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Pursuit of ethical research in a war zone: a quest for freedom

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Abstract

Ethical research in war zones is crucial yet underexplored, especially when analysed as a practice of freedom. Existing scholarship primarily focuses on safety challenges, the implications of researchers' outsider position, and the politicisation of research in war zones. This paper addresses the gap in understanding the emancipatory potential of ethical research, using the case of Ukrainian universities. It employs a statistical analysis of survey data and a thematic analysis of interviews, both conducted with members of the Ukrainian higher education community. This paper demonstrates that ethical research in war contexts not only supports higher education communities but also symbolises resistance against war-induced destruction. This study underscores the importance of developing ethical research practices in war zones, aligning with international standards despite severe domestic challenges. It informs research policies at both institutional and national levels in war zones, and contributes to international policy aimed at supporting higher education communities in these contexts.

Keywords Research · Ethics · Ukraine · War · Conflict

Introduction

While a body of scholarship about research and its ethics in war and conflict zones exists, its focus is limited. This literature covers the challenges, in terms of safety for researchers and participants during field research in war zones (Krause, 2021; Wood, 2006, 2007), the implications of being an outsider researcher in war contexts (Goodhand, 2000; Helbardt et al., 2010), and the politicisation of research in war zones (Heathershaw & Mullojonov, 2020). However, the pursuit of ethical research in relation to the practice of freedom,

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particularly using Ukraine as a case study, has not been researched. This paper investigates these overlapping gaps.

The idea that the Russia-Ukraine war has already impacted the higher education sector in Ukraine (Kurapov et al., 2022; Lugovyi et al., 2023) and beyond (Kushnir, 2023; Kushnir & Yazgan 2024) is not new. However, how members of the Ukrainian higher education community pursue ethical research in the context of war, while dealing with some persisting post-Soviet legacies in research, is unploughed terrain in the scholarship. This is not surprising, given the unprecedented nature of the current situation and the relative novelty of the context, despite the war reaching the end of its third year (at the time of writing this paper). Literature on ethical research in Ukraine, even prior to the war, is limited and disjointed, mainly highlighting issues of research integrity among students and academics, as well as concerns around research ethics for biomedical research.

Following the ideas of Freire (1970), Hermanowicz (2021), and Zibani et al. (2022) in viewing research practice as an enabler of freedom, this paper explores the meaning of practicing ethical research in a war zone, as illustrated by the case of Ukrainian universities.

Research ethics and research integrity have traditionally been treated separately by the education community. Research ethics has typically focused on avoiding harm and exploitation, usually checked pre-research, while research integrity has emphasised honesty and truthfulness, often monitored during or after research (Kolstoe & Pugh, 2023). Calls to unify these concepts have emerged in scholarly literature (Chatfield & Law, 2024) and are reflected in the BERA Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2024), which integrate both ethics and integrity. These guidelines emphasise conducting research to the highest ethical standards while promoting professional integrity. Given that our research design was informed by these guidelines, we adopt an integrated view of ethics and integrity throughout the research process, from design to dissemination. Therefore, we use the terms 'research ethics,' 'ethical research,' and 'ethical principles in research' interchangeably to reflect this holistic approach.

Relying on the analysis of a survey and ten semi-structured interviews with members of the Ukrainian higher education community, the Ukrainian case in this article demonstrates that ethical research can become a significant endeavour for a higher education community in a war context. Additionally, pursuing ethical research in such a context become a symbolic tool for the members of the higher education community to resist the destruction caused by the war in all areas of life, including the higher education sector, and to align their work with international standards despite the war. This paper fills a knowledge gap about the pursuit of ethical research in relation to an emancipation practice, and underscores the importance of supporting the development of ethical research practices in war zones.

To unpack this argument, the article outlines theoretical considerations about research as a practice of freedom, contextualises ethical research in Ukraine through a relevant literature review, and presents the methodological decisions that informed this empirical inquiry. Key findings are then discussed.

Theoretical Considerations: Research as a Practice of Freedom

The idea that research can be viewed as a practice of freedom, or the opposite – oppression, has its roots in the debates about liberating education and the freedom of speech.

Given that the (higher) education sector is one of the primary places where research is curated (Zibani et al., 2022), exploring the (higher) education domain as a platform for research which can serve as a practice of freedom is essential. In doing so, we rely on Freire's view of a dialogical relationship between the education sector and society and the capacity of this relationship to foster or inhibit people's freedom.

