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## DISTANCE EDUCATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN UKRAINE DURING WAR: CHALLENGES AND ADAPTATIONS

**Abstract.** The article aims to draw the attention of the academic community and social work practitioners to the analysis of the dynamics of distance education development in higher education institutions of Ukraine during the war. The study discusses the consequences of the war for traditional educational systems and for higher education institutions in particular. It also gives a brief overview of the scale of displacement universities from the temporarily occupied territories, the number of students, institutions, and teachers.

The purpose of the research is also to analyze the impact of the hostilities on students and faculty, the organization of the educational process, challenges, and adaptation strategies based on the example of representatives of three higher education institutions, with whom four in-depth interviews were conducted. This material is presented in three dimensions: sustainability, challenges, and adaptation. The article analyzes issues such as technical problems, geographical dispersion of students and faculty, mental health support and stress management, security issues, etc. Different adaptation strategies used by different types of universities - displaced and non-displaced - that use online learning to ensure continuity of education are characterized. The positive impact of distance education and the disadvantages educators and students face are highlighted. Additionally, it identifies pressing challenges faced by operational institutions, requiring attention at multiple levels.

**Keywords:** distance education, higher educational institutions (HEI), relocated universities, adaptation strategies during the war, resilience.

## INTRODUCTION

Constant shelling, destroyed housing and infrastructure, limited access to education and limited access to healthcare, the threat of mines, psychological stress, poor quality food, unsanitary conditions, limitation or lack of electricity and heating are daily problems for Ukrainians. *According to the* UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, in the almost two years since the start of the full-scale war, more than 10,000 civilians were killed and injured - 19,875 civilians. More than 592 children died, and at least 1,300 injured children. Total civilian casualties of more than 30, 457 (UN, 2024).

As of 2021, 43,300 square kilometers, or 7% of Ukrainian territory, were under Russian occupation. This area has increased 2.9 times since the start of the Russian invasion in 2022, so now it is approximately 28% of Ukraine's territory. The temporarily uncontrolled territories include the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, parts of the Donetsk, Luhansk, Kharkiv, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia regions, and the city of Sevastopol. Since the beginning, many Ukrainian cities such as Mariupol, Popasna, Severodonsk, Lysychansk, Mariinka, Bahmut, Bucha, Borodianka, Izum, Chuhuiv, Kupiansk were damaged. The shelling continues to destroy big cities like Sumy, Mykolaiv, Kharkiv, and Odesa every day. The losses in the educational sphere are huge and visible. At the same time, losses are also invisible and have prolonged effects.

Obviously, education plays a pivotal role in cultivating critical thinking, social adaptability, and readiness for future challenges. The enrollment of students in the higher education system is dictated by the need to establish an optimal environment for learning professional skills. Destruction of higher educational institutions' infrastructure, losses of human resources, and renewal of the education process during martial law have become the critical challenges of war for Ukraine's higher education system.

It is very important to supply access to the educational process, and the government organized the online educational process to provide security for students, teachers, and academic staff. Many universities that were located mainly on the front line or in occupied territories have already relocated to safe cities. Reallocation of so-called "displaced or relocated higher educational institutions" (Nikolaev, E., Riy, G., Shemelynets, I., 2022). A total of 25 independent higher education institutions and 19 separate structural units of various universities were relocated in March 2022. More than 54,000 students study at the relocated institutions, and almost seven thousand teachers work there. The universities are located in 16 cities in fourteen regions of Ukraine. Most universities have been relocated in a "minimal" format, which means that the rector, vice-rectors, accounting department, and some other employees directly move to the government-controlled territory. Teaching takes place using distance technology. A smaller number of universities implement the "extended" option of relocation, which involves providing them with separate academic buildings and moving the administration and some of the faculty and students to another locality (Nikolaev, E., Riy, G., Shemelynets, I., 2022).

## METHODOLOGY

For our survey, we used in-depth interviews with three Universities and four representatives – two universities from East Ukraine (three representatives) and one university from West Ukraine (one representative). We chose relocated universities for comparison with classic ones from the western part of Ukraine, which were not moved because they are safe places. The number of interviews was four, three female and one male. Age (35-65). All our respondents are experts who work in the higher education

system, teaching social work; some hold administrative positions. The interviews evaluated the needs and support of relocated education institutions and optimizing distance education.

