



ENHANCING EXCHANGE STUDENTS' EVERYDAY WELL-BEING AND SENSE OF BELONGING IN TIMES OF COLLECTIVE CRISIS

*Learning from the case of Ukrainian exchange students
at the University of Helsinki during wartime*

Kaisa Kuurne, Mariia Fursina & Vilma Nihti
Design and photography: Mariia Fursina

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Background: outbreak of the full-scale war in Ukraine

On February 24, 2022, the lives of millions of Ukrainians were forever changed. The full-scale Russian invasion, which began on that day, brought destruction, chaos, and uncertainty into the lives of all Ukrainians and not only them. Among them were thousands of students whose academic lives came to an abrupt halt. Universities across the country were forced to cease operations due to active fighting, dangers to both students and staff, and overall instability. The educational process in major Ukrainian cities like Kyiv, Kharkiv, Kherson, and others was suspended indefinitely. Students, who had planned to graduate, take exams, or start new stages of their academic journey, suddenly faced the daunting question of how to survive and to continue their education in a country at war. Many were forced to leave their homes, heading into the unknown. Many escaped to other regions of Ukraine or abroad, in search of safety and the chance to continue their studies. Among these students were dozens who found themselves in Finland by a fortunate turn of events.

Inviting students from Kyiv to Helsinki

In the wake of the full-scale war, many European countries and universities began seeking ways to support Ukrainians.



“The attack began early on Thursday, 24th February. From that morning onwards, Professor Luhtakallio’s thoughts were with Ukraine. She found it hard to concentrate on her daily work. The same questions that troubled millions of others spun in her head: could an ordinary person somehow help the Ukrainians?”

Eeva Luhtakallio, for a Finnish newspaper article

One such example was the initiative led by Eeva Luhtakallio, a professor of Sociology at the University of Helsinki’s Faculty of Social Sciences. After seeing the news about the Russian invasion, she found it impossible to continue her work as usual. Realising the scale of the tragedy, she decided that urgent action was needed and began looking for ways to help Ukrainian students whose academic dreams had been shattered by the war. Eeva reached out to sociology departments at various Ukrainian universities, expressing her support and offering assistance. Her efforts were met with a response from Taras Tsymbal, the Vice Dean of Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv. He proposed an idea that seemed challenging yet feasible: to transfer some Ukrainian students from the Department of Sociology at Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv to study at the University of Helsinki. The educational process at Taras Shevchenko University had effectively come to a halt due to the war, and it was unclear when it might resume. As a result, the opportunity to continue their studies abroad became a lifeline for many students. The University of Helsinki, particularly its Department of Sociology, acted swiftly to address the bureaucratic challenges and make this idea a reality as quickly as possible.

The University of Helsinki, particularly its Department of Sociology, acted swiftly to address the bureaucratic challenges and make this idea a reality as quickly as possible. At the time, some students and their families were just a few steps away from falling bombs and the advancing Russian army in the Kyiv region.

The University of Helsinki granted special non-degree study rights to the Ukrainian students. This decision, made by the university Rector, allowed the students to enroll in English-taught courses at the University of Helsinki without paying fees, enabling them to continue their studies even if their Ukrainian universities had suspended operations.

This initiative provided an uninterrupted academic pathway for students who were already in the process of earning degrees from Ukrainian institutions.

On the Ukrainian side, Taras Shevchenko University also worked urgently to facilitate the bureaucratic process of student exchanges abroad. After completing the expected 30 credits in the disrupted spring semester, the students transferred them to their home universities in Ukraine.

Later, during the autumn, students who wished to participate in Erasmus+ exchanges could do so through the established cooperation between the University of Helsinki and Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv.

Creating a volunteer-based support network of academic faculty, graduate students and their personal communities

Initially, according to Eeva, the plan was to accept five Ukrainian students. However, in practice, due to overwhelming need, 19 students arrived in Helsinki between mid-March and early April. All of them felt lost and confused, each carrying their own personal stories and experiences of the war. For each of them, leaving their homes and families without knowing if or when they could return was an immense challenge.

“This story is an example of the civic courage of our teaching staff” - says professor Eeva Luhtakallio.

She and her colleagues began looking for ways to support the Ukrainian students not only academically but also by providing them with everyday necessities, such as housing and basic integration into a new environment. At the time, the students had no accommodation, no access to student facilities, and no means of subsistence.

One of the volunteers, Matti Nelimarkka (a University lecturer at the Centre for Social Data Science) recalls:



The first wave of Ukrainian students, along with volunteer researchers, held informal gatherings at the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Helsinki. March-April 2022

“Eeva Luhtakallio sent an email to the faculty list looking at people who could house some students. I live alone in a 120m² space, so it was clear that I have the capacity and space to host any refugees without significant decrease in my quality of life. I assumed that the immediate need of Ukrainian students, in terms of housing and accommodation, was to rebuild a basic sense of security: food, cleaning, shelter, and so on...

I think the students also wanted to spend a lot of time cleaning the flat and I assumed this was also a way to distract their minds from the crisis at hand. Similarly, they wanted to cook food following Ukrainian traditions. In the beginning, we also worked out some ideas on what kinds of food they like the fridge to fill in, which was then regularly filled. I also tried to have in the beginning some shared time for dinner just to have a chance to regularly discuss our days”

Matti about his experience hosting Ukrainian students

Thanks to the efforts and generous response of the university community, around 17 households among professors, staff, and their acquaintances agreed to host Ukrainian students at such short notice. Volunteers met the students at Helsinki-Vantaa Airport, helped them with paperwork for temporary protection, liaised with migration services, assisted with obtaining SIM cards, and addressed other everyday needs. They also organised small gatherings to introduce the students to one another and to create a sense of community.

Some of the students had fled particularly dangerous situations—under shelling or from areas on the brink of occupation. These young people brought with them stories of fear, loss, and uncertainty, but thanks to the community in Helsinki, they were given a chance to rebuild a part of their academic lives in a new environment.

“I think the idea of bringing a whole group of students instead of just a few individuals here and there was really crucial, as they already had some social support network in place through students they knew. I could see this from two students I hosted; they regularly met with others and discussed experiences etc. They also connected to the wider support structures within the city; they spent quite a bit of time in the beginning at the Ukraine support centre or similar facility.

Over time, it seemed that the students began to integrate more into Finnish society and its activities. It also appeared that the group of students organised some activities and gatherings of their own. This gradually changed the dynamic, making my home more of a place to sleep rather than a place to live.”

one of the academic volunteers on Ukrainian student’s integration



Snellmania Building at Unioninkatu 37 – a regular venue for coffee-meetings with students. Photo: University of Helsinki



Maksym

20 years old,
Konotop, Sumy
region

The war overtook Maksym just a few months before his 18th birthday, while he was in northern Ukraine with his mother and younger brother. He had big plans – he was supposed to travel to Poland soon to participate in an international speed-cubing competition. However, those dreams were shattered when his hometown of Konotop, in the Sumy region, was surrounded by Russian troops.

