SOCIAL AND CULTURAL ASPECTS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

EDUCATION UNDER CONFLICT: CRISIS MANAGEMENT AT DISPLACED UNIVERSITIES IN UKRAINE

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ABSTRACT

The study deals with the retrospective investigation of the predominant factors that influenced the performance of displaced universities from Eastern Ukraine under the armed conflict. The research also sought to examine the goals and strategies pertinent to university management teams at different stages of crisis and in different dimensions. To achieve this, questionnaire was chosen as a research instrument to collect data that was further analysed and grouped into overarching themes. Based on the research results, the study provides recommendations for multiple stakeholder groups on enhancing the crisis management techniques at higher education institutions in Ukraine, in particular at displaced universities. Moreover, the paper suggests further directions in researching the crisis management in Ukrainian higher education in order to improve the preparedness of universities to emergency and crisis situations as well as to boost the effectiveness of management planning, decision-making and implementation processes.

Key words: crisis management, higher education, displaced universities, leadership, organizational identification, crisis communication

INTRODUCTION

Viability and success of an organization largely depend on its ability to adapt to externalities and take adequate responsive measures to deal with major events, which threaten an organization itself, or its stakeholders. This has become a common practice for any kind of organizations to regularly identify, assess, prioritize risks and introduce effective plans, which are designed to indicate the most optimal way to respond, manage crises and recover with minimal damage.

Universities, as any other organizations, face numerous challenges in their day-to-day operations and activities, and therefore, have to elaborate convenient strategies to overcome difficulties and maintain stability. However, what happens to higher education institutions (HEIs) when they become involved in crisis and emergencies? Obviously, in such critical context common recommendations for successful performance may fail since institutions require specific approaches to mitigate the impact of the crisis and continue to fulfil their three core missions: teaching, research, and societal engagement. From this perspective, three missions of a university have to be adapted to a new hostile environment in order to deal with uncertainties through modifying university's vision, goals, and services.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

In 2014, Ukraine witnessed an armed conflict in its Eastern part, which changed fundamentally the overall situation in the country. There were different factors, which contributed for escalating this unprecedented armed conflict: the region has a complex structure in terms of socio-economic, political and cultural aspects, infrastructural peculiarities, language and religious issues. Eastern Ukrainian area, also called Donbas region, is distinguished by its complicated historical path and diversified ethnic composition where various cultures and traditions are closely intertwined.

Unfortunately, the recent events in Ukraine led to vulnerable status of universities in the East of Ukraine and urged them to flee from the conflict zone, acquiring a new status of a displaced university. Identity challenges have been raised sharply almost at all displaced universities because of political and cultural clashes among the institutional staff and authorities.

It should be noted that most top managers of Eastern Ukrainian universities adhere to the Ukrainian integrity, and therefore, encouraged their employees to continue working in the university but on the territory controlled by Ukrainians. Certain universities had a main campus in Luhansk or Donetsk and possessed branch campuses in other cities/regions. For some branch campuses, the evacuation process was alleviated by having real property and infrastructural facilities in the branch campuses. Unfortunately, some universities either did not have branch campuses or their branch campuses were in the war zone, then they had to move to a new place seeking support from the government to provide them with premises and technical assistance. This is the instance of Donetsk National

University that moved to Vinnytsia, a city in central Ukraine. According to the data of the Coordinating Centre of Displaced Universities, Donetsk National University lost almost 10 000 students and 500 academics after evacuation, but it was ranked as the second-best college in central Ukraine in 2016 (EuroMaidan Press, 2017) which shows a great potential of a displaced university.

Despite the uncertainty of the situation, the common aspiration of all displaced universities is that the armed conflicted will be over, and they could return to their main campuses and hometowns. In this regard, the government has issued a number of regulations that recognize and support displaced universities by involving them in grant programmes and initiatives in cooperation with international community. The Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine (MoES) that oversees evacuated universities also emphasizes that these universities present an opportunity for Ukraine to advance (Grynevich, 2017) and to improve distance learning in higher education as all displaced universities moved to online and blended delivery mode.

