

STUDENTS' ADAPTATION IN MULTICULTURAL ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract: Studying in a foreign country provides an opportunity for total immersion in another language and culture. Learning mobility is one of the fundamental ways in which young people can strengthen their future employability, as well as their intercultural awareness, personal development, creativity and active citizenship. The main problem which hinders the positive influence of mobility lies in the difficult acculturation. The aim of the research is to identify the factors which influence the adaptation process of mobility students.

Keywords: adaptation; multicultural environment; educational mobility

JEL: I23

1. INTRODUCTION

Mobility is a means of promoting employment, reducing poverty, and promoting active European citizenship by improving mutual and intercultural understanding and boosting economic, social and regional cohesion. Educational mobility, also conceived as learning mobility, is an important part of the broader conception of people mobility. It is a transnational mobility for the purpose of acquiring new knowledge, skills and competences. Learning mobility is one of the fundamental ways in which young people can strengthen their future employability, as well as their intercultural awareness, personal development, creativity and active citizenship. Learning mobility can make education and training systems and institutions more open, more European and international, more accessible and more efficient.

Therefore, it is of great importance to overcome the obstacles faced by the students during learning mobility. A number of factors may contribute to keeping many young people from even considering a stay abroad: time pressure, jobs, lack of funding, lack of language skills and intercultural knowledge, as well as a general reluctance to leave "home".

Studying in a foreign country provides an opportunity for total immersion in another language and culture. Foreign language skills and intercultural competences widen an individual's professional options, upgrade the skills of the European workforce and are essential elements of genuine European identity.

The main problem which hinders the positive influence of mobility lies in the difficult acculturation. Acculturation refers to psychological and behavioral changes experienced after sustained contact with members of other cultural groups (Ward & Rana-Deuba,

1999). Research shows that international students studying abroad have reported adjustment problems (Ward & Kennedy, 1994; Swagler & Ellis, 2003; Nilsson & Anderson, 2004; Li & Gasser, 2005). Some problems include loneliness, lack of confidence in foreign language fluency, social contact difficulties and lack of identification with host nationals, and greater role ambiguity in performing work/internship/study duties.

The aim of the research is to identify the factors which influence the adaptation process of mobility students.

2. RESEARCH DESIGN AND SAMPLE DEMOGRAPHICS

The population of the survey was specified as consisting of students from University of Economics – Varna and its partner universities, who had participated or were participating in educational mobility.

The main survey instrument was a questionnaire developed specifically for this research. The Internet was used as a survey distribution media due to the geographic diversity of the respondents. Convenience sampling was used combined with snowball sampling. They are a part of the nonprobability sampling procedures. Only the accessible and cooperative members of the population are expected to respond and further spread the survey. The selection criterion was their participation in educational mobility.

The questionnaire was prepared for online distribution using the software LimeSurvey 2.0 in two language versions – Bulgarian for the outgoing students from Bulgarian universities and English for the incoming students in Bulgaria and both outgoing and incoming students in the partner universities. The sampling frame was formed by a database provided by the university International Relations Office. An invitation for participation in the survey was send to all respondents by email. The partner universities were asked to spread the questionnaire among their mobility students. The project website (<http://mobility.ue-varna.bg/>), social media and interest forums were used as additional distribution channels.

322 respondents participated in the survey.

Table 1 presents the distribution of the respondents by questionnaire language and participation in educational mobility.

Table 1. Number of respondents by questionnaire language and participation in educational mobility

	Bulgarian	English
Have participated in educational mobility	50	189
Haven't participated in educational mobility	28	55

60.7% of the Bulgarian respondents who haven't participated in educational mobility state that they have an intent to do it in the future. The main motives for participation are: meeting new people and visiting new places, the access to a new educational system, the challenge of acquainting oneself with different cultures.

87.3% of the foreign respondents who haven't participated in educational mobility state that they have an intent to do it in the future. The main motives for participation are: the opportunity to learn new things, traveling, new experience, broadening the horizons, acquainting oneself with different cultures, meeting new people, mastering language skills, entertainment, etc. The foreign respondents show a higher willingness to participate in educational mobility. They also present a wider range of motives.

