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**CULTURAL AND EDUCATIONAL ASPECTS
OF PUBLICATIONS ON UNIVERSITY WEBSITES
(CASE STUDY OF REGIONAL UNIVERSITIES)**

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Abstract. The present work studies publications on the websites of two Russian regional universities (Chelyabinsk State University and South Ural State University, the Russian version) which are situated in the multicultural region and work with applicants from Asia and Africa. The unique history of the region may it possible to outline specific strategies and digital opportunities to reflect university life, including its cultural and educational components. It analyses positive and negative aspects of publications to attract local and foreign prospective students and pays special attention to news about cultural events. The research shows how publications reflect university policy and discusses strategies to improve cross-cultural activities.

The work studies the general overview of two university websites, their sliders, news sections as well as changes in the content during a six-month period. The slider of Chelyabinsk State University website differs by its simplicity of information presentation and lacks any unique character, reflecting the so-called “educational path” from childhood to university graduation. In comparison, the slider of South Ural State University website traditionally uses more pictures than the one of Chelyabinsk State University and shows the university policy and its international status.

The six-month period of watching the given websites signals about a positive tendency in the slider of South Ural State University where the number of pictures has been reduced from twelve to eight and the absence of “kaleidoscope” effect has become more comfortable for viewers to focus on the news they are interested in. In the slider of Chelyabinsk State University we can notice a negative tendency because the number of pictures has been reduced from four to two and it produces an effect of no

university life, which cannot attract any prospective students who look for friendly and lively atmosphere with implications for a possible successful future.

In the news section the research looks at the time period of updating, the presentation format and the content. The website of South Ural State University publishes news more often than Chelyabinsk State University. The high frequency of publications has its advantages (the evidence of lively university life) and disadvantages (viewers can miss some significant news). The number of news is similar on both websites (8 and 10, respectively). However, the key difference between two news sections is the visualization of news on the website of South Ural State University. It is especially important for international students. In the content of publications the priorities of university news at South Ural State University are the following: cross-cultural aspects, technologies, communication. Most pieces of news offer a mixture of these priorities. The subjects of publications on the website of Chelyabinsk State University are different depending on the period and have no permanent strategy. In the autumn of 2018 the news section told the viewers about cross-culture relations, prospective students, science and education while in the spring of 2019 they show the interest of the university in its personnel. Unfortunately, this positive idea almost neglects students, prospective students and science, and makes it ignore cross-cultural aspects.

The websites of universities should choose topics of publications much more carefully as the “clip mind” generation can detect “empty” news quite easily. Moreover, bad navigation and the absence of visualization can push off the young viewers. To attract prospective students, home and foreign ones, the public relations of universities should put an emphasis on the human-centered factor as communication and abilities connected with it are of great importance nowadays.

The international activity of universities should be shown through interaction of local students and cross-border ones. The current website versions reflect home and foreign students separately which should be overcome in the future.

Keywords: education, culture, prospective students, foreign students, space

Introduction

In circumstances where internet technologies rule almost every sphere of our life, universities try to use all digital opportunities to seek for its prospective students. University websites and groups at social networks seem to be the fastest and easiest ways to attract applicants and audience in general. They publish news concerning various aspects such as upcoming

events (Schools, Conferences), education (Bachelor, Master programmes), breakthrough research, greetings, etc. It allows showing lively atmosphere of a university and creating certain educational culture. Arnaud Chevalier says that empirical evidence suggests that student migration can positively affect economic growth in both sending and receiving countries, however, he admits that there can also be negative consequences (Chevalier A., 2014). The present work focuses on the way how two regional universities use their digital opportunities to reflect university life, including its cultural and educational aspects, and to attract prospective students, local and foreign ones.

Objectives / Purpose of the study

The study aims at analyzing the Russian version of websites of two local universities (Chelyabinsk State University and South Ural State University) both being situated in the multicultural region and working with applicants from Asia and Africa. The English version of websites is not discussed in the present work. The study pays special attention to news about cultural events. One factor is especially noteworthy: the South Ural region is a place where several cultures co-exist historically for a long time (Russian, Bashkir, Tatar cultures). Moreover, nowadays the region attracts residents of the former Soviet Union as it provides a long-lasting mixture of Christian and Muslim cultures. Thus, the South Ural has a unique basement for continuing the development of its multicultural specificity, particularly in education.

