Baltics4UA: Supporting Ukraine through citizen engagement at Baltic Universities

Higher education in humanitarian crises: resilience, social inclusion, innovation

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Highlights

When planning social actions for Ukrainians, one should carefully think through the intricate details of how to identify the most pressing needs for an event, involve Ukrainians into the organizing team, and cooperate with other actors. Organizers must prioritize the safety and well-being of participants, especially when addressing sensitive topics, by appointing experienced moderators and implementing strategies to prevent disruption, both online and offline.

About Baltics4UA

This policy brief has been developed by the project "Supporting Ukraine through citizen engagement at Baltic Universities" (Baltics4UA, https://baltics4ua.eu/). Baltics4UA enhances Baltic universities' social responsibility through civic engagement actions to address the Ukrainian humanitarian crisis in the Baltics. The recommendations outlined in this policy brief were derived from open access publication "Academia as catalyst of the quadruple helix implementation for social responsibility in the Baltics"

Executive Summary

Since the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, a new reality has unfolded not only for Ukrainians but for European Union (EU) countries, especially neighboring ones. In response to the crisis, many Ukrainians have been forced to leave their country and travel to EU countries, with a significant number of them finding shelter in the Baltic states. Higher education institutions in particular actively mobilized to support Ukrainian researchers, students, and refugees in their communities. However, as the global community was caught unprepared for the magnitude of this humanitarian crisis, universities' responses were largely spontaneous and initiated by different interest groups, e.g. student councils, and reactive as they sought to support different needs as they arose, rather than being thoroughly planned from the beginning.

In light of this humanitarian emergency, the Baltics4UA project brings forward a pivotal mission: to introduce a systematic and participatory approach for Baltic universities to support Ukrainian refugees thus forging resilience at institutional and societal levels. Within this policy brief, we present a comprehensive strategy designed to mobilize citizens and institutions in support of Ukraine and its people. Drawing from our hands-on experiences, we recognized a range of 18 distinct social action types based on the activities that universities have implementented. Furthermore, we offer a section detailing the lessons learned from implementing these initiatives within the Baltics4UA consortium. Our recommendations are tailored to two primary target audiences: university managers and administrators, as well as lecturers and university staff.

Acknowledgements

Rationale for action taking

According to the UNHCR (Nygren 2024), since the onset of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, there have been 6.5 million Ukrainian refugees globally, with Estonia registering 57,725, Latvia 52,120, and Lithuania 83,750. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have played a pivotal role in supporting Ukrainian refugees by providing them with humanitarian aid, funding, study, and job opportunities. Given the importance of HEIs' contribution and unprecedented response to the humanitarian crisis, they serve as role models of social responsibility, driving and empowering people involved in support efforts. Baltics4UA aims to enhance these efforts through the bottom-up empowerment of academic communities to address the humanitarian crisis.

Addressing refugees' needs and responding to the humanitarian crisis in the most effective way requires a thorough understanding – and both institutional- and community-led actions – to bring together the collective mobilization at all levels to tackle these challenges. Additionally, to drive positive change within society and ensure the enhancement of crisis response capabilities among HEIs, it is not possible to act in isolation, thus the engagement of all quadruple helix actors – science, policy, business, and society – is fundamental. Based on this belief, the Baltics4UA project sought to empower academic communities through the adoption of citizen engagement methodologies for humanitarian purposes. Our approach also supports lifelong learning for the improvement of Baltic societies, while socially including Ukrainian refugees and acting for their benefit.

These bridges between Ukrainian and Baltic academic and citizen communities have been built through a series of 23 public social actions organized by Baltics4UA partners. For example, as the Estonian Public Broadcaster (ERR) reports, "The needs of Ukrainian refugees in Estonia have changed over the last two years and they now need help with long-term issues" (ERR 2024).

Similar trends should be expected in other countries where Ukrainian refugees reside. Therefore, these circumstances highlight the need for the development of an ongoing integration and support framework for Ukrainians in which HEIs can play a key role, connecting the quadruple helix of citizens, entrepreneurs, public institutions and universities.

Proposed policy option(s)

To foster citizen engagement within HEIs and bolster support for Ukrainian refugees while promoting social responsibility, the Baltics4UA project introduces a comprehensive framework of social initiatives. Specifically, our social actions adopt the typology outlined by the World Bank Working Group on Citizen Engagement (2015) that distinguishes four levels of citizen engagement, namely:

- **Information:** Citizens are recipients of information by external stakeholders.
- **Consultation:** Institutions receive citizens' feedback with citizens' role being limited to this one-way interaction.
- **Collaboration:** Citizens are called to contribute to the process in a two-way interaction scheme.
- **Empowerment:** Citizens are initiators and strategic organizers of the actions.

