

# How Geopolitics Shapes Higher Education Internationalization: Institutional Responses to the Russian Invasion of Ukraine

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**This article was not written with the assistance of any Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology, including ChatGPT or other support technologies**

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## Abstract

*Values such as peace, mutual understanding, and solidarity have long been subsidiary to the aim of pursuing competition and revenue through the internationalization of higher education (HE). With the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, higher education institutions demonstrated strong support for peace and solidarity. Yet, the extent to which we are witnessing a return to an international politics rationale driving HE internationalization remains unclear. Using Canada and Germany as case studies, this paper compares how international conflict impacts HE internationalization practices from a host institution perspective. The developed theoretical framework connects HE crisis literature with novel approaches to HE institutions in global geopolitics. Data were analyzed through critical policy analysis, focusing on university presidents' statements and institutional press releases. The key finding suggests the dominance of the logic of appropriateness whereby a geopolitical rationale governs institutional responses in a context where widely shared democratic values are under attack.*

Keywords: conflict; geopolitics, higher education; internationalization; Ukraine

## Introduction

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, developed into a global geopolitical crisis that has impacted diplomatic, economic, and political relations around the world. Most importantly, it has been described as an education crisis, as the war disrupted educational aspirations for more than five million children and youth (UN News, 2023). The war itself shifted the operations of some higher education institutions (HEIs) across the world as universities quickly responded to provide various supports to host learners from Ukraine. In Ukraine, there were approximately 1.67 million students in tertiary education across universities and other types of higher education (HE) institutions in 2017 (WENR, 2019). According to data from the United Nations, since the outbreak of the war, over six million people left Ukraine, including students, researchers, and scholars (UNHCR, 2023). Government support from Western nations became

an essential source of assistance while other forms of support also emerged. For example, HEIs also acted swiftly enabling academic mobility to support Ukrainian students.

Morrice (2022) noted that the opening of borders and recognition of the importance of HE access for Ukrainian refugees was unprecedented, leading universities to explore innovative approaches to support displaced students. In the years following, a pivotal shift has occurred in the dynamics of institutional internationalization where host universities accept students through flexible pathways (e.g., visiting, exchange, or guest students) and provide significant financial assistance and concentrated advising supports. This humanitarian approach diverges from conventional internationalization practices where student applications go through rigorous admission processes with fees attached.

The purpose of this paper is to bridge the gap between geopolitics and internationalization by investigating the internationalization practices of host universities in relation to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The article examines the specific actions taken by universities and target those factors that may influence institutional responses triggered by political pressure. The paper is guided by the following research question: How has the war in Ukraine impacted host institutions' internationalization practices?

Specifically, this paper examines and compares the institutional responses of universities in Canada and Germany, two countries that have hosted a significant number of Ukrainian students. By comparing institutional responses from these two federal jurisdictions with pro-active government support towards displaced individuals, the paper unveils the changing nature of institutional internationalization practices, which have been shifting from an economic to a political rationale in the wake of the Russia-Ukrainian war. Our findings suggest that the war in Ukraine has led to emphasizing a global political dimension over economic considerations in institutional internationalization responses.

### **How Higher Education Internationalization Relates to Global Geopolitics**

Scholars show that global geopolitics have strong influence on higher education in recent times (Trilokekar *et al.*, 2020; Lee, 2021; Moskovitz & Sabzalieva, 2023; Trilokekar & El Masry, 2022). Yet, the understanding of how global geopolitics and HE are connected remains limited. Buckner and Stein (2020) also suggest that internationalization discourse lacks engagement with the political, historical, or geopolitical dimensions of international relationships and knowledge production. This article takes all of these concepts into consideration.

Geopolitics takes many forms in higher education internationalization. Most HEIs use a pragmatic institutional approach in which international students financially support HEIs. Often graduates gain employment as a valuable source of highly skilled labour within their host country (Trilokekar & El Masri, 2016). A focus on finance raises concerns around economic exploitation of and discrimination against international students (Sabzalieva *et al.*, 2022). This is even more problematic when economic exploitation is grounded in the pragmatic institutional approaches that enable unequal administrative practices and aggressive recruitment strategies (Brunner, 2017; Tamtik, 2022). A pragmatic institutional approach applies to contexts of political regionalisms, such as in the European Union, where the economic rationale of HE internationalization is very present albeit not so much in terms of direct institutional revenues. In the European Union, the internationalization of HE carries the purpose of furthering the mobility of labour, which indirectly contributes to the economic competitiveness of the region (Felder & Tamtik, 2023; Mathies & Cantwell, 2022).

In contexts of conflict, there is a shift from one philosophy that defines internationalization as purely a way for competition and revenue to another philosophy that advocates that internationalization itself promoting peace, mutual understanding, and solidarity (de Wit & Deca, 2020; Guo & Guo, 2017). Within the ongoing violent conflict in Ukraine, HEIs are demonstrating strong support for peace and solidarity while engaging in seemingly ethical approaches to hosting international students, with various supports made readily available. As a result, there is a shift towards political rationale of internationalization.

