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DEVELOPMENT OF STUDENTS' IDENTITY IN THE
FRAMEWORK OF INTERNATIONAL EDUCATIONAL
PROGRAMS

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Abstract

Most universities today are open intercultural organizations that provide not only knowledge, but also instill national values. This article discusses the question whether it is possible to form European identity among Russian students who have spent at least two semesters at a European university as participants of a joint educational program. Yaroslav-the-Wise Novgorod State University and University of Hildesheim have implemented three international joint educational programs according to the type of integrated international programs "double degree" diploma: on pedagogy, on intercultural communication and on technology. In this paper this wide scope of the students participated in the double degree mentioned below are analysed with regard to their own view on national and European identities. By reflecting their experiences students showed that at certain stages of being in a foreign university, it is the national / cultural / ethnic identity that is actualized. The authors argue that an important aspect of academic mobility is the expansion of Russian students' perceptions of belonging to a single European space. Furthermore, the article supports the case that this European space can be considered not only educational, but also general cultural. This European cultural diversity allows the students share common values and formulate joint goals for the future.

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Keywords: Academic mobility, cultural diversity, European identity, international educational programs, national identity.



1. Introduction

Modern universities position themselves as open intercultural organizations that broadcast not only knowledge, but also values and attitudes. The role of international academic mobility and the internationalization of education is spelled out in the main European documents of recent years. Participation in the programs of international academic mobility is conducive to the acquisition and development of professional competencies, allows students during the study abroad to acquire valuable innovative, technological, scientific and educational experience that can be further transferred to the regional community. The process initiated by the Bologna agreement and continuing in the framework of EU programs, contributes to the construction and development of a single European educational space. International academic mobility, which involves training in foreign universities, contributes to the formation of Russian students a sense of belonging to the European and world educational space.

2. Problem Statement

In European universities as well as in Russian ones, the number of international students is steadily increasing. Currently, the quality of university teaching on Erasmus projects participating universities is being strengthened comparatively, such as, for example, with the project ENTEP, one its goals is transnational: “design and deliver modern, module-based curriculum for higher education teacher training” (see ENTEP). A feature of modern academic culture in recent years has become cultural and linguistic diversity, the heterogeneity of student and teaching staff. In such a multicultural environment, the national or cultural identity of a foreign student is experiencing both positive and negative effects. On the basis of sociocultural differences, conflicts of identity are possible, the transfer of negative attitudes that have arisen from individual cultural representatives to an entire cultural community, and disappointment in themselves and those around them. As noted in work by Pluzhnik, Oskolova, & Herrington (2017), before entering the university, students already have ethnic and national identity of varying degrees of maturity, but the need for its further formation remains relevant, since these people are intellectual potential of the nation: they will implement the priorities of society development of in their future civil and professional activities.

International educational programs, which are becoming increasingly popular with Russian students, suggest long-term stay of students in European universities. Thus, the dual strategy of the European Community after Da Silva (2016) succeeds in pursuing economic and social goals through the exchange programs, consolidating Europe. In this regard, there is another factor influencing the identity of foreign students, namely the European identity. The sociologist Hall (2008), exploring the effects of globalization on the formation of cultural identity, has convincingly shown that contemporary cultural identities are becoming increasingly decentralized, dispersed and fragmented. He quite accurately formulates the three main vectors of identity development in the modern world. First, the development of cultural homogenization and the “global postmodern” leads to the erosion of national identities. Second, national and other “local” or particularist identities are strengthened as resistance to globalization. Third, national identities are in decline, while their place is taken by new hybrid identities. In this regard, the

European identity, about which European scholars and politicians so often debate, can perhaps become the logical outcome of the development of national identities.

3. Research Questions

Assumptions that academic mobility within the framework of Erasmus program influences the emergence of a sense of common European identity and the formation of European identity have been repeatedly tested in numerous European empirical studies. As part of this study, the following questions were raised:

- Is it possible to form a European identity among Russian students who have spent at least two semesters in a European university within the framework of an international educational program?
- What influence does a long stay in the European multicultural academic environment have on the students' national or cultural identity?
- Which organizational or financial / political minimum standards are crucial for a sustainable European identity development?
- Which methodical-didactic rules are of particular relevance in educational group constellations?

4. Purpose of the Study

In the context of the everyday self-representation of students at the exchange university, they simultaneously act as representatives of their own university as well as their own country. This role sets in motion a processual examination of one's own identity, which, in a framework that is based on the needs of the students, can develop and strengthen the personal students' development potential. As part of this intercultural encounter, the connecting aspects of the cultures of the exchange student and the host student can be strengthened, as well as the distinctive social values of the cultures can be contrasted and tactfully worked out.

