



## EXPLORING FOREIGN STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS, EXPECTATIONS AND CHALLENGES TOWARDS EDUCATION SERVICES IN ROMANIA

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### Abstract

The study examined the perceptions, expectations and challenges among foreign students studying in higher learning institutions in Romania. The study employed a Likert scale and interview to collect students' opinions. A total of 85 participants out of which males were 65 (76.5%) and females were 20 (23.5%) students from the University of Bucharest, University of Politehnica, University of Oil-Gas Ploiesti, Academic Studies of Economic Bucharest (ASE), University of Babes Bolyai, and Carol Davila University of Medicine were involved in the study. The foreign students involved in this study were from Asia, Africa, Southern America and Europe. The responses of foreign students were divided into two parts. The first part was for the perceptions and expectations and the second was for the challenges faced, which included; education style, financial difficulties, language barriers, homesickness, supervision problems and social/cultural adjustment.

**Keywords:** foreign, perception, students' expectations, challenges, Romania

### Introduction

In the last decade, education has become the world leading sign of reputation and higher learning institutions are among the largest service industry of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. These higher learning institutions are facing multiple tasks, not only to maintain and uphold their identities but also to provide quality and standard services which provide good opportunities in attracting foreign and local students (Hamidal & Rajab, 2012). In Romania, after the fall of the communist regime in 1989, reports reveal

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that higher education has grown dramatically in both enrolment and number of institutions. Enrolment has particularly grown in the fields of social sciences, medicine, pharmacy, as well as engineering, thus attracting a big number of foreign and local students (Maier, 2016; <http://education.stateuniversity.com>).

Reports show that education reforms that took place between 1995 and 2000; shift ideology of wanting foreign currency and the Bologna process which directed all EU member states to enter into a new era of knowledge-based and market-driven economies by competing with each other are the main reasons for the drastic change in higher education (Roman, 2008; Maier, 2016). Romania has made a major progressive step towards adopting the European education standards by restructuring the entire spectrum of the whole University programmes (Bachelor, Master's and Doctoral) studies. These progressive changes have not only attracted Romanian students who are increasingly enrolled in public and private universities, but also a number of foreign students from different countries which are now making Romania a popular destination along the Balkan Zone.

### **Higher Education in Romania**

In Romania, the state is responsible for maintenance of Higher Education through the Ministry of Education, Research, Youth and Sports. Both public and private higher learning institutions are guaranteed autonomy by the state, national legislation and educational policies whereby all of them must take part in the accreditation procedures as explained by the accreditation of higher learning institutions of 1993 (Eurydice, 2007). Currently, there are about 125 public and private universities and polytechnics with a total enrolment of 540,560 local students and 19,295 foreign students in the year 2010/13 (MECTS, 2014). Nevertheless, the task of ensuring the standards and quality of education for both public and private colleges/universities is under the Romania Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS). According to ARACIS (2008), the colleges/universities are required to maintain high quality standards and create quality culture. Standards and culture quality should measure high quality education in terms of good pedagogical standards, opportunity for students to intellectual challenges and critical thinking, as well as ability to solve individual and societal problems.

The Romanian education system has made a tangible progress since 2005 when ARACIS got full membership registration in the European Quality Assurance in Higher Education in 2009, whose results are seen today, since some Romanian Universities were among the Shanghai top 500 world ranking universities in the scientific and research production. These universities include, Alexandru Ioan-Cuza University,

Bucharest University, Iasi University, Babes-Bolyai University, Politehnica University of Bucharest, Technical University of Cluj-Napoca and West University of Timisoara (ERAWATCH, 2013). This observable progress and other factors such as affordable tuition fees and friendly visa-processing system, to a greater extent, have increased the desire of foreign students to take the option of studying in Romania, and as a result, many foreign students have been enrolled in these universities.

Currently, higher learning institutions in Romania are hosting the largest number of foreign students from Europe, Africa, Middle East, Asia and Southern America. A total number of 19,295, foreign students were enrolled in various higher learning institutions from 2010 - 2013 (MECTS, 2014) out of which the highest percentage were enrolled in Medicine and Engineering degree programmes. The foreign students can be grouped into; those under the Romanian Government Scholarship Scheme which takes 85 students each year from developing countries, and ERASMUS students who are in exchange programmes and self-financed students.

