University and War: Life Beyond the Red Line

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Abstract

This article analyzes the transformation of Ukrainian universities in the context of the full-scale war launched by the Russian Federation against Ukraine on February 24, 2022. The authors examine how higher education institutions were faced with the need to make strategic decisions in a situation of existential threat and to fulfill the role of institutions of state stability. Based on the case study of the State University of Economics and Technology (Kryvyi Rih), three stages of the university's transformation in wartime are revealed: overcoming the shock period, forming and implementing protocols for wartime functioning, and transitioning to strategic development focused on recovery and innovation.

Keywords: university, war, institutional stability, education, sustainable development, innovative campus, recovery, educational ecosystem.

On February 24, 2022, the world woke up to a new reality – the reality of full-scale war on the European continent. The Russian Federation launched an unprovoked invasion against Ukraine and its people. This is not a case of a local armed conflict but a genocidal war and a grave violation of international law.

In that moment, every Ukrainian – from the President to an ordinary worker, from schoolchildren to retirees – faced a fundamental choice: to fight or to surrender. That same question was posed collectively and individually. Today, we know the answer Ukrainians and the broader democratic world gave. But back then, on February 24 and in the days that followed, that decision had to be made and lived out through action. Ukrainian universities were no exception.

They had to find their place in the chaos, maintain governance, adopt a plan of action in real-time, respond to external shocks, and balance their roles as institutions, public servants, and civic actors. That morning became a red line – a moment of no return – after which universities found themselves in a new existential context.

Some universities were immediately caught in the line of fire. Their top priority became the evacuation of students, staff, documents, and valuable property. Others, located near or close to the frontline, quickly transformed into logistical hubs – meeting and redirecting displaced persons, offering psychological and material support, and coordinating access to safer regions, often through educational pathways.

A third group of universities, situated farther from active combat zones, became destinations for relocated institutions and internally displaced students and civilians.

Those in the first group often ceased functioning de facto after losing their facilities and staff. Some managed to relocate and maintain legal continuity, awaiting the liberation of their territories and a return to normal operation.

The third group stabilized and resumed development under wartime conditions, to the extent possible in a country defending its sovereignty.

But it is the second group – those operating just beyond the front – that presents perhaps the most compelling case. The majority of Ukrainian universities are public institutions. In wartime, this status came with additional responsibilities: they became agents of state resilience.

One such case is the State University of Economics and Technology (SUET) in Kryvyi Rih – the furthest point reached by Russian forces in their attempted southern offensive. Here, the invaders were stopped and forced to retreat. SUET's wartime journey reflects the transformation experienced by Ukraine's frontline universities.

First, SUET immediately pivoted its mission to serve as a humanitarian logistics center. Dormitories were repurposed, and faculty, students, and local volunteers mobilized.

Second, the university had to preserve administrative control under extreme uncertainty. Three parallel governance systems were deployed:

1. Remote operations from Kryvyi Rih;
2. A backup relocation structure based in western Ukraine;
3. A fully virtual command center, unbound by physical infrastructure.

The university never stopped its academic operations – it simply transitioned to distance learning, utilizing tools and skills developed during the pandemic.

During the first days and weeks of war, the Ministry of Education temporarily delegated extraordinary functions to certain universities, including SUET. These included tasks that typically fall far outside the scope of higher education – helping to stabilize the entire educational system amid national emergency.

Going forward, the resilience and adaptability of the educational system – its ability to self-organize under stress – will likely be studied as a key factor in Ukraine's resistance to aggression. These lessons may intersect deeply with the logic of the Sustainable Development Goals, both for individual universities and for the national system.

Third, SUET prepared evacuation protocols for archives and documents, triaging them into groups for removal, preservation-in-place, or destruction if necessary.

Fourth, emergency staff evacuation plans were developed from scratch – no existing documents could guide such scenarios, as Ukraine had no intention of engaging in war.

Fifth, SUET ensured the continuous 24/7 operation of its five bomb shelters, open to anyone in need of protection.

The university also supported undisclosed missions coordinated by the regional military administration.

In April 2022, SUET launched an Education Hub – a consultation and coordination center for citizens seeking to continue their education amid displacement. Around 80% of visitors were looking to enroll in universities in Ukraine's western regions. The university thus fulfilled its constitutional duty to guarantee access to education and even hosted sessions of the National Multi-Subject Test for school graduates.

The first five months of war were defined by emergency operations. By July 2022, as the war turned protracted, SUET began preparing for its first full academic year under martial law, organizing activities along three tracks:

1. Educational continuity under wartime conditions;
2. Support for critical infrastructure and civil society – including heating points, energy reserves, food and aid storage;
3. Research and consultancy projects for wartime stakeholders (most of which remain confidential and undocumented).

In summer 2023, Kryvyi Rih was hit by a war crime – the destruction of the Karachunivske Dam and the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Dam. SUET suspended routine work to conduct emergency evacuation procedures and received new waves of displaced persons.

During volunteer humanitarian work, four SUET students were killed by a missile strike. On July 31, 2023, the university experienced its worst loss: a direct hit by a Russian Iskander-M missile destroyed an entire academic complex. Ten buildings were damaged, five beyond repair. One staff member was killed and over ten others injured.

After 18 months of full-scale war, SUET had developed protocols for various wartime emergencies and shifted its focus from survival to transformation. The university launched international partnerships not just for aid, but for long-term development aligned with sustainability principles.

One flagship project is "STEM & School Day" with Finland's Aalto University, focused on addressing wartime learning loss in math, physics, and chemistry.

Another is the dual education initiative "New Factory" with ArcelorMittal, which expanded significantly in scope and impact.

SUET also developed training and retraining programs for veterans and civilians affected by war, including first-aid, psychological support, and vocational rehabilitation.

Remarkably, the university preserved its annual International Scientific Congress: Society of Ambient Intelligence, held for the seventh time on December 2–6, 2024.

By late 2023 – early 2024, SUET entered a new strategic phase. The goal was no longer just to respond to crises – but to shape the future. The university embraced a vision of not rebuilding the past, but creating a new ecosystem rooted in sustainable development.

This vision is embodied in LID HUB: Ukrainian Dawn (LID = Liberty, Innovation, Development) – a smart campus being constructed on the ruins left by the July 2023 missile strike.

LID HUB is a smart, service-oriented ecosystem that combines:

- Research and innovation;
- Education and startups;
- Cultural and sports spaces;
- Rehabilitation and business environments.

It is part of an international innovation cluster in construction and includes labs for e-power systems, robotics, smart housing, BIM modeling, marketing, and design.

Partners include Aalto University, Metropolia University, Future Construction Hub TITAN, and private industry. The partner list is open for expansion. A proposal has been submitted to ERASMUS-EDU-2025 for project funding.

In conclusion, after three and a half years of war, we can say that life does exist beyond the red line. The nature and quality of this life depend on how quickly universities can adapt and respond.

The first phase is overcoming the shock to the governance system – typically lasting from a few weeks to six months.

The second phase is the development of wartime operating protocols – testing the university's ability to function under prolonged stress. This lasts at least 18 months and includes full operational and academic cycles.

Only those universities that pass these phases and build meaningful partnerships – not solely based on humanitarian aid – can enter the third phase: laying the foundation for renewal and growth.

The strategic mission of any university that crosses the red line must be to reach this third phase. Only by aligning its goals with the values and interests of its partner community can it remain an active, resilient node within the broader network of cooperation. Otherwise, in a hot war, institutional resources will quickly be exhausted – with all the predictable consequences that follow.