

**МЕЖДУНАРОДНОЕ СОТРУДНИЧЕСТВО  
В СФЕРЕ АКАДЕМИЧЕСКИХ ПРОЕКТОВ:  
СУЩЕСТВУЮТ ЛИ ПЕРСПЕКТИВЫ?**

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**Аннотация**

Статья посвящена анализу ситуации с академическим сотрудничеством на уровне университетов на современном этапе развития высшего образования. На примере совместного проекта LEADER, уже более десяти лет успешно реализуемого двумя университетами — Байкальским государственным университетом (Россия) и Бизнес-школой Р. Айви (Канада), описываются преимущества и перспективы академических контактов в сложившихся в последнее время социально-политических условиях. Данный проект рассматривается как уникальный в силу его ориентированности на практический результат, инновационного формата, опоры на взаимные интересы и равные партнерские отношения сторон, на важность личного вклада и доброй воли участников и связанную с этим низкую затратность. Авторы приводят результаты анкетирования 70 русских участников — студентов БГУ и интервью канадских инструкторов с целью показать сильные стороны проекта и возможности его дальнейшего развития, направленного на укрепление международного экономического и культурного сотрудничества. Делается вывод о необходимости сохранения и распространения опыта проведения подобных совместных проектов.

**INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION THROUGH ACADEMIC PROJECTS:  
ARE THERE ANY FUTURE PROSPECTS?**

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**Abstract**

Today, international academic cooperation of universities is going through a tough period due to political and economic challenges. The authors consider the main causes of this and show how the situation could be improved through the development of local academic programs, such as LEADER Project. This joint educational project, focused on entrepreneurship and management skills, is arranged by Richard Ivey School of Business, University of Western Ontario (Canada). The program has 11 years of positive experience at Baikal State University in Irkutsk and it has proved to be successful and viable. The article provides analysis of the project's strengths and the main components of its success. Attention is also drawn to the specific features and potential advantages of using the case method as a modern teaching procedure, as well as to the innovative format of the project and its mutually beneficial character. The authors analyze the results of a feedback survey of the participants and instructors in order to find out their takeaways

from the project, its possible drawbacks and future development prospects. The key conclusions refer to the importance of retaining international academic contacts.

Universities as institutions dedicated to the pursuit and dissemination of knowledge have traditionally been open to cooperation and collaboration that transcends countries, borders and cultures [1]. In the modern age of fast travel and universal online accessibility these contacts have grown exponentially and academic mobility for both students and professors has become an integral part of university life [2; 3].

At the same time, international cooperation of Russian institutions in any social field, including educational sphere, is now under such pressure as it has never been before. There are several serious reasons for that:

- political tensions and toughening relationships with many countries;
- international sanctions imposed on our companies, politicians and institutions, that make international cooperation more difficult;
- reducing the number of diplomatic infrastructure components in many countries as well as in the Russian Federation (embassies, ambassadors, conciliates, representative offices etc.) as a result of mutual unfriendly steps;
- cutting relations and numerous agreements as a result of the negative tendencies given above;
- fear of many countries to start new projects with the Russian side;
- unattractive image of our country as an aggressive unreliable partner generated by western propaganda and mass media;
- stricter policy of having foreign guests in Russia (shorter period of their stay, tough visa requirements, limited travel opportunities within the Russian territory);
- internal policy of many academic institutions to 'put on hold' many successful projects or wait for better times;
- reducing expenses on many projects as a part of cost-effective policy of universities, scientific or academic institutions, etc.

Taking into account all these factors that our international social sphere is facing now, it is getting extremely complicated (sometimes practically impossible) to tell a positive story about successful international projects that have had a good impact on international relations and have real prospects for being continued. But such stories do exist!

LEADER Project is a long-term education international project that is not only alive but well<sup>1</sup>. Richard Ivey School of Business is an integral

part of University of Western Ontario (Canada), it has an 11-year experience of successful cooperation with Baikal State University (Irkutsk) in spite of all the tensions of international policy which have appeared on the way these years. What makes this initiative so resilient? A look at this Project from different perspectives will allow us to showcase the features that contribute to its sustainable success.

