DIVERSITY MANAGEMENT

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Abstract. *Globalization amplified the multicultural issue. The author support the idea of the intercultural dialogue based on what can join people together according to common goals, with no prejudice on their right to be different and to manifest in a different way by exploring their talent and creativity. The paper presents briefly a part of the research results obtained within the scientific research project "PARTENERIATE 92116", research project that has been win by competition in 2008, the year that had been declared at the European Union as "The Year of Intercultural Dialogue". The topic of the research project is "Equality of chance-as a prerequisite of sustainable development. An evaluation system to promote diversity within the organizations from Romania". The author is the coordinator of the mentioned research project.*

Keywords: Globalization, multicultural management. Intercultural Dialogue, sustainable development, multicultural societies, cultural diferecnces, Intercultural knowledge competence.

1. Introduction

"We want to go beyond multicultural societies, where cultures and cultural groups simply coexist side by side, where they live 'parallel lives'. We need to become intercultural societies where plurality of cultures cooperates in dialogue and in shared responsibility. 2008 as *the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue is an important part of the effort to move beyond tolerance and towards a genuine intercultural Europe." (*Ján Figel, Commissioner for Education, Training, Culture, and Youth, *Intercultural dialogue as a long–term priority for the EU,* "*Intercultural Dialogue as the Fundamental Value of the EU*", Ljubljana, 7 January 2008).

The issues of diversity, diversity management, intercultural dialogue and intercultural competence play a key role in shaping and reshaping the future. Intercultural rhetoric uses cultural difference to build knowledge and support wise action. This paper examines examples of good practices used to design an intercultural dialogue, to manage diversity, and to build *intercultural knowledge competences* within two important higher education institutions in Romania.

Drawing from two case studies regarding learning economics in foreign languages versus engineering subjects the paper argues that *intercultural communication* and *dialogue* can play a key role. The paper stresses the need for *intercultural communication education* that concerns several academic disciplines

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- psychology, social psychology, sociology, education, media studies, cultural anthropology and management (Stier, 2003).

2. From intercultural sensitivity to intercultural competence and effectiveness

Good intercultural teaching practice focus on *the intercultural competence* which requires shifting from "*intercultural awareness and sensitivity*" to "*intercultural effectiveness"* (Salo-Lee, 2007). A *constructive intercultural dialogue* within a university is becoming essential to perform successfully in the long-run. Universities should promote "*cultural respect*" that requires respect for all persons involved in *intercultural communication*, regardless of their origins and cultural choices. G. Chen and W. J. Starosta (1996) describe a model which focuses on four elements: *communication skills, personal attributes* (including the capacity for "*social relaxation*"), *psychological adaptation* (including the ability to cope with stress), and *cultural sensitivity*.

While there are studies (Halualani et al., 2004; Halualani, 2008) 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. Halualani's study - also based on questionnaires and interviews - reveals that there are two main ways of defining and interpreting intercultural interaction on behalf of students: being among or within a demographically diverse campus and the exchanges between individuals of different national, racial and ethnic backgrounds.

The papers examine the extent to which culturally different students engage in intercultural interaction at a multicultural university and what characterizes such intercultural interaction experiences.

The main conclusions of Halualani's research show that studying in a multicultural university makes students engage in intercultural interactions and intercultural dialogue, which makes them more open-minded and non-prejudiced. Although these studies answer questions such as defining intercultural dialogue and intercultural interaction from the perspective of students who learn in a multicultural university, we consider that they do not reflect students' perception on the effectiveness and benefits of studying in a multicultural learning environment.

Gento S. and Medina A. proposed a study that reflects the implementation of a research project concerned with promoting intercultural education in the academic environment.

In our country there are researches concerning intercultural dialogue and intercultural issues but these studies are mainly focused on defining and analyzing intercultural dialogue from ethnic or racial perspectives (Poledna, R., Ruegg, F., Rus C.). The studies undertaken so far, present different thematic, methodological

and theoretical points of view. The present study is characterized by the attempt to be in accordance with the international scientific debate concerning intercultural issues. Current debates have strongly influenced social sciences in Romania while serious attempts have been made to set forward European and South-Eastern European solutions for promoting intercultural dialogue from an ethnic point of view.

The most important goal of our study was to improve students' intercultural competences through intercultural dialogue in academia, as a prerequisite to help students feel more prepared and more open to similar experiences. Students will benefit from such intercultural competences leading to a long-run sustainable competitive advantage.