The idea of education's potential as a tool for liberation or freedom can be traced back to Paulo Freire's influential work entitled "The Pedagogy of the Oppressed" (Freire, 1970). In this work, Freire outlines two key types of relationships between the education sector and societal trends. The first is the "banking concept of education", which is shaped by and perpetuates an oppressive society. In this context, education is likened to a process of depositing – Freire (1970, p. 72) states that 'The more thoroughly the teacher fills the receptacles (students), the better a teacher she is. The more submissively the receptacles allow themselves to be filled, the better students they are'. This type of education is didactic, emphasising rote learning over creativity. Such an approach serves as a tool for the leaders of an oppressive society to cultivate compliant individuals who will uphold the hierarchical and unjust system without questioning it. The second is "liberating education" which exists in a free society and mutually reinforces the freedom of that society. A free society relies on the creative potential of individuals nurtured by a liberating education system. This system aims to cultivate critical thinkers who can transform the world for the better, rather than merely conform to it. It rejects the banking concept of education, mentioned above, and views education as an act of emancipation.

However, achieving this ideal is challenging. Freire (1970, p. 79) himself acknowledges that a completely free society is utopian, and those striving for liberation are often hindered by the pervasive injustices even in societies aspiring to be free: "paradoxically, then, they utilise this same instrument of alienation in what they consider an effort to liberate." Critics of Freire have also pointed out additional challenges in putting these liberation ideas into practice. For instance, Allman (2001) emphasises that the deeply ingrained structures of power and control within educational institutions make it challenging to enact truly liberating practices. The author highlights that even well-intentioned members of an education community may inadvertently perpetuate oppressive dynamics because of these entrenched systems. Other critics, such as Tuck and Yang (2012), highlight the practical challenges of applying Freire's theories in diverse cultural, ethnic and political contexts, where local conditions may significantly impact the feasibility of liberation-oriented education.

Nonetheless, striving for equal relationships amongst the members of the learning process, engaging in critical thinking and reflection – what liberating education stands for – helps move away from the oppressive form of education and an oppressive society in which such education functions (Freire, 1970). Otherwise, oppression will thrive, which is the case in the following examples, ranging from normalised unjust practices in the society where the dominance of one social group is 'normalised' (e.g., race, gender) and is reproduced in the area of education – to new deliberate attempts to use education as an instrument of oppression.

An example of the former includes the cultural hegemony in children's books, whereby seeing the dominant white race in the books from a young age contributes to cultivating white privilege and racism in the society (Halley et al., 2022). The same is relevant for the questions of heteronormativity (Miller, 2022) and hegemonic masculinity/femininity construction in children's books (Tsao, 2020). Aside from these socially 'normalised' examples, new deliberate attempts to use education as an instrument of oppression are evident in the evolving architecture of the educational landscape in Afghanistan under the Taliban rule. Appallingly, it excludes young girls and women from education after the age of 12,

highlighting how restrictions on education become an instrument of oppression which can have a detrimental effect on the education level of the oppressed, mental health and the overall feeling of freedom (Mohammadi et al., 2024).

Aside from exploring liberating education as a platform for research as a practice of freedom, the debates on the freedom of speech are also instrumental here. Freedom of expression is interlinked with the idea of liberating education as it is precisely a feature of the relationship between a free education and a free society that Freire (1970) explicated. However, free speech is not a straightforward goal to achieve as there are a number of relevant conflicting debates, such as hate speech vs free speech, censorship and social media, political correctness and cancel culture, government vs private regulations (Post, 2024). Understandably, they are mirrored to various extents in the area of academic freedom, as research is impacted by the commercialisation, privatisation and digital surveillance trends, and the struggle between institutional autonomy and governmental control (Hermanowicz, 2021). The resultant level and scope of academic freedom is then determined in research and its ethical practices, as exemplified by the case of Ukraine below.

Literature Review: The Legacy of the Past, Ukrainian Higher Education and Research Practices

The discussion of ethical research in Ukrainian universities is rooted in and cannot be separated from the discussion of the path-dependency in the wider context of the operation of Ukrainian higher education. Both are still influenced by the legacies of the Soviet past in higher education and beyond, despite the developmental leap that has occurred in the recent past.

Path-dependency and change tend to be addressed in a lot of policy literature as conflicting powers in policy development, particularly in the context of post-Soviet Europeanisation where change is hindered by the conventions established in the past (Kushnir, 2021a, b). *Path-dependency* is a process of development governed by its own history, which is 'more about dealing with the legacies of past decisions than departing incrementally from them' (Cairney, 2011, p. 214). Path-dependency is not the absence of development, but rather it is the development that follows some pre-established norms. 'Policy windows' as catalytic instances for policy change play a primary role in policy learning in terms of making certain opportunities available and acceptable in a given setting (Steiner-Khamsi, 2006, p. 670). There are a number of historical factors that influence the socio-political context of Ukraine, and as a result, the work of higher education in Ukraine.

