DEALING WITH DIFFERENCES IN ACADEMIC STANDARDS AND LEARNING PRACTICES AMONG INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AS PART OF UNIVERSITY SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

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Abstract. *The focus of the present research is international students' adaptation in the academic environment. The working hypothesis is that there exists a gap between international students' perception of the university policy dealing with academic problems and university (international office, student council, and teaching staff) vision of the same issue. The current research employs the following methods: the monographic (literature review) method and series of semi-structured interviews (20 interviews with international students, seven interviews with university lectures who deal with these students on a daily basis), and an in-depth interview with the university vice rector. The research questions are: (1) What are the key factors of the international graduate students' academic adjustment in Turiba University? (2) What is the role of the university in assuring international students' academic integration? The results are interpreted qualitatively, using the method of inductive thematic analysis.*
Keywords: *internationalization of education, international students, academic challenges, university social responsibility.*

Introduction

The world of higher education has been transforming rapidly. Among the key drivers of change, it is possible to mention such factors as advanced communication and technological services, increased international mobility, emphasis on the market and its liberalization, focus on knowledge society, increased private investment and decreased public support for higher education. (Knight, 2004) It leads to the internationalization of higher education. International students' enrolment in higher education establishments in Latvia has expanded considerably within last few years. It is caused by two main factors: the general tendency of internationalization of education (mobility by students and professors), by growing competition among the higher education institutions in Latvia (due to demographic and economic reasons). According to the UNESCO Institute for Statistics' (UIS) Global Education Digest (2006), an internationally mobile student has left his or her country, or territory of origin, and moved to

another country or territory with the singular objective of studying. Since they come from different cultural, political and educational backgrounds, they inevitably encounter difficulties in their academic, social, and culture adaptation. This brings forth the question about ways the universities deal with these problems. In general, there are two main approaches: (1) day-to-day issue solving, and (2) university social responsibility program. The focus of the present research is international students' adaptation in the academic environment. The working hypothesis is that there exists a gap between international students' perception of the university policy dealing with academic problems and university (international office, student council, and teaching staff) vision of the same issue. The current research employs the following methods: the monographic (literature review) method and series of semi-structured interviews (20 interviews with international students, seven interviews with university lectures who deal with these students on a daily basis), and an in-depth interview with the university vice rector. The results are interpreted qualitatively, using the method of inductive thematic analysis. (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

Literature Review

The main three clusters of the theoretical concepts related to the theme of the present article are student mobility and internationalization of education; university social responsibility and stakeholder theory; teaching international students and academic performance.

N. V. Varghese states that cross-border higher education has become an important mode of the internationalization of the higher education, as this comprises such factors as providers of education (universities and instructors), programs, course materials, teachers and students moving beyond national boundaries. One of the most important components of the cross-border education is students' movement away from their home countries and adaptation in the host country and host university. (Varghese, 2008) The latter aspect is of a special interest in the context of our current research, since students' mobility entails a growing social, cultural, and academic role on the part of the hosting university. J. Knight has provided an overview of the concepts and definitions related to the internationalization of education. She admits, that the decisive drivers of the process are the development of the modern means of communication and technological services (this implies possibility to enter university in other country while staying at home, as well as to participate in webinars, group discussions, etc.); increased staff mobility (for example, within ERASMUS + mobility programs); emphasis on market economy (increased levels of private investments and shrinking support for public education); focus on the knowledge society (new for forms of knowledge acquisition). (Knight, 2004) The institutions can devise

and implement programs within their internationalization strategies: student exchange programs, foreign language study, internationalized curricula, area or thematic studies, work/study abroad, international students, teaching/learning process, joint degree programs, double degree programs, cross-cultural training, faculty and staff mobility, visiting lecturers and scholars, and establishing links between academic programs and other strategies. (Knight, 2007) The student mobility may be for shorter (a few weeks) or longer terms (half year or full year), students are enrolled in studies at the host institution and study alongside their discipline peers. This creates a number of questions: What do students take away from their experience overseas? How educational is that? Is the overseas experience transformative or simply a matter of translocating the student? What practices or processes used in mobility program help to make the experience more than just 'educational tourism'? What indeed is the 'take home' learning for students who participate in student mobility programs? (Richardson & Munday, 2013) According to H. Wu and others, students have to deal with different challenges – the academic (language proficiency, different teaching styles, note taking, etc.) the social (as simple as everyday habits) and the cultural ones. (Wu et. al., 2015) Helping to overcome these barriers, in our opinion, should be a part of the university social responsibility agenda.

