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**DEVELOPING INTERCULTURAL SENSITIVITY AND INTERCULTURAL
DIALOGUE THROUGH ECONOMICS AND BUSINESS EDUCATION**

Suciu Marta/Christina

Economics and Economic Policies Department
ASE
Bucharest, Romania
Christina.suciu@economie.ase.ro

Abstract:

The paper focuses on the topics of intercultural dialogue and intercultural sensitivity. In the content of “Europe 2020”, intercultural sensitivity and intercultural effectiveness have to become key ingredients for promoting multicultural universities. Within these universities students coming from different regions and countries co-operate in classrooms and online platform. In order to co-operate further in business students have to start first to learn and to interact based on an open and flexible education framework. This means to adopt the syllabus, curriculum and the methods of teaching to an international framework based on special dedicated initiative for getting close to a more personalized learning that is student focus, open to dialogue and co-operation. The paper disseminates results from the research project “Parteneriate 92116”, project that had been dedicated mostly to the topic of Diversity Management and Intercultural Dialogue.

JEL Codes: A20, A22, A23, F63, I23, I25, Z10

Keywords: intercultural dialogue, intercultural sensitivity, diversity management

INTRODUCTION

This paper is aimed at debating intercultural competences and intercultural dialogue issues within a multicultural learning environment. It supports the idea of cultural dimension and quality in higher education with a focus on intercultural sensitivity, intercultural dialogue and intercultural effectiveness. The paper disseminates a part of the results obtained within the research project "*Parteneriate 92116*".

The design methodology consists of questionnaires applied within the Faculty of Business Administration (with subjects taught in foreign languages) at the Academy of Economic Studies Bucharest. Qualitative interpretation refers to students' opinion regarding intercultural sensitivity within the two faculties that function as multicultural learning environments.

The author supports the idea according to which intercultural sensitivity and intercultural dialogue issues are very important in order to better understand the complexity and dynamics of multicultural environments within the framework of a global knowledge-based society. Intercultural competence and effectiveness can make the difference for the quality and sustainability of higher education.

In Romania the previous studies concerning intercultural sensitivity focused mostly on the ethnic dimension. The originality of our research regards the fact that it focus mostly on topics such as intercultural effectiveness and intercultural dialogue analyzed within a framework where students interact by learning the same topic in a foreign language

1. BRIEF LITERATURE REVIEW

The educational system plays an important role in promoting equal opportunities, diversity and intercultural dialogue principles by stimulating students to be tolerant and to respect other people. This paper argues for an alternative view on *cross-cultural dialogue* and *intercultural competence* within the framework of a global knowledge-based society and economy. The global knowledge-based society implies not only moving from one place to another but also adapting and integrating people into the national and international context. The lack of specific policies for supporting *intercultural dialogue* may lead to *acculturation*. Acculturation as a concept represents a dual process of culture, psychological and behavioral changes. Berry J. (2005) states that *diversity* and *cultural diversity* in particular have a major impact on behavior, attitudes and personality of individuals in situations of intercultural contact [1].

Cross-cultural dialogue is not only becoming an adaptation problem but also a problem of ethics. Ethical principles, as well as all other forms of culture, are humanly produced and culturally transmitted. By engaging in intercultural contact with different cultures, we gain a more objective view than if we only lived and promoted our own culture.

Evanoff R. (2006) pleads for a synergetic view of "*third cultures*", which integrates the positive aspects of each of the original cultures in novel ways. "*If ethical norms are cultural creations, then they can also be revised in response both to newly emerging problems and to new perspectives gained through cross-cultural contact*" [2, p. 427].

Cross-cultural interactions offer the framework for new contexts of dialogue in which the norms that will govern interactions do not yet exist and hence must be created. Bouville M. (2008) considers that diversity and intercultural dialogue are also problems of ethics in the context of respecting equality of opportunities [3].

Bennett's (1993) *developmental model of intercultural sensitivity* identified six stages that individuals typically go through in the process of acquiring an integrated

perspective [4]. *The ethnocentric stage* assumes that differences are not recognized (*denial*), or differences are perceived but individuals believe that one culture is superior to another (*defense*), or differences are neglected or minimized (*minimization*). Within the *ethno-relative stage* differences are recognized in a relativist way (*acceptance*), differences are slightly becoming adopted (*adoption*), or individuals plead for a *bicultural perspective* which uses multiple frames of reference (*integration*). Individuals acquire a bicultural perspective by integrating some of the ideas and values of the other culture into their own way of thinking.

Diversity and intercultural management becomes more important for almost all multinational and national organizations. In today's world a lot of important companies such as *Motorola, Ford* introduced specific policies for managing diversity. Diversity management should be viewed as an investment rather than a cost; therefore it becomes a social obligation and more of an economic imperative.