The literature tends to view Soviet legacies that stem from almost a hundred years of Soviet occupation of Ukraine as a barrier to development in Ukraine even after the country regained its independence in 1991 (Levada, 2008; Malle, 2009; Spechler & Spechler, 2013). According to Bridge (2004), the Soviet Union was based on the ideas of Marxism-Leninism, which put centralisation, controlled productive force, censorship, compulsory patriotism, and isolation from the Western world at the core of the development of the centrally planned economy. After the fall of the Soviet Union, all post-Soviet countries have been transforming 'from an empire to a nation, from a command economy to a market-based one, and from a communist to a democratic system' (Tsygankov, 2007, p. 425, citing Bunce, 1995). However, the legacy of the Soviet influence is apparent in all areas of life in post-Soviet countries, according to Malle (2009). For example, the author states that the central governments in post-Soviet countries tend to ensure the preservation

of the centralised top-down control of all policy fields, which is coupled with persisting censorship.

The post-Soviet higher education sector is no exception, with its persisting practices of a lack of academic freedom (Oleksiyenko, 2021), segregation of research institutes and universities which undermines the quality of research practices (Lovakov et al., 2022), corruption (Chankseliani, 2013), centralisation and a top-down nature of decision-making (Kushnir, 2021a; Huisman, 2023; Oleksiyenko, 2023) often disguised as a 'manipulated consensus' in education reforms (Silova, 2002, p. 308). Shchepetylnykova and Oleksiyenko (2024, p. 1) argue for the need to look for inherently new ways of tackling such post-Soviet legacies in the effort of the 'de-Sovietization in higher education and research'.

Evidently, research and higher education in the post-Soviet countries, including Ukraine, were heavily influenced by Soviet methodologies, structures and policies, which prioritised state needs and ideological conformity over individual research ethics. These legacies might still affect how ethical research are perceived and practised today, particularly regarding transparency and intellectual freedom.

Regaining freedom from Soviet rule and subsequent internationalisation of Ukrainian higher education institutions (HEIs) served as 'policy windows' for change, in Steiner-Khamsi's terms (2006, p. 670). Ukrainian HEIs began a slow process of reforming, following best practices abroad. This included adopting the most recent fourth edition of Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research from the British Educational Research Association at the time – back in 2023 (BERA, 2018; UERA, 2023).

Existing scholarship on ethical research in Ukraine is scarce and fragmented. Earlier very limited studies concerned predominantly the lack of academic integrity in Ukraine in general including in student research (Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2014) and issues in bioethics, particularly with ethics committees' expertise in research ethics for biomedical research (Pustovit, 2006). Specifically, '…methodological problems connected with its socio-cultural, historical, science and philosophy development particularities' were highlighted in 'Ukrainian ethics expertise' (Pustovit, 2006, p. 85). The foci of more recent relevant studies are more diverse, albeit still limited due to the scarcity of research in this area. One of the foci is still research ethics for biomedical research, such as in Basarab and Anderson (2022) and Sulaieva et al. (2023). There are also a couple of articles focused on the lack of research integrity and how to address it (Fimyar et al, 2019; Knysh et al., 2020; Shykhnenko & Sbruieva, 2022).

The only two studies that are the closest in their focus to our paper are Basarab and Anderson (2022) and Howlett and Lazarenko (2023). However, while the former article discusses research challenges during the war in Ukraine, it is still focused on research ethics for biomedical research. While the latter one is about the war context, it is not about ethical research in Ukraine but rather is a powerful message to anyone engaging in research on Ukraine during the war. Howlett and Lazarenko (2023, p. 722) rightly conclude that 'the production of knowledge about the war requires an elevation of ethical considerations above research outputs to protect our participants, ourselves, and the larger communities affected by the conflict'. We agree with these scholars and would like to position this paper as a response to our mission as academics to generate evidence-based knowledge about Ukraine to counter the propaganda that has sadly had opportunities to mushroom in this post-truth world. Not much is known about 'windows of opportunity' (Steiner-Khamsi, 2006, p. 670) for the higher education community in Ukraine working predominantly in the area of education – as a central area for educating the public – in pursuing ethical research which has been constrained by the legacies of the Soviet past. This paper is going to address this gap in existing scholarship.

