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Sports, Tourism and Leisure Activities – Factor for Integrating Foreign Students in the University Environment

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Abstract: *The integration of foreign students into the university environment is a crucial aspect for their academic and personal development. The aim of the research is to highlight the importance of sport, tourism and leisure activities in facilitating the integration process of foreign students in the university environment. From a theoretical perspective, our study highlights how sport, tourism and leisure activities interact to influence the various social identities of foreign students. On a practical level, the research proposes solutions for universities to capitalize on sport activities in facilitating social interactions between students from different cultures and to support international students to perceive themselves as important members of the university community. By engaging in a variety of physical, tourism and leisure activities, foreign students will maintain their health, will improve their mental stress and will cope better with the specific pressures of a socio-cultural and economic crisis, being able to increase their confidence and self-esteem, developing physical and social skills in an environment that supports and motivates them. Also, participating in the proposed activities will help reduce the feeling of isolation and loneliness, giving them an environment where they will form social bonds and friendships.*

Keywords: *sports; tourism and leisure activities; integration; foreign students.*

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Introduction

According to statistical data provided by the Information System of the General Inspectorate for Migration of the Republic of Moldova, the number of residence rights granted for study purposes is constantly increasing from year to year. This indicates an increase in the number of foreign students who choose to study at the universities of the Republic of Moldova. In the period 2018-2023, approximately 3,800 foreign citizens were granted residence for study purposes. The lowest number was recorded in 2020, with only 241 people, while in 2023 a maximum of 916 people was recorded (Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Moldova, 2024).

International students represent a valuable target group for higher education institutions in the Republic of Moldova, but universities often face difficulties in integrating this unique group into the university community. Problems with a foreign language, lack of cultural understanding, and immigration issues are just a few examples of the myriad of challenges students face (Allen et al., 2010; Zhou et al., 2021).

An excellent way to mitigate the challenges faced by international students and universities in the Republic of Moldova is by practicing sports activities, tourism and leisure activities are a great way for international students to socialize and connect with their peers in the host country. By participating in university sports teams or sports events organized by the university, they can develop relationships with fellow students and improve their communication and interaction skills in the national language. Moreover, sports activities help foreign students to better manage their stress and maintain good physical health. By engaging in a sport or physical activity, they can reduce anxiety and improve concentration and learning (Lesco & Razmiret, 2024).

Also, tourism represents an opportunity for foreign students to discover the culture, history and beautiful landscapes of the Republic of Moldova. Participating in university-organized trips or volunteer programs in rural or urban areas can also be ways for them to explore the host country and learn more about local traditions and customs. Through tourism, foreign students can develop a better understanding of the values and identity of the host country, which will facilitate their integration into the university environment and the community (Mindrigan & Onoi, 2017).

Thus, we aim to carry out orientation and integration activities for foreign students, providing them with information about the services and facilities available and helping them to settle into their new life and academic environment. It is also important that foreign students receive support and respect from their peers and teachers. Promoting diversity and tolerance within the university community can help create a friendly and inclusive environment for all students, regardless of their background.

We believe that sports, tourism and leisure activities are essential factors for the integration of foreign students in the university environment. It will provide them with opportunities for socialization, personal development and cultural exploration, thus contributing to their adaptation and success in their studies and university experience.

The purpose of the research highlighting the importance of sports, tourism and leisure activities in facilitating the integration process of foreign students in the university environment.

In accordance with the purpose of the work, the following **objectives** were developed:

- Analysis of specialized literature regarding the role of sports, tourism and leisure activities in the integration of foreign students;
- Identifying the integration factors of foreign students in the university environment;
- Impact of sports activities on health, well-being and the promotion of an active and balanced lifestyle;
- Theoretical substantiation and elaboration of *the experimental program for integrating foreign students in the university environment through sports, tourism and leisure activities.*

Research methods. Starting from the research objectives, the following research methods were applied in the present study: the analysis of specialized literature and the synthesis of relevant information regarding the factors that influence the integration of foreign students in the university environment and the role of sports activities in this process; generalization, systematization, modeling, research and dissemination of national and international experience regarding the studied issue.

The novelty brought to the field of education by this study lies in the multidimensional approach to integration in a context where integration is often analyzed strictly from an academic or linguistic point of view, without sufficiently exploring the recreational dimension. It also

offers practical suggestions for universities, highlighting the need to create structured programs of sports, tourism and leisure activities to foster the integration and foreign students well-being, thus representing a model for other universities facing similar challenges.

