PERCEPTIONS OF FOREIGN STUDENTS ON THEIR ADAPTATION TO ACADEMIC LIFE

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Abstract: *This paper presents the results of a survey conducted among the foreign students enrolled at the University of Pitesti in the current academic year, on their habituation to academic life, to the teacher-foreign student, foreign student-Romanian student relations of communication. The study aims at probing the perceptions of foreign students on the definition of the main needs of adaptation to the academic environment, on the analysis of the communication relations that facilitate interknowledge, of the factors that can influence different situations of interpersonal and didactic communication, identification of those attitudes and actions that address some of the causes of the foreign student's failure to adapt to academic life. The research is exploratory and relies on a questionnaire-based survey.The study findings highlight the values, representations, beliefs and behaviors of foreign students on their integration into the academic life of the university and provide important anchors of reflection for teachers and students with whom they interact in order to initiate future actions to facilitate interknowledge, interculturalism and multilingualism.*

Keywords: *perceptions, values, representations, beliefs, behaviours.*

1. Paper rationale

In the context of universities' modernization for a competitive Europe in a global economy based on knowledge, the enhancement of the internationalization of higher education represents a priority for the universities and an important indicator of global competitiveness based on quality assurance in education and vocational training, on mobility enhancement, the use of joint degrees and facilitation of the recognition of qualifications and periods of study abroad. Internationalization is "*the process of intentional integration of an international, intercultural or global dimension into the scope, functions and activities of teaching and research in higher education to improve the quality of the educational and research processes involving all students and teachers and to bring a relevant contribution to society*" (Knight, 2004:11). In the author's opinion, the internationalization of higher education has two major components interconnected in policies and programs:

- *internationalization at home/internal internationalization* - promoting an international dimension in the development of the curriculum, of the teaching and research methods, as well as facilitating the integration of foreign students and teachers in the academic life of the university;
- *internationalization abroad* - performing teaching and research activities abroad through mobility, joint degrees, institutional partnerships, transnational projects.

The concept of *internationalization* has been explained in specialised literature in relation to its main themes: mobility programs addressed to students, teachers, the curricular offer of higher education programs, recognition of studies undertaken in other countries,

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visits and exchanges of best practices, multilateral projects, transnational institutional networks and partnerships, international events generating favorable approaches to interculturalism and multiculturalism.

The most visible indicator of internationalization of higher education is students' mobility. Staff mobility is also a significant component of internationalization materialized in Erasmus and CEEPUS funding programs (Central European Exchange Program for University Studies).

The ways in which Romanian universities understood to mainstream the international dimension for curricular reforming assumes many forms (Petcu, Petcu et alii: 12-13):

- *"The inclusion of specialized regional studies of international politics, international affairs and comparative-cultural studies;*
- *Double accreditation of study programs (teaching in Romanian and/or other languages), both by RQAAHE according to national legal regulations and – at the same time – by international institutions according to their standards;*
- *Teaching in international languages of full study programs;*
- *A more detailed reform of the academic content of the courses in order to develop specific skills that help graduates fit more easily in a much more opern society, economy and labour market".*

Along with the academic curriculum and the academic environment, the quality of student life is important for the delimitation of the personal development space, for strengthening ties of friendship, accountability and socialisation. Therefore, extracurricular activities and student involvement in the events organized within the university campus, outside the campus or in cyberspace are excellent opportunities that complement the formally-gained knowledge and skills. Student services represent an important area under the attention of policy-makers at universities, as well as of researchers in the psycho-pedagogical field as knowledge of the adaptation needs of students in academia may lead to optimizing actions at the university level, covering a variety of multicultural activities for the transfer of cultural values and traditions, for knowing each other, for an improvement of students' life experiences etc.

2. Methodology

The purpose of this ascertaining study is probing perceptions of foreign students on the ways of identifying the main needs of adaptation to academia, on the teacher-student, student-student relations of communication, on the factors that can influence the different situations of interpersonal and didactic communication, on identification of those attitudes and events aimed at some causes of the foreign student's failure to adapt to academic life. The study was built on a questionnaire-based survey. During May-June 2016, 30 questionnaires were applied to foreign students enrolled in the preparatory year in Romanian language at the University of Pitesti. The items explored the perceptions of foreign students on their personal satisfaction regarding university studies, the teaching methods of teachers, the teacher-student, student-student communication relation and opportunities for leisure, personal development and intercultural exchanges. It also sought to identify the main needs of foreign students to adapt to the academic environment, the number of friends among the

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Romanian students and teachers, those qualities/values that foreign students appreciate in their Romanian colleagues and teachers. Foreign students were able to express their views on student services and on what should be improved within the university.

