

## AN EXPLORATION OF ARAB STUDENTS OPINIONS ON HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM IN ROMANIA

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**Abstract:** The article analyzes how the Arab students adapts to the education system and daily life in Romania. First it shows the attraction of Romanian schools for Arab students to attend graduate, masters and PhD studies. Then identified some Romanian cultural particularities and how they consider be. Based on the responses to a questionnaire identifies Arab students opinion about how they are received by the Romanian colleagues, and by society in general. Likewise identified Romanian students opinion about their fellow Arabs. At the end of the paper, shows some changes that have been made in teaching to ensure the performance of all students, including those Arabs.

**Keywords:** education abroad, technical education, cultural adaptations.

### INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, Higher Education in Romania has a world-wide reputation as a centre of excellence in learning, teaching and practice. Romanian Universities and Colleges have been receiving thousands and thousands of students from all over the world, especially from developing countries. Today most all Romanian Universities are partners with thousands of well known Universities in all over the world. And Romania has become one of countries offering state-of-the-art facilities and cutting-edge research opportunities together with the chance to walk in the footsteps of so many of the world's most influential thinkers.

Higher education institutions in Romania began to provide education services based on promoting international cooperation between universities in order to respond to the requests coming from different industries. In these conditions appeared a large number of educational offerings for students from different countries.

The Romanian education was popular among the foreign students, especially after World War II. Before this, between 1850 and 1914 many Romanian students have studied in other European countries and afterwards they have contributed in building up the Romanian education system, Romanian industry and culture. Today, when Romania is part of the European Union, it can be noticed an increased mobility among youngsters that decide to go abroad for studies in European universities or in USA.

The purpose of this article is to identify key aspects that represent an attraction for foreign students to come to study in Romania, especially Arabic students. To identify these attractive factors we have started our analysis beginning with a range of studies met to underline the cultural particularities of the Romanian people.

### ROMANIAN EDUCATION ATTRACTION

The Romanian higher education system comprised 48 public universities and 56 private universities. These universities included 536 faculties with a total number of 620,529 students enrolled. Mention should be made that the data available do not allow for the identification of the accurate number of individuals enrolled in the Romanian universities, either public or private.

In 2014, 12.000 foreign students were registered in Romania and in 2015 their number reached 21.000. Most of them are coming from other European countries, especially from France but 6100 foreign students are from non-European countries. The number of foreign students registered for a bachelor degree is around 19.000, for a master degree have registered around 1000 foreign students and for Ph.D around 1000. Foreign students have arrived also from Arabic countries, for example from Tunisia have registered around 1500 and from Maroc around 900.

The application file must be sent to Romania by 15th of September (for undergraduate and graduate studies), but there is no deadline for PhD applicants. International students have to prove good knowledge of the teaching language (English, French or German). For the students who do not meet this criterion there are specialized departments where they can improve their language skills.

It is commonly believed that foreign students decide to attend the Romanian universities due the high quality of the education. There are also opinions that state the fact that Romanian universities represent an attraction due to lower tuition fees in comparison with other European countries and also due to the low cost of living. Researches have demonstrated that foreign students have chosen Romania to complete their education because the living costs in Romania are low even though the trend is heading towards the European Union level, also universities' tuition fees are smaller compared to other European countries (3200 USD or 2300 Euros per year), there is also the possibility of getting hired in a multinational company at a wage similar with the ones in European Union, in addition to this the Romanian Government offers study scholarships to talented. The average annual budget for studying in Romania is: €5500 (€4700 - living expenses, €300 for Books, €500 for Holidays/travel in Romania).

The majority of the foreign students have enrolled in the medical university but also they have enrolled in other universities as well. For example, the Polytechnic University of Bucharest has around 27.000 students, 800 out of 27.000 are foreign students enrolled for a bachelor, master and Ph.D degree. 700 students out of 800 foreign students that the University has are from Arabic countries and Turkey.

Polytechnic University of Bucharest is the oldest and most prestigious engineering school in Romania, with a tradition accumulated over 190 years of existence through the efforts of some of the greatest teachers of our nation, defines its uniqueness by creating knowledge through research and by technological innovation and its implementation through education and vocational training at European level. University Politehnica boasts many years of academic excellence. A rich academic heritage is based around many landmarks in human knowledge, and today's this higher education institution benefit from this lasting legacy.