With the new wave of political activities emerging among HEIs, the relationship between HE internationalization and geopolitics comes to surface. Geopolitics involves the interplay of discourse, communication, power, and knowledge, shaping the spatialization of international politics and resulting in global hierarchies and power structures (Agnew, 2004;

Moisio, 2018). The internationalization of HE contributes to these processes, as it is a highly political endeavour centring around power and geopolitics among governments, institutions, and individuals (Lee, 2021). By promoting their educational systems through mobility, countries can enhance their political influence and reputation globally (Taylor, 2010). Cultural and ideological exchanges can reinforce and/or challenge existing political ideologies, serving as mechanisms for soft-power diplomacy (de Wit & Altbach, 2021). Brain circulation can provide advantages or disadvantages for countries' socio-economic development. Issues related to national security and national interests can directly influence internationalization decisions with new partnerships established, exchanged, or cancelled (Trilokekar & El Masry 2022). Political tensions between countries affect HE internationalization in lieu of limiting student visas, withholding research funding, and the surveillance of scientists (Lee, 2021). Immigration policies, including student visas and work permits for international students and scholars, are inherently political. HE internationalization intersects with various political interests and considerations, making it a highly political process with outcomes dependent on a country's geopolitical position.

Literature on institutional responses to armed conflict/war is scarce. Storz (2012) described the University of Toronto's initiative in WWII, where it offered permanent positions to several Jewish professors with a humanitarian response to those tensions. It must be noted that within this response, Jewish academics nonetheless experienced institutionalized racism. Guo et al (2019) described a similar humanitarianism- discrimination related to Syrian refugee students. Educational institutions hosting refugees sometimes inadvertently perpetuate tensions between minority and majority groups, creating an environment in which refugee students have encountered various degrees of exclusion and discrimination (Rousseau & Guzder, 2008). Ghundol and Muthanna (2022) found institutional support for Yemeni international students studying in Chinese universities in the form of application and registration policies and tuition fee waivers. Pre-COVID, in the United States and the United Kingdom, some HEIs offered a safe place for undocumented immigrants as a way to resist police actions of immigration regulations, safeguard their students' privacy, and train staff accordingly (Allard et al., 2018; Ricketts, 2019). Each of these studies illustrate that geopolitics and institutional pragmatic needs are intertwined and can lead to complex institutional responses. The literature also emphasized the importance of considering historical context, ethical values, and resource allocation when examining the interplay between geopolitics and pragmatism in the internationalization of higher education.

### **Theoretical Framework: Institutional Responses to Global Geopolitical Crises**

This article uses a theoretical framework that builds on Moskovitz and Sabzalieva's (2023) framework of global geopolitics of higher education. We argue that a political crisis can add a unique layer, centring around values, to the interactions between geopolitics and higher education. In crisis, decision-making is fundamentally different than it is under normal circumstances. Crisis literature focuses on decisions affecting the health and well-being of people and countries that need to be made quickly and under pressure, requiring decisiveness, flexibility, and innovation. When decisions are made under pressure, core values and norms serve as the foundational factors that institutions rely on.

Crisis literature references different types of crises within HE and then examines how universities or the whole HE sector responds to crisis. McConnell (2011) defined crises as "extraordinary episodes which disturb and threaten established patterns of working and dominant assumptions about the way aspects of society operate" (p. 63). Spillan (2000) categorized crises as follows: organizational (system breakdowns, fire), internal threats (management corruption, employee violence at workplace), external threats (terrorist attacks, negative media coverage), natural disasters (floods, earthquakes), and technology threats (computer system breakdowns, hacker invasions). According to Rosenthal and colleagues (1989), a crisis revolves around an organization's fundamental values and is seen as a threat to its basic values and essential functions, necessitating an immediate response. In the context of HE, Zdziarski (2006, p. 5) defined crisis as "an event, which is often sudden and unexpected, that disrupts the normal operations of the institution on its educational mission and threatens the well-being of personnel, property, financial resources, and/or reputation of the institution." Zdziarski's (2006) definition is appropriate for this paper, as the Ukrainian war might not impact the organizational survival of host universities but does influence HE operations, impact local communities (students, faculty, and staff with family ties in Ukraine/Russia), affect

financial resources (additional funding needed for crisis management), and could threaten the HEI reputation (if no action was taken). The diversity of crisis responses reflects the politics of crisis in terms of how organizations seek to cope with and address extreme events which often poses a mixture of threat and opportunity (McConnell, 2011).

At the centre of the crisis and geopolitics literatures are institutional core values, where the politics of crisis impacts how those core values can be protected. The proposed theoretical framework as shown in Table 1, encompasses the following components from these literatures: the nature of crisis and its corresponding crisis manager(s), and the institutional responses and their underlying rationales.