Results and discussions

Our study focused on a selected number of foreign students from the Institute of Physical Education and Sport (IPES), which makes the results less representative for higher education institutions with a large number of students, but it is representative for institutions with a smaller number of students in the country or abroad. After analyzing the database for the academic year 2023-2024 of the Faculty of Physical Education and Sport, we note that 34 foreign students are enrolled. Information on the number of foreign students from the other faculties is being collected and will be included in future analyses. Thus, in Figures 1 and 2, we plot the distribution of the number of foreign students from Physical education and Sport faculty by country and sports practiced.

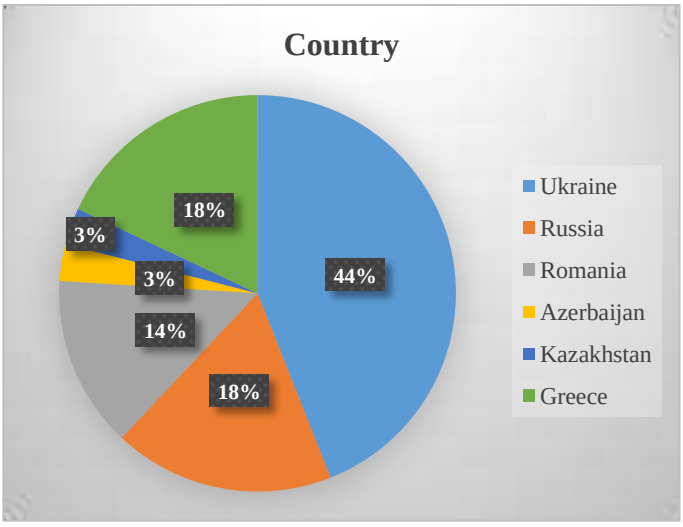


Figure 1. Distribution of foreign students by country

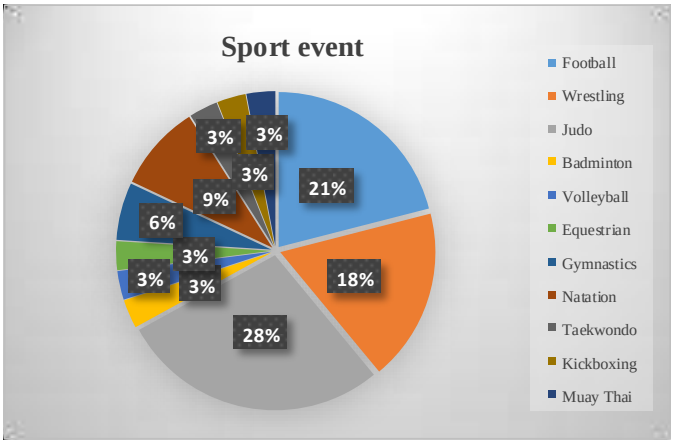


Figure 2. Distribution of the number of foreign students by sports event

Numerous studies carried out by local and foreign scientists (Allen et al., 2010; Glass et al., 2014; Zhou, et al., 2021; Poalelungi, 2022) addressed the issue of sports regarding the integration of foreign students in the university environment. Thus, the researcher Tarna (2012) states that "in order to help students face the university challenges they experience today, it is necessary to know their adaptation mechanisms and resources". In Table 1 we have described the difficulties that hinder the integration of foreign students from Physical Education and Sport Faculty according to studies conducted by local and foreign scholars (Allen et al., 2010; Glass et al., 2014; Zhou, et al., 2021; Poalelungi, 2022).

Table 1. Difficulties in integrating foreign students from Physical Education and Sport Faculty, Republic of Moldova (no. 34)

No. crt.	**Difficulties in integrating foreign students**	**%**
1.	Language barrier	85
2.	Cultural differences	47
3.	Adapting to the education system	65
4.	Financial difficulties	35
5.	Limited access to social and support networks	44
6.	Visa and bureaucratic problems	71
7.	Access to health and counseling services	38
8.	Prejudice or discrimination	24

One of the biggest difficulties mentioned by foreign students at the Faculty of Physical Education and Sport is the language barrier (85%). Lack of language skills can lead to isolation and difficulties in dealing with colleagues or teachers. Visa problems and bureaucracy affect 71% of students. Administrative processes can be complex and stressful, negatively influencing their educational experience. Adjusting to the education system is another major challenge, affecting 65% of foreign students. Education systems vary from one country to another and the transition can be difficult, particularly in terms of teaching methods, academic expectations and assessment. Tackling these problems is key to creating a more inclusive and welcoming university environment for international students.