The guide includes questions about:

- the impact of the war in Ukraine on educational institutions;
- immediate and long-term consequences of the war for the education system;
- what measures have been taken by the university,
- perhaps the administration or even the ministry to establish distance education benefits from distance education;
- difficulties for students and teachers;
- and how universities improve the system and approaches to distance learning, comparing it with the beginning of the war;
- with what challenges respondents faced during the war.

Based on international experience and considering modern conditions and military realities in Ukraine, we are looking for a distance education system during the war in higher institutions through three dimensions of the dynamic system model: (1) resilience, (2) adaptation, and (3) challenges. The dimensions, in turn, consist of indicators that reflect the critical areas of research assessment.

## FINDINGS

### Dimension 1. Resilience

In the literature review (Oviedo, L. 2022), resilience is a process that requires some coping and adaptation. For us, it is essential to relate to the challenges with the adaptation strategies of different types of universities in the context of relocation, which the respondents' interviews can identify.

The impacts and effects of war on the educational system and infrastructure are enormous and terrible. According to the UNHCR report, there is an increasing trend of bombing, and damage to essential services like schools and hospitals will increase if fighting continues, especially in populated areas. The hostilities have damaged over 1,072 educational facilities – schools and science institutions (236 destroyed and 836 damaged). Academic staff and students are tackling the massive challenges of keeping education going in wartime; more than 8 million citizens were internally displaced persons, and over 6 million people were forced to leave Ukraine due to military actions. Ukraine nowadays presents three different approaches to educating students. In 2023, 1,321 million (33% of total 4,001 million total students) children in Ukraine were attending schools in-person, while 1,475 million students (36,9%) were learning online, and 1,205 (30,1%) million were learning in blended mode, combining online and offline classes. A total of 2,68 million children had impaired access to in-person education, according to Ukraine's Ministry of Education. You can see that the learning has been held almost exclusively online as many school buildings have been destroyed and are seen as potential targets.

Our respondents described the impact of the war in Ukraine on educational institutions, including higher educational institutions, in terms of access to higher academics and disruptions in teaching and learning in terms of visual and immediate implications. They mentioned the destroyed infrastructure and had the possibility to provide access to education throughout the territory of Ukraine. Respondents outline the need for highly qualified professionals and the issue of brain drain: *"We lose many applicants and students because they simply leave Ukraine. Moreover, instead of them being able to study in our universities, in our higher education institutions in Ukraine, they first become students of schools somewhere abroad."* (respondent#4, female, 35 years old, U.#3).

Also, they talked about financial difficulties due to cutting the budget from beyond government finance. The provision of distance education depends on the Internet connection and electricity, which are unstable during wartime. In Ukraine, university revenue largely comes from tuition fees, which the government or the students cover. The war has undermined both sources. The Ukrainian government is understandably directing the lion's share of its resources to war efforts. The universities have autonomy for fundraising money, which is difficult in wartime conditions. *"The big question is about financing state educational institutions, as far as possible today, given budget revenues. In general, can we now talk about the development of the education system if there is a question of the general existence, in some cases, of displaced educational institutions that are in great need of support, financial resources, restoration, and so on, that is, this is a big question"* (respondent #1, female, 40 years, U#1.)

The qualitative data analyses show the pivotal role of the Internet connection, which disrupted continuing teaching and learning.

*"An Internet connection is necessary for high-quality learning and, in general, the ability to communicate. Due to the lack of light and interruptions, air alarm, staying in the shelter, and so on, this connection is unstable. Secondly, children are in different conditions, where you can't even dream of communication yet, and they actually do not have access to online education"* (respondent #1, female, 40 years, #U1).

Respondents noted that the long-term consequences of the war for the education system and educational opportunities are quite difficult to determine and comprehend fully at present. This can be done later. However, regarding these consequences, higher education institutions have started emphasizing distance learning.

