

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL EXCHANGE OF ERASMUS STUDENTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF HOSTING INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract

Exchange of education learning and student moving to different countries has become a significant factor in the transformation of higher education. These procedures leads to interaction between local students, exchange students and hosting institutions. Being overseas for couples of months requires some social adaptation. To be able to take full advantage of being exchange student and sponsored university, it's important to recognize existing problems and to offer possible alternatives.

*The purpose of this paper is to find the critical aspects of cultural changes in students exchange programs. The empirical methods are used with a survey of ERASMUS students and interviews with the ERASMUS coordinators in hosting universities. For the descriptive statistics, the data processing methods are used. **Keywords** : exchange of education learning; culture exchange; cultural adaptation; university ERASMUS responsibilities*

Introduction

Higher education face different challenges in this growing world, for-example advertisement of their institution brand, market forces, development in research department and globalization. The last factor involves the exchange programs for students and staff, the awareness of these exchange programs leads to the need for training of the administrative staff.

At the same point international students face challenges as they study abroad and living in different country. They face social, cultural and academic differences and feel home sick. Student exchange programs have different forms, longer period stay to complete the whole study program (BA, MA and PHD), or to study for a full academic year and or for one semester.

ERASMUS programs helps students in individual and professional development, also they learn foreign language and intercultural awareness. Students also develop their skills in quickly adaptation to new situations, thinking critically, working in teams, solving problems, and being tolerant of different views and communicating effectively.

The purpose of this study is to research the critical aspects of cultural adaptation process of ERASMUS students in Latvia. The study uses the mixed approach involving the quantitative research, the ERASMUS student survey and the qualitative one, with ERASMUS coordinators. Data processing methods are the descriptive statistics and thematic content analysis. Two research questions have been discussed throughout this paper that; what are the most problematic aspects of ERASMUS students' social-cultural adaptation in Latvia? and what are the responsibilities of host universities in ensuring international students' cultural and social adaptation?

Research Methodology

In order to investigate ERASMUS students' perception of their cultural and social adaptation process in Latvia, the mixed methods research has been used that comprised the quantitative research, the formalized survey of respondents, and the qualitative one, semi-structured interviews with ERASMUS coordinators.

45 students were surveyed. This procedure can be described as a non-probability purposive sampling, that is, the single-stage procedure in which sampling unit contains only one element, namely, being in Latvia as ERASMUS mobility program participant. The students were approached with the request to be questioned about their opinion via Internet (using the Google forms).

The questionnaire was developed based on the relevant literature study; it consisted of 16 statements concerning cultural and social issues that students face whilst studying in Latvia. Each statement had five-point value varying from the answer 'strongly agree' and 'agree' to 'neither', 'disagree' and 'strongly disagree'.

The ERASMUS coordinators were approached with a questionnaire consisting of 12 open-ended questions. The rationale of these interviews was to find out the key factors that influence ERASMUS students' socio-cultural adaptation in Latvia and what is being done on the part of the university. The comparative analysis of the results was performed after that. The last stage was the thematic content analysis of the interview texts with the aim to see if there is a gap in situation perception by the ERASMUS students and their host organizations.

Results

Firstly, the ERASMUS students were asked for their origin country to see in Latvia which country students mostly come; it was found that 18 students from Spain, 14 from Germany, and 13 from different European countries, Lithuania, Poland and others. Then students were asked to evaluate 16 statements regarding their socio-cultural experiences while in Latvia. The questions involves the lifestyle, the local living conditions, the leisure time and entertainment, the differences between food cultures and the problems in communication with locals of different age (less than 28, between 28 and 60, more than 60).

Fig. 1. shows students' view on the Latvian lifestyle, also the impression of the host country. (abbreviations: sd, strongly disagree; d, disagree; n, neither; a, agree; sa, strongly agree).

