

# ENHANCING THE YOUTH' PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH AND PROMOTING TOLERANCE: EXPERIENCE OF ORGANIZING A SUMMER SCHOOL

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## Abstract

Promoting the participation of the youth in research is considered to be one of the most important priorities of modern education, the successful implementation of which determines the succession and sustainability of science. To implement this priority, various types of knowledge transfer activities are organized. Summer schools are considered to be a successful form of non-formal education that provides a possibility to attract the youth to a research issue, deepen their knowledge and arouse interest in research in general. In addition, summer schools successfully develop young people's soft skills and provide an excellent experience of international communication, allowing them to meet colleagues and make friends.

Within the framework of the project No. Izp-2020 / 2-0136 "The Baltic Germans of Latgale in the context of socio-ethnic relations from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century", funded by the Latvian Council of Science, conducting interdisciplinary scientific research on the Baltic German cultural heritage in Latgale region, in the summer of 2021, the international scientific summer school "Baltic Germans' heritage in Latgale of the 16<sup>th</sup> – 20<sup>th</sup> century" was organized. The aim of the paper is to analyse the scientific and educational specifics of the summer school, as well as other peculiarities of the activity determined by the theme of the project. At the end of the summer school, the participants provided both oral and written feedback, which is used in the paper to analyse the strengths and the weaknesses of the summer school. The peculiarities of the summer school were determined by the focus of the project on the research of the cultural heritage of the ethnic minority (Baltic Germans), which is especially relevant today, as it stimulates interest in the culture of ethnic minorities. By becoming better aware of this culture, the young people's tolerance is developed.

The Baltic German culture and history in the region of Latgale have not been thoroughly studied, therefore the summer school is of unique importance. It provided the participants with the opportunity to get informed about the results of recent and yet unpublished studies. At the same time, the organizers and lecturers of the summer school, who are also the researchers of the project, had the challenge to present the research results to the participants of the summer school in the most compelling way possible, so that they would be remembered and would arouse further interest. In order to achieve these results, lectures, workshops and field trips were organized. Thus, the participants had the opportunity to become aware of the Baltic German cultural heritage on-site and to understand its place in the multi-ethnic region of Latgale.

Keywords: summer school, non-formal education, tolerance, ethnic minority, research project.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The history of summer school dates back to the 1950s, when they were envisaged to employ children and young people in their school holidays and thus prevent them from joining criminal groups and other adverse effects of unfavourable social environment. It was later realized that summer schools could help students with their studies and explain issues that for some reason were difficult to understand or learn [1]. Soon, the use of summer schools broadened, i. e. students could use summer school as an alternative study period and acquire courses of the study programme in summer; the most talented students could deepen their knowledge in a certain field [2]. After the analysis of students' knowledge in spring and autumn, researchers have concluded that on average students lost one month of learning over the summer months [3]. Therefore, summer schools were recognized as an important tool for ensuring continuity of learning. The positive features of summer schools apply not only to their learners but also to their teachers, namely, it is emphasised that teachers gain additional experience in summer schools, learn new teaching methods and have additional opportunities to make profit [4].

Nowadays, summer schools of different orientations and duration have become popular activities required by students of different ages and levels. Their goals are various – from acquiring particular skills and abilities to general training and interesting pastimes. The funding of summer schools, as well as the motivation of students and lecturers to participate, also varies.

The circumstances of the Covid-19 pandemic introduced significant changes to the whole system of education and it also affected the organization of summer schools. As in many other events, also the format of summer schools changed from on-site to virtual participation or hybrid forms. Due to the unpredictability of the situation, on-site summer schools became a particular challenge, especially when it is planned to be organized for an international audience. Although the pandemic has affected the whole world, the restrictions vary from country to country, moreover, they are constantly changing. It is therefore difficult to ensure the possibility of organizing a summer school due to restrictions introduced in a particular country. There is also a risk of not gathering a sufficient number of participants, as travel permits also vary when crossing different national borders. However, the on-site format has significant advantages provided by human contact, which ensures the successful acquisition of both expertise and soft skills.