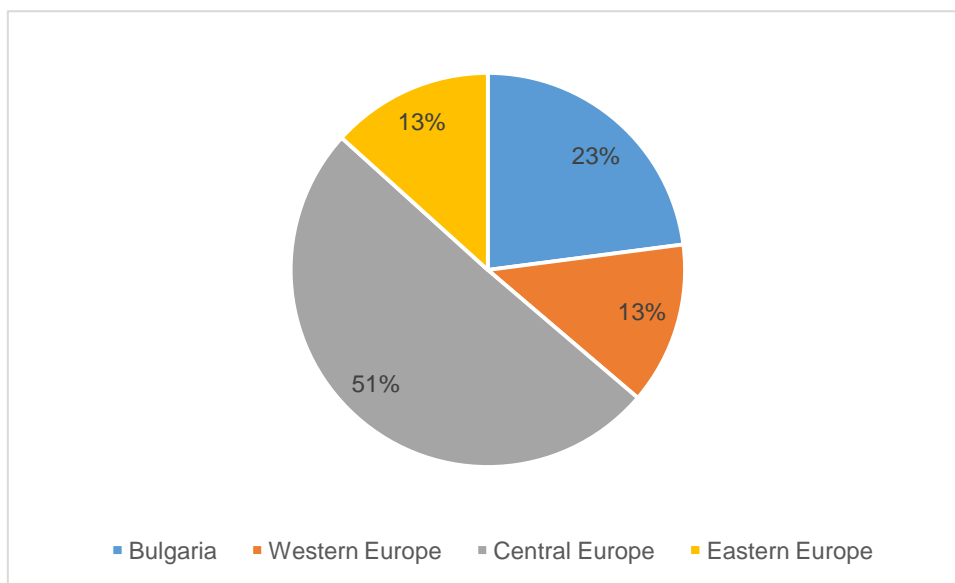
The target group of this research were students who had participated or were participating in educational mobility. This was the reason why we narrowed the results only to the respondents meeting the applied criterion. This means that the final sample consisted of 239 respondents.

Nationality

More than 20 nationalities were included in the selected sample.

The respondents from Poland, Bulgaria, Germany, Estonia, the Czech Republic and Turkey represent the largest shares. Figure 1 presents the general distribution of the respondents by nationality.

Figure 1. Respondents' distribution by countries and regions



The distribution shown in Figure 1 affected the variety of criteria used for answering the survey questions.

This is the reason why the sample was divided into two subgroups – Bulgarian students and foreign students. The underlying cause of this decision was the difference in the sociocultural specifics and the standard of living between Bulgaria and the other countries.

A factor with similar degree of influence is the host country of the educational mobility.

The Bulgarian students had participated in educational mobility in 19 countries. The main host countries were Germany, Poland, Portugal, and Slovenia.

The characteristics of the distribution were not suitable for any conclusion for possible differences in the adaptation process based on the specifics of the host country.

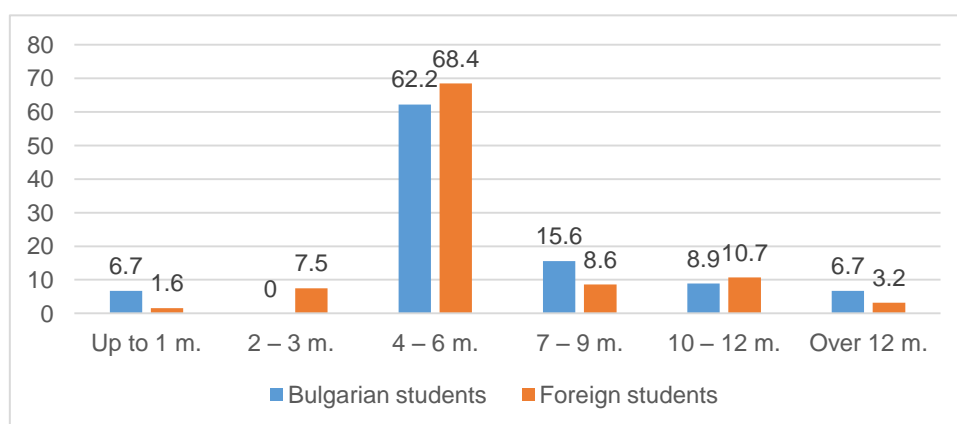
The foreign students also study in a wide variety of host countries.

This wide dispersion hinders any statistical tests on the significance of the differences in the adaptation process based on the home or host country. Such analysis may be a subject of a future research.

Number of visits and length of stay in the host country

Time is an important factor influencing the productivity of the adaptation process. The longer you stay in a foreign country, the better you become acquainted with the new environment and this helps you understand overcome the cultural differences.