**Background and format.** LEADER Project was initiated over 26 years ago by MBA students of Richard Ivey School of Business (London, Canada). Every year teams of Ivey's MBA and HBA students and graduates (instructors in the Project) travel to a number of sites in other countries to teach prospective local entrepreneurs basic business and analytical skills in a program that lasts two to three weeks. These countries are the developing markets of Russia, India, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Nepal, Vietnam and Macedonia, where the Project's partners range from local business associations to educational institutions training economists and entrepreneurs and even the Embassy of Canada in Serbia, Macedonia and Montenegro<sup>2</sup>. The Project has got two distinct components: an educational one, where the participants acquire entrepreneurial knowledge and skills using the case study method and where the Canadian instructors observe the developing market conditions and prospects «in situ», and a cultural one, as participants welcome the instructors to their home country, allow them to experience local culture and history, and often make friends that can easily continue to communicate on both personal and professional levels via the social networking sites once the Project is over. The cultural component, it should be stressed, is always an integral part of such exchanges leading to deep professional and personal insights [4].

Baikal State University is viewed as a unique partner is Russia due to its remote geographical location and high academic standards of Irkutsk which is rightfully called «a city of students», thus making it an attractive site for both professional and cultural exchange. As it is, historically, a university that trains economists and entrepreneurs, most Project participants major in economics or management and are already involved in entrepreneurial activities or planning to start their own businesses.

<sup>1</sup> URL: <http://www.leaderproject.com>.

<sup>2</sup> URL: <http://www.macedonia2025.com/programs/theLeaderProject>.

Moreover, as second- and third-year students, they already know the basics of economics and business analytics and can thus interact with the Canadian instructors at an advanced level, setting high standards for them and learning about the most modern business initiatives. To take this interaction to a new level, the university supports two groups, with about 20 participants in each of them: the «Russian» one where classes are taught through an interpreter, although all students have some knowledge of English sufficient for daily communication, and an «English» group, whose students have a high proficiency in English and can freely interact with the instructors. As for the second, cultural component, Irkutsk is a gateway to Lake Baikal, which undoubtedly makes it an attractive site for many Westerners, and a trip to the lake is a highlight of the program every year. More important, however, is an opportunity for face-to-face interaction that the Project provides to both the participants and the instructors.

Each year several teams of instructors (LEADERites) set out to partner institutions in other countries to teach two- or three-week courses. They teach the same class an intensive curriculum every day, with daily homework. Each day is devoted to a certain business aspect — ideation, strategy, operations, marketing, etc. — thus making it a real boot camp for the participants. Besides, there are «office hours» at the end of each day's classes where instructors are available for individual consultations for those who need them. After the end of the program, such consultations could and do continue through emails and social networks.

An important, possibly the critical contributing factor to the Project's success, is that it runs on goodwill. All the instructors work as volunteers and view this Project as an opportunity to extend their understanding of other people and cultures and as a chance to use their knowledge for the benefit of their peers in other countries. Their visas and tickets are sponsored by the Ivey School of Business and by donations, while the host institution provides them with accommodation, meals and teaching facilities. This «split responsibility» of the three parties involved makes it easier to subsidize the high cost of flights, visas and accommodation as the benefits for each party far outweigh the costs and it can be considered a truly sustainable model even for countries with weak currencies as long as goodwill and trust stay at a high level. The project has been prospering in BSU for more than 10 years as it complies with the main requirements and objectives of the university's international strategy. It demonstrates the

university's readiness for the future, which grounds its activities on interdisciplinary approaches, interactive teaching methods and internationally-oriented programs [5, p. 252; 6].

**Case study methodology.** Case Method has been the subject of academic and scientific articles and books many times. It has become an integral part of teaching process for many disciplines and courses in business, economic and law education of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Best world business schools, including Russian higher education institutions, have been widely using this method in their programs.

Its history started in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when The Harvard Business School pioneered the case method in management education after law schools and colleges that had already used cases for better teaching. For decades the principles and rules of the method had been developing, and finally it came to the modern education system to be used in a wide range of disciplines.

In the article «Making the Case» D. Garvin gives some explanations why case method is considered to be one of the most effective techniques in modern education systems. He points out that many professional training schools are challenged to find ways to train students for entering the practical world. The time spent in the classroom should be somehow translated into practical skills, with the most important real-world activities that a student should acquire being: problem definition, decision-making and action. Many professional schools, including The Harvard Medical, Law and Business Schools, came to the conclusion that Case Method is the best way for teaching these skills [7].

