Chapter 9
The Role of Higher Education Institutions in Academic Leadership and Cultural Resilience for Preserving Cultural Heritage in Post-Conflict Societies

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ABSTRACT

In post-conflict societies, cultural heritage is both vulnerable and vital. This study examines how higher education institutions (HEIs) serve as agents of cultural resilience, focusing on Georgia and drawing comparative insights from Rwanda, Iraq, Palestine, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Through qualitative analysis, it highlights how HEIs preserve heritage, rebuild memory, and support social healing via education, community engagement, and interdisciplinary initiatives. Universities emerge not just as academic centers, but as civic actors shaping inclusive narratives, addressing past injustices, and promoting intergenerational dialogue. By institutionalizing participatory and ethical heritage practices, HEIs foster identity, continuity, and agency in fragmented societies, positioning cultural heritage as a foundation for peace and recovery.

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INTRODUCTION

In the aftermath of violent conflict, the preservation of cultural heritage has emerged as a vital component of societal recovery. It is now widely recognized that rebuilding physical infrastructure alone is not sufficient for sustainable peace; the restoration of collective identity, memory, and cultural continuity is equally essential. Cultural heritage, encompassing not only monuments and artifacts but also languages, traditions, and shared narratives, serves as a foundation for belonging, resilience, and intergenerational connection. In post-conflict contexts, where trauma, displacement, and fragmentation have disrupted the social fabric, heritage preservation becomes both a symbolic and practical means of healing and rebuilding.

Within this complex landscape, higher education institutions (HEIs) hold a unique and often underutilized potential. Traditionally viewed as centers of knowledge production and elite education, universities are increasingly being recognized for their capacity to act as catalysts for cultural resilience. Positioned at the intersection of academic research, youth engagement, and public service, HEIs are capable of initiating and sustaining heritage-based strategies that extend beyond preservation alone. They can offer platforms for critical reflection, foster inclusive narratives, and create opportunities for dialogue in societies that are often polarized by past violence. In doing so, universities can transform from passive repositories of knowledge into active agents of meaning-making and reconciliation.

This shift is particularly relevant in countries where conflict has directly impacted cultural heritage and disrupted systems of education, memory transmission, and social trust. In such settings, universities can take on leadership roles in reconnecting communities with their histories, restoring damaged cultural assets, and reimagining national identity through inclusive and participatory frameworks. Whether through curriculum design, public engagement, or collaborative research with affected communities, HEIs can facilitate processes of recognition, reflection, and regeneration.

The case of Georgia offers a powerful illustration of this potential. The country continues to face the consequences of territorial disputes and occupation, with significant portions of its historical and cultural landscape inaccessible or at risk. In this context, Georgian universities have initiated efforts to document endangered traditions, revitalize local languages, and protect sacred sites not as isolated academic exercises, but as part of a broader strategy of cultural resilience. These initiatives raise important questions about the broader role of HEIs in post-conflict societies: How can universities contribute to preserving cultural identity amid geopolitical instability? What forms of academic leadership are most effective in contexts of trauma and fragmentation? And what institutional models enable long-term, community-rooted heritage work?