5. Research Methods

The methodology is the cultural-anthropological approach, which is characterized by attention not only to the direct process of communication, but also to the conditions of this process based on socio-cultural experience, knowledge, ideas, opinions, values and norms that are historically evolved in each culture and assimilated by its bearers in the process of inculturality. The main aspects of this approach are:

- historical, considering any phenomenon of culture as a result of the dynamics of human culture;
- morphological, revealing the components of a cultural phenomenon;

- personal (anthropological), according to which culture consists of knowledge, beliefs, customs, abilities, habits and behavior stereotypes assimilated by a human being as a social being;
- value-oriented, in which culture is a system of values, and each of its manifestations has its value for the bearers of this culture;
- active, in accordance with which culture is defined as the process of the individual's implementation of any purposeful actions to achieve certain goals and necessary results.

Each of these aspects reveals the corresponding facet of culture and manifests itself in close interaction with all the others. Also, the anthropocentric principle is taken into account, according to this principle discursive strategies are considered in close relationship with man as a psycho-physical substance, as a self-valuable linguistic personality and as a member of a society placed in subject-practical social activity, influencing his consciousness and causing his discursive thinking and discursive behavior. As an empirical method, the authors used the method of interviews and discursive analysis of the received texts.

6. Findings

An analysis of research papers on this topic and European documents showed that the concept of “European identity” has been operationalized for quite some time in a number of official documents, declarations, communique, etc. As early as December 1973, the European Communities at a meeting in Copenhagen adopted the “Declaration of European Identity”, where global objectives and areas of responsibility were formulated, as well as European values that were actualized, for example, when discussing potential EU members. In 1995, the Charter of European Identity was adopted in Lübeck at the 41st Congress of the European Union, which defines Europe as a community with a common historical fate, based on common values. The Charter emphasizes that the formation of European identity, among other things, requires “cultural and educational policies that stimulate the development of European identity”, both at the EU level (Brussels) and in each individual EU member state (Charta der europäischen Identität, 2015). It is through such politics common roots and values of Europe, its “unity in diversity” will be aware realized. The goal is to form tolerance towards representatives of other cultures, to unite citizens around the European idea, etc. For a better understanding, it is necessary to promote the early teaching of children foreign languages. An important thought is emphasized – Europeans are becoming not by birth, but thanks to education, as well as personal contact with Europeans.

Statements about the interconnection of education and the formation of European identity can be found in the main European documents of recent years: Bologna Declarations and Communiqué (1998–2015): Sorbonne Declaration (1998), Bologna Declaration (1999), Prague Communiqué (2001), Berlin Communiqué (2003), Bergen Communiqué (2005), London Communiqué (2007), Leuven Communiqué (2009), Budapest-Vienna Declaration on the European Higher Education Area (2010), Bucharest Communiqué (2012), Yerevan Communiqué (2015). The same documents separately emphasize the role of international academic mobility in the process of the formation of European identity. In the 2015 Yerevan Communiqué, the mobility of future teachers which plays an important role in educating the future generation of Europeans is emphasized: “We will enhance the social dimension of higher

education, improve gender balance and widen opportunities for access and completion, including international mobility, for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. We will provide mobility opportunities for students and staff from conflict areas, while working to make it possible for them to return home once conditions allow. We also wish to promote the mobility of teacher education students in view of the important role they will play in educating future generations of Europeans” (Yerevan Communique, 2015).

Nevertheless, in scientific discussions for many years a critical attitude to this issue remained. The German researcher Haratsch (2008), reflecting on the interaction of German and European identities, still argued that national one was opposed to European identity. But, in his opinion, the latter is unlikely to exist, as the common European consciousness, common European language, common European social (public) structures such as common media activity and European public opinion are not developed yet.

In 2017 the German historian Michael Geler in his interview underlines the need to separate European and EU identities. Some elements are relevant to both identities. However, European identity began its development long before the formation of the EU, EEC, and others (Lienemann, 2017). As Geler observes, European identity is in last place in a number of multi-step and mixed identities for many (Lienemann, 2017, p. 10). But at the same time, it is important that the generation of the Erasmus Program is part of the formation of European identity.

The results of many empirical studies on the interconnection of academic mobility and the strengthening of European identity are not straightforward (Van Mol, 2010; Mitchell, 2012).

Muno and Rünz highlight the findings of the EU simulations in the anthology “Learning Europe through play” that the intensive interaction in peer groups can change the formation of identity (Muno, Niemann, & Guasti, 2018; Rünz, 2018) By encountering different values and identities, the students experience the interaction of different identities and positions. Nothnagel (2018) examines the students' difference experience with the following result: As part of Erasmus stays, identity constructions take place on the basis of difference experiences. Nothnagel names these beneficial phenomena in his data, such as, the topics covered, the introduction of cultural concepts, for example, by means of code switching, the (further) development of everyday theories and the associated (pre)knowledge, etc.

