for entrants and whether the organization of education matches their expectations. The survey of upper-year students also assessed their satisfaction with the organization of the educational process and communication with academic staff.

Among the 150 employees surveyed, the majority were academic staff (64%), followed by representatives of the university's management (20.7%) and employees of the university's administrative units and faculty administration (12%). The staff questionnaires aimed to identify the tasks that are priorities for the development of KSU for the next five years. The open-response questions focused on analyzing the key challenges to ensure the stable operation of the university, faculties, and departments. The results of the surveys were used as the basis for designing the Development Strategy of Kherson State University for 2023–2027. The analysis of the performance of university teachers in the context of the balance of generations was carried out on the basis of the ratio of five age groups of research and teaching staff of Kherson State University and the results of their individual ranking assessment for 2023.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

KSU was founded in 1917 on the base of a displaced during the First World War Yuriivskiy institute for teachers, and passed through multiple reorganizations over its more than 100 years

of functioning. Before the war, Kherson State University functioned as a classical institution with multiple educational fields, providing education on different specialties and educational programs (more than 120) for undergraduates, graduates, and postgraduates (Spivakovsky et al., 2023). University's functioning in the conditions of martial law since 2022 has been characterized by several transformations. On February 24, 2022, at the beginning of the full-scale invasion, the educational process at KSU was temporarily interrupted, and most of the academic and non-academic staff were transferred to distance work. From March 28 to June 14, 2022, the university saw a period of total renewal of the educational process in the distance format. Since April 20, 2022, the KSU administration office was temporarily relocated to Vasyl Stefanyk Precarpathian National University in Ivano-Frankivsk. From June 14 to November 11, 2022, the university premises in Kherson were occupied by Russians, and university staff had no more physical access to its infrastructure. Except for the period of university premises occupation, KSU continued to function in the 'two offices' format during the martial law years – in Ivano-Frankivsk and Kherson. Unfortunately, since November 11, 2022, till the present time, despite the de-occupation, Kherson faces regular attacks and destruction and remains a zone of active hostilities. Therefore, KSU's return is temporarily impossible. In addition, over the recent two years, a number of KSU premises have been damaged or destroyed by shelling and missile hits.

3.1. Crisis decisions and crisis management practices: New contexts of wartime

Taking into account the experience of KSU in the context of a large-scale invasion and existing crisis management practices, the key contexts of the decision-making and perception process in the conditions are moral and psychological contexts and ways of responding to crisis situations, target and outcome contexts, management and administrative contexts (including innovation and riskiness of management and administrative actions).

Moral and psychological contexts are defined through the values and communication dimensions. KSU's experience has confirmed the fol-

lowing universal shared values of crisis management: (1) to adhere to accuracy, transparency, and accountability; (2) to promote constructive dialogue; (3) to prioritize security; (4) to uphold truth, justice, and equality; and (5) to adhere to an ethic of care. At the same time, the analysis of management actions in 2022–2024 suggests that an effective ‘leadership and administrative chain’ can ‘transform’ extreme wartime challenges into tools of resilience, resistance, and further growth, but only if effective crisis communication, coordination, and cooperation are established in situational awareness and decision-making. These findings are consistent with Gladushyna (2019), developing the idea of the key role of strong leadership and the political and cultural preferences of people in the effectiveness of crisis decisions.

Target and outcome contexts determine the long-term perspective and specific outcomes at each stage of crisis management. The primary goal in wartime is always the safety and well-being of the academic community. However, while the long-term goal is the development (progress) of the university, crisis management is also designed to inspire hope and resilience in the face of uncertainty and loss. These goals are united by a common thread – preserving human capital not only of the university but also of the city, region, and Ukraine. In fact, the wartime crisis is shaping a new model of academic life – development and progress through educational resilience and resistance.