For a month, Maksym and his family were cut off from the outside world, with no way to leave the city. Russian forces were stationed around them, and fear grew with each passing day. Maksym was especially terrified by the prospect of forced conscription if the city fell completely under enemy control. He didn't want to fight for a country that was destroying his homeland, so he sought to escape to a safer area, far from the front lines.

In the middle of March 2022, Maksym finally managed to leave his hometown, which might have turned into a trap. He understood there was no future for him there anymore, so he headed to join his girlfriend, who had found an interesting academic programme in Prague.

After starting Czech language courses provided by Charles University for Ukrainians fleeing the war, Maksym began a new life in an unfamiliar city. At just 18, he quickly had to adapt to living in a foreign country, far from his family, and learn independence. He shared a flat with his girlfriend, searched for a job to support himself while continuing his Ukrainian university studies online, and faced new challenges in the Czech Republic. Later, he joined a community of exchange students at the University of Helsinki.

Student stories of the outbreak of the war



*Konotop in the early days of the war, February 2022.
(Photo from Maksym's personal archive)*



Masha's grandmother in Chernihiv, July 2022 (ph. Mariia Fursina)



Masha

24 years old,
Chernihiv



"For the first time in my life, I truly understood what it means to be physically present in one place, yet have your mind constantly elsewhere, completely detached

- about her first experience of forced migration

On the night of February 24, Masha arrived in Kyiv with her friend from Lviv. Just three hours later, she woke up to the sound of explosions next to her dormitory and news of the Russian invasion. Grabbing her still-packed backpack, which held only a pair of jeans and a few essentials, she ran out into the streets of Kyiv, confused and terrified.

Masha's family was in Chernihiv, her hometown near the Belarusian border, where Russian forces had quickly advanced. Returning home was too dangerous, as her city was under threat of occupation and constant shelling. Every day, she checked the news and kept in touch with her family whenever the internet connection allowed. Bombs hit residential areas, and the city frequently lost power and communications, leaving her in fear for her loved ones' safety.

With help from friends and work colleagues, she first went to Lviv and then to Kraków, Poland. Amidst the constant uncertainty, Masha found out that the University of Helsinki was offering Ukrainian sociology students the chance to continue their studies. Grateful for this opportunity, she traveled to Finland, where the university provided support and a sense of stability despite the ongoing war back home.

While studying in Helsinki, Masha remained deeply worried about her family, but the academic community helped her stay focused and hopeful. Despite the unknown, she held on to the hope of one day returning to a peaceful Ukraine.

Polina's early student years were marked by two major challenges: first, the global COVID-19 pandemic, and later, the full-scale Russian invasion. Her student life was far from what an ordinary European student would experience: instead of sitting in lecture halls or attending parties after classes, she found herself facing war and occupation.

Her city of Kherson, was occupied by Russian forces within the first weeks of the invasion.

Polina*

18 years old, Kherson



At the Polish border, two days after the start of full-scale invasion. February 2022. Photo: Maria Fursina.

By March 2022, Russian soldiers were patrolling the streets, replacing Ukrainian flags with Russian ones and taking control of the city's infrastructure. The occupiers completely isolated the city, making life extremely dangerous and unpredictable.

At that time, Polina had just graduated from high school and was preparing to enter university. However, the war cast doubt on her future –it was unclear how she could pursue her education when daily life had become so unstable and fraught with fear. Despite the anxiety and insecurity, her desire to move forward and build a future proved stronger than the fear.

In July 2022, when she turned 18, Polina was forced to leave her hometown.

She left Kherson alone, leaving her family behind, not knowing when or if she would see them again. It was a difficult decision, but she understood that, for the sake of her future, she had to take the risk and escape the occupied territory.

After moving to Kyiv, Polina successfully passed her entrance exams and enrolled at university. Now, she lived independently in the capital of a country constantly under constant threat from air raids, missile strikes, and a lingering sense of instability. Yet, even in these conditions, she did not lose hope for her future. She continued her studies and worked towards her goals, despite the war's constant reminder that nothing was certain.

*the student's name and city have been changed at their request.

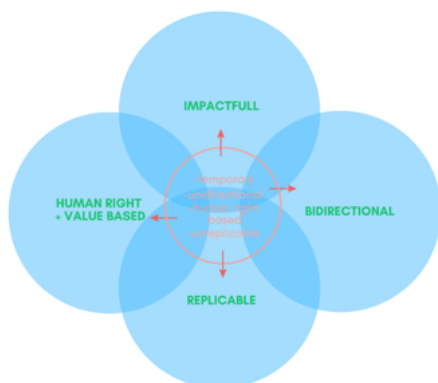
The Academies4Ukraine project: a new paradigm for academic solidarity

(by Gianluca Vagnarelli, i-strategies)

One definition of academic solidarity refers to the support tools that international academic networks offer for assist academics under oppression because whether victims, in their home countries or abroad, of persecution, purges, anti-democratic practices or forced to flee due to war [Çelik, 2023].

In this context, visiting "Scholars at Risk" fellowships, PhD/Postdoc opportunities, free accommodation and enrollment in university courses, language courses, academic tax relief and psychological support for refugees have been the most common measures adopted by the European universities in 2022 under the academic solidarity initiatives towards Ukraine [Estés, 2022]

These measures aimed to provide concrete support for students and researchers in helpless situations, enabling them to pursue careers and studies that would otherwise have been compromised by war. Nevertheless, after the emergency phase, the host universities experienced difficulties providing further funding for additional aid or permanent positions. Being aware of this risk, we conceived the Academies4Ukraine EU project – funded by the Erasmus+ programme in 2023 – with a different approach. A new academic solidarity perspective based on four pillars:



Impactful

Academies4Ukraine aims to be not a temporary, but a strategic initiative able to create a permanent emancipatory process and impactful follow-up. Indeed, the project:

- a) strengthens the institutional long-term resilience capability of Ukrainian universities that are operating in a war theatre;
- b) acts to lastingly reinforce the experience of the European Union universities (especially in border countries Finland and Latvia) in supporting Ukrainian researchers and students;
- c) interpret academic solidarity as an opportunity to innovate the academic system;
- d) prepares the Ukraine post-war reconstruction phase involving public and private actors under a vision that conceives the EU funds not an end but leverage for a permanent and autonomous social and economic development of the Ukraine country.

