

Serving the Community During the Time of War: the Experience of Berdyansk State Pedagogical University

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Abstract

The article describes the experience of Berdyansk State Pedagogical University, which was temporarily displaced due to the occupation of Berdyansk by Russian troops at the beginning of Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. BSPU is a city-forming educational institution that unites talented and promising young people. The publication describes how the university administration, academic staff, and students overcame the challenges of war and temporary displacement. The authors emphasize the importance of communication with the community and local government, as these are people united by a common goal, problems, and needs based on the historical and cultural characteristics of the region in general and in connection with the war in particular. An important factor in the new format of work is the discussion of painful and problematic issues of occupation, education, and culture of Berdiansk and the definition of goals and objectives that the community will face after its de-occupation, which is part of the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals by Berdiansk State Pedagogical University. In general, the university's activities are aimed at implementing 13 goals: poverty eradication, good health and well-being, quality education, gender equality, clean water and adequate social conditions, affordable and clean energy, decent work and economic growth, sustainable development of cities and communities, climate change mitigation, marine conservation, protection of terrestrial ecosystems, peace and justice, and partnership for sustainable development. The course examines changes in the educational landscape due to temporary displacement, adaptation of traditional educational practices to new learning and teaching conditions, and modernization of the educational process related to the creation of an inclusive educational environment. The emphasis is on fostering values that address the current needs and interests of students, creating a favorable environment for the development of academic, social and emotional competencies. Student leisure, which is based on the principle of student-centeredness, is diversified even in the context of the university's relocation and the dispersion of teachers and students across Ukraine and the world. Thematic groups and clubs, summer and winter online and offline camps, a volunteer school, educational and psychological laboratories, theater, dance and history groups, the student almanac "Sails," public lectures by

leading university scholars – all these activities are aimed at unlocking creative potential, creating opportunities for cooperation, interaction and partnership between students, teachers, practitioners and scholars.

Keywords: university, education, sustainable development goals, community, students, values.

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Introduction

The consolidating driver of modern Ukrainian education is the implementation of the provisions of the Rome Communiqué, signed in November 2020 by the ministers of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), in particular in terms of the leading role of universities in achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals (hereinafter – the SDGs) (Educational and professional...). One of the objectives is to ensure inclusive and accessible quality education and to promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. Creating an inclusive environment that will ensure access to education, a new paradigm of learning and personal development, freedom of choice, continuity, focusing around the individual at different stages of life, mutual respect, and the formation of a holistic and valuable personality and professional are key elements in the Vision of the Future of Education and Science of Ukraine proposed by the Ministry of Education and Science (A vision of the future ...). Given the current challenges of Ukrainian education, scholars are discussing the rethinking of the requirements, essence, mission, and role of higher education institutions (HEIs), the introduction of new innovative interdisciplinary programmes, the availability of individual trajectory choices, the changing role of the teacher, the increasing subjectivity of the student, etc. (Sychikova, 2023). The foreseen changes involve the participation of future specialists in the life of the community, region, and state, implementing the third mission of the university – serving the community.

Basic reasoning

The war has demonstrated how important it is to communicate with the community and local government, as these are people united by a common goal, problems, and needs based on the historical and cultural specifics of the region in general and in connection with the war in particular. Currently, the professional training of philology teachers needs to be revised and adapted accordingly. We cannot ignore the fact that the Ukrainian philologist became one of the most vulnerable categories during the war and especially the occupation. Ukrainian philologists suffered from violence along with the military, law enforcement officers, and civic activists.

After our university moved to a new location in Zaporizhzhia, the educational environment changed. Moreover, constant shelling, rocket attacks, mass emigration and adaptation to the new conditions have seriously affected the mental health of students and teachers. However, the challenges also lead to the upgrading of the educational process, which is associated with the creation of an inclusive educational environment and the adaptation of traditional educational practices.

It has become clear that educational components related to live interaction, personal presence of all participants in the educational process require new methods, approaches and forms. In order to improve the academic process, its educational component, and establish communication with internal and external audiences, from December 2022 to April 2023, the BSPU team participated in the expert consultation programme "Communication and Human Resources Policy of the University in the Strategic Management System". The consultancy was carried out within the framework of the Project to Support Displaced Higher Education Institutions, implemented by the Fulbright Programme in Ukraine with the financial support of the US Embassy in Ukraine.

