

# RETHINKING INTERNATIONAL ACADEMIC PARTNERSHIPS IN CONFLICT SETTINGS: LESSONS FROM UKRAINIAN-EU TEACHING TANDEMS

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## Introduction

A society's ability to withstand, adapt to, and recover from crisis, or in other words, its resilience, is shaped by a large extent to the nature and quality of its social capital. Social capital is understood as the relationships and networks among a society's members that foster trust and facilitate cooperation, coordination, and collective action (Aldrich, 2017; Ungar, 2011). However, certain forms of this social capital, particularly those that 'bridge' between groups and enhance social cohesion, tend to be negatively impacted by conflict, as detailed in the extensive literature review by Fiedler (2023). A similar deterioration in bridging social capital was identified in a study on the war's impact within the Ukrainian society (Hoch et al., 2025).

Higher education institutions (HEIs) are uniquely placed to respond to this challenge. Research shows that community engagement pedagogies, particularly Service-learning (SL) programs, that promote equal partnership and reciprocity between students and communities are strongly associated with enhancing 'bridging' social capital and improve social cohesion (Campbell, 2000; Coleman & Danks, 2016; Dahan, 2020), while also helping students and faculty navigate periods of uncertainty and crisis (Kenworthy & Opatska, 2023). That said, HEIs are increasingly affected by, and more often, directly targeted during armed conflicts (Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack – GCPEA, 2024). While international solidarity initiatives have sought to support these

institutions, they are frequently characterized by limited alignment with local priorities and a lack of focus on long term capacity building (Heleta, 2026).

Against this backdrop, the ServU project offers a relevant case for examining how international solidarity initiatives can be structured to align with locally identified needs and support sustainable institutional development. Initiated in response to the challenges of wartime and recovery, the project combines partnership based pedagogical training with community needs assessment approaches to embed SL within local contexts and to support its continuation beyond the project lifecycle. It therefore provides a useful case through which to analyse the factors that are critical in designing international partnership initiatives in higher education during ongoing armed conflict.

The study adopts a document-informed qualitative analysis to examine the 'teaching tandems' practice developed within the ServU project as a mechanism of international partnership and pedagogical transfer in a context of war and institutional disruption. The remainder of this paper first introduces the ServU project as the case under study, then outlines the methodology, examines the effectiveness of this mechanism, and concludes with recommendations for future projects.

Case description: the ServU project

The ServU (*Service-learning in Higher Education for Ukraine's Recovery*) is an Erasmus+ capacity building initiative involving three Ukrainian (UA) and three European (EU) universities. It aims to support Ukraine's recovery by embedding SL within higher education through collaboration with local territorial communities (LTCs). A central component of the project is the development of SL courses based on community needs. Within this framework, teaching tandems, a structured pairing of a UA (junior) partner with an EU (senior) partner from a similar domain and with expertise in developing SL courses, was established as a key mechanism to facilitate pedagogical transfer, capacity building, and the co-development of locally relevant courses.

## Data and methodology

The data used in this analysis consists of three official project documents and reflections from teaching and support staff during

a facilitated group discussion at the project's closing seminar in February 2026. The documents, namely the ServU project proposal, the implementation guide of the pedagogical transfer and course development phase, and the teaching tandems process flow document, help reconstruct the intended design and operationalization of the partnership. The implementation guide contains not only task descriptions but also remarks on adjustments, coordination problems, and lessons learned during this phase. These notes along with the participant reflections, provide insight into how the intended partnership was experienced in practice.

The current literature on pedagogical transfer does not provide a readily adaptable analytical framework that can be applied to this specific context of inter-university partnerships for locally relevant pedagogical transfer during an active conflict. We therefore leaned on the critique of international partnerships described in Heleta (2026) and Johnson & Wilson (2006) as well as on the themes described in the project proposal to derive four dimensions that help us structure our assessment. These dimensions are local alignment, reciprocity, capacity building, and sustainability.

## **Analysis**

The teaching tandems were designed as a central mechanism through which the ServU project sought to translate international solidarity into locally relevant SL course development. The project proposal frames the tandems as a form of collaborative partnership between EU and UA academics, while the implementation documents outline its operationalization in practice. In Table 1, we present an analysis of this mechanism's alignment to the four analytical dimensions mentioned above using the documentation and reflections to structure the assessment based on the stated goals, how it was designed and how it was experienced.

The comparison of intended design, operationalization, and implementation reflections across the four partnership dimensions reveals a consistent pattern: while the teaching tandem model was conceptually well aligned with principles of equitable and locally grounded partnership, its effectiveness in practice was mediated by contextual constraints and variation in how key concepts were understood and enacted among the participants.