The literature on past legacies in Ukrainian research practices is important for our analysis in Sect. "Research Results and Discussion: when Liberation is Found in Pursuing Ethical Research" which will demonstrate that the problems in conducting ethical research in Ukraine have their roots in past legacies, but the war has complicated the research practice and prompted Ukrainian researchers in Ukraine to pursue ethical research as an emancipatory practice in the war context. This analysis will contribute to filling in overlapping gaps in scarce and fragmented existing scholarship on ethical research in Ukraine in general as well as specifically in the war context.

Methodological Approach

This paper addresses the aforementioned gap in the scholarship about ethical research in Ukraine, which prompted the following important research question: *What meaning does the practice of ethical research in a war zone has, as illustrated by the case of Ukrainian universities?*

The research design of the project which inspired this paper was informed by the British Educational Research Association (BERA) Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2024). Following a favourable ethics decision from the Schools of Business, Law and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (BLSS REC) at Nottingham Trent University (UK), the project's mixed-method research design involved two phases: a quantitative phase followed by a qualitative phase. The research design rested on data generation from two sources, both having taken place in the second half of 2024: (1) an online survey with the members of the higher education community in Ukraine, (2) and in-depth semi-structured interviews with some of these members (see Data Access Statement). These methodological choices aimed to provide a deeper understanding of ethical research practices in Ukrainian higher education by combining broad survey data with detailed interview insights from emerging researchers such as Doctoral candidates and from academic staff in the field.

The survey was circulated among over 400 members of the Ukrainian Education Research Association (UERA, 2024) in 2024 as they represent our target demographic – the members of the Ukrainian higher education community involved in educational research. The survey was circulated amongst the UERA membership because UERA is the largest education research association in Ukraine and a hub of education research in the country (UERA, 2024). The topics covered in the survey included: awareness and adherence to ethical principles in research, institutional support and resources for ethical decision-making, frequency and types of ethical dilemmas encountered, practices related to informed consent and data confidentiality, integration of BERA Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research. The survey received 120 responses from 41 institutions in Ukraine, which is 30% of the total UERA membership. Survey respondents represent different roles in the HE sector: Professors who are Heads of Department (n=10), Professors (n=12), Associate Professors (n=56), Senior Lecturers (n=15); Lecturers (n=14), others (including PhD candidates, etc.) (n=13).

The survey results were primarily analysed using descriptive statistics, with the exception of identifying correlations between researchers' confidence/satisfaction and institutional support (inferential analysis presented in Table 1 in Sect. "Research Results and Discussion: when Liberation is Found in Pursuing Ethical Research"). In this Table, there are two dependent variables: 'Confidence in resolving ethical dilemmas' and 'Satisfaction

Table 1 Correlations between researchers' confidence/satisfaction and institutional support

	University provision of resources or support for making ethical decisions in research	Presence of university support mechanisms for researchers dealing with ethical dilemmas	Institutional support for well-being and ethical development
Confidence in resolving ethical dilemmas	0.2369	0.1711	0.299
Satisfaction with existing ethical principles and support structures	0.3810	0.4493	0.4872

with existing ethical principles and support structures'. The three independent variables are: 'University provision of resources or support for making ethical decisions in research', 'Presence of university support mechanisms for researchers dealing with ethical dilemmas', and 'Institutional support for well-being and ethical development.

An opportunistic/snowball sample of ten members of the higher education community in Ukraine was recruited (five PhD candidates and five members of academic staff with senior leadership roles) for the interviews. These two groups were chosen to represent lower and higher experience levels with research and its ethics, respectively. Interview audio-recordings were transcribed, and a thematic analysis of the transcripts was employed, following Rubin and Rubin's (2012) guide for open and axial coding of themes and Kushnir's (2025) conceptualisation of the thematic analysis method. Each transcript was selectively coded to identify important sections of text related to the inconsistencies in the survey data. Targeted codes were developed to capture key themes, concepts, and patterns specifically relevant to these issues. These codes became a foundation for developing tentative themes. For example, the following four codes yielded the theme 'Support structures and resources': 'Institutional support mechanisms', 'Types of training provided', 'Support for researcher well-being' and 'External support'. The following stage focused on regrouping the themes to identify the final overarching themes which are presented and discussed later in this paper, providing illustrative quotations:

1. Challenges of research ethics in the war context
2. Support structures and resources
3. Perceptions and practices of ethical research
4. Institutional and legislative frameworks
5. Improvement and development
6. Contradictions and inconsistencies

The results from the quantitative and qualitative phases were integrated during the interpretation stage. The qualitative data helped explain and contextualise the quantitative findings, offering deeper insights into specific areas of awareness and application of ethical research principles identified in the first phase. This mixed-method approach allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the perspectives and experiences of Ukrainian education researchers regarding ethical practices in their work.