The biggest advantage of the method is its practice-oriented character and interactive learning approach that are considered to be the basis of the method. «Participatory and collaborative learning, using descriptions of decisions faced in real life by real managers, has proven to be an exciting alternative to more traditional forms of education» [8, p. 1].

Now case method is described as one of the main elements in modern teaching methodology. Its popularity and effectiveness can be explained by the fact that it provides «contextualized learning» that is contrasted with conservative traditional theory-oriented approach. Another strength of case teaching process is its broad range of skills it could develop, and new knowledge it could bring, since cases require that the students not only apply course content but also consult other resources [9, p. 159]. When case discussions are conducted amongst individuals from varying

educational and professional backgrounds, an additional layer of insight and learning is offered.

One of the most important factors that defines effectiveness of case method application during training academic process is its compliance with the principles and rules of Case Method formulated by its founders. If we look at the recommendations worked out by the Professor Emeritus at Richard Ivey School of Business J. A. Erskine, we can find a detailed instruction for its effective application at lessons. According to his recommendations, in order to achieve best results in class, teachers and instructors should understand that case method is supposed to be applied correctly, and first of all it should be given through three obligatory stages: preparatory stage (Before Class), discussion stage (During Class) and analytical stage (After Class).

Every stage is extremely important for achieving success in the class and each of them requires setting some tasks and their accomplishments during the lesson, as well as arranging some purposeful activities of instructors and students.

Preparatory stage that is also called «Before Class» and includes several activities: assigning a case (for instructor), reading a case and assignments, preparing for class individually as well as participating in small group discussions between students (the small group discussion can be also arranged in class.)

The next stage is called «During Class» and it consists of many activities that are supposed to be the core activities in the method algorithm. It covers the following activities of students: raising questions regarding the assigned reading, participating in the class discussion by sharing insights on the case and discussing the opinions of other participants. For instructors these activities usually include resolving questions arising after assigned reading, as well as leading the case discussion by questioning, recording and facilitating students' comments, supplying various data for better insight and understanding the case context.

The final stage, that is unfortunately often eliminated by teachers, is not of lesser importance than the previous two. The analysis of the activities completed as well as of their results is crucial for both teachers and students. The analytical stage «After Class» gives the participants a chance to analyze key learnings while getting valuable feedback from each other and paying attention to errors and drawbacks. The instructor's activities during this stage include evaluating the participation of students and recording impressions, as well as evaluating

other materials used (or that could be used) during the lesson. As for students' activities, they consist of reviewing class results, giving feedback on the case discussion and case context, summarizing the case with key learning points and self-analysis [8, p. 2–3].

It would be also reasonable to emphasize some important aspects that influence the productivity of the case method. Firstly, a case as a basic element of the method is its main advantage. The situation described in a case is very close to real life, it is based on true challenges and problems existing in the economic and business world. Secondly, this experience of tackling real-life problems will be the most valuable asset that participants acquire during the process. Thirdly, the text of a case usually includes background information, a company description and the problem itself that is supported by financial details, necessary figures, tables, graphs or reference information. It allows the participants to expand their range of various knowledge and skills for succeeding in case analysis. The case is finished with a task or a number of questions that are expected to be useful for making the decision on the company problem. Finally, the role of a skilled group facilitator in the case method is crucial for its success. His/her main objectives include asking the right questions, clarifying difficult moments, leading discussions, supplying the group with necessary additional materials and references as well as analyzing the results.

It is obvious now that the Case Method has many advantages and potential opportunities for further development and transformation. It combines individual work with small group discussions and group activities. The ultimate result of the Case Method process is not finding the correct decision, but the process itself, as it covers many developing activities that enhance the student's competences and turn it into the most valuable take-away of the learning process.

