

UK higher education sector's response to the war in Ukraine

Abstract

Purpose

The response from the HE sector in the UK to the full-scale war in Ukraine which started in 2022 remains a gap this article aims to address.

Design

Relying on theoretical ideas of neoliberalism and the collection and thematic analysis of relevant official communications from six UK universities, the article uncovers three major ways in which these universities have been responding to the war.

Findings

They include: (1) altruistic responses, (2) the promotion of equal treatment of all people, and (3) the condemnation of the invasion and its implications for UK's international cooperation in HE. These responses suggest the strengthening of the liberal ideals in the UK HE sector, heavily dominated by marketisation.

Originality

This analysis is significant not only for advancing a very limited scholarship on the topic of HE in the context of this war but also for understanding the development of the neoliberal landscape of UK HE and neoliberalism as a phenomenon in times of crises.

Key words: higher education, neoliberalism, social justice, UK, Ukraine, war

1. Introduction

One consequence of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which started on 24.02.2022, has been a disruption to the work of all Ukrainian higher education institutions (HEIs). The number of damaged and destroyed educational establishments, including HEIs, has been growing (Damaged Institutions, 2023). Recent media coverage of the events demonstrates that Ukrainian academics and students are among those fleeing the country, seeking safety. Some members of the Ukrainian higher education (HE) community are staying, putting on soldiers' uniforms and fighting for Ukraine (BBC, 2022).

Research on HE in the context of this war is scarce. The handful of related studies concern changing politics of international HE fora (Kushnir, 2023), war-related challenges in Ukraine's HE (e.g., Lavrysh, *et al.*, 2022; Kurapov, *et al.*, 2023). A couple of commentary articles also debate the implications of the war on refugee education in Europe (Al Ajlan, 2022; Morrice, 2022). There is no research to date about the response to the war from the HE sector in the UK, which is the country that has been a close ally of Ukraine (gov.uk, 2023a). This is the gap this article aims to address.

Relying on theoretical ideas of neoliberalism and the collection and thematic analysis of official communications related to this war from six UK universities, the article uncovers three major ways in which these universities have been reacting to the war: altruistic responses; promotion of equal treatment of people; and the condemnation of the invasion and the implications of this for UK's international cooperation in HE. Based on data analysis, the article argues that these responses suggest the strengthening of the voice of social justice in UK neoliberal HE, in which marketisation previously managed to push such liberal concerns to the background (Morrish, 2017).

The article proceeds with building a theoretical framework for this analysis around the paradoxical nature of neoliberalism, which, despite being a so-called updated version of the liberal school of thought, has come to somewhat diverge from the original liberal focus on the promotion of social justice. These considerations are followed by a review of literature into HE sector's liberal role in crises, followed by the presentation of methodology and key findings.

2. The 'neo' and the 'liberal' in neoliberalism

The prefix *neo* in the term *neoliberalism* suggests that neoliberalism is an updated version of liberalism. However, as explicated below, in practice, neoliberalism has diverged to an extent from the original liberal ideas.

The ideas of liberalism go back to the Age of Enlightenment in Europe in the XVII century, emphasising that human rights are inalienable and universal (Mitchell *et al.*, 1987; Freeman, 2022). Liberalism is a political philosophy that provides a framework for protecting human rights by creating a system of laws and institutions to safeguard individuals' rights and limit the power of the state (Mitchell *et al.*, 1987). In this regard, liberalism often supports the idea of a social safety-net that assists those who are vulnerable or disadvantaged, such as the poor, elderly, at risk or disabled. This promotes access to basic necessities of life, such as food, shelter, and healthcare (Ife *et al.*, 2022).

Thrift (2019: 4) elucidates, 'social justice emerged at a point in history where liberalism emphasized the common good alongside individual freedom'. To define social justice from the liberal lens, Walters' (2022) comment on the features of liberalism are relevant. The author first explains that 'liberalism as it emerged as the dominant ideology of European democracies throughout the latter part of the second millennium provides for the foundation of most Western contemporary systems of law and justice'. Then, focusing on equity and justice in liberalism,

he asserts that ‘important to the healthy functioning of a liberal polity is that all citizens are equal before the law’ and ‘the law must guarantee that no individual or group of people is either privileged by law or discriminated against by the state’ (Walters, 2022: 19). Based on liberal social justice, the state aims to ensure that individuals are equal and everybody’s interests are equally considered in the policy-making equation, ‘irrespective of birth, colour, creed, class, gender, sexual orientation or other irrelevant personal characteristics’ (Walters, 2022: 20).