The studies in University POLITEHNICA of Bucharest can be done in international languages at the following in different faculties. For bachelor studying electronics and telecommunications engineering (in English, French, Germany), computers and information technology (in English, French), applied electronics (in Germany), mechanical engineering (in English, French, Germany), chemistry and engineering of organic chemicals, petroleum and coal chemistry (in English, French), materials engineering-materials science (in English, French), economical engineering for electrical, electronics and power engineering fields (in Germany), economical engineering for mechanical field (in Germany), air navigation (in English).

For master studying business management in (English), biomedical informatics (in English), automatic translation technology (in French), business administration of industrial systems (in Germany), engineering and management of industrial systems (in French), software engineering (in English), mechatronics and bionics technique and organization (in Germany), management digital enterprise (in English), artificial intelligence (in English), advanced microelectronics (in English).

Another factor of attraction is the certification programs in universities. The qualifications of Higher education must be internationally recognized. Transferable qualifications aid mobility, making it easier for students to further study or to transfer achieved credits to other higher education institution or to move from studying to launching a career elsewhere. In order to facilitate and ensure that the quality and transferability of higher education qualifications mean something and are recognized all over the world, Politehnica University developed and apply a number of instruments, among which: European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), The Diploma Supplement (DS), The European Quality Charter for Mobility, The European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF), The ENIC Network (European Network of Information Centre on academic recognition and mobility), The NARIC Network (National Academic Recognition Information Centre).

### **THE CULTURAL PARTICULARITIES**

Even though all the aspects mentioned above are true, from different discussions with foreign and Romanian students resulted that the Romanian people demonstrated kindness towards the foreign students that have arrived in Romania for studies.

Now Romanians are adapting to the European culture, but some cultural aspects have been formed over time and can not be ignored. It has been studied in the last 150 years folklore, traditions, customs, mores, popular literature, classical literature, art, film, religion, nature, architecture and through this cultural particularities were identified. The opinions are quite divergent, but in general any Romanian believes that the peasants, which until 50 years ago used to represent the majority in the country, should be welcoming, tolerant, humane.

It is true that different races have contributed to the Romanian people, some in a higher proportion such as Dacians, Romans and Slavs and others in a smaller like Turkish peoples. For example (quote from Stănescu 2006), D. Drăghicescu (1907) in a classic book believes that the Scythians would have transmitted a strong will, a sharp mind, lively, an opening towards relationships, on the other hand they have also transmitted a some kind of guile, hypocrisy, duplicity. From Thracian it has been inherited the sober character and some sort of guile and even the tendency to deceive. The Romans would have transmitted the forbearance, strong-willed character and sometimes choleric temperament. Slavs contributed with a sense of sociability, an exuberant enthusiasm, belief in superstitions. From the Turkish people it is believed to have acquired a certain carelessness, belief in destiny, in faith and luck and the lack of confidence in ourselves. From the experience of being in contact with the great empires that used to be right across the border, Draghicescu also distinguishes the passivity, the resignation, the lack of offensive power and defensive resistance practice. From these key cultural particularities would results the heterogeneity of the Romanian people ethos.

As shown in the literature (Stănescu 2006), great Romanian philosopher, Lucian Blaga believes that the geographical place has influenced the Romanians' body and soul. The great French geographer Em. de Marton noted that Romania's geography is an almost ideal space. Being sedentary and taking care of agriculture to survive, the Romanians knew that time passes after a certain cyclical. Other scholars such as C. Radulescu-Motru said that Romanian history thought them to resist over time and to behave sometimes collectively and sometimes individually to hide their existence. The great historian Vasile Parvan speaks about fatalism, melancholy, levity into action and about a shell where the soul retreats. The philosopher Constantin Noica noticed a serenity and a fear of change, a shepherd cosmic solitude. The writer Mircea Eliade noted that Romanians being surrounded by great empires have adapted, although they are neither pessimistic, nor passive, nor resigned. Mihail Ralea believed that Romanians are essentially good, with no memory of the evil, not infatuation and exhibit passive adaptability resulting from the East passivity. Other scientists have noted a tolerant and open character, no religious wars, maybe some soul atheism although it is not declared and that the Christianity has profoundly influenced their lives. Romanians were too weary to deal too much with spirituality until the Middle Ages and they have witnessed a lot in their long history.

