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Psychosocial Integration of Foreign Students Within the Faculty of Dental Medicine in Craiova

Elena – Cristina ANDREI[1]
Anca Mihaela PREDESCU[2]
Alexandru Dan POPESCU[3]
Dan Valeriu VOINEA[4]
Alexandrina Mihaela POPESCU[5]
Mihaela Aurelia ŞTEFAN[6]
Sanda Amelia DRĂCEA[7]
Oprea Valentin BUŞU[8]

[1] Department of Histology, Faculty of Dentistry, University of Medicine and Pharmacy, 200349 Craiova, Romania
ORCID ID:https://orcid.org/0009-0008-1581-8928
andreicristina2201@gmail.com

[2]Department of Histology, Faculty of Dentistry, University of Medicine and Pharmacy, 200349 Craiova, Romania
ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2276-3941
anca.predescu@umfcv.ro

[3]Department of Endodontics, Faculty of Dentistry, University of Medicine and Pharmacy, 200349 Craiova, Romania
alexandrudanpopescu20@gmail.com

[4]Faculty of Letters, University of Craiova, Romania
ORCID ID:https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1827-3002
me@danvoinea.ro

[5]Teacher Training Department, University of Craiova, Romania
alexia_popescu@yahoo.com

[6]Teacher Training Department, University of Craiova, Romania
ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0009-0006-2841-5410
stefan.mihaela25@yahoo.com

[7]Department of Biophysics, University of Medicine and Pharmacy, 200349 Craiova, Romania
ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0009-0008-2681-6944
dracea.amelia@gmail.com

[8]Teacher Training Department, University of Craiova, Romania;
ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5917-8821
valentin_busu@yahoo.com

Abstract: Intercultural education in the Romanian space is an insufficiently addressed topic. Against the background of the significant increase in foreign students who choose to study at the University of Medicine and Pharmacy in Craiova, as well as the implementation of study programs in English which in turn have attracted many students from both European and non-EU countries we decided to develop a study aimed at the socio-cultural integration capacity of students at the Faculty of Dental Medicine in Craiova with a teaching program in English. The general objectives of the study aim at the following aspects: the degree of social integration of students; degree of satisfaction of educational needs; the effectiveness of the feedback system; problems encountered throughout the years of study: conflicts, discrimination phenomena, etc.the quality of courses and internships compared to their countries of origin. The target group of the study is represented by the students of Dental Medicine from Craiova, within the teaching program in English, study years I-III. The students who participated in this study come from both EU and non-EU member states. The total number of students enrolled in this study program is 93, and in our study a total of 71 respondents gave their informed consent to complete the distributed questionnaire.

Keywords: *Intercultural Education; Dental Medicine; Discrimination Phenomena; Feedback*

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INTRODUCTION

The objectives and principles of intercultural education

The beginnings of intercultural education have their starting point in the UNESCO Conference in Nairobi in 1976 when the problem of cultural diversity was raised. During this conference, the conflicts that may arise between ethnic groups were highlighted and an attempt was made to outline a conflict prevention scheme, as well as the means to resolve them, Jar (2022).

Among the most well-known, but also the most edifying definitions of what is meant by intercultural education:

According to Abdallah-Pretceille (1999) intercultural education is defined by 'To understand cultures does not mean to accumulate knowledge about it, but to operate an approach, a movement, a mutual recognition of man by man, it means learning to think about another , without entering a master discourse before exiting the primacy of identification and marking. For this, the intercultural approach must be global and multidimensional, to realize the dynamics and complexity and to avoid the classification process', Bunăiaşu (2013).

In the view of Kerzil & Vinsonneau (2004) intercultural education remains above all, an education for values, in which the objectives are intended to promote tolerance and solidarity and in which actions are mainly limited to favoring integration in a most often multicultural and multilingual society, Abdallah-Pretceille (1999).

Among the specialists of the Romanian space in the sphere of pedagogy, university professor Cucoş (2000) stood out on this subject. 'Intercultural education oscillates between an issue of the objective contents of knowledge and an issue aimed at intersubjective relationships. At the cognitive level, based on the contributions of relevant knowledge through the classical disciplines, cultural and social anthropology and social psychology, the deconstruction of stereotypes and prejudices is considered. At the behavioral level, the teacher is faced with conflicting situations, which involve the negotiation of values, codes of behavior', Kerzil (2004).