Studies show that the Covid19 pandemic with the online study offer “has exposed the value proposition of universities. Students are unlikely to commit large amounts of time and money to consume online content. Students go to universities to meet great people, have inspiring conversations with faculty, collaborate with researchers in the laboratory and experience the social life on campus.” [5] Today's online study offer cannot meet the above-mentioned needs of students. To do this, “universities will need to reinvent learning environments so that digitalisation expands and complements, but does not replace, student-teacher and student-student relationships.” [5] Online studies not only threaten students' desire and motivation to study, but can also have a negative impact on national economic development in the longer term. Hanushek and Woessman have used historical growth regressions to estimate the long-run economic impact of this loss of the equivalent to one-third of a year of schooling for the current student cohort. Because learning loss will lead to skill loss, and the skills people have relate to their productivity, gross domestic product (GDP) could be 1.5% lower on average for the remainder of the century [6].

Acknowledging that there are also quite a number of advantages of online learning related to the possibility to organize time more freely, and evaluating the above-mentioned advantages of face-to-face learning, it was decided to organize a summer school in one of the Latvian cities. The aim of the paper is to analyse the scientific and educational specifics of the organized scientific summer school, as well as other peculiarities of the activity determined by the theme of the project.

## **2 METHODOLOGY**

The organization of the school was envisaged in the project description as one of the knowledge dissemination activities in the second half of the project implementation, when the first research results would already be available. Given the pandemic situation, which was already in its initial phase at the time of the project submission, it was agreed that if the restrictions did not allow for an on-site event, the summer school would take place in a virtual environment. However, having analysed the advantages of both types of learning, the face-to-face format was chosen as more appropriate to the specifics of the summer school and the project.

The organization of the summer school started two months before its time, i.e. in the middle of July the application was announced by sending the information to colleagues and posting it on academic and social networks. The pandemic situation determined that the time between the call for application and the date of the receipt of applications was only three weeks, as no one could predict whether it would be possible to organize the school on site. The summer school was envisaged for students who have completed a bachelor's programme, are studying for a master's or doctoral degree.

Since the application time was short and the themes of the summer school were rather specific, the number of interested people was not large. Most of the students applied being encouraged by their lecturers; therefore, the previously established personal scientific contacts played an important role in the organization of the summer school. As a result, 16 students from Latvia, Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Poland applied. Their research interests are related to the study of multiculturalism and the history of Latgale (Latgale is one of the historical regions of Latvia. It is the easternmost region and is north of the Daugava River). Both the project researchers with doctoral degrees and the volunteer lecturers from Latvia, Poland and Belarus were invited to participate and conduct classes. In total, 26

lecturers and students participated in the summer school. This number of participants was optimal and complied with the project description.

After the end of the summer school, the participants (both lecturers and students) gave feedback in free-form: they described the event in three aspects – themes, methodology, organization – providing evaluation and recommendations. 25 feedbacks were received, and the anonymity of the respondents was fully respected. The feedbacks were coded by employing NVivo 12 software, both in Latvian and English. A thematic analysis of interviews was undertaken using an iterative, inductive approach to the generation of codes and themes guided by the aims and objectives of the analysis. At the commencement of coding, case classification was established. The analysis of the feedback is important not only to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the organized summer school, but also to gain experience that can be used in future. Researchers Hattie, Timperley, Zierer, etc., conducted meta-syntheses relating to the effects of feedback on student achievement. These indicated a high effect (between 0.70 and 0.79) of feedback on student achievement in general [7]; [8]; [9]. Although these studies are mainly related to the feedback provided by lecturers to students, their results are largely related to the situation when students and lecturers provide feedback on the event. In addition, given the high level of motivation of the school organizers, significant improvement can be achieved.

### 3 RESULTS

#### 3.1 Peculiarities of the project

The peculiarities of the summer school were determined by the focus of the project on the research of the cultural heritage of the ethnic minority (Baltic Germans), which is especially relevant today, as it stimulates interest in the culture of ethnic minorities and regional studies. By becoming better aware of this culture, the young people's tolerance is developed.