**Table 1.**

**Examining Institutional Responses to Crisis and Geopolitics**

	<b>Theoretical Framework</b>	<b>HE Crisis Literature</b>	<b>HE and Geopolitics</b>
What and Who?	Nature of crisis & corresponding crisis manager	Type of crisis and its link to HE community	Scale
		Guiding core values	Agents
How & Why?	Institutional responses and underlying interests	Crisis politics	Interests
		Agency vs. systemic constraints	Opportunity Structures

When addressing the questions of “What is in crisis?” and “Who ought to solve the crisis?” several factors come into play. These include the type of crisis and the specific HE community affected, both in terms of those impacted by the crisis and those who are expected to act. It is important to recognize that different types of crises have varying effects on higher education (McConnell, 2011). Additionally, contextual factors such as economic development, political regime, extent of destruction, and levels of violence all lead to distinct institutional responses (Milton & Barakat, 2016).

Unpacking a crisis includes determining the scale that is affected by the crisis and identifying the agents who ought to solve the crisis. Global, national, local, and regional forces simultaneously operate and intersect in crisis situations. Scale is important as internationalization policies are directly impacted by events occurring at a global scale, interwoven with local responses. Agents refer to the various actors and the power dynamics emerging from their formal influence, (mis)alignment of values, and capacity for action. Governments are agents in the Ukrainian conflict, as they are provincial/regional jurisdictions with legal power and a direct regulative mandate. Other agents, including international/regional organizations, civil society, and the media, have more of an advocacy capacity. The agency of HEIs is positioned in between the above two types of agency with regards to power dynamics, as HEIs have the capacity to regulate their operations but also are connected to governments through funding. Furthermore, HEIs play an important advocacy role in shaping global conversations, presenting value positions and asserting norms within their organization and in society. Institutional core values determine how institutions perceive a crisis. When values are endangered or violated, this triggers an institutional response. Actions may be driven by defending the core values, fighting over them, reconfirming them, or trading them off against one another (Boin & Lodge, 2021).

Institutional responses in times of crisis are shaped by institutional agency as well as by systemic constraints. Consequently, when examining how institutions respond to crisis, interests and opportunity structures become paramount. Interests motivate actions; they encompass economic, political, cultural, and social motivations and individual/collective desires. Boin and Lodge (2021) noted that institutional responses may affect what we chose to see (and not to see), what we value, who we identify ourselves with, what we fear, who we loathe, what values and goals we prioritize, what we feel is in our interest to focus on, and what we feel we can afford to discount. In some cases, a crisis may directly jeopardize institutional functioning, making survival the foremost concern, while in others, it may raise questions about the very legitimacy of these institutions.

Opportunity structures represent the collection “of norms, rules, institutions, conventions, practices and discourses that enable or constrain different actors and their actions” (Dale, 2015, p. 344). Opportunity structures often operate beyond state boundaries via social media and ideas that circulate globally or regionally, while regulation typically occurs at the national level or wherever the jurisdictional authority lies. Dependence on government funding, autocratic governance structures, dominant organizational culture, or legal frameworks may provide barriers to institutional autonomy in exercising their agency and voice (Boin & Lodge, 2021). These factors highlight the significance of the “politics” surrounding how societies, political actors, and institutions navigate and cope with unforeseen external events, which often present a blend of challenges and opportunities.

### **Case Selection and Data Analysis**

This paper employs a qualitative case study methodology to investigate the institutional responses of universities in Canada and Germany to the Russian-Ukrainian war as it relates to internationalization. The choice of these two countries was underpinned by several reasons. First, both countries have well-established policies aimed at supporting refugee students in higher education. This foundation provides a rich context for examining institutional agency and potential constraints in hosting students. Second, as two of the world’s largest economies, Canada and Germany possess substantial resources that can support displaced students and have the potential to develop robust support mechanisms through HEIs. Third, both countries operate under democratic federal governance system, which allow for a considerable degree of autonomy for institutional decision-making. This autonomy can influence the flexibility and effectiveness of institutional responses. Despite these commonalities, there are also significant differences. First, their geographical locations in different regions of the world give rise to unique geopolitical contexts, international relationships, and migration patterns. These variations can influence the experiences of Ukrainian students. Second, language differs as Canada’s bilingualism (English and French) and Germany’s emphasis on the German language present distinct language challenges for international students. Finally, both countries have distinct historical ties to Ukraine that can influence the reception and integration of Ukrainian students. Germany shares geographical proximity with Ukraine, fostering unique people-to-people ties between the countries. These connections may also impact how Ukrainian students are perceived in Germany. In contrast, Canada has a long history of Ukrainian immigration, dating back to the 19th century, particularly in its Prairie provinces (Lehr, 1987; Martynowych, 1991) in which strong community ties with a focus on cultural preservation and political advocacy. Canada has been a strong supporter of Ukrainian interests, recognizing Ukraine’s independence and providing humanitarian aid during various periods. In turn, Canada’s historical connections are deeply rooted in Ukrainian immigration, cultural preservation, and political advocacy. Germany’s ties with Ukraine are more recent and have evolved since the end of the Cold War, emphasizing economic relations and diplomatic engagement (Dietz, 2011; Stent, 1997). These differing historical ties contribute to distinct approaches and responses to Ukraine-related issues in both countries.

