

ELENA OREKHOVA & LIUDMILA POLUNINA

MODERNISING EDUCATION: INTERNATIONAL DIALOGUE AND COOPERATION

*There is neither a first nor a last word and
there are no limits to the dialogic context
(it extends into the boundless past and boundless future).
M. Bakhtin*

Abstract

The paper deals with the internationalization of higher education and its consequences both for education policy and educational practice in Russia. The internationalization is considered to be not only a political and social process but also a cultural phenomenon having a considerable impact on the modernization of education. Within this context the authors discuss three main directions of internationalization in education: student and staff mobility, academic partnership and syllabi with international dimension. The paper shows how the higher education institutions in Russia contribute to the development of internationalization working together with the universities, international associations and non-governmental organizations from different countries.

Introduction

In the view of many, it is education that is a key area in the successful democratic transition of the economies of Eastern Europe and Eurasia. In the past decades Russia has struggled to establish democratic society and revive its economy. Democracy is often equated with oligarchic rule and fiscal corruption. The process of internationalization in education, viewed as a part of its modernization, the establishment of direct links with universities and colleges in the countries with developed economy help to change this equation, by strengthening democracy through new and revised curricula, exploring the diversity of society and citizenship, via innovative pedagogy and approaches to teaching. Such links support democratic systems by showing how democratic institutions form the context within which free markets function.

We consider internationalization in education a cultural phenomenon which makes it possible to single out inner tendencies in the development of education worldwide, and in which different cultural traditions of educational systems are taken into account. Internationalization is an effective way of diminishing the negative impact of global economic processes on the educational systems and a prerequisite for successful functioning of educational institutions.

The process of internationalization is viewed by us as one of the most perspective ways of entering the contemporary educational context. In our view, it is not synonymous with “globalization” or its highest stage of development. On the contrary, internationalization may become a significant obstacle that will not allow some potentially harmful globalization tendencies to enter the fabric of educational systems.

Higher education is an important instrument in this process as from the times of their first appearance universities have been international organizations which have always generated and encouraged economic and cultural development.

Three Dimensions of Internationalization in Education

There are several approaches to viewing internationalization in education. They can be divided into activity-based, competence-based, culture-based, procedural and strategic. All these approaches are aimed at diminishing differences between the national systems of education for the sake of their preservation and development as well as for making national systems competitive on the international market. Such concept is in full agreement with the mission of the Bologna process, which aims at making higher educational systems in Europe compatible preserving their autonomous status, variety and strong position in the international education market.

The process of internationalization when viewed in such light should be carried out along the following main directions of development:

- Exchange programs (students and professors);
- Academic links between universities;
- Specially developed syllabi with an international dimension.

The main strategy of work in the first two directions is internationalization of the student and teaching body. In many countries teaching foreign students is a profitable kind of activity which is ensured by higher tuition fees paid by international students compared to domestic students. However, we should not forget about the main activities of the university which are traditionally associated with its successful functioning. They include the provision of education, research and community service. They maintain university's good reputation as one of most democratic structures in the educational system which ensures the application of the principle of access to education for all and the principle of equal rights.

The policy of internationalizing the student body ensures the creation of an open society in the country whose educational system will be internationally recognized. Such work should be carried out under the framework of collaboration with partner universities. Organized and controlled internationalization of the student and teaching body arranged as a system of exchange programs may become an effective tool in eradicating "trans-nationalization" of education which has created conditions for establishing a market for small companies offering their services in arranging educational programs abroad. Such companies are purely commercial organizations which work through off-shore institutions and Internet providers making educational services more expensive and less accessible.

A balanced approach to the standard of such education should be ensured by the transparency in the organization of exchange programs, access to information and competent control on the part of the national structures as well as cooperation and mobility of national agencies working in the sphere of international education. Exchange programs in the contemporary context are one of the few methods of preventing the "brain drain" that has affected many universities in the countries with developing economies. In this way universities assure the fulfillment of one of its main functions – to guarantee academic order and stability.

Internationally devised syllabi is another direction in which such cooperation can be indispensable. When training students we should take into consideration the

international dimension of their future career, and depending on their area of specialization offer comparative studies of such disciplines as Education, Law, Literature, Culture, etc. Without doubt foreign language teaching and learning should be carried out on an entirely new level which should ensure the ability of the students and graduates to participate in the intercultural dialogue and exchange programs.