The main ways of promoting and implementing the concept of intercultural education worldwide are the following:

- the existence of training programs for teaching staff regarding the didactic approach to cultural diversity;
- promotion by teachers among students of self-esteem and respect for cultural identity;

- tolerance on the part of both teachers and students towards the culture, customs and traditions of other nations;
- respecting human rights and calling for an end to the phenomenon of discrimination;
- promoting in the educational environment the concept of critical thinking, autonomous thinking and personal development courses;
- empathy towards other peoples and their way of existence;
- openness to the implementation of educational activities carried out in groups of students from different nationalities;
streamlining communication between interethnic groups;
- the implementation of an educational curriculum that embodies the principles of intercultural education, that promotes its objectives and that offers the opportunity to all students to achieve performance in the educational field, Jar (2022).

Intercultural education in Romania: history and limits

Romania's cultural, but also historical-geographical dynamics accentuate the trend of social diversification, especially after Romania's integration into the European Union in 2007(Banks & Banks, 1997).

Although our country has registered a series of changes, sometimes quite abrupt in terms of social dynamics, changes originating mainly from the political sphere, we notice the fact that the topic of intercultural education has not been a sufficiently debated topic, Banks & Banks (1997). Most of the normative acts in the field of national education are ambiguous regarding the definition, objectives and principles of intercultural education in Romania, leaving room for interpretations. Also, there is still a tendency to cultivate monocultural identity, even if this concept is totally outdated (Cucoş, 2000).

In Romanian pedagogical sphere, the concept of intercultural education exists, but as the majority of teachers say, it is insufficiently addressed. Also, teachers are concerned about the persistence of the phenomenon of segregation between students on ethnic, socio-economic, religious, etc. (Gundara & Portera, 2008).

Responsibilities of the teaching staff in a multicultural educational institution

The responsibilities of the teaching staff in a multicultural institution are numerous, and sometimes this effort must be supported by training courses and continuing education.

- the development of the competences in the multicultural sphere of teaching staff by participating in seminars, conferences, workshops that address this topic;
- maintaining a balanced climate within the student group;
- promoting non-discriminatory principles among students;
- updating the concepts taught and referring to the terms used in the specialized field according to international literature;
- encouraging students to work in intercultural groups (Bunăiaşu, 2013; Miroiu, 1998).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Working hypothesis and general objectives

The general hypothesis of the research: against the background of the significant increase in the number of foreign students who choose to study at the University of Medicine and Pharmacy in Craiova, as well as the implementation of study programs in English which in turn have attracted many students from both European countries and the non-EU ones, we decided to develop a study aimed at the socio-cultural integration capacity of students within the Faculty of Dental Medicine in Craiova with a teaching program in English.

The *general objectives* aim at the following aspects:

- the degree of social integration of students;
- degree of satisfaction of educational needs;
- the efficiency of the feedback system;
- problems encountered over the years of study: conflicts, discrimination phenomena, etc.
- the quality of courses and practical internships compared to their countries of origin;
- the accessibility of educational resources both quantitatively and qualitatively, as well as financially.

Research design

Sample characteristics

The target group of the study is represented by the students of Dental Medicine from Craiova, within the teaching program in English, study years I-III. The students who participated in this study come from both EU and non-EU member states. The total number of students enrolled in this study program is 93, and in our study a total of 71 respondents gave

their informed consent to complete the distributed questionnaire. Data collection started on 03/15/2023 and ended on 05/01/2023.

Research methodology

For this study, we created a questionnaire that includes a number of 20 questions with simple complement and multiple complement, as well as evaluation scales. The questionnaire was distributed to a sample of 73 students at the Faculty of Dental Medicine of the University of Medicine and Pharmacy in Craiova in the time interval 15.03-2023-01.05.2023, study years I-III. The questionnaire was made in electronic format with the help of the Google Forms application, and we obtained the informed consent of each student who wanted to be involved in this study. Also, the anonymity of the questionnaire was ensured, with the participants having the possibility to refuse participation in the study.

Study tools

The distributed questionnaire was created following a literature study aimed at this topic of the psycho-pedagogical aspects of intercultural education (Rapanta & Trovão, 2021; Amery et al. 2022; Gong et al. 2022; He et al. 2023; Hackett et al. 2023).