The result of meaningful work in the format of webinars, independent work, as well as individual consultations of our colleagues with experts, was two functional strategies – human resources and communication – to preserve and develop human capital in the war and post-war period, improve the quality of higher education, and develop our university as a focus of education, science, innovation, culture and spirituality of the Ukrainian Northern Azov region. In particular, the goal of the HR strategy is to ensure the stability of the university's functioning in the face of uncertainty and to increase its competitiveness by preserving and developing its human resources. The communication strategy is intended to improve the university's awareness, create a positive image, and ensure that applicants and stakeholders are interested in the functioning of our university and are interested in getting an education.

Berdyansk State Pedagogical University is a town-forming university that brings together talented and promising young people. In order to unite the Berdyansk community, on 31 May 2023, on the initiative of BSPU and with the support of the Berdyansk City Military Administration and the Berdyansk District State Administration, a youth forum "Youth of Berdyansk Region: Challenges of Occupation" was held in the city of Zaporizhzhia. The event was held in a combined format (on-site and remote) and gathered more than 300 people.

The topics discussed at the forum, including the role of youth in the city's life after its de-occupation, the challenges that the city's residents will face, and the prospects for post-war development, aroused the interest of those present, and their depth and scope encouraged new meetings. The university management analysed the survey and the results of the meeting in the publication "Youth views on the role of local government and universities in the development of deoccupied territories" (Bohdanov et al., 2023).

In 2023, the tradition of community solidarity continued and was implemented in a series of events under the general title "Youth of Berdyansk" as a symbol of the unity of the townspeople. Meetings of youth forums "Youth of Berdyansk: Challenges of De-occupation" and roundtables "Art in Occupation" (25 June 2023), "Active Youth of Berdyansk & Sustainable Development Goals" (11 August 2023), "Youth of Berdyansk: De-occupation and Partnership for Sustainable Development", "The Teachers We Need for the Education We Want: Teacher Motivations and Analysis of Challenges" (November 28, 2023) facilitates the discussion of painful and problematic issues of occupation, education, and culture in Berdyansk and the definition of goals and objectives that the community will face after its de-occupation.

Since the beginning of the war, BSPU has positioned itself as an integral part of the Ukrainian city of Berdyansk, so it was very important to link the university with the city. In December 2022, we organised and held an educational and cultural collaboration "Christmas Ideas in Art". This

tradition was continued in 2023: in April, the cultural and artistic event "Easter Unites" was held, and in December, the Christmas event "Let's Warm Our Hearts Together" was held.

All events were co-organised with the Education Department of the Executive Committee of the Berdyansk City Council and the Yevhenia Rudneva Centre for Children and Youth Creativity. Each collaboration day had an eventful programme, including informative lectures, a review of literature related to Christmas and Easter, workshops on making Christmas and Easter decorations, interactive laboratories, quests, storytelling, workshops and many interesting and creative activities.

Such gatherings bring together not only students, schoolchildren, the community of Berdyansk and Berdyansk district, but also guests from different parts of Ukraine and the world, and contribute to "strengthening social ties, restoring eternal values and a sense of unity among the community" (Christmas cleanup: revival...).

With the beginning of the full-scale invasion, BSPU lost its premises, teachers and students were dispersed throughout Ukraine and the world, which had a significant impact on educational activities. The university moved to an online format, survived lockdowns and hacker attacks during online broadcasts. Pre-war events are significantly different from those held during the war.

Nevertheless, the university staff has been looking for new ways to improve the educational process, which would allow us to continue to consolidate the community and promote a positive image of the university.

A very important message was the unity of the university family, so all events were focused on eternal values and the idea of unity. The Vyshyvanka Festival, which has a long tradition at BSPU, was no exception. In 2009, the Faculty of Philology and Social Communications held the first major Vyshyvanka Festival (vyshyvanka – traditional Ukrainian embroidery), which became a historical landmark not only for the university but also for the entire Russian-speaking city of Berdyansk. At that time, the Ukrainian language was spoken only in public institutions, and vyshyvanka was more of a stage costume than an element of clothing. And it was BSPU that started the tradition of wearing vyshyvanka, speaking Ukrainian, returning to centuries-old Ukrainian traditions, and re-gaining their culture. The first event was dedicated to the work of the prominent Ukrainian composer Volodymyr Ivasyuk, who was killed by the KGB on the orders of the top leadership of the USSR.

