

International and area studies in vocational training: new trends and challenges

*Natalia Yu. Gusevskaya**, *Natalia A. Kazantseva*

Transbaikal State University, International Law and Relations Department, 672010 Chita, Russia

Abstract. Russian universities offer many international and area studies for Bachelor's or Master's programs for students intending to work in the sphere of international cooperation. There has been, however, limited research into how these programs meet the learning needs of students in international and area studies. The rationale for conducting this research is to provide insights to educators on how they might design courses to develop better professional skills. A review of the literature highlights the concerns of academics and practitioners about the balance in curriculum emphasis between political theory and international cooperation practice. This study examined the merits of different pedagogical approaches through the experiences of educators from different tertiary offerings. It is argued that there are some categories of proficiencies that are required to sustain a career in the field of international and area studies. Based on the findings, recommendations have been provided in arranging curriculum and academic activities. Critical thinking, writing, political analysis, role-play, and public speaking are highly recommended to be incorporated into the area studies curriculum.

1 Introduction

Russia's foreign policy, due to its size, history, and resource potential, has always been active and ambitious. Although in different periods of its history, Russia defined its national interests on the world stage in different ways. The foreign policy of post-Soviet Russia was entirely focused on the West. However, the period of hopes for cooperation with the West did not score a success, but it gave a better insight into the fact that the collective West is satisfied only with the countries that pursue their vassal foreign and domestic policies. For Russia, with its imperial mentality and superpower identity, such an attitude towards itself is unacceptable. Against the background of deteriorating relations with the West, fraught with the constantly imposed sanctions, the country's foreign policy took a turn to the East not only because of political factors but of purely economic ones as well. Russian government thought it necessary for the country to seize the opportunities offered by the Asia-Pacific countries' economic growth. Russia's pragmatic interests are to ensure its cooperation with the Asian economies to attract massive investment from China and other leading countries, as well as to develop cooperation with the Asian countries to mitigate the effect of the Western sanctions on the Russian economy. Russia's regional interests are to gain its foothold as a powerful economic, political, and security actor in East and South Asia. Finally, Russia's global interests are to counterbalance its foreign policy course which has been previously focused on the Western countries through

mutually beneficial and pragmatic interaction with its partners in Asia-Pacific Region.

To ensure its national tasks in the sphere of foreign policy, traditionally very important for Russia, the country needs specialists who will be able to address its national interests strategically, systematically, at all levels and will be able to achieve results in promoting significant Russian projects in all regions of the world. This means that the task of rethinking the core curriculum and quality of training area specialists and specialists in international relations is an urgent need today.

The demands on professional qualification and training courses in area studies have been increasing in recent years. The paper aims to provide a better understanding of the challenges facing academic aims by investigating practitioners' experiences. The research study presented in this thesis is guided by the main research questions, "what are the students' learning needs; how can the identified needs be built into a new curriculum". The purpose of this study was to identify effective teaching practices that will assist area studies students to achieve better learning outcomes. In particular, it focused on curriculum and learning practices presented in subjects that students undertake while studying at the university.

2 Results and Discussion

We should note that in the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union the career diplomat training system was elite, and it produced highly cultured intellectuals who

*Corresponding author: gusnat1@rambler.ru

had an excellent command of several foreign languages, were able to toughly defend their country's national interests. But constant reforms in the Russian educational system have greatly developed the training system of international relations specialists. First, the range of specialties has been expanded. Major in international relations and areas studies prepares students for a career not only in foreign service but also in other government agencies, international business, research, teaching, journalism, tourism, private, volunteer organizations that work in international affairs [1]. For a long time, the concept of "a specialist in international relations" has determined mainly employees of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Translators/interpreters have traditionally been regarded as specialists in international affairs. The educational profiles of "Areas Studies", "International Economics", "International Law", "International Journalism" have previously existed within the "International Relations" program track. Later they were added by the educational profiles of "International Business and Business Administration", "Public Relations", "Political Science", "Advertising", "International Economic and Environmental Problems", "International Trade and Commerce".

The area specialist is an expert in the comprehensive study of the region, its population, history, religion, language, economy, culture, traditions, and values. The activities of the area specialist closely coincide with those of the diplomat. It consists of various scientific, educational, information and cultural exchanges, trade, and economic cooperation. The professionally important qualities of area studies researchers are knowledge of the language of the region, ability to apply the basics of knowledge of modern sciences in the analysis and forecasting of the development of international relations in the region; ability to speak in public, to participate in discussions.

