

Continuity and accessibility in HE amid political instability and armed conflict: Institutional strategies and cloud-based innovations

*Resilience and Regeneration in HE, Yehuda Elkana Center, CEU, Vienna
June 24, 2025*

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Co-funded by
the European Union

Funded by the European Union. The views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or OeAD-GmbH. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.



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HEIs in armed conflict (1)

- Growing geopolitical instability and increase in natural disasters underscores urgent **need for HEIs to build resilience**
- 2020-2021, HEIs experienced armed violence in **28 conflict-affected countries**, with Ukraine the sole European case (Russian aggression since 2014) (GCPEA, 2022)
- War and armed conflicts pose **challenges to the entire HE sector**:
 - Collateral damage
 - Targeted attacks (e.g. “scholasticide” in conflict zones in Syria or Gaza)
 - Ideological threats
- Multifaceted role of HEIs in conflict, peacebuilding and resistance was shifted into focus by Millican (2018*)

* Millican, J. (Ed., 2018), *Universities and conflict: The role of higher education in peacebuilding and resistance*. Routledge.

HEIs in armed conflict (2)

- **4 central challenges** for higher education in conflict-affected contexts (Milton & Barakat, 2016):
 - Destruction of infrastructure
 - Mass displacement of students and staff
 - Deteriorating educational conditions due to ongoing violence
 - Constrained institutional resilience
- Significant **underfunding of HE sectors in wartime** (Protsyk, 2025; Doronina et al., 2025)
 - E.g. Ukraine: formulaic funding cancelled, loss of tuition fees, increasing adaptation costs
 - Reduction of staff, increased work intensity next to social risks (mental health problems, reduced motivation, dissatisfaction, conflicts in the team, etc.)

HEIs in armed conflict (3)

- **Resilient (higher) education systems** “ensure safe, equitable access and preserves learning outcomes during crises” (Ritesh, 2019)
- Next to international cooperation and the protection of the well-being of staff and students (Protsyk, 2025), **remote learning and personalised study arrangements** are considered crucial for a holistic risk management (Kuzheliev et al., 2023).

CLOUD HED in brief

- Short for: “Disaster resilience in HE systems via a cloud university model”
- **An evidence-based, whole-university approach to the Cloud University Model as disaster-related response**
- „Cloud University“ = temporary shift of HEIs’ operations to the cloud to maintain accessibility and continuity.
- Particular focus on teaching: It requires flexible learning pathways, modular course designs, certification through micro-credentials and appropriate forms of (online) assessment
- Individuals involved face physical threats, mental stress, have to flee or defend their region/country

CLOUD HED involves

- **Needs analysis** (systematic analysis of selected historical and current cases of HE-sectors during and post-conflict/war)
- **Development of trainings** for HE-teachers on how to implement the Cloud University Model in educational processes
- A focus on **transversal and resilience skills**
- Adoption of **innovative teaching practices** in line with latest technological advancements
- Use of **micro-credentials**
- **Guidelines for HEIs** to switch to (temporary) cloud-mode due to emergency

Cloud University Model

A technology-driven paradigm shift in HE

- (1) Utilizes **cloud-based technologies** to create accessible, flexible, scalable, and cost-effective academic environments.
- (2) Breaks down traditional geographical and infrastructural barriers.
- (3) Supports **various HEI services/missions**: Teaching, learning, research, and administration.
- (4) Comprises **various functions**: Content Delivery, Learning Management, Resource Provision, Data Management, Collaborative Platforms, and Personalized Learning.

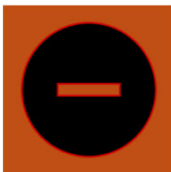
Traditional vs. Online vs. Cloud

Feature	Traditional University	Online University	Cloud University
Infrastructure	Physical infrastructure	Web platforms (e.g. LMS)	Cloud platforms (e.g., Microsoft 365, Google Cloud)
Learning Environment	In-person interaction, direct experience	Remote learning, digital reflection of traditional learning	Dynamic virtual, adaptable
Functions	Most HEI functions are in-person	Strong focus on T&L online	Whole HEI functions are through the cloud
Data Storage	Centralized, on-site servers	Centralized, on university's server	Decentralized, cloud-based
Accessibility	Limited by location and capacity	Remote access to programs	Global access, flexible, scalable
Focus	Direct educational experience	Remote access to education	Resilience through accessibility, flexibility and scalability, cost-effectiveness