It is generally emphasized that the sense of belonging to Europe for non-mobile students is less than for Erasmus students. In 2013, by the request of DAAD, a survey of former and future German students of the Erasmus program was conducted. The purpose of the survey is to find out whether, and to what extent, through the Erasmus programs, the European identity of students participating in mobility programs develops. The theoretical rationale emphasizes the high importance of communication between people of different cultures, i.e. the value of the communicative space in which an additional or new identity can be formed. The results of this study showed, among other things, that European identity is most clearly manifested in Erasmus students when they interact with non-European students: “It becomes clear, especially through contact with non-Europeans, how much Europeans actually have in common” (Maiworm & Over, 2013, p. 36).

The results of the study showed that the participants with Erasmus programs are quite high in identification with Europe. But at the same time there was a clear distinction between Europe as a geographical and cultural space and the EU as a political and economic unit. While three out of four

respondents indicated that they perceive themselves as Europeans, only half of those surveyed identified themselves as “EU citizens”. The common economic space and currency have become the main identifying marker of the EU (Ibid). The fact that participation in Erasmus programs leads to a change in attitudes towards Europe was confirmed by only 41%. However, changes in attitudes were noted as positive by 80% of respondents.

The political and social events of the last five years have changed the perception of European identity. So, in 2013, the results of the annual Eurobarometer survey showed that the Europeans responded to the question “how do you see the near future”:

- national and European 49% (+6),
- exclusively national 38% (-6).

That is, “national and European” were in the lead, and the popularity of this answer is obvious compared to previous years (Eurobarometer des Europäischen Parlaments 79.5., 2013). And according to a poll of 2017, Eurobarometer 87, already more than two thirds of Europeans (68%) feel themselves to be EU citizens, in particular, 82% of Germans. To date, this is the highest figure in the entire survey history. Among the most positive achievements of the EU in 2017, in third place with 25% are “student exchange programs, such as Erasmus” (Standard Eurobarometer 87, 2017).

So, we can talk about the special role of education and educational institutions in the formation of both national and European identity. However, the formation of European identity is usually not an open task in the strategic plans of universities. Today, European universities, above all, seek to emphasize their intercultural openness, support for diversity and readiness for internationalization. As noted by Fadeeva (2014), “universities as subjects of construction of European identity appear rather not in the form of institutions aimed at the formation and development of European identity, but as a community of intellectuals and experts, in whose identity matrix the European component plays a significant role” (p. 28) However, studying in European universities contributes to the formation of a sense of belonging to the European educational space among Russian students.

The formation of their European identity occurs as a process of successful reflection and development of the cultural knowledge as well as the comparison of the outer and inner side of their biography. The influence of the so-called context of origin should be taken into account and reconstructed in the narrative experience, since students' affiliation every day exceeds these limits of recognition or non-recognition of the country of origin in the tertiary sector of European education. Next, we present the results of empirical research.

At present, three international joint educational programs are being implemented at the Yaroslavl-the-Wise Novgorod State University: on pedagogy (since 2004), on intercultural communication (from 2014) and on technology (from 2016). The partner in these programs is the University of Hildesheim (Germany). All three programs are organized according to the type of integrated international programs “double degree” diploma. Their goal is the further internationalization of universities and the strengthening of the academic mobility of students and teachers. Analysis of the problems and difficulties arising from the implementation of “double degree” diploma programs in partnership of Russian and

foreign universities is presented in a number of publications (Aleksandrova, Moskvicheva, & Bubnova, 2018; Nedopekina, Evsikova, & Mikheeva, 2018). Novgorod students studying for two semesters at the partner university have the opportunity to participate in international events organized by the University of Hildesheim for foreign students, primarily for Erasmus students. Today, the University of Hildesheim offers a number of training modules and additional seminars aimed at building intercultural competence and rapid entry into the new academic culture: training on intercultural (academic) communication "Campus International" and a seminar on the development of written communication "Internationale Schreibpartnerschaften", and extra-curricular activities from the Erasmus Studenten Network.

In addition, we should also mention two proposals from the field of additional education – Zertifikat für Interkulturelle Kommunikation und Kompetenz and Portfolio für interkulturelle Kommunikation und Kompetenz. This certificate is available to all university students and is aimed at the reflection of experience in intercultural communication. Thus, from the Novgorod students, who actively participate in all the above-mentioned events, one would expect the expansion of their identity at the expense of the European component.

In the course of the study, participants of all three "double degree" programs implemented at Novgorod University were surveyed. Participants responded to open questions in writing, which allowed them to show greater self-reflection in relation to their experiences, their self-presentation and acquired experience. A discourse analysis of the students' answers showed that at certain stages of being in a foreign university, it is the national / cultural / ethnic identity that is actualized (examples 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6).

