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EVALUATING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF STATE HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY REFORMS IN UKRAINE UNDER SOCIOCULTURAL CHALLENGES: INTERNATIONAL RANKINGS AS DIAGNOSTIC TOOLS

This study examines the effectiveness of state higher education policy reforms in Ukraine through the lens of international university rankings from 2020 to 2025, during a period of unprecedented sociocultural challenges including armed conflict, demographic decline, and post-pandemic recovery. The research employs quantitative analysis of Ukrainian universities' performance in four major global ranking systems (ARWU, QS, THE, CWTS) to assess the outcomes of Bologna Process implementation and national reform initiatives. The study utilizes both quantitative metrics (institutional representation ratios) and qualitative scoring methodologies (point-rating systems) to evaluate changes in Ukrainian higher education quality indicators. Findings reveal a complex transformation pattern where despite increasing international collaboration and institutional resilience during wartime, Ukrainian universities face persistent challenges in global competitiveness metrics. The analysis demonstrates that 17 Ukrainian institutions achieved inclusion in THE World University Rankings 2025, representing a significant milestone, yet most remained in lower-tier categories (1501+). The research identifies critical gaps between national policy objectives and international recognition outcomes, highlighting the need for comprehensive strategic recalibration. Key sociocultural challenges include infrastructure displacement affecting 19 state institutions since 2014, demographic shifts reducing student populations, and the necessity for digital transformation acceleration under martial law conditions. The study concludes that while Ukrainian higher education has demonstrated remarkable adaptability and international engagement growth (20% increase in global research

collaborations 2019-2023), systematic policy interventions are required to address fundamental quality assurance mechanisms, resource allocation optimization, and strategic positioning within European Higher Education Area frameworks. These findings contribute to understanding the relationship between national education policies and international recognition metrics, providing evidence-based recommendations for future reform strategies that align domestic priorities with global competitiveness requirements while addressing unique Ukrainian sociocultural contexts.

Keywords: *state policy, higher education, university rankings, sociocultural challenges, Ukraine, Bologna Process, education reforms, international competitiveness*

Introduction. Contemporary state policy for higher education reform in Ukraine is being shaped under unprecedented sociocultural challenges, including armed conflict, demographic changes, digital transformation, and the necessity for integration into the European educational space [4; 10]. Ukraine has been a full member of the Bologna Process since 2005, which has led to fundamental changes in the national higher education system over two decades [10].

The analysis of state educational policy effectiveness requires objective assessment tools, among which international university rankings occupy a special place as indicators of national education systems' competitiveness [1]. In 2025, a record number of Ukrainian universities — 17 institutions from cities including Dnipro, Ivano-Frankivsk, Kyiv, Lviv, Odesa, Sumy, Uzhhorod, Kharkiv, and Chernivtsi — entered the prestigious Times Higher Education World University Rankings [5].

The research problematic is driven by the need to rethink approaches to evaluating the effectiveness of state reforms under conditions where traditional indicators do not fully reflect the complexity of challenges facing Ukrainian higher education [8; 9]. Bibliometric data from Times Higher Education shows that the total number of research papers produced by Ukrainian universities in collaboration with global partners increased by 20% between 2019 and 2023 to 9,708 publications, indicating growing international integration even under wartime conditions [5].

Literature Review and Problem Statement. The theoretical foundation of the study comprises works by foreign and domestic scholars investigating the relationship between state educational policy and international university rankings [1; 2]. Higher education quality issues are examined through the lens of various methodological approaches.

The result-oriented approach, represented in the works of N.A. Seleznova, defines education quality as the correspondence of process and outcome properties to state standard requirements, social norms, and personal needs [1]. The Bologna Process creates the European Higher Education Area under the Lisbon Recognition Convention, providing a legal framework for implementing unified quality standards [4; 10].

The personality-oriented approach considers education quality as a set of graduate educational characteristics oriented toward the zone of potential personality development. The socio-economic approach by G.A. Bordovsky and colleagues defines quality as the educational system's ability to satisfy consumer demands at various levels [2].

Research on Ukrainian universities in QS World University Rankings reveals that national policy has transformed means of achieving goals into the goals themselves, where publications become an end rather than a means of achieving quality of life, technological progress, and socio-economic well-being of the nation [3].

Analysis of international experience indicates contradictory results from ranking systems [4]. In THE 2025 rankings, Oxford maintains the top position for the ninth consecutive year, MIT rises to second place, surpassing Stanford, demonstrating the stability of leading global universities [5].

