CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

SUBFLY STUDENT DEMOCRACY

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Buga Ioana Codruta

Ciocan Stefania-Alexandra

Galatan Cristina-Diana Amalia

Magdas Teodora-Alexandra   Coordinator: Sofica Aurelian

A. The main role of national cultures is to define and emphasize the importance of differences between nations. Moreover, each culture has its own features, traditions and beliefs that make every country unique. However, common points of interests, such as similar values and ideals, still exist and are vital to determine point of cohesion. The second most important aspect of national culture is that the individual possesses a sense of belongingness to a group that follows same values and "unwritten rules", inherited from previous generations. A consequence of sharing the same culture with a group of people is the fact that persons develop their identity following same pathways as their compatriots. As Hofstede explains in his theory, there are four aspects that influence people thinking about organisations:

1) *Power distance*: in Norway, people do not perceive the contrast between superiors and subordinates, whereas in countries such as Romania, this kind of difference is more visible.

2) *Uncertainty avoidance*: as we can see from the graph, Norway tolerates ambiguity, deviance, innovation, and competition way better than Romanians.

3) *Collectivist/individualist dimension*: we can observe a significant difference in conceiving reality from this perspective: in fact, while Romanian mentality is focused on a collectivist identity, Norwegians prefer an "I" approach, zooming on the individual needs.

4) *Masculine/feminine dimension*: as in the previous case, Norway and Romania have different standpoints when it comes to gender roles, wealth, and quality of life. As a matter of fact, a masculine country as Romania promotes a clear distinction of gender roles, competition, wealth, whereas a feminine-oriented country appreciates more fluid gender roles, co-operation, quality of life. They work to live, not live to work.

5) *Long-term/short-term dimensions*: from the graph below, the emerging information regards the time orientation of two countries with different roots and cultures: Norway is oriented towards short-term planning, profits, and self-determination, while Romania tends to appreciate more lifelong personal networks, future market position and similar aspirations within a company.

6) *Indulgence vs. restraint*: Norway, as well as Nordic countries, values at a higher degree, compared to Romania, freedom of speech, maintenance of social order and importance of leisure.
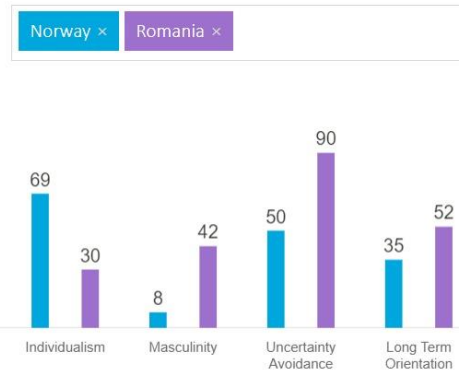
In a similar way, organizational culture has the paramount role of establishing the lifestyle and the psychological environment of a company. It refers to problem diagnosis and projection of improved ways of handling conflicts, synergy and workflows. Organizational culture helps teams overcome barriers of ambiguity. Moreover, organized and structured work lead people into evolving as a community and allows them to freely express their thoughts enhancing the well-being of individuals and the wealth of the company. In addition, the core values of the organization are better understood by employees and management staff if there is a clear, strong and accepted culture. Last but not least, the internal culture influences the nature of long-term goals and strategies, establishing the overall vision.

The main aim of a well-grounded management style is to highlight the way in which managers handle everyday tasks and objectives. It depends on the company's board of directors, on the industry in which they're operating and on the nation where headquarters are. The best outcomes, however, come with a diversity in terms of management styles, meaning that decision-makers should be flexible and adaptive enough to utilize different styles based of the current situations. In addition, appropriate management styles smooth the path toward lower turnover, more engaged employees and better business outcomes.

Our group shares the same vision regarding beliefs and values during interactions between international students and University, even though each of us has different backgrounds and ideals. We built our opinions on a questionnaire (*Annex 1*) we applied to a small sample composed of students (Norwegians and Erasmus) and professors.