**Table 1. Partnership dimensions of teaching tandems: goals, operationalization, and reflections**

Dimensions	INTENDED DESIGN	OPERATIONALIZATION	REFLECTIONS
Local Alignment	Reorientation of higher education towards real-world problem-solving in support of LTC needs viewed as an essential response to the war-induced disruption	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Community Needs Assessment and UA staff engagement with LTC through visits result in course outlines developed based on LTC needs.</li> <li>Use of LTC feedback for refining course.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>UA experts' relationship and knowledge of LTC needs was highly advantageous.</li> <li>Physical visits and feedback collection faced delays and challenges due to conflict activity.</li> </ul>
Reciprocity	EU-UA collaboration as part of broader EU integration of UA universities. Emphasis on peer learning and knowledge exchange.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teaching tandems reflect structured pairing between senior EU staff and junior UA staff based on SL expertise.</li> <li>Guided co-development with course responsibility and ownership primarily on UA staff.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Effectiveness of tandems varied based on the level of alignment in expertise and domain knowledge, and on individual engagement whereby challenges were experienced in matching.</li> <li>Learning perceived as unidirectional.</li> </ul>
Capacity Building	Emphasis on development of pedagogical capacity in UA HEIs through training, knowledge transfer, and acquisition of SL competencies.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Operationalized through MOOCs, SL guidelines, mentoring, mobility to EU institutions, and iterative course development processes.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Working Group members selected based on SL expertise, but variation in understanding of SL and its quality criteria affected consistency in partnership and review processes.</li> <li>Mobility perceived as highly valuable but the limited duration of the mobility, combined with reliance on online contact and supervision, were viewed as limiting partnership dynamics.</li> </ul>
Sustainability	Long-term objective of institutionalizing SL in UA HEIs through curriculum integration, development of shared resources, creation of academic networks, and continued collaboration with LTC.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Courses externally reviewed and subsequently approved at UA institution creating legitimacy.</li> <li>Online training material remains available after project.</li> <li>Post-implementation seminar to share and learn from experiences.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Review process built confidence as courses were perceived as meeting an international standard despite limits on reviewer's contextual knowledge.</li> <li>No clearly defined structures for maintaining and building interpersonal relationships were identified, limiting collaboration beyond the project period.</li> </ul>

**Source:** *Author's compilation based on the ServU project proposal, the implementation guide of the pedagogical transfer and course development phase, teaching tandem documentation, and participant reflections from the February 2026 seminar*

<sup>1</sup> MOOCs are openly accessible web-based learning modules.

Among the four dimensions, alignment to local community needs was particularly robust within the project design and implementation. By relying on the contextual expertise and relationships of the UA academics with the local community to guide the course development, the tandems avoided the risk of importing engagement approaches suited to an EU context potentially misaligned with local realities. Simultaneously, we find that the realities of operating in a conflict-affected environment presented unique challenges in achieving this goal. Physical access to communities and the collection of feedback were subject to delays and logistical challenges. Local needs also evolved through the different stages of the war, which required additional consultation and re-work. Local alignment in the ServU project was thus not a result of project design alone but was also contingent on access to communities and the involvement of locally embedded actors.

On the other hand, on reciprocity, the project proposal refers to peer learning and collaboration, suggesting an orientation towards mutual exchange. However, in its operationalization, the tandems were designed in such a way that knowledge transfer and learning seem structurally unidirectional, from EU mentors to UA mentees. Although the process involved elements of joint course design and iterative feedback, the course development and implementation were explicitly for the UA context and UA students, and were primarily the responsibility of the UA academics. Moreover, no formal mechanisms required EU participants to systematically incorporate knowledge from their UA counterparts into their own institutional contexts.

This seeming disparity might be intentional and more a consequence of the specific context and needs at the time that the ServU was conceived. Given the disruption faced by UA institutions during the war, the partnership was necessarily oriented towards immediate capacity needs, supporting both community engagement and institutional resilience. Reciprocity therefore appears to have been operationalized in a more pragmatic and relational form, where EU participants gained contextual insight and established professional relationships, rather than engaging in fully symmetrical knowledge exchange.

This design choice might also explain why capacity building emerged as a dominant feature of the partnership. Various

mechanisms such as the MOOCs, the guidelines, the short UA to EU mobility, the online supervision, external review, etc., provided a combination of theoretical and practice-oriented learning aimed at substantially enhancing the knowledge and capability of UA partners to develop SL courses.

Reflections related to mobility in particular as essential, with participants emphasizing the importance of hands-on course development, methodological guidance, and exposure to established institutional practices. But such mobility in the context of an active war meant navigating travel restrictions enforced under martial law and disruptions in air travel, which substantially increased the complexity in travel planning. The short duration of these visits was also perceived as limiting the potential for deeper engagement between partners and in the time for absorbing and reflecting on the new knowledge on the part of the UA partners.

Additionally, due to the travel related constraints, the project relied considerably on online supervision, which suffered from unstable connectivity and power outages, and was experienced as less personal due to limited prior interaction among partners and communication in non-native languages. In addition, variations in understandings of SL and its quality criteria across EU partners, as well as mismatches between disciplinary expertise in some cases, posed challenges for effective collaboration.