In neoliberalism, the liberal idea of freedom eventually moved somewhat away from individuals and got associated with the market; and the market started creating inequalities and diminishing individual freedoms. Neoliberalism as an economic philosophy came about in the 1930s in Europe. It was advocated by liberal scholars who wanted to bring back the main ideas of classical liberalism. However, those ideas were becoming less popular because people wanted more control over markets after the Great Depression which was demonstrated in policies for countering the instability of free markets (Mirowski and Plehwe, 2015).

Since the 1970s, there has been a strong shift towards neoliberalism in political and economic practices worldwide. This has resulted in the deregulation, privatisation, and reduction of government involvement in many social services (Harvey, 2006). Most countries, including those that were previously social democracies and welfare states such as New Zealand and Sweden, and those that gained independence after the collapse of the colonial rule of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, have adopted some form of neoliberal policy and practice, either voluntarily or due to external pressures (Harvey, 2006).

Neoliberalism increases the role of the private sector in the economy and society and defines the role of the state in preserving an institutional framework appropriate to privatisation. Thus, the state has to guarantee, for example, the quality and integrity of money, and it ‘must also set up those military, defence, police, and legal structures and functions required to secure private property rights and to guarantee, by force, if need be, the proper functioning of markets’

(Harvey, 2006: 2). Davies (2017) notes that according to neoliberalism, if there is no market in spheres such as education, health care or environment then the state must create them. However, beyond these responsibilities, state's interventions in the created markets must be kept to the lowest (Harvey, 2006).

The matter of state's interference and affiliation between political and economic realms can make the differentiation between neoliberalism and liberalism more clearly highlighted. As Davies (2017) explains, neoliberalism does not aim to reduce the power of the state, but it is a political philosophy and policy agenda that has always expected the state to reshape society around its ideals. As Michael Foucault illustrates, neoliberalism allocates the state a key role in shaping how economic liberty is to be defined (Davies, 2017). Thus, in terms of the division between neoliberalism and liberalism, Davies' claim can be employed based on which neoliberalism is in contradiction with traditions of liberals who are the more egalitarian, optimistic ones, and assume markets and civil society as realms of potential self-rule and self-regulation (Davies, 2017).

After all, the combination of 'neo' and 'liberal' in neoliberalism, evidently, is a paradoxical and yet unavoidable combination. Neoliberalism represents a departure from classical liberalism, which emphasised the importance of limited government and individual freedom, to a more market-oriented approach that advocates for free-market capitalism where caring for social justice, if any, is appropriated for marketisation (Harvey, 2006). Scholars such as Harvey (2006) and Brown (2015) argue that the emphasis on free-market capitalism, deregulation, and privatisation can sometimes conflict with classical liberal ideals of individual freedom and limited government.

As for the 'liberal' component, scholars such as Blyth (2013), argue that the classical liberal ideals of individualism, freedom, and limited government have been co-opted by neoliberalism,

which uses these ideals to legitimise its market-oriented policies. They suggest that the 'liberal' component of neoliberalism is often downplayed or ignored in favour of the 'neo' component, resulting in a paradoxical situation where the very values that neoliberalism purports to champion are often undermined by its policies. Overall, these scholars suggest that while the combination of 'neo' and 'liberal' in neoliberalism may seem contradictory, it is an inevitable and deliberate strategy to legitimise and promote free market capitalism.

3. Higher education sector's liberal role in crises

This section conceptualises the term *crises*, maps literature on the role of HE in crises, explains the neoliberal context of the UK and the voice of social democracy in it.