In the first stage, the questionnaire was distributed to a group of 12 students in order to check its accessibility, correctness and consistency of the questions. The questionnaire is completed in a short time, approximately 15 minutes.

The first questions in the questionnaire collect socio-professional information about the participants' age, gender, nationality, country of origin and year of study. The following questions concern the following aspects: the degree of social integration, the degree of satisfaction of educational needs, the quality of courses and practical internships, the effectiveness of the feedback system, the teacher-student relationship, as well as the problems encountered throughout the years of study.

RESULTS

Fig. 1.
Age group of student respondents

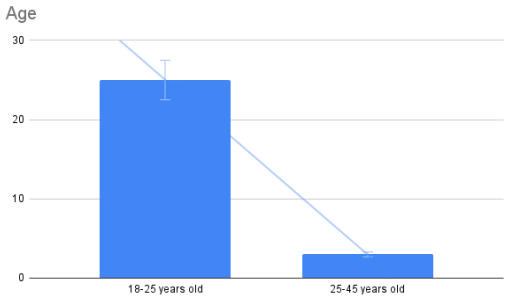


Fig. 2.
Gender distribution of respondents

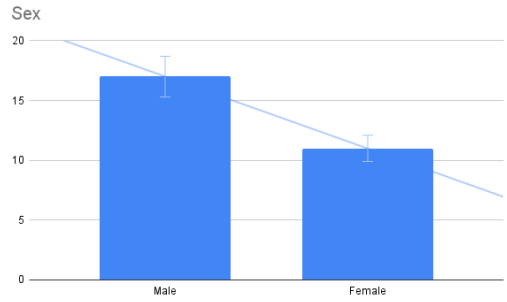


Fig.3.
Distribution of students according to year of study

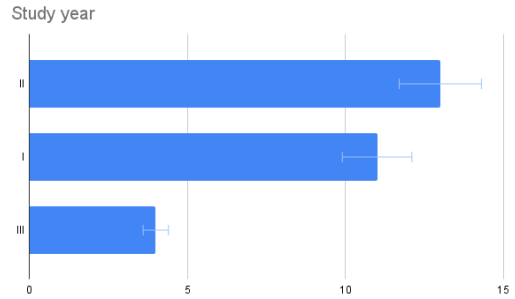
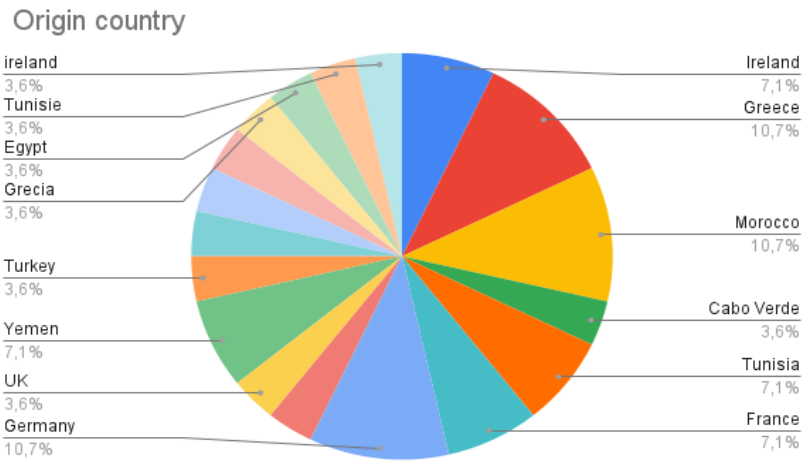
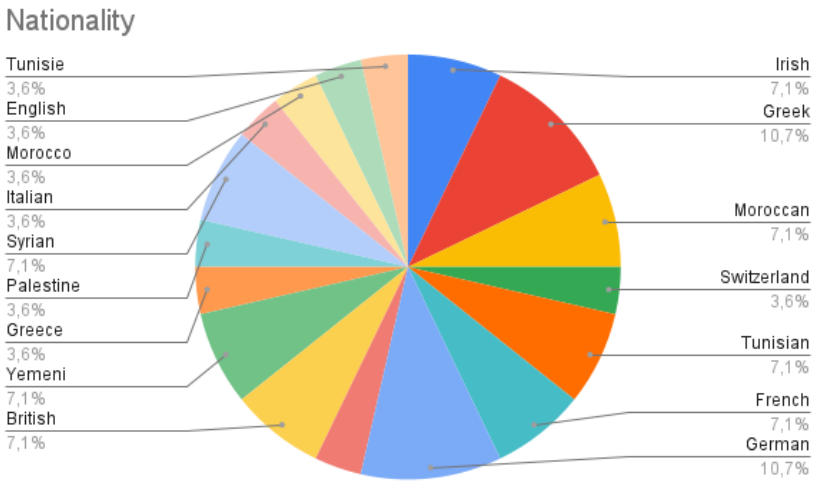


Fig. 4.
The origin country of the student respondents to the study.



