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MULTICLASS PROJECT

**THE CURRENT SITUATION OF THE
INTERNATIONALIZATION OF HIGHER
EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN**

BULGARIA

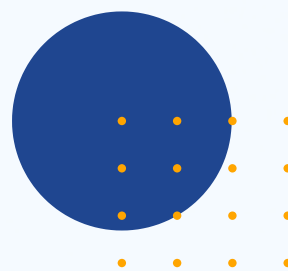
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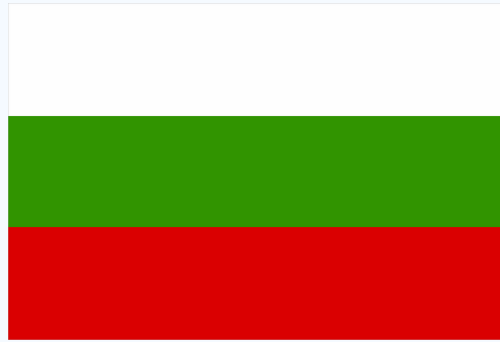
MULTICLASS
Multicultural Classrooms:
Inclusive Learning and Teaching
in Higher Education

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The increased globalization put a new perspective on the importance of setting more multicultural and inclusive higher educational systems in Europe. Traditionally, Higher Education Institutions (HEI) in Europe are recognized for the high quality of education and research and attract many international students. Responding on the raising trends, the Erasmus+ project “Multiclass: the multicultural classroom: inclusive learning and teaching in higher education”, aims to increase the quality and value of the multicultural dimension of HEI in Europe and the capability of teachers to manage multicultural and diverse classrooms.

Bulgaria has a long-standing history and traditions of academic excellence. The Bulgarian HEI are recognized on a global level and are open for international and multicultural students from all over the world. So, in order to elaborate a more in-depth analysis of the multicultural classrooms’ practices in Bulgaria, a qualitative research was conducted in April 2023 with eleven participants. Following the same procedure as the other MClass project partners, the data were collected on the basis of a structured questionnaires. The interviews are made on two groups, first there were involved five selected teaching staff and then, six international students at several Bulgarian Universities all across the country.



The two separate questionnaires were set for the teaching staff and for the students, each of them divided into five sections: individual experience and approaches, benefits, challenges, mechanisms and needs. The emphasize of the research is to find out the main challenges, perceptions, experiences and attitude of both teaching staff and international students in terms of diversity and multiculturalism.

The outcomes of the desktop research prove that Bulgarian HEI system has main benefits and competitive advantages on international level. Some of the main advantages cover the high quality of the training, the recognized degrees and diplomas in all EU member-states, the more reasonable tuition fees and study expenses, and the affordable living conditions. Traditionally, Bulgarian universities have established specific programs and academic departments tailored for international students. These initiatives often include a preparatory year dedicated to learning the Bulgarian language, which then allows students to pursue their chosen specialty. Alternatively, international students may also opt to enrol in English language programs or participate in various international exchange programs.



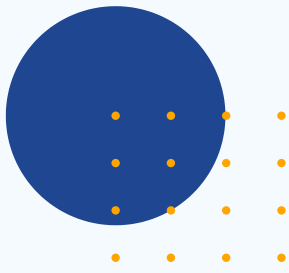
The results of the qualitative research can be summarized in several findings. First, it was confirmed that the both groups - teaching staff and students appreciate the benefits of teaching and learning in multicultural classrooms. The teaching staff manifested to be very motivated and open to work with international students. However, there were found many challenges that should be better addressed when teaching to international students and most of the teachers do not have any training or suitable materials for preparing. Some of the students indicated different problems and misunderstanding, making their studies more challenging. They mentioned the good level of knowledge of English, flexibility, openness to differences, respect for the other cultures.

This study aims to contribute to the analysis of the current situation in Bulgarian universities regarding diversity and multiculturalism. Its objective is to prepare best practices and the provide training and support to teaching staff in managing diverse and multicultural classrooms within higher education institutions across Europe.

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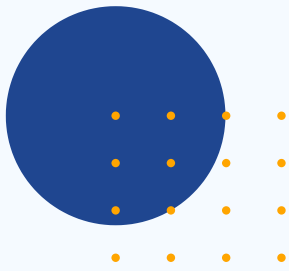


INTRODUCTION

The Bulgarian national report for Multicultural training in HEI aims to contribute for the realization of the goals and objectives of the Erasmus+ project - MULTICLASS “The multicultural classroom: inclusive learning and teaching in higher education”. The MClass project partners are focused on enhancing the quality and multicultural dimension of Higher Education across Europe, and to this end, are committed to developing an innovative, short-term curriculum for staff training, as well as a didactical guideline and a set of teaching materials, designed to enable HEI teaching staff to better manage the challenges posed by multicultural and diverse classrooms.

The Bulgarian report is prepared conformed to the methodology adopted by the MClass partner universities. The comprehensive results of this research are provided in the national report, which summarizes the situation regarding multicultural classroom learning and teaching in higher education. The first part of the national report provides a comprehensive summary of the Bulgarian policies and general legal and institutional framework for the international students to be admitted in Bulgarian HEI. It presents the basic characteristics of the Higher education system in Bulgaria, covering institutional structure of the tertiary education and its programs. The second part of the document is dedicated on empirical outcomes of the multicultural training in HEI. More specifically, it explores the outcomes of a comprehensive summary of 11 interviews with HEI lecturers and international students.