3.1. Conceptualising crises

Crises is one of the modern buzzwords used universally by journalists and scholars to denote disputes, wars, incidents, riots and rebellions (Golden, 2013). In relevant literature, a crisis is conceptualised as an unexpected situation that creates uncertainty and causes a community to perceive a threat to itself or to things upon which decision-makers place core values. Additionally, crises can be experienced in different realms, such as military-security, social, commercial, political, environmental and psychological crises (Golden, 2013). Discussing various types of crises is beyond the scope of this article. However, as this study focuses on HE in war times, it should be clarified that the primary type of crises this article relates to is military-security – that is, a situation in which physical harm threatens Ukrainians in their homeland among a plethora of other related threats to the Ukrainian identity, the destruction of the infrastructure, infringement on people's freedoms, etc. The invasion of Ukraine has had devastating consequences for Ukraine but also economic, political, food supply and other repercussions in the world. In connection with the term 'crisis', the term 'emergency' is used

often to portray unexpected situations which require rapid response in a limited timeframe (Redfield, 2013). The attack on Ukraine is, arguably, associated with a range of emergencies caused by it, such as the risk of nuclear explosion due to indiscriminate shelling around the nuclear power plants, halted grain export from Ukraine to supply dependant regions, etc.

3.2. Higher education and crises

Universities' liberal role in times of crises has been discussed in a limited body of literature, focused particularly on supporting refugees in accessing HE in host countries (e.g., Bond *et al.*, 2007; Felix, 2018; Lambrechts, 2020). For example, Felix (2018) highlights the challenges of students from refugee backgrounds in their transition to the HE environment in the United States (US), and addresses the growing role of HE in facilitating support. In another example, Bond *et al.* (2007) mention Australian universities' contribution in the Changing Culture Project to meet a broad range of newly arrived young refugees' needs as well as providing language, literacy and basic education to enhance their wellbeing.

With regard to the recent wide-reaching crisis – Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, some studies related to the area of education have focused on Ukraine's challenges to adapt to online education delivery (Lavrysh *et al.*, 2022) and the impact of the war on the mental health of staff and students (Kurapov *et al.*, 2023). Elsewhere, with regard to Ukrainian HE, Al Ajlan's commentary article (2022 :1) puts forward 'key steps that academic communities can take to support and integrate their refugee colleagues' and Morrice's (2022: 251) commentary piece debates whether the war will be 'a pivotal moment in refugee education in Europe'.

3.3. UK context: neoliberalism and the voice of social democracy

Given the focus of this article on the response to the war in Ukraine specifically from the UK HE sector, a brief review of the neoliberal ideology in UK's wider politics as well as in its HE is essential. A two-party system is the dominant political system in the UK, represented by two

main parties: Conservatives and Labour (Prosser, 2018). The Labour Party is usually associated with left-wing political strands and as an alliance of social democrats, democratic socialists and trade unionists. Conservatives who have been in power for a long time drive neoliberal agendas, including HE (Hill *et al.*, 2016). The UK, along with the US, ‘is and has been one of the centres of neo-liberal/neo-conservative transformation of economy, society, and of education globally’ (Hill *et al.*, 2016: 2).

While some scholars assert that the vision of education with liberal values has come to dominate western educational thinking (e.g., Halstead and Taylor, 2005), there is a large number of studies that explain how HE is impacted by a particular neoliberal ideology, which has somewhat diverged from the liberal values, in developed countries such as the UK. Halstead and Taylor (2005: 21) explain that liberal values which are typically associated with liberal education are personal autonomy, critical openness, autonomy of academic disciplines, equality of opportunity, rational morality, the celebration of diversity, the avoidance of indoctrination. These values are based on the three central liberal ideals of freedom, equality and rationality (Halstead and Taylor, 2005).

The neoliberalisation of UK HE has been a journey going back to the 1970s and the Thatcher era (Radice, 2013). Although the recent universalisation of HE in the UK has increased public access to HE (Cole and Heinecke, 2020), Mintz (2021) argues that any promotion of social justice for students is a way for UK neoliberal universities to compete for students which are seen as customers. Neoliberalism in the UK HE sector is associated with, for instance, the marketisation of HE (Ball, 2012), enmeshing academics in systems of metrics and performance targets (Morrish, 2017), ‘institutional and individual pressures’ (Mahony and Weiner, 2019: 4), going as far as academics having to conduct unfunded research not to perish (Edwards, 2022). This is accompanied by resulting challenges for promoting social justice when unequal socioeconomic conditions of potential learners are ignored in qualification performance to

enter HE. These include unprivileged groups such as people from refugees, minorities and lower social classes who face more barriers to provide study costs, needed certificates and skills in severe competition of HE admission (Ball, 2012; Lambrechts, 2020).