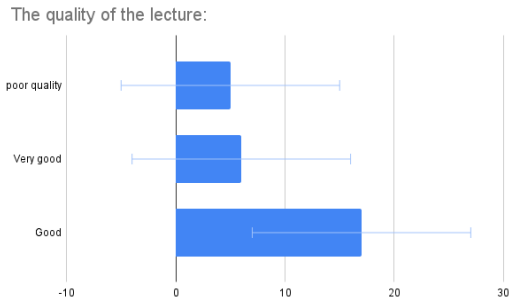
The results show that the majority of students come from Greece, Germany, Yemen and France, with the other countries having a much smaller share. Compared to the dentistry section teaching in Romanian, where there are more foreign students whose country of origin is Arab countries.

Fig. 5.
Nationality of student respondents to the study.



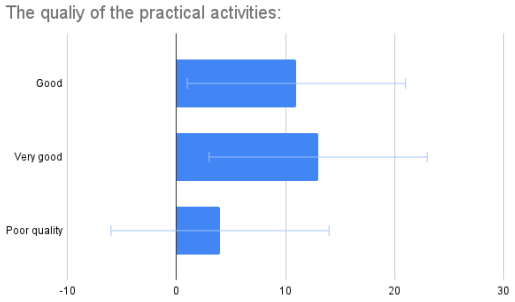
In the case of the nationality of the students enrolled in the section teaching in English, we observe the fact that even here the European countries or from the European economic space continue to predominate: France, Germany, Greece, Great Britain, the non-EU countries having a smaller weight.

Fig. 6.
Assessment of course quality by students.



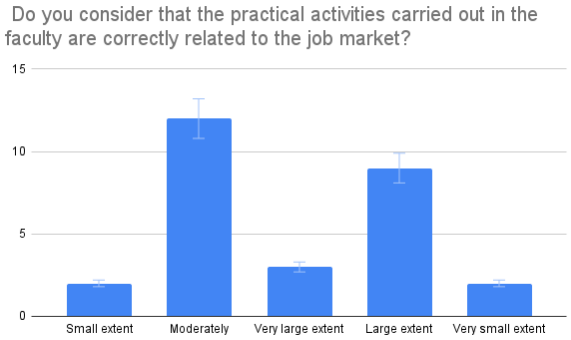
The results show that the majority of students rate the courses held in the English department as good or very good. However, there is also a non-negligible percentage of student respondents (18%) who support the fact that these courses made for the English department are of poor quality. It should be noted that both the university curriculum and the structure of the courses for the English section are similar to that of the section for Romanian students. This fact was decided precisely in order to avoid the occurrence of discrimination and differentiation phenomena in terms of the quantity and quality of the information provided.

Fig. 7.
Appreciation of the quality of practical activities by students.



Compared to the issue of assessing the quality of the courses, we observe that the practical activities are evaluated by the students as very good and good in a significant proportion, and in this case there is also a percentage of 16% of students who declare themselves dissatisfied.

Fig. 8.
The assessment by students of the degree of correlation of the practical activity carried out within the faculty of dental medicine with the labor market.

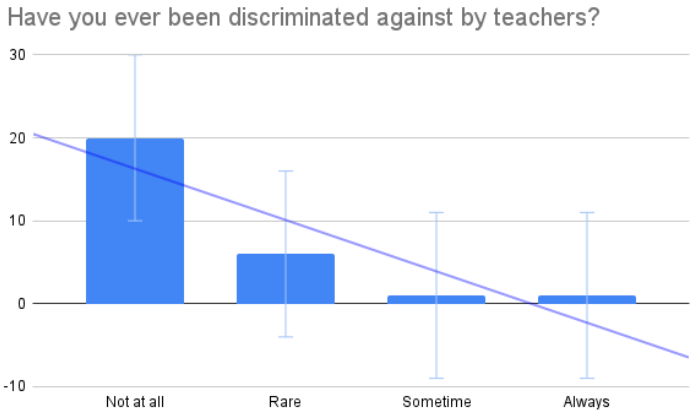


The results obtained show that the practical activities carried out in the English department for the dental field are in line with the requirements of the job market. In the dental field, practice is a fundamental criterion of academic performance, but also at work.

