


EXPLORING PERCEPTIONS OF ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL INTEGRATION THROUGH INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE DEVELOPMENT AMONG FRENCH-SPEAKING MEDICAL STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT. *Exploring Perceptions of Academic and Social Integration through Intercultural Competence Development among French-speaking Medical Students.* This study investigates the social and academic integration of international French-speaking students at “Iuliu Hațieganu” University of Medicine and Pharmacy of Cluj-Napoca, focusing on the development of intercultural competence (IC) through a variety of activities. Drawing on theories of intercultural competence, the study examines the role of university services, cultural activities, and socialization in fostering integration. The study applies surveys to assess pre-arrival and during stay perceptions, exploring the influence of these perceptions on social and academic integration. Through a qualitative survey and post-coding analysis, the research explores how advertising posters activities for Romanian as a Second Language classes reflect and shape students’ perceptions of the city and university. Findings suggest that while academic integration is relatively successful, social integration and the development of IC remain challenging. Posters primarily emphasize cultural and social aspects but often fail to reflect

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the reality of students' experiences. Survey results reveal that while there is a desire for socialization and integration, opportunities for meaningful interaction with domestic students are limited. The research concludes that enhancing IC requires more targeted approaches in both academic and social contexts, with a call for greater collaboration between academic staff and student services to create opportunities for deeper intercultural engagement and integration.

Keywords: *intercultural competence, social integration, academic integration, advertising posters, international students*

REZUMAT. Explorarea percepțiilor de integrare academică și socială prin dezvoltarea competenței interculturale în rândul studenților francofoni la medicină. Acest studiu investighează integrarea socială și academică a studenților internaționali francofoni la Universitatea de Medicină și Farmacie „Iuliu Hațieganu” din Cluj-Napoca, concentrându-se pe dezvoltarea competenței interculturale (CI) printr-o varietate de activități. Bazându-se pe teoriile competenței interculturale, studiul examinează rolul serviciilor universitare, al activităților culturale și al socializării în promovarea integrării. În studiu s-au realizat sondaje pentru a evalua percepțiile dinainte de sosire și percepțiile *in situ*, explorând influența acestor percepții asupra integrării sociale și academice. Prin intermediul unui sondaj calitativ și al unei analize de post-codare, cercetarea explorează modul în care activitățile de creare de postere publicitare pentru cursurile de limba română ca limbă străină reflectă și modelează percepțiile studenților despre oraș și universitate. Constatările sugerează că, în timp ce integrarea academică este relativ reușită, integrarea socială și dezvoltarea CI rămân o provocare. Afișele pun accentul în primul rând pe aspectele culturale și sociale, dar adesea nu reușesc să reflecte realitatea experiențelor studenților. Rezultatele sondajului arată că, deși există o dorință de socializare și integrare, oportunitățile de interacțiune semnificativă cu studenții din țară sunt limitate. Cercetarea arată că îmbunătățirea CI necesită abordări mai specifice atât în context academic, cât și în context social, cu un apel la o mai strânsă colaborare între cadrele didactice universitare și serviciile destinate studenților pentru a crea posibilități de angajament și integrare interculturală mai semnificativă.

Cuvinte-cheie: *competență interculturală, integrare socială, integrare academică, postere publicitare, studenți internaționali*

Introduction

In the 2023-2024 academic year, Romania's medical universities enrolled over 17,000 international students at all study levels. "Iuliu Hațieganu" University of Medicine and Pharmacy (IHUMF) in Cluj-Napoca hosts more than 3,000 international students from 60 countries, with 75% from the European Union.

Foreign students account for 42% of the total student body². During the pre-clinical years, Romanian language courses are included in the curriculum to help students communicate with Romanian patients. This requires not only a B1 proficiency in Romanian for Specific Purposes (RSP) but also strong intercultural skills to understand and respect patients' socio-cultural backgrounds, as well as to integrate socially and academically into Romanian society.

As Ursa and Mărcean point out, “although it is not entirely new, the intercultural competence is not for the moment a part of the curriculum of European medical schools as a separate discipline, as is the case in the United States. [...] On the other hand, the European language policies assume and deconstruct interculturality in various activities and recommend it in the process of learning foreign languages” (2016, 224). The *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR/CV 2020) subordinates intercultural competence (IC) to plurilingual and pluricultural competence, and, to the best of my knowledge, IC is not yet a separate discipline in European medical universities, or other universities, unlike in the United States. However, European language policies encourage interculturality through foreign language learning. Thus, Romanian as a second language (RSL)³ teachers should incorporate tasks that develop IC, as Byram et al. argue: “teachers who deal with matters of language and communication within and between groups of people are particularly responsible for intercultural competence” (Byram et al 2014, 33)(DICE). If teachers are familiar with the principles of IC development, they can easily integrate IC tasks alongside language exercises. In this context, Byram and colleagues demonstrate that “teaching activities that facilitate linguistic and cultural communication and that can be applied to specialised contexts, including of learning Romanian by future doctors” (2014, 37-52). These teaching strategies promote both linguistic and cultural communication, including those applicable to medical students learning Romanian.

