ORGANIZATIONAL ADAPTATION FOR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN UNIVERSITIES AMIDST WAR

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Abstract

In the evolving landscape of Ukrainian higher education, implementing inclusive education is both a challenge and an opportunity, intensified by the backdrop of war and post-war recovery. This study, centered on the experiences of the Berdyansk State Pedagogical University, a displaced and borderless institution, seeks to understand the unique hurdles and prospects in this journey. Engaging with 36 management representatives across four hierarchical levels, the research sheds light on effective strategies to ensure equal access for individuals with special educational needs. Key findings highlight the pivotal role of digitalization (Shuayb, 2020), the importance of adhering to European standards of inclusive education (Veidemane et al., 2021), and the transformative potential of a "university without walls" concept. These insights offer a deep understanding of the present scenario and chart a path forward, emphasizing collaborative, adaptive, and globally informed approaches. The outcomes are crucial for policymakers, educators, and the global academic community, providing a nuanced understanding of inclusive education in conflict-affected settings and underscoring the potential challenges.

Keywords: War, Ukraine, Inclusive Education, University, Institutional Policy, Institutional Strategy

1. INTRODUCTION

The increasing conflicts and crises around the world present unique challenges to higher education (Ivanchenko, 2023). For instance, the adaptation and resilience of educational institutions, particularly in regions facing direct conflict or post-conflict reconstruction, become critical for the continued delivery of quality education (Habib, 2023). It not only challenges the physical infrastructure and resources of education but also strikes at the very essence of its curriculum, highlighting the urgent need for more inclusive and adaptive approaches (Shuayb, 2020).

Given the severity and scope of the ongoing global crises, there is an imperative need for countries and educational institutions to prioritize: inclusive curriculum design, infrastructure spatial adaptability; trauma-informed pedagogies, technologies, and virtual platforms that cater to diverse student needs. By focusing on these areas, higher education can be a beacon of hope, resilience, and adaptability in an increasingly unpredictable and challenging world. Such adaptations require higher education institutions (HEIs) to re-evaluate and transform their teaching methodologies, physical spaces, and digital platforms to accommodate the diverse and often urgent needs of all groups of students, including those directly affected by war. These adaptations ensure both the continuity of educational processes and the maintenance of standing within the academic community. Each element of this inclusive design in higher education resembles a framework that addresses the specific needs of different groups of students. The base encompasses foundational measures like safe learning environments and access to essential resources. At the same time, the top tier involves intricate steps such as trauma-informed pedagogies and conflict-sensitive curriculum adaptation. The goal is to enable institutions at the foundational level to climb up this framework, enhancing the quality and inclusivity of their educational offerings (Coleman et al., 2008). For instance, leveraging digital platforms can ensure educational continuity in conflict zones, whereas embedding peace and conflict studies within curricula fosters student resilience and understanding (Habib, 2023). Similarly, teaching and learning that focuses on trauma-informed approaches can provide significant benefits to war-affected students (Davidson, 2017).

Anchoring all these efforts is the broader vision of creating a higher education system that is both responsive and proactive in its approach toward conflict and crises. This vision entails transforming HEIs from mere providers of knowledge into hubs of resilience and adaptability, thereby safeguarding the future of countless students in conflict zones (Veidemane et al., 2021). As countries grapple with the multifaceted challenges of wars and conflicts, inclusive design in higher education emerges as both a response mechanism and a long-term strategy for diversity, equality and inclusion.

With the pressing need to align higher education in Ukraine with the demands of crisis-ridden environments, the objective of this research is the implementation of inclusive education policies and practices in HEIs, specifically focusing on a university operating in a war zone. This includes examining the institutional policies, challenges faced, strategies adopted, and the interplay of these elements in the context of the war. According to this objective, the following research assumption was made. In HEIs affected by war, the effectiveness of implementing inclusive education is significantly influenced by a combination of internal and external factors. These factors include financial challenges, infrastructural limitations, staff capacity and motivation, and awareness of the special educational needs of diverse student groups. The focus of the investigation is to understand how external factors (such as the conditions arising from wartime) interact with internal institutional mechanisms. It can help to acknowledge both the challenges and potential strategies for enhancing inclusive education in a university setting in wartime.

The structure of this paper is as follows. Section 2 provides a comprehensive review of the relevant literature. Section 3 analyzes the methodology and methods that have been used to conduct empirical research. Section 4 presents the interpretation of the results. Section 5 discusses the implications of our findings. The final Section 6 concludes the paper by summarizing the key insights, reflecting on the limitations of our study, and suggesting avenues for future research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The importance of inclusive design in higher education is pivotal for promoting social equity and resilience, particularly during wartime (Harris et al., 2023; Hurenko et al., 2023). It can foster a sense of belonging and enhance the resilience of institutions and communities against unforeseen adversities.

Similarly, the global impact of events like the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing war in Ukraine have spurred conversations about the resilience and sustainability of urban spaces. While Grum and Grum's (2023) systematic review focuses on the interplay between crises and urban resilience in a broader context, it emphasizes the need for adaptive strategies in the face of global challenges. This perspective sets the stage for a deeper exploration of Ukraine's unique situation, where HEIs must navigate, adapt, and transform within the broader context.

The inability to properly develop and implement an inclusive learning environment can lead to negative consequences, from promoting social disparity and fostering deviant behavior to limiting human potential and job competitiveness (Hansen, 2012). Such a failure would most critically signify a breach of the educational rights of persons with disabilities, as enshrined in the Constitution of Ukraine.

In the case of Ukraine, the challenges multiply. Relocated due to war universities face new challenges but they continue to work. The unique challenges of war-affected universities, such as displacement and trauma, demand specialized strategies for maintaining educational continuity (Milton & Barakat, 2016; Greshta et al., 2023). The role of corporate governance in decision-making and policy development is crucial in this context, ensuring the needs of all stakeholders are met (Dwyer et al., 2023).

European universities have begun to recognize that accessibility for students from different vulnerable groups is not merely a legislative requirement but an indicator of the quality of higher education

(Kocdar & Bozkurt, 2023). For HEIs aiming to elevate their global reputation, the comprehensive implementation of inclusive education has become the *de facto* standard (Madani, 2019).

Organizational resilience in higher education can be defined as the ability of HEIs to anticipate, prepare for, respond, and adapt to adverse events, ensuring continuity in delivering quality education (de los Reyes et al., 2022). While resilience has always been valuable, contemporary global challenges, from geopolitical tensions to pandemics, have underscored its importance (Novomlynets et al., 2023). For HEIs operating in crises, governance becomes even more critical. Effective governance can provide the necessary framework for universities to adapt quickly, ensuring continuity of education, safeguarding academic standards, and supporting the well-being of both students and staff (Manita et al., 2020).