The work studies the general overview of two university websites, discusses similarities and differences in their design and particularly contents, concludes about positive and negative strategies, and provide recommendations for university website design, taking into account international activities.

In developing countries incomes that rise are driving the demand for higher education. But a lack of supply and concerns about quality have pushed locals to look abroad for educational opportunities (Chevalier A., 2014). Interestingly, it is assumed that one important reason for studying abroad is to enhance language proficiency, especially in English, which has high returns even in non-English-speaking countries. However, in the two given universities the working language is Russian, and foreign prospective students should first complete training in Russian, which complicates the process at the beginning but facilitates it in the future. These days the universities under analysis offer only some Master programmes in English. Nevertheless, this situation and the number of foreign students, which is constantly increasing, show the interest of cross-border students in regional universities with a greater degree of involvement into the depth of Russia

where local peculiarities differ from an “international” status of central universities.

Most research on cross-border students mainly focuses on their academic experiences and achievements. A lesser body of research attends to the circumstances of their lives, circumstances that are affected by a number of different agents (Sawir E. et al., 2007). The research carried out by Colleen Ward, Victoria University of Wellington, has shown that the amount of cross-national interaction is generally low, that international students expect and desire greater contact with domestic students who are usually uninterested in initiating contact with their international peers. The work has concluded that interventionist strategies would need to be introduced to promote more and better intercultural activities (Ward C., 2001). In university website publications we can find only either some implications of these strategies or the reluctance to reflect, and probably use, them. The present work dwells on expectations of prospective students, those who seek for a successful unity of educational opportunities and welcoming cultural cohesion.

Methodology

The General View of University Websites

The headers of websites of both universities are partly similar, containing their corresponding names and links to the English version and the one for the visually impaired. However, at www.susu.ru there are some other links showing its international status; they are buttons for topuniversities.com, the project 5-100, the Arabic and Chinese versions.

The navigation of both sites has similar tabs (about university, research, study, structure) as well as different ones (international activity, university life at www.susu.ru; and news at www.csu.ru). Nevertheless, the leading part attracting prospective student belongs to publications of university news in the slider and in the news section.

Sliders and Their Contents

The slider of www.csu.ru (Chelyabinsk State University, Russian version, accessed March 2, 2019) contains only two pictures showing the start of education (so-called “Kids University” for Primary School children) and its finish (graduating from university with an academic degree). On the one hand, the simplicity of the path can interest some applicants. On the other one, the slider lacks any unique character and gives no opportunity to detect how your possible study here will look like. The changes in the slider are discussed in the section below.

In the slider of South Ural State University website there are 10 pictures (Russian version, accessed March 2, 2019), two of which have not changed for at least six months. These two ones highlight online education and the

status of the university on the world level. They fix eyes on applicants looking for a top-ranked university with flexible opportunities. The slider also includes such slides as “an educational model of a new format” (i.e. project learning), networking with the Pushkin State Russian Language Institute, international laboratories, all-Russian multidisciplinary academic competition. Although some of slides are quite formal (rector’s address, admission campaign, annual report), they try to continue the university policy. The rector is quoted with “competitive advantages”; the slide of the admission campaign is a photo reflecting the international character of the student body (two other slides support this message); even the annual report slide contains a scheme of a network resembling the globe with South Ural State University in the center of it. There is one slide that differs from others. It is about the 29th Winter Universiade in Krasnoyarsk. The only connection of it with South Ural State University is the rank of a student competition. And it is used by South Ural State University to the full extent. The images that can be inspired by only mentioning the Winter Universiade are students, sport, international status, opportunities, and mobility. All of them are nurtured by the university.

Sometimes mobility creates new possibilities. Lonely international students can also have advantages. The student world is open and flexible, and losing networks provides opportunities to enter new associations. However, new relationships usually take time and effort, while most cross-border students try to manage their course load and cope with basic communications in the early months (Sawir E. et al., 2007: 157).