Ursa and Mărcean illustrate, “forming and managing the IC which can cope with the cultural challenges that are encountered by foreign medical students in Romanian hospitals” (2016, 222-224) and propose activities to help foreign medical students navigate cultural challenges in Romanian hospitals or informal settings. While these activities can assess knowledge, a key question remains: how can we assess attitudes, values, and beliefs, or measure the development of IC in terms of social and academic integration? If direct measurement is challenging, can we observe and analyse the factors influencing IC development? How do

² <https://umfcluj.ro/universitate/despre-noi/universitatea-cifre/>

³ To respect the language of this study, I will use the term *second language*, in the tradition of English-speaking specialized literature, as distinct from Romanian specialized literature, which prefers the term *foreign language*.

international students perceive their new environment, and how can teaching methods be adapted to support their IC development? To address these questions, I propose an approach based on four interrelated perspectives: the development of IC through intercultural education and accompaniment (IA), the specific needs of migrant students, poster advertising, and the analysis of targeted questionnaires.

Developing intercultural competence and intercultural education

The Council of Europe has emphasized the importance of the intercultural component, highlighting its essential role alongside language skills. According to Professor Michael Byram and his collaborators, IC is

a combination of attitudes, knowledge, understanding and skills applied through action which enables one, either singly or together with others, to: understand and respect people who are perceived to have different cultural affiliations from oneself; respond appropriately, effectively and respectfully when interacting and communicating with such people; establish positive and constructive relationships with such people; understand oneself and one's own multiple cultural affiliations through encounters with cultural difference (DICE, 16-17).

Intercultural education, whether informal, non-formal, or formal, seeks to develop IC in learners of all ages, focusing on principles related to attitudes, knowledge, and action (DICE, 27). Byram et al. identify five key cognitive operations — experience, comparison, analysis, reflection, and action — which lead to desired outcomes when methods encourage student participation. The pedagogical approaches include experiential learning, project-based learning, and cooperative learning (DICE, 37-39). An intercultural encounter, as Byram et al. describe, is “an encounter with another person (or group of people) who is perceived to have different cultural affiliations from oneself” (DICE, 16), and young adults, who are more likely to seek such interactions, can continually enrich their IC. DICE provides valuable theories and examples of IC but does not offer specific descriptors for teaching and assessing IC. CEFR/CV includes IC and interculturality across various categories, such as facilitating communication in pluricultural spaces and mediating intercultural exchanges (CEFR/CV 2020, 114, 116, 117-122, 123, 124). These descriptors, especially regarding pluricultural repertoire, are derived from studies like DICE, Candelier et al.'s *Framework of reference for pluralistic approaches to languages and cultures* (Candeliers et al. 2012) (FREPA), and Beacco et al.'s *Guide for the Development and Implementation of Curricula for Plurilingual and Intercultural Education* (Beacco et al. 2016) (GPIE).

GPIE defines plurilingualism and IC as “the ability to use a plural repertoire of linguistic and cultural resources to meet communication needs or interact with other people and enrich that repertoire while doing so [...], the ability to experience otherness and cultural diversity, to analyse that experience and to derive benefit from it” (GPIE, 10) and therefore enabling individuals to “establish cognitive and affective links between past and new experiences of otherness, mediate between members of two (or more) social groups and their cultures, and question the assumptions of one’s own cultural group and environment” (10). Reflexivity, or metacognition in educational sciences, not relating to any specific academic subject, implies a distancing process from the knowledge and skills applied, in the form of a certain awareness, not only language-related, but also culture and interculturality-related, and involves developing “open, considered and critical attitudes to enable learners to appreciate in a positive manner and manage successfully all forms of contact with otherness” (40).

The context of plurality and otherness is the purpose of plurilingual and intercultural communication in FREPA. FREPA highlights the importance of plurilingual/pluricultural and intercultural communication, where participants need the competence to adapt and engage with “that which is other, different” (FREPA, 12). Communication contexts, shaped by many variables, require specific competences and resources and FREPA theory establishes a strong differentiation of competences and resources: competences are “units of a certain complexity, implicating the whole of the individual and linked to socially relevant tasks in the context of which they are activated; in these situations they signify the mobilisation of different resources which may be internal (coming under knowledge, skills or attitudes) or external (the use of a dictionary, resorting to a mediator)” (FREPA, 11). While competences cannot be taught directly, resources can be, as they are independent of specific tasks and situations. I would argue that teaching and learning knowledge and skills can be applied to CI, but attitudes can only be shaped, guided.

