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OPPORTUNITIES FOR INTERCULTURAL ENVIRONMENT CREATION IN UKRAINIAN AGRARIAN UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

*This study **aims** to highlight the significance of creating intercultural competence among students in Ukrainian higher education institutions (HEIs), especially in the context of European integration. The goal is to investigate the potential impact of Euro Union (EU) educational policies and the Association Agreement between Ukraine and the EU on students'*

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intercultural competence, and to offer recommendations for the effective implementation of intercultural education.

The **methodology** covers a comprehensive set of theoretical and empirical research methods, including the analysis of scientific sources, regulatory documents, an online questionnaire, pedagogical observation, and direct interviews with Humanities instructors. The research specifically focuses on 160 first and second-year master's students in the specialties of "Agroengineering" and "Electricity, electrical engineering, and electromechanics" at Sumy National Agrarian University, taking the course "Communications in the International Environment" during the academic year 2023-2024.

The **results** of the study provide a perspective on the attitudes of students toward international harmony, equality, and social values. The findings reveal that the students prioritize living without war and conflict, national security, and national greatness. However, the study also shows that there are challenges to developing intercultural skills, as students express less interest in an active social life, improving the welfare of those in need, and making decisions that affect their community. The pedagogical observation and expert evaluations underline the need for specialized training to enhance intercultural skills among engineering students.

The **conclusion** is that the study's dual focus on national specificity and international relevance offers actionable perspectives for educators, policymakers, and researchers. It promotes a deeper understanding of the constraints and opportunities in intercultural competence development to meet the demands of a globalized world. At a national level, the study highlights the specific challenges faced by master students in Ukrainian HEIs and the necessity for specialized training to enhance intercultural communication skills. Internationally, the research aligns with EU educational policies and Council of Europe initiatives, contributing to the broader discourse on intercultural competence in higher education. Recommendations include the incorporation of interactive teaching methods, fostering intercultural dialogue, and promoting a nuanced understanding of intercultural communication.

KEYWORDS: Cultural Diversity, European Integration, EU Educational Policies, Higher Education, Intercultural Communication, Intercultural Competence.

INTRODUCTION

In determining the fundamental goal of modern education as a part of the integral development of a person that combines all the components of the "cultural code" – freedom, humanity, creativity, morality, spirituality, emotional intelligence – it is necessary to note that a personality of culture in the modern world is not just a sum of virtues and standards of etiquette, but also the ability to realize one's individual abilities and intellectual and spiritual-creative potential for a high level of responsibility to nature and other people (Troitska, 2015).

The endless flow of changes in the current world requires not solely an intensification of work, competitiveness, ecological culture, tolerance, etc., but also opportunities to make some kind of breakthrough in the worldview and value system of coordinates. This process should be purposeful and organized by teaching a certain mode of behavior with the help of cultural and educational institutions such as family, educational providers, labor groups, national and religious organizations, public associations, and government institutions, etc (Muñoz, 2017). Educational activities should include cultural and social diversity among students and academics, and encourage intercultural learning and social readaptation.

At the same time, the realization of the possibilities of multicultural education depends on multiple conditions:

- The nature of the conditions in which pedagogical influence takes place.
- The potential and capabilities of all subjects of a multicultural and multilingual educational environment.
- The functioning of educational and cultural space.
- The unfolding of this space as a human dimension, in which humanity is the commensurability of each subject's being with the world, with other people, and with their own inner world (Coste & Cavalli, 2015).

This article aims to explore and disseminate the potential of the EU educational policies in light of the Association Agreement between Ukraine and the EU for the formation of Ukrainian HEIs learners' intercultural competence and experience. These are crucial for learners' active participation in a multicultural society and global labour market. These also nurture their intercultural knowledge and prevent misunderstanding or possible disruption in intercultural communication through:

- providing students with the fundamentals of culture, speech etiquette, social norms, and patterns of behavior of culturally diverse people to develop trainees' ability to hear and understand ideas of ethnic mosaic background;
- fostering learners' value-based competencies, namely respect for human dignity and human rights, encouragement of multiculturalism, and affirmation of democratic justice, impartiality, equality, and the rule of law;
- increasing inclusivity, diversification, and quality of intercultural learning opportunities that allow students to gain experience with various strategies of speech among culturally diverse people and their behavioral patterns, including openness to other cultures, beliefs, worldviews, and custom;
- encouraging public self-awareness, sense of responsibility, sense of self-importance, and resilience in the face of uncertainty;
- stimulating active citizenship through volunteering and intercultural learning, including experiences that allow students to acquire practical skills such as self-education; systematic, analytical, and critical thinking; the capacity for listening, observing, feeling, and expressing empathy; flexibility and adaptability; leading, organizational, and collaborative skills; and the ability to resolve conflicts.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A modern higher education institution, as a multicultural space, enables the mobilizing of creative self-realization of students, and encourages their self-development and ability to form peer-to-peer interactions with all participants in the cultural and educational space through the dialogic parameter of educational and cognitive activity.

