



Development of national self-awareness in students of life sciences universities through non-formal education

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Abstract. The purpose of the study was to substantiate the pedagogical foundations and outline effective forms and methods of non-formal education aimed at developing the national identity of students of life sciences universities, considering contemporary challenges, intercultural context, and specific features of professional training of future specialists in agriculture and natural sciences. The authors substantiated the relevance of the subject matter in the context of contemporary socio-political challenges, which require young people to possess a high level of national self-awareness, civic maturity, and an active life stance. Key stages in the development of non-formal education as a recent phenomenon were identified (concept formation, institutionalisation, and the present state). The paper emphasised that in the context of modernity, non-formal education was perceived as a flexible, practice-oriented form of acquiring knowledge, skills, and competencies. It had an equally significant impact on shaping the identity of a citizen and a member of society as formal education does – especially in terms of the development and reevaluation of values, social communication skills, and national consciousness. Special attention was given to the opportunities and potential of non-formal education as an effective means of patriotic upbringing and the development of national

Received 14.01.2025 Revised 18.04.2025 Accepted 22.05.2025

Suggested Citation:

Cherednyk, L., Smoliak, P., & Kostyniuk, V. (2025). Development of national self-awareness in students of life sciences universities through non-formal education. *Humanities Studios: Pedagogy, Psychology, Philosophy*, 13(2), 9-19. doi: 10.31548/hspedagog/2.2025.09.

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self-awareness, the preservation of national identity, and the establishment of an active civic stance. Based on the analysis of scientific literature, the concept of “non-formal education” was examined, the main characteristics of this phenomenon were revealed, and its potential was outlined. Contemporary approaches to organising educational spaces were identified, in which academic training was combined with elements of cultural and educational activities, student initiatives, and volunteer projects. Effective forms of non-formal educational influence were also highlighted (project-based activities, cultural and artistic events, social initiatives, etc.). The results of the study demonstrated that the systematic use of non-formal education methods contributed to a deeper awareness among students of their belonging to the Ukrainian people, the development of value orientations, and readiness for social activity in the face of contemporary societal challenges. The practical value of the study consists in the identification of effective forms and methods of non-formal education that could be implemented in the educational process of universities to develop national identity and civic engagement of students

Keywords: patriotic identity; higher education students; extracurricular activities; civic education; value orientations; cultural heritage; youth initiatives

Introduction

The development of national identity is one of the most important tasks of modern education, especially in the context of globalisation, where the issue of preserving national identity becomes particularly relevant. A distinctive feature of the establishment of the Ukrainian nation, consciousness, and identity lies in the prolonged and complex historical period without a unified state, the dispersion of Ukrainians across the world, and persistent threats to Ukraine’s sovereignty and independence from neighbouring forces eager to claim what is not theirs. This has created an urgent need to establish a strong national context, as national self-identification is the factor that enables Ukrainians to perceive themselves as part of a unified people, bound together by a common history, culture, state language, and the idea of freedom. It is this identity that nurtures patriotism, civic responsibility, readiness for self-sacrifice, and active participation in the defence of the state. In times of external aggression, strengthening national consciousness becomes a vital prerequisite for the preservation of statehood and the further development of Ukrainian society.

Thus, in the realities of transformational social changes, the development of national identity is not only a pedagogical or cultural task,

but also a strategically important component of Ukraine’s national security. Universities play a crucial role in this process, as students not only acquire professional knowledge but also develop their cultural and national consciousness. One of the most effective tools in this regard is non-formal education – a flexible, multi-format approach focused on personal development. It offers broad opportunities for fostering patriotism, national identity, civic engagement, and spiritual culture. In this context, it is important to explore how non-formal educational practices can contribute to the development of nationally conscious individuals within higher education, particularly in the agricultural and life sciences sectors. Life sciences universities, in particular, have a unique opportunity to integrate elements of national consciousness into the educational process by employing methods of non-formal education such as thematic discussions, cultural and educational events, volunteer initiatives, and active learning formats. These methods not only enable students to gain a deeper understanding of their nation but also encourage them to actively participate in the preservation and development of national heritage.

