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И. А. Щеглова

CAN STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES FACILITATE THE DEVELOPMENT OF THEIR SOFT SKILLS?

CAN STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES FACILITATE THE DEVELOPMENT OF THEIR SOFT SKILLS?

МОЖЕТ ЛИ ВОВЛЕЧЕННОСТЬ СТУДЕНТОВ ВО ВНЕУЧЕБНЫЕ МЕРОПРИЯТИЯ СПОСОБСТВОВАТЬ РАЗВИТИЮ МЯГКИХ НАВЫКОВ?

*Irina A. SHCHEGLOVA*¹ — M.Ed., Ph.D. Candidate, Junior Researcher, Centre of Sociology of Higher Education
E-MAIL: irina.shcheglova@hse.ru
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5949-9617>

ЩЕГЛОВА Ирина Александровна — магистр в области педагогических наук, кандидат на присуждение степени PhD, младший научный сотрудник центра социологии высшего образования, Национальный исследовательский университет «Высшая школа экономики», Москва, Россия
E-MAIL: irina.shcheglova@hse.ru
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5949-9617>

¹ National Research University Higher School of Economics, Moscow, Russia

Abstract. Critical thinking and teamwork have never been more important than they are in the 21st century. These skills

Аннотация. Такие навыки, как критическое мышление и работа в команде, приобрели особую важность в XXI веке.

are the key to success in the job market and an essential part of the university curriculum. Educators and education policy makers around the world look for ways to develop and improve these skills, for example, through student engagement in various activities on campus. The aim of this study is to investigate the contribution of student extracurricular engagement to the development of student soft skills.

The current study is based on the project “Student experience at the research university (SERU)”. The sample involves 3,344 respondents representing undergraduate students enrolled in different majors at a Russian national research university in the academic year of 2016-2017. Binary logistic regression was used to estimate the contribution of student extracurricular engagement. Results suggest that there is a statistically significant difference between the distributions of gains in interpersonal and teamwork skills of those students who were and those who were not involved in extracurricular activities.

The purpose of the study is to show that engaging students in the activities beyond classroom but closely tied to educational process increases their human and social capital up to the level required by higher education. Extracurricular activities facilitate student interpersonal communication and help develop teamwork competency. The findings might encourage university administration and academic staff to consider creating and promoting a place where students could reflect upon what they have learned and practice their skills.

Они считаются основополагающим условием успеха на рынке труда и важным аспектом учебной программы в университете. Во всем мире педагоги и политики в сфере образования ищут пути развития и совершенствования этих навыков у студентов, например, вовлекая их в различные мероприятия, реализуемые на базе университета. Цель данного исследования — оценить вклад участия студентов во внеучебных мероприятиях в развитии навыков межличностного общения и работы в команде.

Данное исследование было проведено в рамках проекта «Студенческий опыт в исследовательском университете» (SERU). В выборку вошли студенты-бакалавры разных направлений подготовки, проходящие обучение в российском национальном исследовательском университете в 2016/2017 учебном году (N = 3344 респондентов). Для оценки вклада студенческой вовлеченности во внеучебные мероприятия в развитии навыков межличностного общения и работы в команде используется бинарная логистическая регрессия. Полученные результаты подтверждают наличие статистически значимых различий в приросте навыков межличностного общения и работы в команде у студентов, участвующих во внеучебной деятельности и не участвующих.

Задача данной работы — показать, что вовлечение студентов в деятельность, выходящую за рамки образовательного процесса, происходящего в аудитории, но тесно связанную с ним, способствует росту их человеческого и социального капитала до уровня, требуемого высшим образованием.

Вовлечение студентов во внеучебную деятельность университетом способствует развитию у них навыков межличностного общения и работы в команде. Полученные результаты призваны мотивировать преподавательский и административный состав университета на создание и продвижение площадок, на которых студенты могли бы лучше понять изученный материал, соотнести имеющиеся и полученные знания, а также практиковать новые навыки.