Fig. 9.
The degree of participation of foreign students in extracurricular events of the faculty (congresses, conferences, workshops).

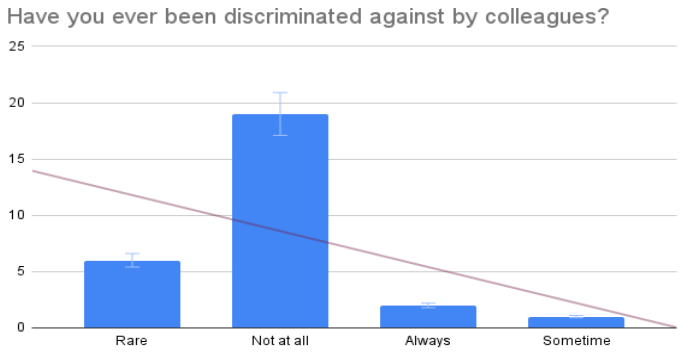
We notice that most foreign students have not been able to integrate into the extracurricular activities of the university, a fact that can have negative consequences on the future profession of dentist, which requires the mandatory, annual attendance and involvement in medical congresses in order to accumulate continuing medical education points (CME).

Fig. 10.
The phenomenon of discrimination among teachers.



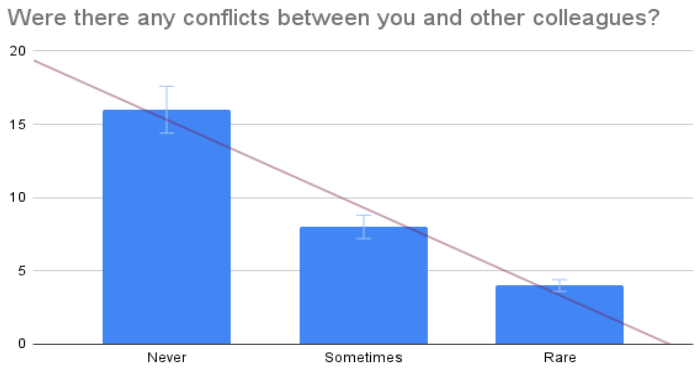
The results of this item indicate that there were situations in which the phenomenon of discrimination among teachers against foreign students took place. These events are regrettable and have no justification, a fact that draws attention to the superficiality of the approach to academic ethics. We believe that the problem of the phenomenon of discrimination must be treated seriously, and all resources must be mobilized in order to stop it.

Fig. 11.
The phenomenon of discrimination among foreign students at the Faculty of Dental Medicine in Craiova.



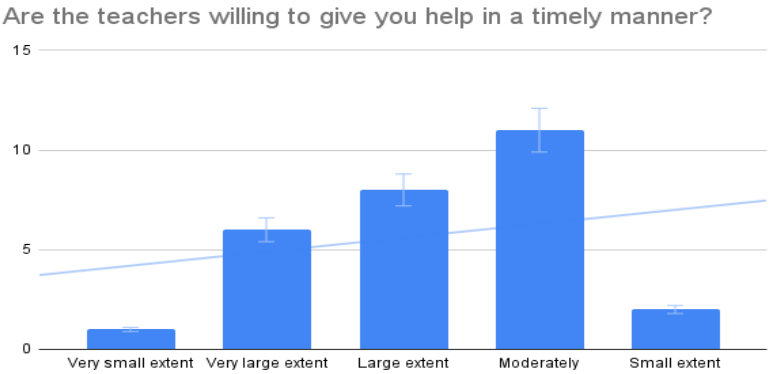
The discriminatory phenomenon among students has approximately the same weight as that among teaching staff, again signaling that it is a worrying phenomenon that must be remedied through courses, events that address this topic and that orientate teaching staff and students in view of the negative consequences in the short term or long that this phenomenon can produce.