Based on the above, Ukraine's educational system during the war, by utilizing and further developing the distance education system, can be outlined as a model that enhances resilience and ensures a more effective response and recovery during the ongoing emergency—the Russia-Ukraine War. Distance education allows the high educational system to respond and recover from the effects of a crisis hit in 2022. It was a short-term timescale but, in certain circumstances, prolonged in the medium term. As our respondents mentioned, especially from displaced Universities, uncertainty requires a long-term plan to prevent future crises and mitigate the impacts of ongoing disruption due to the war. *"It is clear that the military actions hurt the functioning of higher educational institutions. On the one hand, students' access to the educational process became difficult. On the other hand, not all teachers were able to continue working at the educational institution. Some transferred to other institutions, and some left the country... Nevertheless, despite these difficulties, we can say that despite the military actions, higher educational institutions, including our university, were able to resume work and establish a satisfactory educational process."* - respondent #2, male, 65 years, U#2.

The resilience and determination of students and faculty, coupled with support from the global academic community, are crucial in overcoming war challenges and rebuilding a stable and vibrant higher educational landscape (Ivanenko, N., 2024).

## Dimension 2. Challenges

In light of the above, we step ahead and describe higher educational institutions during the war in Ukraine. In this regard, we asked our respondents about challenges faced by students and pedagogical staff and what should be done by the administration in response to challenges. Going deeper into the topic, we aimed to describe from the perspective of challenges how, within the different frameworks – displaced and non-

displaced universities trying to cope with such crises and struggles and which practical approaches and decisions HEIs provided for achieving the main goal - continuing the educational process.

Due to the hostilities, the displaced universities announced a break in the educational process. The situation with **the educational process organization was the first challenge, and it** continues to be highly relevant. According to our respondents, the educational process is conducted chiefly remotely in synchronous and asynchronous modes (in two out of three universities that participated in the survey). One of the peculiarities of the educational process organization in temporarily displaced universities is the inability of many students to participate in distance learning conducted in a synchronous format. Completing assignments in an asynchronous format is common practice when students take an e-course on the Moodle or Google Classroom platform. Other communication channels (mail, messengers) are also used to submit assignments (Porkuian, O., Halhash, R., & Chankotadze, Y., 2024). The main form of education for foreign citizens is full-time. The COVID-19 pandemic forced a transition to a hybrid, mixed form of education, which mainly involved students receiving and processing theoretical material in the form of online lectures, presentations, discussions (discussions in small groups), independent work, and then practicing practical skills directly in classrooms and laboratory rooms according to a specially designed schedule to avoid overcrowding (Borysenko, A. A., Antonenko, A. M., & Tkachenko, I. V., 2022). While the primary concern in the spring of 2022 was to establish safe conditions, the fall brought new challenges such as blackouts, disruptions in electricity and heating supply, and unstable Internet access, which exacerbated the remote learning crisis in Ukraine (Challenges of Ukrainian Education in Times of War, 2024).

Another challenge for high Ukrainian education institutions posed by the ongoing war is maintaining the **quality of education**. Some of the respondents say that the quality of education has decreased:

*"Well, it is clear that from my point of view, the quality of education has decreased or worsened. On the other hand, distance education, if we say that during the war, is valuable because it allows you to still carry out the educational process." (Respondent #2, male, 65 years, U.#2).*

Online teaching requires self-organized, motivated, and experienced (in their professional activity) students. Students are less motivated without face-to-face contact with teachers. This quote illustrates students' varied experiences during the war, with some adapting well to distance learning while others miss the traditional university experience:

*"Students are different, and it is difficult to say about their position in general. Some students are satisfied with this situation... And some students wanted such a full-fledged student life." (Respondent #2, male, 65 years, U.#2).*

The quality of higher education, especially in Social Work mentioned by our respondents, is ensured by a robust system of internal quality assurance within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and accreditation carried out by the National Agency for Higher Educational Quality Assurance (NAQA), which operates independently from Ministry of Education and Science (Semigina, 2023). Meanwhile, according to the results of PISA-2022 (Program for International Students Assessment), in Ukraine, a significant drop in success in all subjects was noted, which may be related to long-distance learning during the pandemic and war in Ukraine (Future Index, 2023).

The war has appeared as a problem in which teachers have different **skills and mastery of digital technologies**. While discussing distance learning, this quote also

indirectly reflects on the challenges faced by teachers in adapting to new teaching methods and technologies during the war.

*"We need methodological support, .... evaluation of the student's educational achievements is critical" (Respondent #2, male, 65 years, U.#2).*

Under the conditions of hybrid education, students should be technically equipped enough for distance learning. The question of whether students have enough opportunities to participate in the educational process regularly requires additional assessment and monitoring (Future Index, 2023).