Figure 2. Respondents' distribution by length of stay in the host country (%)

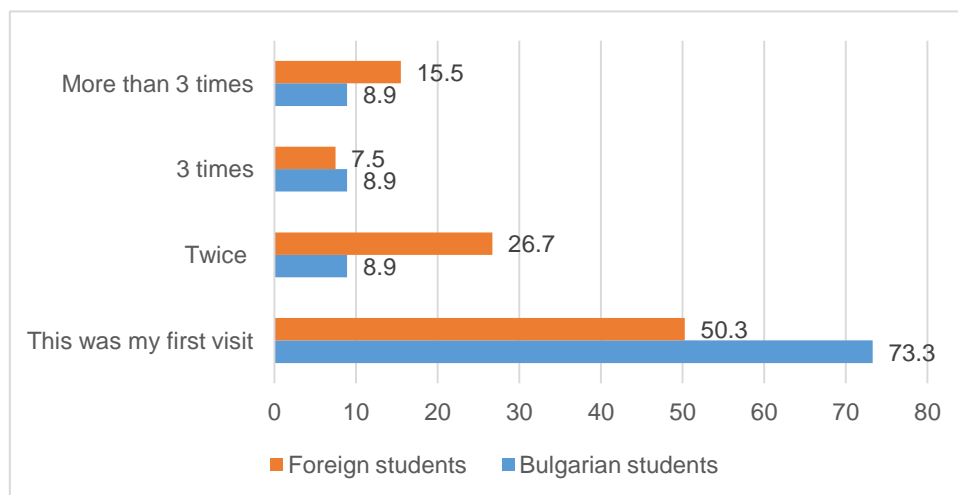


Most of the students had studied abroad for two semesters – 62.2% of the Bulgarian students and 68.4% of the foreign students (Figure 2).

The distributions of the both groups were structurally similar. The other segments were almost insignificant in numbers and this is the reason why it is hard to justify the exact influence of this factor on the level of cultural adaptation.

There was a difference regarding the number of visits to the host country. Most of the student came for the first time – Bulgarians – 73%, foreign students – 50% (Figure 3). The larger part of this difference merged into the respondents who had visited the host country at least once before their last educational mobility. This can be explained with the higher level of mobility among the foreigners as well as their larger resources for travelling. Their choice of the same country suggests a successful adaptation and indicates their willingness to go back to a well-acquainted environment.

Figure 3. Respondents' distribution by number of visits in the host country (%)



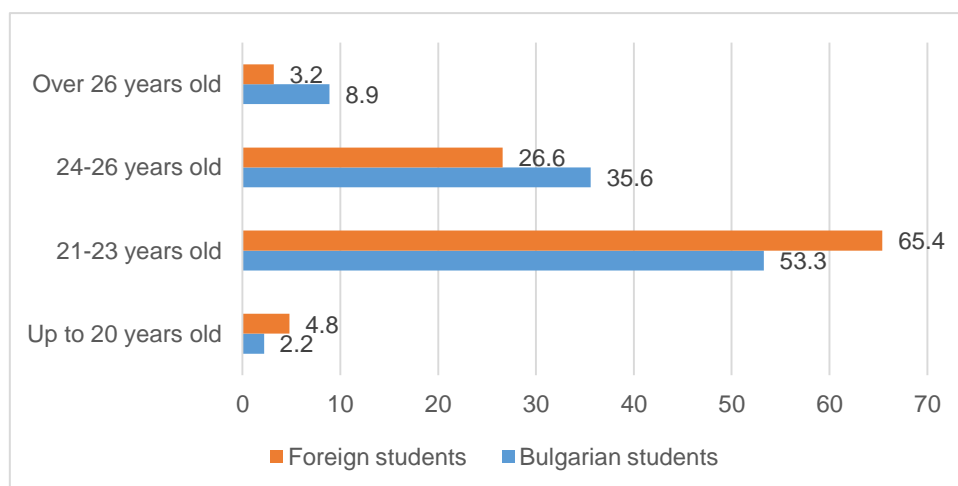
The data in Figure 3 shows significant differences between the two groups. There are reasons for looking for a connection between this factor and the level of adaptation, the severity of the cultural obstacles and the response to the educational process in the host country.

Gender and age

The majority of the respondents are females – 79.5% of the Bulgarian students and 75.1% of the foreign students. The smaller representativeness of the male respondents may influence the survey results to a certain extent.

Figure 4 illustrates the age structure of the two groups of respondents.

Figure 4. Respondents' distribution by age (%)



The average age of the Bulgarian students is higher than of the foreign students. This fact indicates a later orientation towards educational mobility for the first group. On one hand, such later decision derives from the lack of sufficient financial means. On the other hand, factors which influence this kind of decisions are the available information, the