Administrative and management contexts are also worth noting. Based on the experience of KSU’s crisis management in the context of war, occupation, and displacement, crisis decisions were usually situational and adaptive. However, they were based on the university’s systemic long-term strategies formed in the pre-war period. According to the hierarchical levels of decision-making, crisis decisions ranged from the individual level (e.g., decisions on volunteering, continuing studies/work) to the collective level (decisions of departments, faculties, and divisions on adapting curricula, distributing workloads, providing support to staff/students in difficult life conditions). They also encompassed institutional (in particular, strategic decisions

on relocating the university, operating a volunteer center, or cooperating with international and non-governmental organizations) and the international level (decisions on the development of a new university in the region). Even at the international level, various organizations and international associations (USAID, EU) have facilitated certain national and institutional processes through financial, humanitarian, and technical assistance and programs to support higher education in countries affected by armed conflicts.

However, innovative decisions using new approaches, technologies, and tools (for example, the launch of the KSU24 administrative platform and the continuous expansion of its services) and asynchronous non-standard decisions that do not follow the expected logic of events have shown the greatest practical value in the context of wartime crisis response. A separate type of asynchronous decisions under martial law was a number of decisions that were actually made beyond the experience of all members of the academic community, including risky decisions by students and staff to leave the occupation without humanitarian corridors, administrative decisions on the handling of personal files of students and staff, etc. These decisions are formed in response to new challenges and threats and within the limits of university autonomy and internal will, as well as a willingness to act according to personal and common principles in the absence of existing national and sectoral documents and recommendations.

The key to effective crisis response is a rational combination of different types of decisions in wartime crisis management. It includes support and modification of the system of institutional response to current challenges, as well as ‘cautious risk-taking’ described by Edelson (2009), situational and asynchronous decisions. Such decisions are actually *ultra vires* (‘beyond the powers’) of experience outside the functional responsibilities of the administration and academic community of universities. Such an approach to management decision-making can become a new benchmark for crisis management and a natural, justified way of sustainable functioning and development of universities.

3.2. Extreme wartime conditions: Horizon of challenges and hardened optimism

The extraordinary challenges of the large-scale stage of the Russian-Ukrainian war test the resilience and capacity of all higher education institutions. However, their impact varies depending on the location of the institution, the degree of damage to infrastructure, internal readiness for change and resistance of the academic community, external support and solidarity initiatives, as well as the crisis response strategy developed and implemented by the institution. The discussion of the crisis response to wartime challenges of institutions that could continue to operate at their location (Nestulya et al., 2023) emphasizes the internal capabilities of an educational institution to overcome the negative

impact of an aggressive external environment, even with strong partner support and solidarity initiatives. A systematic study of KSU’s experience of crisis response in 2022–2024 raises the question not only of resistance and resilience but also of the internal potential for progressive development, even in the face of war and displacement.

The basis for a systematic institutional response to current challenges at KSU was formed before the war. Support and modification of these decisions became the basis of wartime crisis response. During the years of martial law, numerous crisis decisions were developed and implemented, which not only became effective tools for solving problems but also reflected changes in the type of the university’s overall strategy (from survival to stabilization and growth).

Table 1. SWOT analysis of Kherson State University during martial law

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • KSU’s leading ranking positions • Continuity of quality distance education process • Adherence to academic integrity and transparency of the educational process • Strong scientific potential and an effective system of motivation of scientists • Intensification of international cooperation and academic solidarity • Free access to international educational platforms • Availability of own digital educational, scientific, and administrative platforms (IAS, KSU24, KSU-online) • Stable state funding • Professional and motivated management team • Developed internal regulatory framework and system of sustainability measures • Effective system of student self-government and communications 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High level of psycho-emotional trauma of staff and students • Limited access to resources that could significantly improve the level of teaching and learning • Partially destroyed technical base of the university and faculties • Disruption of stable communication with students and staff, especially those in the temporarily occupied territories • Insufficient international mobility of academic staff and students • Insufficient digital literacy and insufficient level of English language proficiency of academic staff • Insufficient regulatory support and limited financial opportunities for the participation of external stakeholders in ensuring the quality of education at the HEI level
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creation of a powerful educational center in the South of Ukraine • Preserving and strengthening image indicators and positions in the educational, scientific, and information space • Expanding the system of partnerships with universities of the world and domestic scientific and educational space • Accelerated digitalization of all business processes and improvement of digital competences • Implementation of the model ‘KSU is an innovative university with modern digital technologies’ • Additional funding and support for infrastructure, educational, and research projects • Finding its own place in the Ukrainian education market, in particular through the development of unique non-formal education offers • Involvement of foreign guest lecturers • Professional development of academic staff and other university employees • Accelerated learning of English 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Military and political situation in Kherson and Southern Ukraine • Loss of student numbers • Loss of identity/recognition in the Kherson region due to prolonged relocation to another region • Decrease in the quality of training in some educational programs • Territorial dispersion and disruption of communication between students and staff (especially from the temporarily occupied territory) • Loss of authentic corporate culture • Loss of rated (leading) academic staff • Deterioration of the psycho-emotional state of academic staff and students • Uneven workload of the academic staff and non-academic staff • Reforming/reducing/merging regional universities • Limited academic mobility