3. The methodology applied in the research project

In the first place, we have investigated the most appropriate research methodologies available. With the aim of understanding the implication of intercultural dialogue and intercultural capabilities in the context of *KM* and knowledge assimilation among students and being able to provide a correct and accurate interpretation of results we have decided to perform a qualitative research in two most prestigious universities in our country.

The questions proposed in our survey were chosen following a proper analysis of some of the most important studies on intercultural issues and intercultural dialogue. The questionnaire represents an extension of the studies proposed by Halualani R.T and Gento & Medina, who have been preoccupied by the delimitation of concepts and the perception of intercultural dialogue, as well as by the understanding the way teachers respect cultural diversity principles.

This study tries to deal with issues such as: intercultural contact, intercultural experiences, intercultural abilities in the context of KM and career management from the perspective of faculties where students learn in foreign languages and foreign students learn alongside with Romanian students.

We have tried to identify possible advantages for students in order to adapt faster, to be more open, and interact more easily in the context of knowledge assimilation in academia and KM in life.

Furthermore, the flexibility of the study facilitates the discovery of the real perception on intercultural contact and dialogue both within and outside the learning environment. This is a major element that has to be taken into consideration since the study context regards several domains as stated by Halualani (Halualani 2008):

  i) personal approach and experiences on intercultural contact,
  ii) personal and educational factors facilitating or inhibiting communication skills,

    iii) human resource abilities to adapt and operate in organizations characterized by cultural diversity.

We have been interested in the students' openness to intercultural dialogue, therefore the survey was mostly addressed to Romanian and foreign students who study together.

The aim of our empirical investigation was to attempt a factual answer to a fundamental question in our research: "*Do intercultural dialogue and intercultural communication have a major impact on KM in the context of working in organizations marked by cultural diversity?*"

The collected data were analysed and interpreted against results and findings of research undertaken mostly in countries that benefit from interculturality due to their native history (United States of America). Therefore, we consider that further research work should be conducted in our country in order to confirm or refute the results of our study.

4. Intercultural Competence within diverse multiethnic student groups when all the topics are taught in foreign languages

The majority of courses offered in our universities are taught in Romanian.

However, there are faculties where all the subjects are taught in foreign languages. 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 Economics. This faculty was created in 1990 and now both Romanian and foreign students (from more than 50 countries) study here. We consider that this faculty is *an example of good practice* for *a multilingual university* that facilitates *intercultural dialogue*. In order to discover if the subjects taught make any difference we considered also the case of *the Faculty of Engineering in Foreign Language* (FEFL), *the English section, at "Politehnica" University, Bucharest.* We applied the questionnaire method for both universities.

The primary source of data was a 25-question survey that focuses on students' knowledge, attitudes and experiences regarding multicultural education.

The questionnaire had two parts: the first part mostly referred to the personal information of our respondents (such as: faculty, year of study, nationality, age), while the second part was centered on students' opinion and perception on intercultural dialogue and intercultural competences accumulated in university. Twenty-two of these survey questions were multiple choice questions and the last three were open questions. The open questions include: (1) describe which are the circumstances of interaction with foreign students, (2) provide suggestions for universities in order to promote and sustain intercultural dialogue and cultural

diversity in the learning environment and (3) any feedback you would like to provide.

Multicultural training was described to the students as a focus on students' ability to work effectively with various cultural identities.

The hypotheses of the study were:

- H_1: Intercultural dialogue in the learning environment

- H_2: Intercultural dialogue and intercultural contact help complete future career management

- H_3: Working and studying in a cultural diverse environment favorable to KM can lead to more resourceful work outcomes, including personal development.

The results of the first part of our survey is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Personal information of students questioned in our survey for both Faculties

FAB	*FEFL*
Mainly *first* year undergraduate business students	Mainly *third* year and *second* year undergraduates
Students mainly of Romanian nationality (86%)	Students mainlyof Romanian nationality (75%)
Foreign students participation to our survey: Israeli (3%), American (2%), Turkish (2%), Lebanese (1%), Palestinian (1%), Belarusian (1%); (4%) of the respondents did not declare their nationality	Foreign students participation to our survey: Spanish (5%), Tunisian (5%), Abidjan (5%); (10%) of the respondents did not declare their nationality
Their citizenship is almost the same as their nationality with very few exceptions	Their citizenship is the same as their nationality with no exceptions
The nationality declared for the parents are: Lebanese, Israeli, Romanian, Palestinian, Belarusian, Turkish, American and German, while 6% of the respondents chose not to declare their parents' nationality and citizenship	The nationality declared for the parents are: Spanish, Tunisian, Romanian, Abidjan, while 1% of the respondents chose not to declare their parents' nationality and citizenship'.

