

The EU-Eastern Partnership Countries: Association Agreements and Transdisciplinarity in Studies, Training and Research

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Abstract: *The European Union (EU) signed Association Agreements on 27 June 2014 with Georgia, the Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine. The Association Agreement (AA) is the EU's main instrument to bring the countries in the Eastern Partnership (EaP) closer to EU standards and norms. For the citizens of the EaP countries to benefit from these agreements, a more in-depth knowledge of the EU and the EU Member States is required to be reflected in a comparative approach to European Union studies. We examine these implications on the need to expand and adapt, the content and approach to research and teaching European Union studies, with the transdisciplinary approach becoming increasingly dominant, becoming a modern tool for research in social sciences. This contribution aims to offer insight into the implementation of transdisciplinarity in the methodology of education and research as it is determined by current increasing global challenges. This approach should serve as a means of integrating a number of main goals as part of learning, teaching and research processes: strengthening employability of young people and preparing them for citizenship. We discuss the need for modernizing European studies in the EU Member States that could serve as an*

example for the EU Eastern Partnership countries. We conclude that the theoretical approach to European and related studies of other disciplines and their practical implications should always be transdisciplinary in nature and benefit from direct in-situ exposure and should be fully integrated in university curricula.

Keywords: *cooperation, European Union studies, implications of EU-Eastern Partnership, transdisciplinarity*

1. Introduction

In the last decade, there has been a major shift eastwards in global economic power of unprecedented nature. The exact composition of the newly emerging global economic powers is not yet clear, but it is now fully acknowledged that the political and economic relevance of the West is being re-scaled (O'Neill & Terzi, 2014).

The European Union as a trading block, since its inception in 1952 (the Coal and Steel Treaty), has expanded regularly both in scope and membership from its initial 6 Member States to the present-day 28, and with a number still in the antechamber. This increase in membership has also been accompanied by a major expansion of the scope and functions of the European Union, with each successive revision of the Treaty, into a very broad and complex role and mandate; the latter matches, with a few exceptions, those of its Member States, the notable exception being defence. The Commission's President Barroso declared in 2007 that the "new *raison d'être*" of the EU is to help Europeans prosper in a globalized world (European Commission, 2007).

This way of considering the EU on the occasion of its 50th anniversary was new. Less than 20 years earlier, the EU was primarily seen as a regional integrational entity among a relatively small number of participating countries, tearing down the wall that separated them and prevented their economic and political integration, the EU's external policy being essentially a sub-product of this internal consolidation (Sapir, 2011, p. vii). With globalization this internal integrating approach to the Single Market was losing its relevance and, consequently, the EU's external policy acquired a new importance and dimensions, which needs to be taken into account in consolidating the fragmented character of the governance of EU's external policy, including its economic aspects. Closer cooperation between the EU and its Eastern European

partners—Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine—is important for the EU's external relations; as the EU has expanded, these countries have become closer neighbours, and their economic and social development influence the economies in the EU.

On 27 June 2014, the EU signed Association Agreements (AA) with Georgia, the Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine (European Commission, 2014). The AA are aiming at political association and economic integration of EaP countries with the EU. The AA could have a strong impact on the EaP countries' economies and societies to bring these countries closer to EU standards and norms. The AA comprise four general chapters: Common Foreign and Security Policy; Justice and Home Affairs; the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area, and a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA). The EU has put forward suggestions for each partner country and currently negotiates the AA individually. A Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement covers environment, transportation, science and education; it is more than a classical free trade agreement. It concerns the liberalization of trade and harmonization of trade-related legislation of a country with EU standards and the *acquis communautaire*. In addition, prior to the AA is signed, a country should gain a membership in the World Trade Organization (WTO) to become a part of the multilateral trade agreement, which is a precondition for entering negotiations on the DCFTA. As the result, Azerbaijan and Belarus, which are not members of the WTO, cannot negotiate the DCFTA with the EU. Countries that sign a DCFTA will have to adopt about 350 EU laws within a ten-year time frame. Opening the markets through the progressive removal of customs tariffs and quotas, and harmonizing laws, norms and regulations in various trade-related sectors will make this possible. Signatories of a DCFTA will also have access to EU's 500 million consumers and a market with a combined economy of 12.9 trillion euros (European Commission, 2014).