Eastern Ukraine has a complex structure in terms of socio-economic, political and cultural aspects, which threaten the effectiveness and stability of university governance in the region. Accordingly, there is an urgent need to reconsider and assess the university leadership strategies and elaborate techniques to face the emerging challenges, which might transform into critical situations for HEIs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A range of Ukrainian dissertations were dedicated to the issues of effective management of the higher education at national, regional and institutional levels and provided recommendations towards the improvement of the quality and efficiency of higher education system in the country (e.g., Andreichuk, 2007; Pshenychna, 2009; Nikolaenko, 2009).

The article "Transforming University Governance in Ukraine: Collegiums, Bureaucracies, and Political Institutions" published by Ararat L. Osipian (2014) demonstrates classification, typology, and portrayal of the higher education landscape in Ukraine, and analyses interdependence between state and universities. Osipian also perceives higher education institutions in Ukraine as collegiums and bureaucracies, suggesting the university political system as a viable form of organizational structure for the task of reforming universities.

However, the events happened in Eastern Ukraine in 2014 changed significantly political and socio-cultural landscape of Ukraine, including the university environment. Military unrest, a huge number of internally displaced people, crash of industrial companies in Luhansk and Donetsk regions had a great impact on higher education and led to fragile situation in terms of university functioning, student enrolment, staff participation and financing. The government and academic community paid attention to the situation at hand, and thus, the special report "Policy of Integration of Ukrainian Society in the Context of Challenges and Threats of Donbas Events" (Libanova et al., 2015) was prepared. The publication observes the causes, which provoked the tragedy in Donbas, namely historical background

of formation of socio-cultural phenomenon in Donbas as well as contemporary characteristics of the region. Migration and demographical deprivation along with decreased quality of living and deficient infrastructure of evacuated universities are described in the report. In this regard, the National Academy of Science of Ukraine emphasizes that recent events in Donbas create substantial threats for socio-economic development of Ukraine but at the same time, they bring opportunities to build a crucially new country marked with modern economy and well-formed civil society. Hence, the report suggests approaches to restore economic, social and technological sectors in Eastern Ukraine taking into consideration the higher education policy and its role in mitigating crises.

"Restoration of Donbas: Evaluation of Socio-Economic Loss and Priority Trends of State Policy" (National Academy of Science of Ukraine, 2015) constitutes another important collective report which presents research on socio-economic background of Donbas in pre-conflict time and diagnosis of socio-economic damages as a result of military actions. Authors of the report stress upon economic and legal mechanisms of restoration of Donbas in accordance with the requirements of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement.

METHODOLOGY

The main research question guides the study: what were the predominant factors that influenced the performance of Ukrainian displaced universities in crisis management. The limited up-to-date findings on university decision-making during the crisis period led to the selection of qualitative approaches in investigating the research questions. Qualitative methods were used also because of the goal to find out details of the crisis management processes at institutional level through the lens of top managers at displaced universities in Eastern Ukraine.

The first methodological step of the present study was conducting a desk research with a view to gather and analyse the information on the crisis management performance of Ukrainian displaced universities, available in print or on the Internet. The landscape analysis was done in order to diagnose the environment in which universities operate in Eastern Ukraine and to determine drivers for crisis management through document review (university official web sites and available institutional documentation, national policy agenda and regulations).

Based on the literature review, the key areas of university functioning under crisis were identified, and the comprehensive framework (Gladushyna, 2017) was applied to the survey instrument in order to evaluate the overall performance of displaced universities.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Two Ukrainian displaced universities participated in the study and their names were changed for confidential reasons. These universities are presented as Luhansk Displaced University (LDU) and Donetsk Displaced University (DDU) in the study.

