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**STUDENT PUBLIC INITIATIVE AS A FACTOR OF SOCIAL  
IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT**

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*Abstract*

The authors discuss the process of social identity development as outputs and results of complicated social relations and impacts. In the authors' opinion, the modern system of socio-existential self-presentation, both of individuals and a community, loses its former definiteness and becomes an object of construction both on their own part and on the part of external subjects. It is revealing that social identity development is influenced by the interaction type of a person's social and individual being. Moreover, the correlation between the real and the possible is the expression of the individual's activity and social productivity, a measure of the development and manifestation of the individual's socialness. Under these conditions it is the system of higher education that is aimed at the development of students' social (including civic) interaction skills with governmental and political structures, as well as at students gaining the experience of implementation and development of public initiatives essential for social development. Based on detailed analysis, a description of the socio-pedagogical potential of student public initiatives is presented along with the main stages and ways of their implementation in the practice of developing students' social identity and prosocial skills. A young person's ability to take the initiative is seen as an indicator of the level of his/her social activity in future.

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## **1. Introduction**

Significant changes in the sociocultural development of the Russian society have generated the need for training a socially minded and pro-active personality type that is able to take independent decisions in a choice situation, and is characterised by mobility, dynamism, constructiveness and a developed sense of responsibility for the destiny of the country. The way the question is put has led to the need for research in behavioural and activity aspects of the personality's individual and collective being, in which the researcher's focus is on the issues of transition of the social to the individual, reality of self-images and their actualisation, role of choice and subjective position and mobility of all personal characteristics. Time and again, the subject has to "upgrade" himself/herself changing the starting point in the form of values and principles he/she associates himself/herself with, since the correlation between possibility and reality characterises social productivity and activity, which are a measure of developing and manifesting a person's sociality.

However, objective social and economic transformations in modern Russia and negative tendencies in the youth environment connected with them impede considerably student youth's socialisation success. With a high level of professional and personal culture, social mobility and adaptability, student youth have a sustainable interest in practical participation in the life of society. This encourages the development of student social and public initiatives in the Russian Federation higher education establishments. Thus, we consider a "constant" the viewpoint, according to which, realising themselves in socially significant activity, students predetermine their social behaviour and express their position as social subjects and their abilities for self-realisation in various spheres of public life. In this connection we suppose that one of the socially and pedagogically significant forms that facilitates students' successful socialisation is student public initiatives.

## **2. Problem Statement**

The problem of the research is determined by the following antinomy. On the one hand, an important role in the development of socially significant initiatives is played by student youth, since they represent a social group that have the potential of prospective professionals. The development of student youth's specific personality characteristics in social and cultural activity is seen as an essential factor of their social development. On the other hand, it must be conceded that the practice of youth policy organisation and realisation on the whole, and youth initiatives, in particular, calls for theoretical generalisation.

Therefore, to settle the argument, we have analysed the current state of theory and practice of implementing student public initiatives, which states the necessity of developing students' positive social identity with a view to develop coaching of student public initiatives as a means of students' self-realisation and community commitment.

## **3. Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study is the investigation of pedagogically efficient tools for promotion and support of student public initiatives in the course of student social identity development.

#### 4. Research Methods

The research is of theoretical nature, with specified scientific-methodic supply, which makes it possible to use the results for organising work of the teaching staff in educational establishments. The authors' position is shaped by the belief that for intensifying pedagogical efforts to form and develop social identity, proven practices of student public initiatives may be used.

#### 5. Findings

Student youth as a specific social group, being the subject and the object of socialisation, are sensitive to changes in public attitude of mind, processes, and to a large extent – to social innovations. Nevertheless, modern Russian scholarship (A.V. Mudrik, N.L. Selivanova, T.A. Romm, et al.) attests to the fact that it is this social group that is predisposed to a negative influence of destructive consequences within macrosocial processes (Romm, 2015; Selivanova, 2015). The modern epoch in this regard is in a state of crisis. The attempts to modernise Russian education and society on the whole at the beginning of the new millennium have resulted in "...an open cynical inspection of all axiological fundamentals, historically embedded in the theory and practice of the youth social upbringing and their enculturation. They have also led to a blatant emasculation of the individual's social involvement essence, failure to understand the learning outcomes, place and role of socialisation institutions in these processes..." (Reprintsev, 2011).