When the reforms following from the AA are completed, it is expected that Georgia will have 4.3 per cent growth per year (292 million euros in national income). Independent economic research suggests that Moldova's participation in the DCFTA will boost its exports to the EU by 16 per cent, and imports from the EU by 8 per cent. For Ukraine, the DCFTA as a whole is expected to boost GDP by 5.4 per cent annually, if reforms are completed, and Ukraine's national income will increase by 1.2 billion euros per year. Furthermore, Ukrainian exports to the EU are expected to increase by 1 billion euros per year. Sectors that would benefit the most are wearing apparel and textiles, food products, vegetable oil and non-ferrous metals. New market opportunities in the EU and higher production standards will spur investment, stimulate the modernization

of agriculture and improve labour conditions (European Commission, 2014; Vinhas de Souza, 2011, pp. 1–5). Core reforms resulted from the AA are foreseen in a number of key areas besides trade arrangements. They focus on economic recovery and growth issues, consumer protection and vital sectors of national economies such as energy, transport, environmental protection, and industrial development. The reforms are aimed at improving public governance, justice, law enforcement, social development, and protection. A crucial part in the future of these countries are further reforms in education, youth, and culture.

The AA of the EU with Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine are the prelude for the development of a deeper dimension in international relations, both for the EU and the countries concerned, with significant human implications. The need to increase the knowledge and understanding of the EU among the population, and in particular the youth, is essential not only in the EU Member States, but also it should be a high priority for the European institutions and those interested in the European Union in the EaP countries. As the functioning of the Member States is multi- and interdisciplinary in nature, so is that of the European Union; for the EU this is expressed in terms of its organizational structure and interactions between its institutions—European Parliament, European Commission, European Council, and the European Court of Justice—just to name the main ones. While the proposed EU actions emanate usually for the European Commission, they must be agreed by its other institutions before adoption at the EU level and implementation at the EU or Member States' levels. This approach requires a close and regular interaction between these institutions, which can be assimilated to interdisciplinarity in academic terms. Similarly within the structure of the European Commission, proposals for actions are developed by over 20 separate General Directorates (DGs), depending on the subject matter (multidisciplinarity), but have to receive the agreement of the other DGs, before being considered and adopted by the College of Commissioners and then forwarded to the other institutions for “consideration and adoption”. The European Union, as a regional integrational organization with major international dimensions, as has been already stressed above, has a very broad and complex mandate assigned to it by the various successive treaties since its inception in 1957, being very different from the classically called international organizations. In Table 1 the transdisciplinary approach to functioning of the EU is presented.

Table 1. The transdisciplinary functioning of the EU

In 2006 and 2007 the European Commission sent two Communications to the European Parliament, the Council, ECOSOC and the Committee of Regions (COM(2006) 567 of 4.10.2006 and COM(2007) 183 final of 18.4.2007) focused on “Global Europe: as stronger partnership to deliver market access for European Exporters”.	
The European Commission focused in these communications on three key aspects:	Competitive markets
	Economic openness
	Social justice
The communications stressed:	The single market is vital for creating globally competitive companies in the EU
	European economic openness is vital for creating jobs in Europe and for the EU international competitiveness
	While maintaining the Commitment to multilateralism, carefully selected and prioritized bilateral free trade agreements should also be promoted
	The need to overcome the restrictive public procurement practices of most countries – this area is a very significant to untapped potential for EU exporters
	The need to recognize the potentially disruptive impacts of market opening for some regions and workers particularly too less qualified.

Furthermore, the broad and complex mandate discharged by a large number of institutions and agencies composing the EU structure, requires a broad multidisciplinary as well as interdisciplinary approach for its effective implementation.