Adaptation to the academic environment is a complex process designed and directed by university teaching staff with the aim of achieving an optimal collaboration between student and teacher. By connecting to the new cognitive universe, to universal ways of being, students perceive the demands that appear in the daily process of adapting to the new realities of life. Thus, the change occurs from inner and causes a change in general orientation in life, adaptation and relationship with the world, with other individuals (Zlate, 2006).

A study published in the "Journal of Physical Education and Sport" analyzed the impact of sports activities in the integration process of foreign students in universities, thus the authors (Galan et al., 2017) found that these activities provide socialization and interaction opportunities between local and foreign students, helping to create a more united and diverse community. Sports activities also promote interculturality and the exchange of experiences, facilitating adaptation to local culture and customs. In another study (Allen et al., 2010; Wu et al., 2015) there have been identified several benefits of sports, tourism and leisure activities in the integration of foreign students. These benefits include improving students' physical and mental health, increasing academic performance, reducing stress and social isolation, developing a sense of belonging and community, communication and collaboration skills as well.

Also, another important aspect identified in specialized literature is the fact that sports, tourism and leisure activities can be an attraction factor for foreign students in choosing a university or study destination (Bota, 2006; Leuciuc, 2015). Providing adequate facilities for practicing sports and promoting leisure activities can contribute to increasing the

interest and attractiveness of a higher education institution for these students (Glass et al., 2014).

Thus, while the mentioned studies emphasize the general benefits of sports, tourism and leisure activities, our study analyzes the integration of foreign students within the Institute of Physical Education and Sport, exploring how the specifics of sports and tourism activities organized in the host country influence their adaptation to the social, cultural and local academic environment. Figure 3 shows the factors that contribute to the integration of foreign students from the Faculty of Physical Education and Sport, identified following discussions with them, which play an essential role in their adaptation and success at this stage.

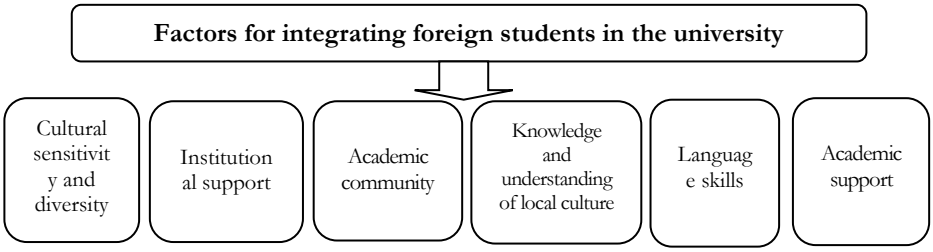


Figure 3. Factors for integrating foreign students in the university environment

Both, in specialized literature (Poalelungi, 2022), and following the performed analyzes, we identified the following key factors:

- Institutional support: which will include counseling and assistance services, orientation programs, additional Romanian language and culture lessons, guides and resources, thus facilitating adaptation and encouraging the academic success of foreign students.
- Academic community: the opportunity to form relationships and connect with other students and members of the university community, through activities, and events that promote interaction between students, both local and foreign, will contribute significantly to creating a sense of belonging and support.
- Knowledge and understanding of the local culture: foreign students who have a better knowledge and understanding of the local culture and customs are more likely to integrate easily into the university environment. We aim to facilitate this process through information lessons about local culture (within the Intercultural Education

discipline), excursions and projects that expose them to specific elements of local culture and community.

- Language skills: a good ability to communicate in the university's language of instruction and the local language is another important factor in the integration of foreign students. Thus, within the discipline C*ulture of communication and specialized language,* foreign students will be guided in developing the language skills necessary for academic success and effective interaction in the university.
- Academic support: will include additional learning support, research networking support or opportunities to engage in academic activities and projects.
- Cultural sensitivity and diversity: teachers and academic staff who are aware of cultural diversity and who possess cultural interaction skills will play an essential role in the integration of foreign students. They can help create an inclusive learning environment where foreign students feel accepted and valued for their individual contributions.