The university social responsibility is perceived as a philosophy of a university as an ethical approach to develop and engage with the local and global community in order to sustain the social, ecological, environmental, technical, and economic development. (Chen et al., 2015) A. Esfijani and others have identified seven main elements of USR that are important to attempt any research in the field; they are engagement, education, research, service, ethics, transparency, stakeholders. (Esfijani et al., 2013) Among the desired outcomes of the university social responsibility, we can mention the following ones: community of scholars and learners, educated graduates who exhibit excellent leadership skills and concern for the environment and the societal well-being. (Knowledge Societies: Universities and their Social Responsibilities, 2011) A number of researchers stress the importance of stakeholder approach when talking about the university social responsibility. (Jongbloed et al., 2008; Mainardes et al., 2010) Stakeholders are any group who can affect or is affected by the achievement of organization's objectives, any constituencies in the organization's external environment that are affected by organization's decisions and actions. Among the stakeholder groups directly affected by the university activities are students, employees, competition. (Maric, 2013) In our opinion, international students form a very specific stakeholder group that has particular demands, interests and networks that need strong management. The first step towards that kind of management is identification of their needs.

Internationalization of education brings forth a broad range of issues related to differences in teaching and learning styles (cultures of learning), academic requirements, communication styles, grading systems, etc. There is various research devoted to exploration of these themes. They can be summarized in the following way:

Adapting to new academic environment and university culture (Valka, 2015; Floyd, 2015; Chen et. al., 2009) The main aspects of the acculturation are academic adjustment that refers to the degree of a student's coping with various educational demands; social adjustment that describes how well students deal with the group assignments and project works; personal and emotional adjustment scale indicates the level of distress when adapting to the academic environment; attachment reflects the degree of commitment to the institutional goals. (Rienties et. al., 2012; Wu et. al, 2015; Eze & Ingebedion, 2015)

Learning strategies that can be classified as the subject-matter specific and the general, where the former implies concentration upon particular problems, but the latter – rather general and interconnected perspective. (Li et. al, 2010) This also implies the development of critical thinking – critical analysis or literature and independent writing, as well as not relying on the professors' viewpoint solely. (Chen et. al., 2009; McLean & Ransom, 2005)

Learning tactics – understanding requirements (written and/or oral), note taking, preparing presentations, and participation in seminars. International students may experience difficulties in understanding assessment principles (grading system), obscure assignment titles and instructions. (Ridley, 2014; Valka, 2015; He & Banham, 2009)

All researchers stress language proficiency requirement. Without it, it is virtually impossible to follow professors' instructions and be successful academically. (Floyd, 2015; Hagedorn & Ren, 2012)

Difficulties dealing with administrative issues (registration for study courses at the beginning of the semester, receiving assessment papers at the end of the course). (Valka, 2015) Of course, there is a difference among short-term exchange (including ERASMUS) students and full-time international students, since exchange students attend a set of particular courses within different group settings, while full-time students are engaged in the regular study activities.

J. Ren and L. S. Hagedorn conducted a survey on the international graduate and postgraduate students' academic performance. Contrary to the undergraduates, they already have previous study experience in their home country higher education institutions, so they have to readjust to already higher academic requirements. (Ren & Hagedorn, 2012)

Other important factors that affect international students' academic success are related to teaching styles and structure of presentation materials, as well as to students' introduction to alternative research methodologies. According to

R. M. Lebcir, H. Wells and A. Bond the academic performance model consists three main elements – teaching style; English language and communication, as well as assessment methods. (Lebcir et. al., 2008) J. Ryan's research is devoted to the 'gaps' in understanding. She concluded that lecturers sometimes view international students as homogeneous group with similar learning styles and expectations. (Ryan, 2005)

Overall, researchers suggest that further studies are necessary in order to improve international students' academic competitiveness that would lead to the higher learning and research standards of the host universities themselves.

Methodology

Research design. Qualitative methods were adopted for the current research because the purpose of this study was to understand in depth the issue of the role university plays in international students' academic adaptation. This article is based on the small-scale research at a largest private university in Latvia – "Turiba". Therefore, we conducted a student survey with open-ended questions. Twenty students were identified as a homogenous sample (i.e., exhibiting similar characteristics). (Zikmund et al., 2013; Mason, 2002) This particular group was chosen because of their previous experience on the undergraduate level in their respective home higher education institutions. Using non-probability purposive sampling, the representativeness was limited in this study. The aim of the current research was not to make extrapolations based on the representative sample, but rather – to identify the critical aspects of academic adaptation and work out specific and targeted solutions. The participants were from such countries as Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, India, Sri-Lanka, Congo, Egypt, Nigeria, and Turkey. To complement students' experience we conducted seven semi-structured interviews with lecturers engaged in the process of teaching international students. To discuss findings of the surveys and the university position regarding difficulties in the academic adaptation we conducted an in-depth interview with the Vice-Rector for Study Development and International Cooperation of the university.

