

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46502/issn.1856-7576/2024.18.03.20>


Cómo citar:

Dumchak, I., Kachmar, O., Mochalova, N., Oleksandrenko, K., & Sidorova, I. (2024). Socio-cultural factors influencing students' learning experience: a cross-cultural study. *Revista Eduweb*, 18(3), 264-275. <https://doi.org/10.46502/issn.1856-7576/2024.18.03.20>

Socio-cultural factors influencing students' learning experience: a cross-cultural study


Factores socioculturales que influyen en la experiencia de aprendizaje de los estudiantes: un estudio transcultural

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Recibido: 16/08/24

Aceptado: 29/09/24

Abstract

The modern globalized educational sphere requires well-established skills to work in a cross-cultural environment. The purpose is the study of socio-cultural factors that affect the educational experience of students. To implement the proposed goal, the PRISMA method of working with scientific sources, the method of content analysis of scientific literature, and the method of synthesizing individual results into a single system were used. In the results, it was noted that the effective formation of the sociocultural educational environment in higher education consists of several complex parts. The positive consequence



of the formation of a socio-cultural environment undoubtedly creates an atmosphere for the success of education seekers and the harmonization of cross-cultural relations. It is indicated that there are separate risks that appear because of the complex interaction of all participants in the educational process. The study found that in modern universities there are many successful cross-cultural cases that contribute to the integration of different students: mobility programs, summer schools, scientific conferences, distance learning courses etc. The conclusions emphasize that the unification of students in a unique multicultural educational environment is a necessary part of the modern educational process in institutions of higher education.

Keywords: cultural differences, social influences, educational strategies, intercultural communication, university education, statistics, foreigners.

Resumen

La esfera educativa globalizada moderna requiere habilidades bien establecidas para trabajar en un entorno intercultural. El objetivo es el estudio de los factores socioculturales que afectan la experiencia educativa de los estudiantes. Para implementar el objetivo propuesto, se utilizaron el método PRISMA de trabajo con fuentes científicas, el método de análisis de contenido de la literatura científica y el método de síntesis de resultados individuales en un solo sistema. En los resultados, se observó que la formación efectiva del entorno educativo sociocultural en la educación superior consta de una serie de partes complejas. La consecuencia positiva de la formación de un entorno sociocultural crea sin duda una atmósfera para el éxito de los solicitantes de educación y la armonización de las relaciones interculturales. Se indica que existen riesgos separados que aparecen como resultado de la interacción compleja de todos los participantes en el proceso educativo. El estudio ha demostrado que en las universidades modernas existen numerosos casos exitosos de integración intercultural que contribuyen a la integración de diferentes estudiantes: programas de movilidad, escuelas de verano, congresos científicos, cursos a distancia, etc. Las conclusiones destacan que la unificación de los estudiantes en un entorno educativo multicultural único es una parte necesaria del proceso educativo moderno en las instituciones de educación superior.

Palabras clave: diferencias culturales, influencias sociales, estrategias educativas, comunicación intercultural, educación universitaria, estadísticas, extranjeros.

Introduction

Given the trends in higher education, multiculturalism is becoming more prominent. This is due to the fact that modern students choose where to study and the availability of various mobility programs. Thus, students from different social status, religion, and culture meet in the same learning space. For this reason, new opportunities for learning are opening up. However, contemporary scholars also emphasize the emergence of various difficulties for both students and teachers (Yerken & Nguyen Luu, 2022). Various socio-cultural factors play a significant role in the system of forming innovative learning spaces for students (Yerken et al., 2022). They also affect their performance, motivation, and social integration in such an educational environment.

The cross-cultural study of this relevant and complex issue will also allow us to understand the impact of basic cultural differences, language barriers, family and social values that can facilitate or complicate the modern process of acquiring knowledge and skills. In particular, the scientific literature has identified that students from collectivist cultures may in some cases feel uncomfortable in individualistic learning environments (Halimi et al., 2020). This problem can also be inherent in students who pay attention to individual results, especially when group work is implemented. Therefore, identifying and understanding the main socio-cultural factors is an important basis for creating an inclusive and effective learning environment that can take into account the key needs of all participants in the learning process in the future. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to analyze the main social and cultural factors that influence the



organization of the learning space and the formation of students' learning experience. The main research objectives are as follows:

1. To analyze the state of the scientific base on the peculiarities of the development of socio-cultural components of the modern learning space.
2. To formulate the main socio-cultural factors that influence the formation of an inclusive learning environment.
3. To identify the main barriers in a multicultural learning environment and formulate separate recommendation solutions to overcome them.