Reciprocal

We need to overcome a unidirectional and sometimes paternalistic vision of academic solidarity, in which one side provides aid (for a limited time), and the other part will merely receives it. The aim is to create a new academic solidarity approach, more equal and proactive, in which, because facing firsthand the dramatic dangers and challenges of academic life during a war, Ukrainian universities will guide the European Union in understanding how to face future crises affecting educational rights. A vision where academic solidarity policies are implemented not top-down but actively co-designed by scholars, students and universities who directly experienced academic life under crises.



Replicable

Even if implemented in a specific context and time, *Academies4Ukraine* has the ambition to be a replicable practice in terms of:

1. Developing a new conceptual framework of academic solidarity and related policy recommendations for future crises that affect educational rights in the European Union and abroad;
2. Providing guidelines for introducing academic services based on successfully implemented practices;
3. Expanding the academic solidarity concept beyond its traditional ethical boundaries and individual moral obligation to achieve broader social and economic impact.



Value-based

Academic solidarity—as protection and support of academic freedom and educational rights—is a crucial initiative in defending universal human rights values. Beyond human rights defence, we believe in an academic solidarity that also promotes common values. In *Academies4Ukraine*, this means:

- i) Condemning the Russian aggressive war against Ukraine, a sovereign state, which constitutes a violation of international law;
- ii) Showing solidarity with Ukrainian researchers, students and universities whose educational rights and academic freedom have been compromised by war;
- iii) Defending Ukraine's sovereignty, European values and democratic principles against illiberal and authoritarian regimes.



Gianluca Vagnarelli, founder of I-strategies and of Academies4Ukraine initiative

Main outcomes of the project

(by Gianluca Vagnarelli, i-strategies)

Due to Russian aggression, Ukraine's higher education system faces multiple challenges: damaged academic buildings, disrupted university activities, the need for shelters for students and staff, and the relocation of universities from occupied territories. The war has damaged around 58 scientific institutions, affecting nearly 15% of the country's research infrastructure. These figures continue to rise [European University Association, Impact of the Russian Federation's invasion of Ukraine on the Ukrainian higher education sector, 2022, p. 3].

The war has also restricted fair access to education, forcing universities to move most activities online. This has created challenges similar to those during COVID-19: unequal access to lessons, isolation, psychological distress, and reduced educational quality. Research shows 97.8% of Ukrainian university students and staff report worsened mental health, with increased depression, loneliness, nervousness, and anger [Kurapov et al., 2022].

1

“Academic Resilience Stories from Ukraine” documentary film. The documentary film will collect interviews with Ukrainian students and researchers, and European universities who supported them, in sharing resilience academic stories;

2

“Enhancing exchange students’ everyday well-being and sense of belonging in times of collective crisis” handbook. Best practices will be shared to inspire the academic system to offer academic services to support the everyday well-being and sense of belonging of university students, especially those who come from war, conflicts and crises;

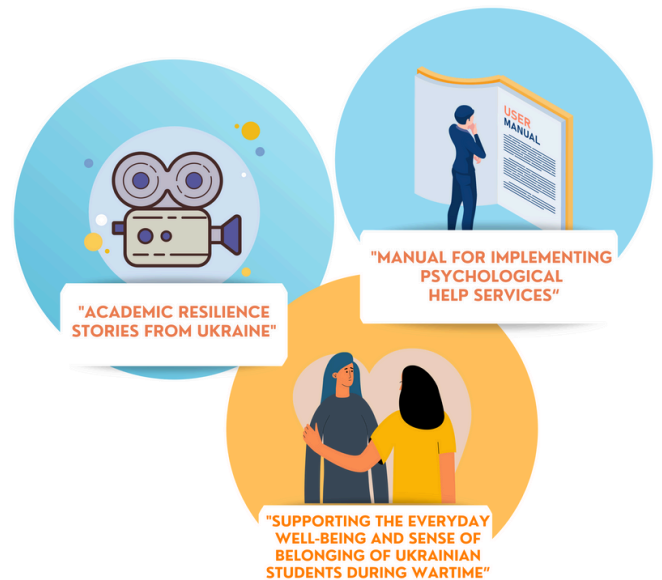
3

“How to implement a university programme to support university psychologically” handbook. The handbook will be a “tactical” manual to implement from scratch, or to strengthen, a psychological support service for university students.

In this context the project Academies4Ukraine will implement three project outputs, supporting Ukraine's Higher Education system:

Academies4Ukraine

Strengthening Academic Resilience in Ukraine and EU



Partners

project concept: www.i-strategies.it/news

I-STRATEGIES
(Project coordinator)
Italy
UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI
Finland

RIGA TECHNICAL UNIVERSITY
Latvia
ODESA NATIONAL UNIVERSITY
OF TECHNOLOGY
Ukraine

KHERSON STATE UNIVERSITY
Ukraine
PAVLO TYCHYNA UMAN STATE
PEDAGOGICAL UNIVERSITY
Ukraine

*The project is implemented by an international partnership made of six European partners: i-strategies (Italy, project coordinator), University of Helsinki (Finland), Riga Technical University (Latvia), Uman State Pedagogical University (Ukraine), Kherson State University (Ukraine) and Odesa National University of Technology (Ukraine).

Documentary film "Academic Resilience Stories from Ukraine"

i-strategies has already implemented the first project output: the documentary film Academic Resilience Stories from Ukraine. The film combines interviews collected from project partners with their shared photographs to tell the stories of those who, despite the dangers, continue fighting to safeguard Ukrainian students' right to education – both in Ukraine and abroad.

The documentary is structured into five chapters, plus a prologue and epilogue, presenting multiple perspectives on how Ukrainian universities are demonstrating academic resilience against Russian aggression.

From digitalisation to community support, through international academic solidarity and resilience-building strategies, the documentary showcases the various approaches universities have adopted to maintain educational provision amid war. These practices highlight how Ukraine's academic system continues to uphold the right to education despite the conflict

The QR code provides direct access to the official website of the Academies4Ukraine project, where the documentary 'Academic Resilience Stories from Ukraine' is available for viewing



“Tutoring Ukrainian exchange students I quickly realized they needed more than just academic support. Many felt divided: they were physically in Finland and emotionally in Ukraine. They really needed an everyday community around them to create a sense of safety and belonging. They needed refuge from constant worry and anxiety. I wanted to create moments of lightness and ordinary and fun student life”

Kaisa Kuurne, project leader



The story behind the Helsinki-based programme

The future project leader of the Helsinki-based sub-project, Kaisa Kuurne, began her lectureship by developing sociological coursework for Ukrainian exchange students, supported by funding from the Ministry of Education. Around the same time, Italian partners contacted her, inviting the University of Helsinki to join the Academies4Ukraine funding application. She immediately embraced the opportunity to create a project focusing on community building to foster Ukrainian exchange students' social well-being and sense of belonging. The driving force behind the initiative was Gianluca Vagnarelli from i-strategies, a small social enterprise specialising in learning innovation and storytelling in higher education