FREPA outlines two global competences and an intermediate zone, which encompass plurilingual and intercultural communication across languages and cultures. The first global competence involves “managing linguistic and cultural communication in a context of otherness” (FREPA, 22), covering conflict resolution, negotiation, mediation, and adaptability. The second global competence focuses on “the construction and broadening of a plural linguistic and cultural repertoire” (22), emphasizing personal development and systematic learning.

The intermediate zone, central to this study, fits within both global competences, and includes four key competences: decentring (viewing things relatively, mobilisation of attitudes, skills and knowledge), making sense of unfamiliar linguistic/cultural features resources described by *can* and refusing

to accept failure), distancing (critical approach, critical *awareness*), and recognizing both the other and otherness in what is different and similar (skills and attitudes (FREPA, 23). These competences span both global competences and reflect stages of IC development. Resources for these competences are categorized into knowledge, attitudes, and skills. Knowledge descriptors centre on “to know,” attitudes focus on personal factors (e.g., awareness, curiosity, acceptance) and the descriptors cover “attention to,” “sensitivity to,” “being aware,” “curiosity about,” “acceptance of,” “positive acceptance,” etc., and skills are described using “can” (FREPA, 24-59). FREPA serves as a useful framework for planning activities aimed at developing these resources.

I state that the activities proposed by DICE and GPIE can be applied in the classroom with the aim of triggering, shaping and developing CI, but we must consider the learner holistically, beyond mere activity participation. There is a risk that the attitudes, behaviors, and skills observed in interactions—such as doctor-patient dialogue simulations or informal exchanges—might simply be memorized responses, lacking deeper awareness and genuine application. In such cases, students might display an IC constructed specifically for the moment, tailored to fit the context of the RSL course (e.g., an RSL exercise, doctor-patient dialogue training, or an exam). This does not necessarily mean that the student has genuinely developed their IC. In the realm of IC, communication with others—particularly in contexts involving difference or “otherness”—cannot occur without personal development. Young adults, especially those in higher education, are generally more inclined to pursue new experiences and engage with diverse individuals. Yet, for this to happen, they must be both willing and provided with the opportunity to do so, regardless of their language proficiency level. Our French-speaking students fall into which category? A recent study suggests that many aspects of IC remain underdeveloped in some contexts:

Although the stereotypes about Romania are positive, the society itself is overly schematic, and there is no general intention of intercultural knowledge. Gains such as adaptability, self-awareness, and a strengthened sense of identity are evident, but IC and overcoming superficial representations are lacking, which are essential for empathy with the adopting society (Ursa, 2017, 334) ⁴.

⁴ “Deși stereotipurile despre România sunt pozitive, chiar entuziaste, societatea în sine este schematizată excesiv și nu există o intenție generală de cunoaștere interculturală. Cu toate acestea, există câștiguri de tipul adaptabilității, o autocunoaștere mai bună, un sentiment identitar întărit, cunoștințe factuale etc. Ce rămâne însă pe dinafară este competența interculturală și traversarea reprezentărilor superficiale, acțiune esențială în câștigarea empatiei față de societatea adoptatoare.” (Ursa 2017, 334). My translation.

Repositioning IC and Intercultural Accompaniment (IA)

In university teaching of RSL and RSP, developing IC is crucial for students' adaptation to their new societal context. While cross-cultural activities targeting knowledge and skills are somewhat effective (Mărcean and Ursa, 2016), forming and developing attitudes remains challenging. Planning activities based on global competences, as outlined in FREPA and DICE, requires teacher training and objective assessment methods. However, French-speaking students often perceive language merely as a tool, IC development remaining minimal. As Mărcean and Ursa (2016) note: "The image of the student who comes for educational purposes to Romania and learns the language for social interaction is unrealistic. Their context may remain family and friends in their home country, accessible instantly via personal gadgets" (33)⁵.

Given the absence of a dedicated discipline for IC, alternative strategies must be considered. Such an approach may come from *liquid intercultural theory* and *intercultural accompaniment*.