Literature review

The study of socio-cultural factors and their impact on the educational experience of modern students has certain results reflected in the scientific literature. Researchers have paid attention to both individual aspects of this issue and conducted comprehensive reviews aimed at highlighting general trends in the development of students in the modern cross-cultural environment. In particular, Al-Busaidi (2019) pointed out the peculiarities of adaptation of students in the environment of Arab universities, although he only briefly noted the existence of similar problems for Arabs studying outside the Arab countries. Ester (2022) identified the general features of teaching mathematics in a multicultural environment of university education, pointed out the existing problems of adaptation of talented students in a foreign environment (on the example of Israel and Finland).

Chao, Wu & Tsai (2021), based on Chinese experience and empirical data from several universities, identified the positive role of distance education and the use of digital technologies in modern education: thanks to distance learning, students have less contact with each other, so the cultural difference between them is not a serious need. The complex problems of adaptation in adult life, the stage of transition from school to university life, were considered by Fute, Oubibi & Kangwa (2024). Similarly, Levchenko et al. (2022) emphasized certain difficulties in the adaptation of young people's psychology. In general, researchers note the importance of additional factors such as communication skills, educational environment, teaching skills of teachers, and student environment. Obviously, these factors are important for socio-cultural interaction in the modern multicultural environment of students.

Among the individual issues that have received research attention is the issue of cultural communication in the team (Sydorenko, 2024). The researchers also analyzed the topic of migrants and their participation in educational processes, concluding that a significant percentage of foreign students in higher education institutions are migrants or descendants of migrants, so working with them will require additional attention (Kamardina et al., 2024).

Krasodomska & Godawska (2020) traced the integration of digital technologies into the educational process and identified some of the problems that emerged during this process. Similar views were shared by Yang & Lilit (2023), who noted the emergence of additional challenges associated with the acquisition of digital competencies as an indispensable attribute of modern distance learning in a multicultural team. Some studies focus on the specific problem of teaching Muslim women, which is extremely relevant for many countries (Harum et al., 2024; Orhani, 2023).

In fact, cultural barriers in education, as demonstrated in some studies, have a much deeper impact on the formation of educational environments, and overcoming them will require additional efforts and considerable time (Abdulai et al., 2021; Yevstakhevyh et al., 2021). The researchers' comments are valuable for pointing out specific difficulties and shortcomings in modern educational environments, as well as hypotheses for improving the situation in the education system. It is important to note that the cultural component in modern education is as important as logistics, teaching, or the use of digital technologies. Therefore, further research on this issue using specific cases that affect students' learning experiences is a relevant issue.



Methodology

Research design

The realization of the research objective is based on the use of a qualitative approach, which is conducive to the analysis and systematization of heterogeneous scientific publications on the subject. First of all, we are talking about such sources as scientific articles in problematic professional journals, some statistical information officially published on the Internet, chapters of collective monographs, monographic studies, abstracts of speeches at scientific conferences, collections of scientific conferences, etc. By combining information from different sources, we managed to achieve objectivity and impartiality in taking into account the opinions of researchers from many countries.

Data collection

The first step in writing the article was to find the necessary scientific information. To realize this stage, we searched among publications in the scientific and metric databases Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. The key markers for finding the necessary information were the following words: cultural differences, social influences, educational strategies, intercultural communication, university education, statistics, foreigners. At first, the search showed 1026 results. We immediately eliminated those scientific sources that were repeated. As a result, the volume of the analyzed literature decreased by 133 items.

The second stage was aimed at examining the sources obtained in detail - texts of scientific articles, tables of contents of monographs, abstracts of speeches at conferences, etc. Given the goals and objectives of the work, 198 search results were eliminated due to inconsistencies. The third stage of working with the literature involved setting a clear date range. First of all, the most relevant research papers published in 2019-2024 were selected. This made it possible to take into account the most relevant research, which would also take into account the existing experience of previous publications. This action resulted in the blocking of 506 scientific publications that had been published (or appeared online) before 2019.