We believe that these divergent characteristics belong to people of every nation and not to an entire people. The historian Lucian Boia (1997) noted that one can say anything about he Romanians and about others as well as the ethnic psychology is inconsistent as it has no scientific grounds. However there is an eastern component in the Romanian culture. In conducted research, we've tried mostly to identify how foreign students are being accepted among the Romanian students.

Taking as a reference the G. Hofstede's theory (Hofstede 1995), in Romania studies have been conducted to determine the cultural particularities. Culture is the "structures of thought and action mentality widespread in the environment " (Kelly 2004). These aspects have been formed over time depending on various factors: economic, political, social, geographical, demographic. The business culture lead to a collective mentality, whereby a group of people is different from another group of people. Different business cultures differ (Hofstede 1995) based on five criteria:

*Distance towards power:* shows the existing inequality. When the distance is small, the subordinate dependence towards the leader is small. Having a big distance requires obedience, if the distance is small people consider themselves equal and organizations are becoming decentralized.

*The degree of individualism:* individualism allows for personal freedom, personal achievements. Collectivism emphasizes group that protects the person in exchange for loyalty. In collectivist societies man lives through collective society, in the individualistic organizations human involvement is small, more important is to satisfy their needs

*The degree of masculinity:* masculine societies seek performance, feminine societies seek prosperity. Masculinity is characterized by earnings, recognition, advancement, promotion; feminism by means of cooperation and security. In masculine societies enterprises, managers are aggressive, disagreements are high. In the feminine societies the predominant style is the democratic one where the role of managers is moderate.

*The uncertainty level:* the need expressed by predetermined rules. Without them we encounter stress, anxiety, irritation. In tolerant societies towards uncertainty the plans are developed on short term, in intolerant societies every action is carefully planned.

*Time management:* businesses could be targeted in the long term, when promotes perseverance, thrift, savings, or short-term when it is encouraging the initiative.

The Trampenaars model (1997) identifies the following characteristics of culture: universality / particularity (the emphasis is on rules or relationships), individualism / collectivism; emotionality / neutral (show or no show feelings); specific / diffuse (make a difference or not between private and professional life); social status is acquired / purchased (obtained by achievement or by age, education); sequential / synchronous (simultaneous or successive events); internal control / external (it is believed that people can control their destiny or not) .

Gallup Romania has conducted in 2005 a survey on business culture in Romania and found a large distance from the management, collectivism, femininity, high uncertainty avoidance and a short-term orientation.

A recent research (Musat 2013) shows the following indicators for cultural characteristics: the distance towards power - 80, the degree of individualism - 30, the degree of masculinity - 42, tolerance to uncertainty - 90, long-term orientation - 52. The study also investigated the degree of indulgence that has value 20.

### THE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research sought to determine how foreign students adapt in Romania, was conducted at the Engineering Faculty of Polytechnic University of Bucharest. In this faculty classes are held in foreign languages like German, English and French. The Engineering Faculty has 500 students enrolled for a bachelor degree and 150 students enrolled for a master degree. Out of the total number of students enrolled in the Engineering Faculty, 300 are foreign students.

In order to identify more accurately the relations between Romanian and foreign students, a research has been conducted over an entire year of study, the last one so the students knew each other for 4 years. Two questionnaires were developed with similar questions addressed to Romanian students and foreign students. All students have answered: 30 Romanians, 16 Arabs and 4 French.

The questions referred to the following:

1. The impact of the existence of mixed groups in preparation;
  2. The existence of rivalries among students by forming mixed groups;
  3. Relations between students;
  4. Participation in joint activities outside teaching hours;
  5. Consultation between students preparing lessons;
  6. Group unity;
  7. Ease of adaptation to Romanian cultural environment;
  8. Interest in knowing the culture of the country to foreign students;
  9. Awareness of the language in which courses are taught;
  10. Awareness of the technical language;
  11. Adapting to Romanian standards of behavior;
  12. Romanians disturbing behaviors towards foreign students;
  13. Interest for knowing the Romanian culture;
  14. The level of knowledge of the Romanian language.
- Foreign students have also responded to two questions:
15. If Romanians are talking about their country;
  16. If teachers give responses to requests to clarify some issues being taught.

### RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN STUDENTS

**From the answers given by foreign students** unanimously believes that know well the language of teaching and technical language, are interested to know Romanian culture, teachers respond to their wishes to clarify issues raised in courses, Romanian students do not have behaviors that disturb them.

