

# FROM CLASSROOM TO POLICY: INSTITUTE OF MENTAL HEALTH AT UCU AS AN ACTOR OF MENTAL HEALTH SYSTEM IMPROVEMENT IN UKRAINE

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**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.36059/978-966-397-609-9-22>

**Keywords:** mental health; policy; recovery; collaboration in mental health; capacity building.

## Abstract

The Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has generated one of the most acute mental health emergencies in modern European history. Against a backdrop of systemic underfunding, inherited Soviet-era institutional structures, and deep public mistrust of mental health services, the Institute of Mental Health at Ukrainian Catholic University (IMH UCU) has developed a service-learning model that integrates postgraduate training, civic partnership, and direct policy participation at the national and local levels. This article examines the model across four dimensions: the structural and historical context that makes it necessary; the institutional methodology that distinguishes it; the evidence base that demonstrates its impact; and the implications it holds for education, mental health policy, and post-war recovery in Ukraine.

## Context and Problem Framing

The Revolution of Dignity and the outbreak of war in 2014 set in motion far-reaching reforms to health-care funding that gradually reshaped the mental health sector, ultimately leading to the adoption of the Mental Health Care Concept Note 2018–30 in 2017 (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, 2017). In 2020 the WHO itself designated Ukraine a Special Initiative for Mental Health, even before the full-scale invasion, acknowledging the scale of unmet need (World Health Organization, 2020). Since the full-scale Russian invasion in February 2022, the country has faced a convergence of trauma exposures – combat, displacement, bereavement, torture, and chronic existential uncertainty – affecting

every segment of the population. Ukraine's Ministry of Health estimates that approximately 50 percent of the national population will require some form of psychological support in the coming years (Ukrinform, 2023). In 2023, the World Health Organization estimated that around 9.6 million people in Ukraine were at risk of or living with a mental health condition, and 3.9 million people were estimated to suffer from moderate to severe symptoms (World Health Organization, 2023). Now Ukraine is living through a public mental health emergency of historical proportions.

The system that must respond to this crisis is structurally fragile yet transforming in many sectors. The Ukrainian mental health system, shaped by institutional logic, has historically centered on large inpatient psychiatric hospitals and social care homes (internats) operating in isolation from primary care and community services (Suvalo & Borovets, 2024). This architecture carried twin deficits: it was clinically inadequate for treating the range of war-related conditions – post-traumatic stress, grief, addiction, moral injury, traumatic brain injury – and it was culturally toxic, given the Soviet state's well-documented weaponisation of psychiatry against dissidents. Trust in mental health institutions and services remains low. Help-seeking behaviour is inhibited by stigma that is not merely cultural but historically determined (Suvalo & Borovets, 2024). Meanwhile, Ukraine faces an acute workforce shortage. Decades of underinvestment in professional training, accelerated by wartime emigration and casualty, have left the country with far fewer psychiatrists, psychologists, psychotherapists, and social workers than its population requires. The WHO estimates that the consequences of the current conflict for mental health will persist for at least ten years, meaning any adequate response must be systemic – not a temporary emergency measure but a rebuilt infrastructure for care (World Health Organization, 2020). This is the problem into which the Institute of Mental Health intervened in 2017, drafting the Concept Note on Mental Health Care in Ukraine until 2030, approved by the government in December 2017 (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, 2017). Situated within Ukrainian Catholic University in Lviv – an institution founded on the principle that education exists in service of society, not merely in service of individual career outcomes – since its founding, IMH UCU has understood that training clinical specialists is necessary but not

sufficient. Ukraine does not only need more psychologists; it needs a transformed relationship between professional knowledge, community life, and governance. Achieving that transformation requires institutions capable of inhabiting the boundary between academy and society, between research and practice, between education and policy.

## **Approach and Methodology**

IMH UCU's approach can be characterised as service learning with embedded policy participation – a model that differs from both conventional professional training and from pure research advocacy. Its defining feature is the refusal to treat these domains as sequential: first train students, then deploy them, then perhaps influence policy. Instead, the model treats education, community service, and policy formation as simultaneous and mutually constitutive processes.