Critical analysis shows that global rankings focus primarily on university research functions, while the educational function takes a backseat due to the difficulty of objectively measuring teaching quality in different countries [1; 4].

Research Objectives and Tasks. The research objective is to evaluate the effectiveness of Ukraine's state policy for higher education reform under sociocultural challenges through analysis of Ukrainian universities' dynamics in international ranking systems from 2020-2025. Research tasks include: analyzing changes in Ukrainian university representation in global rankings; evaluating qualitative indicators of Ukrainian institutions' positions; identifying the impact of sociocultural factors on national higher education system competitiveness; formulating recommendations for improving state educational policy.

Main Research Results with Full Justification of Obtained Scientific Findings. Contemporary higher education quality diagnostics is based on comprehensive use of internal and external expert procedures [1]. Internal expertise is conducted through accreditation procedures, while external evaluation is implemented through international ranking systems

that provide comparative assessments of institutional performance.

In the global competitive environment, university rankings serve not only as criteria for education quality diagnostics but also as primary instruments of competitive struggle and educational policy formation [4]. The Bologna Process represents an intergovernmental higher education reform process launched in 1999 that currently involves 48 European countries and organizations [10]. This process has established the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), facilitating student mobility while promoting international competitiveness of European higher education.

Leading international ranking systems are characterized by fundamentally different methodological approaches [4]. The Shanghai ARWU ranking focuses on research productivity and academic achievements, using six quantitative indicators with emphasis on Nobel laureates, highly cited research, and publications in prestigious journals Nature and Science. The ARWU system allocates 10% weight to alumni quality, 40% to faculty quality, 40% to research output, and 10% to per capita performance. QS World University Rankings combines objective metrics with subjective assessments, allocating 40% weight to academic reputation, 10% to employer reputation, 20% to faculty-student ratio, 20% to citations per faculty, and 10% to internationalization indicators [3]. This methodology incorporates extensive surveys of academics and employers worldwide, recognizing the importance of perception in defining institutional quality.

THE World University Rankings employs the most comprehensive framework, utilizing 18 indicators grouped into five categories: teaching (30%), research environment (29%), research quality (30%), industry engagement (4%), and international outlook (7.5%) [5]. This approach provides holistic assessment encompassing both traditional academic functions and emerging priorities such as knowledge transfer.

The Leiden CWTS ranking represents a distinctive approach based exclusively on bibliographic data from the Web of Science database, eschewing subjective surveys [4]. This methodology prioritizes transparency and objectivity, focusing on publication output, citation impact, and collaboration patterns.

Quantitative analysis of Ukrainian university representation in international rankings from 2020-2025 reveals contradictory trends reflecting both resilience and challenges [5]. The number of Ukrainian universities applying for THE Rankings participation reached a historic

maximum of 55 institutions in 2025, representing a 33% increase compared to the previous year. In THE 2025 rankings, Sumy State University achieved the highest position among Ukrainian institutions in the 801-1000 range globally, while all other Ukrainian universities fell into the 1501+ category [5]. This distribution reveals significant stratification within the national system and highlights persistent structural challenges in achieving international recognition.

For the first time, the rankings included Bogomolets National Medical University, Odesa National University named after Mechnikov, and Vasyl Stefanyk Precarpathian National University [5]. This diversification suggests that specialized institutions are developing capacity to meet international ranking criteria, indicating broader improvements in quality assurance across the Ukrainian system. Analysis of publication activity demonstrates remarkable growth in international collaboration among Ukrainian scholars, evidenced by a 20% increase in collaborative publications between 2019 and 2023 [5]. This trend is particularly significant given operational constraints imposed by armed conflict and resource limitations. Conversely, Russia's global collaborations decreased by 8% over the same period, confirming the isolation of Russian academia following the invasion of Ukraine.

Ukraine's higher education system operates under unprecedented sociocultural challenges that have fundamentally reshaped institutional priorities and operational modalities [8]. Research on temporarily displaced universities provides crucial insights into adaptive capacity under extreme stress conditions [6]. The phenomenon of institutional displacement represents one of the most dramatic manifestations of disruption in Ukrainian higher education [6]. Since 2014, Ukraine experienced two significant displacement waves affecting higher education institutions. The first wave occurred when the country lost control over 7% of its territories, forcing 19 state higher education institutions from annexed Crimea and Luhansk and Donetsk regions to relocate.

