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Professional Training of Social Communication Specialists in Higher Education Institutions: European Experience and Contemporary Approaches

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Abstract

The aim of the article is to generalize the conceptual foundations and practical aspects of professional training of social communications specialists in higher education institutions based on the analysis of European experience and modern educational approaches. The work uses a set of theoretical methods - a systematic analysis of scientific publications, regulatory documents of the European Higher Education Area, educational standards and curricula of leading European universities; comparative analysis of the content and structure of educational programs; content analysis; structural and functional modeling. Participants in the empirical study were not involved, since the work is based on the analysis of open public sources. Data collection was carried out through a systematic review of scientific sources (from the Web of Science / Scopus databases), analysis of educational programs of leading universities in EU countries (Germany, France, the Netherlands, Finland, Poland) and official documents of the European Commission. Data analysis was performed using the methods of comparative analysis, thematic coding, structural and functional analysis and generalization. As a result, key models of training social communications specialists in the EU countries were identified, common trends (competence approach, practical orientation, digitalization, interdisciplinarity) and national characteristics were identified. It was established that the highest efficiency indicators are demonstrated by the models of the Netherlands and Finland, where the integration of the practical component, digital technologies and interdisciplinarity is systemic. A structural and functional

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model of adapting European experience to national educational systems was developed, which includes updating the content of programs, introducing competency-based learning outcomes, strengthening practical training, developing partnerships with the professional environment and academic mobility.

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Introduction

In the twenty-first century, rapid social, cultural and technological transformations are leading to significant changes in the nature of communication processes and the role of information in society. Digitalization, globalization and the development of network media have radically influenced the ways in which information is created, disseminated and perceived, which, in turn, has increased the importance of social communication specialists in various spheres of public life. They are becoming key agents in shaping public opinion, ensuring effective interaction between social institutions and audiences, as well as managing information flows in conditions of information overload.

In accordance with these changes, approaches to the professional training of social communication specialists in the higher education system are also being transformed. The modern labor market places increased demands on the level of their professional, digital, analytical and ethical competencies, the ability to work in an interdisciplinary environment and adapt to rapidly changing technological and social challenges. In this context, the European higher education system demonstrates a number of effective models and practices focused on a competency-based approach, practical orientation of training and the integration of innovative educational technologies.

Implementing the Bologna Process's tenets, which guaranteed academic mobility, comparability of credentials, and focus on learning outcomes, was a crucial phase in the development of social communications education programs in Europe. The active use of project-based learning, internships, digital platforms and partnerships with the professional environment contributed to the formation of practically oriented training, but at the same time complicated the structure of the educational process and increased the requirements for its methodological and organizational support.

Along with the advantages, modern approaches to training social communications specialists give rise to a number of problems related to the need for constant updating of the content of curricula, coordination of theoretical training with the needs of practice, as well as the formation of ethical responsibility in the context of digital communications. The dynamic development of social media, algorithmic platforms and artificial intelligence in the field of communications makes it difficult to predict the professional competencies in demand in the medium and long term. In this context, the study of European experience in professional training of social communication specialists, and the analysis of modern educational models and approaches to the formation of key competencies become particularly relevant. The generalization of such practices creates a basis for the modernization of national higher education systems, improving the quality of specialist training and ensuring their competitiveness in the global communication space.

International studies of recent years confirm that the effectiveness of training specialists in social communications largely depends on the ability of educational systems to adapt to the challenges of the digital age. Thus, Ozgen and Saydam (2022) emphasize that digitization and the development of new media are transforming the nature of public communications, requiring from specialists not only

traditional knowledge, but also skills in working with algorithmic platforms and big data. Hanandini (2024) in his review proves that social transformation in modern society is directly related to technological changes, which actualizes the need to train communication specialists capable of analyzing and directing these processes. In addition, Demir (2024) study shows that the spread of social media and digital slang creates new challenges for language and communication education, which requires a revision of curriculum content. The European Commission in its documents (EC, 2020) emphasizes the need for the formation of digital competences as a basic component of professional training in all fields, especially in social communications. These international developments create a theoretical basis for a systematic analysis of European training models and their adaptation in national higher education systems.