Data collection and analysis. Students were handed out questionnaires with open-ended questions, they were asked to fill out them anonymously, and the students were assured of the confidentiality of data. The questionnaire consisted of six questions related to differences in teaching styles, in academic requirements, their proficiency in English, their prior academic experience, pressures to excel, and interaction with lecturers. Students were assured of the confidentiality of data, and their full consent was received prior to the survey. The semi-structured interviews took place in the offices of the respective interviewees. They consisted of three questions regarding problems regarding the academic standards and teaching practices in Latvia, causes of the academic difficulties and

suggestions how to overcome them. The in-depth interview was recorded and transcribed. Data analysis was qualitative; the themes were developed inductively from the data through the cyclical process of coding and revisiting the questionnaire responses and interview transcripts. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. A theme captures something important about the data regarding the research questions. The thematic analysis consists of several phases: transcribing data, coding interesting features, colliding codes into potential themes and interpretation. (Braun & Clarke, 2006) The repeating patterns in the current research that were coded accordingly were: teaching style in the host university in comparison with the home universities; differences in academic requirements and evaluation systems; the language proficiency issues; the role of the students' previous academic experience; the day-to-day interaction with professors. Conclusions were made based on the juxtaposition of students' lecturers' and administration's opinions upon the themes inferred from the data. We put forward two research questions:

RQ 1: What are the key factors of the international graduate students' academic adjustment in Turiba University?

RQ 2: What is the role of the university in assuring international students' academic integration?

Research and Discussion

The findings of graduate student survey demonstrated that international students face a number of issues while studying abroad. The survey consisted of six open-ended questions. The analysis was carried out in an inductive manner, the main themes were identifies within each question.

The first question was about the differences in teaching styles in the students' home university and the host university in Latvia and about difficulties, they encounter academically. The answers rendered three main streams of arguments. (1) Teaching in the University is perceived to be of more practical nature than in the respondents' home universities. Let us mention one of the exemplary answers: "Yes. There is much difference in the teaching style. In my country, it is mainly theoretically orientated. In Latvia it is practically orientated. Here we have to do many projects, presentations which help us to develop our presentation skills." In general, students do not perceive this practical orientation as barrier to their academic achievements, although they note that not always they clearly understand professors' instructions and evaluation criteria. "But I think that in my university we receive much more new information than here and also the exams are more difficult." (2) Communication with professors in the Latvian University is quite informal, there is no power distance. As a negative feature, respondents mention the lack of communication in-between lectures. "So our doubts remain

unsolved. In India one can express any doubts to the lecturer between the classes." So, we can see that although the communication form during lectures encourage students' participation and active engagement, they feel lack of guidance and left to their own devices, that can affect their academic performance. (3) Students expressed their opinion about the form of instruction. In general, they were quite content with it; nevertheless, they stressed differences, such as use of presentations instead of written tests and examinations that require specific skills, that not all international students exhibit. The solution, according to students could be organization a set of introductory lectures. Overall, students tended to see group work as positively stimulating activity. "Yes, there are many group activities. They make us closer and let to understand lessons more clearly." Some of the respondents were concerned with the length of lectures. Our conclusion here is that the instructor has to be aware of different pace and endurance of the students in the group.

The second question of the survey was about possible differences in academic requirements in students' home universities and in Turiba University. The answers can be divided in three thematic groups. (1) There are students that did not admit any differences, saying that the systems are similar. (2) Differences in the grading system, because in some countries 100-point system is used, whereas in others students are evaluated according to 5-point system in comparison with Latvian 10-point system. Students expressed the wish for better and more precise explanation of the grading requirements in the beginning of the course. (3) Students found differences in the testing system – students have to go through the series of tests during the semester, while in their home country they have only mod-semester testing. Interestingly enough, none of the respondents regarded this as a barrier, rather – they were talking about necessity to develop presentation skills.

The third question was about the role of English proficiency in reaching their academic goals. The answers were uniform – all students admitted that their English skills are satisfactory for following lectures and participating in seminars. One student though pointed out that sometimes lecturers' English were not so good to rely all necessary information. There is no reason for doubting the truthfulness of answers; we have to conclude that perhaps the questions should have been more specific, related to specific activities (e.g. note taking, participation in discussions, understanding assignments, etc.)