To develop crisis decisions, the most effective practical case study for analyzing the university's activities was the SWOT analysis (Table 1), which allowed to summarize the existing challenges and form a management horizon even in wartime uncertainty.

The results of the SWOT analysis were the starting point for drafting numerous crisis decisions, as they provided a comprehensive insight into KSU's functioning in wartime. They were also used when designing the KSU development Strategy for 2023–2027.

During the three years of the full-scale war, the KSU academic community gradually moved from a resistance strategy in 2022 (which was the first situational response to the large-scale invasion and occupation) to a strategy of resilience (2023) and further development (2024) in the new conditions in the following period. Table 2 summarizes the transformation and examples of effective and efficient crisis management decisions in the institutional, image, management, and administrative spheres of KSU.

Among the institutional crisis decisions summarized in Table 2, the best example of a systemic crisis response can be considered the designing of the Development Strategy of KSU for 2023–2027. The starting point was the collection and regular monitoring of information, the analysis of which, together with the SWOT analysis of the university's activities, allowed the university to understand the scale and dimensions of the crisis, its current and potential impact, and the resources available to address it. The desire for the preservation and well-being of the academic community and further progress in educational and research indicators were taken into account through the value orientations and key development priorities identified through surveys of all members of the academic community.

Thus, according to the results of the survey of university employees, the priority goals for the next five years should be (%):

- university leadership based on high-quality education (64),

Table 2. Crisis decision-making in the institutional, image, and management spheres in wartime

Field of activity	2022: Resistance strategy	2023: Sustainability strategy	2024: Progressive development strategy
Institutional and image sphere	The University's Academic Council made a unanimous public decision on Feb 28, 2022, to condemn Russian military aggression. Deprivation of honorary titles of KSU to persons who supported Russian aggression and the work of the Commission to identify the facts of collaboration activities.	Designing a new Development Strategy for 2023–2027 and four functional strategies (human resources, communication, digitalization, and internationalization strategies).	Implementing the Open Science Policy at the university. Implementing the Gender Equality Plan at the university.
Management and Administration	The university's displacement from the occupied territory to the territory controlled by Ukraine based on the decision of the Staff Conference, and the functioning of two offices in Kherson and Ivano-Frankivsk. Changing the focus of the Volunteer Centre's activities.	Updating educational programs and educational content with the priority of supporting national resilience, strengthening Ukraine's defense, and shaping the values of a free democratic society. Scaling-up the activities and expand coverage of the University's Volunteer Centre.	Establishing educational and professional hubs at the University in partnership with international organizations and institutions. Opening a Career Centre.
	Changing the university administration's responsibilities and job functions to overcome staff shortages.	Launching systematic (twice a year) professional training for faculty and staff within the University School of Professional Development.	Implementing the basic package of key performance indicators (KPIs) for faculty deans and update the KPIs for academic staff.
	Launching a systematic monitoring of the location of the students and academic and non-academic staff.	Launching an automated system for monitoring the educational process, students' attendance in classes, and recording lectures, practical classes, and other educational content.	Creating an analytical system for monitoring education quality assurance. Developing innovative educational start-ups (e.g., identification of virtual audiences).

- expansion of international contacts and cooperation (59.3),
- improvement of the material and technical base (52),
- leadership on the basis of scientific creative work (47.3),
- university funding from various sources (42).