Besides, the continuous influx of foreign students from Asia, Africa and the Middle East countries into Romania raises some questions on whether it is genuinely for educational purposes or it is just being used as a gateway to other developed European countries for the purpose of looking for a better life and permanent stay. Therefore, it is against this background that the study examined perceptions of foreign students towards education services in Romania and explored expectations and challenges in their education undertakings.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of foreign students towards the education services provided by higher learning institutions in Romania and find out the expectations and challenges in their academic undertakings.

### **Research Questions**

In view of the background and purpose of the study, this study was guided by three important questions:

1. *What are the perceptions of foreign students towards education services in higher learning institutions in Romania?*
2. *What are the expectations of foreign students on the acquired knowledge from higher learning institutions in Romania?*
3. *What challenges do foreign students face in their academic life in Romania?*

## **Methodology**

In order to study the perceptions of students on education services provided by the Romanian higher learning institution's, interview and Likert scale measures were developed to measure perceptions, expectations and challenges towards education services provided. This method allowed the researcher to capture students' opinions. An interview session was carried for a small sample of students whom the researcher was able to meet at nearest university hostels and campuses.

The study involved foreign students from the University of Bucharest, Politehnica University of Bucharest, University of Oil-Gas Ploiesti, Academic Studies of Economic Bucharest, University of Babes Bolyai, and Coral Davila University of Medicine. Participants were obtained through one-to-one meetings at the university campus, hostels and libraries as well as using friendships networking. A total number of 85 participants, out of which 65 (76.5%) were males and 20 (23.5) were females were involved in this study. Participants were from Germany, Tanzania, Kenya, Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Nigeria, Russia, Venezuela, Thailand, Iran, Burundi, Somalia, India, Cameroon, Algeria, Guinea, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Liberia and Turkey. All these participants were obtained from different disciplines of studies, such as medicine, engineering, business administration, economics, geology, art and design, computer sciences, literature and education science.

## **Data Analysis**

Data obtained from a measured Likert scale of 1= Extremely satisfied 2= Very satisfied 3=Moderately satisfied and 4= Not at all satisfied, were coded and analysed descriptively using SPSS version 20 and summarized in frequencies and percentages. Interview data and open-ended questions were presented as paraphrases in the thematic format. All data were presented according to the three themes under this study, which are; perceptions, expectations and challenges.

## **Results and Discussion**

Based on the purpose of the study, which sought to understand the perception of foreign students towards educational services provided by higher learning institutions, their expectations and challenges; the findings of this study are divided into two major parts. The first part presents students' perceptions and their expectations and the second part presents the challenges they are facing in colleges/university academic life.

### Why Study in Romanian Colleges/Universities?

The study sought to investigate the reasons for foreign students' choice for Romania as a place to study. This question received many different answers which are presented in **Table 1**.

**Table 1:** Respondents' responses on their choice to study in Romania

Responses	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)
Romanian Government scholarship/ERASMUS scholarship	18	21.2
Affordable university tuition fees	36	42.4
Easy admission process, e.g., no language requirement and age limit	14	16.5
Friendly Visa system	17	20.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>85</b>	<b>100.00</b>

From **Table 1**, affordable tuition fees (42.4%) and scholarships from the Romanian government and Erasmus scheme (21%) were the major motives behind the decision by many students from Africa, Arabic countries, Europe and Asia to study in Romanian universities. The observations in Table 1 are in line with data available in the Weingarten site (2013) which shows that Romania had affordable tuition fees, ranging from 2,500€ to 5,000€ for undergraduate and 4,000€ to 7,000€ for postgraduate, as compared to other European Member States which are not tuition free. In France, for example, tuition fees range from 4,000€ to 13,500€; Denmark - 6,000€ to 16,000€; Finland - 3000€ to 20,000€; Sweden - 9,000€ to 15,750€; and, Spain - 5,000€ to 12,000€.