2. Transdisciplinarity and employment opportunities

Interdisciplinarity is becoming slowly an accepted and increasingly applied concept in many areas of human endeavour. EU studies attract students from many different academic backgrounds and thus by the very nature of the student body are more open to a multi- and interdisciplinary approach. The potential impact of the implementation of the AA is also of interdisciplinary character.

The changing nature of EU external policies influence in the light of the AA-type agreements the knowledge and skills required of youth in the EU to be competitive and thus the EU studies have to strengthen its comparative approach in teaching and research; one such approach being the use of non-academic immersion settings for teaching and research. For this approach (study tours and internship programmes) to be effective it has to be integrated in the academic programmes and receive credit. Furthermore, many new disciplines have entered the curriculum of universities in EU and EaP countries. Broadening considerably the scope of these studies, many of the disciplines, among other factors, depend upon the current socio-political global trends and inherent strong path dependency. At present, there is still a great diversity across the European higher education systems and curricula; this is self-evident, since national economic developments are different between countries and represent a complex and multi-faceted phenomenon.

During the last decades, many new disciplines have entered the curricula of universities. Globalization and technology have created new professions which demand new skills and radically impact established disciplines. Many of the disciplines, among other factors, depend upon the current socio-political global trends and inherent strong path dependency.

Education and training in our societies have the paradoxical and often contradictory tasks of preparing students to perform very specific and complex tasks while at the same time being capable of critical thinking, having the ability to discuss, work with multiple sources and large amounts of different information. Today's employers in business, the public sector, and private research organizations look for problem identifiers, problem solvers and problem brokers. And as the complexity of our world increases, an ever-higher level and diversity of skills and knowledge will be needed to manage this complexity.

Transdisciplinarity is a most valuable tool in the decision-making process and for analyzing different policy options. While the importance of interactions between governmental policies is recognized, it is not always fully implemented

in practice in most countries, resulting frequently in incoherent policies. There is, in particular, the need to encourage a greater “knowledge exchange and interaction” between all parties concerned, including public authorities, research and teaching institutions, NGOs, and opinion makers.

As the EU experience shows, the current political and economic challenges cannot be successfully addressed without the contribution of knowledge-based innovations in all areas of education and research including the humanities, technology, the natural sciences, health sciences, and social sciences.

During the past several decades, a new paradigm of the function of higher education in society has gradually emerged. Higher education is crucial to Europe’s ambitions to be a world leader in the global knowledge economy, and higher education institutions must be able to play their full part in the concept of so-called “knowledge triangle”, in which education, research, and innovation interact as key drivers for the knowledge-based society. Systematic and continuous interaction between these three activities is a guarantee for the success of this concept. The results of the implementation of the “knowledge triangle” can be measured in terms of social and economic progress. Through increased trans- and interdisciplinarity and integrated studies, one can get more benefits from the investments in knowledge and education that are currently being gained. At the same time, one can strengthen the interaction between research, education and business, so that enterprises can develop unique products, which benefit from the most advanced knowledge from different sciences. Integrated study programmes in social sciences promote civic competences and provide coordinated, systematic study of such disciplines as economics, political science, law, business and management, regional science, history, sociology, and anthropology. In addition, the content of these programmes should include appropriate contributions from the humanities, mathematics, and, possibly, natural sciences. To study integrated disciplines in social sciences in an interdisciplinary manner helps students to develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good, as citizens of culturally diverse and democratic societies in an interdependent world.

This is especially important for all the EU Member States which have joined the EU in the past decade (the new EU Member States), as these countries have undergone serious political and socio-economic changes before accession to the EU, during the post-accession period, and in particular at the time of the economic downturn in 2008–2010 and economic recession of 2011. All these changes affected virtually all aspects of daily life and had significant long-term economic and social consequences. All the new EU Member States had integrated their

higher education systems into European Higher Education Area, which required reforms in higher education to comply with the process of implementation of the Bologna Declaration (1999). Particular attention during the current reform process is given to the three cycles' curriculum development, workload-based credits as units to be accumulated within a given programme, curricular design that takes into account qualification descriptors, level descriptors, skills and learning outcomes, and promotion of mobility in Europe.