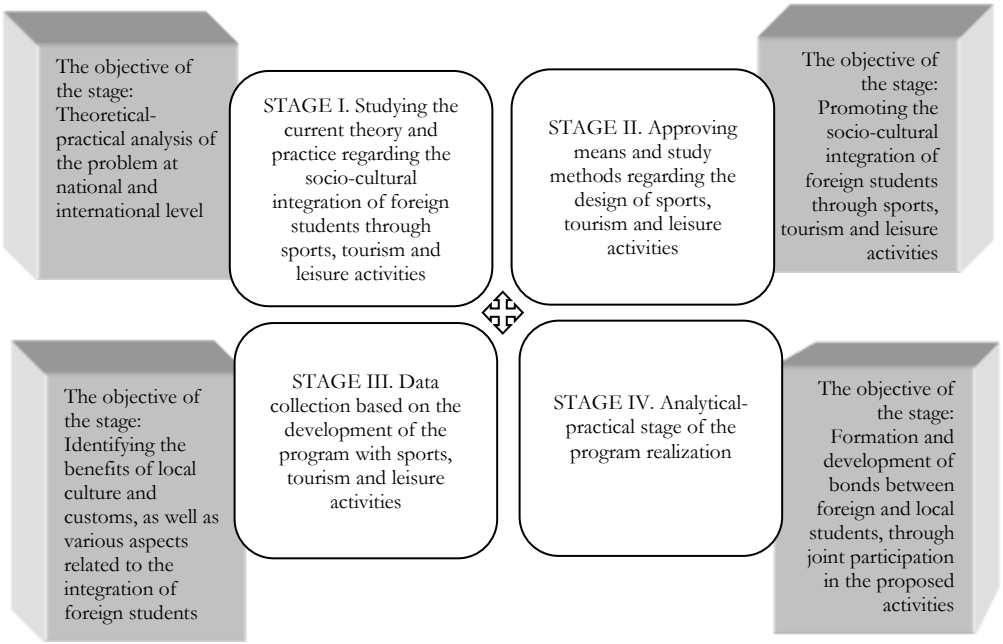


Figure 4. Stages of the experimental program realization for the integrating foreign students through sports, tourism and leisure activities in the university environment

In order to address the previously mentioned problems and to create a favorable environment for the integration of foreign students within the Faculty of Physical Education and Sport of the Institute of Physical Education and Sport (IPES), we developed the stages of implementing the experimental program, shown in Figure 4. The results of this program will be analyzed in future studies in order to assess its impact on student integration.

The integration of foreign students in sports, tourism and leisure activities within the Faculty of Physical Education and Sport, will be achieved by structuring the program, both through theoretical and practical activities (Figure 5) which will encourage their participation and involvement. Thus, we propose to include the following theoretical activities:

Seminar on sports and leisure activities. Organizing a seminar introducing foreign students to the sports and leisure options available, including presentations on local sports clubs, swimming, cycling, nature trips and other leisure activities.

Foreign language courses. Providing additional lessons to foreign students in the discipline *Culture of communication and specialized language*, thus contributing to their integration into the academic community and, implicitly, promoting participation in sports, tourism and leisure activities. This will allow them to communicate more effectively with other students and engage in field activities more easily.

Presentation of sports and tourism facilities. Organization of presentation sessions of the sports and tourism facilities within the State University of Physical Education and Sport of Moldova, as well as in the surrounding area. These presentations will include information about locations, available programs, instructors, and rules for participation.

Workshops on local culture. Organizing workshops where foreign students will be introduced to aspects of local culture and customs. These workshops will include presentations on cultural events, food habits, games and activities specific to the area.

Group activities. Organization of sports, tourism and leisure activities for foreign and local students. These include, for example, universiades, nature hikes, sports competitions, team-building activities and recreational games, designed to encourage academic, social and cultural interaction and integration between participants.

Mentoring. Pairing foreign students with local mentors will also be an effective way to guide and support them in the process of adapting to the

academic environment and to encourage them to participate in sports, tourism and leisure activities. Mentors will provide personalized support and guidance, including identifying and accessing relevant activities.