Keywords: student experience, student engagement, extracurricular activities, soft skills, teamwork skills

Ключевые слова: студенческий опыт, вовлеченность студентов, внеучебные мероприятия, мягкие навыки, навыки работы в команде

Introduction

There is considerable evidence that soft skills such as team work, creativity, intercultural communication and leadership, enable people to become more successful in academic life and personal growth [Casner-Lotto, Barrington, 2006; Strayhorn, 2008; Strielkowski, Kiseleva, Popova, 2018]. Apart from specific technical knowledge that students acquire at university, soft skills constitute a fundamental element of success in the job market, and thus training in these skills become an essential aspect of the curriculum and it reflects the quality of higher education [Vasiliev et al., 2015; Dvorkin, 2016; Deming, 2017; OECD, 2017]. Educators agree that education should go beyond memorizing of certain facts and figures. Educational standards in many countries as well as in Russia and internationally set the ability to work in teams, collaborate with each other as priority learning outcomes for graduates besides knowledge in a specific field.

Looking for ways to increase students' potential, educators and researchers concentrate mostly on what occurs in the classroom [Pascarella, 2001], and the power of the extracurricular sphere is often overlooked. The extracurricular sphere typically includes activities which goes beyond the scope of the academic curricular, occurs outside the normal classroom time and does not require a grade or an academic credit. It can take various forms, for example, research projects, cultural events, art, sports, community service and other activities intended to enrich the learning experience. Researchers point out that the extracurricular sphere of university environment can offer students various opportunities to foster higher order thinking and soft skills [Astin, 1993, 1999; Pascarella, Terenzini, 2005]. Extracurricular activities such as participation in student clubs/organizations give them a chance to learn the values of teamwork, individual and group responsibility, competition, diversity, a sense of

culture and community, and critical thinking [Kuh, 1995]. Extracurricular activities can serve as a channel to reinforce lessons learned in the classroom and apply skills in a real-world context. Besides, students who are actively involved in sport activities and student organizations/ clubs have lower risk of depression [Fredricks, Eccles, 2006; Eime et al., 2013].

If U. S. and European universities offer various types of extracurricular activities, such as sport, music, art, academic clubs, in Russian universities an extracurricular life is not highly developed. Despite the fact that it is positively perceived by Russian students, a few of them are ready to take the initiative to organize a community with a specific mission [Ivanova, Logvinova, 2017]. Moreover, as some studies revealed, many students are not aware of student life activities in their institution as such activities are rarely supported and promoted by institutions [Belikova, 2002].

Studies conducted in international universities since the late 1990s demonstrate different results: some research indicates the positive impact of student extracurricular engagement on academic outcomes, while others show negative or mixed results [Pascarella, Seifert, Blaich, 2010; Kuh, Hu, Vesper, 2000; Brint, Cantwell, 2010; Wilson et al., 2014].

The goal of this study is to investigate the contribution of students' extracurricular engagement to the fostering academic outcomes such as interpersonal and teamwork skills. The study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. Does the students' involvement in extracurricular activities increase likelihood of improving soft skills such as interpersonal and teamwork skills?
2. To what extent does the students' involvement in different extracurricular activities contribute to the development of soft skills such as interpersonal and teamwork skills?

Literature Review

International studies in the area of the development of student learning outcomes point to the fact that extracurricular engagement can foster student cognitive and affective development [Terenzini et al., 1995; Huang, Chang, 2004]. It was found that students' class and out-of-class experiences both made positive, statistically significant contributions to freshman year-end critical thinking scores controlling for pre-college characteristics [Terenzini et al., 1995]. Besides, existing studies show that involvement in different student organizations can provide different results. For example, participation in political and creative organizations increases gains in academic achievements, while participation in sport and religious organizations does not show any significant effect [Baker, 2008]. If an extracurricular sphere has already become an essential part of student life in US universities, it is rarely supported and promoted by Russian universities [Belikova, 2002]. There is a belief among Russian students that 'the administration/faculty will not approve their idea', 'it is impossible to put together a team of like-minded people' [Ivanova, Logvinova, 2017: 7436]. Such reluctance to extend the extracurricular sphere of university life can be explained by the lack of human and financial resources of smaller regional universities. However, Russian research and federal universities see the extracurricular sphere as a platform where students can build their social capital and increase students sense of belonging