Area specialists as well as specialists in international relations have traditionally been representatives of the Russian professional and intellectual community and certainly defined the image of the national human resource potential in the international labor market. Thus, their professional qualifications have met the highest requirements. In Soviet times, the right to train such specialists was granted to a limited number of higher educational institutions: Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO) and the Diplomatic Academy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Asia-Africa Institute of the M.V. Lomonosov Moscow State University was the leading training center for orientalis and area specialists of Asia and Africa. Changes in Russian education in the late 20th and early 21st centuries provided an opportunity to offer specialized training of certified area specialists to other universities by taking into account their regional specificity and a wide variety of specializations.

The traditional effective system of professional training has changed. Russia joined the Bologna Process and moved to a multi-level system of education. Since 2011, Russian universities have offered international relations and area studies Bachelor's and Master's degree

programs. In practice, this has resulted in the introduction of four-year courses, the reduction of teaching hours, and, unfortunately, the deterioration in the quality of training. Three standards of higher vocational education have already changed in the past 10 years. Frequent changes in training requirements have caused a heavy bureaucratic burden on universities and irritation of teachers. All higher education standards declare the competence approach as a leading one. And that distinguishes them from the Soviet educational system, where the knowledge approach was dominant. Pragmatism and the development of professional competencies are key features of the Western educational system. Area research bachelors in Western universities study only the economic, political, cultural, historical, and legal factors that influence certain regions of the world.

As always, Russian reformers chose a unique path, they borrowed from the formal academic elements of the Western system and tried to preserve the achievements of the Soviet educational system. Modern standards of vocational education include the compulsory study of courses that ensure a broad perspective of the student and his or her mental and physical development. They are disciplines like disciplines as History, Philosophy, Rhetoric, Mathematics, Computer Science, and Physical Education. It is a great idea. But you have to remember that the total number of academic hours and the duration of study have been reduced. Thus, the reduction of the course results in a decrease in the quality of instruction in professional and language subjects. Our study in 2015 showed that the introduction of new standards for bachelors has reduced the number of academic hours in language disciplines three times in regional universities. Unfortunately, there is also much less time devoted to area studies [3].

Russian universities of different levels try to do their best to provide job-specific orientation, significant area studies, and language training to prepare foreign/regional affairs specialists who will be able to address challenges of the assigned regions and the whole world. From this perspective, we can draw certain parallels between present-day area studies and diplomatic training institutions.

Diplomatic and area studies at training institutions can be found in all the countries and on all the continents of the globe. All of them annually produce a large number of highly qualified specialists equipped with all necessary professional skills. The process of training future specialists of the kind is comparable to highly sophisticated work, the preparation of "custom-made" unique specialists ready to work in new, changing socio-cultural contexts for the benefit of their own countries. Thus, this process is paid a lot of attention to in academic circles of many countries. British scholars Susan Hodgett and Thomas Ruys Smith state that "the proliferation of Area Studies centers and institutes in Europe, the United States, and the former Soviet bloc through much of the 20th century has been connected to

the putative goals of advancing imperial ambitions or international trade interests, and, later on, knowing ‘the enemy’ and seeking out allies during the Cold War era” [4]. In the 21st century, the process and content of international relations and area studies training have undergone tremendous changes, as scholars speak about New area studies.

Researchers of Stanford University (USA) state that present-day area studies face a lot of problems. To make area studies training more responsive to new global/regional challenges they find it important to balance social sciences and humanities, to provide in-depth knowledge of foreign languages, to adopt a multidisciplinary training program.

In October 2020, a group of European scholars published a new journal *New Area Studies*. The journal became a meeting place of different approaches to the field of present-day area studies. Having analyzed the articles presented here, we can summarize the following approaches to the present-day area studies research.

1. Area studies training includes in-depth knowledge of a certain area or region and communities who live there: its geography, history, culture, anthropology, language, customs, and way, etc.

2. Since each region is populated by a certain nation(s) or community, it must be studied in the process of its development and dynamics and thought as a result of political, cultural, economic, demographic transformations.

3. Our world has become too interconnected and interdependent. Consequently, area studies have become more transregional and multidisciplinary. Nowadays it studies global and local matters as well as matters in between.