### Foreign Students' Perceptions and Expectations towards Education Services

A *foreign student* is someone who is not a Romanian citizen or a prominent resident, but is studying in Romania. Similarly, *perception* is the way in which an individual considers, understands and interprets something in order to get a clear image (Hamidal & Rajab, 2012). Regardless of the exposure towards certain services or information, as well as how individuals choose and manage the information, it differs and depends on one's understanding and interpretation. Likewise, in the provision of education, students have different perceptions towards the different services provided by an institution and these differences depend on one's needs and how the services provided meet his/her expectations. In this regard, foreign student's perceptions and expectations towards education services provided by Romanian education institutions

which might determine their future life after graduation and returning back to their home countries or looking for jobs and opportunities were examined.

**Table 2:** Students perceptions on services provided by universities such as education delivery and contents, teaching and non-teaching support and examination procedures (n=85)

Services Provided	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
<b>Education delivery and contents</b>		
Extremely satisfied	22	25.9
Very satisfied	53	62.4
Moderately satisfied	10	11.8
<b>Professor's support</b>		
Extremely satisfied	4	4.7
Very satisfied	20	23.5
Moderately satisfied	61	71.2
<b>Supporting staff support</b>		
Extremely satisfied	9	10.6
Very satisfied	31	36.5
Moderately satisfied	45	52.9
<b>Examination assessment, grading and feedback</b>		
Extremely satisfied	12	14.1
Very satisfied	45	52.9
Moderately satisfied	20	23.5
Not satisfied	8	9.4

The information presented in **Table 2** shows that 62.4 percent of the students who participated were very satisfied with the content and delivery approaches, while 71.2 percent and 52.9 percent were moderately satisfied with the support provided by university teaching and non-teaching staff respectively. In addition to that, 52.9 percent of students were very satisfied with examination assessment, grading and the way the feedback was provided, whereas 9.4 percent were not satisfied with examination procedures.

**Table 3:** Students' perceptions on service delivery, tuition fees, acquired knowledge and skills and accommodation and Internet (n=85)

Services provided	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
<b>University fees</b>		
Extremely satisfied	6	7.1
Very satisfied	64	75.3
Moderately satisfied	15	17.6
<b>Accommodation and internet</b>		
Extremely satisfied	7	8.2
Very satisfied	28	32.9
Moderately satisfied	50	58.8
<b>Acquired knowledge and skills</b>		
Extremely important	77	90.6
Somewhat important	8	9.4
<b>Expectations</b>		
High expectations	80	94.1
Moderate expectations	5	5.9

Basing on the data presented in **Table 3**, 75.3 percent of the students enrolled in Romania education institutions were very satisfied with the tuition fees, 58.8 percent were moderately satisfied with the accommodation services and 90.6 percent found the knowledge and skills acquired extremely important, while about 94.1 percent of the students had high expectation and 5.9 percent had moderate expectations from these institutions in the labour market.

### **Challenges that Foreign Students' Face in Academic life**

In general, students join universities with the goal of winning the study line, as they tend to choose the top universities in order to get a strong education basis as well as to create global link and long life relationship and success. Nevertheless, in their course of study, students studying in Romania face many challenges in their academic life before they reach their expectations and success; just like many other students studying in foreign countries all over the world. The challenges reported by the students who participated in the study were education style, supervision problem, language barrier, financial difficulties, homesickness and social/cultural adjustment.

### **Education style**

Foreign students, especially in undergraduate programmes from Africa, Asia and the Middle East, reported that the education system in Romania was somehow

different from that of their countries, although they were well prepared and had performed well in high schools. The participants maintained that, in the first weeks of their class, they felt that they were not prepared for academic life in Romania because almost all courses taught in the Romanian universities were a series or a continuation of what had been taught in high schools in Romania. This was mentioned to have caused a lot of stress and difficulties for some students; and that as they tried to cope with the situation they found themselves behind everyone and felt as if they were going off the academic line.