The findings showed that the participating universities identified the first threats of the upcoming crisis and took certain decision to mitigate the impact of the potential crisis on staff and students. Thus, DDU shortened the study period and allowed students to pass the examination session before the crisis escalation. However, both universities failed to pay adequate attention to the safety policy of their employees who were forced to continue working in the admission commission under unsafe conditions. Safety should be the priority of crisis management according to Booth (2015), and therefore the responsibility of the university authorities was to ensure the secure working conditions for their staff, which was not accomplished.

In case of LDU, the institutional model of management was more reactive than proactive as the decisions on tackling the crisis were occurring almost simultaneously with the intervention. Although LDU did not state its official positions regarding the political contestation before the crisis, later on the rector openly declared his pro-Ukrainian stance, accepted responsibility for crisis leadership, managed to preserve the institutional identity and consolidated people after the displacement. On the contrary, the major challenge for DDU became the crisis identity as the leadership supported an opposition, and the initiative of relocation had to be taken by the clandestine group. This example proves the paramount role of leadership in crisis management that was also emphasized by Tafra-Vlahović (2013) who asserted that leaders are the symbol of their organizations in the times of crisis. The case of DDU reinforces the concepts of society identity perception and organizational identification (He & Brown, 2013) being the driving force for motivating employees to engage in extra-role performance.

The drawback in crisis management that was pertinent to LDU refers to the ineffective crisis communication strategies. The absence of appropriate internal and external communications led to chaotic situation among key stakeholders, when students and staff were confused, as they did not know whether the university would start operating in the new academic year. Without proper delivery of message on the university's plans and perspectives in crisis, LDU was perceived as inept institution and this threw students and employees into dilemma whether they should change the working/studying place and start looking for alternative options or wait till the leadership would announce the future strategies regarding university functioning. The results of the research appear to corroborate the observation made by Bernstein (2016) who pointed out that poor communication during the crisis period result in extended, in some cases dramatically, length of time to recover the organization. Furthermore, the inadequate communication under crisis circumstances affects in a negative way the reputation of a university, and both LDU and DDU had to put efforts in renewing the contacts with partner organizations. Taking into consideration that universities were dependent to a certain extent on the technical and financial assistance of international organizations, the delay in restoring the linkages with partners exacerbated the financial challenges the university experienced after the crisis breakout.

The pre-crisis and post-crisis funding schemes of two universities underwent changes, and in both cases, the most serious problem was the loss of students

and consequently fall in profits generated from tuition fees. Moreover, in the highly centralized higher education system as the Ukrainian one, the dependence of HEIs on state appropriations is pivotal, and therefore the university crisis management in the financial area are largely contingent on the decisions made at governmental level. Such long-standing tradition of relying financially on the state budget restricted the capacity of displaced universities to find solutions beyond the governmental support. Nevertheless, Schneller (2010) suggests that crisis has the potential to prompt at-risk university to diversify their revenue sources. Therefore, displaced universities should analyse the best practices of university fundraising activities worldwide as well as to examine their own internal and external environment in order to understand institutional weaknesses, strengths and opportunities in terms of increasing profits and rebuild the effective learning and work climate at universities.

The protracted armed conflict brought tremendous challenges for displaced DDU and LDU, including the loss of the infrastructure capacity. Both universities stated that the available dormitories are not sufficient to accommodate all staff and students who need support as well as there is lack of proper learning facilities to conduct lectures and seminars. However, LDU moved to its branch campus that had already buildings and solid resources for academic purposes, and it was one of the major success factors that enabled LDU to start the campaign of attracting students and staff to move to the new city where the displaced university was located. Having the resources of the branch campus also empowered LDU to promptly set up the Open and Distance Learning Centre, with the help of which blended learning model was implemented and allowed students and staff to benefit from the alternative study and working conditions. In contrast, the infrastructural issue was the primary challenge for displaced DDU and impeded the rebuilding process of university functioning. In this regard, both LDU and DDU received considerable financial and technical support from international development agencies that assisted displaced universities in renovation of buildings and learning facilities. Therefore, it can be stated that partnerships and cooperation with donor organizations play a key role in ensuring the long-term stability and development of at-risk universities.

