

## Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

0440

V8 | Caldicot

Fri 13 Dec 2019

12:00 - 12:30

The Crisis of Ukrainian Higher Education Reform: Moving Towards a Trauma Informed Understanding

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**Research Domain:** International Perspectives and context (IPC)

**Abstract:** Ukrainian higher education is found to be in the state of crisis by the local and international scholars and commentators (Fimyar, 2008). The persistence of the crisis suggests that higher education system may be caught in a transformational trap (Kovryga and Nickel, 2006) that combines unreflected assumptions about the past as well as unquestioned agreements with the models of the future. This chapter engages Ukrainian history of oppression and violent exercise of power with a particular emphasis on the events of Holodomor of 1933 and theories of trans-generational trauma transmission to propose that current dysfunctions in the higher education sector may be mirroring the long forgotten events of 1933. We invite Ukrainian higher education leaders and Western leader developers to re-consider approaches to critical thinking in the context of trauma-informed understanding.

Fimyar, O. (2008). Educational policy-making in post-communist Ukraine as an example of emerging governmentality: Discourse analysis of curriculum choice and assessment policy documents (1999–2003), *Journal of Education Policy*, 23(6), 571–593.

Kovryga, O. and Nickel, P.M. (2006) In a cycle of false necessity? Escaping from embedded quasi-institutions and building a new system of public administration and management in Ukraine. *International Journal of Public Administration*, 29(13): 1151–1166.

**Paper:** When it comes to higher education sector in Ukraine the key descriptor of the status quo is unequivocally crisis. This crisis is apparent in a number of different ways. Firstly, the higher education reform process itself is said to be in crisis through the accounts of local and international observers

(e.g. Janmaat, 2008; Fimyar, 2008). The second dimension of crisis is evidence in the thinking of academics and professionals studying higher education reform in Ukraine.

Most analytical accounts of crisis result in identifying some form of tension between Soviet legacies and Western/European values as the underlying reasons for crisis. Suggestions on how to resolve the conflict often appear unachievable and lack dynamism.

This paper engages the concepts of historical memory (Fedinec and Csermocsko, 2017) and the collective trauma (Sotero, 2006; Bowen and Shaanta Murshid, 2016; Somasundaram, 2007) in an effort to look at the higher education reform from a historical and trauma-informed perspective (Bowen and Murshid, 2016).

Kovryga and Nickel (2004: 610) perceptively suggest that Ukrainian society has a strong shadow side, a parallel reality that exists behind the ideological façade which serves the purpose of satisfying the international pressures for reform. The shadow side ‘represents a more authentic progression towards change and the struggles, which underlie survival’. However, we invite the reader to consider an extension of this one sided statement and allow a possibility of simultaneous co-existence of the authentic shadow and the authentic visible side. Analytically allowing for the presence of these conflicting motivations opens up a different path for analysis of the role of leadership in HE and approaches to leadership development in higher education.

Understanding the historical patterns of relationship to authority and direction and purpose of decision making efforts, provides the context for what Kovryga and Nickel (2004: 624) call ‘well mastered processes of de-centralisation in [modern] Ukraine’. Such decentralisation, occurs through local action in private that goes against the grain of publicly stated goals. It happens at the policy level, level of individual HEIs as well as individual academics and students.

Historical trauma is a relatively new concept in the academic literature and its connection to the large scale change process is largely under-explored. Historical trauma occurs where a dominant group subjects a certain population to all or one of the following: long-term segregation, displacement, physical and/or psychological violence, economic destruction and cultural dispossession (Sotero, 2006; Bowen and Shaanta Murshid, 2016; Somasundaram, 2007). Embedded in the definition is a deliberately violent use of power and hence destructive exercise of leadership with devastating consequences for affected populations. Trauma effect goes beyond the affected population. Bezo and Maggie (2015) report two sets of findings from the interviews with three generations of Holodomor survivors: traumatic emotional states associated with Holodomor and trauma-based coping strategies. Specifically, three types of fear were reported: fear of repeated abuse of power; fear to take action and ‘fear and mistrust in others’.

## **Towards Trauma Informed Understanding of Higher Education Reform**

Literature on Ukrainian higher education reform reveals overlapping themes with those uncovered in the research on the collective trauma and broader Ukrainian history.