Intercultural competences and intercultural dialogue request also *an international co-operation in education*. According to Hofstede [5] cross-cultural studies bring about a *paradigm shift* in how we understand people's behavior at a national, international and global level. In contrast to much descriptive research into differences between, there are not too many literature sources published dealing with the context of *multicultural learning environments*. Hofstede's (2005) five cultural dimensions are: Power Distance (PDI); Individuality (IDV); Masculinity (MAS); Uncertainty Avoidance (UAI); Long or Short term Orientation (LTO).

- *Power Distance* relates to the emotional distance between people. A *high Power Distance (PDI)* would indicate a strong sense of hierarchy and acceptance of one's role within it, while a culture with *low PDI* would tend to regard others as equal, worthy of consultation and assuming little success in playing on the power one might have over the other.
- *Individuality versus Collectivism (IDV)* relates to the ties individuals have within their society. They are loose in individualist societies and stronger in collectivist societies, and expressed by a reliance on group norms and conformity to visible, behavioral standards in the latter.
- *Masculinity versus Femininity (MAS)* relates to role patterns between genders. A society would be considered *feminine* if the roles between the genders were not clearly distinct and in which modesty, tenderness and quality-of-life issues would characterize the approach to life and society.
- *Uncertainty Avoidance (UAI)* describes the level of ambiguity a society is prepared to live in. A society would be high on this scale if they relied on written rules, clear statements and discernable patterns.
- *Long-Term Orientation (LTO)* denotes attitudes on the importance of past, present and future. A *short-term orientation* relates to the present and past, while the opposite orientation cares particularly for the future. For the former, Hofstede cites such virtues as respect for tradition, preservation of face and fulfilling obligations [5, p. 210].

2. INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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

[6]. While there are studies [7] that reflect how culturally different students define, make sense of, and experience intercultural interaction at a *multicultural university* in the US, they are not centered on intercultural competencies. Stier J (2006) argues that *intercultural communication* might be seen as an academic discipline and that the education systems have to support *Education for Intercultural Communication* [8].

In order to promote a constructive *intercultural dialogue* within universities it is essential to perform successfully in the long-run. Universities that function within a multicultural framework should promote "*cultural respect*" for all persons involved in intercultural communication, regardless of their origins and cultural choices. *Intercultural competence* can be divided into: *content-competencies* and *process-competencies* [8].

- *Content-competencies* encompass a one-dimensional or static character and refer to knowing a specific aspect.
- *Process-competencies* consider the *dynamic character of intercultural competence* and its *interaction context* [8].

The *knowing how-aspect* of intercultural competence engages both *intrapersonal* and *interpersonal competencies*. *Intrapersonal competencies* involve *cognitive and emotional skills of individuals*, coping with diverse feelings xenophobia, frustration, ethnocentrism. *Interpersonal competencies* refer to *interactive skills* being aware of owner's own interaction style (*communication competence*) and adequately responding to *contextual meanings (situational sensitivity)*. *Intercultural communication education* should enhance students' understanding of the *dynamics of intercultural interactions*. It should enable them to obtain *intercultural competence*. *Intercultural Programme's Student Outcomes* refer to *meta-competences* and extend beyond '*knowing that*' and '*knowing how*'-aspects of culture. Instead they are about '*knowing why*' and or even '*knowing why one knows why*' [8].

Curricula internalization and culturally affected curricula

Within the framework of a global knowledge-based society and economy *curriculum internationalisation* was developed - the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of higher education. Curriculum internationalisation needed to prepare graduates for the international labour market.

Our research on curricula internalization is based on a survey comprising 135 students coming from *the Bucharest University of Economic Studies (BUES)*. It was conducted in the first quarter of 2010. With respect to the structure of respondents we mention that: the average age is: 20 years on AESB; respondents are fourth year students and first year students and for all of them their studies take place in English.

The academic curricula within BUES is designed such as to be compatible with those of similar universities in Europe.

In order to ensure comparability and compatibility:

- the same subjects taught and the same teaching techniques;
- use of internationally recognized books;

- development of business, management, marketing, accounting, mathematics, law, political science, finance and economics skills

What is Curricula Internationalisation according to our students' opinion?

- standardisation, uniformisation including however cultural differences;
- the same curricula for all countries in order to make it easier for students to go study abroad;
- offering more perspectives for studying abroad by teaching in foreign languages etc.
- including international information and examples in the curricula;
- the same curricula around the world;
- a set of common subjects and examinations tools.

Why such measures are not applied yet?

- countries and particular experiences of universities are too much different to make them adopt the same standards;
- it is technically too difficult to make all universities change their curricula for a standardised one;
- no update of curricula and no similarities;
- too many constraints for certain subjects.