Among the main factors of successful implementation of the new Strategy, university staff noted (%):

- end of the war and return to peaceful life (56.7),
- the speed of the university’s recovery from the destruction (46.7),
- professional development of the HEPP and other university employees (40.7),
- time needed to improve the material and technical base of the university (35.3).

The results of the survey of higher education students showed that the priority areas for improvement include facilitating student contact with potential employers (35% of respondents), psychological support for students (29%), financial support for students (28.2%), organization of education (27.4%), teaching methods (24.8%), development of international relations and study programs for students abroad (23.2%).

In 2024, a number of relevant decisions have already been implemented to take into account the opinion of the academic community. The crisis response of 2022 and the Strategy developed in early 2023 created a strong basis for crisis management in the academic sphere, including the introduction of innovative decisions for the digital transformation of all university business processes (Table 3).

The key challenge for KSU and all universities under occupation and active hostilities was maintaining its resource base and financial stability under martial law. Table 4 presents examples of successful crisis management decisions in this area.

Table 3. Crisis management decisions for digital transformation and educational process implementation during martial law

Field of activity	2022: Resistance strategy	2023: Sustainability strategy	2024: Progressive development strategy
Digitalization and innovation	Transforming the university business process management system based on digital technologies and digitization of the documents’ flow.	Launching the university e-service, KSU24.	Launching the Laboratory for creating and managing video content.
	Assigning the responsibilities of assistant deans for digitalization with an additional one position per faculty.	Implementing the General policies of using artificial intelligence in learning, teaching, and research at KSU.	Developing and legalizing the Concept of Implementing AI-powered Personal Teaching Assistant.
	Enhancing and transforming internal communication systems to ensure effective working and crisis communication of the academic community based on well-known social networks.	Integrating some components of KSU24 and national portal, Diia, (e.g., signing of education contracts by overlaying the electronic signature in KSU24 using the service Diia.Pidpys).	Implementing an updated corporate communication model based on own digital platforms to ensure personal data protection.
Educational process	Resumption of the educational process from March 28, 2022, in a distance format with the priority of a safe educational environment.	Implementing the educational process in a hybrid format: distance learning classes and practical training at the students’ place of location.	Organizing the educational process in the distance (synchronous and asynchronous) and full-time format (launching of full-time weeks with classes at the place of university relocation).
	Developing electronic version of educational documentation and improvement of educational resources on the KSUonline.	Approving the Concept for the Development of Teaching, Learning, and Using English at the University.	Legalizing the usage of training courses from global and Ukrainian educational platforms and recognition of learning outcomes.

Table 4. Crisis management decisions to preserve the resource base and financial stability during martial law

Field of activity	2022: Resistance strategy	2023: Sustainability strategy	2024: Progressive development strategy
Technical resources and financial management	Relocating the university's main resources (human, financial, documentary, digital – more than 8 TB of data), creating digital archives of documents, and ensuring the functioning of the university's cloud spaces.	Moving (evacuation) of valuables, research equipment, and the university's documentary base (archival and personnel documents) to the relocation site.	Restoring and enhancing the research infrastructure, arrangement of educational classes and enlarging their number at the relocation site.
	Adapting the university's financial model and budget to wartime conditions to ensure timely and complete payments to employees and students.	Implementing the funding distribution model between the faculties with the base and strategic funding according to collective and individual achievement.	Founding the University Endowment Fund. Implementing the Fundraising Policy and establishment of the Fundraising Department.
International activities	Engaging international investments for socio-humanitarian support of the academic community and development of the university's educational, scientific, and technical facilities.	Assigning the responsibilities of assistant deans for international affairs with an additional 0.5 position per faculty.	Diversifying project activities at the personal and team level. Including specialized disciplines in English among the curriculum components (at least one discipline per year in English).

The university administration focused on viewing the existing wartime challenges as opportunities to ensure resilience, resistance, and further growth for the KSU academic community. The most successful practices in this area include scaling up the national approach of formula funding at the university between faculties based on the

- motivation principle: stimulating the activities of academic staff in order to improve the quality of the educational process and research activities and increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the functioning of departments and faculties;
- the principle of subvention: redistribution of funding to faculties, taking into account the results of institutional ranking;

- the principle of balance: taking into account the support of all relevant business processes at the faculties aimed at improving the quality of educational services;
- principle of diversification: expanding the scope of activities of the faculties to increase funding sources.