- **2.1. A short description of the national higher education system in Bulgaria**

Bulgaria has a long-standing history and traditions of academic excellence and on a strategic policy level, Bulgarian HEIs are committed on providing high-quality education and training to develop specialists with advanced degrees beyond the secondary level education. More detailed analysis of the national HEI system and structure is provided by national public web sites, such as the Ministry of education and science (mon.bg), National Statistical Institute (nsi.bg) and National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency (navet.bg). Bulgaria has adopted the ECTS (European Credit Transfer System) under the higher education act, and it was put into effect since 2004. Bulgarian higher education institutions are very well-connected with EU universities and students can participate in many mobility and exchange programs such as Erasmus students' mobility, international stay abroad or other form of students exchange.

A comprehensive research and analysis of the International students in Bulgaria is made as well in the framework of the *EMN Main Study 2012: Immigration of International Students to the EU and the National Report from the Republic of Bulgaria in 2012* [1]. This study estimates that the average number of International students in Bulgaria from third countries (outside EU) for the period 2007-2012 varies between 11 200 – 12 100 students per year.

Some more recent data show that the number of foreign students enrolled in Bulgarian HEI is steadily increasing in the last years from 14 512 in 2017/2018 academic year to 18 197 students for 2022/2023 [2]. It is important to mention that foreign students still represent a minor part of the students in Bulgaria. However, it should be highlighted that international students represent less than 8% of the total students in Bulgaria (214 782 students), enrolled for the academic year 2022-2023. Most of the international students come from the neighbourhood countries, such as Greece, Turkey, Serbia and Macedonia.

[1] National Report from the Republic of Bulgaria for EMN study on Immigration of International Students to the EU, 2012, available on <https://studylib.net/doc/18335724/national-report-from-the-republic-of-bulgaria-for-emn-stu>
[2] Data available for 2022 from the web portal www.nsi.bg

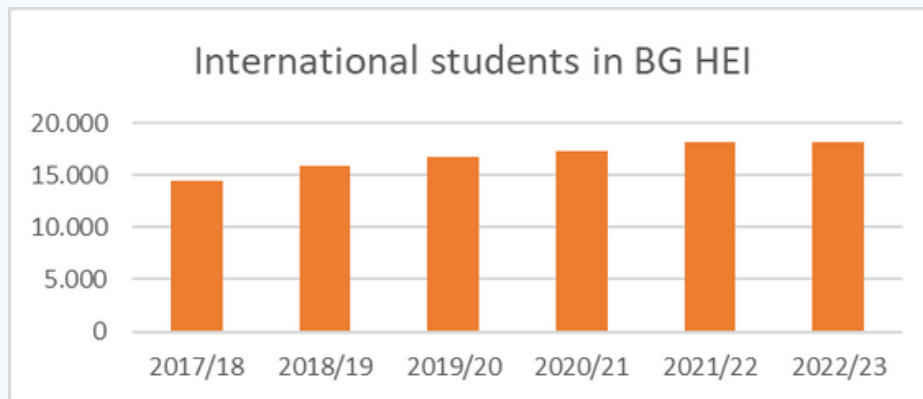
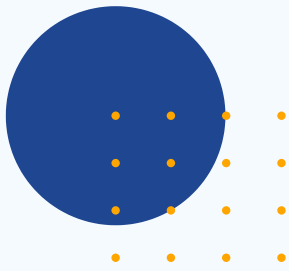


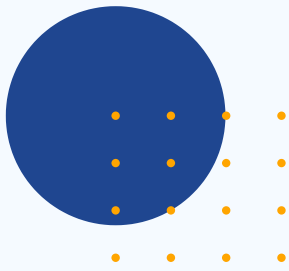
Figure 1 Number of international students enrolled in BG HEI, 2017-2023. (Source: nsi.bg)

Various data show that the majority of international students (more than 60%) are enrolled in Medicine. Thus, the most popular international HEI programs, attracting foreign students are in the field of Medicine (Medicine, Dentistry, Pharmacy) and Engineering. There are available both option for international students, either to enroll in English-language programs or in regular Bulgarian program after a preparatory year on studying Bulgarian language. Some other scientific fields, attracting foreign students are: mathematics and informatics, technical studies (engineering, architecture), chemistry, biology, language studies and humanities, agriculture, etc.

2.2 National policies for the internationalization of higher education

The Bulgarian HEI system is regulated by the National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency (NAVET) which supervise the quality standards of the HEI institutions. The National Agency for Evaluation and Accreditation conducts periodic evaluations and external monitoring to ensure that higher education institutions maintain the high educational standards. In total there are 52 High Education Institutions approved by NAVET [3].

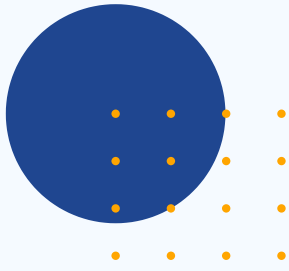
[3] NAVET <https://rvu.nacid.bg/home>



According to the last data, the HEI system includes 37 public and state-owned universities and 14 private universities. More specifically the public universities cover (25 universities, 11 specialized higher schools and 1 self-contained college) and 14 private higher schools (5 universities, 2 specialized higher schools and 7 self-contained colleges). The HEI are not evenly distributed. Most of them are concentrated in the cities of Sofia, Plovdiv and Varna, Ruse, Blagoevgrad and Stara Zagora, but many universities have subsidiaries also in the smaller cities. The tertiary education system consists of universities, specialized higher schools and self-contained colleges.