To meet the challenges of the above-mentioned themes, a number of interdisciplinary educational programmes, for example, European Studies courses and programmes, have been launched in the Member States. Development of interdisciplinary dimension in higher education system, of which European Studies programmes are, is an obvious strategy for the higher education institutions. This trend offered to students and young researchers an opportunity to acquire a solid knowledge about Europe and the European Union. The core disciplines—economics, political science, law and history—are represented in many European studies programmes; they provide students with relevant knowledge about the EU and up-to-date information of the state of the art in this area. Implementation of such programmes also contributed to the creation of a stimulating research environment. Development of analytical skills of graduate students and specialist knowledge promoted by European studies is an asset in areas where profound knowledge of contemporary EU matters is required. In other words, European studies prepared academically educated qualified specialists in the fields of vital importance for the EU and their home countries. Graduates are able to successfully perform in the public sector and non-governmental institutions at the EU and national levels; they can make an objective analysis of the on-going processes of European integration. European studies programmes also contribute to a deeper understanding of issues of current importance as financial problems, public debt and lack of confidence by studying possible options for new fiscal, safety, and justice mechanisms. Trans- and interdisciplinary is also a valuable tool in the decision-making process and in analyzing different policy options. Usually there are wide variations in the preferences and values of decision-makers and stakeholders over qualitative and quantitative, and social attributes of alternatives in a decision-making process. A transdisciplinary approach can help to identify trade-offs and different policy options, as well as evaluate what is the most optimal and relevant policy choice (Muravska, 2011, pp. 170–172).

Another positive trend is an emergence of new forms of networking and partnerships among universities, research institutions and business. In many EU Member States, universities and research institutions are merging and bringing

together resources available for creating a critical mass to enhance the quality of education and research.

There are several academic and professional bodies in the area of European Union studies, as, for example, European Community Studies associations (ECSAs). Representatives from these associations meet regularly at the national level and at periodically held Jean Monnet and ECSA World Conferences. The European Commission Jean Monnet Programme supports multi- and interdisciplinary education and research in EU integration. Besides, the European Commission Representations in each of the EU Member States interact with academics to provide information and assistance on the subject matter.

The number of stakeholders in the public and private sector and the interest of NGOs to cooperate with students, researchers and faculty members of European studies have been growing in the recent years. Experts in education are to be encouraged to join these professional bodies. Furthermore, the European Commission Delegations in the AA countries should follow the example of the EU Commission Representations in EU Member States.

International competition is creating demand for knowledge workers of all types, a challenge that influences universities, who train future professionals and knowledge producers for our society. There is also an increased competition between institutions for talent and funding.

Enhancing the EU-related studies with special emphasis outside the formal academic settings involves a two-way approach with the following elements:

- Improving the knowledge of the EU in the countries concerned through a hands-on approach;
- Improving in-situ for the EU partners of the practical knowledge of the countries concerned, in the countries concerned.

The EU-level “Youth on the Move” is an excellent achievement of the EU. This requires having a larger share of courses and study programmes in English, the vehicular language used in teaching and research activities at the public higher educational institutions in Latvia and in a number of other EU countries. This is especially important in social sciences, including economics, political science, law, and European/EU studies. Most professors and researchers accept this constraint. At the same time, there are more diverging views when it comes to the specific outline of the programmes and especially the balance between specific EU-courses and methodological courses at master-level programmes (Muravska, 2011, pp. 169–170).

However, students tend to select for studies universities with good-quality education and to move to countries with an attractive economic and cultural environment. This trend could strengthen the human potential of certain countries as well as enhance their educational system with highly qualified students, while at the same time weakening high-quality human resources in other countries. The European Commission could focus in the future on a regional “multi-country” policy when considering small countries, and see them as one region. This, in turn could influence the development of high-quality universities with higher concentration of high-level of education and research. This will represent a trend of deeper integration without the loss of national identity. This concept should be further developed (Muravska, 2012, pp. 80–82).