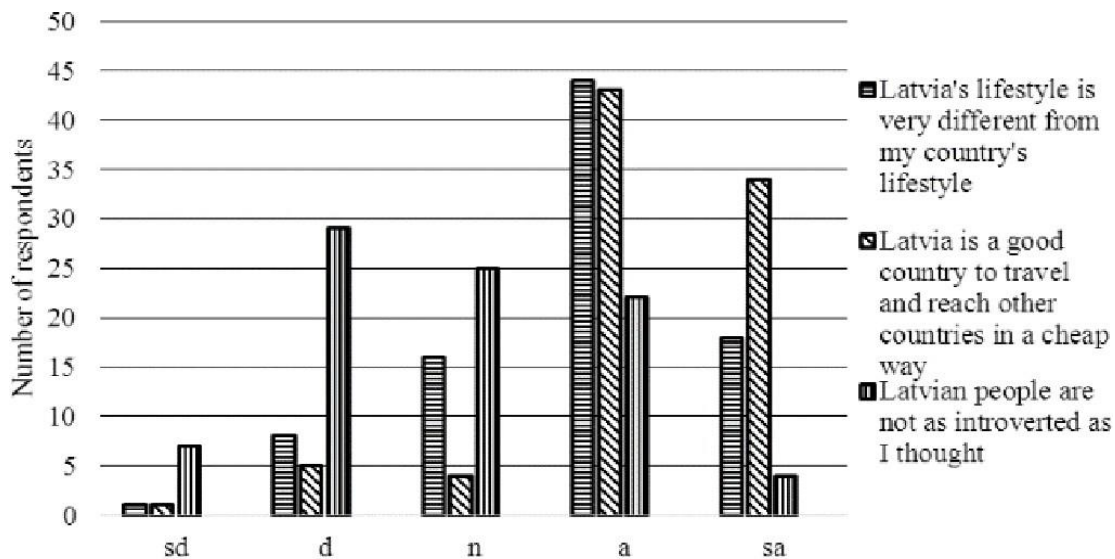


Fig. 1. Attitude to the Latvia 's people lifestyle

As we can see (*Fig. 1.*), the ERASMUS students in their majority admit that the Latvian lifestyle is quite different from the one in their home countries. It says about the interaction and communication aspects such as keeping distance, greetings, speaking and eye contacts as well as all cultural and social environment including language barrier.

Regarding local residents behavior the following question was asked: 'Latvian people are not as introverted as I thought'. The answers were split almost evenly (26 respondents agreed and/or strongly agreed with the statement, that is, they were pleasantly surprised finding Latvians

outgoing. These results recommends that students have to be informed about the lifestyle of the host country before their arrivals.

The next part consisting of four statements that were related to the general living conditions and students' vision to them (see Fig. 2.)

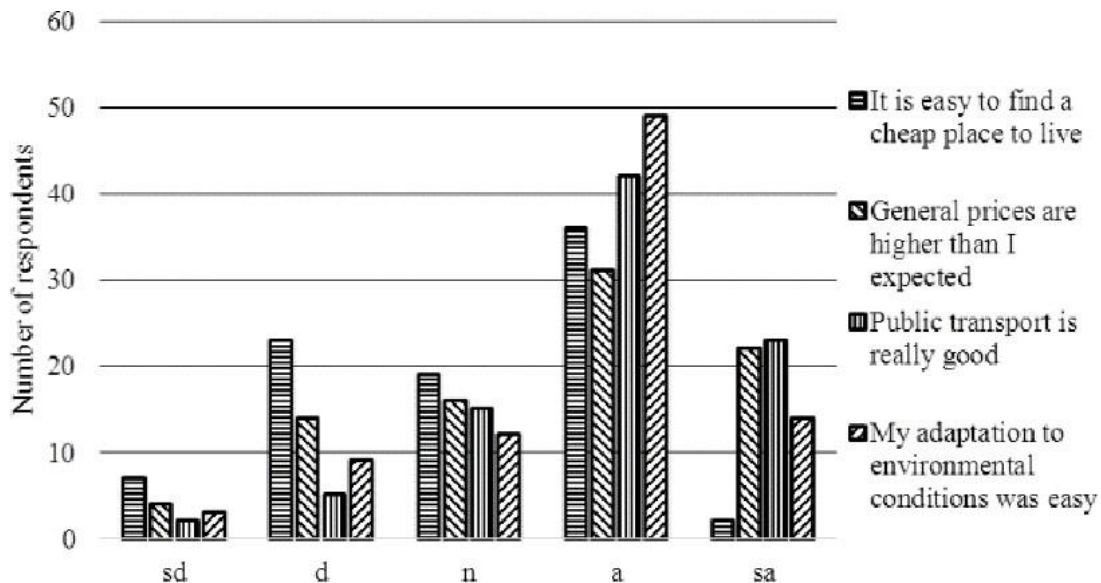


Fig. 2. Evaluation of living conditions

The process of social adaptation, that is the transition period from home to the different environment depends on students' readiness to adapt to the Nordic climate conditions. Then orientation problems in the city and public transportation structure was asked, the answers was distributed almost evenly. It means that students did not think to be too difficult to find relatively inexpensive living place.

Students positively evaluated the ways of getting around in the city and they were not particularly bothered by rain, snow, coldish summer and so on. At the same time, 25 out of 45 respondents had been unpleasantly surprised by the level of general prices. This could mean that they did not have the exact information before travelling to Latvia. As majority of the students were from the EU countries, they could naturally assume that the price range would be approximately the same. This again brings forth the need for thorough prior orientation and prior virtual contacts with host university students.

The next statement concerns students' leisure time activities (see Fig. 3).