In the context of relocated universities, understanding organizational behavior becomes paramount. The challenges posed by relocation exhibit remarkable flexibility and ingenuity in their operations, from curriculum delivery to student and staff support mechanisms (Bohdanov et al., 2023). In translating these theories into practice, war-affected universities often innovate in areas like digital platforms and support systems to maintain inclusivity (Kozmenko et al., 2023). This approach is reinforced by scholars who emphasize the value of fostering an organizational culture that prioritizes diversity, equality, and inclusion as these traits are linked to greater adaptability and resilience (Bernstein et al., 2020).

The principle of inclusive design focuses on creating systems catering to the broadest range of users (Van der Linden et al., 2016). For higher education, this entails acknowledging and respecting differences in learning styles, capabilities, and experiences, ensuring accessibility, and promoting equitable opportunities for all (Dalton et al., 2019). The concept of inclusive design extends beyond the basic tenets of accessibility and equal opportunity, delving deep into crafting environments and experiences that anticipate and accommodate the diverse range of user needs (Woodcock, 2022).

In war-affected environments like Ukraine, the implementation of inclusive design faces specific challenges such as disrupted educational infrastructure and heightened psychological stress among students and staff. War results in displaced populations (Polishchuk et al., 2023), who face heightened vulnerabilities, including limited access to education. Moreover, the psychological toll of war necessitates educational approaches that are sensitive, adaptable, and responsive to trauma (Kaplow et al., 2023). So, it is paramount for higher education systems to reconfigure and adapt to the varied needs of students. Addressing these requires tailored strategies that are sensitive to the context of the ongoing war (Peregudova, 2023). This ensures that learning is not disrupted and that students do not bear the brunt of circumstances they have little control over (Voznyak et al., 2023).

In the face of mounting challenges posed by the ongoing war, university managers in Ukraine grapple with the immediate and long-term tasks of ensuring adaptation, resilience, and inclusivity. This paper delves into the perspectives of these managers, shedding light on the multifaceted challenges they encounter and the strategic approaches they adopt to navigate these turbulent times.

In addition, based on the literature review, we formulate a research hypothesis:

H1: The effectiveness of inclusive education during wartime is influenced by a combination of internal factors (such as financial limitations, infrastructural challenges, and staff capacity) and external factors (including the awareness of diverse educational needs).

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The primary focus of this study pertains to the case of a university's temporary relocation due to the temporary occupation of the city where its original campus was situated in the context of the full-scale war in Ukraine. These exigencies necessitated the relocation of the academic community to ensure the continuity of educational activities, resulting in the establishment of a "university without walls", which has been operational for a year and a half. This emergency prompted a comprehensive reassessment at the institutional level of what constitutes an inclusive educational environment and the concept of barrier-free education. This experience transcends conventional perspectives on inclusion, predominantly centered on physical campus environments, and instead calls for an expanded paradigm that accommodates the exigencies of war and relocation.

3.1. Participants

The research was conducted during the period spanning from August 2023 to September 2023. The study engaged management representatives from the university. Based on the university's overall size and managerial composition, a representative sample was selected to provide a sufficient reflection on the diverse viewpoints of those responsible for corporate governance and organizational behavior at the university. The survey involved 36 respondents who developed and monitored strategies to ensure equal access for individuals with special educational needs on different levels. The selection of respondents for this study was carefully considered, focusing on their specific roles and influence within the university's administrative structure. These respondents include vice-chancellors, deans, deputy deans, heads of academic departments, and leaders of structural divisions, all of whom are instrumental in developing and monitoring for implementing inclusion education at the university. Selecting respondents from these specific roles was crucial for the study as it allowed for a comprehensive collection of viewpoints and insights regarding institutional policies, particularly focusing on governance and regulatory measures that support inclusive design in higher education amidst wartime conditions.

3.2. Instrument and procedure

By the normative-legal framework of international and Ukrainian legislation regarding intervention in HEIs, and following a comprehensive theoretical analysis of pertinent research, an original questionnaire was developed. The questionnaire contained 14 questions (see Appendix). The chosen

questions in the questionnaire are directly linked to the research objective of understanding the implementation of inclusive education policies in HEIs operating within a war-affected environment. Each question is designed to explore key aspects crucial to our objective: valuating existing inclusive policies, considering the needs of vulnerable groups during policy development, analyzing challenges associated with ensuring equal access and support, and studying shifts in institutional perceptions due to the war. This approach validates *H1*. By gathering information on these areas, the questionnaire aimed to explore how universities adapt their internal mechanisms in response to external pressures of the war, thereby addressing both the challenges and potential strategies for enhancing inclusive education in wartime. This comprehensive approach ensures a holistic understanding of the interplay between these factors in the pursuit of effective inclusive education during the ongoing war.

The data collected from these diverse questions will be analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative data from closed-ended questions were statistically analyzed to identify trends and patterns, while qualitative data from open-ended questions were subjected to thematic analysis to extract deeper insights and nuances. This dual approach in data analysis allowed for a comprehensive understanding of how external wartime conditions interact with internal institutional mechanisms, thereby providing a nuanced view of the challenges and potential strategies for enhancing inclusive education in a university setting during wartime.

The questionnaires were administered online using Google Forms and were distributed to the corporate email addresses of the participating management representatives, totaling 48 individuals, including the rector, vice-rectors, deans, department heads, deputy deans, and heads of structural units. A total of 36 completed surveys were returned, which represents a return rate of 75%, allowing us to assert that the sample is representative. The research adhered rigorously to ethical standards, ensuring the anonymity of all participants. Participants were provided with a comprehensive overview of the study objectives, duration, and data security measures. Additionally, they were assured that there were no definitive right or wrong responses, fostering an environment conducive to candid and unbiased feedback. Participants were further informed that their personal information would remain confidential and be employed for research purposes or publication in an aggregated format, facilitating the dissemination of general quantitative and statistical data. All participants provided informed consent for the publication of generalized results.

4. RESEARCH RESULTS

4.1. University policies for inclusive education

In the changing landscape of higher education, ensuring equal access to quality educational services for all is paramount. Institutional policies play a crucial role in shaping and promoting diversity, equity and inclusion, guaranteeing that all students have equal rights and treatment and are welcomed and included so that they do not experience any disadvantage because of belonging to particular groups (especially vulnerable), and that each student is given the same opportunities as others according to their needs.