The most important suggestions made by students regard:

- the use of a foreign language for teaching
- the same information should be presented, but the teaching methods should be adapted to the environment and mentalities of that country
- better established education standards
- more practical classes
- questionnaire regarding the subjects to be studied
- elective courses.

Curriculum internationalisation requires international standards for accreditation of universities that might provide curricula internationalization. Accreditation organizations have their own model of curricula. These models are the standards for accredited programs.

Standards are universalizing and even globalizing by nature. What this paper suggests is that the curriculum reflects cultural patterns of the society in which it is offered. No matter how structured a curriculum may become in accord with accrediting bodies and established standards, *cultural influence prevails*. As an example, a Romanian professor of management will implicitly incorporate Romanian social constructs and culture into his/her teaching of business management, thereby, potentially altering the context of the standard.

Business education accreditation through international accreditation organizations such as *AACSB International* incorporates standards for faculty, students, curriculum, institutional support and governance—all based on *the American educational model*. The presumption of achieving recognized quality academic programmes is attained through *standardization based on the American educational system* - not through an indigenous localized educational system.

The inclusion of *Eastern European countries* such as Romania into the European Union has complicated the issue. The relatively recent members of the European Union have been/are in process of migrating *from an Eastern European socio-cultural-*

economic frame towards that of a more *Western European model*. These countries with their associated economies and business context incorporate, to a certain degree, *the international "big business"* context to which accreditations like *AACSB International* is directed. However, these countries, like most countries of the world have a majority of business activity that is *localized in predominantly small and middle sized businesses* that serve the local and regional economy. The *challenge* is to modify global business curricula that are currently directed to *big international business standardized practice* to be compatible and useful for localized regional culturally framed businesses.

With the aim of understanding the implication of intercultural dialogue and intercultural capabilities in the context of equal learning opportunities among students and being able to provide a correct and accurate interpretation of results we performed a qualitative research. We focused our research on the *Faculty of Business Administration (FBA)* that offers courses taught in foreign languages (English, French and German) and functions within *the Bucharest University of Economic Studies (BUES)*. We applied the questionnaire method to 135 students from FBA. The questionnaire was addressed to students from the first year to postgraduate students with an average age of 27 years.

We present briefly some of the results of our survey. The assumptions of the applied research methodology are:

- equal opportunities is respected;
- intercultural education implies intercultural contact for both faculties;
- intercultural sensitivity & intercultural competences can be achieved for both faculties.

The primary source of data was a *28-question survey* that focuses on *students' knowledge, attitudes and experiences regarding multicultural education*.

The questionnaire had two parts: *the first part* took into account the characteristics of our respondents (such as: faculty, year of study, nationality, age), while *the second part* was centered on the students' opinion and perception on intercultural dialogue and intercultural competences accumulated in university. Twenty-five of these survey questions were multiple choice questions and three of them were open questions. One of the 28 questions is interpreted through *the Likert scale*.

The open questions: (1) provide solutions for respecting and promoting an equal opportunities climate in universities; (2) provide suggestions for universities as to how sustain intercultural dialogue and cultural diversity in the learning environment and (3) identify what kind of competences are important resources for the potential employer.

Multicultural training is considered as an opportunity to stimulate students' ability to work effectively with various cultural identities.

The survey was asking if students had interactions with students of other nationalities and citizenships than Romanian. All respondents confirmed that they had interaction with foreign students. Thus, 42% said that they interacted with a number of 1 to 10 foreign students; 26% interacted with 11 to 20 foreign students; 22% with more than 30 and 10% with 21 to 30 foreign students.

3. CONCLUSIONS

We consider that Romanian universities have to think more of becoming part of an international networking by being actively involved within some *international co-operation educational Programmes on the Master and PhD level*.

These Programmes could be specially designed for the use of the co-operation members. This approach should enable all the members to have easy access to all types

of searchable documents (e.g. co-operation publications - existing and/or newly and commonly developed - relevant texts, emails, and web pages, interesting scanned documents, news and developments of the co-operation. The knowledge creation area is regarded as an excellent arena to share tacit knowledge.

While *business education* currently prides itself in its attempt to incorporate global perspectives, *business curricula* can be argued to be, in reality, at a *local level*. “*We have to think globally, but act locally*”.

Future research has to develop a comprehensive model. Our research suggests that students are open to support intercultural competence & sensitivity. They argued their answers mostly based on the fact that multinational companies prefer experienced employees, who are more open-minded, tolerant and open to diversity.

We suggest the following measures to be taken in universities: promoting intercultural collaboration between students, especially during academic activities; assigning a person or a fellow student to guide and help foreign students; ensuring equal treatment in all university facilities; being more involved and open towards solving students’ difficulties; implementing a Code of Practice for intercultural communication and intercultural sensitivity.

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