- A university is a higher school which provides training in a wide range of subjects in professional areas within at least three of the four major branches of science - humanities, natural sciences, social sciences and technical sciences; offers bachelor's, master's and doctor's degrees in the respective major branches of science; has ample scientific and artistic potential and through its activities contributes to the development of major branches of science and culture. A higher school offering academic courses in one or two major branches of science or culture may be a university with its appellation signifying its specific nature.
- A specialized higher school conducts scientific research or artistic and creative activities and offers courses of training in one of the major areas of science, arts, physical culture, and military science. Its appellation shall signify the specific area in which it trains specialists. These higher schools may also offer training for acquisition of the educational and qualification degree of "master" and the educational and academic and academic degree of "doctor".
- A self-contained college shall provide training for acquisition of the educational and qualification degree "professional bachelor in ...". The college shall have full-time faculty, holding at least a half of the classroom teaching and practical exercises in each specialty.
- A college may be also established within the structure of a university or of a specialized higher school accredited for the professional areas or majors of regulated professions for which instruction shall be offered. The college shall provide training at the educational and qualification degree "professional bachelor in ...".



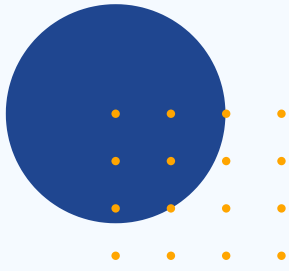


The EU portal eurydice.eu provides a list with the main Bulgarian legal framework documents, acts and ordinances concerning international students [4]. Based on it, the main legal documents for HEI, influencing the admission of International students in Bulgaria are the *Higher Education Act (since 1995)*; *Academic Staff Development Act (since 2010)*; *Granting Loans to Student and Doctoral Candidate Loans Act (since 2008)*; *Ordinance on the state requirements for the admission of students in the Bulgarian higher schools*; *Ordinance on the state requirements for acquisition of higher education at Bachelor, Master and “Specialist in..” educational and qualification degree*; *Ordinance on the state requirements for recognition of the acquired educational degree and completed certain periods of studies in foreign higher schools*; *Ordinances on the state requirements for the contents of all principal documents issued by higher schools and attached European diploma appendix under the model developed by the European Commission, Council of Europe and UNESCO- European Centre for Higher Education (CEPES)*; *Ordinances on applying of a system for accumulation and transfer credit points within higher schools (since 2004), which introduces the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS)*; *Rules on the state requirements for the organization of distance learning form at higher schools (since 2004)*.

2.3. HEI admission procedures for International students

Bulgarian higher education institutions are open for international students, where they can receive a high-quality education, a fully recognized degrees, very reasonable tuition fees and low living costs. Among the main benefits for the international students are the fact, that the country is a member state of the European Union (EU), and thus the degrees received by Bulgarian higher education institutions are recognized in all EU states and beyond. International students can choose to enrol either to Bulgarian HEI programs or to HEI programs on a foreign language.

[4] <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-education-systems/bulgaria/higher-education>



The first option for enrolling in Bulgarian HEI covers to study a preparatory course on Bulgarian language for 2 semesters (preparation year) and then choose a degree program in the Bulgarian language. All Bulgarian universities provide a preparation year in their campuses. The degree programs in the Bulgarian language are significantly cheaper than the programs in a foreign language.

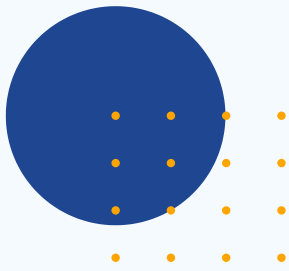
The second option for international students is to apply directly for a program in a foreign language. Some of the tuition fees of the universities differentiate for EU Citizens and for Non-EU Citizens.

At the same time, based on the information from the Ministry of Education [5], the number and type of joint programs with foreign Higher Education Institutions are steadily increasing. The double degree programmes guarantee that after completion, the double degree is awarded by Bulgarian and by the partner university. The programmes cover Bachelor and Master degree curriculum and are organised in cooperation with British, Netherland, American, or French universities.

The joint programs are executed based on the following forms of cooperation between Bulgarian Higher Education Institutions and foreign universities and/or accrediting institutions:

- o Agreements for combined educational activity with foreign universities providing for the award of double degrees and/or joint degrees.
- o Education Franchise Agreements with foreign universities.
- o Accreditations from foreign accreditation agencies for separate professional fields studied in Bulgarian universities or foreign accreditation of an entire Bulgarian university.

[5] News of the Ministry of Education web site, Joint programs with International HEI in Bulgaria for 2022 (on Bulgarian), available on <https://rsvu.mon.bg/rsvu4/#/media-article/141>



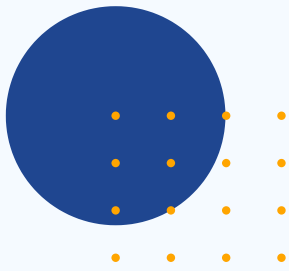
The last data reveal that for 2022, in total 24 Bulgarian universities offer 77 joint programs with International Universities, in which were enrolled 5 200 BSc and MSc students and 64 PhD students.

The greatest number of joint programs have been launched by the Sofia University (10) and the Technical University of Sofia (10), followed by the Higher School of Management – Varna (8), New Bulgarian University (6), Agricultural University – Plovdiv (5) and South-West University – Blagoevgrad (5). The oldest active joint program is created back in 1990 by the Technical University of Sofia and the Karlsruhe Institute of Technology and provides German language education in General Mechanical Engineering for obtaining both Bachelor and Master degrees.