The fourth stage was to apply additional criteria to the resulting list of references in order to specify the required studies among others that, although they were directed in a similar thematic direction, did not directly address the outlined topic. These markers were:

1. The study examines the socio-cultural factors that influence the learning experience of students.
2. The study describes the features of cross-cultural environments in modern universities.
3. The study, using the appropriate scientific basis, describes the difficulties and benefits of learning in cross-cultural environments, contains statistical calculations or other empirical data on this issue.

Taking into account criteria 1, 2, and 3, 30 research papers were retained for further processing. Another 3 papers were used by the authors in previous studies, so they meet the proposed search criteria. Another 3 papers were added as statistical papers for a better analysis of the research material (see Table 1).

Table 1.

Data Collection and Selection Process

Data Processing Stage	Number of Results
Initial Results	1026
Removal of Duplicates	-133
Removal of Irrelevant Studies	-198
Date Range Reduction	-506
Filtering by Criteria	
Criterion 1	-51
Criterion 2	-61
Criterion 3	-41



Number of Included Sources	30
Additional Sources	6
Total	36

Source: Authors' development

Data analysis

The data obtained were processed using the method of content analysis of scientific literature, which made it possible to highlight certain elements of scientific theories in comparison with the empirical research of other scientists. The method of synthesis was also applied, which consisted of combining the fragmentary data obtained into single conclusions based on the processing of scientific literature.

Results

The successful functioning of the socio-cultural educational environment in higher education is determined by a number of complex elements that reflect social, cultural, value and psychological components. In particular, cultural norms and values play an important role in this system, influencing how students perceive the phenomenon of education, interaction with the student environment and teachers (Häyrynen et al., 2021). These norms also affect their awareness of certain methodological approaches to learning (individual or teamwork). This system also emphasizes established family values. The family's attitude to education, level of support and expectations from the student can also affect their motivation and performance in acquiring knowledge (Fute et al., 2024).

In particular, in some cultures, gender roles play an important role in shaping their social space. This can affect how the role of women or men in society is perceived and their participation in education and knowledge in certain disciplines (technology, engineering, humanities, medicine, etc.). At the same time, religious beliefs can influence a student's choice of disciplines and perception of certain topics. For example, this is relevant when teaching ethics, evolution, etc.

On the other hand, social status and economic status can play a separate role in the formation of a socio-cultural learning environment. In particular, the scientific literature proves that the economic well-being of students can affect access to resources (computer, Internet) (Giovanis & Akdede, 2023). This, in turn, can affect the untimely receipt of educational materials and the difficulty of understanding certain subjects. However, perhaps the most important negative role in the system of interaction between all participants in the primary process may be played by stereotypes about ethnicity, gender, social origin, or nationality (Xiao, 2021). Such factors can additionally create certain discriminatory conditions that negatively affect the overall psychological comfort and academic performance of students (see Figure 1).



