



## Enhancing Student Engagement through Interdisciplinary Field-based Education

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### Abstract

*The paper examines the International South-East Summer University at the University of Library Studies and Information Technologies (ULSIT) as a sustainable educational strategy for enhancing student engagement through interdisciplinary field-based education. The Summer University expands student and doctoral participation beyond the conventional university teaching formats by including them into real research environments under the methodological guidance of experienced academic mentors. Students from diverse professional fields, including history and archaeology, information and communication sciences, computer sciences, and national security, are selected to form interdisciplinary research teams that conduct complex field investigations in culturally and strategically significant regions of South-East Bulgaria. The programme combines identification, documentation and preservation of cultural heritage, archaeological surveys and excavations, ethnographic research, archival and museum documentation, digitalization of collections, and specialized training in border and security studies. Through direct engagement in data collection, analysis, and interpretation, participants develop applied research competences, critical thinking, teamwork and analytical skills. The sustainability of the initiative is demonstrated by its long-term implementation, institutional support, project-based funding, and the continuous expansion of partnerships with foreign educational, scientific and cultural institutions. Over the years, the International South-East Summer University has evolved into a dynamic platform that broadens student participation in extracurricular academic activities and enables participants to explore, experience, and better understand the professional fields in which they wish to develop, including the possibility of pursuing a scientific and academic career, as practice has proven. The experience of ULSIT confirms that interdisciplinary, mentor-guided field education represents an effective and sustainable model for strengthening student engagement and building a resilient academic community.*

**Keywords:** *field-based education; interdisciplinary collaboration; International South-East Summer University; student participation; sustainable university strategy; ULSIT.*

### 1. Introduction

Contemporary higher education operates in the context of profound transformation driven by the development of the information society, globalization, and accelerated technological advancement. Universities are no longer solely institutions for the transmission of knowledge; rather, they are increasingly establishing themselves as strategic centers for the creation of innovation and the development of practical competencies. Within the context of the evolving demands of the labor market, educational and research institutions are expected not only to provide up-to-date academic content but also to foster the inherent motivation of learners.

It is precisely within this context that the topic of student engagement occupies a central place in the contemporary debate on the quality of higher education. Traditional models of teaching, primarily based on the transfer of information, often fail to sufficiently activate the cognitive potential of students. A tendency toward the formalization of participation can be observed, whereby the acquisition of knowledge is reduced to preparation for written assignments and the taking of examinations. It is precisely here that the need emerges to incorporate an authentic research environment into the educational process – one in which the student is positioned as a researcher rather than as a passive recipient of information.

In this sense, the paradigm “From Accredited Qualification to Certified Skills” offers a conceptual framework for overcoming the gap between formally obtained academic degrees and practically applicable competencies. It shifts the focus from the certification of educational status toward the acquisition of professionally oriented skills. As Denchev et al. state, “the change in the contemporary



education system is directed towards the creation of a new interactive training model based on information resources and knowledge management” [1].

The International South-East Summer University at ULSIT represents a practical platform for the implementation of this paradigm through interdisciplinary field research involving students, doctoral candidates, faculty members, and experts from various scientific disciplines. It does not function as an additional practical component supplementary to the educational process; rather, it operates as an integrated interdisciplinary environment in which learning takes place through direct participation in scientific research. In this sense, the initiative should be regarded as a strategic instrument for enhancing student engagement through field-oriented academic work.

The main hypothesis of the present study is that student engagement increases significantly when theoretical instruction is integrated with real research practice and the certification of the acquired skills.

## **2. Methodology**

This study presents the International South-East Summer University as an institutional model within contemporary educational strategies aimed at enhancing student engagement. The methodological approach combines a qualitative analysis of the program and the content of its activities with empirical data collected through observation, as well as an evaluation of the outcomes achieved over the years and their significance both for the participants and for the university as a leading educational and research institution in Bulgaria.