The issue of developing national self-awareness is reflected in legislative acts and regulatory

documents, including the Concept of National-Patriotic Education in the Education System of Ukraine (2022), and has attracted close attention from numerous researchers in pedagogy, sociology, psychology, and cultural studies. Studies examined both the theoretical foundations of national identity and practical aspects of its development among youth. Ukrainian scholars emphasised the importance of fostering patriotism, national values, and respect for history, traditions, and language as key components of self-awareness. Furthermore, researchers highlighted the crucial role of the educational process as the primary tool for shaping national consciousness, especially amid contemporary challenges such as military aggression, information warfare, and cultural globalisation. They underscored the effectiveness of non-formal education, volunteerism, student initiatives, and intercultural dialogue as essential elements in the process of national self-affirmation among youth. In the study by I. Pakhomov (2023), particular attention was drawn to the idea that national education should contribute to the development of future citizens of Ukraine as part of the European community, capable of “embracing cultural diversity” within society. A phased characterisation of the system for developing national self-awareness among student youth through civic engagement was presented in the papers by O. Kin & A. Denysenko (2021). They, among other findings, identified effective pedagogical conditions for fostering national self-awareness in learners, including the student environment as a conduit for national consciousness ideas, involving students in various forms of civic activity, and encouraging continuous development of their national self-awareness.

The determining factors that define the priority areas of national education, including the development of national self-awareness, were revealed in a scientific study by N. Khamska *et al.* (2023). The researchers focused on the development of such characteristics in students as patriotic self-awareness, national identity, national values, civic responsibility, effectiveness in preserving cultural heritage, language, history,

and protecting the national integrity of the state and its national interests. The specific features of identification processes during the ongoing war in Ukraine and the role of higher education institutions in shaping students’ national consciousness were analysed in the research by L. Petrenko & R. Poddubny (2024). They proposed a range of measures to be organised within higher education institutions to effectively foster national consciousness among students, including deepening the study of Ukrainian history and culture within the educational process; developing a national-patriotic educational environment; and engaging students in national-patriotic events and volunteer activities. Thus, the paper confirmed the relevance of the problem of developing national identity and its diverse reflection in the research of scholars. The problem of developing national self-awareness among students of life sciences universities through non-formal education has not yet been the subject of dedicated study and warrants further investigation.

The purpose of this study was to analyse and systematise scientific approaches to defining the essence of national identity as a socio-psychological and pedagogical phenomenon; to identify the potential of non-formal education in the development of national values in students; to substantiate the pedagogical foundations, principles and content of the educational impact of extracurricular activities in the context of national and patriotic education of students of life sciences universities.

Materials and Methods

To organise the study of the stated problem, a set of general scientific and specific research methods was applied. Among the theoretical methods, the following were utilised: analysis and synthesis – for examining the conceptual and categorical framework of the study, particularly regarding the terms “non-formal education,” “national identity,” and “patriotic upbringing”; and for synthesising the obtained data to formulate a holistic vision of the phenomenon under investigation.

The methodological basis of the study also involved elements of the axiological approach, which allowed focusing on the value-oriented dimension of national identity development through non-formal education. Comparison and generalisation were used to analyse and systematise scientific literature, educational legislation, regulatory documents, and to compare scientific viewpoints on the essence, role, and pedagogical potential of non-formal education in the development of national consciousness. Sociological methods were applied to complement the theoretical basis with empirical observations. In particular, content analysis was conducted on public discourse presented in social networks, educational blogs, and online platforms such as Prometheus and EdEra. These platforms provided valuable insights into current practices, trends, and tools of non-formal education used in Ukrainian universities. Special attention was paid to student reflections, feedback from educators, and descriptions of extracurricular initiatives with a national-patriotic focus. The empirical component of the study was supported by observation and descriptive analysis of student participation in educational and civic initiatives conducted within the framework of university-based non-formal education.

