

Peacebuilding and Higher Education: An interdisciplinary Approach in the Context of Macedonian Society

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Introduction

At its core, peacebuilding nurtures constructive human relationships. To be relevant, it must do so strategically, at every level (including educational one) of society and horizontally across the potentially polarized lines of ethnicity, class, religion, and race. In this regard, peacebuilding has the capacity to develop strategies to maximize the impact of initiatives for constructive change within this complexity. It focuses on transforming inhumane social patterns, flawed structural conditions, and open violent conflict that weaken the conditions necessary for a flourishing human community (Philpott and Powers 2010). There are certain hallmarks of the constructive relationships that peacebuilding approach seeks to foster among conflicted or divided peoples. These include the cultivation of interdependence as a social and political context for the effective pursuit of human rights, good governance, and economic prosperity, the promotion of transparent communication across sectors and levels of society in the service of including as many perspectives and actors as possible in the reform of institutions and the repair or creation of partnerships conducive to the common good, and the increasing coordination and integration of resources, programs, practices and processes.

The educational institutions and the educational process itself, certainly represent environments that can have a positive impact on the promotion of social cohesion and participatory activities shaped in an intergroup communication and mutual trust in divided or insufficiently integrated societies. Considering that peacebuilding actions should be undertaken on multiple levels: citizen awareness raising and democratization, as well as stimulating social cohesion, interethnic coexistence, intercultural learning and elimination of prejudices, the paper's scope is to explore and analyse the Macedonian higher education's impact in peace building process.

In that way, the preliminary part is focused on the theoretical aspects of the strategic peacebuilding, interaction and bringing to the educational process. The second part deals with the higher education as a tool for peacebuilding in the Macedonian multi-ethnic society, considering historical and socio-political context of the society suit to proclaimed independence from former Yugoslavia (1991), armed conflict (2001) and in context of EU and NATO membership processes.

Theorizing the peacebuilding approach

In a broader context, the peacebuilding refers to the development of constructive personal, group, and political relationships and partnerships across ethnic, religious, class, national, and racial boundaries. Peacebuilding seeks to address the underlying causes of conflict, helping people to resolve their differences peacefully and lay the foundations to prevent future violence. It aims to resolve injustice in nonviolent ways and to transform the structural conditions that generate conflicts. In this regard, peacebuilding is perceived as a long-term and comprehensive strategic process. It is no doubt that peacebuilding becomes strategic when it works over the long run as well as in establishing and sustaining relationships and partnerships among people and within society at all levels.

Theoretically, there are many definitions of peacebuilding and varying opinions about what it involves. Historically, the term itself first emerged during the 70th years of the XX century, by the Johan Galtung, who called for the creation of peacebuilding structures to promote sustainable peace by addressing the “root causes” of violent conflict and supporting indigenous capacities for peace management and conflict resolution (Galtung 1976). The peacebuilding is also considered as:

“...process of socio-economic reconstruction, development and expansion in conflict and devastated areas and between non-privileged nations. Hence, conflict structure could be transformed only by creating appropriate conditions as well as by creating mutual trust. . .” (Harbottle 1984).

According to the International Conference on Peace Building (1986), peacebuilding is a constant, positive human endeavour for building bridges among opposing nations and groups. Its aim is establishing mutual understanding and cooperation as well as removing the stones of mistrust, fear, and hatred (International Conference on Peace Building 1986). Fetherstone (1996) defines peacebuilding as an instrument of preventing the renewal of hostilities, reconstruction of the economic and social infrastructure and facilitating the resolution of the conflict. It makes sense on the difference between peacebuilding and international assistance, i.e. humanitarian and development aid, as it arises from the fact that peacebuilding should be understood as a long-term process aimed at eliminating the essential roots of the conflict.