The majority of the students surveyed do interact with foreign students (90%).

However, 10% of the respondents did not give a positive answer. It seems that they feel just like they *coexist* in a "*multicultural situation*" (Taylor, 1992;

Semprini, 1997). It is very likely that their answer explains or reveals the lack of communication with their foreign colleagues despite the fact that they are students in the same year with foreign students. All the negative answers were given by Romanian students, which means that all the foreign students surveyed interact with both Romanian and students of their own nationality and/or citizenship. Another explanation could be assimilated from the point of view that intercultural interaction does not always happen simply because there is a diverse and intercultural learning environment (Halualani R.T. 2008). The circumstances under which the FAB students declared that they interacted with foreign students were university activities (an expectedly large proportion - 71%) and other activities and circumstances (17%) – figure 1.
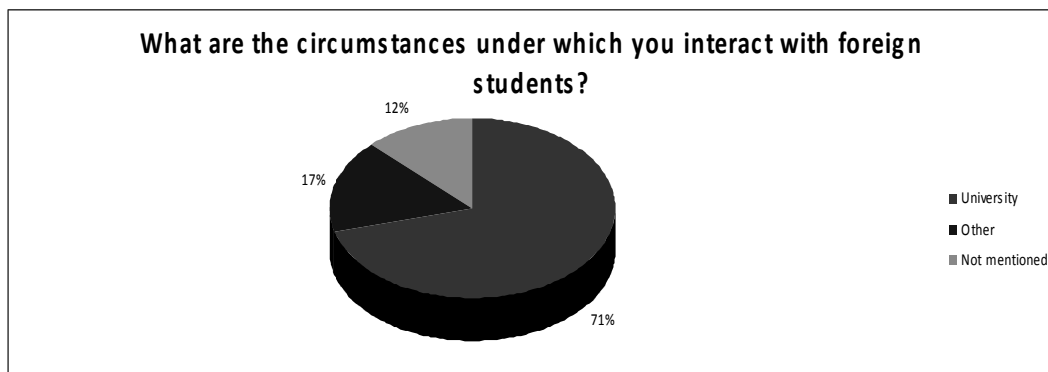
Figure 1: The circumstances of interaction with foreign students

However, 12% of the respondents did not want to state what those circumstances were. Within the category "*other circumstances*" fell: leisure activities, extracurricular activities or both. Regarding the students in engineering, 45% declared that they interacted with foreign students within university activities, while 40% indicated leisure and other informal activities. The circumstances presented, offer us a broader range of information regarding their experience, their openness to intercultural dialogue, their interaction preferences and their native inclination to be open to such intercultural communication through different experiences.

In support to our findings we mention that *cross-cultural interactions* are also underlined as enabling "*students to show cultural sensitivity in dealing with foreigners, while using languages already at their disposal, predominantly English*" (P. Cowley, B.E. Hanna, pg 8).

By understanding intercultural interaction, students reproduce a necessary link between being in the presence of diversity, engaging into cross-cultural interaction and realizing cultural open-mindedness, awareness, and non-racist

living. Studying in a multicultural environment entails also being interculturally involved and competent (R.T Halualani 2008, p 10).

When asked to identify the main difficulties that foreign students faced, the answers were almost equally shared among the four alternatives: understanding the language (27% for both economics and engineering students); adapting (23% for economics and 15% for engineering); socializing (23% for economics and 27% for engineering) and the academic environment (27% for economics and 31% for engineering).

Although students identified the difficulties faced by their colleagues from other countries, if we look at the respondents' answers we may agree with the negative consequence drawn by Halulani: "*The association between demographic diversity and intercultural interaction experiences is that it actually may prevent individuals from seeking out and experiencing actual intercultural interaction because they think they are already doing so.*" (pg 11)

In order to improve the learning environment we asked *what policies or measures they would suggest to the Faculty/University to resolve such difficulties.* The students in economics said that the best policy to be applied would be promoting courses to boost intercultural dialogue and sensitivity focusing on the cultural specificity of each student (37% for economics as compared to 24% for engineering). Other suggestions were: the organization of workshops with all the students of different nationalities (25% for both FAB and FEFL), special preparation programs (22% for economics and 31% for engineering) and the dissemination of materials with useful information (15% for economics and 14% for engineering). It is more than obvious that the need for more communication would be a possible solution to these difficulties.