The analysis of respondents' answers (see Figure 1) showed that most representatives of the management rate the existing institutional policy aimed at implementing an inclusive education at the university at a high (36.1%) or sufficient level (50%). However, the analysis of the answers revealed that at the institutional level, there is a noticeable absence of a clear and systematic strategic approach to implementing an inclusive institutional policy both before and during the war.

Figure 1. Evaluation of institutional policy for implementing an inclusive education
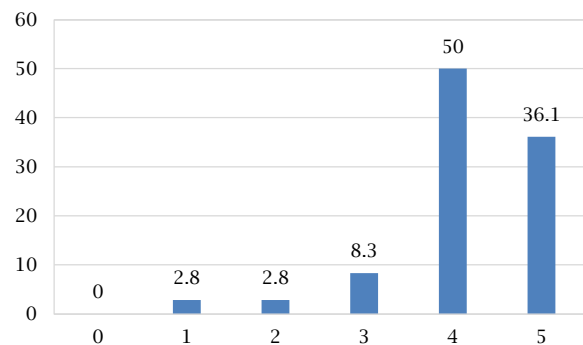
This observation is further substantiated by the inconsistency and the absence of explicitly specified regulatory documentation that would oversee this process. The analysis of the answers to questions about regulatory documents to regulate the organization of inclusive education, access and support of students from vulnerable groups revealed that in 50% of responses from the university management, the Regulations on the Organization of the Educational Process of the University is cited as the guiding document. However, the inclusion policy outlined therein is quite general, a trend observed in other normative documents mentioned by the respondents, which regulate the educational process and different social or legal facets.

Answering for other question "*Do you agree that when developing institutional policies, the needs of all students, including those from vulnerable groups, should be comprehensively considered?*" 80.6% of respondents chose "Strongly agree" or "Agree". However, nearly 27% of university management are unaware of the monitoring of students with special educational needs. Such a discrepancy in responses somewhat hampers the clear and specific definition of inclusive education, its goals, and objectives in the context of the university's activities. It affects the qualitative coordinated collaboration of all structural units and their effective vertical and horizontal interaction concerning creating an inclusive educational environment.

Overall, inclusive education is essential to the university's activities, and many management members recognize its importance and support it. However, there are differences in levels of support and implementation of inclusive education at various management levels and different structural units of the university. This situation may require

additional efforts to create a more unified and effective inclusive educational system. To achieve this goal, it is necessary to establish coordination in the work of all departments and units and clearly define inclusive institutional policies at the university.

4.2. Challenges in inclusive education during wartime

One of the important challenges faced by universities during the war was changes in the stability of the quantitative composition of the university community. This plays a cruel role in shaping an inclusive educational environment. Changes induced by war disrupted this balance, posing challenges in maintaining diversity, resource allocation, academic offerings, community engagement, student well-being, and equitable access to education. At the beginning of the full-scale war, Berdyansk State Pedagogical University's faculty members comprised 249 members. By November 2023, there was a notable reduction in staff numbers to 209. This decrease can be attributed to a variety of reasons. A significant portion of the staff found new employment opportunities in their relocated areas, while others faced dismissal due to threats and intimidation from the occupying forces. These changes reflect the broader challenges faced by the university during such tumultuous times. Regarding student enrollment, the higher education student contingent at Berdyansk State Pedagogical University in the 2021–2022 academic year was 4629. By November 2023, there was a marked decrease to 4181 students. This decline is primarily due to the challenges in recruiting new students to a university that had to relocate. Many potential applicants, particularly those residing in the temporarily occupied regions, faced severe threats from the occupiers. This intimidating environment led to a significant number of these students opting for pseudo-universities established by the occupying forces, rather than pursuing their education at a relocated university.

According to the survey results, the most significant challenges encountered by the university's management in implementing an inclusive education are financial challenges (52.8%). These, in turn, provoke a series of other issues, including limited technical resources (38.9%), infrastructure problems (30.6%), insufficient personnel potential (33.3%), and motivation of the faculty staff (27.8%) (see Figure 2). The lack of sufficient personnel capacity subsequently causes problems related to the inability to consider the needs of all students (27.8%), time constraints due to uneven workload distribution (25%), and a lack of digital technology skills among students (27.8%), which can complicate the effectiveness of implementing an inclusive education. These results showed that the pressing situation could be further complicated by anticipated challenges, including greater financial problems due to the need to restore university infrastructure after de-occupation, loss of human potential among students and faculty staff due to their forced migration and reluctance to return after the war to their previous place of residence, and the insufficient level of faculty members preparation for working in an inclusive environment.

Figure 2. Challenges and problems university faced in the implementation of inclusive education in wartime
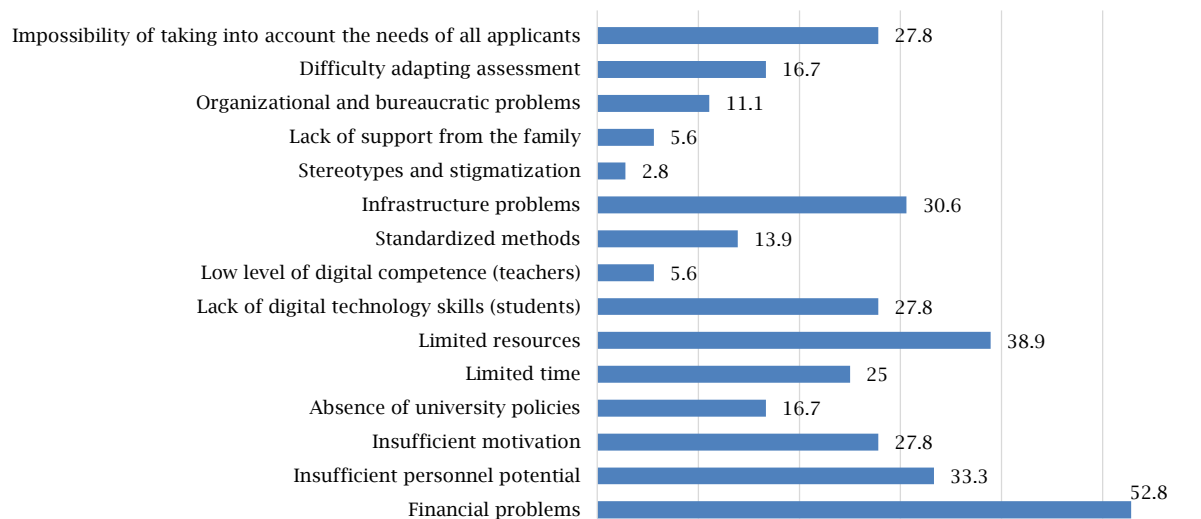
War conditions led to an additional challenge of an increased number of beneficiaries within an inclusive approach and a review of faculty members' teaching and learning methods, which should be regulated at the institutional level (see Table 1). The university management's responses show that the onset of a full-scale war has changed the university's perception of inclusivity, with 47.2% of respondents affirmatively stating this change. Special attention is given to student groups with disabilities (80.6%), with war or victim experience (75%), students of unprotected groups (58.3%), and refugees and internally displaced persons (52.8%).