The largest share of students' studying in joint programs are in the American University, where all students obtain two degrees (a Bulgarian and a US one). Seven universities offer doctoral training in joint programs. More than half of the joint programs involve teaching in English, but numerous programs also offer tuition in Bulgarian, Russian, German, French, etc. A number of the joint programs are organized in cooperation with universities from EU member countries such as Germany, France, Austria, Italy and Greece; however, there exist many joint programs with other countries like United Kingdom, USA, Russia, Kazakhstan, Switzerland, etc. A total of 24 different professional fields are covered, with most joint programs focused in the fields of Economics (17), Administration and Management (11), Tourism (10), Communication and Computer Technology (7), Philology (7), Informatics and Computer Sciences (6), General Engineering (6).



5 News of the Ministry of Education web site, Joint programs with International HEI in Bulgaria for 2022 (on Bulgarian), available on <https://rsvu.mon.bg/rsvu4/#/media-article/141>



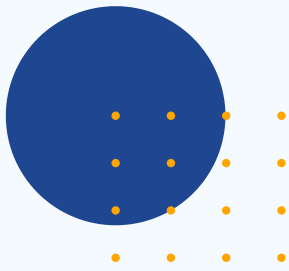
2.4. Overview of the academic literature

A short overview of the academic literature shows, that the problems of integration of foreign students and multicultural education in Bulgarian HEI are not well investigated in the academic research. Some aspects of the multicultural classroom settings are covered by the papers found in the desktop research, which discuss more specific elements such as teaching different ethnic groups or minorities. For example, the study of Sokolova (2022) is focused on the cultural sensitivity of Bulgarian teachers working in classes with multi-ethnic groups. In this domain can be mentioned as well some of the studies performed by specific NGOs such as International Center for Minority Studies and Intercultural Relations (IMIR), where Zhelyazkova et al. (2010) investigate the tolerance and cultural diversity in Bulgaria and the Bulgarian Ethnic model of parallel cohabitation or multicultural recognition.

Some academic authors investigate the problems of teaching Bulgarian language to foreign students. In this field, the paper of Koycheva & Manevska (2018) presents the authors expertise and methods, adopted at the Agricultural University (AU) – Plovdiv for teaching Bulgarian language and include various teaching methodologies to the multicultural classes.

Different aspects of the multicultural education are mentioned as well from more theoretical research perspective. For example, the study of Roth (2007), presents some general conclusions for ethical considerations in front of the intercultural trainers, highlighting the specifics and differences of the European cultural styles. The study of Morska (2012) is exploring some general concepts of the intercultural communicative competences. Dankova & Petrov (2016) investigates some of the main factors which influence the adaptation process of mobility students.

In this perspective, the desktop research shows that the issues of multicultural classroom management, the problems of integrating international students and the specific teaching practices and methodologies to improve the quality of training in Multiclass environment are not addressed sufficiently by the Bulgarian academic community. This can be explained by the fact that international students are still a minor part of the HEI students and university lecturers are not facing more specific problems with their integration and adaptation.



3. Methodology

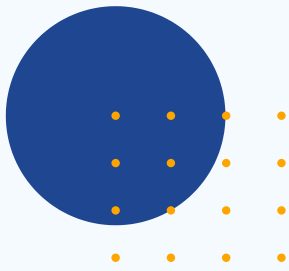
Research Design

Considering the scope of the study, the following research questions were deeply explored in the framework of the literature review and empirical investigations and interviews with teachers and students at HEI.

Research Questions

1. How do international students experience higher education in Europe in terms of diversity and multiculturalism?
2. What are the perceptions and attitudes of teaching staff towards managing multicultural and diverse classrooms in higher education institutions in Europe?
3. What are the challenges and barriers faced by both international students and teaching staff in promoting diversity and multiculturalism in higher education in Europe?
4. How effective is the current training and support provided to teaching staff for managing multicultural and diverse classrooms in higher education institutions in Europe?
5. What are the best practices and strategies for promoting diversity and multiculturalism in higher education in Europe and how can they be integrated into the training curriculum and teaching materials?

All partners introduced the same form of structured interviews. For the purpose to facilitate interviewees, the questions were translated on Bulgarian. The interview questions have been prepared and agreed by the Multiclass consortium. The questionnaire for teaching staff consisted of 20 questions divided into five sections: Individual experience and approaches (10 questions), benefits (2 questions), challenges (2 questions), mechanisms (3 questions) and needs (3 questions) listed in the Annex 2. The student questionnaire consisted of 14 questions, which were divided into 5 sections: Individual experience and approaches (6 questions), benefits (2 questions), challenges (2 questions), mechanisms (2 questions) and needs (2 questions) provided in the Annex 3.



Study area

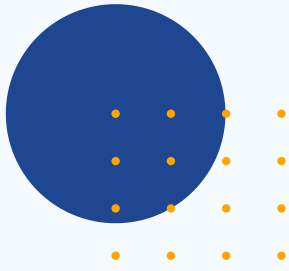
During the first phase, the Bulgarian team presented and disseminated information about the MClass project within the Euraxess Network Bulgaria, on their annual meeting in February 2023. There, about 20 representatives of the partner universities all across the country participated in Euraxess Annual meeting at the premises of Sofia University. Next, through the Euraxess channels in every university were nominated suitable professors and lecturers with expertise in teaching in Multicultural Classrooms in different Universities and specialities. All lecturers who finally were selected have significant experience in teaching in Multicultural classes and cover different disciplines, different scientific domains and different universities. More importantly all teachers have different Multiclass expertise – for example teaching on Erasmus Mobility students, teaching on international students in the preparatory University courses on Bulgarian language, teaching classes in regular English language programs, teaching abroad, or organizing mixed classes for International students.