The article *Loneliness and International Students* by Sawir et al. suggests implications for university services. These implications include friendly classrooms, competent administration, and sensitive student services as they are more significant for international students than for domestic ones. It is significant that students should be better informed about the services already available to them. Universities should promote mechanisms that trigger networking, for example, clubs for students (Sawir E. et al., 2007: 170).

Being conscious of the lack of communication among cross-border students and realizing how they are sick for home, the public relations of universities should put an emphasis on the human-centered factor. Partly it can be expressed by pictures showing human beings in different circumstances. The website slider of South Ural State University, for instance, contained 11 slides (out of 16) depicting people (accessed: September 6, 2018). Moreover, three pictures reflects university affairs in the international arena, which creates a link between the university and the world, reveals its involvement into a “more spacious” model, foregrounds the connection “contact” (Talmy L., 2000). There was one more collage slide highlighting

the cozy atmosphere of the university campus, the heart symbol and happy students of which are aimed at attracting people (Dvinina S.Y., 2019).

Changes in the Sliders

In the spring of 2019 the website slider of South Ural State University has undergone some changes. At first the number of pictures in the slider has reduced to 10 (March 2, 2019), then to 8 (March 11, 2019). It is a good tendency which shows the transition to the number suggested by “Miller’s Law” (7 ± 2). The version accessed in September 2018 was a kind of “kaleidoscope” with events inviting prospective students to join them, while the current version (accessed in March) is centered around the status of the university and its international activity.

The number of pictures in the slider of Chelyabinsk State University website has reduced from 3 to 2 (although in the middle of the experiment there were 4 slides). And this time we cannot see a positive tendency as the absence of any events and news visualized in the slider are considered as emptiness and unwillingness to provide social opportunities for local students and foreign ones as well. In September 2018 the slides included the following content: kids university, prospective students, graduates, a calendar. The version of March 2019 has a photo with graduates and a scheme how to enter the university with specific steps. The scheme attracts attention because a ground squirrel is used as a prospective student. However, it has some disadvantages. Firstly, its colour choice does not correspond to university corporate colours, which makes it a kind of alien to the website in general. Secondly, only experienced students can understand the joke with a ground squirrel as they know about a family of ground squirrels living in the botanic garden of the university. For other students, especially foreign ones, it gives no information and can only puzzle the audience because a ground squirrel has never been considered as a symbol of Chelyabinsk State University and publications have mentioned about it only several times for the past 10 years.

The slides of Chelyabinsk State University website at different time periods reflect stages in university life, entering and graduating, with some variations. They present a common conception, usually it is a collage with no special implications. Nevertheless, sometimes we can find a unique approach (a sample with a ground squirrel) which, in its turn, is so unexpected that arise a lot of questions. Partly, such a “shock” is useful and can interest, but at the same time it shows the absence of any accepted PR policy in the university.

News Sections

Both South Ural State University and Chelyabinsk State University regularly update a news section on their websites, they have 8 and 10 pieces of news respectively. However, there are some differences.

1) The time period of updating.

South Ural State University tries to publish several news every day. On the 6th of September, 2018 they published 4 pieces of news each day (8 news events for two days in total). On the 13th of March, 2019 they have all 8 pieces of news for the current date. It shows university opportunities in different spheres and its willingness to give coverage to various events. Prospective students can feel the atmosphere of the university and may want to join it.

Chelyabinsk State University usually publish one piece of news every day, with some exceptions (it can be 2 or 3 news on some occasions).

2) The presentation format.

The website of South Ural State University offers news headings the corresponding photos (or collages) of which are arranged as tiles (links). If we take a computer screen or a tablet, they place all eight pictures at a time, which facilitates getting aware of all of news. Moreover, this visualization helps foreigners to see what is happening in the university and even partly understand the essence of news.

The news section of Chelyabinsk State University is represented as a list with no photos or pictures. Here we have headings-links as well as two or three lines covering the given news in a few words. On the one hand, it allows viewers to look through one piece of news briefly and skip to another one. On the other hand, pieces of news consisting of 3-4 lines (together with a heading) do not allow placing more than 5 news at a time, and it is highly likely that viewers stop scrolling the page thinking that other pieces of news are old and do not deserve their attention. What is more important is that the absence of any images cannot assist prospective students to feel a psychological connection with the university, and entirely deprive foreigners (non Russian-speakers) of any chance to join university and Russian realias in general.