“The project started with the need to help Ukrainian universities facing war. At the same time, the ambition is to renew the concept of academic solidarity overcoming a unidirectional and sometimes paternalistic vision of it. In this context, when I first contacted Kaisa Kuurne, I immediately realised her work with Ukrainian students at Helsinki University represented a benchmark at the European level that deserved to be known and spread. This is what we are doing”

Gianluca Vagnarelli, i-strategies

“When Gianluca contacted me and told me about his idea of fostering academic solidarity for Ukraine during wartime, I instantly felt we could work together on this. We both felt that such unreasonable circumstances require a more-than-academic perspective. It meant putting our values in practice”

Kaisa Kuurne, University of Helsinki





Enhancing the everyday well-being and sense of belonging of Ukrainian students during wartime

The war in Ukraine challenged universities to reorganise their academic activities, shifting most of them online and placing students in the same difficulties experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic: unequal access to lessons, isolation, psychological distress, and reduced quality of educational outcomes. Moreover, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine affected the mental well-being of Ukrainian university students, causing higher rates of depression, loneliness, nervousness, and anger.

The Academies4Ukraine Erasmus+ initiative enabled support to be planned for a comprehensive programme aimed at enhancing the everyday well-being and sense of belonging of Ukrainian exchange students at the University of Helsinki. The aims of the Helsinki-based sub-project were to strengthen students' academic resilience amid wartime challenges. The key to this effort was community building and the creation of group activities that reinforced the sense of belonging for Ukrainian exchange students. Psychological support in the Ukrainian language was offered to those who felt they needed it.

All activities aimed to help students feel better and continue their studies despite the war. The work with Ukrainian Erasmus+ exchange students focused on supporting their everyday lives by offering them a refuge from the constant stress and worry related to wartime. The project offered tutoring by the project leader, Kaisa Kuurne, a lecturer in sociology, and two part-time project planners, Vilma Nihti and Mariia Fursina, who herself had been among the first wave of Ukrainian exchange students and had since graduated. Everyday support and group activities were designed to help students feel more at home at the University of Helsinki. A Ukrainian psychologist was found through personal networks, and she provided individual sessions offering confidential psychological support.

Drawing on the University of Helsinki's expertise, a further pedagogical aim was to disseminate best practices in everyday support tailored to situations of war, conflict, and other potential crises. The intention was to inspire similar efforts within European academic systems, promoting a culture of academic solidarity, empathy, and support. This commitment included sharing valuable insights and knowledge through the creation of a digital handbook, ensuring that these resources are widely accessible and beneficial beyond the scope of the project.



Meet the Helsinki project team



project leader

Kaisa

Kaisa Kuurne was the responsible leader of the Helsinki project working closely with international project partners. She worked as a Lecturer in Sociology (Ph.D. in sociology, 2010). She had done research on disruptive life situations, social well-being, local community and sense of belonging. Working on the Academies4Ukraine initiative and Helsinki-based sub-project with Ukrainian exchange students, she expanded her academic role to a more holistic dedication to enhance students' well-being putting her sociological knowledge to practice.

Mariia Fursina worked as a part-time project planner, focusing on visual and digital content, communication, and student feedback. Mariia was originally among the first wave of Ukrainian students who came to continue their suspended studies at the University of Helsinki in March 2022. She holds a Bachelor's degree in Social Sciences and has professional training in photography.



project planner, photographer
and designer of the handbook

Mariia



project planner

Vilma

Vilma Nihti was a part-time project planner, working on administration, mentoring, and organising activities to foster student well-being. She had a background in healthcare, more specifically in midwifery, and in social and healthcare system studies.



“When I arrived in Helsinki, I felt lost and unprepared for the harsh reality—the challenge of adapting to a new environment, finding a job, and making friends”

Ukrainian student sharing about her first experience arriving in Helsinki

Three waves of Ukrainian exchange students

Outbreak of the war

Russia’s full-scale invasion in 2022 came as a horrific shock to most people, both in Ukraine and beyond. Some of the students who arrived in March 2022 were literally fleeing bombs and the advancing Russian army in the Kyiv region. The shock and trauma they had experienced were still so fresh that the primary collective feeling among the students could be described as disorientation. In a short span of time, their reality had shifted to one that none of them could have predicted. This left the students, at least initially, in a state of numbness, denial, and immense stress.

In these circumstances, there was an extraordinary need for the university and academic community to take on the role of providing stability and safety for the students, becoming more than just an Higher Education institution offering knowledge.

Between two realities

The students who arrived in the second wave were, perhaps, even more traumatised, as they had lived directly under martial law for some time. By this point, funding had been secured for a mentor-teacher and through Academies4Ukraine, enabling more systematic support for incoming students. The students who arrived in Finland during this period had experienced more wartime events. Their stories of the war varied significantly: while all of them had endured air raids, only some had lived under Russian occupation for a time. All of them faced the hardships of war, including separation from family and friends, as well as the mobilisation of male acquaintances. During the first wave, male students were still permitted to leave Ukraine, but by the second wave, only one male student managed to do so, mostly because he was living abroad already. The gendered dynamics of the war began to shape the experiences of arriving students, with the majority being young women.

Most of them felt a strong desire to support the Ukrainian army and their family and acquaintances back in Ukraine. Some also felt guilt about continuing their studies while others had gone to war or had to abandon their education due to the outbreak of the conflict.

Living in the ambiguity of the future

By the second and third years of the war, the third wave of students had formed a diverse group, comprising individuals from different academic years and with varying levels of experience. This mix created a cohort that closely resembled a typical cross-section of the student population. Some students had been forcibly displaced—either moving abroad to live with their families or relocating within Ukraine, fleeing from active war zones to safer regions. Others, however, had remained in their hometowns, not experiencing the disruption of forced migration. Despite these differences, all of them were bound together by their shared reality of living through the war—a reality that shaped their daily lives, their perspectives, and their aspirations.

Moreover, the academic experiences of these students varied as well. Some were only in their second year of study, meaning their entire university life had been defined by the war and the shift to online learning. For them, the traditional university experience—attending lectures in person, engaging in face-to-face discussions, or simply spending time on campus—was something they had never known. On the other hand, there were students in their fourth year who could still recall what it was like to attend university before the war. Yet, even for them, those memories felt distant—almost like fragments of a different life.