UK government's support for Ukraine in the context of the Russian invasion is evident in the government statement on the invasion (gov.uk, 2023a). The UK has supported Ukraine militarily and helped Ukrainian refugees through two visa schemes. As of the 6th of November 2023, 55,400 arrivals have been recorded via the Ukraine Family Scheme and 136,700 – via the Ukraine Sponsorship Scheme (gov.uk, 2023b); the numbers that have left following their arrival are not part of these figures. While UK government's support for Ukraine in the context of the Russian invasion is evident, literature on this topic is scarce – there are only discussions of the impact of the war on, for instance, UK defence policy (Magill and Rees, 2022) and economy (Mbah and Wasum, 2022). as mentioned earlier, there is no research to date about the response from the neoliberal HE sector in the UK to the war, which is a significant gap this article aims to address. There are, however, some relevant non-scholarly data, albeit limited. For instance, the 2022 annual report of Universities UK (2023a: 10), which is currently the most recent, lists such initiatives of support to Ukraine by UK universities as: 'establishing a twinning mechanism to support Ukrainian universities, influencing visa and research policy, and informing the roll-out of the Homes for Ukraine programme. The twinning mechanism has led to over 70 formal partnerships between UK and Ukrainian universities'.

4. Methodology

The purpose of this study was to investigate: *how did the UK neoliberal university respond to the war in Ukraine?* To achieve this aim, a qualitative research design was employed, utilising online publicly available statements from six UK universities which revealed their perspectives

towards this rather politicised matter and displayed their plans to support those affected by the war.

Out of the existing 142 universities in the UK (Universities UK, 2023b), a random sample of six was selected: Loughborough University, Cardiff Metropolitan University, the Universities of Nottingham, Cambridge, Oxford and Edinburgh. These universities happen to represent Plate ‘Glass’ or post-1960 universities (Loughborough), post-1992 universities (Cardiff Metropolitan) and four Russel Group universities (Nottingham, Cambridge, Oxford and Edinburgh). Data collection for this study aimed to capture relevant official communications published on these universities’ websites between February 2022 (start of the full-scale invasion) and April 2023 (end of data collection) with unrestricted public access, relying on the following search keywords: ‘Ukraine’; ‘academic support’; ‘war’; ‘Ukraine Russia’; ‘Ukraine Russia education’; ‘Ukraine students wars’; ‘conflict higher education’; ‘conflict, university, responses’; ‘Ukrainian universities’; ‘Ukraine, war, education’; ‘support’; ‘Russian’; ‘invasion’; ‘attack’; ‘condemn’; ‘Russia’s’ and ‘Ukrainian academics’ within the mentioned HE websites. Via the online articles on the above-mentioned HEIs’ websites, we accessed the content related to the HEIs’ stance on the recent war and the responses of the UK’s HEIs in terms of support provision to those who have been affected by this war. In total, from within the six HEIs’ websites, 15 articles in relation to the searched key words emerged (see Appendix) among which there were:

- 2 statements from vice-chancellors (University of Edinburgh, 15.03.2022 and Cardiff Metropolitan University, 03.03.2022);
- 1 statement from university’s congregation (University of Oxford, 26.04.2022);
- 11 news posts (University of Nottingham 10.03.2022 and 19.04.2022; University of Cambridge 25.03.2022 and no date; University of Edinburgh 11.03.2022;

Loughborough University 04.03.2022, 25.07.2022 and 08.09.2022; University of Oxford 11.11.2022; Cardiff Metropolitan University 06.10.2022 and 20.01.2023);

- 1 webpage (University of Oxford, no date).

A thematic analysis was applied to the collected qualitative data to identify, analyse and report themes (patterns) within the data, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) guide with the following six phases: familiarisation with content, coding, theme-‘searching’, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and lastly, writing up the results. Themes in thematic analysis can be defined as patterns in the text that ‘at the minimum describe or organise the possible observation, and at the maximum interpret aspects of the phenomenon’ (Boyatzis, 1998: 4). The initial two phases of analysis (familiarisation and coding) involved reading and subjecting the official communications to a rough coding process, where distinctive patterns of different subjects that were evident in each official communication were identified. Subsequently, this formed the foundation for the next two phases related to searching for themes and reviewing them: the statements were scrutinised multiple times, and the coded data from each official communication was restructured to extract the principal themes that emerged. During the phase focused on defining and naming the themes, we relied on theoretical ideas around neoliberal and liberal ideas. Themes were determined based on their frequency across the official communications and their relevance to the research questions. As a result, each official communication featured patterns of similar and interconnected subjects that could be classified under a common theme. Finally, the main themes that emerged included: 1) altruistic responses, 2) equal treatment, 3) condemnation of the invasion and implications for UK universities’ cooperation with Russia in HE. The final phase of writing up the analytic narrative is presented below.