Table 1. Vulnerable students' groups for inclusive institutional policy development

Vulnerable groups	Percentage (%)
Students with disabilities	80.6
Students with psychophysical developmental disorders	38.9
Ethnic minorities representatives	30.6
Students with low socioeconomic status	38.9
Gender non-conforming students (transgender, non-binary, etc.)	11.1
Students with war or victim experience	75.0
Students with traumatic events or disasters experience	55.6
Refugees and internally displaced persons	52.8
Students hailing from diverse geographic areas (e.g., rural youth)	44.4
Members of sexual minorities (LGBTQ+)	16.7
Older adults embrace lifelong learning	36.1
Students resuming their education after a prolonged break	36.1
Students from unprotected groups (minimal or no family support, orphans, frequent change of educational institutions, mental health issues, pregnancy, inability to allocate sufficient time for education due to the necessity of earning a livelihood through work or providing care for someone)	58.3

Respondent's answers to the question "*Based on which characteristics has there been an increase in the number of students from vulnerable groups since the beginning of the full-scale war?*" (see Figure 3) indicate that there was an increase in the number of students based on social characteristics (94.4%), military status (75%), psychological conditions (61.1%), and physical and mental health conditions (47.2%). At the same time, representatives of the university management, answering the question "*For which characteristics is an increase in the number of students from vulnerable groups expected during Ukraine's post-war period?*" highlighted that a significant rise in students from vulnerable groups is anticipated based on the following characteristics: social (88.9%), encompassing refugees, internally displaced person (IDPs), orphans, victims of armed and ethnic conflicts, victims of environmental and technological disasters, victims of natural disasters, students from low-income families, etc.; military (86.1%), including participants of the anti-terrorist operation (ATO), combatants, and war veterans; physical and psychological health (77.8%), comprising students with disabilities, students in need of psychological support, victims of violence, students requiring physical rehabilitation, and students with psychophysical impairments; and family circumstances (47.2%), which includes those who have become primary breadwinners for their families due to the war and students from large families.

This poses additional challenges in the context of the implementation of inclusive education and requires a proactive approach from educational institutions. To meet the diverse needs of these students, universities must invest in accessible infrastructure, provide specialized support services, and train faculty and staff to create an inclusive learning environment. Moreover, fostering a culture of inclusivity and raising awareness about the unique challenges faced by these students will be crucial for their successful integration into higher education. In doing so, universities in Ukraine can play a vital role in promoting equity, diversity, and social integration in the post-war period.

Figure 3. Existing and expected changing among students from vulnerable groups
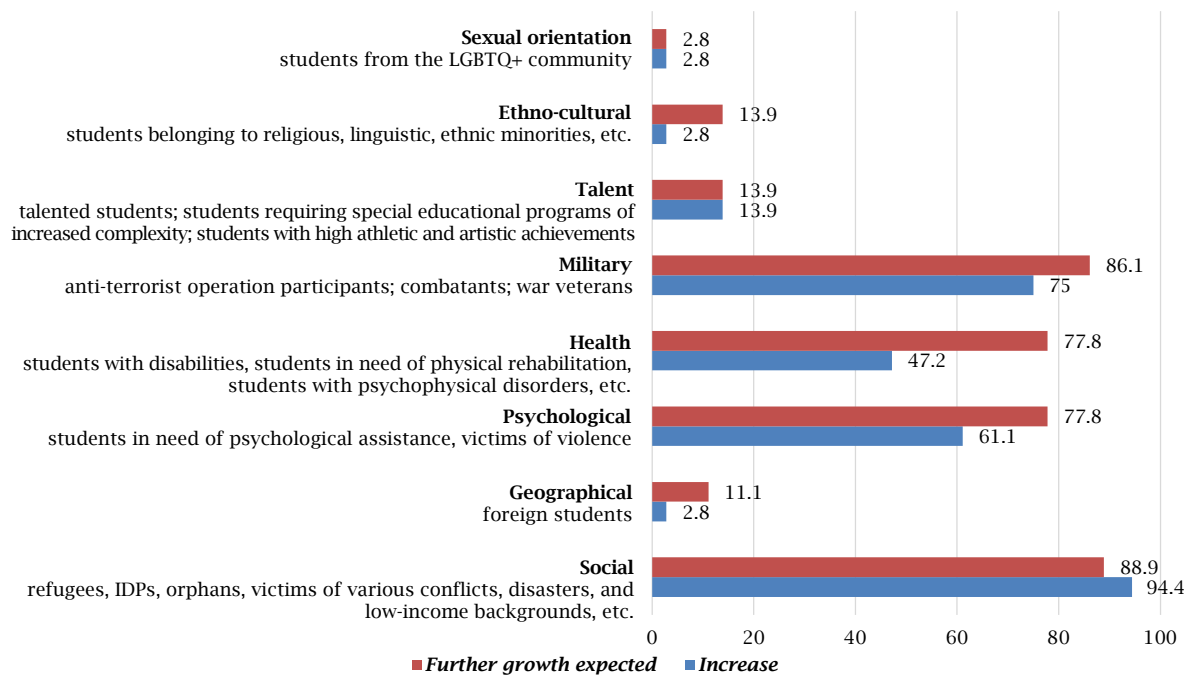
One of the challenges caused by external circumstances is ensuring involvement in the learning of students with war or victim experience. According to the answers to the question "*In your opinion, what are the key areas of focus for supporting students with war or victim experience, and for fostering an inclusive educational environment in the post-war recovery period?*" most university management representatives (91.7%) emphasized the necessity to develop and implement specialized mental health support programs for students with war or victim experience. Additionally, creating avenues for the social-psychosocial reintegration of military veterans and their adaptation to civilian life is vital, as 83.3% of the respondents noted. In the context of post-war recovery, building an accessible, inclusive educational environment for a broad range of beneficiaries is a strategic direction that, according to university administration, can strengthen the community (75%) and promote the principles of equality, tolerance, and justice (75%). In the respondents' opinion, the university's work supporting students with war or victim experience will foster dialogue and mutual understanding (61.1%). This is crucial in post-war recovery as it aids in uniting society and fostering a more equal and compassionate community.