Research Results and Discussion: When Liberation is Found in Pursuing Ethical Research

This section presents our key findings about what meaning the practice of ethical research has in a war zone, as illustrated by the case of Ukrainian universities. It is not surprising that any research in a war zone is hugely difficult, and in some cases impossible (Wood, 2006). The idea that research conducted by researchers in a conflict zone can be seen as either a practice of freedom or oppression stems from debates on liberating education and freedom of speech. Since the HE sector is one of the main domains where research is done (Zibani et al., 2022), it is essential to explore the HE sector as a platform for research that has the potential to serve as a practice of freedom. In doing so, we draw on Freire's (1970) perspective on the dialogical relationship between the education sector and society and the potential of this relationship to foster or inhibit people's freedom.

Freire's (1970) concept of liberation through engaging with the education sector, which contrasts with the banking concept of education, highlights the importance of challenging the 'system' in overcoming obstacles and transforming the disadvantaged position of those who attempt to challenge *the status quo*. This approach is particularly relevant in the context of Ukrainian universities, where the pursuit of ethical research can be seen as an act of emancipation from the oppressive legacies of the Soviet past and more so – from the distracting effect of the current war on the professional practice of the Ukrainian HE community, including their research. The challenges highlighted by critics, such as the deeply ingrained power structures (Allman, 2001), are evident in the Ukrainian context, where researchers strive to overcome these barriers to achieve true academic freedom.

Relying on the analysis of a survey and ten semi-structured interviews with members of the Ukrainian higher education community, this section problematises research practices in Ukraine and showcases that ethical research has become a quest, steered by the past legacies and fuelled by the war, which has tremendously complicated research practice in Ukraine. Research and particularly striving to create, understand and adhere to ethical principles have also emerged as a symbolic tool for academics and postgraduate candidates to pursue their work in the war context, while seeking alignment with international practices abroad. The case of Ukraine demonstrates that the pursuit of ethical research is an emancipation practice for the higher education community, which has suffered greatly from the war.

The findings from the survey and interviews below are presented and discussed in light of the theoretical and empirical literature presented above to analyse how ethical research in a war zone is a matter of coping with the challenging reality and exercising one's own agency to actively pursue research that serves a purpose of emancipation from the injustices, constraints and griefs inflicted by the war. This section demonstrates that the problems in conducting ethical research in Ukraine have their roots in past legacies, but the war has complicated the research practice and prompted Ukrainian researchers in Ukraine to pursue ethical research as an emancipatory practice in the war context.

The results from the survey provide some insight into the support, put in place and ongoing despite the war, provided by Ukrainian universities for ethical educational research, with 71.67% of respondents indicating that their institution provides resources or support for making ethical decisions in research and 28.33% of respondents stating the opposite. If we delve deeper into the mechanisms for supporting researchers, the situation that emerges is somewhat worse, as only 60% of respondents indicate that their institution has mechanisms in place to support researchers dealing with ethical dilemmas. The situation is even worse if it concerns the care for researcher well-being and ethical development, with only 50% of respondents rating the efforts better than moderate. The distribution of ratings for the promotion of well-being and ethical development indicates varied levels of satisfaction among respondents. These challenges with ethical research in the area of education are in line with the literature on research and its ethics in Ukraine in other areas, such as research ethics for biomedical research (Basarab & Anderson, 2022; Pustovit, 2006; Sulaieva et al., 2023). These issues stem from the centralised higher education governing system in Ukraine inherited from the Soviet times (Kushnir, 2021a; Huisman, 2023; Oleksiyenko, 2023). This, in Freire's (1970) terms, would amount to oppressive practices carried over from the past regime where censorship and control prevailed in all areas of life. Despite the gaps in research ethics support in Ukrainian universities, the evident attempts to put in place such support could be deemed emancipatory, aiming to slowly and incrementally transform the weaknesses created by the past.

The need for more awareness-raising about research integrity in Ukraine mentioned by Fimyar et al. (2019), Knysh et al. (2020) and Shykhnenko and Sbruieva (2022) is echoed by Ukrainian universities. In particular, the analysis of the types of training and resources related to ethical research provided by Ukrainian universities reveals that the most common type of training provided is training sessions ($n = 67$), online courses or resources ($n = 66$), written manuals or methodological guidelines ($n = 37$), and access to Ethics Committee consultations ($n = 25$). There were several other types of training or resources mentioned once each, including lectures on research ethics, webinars, and academic integrity training. However, a small number of respondents indicated that no training or resources are provided by their institutions ($n = 8$). This may be attributed to the lack of awareness, rather than the absence of such training or resources, which in any case explains the persistence of the issues in research integrity such as plagiarism in academic outputs, mentioned in the literature (e.g., Fimyar et al, 2019).