4. Effective area studies training must provide a combination of various area-focused disciplines with profound foreign language instruction. In this case, a foreign language must be understood as a practical tool in acquiring specific knowledge of a particular region. In this context, the following point view of view may be interesting for teachers responsible for foreign language training. Thus, British scholar Stephen Hutchings points out the four key principles that might guide the integration of New Area Studies and Modern Languages:

a) the reorientation of notions of language away from fixed lexical inventories and grammatical paradigms towards the speech genres, idiolects, and stylistic registers through which ideas and ideologies acquire flesh in individual utterances;

b) the realignment of language-teaching and ‘content’ syllabi to consolidate the focus on concrete, local contexts of use;

c) the establishment of translation – in its capacity to highlight how translocal flows of peoples, discourses, cultures, and meanings gain linguistic expression – as a Modern Languages bedrock;

d) the abandonment of native-speaker competence as the Gold Standard of Modern Languages excellence [5].

American researcher D. Stocum finds that the American training model is not exemplary [4]. In the 1970s and 1980s, Americans studied the experience of professional personnel training for Soviet foreign affairs agencies

with great interest, admired the high level of professional training in the field-related universities. The present-day American educational standards do not provide for the study of general educational disciplines, physical education, in particular. The dominant attitude is given to the formation of professional competencies. The following disciplines are distinguished as compulsory for the study: Theory and History of International Relations, World Economy, Analysis of International Situations [5]. Courses covering the problems of national and international security are proposed as electives [6]. Unlike Russian educational standards, it is mandatory to study one, not two, foreign language in the amount of 20 credit units which is equal to 720 academic hours compared to 648 academic hours in our reality. In addition, a graduate in the studied field must undergo at least a 6-month language internship in the target-language country and pass his/her language exam higher than the 4th level according to the 6-point international scale of foreign language proficiency [3].

Donna Marie Oglesby, ex-counselor of the US Information Agency, shares the Russian researchers' point of view concerning area specialists and diplomats as "uniquely skilled professionals, deeply knowledgeable in the histories, languages, and cultures of foreign societies" [8]. However, she doubts "whether diplomacy in the United States is a unique profession with a defined body of knowledge and skill set, or merely a practice by a collection of experts with assorted technical knowledge and skills". In her article, she pays attention to the changing character of diplomatic and area studies in the USA as it constantly meets students' demands as well as national and global challenges. American society became divided into 2 groups. Private individuals, with technical knowledge, functional expertise, and global reach did not support diplomacy as a field of study and united around certain apolitical issues. The corresponding academic track in the Association of Professional Schools of International Affairs (APSIA) became human development, including public health. Another group of the American society united against political, military, and intelligence issues with the desire to protect the continued existence of the exceptional American way of life and the global order. The corresponding academic track in international policy schools was security studies, including intelligence. Thus, Donna Marie Oglesby highlights a very important issue in the process of training future area specialists and diplomats. The program curriculum in Area Studies and International Relations must adapt to the needs of every new generation of students to produce more competitive graduates in the future.

A deep analytical approach to the training of American international and area studies researchers is demonstrated by the former American diplomat who held key posts in the US Department of State, Edward “Skip” Gnehm. He states that knowledge of history, area studies, and current international affairs are not sufficient to make an effective specialist. He has developed his own author's course that includes elements of critical thinking, writing, political analysis, leadership development, and public speaking. Edward “Skip”

Gnehm's approach to professional training is fundamental. He points to the importance of the student's extracurricular work as many skills identified before are acquired outside the classroom. According to his point of view, engagement in student organizations gives students valuable experience in leadership roles, in developing and managing programs, and in developing interpersonal skills. Internships are invaluable in exposing students to the workplace environment, giving them concrete experience working with others. Study abroad is yet another experience that proves significant in developing attributes valuable to the international field. Understanding other cultures, speaking foreign languages, and coping with the unexpected are skills emphasized in the study abroad experience [9].

Edward "Skip" Gnehm also highlights the importance of volunteerism as it proves highly valuable in developing key skill sets such as understanding different cultures and navigating environments, unlike the ones with which students are familiar. Civic engagement develops new perspectives and requires patience and understanding. Faculty members play a key role in developing the skill sets students need to find employment in the international workplace.

He also states that it is very important for schools of international affairs to complement their faculty with professionals who have practical experience in their fields. Their role is even more important today, as schools focus on the practical skills needed in the foreign affairs profession. These practitioners bring their real-life experiences – and an ability to relate theoretical analysis to reality – into the classroom. They place theory as well as historical facts into context, acknowledging the impact of individuals and personalities, domestic politics and competing national interests, etc.