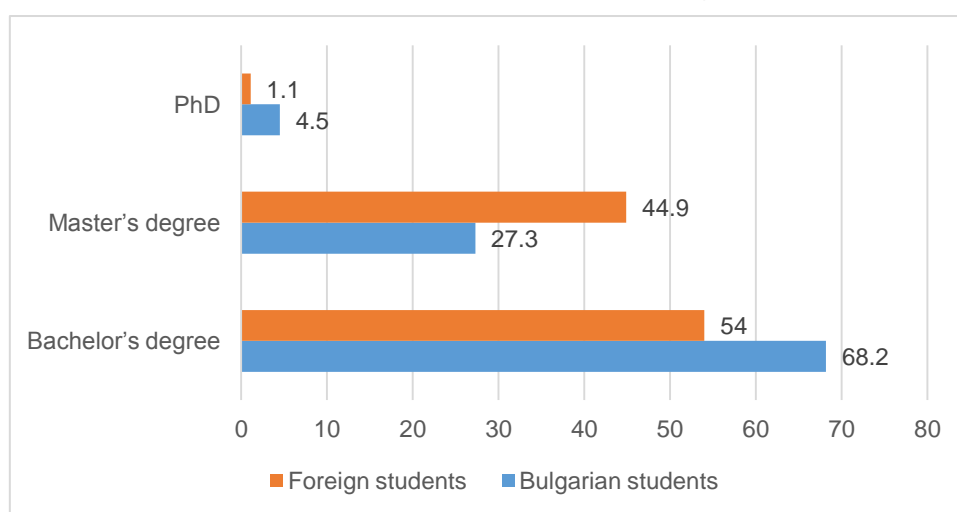
application procedures, the expected obstacles and advantages and the confidence in the ability to overcome all the challenges.

The stated difference may be better represented by proportion indices (indicates the proportion between the respondents of age of up to and over 24 years): 0.679 for the Bulgarian students; 0.425 for the foreign students.

Education

The education degree adds to the information about the respondents' profile (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Respondents' distribution by educational degree (%)

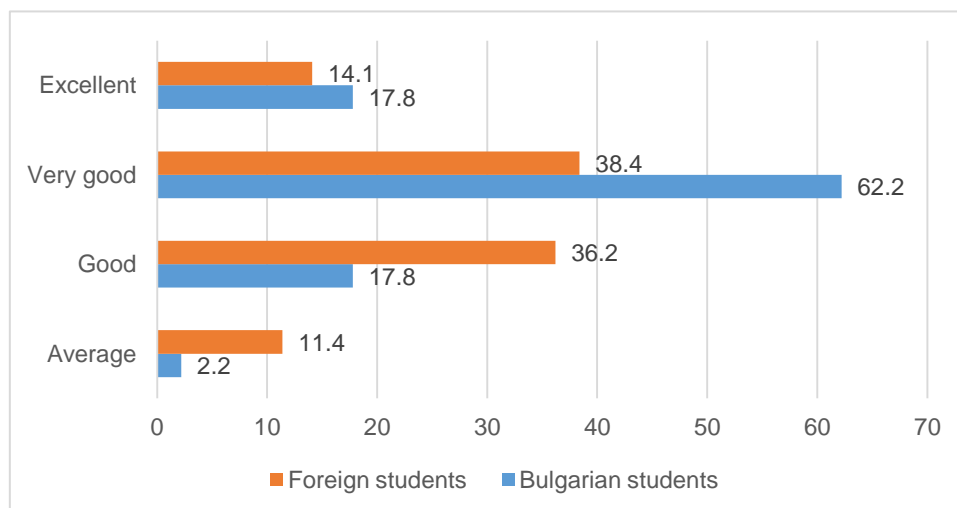


The share of Master's degree students among the foreign students is larger than among the Bulgarian students. The educational mobility still is not very popular among the Bulgarian graduates. Looking back to the age distribution leads us to the conclusion that the Bulgarian students participate in educational mobility in their last two undergraduate years. As can be seen from Figure 5, there was a more even distribution between the two degrees among the foreign students.

The conclusion that can be drawn from these facts is that the higher social experience of the Bulgarian students (associated with ageing) is compensated by the higher educational experience of the foreign students. This could be an explanation for the similar tendencies in the adaptation process of the two groups.

There is a noticeable difference in the level of academic performance between the two groups (Figure 6). The majority of the Bulgarian students has either excellent, or very good performance (80%). This corresponds to the profile of the educational mobility candidates as well as to the selection criteria.

Figure 6. Respondents' distribution by academic performance (%)