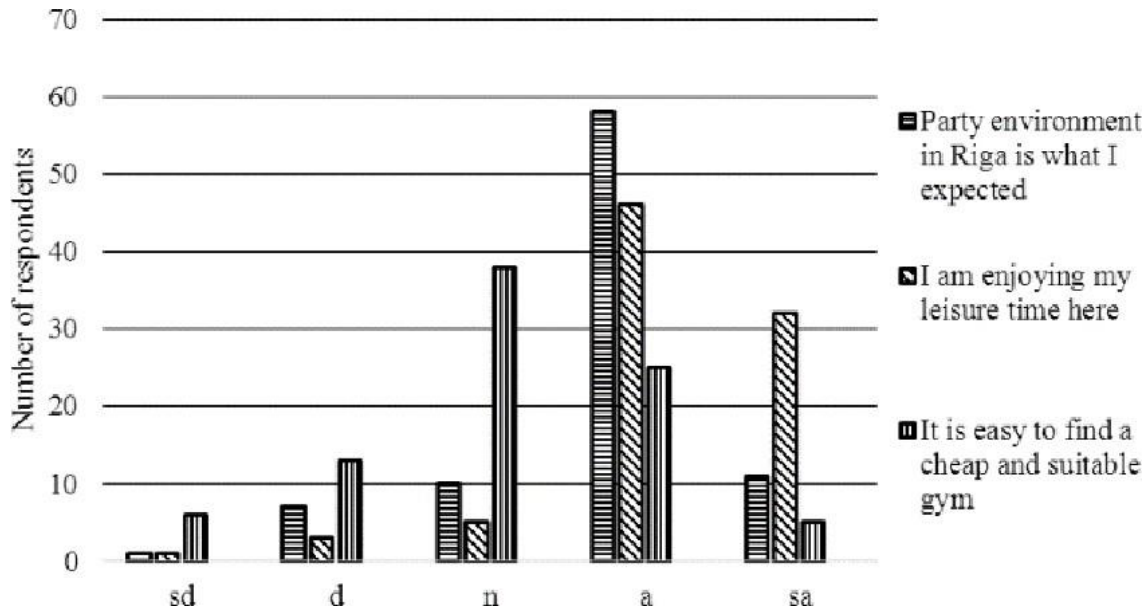


Fig. 3. Students' evaluation of their leisure time activities

Students view their time spent in the foreign country as time for exploration of the party scene and entertainment possibilities. Therefore, the statements received positive votes.

Food culture and adjustment to the local cuisine is an important aspect. To close the gap, the host universities often organize national food festivals. Fig. 4. depicts ERASMUS students' attitude to the traditional dishes in Latvia.

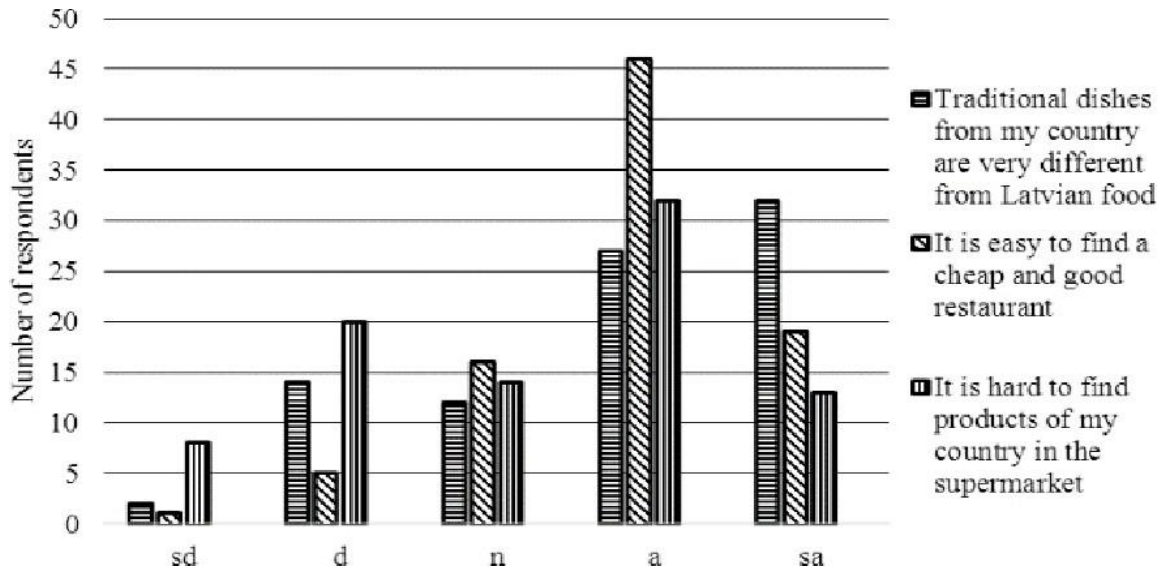


Fig. 4. Attitude to the local cuisine and dining traditions

More than half of respondents agreed and strongly agreed that the traditional dishes are very different and regretted inability to find the familiar products in the market or supermarket. Still most of them answered that it was not a problem to find a cheap and good restaurant. The last question was very significant in aspect of communication with locals (see Fig. 5.).