A year before the war, the university celebrated the Vyshyvanka Festival against the backdrop of the 3D mural "Rushnyk-Vyshyvanka", which adorns the building 5b of the BSPU building and is listed in the Book of Records of Ukraine in the category "Cultural Heritage, Dimensions" as a unique and largest national embroidery ornament of the Zaporizhzhia region. The ornament is made of 1,515 bricks, 10.5 metres high and 6.2 metres wide. In 2023, due to the war and occupation, it was not possible to repeat the magnitude of the event, but BSPU professors and students met in different regions of Ukraine (National Museum of Folk Architecture and Life of Ukraine, Kyiv; Museum of the History of Zaporizhzhia Cossacks, Khortytsia Island, Zaporizhzhia; Vinnytsia Central Park) and recorded memorable video greetings. This became a symbolic unification not only of the university community but also of the whole of Ukraine. In his solemn speech, Rector Ihor Bohdanov said: "And today we all put on embroidery, demonstrating that it is

not a tribute to fashion, not an element of stage dress. It is a code of identification of the multinational Ukrainian people, a source of our strength, our Victory!" (Bohdanov).

This event was much more important than before the full-scale invasion, because every word, every fragment of the video was experienced and suffered; everyone was aware of the price we pay for our freedom, culture, and traditions. In addition, everyone who was interested joined the flash mob "Wear Vyshyvanka", which took place on the university's live_bdpu page on the social network Instagram. The festive day ended with a university-wide presentation "Vyshyvanka as a unique code of the nation" prepared and delivered by Nataliia Romanova, Head of the Reading Rooms Sector of the BSPU Library. You can watch the videos on the BSPU StudMedia channel.

On 1 September 2023, BSPU once again united the city community and celebrated the Day of Knowledge and the initiation of students into freshmen. The event was held in a mixed online/offline format: the premises of Zaporizhzhia National University, to which the university was temporarily relocated, brought together the rector and vice-rectors, the chairman of the trade union committee, deans and teachers, and most importantly, first-year students.

A national anthem and a minute of silence to honour the memory of the fallen heroes and all those whose lives were taken by the war is a new tradition at the beginning of any university event. A symbolic moment was the proposal of Rector Ihor Bohdanov to all present to put memorable signatures on the flag of Ukraine, which will decorate the BSPU History Museum after our Victory.

It is important that the educational work is properly organised and focused on the real needs and interests of the student community. This helps to create a positive student community where not only academic but also social and emotional skills can be developed. Therefore, the free time of students of Berdyansk State Pedagogical University is diversified by thematic circles and clubs that contribute to the realisation of creative potential, creation of space for cooperation, interaction and partnership between students, teachers, practitioners, and researchers, taking into account the principle of student centrality.

Students of BSPU have opportunities for active and diverse growth in the following areas: physical culture, sports and human health, sports programming, creative design; conversation, gaming, reading and psychological clubs and forum theatre. Anyone interested can join the summer and winter camps, the volunteer school, the speech therapy laboratory, dance and history clubs, listen to a literary guide, have their works published in the student almanac, and seek help from the psychological office.

The calendar year ended with a new format for the university – a reading of the one-act fairy tale play "Star Holiday, or Wish Come True!" by contemporary author Nadiya Symchych. The project manager was Maryna Bohdanova. The highlight of this event was the joint play of students, graduates, and teachers of BSPU. The implementation of the project proved the idea that the absence of rooms, buildings, and classrooms does not prevent the university community from being a single entity, conducting educational work, cultivating values, and promoting the development of students' creativity, interest, and creativity.

Conclusions and recommendations

Numerous meetings with the university and city communities help to discuss painful and

problematic issues of occupation, education, and culture in Berdyansk and to define the goals and objectives that the community will face after its de-occupation. All of them are carried out within the framework of the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals by Berdyansk State Pedagogical University.

The mission, vision, and development priorities of Berdyansk State Pedagogical University are aimed at implementing the Sustainable Development Goals of Ukraine (Decree of the President of Ukraine "On the Sustainable Development Goals of Ukraine for the period up to 2030" of 30 September 2019) in order to ensure holistic education, balance of economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development of our country.

The Sustainable Development Goals at BSPU, as well as in our entire country, constitute a new system of mutually agreed management measures in the economic, social and environmental (nature protection) dimensions. The official website of BSPU contains full information on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals by the institution.

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