ACTIVE MEASURES FOR PROMOTING INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE AND SENSITIVITY IN A FACULTY THOUGHT IN FOREIGN LANGUAGES

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Abstract

The paper is aimed at debating intercultural dialogue and sensitivity within a multicultural learning environment. It supports the idea of diversity management in intercultural educational environment’s focusing on the student’s perspective. The study represents an ongoing research regarding the level of interculturality in University Politehnica of Bucharest and is mainly addressed to national and foreign students. The aim of project is to unify measures, strategies, infrastructure and goals in universities in order to obtain a higher degree of collaboration among national and foreign students. The present paper represents the most valuable step in completing the project. For this purpose the methodology applied consists of qualitative data analysis provided by students enrolled in the Faculty of Engineering in Foreign Languages. The Faculty of Engineering in Foreign Languages being the only Faculty in the University who provides educational engineering programs in three different languages, English, French and German. Besides national students in our Faculty we benefit of foreign students enrolled in bachelor and master education as well as Erasmus students. The survey will comprise issues like: active measures for enhancing intercultural dialogue, multicultural work projects, the importance of intercultural academic environment, intercultural competence achievements (Deardorff K, 2009), suggestions for curricular improvements and the importance of studying the topics in a foreign language.

Research results address mainly the active measures that the university has to support for intercultural educational spaces. Finally the paper presents a SWOT analysis from the perspective of intercultural education and some future guidelines for the University.

Keywords: Intercultural education, intercultural exchange, measures for intercultural dialogue, academic guidelines.

1 INTRODUCTION

The present paper represents an inquiry of intercultural dialogue and intercultural sensitivity in higher education from the perspective of unifying measures, strategies, infrastructure and goals in universities in order to obtain a higher degree of collaboration among national and foreign students. The purpose of the present study is to complete with valuable ideas to the enrichment of intercultural dialogue and sensitivity within higher educational environments. The topic of intercultural dialogue is a long debated one especially in the area of education. The roots of the intercultural sensitivity rely on education and on what education can do to promote global understanding.

Universities curricula have to prepare students not just professionally but also from the point of view of facing a more pluralistic society. These objectives could be fulfilled: “schools have to manage diversity with everything that diversity means based on the use of the tools that diversity offers” [1].

Nowadays universities need to have a specific behavior like organizations to remain competitive and to permanently upgrade their curricula to the specific requirements of the labor market. Some authors indicate that participation in intercultural education can result, mostly in the short-term, in changes to individual attitudes and cross-group relationships [2], [3], [4].

[6] argues that intercultural communication might be seen as an academic discipline and that the education systems have to support education for a global multicultural world.

In such a context the need for cross-cultural adaptation it is mandatory because “it brings up the question of how intercultural adaptation transgresses form semblance to assimilation” [6].
1.1 University Politehnica of Bucharest and Faculty of Engineering in Foreign Languages

University POLITEHNICA of Bucharest is the largest and the oldest technical university in the country and among the most prestigious universities in Romania. The university hosts 15 faculties in areas like electrical engineering, energetics, computer science, electronics, mechanics, material science, chemistry and economics engineering.

The university benefits from a high visibility and recognition among Romanian universities but also in the South Eastern Europe being the promoter of multiple achievements in the technical area.

The mission of the University POLITEHNICA of Bucharest has been thought over as a blend of education, research and innovation, which represents a key towards a knowledge-based society and economy. Creating knowledge mainly by scientific research, giving it out by education and professional training, disseminating it by information technologies, as well as the use of technological innovation are elements that define the university distinctive profile.

Among the Faculties present in University Politehnica of Bucharest is the Faculty of Engineering in foreign Languages. FEFL is the only Faculty where bachelor and master studies are entirely in foreign languages. This kind of learning, as in foreign language, is reaching a deeper level of the students commitment and has a higher impact on their behavior.

Language is often perceived as a barrier in study abroad programs as it may limit students' opportunities to interact with local cultures.

But language is not the only barrier because proving a quality intercultural education is a challenge. An international university has to take into consideration all the international dimensions like curricula development, international qualifications or intercultural competencies. Changes are necessary in various aspects like: its objective, content, course materials, assessment, instructional language, methods, teachers, and infrastructure.