5. UK universities' response to the war

This section presents the key themes and discusses them in connection to the theoretical framework and the literature review provided earlier.

5.1. Altruistic responses

The theme 'altruistic responses' to the crisis emerged from the websites' statements which explain how HEIs in the UK have been assisting at-risk Ukrainian academics and students in continuing their education journey. The following main categories of charitable actions include:

- Accommodation support (University of Nottingham, 10.03.2022 and 19.05.2022; University of Cambridge, 25.03.2022; University of Oxford, no date; Cardiff Metropolitan University, 20.01.2023); Cardiff Metropolitan University, 06.10.2022);
- Humanitarian aid for Ukraine (medicine, bandages, etc) (University of Nottingham, 10.03.2022);
- Wellbeing and mental health support (University of Nottingham, 10.03.2022 and 19.05.2022; University of Edinburgh, 15.05.2022; Loughborough University, 4.03.2022; Cardiff Metropolitan University, 03.03.2022 and 20.01.2023);
- Financial support (living costs and tuition fees) (University of Nottingham, 19.05.2022; University of Cambridge, no date; University of Oxford, 22.04.2022; University of Edinburgh, 15.03.2022; Cardiff Metropolitan University, 03.03.2022 and 20.01.2023);
- Arrangements for people's safe return from Ukraine and Russia (University of Edinburgh, 15.03.2022);
- Educational and athletic support (scholarships, online education provision for Ukrainian students, their access to digital libraries and summer school projects) (University of Cambridge, 25.03.2022; Cardiff Metropolitan University, 06.10.2022);

and 20.01.2023 University of Oxford, 26.04.2022 and 11.11.2022; University of Edinburgh, 15.03.2022 and 11.03.2022; Loughborough University, 25.07.2022 and 08.09.2022);

- Support for students in gaining qualifications and passing English language tests (University of Edinburgh, 15.03.2022);
- Immigration support (University of Nottingham, 19.05.2022; University of Edinburgh, 11.03.2022 and 15.03.2022; University of Cambridge, no date);
- Support for Ukrainian universities in continuing to function during and after the war (Loughborough University; 25.07.2022; University of Oxford, 11.11.2022; Cardiff Metropolitan University; 06.10.2022; University of Cambridge, 25.03.2022).

These support measures can be seen as awakening the liberal values based on which HE was originally developed in the UK (Shen, 2016). As Halstead and Taylor (2005) depict, equality of respect is one of the central strands of liberal education to which the principles of impartiality and tolerance are linked. Equality of respect in education is about equal opportunity for all individuals, the celebration of diversity, public access to education, and the universalisation of education, which have all been promoted since World War II (Cole and Heinecke, 2020). Moreover, equality of respect in HE is about ensuring that everybody's needs are fairly considered in policy-making (Walters, 2022). Effectively, UK universities' altruistic supports, the equality of respect can be primarily characterised as the 'equality of opportunity' for at-risk people to access academic resources. According to Halstead and Taylor (2005: 23), equality of opportunity is implicit within equality of respect, and it can be applied to 'genuine attempts to increase opportunities for disadvantaged groups and individuals to gain access to valued goals like higher education'. With this in mind, it seems that the UK's universities endeavour to show their loyalty to the liberal value of equality of opportunity in this crisis by providing extra facilities for Ukrainian students and scholars, as well as those from Russia who do not support

the invasion, to reduce the discriminative consequences of the war on their educational and professional journeys.

There are plenty of examples that illustrate altruistic activities and plans of UK HEIs for the people affected by this full-scale war. A few extracts are presented here to explain how equality of opportunity is represented in the addressed statements. For example, Cardiff Metropolitan University (20.01.2023) suggests that financial services ease the situation for the Ukrainians who were already affiliated with the university at the start of the war:

‘Cardiff Metropolitan University has pledged £400,000 to support the role of education in peace-building in Ukraine. The money will be used over the next two years in Fellowships and Scholarships, as well as accommodation for those fleeing Ukraine’.