Therefore, the study of European experience and modern approaches to the professional training of social communications specialists in higher education institutions is a relevant scientific and pedagogical problem that meets modern social challenges. The purpose of the study is to summarize the conceptual principles and practical aspects of the professional training of social communications specialists in higher education, taking into account European experience and modern educational approaches. In accordance with the purpose, the following research questions were posed:

1. What are the main models of professional training of social communications specialists operating in the countries of the European Union and what are their common and distinctive features?
2. What key competencies (professional, digital, analytical, ethical) are formed within the framework of European educational programs in social communications?
3. How are practical orientation, digital technologies and interdisciplinarity integrated into the structure and content of training of social communications specialists in leading European universities?
4. What areas of adaptation of European experience are the most promising for the modernization of national higher education systems in the field of social communications?

Literature Review

The issue of professional training of social communication specialists in the higher education system is the subject of active interdisciplinary research in the fields of pedagogy, social communication, media studies and educational sciences. In modern scientific literature, social communication is considered as a dynamic field of professional activity, which is undergoing constant transformations under the influence of digitalization, the development of social media and the globalization of information processes (Hanandini, 2024; Ozgen & Saydam, 2022; Shevchenko et al., 2022). Researchers emphasize the growing role of communication specialists in the formation of public discourse and the need for adequate updating of the content of their professional training.

A significant number of scientific works are devoted to the competency-based approach as a methodological basis for training specialists in the field of social communications (Mialkovska et al., 2025a, 2025b, 2025c; Holubnycha et al., 2022; Diachenko & Usatyi, 2021). These studies emphasize the importance of developing not only professional knowledge but also universal competencies, in particular, critical thinking, media literacy, digital competence and social responsibility (Kafadar, 2021). At the same time, the authors note that the implementation of the competency-based approach requires significant changes in teaching methods, assessment of results and organization of the educational process.

A separate area of studies focuses on the analysis of the European experience of professional training of social communication specialists in the context of the Bologna Process and the formation of the European Higher Education Area (Popescu, 2025; Heinz & Maasen, 2020; Mendick & Peters, 2023). The authors consider the mechanisms of harmonization of educational programs, the introduction of learning outcomes, the credit-modular system and academic mobility as factors for improving the quality of education and the competitiveness of graduates in the European labor market.

In scientific works devoted to innovative educational approaches, considerable attention

is paid to the integration of digital technologies, project-based and practice-oriented learning in the training of social communications specialists (Kovalova, 2025; Bakhtiyarovna, 2025; Sanatbay et al., 2025). Researchers justify the feasibility of using online platforms, simulation environments, case methods and internships as means of developing professional skills and adapting students to the real conditions of communication activities. At the same time, it is noted that the digitalization of education creates new challenges related to the quality of education and the preservation of humanistic values of education (Demir, 2024). Particular attention in the modern literature is paid to the issues of interdisciplinarity and ethical aspects of training social communication specialists (Peek & Guikema, 2021; Ye & Xu, 2023; Murphy et al., 2021). The authors emphasize the need to combine knowledge from sociology, psychology, marketing, information technology and ethics to form a holistic professional worldview of future specialists. At the same time, the lack of coherence between theoretical training and the practical requirements of the professional environment is emphasized.

Summarizing scientific developments, one can distinguish three key areas of study in the field of professional training of social communications specialists:

1. Theoretical and methodological – study of the essence of social communications and concepts of professional education (Kalashnik et al., 2021; Diachok et al., 2020; Demchenko et al., 2021).
2. Educational and pedagogical – analysis of models, methods and technologies of training specialists in higher education (Yashchuk et al., 2021; Stratan-Artyshkova et al., 2022; Rozhnova et al., 2024).
3. European integration and practice-oriented – study of European experience, competency-based standards and interaction of education with the professional environment (Budnyk, 2021; Sydorenko et al., 2021; Halushchak et al., 2022).

Thus, the analysis of scientific literature shows that, despite a significant amount of studies in the field of social communications and higher education, the problem of comprehensive understanding of the European experience of professional training of specialists and adaptation of modern approaches to national educational systems remains insufficiently studied. This determines the relevance of further studies aimed at integrating theoretical and practical developments into a holistic model of training specialists in social communications.