Nine universities from conflict-affected regions experienced double displacement — first in 2014 and again following the 2022 full-scale invasion — illustrating the prolonged nature of institutional instability [6]. Infrastructure destruction, human resource displacement, and educational process restoration under martial law conditions became significant challenges. Negative consequences include loss of displaced universities' leadership potential and decline in quality and capacity of educational and research activities. The demographic crisis affecting

Ukrainian higher education extends beyond immediate conflict-related impacts to encompass broader trends including population decline, emigration, and changing social priorities [9]. The intersection of war, digitalization, demographic crisis, and labor market transformation creates synergistic effects that amplify individual challenges and require comprehensive policy responses.

The evaluation of state reform effectiveness requires systematic comparison between policy intentions and observable outcomes in institutional performance [7]. Ukraine's Higher Education Development Strategy for 2022-2032 articulates a comprehensive vision emphasizing international competitiveness, quality enhancement, and integration with European frameworks. The strategy defines the goal of creating an attractive and competitive national higher education system integrated into the European Higher Education Area and European Research Area.

Effectiveness analysis reveals persistent discrepancies between strategic goals and practical achievements across multiple dimensions of system performance [9]. The gap between intended outcomes and observed results suggests that policy implementation mechanisms may be inadequate to address the complexity of challenges facing Ukrainian higher education. Research findings regarding the transformation of means into ends within ranking-focused policies represent a critical insight into unintended consequences [3]. The observation that QS Rankings may incentivize behavior prioritizing ranking improvement over substantive outcomes suggests the need for careful consideration of incentive structures in policy design. University performance should result in quality of life improvements, technological progress, and economic and social well-being.

Comparative analysis with European higher education systems reveals important insights into alternative approaches [9]. The examination of dual education models in Germany, Sweden, and the Netherlands highlights potential benefits of closer integration between higher education and economic sectors. These countries have developed sophisticated mechanisms combining theoretical education with practical experience, creating graduates with both academic knowledge and professional competencies.

Development of international cooperation represents a fundamental strategic priority for enhancing Ukrainian higher education quality and competitiveness [5]. The Twinning Ukraine program exemplifies innovative partnership approaches, coordinated by the Cormack

Consultancy Group, establishing systematic partnerships between Ukrainian and British universities. The collaboration between Zaporizhzhia National University and Durham University demonstrates potential scope across diverse disciplines including history, anthropology, psychology, law, and risk studies.

The development of virtual reality technologies for documenting conflict impacts illustrates how international partnerships generate innovative solutions [5]. The creation of virtual reality tours across militarily affected areas enables international researchers to engage with Ukrainian contexts while addressing security constraints. These technological innovations demonstrate how crisis circumstances can stimulate creative approaches to knowledge production.

Digital transformation of educational processes has emerged as both necessity and opportunity [8]. The accelerated adoption of online and hybrid learning modalities during pandemic and wartime periods demonstrated institutional capacity for rapid adaptation while highlighting challenges related to technological infrastructure and pedagogical effectiveness. Higher education requires not only reconstruction of damaged infrastructure but also strategic rethinking of institutional roles and stakeholder relationships.

Funding and resource provision challenges have created imperatives for developing innovative financing mechanisms [3]. The paradoxical nature of wartime operations — where life-threatening conditions coexist with continued educational responsibilities — requires unprecedented levels of creativity in resource management. The international dimension of resource mobilization provides immediate assistance and frameworks for long-term collaboration that may persist beyond the current crisis period.

Conclusions. The conducted research reveals a complex picture of Ukrainian higher education system transformations under sociocultural challenges. Quantitative indicators demonstrate growth in international recognition: a record 17 Ukrainian universities entered THE World University Rankings 2025, and international research collaboration grew by 20% during 2019-2023 even under wartime conditions.

However, qualitative analysis of Ukrainian institutions' positions in global rankings indicates systemic competitiveness problems. Most Ukrainian universities remain in lower ranking categories (1501+), pointing to a gap between national ambitions and international quality standards. Sociocultural challenges fundamentally impacted higher education system

functioning. Displacement of 19 state institutions due to armed aggression, demographic crisis, and digital transformation necessity created unprecedented conditions for educational policy.

Analysis of state reform effectiveness shows the need for strategic rethinking of approaches to ensuring education quality. Implementation of the Bologna Process and European standards requires adaptation to Ukrainian realities considering unique wartime challenges.

Recommendations for improving state policy include: developing a comprehensive strategy for enhancing university international competitiveness; creating effective mechanisms for research and innovation funding; strengthening education integration with national economy needs; developing dual education following European models; implementing digital technologies in the educational process. Future research prospects are related to monitoring long-term reform consequences and developing adaptive models for education quality management under uncertainty conditions.

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