In another example, University of Cambridge (25.03.2022) describes urgent educational needs of Ukrainians and how the university supports them:

‘Among them are the provision of online material for Ukrainian students (both at school and university level), help with supervisions (especially for final-year PhDs), access to libraries and digital publications, and help with the preservation of rare books and valuable collections... Cambridge University Press and Assessment has already made the majority of its academic journal content free to institutions registered in Ukraine’ (25.03.2022).

Additionally, Loughborough University (25.07.2022) focuses on the university’s collaborative plans for the reconstruction of Ukrainian cities and educational institutions post-war:

‘Loughborough and O. M. Beketov NUUEKh will undertake a joint project called “Building Ukrainian Cities Back from the War Ruins”. Over the summer Loughborough will be supporting a programme called ‘Innovative cities: best practices of post-war reconstruction’.

The mentioned extracts demonstrate the universities' commitment to ensure that Ukrainians have equal opportunity to remain and progress in HE. These initiatives align with the liberal principle of equality of respect in HE, which pertain to promoting inclusivity of individuals from diverse backgrounds and recognising the unique needs and potentials of different people, including those at risk elsewhere in the world who could seek safety through HE in the UK.

5.2. Equal treatment

UK universities' commitment to the equality of respect and, specifically, equality of opportunity is also apparent in the communications' extracts associated with the second theme – 'equal treatment'. The concepts of 'equality of respect' and 'equality of opportunity' from the discussion of the previous theme are partly applicable to the analysis of this theme. This is because the extracts that have formed the basis for this second theme primarily focus on the different groups of at-risk people receiving altruistic services rather than the types of services. In these extracts, HEIs focus on the inclusivity of UK universities' aid to at-risk academics and students regardless of their nationalities. Firstly, the universities emphasise that their support is not restricted only to the invasion of Ukraine. Secondly, there are a couple of communications that make a distinction between Russian people and Russia's government, and recognise that Russians who are against the war may also be affected by this war. By way of example for the former, the University of Edinburgh (15.03.2022) announces:

'Working with Cara, as we did for academics displaced by the conflicts in Afghanistan and Yemen, we have agreed funding to host ten at-risk scholars from conflict zones across the world, with a focus on Ukraine as the most pressing issue'.

In its statement, this University stresses that its charitable support is allocated to diverse nationalities enduring crises both in the past and the present, and it is not restricted to Ukrainians. Similarly, the University of Nottingham (19.05.2022) states:

‘The scholars at risk programme is designed to support Ukrainian students. However, it may be used beyond the current crisis to support students at risk of displacement in all conflicts’.

The examples above demonstrate that the liberal value of equality of respect is represented in the universities’ treatment of diverse groups affected by various crises. Such equal treatment means UK’s universities assume people from different nations and backgrounds equally deserve to access HE.

Support for Russians already affiliated with UK universities at the start of the war is a controversial issue in the context of our discussion here. An example that requires discussion is an extract from Loughborough University’s statement (04.03.2022):

‘We also offer our support to our Russian colleagues and students at the University.

This is Putin's invasion and not the Russian people's’.

On the one hand, such narratives could be seen as camouflaging universities’ intentions to preserve the Russian clientele. However, on the other hand, it is important to view such statements in the context of universities’ wider response. While the official communications gathered from Loughborough during the collection of the data that informs this article do not present an explicit condemnation of the invasion or clarity around the idea of supporting only those Russians that condemn the aggression, it is stated that Loughborough Pro Vice-Chancellor for Research calls the conflict ‘Russian’ (25.07.2022), which does insinuate implicit condemnation.

5.3. Condemnation of the invasion and implications for HE cooperation

In line with the above themes, the theme focused on the ‘condemnation of the invasion and implications for HE cooperation’ can also be seen in the context of the liberal values around which western education has been developing since World War II (Halstead and Taylor, 2005). The importance of human rights as a liberal value in HE will be specifically considered in addressing UK universities’ reaction to the war. UK universities’ market-based priorities (Ball, 2012) will be re-examined in contrast to measures for quitting academic collaboration with Russian universities and government. This is significant as it suggests ignoring the benefits likely to be achieved through partnerships.