3. Results

At question *Q1 – How satisfied are you with what you study at the university?*, 83% of respondents say they are satisfied and very happy with what they study at the university, while 17% show a certain degree of dissatisfaction regarding their studying options in the university,

When asked the second question, *Q 2 – How satisfied are you with the teaching methods of the didactic staff?*, all students surveyed say they are pleased and very satisfied with the methodology adopted by teachers in the act of teaching. Regarding the respondents' answers to question *Q3 – How satisfied are you with the teacher-foreign student communication?*, 30% of foreign students are very satisfied with the communication with their teachers, 60% are satisfied and 20% describe the communication relationship as somewhat satisfactory, it being understood that the act of communication could be optimized by the partners in the dialogue.

At question *Q4 – How satisfied are you with the foreign student-foreign student communication?*, 67% of respondents are satisfied and very satisfied, 20% to some extent, while 13% express clear dissatisfaction with the act of communication with a fellow foreign student.

At question *Q5 – How satisfied are you with the Romanian student-foreign student communication?*, 47% of respondents are satisfied and very satisfied, 10% to some extent and 43% of foreign students show some dissatisfaction in their communication with some Romanian students.

At question Q6 – *To what extent do you believe the university provides you with leisure opportunities?*, 27% of respondents answered to a very large extent, 9% to a large extent, 36% to a certain extent, 28% to a small and very small extent.

At question *Q7 – To what extent does the university give you the opportunity to make your country, culture and traditions known?*, 63% of respondents believe that the university offers these opportunities to a large and very large extent, 28% to a certain extent and 9 % to a small extent.

At question Q8 - *To what extent does the university give you opportunities for personal development?*, 56% of respondents felt that the university provides opportunities for personal development to a large and very large extent, 17% to a certain extent, 27% to a small and very small extent.

At question Q9 - *To what extent do you think the university gives you opportunities for professional development?*, 46% of respondents consider these opportunities exist to a large and very large extent, while 26% think that these exist to a certain extent and 28% to a small and very small extent.

At question Q10 - *To what extent do you think you have integrated in the academic community?*, 27% of respondents believe that they have integrated to a very large extent, 18% to a large extent, 27% to a certain extent, 28% to a small and very small extent.

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At question Q11 - *How far do you think that what you have learned so far will be used in your future professional career?*, 64% answered to a large and very large extent and 36% to a certain extent.

At question Q12 - *Which were for you the main needs of adaptation to the academic environment?*, 67% - knowledge of Romanian, 26% - the need to communicate in Romanian, 7% - the need to have friends among the Romanian students.

At question Q13 - *What were the events of the university that allowed a better foreign students – Romanian students interknowledge?*, the respondents mentioned events of the university that helped in this sense: International Student Day, student scientific sessions, trips to the mountains and in the surroundings of Pitesti, hostel parties.

At question Q14 - *How many friends do you have among the Romanian students?*, most respondents (28) mentioned that they have between 2-4 Romanian friends, and only 2 students indicated that they have 10 friends among the Romanian students.

At question Q15 - *How many friends do you have among the Romanian teachers?*, all respondents said they had friendly ties with 3 to 5 Romanian teachers.

At question Q16 - *What do you like most about your colleagues, Romanian students?*, the respondents mostly appreciate in their fellow Romanian students qualities such as generosity, kindness, humor, beauty, education, friendship, availability.

At question Q17 - *What do you like most about your teachers?*, the respondents appreciate mostly their teachers' dedication, passion for the profession, enthusiasm, preparation, teaching methods, humor and efficiency.

At question *Q18-From your point of view, what should be improved in the University of Pitesti?*, the respondents launch a series of proposals for the improvement of student hostel accommodation and facilities in classrooms. As regards the services offered by the university for foreign students, many respondents pointed out that they could be diversified and even offered some examples: guidance materials in the city and on campus, introducing a system of online admission, initiative of welcoming foreign students at the train station or airport, the buddy system, the welcome week, creation of a survival guide for foreign students, but also academic mentoring.