According to different psychologists, a period of university years for any student is supposed to be the moment of active building up their Self-Concept [10; 11, p. 135–136]. The self-concept is an important term for both social and humanistic psychology and it means «the individual's belief about himself or herself, including the person's attributes and who and what the self is» [12]. The concept covers different aspects of an individual's self-esteem, which is based on various existential issues including the act of comparing himself/herself with the others in the group. It is another strong argument for Case Method's application

during academic and professional university training courses due to its powerful positive impact on a student's personality development as well as on forming his/her decision-making and critical thinking skills.

**Russian students' perspective.** Two student surveys were organized by Baikal State University in 2016 and 2018 to analyze its students' experience and takeaways from the Project. They were asked to grade the usefulness of the Project on the scale of 1 to 10 (10 being the maximum grade), to describe its strengths and weaknesses and to give their assessment as to if (and, more importantly, why) this Project should be continued. Seventy students took part in the survey. They graded the usefulness of the Project very highly; half of the participants (36) gave it the highest grade of 10, while 20 people gave it 9 points, which brought the share of the participants highly satisfied with their experience to the astounding figure of 80 %. Grade 8 was used by four participants, same number assessed the Project as 7 out of 10, grade 6 was given by one participant. It is also worth noting that while 2016 participants gave the Project grades that varied between 10 and 6, all the 2018 students gave the Project the highest grade of 10.

The most valuable components of the Project, from the students' viewpoint, is the use of case studies, which was mentioned by almost all participants who compared this methodology with the «traditional» classes that they have and noted its «practice-oriented», «skills-centered» character. Although well-known and relatively popular in Russian business schools, the case study methodology in this format was a novelty for many students, and also turned out to be the biggest takeaway of the project. Forty percent noted that the classes helped them «better understand» and «systematize» something they studied earlier. The lectures were also described as «unusual» due to their interactive format and a high number of examples from the instructors' own business experience. The instructors did their best to make the lectures emotional and to «localize» them drawing on the students' knowledge of local businesses and customs.

Another valuable characteristic noted in the questionnaires was the opportunity to discuss the cases and do tasks in small groups, often comprised from students who did not know each other before the start of the Project, which helped them hone their interpersonal skills, establish new contacts and even «make new friends». Such cooperation, totally in the spirit of true entrepreneurship, was further continued

when the groups prepared and presented their business plans at the end of the Project.

As roughly 40 percent of the participants (those in the «English» group, majoring in either International Economy or International Management) are advanced students of English and need English for their future careers, most of them mentioned the benefit of having an opportunity to «practice» their language skills in solving professional tasks.

Last but not least, most students also mentioned the fact that the instructors were from a Canadian university as a definite advantage and a great asset of the Project. The reasons behind this can be broken into two large groups: professional and personal. Professional ones included «Canadian approach to teaching», «new teaching methods», «new theories and terminology», «western approach to analysis». Personal ones, especially dominant among 2018 participants, clearly mark the desire of young people to have face-to-face communication with their peers from other countries in the current unfavorable political climate, their openness and desire for cooperation: «we made new friends», «after-hours activities were also great», «real-life communication with native speakers was valuable», «I made some personal contacts». Thus, the Project's potential as a tool of «people's diplomacy» can hardly be overestimated. Such low-cost projects go a long way because they involve young people, both Western and Russian, with a limited experience of real life interaction with each other and are excellent at promoting friendship and goodwill for future cooperation.

The weaknesses mentioned by the participants were mainly small-scale organizational inconveniences («it was very hot in the room on the first day», «it was hard because I also have classes in the morning»). Almost 30 percent, however, wished for the Project to last longer as they enumerated such weaknesses as «not enough time to study all topics thoroughly», «need more time to present a high-quality business plan», «need to spend more time on the analysis of cases and practical examples», «two weeks is not enough». Besides, as most of the participants are senior students, the phrase «we have studied this earlier» is present in 36 questionnaires out of 70, and while most students put it in the «strengths» section and see the opportunity to use their knowledge to solve practical tasks as a definite advantage of the project, 8 people cite this as a weakness, saying that the Project was not challenging enough for them.

All 70 participants, even those assessing it at 6 or 7 points, answered «yes» to the question «Do you think the Project should be continued?», which is another proof of its high value to the students. The reasons mainly repeat those given in the «strengths» section of the questionnaire, namely, «systematizing» knowledge, «better understanding of how to do business», «valuable discussions with instructors and other students», «experience of presenting my Business Plan to experts».