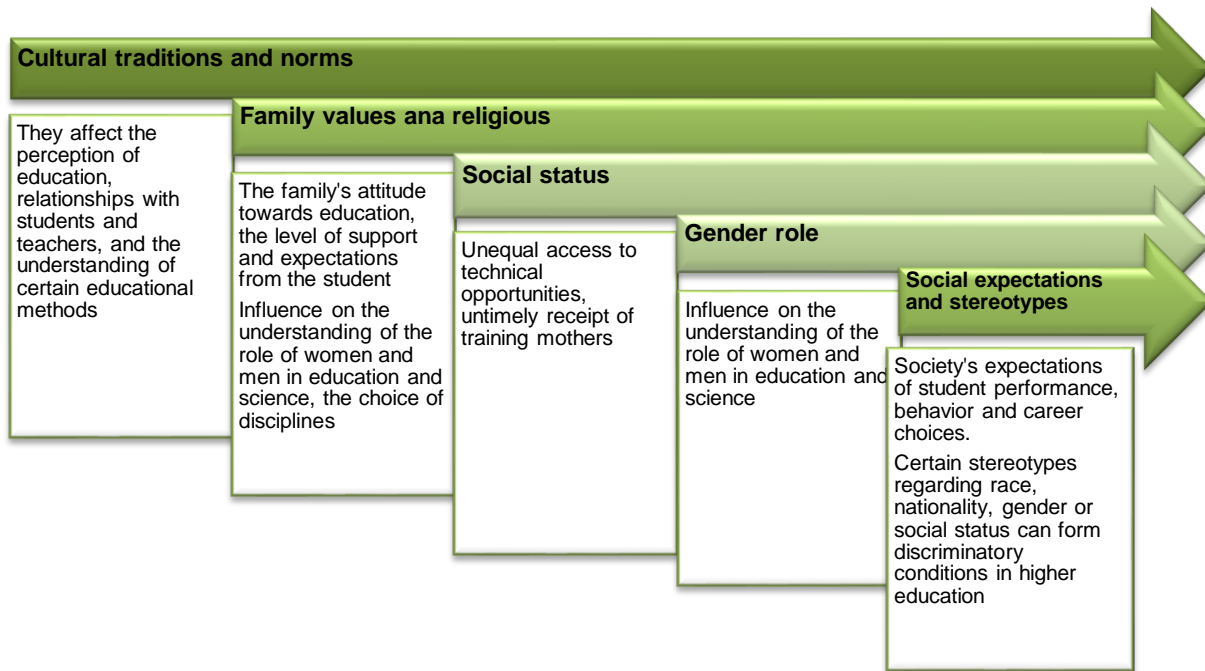


Figure 1. The main components of the formation of socio-cultural environment in higher education
Source: Authors' development

A positive result of the formation of the socio-cultural environment regulates the success of the formation of competencies among students related to their coexistence in a multicultural environment. Also, this process affects on harmonization of interethnic relations, prevention of xenophobia, and tolerance. As of 2022, 1.52 million students from abroad were studying at EU universities. In 2022, 376,400 international students studied in Germany (European Commission, 2022). They accounted for 25% of all international students studying in the EU. France was the next largest country in terms of the number of international students (17%). More than 44% of international students studying at tertiary level across the EU in 2022 were from other countries in Europe and Asia (25%) and Africa (17%) (European Commission, 2022) (See Figure 2).

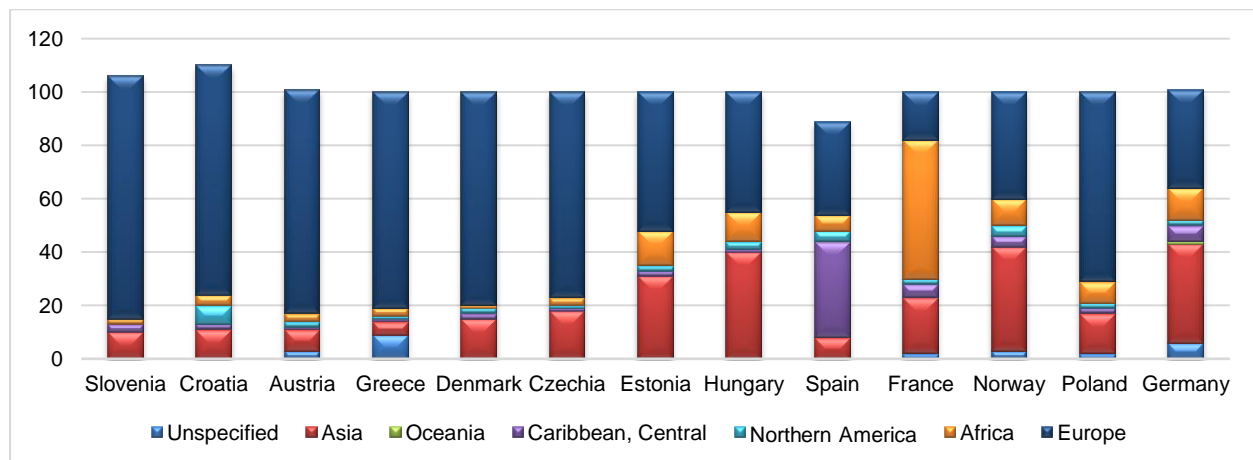


Figure 2. Distribution of international students in selected European countries
Source: European Commission (2022)

In 2023, the European Association for International Education (EAIE) published the results of an annual survey that showed the role of international students in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). According to recent reports, more than half of participating universities (51%) said they received 2x more international applications for the 2023-2024 academic year than the year before (M Square Media, 2023). This shows that many more foreign students than in the past want to study in EU countries. In addition, almost half of the surveyed institutions (47%) believed that the number of international students increased in September 2023 compared to September 2022 (M Square Media, 2023). Thus, all this information indicates that EU universities are becoming more attractive to foreign students.