Our interviews also reveal concerns about educational outcomes and that **the assessment system** does not work enough:

*"When students did not show significant ability to learn ... and at the end, they graduated from university with high achievements. I have three or four of them in the last two years." (Respondent #1, female, 40 years, U#1).*

Another angle of adaptation is the problems relocated universities face when dealing with ambiguous loss. Ambiguous loss is inherently traumatic because the inability to resolve the situation causes pain, confusion, shock, distress, and often immobilization. Trauma is open—chronic pain. Without closure, the trauma of this unique kind of loss becomes chronic. It is helpful to recognize the distress of more ordinary loss to understand the trauma of ambiguous loss. Most people cannot tolerate the feeling of being in a situation that is outside their control (Boss, P., 2006). The intellectual and relational uncertainty of living with someone both here and not here produces a terrible anxiety of bizarre human experience:

*"We are no longer needed in our community and have not yet been fully accepted in another community... Borderline marginality, when it is no longer yours, and not yet yours" (respondent #3, female, 37 years, U#2).*

We introduce a new concept of ambiguous loss, a "situational goodbye." Examples could include the COVID-19 pandemic, a change in future plans, natural disasters, political unrest, or a loss of financial or personal security.

*"A person may have lost all his property, his house, and housing, left with nothing" (respondent #3, female, 37 years, U#2).*

By summarizing the answers, one sees that students and teachers are faced with **psychological problems** and limited mental services; no special departments are created at higher-level institutions. Only the university's local staff (teachers and professors) were involved in this matter by their will. For example, in Lugansk, Taras Shevchenko University established the Center for Psychological Recovery and Adaptation even though the government set up a State Plan to combat the consequences of trauma and PTSD through psychosocial services for children under 18, not for students.

The respondents mentioned difficulties working in everyday stress and uncertain situations and various other aspects influencing their well-being:

*"Well, it is clear that there were psychological difficulties because the situation is not certain. Everyone was waiting for it to be over. And now everyone is waiting for everything to end. And this greatly affects the psychology of teachers and students... you have to come; no one takes into account what your mood is, what you want at this moment; you have to come to classes, both a student and a teacher, and you have to work... And motivation is affected by everything, including psychological well-being. Moreover, without such deep internal motivation, successful work is impossible" (respondent #1, female, 40 years, U#1).*

Almost all respondents emphasized the importance of **safety and security**. While online learning provides safety, it is not ideal as it affects students' personality and social development.

*"It is very convenient because you can connect from any place, including from a safe place, especially when we are talking about shelling, about days when you cannot go to classes"* (Respondent #4, female, 30 years, U#3).

Some students who live in uncontrolled territories face safety issues, as their parents are afraid of Russian officials' punishment. Another problem for those living in occupied territories is the Internet quality and communication quality.

The below statement reflects on the emotional impact on students who miss out on the social aspects of university life due to the war, highlighting the importance of **the socialization of the university's environment** for personal development. As Iryna Tulyakova, the head of the Coordinating Centre for the Development of Family Education and Childcare, claimed, "This generation of children lost a lot — and lost not only in terms of knowledge but also in terms of their development." (Future Index, 2023, p. 68).

The survey shows that students reported burnout, feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and anger, mental and physical health of students:

*"And many students, I was also told about this, regret that they are deprived of it. Because this is the environment of a higher educational institution, it greatly influences the formation of personality."* (Respondent #2, male, 65 years, U#2).

The respondents further acknowledged that host authorities are influential actors who can drive universities to development. Unfortunately, the response to needs, especially the ratio of relocated universities, is not significant.

*"Well, local authorities do not always want to make such contacts, or they do not fully want to make such contacts. We, for example, establish a connection with other city employment centers. They say: who are you, what are you? Definitely, we are adding new troubles."* (Respondent #1, female, 40 years, U#1).).

The war in Ukraine is still going on, which affects the training of scientific and scientific-pedagogical personnel. A number of problems arise, such as destabilization of conditions and work schedule, change of location or temporary residence of applicants and scientific and pedagogical workers, psychological burden, stress, lack of stable communication, communication breakdown, access to necessary information, etc. (Hryb, 2022).

