

Scientific Conferences as a Part of Research and Development Area of Modern Universities

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ABSTRACT

The given paper summarizes key trends of modern higher education. The authors describe the structure and objectives of research and development area of modern universities revealing the experience of the Udmurt State University. Conference activities are regarded as a major component of the university research and development area which is supposed to provide students with the competences required for the beneficial integration into the global educational system and presumably to shape their professional trajectory. The article considers university research and development area from the perspective of such current tendencies as globalization, modernization, internationalization and integration. While analyzing the structure of university research and development area the authors highlight the specific position held by conference activities, describing principle requirements and stages that should be followed while organizing and holding scientific conferences of different levels.

Keywords: higher education, research and development area, conference activities, internationalization, academic mobility.

Introduction

As a major component of the state policy educational policy is regarded as a tool to provide and secure the fundamental rights and personal freedoms of nationals, to increase the pace of social and economic, scientific and technical development of a country and as a forward guidance to reach an advanced state of intellectual, cultural, and material development of its society.

Defining the term “education” dictionaries of pedagogical terms emphasize three key elements including process, value and result (Fig 1). It should be noted that procedural, valuable and productive aspects of education as a social and dynamically changing phenomenon has to be defined as a single entity. Reproduction and development of education require great resources strong human capital, effective and multilateral cooperation of establishments and organizations at multiple levels. (Atanov, Grinchenko, Lebedev, Kapustin, Kapustina, 2015).

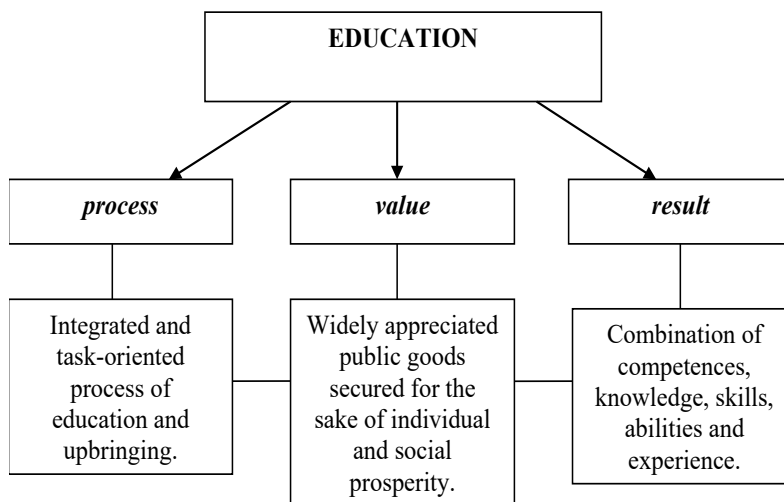


Fig. 1. The structure of education as a pedagogical term.

Moreover, education ceases to be identified with the formal school and even university education. Currently any activities tend to be treated as education, if they are intended to change the behavior of individuals and to contribute to the promotion of new knowledge and new skills. A variety of social institutions apart from schools and universities have taken on the role of promoters of education .

Gavrilenko highlights that the place of education in society is largely marked by the impact of knowledge on the people social development, their experience, skills, opportunities for career growth, and personal qualities. In this respect many researchers have come to a conclusion that this impact is becoming more considerable in the XXIst century arguing that the revolution in information and the formation of a new type of social organization – an information society as a reflection of the post-industrial culture – could not but put forward the information and knowledge to the forefront of social and economic development and intensify their role as a strategic resource of a country.

Major trends of modern higher education

If we focus on the essence of the university education than we can observe the remarkable shift toward “universal” access to higher education. As competition intensifies covering a greater share of the global market, higher education – as a key supporter and provider of human capital – has become fundamental in terms of creating competitive environment and facilitating quantitative expansion. American sociologist Martin Trow has described the development of higher education as enrollment rates increase with each generation, charting its progress from “elite” to “mass” and “universal” as enrollment increases from small numbers to 15% and then 50%. (Trow, 2006: 95).