The distribution of funding, even in wartime, provides for sustainable (basic) funding and strategic funding, which allows to consider and stimulate achievements in scientific and international activities to meet the needs of strategically defined priority areas of the university, i.e., digitalization or internationalization.

Another successful practice includes systematically rating academic staff, departments, and facul-

Table 5. Financial incentives by the results of scientific activity from the strategic funding reserve (2022/2023 and 2023/2024 academic years)

Type of ranking	Leadership positions according to the ranking assessment results	Additional funding
Personal ranking of academic staff	Top third of the TOP-10% of academic staff according to the personal ranking	0.5 position per person
	The second third part of the TOP-10% of academic staff, according to the personal ranking	0.3 position per person
	The last third part of the TOP-10% of academic staff, according to the personal ranking	0.15 position per person
Ranking of departments, ranking of faculties	1st position	0.3 position per department/faculty
	2nd position	0.25 position per department/faculty
	3rd position	0.2 position per department/faculty

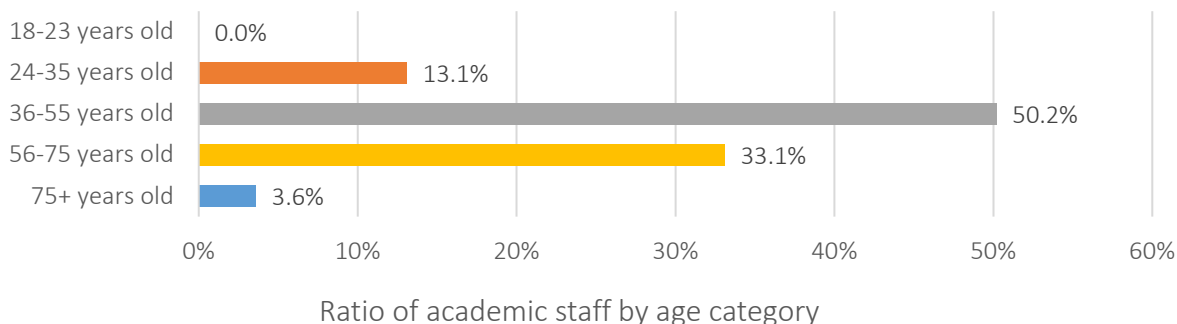


Figure 1. Generational balance of Kherson State University (2023)

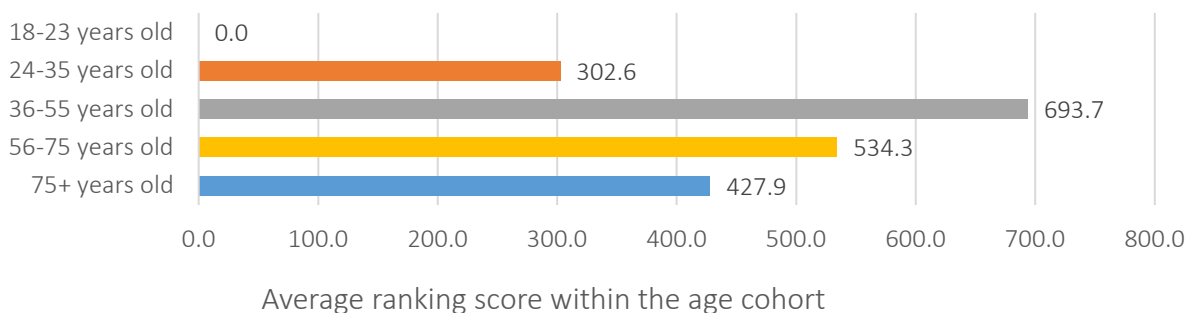


Figure 2. Generation balance of Kherson State University’s academic staff and the results of the ranking assessment (2023)

ties (starting in 2020) to stimulate the professional growth of scientists by allocating additional rates (Table 5).

