

DIFFICULTIES IN INTEGRATION OF FOREIGN STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION OF PHYSICAL EDUCATION AND SPORT IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

G. VOLCU¹ I. VOLCU¹

Abstract: *The article presents some difficulties in the integration process of foreign students in higher education of physical education and sport in the Republic of Moldova. The integration of foreign students is a complex process, which requires a lot of attitude and involvement in activities on their part. A foreign student is integrated into society when comparable results are obtained with those of the members of the host society. We refer to the field of physical education and sport through obtaining knowledge and interaction with members of the educational institution, as well as identification with its values and principles. The migration of students between different states and regions for studies is an imminent feature of humanity at the current stage, contributing substantially to the exchange of experiences and the formation of personality. However, their integration represents a challenge for the host society, especially in the case of large migration flows. Following the research, we can conclude that the integration of foreign students is a process that takes a long time and requires efforts from both the host society and the foreigners, by optimizing their own efforts.*

Key words: *Difficulties, physical education, integration, student, foreign.*

1. Introduction

The new millennium presents education with a multitude of problems and very few solutions, which requires specialists in the field to approach innovation and an optimistic attitude, so that in the future, the challenges of this period are highlighted and not the threats generated by unsolved problems in the field.

According to some authors [1] the first challenges of higher education have already manifested themselves in the last decades of the last millennium, in the form of the globalization phenomenon. In this context, the "massification of education" occurred, because of the reconsideration of the social function of higher education and the transition from an elite to a mass education.

¹ Moldova State University. The Institute of Physical Education and Sport, *Chisinau*, Republic of Moldova.

Currently, a separate topic in the context of the challenges of the higher education system, including physical education and sport in the Republic of Moldova, is the socio-cultural integration of foreign students.

At the European Union level, immigration and integration are long-debated topics, with the social integration of foreigners in host societies representing the core of public policies in the field of immigration. In this context, the Republic of Moldova is at the beginning of the path [13].

The intensification of migration flows at the international level also has effects for the Republic of Moldova. Known as a country of emigration and transit, it has gradually become a destination country for many foreign citizens, including for studies, and later with the opportunity to live permanently, start families and get a job. The attractiveness of the Republic of Moldova for foreigners is due to its position as a country bordering the EU space, but also to the implementation of measures related to the liberalization of the visa regime and the measures of the RM-EU Association Agreement.

In such conditions, it is necessary to effectively manage migration flows, periodically update regulatory norms in this regard, ensure circular migration, but also change society's vision regarding the immigration of foreigners and their social integration in the Republic of Moldova, depending on the profile of foreigners.

According to the dictionary [4,14], integration means to include, to be incorporated into a whole, and integration is the action of integrating. This action is a long-term one and depends on the length of stay in the host country, age, purpose of migration, etc.

Obviously, if we refer to the integration of foreign students, it is a more specific aspect, because their purpose is primarily to obtain education and this favors the presence of the foreign student in the university environment during their student years. In such conditions, foreign students interact daily with local students, favoring the process of social integration.

The migration of students between different states and regions for studies is an imminent characteristic of humanity at the current stage, contributing substantially to the exchange of experiences and the formation of personality. However, their integration represents a challenge for the host society, especially in the case of large migration flows.

In this context, it is necessary to include in the agenda of institutional policies and strategy the dimension of socio-cultural integration of foreign students within it, including addressing the issue of discrimination and hate-based actions.

The purpose of the research is to study the difficulties in integrating foreign students into higher education in physical education and sport in the Republic of Moldova.

The objectives of the research.

1. Analysis of theoretical approaches regarding the integration of foreign students into higher education in the Republic of Moldova.
2. Establishing the weight of foreign students in the Republic of Moldova.
3. Identifying difficulties in integrating foreign students into higher education of physical education and sport in the Republic of Moldova.

2. Material and Methods

To perform this article, we analyzed some of the difficulties encountered in the process of integrating foreign students into higher education of physical education and sport in the Republic of Moldova.

For this, we used the following research methods: theoretical analysis, statistical-mathematical method, graphic method, survey method, interview, observation.

Data collection was carried out by developing a questionnaire and filling it out by foreign students. Participants were asked to provide an answer for each item. For this, respondents were given general instructions on how to fill out the questionnaire, as well as the use of the data provided by them.