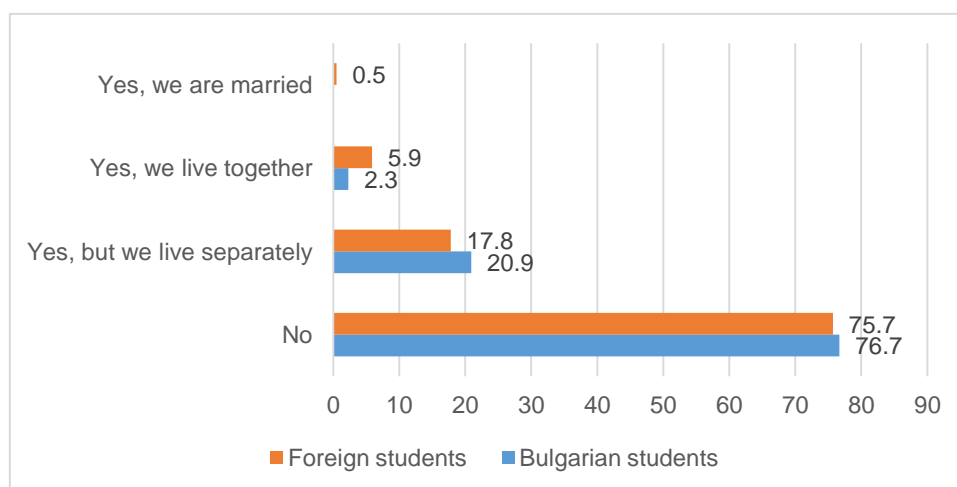
This difference is confirmed by the higher performance index of the Bulgarian students – 4.000 (the index of the foreign students is 1.105 – almost equal distribution between the higher and the lower groups). This may be influenced by the difference in the assessments standards of the educational systems in the researched countries.

Relationships

A small number of the respondents expressed that they had any relatives in the host country – 16.3% of the Bulgarian students and 8.7% of the foreign students. Nevertheless, we can conclude that the Bulgarians are more eager to go on educational mobility in countries where they can rely on some help from relatives. Such support may ease the adaptation process, but due to its small share we are not able to test its significance.

The presence of an emotional relationship adds to the information about the respondents' profile (Figure 7).

Figure 7. A committed relationship in the home country (%)



The data shows that the majority of the respondents didn't have a committed relationship in their home country. This fact may play the role of a premise for facilitating the adaptation process. The participation in an educational mobility results in an absence from the home country which makes having a committed relationship difficult. Leaving a beloved person at home intensifies the nostalgic processes and hinders the adaptation in the new environment.

Conclusions

- The majority of the respondents are from Central Europe.
- Most of the students had studied abroad for two semesters.
- Most of the Bulgarian students had come for the first time to the host country (73%), while half of the foreign students had visited the host country more than once.
- Women form the majority of the respondents in the both groups.
- The average age of the Bulgarian students is higher than of the foreign students.
- The share of Master's degree students among the foreign students is larger than among the Bulgarian students.
- There is a noticeable difference in the level of academic performance between the two groups – the majority of the Bulgarian students has either excellent, or very good performance (80%), which higher than the foreign students.
- Due to the small share of students with relatives in the host country we are not able to test the significance of this factor.
- The majority of the respondents didn't have a committed relationship in their home country, which may play the role of a premise for facilitating the adaptation process.

3. DISCUSSION OF THE RESEARCH FINDINGS

Motives

The motives for participation in educational mobility shape the will for overcoming the obstacles during the adaptation process.

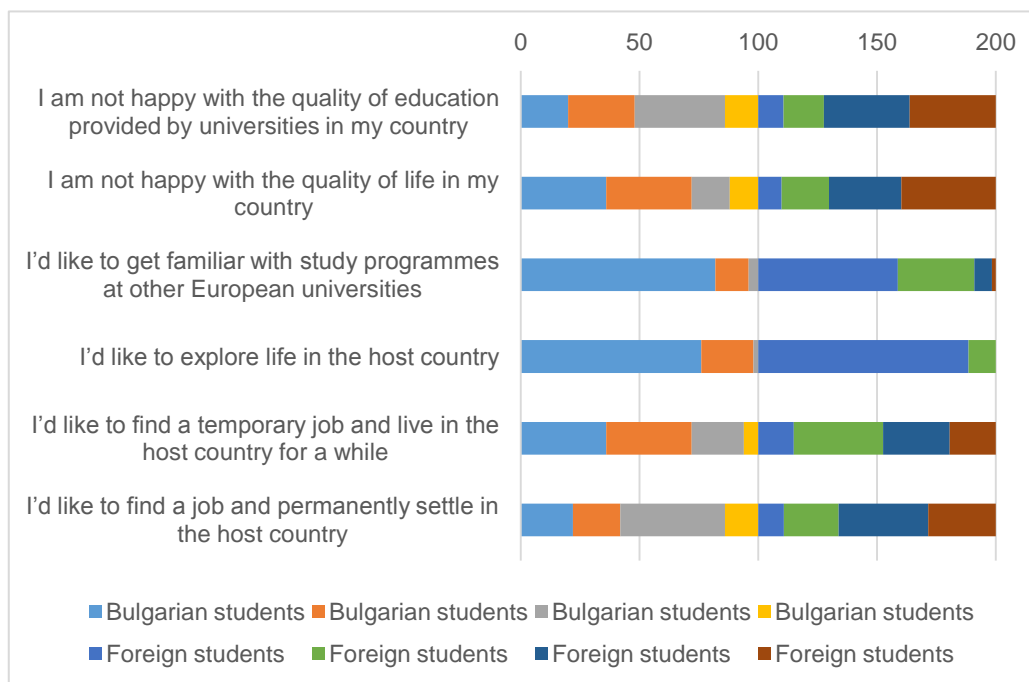
The structure of the motives is illustrated in Figure 8. The predominate motives for both groups are the cognitive ones – getting familiar with the lifestyle, organization and education in the host country.