The paper traces the dynamics of engagement across three main dimensions: theoretical and practical relevance, the acquisition of professional skills, and interdisciplinarity. This approach enables the development of a comprehensive assessment of the impact of field-based learning on the academic development of the participants. Observation of teamwork reveals the degree of active involvement in the research process. The results demonstrate a clear increase in satisfaction with the learning experience and a greater willingness to participate in future scientific initiatives. As highlighted in previous research, “Teaching knowledge or skills needed to practice a chosen profession should no longer be a leading objective of education. It’s more important to show the learner how to fully deploy their abilities and creativity.” [2]

The analysis of the subsequent academic trajectories of the participants demonstrates an increase in the number of students engaging in scientific publications and academic forums, as well as in those who choose to continue their studies in master’s and doctoral programs. This trend indicates the development of a research-oriented mindset among the learners, which may be regarded as an indicator of deep and sustained engagement.

## **3. Methodological Framework of the International South-East Summer University**

### ***3.1 Theoretical and Practical Significance as a Foundation for Participants’ Motivation***

The International South-East Summer University is built upon the understanding that sustainable participant motivation emerges at the intersection of theoretical comprehension and the practical applicability of knowledge. Higher education cannot be limited to the transmission of conceptual models detached from the real social and professional context. When the theoretical framework is experienced as living and functional rather than as an abstract construct, it acquires inherent persuasiveness and stimulates an active cognitive stance among learners.

The theoretical significance within the framework of the program manifests itself through the application of scientific methodologies in real research situations. Participants do not merely become acquainted with the principles of historical analysis, information processing, or cultural interpretation; rather, they employ them as tools for addressing specific scientific tasks. In this way, abstract concepts are transformed into tangible categories through which empirical material is structured. It is precisely this transformation that creates a sense of meaningful coherence within the learning process.

The practical significance complements the theoretical preparation. Interaction with cultural objects, the processing of archival documents or digital resources, presupposes precision, systematic work, and commitment on the part of the team. Each participant becomes aware that their actions have concrete consequences – both for the scientific outcome and for their own development. This awareness strengthens motivation and encourages deeper engagement in the activities.



The synthesis between theoretical knowledge and practical action forms a qualitatively new type of academic engagement. Motivation is no longer based solely on external factors such as assessment or academic status; rather, it is built upon the experience of knowledge as an instrument for real impact. The “learning by doing” approach has been identified as a powerful motivational mechanism for engaging young researchers in active scientific participation [3]. In this sense, the International South-East Summer University creates an educational environment in which theory and practice do not exist in parallel but mutually condition one another, transforming motivation into a natural outcome of participation.

### ***3.2 The Field Research Environment – Acquisition of Professional Skills in an Authentic Setting***

Fieldwork conducted in border regions of Southeastern Bulgaria and the Republic of Turkey that are significant from both cultural-historical and strategic perspectives places students in direct contact with authentic objects of research. This direct encounter with reality transforms the nature of the cognitive process. Instead of analyzing secondary sources within an academic environment, participants work with primary materials collected by themselves, the interpretation of which requires precision and methodological discipline.

Archaeological research, the processing of museum collections, archival documentation, ethnographic interviews, and the digitization of various pieces of information, along with the implementation of various technologies, including unmanned aerial vehicles, form a complex research ecosystem. In this ecosystem, every action has specific consequences and requires scientific responsibility. The application of digital technologies, GIS mapping and 3D modelling in cultural heritage management has already been conceptualized as part of a broader “information environment” model, integrating information collections, technologies and the human factor [4].

The process requires consistency, reasoning, and critical analysis skills, which stimulate deep cognitive activity. As previously emphasized, extracurricular research activities “are based on the principle of ‘Learning by Doing’ and are concentrated around the organization and conduct of summer practical classes and summer universities” [5].

Working in a dynamic field environment also requires adaptability and the ability to function effectively within a team. Unpredictable circumstances associated with field conditions necessitate decision-making in real time and the consideration of diverse expert opinions. This process develops not only the analytical skills of the participants but also their capacities for collaboration, for assessing the real environment, and for subsequently selecting the most appropriate courses of action.

It is precisely in this context that the acquisition of professional skills becomes most evident. Since students do not perceive the tasks as abstract exercises but rather as real scientific challenges, field-based learning becomes a powerful mechanism for the in-depth assimilation of knowledge and the formation of research habits.

