

**10th IACCM Annual Conference and 3rd CEMS CCM / IACCM Doctoral Workshop,
University of Ruse, Bulgaria – 29 June – 1 July 2011
CULTURAL ASPECTS OF CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION:
Cometences and Capabilities**

**INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION WITH INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS: BULGARIAN
REALITIES AND FOREIGN GOOD PRACTICES
(THE ROLE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS)**

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The changes in Bulgaria after 1989 and its accession to European Union in 2007 provided possibility to Bulgarian higher education to take part more actively in the processes of internationalization and globalization of the higher education and contributed to intensification of the students and lecturers mobility within united Europe.

Today in Bulgaria there are 51 accredited institutions for higher education. According to National Statistical Institute (NSI) during the 2009/2010 academic year 9.8 thousand international students were taught in our country, which is with 6.7% more than the previous year. (NSI, 2010, p. 5). In the frames of EU's program "Erasmus" during 2009/2010 627 international students visited Bulgarian higher education institutions (HEIs) and 1687 Bulgarian students, during the same period, were taught in different European countries. (European Commission, 2011)

The desire of the representatives of Bulgarian higher education to expand its share in the international education market is evident from the clearly expressed will in that direction in public space – both on behalf of members of academic community and on behalf of state institutions which is reflected in the legislative changes currently taking place in Bulgaria.

Increasing the competitiveness of Bulgarian higher education institutions, both on a domestic and international level, is the main task for each institution and for the sector as a whole. In this context, achieving a strong connection between the students and the higher education institution of their choice, expressed in attachment and loyalty on their part, is a major task for education institutions, being a source of competitive advantage. Such loyalty, however, is also directly connected to the level of satisfaction felt by students with respect to their universities and schools of higher education. Understanding of the factors resulting in a high level of satisfaction and the methods of management of such factors create the opportunity for development of effective strategies for advancement.

Students' satisfaction can be measured against the following parameters: quality of academics, quality of administration, quality of social life; quality of infrastructure and quality of support services. (Thomas, 2011, p.185). Higher education is one of the fields where intercultural communication is extremely intensive and justifiably may be regarded as a major element for achieving student satisfaction. In today's global and multicultural world, the issues of intercultural communication should be viewed as an integral characteristic of the quality of teachers and teaching, since cultural competency and sensitivity are important factors for the quality of the education process. Intercultural communication is related to the quality of social life because it provides students with opportunities for expansion of their cultural horizons, but may also be a source of problems and discomfort. Development of intercultural awareness is also important for the quality of support services and administration, bearing in mind that support service officials need to do their job with knowledge of the specific problems, needs and attitudes of the students depending on their cultural affiliation.

In May 2011, the author carried out an unrepresentative telephone survey covering representatives of international student departments and public relations departments in

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five of the accredited Bulgarian institutions of higher education and an examination of their internet pages.

The results reveal that while most higher education institutions in Bulgaria do have departments or individual experts working in public relations, they are as yet not fully aware of the serious potential of this technology. The study also comes to show that the issues of intercultural communication are currently insufficiently presented in the agenda of Bulgarian universities and there is plenty of room for improvement and development. A review of the literary sources from Bulgarian authors reveals that the problems analysed in the present report are modestly presented. A search of the electronic catalogues of SS. Cyril and Methodius National Library of publications (books, collections, treatises, periodicals) containing the key words “higher education” and “public relations” found only nine relevant titles from 1992 onwards, and under the key words “higher education” and “intercultural communication” – only two.

The main purpose of the report is to emphasize the positive contribution of public relations in the processes of intercultural communication with international students as one of the important target publics in schools of higher education.

Intercultural communication in Bulgarian higher educational institutions for the present has been carried out spontaneously, in the course of the educational process and the interpersonal communication, but it becomes more and more obvious that it is necessary to provide active support of professional communicators therein.

An overview of foreign experience may provide useful guidance for activity enhancement within Bulgarian universities in the field of public relations and intercultural communication.

Today's schools of higher education constitute large heterogeneous communities made up of various internal publics (students, lecturers, administrators, technical and service personnel) where people of all social strata, nationalities and age groups converge. The efficient integration of such publics would be unthinkable without the application of public relations techniques.

Public relations is defined as social technology; therefore, we propose to assume that, according to functionalist sociology perspective, public relations, as any other technology may be characterized by manifested and latent functions.