At the international level, peacebuilding became a root concept within the United Nations’ approaches. Following Boutros Boutros-Ghali’s 1992 report, it defined peacebuilding as action to solidify peace and avoid relapse into conflict (An Agenda for Peace 1992). In 2000, the Brahimi Report defined it as “activities undertaken on the far side of conflict to reassemble the foundations of peace and provide the tools for building on those foundations something that is more than just the absence of war” (UN 2000). In 2007, The Secretary-General’s Policy Committee stated that:

“Peacebuilding involves a range of measures targeted to reduce the risk of lapsing or relapsing into conflict by strengthening national capacities at all levels for conflict management, and to lay the foundations for sustainable peace and development. The peacebuilding strategies must be coherent and tailored to the specific needs of the country concerned, based on national ownership, and should comprise a carefully prioritized, sequenced, and therefore relatively narrow set of activities referring to pre-identified objectives” (Secretary-General’s Policy Committee 2007).

Such UN’s understandings suggest that one of the main peacebuilding objectives revolves around the effort to prevent the recurrence of violent conflict in its aftermath by establishing or strengthening the needed social foundations about peace lasting. It means that peacebuilding seeks to transform a war-torn society into a sustainable one in various arenas (politics, security and socioeconomics), by creating or reforming the state apparatus, state institutions, and other relevant institutions, including those identified as the civil society.

Considering the evolutionary nature and goals of the peacebuilding concept, the dilemma arises whether peacebuilding refers to post-conflict societies uniquely, or it is relevant and applicable in societies not affected by conflict. Both dilemmas are coherent with perception of the peacebuilding as an effort for constructing new or better living conditions through establishing a so-called sustainable peace. As concept, sustainable peace frames the development of constructive personal, group, and political relationships across ethnic, religious, class, national, and racial boundaries. It aims to resolve injustice in nonviolent ways and to transform the structural conditions that causing the deadly conflict, in term to strengthen the local and national capacities for dealing with the past, engaging with the present, and shaping the future to not exclude, oppress, or divide the people and society.

In this way, peacebuilding is increasingly perceived as strategy that encompass concrete measures and cooperative projects in connecting all state and non-state actors toward achieving its goals - improving mutual communication and trust, better social cohesion, economic and social development. Therefore, peacebuilding involves complex environment of stakeholders at all levels. Still, it is neither a purely political, security nor developmental process, but one that gathers key security, political, economic, social and human rights elements in a coherent and integrated way. In such complex circumstances, the educational institutions can and should have a significant role within peacebuilding process. Their role in this context can especially be traced through the prism of their contribution to the improvement of social cohesion as well as in intergroup communication and contact activities.

Bringing peacebuilding into the education process

In the debate about the nexus between peace and education, the education could be perceived as a factor which can threaten peace, but also as an instrument for peace strengthening and promoting. In this regard, any analysis of the education system is more likely to highlight a range of areas where some parts of the system may be fuelling conflict in a highly politicized way, whilst there may be other aspects of the system that are trying to bring about change and contribute towards peacebuilding (Davies 2010). The “human needs” theory, as developed by Burton, identifies the causes of conflicts raised from unfulfilled basic human needs of recognition, security, and identity. If any of those needs remain unfulfilled, individual or group conflict will result (Burton 1990).

The access and right to education, as an integral part of the basic human needs is considered as a universal worldwide human right respectively. Its importance and value affect the personal and community development. The right to education is seen as one of the critical issues of peace governance arrangements that could facilitate peacebuilding and create a contact platform between communities. Therefore, in societies that have experienced violent conflict(s), the education policy may also has a longer-term role in the post-conflict development, to help successive generations understand the causes and consequences of the local or broader violent conflict and potentially to contribute in the peacebuilding and peacekeeping processes. The so-called “integrated education” in conflicted societies can be perceived as an instrument that drives positive impact in enhancing social cohesion and intergroup communication through immediate activities.