However, the complex dimension of the sociocultural environment is revealed in a complex system of relationships between all participants in education. Therefore, the content of these connections is key in the complex structure of education quality (Pichkur et al., 2023). Thus, the sociocultural educational environment can also influence the regeneration of certain challenges (Sari et al., 2024). Some of these risks, given their nature, can be socio-psychological, that is, determine situations of uncertainty in interpersonal relationships as a result of complex value disorientation (we are talking about psychological and identification changes). Socio-psychological risks can occur as a result of the complex interaction of all participants in the educational process, in particular in the format of student-student, teacher-student, teacher-teacher, etc.

Each type of these relationships is manifested in communication, which in some cases can lead to conflict situations (Vakhovskiy et al., 2022; Kim & Lee, 2023). It can be defined as a conscious or unconscious way of behavior of participants in the educational process in socio-cultural educational conditions (Klimek & Klimek, 2021). Also, both subjective and objective factors can be a source of risks to the formation of an effective socio-cultural environment of a higher education institution. Among the latter are the traditions of institution management: established rules and behavioral stereotypes, as well as the direct order of organization of the learning space system (Yılmaz & Temizkan, 2022; Bohomaz et al., 2023). Socioeconomic barriers also play a role. In particular, international students who come to study in European countries may face financial difficulties and limited access to educational resources. In addition, difficult adaptation to the high cost of living may also be evident (Giovanis & Akdede, 2023).

All of these factors can affect their social status in the country and affect their learning outcomes. The MSM report found that high living costs are the most pressing issue, with over 60% of respondents identifying it as a significant problem (M Square Media, 2023). International students from nations with lower income levels or depreciating currencies may find this difficult. As a result, some students can find it difficult to pay for necessities like housing, food, and transportation. For overseas students, obtaining a visa is an additional hurdle. According to the research, 54% of survey participants said that visa-related problems were either very tough or somewhat challenging. Specifically, the most often selected topic, according to 31% of respondents, was obtaining a visa (M Square Media, 2023). Students who want to study abroad may find this to be a major challenge because they have to deal with intricate administrative processes and criteria (See Figure 3).



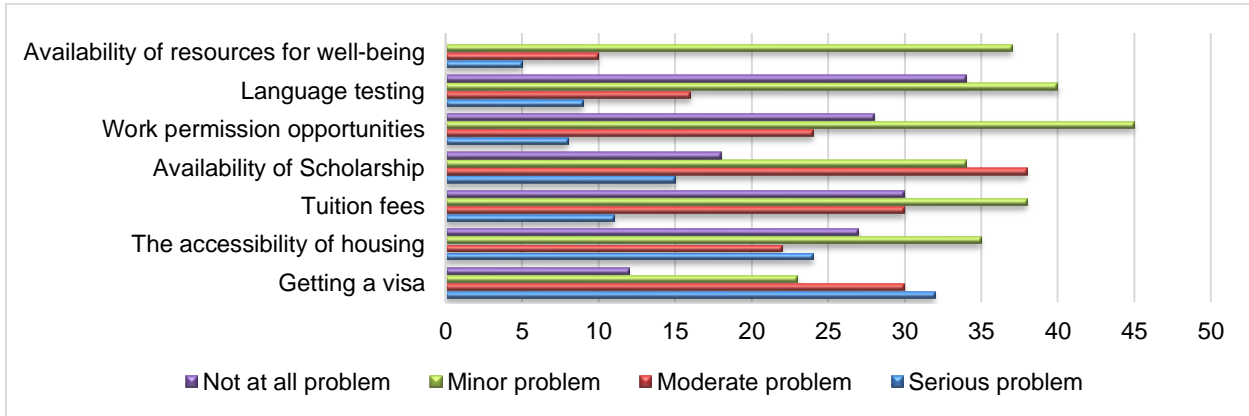


Figure 3. Problems faced by international students in European universities
Source: M Square Media (2023).