There is also a serious risk that the continued lack of knowledge accumulation will further increase the pre-existing gap between industrially developed and less developed regions and countries in Europe. The question is how much time and effort will be required to reconstruct the human capital once it has been dispersed? For example, in the European Research Area (ERA), universities are the key actors in European innovation to help build a strong ERA. In July 2012, the European University Association signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the European Commission DG Research and Innovation, and a Joint Statement with the Commission and other European stakeholder organizations, committing the signatories to working in partnership towards achieving the ERA goals (EUA, 2013b).

2.1 Horizon 2020

Most recent economic and political environments open new horizons and challenges for universities. The main instrument is the Horizon 2020 programme, introduced by the European Commission, which will provide support to university research. The major problem in the EU is that 85 per cent of European public research funding is spent nationally without transnational collaboration between programmes or competition between researchers from different Member States, while only 15 per cent is coordinated in intergovernmental organizations or spent jointly in the Research Framework Programme.

This proportion should be gradually changed. As it is stated in the Agreement on “Horizon 2020”: the EU’s research and innovation programme for the years 2014 to 2020 (LERU, 2011, p. 10), Horizon 2020 promotes international collaboration and provides potential for coordination and dialogue, and partnership across Member States should be supported as a means to address global challenges and to avoid fragmentation and duplication of research effort in Europe. At

the same time changes in education are strongly linked to the next long-term programmes for research and innovation (Horizon 2020), and education and training (Erasmus+).

2.2 Universities as regional actors: education research and social inclusion—ERA Chair

What is important is to understand the ways in which research universities interact with regional economies. The answer to this central question can be found in the framework of an interaction of university products and necessary factors for technology-based economic development. However, we should keep in mind that the bundled nature of university products makes it impossible to separately assess the impact of universities on their regional economies. To provide some solutions to this issue, the European Commission initiated the introduction of the European Research Area (ERA) Chairs at universities with currently low levels of participation in the Framework Programme.

The ERA Chairs are supposed to attract outstanding academics to help close the research and innovation divide within Europe on a regional basis. This is a new measure aiming to help develop research excellence regionally and is a part of Horizon 2020. For the pilot project, the Commission already received a lot of responses from the EU Member States that have cohesion regions. Member States should adapt policies and steering mechanisms with the objective of encouraging interaction between universities, research institutes, businesses and public institutions. At the national level, national funding mechanisms could be established to support different profiles of universities and research institutions to create a critical mass for ground-breaking innovation, research and education. In the new Member States the implementation of European Social Fund in the area is another source to reallocate resources to form more effective establishments that help to create a critical mass. Funding mechanisms and their successful use are often based on international partnerships, which in many cases are of vital importance. Such funding arrangements among various parties are required to guarantee adequate resources as well as the quality and social relevance of research and innovation activities. Incentives for additional private funding are needed for the efficient accumulation of resources that would be sufficient for ensuring sustainable and competitive research and educational environment. In addition, recognition of developing excellence at higher education institutions is required. This will help in cooperation with external partners in bringing innovations to be implemented in various areas of society. Through increased transdisciplinarity one can get increased benefits from investments in knowledge

and education. At the same time, one can strengthen the interaction between research, education and business so that enterprises can develop unique products, which combine the most advanced knowledge within the fields of humanities, social sciences, technology, health sciences, and natural sciences.

Research and innovation are considered a key priority within the Eastern Partnership cooperation (European Commission, 2011). A dedicated Panel on Research and Innovation under the current EaP Platform IV, “Contacts between People”, was successfully launched in November 2013 and joint projects started to be implemented in the framework of Horizon 2020. The panel supports EaP countries in their national and regional capacity building in research and innovation. This also facilitates coordination of policies and programmes between EU and EaP countries by sharing information and experiences, as well as the development of joint activities (EC DG for Research and Innovation, *n.d.*).