The mentioned above “mass scale” of education has contributed to the widening

and expansion of international educational space. Due to this tendency, the international community has announced an initiative to work out the global educational strategy, which is expected to be independent of the place of living and the educational background of a person. By and large currently countries all over the world seem to share common ideas about higher education and admit that modern education has to be international. It means the higher education system tends to reveal international features and according to Bennett should meet the following targets:

- to develop multiple historical perspectives;
- to strengthen cultural consciousness;
- to strengthen intercultural competence;
- to combat racism, sexism, and all forms of prejudice and discrimination;
- to increase awareness of the state of the planet and global dynamics; and
- to develop social action skills (Bennett, 1990: 38).

While interpreting basic trends of modern higher education Ph. Altbach, L. Reisberg, and L. Rumbley define internationalization as the variety of policies and programs that universities and governments implement to respond to globalization (Altbach, Reisberg, and Rumbley, 2009: 25).

Thus multiculturalality of the social space in which a new generation of students is being raised and developed relies on the implicit acceptance of differences, multiplicity and variability of cultural and social patterns, human rights and freedoms, non-violence, religious tolerance and intercultural dialogue.

The second trend is marketization. The political and social environment in which higher education is embedded has tended to emphasize the virtues of markets, competition and private initiative, vis-à-vis the vices of public intervention in higher education (Teixeira, Dill, 2011). This growing relevance of markets in higher education policy and discourse is the result of several complex factors. The so-called crisis of the welfare state has challenged the sustainability of the traditional financial reliance of higher education on public funding. Governments in almost every country have tried to contain the growth of public expenditure, an objective that is significantly difficult due to the unquenchable expansion of many components of public expenditure (Barr, 2004).

Until recently, higher education has been seen as a sector that required and received support owing to public funding, which was the responsibility of national and local governments to provide. Basically modern universities are necessarily in competition for funding, students, facilities and privileges. Popkova, Ruleva, Serikbayev (2016) argue that universities have been forced to turn to commercial models of knowledge, skills, curriculum, finance and management organization in order to meet competitive challenges. Thus, following this shift students are turning into customers or clients

Moreover, marketization of education can be signified as “the intensified injection of market principles such as deregulation, competition, and stratification into the public schools” (Bartlett et al., 2002). In a sense, marketization is a “meeting of science and market” (Wedlin, 2008: 115). Taking notice of marketization of higher education Dill (2003) defined it as an intervention of the market in the life of educational institutions. Brown (2011) understands “marketization” as “the application of the economic theory of the market to the provision of higher education”. In other words, the principles of private market exchanges have been

introduced in public institutions. Critical-discourse analyst Norman Fairclough (1992) calls it “commodification”, when the educational services have become a “product”. Barnett (2011) shares this view and believes that due to the effect of market discourse on educational process students has become perceived as customers, teachers as sellers and education as a commodity.

In line with recent education-focused researches marketization is evaluated as a responsive measure of self-defense reflecting all relevant constituencies of business relationships where knowledge and education are considered as “goods”, educational efficiency, accountability and quality are redefined in market terms; student-teacher relations are mediated and supported by the consumption and production of things.

The third trend is globalization. While academic systems have been expanding, several other developments have affected higher education worldwide. To a large extent these developments taken as a whole are all related, thus introducing a challenge of addressing the variables separately. Globalization is not only shaping the world’s economy and culture but obviously is influencing higher education as well. The emergence of a global knowledge system in which communication is instantaneous and research and other information are disseminated globally, the use of English, as the lingua franca for scientific communication, and the expansion of information technology are key factors.

Relying on the fundamental research of Altbach, Reisberg, and Rumbley (2007, 2009) let us define globalization as the reality shaped by an increasingly integrated world economy, new information and communications technology, the emergence of an international knowledge network, the role of the English language, and other forces beyond the control of academic institutions (Altbach, 2009, 23-48).

While analyzing key features of globalization Gavrilenko (2015) comes to the conclusion that globalization as a factor of increased competition, creates a positive trend in technology transfer, promotes best scientific, technical and technological experience, and leads to the introduction of new management decisions, which is the main principle of minimizing risk and costs with the global communications infrastructure interpreted as transnational dissemination of ideas, cultures and information among similar nations, and between different cultural groups

One of the most visible aspects of globalization is student and scholar mobility. More than 2.5 million students are studying outside of their home countries. Making forecasts for the short-term dynamics of academic mobility international scholars predict 8 million international students by 2020. These students are also expected to add international diversity to an academic environment (Altbach, Reisberg, and Rumbley, 2009).