The goal of the project is to determine the place of the German community in the multicultural environment of Latgale in a diachronic and synchronic perspective on the basis of certain methodological principles, analysis of various sources (legislative enactments, set of laws, ego-documents, folklore materials, etc.) and introducing new diverse sources into the scientific circulation. The project emphasizes the level of perception. The researchers focus on three facets of perception: the Germans through the eyes of the Germans themselves, the Germans as viewed by other ethnic groups and other ethnic groups as viewed by the Germans. The Germans who arrived and settled in the territory of Latvia are called Baltic Germans in Latvian historiography. The Germans have lived in the territory of Latvia longer than other ethnic groups – since the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Therefore, their influence here has been deeper and more sustainable.

Latgale is a cultural and historical region in the eastern part of Latvia. The territorial identity of today's Latgale is traced back to the Principality of Jersika at the turn of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, which in the Latin texts is referred to as Lethia, and as Lotigola in the Old Russian records. In the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Latgalian lands occupied the territory of modern Latgale, as well as the eastern part of Vidzeme. The territory Lethia inhabited by Latgalians gave the name for the whole of Latvia. After the Livonian War (1558 – 1583) the Latgalian lands became part of the Polish-Lithuanian State. In 1629, after the Polish-Swedish War (1600-1629) the Truce of Altmark was signed. According to the treaty, Latgale (*Województwo inflanckie* [the Inflanty Voivodeship]) was separated from Vidzeme which remained under the Swedish rule. In 1772, after the first partition of Poland, Latgale became part of the Russian Empire. [10] "Latgale was part of other governorates unlike Vidzeme and Kurzeme, and it was not perceived as a truly Latvian territory by people of Vidzeme and Kurzeme up to 1905-1906". [11] This increased the gap between Latgale and other regions of Latvia. Only in 1918 was it possible to unite the territories. However, the administrative isolation of Latgale, which lasted almost 300 years, determined the peculiar economic, social, and cultural development of the region, which differs from the other regions of Latvia. This became the reason for the "exclusion" of Latgale territory, which is still observed today. In February 2019, a special subcommittee was formed in the Saeima (the Parliament of Latvia) to address the problematic issues in Latgale; the subcommittee will consider the economic and social problems, as well as try and solve the issue of cultural identity in the region. To solve the problem of "exclusion" of Latgale and to achieve social cohesion in the future, it is necessary to consider the origins of this problem. It means exploring the socio-ethnic processes from the 17<sup>th</sup> century until the restoration of Latvia's independence, as well as the impact of these processes on the development of a peculiar cultural environment in Latgale.

The chronological framework of the project is from the 17<sup>th</sup> century till the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. That was the time when the state of Latvia had not yet been formed, and the territory was under the rule of different states – the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and then the Russian Empire. However, that was also the time when the prerequisites for the future national state were formed, as well as the time of the most intense interethnic communication.

Latvia is a young multinational state; therefore, the consolidation of the society is necessary for its existence. This is one of the primary issues in the internal policy of Latvia. The consolidation of the society is based on intercultural dialogue, which is possible only if people are interested in each other. Interest in each other contributes to tolerance, which is one of the values and the guarantor of the development of the state. The research implemented within this project is aimed at developing the interest of the Latvian society in the life of the German society, as well as other ethnic groups. The research will show the possibilities of intercultural communication and dialogue in the diachronic and the synchronic perspectives.

### **3.2 Analysis of the opinions of the summer school lecturers and students**

Classes at the summer school were organized in three forms: lectures, workshops and field trips. Special attention was also paid to students' individual reports, when the lecturers provided recommendations for research. Young scientists – doctoral and master's students from Latvia and abroad – were offered methodologically and thematically diverse classes. The duration of the school was seven days. It is noteworthy, that the participants travelled the way from the place of arrival to Latvia to the site of the summer school and back by one vehicle, at the same time implementing a field study and getting acquainted with important objects of Latvian culture.