The university can provide a platform for open discussion and interaction among representatives of various social groups, including war veterans, facilitating mutual understanding of their needs and perspectives. This dialogue and mutual understanding can pave a collective path to recovery in de-occupied territories and lay the foundation for inclusive policies on a macro level. A leading idea from the university's management is to position the institution as an initiator and mediator, providing a platform for discussing and making decisions considering all stakeholders' diverse interests and needs. This approach promotes the construction of an inclusive society where every citizen has equal opportunities and rights and is a significant step in post-war recovery and community rebuilding.

The system of current and anticipated challenges cannot be overlooked when considering the challenges brought about by European integration. According to a qualitative analysis of respondents' answers to the question: "*What prospects and challenges of inclusive education in Ukraine are expected as a result of European integration?*" the challenges were grouped into four key themes, closely tied to the overall sentiment of the respondents. The first is related to financial constraints. Respondents emphasized the critical need for sufficient financial resources to support the transition towards and maintenance of new standards in inclusive education. This reflects a broader understanding that financial investment is key to the success of these initiatives. The second theme reveals the training and professional development needs of educators, support staff, and administrators. The respondents highlighted the need for extensive professional development to align with European standards of inclusive education, suggesting a recognition of the gap in current capabilities and the standards set forth by European integration. The third key theme of challenges is related to cultural and social adaptation. The respondents pointed to the challenge of adapting to a new educational paradigm. This involves changing cultural attitudes and societal norms towards inclusivity, a process that can be intricate and time-consuming. It underscores the respondents' awareness of the deep-rooted cultural shifts necessary for the successful implementation of inclusive education. Infrastructure and resource allocation, which involves developing the required infrastructure, including both technology and physical resources, was seen as a significant hurdle. This concern reflects an understanding of the tangible, logistical aspects of implementing inclusive education, recognizing that physical and technological upgrades are integral to creating an inclusive educational environment. According to university management representatives, these challenges will lead to changes in regulatory and legal regulation alterations in traditional approaches to teaching and learning. It will open opportunities for education financing to create a conducive environment for all students. Therefore, acknowledging and adopting European standards should serve as a roadmap for institutional improvement and inclusiveness in HEIs, especially in planning potential institutional strategies.

4.3. Strategies for sustainable inclusive education

Analyzing potential institutional strategies is impossible without considering the core elements of inclusive education, which, in the view of the university management, became particularly relevant with the onset of the full-scale war in Ukraine, considering students' needs. According to the university management (see Figure 4), the most pertinent element is a focus on ensuring digital accessibility for all (75%). Firstly, the university operates in a virtual format, providing essential technical tools for faculty staff and students and enhancing their proficiency in using these tools. Secondly, considering all students' needs will require flexible approaches in organizing various forms and formats of teaching and learning to ensure access to education for all students (66.9%). Other elements include the development of adaptive courses, mental health and social support (all at a rate of 61.1%), changing teaching and learning approaches (58.3%), and the implementation of an equal opportunity institutional policy (47.2%).

Figure 4. Key internal elements of inclusive education at university during wartime
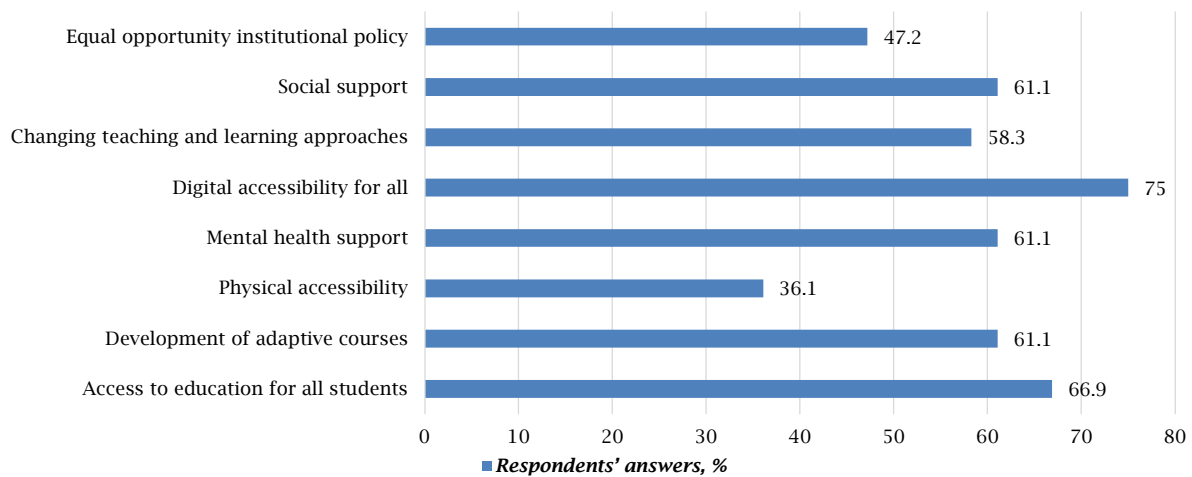
These results illustrate a conscious effort to adapt the internal institutional needs to the external challenges of implementing inclusive education in wartime.

The other important question concerned the effective strategies for the implementation of inclusive education at university. The responses to this question contribute to a deeper exploration of how external wartime conditions interact with internal institutional mechanisms and cope with the immediate challenges of war but also lays the groundwork for sustained inclusive education in the post-war recovery phase.

According to the respondents (see Table 2), the most effective strategy is technological, specifically equipping HEIs with assistive technologies and supportive software for educating students with disabilities and other vulnerable groups (80.6%). This involves considering the possibility of providing subsidized or free technical tools (computers, tablets, etc.) and internet access for students from vulnerable groups (75%).

Table 2. The effective strategies for the implementation of inclusive education at university.