The positioning of our Faculty is recognized by a substantial number of incoming Erasmus students and by the number of enrolled foreign students in the educational programs. Fig. 1 represents the dynamics of Erasmus students from 2013 until the academic year 2016/2017 for the whole University and at FEFL.

Data presented above shows an increasing number of foreign students form one year to another with a positive tendency for the Faculty of Engineering in Foreign Languages. Foreign student's home-countries are Slovakia, Poland, Germany, France, Italy, Holland, Switzerland, Spain, Greece, Finland, Estonia, Portugal, Croatia, Iraq, Nigeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Czech Republic, Austria, with the highest percentage of students coming from France 37.5%.

2 SURVEY REGARDING THE ROLE OF INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE IN ACADEMIC ENVIRONMENT

In order to determine the sensitivity degree on intercultural interactions in our University a questionnaire was addressed to Erasmus students, foreign students that study in Romania for 4 years and Romanian student.
Our research concentrated on three main directions: 1) difficulties of foreign students in Romania from the perspective of both national and international students, 2) their opinion regarding the acquisition of certain components of intercultural competence, 3) degree of support provided by the university towards enhancing intercultural dialogue and sensitivity.

For the present purpose, a survey was launched comprising eleven questions on the problems under analysis and the whole survey was completed by 58 students out of 70 selected. All the respondents were asked to sincerely complete the questionnaire and to provide valuable opinions regarding the role of intercultural dialogue in the academic process.

In the sample of surveyed students we considered a control margin of around 15 percent, helping us to correlate and compare the results among participants. Students participating in the survey were half Romanians and half foreigners, for foreigner’s a weight of 74% Erasmus students and 20% foreign students enrolled at FEFL. All the surveyed students were from the English stream.

For the first direction which comprises three items we grouped the questions in the first part of our survey. The first item in the questionnaire focused on identifying the difficulties that foreign students encounter during their mobility in our University, results are reflected in Fig2.

![Fig. 2: Can you identify any difficulties that foreign students might experience during their studies?](image)

Along with the presence of foreign students in the university, “gaps” between them and local students are present. Foreign students are required to adjust (accommodate) to the academic standards and cultural assumptions of the mainstream groups in order to achieve success, while the institutional practices are not expected to change [10]. There were 80% respondents from all nationalities that appreciated the existence of certain difficulties for foreign students.

Among the main difficulties identified by our respondents the “different level of knowledge concerning different topics” has the higher percentage- 23%, followed in line by the difficulties of understanding the language. (Fig 3)

![Fig. 3: Identified difficulties encountered by foreign students](image)

Such an opinion states that the level of curricula internationalization is not achieved. Differences among subjects content and requirements of professional knowledge are a major problem for foreign students. Also the language gap is an important factor that affects the educational standard.

Stated difficulties are related the outside context of development of our foreign students explained by differences in educational programs and on the emphasize put on foreign language acquisition.

Along with identifying the main difficulties we asked our respondents to provide valuable opinions regarding the necessary policies that the University should promote. (Fig.4)
Most students, Romanians and foreigners, appreciated that promoting courses to boost intercultural dialogue, competence and sensitivity is the key towards solving some difficulties, along with organizing workshops. Usually Universities, when it comes to international students, focus on strategies regarding reduction of gaps that might hinder their study and life in the host country. Common examples are courses languages and educational support.

Such actions are not enough for such a complex educational environment. Students should be encouraged to look at issues from different cultural perspectives and this is stated also by our respondents. In order to enrich the intercultural experience students feel the need for a stimulating environment that facilitates exchanges of ideas and experiences for all the participants. Is like searching a dynamic dialogue where everyone is valued and free to express according to their culture and experience. If these where to happen Universities should focus mainly on introducing special topics and courses with an optional character for students that will contribute to encouragement of free dialogue.

For the second direction, the importance of certain components of intercultural competence, we addressed three items. First of them asked students to rate some components of intercultural competencies taken from [11] work on intercultural dialogue in education. (Fig. 5)
This question is interpreted through the Likert scale. Responses provided centered on the “very important” value. The highest score was achieved by “respect for other cultures” (31 times rated most important), followed by cooperation between people from different cultures (22 times rated 5) and foreign language (16 times rated 5). Two of the three components state a higher level of intercultural sensitivity, focusing more on the degree of direct interaction rather than on knowledge acquisition.

