Pursuing goals of sustainable development and internationalization in higher education context

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Abstract. The article concerns internationalization of higher education as a factor for pursuing sustainable development goals by developing university students' global competences. A review of modern research on internationalization processes in different national contexts allowed to highlight the main challenges of interaction between domestic and international students as well as discuss possible solutions. Analyses of survey results, aimed at identifying the factors preventing effective cross-cultural communication in a non-linguistic Russian university, confirm the demand for students' development of intercultural competence, which is considered to be most effective through the study of a foreign language. The paper shows significance of involvement of Russian and international students in joint classroom and extracurricular activities, which can become the basis for their future international cooperation in the field of implementation of innovative technologies and foster sustainable development goals. The leading role of university foreign languages departments in tackling issues of university internationalization is emphasized.

1 Introduction

Principles of sustainability imply solving global issues on the basis of joint efforts and international collaboration, participation in global initiatives and establishing unity in diverse societies. Universities play a leading role in preparing young people for living in sustainable world. Developing global competences of students, necessary for living in interconnected world, has been declared as an education imperative [1].

Promoting principles for sustainable development in education suggests integration of higher educational institutions into global educational environment, which can be achieved in different ways. Trends and forms of international cooperation on the level of establishments of higher educational can vary, but all the actions are aimed at providing students with professional and interpersonal skills necessary for their integration in the international working settings [2, 3].

Transformations required for promoting sustainable development principles in higher education include their introduction into the curriculum [4], students' engagement in organizations, youth movements and forums, participation in international projects and events which can allow students to develop global skills and competencies.

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Introduction of new educational strategies and students' involvement into extracurricular activities foster intercultural interaction and develop their cultural sensitiveness. Therefore, being in university multinational environment contributes to university graduates' international employment as many of them are willing to be in demand not only by the Russian, but also by international labor market.

At present, one of the trends in development of higher education is internationalization, which "becomes the basis for modernization and has a great influence on the paradigm of training specialists" [5].

Higher educational establishments have always been centers of international activities. Anyway, at present increasing globalization demands expanding universities' actions necessary for successful implementation of internationalization. New approaches and strategies to solve the problems arising during this process in different national contexts are discussed by educators and scientists [6, 7]. Risks and concerns connected with implementation of internationalization in higher educational establishments are also widely debated [8].

The term "internationalization of education" refers to various processes and activities, including mobility of students and professors, teaching and research collaboration, involvement in international and cultural projects, promoting cultural understanding, and others. The COVID-19 pandemic posed new challenges to the educational community. For example, restrictions on movement require universities to focus on developing internal internationalization [9]. Internal internationalization implies teaching the knowledge and skills that are currently in demand in the world, within universities, using internal resources. The solution to this problem is possible only through the joint efforts of the leadership of universities and teachers [10].

Any activities aimed at development of university internationalization cannot be carried out effectively without students' acquiring a foreign language communicative competence. Working in multinational environment definitely requires from university graduates proficiency in a foreign language, which will allow them to conduct negotiations with international customers and suppliers, navigate in sources of international information, manage business correspondence processes. The process of internationalization is hardly possible without adopting English as a medium of instruction. The increasing number of foreign students in the universities of the Russian Federation, raises the question about improving the methods of teaching not only English, but also Russian as a foreign language.

Moreover, to comply with the trends of professional development in the 21st century and cooperate with foreign partners in the implementation of innovative technologies, a young specialist must be interculturally competent. There is a growing need for cross-cultural communication skills which also can help students be career-ready and achieve success in the future. The search for mechanisms contributing to the creation of an educational environment that provides for the use of techniques of intercultural interaction is discussed by modern authors and recognized as essential [11].

In the context of internationalization, the role of foreign languages departments in non-linguistic universities can hardly be overestimated. Teachers of foreign languages train competitive specialists who can effectively carry out professional duties, possess proficiency in foreign languages and know the basics of cross-cultural interaction. Today, the role of a foreign language teacher has changed as it is essential not only to provide a student with a foreign language knowledge but to form tolerant attitude to values of different cultures.

The process of internationalization demands foreign language proficiency from all the participants of the educational process, including teaching staff. To fulfil the task of providing university graduates with proper knowledge and skills to meet the requirements

of the global market, university teachers have to adjust to constantly changing academic environment with new challengers.

The aim of the study is to analyze the perception of academic settings as a multinational environment by second year Russian students of non-linguistic Russian university. In spite of having been in the focus of interest for the last decade, internationalization of higher education remains the challenging field for discussion due to its complexity [12]. Besides, most of the research in this field is aimed at considering the issue of improving foreign language and cross-cultural competences of the students who are trained to become foreign language teachers [11]. The paper is relevant to university staff of a non-linguistic university who are involved in training students in multinational environment and face numerous challenges in changing university settings.

To achieve this aim frequency of contacts between Russian students and international students is considered; factors preventing students' communication are analyzed.

2 Materials and methods

The methods used in the study include analyses of relevant Russian and foreign literature. Quantitative and qualitative methods were used to analyse students' responses to the survey questions. The survey contained 15 questions of different types (open-ended and closed questions). The respondents participating in the study were 50 Russian second-year students of non-linguistic university. The survey questions concerned their perception of multinational university environment and intensity of interaction between Russian and foreign students.

