

INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION PROJECTS AND PROGRAMMES

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THE BALTIC UNIVERSITY PROGRAMME ON THE EVE OF THE 20TH ANNIVERSARY

This article is dedicated to the Baltic University programme — a unique educational project aiming at the sustainable development of the Baltic Sea region. International interuniversity cooperation facilitates intercultural communication between students and researchers, and creates new prospects for joint research, which opens up an opportunity for solving common environmental and social problems in the Baltic Sea region.

Key words: the Baltic University programme, an educational project, interuniversity cooperation, sustainable development, the Baltic Sea region.

In February 1991, in the city of Kalmar (Sweden), Uppsala University held a conference dedicated to planning an unusual educational project. The conference brought together university employees and researchers from the Baltic Sea region. The 33 participants included representatives of the universities in Kaliningrad and in Saint Petersburg and, among them, one of the authors of the article. The idea of the project was extremely ambitious and revolutionary even for the time of the first significant changes to the political map of Central and Eastern Europe. It was the joint development of an educational programme aimed at simultaneous involvement of students from the Baltic region (defined as the drainage basin of the Baltic Sea) in finding solutions to the problems of its environmental condition and, as a result, the condition of the Baltic Sea as common heritage. The training was expected to be carried out by means of satellite television, which would bring together thousands of students from dozens of participating universities of that part of Europe; the English language was acknowledged as a common means of communication in the non-English-speaking region (later, this "variant" of English was called *Baltic English*). These were the targets set. Many of them turned out to be unachievable. However, the passion and enthusiasm of the inspirer, organiser and long-standing (over 15 years) project leader — Lars Rydén, the professor of Uppsala University, encouraged dozens of teachers and experts at the universities throughout the region to immerse in the work, as a result of which the first *The Baltic Sea and its environment* satellite TV training course was launched in September 1991.

The Baltic University programme involves interuniversity cooperation established in order to facilitate sustainable and democratic regional development in the countries of the Baltic Sea basin. As a result of long-term strenuous efforts, the participants and in particular the founder of the programme, Lars Rydén, managed to form a community of energetic and qualified teachers devoted to the idea of the Baltic University. A number of courses were organised, several books were written, and a series of films was created thanks to their active participation. At the moment, the Baltic University is a world-famous international regional university network bringing together more than 225 universities from 13 countries of the Baltic Sea basin. The programme offers courses for undergraduate and master's students and lays the foundations for joint research. Several thousands of students undertake the courses every year. The programme covers the major problems of the environment and sustainable development of the Baltic region. It is coordinated by the secretariat from the University of Uppsala (Sweden). Regional centres are hosted at the leading universities of the following cities: Turku (Finland), Łódź (Poland), Kaunas (Lithuania), Saint Petersburg (Russia), Kaliningrad (Russia), Tallinn (Estonia), Riga (Latvia), Copenhagen (Denmark), Hamburg (Germany), Zittau/Görlitz (Germany), Minsk (Belarus), Nitra (Slovakia), Lviv (Ukraine), Ostrava-Poruba (Czech Republic).

Since the very start of the programme implementation, the emphasis has been placed on the study into the opportunities of sustainable development in the Baltic Sea region with a focus on building joint resources for the purposes of sustainable development, among which education is a priority. Today, the programme is an acknowledged world leader in education aimed at sustainable development.

There are two regional programme centres in the Russian Federation: one of them has been operating at Saint Petersburg State University since 1991, the other has been functioning at Kaliningrad State University (today, the Immanuel Kant Baltic Federal University (BFU)) since 1997.

The most important educational achievements of Russian universities in the implementation of the basic provisions of the Bologna process within the programme are as follows.

1) Curriculum development.

Some universities have adapted the courses developed under the auspices of the programme to the local conditions and national educational standards, following the modern requirements stemming from the growing interest for regional studies, increasing ecologisation of education, the acknowledgement of the role of cross-cultural communication. As a result, a number of courses could be included into the curricula. For example, the *Baltic region* course was, to a great extent, incorporated into a special course on the socio-economic geography of the Baltic region, while the *Sustainable development of the Baltic region* course was included under the original title into the curriculum developed for the students of the economic, social and political geography field of study offered by the Faculty of Geography at BFU.



2) Curriculum content development.

Despite the exceptional role of the courses developed within the Baltic University programme, the information presented in them is becoming out of date. The following measures are taken to maintain the relevance of the courses:

— the modernisation of the courses according to the changing socioeconomic situation in the region, the adaptation of the existing textbooks and teaching aids, translation of foreign literature on the course subject and the use of available Russian sources and periodicals;

— the teachers of the Baltic University regularly participate in workshops and schools organised both by the programme and the participating universities;

— teachers from the partner universities present lectures; specialists in the corresponding fields are invited to deliver public lectures;

— new courses are being developed with the assistance of invited leading professors and experts.