(1) In Germany, I felt more like a foreigner, of course, but not a very different mentality. Rather, it is simply because of belonging to a different nationality and the current political situation between Russia and Europe. Still, facial expression changes when people find out which country you are from. Though trying to hide it for a sweet smile. But not with all, of course, these prejudices were felt. For example, in the hostel I have developed good and friendly relations with foreign students and some Germans who studied with me. We spent our free time together, arranging evenings of national cuisine, celebrated each other's birthdays, and helped us to study in language courses. Intimacy was felt more with the same "visitors" like us.

Student, Pedagogy

Example 1 – the thoughts of a student whose internship took place in 2014-2015 at the peak of the political tension between Russia and Germany, which influenced a certain alienation of the student in communication with the host students.

In the texts of students of "Intercultural Communication" (2, 3, 4) a deeper reflection with attempts to explain certain problems and their own behavior is presented, that is primarily due to their professional interest and learning objectives. During the first two courses in their native university, students prepared for studies in Germany, studied the history and culture of the country, and especially the intercultural communication.

(2) ...There were a German course and an English course with international students; it was on such courses that I was comfortable, because there was no separation into ours and others, all were the visitors. On the other courses I still felt that we were treated differently but not by the teachers. There were several people who were concerned, for example, during group assignments, to be monitored so that we all understood. But anyway, personally, I felt Russian, I even tried to parody the behavior of other students, smile to everyone I met, tried to parody even the intonation of speech, but all this was a parody. I think we tried very hard to merge with the Germans.

Student, Intercultural Communication

In Example 2, the student focused on an assimilative strategy, while Example 3 demonstrates the classic picture of cultural shock and reverse cultural shock. And the decisive factor in overcoming these negative phenomena was the increase in language competence.

(3) There was some discomfort, especially in the first semester, that is, in the first six months of stay in a foreign country. The feeling of loneliness, because I was there alone and did not know anyone, the constant fear of breaking some rules, go somewhere where they don't walk, put on something inappropriate (such as heels for example or make up much for the Germans). I have always said that I feel stupid there, since one of my most basic skills (ability to speak) is lower than that of the main mass. In the beginning I felt only Russian, and already later, after half a year, everything changed, I felt comfortable there, I understood the principles of life there, studying at the university, how everything happens there and it became easier. There were friends, knowledge of the spoken language increased, which made it easier to understand my friends and already upon arrival in Russia, I felt superfluous here.

Student, Intercultural Communication

The main marker of European identity in most students is a sense of belonging to the European community in the presence of representatives from Asian and Arab countries (examples 3, 4).

(4) When I was surrounded by Hindus or Chinese, I did not separate myself strongly from the Germans, i.e. closer to Europeans. And when I was only with the Germans at first, yes, the realization was strong enough that I was Russian, but they were not, they were different. But it passed, when I started to talk more with the guys, I got to know them closer, and now for me they don't really differ from us.

Student, Intercultural Communication

(5) At first I went to German courses and was the only Russian, and all the other were Spaniards and Chinese, I considered myself more European. But in the dormitory from the very beginning we can classify ourselves as Europeans, and in the class too, too. But since we were the only Russians in class, and all the rest were Germans, the feeling at first was that we were Russians, but then we got used to it, and we didn't do an accent on it. And so I can say that the more we were there, the more we felt like Europeans.

Student, Technology

Example 6 – the reflection of a student who spent four semesters in Germany, being an undergraduate, graduate and doctoral student. Initially, there was poor knowledge of the language, which prevented quick adaptation. In the text, we see how the attitude changed after the training internships:

(6) In Germany, I felt Russian. During the last trips, being already not a student, I felt that I belonged to Europe. The first trip was a culture shock and an understanding of another world.

Student, Pedagogy

So, all respondents noted difficulties in entering a different academic and everyday culture. 90% of respondents stressed the strengthening of cultural identity, especially in the first stage. In all the interviews there is a positive change in attitudes towards Germany and Europe, the formation of practical intercultural openness and a certain sense of belonging to the European educational space.

7. Conclusion

So, academic mobility, carried out in the framework of programs supported by the EU and individual European funds, contributes to the mastery of Russian students' competences that ensure their further successful social and professional activities. An important aspect of this mobility is the expansion of Russian students' perceptions of belonging to a single European space, not only educational, but also general cultural, sharing common values and formulating common goals for the future. Students form a complex national identity consisting of ethnic, national and global / European components that do not contradict each other under favourable conditions. Almost exactly twenty years ago, the Sorbonne Declaration was established as one of the cornerstones of the Bologna Process. Finally, the somewhat forgotten commitment to the European dimension will be recalled below: «Europe is not only that of the Euro, of the banks and the economy: it must be a Europe of knowledge as well. We must strengthen and build upon the intellectual, cultural, social and technical dimensions of our continent. These have to a large extent been shaped by its universities, which continue to play a pivotal role for their development» (Sorbonne Declaration, 1998).

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