The main conclusion we drew regards the partial incompatibility between cultures. One aspect that emerged from the questionnaire was that some international students, who have a different culture and a different way of approaching things, don't always appreciate the "laissez-faire" style of professors. A way to solve this issue might be creating a common starting point made of reciprocal benefits and shared objectives. However, opinions differ based on the origin of the international students: in fact, some others believe that the teaching approach is stricter here than in their homeland (i.d. mandatory assignments that must be fulfilled in order to have the permission to take the final exam).

First of all, student-university interaction should begin with creating symbiosis and listening actively to international students, so as to guarantee them the safe academic environment they need to become an integrated part of the community. The common ground should consist of some shared values such as the promotion of diversity, which

should be seen as a way to create added value for both parties, tolerance, cultural sensitivity, and creativity, which ultimately leads to innovation.

From a Romanian point of view, the ground beliefs that regulate the interaction between international students and university are more traditional: the desire to succeed in a country which offers various ways of life improvement like building the necessary knowledge to follow personal dreams, to have a recognised, appreciated social status in the domain you're performing in. All these achievements couldn't be accomplished in their home country.

Since one aspect that emerged from the interview is the absence of a student campus that can accommodate all students, we consider that the university should build such a place.

The structure of this establishment should encompass dorms, recreational spaces (such as gaming rooms, ping-pong/tennis areas, football court etc.), canteen, cafeteria, co-operation spaces, libraries, gym, laundry room, etc. The benefits that would come with the creation of such a place are an improved integration of Erasmus/international students, promoting a better lifestyle among the students, supporting a cohesion, and enhancing a stronger relationship and sense of belongingness between all students.

The biggest downside, however, is represented by the very high costs such a building would require, not only regarding the construction by itself, but also considering the maintenance expenses. Last but not least, one element that must not be neglected is the selection process of applicants. The best choice would be to give priority to Erasmus students, and to plan a selection method fair and transparent enough to give everyone the opportunity to access these complexes (the university should consider not only grades, but also the active involvement of applicants into the society, such as taking part into extracurricular activities).

B. We believe culture has a big influence on our everyday lives.

Globalization has a big impact when it comes to shared cultures and opportunities as everyone has a different mindset trying to adapt to a new environment and setting. People feel the need to integrate and to be integrated more and more nowadays in the society that they're part of and have a strong need of belonging.

Building knowledge and insight on cultural differences is one of the most important aspects as it has a significant influence on our social life and the way we perceive reality. Our group came with a proposition that encompasses all cultural dimensions and students' integration issues: an USN social media platform dedicated to Norwegians, Erasmus and international students at USN. Even though an academic platform already exists, it didn't really succeed in creating bonds and centralizing students interests and internal news.

One of the main aims of this app is to smooth the integration process of international and Erasmus students through valuing differences in culture and enhancing a sense of belongingness. Moreover, the app will be built in such a way that personal characteristics and interests will be highlighted in the personal profile of each student, showing their nationality, their favourite subjects and their main skills. In this way, students with different roots and perspectives upon life and society will be able to connect with each other and build intercultural and interpersonal knowledge. Study-buddy and companions with similar concerns will be easier to be found and partnerships

among students will flourish. As a consequence, social intelligence and sensitiveness will be sharpened and everyone can establish a solid foundation made of universal values and beliefs. Students' identity is also represented by USN culture, which is a common ground of both Norwegians and foreign students. One aspect that emerged from our interview is that both local and international students value same principles such as family, friends, qualitative education, nature, and self-improvement. Therefore, even if not all of them are aware, their starting point in terms of what they value and what they believe in is more or less the same.

Something that came to our attention after the questionnaire regards the integration process length. Many students complained about the abrupt interruption of communication between students after the first two week of the semester, when activities like *Fadderuke* and parties are organized. During this short period of time, diversity and new beginnings are celebrated, exposing international students to the Norwegian environment for the first time. However, when parties finishes and the introduction weeks end, the connection lessens, and students tend to be focused more on themselves and on their few old friends. The innovative power of the USN social platform is that this kind of barrier will be overcame. Thus, trying to stay connected on a daily basis and trying to get to know new people and new perspectives is our primary goal.