4. Discussion

The respondents consider that student life includes many different aspects, from strictly academic, scientific concerns to coordinated/voluntary student manifestations and events, from an atmosphere of academic study to emotional and intense feelings, feelings manifested in different contexts by each individual student. The students surveyed believe that life in campus among their Romanian colleagues, who are cheerful, communicative, open and friendly characters, could be greatly improved by increasing opportunities to participate in extra-academic activities, theme trips, campfires, creative workshops, exhibitions, dancing events, culinary workshops and other activities that may involve them in the creative use of every student's talent, knowledge and energy. All foreign students surveyed happily underlined those moments important to them when they have made friends not only among students, but also among teachers, have connected more and came in contact with the traditions and customs of Romanian students and of their colleagues from other countries. The respondents stressed that it would be necessary for the services devoted

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to university students to multiply by new activities proposed even by the students, social, cultural and leisure activities that help build student identity, create a networking communication and facilitate interaction, as well as solidify social cohesion. Involvement in these types of activities will enhance students' sense of belonging to the academic community and will provide excellent means for their effective integration. The respondents claim they need to deepen their knowledge of Romanian, more diversity in the provision of courses in English and/or other international languages, the presence of teacher- mentors and Romanian student- mentors to assist them in their academic integration, to present new places and people, to explain the process of integration into the labour market. Moreover, there are some respondents who regard the presence of foreign teachers to teach in the university alongside Romanian teachers as an important issue, which would open the university to other contacts and international partnerships to a larger extent. Foreign students mentioned the importance of enhancing comfort and improving the accommodation provided to students in general (rooms with bathrooms integrated into the room, equipped with air conditioning, WI-FI). Other issues mentioned by respondents included certain relational difficulties in the administrative and secretarial space of the university, the lack of orientation signs in public spaces adapted to the needs of foreign students and the lack of counselling and/or mentoring services tailored in accordance with the international students' needs of personal and professional development.

5. Conclusions

The study findings highlight the values, representations, beliefs and behaviours of foreign students on their integration into the academic life of the university and provide important anchors of reflection for teachers and students with whom they interact in order to initiate future actions to facilitate interknowledge, interculturalism and multilingualism. The presence of foreign students in the university helps to diversify the teaching practices, the methods and, thus, to increase the quality of education and student support services in the integration, the affirmation of interculturalism and the adoption of a holistic vision of the matters, processes and systems. Generally, the students surveyed are satisfied with the quality of university studies and appreciate in a positive manner the performance of teachers, with whom many of them even have friendly relations. Regarding communication and relationships with teachers, these issues could be improved if the matters that hamper the understanding of the educational message were analysed more, if more personal reflection during the classes were stimulated more and contextual communication favourable to the of a formation reflective communicative behaviour were capitalized. Some students stressed the importance of establishing a pleasant affective climate in the context of didactic communication and a democratic teacher-student relationship, based on closeness and understanding. At the level of interpersonal communication, the need to encourage the teacher to adapt in all respects to the particularities of each student was noted. Other students interviewed said that a limitation of the teacher-student relation only to the formal context of academic activities favors the emergence of communication difficulties, impedes and restricts interpersonal contacts. From the perspective of certain respondents, Romanian teachers should learn to practice intercultural communication based on an attitude of acceptance of diversity, respect, active and assertive listening, non-discrimination and the

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lack of stereotypes and prejudices. The possibility of intercultural communication is the framework that is favourable to openness on both sides and to the mutual exchange of knowledge of the interlocutors' values, culture, traditions and behaviours.

Research limitations are related to the small number of subjects surveyed, the results of diagnostic studies cannot be generalized, one can even invoke a certain stiffness of the relationship between researcher and respondents by applying a quite formalized questionnaire, without interpreting the results according to the variables of gender, age, country of origin. This formalization of the questionnaire by building pre-coded multiple choice questions (11) has the main advantage of enabling faster data processing. Only 7 open questions allowed the personal answers and comments. Other limitations of the research can be related to the perceptions of Romanian teachers and students expressed in a possible mirror research of the issue of foreign students' adaptation, but also to the respondents' ability to understand certain aspects investigated as they are enrolled in the preparatory year and they are not native speakers of Romanian language. Moreover, the feelings, resentments, prejudices respondents and the intellectual and scientific level of each of them can influence the study undertaken more or less. This study paved the way for performing research over a longer period of time through the cooperative methods of qualitative and quantitative research that deepen more dimensions of the issue of foreign students' habituation to our university's academic life and even provide improvement solutions.

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