The educational systems can provide positive interpersonal relations, a sense of belonging of all students, group solidarity, tolerance, and mutual trust, while the aspects of educational social cohesion can be directly brought into relation with the peace building objectives. The impact of education in general is seen as “the most powerful generator of social capital” in today’s society, contributing to social cohesion by socializing the new members of the society, providing them with knowledge and skills to facilitate their social participation. Durkheim considers social cohesion as the capacity of a society to ensure the wellbeing of all its members, minimizing disparities and avoiding marginalization. Still, although there is no single agreed definition about social cohesion, this term can be linked to the generation of shared values, identities, and norms, and denotes an awareness of social exclusion and inclusion (Tawil and Harley 2004). According to Green and more specifically, social cohesion places emphasis on the integration of the individual and the group as the basis of overcoming social, ethnic, or political conflict (Green et al. 2009). Such an integration understanding usually implies that ‘other’ (e.g. minority) groups must adjust to the majority’s social and cultural norms so that the society becomes cohesive.

Social cohesion in educational systems refers to positive interpersonal relations between students, a sense of belonging of all students and group solidarity. The tolerance and inclusion are key elements of social cohesion in education process (Hoskins 2008). Education institutions are regarded as places where students should learn to be members of a culturally diverse community (Schuitema and Veugelers 2011) and where mutual understanding and shared values should be promoted (Phillips et al. 2010). Social relations are defined as “*the most prominent aspect of social cohesion*” (Schiefer and Van der Noll 2017) and affect the quantity and quality of relations. Schiefer and Van der Noll distinguished four components of social relations that should be achieved through the educational process: social networks, trust, mutual tolerance, and participation. The social networks in educational settings are defined as the configurations of relational ties among peers in a class and school, relations between students and teachers, and patterns of relations between parents (Carolan 2014).

Trust refers to classmates, teachers, or the school as an institution. Perceived helpfulness and fairness are two of the key elements of students’ generalized trust in others (Dinesen 2011) and are thought to also play a role in one’s trust in classmates. Tolerance toward outgroups refers to both observable positive relations in the classroom or school and attitudes toward students from outgroups. Based on contact theory (Allport 1954), cross-ethnic friendships are regarded important for tolerance toward outgroups and contribute to stronger social cohesion. Participation is connected to a positive school climate or involvement in civic education. Students can participate in social activities both within and outside the school. An active participation in the classroom during lessons is regarded as helpful for a positive school climate that fosters social cohesion, while from a citizenship education perspective, student participation refers to providing students with knowledge and participatory skills within the school enabling them to participate in civic affairs and social life outside their schools in their neighbourhood and country (Banks 2017). The education’s influence on the intergroup communication and intergroup contact activities, reflected through a contact hypothesis (Allport 1954), aims at promoting intergroup relations within conditions of status equality and cooperative interdependence. Educators also facilitate sustained interaction between participants and the potential formation of friendships and might help alleviate conflict between groups and encourage change in negative intergroup attitudes. In this regard, educational institutions are environments that enable or should enable direct contacts and interactions between participants/students from diverse cultural, ethnic, religious and social groups.

Interactions with people of other cultures offer opportunities along to road to more peaceful communities, while the intergroup communication competence gives the needed tools for building bridges over the cultural divides. Allport (1954) emphasizes that the intergroup contact does not automatically or always reduce prejudice,

but it is affected by: 1) equal status among group members; 2) group members working toward a common goal; 3) cooperative interaction among group members; and 4) clear institutional forms of support for intergroup contact. Allport's approach in defining the criteria is quite restrictive as his focus is mainly on race relations, while the intergroup contact theory has widened over the years and includes prejudice based on ethnicity, religion, disability, sexuality.

Hypothetically, by establishing contact and increasing knowledge about other cultural groups, the prejudice has to be reduced. Another way that contacts reduce prejudice is by facilitating empathy and perspective taking. Intergroup contact, especially when it fosters close personal relationships, makes easier taking and understanding perspective of outgroup members, share their emotional experiences and empathize with their concerns, thereby improving intergroup attitudes. Thus, the intergroup communication in educational environments can be perceived as perspective and significant instrument that enables creation of partnerships, friendships, and mutual trust between different parties/students as well as that has positive impact on peacebuilding process.