The pedagogical foundation is service learning, embedded formally in UCU's institutional strategy. Students in psychology, social work, and occupational therapy undertake supervised community placements in hospitals, veterans' support centres, schools, and civil society organisations, with field experience integrated into academic assessment and curriculum development. The community is not a site for applying pre-formed knowledge but a source of knowledge in its own right.

The institutional model extends this logic upward into governance. IMH UCU does not merely train practitioners for a system that others design; its faculty participate directly in designing the system. The draft of the Mental Health Concept Note in Ukraine for the period until 2030, which the government approved in December 2017, was developed by the Institute's team (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, 2017). Dr. Oleh Romanchuk, the Institute's Director, and Dr. Orest Suvalo, its Executive Director and the manager of the Ukrainian-Swiss project "Mental Health for Ukraine", are among the named expert contributors to the national "MHPSS Target Model 2.0" – the comprehensive blueprint for restructuring Ukraine's mental health and psychosocial support system, developed under First Lady Olena Zelenska's All-Ukrainian Mental Health initiative with WHO partnership (Coordination Center for Mental Health, 2023). Policy expertise and training work are

concentrated in IMH UCU, with increasing vision and steps towards research capacity development.

The methodology also encompasses capacity-building beyond UCU's own enrolled students. Recognising that the solution to a workforce shortage cannot come only from new graduates, IMH UCU delivers continuing education to practitioners already working in the system – teachers, primary care physicians, psychologists, and psychotherapists – in trauma-informed practice and cognitive behavioural therapy (in cooperation with the Ukrainian Institute of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy), and psychosocial support frameworks. The EU-PROMENS programme, financed through EU4Health, provides one multilateral vehicle for this, delivering training workshops across 27 EU Member States plus Norway, Iceland, and Ukraine; sessions were provided by IMH UCU in Uzhhorod, Lutsk, and Lviv in 2026 (EU-PROMENS, 2026).

A further methodological strand targets the pastoral workforce. IMH UCU is currently training priests in the fundamentals of psychology – a significant step for a Catholic university and a recognition that clergy often reach populations that resist engagement with formal clinical services. By extending mental health literacy into the pastoral domain, IMH UCU effectively multiplies the reach of psychologically informed support into communities where institutional trust is lowest. Underpinning all these methodological streams is an institutional logic of coalition-building. In 2023, UCU initiated the Alliance of Ukrainian Universities – a consortium of six higher education institutions collaborating on post-war reconstruction projects (UCU Strategy, 2024). IMH UCU's mental health expertise anchors the Alliance's work on community wellbeing and social recovery, creating a platform for multi-site research, shared curriculum development, and coordinated policy advocacy that no single university could sustain alone. UCU is also among five higher education institutions that have created a consortium within the framework of First Lady Olena Zelenska's All-Ukrainian Mental Health initiative "How Are You?" to build a scientific cluster on mental health.

### **Analysis and Reflective Evidence**

The most concrete demonstration of the model's effectiveness is the Lviv Regional Complex Programme on Mental Health and

Psychosocial Support of the Population for 2023–2026, presented at UCU in September 2023. This programme was developed by a working group convened under the Lviv Regional Military Administration, with UCU as a primary institutional partner alongside the DiahnomeD charitable foundation, the Ukrainian-Swiss “Mental Health for Ukraine” project, the “Family Circle” Mental Health Center, and the civic organisation “Bird of Ukraine” (Ukrainian Catholic University, 2023; UCU Foundation, 2023).

The programme is significant on several counts. First, it is a government programme, not a university initiative: it is formally coordinated by the Lviv Regional State Administration through its departments of healthcare, education, and social protection. UCU’s role is to provide the educational and research infrastructure that makes programme delivery possible – training professionals, supervising practitioners, generating evidence, and maintaining intellectual rigour. This positioning, as structural partner rather than service provider or external advisor, represents a mature and arguably more durable form of policy engagement than lobbying or publication alone.