The focus was on three issues: the Baltic German cultural heritage in Latgale; research problems of the socio-ethnic relations in Latvia and abroad; and issues of source studies. In the summer school special attention was paid to the study of heraldry and genealogy, interethnic and interfaith relations, the relations of various national groups with the cultural environment, the society and the state in the 16<sup>th</sup> – 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, as well as the cross-border processes in the territory of Latgale. The young researchers had the opportunity to participate in 13 lectures and 3 seminars on these themes. The school participants showed great interest in all the themes, asked many questions and actively participated in discussions after each class. The young scientists especially appreciated the opportunity to get acquainted with the cultural environment of Latgale on site by participating in the field trips to Krāslava, Aglona and Daugavpils, where the Baltic German cultural sites in Latgale were studied.

An important feature of the summer school is the large number of lecturers, which ensured a high methodological and scientific level of classes and diversity of lecture topics; that in turn stimulated student participation in the research in the longer term, which is seen as an important aspect of modern higher education both by researchers [12]; [13] and education policy makers [16]; [17]. Researchers recognize that most undergraduate students are motivated to pursue academic goals [13]; [14]; [15], besides, undergraduate student research increases success in various fields of the student's chosen academic endeavour [13]. Students involved in research have reported benefits in general educational skills such as written or oral communication, research specific benefits and skills in various research areas, data analysis, etc. [12].

In general, the lecturers and the students of the summer school highly appreciated the thematic and methodological diversity, the real interest of the participants and the free atmosphere that stimulated the exchange of ideas: "The School of Young Researchers was organized at a high level, which contributed to its successful work. The school brought together renowned researchers from Latvia, Belarus and Poland. That allowed the students not only to get acquainted with the results of the scholars' research, but also to really feel the atmosphere of multilingualism and intercultural interaction. It is important that the conducted classes not only acquainted students with the theory or specific results of their lecturers' research, but also had a practical component, where students could consolidate their knowledge or receive specialist consultations." (Lecturer 2, male)

The international team of highly qualified lecturers has managed to conduct classes at a high scientific level. They were interesting not only for the students, but also for the lecturers themselves. The lecturers actively participated in all classes and engaged in discussions, which often continued long after the end of the formal programme.

"First of all, it should be noted that the organizers of the school managed to attract high-level specialists and listeners. The material presented during the classes was rich and extremely interesting, which for many became a pleasant discovery and allowed to consider the history of Latgale and Latvia from a new

perspective." (Lecturer 1) "It is important that the programme of the school was designed so that it ensured the possibility of discussion of reports and follow-up discussions." (Lecturer 3) "Almost every day (and every evening) we exchanged our experiences, regardless of age and academic title." (Student 7)

The participants also pointed out the important role of the summer school in the process of education, in researching the theme, in promoting scientific cooperation and disseminating knowledge. "For my part, I can assure you that I left the school, convinced of the correctness and significance of this initiative. It has served for the benefit of science, international cooperation and dissemination of knowledge about the history and cultural heritage of Latgale." (Lecturer 8)

Although the official languages of the summer school were Latvian and English, other languages that many participants knew – Polish, German, Russian – were also used in informal communication. Knowledge of these languages is important when studying the multicultural environment of Latgale, the historical sources of which can be found in the mentioned languages. The participants of the school perceived this aspect as a factor that enriches communication: "Communication in four languages was a pleasant challenge, it enriched both communication and knowledge" (Student 5) Thus, the multicultural environment of Latgale was also manifested in the activities of the school.

