

The future of higher education today

Episode 1: How can our universities support Ukraine? – Transcript

Sofia Henderson: Hello. You're listening to The future of higher education today. We bring people together to talk about the big questions facing higher education, its future and its purpose.

Alla Tsapiv: We have no bombs. We cannot protect ourselves, but we can protect our smart students, our future. And we can give them the plans for their future life.

Sofia: This is Alla Tsapiv, Vice Rector at Kherson State University. Her university has been devastated by war, and it's not the only one. Universities across Ukraine are facing destruction, terror and the loss of students and staff fleeing conflict.

In the face of such a terrifying war and humanitarian crisis in Europe, what can UK universities do to support and what does it mean for the future role of UK universities internationally?

Sofia: We'll be talking to Alla today on the show alongside Rachel Sandison, Deputy Vice-Chancellor for External Engagement at the University of Glasgow.

Rachel Sandison: Preserving the higher education sector in Ukraine is of the utmost priority to us all. It is fundamental.

Sofia: And Jamie Arrowsmith, Director of Universities UK International.

Jamie Arrowsmith: The sector is at its strongest when we can coordinate a cross-sector response where we do bring people together.

Sofia: So, Alla, how has life at your university changed since the war started?

Alla: Life has changed, of course. The life of our university and the life of each Ukrainian, it has changed, because we had to face the biggest challenge in our life: the war. We had no instructions for how to behave, what to do, how to leave, how to survive. And I think that when you don't know what to do with your own life, that's difficult.

And moreover, you are not responsible just for yourself and your family. You're responsible for the whole university, for the students. And I think that forced us to be really strong and to cope with everything. But actually, to say how it changed: everything changed. We changed the way we understand our life, the way we appreciate everything we have, the way we love our country, nowadays more than ever before.

We had a very beautiful and happy life, of course. Maybe we even didn't realise how happy we were, but we really were happy and we had beautiful building of the university, all the necessary facilities, too: swimming pool, playground, beautiful park, lots of students. We could come to our work, have meetings, have lessons. It was perfect.

But on the 24th of February, when Russian troops came into Kherson, it was occupied. Almost since the first days of war. We could not believe it was true. It was so scary. We were just, the only thought was just maybe to hide somewhere, but we could not hide. And we had to come to the university and to think what to do.

We started to do everything online. We, of course, had to displace to another city to the western part of Ukraine. Now we are 1000 kilometres away from our native city, and our students are here with us, they are in different cities of Ukraine, it's not only Ukraine, but still, you know that Ukrainians are very strong and optimistic. We are not going to give up.

Even now, while saying this, I have no electricity in the building, no heating, no Wi-Fi. It's rather quiet. It's dark. But still, I think that it won't prevent me from talking to you. And I can do everything that I'm supposed to do.

Sofia: So you spoke there a little bit about how things are now compared to the start of the war. How does the situation feel now compared to at the beginning of the conflict?

Alla: Up to now, we have already, like adapted to the new conditions and on the 11th of November, our city was liberated. It is free now and we feel so much happy about it. And of course, our rector, and our vice-rector and me also, we went to Kherson to see how everything is going on there. We went to our building, we were crying when we just saw the name of our city and we understood that it is free, that there were no Russian troops there anymore.

You even can't believe – I even can't explain how I felt. I was not just happy. That was something more than just happiness. I was crying and I wanted to hug everyone I saw in the streets and all my colleagues because it was the biggest dream I've ever had to come back to free Kherson, to Ukrainian Kherson again.

Now we face another challenge, because our building is safe. Safe, thanks to God, it is not destroyed, but actually much of our equipment is destroyed and stolen and they have done anything they wanted to do with everything that we appreciated so much. And we cannot come back Kherson now, all of us, because it's not safe. It is being attacked every day.

But still, we are strong and we are working. We continue education, and you know that it's a great pleasure to work with our students, because they want to study, they find the way to do it. And our teachers also do their best to find any possibility. And Kherson is free. And we really believe in our victory. It will happen.

Sofia: Thank you. It sounds like a mix of really hopeful but also challenging times. But the university has been able to do a lot to adapt, and that's good to hear.

So, your university has been paired with the University of Kent as part of the twinning scheme, which pairs UK universities with Ukrainian universities to offer support. What support has been offered to you through the scheme?

Alla: The first partner that helped us was the University of Kent. Since that day, we have been in touch always, and I think that we found not just partners but good friends really. And our colleagues ask us how we're doing: 'Is everything okay? We have heard that you have no light. How can we help you?' And that's really helpful. I have never had much support.

But actually to talk about the project itself, I think that it was firstly a great idea to twin Ukrainian universities and British universities. Our first meeting that we had, we just introduced our universities and we discussed everything that we need. Our partners told us that we do not need anything from you, we just are here to help you so you can tell us everything you need, everything you think that we can help you with, and we will do our best to do it.