The gradual integration of students, teachers, and employees of an educational institution, as well as representatives of state, political, cultural, and educational organizations and movements, influences the cultural and educational development of Homo Educandus. In the various directions of modernizing higher education, the implementation of a Europeanized intercultural approach is gaining substantial popularity in goal setting, content, organization, and management conditions of education (Bransen, 2021).

Historically, European societies are multicultural. Sometimes the movement and mobility of a population has caused certain tensions and conflicts, however, citizenry in the EU is based on such values as mutual understanding, intercultural and interreligious dialogue, solidarity, equality of genders, and harmonious relations on personal and national levels. The issues of overcoming intercultural barriers and cultural identity in education are not only the focus of scientists, but also relevant organizations such as the Council of Europe (Kuhn, 2015).

A number of declarations, projects, and programs were adopted and approved, namely:

- “Intercultural Problem in the Education System: Religious Diversity, Dialogue in Europe (2002)”;
- “Intercultural Education: Managing Diversity, Strengthening Semocracy” (Declaration of the Standing Conference of European Ministers of Education, 2003);
- “Materials of the International Seminar on the Problems of Intercultural Dialogue in the University Campus (2008)”;
- “Living together in equality and dignity” (White Paper on International Dialogue, 2008);
- “Competences for Democratic Culture: Living Together as Equals in Culturally Diverse Democratic Societies” (Council of Europe, 2016);
- “Intercultural Cities Programme” (Council of Europe, 2016);
- “Languages at the heart of learning (2016)
- European Union Youth Strategy (2019-2027
- Model Framework for an Intercultural Integration Strategy at the National Level (2021)
- The European Declaration on Global Education to 2050 (2022).

Thus, the Council of Europe has affirmed that the intercultural approach to the educational space has provoked an open and respectful exchange of views based on mutual understanding and respect between people and groups with different ethnic, cultural, religious, and linguistic backgrounds.

This approach assists in overcoming linguistic, cultural, ethnic, religious, gender, and social-economic barriers and enables constructive and democratic interactions on the basis of common universal values. This helps to achieve social harmony and prevent conflicts because it is necessary to introduce democratic management of cultural diversity in various forms. Furthermore, the intercultural scope strengthens democratic civil society and expands citizen participation, it creates and enhances spaces for intercultural dialogue, such as the European Declaration on Global Education to 2050 (2022), which has made commitments to education's contribution to international solidarity, human rights, global social justice, and sustainability and peace (<https://www.gene.eu/ge2050-congress>).

METHODOLOGY

In order to achieve the study's purpose, a combination of theoretical and empirical research methods was used. The theoretical methods involved analysis and generalization of the scientific sources and regulatory documents to determine the main issues of the research. These approaches allowed the authors to collect and summarize valuable points from scholars' contributions worldwide and enriched the authors' experience in fostering engineering students' intercultural skills.

Besides the specified theoretical methods, the empirical methods of scientific knowledge that were utilized to obtain data included gathering information from engineering students using Google Forms as an online questionnaire, pedagogical observations, and direct interviews with humanities instructors. The technology of for human values testing (Braithwaite, & Law, 1985) was modified and adapted for the needs of the study.

The pilot survey was conducted among the first and second-year master's students enrolled in agroengineering, electricity, electrical engineering, or electromechanics specialties at Sumy National Agrarian University (Sumy, Ukraine) (<https://snau.edu.ua/>) who took the course "Communications in the International Environment" during the autumn semester of the 2023-2024 academic year.

A total of 160 full-time engineering students participated. This training course and its participants were chosen because the course covers both foreign language and cultural aspects. The course included components in English and offered a module in cultural considerations for design components.