Secondly, the changes will affect the material and organizational support of learning and teaching. It is only possible to completely replace the traditional form of education because something can replace the usual communication with the student. Therefore, along with the wide application of technical measures, it is still necessary to develop rules and create conditions for the organization of offline learning (Zuyev, 2022).

### Dimension 3. Adaptation

A resilient education system includes several common components. It is characterized by policies and plans to embed overall system strengthening, anticipate risk, plan for and respond to and recover in times of crisis, and prevent and mitigate future disruptions. Nevertheless, the Ukrainian HEIs' ability to adapt their education process to the quarantine restrictions has provided them with valuable experience to resume studies even in these harsh conditions.

Hence, as claimed by VOX Ukraine – an independent analytical platform, in the survey "In Strange Walls: How Displaced Universities Overcome Problems" (2023),

COVID time lessened learning who organized the educational process during covid time, but it should be emphasized that the entire higher education system of Ukraine did not make a full and systematic transition to distance learning as a “new normal”; the majority hoping that with the lifting of quarantine restrictions, education would return to “business as usual.”

This part of the article aims to reveal various aspects influencing the adaptation of HEI in Ukraine during wartime and the positive contribution of distance education to separate students and teachers. All respondents talked about accessibility and convenience for students to distance education and highlighted the security and safety that are maintained during distance education:

*“We must everywhere, firstly, take students and pupils to offline training, and secondly, provide the practical component in every possible way, even in uncontrolled territories and even abroad” (Respondent #1, female, 36 years old, U#1).*

*“It is a big challenge that obliged higher education institutions, including our university, to revise the formats of education, to revise how education should take place given safety in a situation, if, for example, there is an air raid” (Respondent #4, female, 30 years, U#3).*

Some favorable aspects respondents said that one student could study in two or more educational institutions at the same time in different forms and agreed that it could lead to expanded opportunities for students but at the same time to those who choose this strategy – to study in parallel specialties or different universities at the same time – hinders to quality of studies and profoundly diving into the occupation:

*“They have no limitations at all. This is the time for students when they can study in different fields” (Respondent #1, female, 36 years old, U#1).*

*“In 4 years, they receive not one, but two, or even three diplomas” (Respondent #3, female, 37 years old, U#2).*

The interviews suggested that **distance education** as a driver for HEI during the war allows for more rapid, effective, and generally tailored responses. Respondents acknowledged that distance education includes the following **characteristics**:

- Synchronous format. There are rare cases when the asynchronous learning format is used.

- Individual formats are possible during the teaching: *“Our training department is not ready to accept a variation of the asynchronous format” (Respondent #1, female, 36 years old, U#1).*

- Flexible format: New regulations on remote teaching allow students to combine different types of studies and be present in two institutions simultaneously.

- Each student of higher education “must master at least 25% of the general curriculum of this selective component.”

- Open platforms, training forms, and academic mobility abroad are accepted.

- The university has limited material resources (the teacher should purchase Zoom with their money);

- Electronic versions of documentation can be stored in unlimited quantities. – this is provided through corporate accounts.

- Individualized approach and instructions: *“Distance learning in this sense contributed to the individualization of learning” (Respondent #2, male, 65 years, U.#2).*

- Flexible and convenient: *“In fact, it is, first of all, convenient because if there is an Internet, then everyone, both students and teachers and employees, can join from anywhere and have this educational process, be present at classes” (Respondent #4, female, 30 years, U#3).*



Provide quality learning experiences, given access to necessary resources like the Internet: *"Well, in principle, if you have access to the Internet, then you have every opportunity to get a quality education"* (Respondent #2, male, 65 years, U#2).

Maintain educational standards: *"We cannot get anywhere from efficiency. If we abandon the quality of education as a criterion in general, we will get a kindergarten in higher education institutions."* (Respondent #1, female, 36 years old, U#1).

Table 1 summarizes the forces pushing HEIs (high educational institutions) in different or exact strategic directions for adaptation and service in war conditions.