Within its **manifested function**, public relations, as part of the organizational management (according to Cutlip, Center and Broom), have to „establish and maintain mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the publics on whom its success or failure depends.” (as cited in Ledingham&Bruning, 2000, p. xiii). Public relation experts are defined as “boundary-spanners”, whose responsibility in organization is to „support other internal subsystems by helping them communicate within the organisation itself and by helping them in communicating with external audiences. They provide a counselling role, advising what and how to communicate and they can also provide an implementation role by undertaking the communication on behalf of the subsystems”.(Gregory, 2004, p. 50).

In the global world we live in, the cultural differences of target publics play an important role in communication process. “Corporations will need communicators who can educate them about the cultural background of a certain audience and the best way to address its needs [. . .] We [communicators] will also be required to help [management and] staff find meaning in a rapidly changing world” (Cambié& Ooi, 2009, pp. 13, 14)

Foreign students represent one of the major target publics in the field of higher education for several reasons, both at micro and macro level. In a short-term perspective, it is their financial contribution for the respective educational institution, the local community and the national economy of the host country that comes to the foreground.

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The long-term effects, however, should not be ignored. For example, a study organised by the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals (UK) found that international students generate a reserve of goodwill not only with regards to their Alma mater but with regards to the host country as well. They are highly likely, even after their return to their home places, to continue using intellectual goods and services, such as publications, know-how and courses, from the country in which they were educated (UK), and to recommend their universities to future students (Development Education Association & Association of University Teachers, 1995, p. 11). Ultimately they may be viewed as bridgers of the gap between the culture they belong to and the culture of the countries in which they received their education

Foreign students also require special attention on behalf of higher institutions due to the fact that they can be identified as a “vulnerable” public (Brown, 2008, p. 11) which must be facilitated in the course of introduction and adaptation into an entirely new lifestyle away from their homeland.

It is important to highlight that although the focus of this study is international students, many of the activities aimed at them actually contribute to the development of the intercultural skills of the students as a whole. Today, as professionally instructed specialists, they all must possess cultural sensitivity and ability to conduct a dialogue because they form the future scientific, social and political elite nationally and globally.

From the point of view of communication with international students (both those following the full programme and those participating in international exchange programmes), the efforts of PR experts, within the manifested functions of public relations, should be concentrated in two directions. The first is *informing and advising the management* and the different units in higher education institutions (administrative and academic) of the specific needs and problems facing international students by means of information campaigns, seminars and trainings³⁰.

The second is *maintaining constant dialogue with the students themselves*, both for the purpose of getting to know their needs, demands and attitudes and for the purpose of acquainting them with the culture of the respective university and the respective country.

Arguably, intercultural dialogue commences as early as the time of selection of the educational institution. At the eve of 21 century Karen Heenan Davies wrote that „Companies [and HEIs as well] will become more global, so practitioners [in public relations] will need to demonstrate global capabilities, with cultural sensitivity and knowledge to adapt programmes to suit local needs” (as cited in Theaker, 2004, p. 333)

From this perspective the main task of public relations practitioners is to adjust their communication plans and programs in regard to the cultural specificity of target publics and to provide international students rich and useful information about their future environment, so that these students can make an informed choice of an educational institution, which corresponds to their educational, personal, and last but not least – cultural preferences.

Comprehensive knowledge of the values, motivations and information needs of the target audience allows public relations experts to carry out effective communication programmes in conformance with its specifics.

Although communication with students can be carried out through a variety of channels – information materials, meetings and presentations, online communication merits special attention. Internet sites are a powerful communication instrument in the

³⁰ An example in that respect is given by the Chicago University. Chicago University (2011). *Training at the University of Chicago*. Retrieved from < <https://training.uchicago.edu/>>

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hands of public relations practitioners, which allows provision of constantly updated information facilitating both the choice of educational institution and the successful transition of future students into a new, often significantly different reality. Such sites enable universities to provide information on everything related to admission and entry – from introduction to the different specialties and programmes, application steps, availability of scholarships and visa issues to reception in the country, accommodation, social opportunities within and outside the campus, existing students' organizations, services offered to international students by university bodies, etc.