Second, the programme directly integrates the service-learning logic into its design. Its three priority areas – public education and awareness, healthcare capacity-building, and development of a networked social services system – all require trained practitioners embedded in communities, which is precisely what IMH UCU graduate programmes produce. Third, the programme operationalises the national policy framework at the regional level. It is explicitly designed as a continuation of the All-Ukrainian Mental Health Programme ‘How Are You?’ – the initiative launched by First Lady Olena Zelenska in May 2022, coordinated by the Cabinet of Ministers’ Coordination Center for Mental Health with WHO support (President of Ukraine, 2025). IMH UCU experts, having contributed to the national Target Model 2.0 that underpins ‘How Are You?’ (Coordination Center for Mental Health, 2023), then participated in translating that model into a specific regional programme.

Reflective evidence from programme participants and university leadership corroborates this analysis. The feedback loop between education and policy is closed rather than aspirational: the programme creates the institutional context in which UCU

students could undertake placements, simultaneously contribute to programme delivery.

### **Implications for Education, Policy, and Recovery**

For higher education, IMH UCU's model poses a direct challenge to the conventional demarcation between academic formation and social engagement. The dominant model of professional education – in which universities produce graduates whom society then deploys – presupposes a functional ecosystem of institutions, employers, and policy frameworks into which graduates can slot. In Ukraine, that ecosystem is in active reconstruction. IMH UCU's response is to make the reconstruction of the ecosystem itself a pedagogical object: students learn by participating in system-building, not by preparing for a finished system to receive them. This is educationally demanding – it requires faculty who are simultaneously researchers, practitioners, and policy actors – but it is arguably the only viable model in a context where the system does not yet fully exist.

The implication for curriculum design is significant. Mental health training in Ukraine cannot be abstracted from the political economy of the health system, the cultural history of institutional distrust, the demographic realities of IDP communities, or the governance structures that will fund and regulate care. IMH UCU has responded to this by integrating policy literacy, community partnership, and evidence synthesis into core training, alongside clinical skills. The result is graduates who understand not only how to provide therapy but how to advocate for the conditions under which interventions are possible.

For policy, the model demonstrates that universities can function as genuine co-designers of governance rather than as post-hoc consultants. The national MHPSS Target Model and the Lviv Regional Programme (Coordination Center for Mental Health, 2023; Ukrainian Catholic University, 2023) were not academic outputs subsequently adopted by government; they were produced through working groups in which UCU experts participated alongside ministerial officials, international organisations, and civil society from the outset.

For post-war recovery, the deepest implication may be cultural. Ukraine's mental health crisis is not only a clinical problem or

a workforce problem; it is a trust problem. A population that has experienced state institutions as dangerous, professionals as unavailable, and psychological distress as shameful does not become a help-seeking population simply because new services are created. The cultural work of normalising care – reducing stigma, building trust in practitioners, creating environments where veterans, displaced persons, and traumatised people feel safe enough to seek help – requires sustained presence in communities over time. IMH UCU’s service-learning model builds exactly this presence, through students and practitioners who are embedded in specific communities long enough to be known rather than merely encountered. First Lady Zelenska’s articulation of the “How Are You?” programme’s goal – to make mental health support accessible, friendly, and free (President of Ukraine, 2025) – points to precisely this cultural ambition. UCU IMH’s contribution is to provide the professional human capital and the community trust infrastructure without which accessibility, friendliness, and affordability remain aspirations rather than realities. In this sense, the Institute’s work is not only a service to Ukrainian society but a structural precondition for the policy ambitions that Ukrainian society has set for itself.

The model also holds broader comparative relevance. Post-conflict and transitional settings across the world face analogous challenges: acute mental health need, degraded or distrusted institutions, workforce shortages, and the urgency of building systems that did not previously exist (Suvalo & Borovets, 2024). IMH UCU demonstrated capacity to link service learning, community partnership, and policy co-design within a single institutional framework offers a transferable template – not one that can be replicated without modification, since its coherence depends on UCU’s specific civic mission and cultural positioning, but one whose logic is exportable: the insight that in contexts of system reconstruction, the university must learn and govern at the same time as it teaches.

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