Online learning or blended learning has been a common practice for many countries, but in Ukraine, this is an innovative approach in education and basically considered to constitute alternatives to traditional teaching. A few Ukrainian HEIs introduced distance learning programmes at undergraduate or postgraduate levels mainly for diversification of provided educational services and ultimately for fundraising objectives. Nevertheless, in the case of evacuated universities online or blended learning system proves to be the only feasible solution to maintain the university as an entity since the majority of staff and students moved to different regions of the country and are not able to attend or conduct lectures on site. The positive aspect of the situation is that, as Schneller (2010), pointed out the crisis might have an innovative impact on universities and can contribute to the boost of innovative models and approaches in higher education. Thus, the armed conflict in East Ukraine and the massive introduction of distance learning at DDU and LDU

create special requirements to examine the issues of online learning at national level and elaborate convenient model for online education under contemporary military unrest.

The challenge of displaced universities is not only how to provide access to education, but also how to create inclusive and positive learning environment. In this regard, the distance learning should be based on the online collaborative learning (OCL) theory which was developed by Harasim (2012) based on the constructivist approaches to learning. OCL was described as a theory that "provides a model of learning in which students are encouraged and supported to work together to create knowledge: to invent, to explore ways to innovate, and, by so doing, to seek the conceptual knowledge needed to solve problems rather than recite what they think is the right answer" (Harasim, 2012, p. 9). The OCL theory can be implicated in the creation of knowledge community where the learning activities are guided by the social discourse. Though team group activities are not common as a learning practice at HEIs in Ukraine and the focus is given to individual assignments, the OCL theory might be an excellent framework for displaced universities to introduce a new approach to teaching and learning, helping conflict-affected students to avoid learning and social isolation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Although there are numerous practices in crisis management how to deal with fragile and risk situations, the recommendations below were designed specifically for the current higher education context in Ukraine.

Despite the decentralization processes in higher education in Ukraine, the universities largely depend on the Ministry of Education and Science (MoES) that has the real power to trigger necessary reforms at national or institutional level. The involvement of the MoES is therefore crucial in the advancement of crisis management performance of Ukrainian HEIs. Hence, MoES should consider that displaced universities encounter numerous difficulties in terms of infrastructure, namely premises and technical facilities, and therefore the government might consider a possibility to merge on a temporary basis displaced and other Ukrainian HEIs of similar specialization. The merger can be realized as a full integration of a displaced university or a partial integration, when only academic faculties or certain administrative units are merged. Partially merger is referred to the cost-sharing model when two or more universities create a joint academic or more often administrative unit and benefit from this venture by sharing and reducing the costs for premises, equipment and salaries. If academic faculties or departments are merged, students from displaced universities will have access to necessary facilities, which are indispensable especially for science, technical and engineering programmes. In this way, cost sharing will boost the quality of education and services of displaced universities as well as increase the attractiveness of education and ultimately improve the recognition of diplomas of Eastern Ukrainian universities among employers and society.

At institutional level, the recommendations concern the internal communication strategies, which have a crucial role for displaced universities in reaching their employees and students. In particular, e-communication proves to be the most effective way of keeping staff and students aware of the latest updates, including the safety policy regulations, adopted decisions and plans of implementations of diverse initiatives. Therefore, displaced universities have to create a database of e-mails and other personal contacts of all enrolled students and staff. Moreover, it will be indispensable to make necessary institutional arrangements and to mandate a specific department or people to be responsible for regular internal communication within a university.

It is suggested for all Ukrainian universities to adopt the practice of developing institutional policies and implementation plans based on the ex-ante risk and impact analysis. This measure is meant to boost the efficiency of institutional policies and practices and to enhance university preparedness and response activities to crises.