A good example in this respect is University of Cambridge which, for 2010, is ranked first by QS World University Rankings (QS World, n.d.), being the first non-American university to hold that position. Its site stands out with its incredible wealth of content regarding all aspects of life within the university. Visitors can learn important details about the institution – history, traditions, organisational structure, values and mission. In the “A-Z for International Students” (Cambridge University, 2010) guide foreign students can find an answer to all relevant questions regarding their stay at the university. External resources are also offered. For example, the “Comfort Zone” brochure of the British Council (British Council, n.d.) on the same site provides foreigners with the opportunity to learn about different aspects of daily life in the UK which will be of importance from their very first day in the country. Students are also provided with a publication prepared by the UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA, n.d.) explaining the phenomenon of culture shock, the main underlying factors and useful links to different sites on the topic.

It is worth noting that preliminary knowledge of the “culture shock” phenomenon is important as it is a step towards management of a problem which may have serious psychological, social and physiological consequences. Delivered on time this information provides preconditions to at least diminish the gap between expectations and reality.

Studies show that stress is at its highest at the earliest stages of the stay as foreign students are expected to cope with the new language and the challenges of a new socio-cultural and academic environment, combined with feelings of home-sickness and loneliness (Brown, 2008). This may render a negative impact on behaviour, relations and the perception of others.

Such negative consequences can extend beyond the individual level and may, ultimately, reflect on student-institution relations. The inconsistency between expectations and reality caused by inherent difficulties in adapting to a new culture – that of the host country and the organizational culture within the respective university - may grow into a negative attitude towards the receiving organization and even towards the country as a whole.

The efforts of university academic and administrative staff to support students during the period of orientation and acquaintance with the new country are, from a psychological point of view, an important indicator of the value of students for the organization. These are efforts which not only facilitate the above process but also increase the sense of satisfaction in relations with the organization and hence enhance the positive attitude and loyalty to the institution., as far as they are related to such key determinants of service quality amongst which responsiveness („emphasising attentiveness and promptness in dealing with customer requests, questions and complaints”) and empathy („defined as caring, individualized attention that the firm provides to its customers”)(Al Khattab&Fraij, 2011, p.15)

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Building a good and lasting relationship between students and their universities is possible only with the joint efforts of international student departments, students' organization, the staff team and, of course, public relations departments.

Leading world universities offer their international students different opportunities for a smoother transition into their new life. A positive contribution to the adaptation process are the so-called „orientation days”³¹. Effective means for mitigating culture shock and facilitating adaptation are the so-called ‘Host Family Programs’³² the philosophy of which is to provide a “home away from home”. Programmes of this type are free and on a voluntary basis. International students are thus given the chance to create long-term close, empathic relations with locals who can then introduce them to their own culture and lifestyle. Regardless of whether the hosts are members of the local community or part of the academic staff, alumni or administrative staff of the respective university, they can offer students from abroad the chance to feel more comfortable in the new environment. Some universities launch different events at which international students and their host families can participate together thus strengthening the connection between all parties in the programme.

An alternative to this approach is accommodation of the “Bed and Breakfast”³³ type (used mainly for short-term stays and not for the entire study period). This form is paid but is significantly different from the standard stay in rented premises because potential hosts may join such a programme only after undergoing orientation sessions and interviews with university representatives prior to being approved. A significant part of their obligations is to spend some time with their guests on a daily basis so that they can get to know each other.

Regardless of the specific form of the programme, participating students will have the opportunity to immerse themselves into the local culture in an informal way, to hone their language skills, to receive support during organization of their new life.

The benefit is bilateral as international students, on their part, enhance the cultural horizons of their hosts and the local community as a whole. Ultimately, these programmes allow for a stronger connection with the university itself.

Examples from the practice of different European North American and Australian universities demonstrate that the role of professional communicators in the process of intercultural communication in schools of higher education is significant. Professionally organized communication programmes play an important role for reducing perturbations

³¹ For example, the Stockholm University website presents a lot of on-line resources along with up-to-date information on events such as “Orientation Day”, “ Guided tours on campus” and “Guided bus tour in Stockholm”. Stockholm University (2011, June 30) *Study with Us: Orientation days for exchange students* <<http://www.su.se/english/study/exchange-students/orientation-days-1.513>>

³² An example is given by the Denison University. Denison University (2011) *Office of International Student Services: Host Family Program*. Retrieved from <http://www.denison.edu/offices/international/host_family_program.html>

³³ Detailed information is available on the Griffith University website. Griffith University(2011) *Homestay*. Retrieved from <<http://www.griffith.edu.au/homestay>>

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during the transition from one lifestyle and cultural environment into another. Ultimately, it could be said that efficient communication is part of the quality of the educational service offered, which is far more than just the sum of educational issues.