Robert Hutchings, dean of the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas, states that around the world diplomatic training is mostly confined to foreign language and area studies with a thin veneer of "how-to" instruction for junior diplomats. Thus, he supports the idea of more active involvement of practitioners in the educational process. Also, he blames academic research for being "too abstract and theoretical, written by academics for other academics". He metaphorically describes the situation as "the gulf that has developed between the worlds of learning and policy" [10].

The same point of view is supported by his British colleague, former UK Ambassador, and training expert, Charles Crawford. He says there are differences between the diplomatic theory and practice of Western diplomats. He emphasizes the idea of the changing character of the diplomatic theory itself as "besides the traditional formal academic approach, tackling the Vienna Convention, the legal basis for international trade and consular work, concepts of multi-polar power and international relations, new areas of Diplomatic Theory are being introduced. Diplomacy is sliced and diced to create new courses and plump research grant opportunities: Economic Diplomacy, Commercial Diplomacy, Climate Diplomacy. Crawford accuses the existing practice of

training diplomats of teaching "useless theory" and suggests introducing the following disciplines into the training course: records of conversations, i.e. teaching the art of "capturing key points of agreement and disagreement while conveying the sense of the meeting". Also, Crawford points out that the practical diplomatic training should include public speaking and communication skills, all necessary skills to easily maintain a dialogue. The career diplomat attaches particular importance to the ability to negotiate and act as a mediator which is being taught in the course of training through role-plays. Future diplomats should be taught the basics of media work and how to share information safely and professionally with media contacts [11]. It is necessary to mention that the British diplomat does not pay attention to the knowledge of the language and culture of the region necessary for the successful work of a diplomat. He is complimentary about the professional training at MGIMO and calls it "a world-renowned center of theory and relentless practice".

According to Jean-Christophe Mauduit and Marga Gual Soler, the international and area studies curriculum lacks disciplines that reinforce the connections between science, technology, and international affairs. They suggest introducing the epistemic culture of scientific research and its associated methods (publication, peer-review, and funding mechanisms) that is necessary to help establish international research collaborations into the curriculum. In addition, future professionals would benefit from joint education in cross-cutting issues, such as a deeper understanding of global scientific governance and the interaction between science, technology, and innovation and its repercussions on the economy, trade, defense, and geopolitics.

In their opinion, teaching approaches must include not only theory but also skills development. In order for science diplomats to perform their functions effectively, skills development can prove even more important than content knowledge. Jean-Christophe Mauduit and Marga Gual Soler suggest using experiential learning methods such as role-play simulations and interactive case studies to understand how the intersection between science and diplomacy plays out in the real world [12].

In China, the international and area studies curriculum includes courses of ideological importance. They build a value system that corresponds to the ideology and morality of the state. The Chinese try to resist the interference of alien values and western social theories. [13]. Thus, any educational program has mandatory ideological and political courses. International and area studies students are offered such courses as Basics of Law and Morality, Introduction to the Basic Principles of Marxism, Theory of Socialism with Chinese specificity. Electives include Chinese culture or Chinese philosophy. Computer Science and Physical Education are studied as general education disciplines in the amount of 144 hours. 720 academic hours are allocated for a foreign language study [3]. As K.S. Rana points out, in China "very high importance is given to foreign languages; the diplomatic service has interpreter-level experts in over 50 foreign languages, specialists are now

required to work in regions outside their zone of expertise, adding to their range of skills, as also the professionalism of the service" [15]. That's why Political Science, International Law, Theory of International Relations, Introduction to Diplomacy, International Organizations, Consular Service, Foreign Policy of the Assigned Region, Comparative Study of Political Systems, Arms Control courses are taught in two languages – native and foreign. This, undoubtedly, contributes to the formation of translation competencies of a future specialist of international and area studies in his/her professional field.

3 Conclusion.

The analysis of the international and area studies training experience has demonstrated the necessity to borrow the idea of a professionally applied orientation of language training, multilingual education (a balance between teaching using a native language with two foreign languages), as well as providing intensive teaching of a foreign language during internships in the target-language country. The idea of incorporating active teaching techniques and the involvement of professional practitioners in the educational process seems to be important. The training content must be constantly reviewed depending on the development of science and technology and their impact on the system of international affairs. Critical thinking, writing, political analysis, leadership development, and public speaking are highly recommended to be incorporated into the area studies curriculum. Its axiological component should be placed at the forefront of professional training. The joint implementation of all these principles should provide real professional training that will allow graduates of Russian universities to be competitive in the labor market and successfully work on a global scale.

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