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FOREIGN MODELS OF EDUCATIONAL STABILITY DURING CRISES

MODELOS ESTRANGEIROS DE ESTABILIDADE EDUCACIONAL DURANTE CRISES

MODELOS EXTRANJEROS DE ESTABILIDAD EDUCATIVA DURANTE CRISIS

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ABSTRACT: The study analyses approaches to ensuring the quality of higher education in crisis contexts, considering the impacts of pandemics, wars, and natural disasters on institutional resources and management processes. Based on secondary data from a survey conducted between April and July 2023 with 489 respondents from European countries, significant transformations were identified in universities since the COVID-19 crisis. There was a greater focus on student mental health, the expansion of hybrid learning, and the popularization of remote work among administrative staff. Universities have increased the use of online tools for admissions and digital marketing in communication strategies. In the post-crisis period, there has also been a strengthening of institutional preparedness for emergencies and crisis management. The study pays special attention to the response of European universities to the war in Ukraine and its implications for higher education.

KEYWORDS: Quality management. Education. Crisis situations. Crisis communications. Communication policy.

RESUMO: O estudo analisa abordagens para garantir a qualidade do ensino superior em contextos de crise, considerando os impactos de pandemias, guerras e desastres naturais sobre os recursos institucionais e os processos de gestão. Com base em dados secundários de uma pesquisa realizada entre abril e julho de 2023 com 489 respondentes de países europeus, identificaram-se transformações significativas nas universidades desde a crise da covid-19. Observou-se maior foco na saúde mental dos estudantes, expansão do ensino híbrido e popularização do trabalho remoto entre o pessoal administrativo. As universidades intensificaram o uso de ferramentas online para admissões e marketing digital em estratégias de comunicação. No período pós-crise, nota-se também o fortalecimento da preparação institucional para emergências e gestão de crises. O estudo dedica especial atenção à resposta das universidades europeias à guerra na Ucrânia e às suas implicações para o ensino superior.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Gestão da qualidade. Educação. Situações de crise. Comunicação de crise. Política de comunicação.

RESUMEN: El estudio analiza los enfoques para garantizar la calidad de la educación superior en contextos de crisis, considerando el impacto de las pandemias, las guerras y los desastres naturales en los recursos institucionales y los procesos de gestión. Con base en datos secundarios de una encuesta realizada entre abril y julio de 2023 con 489 encuestados de países europeos, se identificaron transformaciones significativas en las universidades desde la crisis de la COVID-19. Se prestó mayor atención a la salud mental de los estudiantes, se expandió el aprendizaje híbrido y se popularizó el trabajo remoto entre el personal administrativo. Las universidades han incrementado el uso de herramientas en línea para la admisión y el marketing digital en las estrategias de comunicación. En el período posterior a la crisis, también se ha fortalecido la preparación institucional para emergencias y la gestión de crisis. El estudio presta especial atención a la respuesta de las universidades europeas a la guerra en Ucrania y sus implicaciones para la educación superior.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Gestión de la calidad. Educación. Situaciones de crisis. Comunicación de crisis. Política de comunicación.

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INTRODUCTION

Unplanned and uncontrollable external challenges seriously complicate the functioning of universities. At the same time, as research shows (Dumas et al., 2014), the system of quality assurance in higher education institutions is not sufficiently adapted to the conditions of the crisis.

This is further confirmed by practice: unofficial reports from German universities indicate difficulties arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. A significant number of students were unable to continue or start their studies, as reported by almost 60% of universities.

In addition, about 40% were forced to drop out due to government restrictions. It is estimated that approximately 80,000 students have discontinued their studies altogether. As a result, universities have faced problems in forecasting the resources needed for the effective functioning of the institution in a context of growing uncertainty (Henkey, 2018).