The research utilized publicly available policy documents related to institutional crisis response starting from February 24, 2022 from HEIs in Canada and Germany. These documents included university presidents’ statements, institutional press releases, and university association releases. 62 Canadian universities comprising of 47 comprehensive universities and 15 research-intensive universities were analysed. These universities, along with their dedicated support services, were listed and accessible via publicly available links on the Universities Canada website (Universities Canada, 2022). 35 German universities and 25 universities of applied sciences were analysed from different parts of the country (all Bundesländer). In addition, materials from six university associations and rector’s conferences in Germany were selected for review. A total of 208 documents were identified and reviewed within the Canadian context and 300 in German context. In our critical content analysis, we focused on the themes captured in our theoretical framework (scales, agents, interests and opportunity structures).

The documents helped us to take stock of the different types of support provided by universities. Data analysis involved a critical content analysis of these purposefully sampled documents (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Krippendorff, 2018). Textual analysis of a smaller pool of documents was conducted to identify the scales, agents, interests, and opportunity

structures that shape HEIs' responses to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The process involved a combination of deductive coding using the theoretical framework and inductive coding to trace narratives surrounding geopolitics and the distribution of resources, knowledge, and power within internationalization activities.

The methodological approach of critical policy analysis (CPA) was used to draw attention to policy as a highly political and value-laden process (Allan et al., 2010). CPA investigates the underlying hierarchies and inherent subjective values within policies that shape actions. CPA also enables scholars to examine the circulation of power, how policies create “winners” and “losers,” and the strategies of resistance among stakeholders (Diem et al., 2014, p. 1072). The different policies and statements used in this research are influenced by specific historical, geographical, and socio-economic contexts (Ball, 1994; Ozga, 2000; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). Policies are not value-free as they serve the interests of particular stakeholders in power and may deviate from a standard implementation path. Bacchi (2012) suggested critical examination and questioning of policies and not to blindly accept policies without critical thinking. By adopting CPA as a data analytical framework, the critical lens delved into how policy is presented, who benefits from it, and what dynamics may deviate from its initial intentions. We use this approach to enable a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding internationalization practices during times of global crisis.

## Findings

### **The War on Ukraine from a HE Internationalization Perspective**

This section identifies the type of crisis as it pertains to HE internationalization. Following is an examination of the institutional responses and the rationales behind the chosen responses. This examination encompasses scales and the agents, interests, and opportunity structures that guide institutional decisions and actions.

### **Defining the Crisis: Scales and Agents**

#### *The War as an Issue at International, Regional, and Local Levels*

HEI statements used in this article issued a reaction to the Russian war on Ukraine and problematized the conflict across international, national, and institutional contexts. The first scale involved the location of the war on Ukrainian territory. This was reflected in expressions of concern for affected citizens and solidarity with the Ukrainian people. Second, HEIs drew connections to the regional (European for Germany, provincial for Canada) and/or international community. Finally, university statements referred to the impact of the war on themselves such as in terms of existing ties with Ukrainian HEIs and scholars or in terms of the influx of Ukrainian refugees.

HEI statements interpreted the magnitude of the crisis whereby local implications were directly attributable to a global political situation. Several universities in both countries explicitly pointed to the government of President Putin and/or the Russian government as the instigator of this aggression against the self-determination of Ukraine's people. Universities in Canada viewed the events on a worldwide scale, noting that: “events over the past two days have shaken this world order” (UPEI). Some Canadian HEIs added that the crisis has “potential implications for world peace” (USask) and “we unite with the international community in calling for peace” (St. Mary's U). Similar statements were made by German HEIs, their associations, and internationalization-related organizations. The German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) recognized that the war constitutes a crisis on a global scale. University statements related to the global impact of the war and emphasized that “Russia's attack on Ukraine concerns us all” (HAW). German HEI statements focused mainly on the European scale. The invasion was equated to “an attack on the European idea” (UKassel), as a consequence of which shared European values such as democracy and freedom need to be upheld.

Locating the impacts of the war on Ukraine at different scales evoked different understandings of the type of crisis it represents and how it is linked to the HE community. Public statements from Canadian and German university presidents unmistakably conveyed the belief that this war posed a significant threat to fundamental institutional and societal values. Example statements noted that it is “an assault on democracy and our deepest values” (UWaterloo), an attack “to the values upon which institutions like our own are built” (QueensU), a “deeply troubling attack on sovereignty” (UGuelph), a “threat

to democracy” (QueensU), an “illegal and unjust war” (UBC), and “violence, disregard for national and international law and academic freedom, [which] pose a severe threat to the academic system” (UBamberg), and in these statements the HEI presidents pledged to “continue to defend the fundamental values of peace, truth, democracy, academic freedom, and international cooperation” (UOttawa), to persist in “supporting peace, security, and democracy” (YorkU), and to uphold the “values that form the foundation of enlightenment and science” (UJena).