An important part of the tasks facing public relations experts is to create conditions in which international students will have the opportunity to express their cultural affinity and will be able to get to know each other on a cultural level.

A good practical example is that of an international university operating on the territory of Bulgaria – the American University in Blagoevgrad (AUBG). Its internet site contains numerous valuable ideas. Its “International week” covers various interesting events such as “Country Presentation” in which participants share little-known facts of their culture and traditions; “Arts, Crafts, Games” – a programme involving activities such as origami, teaching Mongolian writing and Bulgarian embroidery; “Taste Fest” – presentation of traditional dishes prepared by students, teachers and employees; AUBG Millionaire Show – quiz show containing questions on the culture, geography, history and traditions of the different countries represented in the university community; Travel Series programme in which students exchange international knowledge by sharing their impressions from a foreign country they have visited (American University in Bulgaria, 2011) In this way PR specialists at higher schools can help students develop cultural empathy and broad-mindedness.

In the context of this topic, it is interesting to explore the role of public relations within its **latent functions**.

An important task facing the teacher and administrative staff with regards to both international students and students as a whole is the formation of intercultural communication competences, i.e. “the knowledge, skills and attitudes that comprise a person's ability to get along with, work and learn with people from diverse cultures” (Intercultural, n.d., para. 2).

According to some studies, although universities, offer many opportunities for intercultural communications, most “students are more likely to work and learn alongside and not jointly with those they perceive as culturally different” (Mixing, n.d., para. 3). According to the same studies a path towards solution of this problem is to convince them to leave their comfort zone and extend communication beyond national, cultural and language differences.

Special attention in this regard deserve the programs, aimed at local communities (another important external target audience), where students participate as volunteers because there unstrained environment for intercultural communication is provided. Although these programs are created in order to strengthen and maintain the relationship between universities and their local communities, such programmes can successfully serve as a bridge between in-auditorium training (expanding the range of possible didactic and pedagogic approaches) and the PR-practice of the respective educational institution.

What is unique for public relations in schools of higher education is that such programmes directly contribute for increased quality of the end product of higher education – not simply well-trained professionals but young people of democratic thought possessing the skills to work in a global and multicultural world.

Public relations programmes are an important element not only with view of fostering the relations of universities with their target publics but also as a supplementary element within the so-called informal learning process whereby students accumulate valuable worldly experience and develop important qualities and skills necessary for successful professional realization, determined “as “key” because they serve as the

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foundation for the development of further competences; “soft”, because they supplement specific professional competences; “transferable” – because they are developed throughout the entire life cycle in different situations and can be applied in any professional environment; “hidden” – because are difficult to measure and assess but are clearly identifiable in the work place” (Georgieva, 2011, p.13)

The joint work of teachers and PR-experts may result in the creation of significant “community relations” programmes ranging within a wide frame – work with social institutions (orphan homes, homes for the elderly, etc.), health institutions, schools, civil associations, non-governmental organizations, local and central government, which will meet significant social needs as well as provide students with the opportunity to apply their skills and knowledge, to accumulate empirical experience, to cooperate beyond the boundaries of their cultural origin, united by a common, relevant cause.³⁴ This creates synergy both in terms of the educational and instructive process and in terms of the PR-activities of the individual institution.

Public relations activities within the university environment can and must, in many cases, be viewed as an aid and supplement to the educational and instruction process. Such programmes not only create favourable social consequences for their beneficiaries but at the same time promote social sensitivity, democratic thought and behaviour, cultural and ethnic tolerance, a spirit of cooperation and respect towards others in all students engaged in their performance. Ultimately, social values and attitudes are formulated in the practical application of knowledge and ideas already acquired and in the accumulation of new knowledge and ideas as a result of the interaction and communication with other people.

As a conclusion we may summarize that professionally implemented PR approaches to issues of intercultural communication in higher education have significant consequences both for individual educational institutions and society as a whole. They are among the significant factors determining positive attitude and loyalty to Alma Mater, developing good-will to the host-state, building bridges between various cultures which is extremely important in today’s multicultural world striving for peace, understanding and sustainable development.

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³⁴The Stanford University website provides rich and valuable information about “community relations” programmes. Stanford University (2011) Haas Center for Public Service. Retrieved from <<http://studentaffairs.stanford.edu/haas>>

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