The criticism of Russia for initiating the war and of those who support it is evident in the following forms in the communications that were examined: explicitly condemning Russia’s actions (University of Nottingham, 10.03.2022; University of Oxford; University of Edinburgh 15.03.2022); acknowledging that the war has emotional and mental implications (i.e., stress, fear, shock) for Ukrainians, Russians and other nationalities (University of Oxford, 26.04., 2022 University of Edinburgh, 11.03.2022; Cardiff Metropolitan University, 03.03.2022 and 06.10.2022) and expressing their solidarity and compassion with Ukrainians and those Russians who have denounced the aggression (University of Nottingham, 10.03.2022; University of Oxford, 26.04.2022; University of Edinburgh, 15.03.2022).

Among the institutions which directly condemn the invasion, the University of Nottingham (10.03.2022) seems to be the most critical:

‘The University of Nottingham condemns the actions of the Russian government in the strongest possible terms.’

The vice chancellor of the University of Edinburgh suggests that such statements of condemnation became a routine response from UK universities:

‘I want to reiterate that we join our colleagues in the sector in condemning this invasion’ (15.03.2022).

Criticising the invasion, UK universities take a liberal stance expressing the reactions of their staff and students as well as a wider community around the universities to the invasion. For instance, Cardiff Metropolitan University (3.03.2022) claims:

‘Students, staff and partners of Cardiff Metropolitan University have expressed shock and sadness at unfolding events in Eastern Europe, following the military invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation’.

The condemnation of the invasion has also gone hand in hand with demonstrating solidarity and compassion towards those affected by the war, as exemplified by the statement from the University of Oxford (26.04.2022):

‘Congregation expresses its strongest condemnation of the war of aggression started by Putin's regime against Ukraine; its sympathy and support for the people of Ukraine in its struggle for freedom, for the anti-war and human rights movement in Russia, and for all civilians endangered by this war whatever their nationality; affirms its support for the independence and self-determination of democratic Ukraine’.

There are also examples of UK universities calling on the Russian government to stop the invasion, such as in the case of the University of Nottingham (10.03.2022):

‘We stand in solidarity with the people of Ukraine and call on the government of Russia to desist its invasion and the violation of the human rights of civilians in the country’.

These illustrative extracts from UK universities’ responses to the invasion showcase that UK universities primarily adopt a critical stance towards the invasion. They consistently display

empathy towards the victims of the war, namely Ukrainians. As the two previous themes (i.e., altruistic responses to crisis and equal treatment) were analysed in light of the importance of liberal values and how they are safeguarded by HEI during the war, the condemnation of Russia's aggression by the universities will be explained by emphasising one of the primary liberal values that has been violated in starting this invasion, namely, human rights.

Human rights are a fundamental aspect of a liberal political philosophy, which places great importance on individual liberty and freedom to overcome oppression. In a liberal context, human rights are essential for protecting and promoting individuals' dignity, autonomy, and well-being regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, gender, or any other characteristic (Mitchell *et al.*, 1987). Liberalism values the notion that each person has inherent worth and should be allowed to make their own decisions without interference from others, and recognises that human rights are necessary to protect people from being abused by persons who are in power (Charvet and Kaczynska-Nay, 2008). By protecting individuals' rights, the society as a whole can function more fairly and efficiently (Charvet and Kaczynska-Nay, 2008).

The Invasion of a country leads to a breach of human rights, including but not limited to the right to life, liberty, security, self-determination and access to education (Tomz and Weeks, 2018). The invasion of Ukraine also resulted in the displacement of many people and the deprivation of their human rights. For example, the University of Nottingham criticises Russia specifically because of this:

‘We stand in solidarity with the people of Ukraine and call on the government of Russia to desist its invasion and the violation of the human rights of civilians in the country’.