So the first thing that we asked was for computers and laptops, because when we escaped the university, we could not take anything with us. We had to escape the city on our own by cars and buses, and we just came to the empty building without anything. Our partners sent us 100 laptops and that was enough. Then they had made special English courses for our students and our teachers, and then we had lots of solidarity events, so lots of meetings.

And that was really touching and helpful for us. And it makes us understand that we have this support. It's not just words, it's real support. And of course we plan a visit to the University of Kent, I hope that everything we will be okay and we will come. And I also hope that once they will come to Ukraine, when everything is peaceful and the war ends. It matters now more than ever, because when you plan something, it means that you have a future.

Sofia: Thanks so much, Alla. That was a really helpful overview of all the support you've received. What more does your university need from UK universities?

Alla: We need generators now. We don't have them in Ukraine and our university has no money now to buy it because our money is limited. And of course, if our partners and other colleagues can help us with this it would be great. We need electricity for heating, for charging, for internet. It's difficult to stay when it's dark and it's cold for a long time.

Of course, we are thinking about different internships and academic mobility of our students. It would be great if our students could come to the University of Kent for summer school or something like that. We understand that now we cannot give them all the opportunities that we could give them before. And if they could come to the university, maybe some are teachers, they could give them at least for some period of time libraries. Anything like that would be great.

And also maybe in future, not just one summer school will help, such long partnerships, different online events. And also I hope that we will cooperate the scientific field.

Sofia: It sounds like you have a lot of plans, but also there are areas of challenge where you need more support.

Joining the conversation is Rachel Sandison, Deputy Vice-Chancellor (External Engagement) at the University of Glasgow, to tell us a bit about how universities in the UK are working with Ukrainian universities under the twinning scheme. Thanks so much for joining us, Rachel.

Rachel: It's my absolute pleasure. Thank you so much for having me.

Sofia: Could you tell us a bit about your role at the university?

Rachel: I have responsibility for our international strategy, Global Glasgow 2025, and our activities with international partners. And also really importantly for this conversation, I am the university's sanctuary champion, so I have direct responsibility for guiding the university's activities in support of displaced forced migrants.

So, you know, the work that we are doing is part of this twinning initiative with Ukraine and is hugely important to the University of Glasgow and on a very personal level to myself.

Sofia: So how did your university get involved in the twinning scheme?

Rachel: We were approached about this twinning opportunity by Cormack Consultancy and by Universities UK International and really delighted that we've actually been paired with three universities in Ukraine.

It really has been an incredible opportunity to engage with three very different partners facing very different challenges. And I would just like to say that it has been overwhelming to witness first-hand, I think, the resilience and the optimism of Ukrainian colleagues and students.

Crucially, this is not just about providing an immediate response to the war in Ukraine, but our desire is to really develop long term sustainable, mutually beneficial partnerships which are based on trust and respect.

Sofia: Thanks so much, Rachel. And it was great to hear about some of your hopes for the future. I wanted to ask what are some of the things you're learning from the experience?

Rachel: Oh wow, so much. So much. It's been a really formative experience for colleagues at the University of Glasgow, myself included. As a direct response to the war in Ukraine, I think has actually really given us food for thought. It really highlights what can be achieved when the higher education sector mobilises quickly and collectively because the UK responds to supporting Ukrainian institutions is not something that we have ever been able to deliver in any other part of the globe previously.

And we really have learned so many lessons through the funding arrangement that we can actually hopefully put into practice with other institutions and organisations across the globe. And really crucially for me, it was about coming together without any new assumptions as to what the needs of those Ukrainian institutions would be. So much of the initial meetings were really us just listening, really trying to understand the context in which those institutions were operating within and what mattered most to them, where could we really add value and provide that crucial support.

Sofia: You're both on either side of the twinning scheme. From each of your perspectives, what have some of the challenges been?

Alla: If I may start, I think that since our first meeting we were ready to listen. We just tried to listen to each other and our partners, they just were very much concentrated on us. And since the first dialogue, I understood that these are people who really want to help and support.

And we didn't know how it would work. That was just like, that was the pilot project, we didn't know how it would work, what we would do. But it was very promising and

each meeting made us believe that it will work, that we are really understand each other, that they are really ready to help.

And when we just understood that, they'd have to think about us always, not just when we have official meetings to discuss our plans or the results when they just ask how we're doing, where they just read all the news about the liberation of Kherson about the missile attacks, they're right to ask which ones are safe, 'are you okay?', and that's really touching for us.

So I can't say that something is wrong, because it's not. Everything is good. I am really happy to have such partners and we are really happy to be a part of this initiative to enforce hope. It's really made us believe that there is a hope.