Method

Research design

The study has a theoretical and analytical design aimed at generalizing the conceptual foundations and practical aspects of professional training of social communications specialists in higher education based on an analysis of European experience and modern educational approaches. The design involves a systematic review of scientific literature, analysis of regulatory documents of the European Higher Education Area, comparative analysis of educational programs of leading European universities, content analysis and structural and functional modeling.

Participants

The objects of analysis were: scientific publications from the Web of Science, Scopus, Google Scholar databases for the period 2020–2026; educational programs and curricula of leading universities of the European Union countries (Germany, France, the Netherlands, Finland, Poland); official documents of the European Commission, the European Higher Education Area, national educational standards of the indicated countries; analytical reports of international organizations (OECD, UNESCO) on digitalization and the competency-based approach in education.

Data collection tools

Data collection was carried out through:

- systematic search in scientometric databases using the keywords: “social communications”, “professional training”, “higher education”, “European experience”, “competence-based approach”, “digitalization”, “interdisciplinarity”;
- study and analysis of curricula and work programs of the mentioned universities according to the criteria: program structure, ratio of theoretical and practical

components, level of digital integration, presence of interdisciplinary modules;
- content analysis of scientific publications to identify key trends and approaches.

Data analysis

Data analysis was performed using:

- comparative method for comparing training models in different EU countries;
- content analysis for systematizing competency components and methodological approaches;
- structural-functional analysis for building a model of adaptation of European experience;
- generalization method for formulating conclusions.

To ensure the reliability of the results, triangulation of sources (scientific publications, regulatory documents, curricula) and independent coding by two researchers were used.

Results

In the course of the research, it has been found that the professional training of social communication specialists in European higher education institutions is based on a combination of competency-based, practice-oriented and interdisciplinary approaches. An analysis of educational programs at leading universities in the European Union countries showed that the key learning outcomes are the formation of communication, analytical, digital and ethical competencies that meet the modern requirements of the labor market and the social challenges of the information society.

A comparative analysis of training models in different EU countries indicates the presence of both common features and national characteristics. Thus, in Germany and France, a clearly structured education model with an emphasis on combining fundamental theoretical training and mandatory professional internships in media organizations, PR agencies and the public sector dominates. In the Netherlands and Finland, interdisciplinary curricula and a high level of digitalization of the educational process play a leading role, which ensures the preparation of specialists for work in the conditions of digital communications and network media. In Poland, a gradual transition to competency-based models is observed, although the level of practical and digital components remains lower on average than in the countries of Northern Europe.

The generalized results of the comparative analysis of European models of professional training of social communication specialists are presented in Table 1, which reflects the level of implementation of the competency-based approach, practical training, digitalization and interdisciplinarity in individual EU countries. The data in Table 1 show that the highest indicators for all parameters are characteristic of the Netherlands and Finland, while the countries of Central and Eastern Europe demonstrate moderate values.

Table 1. *Comparative characteristics of professional training models for social communications*

Table 1: Comparative characteristics of professional training models for social communications specialists in EU countries

Country	Competency-based approach	Practical training	Level of digitalization	Interdisciplinarity
Germany	*High* Clear linking of learning outcomes to industry qualification frameworks. Emphasis on the formation of specific professional actions and responsibilities	*High* Required long-term internships (practical semesters) in partner media organizations, PR departments of corporations or government agencies. Close integration with the labor market	*High* Systematic implementation of digital tools for data analytics, SEO, CMS and digital storytelling into training courses	*Medium* Integration of knowledge from sociology, political science and management, but within a clearly defined specialization (journalism or PR)