Additionally, elements of pedagogical modelling were applied to determine potential formats and methods of non-formal education suitable for implementation in life sciences universities. These included: thematic quests, educational forums, student volunteer and mentoring projects, debates, artistic and cultural events, and participation in all-Ukrainian campaigns and commemorative activities. The research materials comprised scientific articles, monographs, dissertation studies, legislative and strategic documents, and digital educational content reflecting the practical implementation of non-formal educational strategies in higher education institutions. The combination of conceptual analysis and content analysis ensured a multi-dimensional, interdisciplinary approach, contributing to the comprehensiveness and reliability of the research findings.

Results and Discussion

The development of national self-awareness among students of life sciences universities through non-formal education is a process of purposeful influence on the worldview orientations of the individual through educational activities conducted outside formalised curricula. It is aimed at the awareness of one's own ethnocultural identity, historical and cultural heritage, language, traditions, and the development of an active civic stance. Its goal is the deliberate fostering in youth of an understanding of their national identity, cultural heritage, historical memory, and civic position through educational activities that take place beyond the formal education system. These activities are intended to create conditions for the emotional experience of national values, the comprehension of the role of each citizen in society, and to promote the development of patriotic consciousness.

A review of the literature on the development of national identity among students of life sciences through informal education indicates a growing interest among scholars in this issue. The importance of implementing a culturological approach in the process of shaping the personality of future specialists was addressed by I. Zaitseva (2018). The study focused on the specific features of teaching educational components with a culturological orientation, which fosters respectful attitudes toward the spiritual heritage of the Ukrainian people and promotes the development of spirituality, physical perfection, moral, artistic-aesthetic, legal, labour, and environmental culture – an essential factor in building an independent Ukrainian state and developing national self-awareness in students.

In the study on the specifics of developing national consciousness among students specialising in “Physical Culture and Sports,” conducted by V. Kindrat *et al.* (2019), it was demonstrated that the development of national consciousness in students during their education should occur through a close, integrated relationship between acquiring knowledge and the moral development of the individual. The effectiveness of this process

largely depends on the substantive content of educational programmes, the rational organisation of both academic and extracurricular activities, and the spiritual level, education, and culture of the instructor, along with their ability to integrate educational material with national upbringing tasks to comprehensively influence students' awareness, emotions, and behaviour. In the study by O. Luchaninova & S. Rashidova (2024), the effectiveness of national-patriotic education as a systematic and purposeful activity was examined, especially in the context of wartime. The researcher emphasised the importance of developing patriotic consciousness, loyalty, and love for the homeland among the younger generation. The role of non-formal education in shaping the national identity and civic awareness of students was also highlighted. Methodical aspects of developing national self-awareness in the younger generation through Ukrainian musical art were discussed by L. Vasylevska-Skupa *et al.* (2022), who promoted the development of the student's personality by engaging with the best examples of Ukrainian and world art (attending concerts, exhibitions, master classes, excursions, museums, etc.).

The possibilities of non-formal education as a means of personal development were explored by S. Hanaba (2024), who distinguished between non-formal and informal education and stressed that "in the contemporary changing world, the cognitive and informational needs of various social groups cannot be met solely within the traditional education system". Various formats of non-formal education (trainings, workshops, project activities, interest clubs, volunteering, etc.), according to V. Shynkaruk *et al.* (2025), play a leading role in the development of key leadership qualities, promoting the development of independence, initiative, responsible attitude towards work, communication skills, ability to work effectively in a team, and critical thinking. The problem of developing national self-awareness of students through non-formal education has not been the subject of a separate study. The analysed studies emphasise the importance of non-formal education in the

development of national self-awareness among students of life sciences universities (Shynkarenko & Miroshnychenko, 2021). They demonstrate that the combination of a cultural approach, patriotic education, and personal development contributes to a deeper awareness by students of their national identity and role in society.

The history of non-formal education originated in the mid-20th century as a response to the limitations of the conventional (formal) educational system, which did not always meet the needs of rapidly changing societies, especially in developing countries. Key stages of the development of non-formal education as a contemporary phenomenon are presented in the Figure 1.