In 2023, the European University Association conducted a study on problematic changes in the higher education system and noted how the armed conflict in Ukraine had affected the activities of European educational institutions (MacAskill, 2019). Most of the 489 higher education institutions surveyed have already begun to adapt their curricula for Ukrainian students and are ready to employ Ukrainian teachers.

Thus, the pandemic and the war in Ukraine have become the main critical factors that have forced universities to take an innovative approach to academic program planning, review changes in population mobility, and explore new forms of resource provision and staffing. All the above requires a special paradigm for analysing algorithms for managing the quality of education in crisis conditions.

The purpose of this article is to study the work of foreign universities in ensuring the quality of educational activities in conditions of sudden changes in restrictive flexible regimes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In times of crisis, new qualitative reforms in educational institutions require more organizational and technical transformations in learning schemes, including their transition to distance learning, where learning can be conducted systematically without interruption, while ensuring appropriate quality standards for process development (Bojović et al., 2020).

The quality of education is achieved through management strategies and methodological actions that contribute to the formation of structures and systems that ensure the provision of educational services. Information systems provide important assistance in collecting information about educational processes for research and scientific studies (Mialkovska et al., 2023a).

Such management allows quality to be controlled at all levels of an educational institution's activities.

In certain cases, educational crises can arise because of natural disasters, social inequality—ethnic, religious, or other—isolationist cultures, the global COVID-19 pandemic, military action, and extremely unstable economic conditions, including a shortage of public funding (Martínez-Campillo & Fernández-Santos, 2020).

Researchers identify this concept to scientifically substantiate the problem of extreme negative and illogical opposition and inadequate response to situational circumstances. The crisis management approach assumes that the problem must be solved differently. This requires a sound concept of structural strategic planning, not to mention functional and resource planning, as well as administrative management structures to control and monitor resource expenditure and the provision of educational services (Mialkovska et al., 2023b).

In such cases, special tools and programs designed to work in extreme conditions are used; they are applied by administrators and other responsible persons in educational institutions (Al-Janabi et al., 2022).

When studying quality management in education in crisis situations, the focus is usually on identifying key factors and the most effective models of management in crisis situations.

Based on a survey of teachers from thirty general education schools, Samawi (2021) identifies the main components of successful crisis management: clear and concise leadership and planning, timely communication, adequate routine communication, teamwork, and cooperation.

The study by Mialkovska et al. (2024c) emphasizes the leading role of the manager, or more precisely, management skills, as one of the key factors in the effectiveness of the secondary education system. As the authors note, to achieve such transformations, it is clear that a clear vision, formulation of tasks, and development of a plan are necessary at the stage of implementation of changes.

Like other researchers, Bush (2020) draws attention to the quality of leadership as a crisis factor for educational institutions in progressive countries: the US, the UK, Malaysia, Nepal, and South Africa. In Cyprus, the importance of managerial competencies is emphasized in vocational and technical educational institutions as a phrase of readiness for and after a crisis.

RESEARCH METHODS

The study is based on general scientific methods of secondary data analysis from a European survey of representatives of higher education institutions (European University Association, 2024). The source was statistical data on the development of higher education

institutions in Europe collected from April to July 2023. This information was used to formulate policy on the European higher education system, including an analysis of quality assurance systems in European higher education and an assessment of the effectiveness of measures to respond to the crisis caused by the pandemic and the war in Ukraine (European University Association, 2024).

According to the respondents, 40.7% of them stated that the number of students at their higher education institution ranged from 7,500 to 24,900, while 39.3% stated that there were fewer than 7,500 students, and another 14.7% reported between 25,000 and 49,900 students. By type of institution, the largest share of respondents came from multidisciplinary institutions—56.6%. In addition, 17.6% of respondents were from specific specialized universities, 11.5% from applied science institutions, 7.6% from technical institutes, and 5.1% from art schools or conservatories.