Fig. 12.
Frequency of conflicts between colleagues.



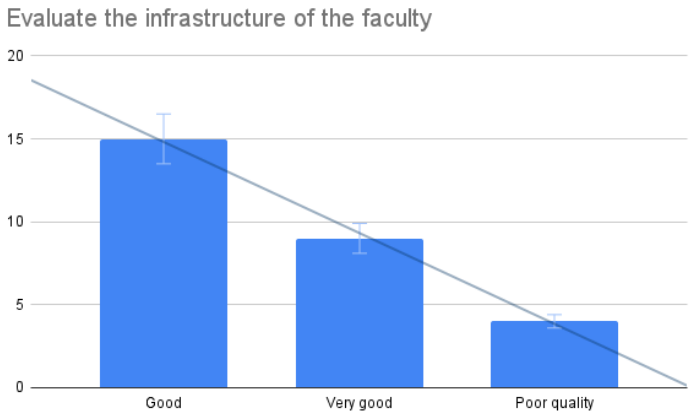
Also, the outbreak of conflicts also originates from the national and cultural diversity of the students. The existence of completely different traditions, customs and mentalities can generate conflicts between colleagues, especially considering that they spend a large part of the day together in courses and practical activities that require them to work in teams.

Fig. 13.
Availability of teaching staff to offer help in solving the problems of foreign students.



This item captures the fact that the teachers in the English department are involved and devoted in guiding foreign students with the objective of familiarizing them both with medical concepts and with the events of everyday life that can mark their evolution as future doctors dentists.

Fig. 14.
Assessment of university infrastructure by foreign students.



The results show that UMF Craiova has an adequate infrastructure for the dental medicine program in English, rated by the majority of students as good and very good (laboratories, classrooms, campus, library). However, we notice that the online platform of the faculty does not fully satisfy the demands of the students, a significant percentage of them rated it as poor quality or very poor. So, the online platform where course materials and practicals are uploaded needs adjustments.

DISSCUSIONS

The existence of a multicultural community in university academic medicine represents a challenge for both students and teachers. The approach to this school situation requires the acquisition of knowledge regarding the correct management of cultural diversity by avoiding the occurrence of the phenomenon of discrimination.

In our study, we identified situations in which the phenomenon of discrimination was highlighted both among students and among teaching staff. The phenomenon of discrimination represents a serious problem that can have major negative consequences on the individual, D'hondt (2021). A teacher who does not have sufficient knowledge about how discrimination can influence the quality of the educational act can cause a significant decrease in academic performance among students (Valiente, 2020).

One of the solutions that could reduce or even stop the spread of this phenomenon among teachers is represented by the implementation of policies/regulations that sanction this type of behavior (D'hondt, 2021). Also, the organization of conferences and workshops aimed at combating racism and discrimination prove to be useful in the proper understanding of the phenomenon.

This phenomenon of discrimination observed in our study did not prove to be the majority (about 25%), but enough to raise an alarm signal in order to correct it in order to prevent it from spreading further. Most of the students declared themselves satisfied with the promptness of the teachers in solving the problems that arose during the educational path. Also, foreign students from the English department appreciate the quality of the practical activities carried out during the internships. Internships are of vital importance in the future profession of dentist and require a very high degree of involvement of the teaching staff responsible for their good performance (McGleenon & Morison 2021).

At the same time, foreign students rated the faculty's resources as good and very good. The only element of the infrastructure criticized was the online platform where the courses and practical activities are uploaded. So, living in an era of digitization, it is necessary to adjust the online educational platform for optimal accessibility (reduced time, correct and complete display, ease of use) of educational resources (Haleem et al. 2022).

CONCLUSIONS

Cultural diversity in the academic educational environment continues to be an insufficiently addressed topic in Romania, because the educational offers for students from other EU and non-EU states experienced a significant expansion only after our country's accession to the European Union in 2007.

The integration of foreign students into the Romanian university environment turns out to be a complex process that requires in-depth knowledge of intercultural pedagogy on the part of teaching staff. The rich ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity radically changes the way teaching materials are designed, but also the way lessons and practical activities are conducted. At the same time, we emphasize the fact that intercultural education has the role of making interpersonal relations more efficient within educational institutions, increasing the degree of tolerance and promoting and encouraging the exchange of opinions.

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