Due to these factors, generation and support of numerous differences have become highly sought after. One's own unique identity has appeared a unique and valuable resource worthy of protection and care. According to M.V. Shakurova, at present young people are more independent in making a choice in relation to their own life scenarios and plots. M.V. Shakurova states that "traditional inheritance" (social, occupational, etc.) tends to be replaced by the search activity, reliance on referents and construction of themselves and their lives (Shakurova, 2013). Self-identification does not function under specified boundary conditions traditionally ascribed to a certain age. It rather paves its way to "adult" environments. Socialisation is increasingly confronted with educational practices, which makes the latter, unfortunately, become a simulacrum. For an individual, the education system, not burdened with identity politics, using imposition mechanisms rather than those of providing choice, is inferior in order of importance to other social institutions. Such a system denies individuals real social and pedagogic support of their socio-cultural and personality identity under development (Shakurova, 2013).

It is student youth that have to face and go through a specific contradictoriness of present socialisation processes. The process of gaining identity (both personal and social one) for them is synchronised, on the whole, with the process of socialisation (Smyth-Lovin, 2007), since searching for one's own uniqueness and self-relation (i.e. identity) is in direct connection with reflection on life projects, purposes and ways of identification.

All in all, we find it possible to identify the following essential tendencies of the modern socialisation background:

- space extension of social and interpersonal contacts;

- increased social uncertainty in society, which stems from increased dynamism of standards, norms and value orientations;

- increased socialisation period, enhancing social adjustment and “liquid” socialisation (the latter, according to Bauman (2000), implies that in the situation with the so-called “solid culture” there exist clear norms, standards and institutes of socialisation that identify results and interaction technologies of children and adults. The culture of the modern multidimensional world determines the “liquid” socialisation, in which a multifaceted and untargeted impact is possible, whereas the result may be delayed or latent (Bauman, 2000);

- expansion and consolidation of infosphere role aimed at replacing traditional intergenerational ties.

In this connection, taking into account the modern socialisation process, identification of the reasons for young people’s rejection and / or resentment against moral attitudes and values generally accepted in the society, must be credited with fundamental significance. Under these conditions, the need for harmonisation and correlation of different types of identity (personal, social, ethnocultural, civil, etc.), should be considered as manifestation of individual striving for socialisation, individuation and rootedness in the sociocultural space. Thus, it can be concluded that social identity can be discussed as one of the main criteria of youth’s positive socialisation in the modern world.

At the same time, at present we observe a growing tendency of young people willing to become more civic-minded and pro-active in the system of public relations, searching for the drivers of motivation and pedagogically efficient methods of young people’s development of public activity and initiative. In this case, a methodical problem of adequate sampling and value orientations of young people’s positive social identity (with due regard to young people’s age characteristics and their sociocultural environment) and pedagogically efficient tools of development, practices of implementing and supporting youth public initiatives as a factor of the emergence of such identity inevitably arises (Nikovskaya, 2011).

A traditional dictionary entry for the term “initiative” (Lat. “initiare”) defines the category under study as “An act or strategy intended to resolve a difficulty or improve a situation; a fresh approach to something”; “the power or opportunity to act or take charge before others do”; “the ability to assess and initiate things independently” (Oxford Dictionary). In the context of psychology and pedagogy the problem of developing initiative has been extensively studied by Russian (M.I. Weisfeld, A.V. Volokhov, I.I. Frishman, etc.), and foreign scholars (W. Windelband, E. Meumann, P. O’Jules, E. Erikson, etc.). Initiative can be defined as any initial human action performed in an original, non-traditional form, which pursues conceptually new goals and tasks for the individual and society. These scholars analyse initiative on a unilateral basis, since they define it only in connection with the initial stage of any activity, as a one-time, actual state, which does not clarify the ongoing nature of initiative. Experience shows that initiative is intrinsic not only to the beginning of activity, but also to its different stages. A self-starter is capable of proposing an initiative, and can take the responsibility for its implementation.

Personal initiative can take the form of proposals, actions and positions. What most accurately expresses the active nature of the person implementing initiative is such a characteristic as “enterprise”. In this case, the initiator’s internal activity provides a real opportunity for successful implementation of

the initiative. The involvement of as many participants as possible, provided that the initiative pursues both a personal and socially significant goal, serves as a model of initiative for them. If successful, this activity becomes a kind of stimulus for their own activity and initiative (Onorato & Turner, 2004.). So, we believe that initiative has a number of stages in its development that together give a more complete, “detailed” picture of initiative as a phenomenon and process.

Using an analytical-synthetic research method for understanding the essence of initiative, we define the notion. Based on the correlation between the internal and external human activity, we can characterise initiative in connection with the beginning of any activity as a result of the transition of internal activity into external one, just as a “presentation” of this activity.

Proceeding from the above, initiative is a synthesis of intellectual, volitional and emotional components, and is also determined by the need and semantic spheres of the individual. Comparison of facts provides for the uniqueness of the initiation thinking phase, which is a phenomenon caused both by the content and conditions of activity and personal characteristics. However, in our opinion, scholarship on initiation of thinking is characterised by unjustified separation of intellectual and motivational components of activity, which is demonstrated by establishing unambiguous links between the level of motivation and the effectiveness of mental activity.