Rachel: Yeah, and I might just follow up where Alla's left off. I mean, I have always said that the twinning partnership for me has become a real beacon of hope. And I think that the positives of this engagement far outweigh any challenges that we have faced.

And I think that where those difficulties that occurred as it is through sometimes quite practical concerns, the ability sometimes for our colleagues to be able to get online, to have those meetings because electricity or Wi-Fi connectivity goes down.

We've also had some difficulties actually just through, you know, getting visas for Ukrainians students to be able to join us. So there have been some real delays which have meant that not all students who hope to join us at the University of Glasgow this semester were able to. And I'm pleased to say that we are deferring those students to 2023, so they still have that opportunity.

Sofia: One of the difficulties that has been raised by some is that there may be a brain drain, which is that people might leave Ukraine as a result of some of these schemes. How can we help while not producing a brain drain?

Alla: I think that is really a problem because really young people, they have escaped Ukraine already and some of them will never come back. But when we just started this project, the mission, the main idea is not to help Ukrainians just escape and move to another countries, but to help them survive and to support them during the wartime.

And this help, these programs, like summer schools and exchange programs or academic mobility, it means that they will stay in the partner university for some time during the time when it is dangerous to be in Ukraine. And afterwards they will come back. And I think that this initiative demonstrates that they can stay in Ukraine. They can come back to Ukraine when the war ends, and they will have more possibilities than they used to have before.

We understand now that the support and help of our partner universities is now bigger than it was before and understand that our partners, they are really ready to help us now and they want to do it later when the war ends, and that Ukraine is in the centre of attention of people because they understand how difficult it is for us to stay in the country during the wartime.

I also could come to another university and leave everything here. But first of all, I knew that I have responsibility before my students. I cannot leave my university and I want to live in my country. I love it so much. I am ready to do anything I can, everything I can to support Ukraine and to rebuild it, to renew it, to support it.

I know that when we come back to Kherson, for example, I have no idea what will be there. But I think that we are ready to face all these difficulties. When I was listening to Rachel, that was really very touching for me because she sounds very optimistic. And in your words, I hear your belief in us, in Ukrainians.

And that's really that's helpful. And it matters that not only we believe in ourselves so that our colleagues and partners believe that we're strong and we can build our future.

Rachel: Yeah. And can I just say Alla: absolutely! I believe that preserving the higher education sector in Ukraine is of the utmost priority to us all. It is fundamental. And so this should not be about displacing Ukrainian talent, Bringing that to the UK. It's about supporting the Ukrainian higher education ecosystem and staff and colleagues in Ukraine to thrive in the future.

And I think there are a number of ways in which we can do that. We are thinking about opportunities for joint delivery of degrees that will be wholly delivered in Ukraine, looking at ways in which we can access research, funding for research, collaboration to take place in Ukraine to support early career researcher programs in Ukraine. And I think that is so vitally important.

Sofia: Thanks so much both. And I think what I really got from that was rather than being fearful that this will produce a brain drain, you're actually really hopeful for the future.

So, what would you say to someone in a university that is looking into the partnership scheme?

Alla: Our mission to educate students to, say, preserve higher education in Ukraine " it's a great mission and I want to say that I'm really happy to be part of it. So many universities give shelters to our students. They give them opportunities to study. They help them to survive. They give them lots of opportunities. They give them accommodation and everything that they need.

It is really helpful and it really helps the university to survive. So I think that it means that the university has a really happy fortune. You will find a real partner, a soulmate, people who support and believe in them, and I wish to all people who have already joined this initiative or who are going to do it, to be strong, to be supportive and to be optimistic.

Never give up. And it was a real pleasure to listen to Rachel. We haven't met before and actually, in her words, there is so much optimism that really makes me smile.

Thank you so much, Alla, for those kind words. I would really recommend any institution who is thinking of engaging to please, just do it. Reach out to colleagues. Be part of the solution. And through that you will make incredible friendships and you will be able to develop powerful, mutually beneficial partnerships for your own community or staff and students as well.

So it really has been an enormous pleasure and privilege to be involved in the twinning initiative. I very, very much look forward to visiting Ukrainian partners, hopefully in the not too distant future. But Alla, thank you so much for your candour today. I genuinely do hope we'll have the opportunity to connect again.

Sofia: Thanks so much Alla and Rachel. It's great to hear that we've been able to bring you together as well. And thank you so much for making such personal contributions, because I know it's not an easy thing to do. We really appreciate it.

Alla and Rachel provided a valuable and personal insight into the impact of the twinning scheme. But how did the twinning partnership come about, and do UK universities have a role in this kind of work in the future? I'm now joined by Jamie Arrowsmith, Director of Universities UK International, to find a bit more about the scheme itself.