CONCLUSIONS

The results of the research indicated six predominant factors that influenced the performance of Ukrainian displaced universities in crisis management, namely i) university leadership; ii) organizational identification; iii) communication approaches; iv) availability of appropriate infrastructure; v) financial capacity and stability; and vi) integration of blended learning into institutional curriculum.

The first factor refers to the strong and effective university support in crisis circumstances, especially from the rectors who are in the position to adopt university-wide crisis management decisions and interventions. Organizational identification and self-identification were the main driving force for initiating a relocation of the institution. Both LDU and DDU had to determine clearly their organizational identity that shaped the further development of universities in exile. Therefore, identity issue constitutes an important factor in crisis management, in particular in the cases of armed conflicts, where the political and cultural preferences guide people's decision and actions.

Lack of communication caused aggravated frustration among employees and students of LDU as after the relocation the university tried to reach its member and to inform them about the displaced status of the HEI. Unfortunately, the absence of proper communication means and data delayed the recovery process of the universities in exile.

It was evident throughout the answers of the questionnaire that moral of employees at displaced universities was weakened by the unavailability of appropriate working conditions. The proposal for cost sharing model between two or more Ukrainian HEIs could be a solution for displaced universities to reinforce their infrastructural capacity and provide students and staff with relevant material basis.

The armed conflict drastically affected the economy of Ukraine and the financial stability of Eastern Ukrainian universities, which is another predominant factor

of the crisis management performance. Displaced HEIs largely rely on government appropriations that cannot cover completely the pressing demands of universities in terms of renting premises and purchasing equipment for training purposes. Hence, various possibilities on how to diversify revenue sources have to be analysed by evacuated universities to ensure their positive progression.

Finally, displaced universities managed to find an alternative way for maintaining the study process, namely they integrated blended learning into the institutional curriculum. Online learning appeared to be innovative for Ukrainian universities and at the same time the only feasible solution to attract students and staff who could not move to the new location of the evacuated universities, but who endeavoured to remain under the umbrella of these HEIs. Hence, the success factor of the performance of the displaced universities during the crisis period was the introduction of distance education as well as the effectiveness of harnessing learning technologies, for instance, launching an online platform and arranging professional training for academics on how to use the new digital instruments in teaching.

The crisis in Eastern Ukraine revealed the weaknesses of university management structures and models and at the same time showed that displaced HEIs are committed to survive as well as managed to institutionalize change and innovations under the fragile circumstances in order to remain in demand among students, staff and society. The suggested recommendations to various stakeholders aim at improving the management performance in higher education and ultimately reinforce the institutional capacity and sustainability of displaced universities.

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УПРАВЛІННЯ УНІВЕРСИТЕТАМИ ЗІ СХІДНОЇ УКРАЇНИ НА РІЗНИХ СТАДІЯХ КРИЗИ В УМОВАХ КОНФЛІКТУ

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У статті наведені результати ретроспективного аналізу ключових фак-торів, які вплинули на ефективність переміщених університетів зі Східної України в умовах конфлікту. Метою дослідження є також вивчення цілей та стратегій, що стосуються управління університетом на різних стадіях кризи та в різних аспектах. Щоб досягти цього, опитувальник було обрано як інструмент дослідження для збору даних, які були потім проаналізовані та згруповані в загальні теми. Виходячи з результатів, дослідження надає ре-комендації для декількох груп зацікавлених сторін щодо вдосконалення мето-дів управління кризовими ситуаціями у вищих навчальних закладах України,

зокрема у переміщених університетах. Крім того, у статті запропоновано подальші напрями дослідження антикризового управління в українській вищій освіті з метою підвищення готовності університетів до надзвичайних та кризових ситуацій, а також підвищення ефективності процесів планування управління, прийняття рішень та впровадження.

Ключові слова: *антикризове управління, вища освіта, переміщені університети, лідерство, організаційна ідентифікація, антикризова комунікація.*