Responses	Answers (%)
Considering the possibility of providing subsidized or free technical devices (computers, tablets, etc.) and internet access for students from vulnerable groups	75.0
Equipping educational institutions with assistive technologies and auxiliary software for students with disabilities and other vulnerable groups	80.6
Partnerships with civil society organizations	52.8
Adapting curriculums and courses	38.9
Reforming the university organizational structure and workload of staff	30.6
Adapting teaching and learning methods	50.0
Involving specialists in inclusive and special education	41.7
Advocacy and raising awareness about inclusive education	44.4
Providing financial support for students from vulnerable groups	44.4
Employment after graduating from university	36.1

For the university management representatives, a partnership development strategy is vital (52.8%). This can be used as an additional opportunity to involve experts in inclusive and special education (41.7%). Advocacy and enhancing public awareness, emphasized by 44.4% of respondents, as well as opportunities for providing financial support to students from vulnerable groups (44.4%) and assistance in employment after graduating from university (36.1%) are also significant.

An essential component of potential strategies for all tiers of management is also the adaptation of teaching and learning methods (50%) and the adaptation of curriculums and courses (38.9%). However, the reformation of the university's organizational structure and the workload of the faculty member staff, mentioned by 30.6%, mainly matters to department heads and deputy deans. They juggle their leadership roles with their primary teaching position and are directly involved in the educational process. Focusing on this strategy will ensure an equal opportunities policy for students and faculty members. This is because reforming institutional policy and strategy should be based on interaction, collaboration, and mutual respect among all participants in the educational process. Integrating students' and faculty members' needs and aspirations into strategic planning will create a harmonious, inclusive educational environment where everyone can realize their potential. Moreover, this approach will boost motivation, job satisfaction, and overall educational quality. Such a strategy will not only help achieve the university's strategic goals. However, it will also strengthen its position in the educational market, making it more competitive and attractive to potential students and professionals.

An additional strategy, brought to light through a qualitative analysis of responses from management representatives, revolves around embracing globalization and the integration of European processes by implementing European standards for inclusive education. The qualitative analysis of responses from management representatives to the question: "*What prospects and challenges of*

inclusive education in Ukraine are expected as a result of European integration?" has unveiled fundamental themes, encompassing a range of potential prospects, including enhanced quality and standards — respondents believe that the adoption of European standards will introduce best practices and benchmarks that are essential for guiding Ukrainian educational institutions; international collaboration and support, as per respondents, through European integration, open doors to invaluable international collaborations that have the potential to enrich the landscape of our educational practices; policy and legislative development — the examination of European models is seen as a realm of possibilities, with European models expected to shape our policy reforms, making our education system more inclusive and responsive.

Additionally, during the analysis, key strategic implications of European integration were identified. It is expected to have positive consequences for the development of inclusive education within the context of European integration. These dimensions encompass: policy integration, according to respondents, involves not only the implementation but also the adaptation of European policies to align with our specific needs; capacity building, respondents believe that investment in empowering our educators and staff is crucial; stakeholder engagement is identified as pivotal in effectively addressing challenges and seizing the opportunities presented by this integration; continuous evaluation, respondents deem this essential to ensure that our approaches remain relevant in a constantly evolving educational landscape.

In particular, the analysis of responses to the open-ended question: "*In what way can the European standards of inclusive education become a road map for institutional improvement and inclusiveness of the educational environment in a higher education institution?*" allowed us to conduct a qualitative analysis of potential strategies that need to be considered in the context of European integration in the educational sector. This analysis revealed that European standards of inclusive education are perceived as a critical foundation for enhancing institutional practices and fostering a more inclusive educational environment. Among the key themes identified, the necessity of adapting and studying European experiences to the local context was emphasized, as respondents suggested that learning from European models could significantly benefit Ukrainian higher education. Additionally, enhancing the qualifications of faculty members and support staff was highlighted as a vital strategy, with respondents agreeing on the importance of aligning professional development with European standards. Financial support and the development of effective policies and strategies were also noted as crucial. Respondents underscored the need for adequate funding and strategic planning to support these transformative efforts. The importance of systematic and consistent changes, supported by legislative initiatives at the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine level, was also a recurring theme. As respondents indicated, legal backing is essential for the effective implementation and sustainability of inclusive education reforms.

Overall, the analysis underscores the multifaceted impact of integrating European standards in Ukrainian higher education, highlighting the balance between opportunities for advancement and the challenges of adaptation, professional development, and policy alignment. However, the war's context must be considered in introducing and adapting European standards. This context makes Ukrainian policies and practices for building an inclusive educational environment unique. It demands a particular approach and innovative strategies for reforming the inclusive educational environment of HEIs. Here, challenges that seem insurmountable should be viewed as potential opportunities through seeking new approaches, resources, and partnerships.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. Warfront: A constant disruptor

Inclusive education in Ukrainian universities, particularly within the context of Berdyansk State Pedagogical University, faces a challenging path complicated by numerous intricacies, especially considering the profound and pervasive impact of the ongoing war. As the results indicate, the war not only caused the physical displacement of HEIs but also financial and infrastructural problems, leading to limited technical resources, a shortage of personnel, and a decrease in motivation among academic and support staff.

These challenges, combined with the constant stress and anxiety of constant threats (Kipenskyi et al., 2023), burnout (Tsybuliak et al., 2023), psychological scars from coercion and the escalation of hostilities (Nenko et al., 2023), as well as systemic issues such as deportations and disinformation campaigns (Lavrysh et al., 2022), have deeply penetrated academic communities, especially for those still residing in the occupied territories. As a result, the unstable environment, characterized by communication disruptions, decreased academic focus, uneven workload distribution, and heightened psychological difficulties, manifests in discrepancies between expected and actual learning outcomes for students. However, even against the backdrop of these challenges, Ukrainian universities strive to create a supportive and inclusive educational environment that caters to the needs of all students.

5.2. Challenges in defining inclusion in higher education

The term "inclusion" within the context of HEIs in Ukraine is evolving, with its dimensions expanding beyond traditional understandings. Historically, the concept was primarily centered on physical accessibility for students with disabilities and providing tailored educational materials (Stern et al., 2014). However, with the advent of "universities without walls", the inclusion benchmarks are shifting. Factors like physical accessibility, once deemed paramount, are now becoming secondary in the face of new challenges and paradigms.

One such emerging paradigm is digital inclusion, which emphasizes using digital tools to cater to students with varied needs and those residing in diverse locations (Reisdorf & Rhinesmith, 2020). This evolving understanding demands a more

individualized and adaptable approach to education, ensuring that the unique requirements of all students, including combatants, refugees, and internally displaced persons, are met. According to the feedback from the research participants, among potential effective institutional strategies could be the implementation of equal opportunity institutional policies.