Jamie: Hi. Thank you. I'm really, really happy to be able to talk about the program.

Sofia: Could you tell us a bit about how the twinning partnership actually came about in the first place?

Jamie: I think when news of the invasion first came in, everyone was horrified. There were outpourings of support from across the sector and indeed across the country. And I think within universities it was very clear that everyone wanted to help. But given the scale of the crisis that was unfolding. I think it was really difficult to grasp how we could help in a really tangible way.

We had, however, been approached by Charles Cormack and the team at Cormack Consulting. They had existing links with Ukraine and were really keen to foster a conversation between UK universities and Ukrainian partners. So what we did was to

come together with, I think it was seven or eight Ukrainian institutions, to really discuss what they wanted and the message that we got was very, very clear.

They wanted the support to be able to carry on operating through the conflict. But I think importantly, even in those very early days, they were looking forward, they were looking beyond the conflict and recognising that universities they were going to be vital to the reconstruction efforts, and they wanted to ensure that they were still that that they would remain in place and be able to serve the needs of students and of the communities in which they were located.

Sofia: And the scheme has actually come quite far since the beginning as well. So part of that is the support you're getting. So could you tell us a bit about how the government is helping?

Jamie: In the immediate aftermath of the conflict, the UK government showed what I think was an admirable level of flexibility in really important policy areas, for example, around visas and immigration. But more substantively, I think what we've seen is really significant funding that's been committed, again, both to support Ukrainian academics and scholars and students, but also to the twinning scheme as well.

We've recently launched a £5 million call for proposals which is entirely supported through UKRI and Research England. That programme will support research and innovation activities for universities involved in the twinning partnerships. It's really a fantastic scheme, hugely welcome. I think the enthusiasm and support that we have seen from the research funders and from wider government to help us deliver that program has been really, really welcome.

Sofia: Yeah, that sounds like some really brilliant support you've got and there's really been an outpouring of activity around the twinning scheme with Ukraine, I think. Do you think we've seen this kind of support before?

Jamie: I think UK universities have been supportive of institutions and of students and of academics working in difficult contexts across the world. I do think that the situation in Ukraine has actually brought together a number of features and characteristics which probably create a unique situation.

First is the overwhelming level of political and public support. From the very outset, it was very, very clear that the UK government was going to support Ukraine and that actually provided an entry point for universities.

It's all very well universities saying they want to work to support the system, but if things like the visa free immigration system do not support that, then it can be very difficult. I think that was the first point. The second is the overwhelming level of public support as well. And I think the final point that's proven really important: there

is a government in an administration that we can work with in Ukraine that maybe isn't there in some other systems where there might be crisis.

I think it's that collection of different features that have meant that we have been able to put together a really comprehensive, sector wide response. I think the challenge to the sector going forward is going to be the question, 'What about the next crisis?'

Sofia: Yes. So on that point, what about the next crisis? How do we make decisions about what crises we're going to support and which ones we're not, as a sector?

Jamie: I think what we've seen is, as I've already mentioned, a really high level of political and public support, and that has really intersected with the universities and what they've been able to provide as well. So a twinning scheme is not going to be the answer in every circumstance. But we do have to look at what else we can do.

For example, supporting displaced students. That does not always necessarily mean having those students coming to the UK, but what can we do through, for example, transnational education partnerships?

What I would say is that universities are autonomous. Universities are able to take stock of a variety of different positions and all the different evidence and make decisions about where they feel best able to respond and where they're absolutely aligned with both their strategic priorities, but also what they see as their values as an institution as well.

But I think ultimately one of the lessons from the training program is that the sector is at its strongest when we can coordinate a cross-sector response where we do bring people together. So as far as possible, I think that's the preferred approach. But obviously that does not prevent individual institutions, individual academics taking a stand and actually engaging with different, different crises in different situations as they emerge.

Sofia: I think also the point you've made as well about the value of coming together as a sector and the fact the universities are making their own decisions to be part of this and to work with each other. And that's really producing some great results.

Jamie: Yeah, and I think ultimately that's the whole point of this scheme is about: what do partners in Ukraine want? And I think any of the other kinds of crises in the future, I think that also has to be the starting point: not necessarily what we want to do, but what do partners need to be able to continue operating? And I think that's one of the key lessons that we can draw from this.

Sofia: Jamie, it's been really great to hear more about the scheme and the role universities have in this kind of work in the future. Thanks so much for taking the time to talk to us.

Jamie: Thank you. It's been a pleasure.

Sofia: You've been listening to The future of higher education today. If you'd like to find out more about the scheme, take a look at the show notes on our website, universitiesuk.ac.uk. thanks so much to our guests today, and thank you for listening.