to home institution which helps to sustain strong relations after their graduation. As the results drawn from 27 semi-structured in-depth interviews with students enrolled at two Russian universities (a national research university and a federal university) show that they can choose from a variety of activities related to research, art, sport, governance socially important projects, where students can practice their public speaking, time-management, organizational and leadership skills [Bekova, Kasharin, 2018]. As the authors believe, these skills can be fostered due to the collective nature of extracurricular activities, when students place themselves in teams to work on a common task [Ibid.]. In other words, student clubs and organizations may create strong communities through which students build meaningful social connections with other students and faculty which they believe can be useful in their future career [Ibid.]. On the other hand, student organizations resemble with real companies and corporations where students can play a role of the CEOs of their own experience, take actions and bear responsibility for them.

From the described literature, it is possible to draw the conclusion that a systematic understanding of the nature and benefits of undergraduate student engagement in extracurricular activities is still lacking and this study is aimed to fill this gap.

Methodology of Research

The current study is based on the Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) Project which is a comprehensive online survey that relates to students' learning and engagement at major public research-intensive universities in the USA, Russia, Europe, China and Japan. The sample consists of undergraduate students of different majors enrolled at a Russian research-intensive university in the academic year 2016—2017 and equals to 3,344 respondents. The response rate was 22%. As researchers mention, online surveys are much less likely to achieve high response rates compared to surveys administered on paper [Nulty, 2008]. Declining response rates is a problem that is a source of concern for all who conduct campus surveys. There are a number of reasons for this decline, including the proliferation of surveys and resulting survey fatigue, students' patterns of interacting with social media, and also suspicions about the uses of data by campus officials [Porter, Whitcomb, Weizer, 2004; Gruzdev, 2013].

All undergraduate students received an email with an invitation to participate in a web-based online survey on their experience at university. Students' participation in this survey was voluntary, they may refuse to take part in the research or exit the survey at any time without penalty. The collected data were cleaned and anonymized. The descriptive statistics of the sample and the general population is presented in Table 1.

Since the distributions of the sample on the variable 'gender' and 'year of study' were different from the selected population, the technique of weighting adjustment was implemented to present some descriptive statistics and draw conclusions on our sample.

The variable 'gains in interpersonal and teamwork skills' was calculated from the question '*Please rate your level of proficiency in the following areas* **when you started at this campus and now**. The response categories were ranged from 'Very Poor' to 'Excellent' and then were recorded in the dichotomous variable characterizing the

changes in the level of students' learning gains in the process of learning ('did not change' and 'increased').

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of the Sample and the General Population

Variables	Sample	General Population
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	32 %	40 %
Female	68 %	60 %
<i>Year of studies</i>		
1 year	42 %	35 %
2 year	26 %	25 %
3 year	16 %	19 %
4 year	16 %	21 %
<i>Academic Achievements</i>		
Average Grade	7,6	7,3

The prevailing view in higher education research is that self-reported learning gains lack validity [Porter, 2013]. However, there is evidence that method of self-anchored then and now comparisons (pretest ratings) used in the SERU survey provide valid indirect measures of learning outcomes [Thomson, 2017]. In addition, some research showed that student engagement measures based on self-reported data are significantly and positively related to perceived gains in learning [Zilvinskis, Masseria, Pike, 2017].

A binary logistic regression was utilized to explain the relationship between the dependent binary variable 'self-perceived interpersonal and teamwork skills' and the independent variable 'extracurricular engagement' accounting for confounding variables (gender, employment, grades, etc.).

To measure the student extracurricular engagement the following questions were used:

1. While a student at university have you been involved or are you currently involved in a student organization(s)? (No = 0; Yes = 1).
2. Performing community service or volunteer activities: How many hours do you spend in a typical week (7 days) on the following activities? (from 0 h. = 1 to 30 h. = 8).

Results of Research

As the results show, around 40 % of all respondents are members of students' organizations. The percentage of students participating in organizations remains more or less equal throughout the academic year and does not exceed 10 % per year of study (Table 2). Girls (27 %) are more active participants of students' organizations than boys (11 %) (Table 3).