From Figure 8 it can be seen that the Bulgarian students stress the importance of two interconnected motives – lack of satisfaction with the quality of life in the home country and finding a temporary or permanent job in the host country. The difference in the perception of the quality of life in the home country is eminent for the Bulgarian students. This fact modifies the way they perceive the economic, social and organizational characteristics of the new environment.

The Bulgarian students show a lower rate of satisfaction with the quality of education provided by universities in Bulgaria. This attitude results in a stronger motive for getting familiar with study programs at other European universities.

The above motives are salient for the foreign students.

Figure 8. Motives for participation in educational mobility



These differences are confirmed by the indices of motive's importance shown in table 2.

Table 2. Motive's importance indices

Motives	Bulgarian students	Foreign students
I am not happy with the quality of education provided by universities in my country	- 0,004	-0,448
I am not happy with the quality of life in my country	0,440	- 0,405
I'd like to get familiar with study programs at other European universities	0,920	0,820
I'd like to explore life in the host country	0,960	1,000
I'd like to find a temporary job and live in the host country for a while	0,440	0,053
I'd like to find a job and permanently settle in the host country	- 0,160	- 0,322

The main motives are the cognitive without significant differences between the two groups. However, the rest of the motives are not equally important to the Bulgarian and the foreign students. The highest difference is observed in the satisfaction with the quality of life in the home country and the willingness to find a job in the host country.

The higher degree of emigrational motives of the Bulgarian students influences their adaptation strategy and their intentions after the educational period.

Conclusions

- The predominate motives for both groups are the cognitive ones – getting familiar with the lifestyle, organization and education in the host country.

- The highest difference is observed in the satisfaction with the quality of life in the home country and the willingness to find a job in the host country – predominate motives for the Bulgarian students.
- The Bulgarian students are more eager to stay and work abroad.
- For the Bulgarian students the dissatisfaction with the quality of life and the educational system in the home country are a precondition for the development of an adaptation strategy which aims at an integration to the new environment with intent to settle down there.
- The Bulgarian students use mainly a common language for communication and have a small advantage in using the host country language. This helps them overcome the language difficulties in the communication with host country citizens.
- Most of the respondents in the two groups conducted an independent research on the necessary information.
- The educational institutions neglect the organized preliminary preparation of the students as a significant factor, which fosters the cultural adaptation.

Personal adaptiveness

In case of lack of differences in the personal attachment to the environment, the personal traits become a leading factor determining the speed and the results of the adaptation process. Our research includes a personal traits test. The latter are selected based on their influence on the adaptation process.

Table 3 summarizes the indices of the personal traits according to the Bulgarian and the foreign students (we use a 4-point scale – not at all, rather not, to some extent, completely, for the evaluation of the presented statements).

Table 3. Indices for assessment of the adaptive abilities

Personal traits	Bulgarian students (BS)	Foreign students (FS)	Comparison
I set high goals	0,960	0,820	BS
I often blame myself for something I have done (sometimes without a reason)	0,440	0,480	FS
I establish warm and cordial relations with people around me	0,960	0,820	BS
I think of myself as a responsible and reliable person	0,920	0,871	BS
As a whole, I accept the rules I have to respect	0,960	0,852	BS
I manage to control myself and my own actions, self-control is not a problem for me	0,920	0,810	BS
In general, I like people	0,880	0,799	BS
I am not shy about expressing my feelings in public	0,360	0,287	BS
I am good at finding common ground with people around me	0,780	0,736	BS
Deep down, I am an upbeat person, I believe in the future	0,720	0,778	FS
Most people who know me treat me well and they love me	0,920	0,905	BS