**Canadian instructors' experience.** The feedback of this section is based on personal interviews with LEADER instructors. Their general assessment of the experience is positive, the highlights being the long history of cooperation with Russia (25 years), the opportunity to work in the environment that «fosters collaboration, participation and cooperation...», and the cultural exchange component (Blaine Morry, LEADER 2018, personal correspondence).

Talking about the advantages of the site (Baikal State University), the instructors stress that the Project is beneficial not only for the students who «learn new business skills», but also for the instructors as it «offers us insight into the business landscape in a completely different part of the world... Visiting a location in Siberia in a business context, is an opportunity that not many people in North America have the privilege to experience. This provides business considerations that others would not make» (Blaine Morry, LEADER 2018, personal correspondence). Thus the relatively «remote» location of Irkutsk becomes the competitive advantage for academic and cultural exchange giving the future Canadian business leaders an opportunity to evolve their business judgment within a completely different cultural context. It should be noted that this «cultural exchange» is undoubtedly bilateral, as the students also stressed its importance in their questionnaires. It is such «person-to-person» contacts that form the basis of people's diplomacy and lay foundations for goodwill and future cooperation in international relations at all levels.

From the academic standpoint, the instructors noted the intelligence, enthusiasm and high motivation of BSU students, who were able to deliver high quality presentations of business projects: «The business plans that were presented were also very impressive. The financials were thorough, the strategy logical, and overall the ideas were very creative. The work that many students put into their projects was admirable, and we were very happy with the final presentation that students developed» (Victor Lal, LEADER 2018, personal

correspondence). This aspect of the program is very important: in having students apply the theoretical knowledge gained in the classroom and applying it to new and original ideas, instructors can gauge how successful they have been in helping students understand concepts and develop their business acumen.

As for the opportunities for improvement and future cooperation, the instructors proposed «bringing in more entrepreneurs from the community» (Victor Lal, LEADER 2018, personal correspondence) and targeting people who are already running their own businesses. From the authors' viewpoint, implementing this idea will not only give such entrepreneurs a chance to improve their knowledge of business basics, but will also present an invaluable opportunity for the university students to mix with local entrepreneurs who have an experience of running businesses and who could offer insights into the real-life situations and challenges. The participation of the local entrepreneurial community or organizations could also contribute to the long-term success of this international project. BSU has already started such work by inviting highly motivated participants of the Russian President Management Training Initiative to take part in LEADER Project.

**Conclusions.** Summarizing the key points of the article, it should be emphasized that international professional education programs with their mutually-beneficial character could become an effective means for establishing long-term relations and building up culture bridges between Russian education institutions and their foreign partners.

The tough international situation of today makes it more and more difficult to continue stable cooperation with foreign institutions and prevents companies from establishing new contacts.

The LEADER Project is a unique program that definitely should be continued and supported by all the possible resources as it has several advantages that can't be ignored:

- the project is a good example of people's diplomacy that could make valuable contribution to strengthening of international relations in social and academic spheres;
- the program activities include face-to-face communication in contrast to distant learning programs that are becoming more popular in other universities because of modern technologies, virtual contacts and Internet-enabled communication;
- the Project is based on equal partnership relationships of two institutions, Baikal State University in Irkutsk, Russia and Richard

Ivey School of Business in London, Canada. Both contribute financial and organizational resources, as well as volunteer work and goodwill to its success; both are interested in a long-term partnership;

– the Project is cost-effective and mutually beneficial for both parties: the instructors do not only share their knowledge, but also obtain a unique opportunity to observe the business context in other countries and to experience local culture;

– the Project is built up as a professional training course as well as a culture-oriented program making people of different countries closer: after-hours activities and teambuilding are as important to both parties as the academic component;

– it is based on interactive learning and practice-oriented approach to teaching, besides, the participants get a chance to experience Western approach to business education and practice their language skills while solving academic and practical tasks, thus preparing them for other academic mobility programs;

– the basic methodological element of the project is Case Method that is proved to be a demanded, effective and perspective element of modern education;

– Irkutsk with its Baikal State University is the only Russian site among all the international LEADER Project destinations ;

– LEADER is the only international course on entrepreneurship and management basics in Irkutsk universities.

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