Country	Competency-based approach	Practical training	Level of digitalization	Interdisciplinarity
France	*High* A model focused on "activity-based competencies" tested through real or simulated projects	*High* Mandatory internships lasting 3 to 6 months, often followed by a job offer. Work-study network	*High* Focus on digital communications (communication numérique), social media strategy development, digital footprint analysis	*Medium* Combination with courses in law, economics, and information theory, although the program structure often remains quite hierarchical
The Netherlands	*Very high* Learning is built around solving complex problems. Assessment through portfolios of achievements and group projects	*Very high* Internship is the core of the programs from the first year. Close cooperation with international companies, digital agencies; real cases as the basis of learning	*Very high* Digital competencies are integrated into all aspects: from digital marketing and UX studies to programming for communicators and working with AI tools	*High* *High degree:* programs freely combine modules from IT, design, behavioral psychology, game studies and business analytics
Finland	*Very high* Competencies are defined together with employers. System of continuous assessment based on reflection and development of personal qualities	*Very high* "Laboratory" approach: students work in campus media labs that simulate real newsrooms and agencies. Strong ties with the IT sector	*Very high* Training focused on working in the network media ecosystem, platform economy, using data to create content	High Programs are developed at the intersection of communications, technological sciences, and social studies. Students often develop individual learning trajectories
Poland	Medium Gradual integration of competency-based principles added to traditional knowledge approaches. The assessment system often remains examination-based	*Medium* Mostly available in the form of short-term internships or volunteering. Less integrated into the curriculum than in Western countries	*Medium* The study of digital tools is often isolated into separate courses rather than integrated into all disciplines. Implementation at the level of individual progressive universities	*Medium* Interdisciplinarity is manifested through the introduction of separate courses in related fields (e.g., communication psychology), without deep methodological integration

Source: systematized by the author based on a comparative analysis of educational programs and curricula of leading universities in EU countries

Analysis of the structure of educational programs showed that most of them have a modular organization, which provides flexibility of educational trajectories and the possibility of individualizing students' training. Considerable attention is paid to the integration of theoretical courses with practical classes, internships and project activities in cooperation with media organizations, public

institutions and the business sector. The effectiveness of such integration is confirmed by the increase in the level of practical readiness of graduates for professional activity.

In the course of the research, a graph in Fig. 1 is created to clearly compare the degree of development of the three main elements of vocational training – competency-based approach, practical training, and digitization – in each of the EU's member states. The analysis demonstrates the clear superiority of the training models of the Netherlands and Finland, the consistently high indicators of Germany and France, as well as the lagging behind of Poland in all three parameters.

Thus, the results of the analysis, presented in Table 1 and illustrated in Figure 1, indicate that the effectiveness of professional training of social communications specialists in the EU countries largely depends on the level of integration of the practical component, digital technologies and interdisciplinary approaches into educational programs. The conclusions obtained can be used as an analytical basis for the modernization of national higher education systems in the field of social communications.

The results of the research showed that digital and innovative educational technologies are increasingly being implemented in modern European programs for training social communication specialists. Such tools contribute to the development of professional competencies, practical skills and analytical thinking, and also allow students to effectively work with large amounts of information and adapt to a rapidly changing communication environment.

For the purpose of illustrating the structure of the educational process and the relationship between its components, a structural and functional diagram was developed in Fig. 2, which demonstrates the main elements of specialist training and the interaction between theoretical courses, practice, digital tools and interdisciplinary projects.

A detailed examination of current trends in the training of social communications specialists has made it possible to identify the main educational technologies and approaches that are actively being implemented in the programs of European higher education institutions:

1. *Online platforms and blended learning*. Many universities in the Netherlands (University of Amsterdam, Utrecht University) and Finland (University of Helsinki, Turku University) actively use online platforms for self-study and integrate them into blended learning. This makes it possible to combine lecture courses with distance practical tasks, cases and group projects, which increases the flexibility of the educational process.