Personal traits	Bulgarian students (BS)	Foreign students (FS)	Comparison
I am physically attractive	0,123	0,742	FS
When I take a decision, I stick to it	0,840	0,800	BS
I am very happy as a whole	0,004	0,787	FS
I am sensible and calm	0,480	0,585	FS
I am often impatient, overexcited and I get overwhelmed with my desires	0,440	0,079	BS
I believe that reason should rule, not feelings. We need to think before we act	0,600	0,534	BS
I do not judge people, I accept them the way they are	0,600	0,532	BS
I see myself as an interesting person, remarkable and attractive as a personality	0,920	0,798	BS
I am not indifferent to success and praise. I aspire to the top	0,680	0,670	BS
I am pro-active, energetic and full of ideas	0,840	0,786	BS
As a whole, I treat myself well	0,880	0,800	BS
I am happy with myself	0,600	0,714	FS
I see myself as an agreeable person who gets on well with people	0,920	0,809	BS
I believe people like me for whom I am, not for the way I look	0,920	0,809	BS
Most of times I take it easy with nothing to worry about	0,160	0,284	FS
I believe I change and grow as a person. My attitude to the world is changing too	1,000	0,958	BS
I am doing my best to count on me only and I do not look for help	0,960	0,564	BS
I stand out among others	0,760	0,437	BS
I see myself as an interesting person, remarkable and attractive as a personality	0,720	0,596	BS
I am not indifferent to success and praise. I aspire to the top	0,680	0,617	BS
I am pro-active, energetic and full of ideas	0,800	0,862	FS

Conclusions

- The data indicate a high degree of adaptive potential for all of the traits. Lower rates are observed for anxiety and expression of feelings.
- The Bulgarian students tend to count on themselves and do not seek help, which may hinder the adaptation process, which is based on communication and collaboration.
- The Bulgarian students as a whole show more explicit opinions (74% of the cases).
- There is no significant difference in the opinions structure between the two groups. The exceptions are the values for attractiveness and happiness.

Adaptation obstacles

The successful adaptation to the new environment requires the overcoming of many obstacles. This process includes a lot of new information, orientation in the new forms of

organization of the social life, overcoming of different stereotypes, modifying unsuitable behavior models and so on.

We examine two main areas of obstacles – way of life and educational process.

The way of life is divided into three factors – accommodation, cultivating a taste for the local food and living expenses.

The other group of adaptation obstacles involves the educational process. Getting used to the organizational specifics of the new university, teaching methods, lecturers, workload and the new peers takes time. The language barriers may slow down this process.

This can be seen from Table 4 which presents the indices of the significance of the adaptation obstacles (we use a 4-point scale – no, rather not, rather yes, yes, for stating if there are any difficulties in the presented situations).

Table 4. Indices of the significance of the adaptation obstacles

Adaptation obstacles	Bulgarian students (BS)	Foreign students (FS)	Comparison
Everyday life issues concerning accommodation, students residence and renting	-0,583	0,463	BS
Cultivating a taste for the local food	-0,542	-0,598	FS
Living expenses	0,000	-0,033	BS
Getting my way around lecture rooms and administration offices at the university	-0,708	-0,595	BS
Access to technical equipment, academic literature, reading rooms	-0,791	-0,598	BS
Understanding professors' lectures in class	-0,499	-0,642	FS
Note taking at lectures	-0,625	-0,650	FS
Intensive academic workload	-0,708	-0,468	BS
Getting along with my new peers at university	-0,376	-0,396	FS
Overcoming language barriers	-0,417	-0,512	FS
Completion of assignments	-0,542	-0,598	FS

Conclusions

- The majority of the respondents perceive these obstacles as insignificant and easy to overcome.
- The most challenging areas are the living expenses, getting along with the new peers, the language barriers, and the accommodation (only for the foreign students).
- Structural differences are present in the accommodation, living expenses, and the intensive academic workload.
- Both groups have similar advantages in the assessment of the problems.

Institutional and social support. Individual efforts

The educational mobility's goals are accomplished through institutional, social and individual efforts.

The institutions set the rules and provide the necessary conditions for the organization of the financial, educational, living and informational processes.

In the current research we examine only some of the institutional function – providing preliminary information and support by the host university admin workers in charge of international students and the professors.

The social support is based on the human relations (family, friends and colleagues).

The individual efforts are important means in managing critical situations in a completely new and often unknown environment.

Table 5 summarizes the comparison of the significance of the factors for overcoming of the adaptation obstacles (we use a 4-point scale – no, rather not, rather yes, yes, for stating which factors contributed the most for overcoming the adaptation obstacles).

Table 5. Indices for assessment of the significance of the factors for overcoming of the adaptation obstacles

Factors for overcoming of the adaptation obstacles	Bulgarian students (BS)	Foreign students (FS)	Comparison
Preliminary information on new life and education in the host country	0,290	0,438	FS
Excellent language fluency	-0,125	0,405	FS
Previous experience in communication with people from the host country	-0,208	-0,059	FS
Host university admin workers in charge of international students	0,501	0,320	BS
Professors at the host university	0,404	0,294	BS
Students from the new student group	0,458	0,396	BS
Students or friends from my country who study and work in the same city in the host country	- 0,084	0,119	FS
Relatives who live in the host country	- 0,702	-0,750	BS
My personal qualities and my communication skills	0,833	0,762	BS
My commitment to overcome obstacles	0,874	0,729	BS

Conclusions

- The highest significance has the personal qualities and the communication skills as well as the commitment to overcome obstacles.
- The foreign students rate the preliminary information on new life and education in the host country, the language fluency, and the previous experience in communication with people from the host country higher.
- The Bulgarian students consider the following factors more important – support from host university admin workers, professors and students, and personal qualities and commitment.
- The most significant differences are in importance of language fluency, preliminary information and university support.

