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THE POSSIBILITIES OF DEVELOPING INTEGRATION SKILLS AT A HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION

Abstract. The *aim* of the research “The Possibilities of Developing Integration Skills at a Higher Education Institution” is to study how students can develop integration skills at a higher education institution using a structural model to realize these possibilities. The main conclusions are as follows:

1) it is possible for a higher education institution to realize the possibilities that promote student integration skills – to live and learn in a multicultural environment, to cooperate and communicate, and to agree on common decisions;

2) the development of student integration skills can be realized only if the leadership supports diversity across the higher education institution by:

- realizing a supportive policy,
- creating an inclusive environment,
- favouring active cooperation and communication between personnel (students, the teaching staff, administration) in the promotion of student integration skills development.

Keywords: integration, integration skills, management of student integration skills, development process

The Aim of the Research

To study the possibilities of developing student integration skills at a higher education institution on the basis of theoretical and empirical research in order to develop a structural model to realize these possibilities.

Review of the Background Literature

The concept “integration skills” has not been defined in the pedagogical and psychological literature in Latvia. Consequently, we searched for a preliminary definition according to the general definitions of “skills” worked out by different authors (Kuzmina, 1996, p. 78; Prets, 2000, p. 245; Hodžsone, 2001, p. 23; Špona, 2006, p. 123; Šarpa, 2009, p. 97) and an analysis of documents like “A Memorandum on Lifelong Learning” developed by the European Commission (2000), “The Key Competences for Lifelong Learning of the European Framework” (2006), documents worked out by the American organization “Partnership for 21st Century Skills” (2009) and the Singapore Ministry of Education (2010), and documents developed

in the World Innovation Summit for Education (WISE) in Qatar (2010). We also considered viewpoints from the theoretical literature on the necessity to adapt to “a new multicultural reality” and “diverse society”:

1) adjusting to diversity by highly appreciating cultural variety, that is favouring relationships among people belonging to different cultural backgrounds that could be characterized as cultural equality, enrichment and adaptation instead of competition (Cohen, 1994, p. 93; Gupta, Ferguson, 1997, p. 343; Batelaan, 1998, p. 21; Pang, 2001, p. 46; Banks, Manks, 2004, p. 87; Parekh, 2006, p. 128);

2) actively participating by discussing, explaining and proving one’s point of view while at the same time respecting different opinions in order to solve conflicts and agree on and come to common decisions (Kagan, 1994, p. 115; Cohen, Lotan, 1997, p. 254; Sierens, 2000, p. 67; Mushi, 2004, p. 189; Petursdottir, 2009, p. 56);

3) cooperating and communicating with people of different cultural background, can change negative attitudes, stereotypes and prejudices about others (Batelaan, 1998, p. 32; Banks et al., 2001, p. 133; Deardorff, 2006, p. 253; Muižnieks, 2007, p. 5; Allport, 2010, p. 254).

Reflecting upon these sources, the authors developed the following definition of “integration skills”: integration skills are the necessary knowledge, experience and attitude that ensures the integration of people belonging to different cultural backgrounds, that are living, working and studying in a multicultural environment successfully and equally while respecting diversity, all in an effort to enrich the process of cooperation and communication without losing the uniqueness of their native culture and language.

On the basis of the theoretical literature (Banks, 1991, p. 134, 1993, p. 15; Cohen, 1994, p. 101; Kagan, 1994, p. 235; Gupta, Ferguson, 1997, p. 344; Batelaan, 1998, p. 27; Enslin, 1999, p. 122; Pang, 2001, p. 51; Banks, Manks, 2004, p. 93; Parekh, 2006, p. 129; Petursdottir, 2009, p. 58) the authors consider the following as the most important integration skills:

1) to live and study in a multicultural environment:

- communicate in the native language,
- respect and develop one’s native language and culture,
- communicate in a different language,
- respect, be open and tolerant towards the different language and culture,
- communicate with representatives of different cultures on an equal basis,
- accept the future of their country and society as a multicultural country and

diverse society,

- share common values with the representatives of different cultural backgrounds;
- 2) to make common decisions:
 - be able to work in a team,
 - express and defend one's own point of view,
 - have an active participation in the decision making,
 - respect different points of view, make decisions in a democratic way,
 - make compromises and adapt,
 - solve conflicts,
 - be responsible for the decisions made,
 - be organized,
 - be critical and creative.
- 3) to cooperate and communicate:
 - make contacts with the representatives of different cultures,
 - be tolerant, listen to others, take into account other student opinions and feelings,
 - learn from other students, enrich one's own experience and knowledge,
 - be flexible, adapt to different situations, be open to new ideas.

Methods of the Research

1. Analyze the theoretical literature on management science, pedagogy, psychology and sociology.
2. Analyze the international, national and educational documents from the perspective of developing student integration skills.
3. Conduct a poll (of students and the teaching staff).
4. Analyze student essays.
5. Discuss the results with students and the teaching staff.
6. Analyze the content.
7. Use the methods of statistical analysis of data to summarize the data and organize the results of the research.

Type of the Research

This was an experimental research project. During the first semester of the 2010–2011 academic year (September to December), the experimental group of the Riga Technical University (hereinafter RTU) was created. In the experimental group, the experiment was carried out to test the structural model of developing student

integration skills at a higher education institution. First-year students from the Faculties of Architecture and Urban Planning and Civil Engineering constituted the experimental group. In order to compare the effectiveness of the structural model, a control group of RTU was created along with a study in the Institute of Transport and Communication

Basis of the Research

1. First-year students from the Faculties of Architecture and Urban Planning and Civil Engineering of RTU. Overall, during the autumn poll in the RTU 82 questionnaires of the control group and 79 questionnaires of the experimental group were collected. After the reiterative data collection in the winter and data specification, 66 questionnaires of the control group and 64 questionnaires of the experimental group were included into the research.

2. 85 first-year students from the Institute of Transport and Communication were polled during the autumn poll and 52 of their questionnaires were included into the research after the reiterative data collection in the winter and data specification.

3. RTU teaching staff (41 persons participated in the poll; and 12 persons participated in the discussion).

4. 65 RTU first-year students from different faculties (the Faculty of Civil Engineering, the Faculty of Architecture and Urban Planning, the Faculty of Power and Electrical Engineering, and the Faculty of Electronics and Telecommunications) participated in the discussion.

5. 64 RTU first-year students from the Faculty of Building and the Faculty of Architecture and Urban Planning wrote essays on “My Studies in a Multicultural Environment”.