In a multicultural learning environment, language barriers may also arise. This can affect the level of engagement of the student in the learning process.

However, modern European universities demonstrate successful cross-cultural case studies. European universities offer foreign language training for students. In particular, in Luxembourg and France, most university students’ study two or more foreign languages. At the same time, the Czech Republic and Romania also have a large share of students studying two or more languages (84% and 89%, respectively). In particular, the Language Centre of the Jan Evangelista Purkyně University in Usti nad Labem (Czech Republic) offers English as a 2nd foreign language class for students, mostly future historians, political scientists, humanities, English language teachers, and computer science majors. These classes bring together representatives of different nationalities: Czechs, Ukrainians, Russians, and Hungarians. Some of them are studying under the Erasmus+ program, the first level (bachelors). English classes include elements of general English and academic writing. During the 2023-2024 academic year, 70 students attended this course, where various thematic issues were raised: religion, politics, war, education, higher education. These EU countries are followed by Finland, Germany (both 85%), Poland, and France (81% and 85%) (Eurostat.eu, 2023) (see Figure 4).

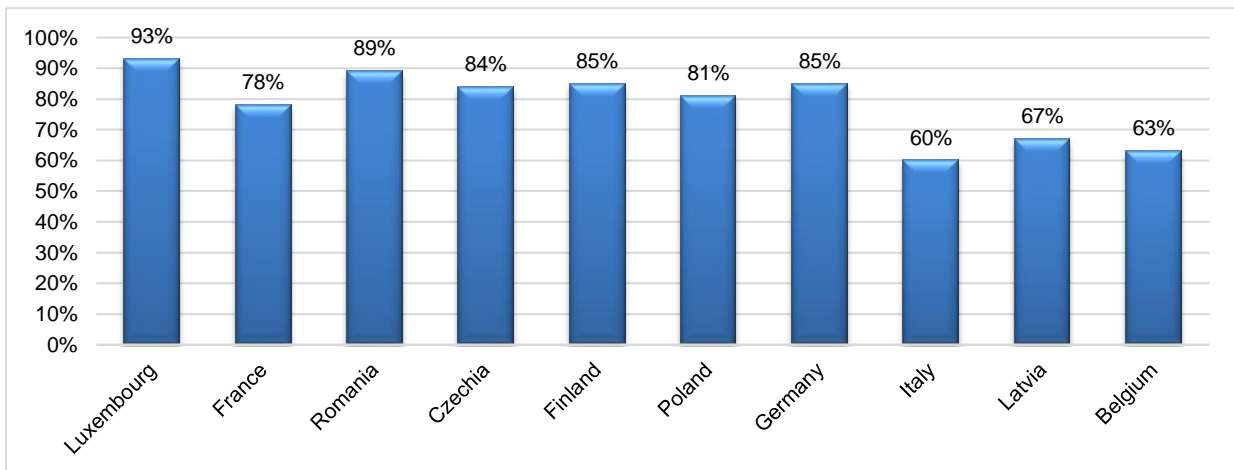


Figure 4. Percentage of people learning two or more foreign languages in selected European countries
Source: Eurostat.eu (2023)

Overall, in 2023, English became the most studied foreign language at the higher education level in the EU: 92% of students studied it. In terms of university education, Spanish was second (23%). It was followed

by French (22%), German (22%), and Italian (4%). Besides, there are many successful cross-cultural cases in modern universities that promote the integration of students from different countries. In particular, mobility programs (Erasmus+, Fulbright, or DAAD) play an important role (Palfi et al., 2023). In addition, European universities organize various summer schools (both online and offline) that bring together students from all over the world for short-term intensive study. At the same time, leading universities are also developing a policy of cultural inclusiveness by creating special clubs and programs that support different national and cultural groups of students (Yerken & Nguyen Luu, 2022). Thus, these cross-cultural initiatives influence the formation of global learning environments.