Meanwhile, a significant challenge lies in the lack of a unified understanding of "inclusion" at the legislative level. The lack of alignment in terminology and critical principles of inclusion, both domestically and with European standards, poses a substantial barrier. This divergence calls for the government's immediate attention to streamlining definitions, ensuring that the concept of inclusion is multidimensional and aligned with international best practices and standards.

5.3. Digital realm in higher education: Opportunities and constraints

The digital era has unquestionably reshaped the contours of higher education, bringing with it a mosaic of opportunities and challenges. Digital technologies have seamlessly woven into the fabric of contemporary society, with higher education being no exception. On the one hand, digital advancements have ushered in innovative tools like virtual assistants, catering specifically to students with special educational needs (Galynska & Bilous, 2022). Such technologies enable HEIs to customize the educational journey, ensuring it aligns with individual student capabilities and requirements (Gabriel et al., 2022). The digital realm also promises consistent access to education, which is particularly vital when traditional educational infrastructures falter, as witnessed in several regions of Ukraine due to war-induced disruptions (Nehrey et al., 2023).

The digital domain is an asset and a lifeline for "universities without walls" — institutions that have transitioned to a virtual format due to adversities such as warfare (Galynska & Bilous, 2022). It ensures that education remains within reach for all, especially those hailing from vulnerable groups. Be it students ensnared in war zones, those navigating the challenges of temporarily occupied territories, or even those geographically distant, digital platforms bridge the accessibility chasm, ensuring education remains unimpeded (Kravchenko et al., 2022). Moreover, these digital avenues have been pivotal in gauging educational needs, facilitating psychological support, and fostering communication, especially for those scarred by the ramifications of military conflict (Tytova & Mereniuk, 2022).

However, the digital shift is not devoid of hurdles. Foremost among these is the quest for digital equity. The goal is to ensure unfettered access to digital tools for every educational stakeholder, from students to faculty staff, irrespective of their socio-economic or geographical backgrounds (de Brito Prado et al., 2023). The results of our survey support such conclusions. According to the university management opinion, the most relevant institutional strategy is a focus on ensuring digital accessibility for all. For instance, to enable asynchronous communication, faculty members from relocated universities use the Moodle electronic learning support system. This system includes educational and methodological support for courses,

as well as forms for discussion and support. This approach allows students from temporarily occupied territory to study at their own pace and at any time convenient. For students with disabilities, special attention is paid to the formatting of the content, including text structure, labelling, images and explanations, as well as the use of colour gamut contrast and adaptability. Multimedia educational materials are supplemented with a text version to facilitate the perception of information by persons with hearing impairments. Synchronous interaction happens with the video conferencing platform, which supports the subtitle function and facilitates accessibility.

Complicating this situation, as evidenced by the results of our survey, is the lack of digital skills among students with special educational needs and, as noted by Glencross et al. (2021) the financial pressure associated with the need to acquire technical tools. For individuals with low income, this only exacerbates their disparities. It can lead to "digital inequality" which can further deepen societal rifts, amplifying the chasm between the digitally privileged and the marginalized (Sichkarenko et al., 2021).

Furthermore, the active use of digital technologies to ensure the systematic provision of educational services for all and their safety in the conditions of armed conflict leads to the challenge of developing adaptive courses, and changing approaches to teaching and learning. In particular, it calls for enhancing the level of digital competence among faculty staff (Talanova & Kushchenko, 2022). They have to possess skills for the critical and creative use of digital tools, adapting them to the individual needs and capabilities of students from different vulnerable groups.

5.4. European integration: Navigating the challenges

European integration is a double-edged sword for Ukraine's higher education system. On the one hand, European integration can stimulate the modernization of the higher education system by European standards and requirements (Bondar et al., 2020), promote the adoption of best practices, and set benchmarks that are crucial for the management of Ukrainian HEIs. It opens the doors to invaluable international cooperation with the potential to enrich the landscape of our educational practices, including inclusive. On the other hand, it imposes significant burdens. Various European states' diverse educational systems, cultures, and socio-economic realities make a one-size-fits-all approach challenging. Furthermore, implementing inclusive higher education principles demands substantial financial, technical, and human resources. This aligns directly with the responses from the management representatives. For instance, directives like the Rome Ministerial Communiqué (European Higher Education Area and Bologna Process, 2020) advocate for enhancing digitalization in higher education. However, achieving such goals is formidable without the requisite infrastructure and preparedness, especially for countries with resource constraints.

Moreover, disparities in resource availability among European nations can lead to unequal paces in implementing inclusive practices, potentially affecting global competitiveness. The challenge is

compounded by the necessity to study the European experience and adapt it to the local context, implementing systematic and consistent changes supported by legislative initiatives at the level of the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine. The consequences of the conflict, including the destruction of educational infrastructure, reallocation of the country's financial resources to ensure its defence capability, loss of human potential among students and faculty, and psychological issues they face, pose significant obstacles on Ukraine's path to European integration.

6. CONCLUSION

Pursuing inclusive education in Ukrainian universities, particularly in the challenging context of war and for future post-war recovery, reveals significant obstacles and potential opportunities. The effectiveness of inclusive education in HEIs during wartime is influenced by a mix of internal and external factors, ranging from financial and infrastructural challenges to limitations in staff capacity and motivation, as well as varied awareness levels about the educational needs of a diverse student body. While the importance of inclusivity is widely recognized, our study highlights a substantial gap in systematic and strategic approaches to inclusive education. This gap is exacerbated by the general nature of current institutional and governmental policies and the lack of specific regulatory frameworks.

The study, though limited to a single institution, provides valuable insights that can inform broader strategies for inclusive education in conflict and post-conflict settings. To effectively address challenges, the study underscores the necessity of a multifaceted strategy. At the university management level, embracing technology for digital accessibility, integrating assistive technologies, and providing necessary technical equipment are key strategies. Promoting collaborative partnerships with civil society and experts is essential for resource sharing, expertise, and fostering an inclusive learning environment. Redefining teaching methodologies to accommodate diverse learning needs, training faculty in inclusive practices, ensuring curriculum flexibility, and supporting various learning styles with technology are also critical. Additionally, implementing career counseling for students from vulnerable groups is vital for their successful transition into the workforce. At the governmental level, blending European inclusive education standards with the unique Ukrainian context is imperative. Incentivizing HEIs excelling in inclusive practices and allocating specific research funding are recommended actions. Ukrainian universities can

benefit from international collaborations, shared research, exchange programs, and curriculum development, supported by funding and global advocacy.