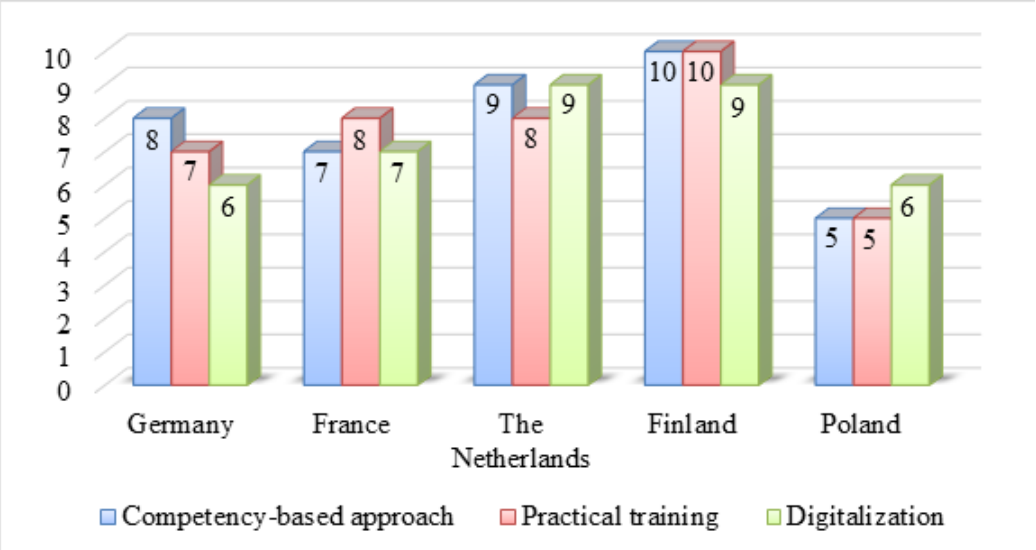

Fig. 1: Level of development of key components of training (conditional scale 1 – 10)

Source: compiled by the author based on a comparative analysis of educational models of EU countries

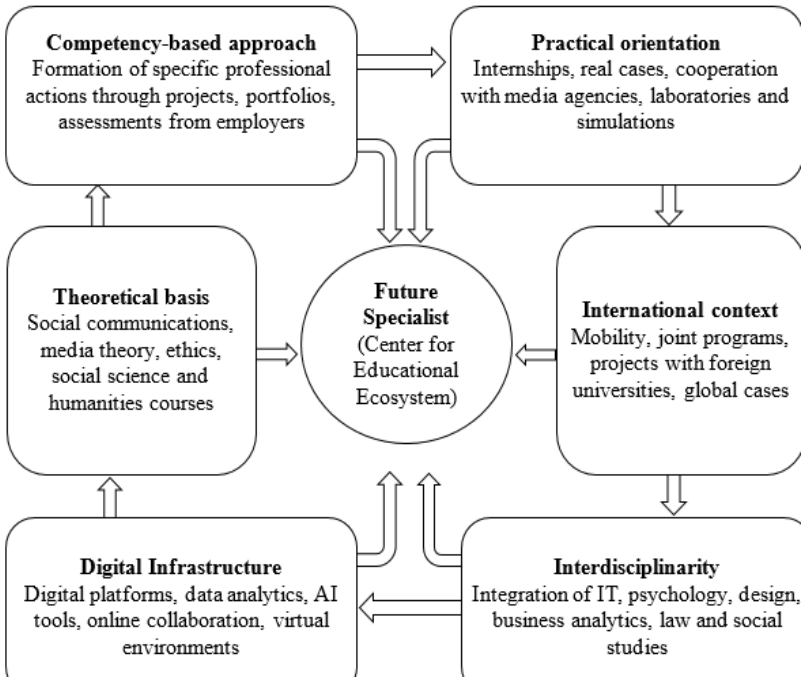

Fig. 2: Structural and functional diagram of the interaction of educational approaches according to the study of European universities

Source: compiled by the author

2. *Simulation environments and workshops*. In order to develop communication and crisis management skills, French universities (Sciences Po, CELSA – Sorbonne) use specialized simulation modules that recreate the work of PR agencies, media offices and government bodies. Students perform realistic scenarios, including crisis communications, campaign planning and responding to social challenges.
3. *Case method and problem-based learning*. This approach is actively used in the UK (London School of Economics, University of Westminster) and Germany. The use of real cases allows students to solve practical problems, analyze communication strategies of companies and government agencies, make informed recommendations and practice teamwork skills.
4. *Interdisciplinary learning*. One of the defining characteristics of modern European programs is the integration of courses in social communications, media studies, sociology, psychology, marketing and information technology. For example:
   - in Finland and the Netherlands, students take courses in digital analytics, statistics and working with big data;
   - in Germany, social and psychological disciplines are combined with practice in media and PR, which allows for a deep understanding of audience behavior;
   - in France, great attention is paid to intercultural communication and international media projects.
5. *Use of digital tools and analytics*. European programs actively integrate digital technologies: content management systems (CMS), social media analytics tools, multimedia creation platforms, and data visualization software. This provides students with the practical skills needed for modern communication activities.