As indicated in the Table above, while all mentioned types of institutional support exhibit a positive relationship with researchers' confidence in addressing ethical dilemmas, the strength of these relationships ranges from 'very weak' to 'weak'. This raises questions about the role of self-development and independent learning among the respondents. This can be partially attributed to the respondents' profile. To bridge the information gap regarding the impact on emerging researchers, we focus on this as one of the key aspects in the in-depth interviews.

The correlation study reveals a positive association between satisfaction with existing ethical principles, on the one hand, and support structures and the current state of institutional support provision, on the other hand. Specifically, greater satisfaction with ethical principles and institutional support structures is moderately correlated with the availability of resources or support for ethical decision-making in research, the presence of university support mechanisms for researchers facing ethical dilemmas, and, notably, with institutional support for well-being and ethical development.

All in all, concerning institutional support and researchers' confidence, we assume that institutions aiming to improve researchers' confidence in resolving ethical dilemmas should focus more on enhancing researchers' well-being and ethical development programs, as well as providing specific resources and support mechanisms for ethical decision-making. The same applies to institutions that aim to enhance researchers' satisfaction with ethical principles and support structures. Raising the quality and/or expectation of ethical standards in research would, in turn, arguably, strengthen the emancipatory role of research in Ukraine in the context of war and post-war recovery.

In the survey responses, we found some data that might point to some contradictions and inconsistencies that require delving deeper into the issues. As a result, we identified some areas that prompted the focus of the in-depth interviews ($n = 5$) questions (see Table 2).

The interviews were conducted with five emerging researchers (ER 1 – 5) who were doing their Doctorates with projects connected to the field of education, albeit in different areas: General Pedagogy, History of Education, Economics of Education, Social Education, and Educational Psychology. The data encompasses responses that demonstrate their awareness of conducting evidence-based research ethically. It also explores their attitudes toward the need to have their methodological considerations reviewed by an ethics committee.

The respondents' awareness of conducting research ethically and importance of ethics is exemplified by the following illustrative quotations:

Table 2 Interview focus areas based on survey data inconsistencies

Survey Data Inconsistencies	Interview Focus Areas	Target respondents
Recognition vs. Participation: Researchers recognise the importance of evidence-based ethical research, but only 14% agreed to participate in in-depth interviews	assess awareness of ethical research and its importance	PhD candidates
Confidence in Data Protection vs. Unfamiliarity with Laws: 68.33% claim they apply strong data protection measures, yet 60.83% are unfamiliar with relevant laws	assess actual situation with research ethics regulations	Experts
Ethics Committee Approval: Despite ethical oversight being crucial, 80% do not require ethics committee approval for their research	Understand the reasons behind the lack of ethics committee approval requirement and its impact on research practices	PhD candidates and Experts
High Familiarity vs. Low Engagement: 90% of respondents state they are well-acquainted with ethical principles, but only 22.5% provided suggestions for improvement	Investigate ways for improvement and applying these principles in practice	Experts

Ethical research is research that does not harm anyone and that does not violate any norms (ER 1)
I consider it [research ethics] fundamental because I work with people and write about people (ER 4).

PhD candidates have demonstrated general understanding of ethical research as well as a strong recognition of the importance of ethics in research, particularly regarding honesty and protecting participant confidentiality. However, their understanding is surface-level, lacking in detail. The respondents had some difficulties with answering the questions about ethical approval as they had never engaged in such practices:

…the only thing we sign at admission is about academic integrity, and I can't even say anything else (ER 1)
I would only go for it if we had such a commission; I just don't know about it (ER 1)
These issues are agreed upon with the research supervisor (ER 4)
… in communication with the scientific supervisor, such a check is constantly passed (ER 5)

Awareness of formal ethical approval processes is still limited. Some PhD candidates are unsure about the specific requirements for ethical approval in their institutions, indicating a need for clearer guidelines and education on this topic. Enhancing the quality and expectations of ethical standards in research would, in turn, likely bolster the emancipatory role of research in Ukraine, both during the war and in the post-war recovery period.

Overall, while there is awareness of ethical research principles, there is room for improvement in understanding and applying these principles comprehensively. Enhanced educational initiatives and institutional support can help bridge these gaps, ensuring that PhD students are well-equipped to conduct their research ethically.