3 Results and discussion

The survey respondents were Russian students of Ural State University of Economics (USUE), which is known to be one of the leading higher educational institutions in Ural region in terms of international cooperation and internationalization. The university has numerous foreign university-partners, the teachers and students are engaged in various international activities, including academic mobility programs, joint project Capacity Building in higher education action: Joint Project "Enhancing Teaching Practice in Higher Education in Russia and China" (ENTEP) and many others. USUE academic environment is proved to be international: there are foreign students from nearly 60 countries who major in economics, management, finance, information technologies, commerce, food engineering and other fields. Anyway, there are no international students in each academic student group, including the respondents' groups. This does not exclude communication between Russian and foreign students during numerous extra-curriculum activities, in real-life situations and in student hostel.

The survey results prove that absolute majority of the students (92%) perceive academic environment of USUE as multinational. Not having foreign fellow-students in their academic groups, the respondents still recognize and realize the presence of features which enables university settings to be called international.

As for socialization between domestic and international students, data analysis presented in Fig. 1 indicates that 58% of the Russian second-year students do not socialize with international students on a regular basis, it happens quite rarely. 14% of the respondents never do it, in contrast to 28% (8% (constantly) and 20% (often) of the students who are actively involved in international interaction although they do not have international fellow-students directly engaged in the learning process in their academic group. There is no sufficient research on international and domestic students' interaction.

However, previous studies prove infrequent bonds and low incidents of intercultural friendships in different national contexts [13].

Fig. 1. How often do you communicate with international students?

According to Akimova and Adolf, manifestation of ethnocentrism and, as a consequence, ineffective intercultural interaction, can be caused by lack of the intercultural communication competence [14].

Insufficient knowledge of a foreign language also belongs to the key factors preventing mutual understanding. Fig. 2 shows that almost half of the respondents (48%) find this factor significant and agree that it can reduce effectiveness of interaction between domestic and international students.

Fig. 2. Does poor knowledge of English or any other foreign language have a negative impact on the effectiveness of interaction between you and international students?

Particular attention is paid to students’ perception of the significance of cultural value differences for productive communication between domestic and foreign students. The data presented in Fig. 3 show that only 28% of the Russian respondents consider lack of cultural knowledge to be relevant for their interaction with international students. It can be assumed that not all the Russian students understand the meaning of “cultural value differences”. This can account for the fact that most of the Russian students (68%) consider this factor to be less significant in comparison to the ability of speaking a foreign language. Introduction of cross-cultural communication into curriculum as an obligatory subject can foster students’ better understanding of international students’ values and cultural peculiarities and promote more effective interaction between domestic and international students.

Fig. 3. Does poor knowledge of cultural value differences have a negative impact on the effectiveness of interaction between you and international students?

Modern research findings demonstrate that crucial role in students' acquiring communicative and intercultural skills is played by their instructor, who can support cross-cultural interactions via group work and collaborative assignments [15]. USUE foreign language teachers promote active socialization and adaptation of international students by initiating domestic and foreign students' classroom activities and joint projects [16].

Moreover, apart from developing foreign language and cross-cultural competences in class, foreign language teachers improve them by involving domestic and international students in extracurricular activities, including fulfilling various tasks related to principles of sustainable development. As reported by Dolly Eliyahu-Levi and Michal Ganz-Meishar, who examined perceptions and attitudes of intercultural competence development, students involved in extra-curricular learning had a deeper insight on creating a pluralistic professional identity and cultural-emotional commitment in comparison to the students who were not engaged in extra-curricular activities [17].

The issue of possessing a cross-cultural competence by teachers themselves has been discussed and debated in modern literature for the last decade [18]. Not only students, but university subject teachers can face problems in interaction with international students. It is proved that foreign language teachers have numerous advantages in comparison to subject-related teachers, as most of them are more open to different cultures and possess intercultural sensitivity [19]. One of the missions of university departments of foreign languages must be giving assistance to non-linguistic university staff in improving their communicative foreign language and cross-cultural competence.

4 Conclusions

The paper examined process of internalization in non-linguistic Russian university and its perception by the Russian students. The research findings show that USUE students consider their learning environment to be multinational. Anyway, survey data indicate that interaction between Russian and international students is not very intensive. Analyses of the factors, preventing effective interaction between domestic and foreign students show that insufficient knowledge of English and lack of cross-cultural awareness belong to the list of the main challenges on the way to successful multicultural interaction. In this context the role of university departments of foreign languages is becoming most significant. Involving Russian and foreign students in various forms of joint classroom and extracurricular activities can promote more active cross-cultural interaction as well as improve its quality. Effective intercultural communication between students of different nationalities can serve as foundation for future international cooperation in various areas, including implementation of innovative technologies which are essential for pursuing sustainable development goals. Foreign language teachers can also provide assistance to subject teachers to be prepared to face challenges connected with the process of internationalization. Development language courses and intercultural training can help the university staff who do not speak foreign languages to meet the requirements of universities internationalization and introduce principles of sustainable development in the process of education.

The conclusions call for the need to continue research into university subject teachers' perception of challenges and issues of internationalization. Further study of foreign language communicative and cross-cultural competences of international students and Russian subject-related teachers of non-linguistic universities is desirable to have better understanding of the process of higher education internationalization and find proper responses to its challenges.

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