### ***3.3 Interdisciplinarity and Publicity – Factors for Enhancing Engagement***

The interdisciplinary character of the program is of fundamental importance for the quality of engagement. The formation of a working collective composed of representatives from different scientific fields creates a space for interaction between methodologies that, within the framework of the standard educational process, sometimes function separately. This contact between diverse analytical perspectives enriches the cognitive process and encourages integrated thinking at multiple levels.

When historians, information technology specialists, researchers of cultural heritage, and experts in national security work in joint teams, a need emerges for synergy between different professional languages and conceptual frameworks. This process of mutual adaptation broadens the horizon of thinking and creates new possibilities for interpretation. The interdisciplinary approach not only enhances scientific productivity but also strengthens the sense of belonging to a shared academic community.

Engagement within the International South-East Summer University is not limited to research activities alone. The public presentation of results, discussions with local institutions, and participation in academic forums broaden the scope of the experience. Students pass through all stages of the scientific cycle – from the formulation of a research problem and the collection of data to their interpretation and communication before a professional audience. In this way, the educational process acquires a sense of completeness. Participants do not merely perform specific tasks; rather, they experience scientific research as a process that connects knowledge, responsibility, and social



significance. It is precisely within this completeness that the deep and sustained student engagement fostered by the International South-East Summer University becomes evident.

#### **4. Sustainability-Driven Student Engagement: Empirical Evidence from the 2025 Edition**

This model corresponds with the understanding that sustainable university development is inseparable from the integration of education, research and cultural heritage preservation within the modern university information environment [6].

The most recent edition of the International South-East Summer University in 2025 confirmed the sustainability of the interdisciplinary field-based learning model and its effectiveness in enhancing student engagement. Over the years, the International South-East Summer University has demonstrated its capacity to function not as a one-time academic initiative, but as a consistently developed scientific and educational platform within which learning and research are conducted in parallel and mutually enrich one another. Within the framework of the activities, comprehensive field studies were conducted in the municipalities of Malko Tarnovo, Bolyarovo, Elhovo, Topolovgrad, Svilengrad, and Yambol. The scope of the research expanded upon the results achieved in previous years and contributed to the accumulation of new empirical material.

Participants worked in a real research environment that included archaeological investigations and surveys, the identification and documentation of tangible and intangible cultural heritage, the processing and digitization of museum collections, as well as audio-visual recording of elements of intangible cultural heritage. In the course of the work, systematic observations were conducted on the current condition of sites belonging to the cultural infrastructure; descriptive forms were completed, and digital datasets were created that can be used both for scientific publications and for future educational modules. Within the framework of the research activities, participants applied various methodological approaches, including archaeological excavations, the preparation of field documentation, work with archival units, the systematization of the acquired information, and its subsequent analysis. This process led to a tangible increase in professional competence and independence in working with primary sources.

A particularly significant outcome of the International South-East Summer University 2025 was the deepening and institutionalization of partnerships with museums, tourist centers, municipal administrations, and other institutions. This made it possible not only to accumulate new scientific material but also to integrate it into real cultural, educational, and administrative practices. Portions of the archival collections of the Historical Museum “Prof. Aleksandar Fol” – Malko Tarnovo and the Municipal Historical Museum – Topolovgrad were digitized, and the created electronic datasets improved both the accessibility and preservation of valuable historical documents and artifacts.

At the same time, expert meetings and thematic discussions were held with representatives of institutions related to border control and national security, including discussions of current challenges facing the border regions. This interdisciplinary interconnectedness broadened the thematic horizon of the program and strengthened the relationship between cultural heritage, demographic processes, and the strategic significance of the region.

From the perspective of outcomes, the implementation of the International South-East Summer University in 2025 led to the preparation of reports, presentations, and scholarly works based on the collected field data. The analysis of feedback indicates increased motivation to participate in scientific publications and conferences, as well as a clearly expressed willingness to continue education in master’s and doctoral programs. A stable research identity can be observed to emerge, characterized by a higher degree of critical thinking, greater confidence in public presentation, and a sustained aspiration toward academic realization.

Part of the results has already been directed toward presentation at international scientific events, including the conference “New Perspectives in Science Education” which demonstrates the integration of field research into international scientific exchange. In this way, the International South-East Summer University 2025 not only reaffirmed its educational and scientific effectiveness but also strengthened its position as a sustainable model for combining student engagement, scientific productivity, and institutional partnership.