The interviews with five experts who work for the National Agency for higher education Quality Assurance and/or for different commissions dealing with academic integrity issues focused on: the absence of a national legal framework for research ethics, the lack of ethics committee approval requirement and its impact on research practice, ways for improvement in ethical research and applying these principles in practice. A national framework spelled out in the national legislature for ethical research seems to be an expectation by the participants, perhaps because of the centralised higher education governing system in Ukraine inherited from the Soviet times (Kushnir, 2021a; Kushnir, 2021b; Huisman, 2023; Oleksiyenko, 2023).

The current situation with producing a national framework in the form of legislature in the field of education can be illustrated by the following quotations:

The work on Academic Integrity Law started in 2020… now four years have passed; it has only reached the first stage of the procedural process… The committee recommended its adoption as a basis for the first reading (Exp. 1)
there is a ministerial document … all university documents were created based on it (Exp. 2)

The experts admit that although there is no national law on governing ethical principles of research in the area of education in Ukraine, each university has a set of regulations of different kinds that predominantly deal with problems caused by violating academic integrity rules. Though the practices of observing the rules may sometimes be traced back to the Soviet legacy in research. And the brightest examples of it are the cases when the highest

Ukrainian educational officials had to refuse from their doctorate after plagiarism had been detected in their research work (NGL Media, 2024).

Experts generally share the view that the lack of a requirement for ethics committee approval is not critical in the context of education research. They do not see it as essential.

> *It is connected with the fact that the environment [we] today does not really feel the need to turn to such commissions and, accordingly, to additional workload (Exp. 1)*
> *In our university, for example, there is a different code of research conducted by medical doctors and biologists, which concerns ethics in behaviour with animals (Exp. 3)*

Experts recognise that although each university has committees or boards to address ethical issues, these bodies are not always active. This inactivity appears to be a longstanding trend in Ukraine, affecting multiple fields over several decades, not just research ethics for biomedical research, as analysed by Pustovit (2006). When these committees do meet, their primary focus is often on externally reported cases of plagiarism.

> *In most establishments where they should be, they don't actually work… Even according to documents, these are primarily commissions that if there is an appeal against plagiarism they consider (Exp. 1).*
> *Ethics commissions are everywhere, in every faculty at our university. As for checking the quality of research tools, this is terra incognita, and everything depends on the researchers' ethics (Exp. 2).*
> *They (ethics commissions) rely on post-factum things (Exp. 4)*
> *With us, this is only a commission on the issue of academic dishonesty, which, already based on the results of the discovered facts, continues work regarding responsibility (Exp. 5)*

Overall, the interviewed experts acknowledged that while universities have committees or boards to address ethical issues, these bodies are not always active and primarily focus on plagiarism cases. This finding is significant as it reveals a limited understanding of the broader scope of ethical principles in research. The emphasis on avoiding plagiarism in research outputs likely stems from past issues with student academic integrity in Ukrainian universities (Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2014). Experts noted that these committees mainly operate post-factum, addressing academic dishonesty after it has been reported, rather than proactively ensuring the ethical quality of research tools and practices. This highlights a gap in the current system in Ukraine, where ethical oversight is often reactive rather than preventative.

Ways of filling this and other gaps were addressed in the experts' vision of improvement in ethical principles in research and applying these principles in practice. Among them are legislative and institutional issues as well as the role of non-governmental sector and researchers' agency:

> *…for me personally, a very important role was played by Ukrainian Educational Research Association, because it is a kind of standard to which one should strive… That is, it turned out that the public organisation performs a very important role, including the formation of academic integrity culture (Exp. 2).*
> *It is impossible to build it in one separate segment. Political will is needed, of course, but the academic community should be more active, and also advocate for it (Exp. 4)*
> *in that total poverty and demands on researchers, and in at the same time such a total and public devaluation of their work, academic integrity will not be born, because even people who are honest by nature, under the flow of such unhealthy demands … begin to look for ways to survive in this situation. These ways are not always virtuous (Exp. 4)*

It is also assumed that researchers' self-development plays an important role in their confidence and satisfaction with ethical principles and support structures. Universities are not the sole source of information and support; researchers also rely on their own initiatives, moral principles and external resources for ethical development and decision-making.

The freedom to conduct research and the effort to institutionalise ethical principles in research, despite the disruption and suffering that the war brought on, often with the aim to evidence the toll that the war has had on Ukraine, play a crucial role for fostering freedom amid the oppressive injustice inflicted by the war. However, the challenges of achieving this freedom are mirrored in the Ukrainian context, where researchers face obstacles in their pursuit of ethical research, present because of past legacies and complicated by the current war.