Level of adaptation to the educational process

The interaction of different factors and the adaptation process create a specific style for participation of the incoming students in the educational process. The main characteristics of this style are:

- Forms of participation (activity – passiveness; confidence – uncertainty; initiative – cautious and so on).
- Student group role (leader – passive member; caution – openness; formality – informality and so on);
- Relations with the professors (proactive – passive).

Tables 6 and 7 summarize the comparison of the positive and negative aspects of the adaptation to the educational process (we use a 4-point scale – no, rather not, rather yes, yes, for the assessment of the presented situations).

Table 6. Assessment indices of the positive adaptation aspects

Positive forms of adaptation	Bulgarian students (BS)	Foreign students (FS)	Comparison
I am often proactive and I take the initiative in the student group	0,282	0,143	BS
My peers express interest in me and they want to communicate with me	0,500	0,539	FS
I can influence my peers' opinions to pursue my interests	0,083	0,230	FS
I feel comfortable in the group, I accept and respect its norms and rules	0,833	0,735	BS
In all classes I feel assured and calm	0,522	0,549	FS
I am able to use my competences and express fully my individuality in the learning process	0,417	0,638	FS
I am good at all subjects and I do my assignments on time	0,834	0,726	BS
I am not afraid of expressing my own opinion in class	0,624	0,202	BS

Table 7. Assessment indices of the negative adaptation aspects

Negative forms of adaptation	Bulgarian students (BS)	Foreign students (FS)	Comparison
I don't get involved. I am reserved in my relations with my peers	-0,458	-0,304	BS
I find it difficult to communicate and find common ground with my peers	-0,751	-0,506	BS
My peers are cautious and they rarely communicate with me	-0,833	-0,749	BS
I am shy about requesting my peers' help	-0,667	-0,481	BS
I find it difficult to express my ideas in class	-0,446	-0,324	BS
I find most subjects complicated and I learn with difficulty	-0,792	-0,771	BS
I find it difficult to ask questions and ask professors for help	-0,666	-0,428	BS
I need help in most subjects and I require extra time with professors	-0,750	-0,913	FS

Conclusions

- The comparison of the values for the positive aspects is in favor of the foreign students. There are more active, influential and able to use their competences and express fully their individuality in the learning process.

- The Bulgarian students feel more comfortable in the group and are more confident in their abilities in the different subjects and assignments.
- Rather small part of all respondents declares to have experienced some of the negative aspects of the educational adaptation.
- The indicators for gaining a leadership position in the group are relatively lower than the rest. Leadership could foster the adaptation process but is not an obligatory quality.

4. SUGGESTIONS

The mobility students may be divided into two groups – incoming (the foreign students) and outgoing (the home country students). Therefore, the university has two roles – as a receiving and as a sending institution. Both roles are challenged by different problems concerning the students' adaptation process. This is the reason why we group our suggestions into two sets of measures.

Suggestions regarding the adaptation process of the incoming students

- Preparation of a detailed guidebook, published online. The guidebook should be sent by email to each approved international student.
- Conducting a preliminary survey on the expectations of the incoming students.
- Organization of the student welcoming and accommodation.
- Orientation days for the university, the city and the cultural specifics of the country.
- Providing an adviser and counselor for the student.
- Inclusion of the student into the group of the other incoming students, as well as into groups of local students – participation in classes, lectures, extracurricular activities, cultural and sport activities.
- Organization of the departure of the student.
- Conducting a survey on the satisfaction of the students with their educational mobility at the host institution.

Suggestions regarding the adaptation process of the outgoing students

- Preparation of a detailed guidebook, published online. The guidebook should be sent by email to each approved international student.
- Language courses for different host countries.
- Organization of meetings with students who have participated in educational mobility.
- Organization of meetings with people from the host country (selection from the international students).
- Culture awareness courses.
- Conducting a preliminary survey on the expectations of the incoming students.

- Organization of the departure of the student.
- Providing an adviser who will be available for online consultations.
- Conducting a survey on the satisfaction of the students with their educational mobility at the host institution.

In addition to these suggestions we stress the importance of the academic staff mobility which could be a way to overcome the disparities in the teaching methods and the quality of education.

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