Figure 1. Stages of the development of non-formal education as a contemporary phenomenon

Source: created by the authors based on I. Akimenko (2024)

Non-formal education is perceived as a flexible, practice-oriented form of acquiring knowledge that often has an impact no less significant than formal education, especially in shaping values, skills, and national consciousness. To provide a detailed explanation of the key concept of “non-formal education”, legislative acts and the work of researchers who have investigated this phenomenon were analysed. The Law of Ukraine No. 38-39 “On Education” (2017) defines non-formal education as education “that is generally acquired through educational programmes and does not imply the awarding of state-recognised educational qualifications at educational levels, but may result in the granting of professional and/or partial educational qualifications”.

Non-formal education as a distinct type of modern pedagogical systems is explored in the studies by foreign researchers and Ukrainian scholars. For instance, in the study by A. Zabolotna *et al.* (2024), non-formal education was defined as one of the “important forms of developing competencies acquired in formal education and developing new ones that significantly increase the competitiveness of specialists”. The main key tools of non-formal education, according to scholars, include trainings and seminars, volunteer projects, student participation in youth organisations and associations, so-called business incubators, expert master classes, conferences, and forums, among others. Non-formal education was defined by V. Shynkaruk *et al.* (2025) as a continuous cognitive development process aimed at “activating new knowledge, deepening the level of professional competence, and autodidactic activity characterised by the absence of strict regulations regarding the location, time limits, and organisational forms of learning,” emphasising that the integration of formal, non-formal, and informal learning should ensure effective education of the future.

Studying the socio-pedagogical conditions for the development of social competence in high

school students through informal education, researcher M. Fedoruts (2021) noted that informal education is any organised systematic educational activity of subjects that takes place outside the official education system and aims to provide selected groups of the population with selected types of education. The researcher emphasised that the advancement of informal education has become an important and natural factor in the development of democratic processes in the education sector in many industrialised countries around the world.

The opinion and scientific approach of T. Vasilyuk *et al.* (2024) are reasonable, revealing informal education as a pedagogical process that is mostly implemented outside of official educational institutions – in the workplace, in the activities of independent educational providers, or at home. Features of this form of education include the absence of a fixed learning schedule and flexible, unregulated use of educational resources. O. Shelever *et al.* (2023) investigating the role and significance of non-formal education during martial law in Ukraine, considered it is defining differential characteristic to be its institutional nature, which precludes the issuance of official state-recognised educational documents. The main generalised qualitative characteristics of non-formal education are presented in the Figure 2. The socio-pedagogical characteristics of non-formal education are defined by its role-related factors in society: free access to participation (regardless of status, gender, place of residence, nationality, age); differentiation of learning content depending on needs; interactivity and innovativeness of learning forms. Researcher E. Saveliev (2021) emphasised that formal education is losing its monopoly, as it does not provide a 100% guarantee of integration into the labour market. Informal education is one of the forces weakening this monopoly by offering alternative forms of learning and new content that help people to adapt to the constant transformations of society.

Voluntariness and flexibility
Non-formal education is a voluntary process that involves free choice of content, form and pace of learning
Activities outside formal institutions
This type of education is implemented in environments that do not have the status of official educational institutions – for example, in professional settings, clubs, circles, family
Focus on practical implementation and the development of life skills
Non-formal education is aimed not so much at acquiring knowledge as at developing practical skills, social, and civic competencies
Lack of rigid structure and regulated assessment system
Non-formal education does not have clear programmes, fixed levels, and formal assessment of knowledge, which makes it extremely adaptable to the needs of the individual
Significant role of motivation and self-education
Self-direction and intrinsic motivation are key factors the effectiveness of non-formal learning

Figure 2. Generalised qualitative characteristics of non-formal education

Source: created by the authors based on O. Shelever et al. (2023), I. Akimenko (2024), S. Hanaba (2024)