For attracting suitable students, the team explored several nominations among different universities and identified the candidates based on their country of origin, ethnicity or religion.

Data Collection

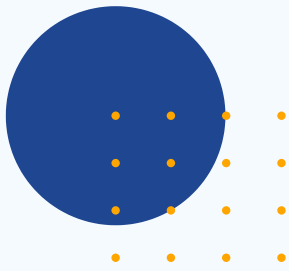
To collect and explore qualitative data, Sofia University team conducted 11 interviews with lecturers and students with substantial experience and expertise in Multicultural classrooms settings. To conduct interviews, the team first sent both Bulgarian and English versions of questionnaires and informed consent by email, then organized interviews by telephone or through online platform (zoom, google meet). Considering privacy issues, no recordings were performed, but interviewers took notes of the answers. Most of the interviews took between 30 min and 45 min., allowing interviewees to freely express their personal feelings, memories and attitudes for teaching and learning in international settings. Some of the contacted students were afraid to speak publicly and preferred to send written answers on the interview questions, not feeling comfortable to discuss openly their feelings and experiences from experiencing discrimination and racism. It was admitted that international students have faced different struggles.

All of the interviews were conducted in the period 15th of March and 15th of April 2023. The transcripts are taken on Bulgarian and then translated on English. All respondents submitted a signed consent form (on Bulgarian).



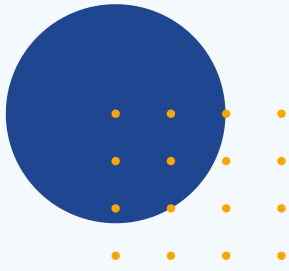
For teaching staff

	Gender	Age	Faculty	Field of expertise	Years of experience in teaching	Years of experience in multicul. classroom
1	Female	40-50	University of National and World Economy, Sofia	ICT and Business	15-20	Over 13
2	Male	40-50	Technical University, Sofia	Engineering	15-20	Over 13
3	Female	40-50	Medical University, Sofia	Chemistry	15-20	Over 13
4	Female	40-50	Department for language teaching and International students, Sofia University	Physics	15-20	14
5	Female	40-50	Plovdiv University	Bulgarian language for foreign students	15-20	15



For students

	Gender	Age	Faculty/University	Field of study	Country of origin
1	Female	25	Technical University of Sofia	Transportation Technics and technologies	Serbia
2	Male	25	University of National and World Economy, Sofia	Economics of the infrastructure, and media economics	Turkey
3	Male	30	University of National and World Economy, Sofia	Human resources	Bulgaria
4	Female	20	New Bulgarian University	Psychology	Iran
5	Female	20	Sofia University	Journalism	Ukraine
6	Female	20	University of National and World Economy, Sofia	International Relations	Bulgaria/ Macedonia



During the interviews, the interviewees' rights, privacy and confidentiality were ensured and informed consent was signed by all participants. The study was approved by the MClass partner institution - Ethics Committee of the Czech University of Life Sciences Prague. The collected data were transcribed and analysed using qualitative data analysis methods - content analysis. Data were coded and categorized based on themes emerging from the data.

4. Results

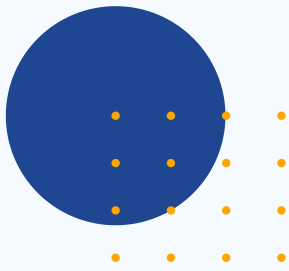
4.1 Academic staff experience

Individual experience and approaches

All selected teachers are professionals with substantial experience (more than 15 years) in teaching in multicultural environment. The academic staff, who took part in the interviews came from 5 universities (Sofia University, Medical University, Technical University, Plovdiv University, and University of National and World Economy). Most of the teachers have mainly experience with international students usually coming from neighbourhood countries (Greece, North Macedonia and Turkey), but lecturers remember to have had students from all around the world - Italy, UK, Germany, Japan, Austria, India, China, Vietnam, Arabic countries, Africa, Russia, Ukraine, even Chili, Cuba and many others.

In general, all of the teachers enjoy and are very positive for teaching in multicultural classes and teaching international students. In many occasions all of the teachers declared to feel very motivated and interested in multicultural classrooms, as the students are more challenging and demanding. As one of the teachers states: *“Bulgarian students are not used to ask many questions, while most of the international students are more focused, more active in class, show bigger respect, perform tasks more accurately than Bulgarian students”*. Another lecturer states: *“I’m really motivated in a positive way, as multicultural classrooms challenge me to be a better lecturer”*. Most of the lecturers recognize that multiclass environment is more competitive as nobody from the students want to be ashamed. In Multiclass environments, students feel more challenged and motivated to learn more and to catch up with learning. So, international groups are more engaging and students feel more competitive. Another teacher states that international students work together to cope with many different problems, they cooperate more, becoming friends and forming communities.





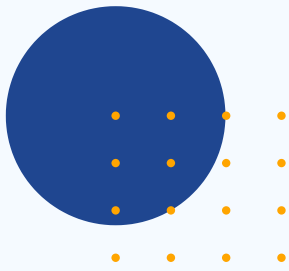
None of the teachers had experienced cases of racism or discrimination in their class. The teaching staff tries to be tolerant with the international students, employing different strategies to manage and motivate diverse classrooms. Some teachers state that they always try to explore students' points of view, to adapt their teaching strategies, their explanations and examples. Some teachers are used to employ a lot of visual examples, drama techniques, demonstrations with 3D models, showing movies and visual models to illustrate more complex issues. The students' questions provoke teachers to be more creative and open for better explaining complex issues and organizing demonstrations and first-hand experiments.