Student and scholar mobility has become a major factor in higher education worldwide. Students seek access to fields that may be lacking in the home system, as well as high-quality degree programs, especially at the postgraduate level. If we consider the academic labor market then we can notice that the latter has increasingly globalized, with many thousands of scholars crossing borders for appointments and professional fulfillment at all levels (Altbach, Reisberg, and Rumbley, 2009: 75).

Scientific conferences in the structure of modern universities

In order to estimate the role of conferences in the structure of modern universities let us focus on the definition of this phenomenon.

Dictionaries of pedagogical terms interpret conference as a pattern of scientific activities used by scholars, researchers, professors, students and officials to introduce and discuss research, projects and surveys of multiple directions.

Taking into account standpoints shared by both Russian and international scholars we may define a scientific conference as a meeting of scientists attributed to a certain research field, intended to bring them together to learn and discuss critically recent developments, current data, to enhance relations with colleagues and to find new counterparts.

Look-back analysis allows us to suppose that the first officially registered conference dated back to 416 BC. It was the feast of the companions of the tragic poet Agathon where the participants were supposed to present a monologue devoted to Eros ancient Greek God of love. As it is confirmed by historical records initially conferences were attended by noble-born citizens.

In a modern sense of this phenomenon these meetings do go by multiple names depending on their size, scope and objectives.

According to their focus and target we should differentiate between:

- scientific and theoretical conference which is supposed to cover theoretical approaches while dealing with a range of challenges which should be responded while carrying out experiments;
- research and practice conference which is focused on sharing gathered experience and best practices relevant to some applied issues;
- scientific and technical conference which is expected to provide exchange of experience, skills and knowledge on various technical and engineering issues;
- business conference with the task to deal with business challenges and perspectives as well as with peculiarities of current legislation or state policies relevant to particular sectors and branches.

Relying on the territorial principle it is possible to point out:

- local conferences embracing certain universities, schools or enterprises;
- regional conferences;
- All-Russia conferences;
- All-Russia conferences with the international participation;
- International conferences;

Bearing in mind subject matters criteria experts single out:

- highly specialized conferences with the focus on a single subject matter or academic field (e.g. human sciences or natural sciences);
- broadly-focused conferences covering a wide range of issues, subject matters and general scientific notions.

Basically modern scientific conferences tend to have a rather rigid structure including:

- registration of participants; introduction of agenda;
- opening ceremony; welcome address;
- plenary session;

- workshops and sections;
- coffee-break;
- social programme;
- closing ceremony;
- issue of the conference information package.

Finally scientific conferences could be held in different forms like:

- live in-person conferences which require direct involvement of speakers and participants;
 - distance conferences which do not necessarily lead to direct involvement of the concerned parties;
 - Internet-conferences via Skype, video/teleconferencing.

As for the stages, scientific conferences held and organized in modern universities basically follow a range of phases such as:

- Planning when organizers are expected to discuss and approve the form, the title, the dates and timing of the future conference.
- First organizing drive. This stage is followed by the approval of working parties as well as Organizing committee, its Chair and Co-chair.
- Informing. This phase deals with the approval and delivering Call for papers reflecting all possible details, features and requirements participants and speakers are expected to be aware of.
 - Second organizing drive when organizers have to submit the received applications and keep contacts with the speakers and applicants of the coming conference.
 - Conference activities.

Let us turn to the experience of the Udmurt State University (UdSU).

UdSU is the oldest multidisciplinary higher educational institution of the Udmurt Republic. For over 80 years of its history UdSU has been celebrating the reputation of scientific, educational and cultural center of the region.

With a strong focus on internationalization and intention to integrate into European and worldwide education areas, UdSU has been in cooperation with various universities and organizations in the CIS, Europe, Asia, North and South America under many international partnership agreements and projects.

Taking into account globalization and internationalization of modern higher education the administration of UdSU regards effective scientific research as a foundation to strengthen its positions in the global education area.