With science being inextricably linked to “peace, the rule of law, and the freedom of unhindered exchange among scholars across state borders” (UBamberg), the attack on Ukraine was equated to an attack on the “cross-border community of teachers, researchers, and students all over the world” (DAAD) and, thus, on core values in the HE sector in terms of “responsibility in ensuring peace and freedom and a knowledge-based view of the world” (DAAD). Next to values that relate to the relationship between HEIs and their immediate and/or further contexts, the analyzed statements also included references to values that apply to intra-institutional relationships: HEIs “must remain places of respectful discourse even in difficult times” and HEIs will continue to be “non-discriminatory, liberal-minded places of diversity” (UBamberg). There was a connection drawn between the statements and the principles of Western liberal democratic values. As Russia is viewed as one of the main superpowers opposing liberal values, the war was perceived to have significant implications for international peace politics.

Universities in both Canada and Germany perceived that the crisis directly impacted their entire community, including students, faculty, university staff, and members of the Russian community who actively oppose the war. In this way, the crisis exposed the “vulnerability of universities as a whole, but also of individual scholars” (UBamberg). Next to expressing solidarity with the Ukrainian people as such, the assessed statements particularly related to people with Ukrainian origin who are part of the HE community. A typical example was as follows: “Our thoughts are with our colleagues, fellow students and their families” (HUBerlin). In this vein, several statements in the German context put numbers to the affected community and listed the number of Ukrainian students studying at their institution or in Germany more generally and the number of existing institutional collaborations such as in research or through the Erasmus+ program.

While German HEIs emphasized existing institutional ties in research and teaching with Ukraine in a broad range of subjects, in several instances, Canadian universities highlighted their robust cultural ties and historical connections with the Ukrainian people at the provincial level. Here are illustrative examples: “Alberta’s large Ukrainian community has enriched our province” (UCalgary), “In Manitoba, with so many here having strong and historic connections to Ukraine” (UManitoba), “The University of Toronto community has a special connection to Ukraine” (UToronto). By emphasizing those close-knit academic and cultural connections, universities aimed to bridge the geographical distance separating them from global events across the world, underscoring the significance of these events in their local contexts.

### ***Problem Solvers at the Global-Local Nexus***

In terms of key agents, findings show the importance of a global-local response dynamic. Canadian universities primarily perceived their supportive role towards the government’s diplomatic efforts in addressing conflict at a global scale. Some Canadian universities articulated support for their Prime Minister and Premier (UBC; Mount RoyalU) and York University expressed a broader commitment to all diplomatic initiatives aimed at achieving peace and democracy. Support for the humanitarian work of national agencies such as the Canadian Red Cross and UNICEF Canada was also mentioned (AthabascaU; UCalgary). German HEIs similarly expressed support for (sub)national governmental policies (“We [...] join the Bavarian government’s demand for an immediate halt to the invasion” [UBamberg]) or even issued joint statements with the subnational government (e.g., joint declaration by the state and universities in North Rhine-Westphalia). Some German HEIs and their associations called on the federal government to mobilize the necessary financial means to be able to respond in a suitable manner to the influx of refugee students and academic staff. In a joint statement from March 2022, the German universities of applied sciences wrote that they “are counting on the federal and state governments to provide the funds needed to support students and academics from Ukraine and to offer appropriate assistance in a timely and unbureaucratic manner” (HAW).

In Germany we do not only find individual HEIs' responses to the war in Ukraine but also efforts to coordinate responses. These efforts span across different (sub)national levels and involve different types of organizations. The identified organizations include the Alliance of Science Organizations in Germany, rector conferences (German rector conference and the conference of Universities of Applied Sciences [HAW]), Länder-level associations such as Universität Bayern and cross-border networks such as EUCOR – The European Campus. Next to rector-level statements and the findings include statements of students' associations in the German context. One central identified agent is the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD). Upon the request of the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the German Länder and supported by the Federal Ministry of Education, the DAAD established the National Contact Point Ukraine where all the available support for German HEIs and Ukrainian students was and is gathered.

HEIs clearly delineated their role in supporting the diplomatic efforts locally. Universities emphasized their role as knowledge-based institutions in society with substantial expertise in the field. In the Canadian context, Royal Roads University's statement emphasized that "One of the most important roles of a university is to provide crucial expertise and insight during times of enormous crisis, and to convene conversations that can make progress toward solutions (Royal RoadsU). The President of Wilfrid Laurier University underscored: "In times like this, universities have an important role to play in contextualizing complex issues and fostering dialogue on the increasing number of humanitarian crises around the world" (WFU). The University of Waterloo saw its role "in preserving democracy by offering a safe place for free inquiry and preparing our students to be global citizens." The university highlighted its expertise in cyber-security, international relations, and European history, underscoring their relevance in making sense of the situation.