3) The introduction of the credit transfer system.

The Baltic University programme was one of the first to adopt the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS). Each programme course accounts for a certain number of the ECTS credits, which gives the Baltic University students a chance to study at partner universities and gain corresponding credits (which is especially popular in Sweden and Finland). The number of the ECTS credits per a course ranges from 7.5 to 30 depending on the scope of the course. Russian students are granted a unique opportunity to gain a substantial number of the ECTS credits at their home universities.

4) The development of distance learning technologies.

The Baltic University was established as a new structure, which extensively applies distance learning methods. It is not a coincidence that the first BFU programme was organised on the premises of the Telecommunication training centre. At Saint Petersburg State University, it still uses the facilities and infrastructure of the Fenix distance learning centre. These regional centres are fully equipped for lecture broadcasts, audio-, video-, and Internet-conferences. The courses are provided with printed and electronic textbooks, video materials, and a CD data base. The Uppsala secretariat offers active Internet support. Audio and Internet-conferences held by groups of students from different countries studying the same programme course in the same semester are extremely popular. These discussions of topical issues create a basis for mutual development and cross-cultural communication. The students get an opportunity to improve their language skills as well.

5) Training process optimisation.

The Baltic University programme pays special attention to course optimisation. In order to keep the information presented in the textbooks and academic literature up-to-date, advanced training workshops for the teachers of the programme are held annually with the assistance of the leading researchers and professors of the Baltic region universities. The teachers are granted a unique opportunity to get acquainted with the modern lines of re-

search in the field of sustainable development, humanities and socio-economic studies, and gain experience in mastering advanced teaching technologies. Annually, international conferences are organised for the most active students in different countries of the Baltic region. The student conference held by the Polish national centre of the programme (on the premises of the Technical University of Lodz) received wide recognition. Students do not only increase their educational level when visiting lectures delivered by the leading professors and researchers invited to hold workshops and master classes but also make friends throughout the Baltic region. Regional conferences attracting students and teachers are held annually.

6) Other activities.

New courses on the most topical issues pertaining to the Baltic Sea region are being developed.

Summer schools are organised for students participating in the programme.

The opportunities for international research projects are being discussed.

Joint publications are being prepared.

The Open University is functioning under the auspices of the BFU Programme Centre. Students are offered "*The environment of the Baltic Sea region*" and "*The water management in the Baltic Sea region*" courses.

Since the mid-90s, the programme has been cooperating with various non-governmental organisations, whose activity is connected with putting into effect the idea of sustainable development. For example, a strategic alliance was formed with TV broadcasters with a view to information dissemination. The programme ensured cooperation with the representatives of national authorities (for instance, the Environmental Protection Agency) and, what is more important, the local authorities.

The SUPERBS project which was launched in 1998 created a network of cities and universities supporting the idea of sustainable development and brought together eight countries. One of the results of the project is the establishment of the Baltic University Urban Forum — BUUF. The project became a resource for universities, since it was aimed, among other things, at university education in the field of sustainable development of society. It also serves as an information resource for cities and towns, since the reports and materials published became guidelines for sustainable urban development. A total of 35 work packages aimed at sustainable urban planning, development of democratic processes and environmental management were developed in 1999—2002. The "*Sustainable development of societies*" master's course (15 ECTS) was developed in the framework of the project. Today, it is running successfully at a number of universities within the Baltic University programme network.

Another project — *Healthy Ecosystems — Sustainable Agriculture* — was completed in 2009. It focused on the study of rural territories. The leader of the project was Dr. Christine Jakobsson, the new director of the Baltic University programme. A textbook dedicated to sustainable agricul-

ture, land use, rural development, ecosystem health and management is being prepared for the publication within the project.

The programme keeps pace with the modern requirements. It has turned into a solid educational platform for the implementation of ideas of sustainable development. A good example of that is a regular conference of rectors held once in two years where the universities are engaged in discussing the most topical issues of the higher education development in the 21st century.

It is noteworthy that the scope of the Baltic University programme in numerous aspects corresponds to the key provisions of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea approved by the European Council on October 26, 2009 and aimed to tackle the following tasks:

- fostering the conditions for sustainable environment;
- increasing the well-being of the residents of the region;
- ensuring the accessibility and attractiveness of the region;
- providing security and safety to the residents of the region.

A sign of the recognition of the Baltic University programme as an important actor on the international political scene is its approval in December 2009 as a strategic partner of the Council of the Baltic Sea States, which is a guarantee of further effective cooperation aimed at facilitating the sustainable development in the Baltic region.