When asked to provide more solutions, students suggested the following: mixed groups of students of different nationality/citizenship; organizing tour guides for foreign students; "*showing around*" sessions for first year students; organizing more language courses (Romanian); offering more language courses (other than English and Romanian); organizing trips to facilitate communication among students of different nationalities; group and team-building activities; sport events; cultural workshops in music and arts; team projects; socializing and extracurricular activities; brainstorming sessions; better prepared administrative personnel; special advisers for foreign students; after school classes; making more room for NGOs to deal with this problem; encouraging more communication in seminars; having more dialogue in classes; cultural exchange programs and intercultural activities; spending more time with Romanian students; informal meetings for students; culturally-diverse menus at the cafeteria; Romanians volunteering to help foreign students adapt.

Kang and Dutton (1997) found that a significant proportion of students' acquisition of knowledge about others comes through experience and interactions

with people who are different. But if universities do not fulfill these requirements entirely within the learning environment then it is necessary that all the suggestions proposed by our respondents should be taken into account. The students in this research study indicated the importance, yet the lack of communication and specific policies that would help field experiences in their educational preparation. Therefore, the effort of academic communities to facilitate interaction with diverse populations is vital to increase students' exposure and knowledge background.

Based on their study of university students' multicultural awareness levels, Globetti et. al. (1993) suggested that the content of multicultural courses should help students get involved in experiential learning using methods such as role-playing and brainstorming. Partially some of these suggestions were anticipated by our students who showed great interest in intercultural dialogue and also demonstrated their realistic implication.

Asked whether there is any specific policy meant to promote intercultural dialogue in their University, in the case of students in economics the large majority (60%) admitted having no idea about any such policy, while 28% said there was such a policy and 12% said there was no such policy. As for engineering students 35% considered there were specific policies, while 40% said there was no such policy and 25% admitted having no idea about any such policy. This question is very useful in discovering how well informed on such issues students are. For the question "*How much does your University/Faculty focus on supporting management of diversity, inclusive treatment and equal opportunities*?" the answers were: "*a lot*" (11% for economics and 10% for engineering), "*to some extent*" (45% for economics and 30% for engineering), "*not enough*" (27% for economics and 35% for engineering), "*I don't know*" (17% for economics and 25% for engineering).

The answers provided reflect that the implication of universities in promoting management of diversity and equal opportunities is not very popular among students. According to Gento and Medina (2008) a particular school culture in the management of diversity can be consolidated with the influence of flexible groups: they contributed, not only to increasing solidarity among students, but also to expanding commitment in order to improve performance of schools, students, teachers and other staff.

Going further with our survey we asked: "*What are the communication difficulties that you encountered in the relationship with students of other nationalities?*" the answers were: different perceptions on things (41% for economics and 46% for engineering), „the language" (24% for economics and 12% for engineering), "the culture" (18% for economics and 15% for engineering), "preconceived opinions" (16% for economics and 12% for engineering), other (1% for economics and 15% for engineering).

If communication represents a barrier in connecting with other nationalities then it is possible that tuition systems and education institutions must take into consideration adapting and promoting courses that teach students to mediate and accept cultural diversity. Figure 3 illustrates the FBA students' opinion as to the *benefits for students to be taught in a foreign language*.

The FEFL students answered "yes" in a proportion of 90%.
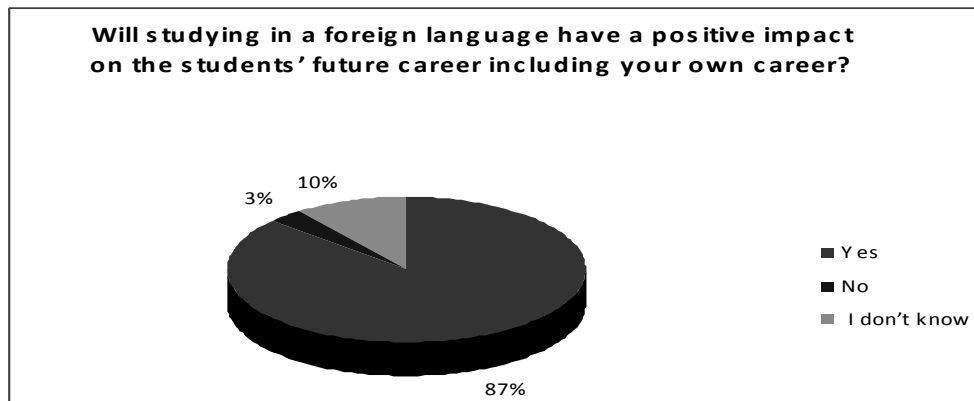
Figure 2: The positive impact of studying in a foreign language on students' future career