Higher education processes in Macedonian society: Background information

The question of the role of high education in Macedonian multi-ethnic society has emerged from the broader context of interethnic relations and specifically as an issue of the access to high education of non-majority ethnic groups. It becomes the most salient aspect of interethnic tensions as access to high education have become politicized and political parties' representatives claimed it is a matter of high priority that requires all necessary means to be achieved (Georgieva et al. 2014). The core problem in this regard has different ethnic perspectives. The ethnic Albanians demanded more favourable conditions and access to high education, while ethnic Macedonians perceived such claims as repetition of once experienced separatist Serbian-Kosovo scenario.

The data about graduate students for Universities in Skopje and Bitola in 1990-1991 (the only state universities in that period) show that 1.5 percent are Albanians, while 87.9 percent are Macedonians (Leatherman 1999). According to the State Statistical Office (SSO), the situation in 2015/2016 shows an evident change in ethnical representation of the graduated students in the universities, compared to 1990-1991. Total number of graduated students counts: 6 015 out of 8 124 are Macedonians (or 74.03 percentage), 1 592 (19.59 percentage) are Albanians, 153 Turks, 30 Roma, 57 Vlachs, 85 Serbs, and 192 Other (SSO, 2016). In 2021/2022, the total number of first-time enrolled students are 47 493. Out of total number 32 819 (69.10 percentage) are Macedonians, while 11 828 (24.90 percentage) are Albanians (SSO

2022). Such proportion is derived from the introduction of Albanian as a language of instruction in the higher education. In this regard, the provisions of the Law on Higher Education (2000) envisaged the introduction of minority languages in higher education, opportunities for establishment of private higher education institutions and the establishment of professional bodies for accreditation and evaluation. The law's amendments and changes enabled the establishment of the South East European University (SEEU) in Tetovo in March 2001. In the followed period, three more new state universities have been established: State University of Tetovo in 2004, Goce Delchev University - Štip in 2007 and the St. Paul the Apostle University for Information Technologies – Ohrid in 2009, and lately in 2016 the sixth state university - Mother Teresa University in Skopje, was established.

According to the SSO's data, Macedonians are the majority among students at the: Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje, St. Clement of Ohrid University in Bitola, Goce Delchev University in Štip and St. Paul the Apostle University for Information Technologies in Ohrid. Within these universities, Macedonian is main language of instruction. In other hand, Albanians are the majority students at the: South East European University in Tetovo, State University of Tetovo and Mother Teresa University in Skopje, with Albanian as the main language of instruction in education. However, above presented statistics by the SSO, shows that the access of ethnic communities to high education is improved in the past 20 years, but the dilemma is whether and how the high education contributes for promoting and building social cohesion/segregation and interethnic dialogue and communication as well as to which extent the high education impact on peacebuilding. Additionally, the SSO's data show a serious absence of mutual contacts and communication between ethnical Macedonian and ethnical Albanian students because of their choice to enrol in universities where their mother tongue is main language of instruction.

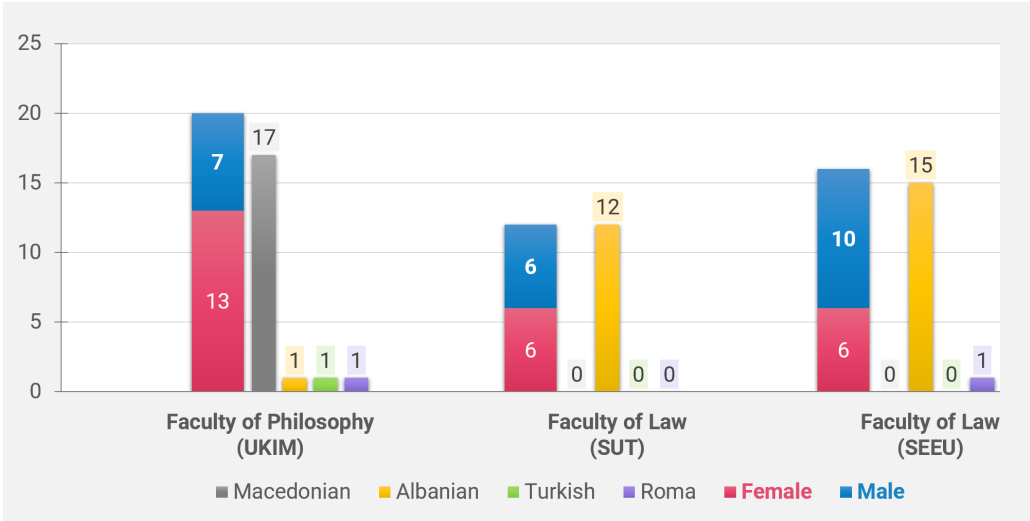
The peacebuilding model in higher education: An interdisciplinary approach in the context of Macedonian society