The challenges and gaps in ethical research practices in Ukrainian universities are closely tied to the concept of path-dependency (Cairney, 2011) within the broader context of Ukrainian higher education. Both are still influenced by the legacy of the Soviet past (Kushnir, 2021a). The expectation for a national framework for ethical research is arguably rooted in the tradition of top-down policy-making (Huisman, 2023; Oleksiyenko, 2023). The absence of such a framework, which interviewees equated to a lack of expected censorship (Malle, 2009), has led to practices where obtaining a favourable ethics opinion for research is often overlooked.

A significant milestone in advancing ethical foundations in Ukraine's educational research sector has been the establishment of a national framework for ethical research, although it is not outlined in legislation. This milestone includes the translation and adoption of the 2018 edition of the British Educational Research Association's Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research into Ukrainian in 2023 (BERA, 2018; UERA, 2023). These Guidelines were adopted by the UERA. It is the biggest education research association in Ukraine and a hub of education research in the country (UERA, 2024). The ability to conduct research freely and the efforts to institutionalise ethical principles in research through the adoption of a national framework for ethical research, despite the disruption and suffering caused by the war play a crucial role and evidence the fostering of freedom amidst the oppressive injustices inflicted by the conflict.

However, there is a need for more comprehensive explanation and dissemination. The translated guidelines have not been widely recognised as the primary framework, possibly because they were not issued by the government. Additionally, the barrier to understanding and implementing these guidelines lies not in the language but in the approach. The differences between the Ukrainian 'what should NOT be done' approach and the UK's 'what should be done' approach, as well as between the Ukrainian strategy of 'how to threaten researchers' and the UK's strategy of 'how to care for researchers and research participants,' are evident. Survey results indicate that 40% of respondents reported that their HEI lacks mechanisms to support researchers facing ethical dilemmas, and only half stated that their university cares for their well-being and development as researchers. While recognising that ethical research in Ukraine is generally understood to focus primarily on anti-plagiarism in topic, research proposal generation and the production of research outputs, it is important to broaden this understanding to encompass a wider range of ethical considerations, emphasising responsibilities to participants, sponsors, clients, stakeholders, and researchers.

Considering that the translated BERA guidelines are currently the only framework available for education researchers in Ukraine, it would be beneficial to review and further adapt these guidelines to the Ukrainian context, potentially incorporating updates from the 5th edition of the BERA guidelines (BERA, 2024). Following this, UERA could

enhance its efforts to raise awareness about ethical principles in research by collaborating with senior leadership teams from Ukrainian HEIs and organizing train-the-trainer events. These events would equip individuals within each HEI to disseminate knowledge about the framework and build upon it. Avoiding the approach of liaising with the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine for top-down implementation could present a 'window of opportunity' (Steiner-Khamsi, 2006, p. 670) to respond to Shchepetylnykova and Oleksiyenko's (2024, p. 1) call for the 'de-Sovietisation in higher education and research' in Ukraine.

Conclusion

This paper highlights the critical role of research practices and the pursuit of ethical research as a form of research practice in war zones, using the case of Ukrainian universities as a focal point. The findings underscore that, despite the immense challenges posed by the ongoing war, the Ukrainian higher education community has embraced ethical principles in research not only as a professional obligation but also as a form of resistance to the injustice and destruction inflicted by the war, and a means to align with international standards. This pursuit of ethical research amidst war serves as a powerful testament to the resilience and commitment of Ukrainian academics and students. It also highlights the need for continued support and development of ethical research frameworks in conflict-affected regions to ensure that scholarly work can contribute positively to both local and global knowledge bases.

By addressing the gaps in existing literature and providing a nuanced understanding of the complexities involved in conducting ethical research in war zones, this paper contributes significantly to the field. However, it is important to note that the interview part of the study was small, which limits the generalisability of the findings. While in this paper, the interview data complemented the survey data, future research could rely more extensively on the interview method to elicit more in-depth stories to explore the development and implementation of ethical research frameworks tailored to conflict zones, examining their effectiveness and adaptability in various contexts. Additionally, studies could investigate the long-term impact of ethical research practices on the academic and social resilience of communities affected by war. The Ukrainian case study ultimately serves as a poignant reminder of the transformative power of ethical research practices, even in the most adverse conditions, and the importance of fostering an academic culture that prioritises integrity, freedom, and resilience.

Declarations

Ethics Statement The overarching research design of this project was informed by BERA (2024) Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research, and data collection followed a favourable ethics decision from the Schools of Business, Law and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (BLSS REC) at Nottingham Trent University.

Informed Consent Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the interviews.

Conflict of Interest The authors declare that there exists no competing financial interest or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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