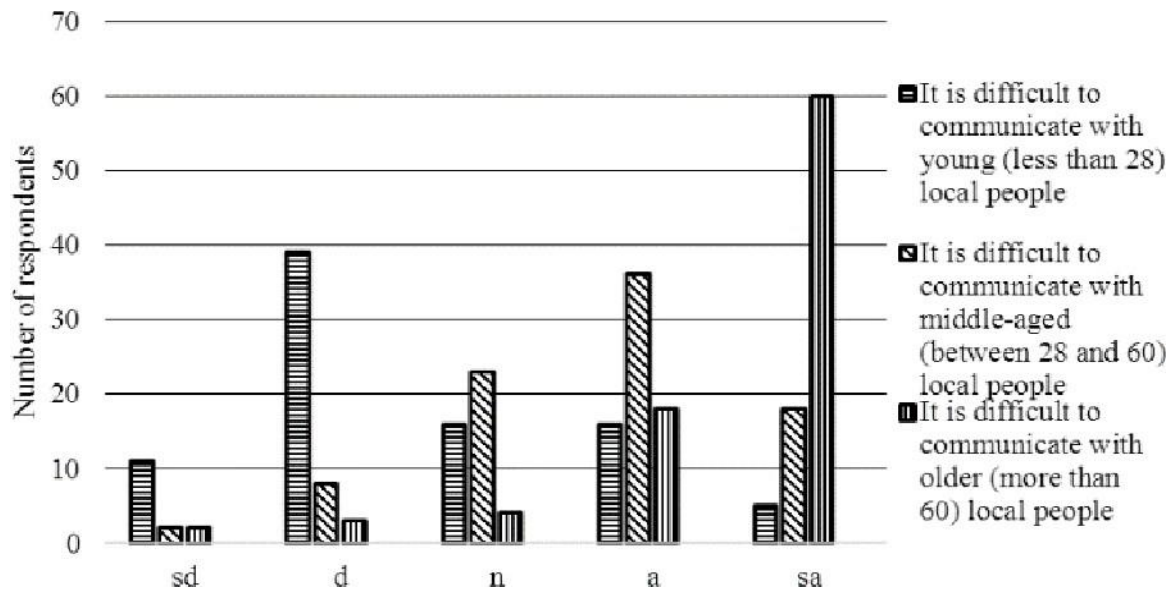


Fig. 5. Communication difficulties with local residents

There is a direct negative correlation between age of the local residents and the knowledge of foreign language. The young generation has no problems speaking English. The problem could be solved by pairing up international and local students. This approach is used by several universities in Latvia.

In order to see the situation from the different perspective, the author conducted semi-structured interviews with the ERASMUS coordinators from two Riga universities. The questions concerned different social and cultural aspects of ERASMUS students' life.

1- Technical and organizational assistance by the receiving institution: According to all ERASMUS coordinators, the incoming students receive all necessary technical and organizational assistance. The representatives of the Students Council of the respective universities help to overcome the daily difficulties. All coordinators admitted that the most difficult part of their job was the great amount of the paperwork.

2- Engagement in the local social and cultural activities: Both coordinators answered that their schools have organized field trips to beautiful places of Latvia and sometimes abroad, sporting and entertainment events.

3- Students' prior awareness of local conditions and traditions. Both coordinators concerned the problem of readiness of incoming students to adapt to the local social, economic, cultural and academic standards. 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 it the school should organizes integration and culture training seminars for teaching staff.

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to investigate the critical aspects of the ERASMUS students' cultural adaptation in Latvia.

1. According to research, the answer to the first question could be formulated as follows: the most critical factors in the ERASMUS students' cultural and social adaptation Latvia were the lack of crucial information about the receiving country and the host universities.

2. It does not mean that they arrive unprepared; still, they can hold some prejudices and stereotypes. They experience the subsequent differences in lifestyle, food and dining traditions and difficulties in communication.

3. In students' opinion, the Latvian people are largely perceived as being introverted and there exists the direct negative correlation between the age of the local residents and their ability to communicate in English.

Recommendations

1. This set of problems could be solved by preparing informative materials about the country and the host university.

2. Establishing the Facebook discussion group in which the students could contact their Latvian counterparts before to the actual travelling to Latvia could solve at least some of the initial problems.

3. 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.

4. 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 the daily basis.

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