The state of art of Macedonian high education respects and implements the idea of intercultural education. The policies in high education are continuously facing with criticism, as they are inconsistent and based on frequent experiments, and they are not incorporating the models of intercultural education, its priorities and goals. There are several explanations for such a perception, as: parallel education systems are established, which produce physical and cultural distance; poor teacher competencies for teaching intercultural education; strong influence of the non-formal and the in-formal educational influence (family, local community, political parties); as well as absence of clearly defined and nationally and locally accepted education goals (Georgieva et al. 2014). There is a general concern that current educational system (including higher education), produces more ethnic distance than social co-

hesion, communication, and dialogue (to which, among other things, the peace building approach is aimed to).

Beside the current state of the art, the Macedonian high education system experienced the sporadic, but significant efforts to move forward the intercultural dialog between students and between teaching staff from different ethnicities and universities. The EU funded TEMPUS project titled “Interuniversity 2nd and 3rd Cycle International Relations Study Programs in Macedonia”¹. In Macedonian context, the purpose of the project was manifold, but primarily it boiled down to capacity building and establishing academic links across the largest ethnical communities in Macedonia. In this regard, a joint Program for Interdisciplinary MA Studies in International Relations: conflict resolution, diplomacy, and human rights, has been established as a part of this project in 2010, with participation of three state universities from Macedonia - Ss. Cyril and Methodius University of Skopje (UKIM), the Southeast European University (SEEU), and the State University of Tetovo (SUT), the University of Gothenburg (as a project holder) and other partners from Austria, France and Ireland. The Faculty of Philosophy at the Ss. Cyril and Methodius University led the specialization in Conflict Resolution Studies, the Faculty of Law at the Southeast European University provided expertise in Diplomacy and International Relations Studies while the Faculty of Law at the State University of Tetovo led the specialization in Human Rights.

Figure 1: Gender and ethnical composition of the enrolled students in the first year of studies (2010/2011)



1 Project reference 144787-TEMPUS-1-2008-1-SE-TEMPUS-JPCR, 2009-2012. More information at: <http://pf.ukim.edu.mk/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/macedonia2008.pdf>, p.78.

Once the accreditation process of study program was completed, 48 students enrolled in 2010/2011 and it largely matched with the objectives of the project, as it was envisaged to be enrolled total of 60 students in the first year or 20 students at each of the three concerned universities. Most of the students enrolled at UKIM were Macedonians, while the ethnic Albanian students dominated in the other two universities. According to the concept and structure of the joint study program, students from all three universities attended the two joint compulsory courses at each of the universities, while the choice of elective courses was from the offered list of courses at the faculty where they were enrolled. As a result, the study process and implementation of study program has been taking place in the classrooms of all these three universities. English was the only language of instruction within the program.

Table 1: Numbers of enrolled students in the first accreditation period (2010-2015)

Academic year	2010/2011	2011/2012	2012/2013	2013/2014	2014/2015
Faculty of Philosophy (UKIM)	20	20	7	7	6
Faculty of Law (SUT)	12	9	16	/	/
Faculty of Law (SEEU)	16	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

The trends of interest observed through numbers of enrolled students at UKIM in the first accreditation period (academic 2010/11 to 2014/15) show a serious and evident decline. The decrease of the number of enrolled students starting from 2012 largely interfere lack of funding for free scholarship, i.e., the students were required to pay for scholarship by themselves.² However, despite the positive experiences of students and the academic staff of all three universities during the program's first accreditation period (2010-2014), the Faculty of Philosophy in Skopje is the only institution that re-accredited the study program and it is still ongoing in 2022.