In these circumstances, the Academies4Ukraine Helsinki-based programme plays an important role in providing support and creating communities where students with different experiences can connect, share their stories, and rebuild their confidence. By offering both academic assistance and a sense of belonging, the project helps students navigate the uncertainties of war and find hope for the future.



The conceptual framework of the project

Supporting the everyday well-being (definition).

Wartime propels anxiety, and living apart from loved ones accentuates it. In addition, many Ukrainian exchange students were relatively young and abroad for the first time. In order to support their ability to study and learn under such circumstances, the project focused on strengthening the students' everyday well-being.

Well-being firstly involves material living conditions, including subsidised low-cost student housing offered by the student foundation HOAS, and Erasmus study grants, which enabled students to meet their monthly material needs without constant worry. The project members not only focused on academic support but also assisted with a number of issues related to everyday well-being, such as health and doctor's appointments, paying bills, and navigating the Finnish system—from university bureaucracy to social services.

Students were in Finland under the category of temporary protection, which the EU had granted to all forced migrants from Ukraine. As a result, students received their healthcare and social services through reception centres, which also had social workers whose role was to assist Ukrainians with their everyday matters. However, this support was not always sufficient. Students needed someone to help them understand how the system worked, and more importantly, someone they knew and felt comfortable contacting in case of any concerns. The students' tutor teacher, Kaisa Kuurne, along with the two part-time project planners, Vilma Nihti and Mariia Fursina, took on this task and were actively present on Telegram, responding to any questions and concerns

“To make it as easy as possible to contact me, I made the decision to be present on Telegram, which Ukrainian students were using as their social media platform. I think what mattered most was the feeling that I was there in case they had a concern. Often, I received a message in the evening about a worry, and all that was needed was a simple, comforting note that the matter would surely be resolved”

Kaisa Kuurne, project leader



Sense of belonging (definition)

The project leader, Kaisa Kuurne, had conducted research into the different dynamics of belonging for years and designed the project aims to enhance students' sense of belonging, putting sociological understanding into practice. Belonging is vital: human beings need it to survive. Exile and isolation have historically been among the most severe forms of punishment. In recent years, scholars from a variety of research fields have increasingly engaged with the concept of belonging (e.g. Antonsich, 2010; Bennett, 2015; Guibernau, 2013; Kuurne and Gómez, 2019; May, 2011; Savage et al., 2005; Yuval-Davis, 2006, 2011). Studies on belonging have addressed a wide range of topics, including transnational migration and race, globalisation, and cosmopolitanism.

Belonging is about social locations, identifications, emotional attachments, and ethical valuations of what truly matters. It is also about the 'politics of belonging', which involve the delineation of boundaries between 'us' and 'them' (Yuval-Davis, 2006; 2011). Even the most personal, intimate feeling of being 'at home' is inevitably conditioned by social and power relations—in other words, the politics of belonging. The question of belonging tends to arise when it is problematised.

Wartime alters the logic of both belonging and the politics of belonging, as people are forced to leave their home regions and loved ones become dispersed across different locations and even different countries.

National belonging is facing an unforeseen intensification in the face of external invasion. Social institutions and citizens are compelled to redefine their relationship with the nation. Belonging is deeply intertwined with everyday practices which, during times of peace and the ordinary flow of life, are often taken for granted or remain unconscious (Kuurne & Vieno, 2022). Belonging 'is something we have to keep achieving through an active process' (May, 2011: 372).

War jeopardises everyday belonging because familiar places may be destroyed or under threat, people become cautious and stressed, and daily routines are disrupted. Anticipated and often taken-for-granted life plans and trajectories no longer exist. Time, in many ways, becomes frozen, with the focus shifting to survival—enduring each moment, each day, each week, and each month. Wartime experiences are not only personal but also shared with all those who matter. War critically intensifies the question of belonging.

This was the situation in which Ukrainian exchange students arrived at the University of Helsinki. Many described their sense of self as divided between their physical presence in Finland and emotional presence in Ukraine. To enhance their social belonging, we designed a programme to create moments of local engagement and peer group sociability with fellow Ukrainian students and the wider academic community. The people involved in the project occupied a space somewhere between academic and personal communities. Gatherings were held at Kaisa's home, and her family members took part in some of the activities. Although the newly created community could not replace the students' dispersed webs of belonging, the aim was to establish a local community that would offer a sense of safety, everyday belonging, and meaning.





Everyday support and community building

Coffee meetings were organised once a month in the afternoons after lectures, typically lasting around two hours. At the beginning of each meeting, we discussed general news, current issues, and any questions students had. Occasionally, specific topics were introduced, such as preparing for a seminar presentation. These meetings therefore served to support both academic development and social well-being.



Regular informal “coffee meetings”

Informal coffee meetings served as a space to meet others and ask any questions. They had no formal agenda beyond simply coming together. Listening to students and fostering a sense of community were central to these gatherings. Sharing food is a core part of building community, and within this project, drinking coffee or tea together with Finnish sweets helped create a warm and welcoming atmosphere.



Digital communication with students

Group meetings and ongoing matters were communicated through a Telegram group created by the students, which also included members of the project team. The app was selected as the project's internal communication channel because students were already actively using it. In addition to receiving updates, students could pose questions about their studies or practical matters, which were answered by both peers and project staff. The aim was to maintain an open dialogue. The group still includes some former exchange students for whom the platform had become an important community during their time abroad.

Advising in studies, mundane and bureaucratic stuff

In addition to the Telegram group, students also had the opportunity to contact project staff privately. A great deal of support and guidance was required on issues such as accommodation, healthcare, and other bureaucratic matters related to studying abroad. Although primary advice regarding social security, healthcare, and housing was provided by the reception centres, the project staff were more accessible and therefore quicker to assist with practical concerns.



Social programme and excursions fostering group belonging

The social programme was designed both to help students become better acquainted with one another and to familiarise them with their new place of residence. The activities provided a break from academic demands and a brief sense of normal student life. In addition to regular coffee meetings, other activities included a Christmas party, an overnight trip to Nuuk National Park, cinema visits, a visit to the Kiasma Museum, attendance at the annual and international sociology conference in Finland, an overnight trip to Stockholm, and a farewell party for departing students. The locations for social activities were chosen to align with the aims of the project: the museum's current exhibition focused on themes of home and belonging, the film screening addressed both local society and the war in Ukraine, and the Christmas party introduced students to local traditions, showcasing one of the year's major celebrations through traditional activities and food.



H.E. Ambassador of Ukraine Olga Dibrova visiting Helsinki University, rector Sari Lindblom, students and academic staff. May 2024



“Little Christmas” party

The Finnish tradition of celebrating “Little Christmas” ahead of the official holiday provided a wonderful opportunity for Kaisa and her team to invite students to an informal festive gathering at Kaisa’s home. It was a chance to get to know one another better, sample traditional Finnish Christmas dishes, share their own festive customs, and play board games together. This event helped to break down the usual hierarchical barriers between students and lecturers, shift the context of their interactions, and bring a sense of warmth and togetherness to the festive season – ensuring no one felt alone at this special time of year.



