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ROLE OF CLASSICAL UNIVERSITIES IN CREATING A STABLE MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY

Multiculturalism is a reality of modern life. In Russia, it looks set to be a defining feature of social development in the coming decades. Southern Russia is one of the most complex regions in the country. The federal subjects that lie in the North Caucasian Federal District created in 2010 are typically multicultural and multifaith entities, with significant migration flows and varying degrees of urban development. Added to this is the potential for social and political conflict, terrorism and extremism, plus a series of problems connected with the geopolitical situation. The long-term development of the new federal district and a successful resolution of the crisis will, to a large extent, depend on the ability of the younger generation to effectively pursue their life and career goals in a context of multiculturalism and ongoing intercultural dialogue, thereby ensuring the innovative, dynamic development of the country as a whole and, what is more, the preservation of its integrity.

University education has a special role to play in this transformation process. It seems to us that recent years have brought a new realisation, in Russia and elsewhere, that in today's world, education is a crucial factor in achieving success, both at individual and at national level. The globalisation of all areas of social activity has inevitably created a need not only for the appropriate specialists, but also for widely educated, creatively-minded citizens with good intercultural communication skills. It is no accident that when the North Caucasian Federal District was created, one of the key goals set was to establish a North Caucasus federal university.

From its traditional role as an institution for socialisation and transmitting experience, education is thus evolving into a means of socio-cultural development. And within this process, universities have a particular part to play at every level – global, state, regional and local.

That is how we at Stavropol State University [SSU] see our role in the multicultural region in which we live. For us, one of the key elements in the effort to create social stability in the region is harmonising interethnic relations through the priority introduction of educational programmes and the development of research projects aimed at producing highly skilled specialists capable of implementing, in their professional activities, policy to ensure the socio-political, economic, environmental, informational, socio-cultural and intellectual security of southern Russia.

Stavropol State University and the education system in the North Caucasus as a whole have to contend with a complex, ethnically diverse body of students, with different languages, cultures and mentalities. And this ethnic diversity is growing by the year. We currently have students from 54 different ethnic groups enrolled in our daytime courses. Every year, when dealing with admissions according to Ministry of Education guidelines, the university accepts applications from dozens of youngsters from Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachay-Cherkessia, the Chechen Republic, the Republic of Adygeya, Ingushetia, Kalmykia and South Ossetia. The role of higher educational establishments in such circumstances is two-fold.

On the one hand, it is important to create a special socio-cultural and educational space, drawing on national culture and the freedom to choose one's identity, in terms of ethnicity, religion and/or personal philosophy.

On the other, however, there is a need to ensure unity in terms of the organisational structure and content of education, and the integrity of the state education system across the country as a whole. The question of how to reconcile these two conflicting demands is one that is currently being explored by researchers and teachers at SSU.

From their inception, classical universities have always been seen as cosmopolitan communities, paving the way for various types of cultural dialogue: dialogue between the culture of natural sciences and the culture of humanities, between different ethnic cultures, and between scientific and theoretical ideas. Which aspects of this traditional-style university education are worth preserving and what needs to be changed?

Firstly, classical universities in Russia must continue to form the basis of a unified national education system, and ensure its development and optimum use.

Secondly, university education programmes should not only reflect the globalisation of information, but also include various areas of national and regional study, with a specific ethnocultural slant. University education should contribute to the socialisation and universalisation of ethnic groups, and promote integration and inclusion in the wider context of Russian and world culture.

Thirdly, classical universities have a responsibility to become centres of civic and patriotic education, a focal point for all the forces in society responsible for non-material production – policy-makers, scientists, educationalists, artists. Patriotism is an intrinsic part of the Russian consciousness, and the task of science and education as a whole is to provide it with an objective foundation at a time when there is a need for all members of society to embrace the idea.

Classical universities are concerned not simply with the methods, but also, more broadly, with the methodology of multicultural education, working on the basic concept, principles and ways of implementing multiculturalism in education and cultivating ethnocultural competencies in their students. Today's fast-changing social and political environment requires us to find new approaches and solutions. For Stavropol State University, situated in the ethno- and geopolitical centre of a complex, multi-ethnic and multicultural macroregion such as the North Caucasus, the realisation that, just as our students are set to become increasingly multi-ethnic, multifaith and multicultural, so too is the workforce of which they will eventually be a part, is of fundamental importance.