Lastly, on sustainability, a distinction emerges between institutional and relational forms of continuity. Institutionalization of Service-learning (SL) practices was strongly embedded in the project design. This included the external review and approval of course curricula at UA institutions, the documentation and sharing of experiences through the final seminar, the continued availability of training materials and online resources, and the involvement of additional UA teaching staff beyond the core project group in course implementation. While online observation of pilot courses was also planned, this did not materialize due to contextual constraints. In contrast, relational sustainability was less clearly supported. No formal mechanisms were established to maintain or further develop the professional relationships formed within the teaching tandems, limiting opportunities for continued collaboration, co-creation, or knowledge exchange beyond the project period.

## Discussion: Designing Partnerships in Conflict-Affected Higher Education

The ServU project illustrates how international academic partnerships can be adapted to function under conditions of disruption and conflict. As Malchykova & Pylypenko (2026) show in their analysis of Kherson State University, the war has fundamentally altered institutional capacities, infrastructure, and the conditions under which teaching and learning take place. It also necessitates a reshaping of the role of HEIs, pushing them towards crisis response, social solidarity, and institutional resilience. In this context, SL pedagogy has emerged as a particularly relevant approach, which enables HEIs to maintain meaningful student engagement while responding to urgent community needs (Kenworthy & Opatska, 2023). The ServU project responds to this unique circumstance, leveraging international partnerships through the teaching tandems to develop SL expertise and design courses aligned with locally identified needs. Additionally, as the project was initiated by the UA partners, it demonstrates strong local ownership and a clear orientation towards supporting recovery and strengthening institutional resilience.

A key strength of the teaching tandem model was the recognition of UA academics as contextual experts, while EU partners contributed methodological expertise in SL. Mobility and in-person interaction played an important role in building relationships based on mutual respect, supporting collaboration throughout the course development process. Yet, constraints related to travel, infrastructure disruptions, and the evolving needs of communities required continuous adaptation in both collaboration and course development processes. This reflects that university partnership models in conflict settings must prioritize adaptability and sustained communication, rather than rely solely on predefined structures within the project.

During the closing seminar, UA participants, looking to the future, also reflected on the potential value of fully co-created SL courses jointly implemented across EU and UA institutions, enabling interaction and learning between students of both institutions. While the ongoing conflict makes such levels of collaboration highly challenging, it could be a potential direction for strengthening reciprocity and mutual learning in a post-conflict setting.

The project also shows that pedagogical capacity building can be effectively supported through the combination of structured training and practice-based learning through collaborative learning. Workshops, guidelines, and online resources facilitated the transfer of general pedagogical knowledge, while mobility and tandem collaboration enabled more applied learning through co-development and exchange. That said, our analysis also notes the importance of careful partner matching and the need for a shared understanding of pedagogical nuances. Variation in interpretations of SL and differences in disciplinary expertise affected the consistency of the mentoring and review processes. Future initiatives may thus benefit from establishing clearer quality standards and provisioning training sessions for mentors and reviewers to improve alignment among all tandems. Developing these standards collaboratively would additionally provide opportunities for more reciprocal forms of knowledge sharing and learning between partner institutions.

At the level of course development, the project demonstrates that institutionalization can be achieved through curriculum integration, formal approval processes, and the creation of shared resources. However, in a conflict-affected environment, sustainability cannot be understood as the stabilization of course content. Community needs within a conflict and post-conflict setting will likely remain dynamic, as observed during the course of the project, and hence potentially necessitating periodic adaptation and renewed engagement. Institutional sustainability therefore depends not only on embedding practices within university structures, but also on maintaining the capacity for continuous responsiveness.

At the level of partnerships, sustainability was less clearly embedded in the project design. While the tandems facilitated the development of professional relationships and enabled meaningful collaboration during the project period, no formal mechanisms were in place to sustain or further develop these connections. In contrast to more stable contexts, where relationships may continue more organically, the constraints associated with conflict settings, such as restricted mobility, limited opportunities for in-person interaction, and disruptions to communication infrastructure, make organic development of relationships challenging. Given the project's emphasis on long-term partnership, this points to the

importance of embedding structures for continued interaction, exchange, and collaboration beyond the lifecycle of individual projects. Sustainability must therefore be considered not only in institutional but also in relational terms.

Taken together, these insights point at how, in the uniquely challenging context of an ongoing war, partnership models for pedagogical exchange benefit significantly from prioritizing alignment to local needs and on strengthening capacity development. Future initiatives should also consider how opportunities for reciprocal exchange and sustained collaboration throughout and beyond the project lifecycle can be more deliberately built into the structure of the engagement, to support more balanced knowledge exchange and foster longer-term collaborations.

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