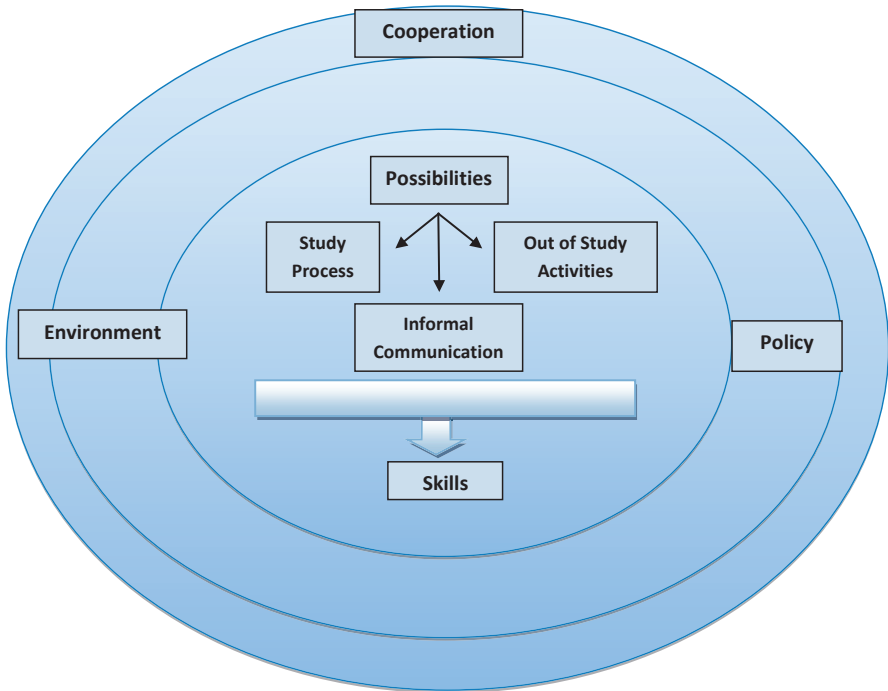
Description of the Research Results

1. The definition of “integration skills” was developed.
2. The most significant integration skills were stated - to live and study in a multicultural environment, to cooperate and communicate, to make common decisions.
3. The possibilities of developing student integration skills at a higher education institution were identified:
 - a) popularizing diversity through the study process;

b) student involvement in study activities (cultural, educational, sports etc.) outside the classroom and different interest groups (choirs, dancing groups, art studios etc.) in a multicultural environment – within or outside of a higher education institution;

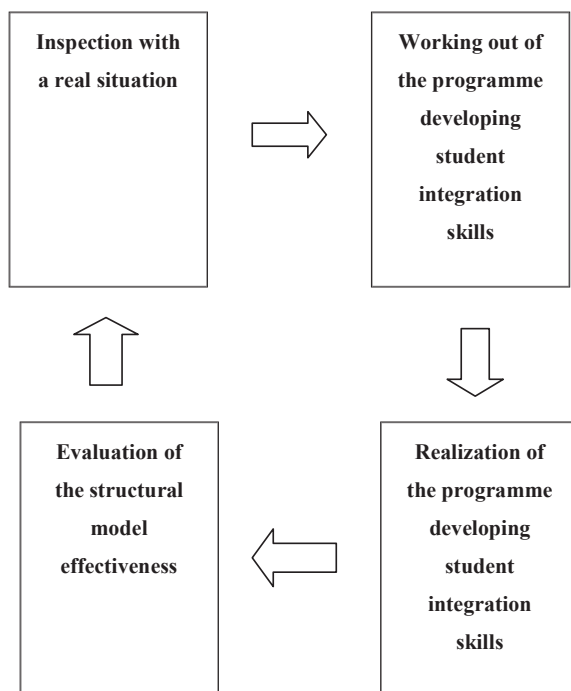
c) informal communication of students belonging to different cultural backgrounds.

4. The necessary preconditions to realize the development of student integration skills at a higher education institution were worked out – policy, environment, and the cooperation and communication process of personnel (students, the teaching staff, administration).
5. On the basis of the research and the preconditions necessary to realize these possibilities a structural model was developed (Picture 1).



Picture 1. The Structural Model Developing Student Integration Skills at a Higher Education Institution

6. The management of developing student integration skills according to the basic principles of the structural model was implemented at RTU (Picture 2).



Picture 2. The implementation scheme of the structural model developing student integration skills

The implementation scheme of the structural model at RTU was the following:

1. A survey of the real situation at RTU:
 - Investigated documents regulating the working process of the higher education institution in the context of developing student integration skills,
 - Conducted research on the environment of the higher education institution as a multicultural environment,
 - Studied the work of the teaching staff in a multicultural environment,
 - Conducted an investigation on the use of study methods, means, and forms promoting the development of student integration skills,
 - Analyzed the content descriptions of study courses related to intercultural issues.

2. The analysis of the real situation at RTU showed that at the present moment possibilities to promote the development of student integration skills are not being satisfactory realized because of insufficient preparation of the teaching staff and the administration:

- 1) not reasonably using the possibilities provided by the study process by:
 - excluding intercultural topics in the context of study courses. At the present moment the content of study courses poorly reflects the diversity of society. For example, there are several important contribution to Latvian society (intellectual, cultural, technical achievements) from people belonging to different nationalities),
 - unprofessionally using cooperative learning by not promoting cooperation and communication with students belonging to different cultural backgrounds,
 - not analyzing the cooperation process of students,
- 2) ineffectively promoting active student involvement in the development of higher education institutional policy by:
 - not including student cooperation with the Students' Parliament,
 - not including student cooperation with the teaching staff to organize the study process (development of study courses, choice of study methods, means, forms, assessment process),
- 3) insufficiently involving students in study possibilities in the multicultural environment outside the institution,
- 4) not favouring informal student communication,
- 5) not working out and implementing the policy supporting the development of student integration skills at a higher education institution. The analysis of the documents (i.e., the Law on Higher Education Establishments (1995) and the Constitution of RTU (2007) proved that the documents mentioned before do not include definite regulations and norms for the facilitation of the student integration process at the higher education institution.

3. After the analysis of the real situation at RTU, the programme, according to the main principles of the structural model, was developed and realized by the teaching staff, administration and the students of RTU. During the 1st semester, 2010–2011 academic year, during the period from September–December, the structural model was tested in the experimental group.

4. Finally the effectiveness of the programme promoting the development of student integration skills was evaluated by:

- 1) comparing the RTU experimental group with the RTU control group and the student group from the Institute of Transport and Communication. As a result, an

increase of cooperation and communication among students belonging to a different cultural background was found in the experimental group. The research data proved (Table 1) that the experimental group had an indicator on the scale of “Student integration in the social environment of the university” in winter measurement which was 0.27 points higher ($M = 3,76$) on the average than the autumn measurement ($M = 3,48$). This difference according to the T-test analysis is statistically significant.

Table 1

The average indexes of the RTU student integration scales

	Control group		Experimental group	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Autumn measurement				
Student integration in the learning environment	3,84	0,50	3,93	0,46
Student integration in the social environment	3,59	0,86	3,48	0,86
Student integration in the ethnic environment	2,97	0,84	2,96	0,85
Student integration in the political environment	4,15	0,50	4,17	0,52
Student involvement in out of study activities	3,94	0,67	4,16	0,59
Winter measurement				
Student integration in the learning environment	3,78	0,61	3,85	0,53
Student integration in the social environment	3,67	0,79	3,76	0,83
Student integration in the ethnic environment	3,15	0,99	3,11	0,73
Student integration in the political environment	4,22	0,58	4,25	0,43
Student involvement in out of study activities	4,09	0,71	4,11	0,71

2) the research data also proved (Table 2) that student attitudes towards their group mates – students of different cultural background (they trust in, feel well, are willing to study, work and rest together – changed; they were open to new social contacts with students of different cultural origin. Thus, their attitude has become more positive and favourable toward people of different cultural backgrounds.

Table 2

RTU student integration in the social environment of a higher education institution: average differences of indexes in autumn and winter measurements (Paired T-test analysis)

	Calculation differences		T-test		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>V</i>	Significance
Control group					
I trust in my group mates of different cultural background	0,091	1,092	0,677	65	0,501
I am willing to study together with my group mates of different cultural background	- 0,091	0,907	- 0,814	65	0,418
I would like to work together with my group mates of different cultural background	- 0,061	0,892	- 0,552	65	0,583
I am willing to have a rest together with my group mates of different cultural background	- 0,106	1,040	- 0,829	65	0,410
I feel good with my group mates of different cultural background	- 0,106	0,914	0,943	65	0,349
I am willing to make new social contacts with students of different cultural background at the higher education institution	- 0,234	1,065	- 1,760	63	0,083
Experimental group					
I trust in my group mates of different cultural background	- 0,34	1,09	- 2,53	63	0,01
I am willing to study together with my group mates of different cultural background	- 0,03	1,08	- 0,23	63	0,82
I would like to work together with my group mates of different cultural background	- 0,31	1,01	- 2,49	63	0,02
I am willing to have a rest together with my group mates of different cultural background	- 0,38	0,95	- 3,15	63	0,00
I feel good with my group mates of different cultural background	- 0,27	0,90	- 2,37	63	0,02
I am willing to make new social contacts with students of different cultural background at the higher education institution	- 0,30	- 0,87	- 2,74	63	0,01

3) The research data did not show statistically significant differences in the habits of student language use before and after the experiment. Thus, students – both Latvians and minorities – kept using their native language when communicating with their friends, at the university and in their family. Therefore, as the data proved the increase of communication and cooperation among students belonging to different cultures and the development of a positive attitudes for both Latvians and minorities toward their group mates of diverse cultural belonging did not depend upon the use of one's native language in students' every day cooperation. Thus, the use of one's native language did not negatively influence the intercultural communication process.