Considering the diversity of implemented educational technologies and the interdisciplinary nature of the programs, the key advantages of modern approaches in training social communications specialists are highlighted:

- development of critical thinking and analytical skills;
- formation of practical competencies that meet the real requirements of the labor market;
- increasing the flexibility of learning due to the modular and blended structure;
- preparing students to work in interdisciplinary teams and an international environment;
- emphasis on digital literacy and the ability to work with large data sets.

Thus, modern educational approaches in Europe combine innovative technologies and interdisciplinarity. They provide comprehensive training of social communication specialists who are able to adapt to the dynamic labor market, work with digital tools and effectively interact with different audiences. The structural and functional diagram of Fig. 2 illustrates the logic of combining all components of training and demonstrates the relationship between theory, practice, digital technologies and international projects.

Based on the generalization of the results of the analysis of European experience, key areas of its adaptation to the national higher education system have been identified. First of all, this is *an update of the content of educational programs,* taking into account modern digital transformations and technological innovations in the field of communications. This involves the integration of courses on digital analytics, working with social media, multimedia technologies and data visualization tools, which are already actively used in leading universities in the Netherlands, Finland and France.

The second important direction is *the introduction of competency-based learning outcomes*, which makes it possible to clearly define what knowledge, skills and values a student should acquire by the time of graduation. This includes the development of communication, analytical, digital and ethical competencies that ensure readiness for professional activity in a dynamic media and information environment.

The third direction is *strengthening the practical component of training*. The experience of European universities shows that the modular structure of training, internships in media organizations, work on real projects and simulation workshops increase the professional readiness of graduates. Adapting this approach in the national system involves the development of partnerships between higher education institutions and the professional environment, including media companies, PR agencies, public organizations and government bodies. The research confirmed that the effective implementation of European approaches requires comprehensive systemic support. This includes, in particular, as follows:

1. Methodological support: development of adapted educational materials, cases and simulation programs for the national context.
2. Teacher training: training teachers in modern educational technologies, digital tools and interdisciplinary teaching methods.
3. Creating conditions for academic mobility: exchange of students and teachers with European universities, participation in international projects and conferences, which contribute to the integration of best practices into national programs.

Particular attention should be paid to the combination of European experience with national educational traditions. This allows for preserving the cultural and educational characteristics of the national system, while increasing its competitiveness at the global level. For example, in Ukraine, the integration of European practices can combine flexible modular learning paths with traditional academic training, which will ensure a balance

Figure 3 presents a visualization of the process of adapting European practices in the national higher education system. The structural diagram demonstrates the key steps: updating programs, implementing competency-based outcomes, developing practical training, establishing partnerships with the professional environment, and ensuring academic mobility. This makes it possible to clearly assess the logic of the interaction of these elements in the formation of a modern model of training specialists in social communications.

The results obtained indicate that the use of European experience in the national context can become the basis for the formation of a modern,