### **Language barrier**

Language mastery was the problem facing many foreign students both using in Romanian and English language as mediums of instruction. It was mandatory for all students under Romanian government scholarships to take a one-year language preparation course/programme because their program of study was taught in Romanian language. The study found that students using Romanian as their language of instruction were ineffective in class participation due to poor intonation, pronunciation of words and phrases and their inability to respond quickly or have courage to ask questions in the class. Correspondingly, it was reported that even those students who were studying their programmes in English faced problems as most of the lecturers were not fluent enough in English; thus, at some point ending up in explaining the difficult parts of the subject in Romanian language which affected the students who were not familiar with the language.

### **Financial difficulties**

Romania, like many other middle income countries in Europe, has not created enough opportunities for jobs, not only for students but also for her citizens. However, the available opportunities for students have restrictions on student work visa and students were ineligible to work in Romania; and, if granted to work the privileges were limited or fixed for only four hours. The study found that many students, mainly from Africa, the Middle East and Asia, are ineligible to get financial awards or loans from the government of Romania. The majority of the students reported to depend on family back home for financial support. Hence, any delay in arrival of subsistence allowances from their families put them in a very difficult time which affected their class attendance.



### **Supervision problem**

It was expected that at any level of study, students must produce a scholarly work that could have an impact in their societies back home. Despite the fact that students must work independently in their thesis writing, they still need appropriate support/guidance from their supervisors to shape their projects for better results. Almost 27% of the respondents who responded to this question reported that supervision was a challenge to their academic life since they received less help from professors to shape their project work.

### **Homesickness**

The separation of students from their families, loved ones and friends was reported to be a major challenge facing many foreign students and one of the factors that could lower their academic performance if immediate support was not provided by the guidance and counselling departments. The study found that almost more than half (55.9%) were reported to have been stressed for being away from their loved ones (wife, husband and children), mother, father and friends. In the same vein, 37.5% were reported to have been calling their loved ones and families once or twice a day and more than half (53.4%) were reported to have been calling their families twice a week.

### **Social/Cultural adjustment**

It is obvious that foreign students, who are studying abroad, not only in Romania, face social and cultural problems the moment they arrive in the foreign countries. It was imperative and of necessity for the foreign students to adapt as fast as possible to the new environment since this, naturally affects ones' ability to concentrate on the studies. The same situation was found to affect foreign students in Romania who face the same problem of social/cultural adjustment, including; classroom situation, immigration paperwork issues, different food taste, language and people looking different, which increased their loneliness, frustration and anxiety thus making some of them even think of going back home.

### **Recommendations**

This study was concerned with examining the perceptions, expectations and challenges facing foreign students studying in Romanian colleges and universities. Considering the results of the study on the perceptions, expectations and challenges that foreign students face, the following recommendations are put forward:

- University lecturers need to maintain the structure and rules of English programmes by avoiding code-switching (mixing of English and Romanian language), principally in those classes meant to be taught in English.
- There should be change of attitude among professors who should take their full responsibility to contribute in the academic and intellectual development of the students by ensuring that students assigned to them are competent and able to produce a high quality project report.
- The university management needs to improve and provide better services related to accommodation and internet in order to fulfil the needs and expectations of foreign as well as local students.
- Moderate level does not mean that the services provided by institutions are poor, but rather that the institutions have to do better than that, in order to popularize their institutions and to encourage the alumni to recommend others to join their institutions.

## Conclusion

The purpose of the study was to examine the perceptions, expectations and challenges among foreign students studying in higher learning institutions in Romania. During 1975 - 1990 the number of foreign students who were enrolled in Romanian higher learning institutions was low at both local and foreign levels. It is apparent that after the fall of the communist regime and internalization of Romanian higher learning institutions with the number of different programmes, low level of tuition fees and living costs and the prestige of the higher education system, i.e., the quality of education and the existence of some rare and prestigious types of programmes such as oil and gas had attracted a large number of foreign students from Africa, Asia and Latin America to join Romanian higher learning institutions. However, a large number of foreign students were found to be enrolled in the fields of medicine, pharmacy and engineering. It is therefore important for other institutions in Romania to internationalize their programmes' visibility across borders in order to attract more foreign students.

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