Discussion

Given the purpose of the study, in particular, to identify certain socio-cultural factors that affect the development of students in higher education, it was found that such factors as cultural traditions and norms, family attitudes to education, gender stereotypes, ethnic stereotypes, and social expectations can affect the effective acquisition of knowledge. The findings correlate with the conclusions of other scholars who emphasize that higher education plays the role of an important socio-cultural phenomenon whose goals and objectives are determined by society (Karacsony et al., 2022). Higher education is also an important factor for its development and transformation, a key component of modern social culture (Politova et al., 2022). Therefore, based on the results obtained, the current higher education sector is a kind of environment of socio-cultural development, where the functioning of the educational system unfolds. The positive impact of the socio-cultural system of higher education determines the success of students, influences their development and achievements in the future.

The results also show that more than half of the EU universities (more than 50%) stated that they had received more applications from international students for the 2023-2024 academic year than a year earlier. This indicates that a much larger number of international students than in the past are thinking about studying in the EU. These results also correlate with other studies and reports that demonstrate the demographics of international students (DeLuca et al., 2019).

However, the results also highlighted some of the challenges faced by international students. They concerned both the organization of the learning space, teaching methods, and socioeconomic problems. Recent studies have also drawn attention to barriers to cross-cultural interactions in specific countries (DeLuca et al., 2019; Xiao, 2021). Other scholars have also noted the existence of language barriers. It has been established that there are certain language barriers even in countries where English is spoken (Xiao, 2021). In particular, students from India, Australia, and New Zealand faced difficulties due to different language structures and pronunciation of English, which is the main language of instruction in the United States and Canada. (Al Dilaimy, 2024). Other scholars also emphasize other problems that the authors of this article did not focus on.

In particular, cultural adaptation is a particular problem, as shown in the study by Abdulai et al. (2021). This can be expressed through a different level of formality in communication, a habit of individualism and open expression of emotions that is not typical for their cultural environment (Giovanis, 2021). Also, the results did not pay attention to the emergence of a conflict of values, which is also widely covered in the scientific literature. In particular, this can be seen by contrasting Arab countries, India, and the United States with European countries. Although the family institution also plays an important role in the United States and Europe, in India and the Arab countries, the leading role of the family and religious traditions is noticeable. However, in Europe and the United States, individualism and personal freedom are valued.

These factors can lead to conflicts of values, particularly regarding gender equality and academic independence. Most scholars, as well as the authors of this article, have drawn attention to the existence of stereotypes and prejudices that may exist in the cross-cultural educational space (Giovanis, 2021; Fouzia Ajmal et al., 2020). In particular, students from Arab countries who come to Europe to study may face



stereotypes about their religion or culture at Western European universities. Such factors can negatively affect the process of integration and the development of self-esteem.

The results also showed that creating an effective language environment is an important part of a successful cross-cultural space. Most international students at EU universities study two or more foreign languages. It has been found that English has become the most studied foreign language at the higher education level in the EU. These results are also correlated with other works (Al Dilaimy, 2024; Aliyeva, 2023). However, the proposed study has its drawbacks, in particular, the use of the Prisma approach may result in the inability to measure certain cultural factors. In particular, cultural influences are difficult to quantify using this approach due to their subjectivity. In addition, the main emphasis was placed on finding English-language sources, thus, the study ignored works written in other languages.

Conclusions

Thus, the successful formation of the socio-cultural educational environment in higher education is determined by a number of complex elements that reflect social, cultural, value and psychological components. The positive effect of the formation of the socio-cultural environment affects the success of students and the formation of their competencies related to their coexistence in a multicultural environment, harmonization of interethnic relations, prevention of xenophobia and development of tolerance.

The nature of the socio-cultural environment is manifested in a complex system of relationships between all participants in education, i.e. the content of these relationships is crucial in the complex structure of the quality of education. However, the formation of a successful socio-cultural learning environment can face various challenges. Some of these risks, given their nature, can be socio-psychological and socio-economic. The former is the result of complex interaction between all participants in the learning process. On the other hand, successful integration into a multicultural educational environment is affected by financial difficulties, problems with housing or scholarships, and limited access to educational resources.

However, as the study found, there are many successful cross-cultural cases in modern universities that facilitate the integration of different students: mobility programs, summer schools, scientific conferences, distance learning courses, organization of special clubs and training programs. In general, all of these activities contribute to bringing students together in a unique multicultural learning environment.

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