Community

“I felt a sense of belonging to a community and had a really good time with all the people who were connected to this project.”

student feedback on the programme

Art exhibition about home

A visit to a contemporary art exhibition exploring the theme of home, guided by the exhibition’s curator, sparked deep discussions about the meaning of home and the experience of adapting to a new country. Students had the opportunity to reflect and express their emotions through art. An informal coffee discussion following the exhibition allowed participants to share their impressions and personal stories.

Guided tour around Helsinki

A guided tour of Helsinki conducted in Ukrainian offered students the opportunity to connect more deeply with the city they now called home. It enabled them to learn about Helsinki's history and culture, helping them to discover both similarities and differences between their hometowns and their new environment.

This experience not only broadened their knowledge but also fostered a stronger sense of belonging and supported their integration into the local community.



Excursions to a nearby towns

Short group trips to nearby Finnish towns gave students the chance to explore the history and culture of different Finnish cities, try new experiences, and enjoy the typical student dynamic of travelling together by bus.

Many students later shared that these trips made them feel carefree again – reminiscent of their school days.

Cruise to Stockholm

A weekend overnight cruise from Helsinki to Stockholm took place in the spring and was blessed with pleasant, warm weather. Sharing the journey, the excitement of travel, and memorable moments with the group fostered a sense of belonging and strengthened group cohesion.

Finnish movie evening

A group visit to a small vintage cinema to watch a film by the renowned Finnish director Aki Kaurismäki offered students the opportunity to gain a deeper insight into Finnish cinema and language.

It was a simple yet enriching evening, combining cultural exploration with a relaxed and enjoyable atmosphere.



Sense of safety

“The project is important because it improves the moral state of the participants, improves socialization, and provides a “place” where you can feel safe, comfortable, and better. By “place” I mean a community of people”

Feeling normality of life

“Being involved in the project gave me a taste of life as it was before the war. Perhaps the most dramatic changes in my inner well-being occurred after visiting a psychologist. After these sessions, I felt a decrease in anxiety and an awareness of what I needed to work on next. It helped me to distract myself from various unpleasant thoughts and delve deeper into self-knowledge. The trip to Turku at Christmas is a fascinating memory for me - it was fantastic! I should also mention a retreat in a villa near Nuuksio, where I got a lot of positive energy from the sauna and warm conversations with my coursemates. I believe that the balance of spiritual and physical states should be in balance, and these trips clearly demonstrate this principle”

student feedback about programme



Bachelor Seminar for Ukrainian students

The Academies4Ukraine initiative and its Helsinki-based sub-project were incorporated into a Lecturer's position (funded by the Ministry of Education), which focused on developing and tailoring teaching for Ukrainian students during wartime. The primary aim was to support Ukrainian exchange students in progressing towards their Bachelor's degrees, to be completed at their home universities in Ukraine. As Kaisa Kuurne notes, "We are an institution of higher education with the primary task of offering higher education."

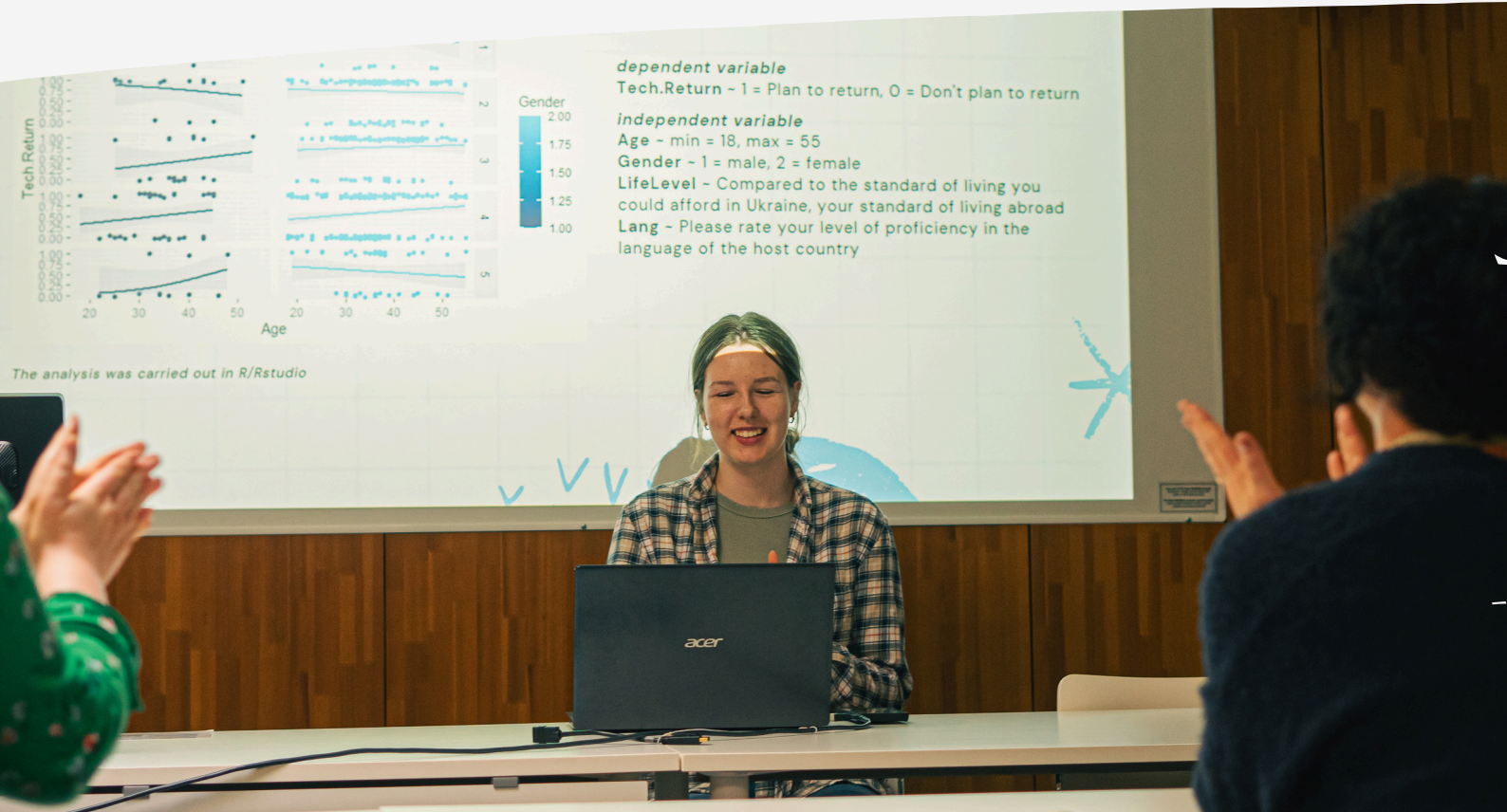
To this end, a special seminar was created to assist Ukrainian fourth-year students in writing their Bachelor's theses remotely for their home university in Kyiv. The bilingual pedagogy was made possible with the help of Ukrainian doctoral students Alina Khelashvili and Maria Prystupa, who worked alongside Kaisa Kuurne as assistant teachers. They organised sessions in Ukrainian in which students worked on their theses. Each student also wrote a summary in English and presented their work in a conference-style session at the end of the seminar.