Main objectives and challenges of the UdSU scientific activity include:

- expansion of the UdSU research and academic area;
- accumulation of new scholarly knowledge and latest scientific achievements, establishment and development of schools of thought;
- development of basic research as a background to create and promote new technologies;
 - efficient use of scientific potential of the university staff, encouraging the UdSU contribution to scientific and technical progress and to international scientific integration;
 - laying the groundwork for security and strengthening of basic, crucial nature of science in the context of the expanding global higher education;

- maintenance of integrity and consolidation of the educational and scientific processes providing a solid grounding both for students and teaching staff;
- providing conditions for intellectual property protection as a premise of joining the global market of hi-tech production;
- providing support to the issue of appropriate scientific, methodological, theoretical and applied contributions.
- selection and publication of the scientific, scientifically-methodical, educational and educational-methodical literature.

Scientific research in UdSU covers such areas as fundamental research; updating of expert and manufacturing capabilities of higher education; expansion of international cooperation in science and technology; development and promotion of innovative activities; applied research; development of software products; database generation; scientific internships and scientific conferences.

The administration of UdSU has been struggling to encourage its teaching staff to be involved in scientific activities, trying to promote teachers, professors and researchers with a high index of scientific activity. Thus teachers and lecturers who successfully defend their thesis to apply for academic credentials can rely on immediate compensation (albeit this one-time payment could not be very high). Moreover as a measure of encouragement university teaching staff are provided with a modest financial backing while publishing scientific articles, monographs, treatises and workbooks. University Research and Education Centers (REC) Schools of thoughts and Research Laboratories are stimulated and appreciated as a core of the scientific and education area of the University. Since 2014 with the perspective to strengthen its international standing due to the initiative of the Institute of Language and Literature UdSU hosts annual Internet-conferences devoted to some crucial issues of modern education such as worldwide strategies of multicultural education, integration of EU educational systems, academic mobility and joint education programs.

Being a peripheral university another significant challenge that UdSU has to meet is the expansion of youth science. Since 2003 the statistics of the students' involvement in scientific activities has gradually started to improve mainly driven by such factors as growing personal interest, aspiration for academic advantages and privileges, desire to improve intelligence and practical skills and to broaden horizons.

Like in many universities and institutes all over the world students' scientific research in UdSU is implemented via scientific conferences, international exchange programs, projects, academic competitions, intellectual contests and cognitive activities. As a component of a student's professional competence academic and scientific affairs are expected to contribute to the development of such skills as:

- search for reliable and authentic sources of information;
- selection of the appropriate information;
- conceptual refinement of the selected portions of information
- making written records of the selected information (plans, abstracts, summaries, reports, reviews etc.);
- announcing research findings;
- publishing research outcomes.

In order to contribute to youth science and to enrich students' portfolio UdSU has gained

more than ten-year experience of conducting regular student conferences in English. Such annual meetings are held in April as a part of our traditional Week of Science. Basically students are registered and attached to different sections reflecting a wide range of majors offered by UdSU (humanities and applied sciences, natural sciences and engineering, social sciences, oil and gas). Young researchers are supposed to introduce a topic representing his or her field of interest and consequently make a report in English consulting with their supervisors and language instructors. As a summary students introduce their papers to be published in the conference information package.

Conclusion

Traditional borders are opened up for fresh innovative perspectives. Thus the competence of effective interaction and communication within cultural variety is becoming one of the most required proficiency for contemporary education. Intercultural component is a challenge that makes us expand educational process in order to provide opportunities for real and effective intercultural interaction and communication for students, lecturers, professors and researchers.

University education implies proper alignment and interconnection of education and science, while balance could vary with the level of financial backing delivered to research projects, material security and technological infrastructure as well as students and teachers demand and inclination to scientific and research work.

Thus we may highlight the need to integrate modern higher education and scientific advance in order to improve quality of education due to new knowledge and scientific progress. As far as university science is concerned its major objectives include pursuing fundamental and applied research, introduction and penetration of scientific breakthrough into the learning process, development and promotion of high-technology products in order to guarantee national security, economic and intellectual progress and to improve living standards.

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