

International help 'must not kill Ukrainian system with kindness'

As Ukrainian universities resume online teaching, experts say longer-term solutions must avoid brain drain and look to post-war recovery



Help for Ukrainian students and academics should also support the reconstruction of the higher education system when hostilities cease, university leaders said.

Ukrainian universities are switching focus from the survival of staff and students to the resumption of teaching. For most, this must be delivered either online or abroad. [Taras Shevchenko National University](#) of Kyiv's roughly 30,000 students will be logging on from across the world when teaching resumes on 4 April.

"Whether they are in Poland, or Spain, or in the US, it doesn't matter," said Kseniia Smyrnova, the university's vice-rector for international cooperation. She said that if students were safe and able to log on, staff would do their best to help them finish the semester and academic year.

Some students scattered by the war are now on exchanges at other

universities, such as through the Erasmus+ programme, while others will continue studying remotely with their home institution. Some, such as medical students, will have to blend online learning with in-person practical classes outside Ukraine.

But as the war enters its second month, thoughts are turning to solutions beyond temporary mobility. "In case of the continuing of this situation, the next step is double diploma programmes and the possibility of [an] open Ukrainian university," said Professor Smyrnova.

Double diploma programmes would allow students to complete their studies while keeping ties to their home institution, she said. "This idea of the connection of the home university should be in the priority," she added. "We're really thinking about the avoidance of brain drain."

"A lot of universities, particularly in America, are immediately going to scholarships and actually an unintended consequence of that kindness could be a brain drain in terms of both students and academics," said Charles Cormack, chair of the Cormack Consultancy Group, which has helped organise seminars between Ukrainian and international universities. "Don't kill the Ukrainian system with kindness."

Jindřich Vybíral, rector of the Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design in Prague, which has 15 Ukrainian student refugees enrolled, said: "In addition to the current solution of humanitarian problems, it is necessary to start thinking about helping to rebuild Ukrainian higher education."

He said that universities elsewhere in Europe would have to form strategic alliances, offer more student mobility and support joint research projects with Ukrainian universities to help "rebuild and further develop" the Ukrainian higher education system.

Mr Cormack and Professor Smyrnova said early plans were being developed for an "open Ukrainian university": a platform that would allow students to

choose online courses from Ukrainian institutions and continue their current studies remotely. Mr Cormack said some UK universities had already volunteered their expertise and time to help build the platform.

Anzhela Stashchak, a project director for Cormack Consultancy Group and head of international relations at Kharkiv National Medical University, said such a platform would help bolster capacity at universities in western Ukraine, which was currently "very limited" and unable to accommodate all those displaced from institutions in the war-torn east of the country.

Professor Smyrnova said that an open university could offer students greater flexibility if it allowed them to pick modules from different institutions, but that it would be "really a very complicated legal structure" that would face difficulties overcoming national differences in assessment and recognition.

Nevertheless, she said the platform could be a good solution for students at institutions most affected by war, including [V.N. Karazin Kharkiv National University](#). "They cannot restart the education process in classes because the buildings and premises were destroyed," she said.

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