Moreover, the level of development of engineering students' intercultural competence was identified on the basis of pedagogical observation. The following intercultural skills of students were evaluated:

- the ability to distinguish general and specific in the culture of native and foreign-speaking countries;
- the ability to follow the norms and rules of behavior adopted in a multicultural society;
- the ability to establish and maintain communication with representatives of other cultures;
- the ability to navigate in situations of intercultural communication;

- the ability to overcome intercultural misunderstandings during communication in the form of “dialogue of cultures.”

During the pedagogical observation, expert evaluations were used to obtain better data results. The specified method consisted of an intuitive and logical analysis of the problem of developing students' readiness for intercultural communication. As part of the expert evaluations, a survey of lecturers of the Humanities (5 participants) was conducted. The interaction of students during practical classes and extracurricular activities was observed to determine certain changes in the level of development of students' intercultural competence.

RESULTS

In order to examine students' views on the importance of different factors in intercultural interaction, the authors implemented an opinion (n=22 options) based on the Goal Values and Social Values Inventories questionnaires (Braithwaite & Law, 1985). The students were asked to rate the importance of each option on a five-point scale: 1– Not at all important to me, 2 – Not important to me, 3 – Somewhat important to me, 4 – Important to me, and 5 – Very important to me.

Thorough analysis student responses to the questionnaire revealed that among the participants prioritized living without war and conflict (98.1%), national security (96.9%), and national greatness (91.5%). Most students valued international cooperation as well. Participants (65.7%) considered having all nations working together to help each other as important, with 15.4% saying it is “very important.” A large percentage of participants (89.6%) believed in greater economic progress and prosperity for the nation. The respondents also thought about preserving the natural environment, with 61.5% feeling it was important to prevent the destruction of nature's beauty and resources and 19.6% thinking it is “very important.”

At the same time, they were not ready for an active social life (98.8%), improving the welfare of all people in need (94.3%), or making decisions that affect their community (93.1%). Half of the students (51.9%) were unsure in evaluating their readiness to change the way of life for the better.

Furthermore, the analysis of empirical data from pedagogical observation showed that the majority of students had not developed intercultural skills, had no experience in intercultural interaction, and didn't know how to follow social norms and rules adopted in a multicultural environment. Only a small part of students had the ability to analyze and compare the cultural realities of their native and foreign-speaking countries to apply some speech etiquette formulas.

Almost unanimously, academics believe that engineering students, as part of the European integration of Ukraine, need special training for intercultural communication. The students' levels of readiness for intercultural interaction with representatives of different languages and cultures were highlighted. They assessed the level of development of intercultural competence among students as follows: average – 80% of respondents, low – 17%, and high – 3%.

Thus, the results of the conducted research revealed the problems faced by lecturers of the Humanities during the training of engineering students for intercultural interaction, as well as students' existing level of readiness for intercultural communication.

DISCUSSION

The results of the analysis of the pilot survey, which was conducted among students and academics of Sumy National Agrarian University (SNAU), indicated signs of value ambiguity – an uncertainty in orientations similar to “viewpoint vacuum” – in the answers. However, there was data indicating that students with an active life position, who participate in dialogue with representatives of diverse cultures, profoundly study foreign languages.

The outcomes of the pilot survey revealed the necessity of developing students' awareness of the benefit of including various cultures in the formation of their own value orientations, creating a balanced determination of personal development, realizing an individual's own initiatives when choosing and making fateful decisions, and “gravitating” to the conceptual understanding of life's problems and contradictions in contrast to the consumerist approach.

Currently, the students and educators of Sumy National Agrarian University (SNAU) are oriented towards academic mobility programs and projects. Cooperation with international partners is implemented in different meaningful directions using various organizational forms, including academic mobility, participation in international conferences, seminars, “round tables,” implementation of joint educational programs, and partnership in various international scientific and educational organization projects.

Academics and students of the university are actively taking part in the implementation of the European Union ERASMUS+ program and the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD). In the framework of the DAAD project “Support of German-language Educational Courses,” students and faculty interned and studied at the University of Applied Sciences Weinsten-Triesdorf, Germany.

International projects INTERADIS (International Students Adaptation and Integration) and UNICOM (Universities-Communities: Strengthening Cooperation) have provided academic internships with foreign partner universities in Lithuania, Italy, etc. These internships promote familiarization with the new tools from the best European practices in the field of cultural studies and intercultural communication. The mediating languages are modern European languages such as English, German, Polish, French, etc.