The importance of studies in a foreign language for intercultural communication in the University was assessed as follows: the majority of the positive answers (32% for economics and 35% for engineering) were in favour of a better preparation to face any future challenges related to intercultural dialogue. 25% for economics and 21% for engineering referred to better and improved language skills due to courses taught in a foreign language; 22% for economics and 28% for engineering pointed to easier socialising due to courses taught in a foreign language; 20% for economics and 14% for engineering referred to openness in communication. 2% for both groups suggested that enlarging career opportunities and learning about other cultures would be other benefits.

The results to the question "*In your opinion, is there any advantage for Romanian students to be taught in a foreign language other than Romanian*?" are illustrated in figure 3.

Next, when asked whether studying in a foreign language would have a positive impact on students' future career, including their own career, 87% for economics and 95% for engineering gave a positive answer, 3% for economics gave a negative answer, while 10% for economics and 5% for engineering did not know what to say. Similar answers were given by students in engineering among whom 80% considered that studying in a foreign language had a positive impact for future career management.
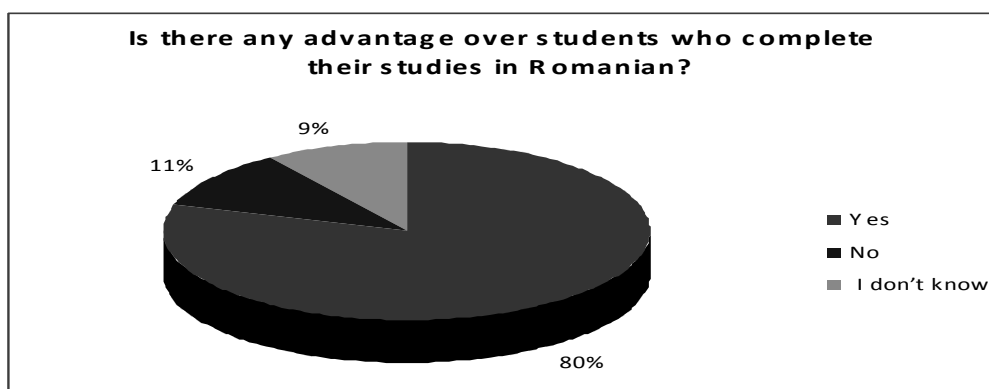
Figure 3: Students' opinion on the advantage of studying in Romanian

By providing this information, students acknowledge that studying in a foreign language is important and directly ensures future advantages for themselves and for any person in general. *While students asserted that they had become more skillful in communicating cross-culturally, not all of those who answered positively were capable of identifying such advantages.*

Those who gave a positive answer were asked to say what this positive impact could mean. The results are in table 2:

Table 2. Distribution of answers regarding a positive impact on the students' future career to study in a foreign language

Positive impact	Answers from FAB *students*	Answers *from FEFL students*
better business and economic skills due to the international content of the academic curricula	27%	13%
more knowledge acquired due to the international content of the academic curricula	17%	31%
better communication skills adapted to an internationalized economy and global markets	35%	34%
professors usually have a large international experience that will be translated into better teaching methods and more knowledge	14%	9%
professors usually have a large international experience that will be translated into the skills acquired	7%	13%

A great number of positive answers on better communication skills and better business and economic skills reflect the fact that learning in a foreign language helps build intercultural knowledge competences. Also, a large amount of positive answers referred to knowledge acquired due to the internationalisation of the academic curricula, which reflects a positive trend for the future.