The condemnation of the attack is a starting point to explain the third main theme that came out from the data, and from this point the discussion of this theme focuses on its second and final aspect – the idea of punishing any actions that attack the ideals of liberalism. Such

punishment includes ending all formal links, agreements and collaborations with universities in Russia (University of Nottingham, 10.03.2022; University of Edinburgh, 11.03.2022), monitoring sanctions lists, and all philanthropic relations with individuals connected to Russia (University of Cambridge, 25.03.2022; University of Edinburgh, 11.03.2022), reviewing gifts and donations for any funding or institutional research links related to Russia (University of Cambridge, 25.03.2022); stopping funds for research linked to Russia and divesting Russian investment holdings (University of Edinburgh, 15.03.2022). These reactions were facilitated by the statement made by Russia's Rectors' Union early March, which openly supported Russia's war propaganda . In this statement, the Union maintains: 'This is Russia's decision to finally end the eight-year confrontation between Ukraine and Donbas, achieve the demilitarisation and denazification of Ukraine, and thereby protect itself from growing military threats' (THE, 2022).

While the measures mentioned above are intended to show a disagreement of UK (neo)liberal universities with the actions that go against any liberal values by allowing them to affect cooperation strategies, such reactions may also result in diminishing some interests for HEIs in UK. These disadvantageous consequences can be analysed in connection with the neoliberal context of UK academia. As explained in the literature review earlier, neoliberalism normalises the commercialisation and marketisation of HE (Lynch, 2006). Moreover, it was discussed that HEIs operate in a highly competitive environment and invest in all sorts of things to stand out (Mintz, 2021). One of the most common profit-making vehicles used by universities to maximise their economic and ranking status is international collaborations. In this regard, Bamberger *et al.* (2019: 204) illuminate that 'internationalisation in HE is an area which has been widely identified with neoliberal ideas and practices'. Effectively, neoliberalism is deeply embedded in academic and commercial connections among universities across the world. HE internationalisation can be put into effect by various initiatives such as international research

collaborations, student exchanges, sabbatical projects, conferences, shared holdings and investments, etc. (Spencer-Oatey, 2013). Thus, a close association between neoliberalism and internationalisation in HE suggests that pausing commercial and academic relationships with Russia means ignoring the economic and reputational profits by HEIs in favour of liberal values. Although neoliberal values of competition and profit-making are an ever more powerful frame through which HE is operationalised, it seems that the commitment to liberal values, including human rights surpasses, neoliberalism in times of crises, such as during the invasion of a country.

6. Conclusion

This study has explored UK HE sector's response to the war in Ukraine, illustrated by six universities. The study has revealed that despite the characterisation in the literature of the UK HE sector as dominantly driven by neoliberal profit-making ambitions (e.g., Morrish), the universities' reactions to the war reinforce the liberal principles of social justice which have been previously overshadowed by the marketisation of education. The findings of this research show three distinct strategies adopted by the addressed universities in their response to the ongoing armed conflict and in their efforts to mitigate the plight of the people at risk thereof. They include: altruistic responses of UK HE to the war, the promotion of equal treatment of people, and the condemnation of Russia's attack and implications of this for international cooperation in HE. Each of these three avenues of actions represents some principles of liberal values which are revived by the universities in this crisis. In effect, the theme of altruistic responses to crisis emerged from the data collected, revealing that UK universities are providing various forms of support to at-risk Ukrainian academics and students affected by the war. These measures align with the liberal values of equality of respect and opportunity that have long been promoted in the UK's HE system. The support provided by UK universities can

be seen as an effort to reduce the discriminatory consequences of the war on the educational and professional status of those affected. The promotion of equality and fostering inclusivity is also reflected in the second theme where the universities emphasise equal treatment of people and provide equal support to at-risk individuals, regardless of nationality or the crisis they are facing. According to the third theme, the embodiment of liberal values, notably human rights, is perceived in the universities' statements in terms of condemning the invasion and implications of this for UK's international cooperation in HE. The invasion of a country effectively leads to a breach of various human rights which are praised by UK's HE sector as a foundation to protect liberal values. Furthermore, the strong connection between neoliberalism and internationalisation in HE implies that halting academic and commercial ties with Russia could result in neglecting the economic and reputational benefits that HEIs gain in support of liberal values. It seems that upholding liberal values, such as human rights, outweighs profit-gaining ambitions during crisis, such as this invasion.

Overall, the response of UK universities to the war in Ukraine highlights the importance of education in times of crises and the potential of HE to promote liberal values. Therefore, this analysis is significant not only for advancing a very limited scholarship on the topic of HE in the context of this war but also for our understanding of the development of the neoliberal landscape of UK HE and neoliberalism as a phenomenon in general in times of crises.

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Appendix: Official communications from six UK universities

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Source: Authors' own work