SPSS Statistics version 22.0 was used for this analysis. To study the main catastrophic mechanisms and observe reactions to crisis phenomena, specific questions were used specifically for the research area for 2024 (European University Association, 2024), in particular:

1. Question 9: In your opinion, which of the events that have taken place in the last 5 years has most significantly changed the overall strategy of your higher education institution?
2. Question 11: In your opinion, how have national reform trends in various areas significantly affected your institution's activities over the past 5 years?
3. Question 16: Is student participation in the management and quality control of education expected at your university?
4. Question 31: Has the activity of your higher education institution in various areas increased in 2023 compared to the reference period?
5. Question 49: What active measures has your institution taken in connection with the military actions in Ukraine?

RESEARCH RESULTS

Approaches and tools for quality control in education in different countries are largely shaped by the specifics of national policy, the economy, the socio-demographic situation, and other factors. Reforms in the field of education, which are usually aimed at improving the quality of university education, are also of particular importance (Tokel et al., 2017).

According to the survey results, the majority of respondents identified the following as key strategic events in the development of strategies in higher education institutions:

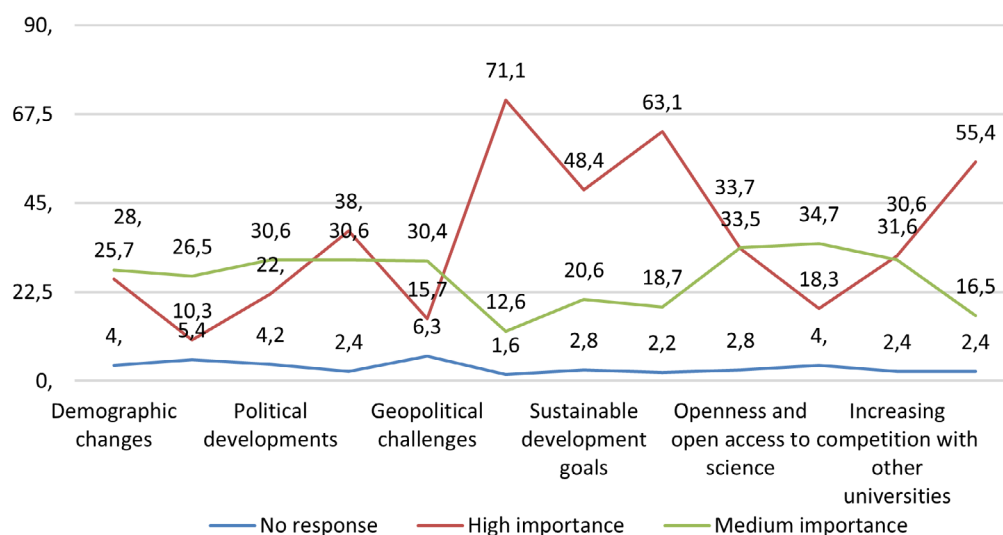
active introduction of digital technologies (71.1%), the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic (63.1%), strengthening inter-university cooperation (55.4%), focusing on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (48.1%), changes in the economy (38.0%), scientific openness (33.5%), and increased competition among higher education institutions (31.6%).

The average degree of influence on strategy formation in higher education institutions includes open science (44.7%), university rankings (34.7%), the political situation (30.6%), the economic situation (30.6%), the geopolitical situation (30.4%), and inter-university competition (30.6%) (Figure 1).

In our opinion, the existing results of secondary analysis are insufficient for a comprehensive assessment of the impact of these factors on the crisis and the corresponding adaptation challenges faced by educational institutions.

Figure 1

Respondents' assessment of the impact of various events on the overall strategy of higher education institutions over the past five years



Note. Calculated by the author.

According to the survey, most respondents believe that educational reforms in the country to finance universities by the state had a significant (51.7%) or moderate (18.7%) impact on government actions. 8.7% of respondents complained that their country had not implemented such reforms at all, while 3.4% of respondents reported that educational changes had no impact on institutional funding (Table 1).