The traditional conservative educational model, which has historically been formed in Russia, is also characteristic of many countries in the world. Contemporary educational context requires a change of priorities especially in the field of humanitarian education. Human beings are free agents who have the right to choose what kind of education they should pursue. The realization of this principle does not require a change of the basis of the whole educational system or its organizational foundation. What it does require though is a change of the aims and content of some educational programs.

A harmonic combination of the student-centered approach with a traditional knowledge-oriented approach characteristic of the Russian educational tradition will ensure the creation of a manageable system which will synthesize the achievements of international and national schools of education.

In the modern world in which the processes of integration of education are accelerated, there is also a visible tendency for general inter-relatedness and the transfer of the capital, information and intellectual resources cannot be stopped by any borders. That is why, the demand for an educational pattern which combines the best out of different systems and preserves its identity is unquestionable.

The Case of Tula Lev Tolstoy Pedagogical University

The understanding of the strategic role of education in the modern world and the benefits that might be brought about by setting up direct links with a university functioning in an established free market economy and democratic society led Tula Lev Tolstoy State Pedagogical University in Russia to seeking partner relations with universities in Europe, Asia and America. The collaboration programs center on reciprocal faculty exchanges, curriculum development, Internet service provision, and outreach, in order to develop mutual understanding and cooperation between the educational institutions, and reach out to a wider audience. The vision behind establishing this kind of partnership between the universities has included their similarities in the general mission and goals as well as in the existing programs and curricula.

Tula Lev Tolstoy State Pedagogical University was founded in 1938 with the view of providing liberal arts and teacher training education for the region. Currently, it comprises 10 faculties where students are trained in 40 specialties at the undergraduate and 22 at graduate level. It serves a clientele of 4200 full-time and 2300 part-time students. In the last few years it has always been included in the Ministry of Education's list of top ten best pedagogical universities in Russia. The university has been involved in internationalizing education for many years. It has been offering degree-granting programs to international students since 1977.

Another factor that played a decisive role in establishing the partner relationships was the support of different stakeholders such as, for example, the Tula-Albany Alliance, a non-governmental organization that has been running a

range of exchange programs between the Capital Region of New York State and the Tula Region in Russia on the base of the network of links with educational, governmental and other institutions in the two regions. The cooperation of the two cities (Tula and Albany) goes back to 1993 when the Proclamation for Twinning was adopted. It became the result of the realization of considerable similarities of the two cities situated on the banks of major rivers and serving as the government centers for their regions. Both cities also have a reputation for fine schools of higher learning and other cultural interests.

Being a member of such authoritative international organizations as International Association of Universities and European Association of Universities our university takes part in many activities promoting the development of partnership between higher education institutions throughout the world including the Tuning project. The exchange of experience of working in similar areas is beneficial for the universities as it provides better solutions to the emerging problems and help to plan their activities in some major areas bearing in mind the experience of the partner.

One of the tangible results of the cooperation between the institutions is the exchange programs which allow to establish direct links between faculty and serves as project-prompter for further cooperation. The exchanges and the follow-up activities are deliberately organized as a series of micro-dialogues which leads to establishing direct links between the faculty and corresponding departments. Such “micro-dialogue” encourages a wide variety of “grass-roots” initiatives and significantly contributes to the overall success of the inter-university program of exchange. The experience of the successful dialogue between the higher education institutions in different countries can take a new turn in the program of its dissemination to secondary educational establishments. This can contribute to involving younger generation into the inter-cultural dialogue to develop tolerance and contribute to the stability of the peace in the world.

Conclusion

The universities that pursue common goals may find other areas of joint development possible as a result of their close consultation and collaboration while working on the joint projects. We are sure that only working together the universities of the world can find the right balance in combining their national traditions and international trends in the contemporary educational context: “At any moment in the development of the dialogue there are immense, boundless masses of forgotten contextual meanings, but at certain moments of the dialogue’s subsequent development along the way they are recalled and invigorated in renewed form (in a new context)” (M. Bakhtin, 1986, p. 170).

References

- Bakhtin M. (1986): *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. Edited by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Translated by Vern W. McGee. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

Elena Orekhova
PhD in Pedagogy, Professor
Tula Lev Tolstoy State Pedagogical University
Tula, Russia
orehova@tspu.tula.ru

Liudmila Polunina
PhD in Pedagogy, Associate Professor
Tula Lev Tolstoy State Pedagogical University
Tula, Russia
poluninaln@mail.ru