Thus, initiative can be defined as a personal characteristic that encompasses cognitive and motivational factors expressed in the continuation of mental activity beyond the limits of situational prediction. It is a person’s ground-breaking idea and personal activity in introducing these ideas with a view to changing the environment and him/herself, being part of it. With a clear focus, permanent self-manifestation in work and positive results, individual initiatives, acquiring a personal meaning, will become the basis for the development of initiative as a quality of the individual.

It should be emphasised that the character of initiative depends on personal orientation, social needs and interests. Being a personal quality, characterised by independent goal-setting, determination in finding ways to achieve goals, independence and perseverance in achieving them, initiative influences the change in the attitude of the subject to other subjects, to work, and to display of social initiative. Then public (social) initiative may be characterised as the ability to conscious, purposeful and active social work; a form of expressing a person’s social and cultural needs; subjective and socially significant basis of personal realisation and initiative work. This aspect of developing initiative in the course of learning and cognitive activity appears to be understudied. Yet, it is an object of primary importance, and is essential for consideration.

From the point of view of psychology and pedagogy, changing the organisation of the content of education assimilation, which implies an increased insight, providing optimal conditions for students to benefit from realising their potential, employing not only logical mechanisms in the cognitive search, but also such mechanisms as anticipation, forecasting, intuition, etc., is a prerequisite for developing students’ initiative-taking activity. The main components of initiative-taking activity are as follows:

- “transformative” attitude to disciplines, phenomena and objects;
- willingness to embrace change;
- creativity;
- the process of initiative-taking activity itself.

The core of the model of initiative-taking activity is developing students' motivation for creative social initiative, since it is motives that ensure successful development of initiative and students' proactive engagement. This approach provides a sense of the notion of the individual as a developing system of man's attitude to the world around him and to himself (Mudrik, 2017). A person, who has achieved a high level of integration of the leading personal characteristics, takes the path towards continuous self-development resulting from heterochronality of the named relations, which causes more and more internal conflicts serving as a propelling device of the individual's "self-movement" and his conscious "self-construction" (Mudrik, 2017).

We also agree with the point of view stating that the efficiency of the influence of social initiative development on construction of personality identity in the course of social interaction is determined, on the one hand, by personal agency (activity, initiative in interaction) in this communication. On the other hand, potential constraints of the interaction itself should be taken into account. Much of social interaction is episodic and short-term acts. However, not every "long-term" social interaction is bound to be a developing process. Importantly, personality identity forms as a result of participation in any referential act under study, including "non-developing" ones, yet, identity characteristics in this case would be different (a common result of such interaction is the identity development "from the contrary" (not to be like those who are the subjects of this interaction) (Shakurova, 2013).

Maturation and, consequently, activation of self-identification processes and planning of one's own life decreases (narrows) the degree of pedagogic presence in a person's life, both qualitatively and quantitatively, and reduces the possibility of motivated influence on identity development. Traditionally, as a violation of this level, which manifests in unbalance and non-conventionality of positioning in the pedagogic interaction, bilateral interaction is reduced to unilateral pedagogical interaction. Along with this, we are attracted by a slightly different perspective on this dependence. Over-estimating growing people's capabilities, delegating the degrees of freedom, disproportional to their real capabilities (with consideration of the potential ones), and, as a result, unreasonably decreasing the level of pedagogic guidance also transforms bilateral interaction to unilateral, where a growing person is a subject.

Infeasibility of these transformations identifies the need to cultivate the mechanisms of pedagogic interaction, which are characterised by bilateralism, mutual reference and solidarity of the sides. Thus, in the focus of our research there are a number of challenging issues of how to motivate a person to meaningful interaction, which is marked by constant social manifestation and activity display.

Since any social interaction is processual, we find it possible to develop and support student public initiatives as one of the factors of their achieving a positive social identity. In this connection we tend to believe that it is initiatives of this kind that imply intense activity (comprehensive effort, hard work, effective, free and conscious performance, etc.) In V.G. Mordkovich's and M.A. Nugaev's concepts a person's pro-active engagement is an intrinsic property of the social subject, which demonstrates the intensity of a person's competence manifestation, and shapes his/her attitude to work, society, social groups and people (Nikovskaya, 2011).

It is therefore essential that the implementation of prosocial initiative is led by students taking public initiative, which, in its turn, is young people's essential characteristic and a necessary component in reaching the goals of social and cultural adaptation and self-realisation among young people (Romm,

2015). It is no accident that the notion of “initiative” is used, as a rule, as a characteristic of a person’s traits, an essential element of self-realisation.