In order to predict further changes in the scientific potential based on the indicators of individual rating assessment, the performance of KSU teachers in the context of the balance of generations. Several years of observations make it possible to note that the systemic incentives introduced at the university and its preservation, even under martial law, allowed one to maintain an organic ratio of generations of academic staff, where the majority are teachers aged 36 to 55 (Figure 1) and promote the efficiency and effectiveness of scientists (Figure 2).

Third, the digitalization of university business processes was a priority. In particular, the adaptation and modification of the services of the KSU24 administrative platform to ensure integration with the Diia.Pidpys service, as well as the improvement of educational resources on KSU’s online platform.

Fourth, the introduction of the institute of assistant deans for digitalization (2022) with an ad-

ditional 1.0 position for each faculty for strategic financing and assistant deans for international work with an additional 0.5 position for each faculty (2023) provided quality support for the accelerated digitalization of KSU business processes and ensured systematic work on internationalization and international partnership as priority areas of the university’s strategic development.

Finally, continuation of the system of planning and achievement of key performance indicators for all categories of academic staff (assistant, lecturer, senior lecturer, associate professor, professor, head of department, dean, vice-rector, first vice-rector) was introduced in 2020. In particular, the contracts of academic staff include the following: key performance indicators; actual indicators as of the date of appointment; planned indicators to be achieved by the candidate for the relevant position in case of signing the contract; mechanisms for verifying the achievement of such targets; and timeframes for achieving such targets. When considering the cases of academic staff for vacant positions, the Competition Commission determines the next term of office, on the one hand, taking into account the results of achieving key perfor-

mance indicators for the previous period, and on the other hand, based on the planned performance indicators for the next period.

Thanks to this strategic crisis response, in 2022–2024, the university not only maintained its ranking positions in national and international rankings at the institutional level but also significantly improved them. In particular, in the consolidated ranking of Ukrainian higher education institutions, KSU improved its position by 7 points in 2022 (from 77th to 70th place) and by 20 points in 2023 (from 70th to 50th place). During the years of full-scale war, the university has also systematically improved its position in the Scopus ranking over three years, from 94th (2021) to 51st place (2024). The implemented crisis decisions, accelerated digitalization and transformation of business processes, collective development, and implementation of crisis response strategies and practices have allowed the university to demonstrate progress in most areas of its activities. Moreover, it also preserved the spatial and territorial identity of the academic community (93% of academic staff as of November 2024 are residents of Kherson and Kherson region, 7% are from other regions of Ukraine). This is vital for the sustainability of the academic community and the future resumption of the university in Kherson.

3.3. Management actions and principles of forming a wartime crisis response strategy

KSU was forced to make not only complex crisis decisions in the face of limited internal information and external coordination but also to overcome complex ethical dilemmas and inspire hope and resilience in the face of uncertainty and losses. This study suggests that crisis decisions, even in the same sphere of activity, evolved during martial law, and the transition to the next crisis response strategy was ensured by adhering to the principles of flexibility and scalability in decision-making. The dynamic framework of crisis management is demonstrated by existing research during the pandemic crisis (Paton et al., 2024). However, the results also suggest the key role of adherence to values and taking into account the ethical implications of crisis decisions, in line with the findings of Liu et al. (2022) and Preda and Stan (2023).

Based on the assessment of KSU's crisis response from 2022 to 2024, an algorithm for the most effective management actions of the university management in crisis situations can be formed (Figure 3). The proposed sequence of decision-making helps to make informed choices that prioritize the welfare of the university and its academic community. The decisions formed using this approach can be situational and systemic, but the most important are the management approaches to their formation and implementation:

1. Identifying the key priorities for the current phase, such as protecting human life, ensuring the greatest possible safety for the academic community, or maintaining essential services. Determining which decisions and resources can be adapted and modified to the current crisis. Focusing on determined key areas and considering adopting compromises to achieve them.
2. Thinking about the ethical implications. Every decision must be carefully considered for possible impacts on diverse actors. Analyzing the feedback from stakeholders, primarily students, employees, and the community. Ensuring fair and just decisions and upholding the values of the academic community.
3. Striving to maintain a culture of academic communication to offer a sense of inclusion and belonging. Social media and online communications are effective crisis communication and support strategies.
4. Making decisions clearly, transparently, and openly, and share information among relevant actors. Avoiding hiding the truth or understating risks that could undermine confidence and exacerbate the challenges of war.
5. Adapting and evolving. As crises can be fast-developing and unforeseeable, one should be ready to adjust strategies following the new normal. Remaining flexible, asking for feedback, and being ready to modify the university's business processes if necessary.