**Table 1. Comparison of the organization of the education process between Displaced Universities and Regular**

Regular	Relocated
Allow students to study at several institutions at the same time	Allow students to study at several institutions at the same time
In-person education in university as students, teachers	Distance education
Availability of distance education learning platforms for internal use of students and teachers	Availability of distance education learning platforms for internal use of students and teachers
The equal process for accreditation of licensed programs	The equal process for accreditation of licensed programs
Availability to participate in exchange program (staff and students)	Availability to participate in exchange program (staff and students)

In the following, we unravel and discuss **the benefits of distance education:**

1) Individualized approach and instructions: *"Distance learning in this sense contributed to the individualization of learning"* (Respondent #2, male, 65 years, U#2).

2) Flexible and convenient: *"In fact, it is, first of all, convenient because if there is the Internet, then everyone, both students and teachers and employees, can join online and have this educational process, be present at classes"* (Respondent #4, female, 30 years, U#3).

Provide quality learning experiences, giving access to necessary resources like the Internet: *"Well, on the whole, if you have access to the Internet, then you have every opportunity to get a quality education"* (respondent #3, female, 37 years, U#2).

3) Upholding educational standards: *"We cannot get anywhere from efficiency. If we abandon the quality of education as a criterion in general, we will get a kindergarten in higher education institutions."* (Respondent #1, female, 36 years old, U#1).

## DISCUSSION

While Distance Education is not new, Ukraine's experience is unique because of the scale, complexity, and consequences affected by continuing military actions requiring a new setting and having to contend with a wide array of issues.

We gather **Recommendations and Issues** that need to be addressed from the side of students, teachers, and general in the table below. Forced relocated universities need more support.

**Table 2. Issues that need to be addressed regarding Distance Education in Higher Educational Institutions**

General/system	Students	Teachers /Academic staff/Administration
Special approach to accreditation and authorization of the process in case of relocated universities	Increased personal or real-life contact with teachers and with each other	Lack of technical skills and development
The mechanism allows one to be a student at several university programs at the same time for free	Limitation of studentship and socialization	Awareness raising regarding to use of AI and other digital innovations
Government support for relocated universities is not enough	A lot of opportunities for students (for higher education and professional development)	Teacher`s motivation is the main factor in the quality of education
Moving from synchronized to an asynchronized model of distance education	All male students under 18-60 are restricted to live in Ukraine	The administration of the relocated universities should find ways of communication with local authorities to strengthen the university mission and aims (including students' practical training)
Comprehensive psychosocial services for students and teachers funded by the state	Additional support for students to become social workers and high responsibility in the context of the war. Mental health issues	Mental health issues
Prepare for transition from distance education to in-person education.	Students of relocated universities have limited practical hours/places, lack of professional supervision	Update social work program for urgent response to needs and implement evidence-based practices

We also want to outline issues about psychosocial services. Each of these groups faces different living and psycho-emotional conditions. Our respondents said they deeply reflected on the news about fighting, shelling, losses, and deaths. One of them said that the university makes corporate mail sending them. Receiving bad news about the killing of someone from the community stressed both – teachers and students. There is also a

distribution of information about whether someone died in the community or from relatives. This information is always influential. It seems this is more of a psychological problem for students in the learning process.

First, talking to professionals about intrusive thoughts about the war can have a therapeutic effect and help students navigate difficult circumstances. Moreover, integrating psychological services into universities can change students' perceptions, promoting a positive attitude toward receiving psychological support. Establishing such services at universities could minimize the harmful effects of war on young people's mental health.

Then, conduct support for teachers; the war affects not only the emotional state of students but also teachers, who are supposed to support students but, due to their own experiences, may not always be able to do so.

Also, experts believe that shortly, the education sector of Ukraine will have to “(1) overcome the challenges of war damage; (2) rethink and develop a new vision of the system as a whole to ensure its comprehensive development; (3) create convenient conditions for the transformation of the network of educational institutions to meet the social and economic needs of the country; (4) improve the quality of education; (5) ensure an innovative learning and researching environment; and (6) partner with stakeholders of different levels and scope of interventions to ensure inclusion of and positive outcomes for all students and stakeholders.

To sum up, despite the hazardous trends (destruction of infrastructure, losses among students and personnel, problems in the educational process organization), the Ukrainian HEIs continue operating and providing educational services. Like in the times of the pandemic, the Ukrainian higher education system has a great opportunity to emerge from this crisis much stronger, adapt to the new conditions, and, eventually, reform (Higher Education in Ukraine, 2023, p. 36).

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