Conclusions

1. The aim of the research has been achieved since the results of the research demonstrate the effectiveness of the realized programme in the experimental group, namely the increase of communication and cooperation among students belonging to a different culture and the development of a positive attitude for both Latvian and minority students toward their group mates of diverse cultural origin. This research proves that it is possible for a higher education institution to use its potential to promote student integration skills:

- to live and learn in a multicultural environment,
- to cooperate and communicate,
- to agree on common decisions

To develop the possibilities of student integration skills at a higher education institution, institutions need:

1) to popularize diversity throughout the study process by

- including intercultural topics in the content of study courses,
- using the study process (classes, research work, study practice) methods and means to promote students cooperation through cooperative group work, pair work, games, study excursions etc., where students of different cultural background participate,
- analyzing the student intercultural communication process;

2) to support student study activities outside the institution in a multicultural environment by:

- promoting student involvement in cultural, educational, sports activities, etc. organized within a higher education institution and out of it (e.g., culture projects, festivals, competitions, summer workshops, camps, excursions, exhibitions, concerts etc.);

– favouring student involvement in groups of interest – choir, dancing group, theatre studio, etc. at a higher education institution and outside of it;

3) developing the informal communication skills of student involvement with different cultural backgrounds:

– adapting to the inner environment of a higher education institution for the promotion of informal student communication (i.e., providing students' with a lecture – room to stay during the lectures and breaks as well as a classroom for pupils at school); library; canteen, cafe, arranging the premises to give students a possibility to spend their spare time, for example, sport hall, cinema/music studio, exhibition hall etc.

– organizing activities at a higher education institution where students from different faculties and other higher education institutions can participate,

3. The possibilities of developing student integration skills can be realized only on the condition when management supports diversity throughout the higher education institution

1) the development of such an environment at a higher education institution where students of any cultural background (both Latvians and non – Latvians) do not feel the danger to their cultural identity (linguistic, ethnic, religious),

2) the realization of a supportive higher education institution policy that is run by the administration and the Student Parliament, and

3) the active cooperation and communication between personnel (i.e., students, the teaching staff, administration) all of which are concerned in with the student integration process.

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Santrauka

Ilzē IVANOVA, Antra ROSKOŠA

INTEGRACINIŲ GEBĒJIMŲ UGDYMOŠI GALIMYBĒS AUKŠTOJO MOKSLO INSTITUCIJOSĒ

Straipsnyje autorės pristato ir analizuoja studentų integracinių gebėjimų ugdymosi sąlygas aukštojo mokslo institucijose. Autorės tyrimą atliko pasitelkdamas daugiakultūrę universiteto aplinką, todėl straipsnyje pateikia keletą efektyvių įtraukiamųjų strategijų integraciniams gebėjimams ugdyti(is). Ypač reikšmingos išvados apie pozityvaus požiūrio į tautinių mažumų studentų mokymąsi kartu su latvių tautybės studentais. Eksperimento metu buvo sukurta palanki bendravimui ir bendradarbiavimui aplinka, kuri padėjo studijų procesą padaryti ypač sėkmingą. Be to, poststudijiniu laikotarpiu buvo skatinama kultūrinė, edukacinė ir sportinė veikla: kultūrinės šventės, varžybos, stovyklos, ekskursijos ir parodos. Ši neformalioji komunikacija buvo ypač reikšminga studentų integracinių gebėjimų ugdymuisi.

Esminiai žodžiai: integracija, integraciniai gebėjimai, integracinių gebėjimų ugdymosi vadyba.

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