We suppose that student public initiative is a form of manifestation of social activity through fulfilment of their own needs, as well as a means to interact with the reality of social life. This form corresponds to students’ characteristics as a social group. It seems consistent with the ideas of employing such initiatives for the construction of the students’ social identity, since identity is of project nature. It is always a process, the on-going “reconstruction”.

On the governmental level, the purpose of the Russian Federation State Programme “The Education Development Programme for 2013-2020” (SP) is to integrate young people in the system of social practices and promote a comprehensive system of supporting talented young people with leadership qualities and social initiative. In order to develop students’ skills in organisational and other socially significant activity, to form a positive image of a socially active university student, to construct students’ positive social identity, to develop social activity, self-realisation, independence, mobility behaviour, we consider that the following main ways of implementing student public initiatives should be named:

1. The development and support of students’ leadership position encompasses the following stages:

- identifying leadership position (questionnaire, tests, game activity);
- consolidating leadership position (portfolio);
- training leaders of different types: (managerial leader; information leader, value orientation leader, etc.);
- using leadership position in the course of assigning roles and responsibilities in the social and cultural activity of student public associations.

2. Development of social initiatives in university public associations.

– a student association “People’s Planet”, a volunteer group “The Workshop of Good Deeds”, University Student Council, etc.

3. Development of social initiatives through participation in university contests and grants.

– developing social projects while participating in the contest “The Best Student Group”, «The Best Social Project in the Hall of Residence”, etc.

4. Development of social initiatives in the professional sphere through participation in regional, all-Russian and other contests. At this point the contest conditions are as follows:

- the situation of free but responsible choice of possibilities and forms of meeting one’s own needs, a young person’s interests and a creative team in the suggested interaction with numerous institutions: schools, establishments of higher education, institutions on social protection, etc.

- a potential situation of social success, “pre-programmed” by positive possibilities of support for the initiative. These possibilities are realised by individuals in a specific project;

- the situation of developing a responsible value attitude of the interacting subjects to each other’s interests, problems and capabilities in the implementation of the proposed;

- a form social contacts expansion and acquisition of new experience of youth interaction in order to make decisions in their own best interests in the socially accepted and cultivated role of a person who can reach his/her goal.

One of the most important means of initiating and implementing innovations in the youth sphere is social design, which encourages young people to recognise the needs in solving various social problems. On a large scale, a social project is a model of human activity itself, which is aimed at changing the social situation. Its main strategic goal is providing identity of interests in organised collective relations with the experience of existing conditions and life of various social groups.

Social projects are of two types:

1) as part of a programme, which is a specification form and substantive content of development priorities in the social and cultural life of the territory;

2) as an independent solution to the local problem for the intended audience.

In our study a social project is seen as a product of innovative design among youth designed to target a specific issue, identify social factors, apply new technologies in the regional youth policy that update various forms of youth activity.

Youth initiatives as social projects can be classified according to innovative capacity:

1. Incremental innovations imply upgrade, alteration and modernisation of an object having an analogue or a prototype (programmes, methods, other projects, etc.).

2. Combinatorial innovations are aimed at a new, constructive combination of previously known techniques, which have not yet been used in a similar combination.

3. Radical innovations have a strong capacity for innovation in student youth's development.

In relation to the former conditions, youth initiatives are classified as follows:

1. "Replacement" initiatives exclude old and introduce new elements of socio-pedagogic activity among young people: its goals, content, means and organisation forms.

2. "Abolishing" initiatives preclude the existence of the former elements of socio-pedagogic activity after they have been proved inconsistent.

3. "Open" innovations cannot be compared with their functional predecessors in terms of the purpose of application, means of utilisation or existing social situation.

4. "Retrovisional" innovations are youth innovations targeted at reviving traditions of working with young people from the previous historic periods, relevant for the current situation.

It is obvious that the socio-pedagogical potential of youth initiatives consists in creating favourable conditions for socialisation of all participants' categories (organisers and those organised), their conscious adaptation to existing conditions, the choice of the social role and means of its fulfilment, as well as construction of identity. Youth initiatives develop students' abilities to productively interact with the surrounding social space and its subjects, thus forming students' positive social identity.

## **6. Conclusion**

Public initiative corresponds to students as a social group in terms of socialisation, choice of the social role and means of its expression, and fruitful social interaction through social activity. It correlates with perceptions of social identity as a measure of the personality subjectness (activity, initiative in the process of interaction) in such interaction. In this case students' internal activity is considered an important incentive towards the development of social identity and their own activity for successful personal development.



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