In the fourth question, the stress was on the role of graduate students' previous academic experience. Most of the students answered that knowledge they have gained during their bachelor studies was enough to continue their studies on the next level, apart from a few cases when students changed their specialization from computer sciences to business administration. However, the

situation would be the same with the local students if they changed their specialization.

The fifth question was regarding pressures from their families to excel in studies and to receive high grades. There was almost fifty-fifty divide in answers – positive and negative. Though there is no a definite proof, we can make an educated guess that students who had had previous working experience and whoa were paying for their studies themselves did not feel any outside pressures ("No, because I always tend to be responsible for my own life in any situation, therefore I have no any kind of pressure"), whereas students whose parents were paying their education fees, felt obliged to excel in their grades.

The sixth question was about interaction with professors. Predominantly all answers were positive – from simple statements ("Yes, they are helpful and friendly") to longer explanations ("Yes, we can send our projects via e-mail, we can have qualified consultations from professors"). Nevertheless, a few students expressed their dissatisfaction. Although the overall tendency is positive, criticisms show that perhaps it is necessary to plan the time for short individual face-to-face consultations during the semester.

The second step of the empirical research consisted of seven semi-structured interviews with instructors who deal with the graduate students on daily basis. The interviews were taped, and after that transcribed. The instructors were asked three questions: (1) What are the main problems graduate students face academically? (2) What could be reasons for these problems? Education System? Culture differences? (3) What should the university do to solve these problems? Summing up, the answers were along the following lines. (1) International students require longer adaptation period – to the university academic environment, to professors, to their groupmates. Students have different cultural backgrounds, different time perception, that sometimes make it problematic to submit study papers on time. As well as students' educational background is not always adequate to be successful during MBA studies. Part of the students lack IT skills that calls for slow explanation and waste of time and energy for all parties involved. One of the professors was quite critical in describing students' attitude – they try to skip tasks, there have been even cases of plagiarism. (2) The reasons accounted for in the semi-structured interviews were culture differences, differences in education systems and academic requirements, in mentality. (3) The university has to have a special strategy dealing with international (undergraduate and graduate) students – first, students have to be tested before starting their studies (their education documents should be tested as well). In case their English level is not adequate, students have to attend language courses for a year (paid by the students themselves). If they fail again, they have to be sent home. To help students in their adaptation the university can organize company visits, invite quest lecturers, organize thematic meetings, the form of the lecture should be a

discussion, rather than an instructor's monologue. All requirements should be clearly formulated, substantiated, relied to students, professors should stick to them meticulously.

The third step of our research consisted of in-depth interview with Turiba University vice-rector for Study Development and International Cooperation. The Vice-Rector admitted that there are considerable differences in the international students' academic performance; mostly they depend on the region of origin. For example, students from the Northern Europe and Germany are highly organized and independent in their studies, their English proficiency is good. On the other hand, the students from Asia (India, Uzbekistan and other countries), as well as students from Africa (Egypt) have different cultural, as well as educational upbringing, they are coming from quite hierarchical systems (both political and family structures), they are used to control and strict guidance. When coming to Latvia, they have to be more self-organized (the university curriculum presupposes a lot of independent study work), so sometimes they might fail for this reason alone. The university responsibility would be, first, to work with every international student and, second, to prepare the teaching staff for working within the international environment. In order to accomplish the latter task, the school organizes integration and culture training seminars for teaching staff and for those who are involved with international students on daily basis. The important thing to do, according to the Vice-Rector, is to be strict regarding all academic requirements and terms, in other words, not to step down. Sometimes the international students admit also the localism and lack of international experience of the university professors. This is a problem that should be attended to urgently, and this can be a part the university social responsibility strategy.

Conclusions

1. The working hypothesis that there exist a gap between students' and professors perception of their academic adjustment is proved. Students tend to see their situation rather optimistic (especially regarding their academic background and English proficiency), while their instructors detect some serious issues, that could be solved by the university intervention in the form of the university social responsibility.
2. The answer to the first research question is the following: The key factors of international graduate students' academic adaptation in the Turiba University are cultural differences (time perception, individualism vs. collectivism, power distance), differences in students' previous academic experience, study skills, insufficiently formulated requirements, professors' lack of international teaching experience.

3.   The answer to the second research question is the following: The University should view international students as a stakeholder group with particular needs that can be satisfied by the means of intercultural training of all parties involved, raising intercultural awareness, approaching students on the individual basis (not as a homogenous group).

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