3. Competence-based learning: study visits to the EU institutions and to the AA countries

Transdisciplinarity is a crucial element of European Union’s studies, which needs to encompass a number of different disciplines to take into account the complex and wide-ranging nature of the EU. Such disciplines include political, economic, legal, social, labour, environmental and public health sciences studies, just to mention the most salient ones. The European Commission actively promotes European Union studies through various programmes and activities. However, educational institutions could promote transdisciplinary education not only in academic environment, but also in non-academic settings. The best model example is the students’ study tours organized as a multi-institutional non-profit university activity (Berlin, 2011). These studies which focus on the European integration process have the advantage of access to the EU and related institutions as well as bodies involved in EU activities, to complement their academic training with confrontation with reality in the form of an “academic immersion” in a non-academic interdisciplinary setting. For the study tours, students are selected usually by the participating universities and they must receive academic credit for their participation in the study tour (the credit received and the additional academic work which they might have to perform is determined by each academic institution). The EU institutions which offer in-depth immersion include European Commission, Parliament, including think-tanks related to the European Parliament political groups, European Council,

European Court of Justice, European Central Bank, European Economic and Social Committee, Regional Committee, and European Statistical Office. During study visits a broad number of topics are covered, including EU external and international relations, financial issues, internal market, migration, immigration, mobility, etc.

Following the study tours, these institutions also offer a number of internships to the participating students. In the context of the AA, the study visits and internship programmes could involve students jointly from the EaP countries.

The study visits and internships by students from the EU countries to the EaP countries would include participants from all the EU Member States who have both background knowledge of the EU and specific interest in either one or more of the EaP countries. It would have a common core of three- to five-day briefings on the EU in Brussels, followed by two separate sets of three-week study visits to either Eastern Europe (Moldova and Ukraine) or the Caucasus countries (one week in each). This, in turn, is followed by two- to three-month internships in one of the countries concerned. These programmes would involve up to 70 and 100 participants each year and thus over a period of five years train a core of 350 to 500 young professionals who would have a practical knowledge of the EU and its EaP dimension. It would be in the interests of the EU, its Member States and the EaP countries to collaborate and fund jointly such a multi-annual and transdisciplinary project. The type of education in non-academic format could stimulate competence-based learning. It could help develop global, national and local generic competences (Beneitone & Bartolome, 2014, pp. 303–332). Another important achievement could be a language for communication and terminology that is understood by all major stakeholders, including experts in education, students, graduates and employers.

4. Conclusions

Transdisciplinarity means a close interaction of the educational establishment with the rapidly evolving international scene and its needs. Its impact on European Union studies is evident. The need for a more practical approach needs to be explored. Increased interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity in education and research is not a goal in itself but a means for creating new knowledge and competencies at a world-class level. It will strengthen the Member States of the EU and the whole EU competitiveness in relation to other countries and regions. If one does not set a clear focus on promoting cross-disciplinary thinking

within research and higher education, one risks losing out on the necessary new knowledge and skilled labour force, the ultimate guarantee for common wealth and welfare.

Integrated and interdisciplinary research and education are neither a substitute nor competitor for mono-disciplinary research and education; on the contrary, this approach is a supplement.

In many cases, strong mono-disciplinary knowledge is the precondition for new cross-cutting knowledge; conversely, interdisciplinary knowledge can contribute to creating the necessary dynamic within the individual fields.

International competition is creating demand for knowledge workers of all types, a challenge that influences universities who train future professionals and knowledge producers for societies. The EU leaders promoted less than a decade ago a major “new *raison d’être*” for the EU in the rapidly globalized world—the EU should use its collective weight to shape “globalization” and thus help Europeans prosper as well as create a better global world. The EU should increase its commitment in promoting the educational component associated with this new globalized *raison d’être* of the EU. The relations between the EU and EaP countries are important for both the EU external policy and the countries concerned. The increased intercourse with Europe that can be expected in the wake of the AA which offer many new opportunities for the European Union and Eastern Partnership countries’ communities. The European Union studies should enhance their comparative approach and be complemented by teaching and research in non-academic settings. The experts in education already involved in European Union studies should be encouraged to become interested in the EaP aspects of their subjects. Such an approach should be progressively extended to other countries with which the EU will conclude similar agreements in the future.

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