The seminar also aimed to facilitate the integration of Ukrainian academic culture into the European context by teaching students the standards and key practices of academic writing and study within the EU.

LESSONS LEARNED

Working with Ukrainian students taught us what to prioritise when offering tailored academic support. We discovered that academic cultures and the "taken-for-granted" expectations around studying, as well as the roles of teachers and students, differ between Ukraine and Finland. In Finland, academic culture tends to be more informal in social interactions, yet more strict in terms of class participation and adherence to course guidelines, for example.

When providing tailored support that is both relevant and effective, a learning-by-doing attitude and attentive listening to students are essential. The key lies in reciprocal learning.





“Integrating youth into the international professional networks provides resources for the national intellectual development and contributes to the resilience of education in Ukraine. For foreign colleagues, this offers an opportunity to see the Ukrainian war through human stories and to hear first-hand accounts of what it’s like to live through events that are reshaping European history. This is an important combination of the fundamental professional education and practical tasks of the real world.

For me personally, it’s very important to be a part of the project that aims to create networks and spaces of communication between societies that face different everyday. This is where we nurture the realistic notion of persons and circumstances affecting them, and the recognition of the equal value of diverse subjects”

Mariia Prystupa, doctoral student in University of Helsinki about teaching Bachelor seminar for Ukrainian students



Sociology Conference (Kuopio 2024 & Turku 2025)

Given the way in which the project began, most students involved were sociology students. As part of their academic socialisation and European integration, they were given the opportunity to participate in the annual sociological conference in Kuopio. This involved an overnight stay and served several purposes.

Firstly, it was an opportunity to become acquainted with professional-level sociological practices and to gain new and timely sociological knowledge. Students could either attend the various research sessions or submit their own research proposals to be presented. A few groups of students presented their work at the conference.

Secondly, the trip provided time for students to bond and strengthen the group dynamic.

Thirdly, visiting another Finnish town and region deepened the students' understanding of Finland and their current place of residence. Participation fees were waived for Ukrainian students following negotiations with the organisers.



Academic support

"I felt like I belong to the community of sociologists and I felt honoured to be there"

"Before this trip, I did not have such an opportunity to immerse myself in a sociological family outside of Ukraine"

"It turned out to be a very unexpected opportunity for me to gain experience in presenting my sociological knowledge and skills"

Student feedback on Sociological Conference, April 2023





"It was like school trip, it made me feel like I am 16 again"

December 2023

"The lives of Ukrainians are hard and uncertain. While we may be safe and comfortable abroad, we worry about our families who remain at home, experiencing regular blackouts and shelling. It's emotionally challenging, even though we may appear fine virtually. I believe the greatest benefit of this project was bringing us all together"

student feedback on group trip to Turku





"The project was important to me because of its engagement with and focus on the complexity of the future in the context of Ukraine. These activities made it possible to reduce anxiety levels and improve emotional well-being, at least for a while. I believe the future of this project lies in this."

one of the student about the trip to the Finnish national park



Var hör du till?
Var känner du

Where do you belong?
Where do you feel at home?

Den här utställningen
tillhörighet och hemmet.
Att höra hemma någonting
tellen – till vem vi är och v

This exhibition reflects on the theme of home and
longing through contemporary art. Belonging is
needed to identity – to who we are and where we
are from.

Verken visar att hemmet kan vara
en gemenskap eller ett ställe
kan finnas i språket eller i
individuella upplevelser och
förändringar och

Featured artworks show that home can be a
place, a community, or a state of mind.
Home can be found in a language or culture,
and is intertwined with historical events.

Verken på utställningen
Nationalgalleriet

from the collections

Känn
hem
s Like
me

Kiasmas saml
Collection Exhibit



"The project improves the lives of people who have become refugees or left their home country. Often, the quality of life for such individuals drops sharply, but the project helps stabilise this decline to some extent. In addition, horizontal connections are built with the Ukrainian community in the country, contributing to the better integration of the group's interests within society."

student feedback on Helsinki-based sub-project





Ukrainian demonstration dedicated to the second anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. 24 February 2024



Ukrainian students are helping local volunteers to light candles. 24 February 2024



Kaisa and students are participating in the Sunflower March Parade dedicated to Ukraine's Independence Day. August 24, 2023

"In healing cultural trauma, rituals play an important role. In engaging with rituals and symbolic moments, we have drawn upon what mattered to the students and to Ukraine, and participated, for example, in the 'Light for Ukraine' demonstration held on the second and third anniversaries of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, as well as the sunflower parade on Ukrainian Independence Day."

Kaisa Kuurne, project leader

War and collective trauma

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russian forces in February 2022 has resulted in people being forced to flee their homes or attempt to survive in the extreme conditions of conflict. According to the Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, by 2023, already 8 million Ukrainian citizens were living abroad, representing about 20% of the population. After more than three years of conflict, the war has become a major polytraumatic event. As civilian attacks have been carried out throughout the country, there is no place in Ukraine where civilians can feel safe. Although the war started suddenly for the majority of the civilian population, today it has a long-term character and has led to chronic traumatisation, which can exist on at least two levels at once—individual and collective—and affects every Ukrainian living in, as well as outside, the country. This traumatisation has touched human, social, democratic, material, economic, and environmental aspects of people’s lives. (Frolova & Silver 2024; Bouchard et al. 2023)

As Frolova and Silver (2024) point out, Ukrainian people are grappling with what Silver et al. (2021) have explicated as intense, direct exposure to cascading events such as random civilian bombings and terror attacks, personal and economic losses, and social isolation from relatives and friends. In addition, the Ukrainian population has been repeatedly traumatised by the transmission of the Russian invasion via both traditional and social media. This way of receiving information is one of the most traumatic due to the intense and rapid dissemination of negative stories and graphic visual images, as well as being easily accessible. The parallel experiences of both individual and collective traumatisation have impacted individual mental, physical, and public health. (Frolova and Silver, 2024) Collective trauma can be seen as a cataclysmic event that shatters the basic fabric of society. As Hirscherberger (2018) suggests, collective trauma is a horrific loss of life, but it can also be seen as a crisis of meaning.