When it comes to the importance of studying in a foreign language for achieving intercultural competence respondents also rated as most important the socializing aspects along with interactions within intercultural environments and communication. (Fig. 6)

![Fig.6: How do you appreciate the importance of studying all the topics in a foreign language for achieving intercultural competence in our University?](image)

Again the components rated according to importance, stated a higher level of sensitivity, characterized by socialization, communication and intercultural environments.

When it comes to potential benefits of intercultural dialogue in educational environments, students appreciated that direct contact with foreign students in the context of intercultural teams should be the appropriate measure to follow (26%).

The third direction focused on the degree of support provided by the university towards enhancing intercultural dialogue and sensitivity. This direction has the role to determine the tendency that the University should promote for the future.

When asked about university support regarding the intercultural interactions 59% of students felt that the University provides enough implication while 39% felt the situation could be improved. Among examples provided we enumerate: the presence of a buddy system, international events, courses together, institutional support.

Besides those enumerate by our students we emphasize university support regarding the integration of foreign students through Romanian language courses that provide a minimum requirements on national language. Among the responses collected Romanian students felt that the university has to more in order to improve the interactions with foreign students whilst foreign students felt the degree of support is enough.

For the end of the survey we launched an open question addressing policies that need implementation to promote the recognition, acceptance and stimulation of cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue within the University. Students exemplified: more interaction between different cultures and people, multicultural team works, more importance to things which regard humanity because it gets lost somehow in all this competition (Germany), offering Romanian students the possibility to be a buddy for foreign students, to share their knowledge and give advice if needed as well as just socialize, organizing various activities for foreign students on behalf of the university, city rally – splitting students in groups and give them tasks through the city in this way they get to know new persons as well as the city - , kind of a pub quiz about Romanian culture and history in groups – even if answers are not known in this way they find out interesting things and work together.
3 SWOT ANALYSIS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION IN OUR UNIVERSITY

After completing the interpretation of survey we decided to sketch a SWOT analysis from the perspective of intercultural education in our University. The analysis comprises the four components, strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats.

For the Strengths we consider: the experience- as a university that provides courses for foreign students along with the teachers whom benefit of a valuable experience for working in multicultural contexts, students openness which is reflected from the survey, the higher level of sensitivity proved by our students, mutual tolerance and the course of Romanian language addressed to foreign students.

For the weaknesses we consider: insufficient measures that encourage intercultural interactions in our institution, absence of courses or programs dedicated to enrichment of cultural savvy, personal dedicated to such an area is insufficient, not much emphasis on encouraging intercultural work teams.

For the opportunities we consider: high visibility, the presence of an intercultural environment, positive experience of students until now, the increasing number of foreign students that chose our University.

For threats we consider: competition within our country and outside, differences in curricula content, differences among level of command for foreign languages, insufficient measures promoted to enhance intercultural dialogue.

4 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Intercultural learning processes differ, depending on the person’s background, living environment and other experiences. In such an educational context of multiple cultures theories and principles common measures are hard to apply. This study shows that intercultural learning and the development of intercultural competence is possible within our University. A high level of sensitivity, students experience and openness represent our main advantages. Positive measures and optimistic strategies are necessary in order to facilitate the intercultural education.

As recommendations, we suggest the following measures to be taken in our university: promoting intercultural collaboration between students, especially during academic activities, assigning a person or a fellow student to guide and help foreign students, being more involved and open towards solving students’ difficulties, promoting the Ombudsman institution, implementing a Code of Practice for intercultural communication and intercultural sensitivity, ensuring a maneuver margin to bring the informal into education due to such a specific educational environment, increase student intercultural competencies through curricular and extra-curricular learning opportunities with diverse courses, individuals, and communities.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work has been funded by University Politehnica of Bucharest, through the “Excellence Research Grants” Program, UPB – GEX. Identifier: UPB–EXCELENȚĂ–2016 Research -Măsuri de promovare a competențelor și senzitivății interculturale în cadrul unei Facultăți cu predare în limbă străină- Active measures for promoting intercultural competencies and sensitivity in a Faculty thought in foreign languages. Contract no 85/26.09.2016.

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