A qualitative analysis of existing definitions of non-formal education reveals ambiguity and contradictory interpretations among scholars. Researchers express diverse, and sometimes even mutually exclusive, views regarding the degree of organisation, structure, and effectiveness of this type of education. Meanwhile, the forms and methods of non-formal learning remain insufficiently addressed by the academic community. An important aspect of this contradiction is that, in the European context, the main focus is on the validation and official recognition of non-formal learning outcomes, whereas in Ukrainian pedagogical literature, the absence of certificates is still considered a defining feature of non-formal education. Thus, non-formal education is a type of educational activity carried out outside the official (formal) educational system, characterised by voluntary, flexible, often unstructured nature, aimed at the development of personal, social, civic, or professional competencies. Its main features include voluntary participation, flexibility of content and forms, orientation to participants' needs, learning through practical activities and experience, active interaction among participants, absence of official diplomas, but possible certification.

According to N. Pavlik & S. Kolyadenko (2023), non-formal education “as a sphere of

scientific knowledge is a promising area of contemporary socio-pedagogical research that will contribute to social and pedagogical transformations by introducing a new system of values, patterns, methods, and technologies into the education system”. Non-formal education plays a significant role in shaping the learner's personality because it: promotes comprehensive development, complementing academic learning and thus contributing to the development of soft skills, creative and critical thinking, emotional intelligence, and decision-making independence; fosters civic engagement, which is especially important in the context of our research topic. Participation in social projects, volunteer initiatives, youth and community movements contributes to the development of national identity and self-awareness, cultivating an active, conscious citizen and member of society; expands opportunities for self-realisation, as trainings, internships, workshops, mobility, and exchange programmes provide practical experience outside the formal education system; increases motivation for learning. Participation in non-formal activities stimulates self-education and develops intrinsic motivation for self-improvement; builds adaptability to change by fostering flexible thinking and the ability to engage in lifelong learning.

The methodology of organising non-formal education is revealed through a set of technologies, methods, and techniques of non-formal learning. N. Pavlik & S. Kolyadenko (2023), studying the theory and practice of youth non-formal education, emphasised that organisers of non-formal education prefer active and interactive forms and methods of learning. The development of informal education is promoted by international organisations such as UNICEF, UNESCO, the European Union, the Council of Europe and others. That is why informal education is more developed in Europe and is perceived by European employers on a par with formal education (Zhuravel & Rogozna, 2018).

As a flexible and dynamic system, non-formal education provides a wide range of forms of influence on the development of national consciousness among students of life sciences universities. In particular, effective forms of non-formal educational impact include:

- patriotic trainings and seminars (for example, the training “I am a Citizen of Ukraine”) contribute to the awareness of national belonging, the development of values, and civic responsibility;
- volunteer activities, such as assisting the military or internally displaced persons, promote the development of an active civic stance and patriotism. In the context of the full-scale invasion, volunteer work has become not only an expression of civic activity but also an effective means of shaping the national consciousness of students. Volunteering is not just support for the army or victims but also active participation in defending the nation’s identity, values, and cultural heritage. Student youth have become drivers of volunteer initiatives. For instance, a student volunteer headquarters was established at the National University of Life and Environmental Sciences of Ukraine, coordinating over 300 participants; students and faculty members participate in organising and dispatching humanitarian aid to the front lines, setting up support centers for evacuees, and more (The team of the Senate..., 2023);
- cultural and historical excursions and trips to national landmarks (e.g., the Heroes of

Kruty Memorial, museums of the liberation movement) provide direct contact with history and cultural heritage, actualising national memory;

- project activities (“My Family in the History of Ukraine”, video interviews with veterans) develop research competencies and a deep personal understanding of national identity;
- cultural and artistic events, such as celebrating Vyshyvanka Day, organising Shevchenko evenings, and folk art exhibitions, promote the value-based comprehension of national culture;
- student debates and round tables (for example, debates on the topic “Being Ukrainian means...”) develop critical thinking, public speaking skills, and the development of one’s own civic stance;
- club activities based on interests (Ukrainian film clubs, historical reenactment groups) create an informal environment where national consciousness is naturally strengthened;
- participation in online courses on Ukrainian history, culture, and politics (e.g., courses on Prometheus, EdEra platforms) allows students to broaden their national outlook in a convenient format.