Several sub-units within the universities displayed active local agency during this period. Their actions underscored the active involvement in addressing the crisis and promoting awareness and understanding within their communities. The most important identified units included international offices, counselling services, departments such as those related to Ukrainian or Russian studies or to Eastern Europe more broadly, and student groups. For instance, the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies at the University Alberta played a pivotal role in informing the public on the contextual complexities of the situation. The Department of Russian Studies at Dalhousie University facilitated an online conversation to share historical insights on the matter. In the German case, the University of Fulda's Imre Kertész Kolleg is one example where a panel discussion on the situation in Ukraine with experts from different fields was locally organized.

The activities by university sub-units and certain groups of university members very often involved cooperation with the local community and with municipal actors. In the Canadian context, Simon Fraser University's Philosophy Department partnered with the Red Cross to coordinate donation collection efforts. Political scientists at Brandon University and Memorial University organized a forum dedicated to discussing the conflict, while non-institutional local activist groups such as Tryzub in Brandon, Manitoba helped to organize a march at Brandon University. Toronto Metropolitan University faculty established a working group of people to share news, resources, and knowledge on the topic. In the German context, we identified cases where individuals originating from Ukraine were coordinating institutional support offers and donations (UPaderporn).

### **Shaping Institutional Responses: Interests and Opportunity Structures**

The findings reveal a diverse range of institutional supports provided by host institutions in both Canada and Germany. The supports fall into five main categories: 1) financial; 2) social; 3) educational/academic, 4) cultural; and 5) political. Findings point to four primary sets of interests that triggered institutional responses: upholding human rights, promoting peace and security, guaranteeing the functioning of local and Ukrainian HE systems, promoting cross-cultural knowledge exchange and exercising ethical leadership through political influence. It is important to note that the identified institutional responses usually appear in combination.



**Table 2.**

**Overview of Identified Institutional Responses with Corresponding Interests and Opportunity Structures.**

Institutional response type	Response	Interest	Opportunity structures
Financial	Scholarships, bursaries, tuition waivers, interest-free loans, emergency support funds, research stays	Promotion of peace, security, and human rights	Availability of funding at HEIs/by government
Social	Counselling, wellness supports, immigration help, humanitarian aid		Institutional unit-level structures in place
Educational/ Academic	Support of Ukrainian HEIs in their operations (e.g., hosting entry exams) Linguistic and subject-related integration (e.g., placement initiatives)	Ensuring the functioning of Ukrainian and local HE system	Geographic proximity to Ukraine Institutional capacity (physical and digital infrastructure)
	Establishment of new institutional partnerships		Programmatic offers available
Cultural	Events on Ukraine	Promoting cross-cultural knowledge exchange	Personal ties Cultural diplomacy
	Suspension of Russian study-abroad programmes Pro-active advocacy, expert panel discussions, stakeholder engagement		Ethical leadership and political influence

***Promote Peace, Security and Human Rights Through Financial and Social Support***

One central theme among institutional responses was offering financial support. Specific instruments included scholarships for Ukrainian students, financial aid, tuition awards and waivers, research internships, research stays, and emergency support funds. Additionally, universities launched fundraising campaigns and established donation platforms

and emergency funds to aid Ukrainian students. A connected type of response in this regard would fall under the social category of institutional responses, where students, staff and the local community were engaged in raising funds and – in the case of Germany – goods for the purpose of humanitarian aid. Financial support initiatives were framed within the narrative of promoting peace, security, and human rights. For example, the University of Alberta in Canada introduced scholarships with the explicit goal of ensuring: “the safety, security and the ongoing support of their [Ukrainian students] studies” (UAlberta). Western University in Canada similarly underscored its commitment to assisting students in the pursuit of “education and scholarship in the safety of our campus community” (WesternU).

Linking institutional funding decisions to core democratic values helps legitimize these unforeseen expenses and garner community buy-in. The framing used to support these decisions involved advocating for equitable educational access as a fundamental human right, with institutional interest in global engagement as a secondary consideration. Consequently, institutions opted to extend this opportunity to all students and academics who have faced involuntary displacement due to war. A concrete example is Queen’s University in Canada, which has established the Principal’s Global Scholars and Fellows Program to support international students from war-affected countries, ensuring their equitable access to education.

For both Canada and Germany HEIs, institutional responses to financially support Ukrainian students and academics depended on public funding resources. In Canada, the province of Ontario established a \$1.9 million CAD “Ontario-Ukraine Solidarity Scholarship” in 2022 in response to Russia’s military invasion. In Germany, similar scholarships were made available to Ukrainian students, researchers, and teaching staff. Next to privately sponsored support such as that given by foundations, publicly funded support were channelled through subnational funds and existing and newly established scholarship schemes of the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD). While the latter is funded through different ministries such as the foreign ministry, several Länder governments topped up the funding of existing programmes (e.g., BayFOR) and made funding available to employ additional staff such as for language training.