BENEFITS

Teachers identified both benefits and problems when teaching in multicultural environment. The benefits can be related with learning and accepting a new culture, accepting a different point of view, trying to be more comprehensive and clearer in teaching. Most of them find that teaching is always interesting and there lack a routine, as teachers should be alert for all kind of questions, unexpected situations, these MClass experiences motivate them to provide more examples to make connections with different disciplines and subjects.

Another important benefit is the positive feedback received from international students. All teachers remember when international students expressed their gratitude. This is very fulfilling when students understand and become more confident in their knowledge. There are many wonderful experiences with international students, as they more often are polite, make compliments, and show gratitude for teacher' efforts.

Concerning the Bulgarian language studies, the teachers say that the impact and the benefits of the Bulgarian classes come almost immediately. *When students leave the room after the first classes, they can go out and say "hello" and "thank you" on Bulgarian. After several hours they can understand better the local people, so they become more aware of the life around them.*



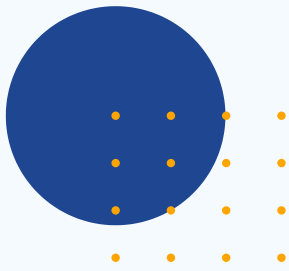
This makes students really motivated to perform better. It changes their stay and their experience. In the beginning, international students live very lonely, without talking or communicating with other students or rarely speaking with other people outside the university. With the progress in the classes, they become more confident and start to talk and to communicate. All this allows students to feel more comfortable not only in the classes, but in the local environment. This way, they become able to explore the city and the country on their own.

CHALLENGES

Most of the challenges are related to student's expectations and pre-conceptions. For example, the requirements on a school level largely differ across countries, and these students come to Bulgarian Universities with different expectations and background knowledge, including different level of English skills. Some students expect to be tolerated just because they are foreigners. Some teachers report that some international students had cases of cheating, bad discipline in class or be lazy, not preparing properly their classwork, for missing classes. Therefore, teachers in the beginning of their classes should to explain clearly the rules and show that the "mentality" in the university should be that students have not to "receive" knowledge, but they have to work hard for it, for obtaining meaningful results.

Some of the other challenges of the international students come from their efforts to adapt to the local culture and customs. Usually international students have different organizational and administrative struggles and need more time to organize properly their stay in the beginning of the semester. There are many cases of challenges considering practical issues such as finding accommodation, organizing classes, adapting to the teaching requirements and others.



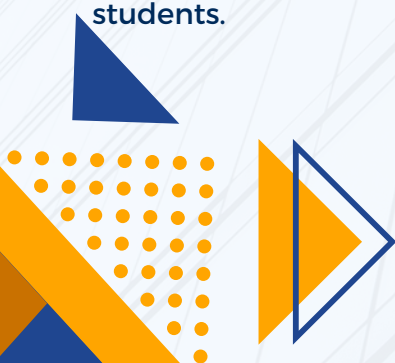


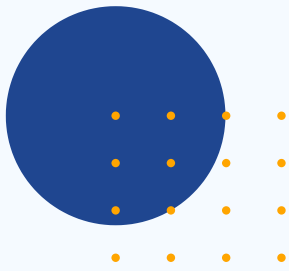
Some of the teachers' challenges are to respond to the student's expectations and to be very creative in order to engage and to motivate them to learn. To make international students feel more comfortable in class, teachers offer them personal attitude, support and assistance, ask them if they need some additional help for administrative issues, try to be flexible for examinations. Some teachers even provide their contact details just in case of specific problems with the students. They try to be flexible with deadlines, considering that students are traveling on their holidays, make exceptions and try to figure out the students' point of view. One of the lecturer states that he is open to discuss with the students their problems, or to find a person (specific for the situation), who can help better the student as is closer to them. For example, a senior student can become a better mentor for international students who have problems with the learning material. It is important as well to find the solution of each situation together with the students and to always looking for a compromise and for solutions that can work for the specific situation together with the students.

MECHANISMS

Actually, the most important mechanism for improving teachers' skills for working in international environment is to offer them teaching experiences in international settings. That is why, universities should support and encourage teachers to teach abroad, on Erasmus teaching programs or others.

In Technical University, there are provided different mechanisms and administrative procedures for preparing better the integration program for the international students. There are ensured different workshops for international students. It is set as well a "Buddy program", where Bulgarian students are matched to become an informal guide for international students. There are Erasmus office, an Office for International students and other University administrative staff for dealing with administrative questions and practical issues of the international students. The Erasmus office aims to provide not only administrative support, but as well all kind of accommodation and integration support for the international students.

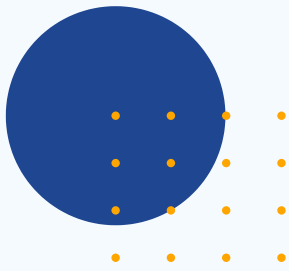




In the Medical University, Bulgarian students are used to organize different programs for international students. These activities are not only for orientation, but as well for learning Bulgarian. For example, in the third and fourth years, when students have to work in hospitals, even international students should know some basic Bulgarian language to work properly with Bulgarian patients. So Bulgarian students organize some informal language learning classes and practices for their international colleagues. There are other initiatives for making foreign students more well adapted to the local culture, some student conferences, open for local and international students and others.