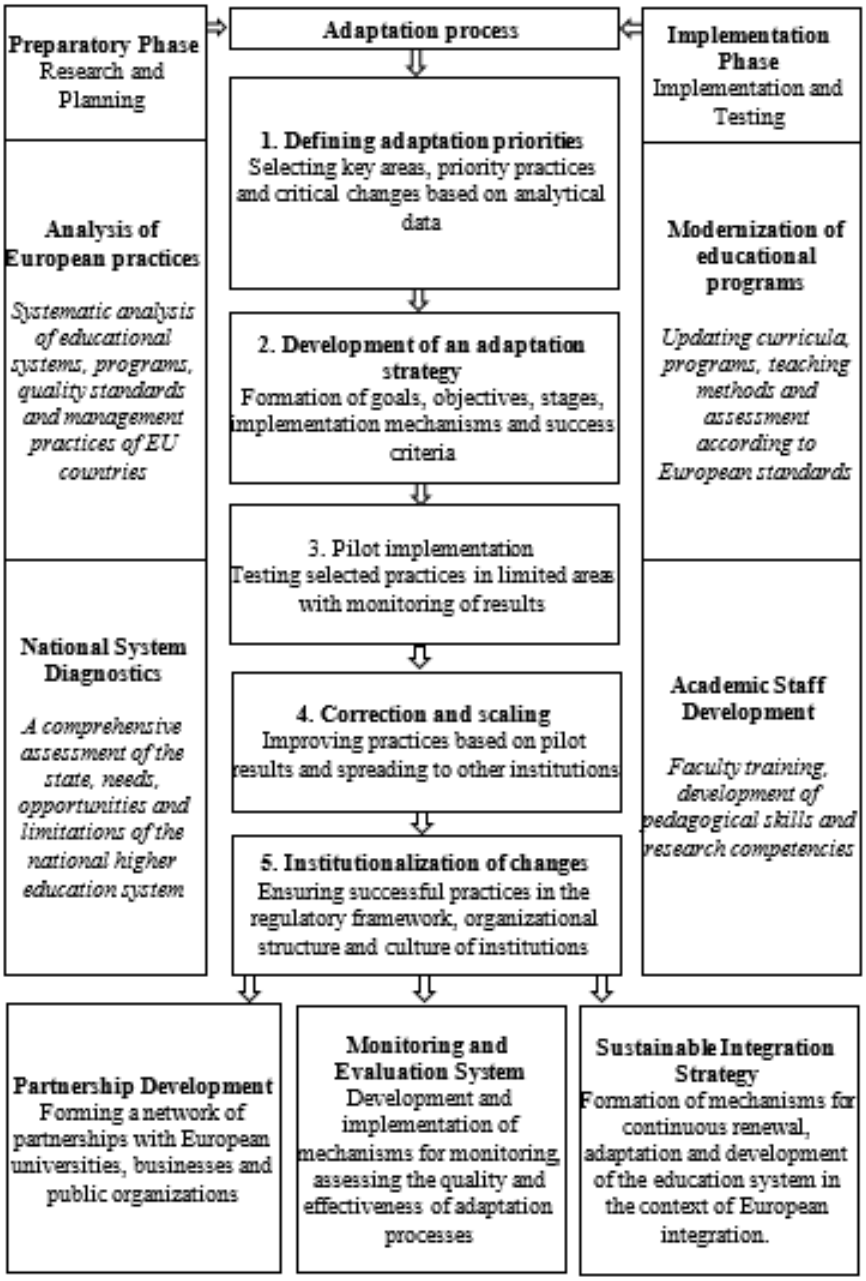

Fig. 3: Structural diagram of the adaptation of European experience

Source: compiled by the author

competitive model of training social communications specialists. Such specialists will be able to function effectively in the global information society, work with digital platforms and innovative communication technologies, and adapt to the requirements of the international labor market.

Discussion

The results obtained confirm that modern professional training of social communication specialists operates in conditions of high dynamics of the information space, where traditional knowledge-oriented approaches no longer provide the appropriate level of

readiness of graduates for professional activity. Our findings are consistent with the research of Ozgen and Saydam (2022), who emphasize that digitalization and the development of new media are transforming the nature of public communications, requiring new competencies from specialists. Similarly, Hanandini (2024) proves that technological changes directly affect social interaction, which actualizes the need for training specialists who are able to analyze and direct these processes. The models of the Netherlands and Finland identified in our study as leaders in terms of practical integration, digitalization, and interdisciplinarity coincide with the conclusions of Heinz and Maasen (2020) on the key role of social sciences in shaping the European Higher Education Area, as well as with the studies of Mendick and Peters (2023) on the impact of post-Bologna policies on the structure of master's programs.

A comparison with the works of Holubnycha et al. (2022) and Diachenko and Usatyi (2021) confirms that the competency-based approach is the methodological core of modern education, but our study specifies its implementation in the field of social communications by highlighting four groups of competencies (professional, digital, analytical, ethical). Particular attention should be paid to the ethical component, which, according to the results, is directly integrated into professional disciplines. This is consistent with the recommendations of Murphy et al. (2021) on the need to consider the ethical aspects of artificial intelligence in communication education and the conclusions of Peek and Guikema (2021) on the importance of interdisciplinary approaches in the training of specialists.