Advantages and disadvantages



- Courses and resources can be accessed from any location with internet connectivity
- Education accessible more flexibly and globally
- HEIs can scale their resources according to demand without major infrastructure investments → reduced costs
- Seamless communication and collaboration between students, teachers and staff



- Digital divide and internet access – barrier for students in rural or low-income areas, or in case of black outs
- Data Privacy and security concerns (e.g. vulnerability to cyber-attacks)
- Loss of Campus experience and potential for lower engagement
- Dependence of Third-Party Providers
- Hidden Costs (data storage, scaling-up services, integration of different platforms)
- Standardisation challenges (how to meet the specific needs of every course or subject)

Progress and activities (10/24 – 06/25) (1)

WP2: Case study and needs analysis handbook of HE-sectors pre-, during and post-crisis

- 🎓 Post WWII Polish and Austrian HE-system
 - 8 interviews
- 🎓 Ex-Yugoslavian HE-system
 - 14 interviews
- 🎓 Ukrainian and Israeli HE-systems during ongoing war/armed conflicts
 - 23 + 20 interviews
- 🎓 Current Polish and Latvian HE-system at risk of crisis
 - 33 interviews

Progress and activities (10/24 – 06/25) (2)

WP2: Initial results (extract)

- 🎓 Vast differences in historical context, geopolitical landscape, and available technology
- 🎓 Development of crisis-driven governance models
 - Emergency task forces, decentralised authority, agility
- 🎓 Rapid shift to remote teaching
 - Current conflicts: full digital transition, emphasised real-time adaptation over passive reaction
 - Former Yugoslavia: improvised, low-teach learning networks
- 🎓 Mobilisation of informal/underground networks
 - (Semi-)clandestine material distribution (former Yugoslavia, WWII-Poland)
 - External support was vital
- 🎓 Crisis as catalyst for transformation
 - Strengthened community engagement, informal practices integrated post-crisis, etc.

Progress and activities (10/24 – 06/25) (3)

- WP3: Conceptualisation of the shift to the cloud
 - Desk research of “good practices”: **other cloud universities** worldwide
 - Fine-tuning the definition of cloud universities
 - Field study of **SSU, BGU, Tel-Hai, RTA and UKSW** to analyse:
 - Management structures and their needs for transition to the cloud
 - Teaching conditions and practices, curricula & their readiness for the cloud
 - Technical and IT-conditions
 - **Pilot curricula adaptation to the cloud at SSU, BGU, Tel-Hai, RTA and UKSW** with a view to structure of modules, use of micro-credentials and appropriate forms of (online) assessment
 - Development of **guidelines** for SSU, BGU, RTA, Tel-Hai and UKSW and, more generally, for further interested HEIs

WP3 Examples institutions facilitating a cloud university model (selection)



- **University of Tokyo** – has developed its **own platform** (UTokyo Azure), offers highly **personalized and interactive models** with individual feedback, gamification, and case-based approaches, and is one of the universities with well-developed scholarship programs.
- **Arizona State University** – Integrates **mass content with personalized recommendations** and access to mentors, provides an extensive program portfolio, and offers online counseling, forums, and digital mentorship using diversified cloud platforms.
- **Kiron Open Higher Education** – An initiative focusing on online learning for refugees and migrants; provides specialized education tracks with a **focus on digital skills**, integrates mass content through AWS; offers free education related to IT; and delivers education through **partnerships with recognized universities**.
- **The Open University (UK)** – Provides an extensive program portfolio ranging from undergraduate degrees to microcredentials across all disciplines through Microsoft 365, offers flexible payment systems, and has the most **structured student support systems**.

Some question marks ...

- 🎓 **Positionality in the handbook** – we aim for neutrality regarding conflicts, but how can/should we uphold it in practice?
- 🎓 **Good practices** – most cloud-based technologies originate from the US; how do we address this dependency?
- 🎓 **AI as a cross-cutting theme in teaching & learning** – reinforces the broader question of how to approach AI in student assessment.



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