At the University Departments of International Students in Sofia University there are collected and developed many resources and programs to support both students and teachers for making international programs more successful. On one hand there are specific resources such as lectures, visuals, films, exercises and experiments, additionally vocabularies on Greek, on Turkish, on Arabic language and others. The lecturer reported to have a lot of technics and teaching good practices and examples to follow and as a whole, to feel well prepared and supported.

In Plovdiv University, the international office is very active. They organize many activities for the Erasmus students and actually for all the students. They offer specific courses about Bulgaria, they organize for all international students a cultural program including visits of traditional places, traditions, music and dance performances, national cuisine and many others.



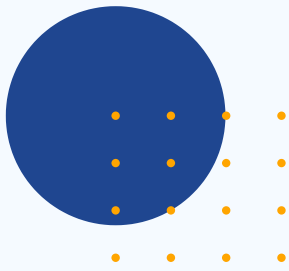
NEEDS

The most important skills for teaching in multiclass environment are the good communication skills and more precisely, good English language skills. Then, the teachers should have appropriate mindset and to be open – not to have prejudices, to be ready for challenges and to be open to learn from the students, to be open-minded, and accept cultural differences. But most of the personal skills cover communication and the ability to be more people-focused and student-oriented (and not so much task-oriented). Teachers should use all possible tools to explain and present properly the new knowledge to the students, adapting it to their own pace and following to the student's progress. As a teacher says: I try to be flexible and open for students' requests. Usually, I don't have expectations in the beginning of the course – I just leave my students to lead.

Teachers should be prepared to enter into the class without any expectations and preconditions. Most of the lecturers' say that there are lack specific mechanisms on University level to support teachers to prepare for international students. Teachers have to acknowledge the cultural differences of the international students. For example, a teacher report that: the students from the Muslim culture are in general shy and do not ask questions, they are rather confused if they have to publicly explain a problem in front of the others or to go to write something on the blackboard. So, teachers have to be prepared and be flexible to adapt their teaching for this kind of differences.

4.2. Student perspective Individual experience and approaches

It is important to state that in general, most of the students were not very open and do not easily talked to their problems. Several students reported to have experienced some acts of racism and discrimination. In general, international students reported that it was not easy to integrate into Bulgarian HEIs. However, most of them are positive from their international experience. All of the students reported to have received some personal support from other students or staff, in order to deal with the adaptation struggles. Among the key problems are identified mostly the lack of good language/ communication skills, mismatch between expectations and reality, the attitude of other students or lecturers.



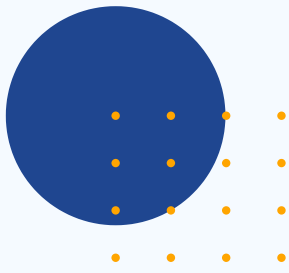
Most of the students reported that after some adaptation time, they succeeded to find strategies to surmount the difficulties and this made them feel more confident and stronger. Most of them succeeded to find friends and to form a positive environment for study in multicultural environment. Most of the students reported to be very engaged, satisfied, motivated and engaged when taking part in multicultural environment. Some of the students had problems with their teachers, showing very strict and rigid or with other students. As one student said, in the multicultural classroom there have to be made many additional efforts to make it easier for students to express themselves and to get them used to different types of audiences and criticism.

BENEFITS

Among the main benefits are the learning a foreign language and working with different people from different countries. As reported by a student: *This is one of the best things that has ever happened to me. Every day I have the opportunity to develop my language skills as well as my knowledge of the world.*

Among the benefits are reported the kind attitude of the other students: everyone helped me in whatever way they could. Meeting and working with people with a different religion or race has many advantages and they enrich the person culturally. Students enjoyed team work, as cooperating with people of different religions or races in a team helps them a lot. It teaches the students that they can't work and be in a team with only with people similar to them, from the same race or from the same religion. At the end, students expect that this will better prepare them for the real world. Multicultural team allowed students to demonstrate their knowledge and skills, and to see what is the others' culture and their way of thinking. One student reported that: I had the chance of developing a case study with a student from Togo, who subsequently took the idea 10,000 km from Bulgaria, and made this project happen at his home. This is still working perfectly even today!



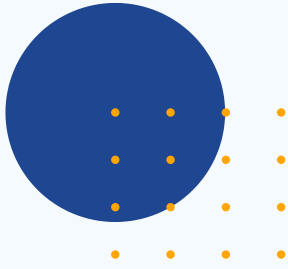


CHALLENGES

The main challenges and barriers faced by both international students and the teaching staff in promoting diversity and multiculturalism in higher education consist mainly of false expectations and language issues. Some students report that communication with foreign students is difficult as most of them stay as a separate group on their own. The difficulty arises when foreign students try to communicate in a very narrow circle, mainly among themselves, and this way the others students cannot approach and interact. Some students suggested that foreign students do not have Bulgarian telephone numbers or have strange surnames, and this makes a difficulty to find them through social media and social networks and add them to the group students' channels and chats forums.

Many challenges are related as well to the language in which students can communicate. Multicultural classes are complex structures of different people with different perception of the world around them and their communication with others may differ in many specific senses. On the other side, several international students report to survive acts of racism, discrimination and lack of understanding during their studies. In fact, the integration of foreign students is a very slow process. As one of the students report: *The biggest disadvantage is discrimination. Also, I felt ignored just because I come from a different religion and race, my comments were not taken seriously, that hurts me a lot and made me feel worthless.*

Another student said that she has experienced a lot of situations and cases of discrimination and racism. At the beginning she tried to respond and to criticize the others, being negative and offensive, but after a while she realized that this behaviour is useless and she cannot change the other people' attitudes and perceptions. Finally, as stated by TP from Serbia: *when I started studying at the university I didn't want to talk to my colleagues. It was impossible for me to understand what they were saying. I had many and really awful difficulties on all levels, from buying a coffee to administrative issues. The language was a barrier as well for studying. I had a lot of difficulty to understand the learning content as I couldn't understand the language.*



MECHANISMS

The main mechanisms can be related to giving scholarships for foreign students, internships that are organized and supported by the university management, and participation of the university in the Erasmus and other student programs, which promote the creation of well-structured and functioning multicultural classes. On a purely practical level, there are newly equipped student dormitories, where many of the international students can live in good conditions.