At the same time, an analysis of statistical documents was carried out, such as: Activity reports of the State

University of Physical Education and Sport, currently the Institute of Physical Education and Sport, statistical data on higher education in the Republic of Moldova made public by the National Bureau of Statistics and the Ministry of Education and Research of the Republic of Moldova.

3. Results and Discussion

In the Republic of Moldova, at the beginning of the 2023-2024 academic year, 21 higher education institutions were operating, 3 institutions less than in the 2021-2022 academic year, as a result of the reorganization through merger of public higher education institutions, including 13 public and 8 private institutions. In Chisinau municipality: 17 institutions and 1 unit each in the municipalities of Balti, Comrat, Cahul and Taraclia (Table 1).

Higher education institutions in the Republic of Moldova

Table 1

	2015-2016	2016-2017	2017-2018	2018-2019	2019-2020	2020-2021	2021-2022	2022-2023	2023-2024
Total Institutions	31	30	29	29	27	24	24	21	21
Public institutions	19	19	19	19	18	16	16	13	13
Private institutions	12	11	10	10	9	8	8	8	8

According to an analysis by the Ministry of Education and Research of the Republic of Moldova [6], at the beginning of the 2022-2023 academic year, the total number of students in higher education institutions (in higher education, cycle I, Bachelor's degree) and cycle II, Master's degree, was 56,758 thousand people (excluding foreign students), decreasing

by 2,889 (4.8%) compared to 2021-2022 (Table 2).

The number of foreign students at the beginning of the 2022-2023 academic year amounted to 5.0 thousand people, down 2.7% compared to the previous academic year. The highest shares are noted for foreign students from Romania (44.1%, down 7.5 percentage points compared to the 2021-2022 academic year), Israel

(15.1%, down 4 p. p.), India (16.4%, up 3 p. p.) and Ukraine (14.6%, up 7 p. p.).

Based on data from the National Bureau of Statistics [5], at the beginning of the 2023-2024 academic year, the number of foreign students amounted to 5.2 thousand people, an increase of 4.0% compared to the previous academic year.

The highest shares are noted for students from Romania (51.7%, an increase of 7.6 p.p. compared to the 2022-2023 academic year), Israel (10.3%, a decrease of 4.8 p.p.), India (21.1%, an increase of 4.7 p.p.) and Ukraine (7.5%, a decrease of 7.1 p.p.).

Table 2

Number of students in higher education institutions in the Republic of Moldova

	2015-2016	2016-2017	2017-2018	2018-2019	2019-2020	2020-2021	2021-2022	2022-2023	2023-2024
Total students	81669	74726	65543	60608	56840	59033	59647	56758	56527
In public institutions	66938	62108	55341	50620	47745	49549	50197	47942	47149
In private institutions	14731	12618	10202	9988	9095	9484	9450	8816	9378

From the accumulated data, a decrease of 4.8% in local students and 2.7% in foreign students is observed in the year 2022-2023 compared to 2021-2022 and an increase in the number of foreign students by 4.0% in the next academic year 2023-2024 compared to 2022-2023.

In general, statistics in the field show a significant increase in the share of foreign students. While in 2010 they represented only 1.3% of the total university population, in 2023 this percentage increased to 9.2%. Currently, the number of foreign students enrolled in higher education in the Republic of Moldova has exceeded 5 thousand, most of them coming from Romania, India and Israel.

This phenomenon contributes to the modernization of the educational system in the Republic of Moldova by increasing the financial potential of universities and increasing the qualification of teachers, which allows for the modernization of higher education institutions and better training of future specialists. The increase

in the number of foreign students contributes as much as possible to support the educational system following the migration of young people from the Republic of Moldova to other countries.

In the opinion of V. Calugher [2], the modernization of the educational process is determined by the socio-economic context, the conditions of the labor market in the country, as well as the conditions of the integration of higher education in the Republic of Moldova into the single European space.

Thus, the concerns in the field of development of current higher education are in the center of attention at different levels: from the governing structures to each educational institution in particular. In this context, we mention the research carried out by Muraru E., Gutu V., Dandara O., 2003 [9]; Rusnac Gh., Gutu V., Muraru E., Dandara O., 2003 [12]; Muraru E., Gutu V., Dandara O., 2005 [10], which addresses the issue of standardization as an important factor for increasing the

attractiveness and European and global competitiveness of higher education in our country.

Given this fact, it is necessary to ensure its continued sustainability through a balanced approach from an economic, social and cultural point of view, which can capitalize on the knowledge and other resources it has and attracts at a higher level, generating long periods of efficiency and multidimensional performance, validated by the market and recognized by society.