Also 90% of them believe they have friendly relations with their Romanian colleagues, but they form a distinct entity, they have learned from Romanian culture. Withal 70% consider that the existence of mixed groups has a positive impact in their training. They also consult Romanian students in clarifying certain aspects of the course, it is not difficult to adapt to the environment in Romania, that were easily adapted to living conditions in Romania, they have learned Romanian well, that Romanian colleagues speak about Romania. Also 50% of them consider that there is a emulation between Romanian and foreigners to education. The same percentage believes that participating in the joint action.

**From the answers given by Romanian students** we can conclude that that students unanimously considers that the foreign students adapt well in Romania, that cultural information is being changed and that Arab students quickly learn Romanian.

It is noted that 2/3 of the Romanian students consider that the existence of mixed groups has a positive impact in training, that students consult each other while preparing their homework, that there is unity in the group, that foreign students are interested in knowing the Romanian culture. Also 2/3 of Romanian students consider that there is no special emulation to learn whether foreign students are part of the group or not, that they do not participate in common activities in their free time, and that Romanian students' behaviors is not to disturbing for foreign students.

Also 85% of the Romanian students consider they have established friendly relationships with foreign students and that they have learned some aspects of the culture of the countries the foreign students come from, they know to an acceptable level technical language and that their behavior is compliant in our country

So Romanian students consider that foreign students adapt well to the conditions in Romania, both in terms of behavior and the Romanian language, that friendly relationships are established between them and that they exchange cultural information. Regarding the educational process there is a collaboration between them and they are not considered as separate entities, all being students, it is estimated that they know very well the French language in which the education process is conducted .

It seems that the friendships do not extend far and extra teaching activities. Although some Romanian students have replied to the questionnaire that they went together to different conferences, they have made visits to potential employers, they went to clubs, to theaters and concerts, doing sports and excursions together.

It is interesting to **compare students' opinions** about their relations. The same proportion (66-70%) think that it is good teaches the same group. Romanians feel emulation for teaching in 33% of the cases and foreigners in 50% of the cases. The same percentage (80-90%) believe that relations between them are friendly, it helps to lessons (66-70%). Romanians feel that foreigners adapt easy to the environment (90%) but only 70% of foreigners feel the same.

Differences do occur. Of Romanian 33% believe that certain behaviors of their disturbs, but no stranger said this. 66% of Romanian feel that they are two distinct entities in the group, while foreigners think this of 50%. It means that each group has however identity.

In order to create a friendly social and learning environment to foreign students, Polytechnic University of Bucharest provides the following supports: printed books and practice handbooks written in foreign languages, with specific indications for foreign students; E-Books and and practice handbooks written in foreign languages posted on the website of the Faculty (Moodle Platform); specialist advice for foreign students; attracting and motivating foreign students to participate in Annual Student Scientific Sessions; tutorial for carrying out practical activities within multinational companies operating in Romania; facilitating participation in scientific conferences and congresses having technical profile; providing accommodation and participating in social activities on campus.

In order to revitalize the relations between Romania and the Arab World, by launching cultural projects with national, European, Arabian, and international support, four years ago was founded The European Romanian-Pan-Arabian Cultural Center (CCERPA). This Center aim is to promote and support the Arab culture in our country, and the Romanian culture throughout the Arab world, by initiating informational and educational programs to raise the awareness of our people and communities, about the history, culture of each nation, emphasizing on the common ground, and also on a good knowledge of the moral, social, scientific, sightseeing, economic and political values specific of each country.

## CONCLUSIONS

The study shows that Arab students are welcome in the Faculty of Engineering. Romanian students are friendly with their fellow Arabs. Do not feel differences between Romanian and foreign students, all is considered to be peers with the same interest, training in engineering. This behavior is a consequence of the fact that Romania was at a crossroads of civilizations.

At the same time Arab students retains its cultural identity, as well as Romanian students or students from other European countries.

Foreign students get advantage of wonderful blend of tradition and modernity, vitality and performance, along with traditional and new campuses at low cost.

Also, studying in Politehnica University offers a unique cultural experience in a dynamic and multinational environment. Besides earning a world-class qualification, international students have the chance to learn new languages, get international intercultural skills that are of great value to future employers and an essential advantage in a dynamic world, build a friend and professional network lasting forever, to travel and make practice or exchange studies in other countries, etc.

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