In both the Canadian and German case, the provision of financial resources to incoming Ukrainians was complemented by social support measures. Social support was comprised of various advising services such as wellness support, mental health services, immigration guidance, and assistance with funding and accommodation. As outlined in the first part of the analysis, social support has primarily been delivered locally through dedicated units at the respective HEIs such as international offices and/or municipalities.

### ***Promote Cross-Cultural Knowledge Exchange***

A next category of institutional responses revolved around ensuring the continuous functioning of the HE system in Ukraine and in the host country and, thus, relates to education as one core mission of HEIs. These institutional responses included provision for specific courses for the linguistic and subject-related integration of Ukrainian students and digital assistance for Ukrainian HEIs. German HEIs’ offered standardized entrance examinations for over 5,000 applicants from Ukraine seeking admission and continued studies at Ukrainian universities. The university entrance exams took place between July and October 2022 in six German cities, with the respective universities (HUBerlin, UFrankfurt, UHamburg, UCologne, ULeipzig, UMunich) acting as the main coordinators. This initiative was prompted after the Ukrainian Ministry of Education and Sciences reached out to the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF). The following statement by the Minister for Education, Science, and Culture in the state of Schleswig-Holstein (Prien) demonstrated that this type of institutional response reflected an educational rationale: “By offering the Ukrainian university entrance tests in Germany, we are helping young Ukrainians to avoid breaks in their educational biography and to prepare for studying in Ukraine.”

Several German HEIs stated that they sought to maintain “scientific relations and exchange relations with [their] partners in Ukraine.” Others opted for establishing novel institutional ties with HEIs in Ukraine. The University of Ulm gave support for the HE system in Ukraine to help students and staff located there to build new institutional partnerships with the University Charkiv. In September 2023, the two institutions agreed to develop double degree programs. New partnership development was less present in the Canadian context which could be explained by to the closer geographic proximity between Germany and Ukraine and a stronger influx of Ukrainian refugees into the German HE system. The educational/academic response type furthermore depended on the institutional capacity, including the respective

institution's infrastructure, which provided different opportunities for educational offers (e.g., corresponding institutions, language centres) and for supporting Ukrainian HEIs in the delivery of their offer.

Institutional educational responses were closely connected to cultural responses because the establishment of new institutional partnerships serves both educational and cultural objectives. For example, in 2022, the University of Guelph in Canada established a new international partnership with Dnipro State Agrarian and Economic University in Ukraine to advance academic ties and "solidarity and respect for other cultures and traditions" (UGuelph). This objective aligns with Oleksiyenko and colleagues (2023), who emphasized the significance of strengthened institutional partnerships with Ukraine from a cultural perspective, as an advanced opportunity to share histories and cultures with others. Other cultural responses included organizing events on Ukraine such as by partnering institutes of the respective HE institutions and – relating back to the educational response and the integration of topics on Ukraine into teaching content. Very often, these events entailed reflections on the political situation in Ukraine prior to, during, and after the invasion, so that the line between exchanging knowledge across cultures and exercising political influence through the organization of events was blurred.

### ***Promote Political Influence with Ethical Leadership through Internationalization***

A prominent theme in the findings was exercising political influence as an institutional response among HEIs. In addition to bringing collaborative relationships with Russian HEIs to a halt, political responses also involved universities organizing campus rallies, marches, and vigils and raising flags or displaying blue and yellow on campus buildings to demonstrate solidarity with Ukraine. Outreach activities where experts provided insights into the political situation were also present.

Implementing sanctions demonstrates an alignment with foreign policy objectives mandated by the governments. This institutional response was seen as helping to maintain positive relationships with governments and policymakers. For example, the University of Manitoba took measures to cease any involvement in the transfer of funds to Russia. The university divested a portion (0.03%) of its pension program previously invested in Russian companies, and its endowment funds no longer include such investments. The Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada urged its grant recipients to immediately suspend ongoing collaborations with Russian industry partners. Similarly, while acknowledging institutional autonomy, the Alliance of Science Organisations in Germany issued the recommendation that 'academic cooperation with state institutions and business enterprises in Russia be frozen with immediate effect until further notice' (Allianz der Wissenschaftsorganisationen, 2022). As a result, ongoing academic relations with Russia, including joint projects and events, were terminated. The response of Freie Universität (FU) Berlin in Germany illustrated how, in the suspension of partnerships with Russian HEIs, the political and financial response went hand in hand. The suspension not only affected degree programs but also research partnerships and financial transfers to research centres such as the German-Russian Interdisciplinary Science Center (G-RISC). Politically, not only was the strategic partnership with St. Petersburg University suspended, but the university's office at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations was also closed. The underlying rationale for these actions was to sanction Russia and to prevent any financial support helping Russia's cause. Instead, financial support was offered to students who had to return to FU as a result of suspended relations and to Ukrainian students whose stay at FU would have come to an end but whose return was rendered impossible due to the war. Funds for the latter purpose, very often called a "Ukraine Emergency Fund," have also been identified for other German HEIs.