NEEDS

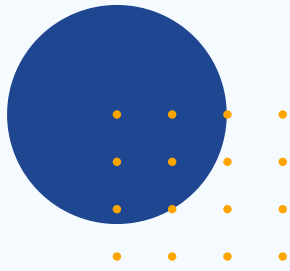
The most important issue is the good communication skills and the capacity to speak on a foreign language. That is why, most of the students emphasize on the need of language courses, manuals and materials for initial orientation. The most important thing for a person to feel good in a multinational environment is to communicate freely with all kinds of people and try to constantly improve his language skills.

It should be noticed as a good practice that international students present themselves at the beginning of the courses, so that the lecturers could have in mind the specific requirements of the multicultural classes.

Accepting students from various countries, teaching empathy, tolerance, understanding, desire to learn how to more easily integrate them and how to show them that we also want them to be part of our community.

It is evident that mental support is also very important because in most cases international students feel alone and misunderstood by the others just because they are from a foreign place. The fact that they do not know the language and cannot express well makes them feel isolated, they have many confusions and misunderstandings and they distrust the others.

Teachers should have the ability to empathize, to see the other person's perspective, should understand the other person and to be patient. Language difficulties are not an obstacle, just a challenge, and people should look for the opportunities, and not for the problems.



5. Discussion

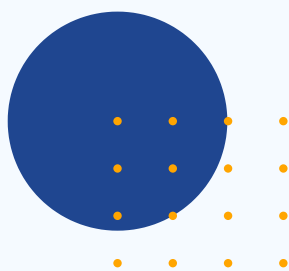
The survey results show that somehow teachers and students are left alone to experience different problems and practical issues in the Multiclass environment. In practice, there lack specific training solutions on University level for supporting the teaching staff for better managing multicultural and diverse classrooms in higher education institutions in Bulgaria.

Many teachers recognize as good practices and strategies for promoting diversity, multiculturalism and inclusion in class to employ specific instruments such as team projects, knowledge sharing activities, open class discussions and opportunities for the students to work together and to contribute to the group work. It can be very motivating for all to learn from each other. For example, good practices are to ask foreign students to discuss specific examples and questions from their local culture and country, to create specific solutions together and to cooperate. These practices can be easily integrated into the training curriculum and teaching materials. All participants in the interviews said that this open their perspective and is very motivating both for the students and the teachers. This makes them to enjoy being part of the international classroom.

On university level, it is possible for lecturers to have some sort of training and even certifications for verifying their international teaching skills. Some lecturers reported to have colleagues with bad English language who are teaching on multiclass environment, where students have problems to understand and complain. The first-hand experience is very important and more lecturers have to be encouraged to travel and to teach abroad.

In all cases, some additional courses on multicultural issues for lecturers can prepare them to take in consideration different factors such as cultural awareness, personal interactions and communication when teaching international students. Many lecturers do not recognize that their questions can be offensive for international students. There were two examples of a Serbian and a Turkish student, who received bad comments as they missed to put information specific to Bulgarian names/ or national history.





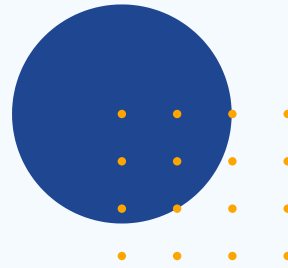
6. General evaluation and conclusions

In summary, the following general trends for the internalization of national HEI's can be identified. Bulgaria has good traditions for hosting international students and many foreigners study or work there. However, there lack a specific national-level policy for promoting Bulgarian HEI on international university fairs, as the main efforts for HEI internationalization and for attracting international students are made by individual Universities or by private companies. The majority of the international students (more than 60%) are enrolled in the Medical Universities. Even more, many Bulgarian students decide to study abroad due to the low visibility and prestige of the national HEI.

On an administrative level, there exist well established mechanisms for admitting, accepting and teaching foreign students in Bulgarian HEIs. The two main general options for international students include: to join a foreign language University program or to opt for an additional year for studying Bulgarian and then to choose among the large variety of Bulgarian HEI programs and courses. There are many international students who visit every semester different Bulgarian universities by using different forms of short-term stays, short-term Erasmus exchanges, join programs, exchange schemes and travels and others. The percentage of the English-speaking population is relatively high and there are many opportunities for international students to find a good community, employment and learning options.

The teaching staffs reported to be flexible and open to work with foreign students, but in fact, many of the international students reported to have survived bad experiences and cases of discrimination. So, it is important to prepare better Universities and particularly teaching and administrative staff how to cover specific aspects of the multicultural classroom management and training in Multicultural settings. Moreover, the lack of specific research in the topic of training and management of multicultural classrooms prove that the level of internationalization of Bulgarian HEIs is still small. So further efforts should be made to make Bulgarian HEI more open for international students, including better presentation and guiding materials, preparing staff for better working with foreign students, and providing more relevant, and accessible documents of English.

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