Intercultural communication affects the participants' communicative culture in the educational process. For its development, it is necessary to have appropriate conditions, such as: awareness of the need for the formation of a communicative culture, motivation of the actions of participants in the educational process, availability of basic communication culture skills among student, use of effective innovative teaching methods, in particular interactive business games, and control over the dynamics of the formation of elements of communicative culture (Byram & Wagner, 2018).

As the main pedagogical technologies that determine the effectiveness of the developed course, we single out the following: the use of forms, methods, and means of education oriented to the activation of educational and cognitive actions: a) seminars-

disputes; b) role-playing games; c) interactive technologies. We consider it necessary to use effective organizational forms of training that promote interpersonal interaction, such as: collective (interactive lectures, “round tables” and group (discussions and debates, case study, project method, intercultural trainings).

When studying the proposed course, special attention should be paid to the formation of intercultural strategies used by communication partners to establish and maintain intercultural contact. The aim is to overcome cultural differences and improve the quality of intercultural interaction. The following strategies should be used: making analogies, contrasts, generalizations, and comparisons of native and target cultures; interpreting of new aspects of the target cultures; observing culture when communicating with representatives of the target cultures (Holubnychy et al., 2021).

In this context, there is a crucial necessity to studying the process of students' intercultural adaptation and the European approaches that can be implemented by Ukrainian universities. This process can facilitate and support the formation of the physical and virtual intercultural educational environment (Bilotserkovets et al., 2020; Nagachevska & Kushka, 2023; Lushchuk, 2020).

It is essential to take into account peoples' overall capacity to encode and decode information appropriately in order to adjust to the host environment, as well as their capability to overcome culture shock in the process of intercultural adaptation (Byram & Wagner, 2018; Fomenko et al., 2019).

Some scholars (Lushchuk et al., 2020; Bilotserkovets et al., 2023) note that an individual needs to adapt to certain aspects of the foreign culture with temporary cultural contacts such as training, internships, participation in different international programs etc., to acquire certain practical skills that underlie cultural and deterministic behavior of people of distinctive culture and to understand the rules for social relations in that culture.

As potential problems can emerge because of the mismatch of norms, values, and peculiarities in the partners' backgrounds, it is relevant to find “points of contact” that link different linguistic and cultural bases. Moreover, aside from the lack of foreign language knowledge and skills, which can complicate intercultural communication, there is the issue of recognizing diverse psycholinguistic features such as cultural and spiritual aspects, which is necessary for mutual understanding among different peoples in a particular social or professional field (Fomenko et al., 2020).

Additionally, personal identity acquires signs of mature positivity when people integrate in the foreign cultural space. They are inclined to show empathy to culturally diverse people and are able to transform their own stereotypes. As “foreigners” perceive the elements of another culture, their self-esteem shifts from an exclusively cultural state to an intercultural state. This intercultural identity is flexible and quite mobile because it is no longer based on belonging to the original or foreign culture (Benet-Martinez & Ying-Yi, 2015; Lushchuk et al., 2021; Bilotserkovets et al., 2023).

Although international students' decisions about higher education institutions are influenced by numerous criteria, the most important one is the quality of education. This, in many respects, depends on learners' effective adaptation to the new academic environment.

This process, in our opinion, should involve all agents of socialization (family, educational establishments, national and religious organizations, socio-political institutions). For young people, the conviction that the uniqueness of their native culture, in comparing to social values, can be known and felt through the dialogue of cultures. The ability to equate and contrast the cultures of different nations and identify their peculiarities and common features fosters emotional intelligence, systematic and creative thinking, orientation to ethical values, and encourages students to take into account the ethno-cultural and religious characteristics of the individual as a carrier of culture.

Therefore, the promotion of Ukrainian educational services to the international market requires organization of international students' adaptation to the academic and cultural environment of higher education institutions as well as the preparation of Ukrainian students for participation in the academic mobility programs abroad (Banks, 2015; Kobzhev et al., 2020).

CONCLUSIONS

This study makes a significant contribution at the national and international level, as it addresses the crucial issue of nurturing intercultural competence among students in Ukrainian higher education institutions (HEIs) in the context of European integration. The novelty of this research lies in its profound exploration and dissemination of the potential impact of EU educational policies and the Association Agreement between Ukraine and the EU, as well as the presentation of recommendations for implementing intercultural education that resonates with the European discourse.