Table 2. **Participation in student clubs by year of study (weighted)**

Cross tabulation Year of study * While a student at the HSE have you been involved or are you currently involved in a student organization(s)?					
			While a student at the HSE have you been involved or are you currently involved in a student organization(s)?		Total
			No	Yes	
Year of study	1	Count	381	228	609
		% of Total	16,7 %	10,0 %	26,7 %
	2	Count	284	203	487
		% of Total	12,4 %	8,9 %	21,3 %
	3	Count	292	216	508
		% of Total	12,8 %	9,5 %	22,2 %
	4	Count	443	238	681
		% of Total	19,4 %	10,4 %	29,8 %
Total		Count	1400	885	2285
		% of Total	61,3 %	38,7 %	100,0 %

Table 3. **Participation in student clubs by gender (weighted)**

Cross tabulation Gender * While a student at the HSE have you been involved or are you currently involved in a student organization(s)?					
			While a student at the HSE have you been involved or are you currently involved in a student organization(s)?		Total
			No	Yes	
Gender	Man	Count	418	259	677
		% of Total	18,3 %	11,3 %	29,6 %
	Woman	Count	983	626	1609
		% of Total	43,0 %	27,4 %	70,4 %
Total		Count	1401	885	2286
		% of Total	61,3 %	38,7 %	100,0 %

The findings of the binary logistic regression analysis indicate that participation in student organizations/clubs can foster the development of interpersonal and teamwork skills. According to the results, gender and employment off campus are not significant predictors, while grades and employment on campus have significant effect in the model (Table 4). Also, the results indicate the significant relationship of participation in extracurricular activities to increased sense of interpersonal and teamwork with the pattern of relationships varying by year in school. By the fourth year of study seniors perceive their skills at the highest potential.

Table 4. Binary logistic regression between student extracurricular engagement and learning outcomes

Variables	Self-perceived level of interpersonal and teamwork skills	
	B (S.E.)	Exp(B)
Student extracurricular engagement		
Being a member of student organizations/ clubs	,312 (.103) **	1,366
Performing community service or volunteer activities	,029 (.050)	1,030
Student characteristics		
Average grade	,124 (.042) **	1,132
Gender (female)	-,197 (.101)	,821
Course (1 course — reference group)		
2 course	,266 (.134) *	1,305
3 course	,693 (.132) ***	1,999
4 course	,810 (.125) ***	2,249
Employment on campus	,304 (.116)**	1,356
Employment off campus	-,099 (.097)	,905
Constant	-1,712 (.330)***	,180
Pseudo R ² Nagelkerke	0,071	
Prediction accuracy	61,1	

* $p \leq 0,05$; ** $p \leq 0,01$; *** $p \leq 0,001$.

Conclusions and Discussion

The study confirms that those students, who are engaged in extracurricular learning environment, show higher gains in interpersonal and teamwork skills in comparison to those students who are not. However, the percentage of students who show some interest and have time to join activities which go beyond the academic curricular is not high that was proved in the previous studies [Belikova, 2002; Bekova, Kasharin, 2018].

Knowing how to work with a team is an essential skill for a future career. Student organizations/clubs can be a valuable source of building network that can offer some career perspective later on. That is why these research findings should encourage administrators, faculty and policy makers to extend and support extracurricular opportunities for students.

Undoubtedly, educators and policy makers cannot but agree that the ability to think critically and collaborate with others have never been more important than in the 21st century. Years of practice and research show that it is not enough to make a few changes in pedagogical approaches of teachers. The core of higher education has to be altered, and it requires a serious transformation in the attitudes towards teaching process and organization of curriculum. Besides, while providing students with a platform for extracurricular activities, it is worth considering a balance between academic and extracurricular activities.

A premise of this work is that engaging in activities beyond the classroom but related to academic curriculum would increase the students' human and social capital to the normative importance that university places on higher education beyond the

Bachelor's degree. The extracurricular sphere has a chance to become an area where students can express their will, practice skills learned during lessons as well as develop a capacity for self-improvement.

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