Our results on the active integration of digital technologies, simulation environments and project-based learning are confirmed by the studies of Kovalova (2025), Bakhtiyarovna (2025) and Sanatbay et al. (2025), which demonstrate the effectiveness of project-based learning for the development of professional skills. At the same time, Demir (2024) rightly notes that digitalization creates new challenges for language and communication education, which confirms our position on the need for pedagogically controlled implementation of digital tools.

It is important to note that the areas of adaptation of European experience identified by us – updating the content of programs, competency outcomes, strengthening practice, developing partnerships and academic mobility – echo the conclusions of Budnyk (2021), Sydorenko et al. (2021) and Halushchak et al. (2022) regarding the need for practice-oriented and integration strategies in modern higher education. However, our study offers a systematic approach to adaptation that takes into account the specifics of the socio-communication industry, which was lacking in previous works.

At the same time, the study has limitations: it is based on the analysis of open sources and does not include empirical data from surveys of students or teachers; the comparative analysis covers only five EU countries, which does not exhaust the full diversity of European practices; the conclusions on adaptation require further verification in specific national contexts.

Conclusions

As a result of the research, it was found that the professional training of social communications specialists in modern European higher education institutions is based on the integration of competency-based, practice-oriented and interdisciplinary approaches, which ensures the formation of a holistic complex of professional, digital, analytical and ethical competencies. Such a model meets the challenges of digitalization, globalization of the information space and the growing role of social communications in social development.

A comparative analysis of educational programs in the European Union countries has shown the presence of common trends in the structure and content of specialist training, in particular, the modular organization of training, orientation on learning outcomes, active use of project and simulation forms of work, as well as close interaction with the professional environment. At the same time, differences in the levels of practical training, digitalization and interdisciplinarity have been identified, which make it possible to single out leading models (the Netherlands, Finland) as benchmarks for further modernization of educational systems.

It has been proven that the effectiveness of training social communications specialists increases

significantly when digital tools, data analytics, and innovative educational technologies are systematically integrated into all elements of the educational process. This promotes a transition from reactive training focused on current professional roles to proactive training aimed at developing the ability to predict changes, work with new platforms, and adapt to transformations in the communication environment.

It has been established that an important component of modern programs is the inclusion of ethical and socially responsible dimensions of professional activity directly into professional disciplines. This approach ensures the formation of a conscious attitude of future specialists to the consequences of communication decisions and increases the level of their responsibility in the conditions of the spread of algorithmic and artificial intelligence systems.

The generalization of European experience made it possible to identify key areas for its adaptation to national higher education systems: updating the content of educational programs, taking into account digital transformations; introducing clearly defined competency-based learning outcomes; strengthening the practical component through internships, project activities and partnerships with the professional environment; developing academic mobility and advanced training for teachers.

The research materials can be used for:

- modernization of educational programs in social communications in higher education institutions;
- development of models for integrating digital and interdisciplinary components into the educational process;
- formation of strategies for increasing the competitiveness of graduates in the national and international labor markets.

Based on the research conducted, we offer the following recommendations:

- initiate a review of educational programs in the specialty “Social Communications” in order to integrate digital modules (data analytics, work with AI, social media) and increase the share of practical classes (at least 40% of the total).
- develop a national competency framework for social communications specialists based on European standards, providing for mandatory criteria for digital and ethical training.
- introduce project-oriented learning and a case method using real communication situations; organize master classes with the participation of media and PR practitioners.
- conduct empirical research (surveys, interviews, observations) in domestic higher education institutions to determine the real level of formation of digital and communication competencies among students and graduates.
- create career centers and partnerships with media organizations, PR agencies, and public structures to provide internships, student participation in real projects, and graduate employment.

Thus, the conducted research confirms the feasibility of using European experience as a conceptual and practical basis for creating a modern, flexible and competitive model of professional training of social communications specialists capable of functioning effectively in a dynamic global information society.

Ethics Statement

This study used publicly available and aggregated data without involving human participants; therefore, ethics committee approval was not required.

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