Even sporadic, the experiences with this joint study program are significant in several respects. The study program has shown that students and academic staff from different universities and from different ethnicities can effectively collaborate and can build partnerships based on mutual respect and trust. By providing students with a positive, constructive, and less polarized environment to discuss, to get involved and to study international relations with specialization in three different modules, the project has impacted the breaking down of traditional barriers (prejudices and stereotypes) and contributed to promoting the interethnic cooperation.

² According to TEMPUS program's rules, the funds for scholarship (tuition fees) for the first two years of the studies and academic staff costs were covered by the project's budget.

In the absence of monitoring and evaluation process on the effects and results of the implemented study program, for the purposes of this paper informal communication was carried out with some of the participants (lecturers and former students), for their perceptions and attitudes regarding several aspects. In this regard, it can be noticed a dominant positive attitude about the success of the study program in terms of creating better relations both between students and lecturers, with different group (ethnic) identification. Confirmation of that, is their common attitude to increase the number of new friends from another ethnic group, once the implementation of the program began. In addition, the positive attitude prevails among the former students that during the implementation of the program, the teaching staff manifested a significant positive contribution in establishing relations and in providing equal status between students from different ethnic groups. The students have a positive attitude about the experience they gained from relationships and cooperation with colleagues from another ethnic group. According to them, the program enabled a better understanding of the views of colleagues from another ethnic group regarding various topics related to international relations, diplomacy, human rights, and conflict resolution.

The academic staff from the three universities that commonly developed program curriculum and participated in the implementation of the study program, are still active and sustainable, as during and following the project implementation several teams were established to participate in the implementation of different national and international projects. The uniting of students from different ethnic backgrounds, represents an important step forward for the Macedonian society. From today's perspective (October 2022) it can be noted that the project has facilitated promotion of mutually beneficial relations. Unfortunately, such a bottom-up approach didn't provide enough food for thought for government bodies and policy makers in the Macedonian society. Like most pilot solutions involving third parties and funding, including the opportunities for temporary funding of end users (students and teaching staff) and documented good practices and perception by the end users, however, this project activity was not recognized by policy makers in the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Macedonia and was not incorporated within the higher education system.

Conclusion

The conception, legal and institutional set-up in high education in countries with different ethnic and linguistic groups are often a challenging, demanding, and contentious issue, as they should meet different needs and interest of the groups. The engagement of the inter-ethnic and inter-cultural interaction in the high education process in the context of the peacebuilding's transformative role has potential to facilitate the social cohesion, contact, communication and cooperation between groups and peoples, even in divided or (post)conflicted communities. If societies fail to ensure social cohesion and integration between different ethnicities through the educational system and thus do not deal with the consequences of the existing segregation practice, then the connection between education and peacebuilding is lost. In such situations students usually show high level of prejudice and mistrust towards students from different (ethnic, religious, racial, etc.) background. In other hand, integrated education should not be accepted as a technocratic process where simply different students come together when they are usually educated apart. Therefore, (educational) integration should be understood as a multi-faced, long-term, and open-ended process in which all stakeholders come together and benefit from it.

Education is still not perceived by policy makers as a key instrument for peace governance arrangements that could facilitate peacebuilding and create a contact platform between communities. The future of the higher education as a peacebuilding instrument in Macedonian society depends on shared understanding of its mission and its goals if not only on common vision about what it means. In this regard, the main challenge for education system in Macedonian society is the widespread division along ethnic lines. Providing opportunities for studying in mother tongue did not integrate higher education process and its beneficiaries. Therefore, the future focus should be on providing opportunities for interaction between students of all ethnic communities as well on promoting the common ground - development of various skills, finding common interest, values and behaviours through interaction, and finally have to result with an increase of students' participation in the democratic and cohesive society. Moreover, the specific goals of education should be geared towards progress in personal skills and knowledge of the students through the processes of getting to understand and respect of other cultures. Such approach will generate a more significant and sustainable higher education's role in peacebuilding in the Macedonian society.

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