Most of the answers when asked *what the importance of studying in a foreign language in achieving intercultural communication in university is*, were "*we feel better prepared to face any future challenges related to intercultural dialogue*" (35% for economics and 34% for engineering). 83% of the respondents for economics and 80% for engineering agreed that interaction with foreign students can bring more benefits for intercultural dialogue and sensitivity as well as career management and development than interaction with just Romanian students - figure 4.
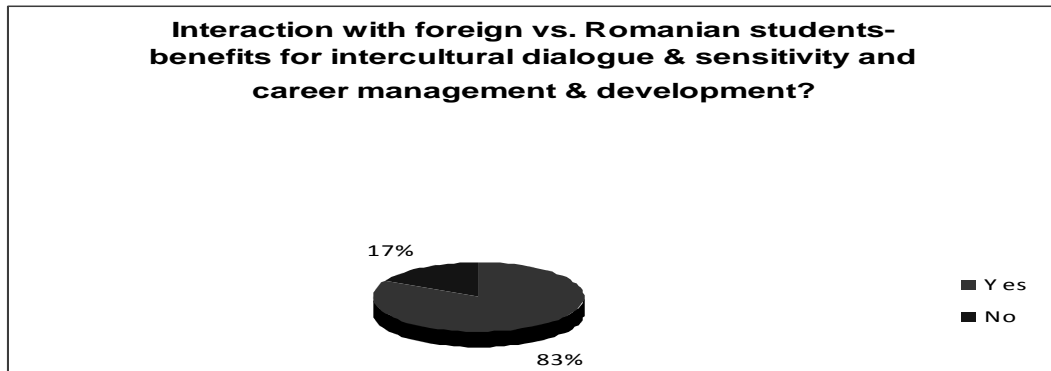
Figure 4: Answers of students from FAB to the question *"Interaction with foreign versus Romanian students benefits for intercultural dialogue and career management and development*?"

The respondents were asked *what should be done to promote recognition, acceptance and stimulation of cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue in their university*.

Their suggestions were: language improvement; intercultural workshops; drama classes; activities for stimulating intercultural dialogue; intercultural events; equal treatment; more programmes for students; programmes with many foreign universities; cultural diversity courses; programmes for cultural sensitivity; international fairs; teamwork; multicultural teams; building connections with people all over the world; sport events; extracurricular activities involving teamwork; transfer of students; international credits; more socialization; more scholarships abroad; mixed teams. The main purpose of the question was to make the transition from dialogue to empowerment and action. Given the answers, we can conclude that the students surveyed are open to intercultural

experiences and their creativity and open-mindedness is stimulated by interactive exposure.

83% of the students in economics and 79% of the students in engineering said they identified differences in attitude, mentality and behaviour at students of other nationalities; 11% said they did not notice any such differences, while 6% remained neutral. Those having identified differences said that these differences consisted in attitude and mentality (57% for economics and 56% for engineering), embodiment of knowledge (15% for economics and 22 % for engineering), objectives (21% for economics and 15% for engineering) and mission (7% for both categories of students). According to the respondents' opinion, *working and studying in a cultural diverse environment* favourable to *KM, creative and innovative management and intercultural dialogue* can lead to: more opportunities to manifest in a creative way (35% for economics and 30% for engineering); using the innovation potential in a more operational way (13% for economics and 22% for engineering); resourceful work outcomes, including career and personal development (52% for economics and 48% for engineering).

When asked on what should students focus more in order to make the best of the intercultural dialogue work in favour of stimulating creative and innovative potential of foreign students, their answers were: displaying an inclusive and supporting behaviour (33% for economics and 29% for engineering), forming diverse teams (23% for economics and 17% for engineering), having an international experience of their own in order to understand cultural diversity (19% for economics and 15% for engineering), asking for their help (11% for economics and 17% for engineering), just being tolerant (9% for economics and 11% for engineering), learning their language (5% for economics and 11% for engineering).

Conclusions

The students were very confident and said that studies in foreign languages like English could contribute to making them *feel better prepared to face any future challenges*. Some suggested that intercultural competences and dialogue could be a means of better adapting to a foreign country, as well as an opportunity to study topics of professional interest in the original language. *The interpersonal aspect* was not ignored either, as many students mentioned *socializing easier* as a plus of studies in foreign languages, while a lot of students remarked that students participating in such studies were *much more open to communication*.

We consider that more work is still needed on various fronts: *first*, making people and universities aware of what they can gain from *lifelong learning, investing in language training* and adopting a strategic approach to *KM based* on *intercultural dialogue* and *competences*. S*econd*, as English is seen more as a

'basic competence' that everyone needs on the labour market, the education sector should encourage students to add it to their portfolio of skills.

Despite the fact that our study is not meant to be a comprehensive one, it is a first step in analyzing such issues in a country like Romania. Moreover, we consider there is still much room for further research in the field of KM, intercultural dialogue*,* intercultural competence, intercultural sensitivity and effectiveness, cultural diversity etc., especially in the context in which Romania has become more open for foreign students and international approaches. Obviously, even this study is going to have a follow-up, as it is part of a research project that is to unfold for another two years.

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