#### **5. Strategic Development for the Future**

The forthcoming edition of the International South-East Summer University 2026 conceptually builds upon the results achieved so far and is structured as a research project with clearly defined objectives, tasks, and stages of implementation. It is planned to expand field activities through the continuation of



archaeological excavations and the introduction of new methods for processing and analyzing the acquired information, documenting both tangible and intangible cultural heritage, as well as further strengthening cooperation with local self-government authorities, educational, scientific, and cultural institutions, security bodies, and deepening engagement with local communities.

A principal driving force of the International South-East Summer University is the synergy that emerges from the interaction between research teams and representatives of local communities, in which each side draws experience, information, and skills from the other in the process of generating qualitatively new knowledge. In this way, a contribution is achieved that is not only academic or educational but also practically applicable at both the local and national levels.

The strategic framework of the International South-East Summer University includes a clearly structured work plan that encompasses the preparation of the research team, the implementation of field studies, and the subsequent dissemination of results through reports, presentations, publications, and other forms of scholarly communication. The newly acquired valuable knowledge is interpreted within the context of various academic disciplines and subsequently incorporated into the educational process of students at ULSIT.

The presented approach to the planning, structuring, and implementation of a research project ensures not only the continuation of the scientific achievements accumulated over the years but also its institutionalization and the sustainability of its partnerships with regional cultural and administrative structures.

The evolution of the International South-East Summer University over the years, together with the vision for its future development, reinforces its role as a strategic instrument for enhancing student engagement through research practice in an authentic environment and through the application of interdisciplinary approaches. Evidence of the sustainability of the initiative lies both in its long-term implementation and in the considerable number of students and doctoral candidates who have taken part in it. Moreover, the International South-East Summer University contributes to the personal, moral, and professional development of its participants, which naturally continues in the choice of an appropriate career path, including the pursuit of an academic career.

## 6. Results

In synthesized form, the impact of the International South-East Summer University can be summarized in the following interconnected directions:

- Development of applied competencies – practical work involving the digitization of archival and museum collections, the processing of field data, and the use of specialized technological tools contributes to the strengthening of skills in the field of information technologies and the analysis of complex information data;
- Public and professional orientation – interaction with institutional partners and work in strategically significant regions create a realistic understanding of professional requirements in various fields – cultural heritage, public administration, tourism, libraries, and security. This strengthens motivation for continued specialization and professional development;
- Development of research competencies – a significant improvement is observed in the ability to formulate scientific hypotheses, structure arguments, and critically use sources. Student research outputs demonstrate a higher level of analytical rigor and the ability to connect theoretical models with empirical data, which indicates sustainable intellectual development;
- Early involvement in project-based activities in the form of practical training supports the development of confidence among students, which in turn increases the number of participants who continue their education in master's and doctoral programs at ULSIT;
- Institutional sustainability and strategic value – the long-term implementation of the initiative, project-based funding, and the expanding network of partnerships confirm that the International South-East Summer University is not an isolated educational experiment, but rather a structured and sustainable university strategy for increasing the involvement of students and doctoral candidates in research activities.

## 7. Conclusion

The results of the study confirm that the International South-East Summer University functions as an effective and sustainable model for stimulating student engagement. The empirical data collected through observation, interviews, and the monitoring of participants' academic development outline



lasting positive changes in the way students perceive their own role in the educational and research process.

Participation in a real field research environment transforms the understanding of knowledge as a static system of pre-structured concepts. Learners begin to perceive it as a dynamic process of discovery, analysis, and interpretation in which they themselves are active subjects. This transformation leads to increased independence, a stronger sense of personal responsibility, and a conscious integration into the academic community. A significant proportion of the participants continue to engage actively in various events within the educational, scientific, and cultural calendar of the University of Library Studies and Information Technologies.

In this context, the International South-East Summer University establishes itself not only as an educational practice but also as a university strategy that integrates theory, field-based research activity, and institutional partnership. Its sustainability demonstrates that interdisciplinary training guided by mentors in an authentic environment represents an effective model for the development of young researchers.

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