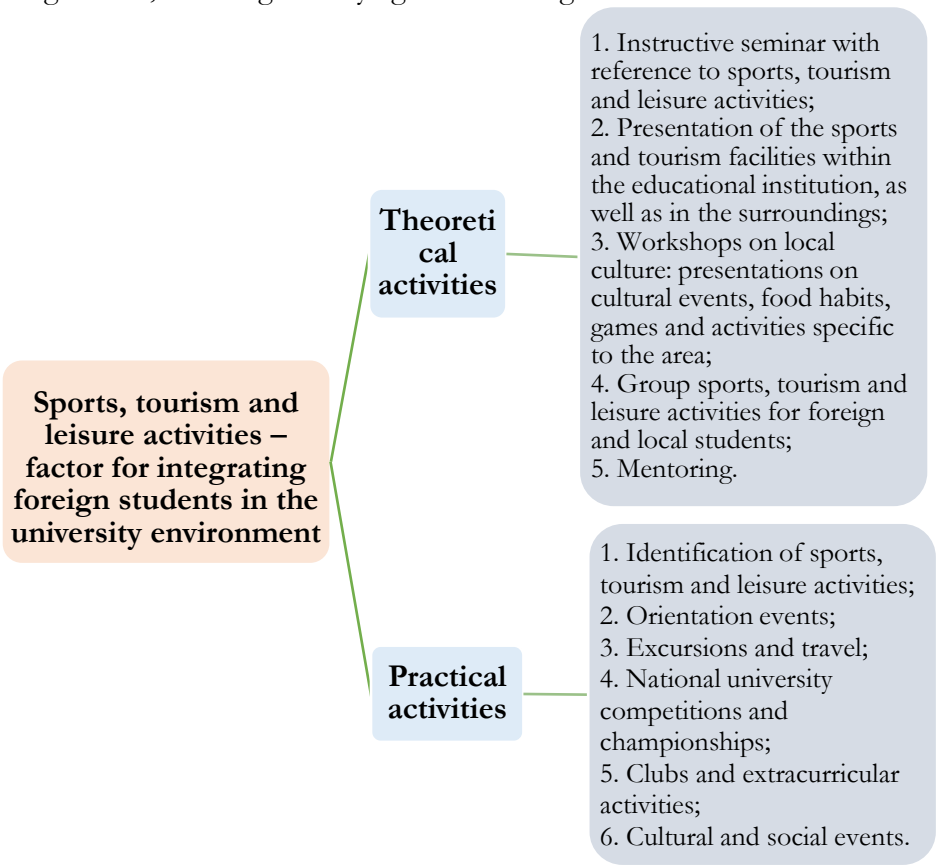


Figure 5. Theoretical and practical activities regarding the integration of foreign students in the university environment

Theoretical activities will be combined with practical activities such as visiting sports facilities, organizing sports competitions and tournaments, excursions and trips to tourism areas. The researcher Enache (2012) mentions that „through the holistic approach to integrating foreign students in sports, tourism and leisure activities in the university environment, they will be able to enjoy a richer experience and feel part of the academic community".

In order to structure the practical activities regarding the integration of foreign students in sports, tourism and leisure activities in the university environment, in Table 2 we have described the expected results.

Table 2. Practical activities regarding the integration of foreign students in sports, tourism and leisure activities

No.	**Practical activities**	**Expected results**
1.	Identification of activities and facilities	activities: sports, tourism and leisure. facilities: sports, leisure centers, tourist attractions, etc.
2.	Orientation events	guided tours, presentations about facilities and options, demonstrations or hands-on sessions to familiarize with the activities available
3.	Excursions and travel	excursions and trips to tourist areas and national interest places, to give foreign students the opportunity to explore and discover the culture, traditions and beauty of the places in the given area.
4.	Competitions and national university championships	organization of sports competitions with the involvement of foreign and local students, thus they will integrate into teams and socialize with their colleagues. organizing thematic events to encourage healthy competition and cooperation among students.
5.	Clubs and extracurricular activities	encouraging foreign students to join student clubs and organizations, which will give them the opportunity to get directly involved in activities and events related to these fields and to connect with other students who are passionate about such activities.
6.	Cultural and social events	organizing cultural events that showcase cultural diversity and promote the exchange of experiences and knowledge between foreign and local students. These events will include presentations, festivals, exhibitions and other activities where participants can learn from each other about their culture and traditions.
7.	Mentoring and support program	creating a mentoring program where foreign students are paired with local students, which will help them integrate into the university environment and encourage to participate in sports, tourism and leisure activities. Mentors will provide support and useful information about available activities, organize joint activities or answer foreign students' questions and concerns.

It is important that the structure of the practical activities is flexible so that it can be adapted to the needs and preferences of foreign students, to provide clear information about the planned activities, encouraging that open communication and student participation in the process of organization and feedback.

Conclusions

The study on sports, tourism and leisure activities as a factor for integrating foreign students in the university environment highlighted the importance of these activities in ensuring a positive and successful experience for foreign students. Based on the results obtained, the following conclusions and recommendations can be drawn:

- Involvement and encouragement of foreign students in sports, tourism and leisure activities;
- Promotion of tours and tourism in the host country by universities, by exploring new places and interacting with locals, so they will get an authentic experience and increase the sense of belonging to the community;
- Development of leisure programs and extracurricular activities adapted to the needs and interests of foreign students;
- Creating a friendly and inclusive environment in universities and facilitating interaction between foreign and local students;
- Promoting diversity and intercultural dialogue within universities.

Sports, tourism and leisure activities are essential factors in the integration of foreign students in the university environment. By promoting these activities and creating a friendly and diverse environment, universities can contribute to an easier and more successful integration of foreign students into the university environment. Future researches will be extended to the national level in order to achieve a more complete image of the role of sports, tourism and leisure activities in the integration of foreign students, including different social, cultural and educational contexts.

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