Ukrainian exchange students come to Finland from varying circumstances. Some of them have experienced more individual-level traumatic events than others, including terrifying war experiences, loss of contact with loved ones, or the loss of loved ones. However, all of them have experienced collective trauma, as the social and material fabric of Ukrainian society has been attacked. This has shaken their sense of safety at a profound level, and many feel anxiety, guilt about being away, or difficulty concentrating. The project’s focus on enhancing everyday well-being and belonging was aimed at improving their basic sense of safety and creating opportunities to experience “regular student life.” It was also necessary in order to improve their ability to concentrate and study.

LESSONS LEARNED

While we initially thought that peer support groups might be useful, we learned that, in fact, students needed more informal social gatherings and the opportunity to contact us in case of need or anxiety. Moreover, they did not feel comfortable sharing their emotions in groups but preferred individual support. Individual psychological support was arranged through a Ukrainian psychologist, who was found via our own networks and who spoke Ukrainian. In addition to her psychological expertise, she could also relate to students’ war experiences and the difficulties they might face in a new country, as she had also moved to Finland due to Russia’s invasion.

Towards a trauma-informed academic community

When Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine began, the project leader, Kaisa Kuurne, recalled that her depth psychology teacher, Dr Clarissa Pinkola Estés—also a post-trauma recovery specialist and psychoanalyst—had once said that people going through acute trauma will not remember what you said, but they will remember the “simple kindness”. Simple kindness became the guiding principle for the entire project, from planning to implementation. The aim was to create a community of kindness for young students coming from a war zone.

Various communities, including the academic community, can adopt a trauma-informed approach, which can be highly beneficial for trauma-affected students. Montero and Zouhoury (2022) suggest that adopting a trauma-informed approach is an active process involving all members of the academic community—teachers, teaching assistants, support staff, administrators, and volunteers—in building a climate of respect and generosity of spirit to ensure the physical and emotional safety of all students (see also Oehlberg, 2008). Validating and supportive teachers can help war-affected students feel safe and develop a sense of belonging. This, in turn, may encourage students to share their lived experiences during pre-, trans-, and post-migration phases (Montero and Zouhoury, 2022)

Montero and Zouhoury (2022, 86) write:


“Every human culture makes sense of the world through stories. The art of storytelling dates to time immemorial. Humans, as storied beings, understand themselves and others through stories, learn through stories, and heal through stories. When school and classroom spaces are safe, and refugee newcomers develop trusting relationships with their teachers and other school staff, they may voluntarily begin to tell their trauma stories. ... As trauma stories are told and retold, they can be transformed into the energy necessary for self-healing”

Much of being attuned to war-affected students involves being open and inviting them to share their stories in their own way and at their own pace. Trauma recovery is about empowerment, in which the support provided to survivors must “restore power and control to the survivor”, a process that is strengthened when they become the authors of their own narratives (Herman, 1998).

Teachers can support students' adjustment to life in the host country by promoting mental health and well-being at a foundational level. For example, educators can reinforce students' coping strategies and foster peer-to-peer relationships that help cultivate a sense of belonging (Monteiro and Zouhoury, 2022). The Helsinki-based sub-project was centred around these aims.



In becoming a trauma-informed educator in higher education Monteiro and Zouhouri's (2022) key guidelines (slightly modified) are useful:

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- **Be curious about the lives of your students.** Take time to learn about the geopolitical contexts of their countries of origin.
 - **Understand that refugees are not helpless.** Learn to recognise signs of resilience and post-traumatic growth, and provide opportunities for students to strengthen their ability to recover from adversity.
 - **Avoid pathologising or psychologising students.** Leave the diagnosis and treatment of mental health conditions to professionals. Instead, support students by promoting well-being and mental health within the classroom environment.
 - **Recognise that the trauma story is central to healing.** Healing happens in the context of a trusting relationship. Build such relationships with your students, and be open to receiving their trauma narratives – but do not go looking for them.
 - **Listen with empathy and respect.** Show that you care by actively listening and responding with understanding.
 - **Learn to recognise signs of psychological distress** and help students access appropriate support when needed.
 - **Do not take students' negative behaviour personally.** Understand that trauma may shape how students act, and respond with patience and insight.
 - **Prioritise your own mental health.** Develop self-care strategies to prevent compassion fatigue or vicarious trauma.

A trauma-informed orientation is fundamentally similar regardless of the source of trauma, as trauma can be understood as an emotional response to any deeply distressing event (Little & Akin-Little, 2019).

Moreover, supporting trauma-affected students beyond conventional academic roles and responsibilities can also offer educators a sense of deeper purpose – provided they maintain clear boundaries and take care of their own well-being.

Best practices for the future initiatives

Facilitation of student community development

- *initiating and coordinating regular informal meetings, such as coffee gatherings, creating a sense of safety and stability*
- *fostering peer to peer relationships*
- *creating opportunities for shared experiences that enhance social bonding and cultural exchange*
- *raising awareness of opportunities for international students to connect and collaborate with local student organisations*

Redefining hierarchical relationships between academic staff and students

- *organising informal events where students and academic staff can interact in a less formal setting, developing a shared academic community*



Organizing extracurriculum activities that are fun and social

- *helping students to feel a sense of ease and experience "regular student life" despite the traumatising events*

Being there for students through an open flow of communication

- *promote open channels of communication between students and faculty members in the spaces where students already are (e.g., Telegram or WhatsApp).*
- *adopt a dialogical approach when interacting with students*



Practicing storytelling and deep listening

- *listening and validating students' stories is in heart of community-based healing*

Adopting a trauma-informed orientation

- *recognising the ways in which traumatic experiences and psychological stress may prevent students from fully engaging in their studies is an important part of trauma-informed higher education.*

Fostering symbolic practices and rituals of commemoration

- commemorating those who may have been lost matters greatly to those mourning, enduring, and surviving.
- participating in symbolic practices and rituals validates students' traumatic experiences and sense of loss, and is, therefore, crucial in community-based healing.

Supporting academic resilience

- paying attention to well-being is essential in supporting academic resilience.
- tutoring students.
- offering new opportunities for meaningful learning.

Building cultural bridges through local insight

- partner with native speakers who can navigate cultural nuances and connect different academic traditions, making cross-cultural collaboration more authentic and effective.
- create a shared understanding by openly discussing communication expectations early on, preventing misunderstandings while honouring diverse perspectives.



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