Table 1

Assessment of the importance of national reforms in education for higher education institutions in various areas of their activity

Answer	Number of respondents, persons	Share of respondents, %	Total share, %
<i>Institutional funding</i>			
No response	10	3.0	3.0
High importance	101	51.7	54.7
Medium importance	86	18.7	74.6
No reforms in the last five years	37	8.7	84.4
Low importance	11	3.4	
Total	245	85.5%	216.7%
<i>Management and autonomy</i>			
No response	12	1.6	1.6
High importance	140	40.2	43.0
Medium importance	116	15	70.0
No reforms in the last five years	57	12.8	82.8
Low importance	20	5.0	
Total	345	74.6	197.4
<i>Ensuring the quality of education</i>			
No response	13	2.9	1.8
High importance	217	56.0	588
Medium importance	78	17.1	77.0
No reforms in the last five years	27	6.7	84.8
Low importance	10	3.0	
Total	345	85.7	751.6

Note. Calculated by the author.

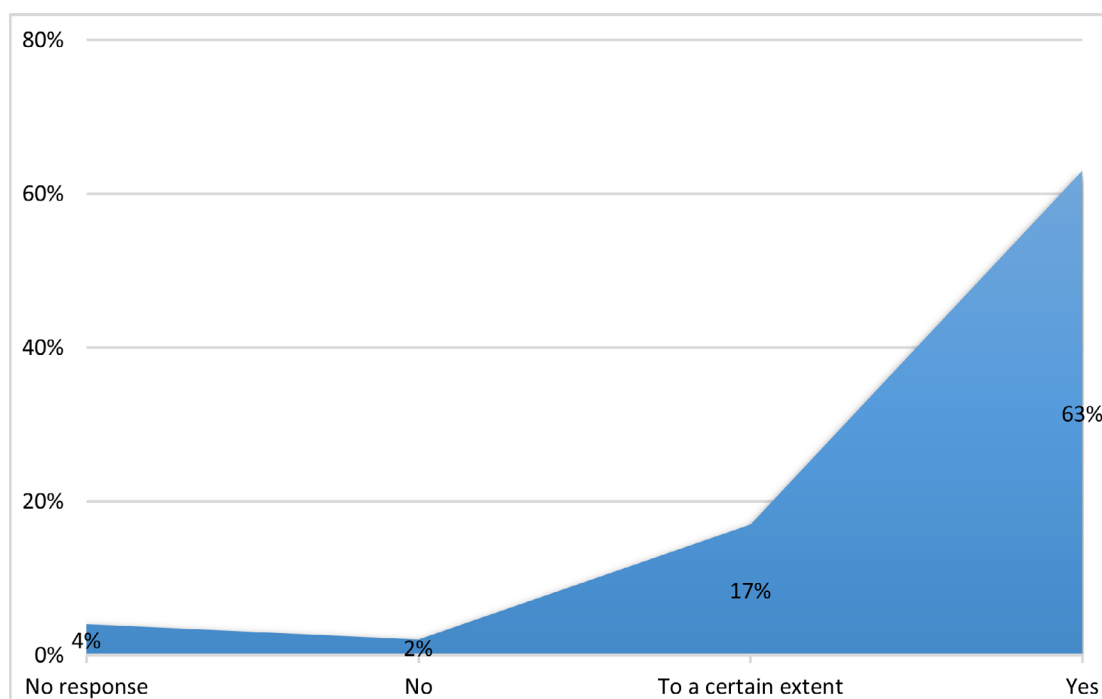
Among the 378 survey participants, 40.2% reported that education reforms had significantly affected management processes and the level of autonomy in higher education institutions. Moreover, 15% perceived this impact as moderate, while 5.0% believed that such changes had no significant impact on the managerial sophistication and autonomy of universities. However, it should be noted that the data collected has some limitations that do not provide a complete understanding of the impact of reforms on quality assurance systems in universities.