Finally, issuing presidential statements across most HEIs in Canada and Germany demonstrated ethical leadership. University presidents are seen as leaders and role models in their communities. Taking a stand against the war demonstrates institutional values and sends a clear message about it to their academic communities and to the broader society. In the Canadian context, universities located in the provinces with significant Ukrainian population were the fastest to respond. Most presidential statements from institutions situated in British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba were promptly issued on February 24, 2022, while other statements were issued during the following weeks from over 52 universities and colleges in total. The institutional leaders in the four provinces mentioned may have felt a greater sense of political responsibility due to close historical and cultural ties that prompted them to respond swiftly.

Universities also played an advocacy role in making sure there was no discrimination against Russian students and scholars at their institutions. Universities did not only call for the respectful treatment of people from Russia but also

expressed solidarity with the open letter where Russian scholars spoke out against the war. Statements emphasized that “people who are taking a clear stance against this war at enormous personal risk deserve our great respect and recognition” (HAW) and that universities ought to maintain respectful discourse in these trying times. These actions underscored the impact of the political activities of academic institutions.

## **Discussion**

This article started out with the observation that, in light of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, HE institutions across the globe reacted with swift responses to support incoming students and academics from Ukraine. Student and staff mobility and institutional collaboration are core components of HE internationalization. The internationalization of HE over the past decades has been primarily marked by economic rationales out of which pragmatic institutional approaches have been dominant. This paper targeted public statements that show the extent to which we are witnessing a return to an international politics driving HE internationalization and, thus, a stronger emphasis on values such as peace, freedom, and solidarity. We developed a theoretical framework that combines the literatures on the respective influences of crises and geopolitics on HE. This framework captures how a crisis is perceived and who ought to solve it, and the underlying interests and opportunity structures of institutional responses. The framework was then applied to comparatively assess how HE institutions in Canada and Germany responded to the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

The analysis showed that the conflict in Ukraine is located across three different scales – international, regional, and institutional – and has evoked core democratic values that require protection. The analysis further demonstrated how the contextually different countries of Canada and Germany adopted a very similar range of institutional responses (financial, social, educational, cultural, and political), guided by the logic of appropriateness, aligning with values that appears institutionally correct based on the shared core values. The logic of appropriateness suggests that universities make decisions based not only on a calculation of material interests or strategic goals but also on what they perceive as socially acceptable or normatively appropriate within their institutional contexts. When faced with a situation like the conflict in Ukraine, HEIs may feel compelled to respond in ways that uphold certain values (democracy, academic freedom, international cooperation), even if doing so may not directly serve their immediate material interests or strategic goals. Our data demonstrated that universities condemned Russia's actions, expressed solidarity with the people of Ukraine, offered variety of supports to affected students or scholars, or even took more proactive measures such as suspending academic partnerships or research collaborations with Russian institutions. These actions were driven by a sense of moral duty, a commitment to upholding international norms and overall integrity of the academic community.

## **Conclusion**

By gathering and assessing empirical data on HE internationalization during a geopolitical crisis, our study demonstrates how academic mobility is becoming a prominent mechanism of knowledge politics in the context of global geopolitics. By showing how conflict response and the internationalization of HE are connected, this study underscores the complexities and evolving dynamics of higher education’s role in responding to and navigating the impacts of geopolitical conflicts. It remains to be seen how the analyzed adaptation of internationalization practices will lead to institutional transformations in HE. Yet, we can expect the surge of other geopolitical crises to impact debates about the understandings and purposes of HE in both theory and practice (Tröhler, 2023). We can also expect that the identified patterns of HE internationalization will leave traces in the processes of constructing HE spaces and regimes (Zapp & Ramirez, 2019).

While past behaviour and established institutional norms provide valuable insights into how institutions may be likely to respond to the unpredictable nature of crises in the future, the responses may vary depending on specific circumstances and contextual factors. Future research should delve deeper into those contextual nuances to add further insights into university responses to crises. For example, conducting a survey and applying quantitative methodology could also be helpful in tracing ratios on the prominence of the type of support universities have provided, i.e. financial, social, educational/academic, cultural and political support. Furthermore, the cases of Canada and Germany mirror Western ideals for universities, including liberal democratic values, which may not necessarily be applicable to all spaces beyond the

European and Northern American HE areas. Next to addressing how equity and inclusivity in HE internationalization practices are affected by geopolitics it may be worthwhile to explore HE spaces where universities ought to fulfil different purposes.

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