Furthermore, Zourou & Oikonomou (2023) introduced a typology of social actions in the open-access publication "Baltic universities fostering citizen engagement through social actions for Ukrainian Refugees."
1. Citizen Science
2. Hackathon
3. Crowdfunding
4. Crowdsourcing
5. Do-it-yourself
6. Art event (theatrical plays, music concerts, exhibitions etc.)
7. Scholarship

8. Tuition free studies
9. Free accommodation
10. Psychological counseling
11. Podcast
12. Campaign
13. Public lectures
14. Legal counseling
15. Networking event
16. Summer camp
17. Educational equipments
18. Working/Research group

This diverse array of social actions offers the ability to craft your set of actions based on the capacities of your institution, goals, resources and time available. In case you want to learn more about each specific action that the Baltics4UA partners have implemented, please refer to open access publication: "Citizen engagement as crisis response at higher education institutions in the Baltic states and Ukraine"

Policy recommendations for HEIs to enhance citizen engagement

Based on the experience of the 23 Baltics4UA social actions (Abolina, et.al., forthcoming), we provide the following set of recommendations for university managers and administrators, as well as teachers and other university staff, for realistic and feasible ways that HEIs can enhance citizen engagement.

To maximize citizen participation, designing social actions that achieve at least the "Consultation" level of engagement was found to provide citizens with opportunities to provide their feedback, contribute to the process in a two-way interaction, or become the initiators and strategic organizers of the actions.

Target audience	Action point	What it entails
For university managers and administrators	Include Ukrainians in the planning and implementation of social actions	Ukrainians can help to access refugee communities, serve as intercultural mediators, and assist with communication by translating required materials. Social actions are important for bringing communities together, but as the needs of both audiences differ, there is a need to carefully think about how to meet both of them.
	Carry out a needs assessment survey of Ukrainian students at the university	Identify the most pressing support needs of Ukrainians and then make knowledge-based decisions about how to address these needs and which social actions are most required. This is important as the needs may change in a short period of time.
	Invite members of the senior university management to participate in events	Involve those directly related to the subject of the event to the event itself, such as directors, who are key decision-makers.
	Seek support from local organizations and businesses	Arrange meetings with local charitable and humanitarian organizations and businesses to gain first-hand insights about the needs of Ukrainian refugees and identify potential avenues for collaboration, such as organizations seeking volunteers.

For university managers and administrators	Collaborate with artists to host cultural events	Actions which have an emotional dimension, e.g. movie screenings based on true stories or art exhibitions that introduce Ukrainian culture and the circumstances in Ukraine during the war, are more likely to motivate participants to become involved in social actions. Events that involve different sensory dimensions (listening - music, movies; seeing – art exhibitions, movies; tactile – dance) enable participants to be more emotionally involved and also stimulate analytical thinking about the topic. Care should be taken to make sure that permission is sought from the film director/production company for a public screening. To ensure the accessibility of the event, the film should be subtitled.
For lecturers and university staff	Organize guest lectures and roundtables to spread awareness of the topic, share expert knowledge, and help to counter disinformation about the war.	Public lectures that aim to attract an audience from beyond the university should be comprehensively titled and described, so that it is accessible to the general public. Publicity for events is boosted when personal contacts are used to spread news about the event, such as lecturers advertising the events to their students, rather than generic email lists. A moderator should also be appointed who can facilitate opportunities for consultation in the Q&A and ensure that the delivery-style of the speaker is accessible.
	Organize extra-curricular opportunities support citizen engagement outside of the regular classroom	Educational opportunities such as interdisciplinary courses, hackathons, language tandems, and treasure hunts involving local students and Ukrainian refugees help foster teamwork, intercultural awareness and understanding. They also allow teachers to blend theory and practice. Facilitating opportunities for student-led actions requires formulating more specific tasks and goals.
	Be mindful that the events deal with sensitive topics and the wellbeing and safety of all participants needs to be ensured.	The topics discussed can be upsetting for participants, so it is important to assign a moderator who should be prepared to deal with these types of situations. To avoid trolling at both online and in person events, an experienced facilitator should be appointed to moderate events. For online events, the host should require participants to register in advance, use the waiting room function to only admit registered participants, and ask participants not share the meeting link publicly.

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