As noted by 56.0% of respondents, changes in education quality policy are of paramount importance, while another 17.1% consider these reforms to be moderately important for maintaining an adequate level of educational services in higher education institutions. Only 3.0% of respondents share the view that changes in this area are not significant enough to improve the quality of teaching (Sharifi et al., 2021).

Moreover, the survey results show that, according to respondents, approximately 63% of higher education institutions provide students with sufficient opportunities to actively participate in management processes related to quality assurance (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Distribution of responses from university respondents regarding student participation in university management, particularly in quality assurance (e.g., through inspections)



Note. Calculated by the author.

According to respondents, in 2023, universities saw noticeable improvements in a few areas compared to the period before the 2020 pandemic. 54.3% of respondents reported an increase in the attention paid to students' mental health. In addition, 52.3% noted a wider use of blended learning, while 46.0% noted an increase in the number of administrative staff who, having switched to remote work, offered remote employment services.

Also, 45% of respondents noted that in 2023 there was increased student interest in hybrid educational programs, while 40.0% noted an increase in flexible learning frameworks offered by higher education institutions. As many as 38.4% of respondents noted that the share of online testing in the curriculum had increased (Figure 3).

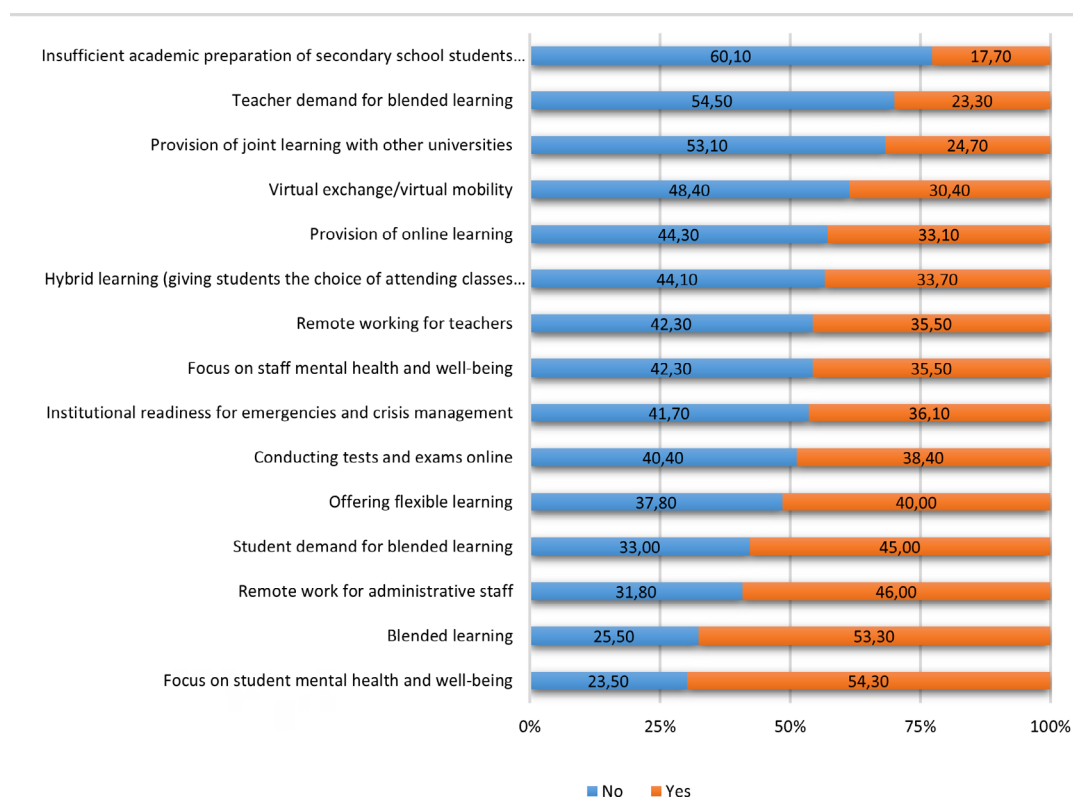
Although 36.1% of survey respondents predict that by 2023, higher education institutions will be better prepared for emergencies and crisis management than in 2020, the remaining 41.7% believe that no significant changes have taken place in this regard.