The participants of the school positively assessed also its organization. "A well-thought-out cultural programme made it possible to get acquainted with the sights of Latgale and Daugavpils, get to know the school participants in an informal setting, establish contacts and discuss plans for further cooperation." (Lecturer 3) It should be noted that it is important for participants to feel comfortable not only in the organized formal events (lectures, workshops, field trips), but also in informal communication that takes place outside the envisaged programme. The professional care (travel directions, various formalities, taking into account individual wishes, etc.) and excellent living conditions (transport to and from Riga, accommodation and catering) were appreciated. "I was very surprised when I found out at the end of the school that it was the organizers' first experience in implementing this kind of event, which brings together teachers and students from different countries for a short period of time. Everything was so systematically organized and thought out to the smallest detail! Every day, I really enjoyed the balance maintained by the organizers confidently and thoughtfully, allowing for the scientific, educational and cognitive elements of the programme to naturally complement each other, but at the same time not prevail over one another." (Lecturer 5)

The summer school also contributed to the promotion of the cultural environment of Latgale and Latvia, which in the long run can affect the development of cultural tourism. "The school has become an excellent advertisement for Latvia and its ethno-confessional diversity, it laid the foundation for scientific contacts of both lecturers and students. It is important that none of the participants in the school was casual, each made an important contribution to the school and was truly interesting for others. I consider that the number of participants was optimal. I am afraid that increasing this number would "erode" the obvious privileges of communication enjoyed by the members of small and medium-sized groups." (Student 1) "Personally for me, the summer school in Daugavpils was the opportunity to get to know the country that I visited for the first time and it was an acquaintance in its best sense." (Student 2) "I got to know Latgale not only thanks to interesting trips, reports and discussions, but first of all thanks to people." (Student 15)

Although each participant found something particularly interesting in the summer school programme and in the cultural environment of Latgale, everyone admitted that the time and the acquired knowledge would remain in their memory for a long time. In informal communication, the participants expressed a wish to organize such an event on a regular basis.

The weaknesses the summer school mentioned by the participants were mainly related to the insufficient implementation of individual wishes and interests. There were some weaknesses mentioned that are related to various areas – the themes, methodology, organization. However, each of these wishes was different – one student lacked general lectures on the history of the Baltic Germans in Latvia, one lecturer indicated that there could have been a larger number of workshops, another student noted that the food offer included meat products too often.

## 4 CONCLUSIONS

The Baltic German culture and history in the region of Latgale have not been thoroughly studied, therefore the summer school was of unique importance. It provided the participants with the opportunity to get informed about the results of recent and yet unpublished studies. At the same time, the organizers and lecturers of the summer school, who are also the researchers of the project, had the challenge to

present the research results to the participants of the summer school in the most compelling way possible, so that they would be remembered and would arouse further interest. In order to achieve the results, lectures, workshops and field trips were organized. Thus, the participants had the opportunity to become aware of the Baltic German cultural heritage on-site and to understand its place in the multi-ethnic region of Latgale.

In order to analyse the strengths and the weaknesses of the summer school, the participants were asked to write a review, the analysis of which could be useful for the organization of such events in the future. The lecturers and the students acknowledged that the school provided an opportunity to establish new scientific contacts, to deepen knowledge not only in the issues of studying the Baltic German cultural heritage in Latgale, but also in the analysis of the peculiarities of the multicultural environment in the diachronic aspect. In general, the lecturers and the students very much appreciated the thematic and methodological diversity, the real interest of the participants and the free atmosphere that encouraged the exchange of ideas. A special particularity of the school was its multilingual environment and the high scientific level, which was ensured by Latvian and foreign lecturers. The summer school also contributed to the promotion of multicultural environment, which can have a long-term impact on the development of cultural tourism. The weaknesses of the summer school, mentioned by the participants, were mainly related to the insufficient implementation of certain individual wishes and interests.

On the whole, it can be concluded and hoped that the summer school and the multicultural environment of Latgale, where communication takes place in different languages and everyone finds something close to their culture and interests, has promoted intercultural understanding and tolerance. Communication between lecturers and students as equals, their genuine interest in the themes of the summer school and the success of the school have promoted the students' involvement in research.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The research is funded by the Latvian Council of Science, project "The Baltic Germans of Latgale in the context of socio-ethnic relations from the 17<sup>th</sup> till the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century", project No. lzp-2020/2-0136.

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