At the national level, this study sheds light on the specific challenges students face in Ukrainian agrarian settings, a domain that has received limited attention in previous research. The findings from the pilot survey conducted at Sumy National Agrarian University underscore the significance of fostering intercultural skills, including the ability to navigate diverse cultural norms, establish effective cross-cultural communication, and address potential misunderstandings.

Notably, the expert evaluations from Humanities lecturers and the survey results indicate a consensus among academics on the necessity for specialized training for Ukrainian students in the face of European integration. The training will enhance students' preparedness for effective participation in a multicultural community and ensure the success and adaptability of Ukrainian agrarian graduates in diverse and dynamic professional environments.

Internationally, the study provides insights into the broader discussion of the role of intercultural competence in higher education. By aligning the study with EU educational policies and drawing on declarations, projects, and programs initiated by the Council of Europe, the research establishes a bridge between national and international perspectives. This helps in understanding how educational policies and practices can be harmonized to promote intercultural skills among students in diverse cultural and academic contexts.

In essence, this study's findings, with a dual focus on national specificity and international relevance, offer actionable perspectives for educators, policymakers, and researchers both within and beyond Ukraine, fostering a deeper comprehension of the challenges and opportunities associated with intercultural competence development in the rapidly evolving landscape of higher education.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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АНОТАЦІЯ / ABSTRACT [in Ukrainian]:**РОЗКРИТТЯ МОЖЛИВОСТЕЙ ДЛЯ СТВОРЕННЯ МІЖКУЛЬТУРНОГО
СЕРЕДОВИЩА В УКРАЇНСЬКОМУ АГРАРНОМУ ВНЗ**

Дослідження має на **меті** висвітлити важливість формування міжкультурної компетентності серед студентів українських вищих навчальних закладів (ВНЗ), особливо в контексті європейської інтеграції, дослідити потенційний вплив освітньої політики ЄС та Угоди про асоціацію між Україною та ЄС на формування міжкультурної компетентності студентів, а також запропонувати рекомендації щодо ефективного впровадження міжкультурної освіти.

Методологія охоплює комплексний набір теоретичних та емпіричних методів дослідження, включаючи аналіз наукових джерел, нормативних документів, онлайн-анкету, педагогічне спостереження та прямі інтерв'ю з викладачами гуманітарних спеціальностей. У дослідженні

взяли участь 160 студентів першого та другого курсу магістратури спеціальностей «Агроінженерія» та «Електроенергетика, електротехніка та електромеханіка» Сумського національного аграрного університету, які протягом навчального року вивчали курс «Комунікації в міжнародному середовищі» у 2023-2024 навчальному році.

Результати дослідження дозволяють побачити ставлення студентів до міжнародної злагоди, рівності та соціальних цінностей. Результати показують, що студенти надають перевагу життю без війни та конфліктів, національній безпеці та національній величї. Проте дослідження також показує, що існують проблеми у формуванні міжкультурних навичок, оскільки студенти виявляють менший інтерес до активного соціального життя, покращення добробуту тих, хто його потребує, і прийняття рішень, які впливають на їхню громаду. Педагогічне спостереження та експертні оцінки підкреслюють необхідність спеціалізованого навчання для формування міжкультурних навичок серед студентів інженерних спеціальностей.

Висновки полягають в тому, що подвійна спрямованість дослідження на національну специфіку та міжнародне значення пропонує практичні перспективи для освітян, політиків і дослідників. Це сприяє глибшому розумінню обмежень і можливостей розвитку міжкультурної компетентності для задоволення потреб глобалізованого світу. На національному рівні дослідження підкреслює специфічні виклики, з якими стикаються студенти-магістри в українських вищих навчальних закладах, і необхідність спеціалізованої підготовки для вдосконалення навичок міжкультурної комунікації. На міжнародному рівні дослідження узгоджується з освітньою політикою ЄС та ініціативами Ради Європи, сприяючи ширшому дискурсу міжкультурної компетентності у вищій освіті. Рекомендації пропонують включення інтерактивних методів навчання, сприяння міжкультурному діалогу та просування тонкого розуміння міжкультурної комунікації.

КЛЮЧОВІ СЛОВА: вища освіта, європейська інтеграція, культурне розмаїття, міжкультурна комунікація, міжкультурна компетентність, освітня політика ЄС.

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