Sociological studies conducted in Germany show that universities' response to the challenges posed by the pandemic and the subsequent lockdown has been rather sluggish.

By the summer of 2020, about half of higher education institutions had switched to a blended learning model, some had switched to a fully online model, and the rest offered a combination of face-to-face and distance learning. More than 80% of universities provided financial and material support to students who were abroad at the time, enabling them to return to the country (Kercher & Westfeld, 2020).

Figure 3

Respondents' answers regarding changes in 2023 in the activities of higher education institutions by area of work compared to the situation before the COVID-19 pandemic



Responses of university respondents to measures taken by European universities in response to the war in Ukraine

Although 36.1% of survey respondents predict that by 2023, higher education institutions will be better prepared for emergencies and crisis management than in 2020, the remaining 41.7% believe that no significant changes have taken place in this regard.

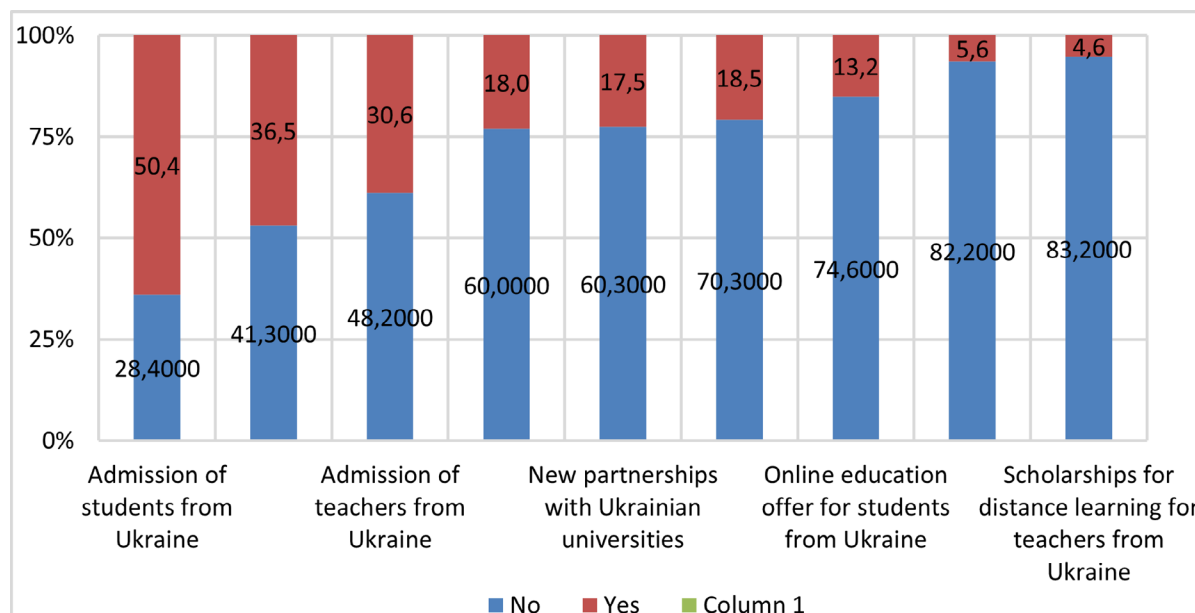
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Almost 60% of German universities organized online meetings for first-year students, and almost half of them activated digital channels to engage the public. Over 70% of educational institutions changed their admission procedures for foreign students (COVID-19 pandemic), modifying admission requirements, application procedures, and required documents. About 55% of universities extended application deadlines, while half of the institutions made it possible to apply online (Kercher & Westfeld, 2020).