One representative of the Student Democracy association, after getting to know the strategy behind the USN social media app, agreed upon the utility and importance of having such a centralization system for academic purposes. She considers that relevant news and events could be shared and promoted on this platform. Moreover, the management aspect could be easily handled by one or two volunteers.

On the other side, we asked some Erasmus students to express their opinions about being represented as well within the boards and committees. Some of them consider that being directly represented is unnecessary, because of the low degree of practical knowledge about how things actually work in a different country; others believe that being represented by an Erasmus student might be useful since this way their issues could be understood and solved more easily.

To summarize everything up, culture means different things. It could mean values, beliefs, or even ethics. Everyone has his own vision about what culture truly means, but an undeniable aspect is that it plays a crucial role in people development.

ANNEX 1

Questions for Erasmus Students:
1. Why have you applied for a semester in Norway and what are you expect to achieve during your stay here?
2. What was the thing/aspect that terrorized you when you first arrived in Norway?
3. How has the integration process been? Could it be somehow improved? Which barriers must be overcome?
4. Are you or would you like to be represented in the committees?
5. What do you think about using an USN social media app?

Answers:
1. International students apply for studies in Norway because they enjoy the scenery, winter sports, culture, language and educational system.
2. The aspects that are seen as obstacles for them in Norway are the high costs of living, Covid-19 pandemic, coffee shops closing early and sometimes locals are not quite eager to help them integrate in their society.
3. Foreign students find it difficult to integrate as the locals are often referred to as shy and distant. The integration process has both positive and negative aspects, a positive aspect is that students and also the faculty staff organized trips and meetings to get to know people and their culture and a negative aspect is that locals break contact after the initial integration process.
4. The students would like to be represented in/by board committees because they want their voices to be heard and not only get the feel that their opinions matter but also see the change that they request be put into action as well as possible as they don't have enough insight about how the university deals with such issues.
5. Many students agree that there should be a way that helps them integrate easier by easily keeping in touch with the local and international students.

Questions for Norwegian Students:
1. What kind of values guides you throughout the day?
2. How do you perceive the professor-student relationship?
3. What's something a foreigner should know about your "unspoken rules"?
4. How do you think a smooth integration process should look like?
5. How do you think foreigners bring added value to your intercultural sphere?
6. What do you think about using an USN social media app?

Answers:

1. What motivates and guides Norwegian students every day are a set of values that are well defined as family, friends, quality of education and becoming the best version of themselves.
2. The student/teacher relation is perceived as both negative and positive, some students believe they're too straightforward and need more help and guiding to go through the lessons while others perform well on their own.
3. Norwegian students believe that foreigners should know that locals are usually shy, egocentric and they enjoy their privacy.
4. All students believe in order to have a smooth integration there needs to be some facilities and activities that initiate it such as well-defined campuses and dorms that can accommodate most students and offer possibilities to do leisure and recreation activities, organize meetings….
5. The students believe that foreigners bring added values to their intercultural sphere by offering them a new perspective of the outside world, learning new languages and learning about another culture.
6. Most Norwegian students agree that it would be a good idea to have a platform where they can connect with foreign students although some of them believe there would be a couple students that might not be interested in interacting this way.

Questions for Professors:
1. In which way the presence of Erasmus students and/or international students influenced and improved the interaction (student-student, professor-student) in class?
2. Have you ever experienced an intercultural misunderstanding?
3. Which core values and beliefs do you think should be the starting point for a flourishing beneficial intercultural interaction?
4. How do you think international students should be integrated into the already existing and national-values-based academic structure so as to smooth the process and benefit from culture differences?

Answers:
1. Erasmus/international students had a positive influence on student/student and student/teacher interaction because Norwegians are a bit shy and find it difficult to leave their comfort zone, this challenges them to understand how other cultures manage different situations and adapt more easily in different situations.
2. Intercultural misunderstanding is quite common in Norway, even if you're born and raised in Norway, when you have different origins, misconceptions start to appear within the Norwegian social group.
3. Safety and respect are the core values that build the foundation for beneficial intercultural interaction.
4. The students should have the impression that they're in an international place, not in a Norwegian place, so this will create a global image.