This study, while insightful, has limitations. Conducted in a single institution, its findings may not apply to the wider Ukrainian higher education context, as they don't fully capture the varied challenges and practices of different institutions. The small sample size, focused mainly on management representatives, restricts the generalizability of the results and might not represent the full spectrum of institutional perspectives. Additionally, the lack of pre-war research limits the assessment of the war's impact on these educational processes. However, the study still provides a crucial exploration of management views, key to understanding the implementation of inclusive education amidst European integration and post-war reconstruction. These limitations highlight the need for further research involving multiple institutions and a more comprehensive sample, including a broader range of stakeholders such as faculty, support staff, and students. Such research is essential to understand better the complexities and variations in inclusive education practices in similar contexts and to develop more holistic and effective strategies. This can contribute to the development of robust and inclusive educational policies and practices.

Adaptation and resilience remain central to the successful transformation of higher educational institutions, especially in contexts that demand rapid responses to socio-political challenges and the need for inclusive educational environments. In the face of adversity, the Ukrainian higher education system has shown remarkable resilience and adaptability. The journey towards inclusive education, while fraught with challenges, also presents a unique opportunity to redefine, reimagine, and reshape inclusive education's future in Ukraine. This study's findings can be practically useful for policymakers and legislators involved in devising and implementing a national-level strategy for inclusive education in HEI. By providing insights into perspectives and highlighting key challenges and opportunities, this study offers a general framework for educational reforms. It underscores the need for a collaborative approach involving various stakeholders to ensure that the inclusive education framework is robust, adaptable, and responsive to the diverse needs of students. Moreover, the findings can inform policy decisions, contributing to the formulation of comprehensive, evidence-based strategies that can foster a more inclusive educational landscape across HEIs in Ukraine.

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APPENDIX. QUESTIONNAIRE QUESTIONS

1. Evaluate the extent to which your university has a consistent policy aimed at implementing an inclusive education on a scale from 0 to 5 points, where 0 is a low level and 5 is high.

2. What regulatory documents of your university regulate the organization of inclusive education, access and support of students from vulnerable groups? (Open-ended question).

3. Do you agree that when developing institutional policies, the needs of all students, including those from vulnerable groups, should be comprehensively considered? Evaluate on a scale from 0 to 5 points, where 0 is a low level and 5 is high.

4. Does your university monitoring of students with special educational needs? It is possible to make one choice. Suggested options:

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Not sure

5. What challenges and problems does your university face in ensuring equal access to higher education and support for all students including vulnerable groups? It is possible to make several choices. Suggested options:

☐ Impossibility of taking into account the needs of all students
☐ Financial problems
☐ Difficulty adapting assessment
☐ Organizational and bureaucratic problems
☐ Stereotypes and stigmatization
☐ Infrastructure problems
☐ Standardized methods
☐ Low level of faculty staff digital competence
☐ Lack of students' digital technology skills
☐ Limited resources
☐ Limited time
☐ Absence of institutional policies of inclusive education
☐ Insufficient motivation of faculty staff

6. In your opinion, Has the onset of the full-scale war in Ukraine changed your university's perception of the importance of diversity, equity and inclusion in the learning environment? It is possible to make one choice. Suggested options:

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Not sure

7. In your opinion, which vulnerable students' groups should the university consider when developing an inclusive institutional policy? It is possible to make several choices. Suggested options:

☐ Students with disabilities
☐ Students with psychophysical developmental disorders
☐ Ethnic minorities representatives
☐ Students with low socioeconomic status
☐ Gender non-conforming students (transgender, non-binary, etc.)
☐ Students with war or victim experience
☐ Students with traumatic events or disasters experience
☐ Refugees and internally displaced persons
☐ Students hailing from diverse geographic areas (e.g., rural youth)
☐ Members of sexual minorities (LGBTQ+)
☐ Older adults embrace lifelong learning
☐ Students resuming their education after a prolonged break
☐ Students from unprotected groups (minimal or no family support, orphans, frequent change of educational institutions, mental health issues, pregnancy, inability to allocate sufficient time for education due to the necessity of earning a livelihood through work or providing care for someone)

8. Based on which characteristics has there been an increase in the number of students from vulnerable groups since the beginning of the full-scale war? It is possible to make several choices. Suggested options:

☐ Social
☐ Geographical
☐ Physical and psychological health
☐ Military
☐ Talent
☐ Ethno-cultural
☐ Sexual orientational

9. For which characteristics is an increase in the number of students from vulnerable groups expected during Ukraine's post-war period? It is possible to make several choices. Suggested options:

Social
Geographical
Physical and psychological health
Military
Talent
Ethno-cultural
Sexual orientational

10. In your opinion, what are the key areas of focus for supporting students with war or victim experience, and for fostering an inclusive educational environment in the post-war recovery period? It is possible to make several choices. Suggested options:

Developing specialized support programs for students with war or victim experience
Creating psychosocial reintegration and adaptation programs for student's military veterans
Advocacy of an inclusive educational environment for diverse student groups
Promoting community strengthening through equality, tolerance, and justice principles
Fostering dialogue and mutual understanding among students
Another variant

11. With the onset of the full-scale war in Ukraine, which elements of inclusive education, in your opinion, have become especially relevant? It is possible to make several choices. Suggested options:

Ensuring digital accessibility for all
Organizing various forms and formats of teaching and learning to ensure access to education for all students
Development of adaptive courses
Mental health support
Social support
Changing teaching and learning approaches
Implementation of an equal opportunity institutional policy
Another variant

12. In your opinion, what are the effective strategies for ensuring equal access to higher education for students from vulnerable groups and full support in completing higher education in wartime conditions and for future post-war recovery of Ukraine? It is possible to make several choices. Suggested options:

Considering the possibility of providing subsidized or free technical devices (computers, tablets, etc.) and internet access for students from vulnerable groups
Equipping educational institutions with assistive technologies and auxiliary software for students with disabilities and other vulnerable groups
Partnerships with civil society organizations
Adapting curriculums and courses
Reforming the university organizational structure and workload of staff
Adapting teaching and learning methods
Involving specialists in inclusive and special education
Advocacy and raising awareness about inclusive education
Providing financial support for students from vulnerable groups
Employment after graduating from university
Another variant

13. What prospects and challenges of inclusive education in Ukraine are expected as a result of European integration? (Open-ended question).

14. In what way can the European standards of inclusive education become a road map for institutional improvement and inclusiveness of the educational environment in a higher education institution? (Open-ended question).