Thus, the multifaceted forms of non-formal education allow for the integration of national-patriotic upbringing into the daily lives of students, deepening their awareness of their own national identity, social engagement, and value orientations.

Conclusions

Thus, it can be stated that in the context of socio-political transformation, military aggression, and global challenges, the issue of developing national identity among student youth is becoming especially relevant. Non-formal education plays a crucial role in this process, complementing traditional educational practices, expanding opportunities for youth self-realisation, and promoting the consolidation of national values. Numerous initiatives aimed at nurturing a conscious, patriotic citizen are being implemented at the National University of Life and Environmental Sciences of Ukraine (NULES).

Further research should focus on developing effective models that integrate civic education, cultural identity, and advanced educational technologies. The development of short-term programmes, trainings, and workshops aimed at fostering national-patriotic consciousness is particularly relevant. Additionally, comprehensive empirical research is needed to assess the impact of students' participation in non-formal education activities (volunteering, cultural initiatives, youth organisations, etc.) on the level of their national self-awareness. It is advisable to analyse the experience of European Union countries, which actively implement programmes for developing national identity through civic, intercultural, and non-formal education, with the

aim of adapting the best practices to Ukrainian realities. Promising areas also include investigating the potential of digital tools, online courses, blogs, YouTube channels, and patriotic projects on TikTok as environments that shape national consciousness among youth through non-formal learning.

Acknowledgements

None.

Funding

No financial support was provided.

Conflict of Interest

None declared.

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Формування національної самосвідомості студентів університетів наук про життя засобами неформальної освіти

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Анотація. Метою статті було обґрунтувати педагогічні засади та окреслити ефективні форми й методи неформальної освіти, спрямовані на формування національної самосвідомості студентів університетів наук про життя, з урахуванням сучасних викликів, міжкультурного контексту й особливостей професійної підготовки майбутніх фахівців аграрного та природничого профілю. Автори обґрунтували актуальність теми в умовах сучасних суспільно-політичних викликів, які вимагали від молоді високого рівня національної самосвідомості, громадянської зрілості та активної життєвої позиції. Були визначені ключові етапи розвитку неформальної освіти як феномену сучасності (становлення концепції, інституціоналізація, сьогодення). Акцентовано увагу на тому, що в реаліях сьогодення неформальна освіта сприймалася як гнучка, практико-орієнтована форма здобуття знань, навичок, компетентностей і мала не менший вплив на формування особистості громадянина, члена суспільства, ніж формальна освіта, особливо якщо це стосувалося формування та переоцінки цінностей, навичок суспільної комунікації та національної свідомості. Особлива увага приділялася можливостям і потенціалу неформальної освіти як дієвого засобу патріотичного виховання та формування національної самосвідомості, збереження національної ідентичності та формування активної громадянської позиції. На основі аналізу наукових напрацювань проаналізовано зміст поняття «неформальна освіта», розкрито основні характеристики досліджуваного феномену та його можливості. Визначено сучасні підходи до організації освітнього простору, у якому поєднувалися академічна підготовка з елементами культурно-просвітницької діяльності, студентських ініціатив і волонтерських проєктів. Також визначено ефективні форми неформального освітнього впливу (проєктна діяльність, мистецько-культурні заходи, соціальні ініціативи тощо). Результати дослідження засвідчили, що системне використання засобів неформальної освіти сприяло глибшому усвідомленню студентами своєї приналежності до українського народу, розвитку ціннісних орієнтацій і готовності до соціальної активності в умовах викликів сучасного суспільства. Практична цінність статті полягала у визначенні ефективних форм і методів неформальної освіти, які можуть бути впроваджені в освітній процес університетів для розвитку національної самосвідомості та громадянської активності студентської молоді

Ключові слова: патріотична ідентичність; здобувачі вищої школи; позааудиторне навчання; громадянське виховання; ціннісні орієнтації; культурна спадщина; молодіжні ініціативи