### ***Centralisation/Decentralisation Tension in the Bologna expectations: un-reflected, undiscussed and unresolved***

Although Ukrainian policy makers have voluntarily signed up to the Bologna process, Ukrainian observers note the commitment to engage has dwindled over time (Shevchenko, 2018). Kovacs's analysis (2014) notes a dual motivation of the Ukrainian higher education policy makers: to preserve good relations with EU and to preserve much desired independence at the same time. As recent political events have demonstrated, both of these goals are equally desired by the Ukrainian people (possibly with the exception of some parts of the Eastern territories) and the Ukrainian government. Ukrainian higher education policy makers reconcile these opposing tendencies through non-confrontational decentralisation expressed in quiet decline in frequency of reports and inclusion of only limited information in the reports (Shevchenko, 2018; Educational Policy Portal, 2015). Such strategy precludes the Western counterparts from understanding the reality of what is happening, keeping the tensions around national building in the shadow.

#### *Fear of Authority and Fear to Take Action*

The ambivalence of the overall policy environment and high levels of mistrust at the policy level are transmitted to the national level university leaders. In the context of over-populated higher education system and strong dependencies of HEIs on 'the political environment for regulations, funding, and legitimacy' (Hladchenko, Dobbins and Jungblutd, 2018: 9), individual institutions are placed in a position where their survival depends on rector's capacity to build relationships with civil servants and politicians. Present day ambivalence combined with the historical fear of authority creates a fertile ground for the abuse of power. Civil servants and politicians themselves exist in an ambivalent legal framework without clear sense of boundaries and accountability (e.g. see Kovryga and Nickel (2004) for some insightful analysis). Who wins? Who losses? What are the definitions of success and failure? The possibility of resisting or challenging the governmental policies is not widely considered by the institutional leaders.

### ***Self-preservation and Indifference Towards Others***

Higher education system as well as the broader political system in Ukraine are frequently described as corrupt (Osipian, 2008, 2017). Positions of power are occupied by individuals who often misuse their office for private gain subverting the publicly stated intentions. The general recognition of these dynamics by Ukrainians themselves has been captured in a satirical TV series 'Servant of the People'

and then skilfully presented in the 'The Economist' (2018) as a part of the broader discussion of corruption and abuse of power in Ukraine. Much has been written about this particular aspect of Ukrainian politics (e.g. Yurchenko, 2018). Osipian demonstrates how numerous governments have exercised strong leverage over universities through abuse of power, how inconsistent and ambivalent expectations leave opportunities open for abusive practices within the HE system, resulting in corruption in licensing, accreditation, admissions and testing (Osipian, 2008, 2017). Hladchenko, Dobbins and Jungblut's, (2018) demonstrate how 'favouritism has also shaped the institutional architecture of Ukrainian HE and research to the benefit of powerful actors'.

### Conclusion

Up until 1990s, Ukraine was a neglected nation (Reid, 1997). And yet the contemporary crisis in higher education and elsewhere in the public sector has drawn a lot of attention from the outside world. Is it possible that the crisis in higher education reforms and in thinking about the reform process is a wakeup call to both Ukrainians and the outside world? Can the world learn from Ukrainian experience and those of other national contexts that experienced the collective trauma?

Bezo, B. and Maggie, S. (2015). Living in "survival mode:" Intergenerational transmission of trauma from the Holodomor genocide of 1932-1933 in Ukraine, *Social Science and Medicine*, 87-94.

Fimyar, O. (2014). What is policy? In search of frameworks and definitions for non-Western contexts, *Educate*, 14(3), 6-21.

Kovryga, O. and Nickel, P.M. (2004). The Inevitability of Enduring Historical and Cultural Patterns: the Paradox of Decentralisation Efforts in Ukraine. *Administrative Theory and Practice*, 26(4), 609-634.

Osipian, A. (2010). Corruption in the politicized university: Lessons from Ukraine's 2010 presidential elections, *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research*, (23)2, 101-114.

Shaw, M. (2013). Flawed Implementation or Inconsistent Logics? Lessons from Higher Education Reform in Ukraine. *European Education*, 45, 7-24.