Higher education in physical education and sport in the Republic of Moldova is organized by the Institute of Physical Education and Sport following Government Decision No. 1080/27.12.2023 On the reorganization of the Public Institution Moldova State University through the merger (absorption) of the Public Institution the State University of Physical Education and Sport [3].

Foreign students who wish to become specialists in the field of physical education and sport also study at this institution.

According to the Activity Report of the State University of Physical Education and Sport (SUPES), in the 2021-2022 academic year [11], 42 students - foreign citizens - studied at SUPES. Countries of origin: Ukraine, Russia, Azerbaijan, Romania, Greece, India, Israel and Canada.

In the academic year 2023-2024, 34 students - foreign citizens - studied at the Faculty of Physical Education and Sport (IEFS). Countries of origin: Ukraine, Romania, Greece, Russia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan.

In the academic year 2024-2025, 13 students - foreign citizens are studying. Countries of origin: Ukraine, Romania, Greece, Russia.

From the accumulated data, a decrease in the number of foreign students in higher

education in physical education in the Republic of Moldova is observed. This occurs because of the graduation of the existing ones and the significant decrease in the number of new enrollees. At the same time, it is worth mentioning that some of them were expelled for failure to fulfill the study plan and non-payment of the contract. This occurred because of the abandonment of the university, which we assume that one of the causes would be the fact that they did not integrate sufficiently into the university environment.

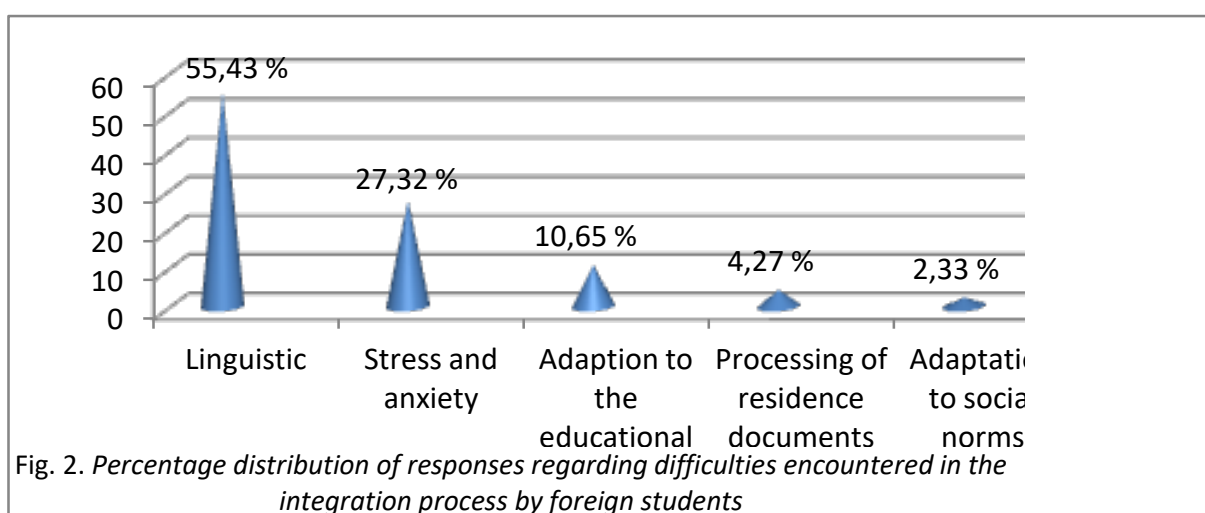
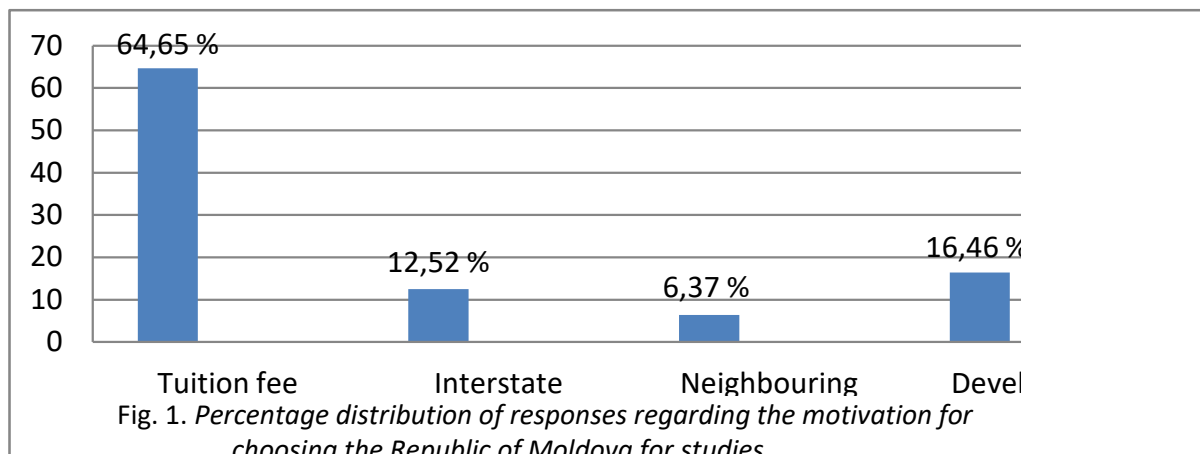
To discover some moments related to their integration into the university environment, we applied a questionnaire in which we obtained the following results:

When asked what the reason was for choosing to be students in the Republic of Moldova, 67.65% said that tuition fees were more affordable, and 32.35 mentioned the existence of agreements between states, which gave them the opportunity to study on a budget (Figure 1).

We note that most foreign students (81.11%) were motivated by the lower tuition fees in the Republic of Moldova, compared to other countries, and the prospect of professional development.

At the same time, when asked what the main difficulties encountered in the integration process are, 55.43% mentioned the linguistic aspect, 27.32% - stress and anxiety, 10.65% - adaptation to the educational system, 4.27% - processing residence documents and 2.33% - adaptation to social norms (Figure 2).

Research [7, 8] indicates that difficulties have a significant impact on the integration of foreign students into university sports activities and can affect the cohesion of participants in competitions and their sense of belonging to academic communication.



It is noted that the main difficulties in the process of integrating foreign students into higher education in physical education and sports in the Republic of Moldova are the language barrier (55.43%), which is obviously one for the majority of foreigners, especially in educational institutions where studies are not offered in an internationally spoken language but only in the local language, although programs are available in Russian.

Given the small number of speakers of other languages, including Russian and English, most courses are held in

Romanian and mixed groups are formed, and it is obvious that this, in addition to the change of environment by the foreigner, contributes to stress and anxiety, as stated by the respondents (27.32%).

Another difficulty mentioned by respondents is the process of adapting to the educational system in the Republic of Moldova (10.65%), which differs from that in the country of origin in terms of teaching-learning-evaluation methods, academic requirements, and the transition to another stage of studies: university.

The desire to be a student in another country also entails the need to complete documents, such as a residence permit, which in the opinion of some respondents (4.27%) is a complicated and long-lasting process, which creates a dose of stress for them.

Cultural differences between countries and regions can make it difficult for foreign students to integrate socially and culturally into the host community. This can manifest itself in difficulties in making friends or adapting to local social norms and traditions.

It is worth mentioning that in the absence of legal documents for staying and studying in the Republic of Moldova, foreign students encounter difficulties in accessing medical services, and this is compounded by the lack of information about the health system and the language barrier.

The confrontation of foreign students with various difficulties and the socio-cultural integration process in general obviously creates stress for them and sometimes anxiety, and psychological support is not always easily accessible.

Reducing these difficulties would be possible by implementing solutions such as:

- Organization of Romanian language courses for foreign students by the institution.
- Organization of English language courses by the institution for teaching staff.
- Providing social and psychological support adapted to their needs.
- Organizing and encouraging foreign students to participate in cultural and sports events with the aim of facilitating the socio-cultural integration process.

4. Conclusions

The integration of foreign students is a process that takes a long time and requires efforts from both the host society and the foreigners, by optimizing their own efforts.

The share of foreign students has increased significantly in the Republic of Moldova, by 7.9% from 2010 to 2023, compared to the total university population. At the current stage, the number of foreign students enrolled in higher education in the Republic of Moldova has exceeded 5 thousand.

The integration of foreign students into higher education in physical education and sport in the Republic of Moldova is a long-term process and is hampered by some difficulties, such as the linguistic aspect (55.43%), stress and anxiety (27.32%), adaptation to the educational system (10.65%), processing residence documents (4.27%) and adaptation to social norms (2.33%).

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