It is a well-known fact that people don't like what they don't know. If a person receives no information about neighbouring peoples' cultures, customs and traditions, he will be inclined to perceive them as alien or, very often even, hostile to himself. Ethnocultural competency presupposes a willingness to overcome difficulties in communication and other types of interaction with members of different ethnic communities, specifically: the ability to remain impartial when evaluating other people, and their specific national psychological traits, to overcome ethnocentric prejudices and to respond to the demands, interests and behaviour of people of other cultures in an engaged, sympathetic and tactful manner.

Stavropol State University is willing and able to make a substantial contribution to the advancement of intercultural dialogue in a multi-ethnic society. In particular, we have developed an innovative educational project entitled "Creation of an innovative research and education facility in a classical university setting as a condition for producing a new generation of specialists capable of implementing national security policy and a positive scenario for the development of the North Caucasus macroregion". The aim of the programme is to introduce a single educational and scientific process at SSU based on an innovative model for a research university, and designed to produce a new generation of regional scientific, political and business leaders who will be capable of ensuring regional security, and providing positive, sustainable, irreversible impetus to the social, economic and political processes in the North Caucasus as an integral part of Russia's "civilised space".

To this end, much more emphasis is now being placed on student's moral training. At SSU, the educational process is inextricably linked to the task of developing a world view that fosters tolerance and intercultural communication skills. One of the ways in which we seek to provide moral training is through the ground-breaking project mentioned above, the main aim of which is to introduce research and educational activities focusing on "Security and counter-terrorism". The project is designed to give graduates the basic skills they need to find self-fulfilment in a context of intercultural dialogue in a multi-ethnic macroregion.

In March 2010 SSU entered a new programme entitled “Human-resource and scientific support for security and the fight against extremism in the North Caucasian Federal District” in a competition. Central to this programme is the idea that all aspects of research and teaching should be directed towards achieving the main strategic goal, namely to ensure Russia’s national security by reducing the threats and risks arising in the North Caucasus region. One of the key ideas of the programme is to concentrate efforts on designing moral education activities in a multi-ethnic society. The SUU’s programme sets a number of goals in this area: prevent extremism through science and educational technologies, develop a “portfolio of identities” of North Caucasus youth, incorporated into the Russia-wide system of socio-cultural coordinates, and create a new breed of leaders from among those who possess these identities. Clearly, developing applied technologies in the humanities requires appropriate experience and a powerful infrastructure in the form of formally established research centres. SSU proposes that the state make use of the university’s considerable experience in studying interethnic relations and regional security.

One issue that is particularly pertinent for southern Russian today is interfaith dialogue. SSU has recently turned its attention to the experimental teaching in schools of the basics of religious culture and secular ethics. Stavropol has been designated as one of the pilot regions. A peculiar feature of this region is that it is multifaith, with schoolchildren from different religious backgrounds studying together in the same schools and the same classrooms. What are the likely effects of this kind of education? Will it contribute to intercultural dialogue and help foster a sense of community and identity or will it, on the contrary, create new dividing lines? The answer to these questions remains to be seen.

When discussing the new vision of moral education, new approaches and methods, it is important not to overlook the moral development function performed by the university environment, including the actual physical setting. A firm believer in the saying that “Even the walls can teach”, SUU not only gives serious thought to the aesthetic aspect of the new and rebuilt laboratories, lecture halls and student residences, but is also trying to create an aesthetically appealing intellectual environment. One of the focal points of this activity is what we call the “SUU museums hub”. The university is now home to a cutting-edge museum complex that makes extensive use of information technologies and teaching aids. Within Stavropol State University, 9 museums are now up and running, two of them unique: the History of Stavropol Journalism Museum and the Museum of Regional Literature and Literary Local History. The literature museum not only has a local history section, but also seeks to reveal, through its exhibitions, the interaction between Russian and Caucasian cultures. It shows how drawing Caucasian culture into its orbit has helped, and is still helping, to shape

Russian civilisation, and how Stavropol played a historic role in the development of North Caucasian culture and education.

Altogether, the museums have more than 8,000 exhibits; there is a virtual exhibition, state-of-the-art computer, multi-media, audio and video equipment, dedicated publishing software, Wi-Fi, etc. The museums also provide a platform for carrying out fundamental and applied innovative research, teaching, tours and outreach activities.

It will thus be observed that SSU is putting together a system to cultivate the ethnocultural competencies of students from all disciplines. We have amassed a considerable fund of experience in providing expert scientific support for policy initiatives designed to develop Russian identity and civic patriotism. We will shortly be in a position to present the results of these efforts in the form of teaching materials and products and we are confident that they will attract wide interest.