3) The content.

On the 13th of March, 2019 the website of South Ural State University offers two pieces of news devoted to the Maslenitsa festival. Moreover, this event is covered in relation with either IT or foreign students, making it possible to put forward the most important topics: the development of technologies at university and the cross-cultural aspect. Other pieces of news are also connected with these issues. The technologies aspect includes the development of concrete of new generation and the design of a car by

prospective students. The cross-cultural aspect can also be seen in the following news: the winners of the contest in the Russian language for foreigners and partly the training in security and counterterrorism. One more piece of news is devoted to inclusive communication and the last one tells the viewers about young journalists. Thus, we can see the priorities of university news at South Ural State University: cross-cultural aspects, technologies, communication. In addition, all photos support these ideas, describing international students body and trying to depict technological novelties. The usage of only one collage for inclusive communication (other pieces of news use photos) attracts prospective students and makes them closer to the university.

The news section updated on the 10th of October, 2018 had similar topics. Two of them were related to prospective students, other two pieces of news covered foreign students, three publications told us about communication and PR, and one piece of news was about the mechanic engineer's day. Therefore, we can see that the issue of prospective students was more prominent then, but this one is also mentioned in the current version. So, the subjects of publications are practically the same and reflect the university policy.

The news section of Chelyabinsk State University (March 13, 2019) puts emphasis on special occasions: five pieces of news are dedicated to celebrations, two of which are related to university researchers' anniversaries and two more ones are about university science and scientists in general. We can add one more publication about the shortlisting of the rector into the women top-10 of the region. As a result, we have 6 news reflecting the fact that the university honours its personnel, which facilitates team-building activities. Among other publications we can find one connected with prospective students and one more telling us about medical examination of students. In the section there is one official publication (the election of a rector) and only one piece of news related both to education and science (forthcoming scientific conference on education). The subjects of publications show the interest of the university in its personnel. This positive side has disadvantages, practically neglecting students, prospective students and science, and ignoring foreign students.

It is an interesting fact that the news updating of October 10, 2018 included two pieces of news concerning cross-cultural aspect, four publications were about students, prospective students and their possible work opportunities, two ones were devoted to education (particularly inclusive education), there was a publication about the book fair (can be considered as a scientific aspect). And only one piece of news was dedicated to the famous university

researcher. Therefore, in the autumn of 2018 the subjects were more versatile and attractive for prospective students, local and foreign ones.

Results / Findings

The comparative analysis of websites of two regional universities (the Russian version) has shown that the educational institutes are doing their best to attract prospective students, local and foreign ones, using hook publications which can interest the audience. The positive tendencies include appropriate updating of news (one publication each day is considered normal, doing it more seldom is abnormal); using photos to create necessary atmosphere and make prospective students feel a part of a university (it should be mentioned that www.csu.ru offers no photos or pictures except in the slider, while www.susu.ru has a news section with photos and one more section with video where snapshots are used); choosing those subjects of publications which reflect university policy. However, there are some negative aspects such as too many pictures in the slider which may prevent viewers from turning their mind to some events (www.susu.ru); sometimes a university can focus on one topic and neglect others (www.csu.ru).

Discussion

The websites can reflect only a smaller part of university activities, and this smaller part should be chosen carefully. Some university publications look like insignificant and are published only to “show activity”. Prospective students feel it and can sort out news. Therefore, more qualitative news attract more qualitative and ambitious students. Moreover, the general view of a website plays a leading role: bad navigation and the absence of visualization can push off the young audience of a “clip mind” generation. The presence of international students is insufficient to promote intercultural interactions and to develop intercultural friendships. The educational institutions have to increase intercultural interactions with three strategies to do it: peer-pairing, cooperative learning and residential programmes (Ward C., 2001). The websites under analysis try to show the international activity of universities, especially South Ural State University, but usually local students and cross-border ones are shown separately, which should be overcome in future publications.

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