Reflecting on the findings, one should take into account the unique context of KSU's functioning

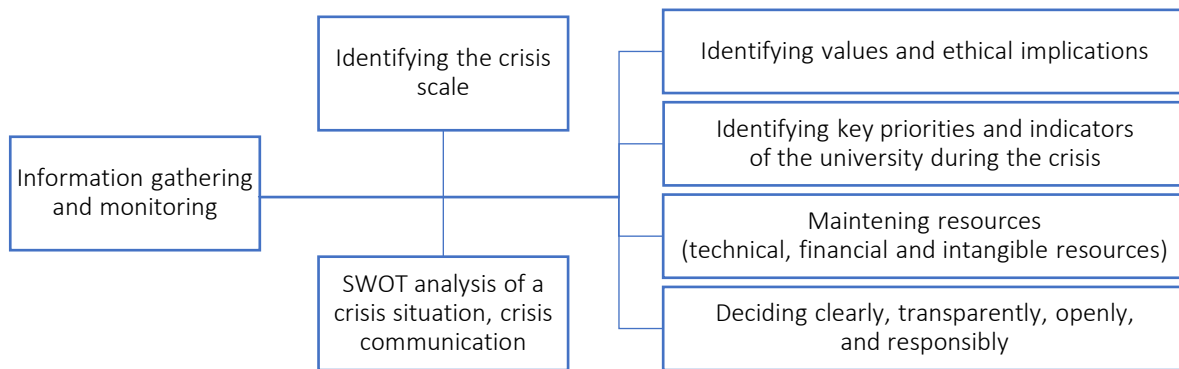


Figure 3. Management actions of the university in crises

during the martial law (occupation, displacement, and experience of working in the two-office format, ongoing work at the place of relocation even after the de-occupation of Kherson caused by active hostilities). Therefore, the findings may not represent the diversity of cases when universities operate during martial law. Moreover, this analysis highlights the reflection of the top management from one university. Accordingly, the experience of KSU is demonstrated through the lens of the author’s analytical

interpretations. However, scaling up and adapting the presented experience of crisis management can help managers and staff of higher education institutions overcome large-scale and unprecedented wartime crises in the context of the ongoing war. Since it outlines the logical sequence of macroeconomic decision-making, the proposed algorithm of actions and management approaches guide the administration on the most important “how,” “why,” and “for whom” of crisis response.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to assess the implementation of crisis management decisions and the formation of a crisis response strategy for a university in wartime (on the example of Kherson State University). The case of the university’s functioning during the war shows that even during active hostilities, occupation, and temporary displacement, the academic community can not only continue to implement the main functions of the university and ensure business processes but also preserve its identity and demonstrate progress in key areas of activity.

The generalization and analysis of the crisis decisions of 2022–2024 in all areas of the university’s activity shows that the academic community of the university gradually moved from a strategy of resistance in 2022 as the first situational response to the large-scale invasion and occupation to a strategy of resilience and resumption of progressive development in the following period. The components of ensuring such a strategic transition and effective crisis management of the university have been identified.

The first is the willingness to act in wartime ‘beyond the powers’ (*ultra vires*) and functional responsibilities of the administration and the university academic community, without clear national and sectoral documents and recommendations, on the basis of internal will, in accordance with personal and common principles.

The second is adherence to the following principles in decision-making: flexibility as the ability to adapt the existing strategy to meet external and internal challenges; value orientation as the ability to make honest and fair crisis decisions in a clear and transparent manner, taking into account ethical implications; and scaling up as the ability to expand and reduce efforts in certain areas based on situational requirements.

The third is the formation of management actions according to an algorithm that promotes a common understanding of the priorities of crisis management among participants and its ethical implications, development of the most effective crisis decisions based on a comprehensive analysis of the crisis situation, support for a culture of academic communication, and ensuring that each member of the academic community feels included, belongs, and is protected, despite the challenges and losses of wartime.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

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