In response to the military events in Ukraine, European universities sought to help Ukrainian students and teachers in various ways. Measures taken included: admission of students from Ukraine—50.4%, special financial conditions (tuition discounts or subsidies)—36.5%, and employment opportunities for Ukrainian teachers—30.6% (Figure 4).

Figure 4

Responses of university respondents to measures taken by European universities in response to the war in Ukraine



Note. Calculated by the author.

Among the less accessible measures implemented by Ukrainian higher education institutions, cooperation with domestic (Ukrainian) institutions accounts for 18%. The establishment of new forms of partnership with Ukrainian universities accounts for 17.5%. In distance learning for Ukrainian students and teachers, online scholarships from Ukrainian higher education institutions account for 13.2% and 4.6%, respectively. The use of digital materials from Ukrainian higher education institutions within partnership programs accounts for 5.6%. At the same time, 13.2% of respondents indicated that their institution does not provide any form of support.

DISCUSSION

Of course, although most higher education institutions have a single strategic axis, clear strategies as such are shaped by external circumstances. Perhaps the most powerful influence on the formation of university strategies in different countries has been the digital transformation and the COVID-19 pandemic that began in 2020 (Dreeseni et al., 2020).

After the pandemic, the coronavirus crisis continued to have an impact on the education system. Among other things, this led to increased attention to students' mental health, more active use of remote administration by staff, and the introduction of flexible educational processes (Kankanamge et al., 2020).

Reducing inequality in partnerships, competition with other institutions, focusing on achieving sustainable development goals, economic growth, openness, and scientific activity are key factors in shaping strategies for European higher education institutions. Meanwhile, less important factors, although not insignificant, include the political situation or geopolitical shifts in ranking positions (Coombs, 2007).

In response to the war in Ukraine, European universities have adopted several reactive strategies aimed at mitigating the educational crisis. Common responses included accepting Ukrainian students and teachers, providing financial assistance, and strengthening educational partnership initiatives with Ukrainian higher education institutions. These findings are consistent with the conclusions of other researchers (Gherghina et al., 2009).

Ovie (2022) emphasizes the impact of internal and external cooperation on the effectiveness of actions taken by universities. It should also be noted that the activities of universities are largely determined by specialized crisis management teams formed for these situations.

The study by Al-Janabi et al. (2022) emphasizes the importance of knowledge sharing and knowledge management during a crisis. This approach was not widespread among European universities during the war in Ukraine.

Thus, it can be argued that the current event has triggered a change in university development management and in the education quality assurance system. The focus has been on the digitization of management: the popularization of blended learning formats, remote work for administrative staff, the active promotion of online learning in higher education institutions, and the electronic submission of documents by students.

At the same time, the lack of regulated information about the dire state of university management education in extreme situations significantly limits the assessment of the adequacy of the response of European higher education institutions at different stages of the crisis.

CONCLUSION

Experience in organizing education quality assurance systems around the world, including periods of acute response or post-crisis recovery, confirms that European universities are systematically adapting to exceptional challenges. One of the key factors in adapting to the pandemic has been the flexible digital transformation of management in European universities. During the pandemic, the main changes in the education quality assurance system in Europe included the organization of marketing activities, training, administrative work, and even interaction with recruitment using COVID-compliant measures.

European universities have demonstrated an impressive level of creativity in synthesizing solutions to the problems created by the pandemic against the backdrop of the ongoing full-scale war in Ukraine. While the former situation mainly affected the strategic planning of higher education institutions, the threat of war meant that particular attention was focused on supporting students and teachers affected by the military action.

At the same time, the study has certain limitations due to a lack of information on the impact of individual factors on crisis management in European HEIs. There is a lack of empirical survey data documenting how national education reforms have affected management and quality assurance in extreme situations. These gaps highlight the need for research to assess the preparedness of higher education systems for emergencies.

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