Fred Dervin (2017) calls for a re-examination of interculturality, questioning traditional views that focus on comparisons and judgments based on culture. He suggests replacing "competence" with "dynamics," emphasizing the fluid, co-constructed nature of intercultural encounters. Intercultural dynamics should move beyond exclusive references to culture, religion, or geographical origin, avoiding the risk of focusing solely on differences. Dervin acknowledges the complexity of interculturality and the persistence of problematic attitudes like stereotypes and racism, despite efforts to reject them: "I'm aware that certain things are not/no longer acceptable (stereotypes, racism, xenophobia, ethnocentrism) and yet, from time to time, I do fall under their clutches" (Dervin, 2017, 9)⁶. Some descriptors, such as getting rid of stereotypes, no longer make sense. He also critiques the goal of "conflict avoidance" in intercultural education, which he sees as unrealistic. Conflict is a natural part of life and learning, and efforts to eliminate it create artificial experiences. Dervin argues that everyone possesses intercultural competences, which are drawn from individual experiences of diversity, allowing IC to be applied differently depending on the person. IC is co-constructed with individuals—who are complex and unique—rather than cultures, meaning that

⁵ „Imaginea studentului care vine cu scop educativ în România și învață limba obligat de contextul și nevoile de interacționare socială este anacronică și nerealistă. Contextul lui poate rămâne familia și prietenii din țara de origine, la care studentul are acces permanent și instantaneu, prin mulțimea de gadgeturi personale” (Mărcean, and Ursa 2016, 33). My translation.

⁶ « Je suis conscient que certaines choses ne sont pas/plus acceptables (les stéréotypes, le racisme, la xénophobie, l'éthnocentrisme) et pourtant, de temps en temps, je tombe sous leurs griffes » (Dervin 2017, 9). My translation.

similarities should be emphasized over differences. National culture still plays a significant role, often leading to binary thinking (e.g., “me/us” vs. “you/them”) and static comparisons (lists of “national” values or cultural codes) ⁷. However, without incorporating the broader cognitive operations defined by DICE, such comparisons hinder genuine IC development.

Dervin defines the purpose of an intercultural encounter as: “(1) becoming aware of each person’s diversity, (2) learning to live with that diversity, (3) learning to analyse situations that prevent us from living with it, (4) living better with others, with less illusion and pretence” (Dervin, 2011, 125) ⁸. Dervin’s definition of IC is much broader than those already mentioned:

[...] it means being aware of our position as *simplexists* oscillating between simplification and complexification, and of that of others; (2) having the ability to recognise, impose, negotiate and present/defend our plural identities as well as those of others; (3) allowing everyone to feel more or less at ease in our interactions with them. This means taking the time to talk to the Other and listen to us. It also means accepting failure (Dervin 2017, 30-31) ⁹.

In this context, developing IC means the teacher or trainer does not dictate what learners should think or do but provides tools to help them think and act independently (Dervin, 2017, 28). If a strategy for successful intercultural communication cannot be defined, if we cannot identify a strategy for successful intercultural communication, if we cannot program interculturalism, the positioning as helper, trainer, or companion in developing IC can be found in intercultural IA, which follows the model proposed by Dervin. In IA, the learner is accompanied and guided towards becoming aware of his own (inter)cultural imaginary worlds, is helped to question the influence of the imaginary worlds of others (institutions,

⁷ The danger of ethnocentrism is also underlined by the GPIE and can be mitigated by the cross-cutting dimension of reflexivity: “The aim is to soften the sorts of ego- and ethnocentric attitudes that can arise from contacts with the unknown. The expected reactions are ones of astonishment: the discovery that standards and values considered to be “natural” are not shared by other groups can easily arouse feelings of surprise or incomprehension, leading to rejection” (GPIE, 40).

⁸ « (1) prendre conscience des diversités de chacun, (2) apprendre à pouvoir vivre de ces diversités, (3) apprendre à analyser les situations qui empêchent de les vivre, (4) mieux vivre avec l’autre, et cela moins dans l’illusion et la façade » (Dervin 2011, 125). My translation.

⁹ « (1) c’est être conscient de notre position de *simplexiste* oscillant entre la simplification et la complexification, et de celle des autres; (2) avoir la capacité de reconnaître, imposer, négocier et présenter/défendre nos identités plurielles ainsi que celle des autres; (3) permettre à chacun de se sentir plus ou moins à l’aise dans nos interactions avec eux. Cela nécessite donc de prendre le temps de parler à l’Autre et de s’écouter soi-même. C’est aussi accepter l’échec [...] » (Dervin 2017, 30-31). My translation.

trainings, advertising, friends, family, workplace, and so on), to weigh up the pros and cons of these worlds, to combine or modify them and, in turn, to help others to rethink their imaginary worlds (Dervin 2016, 107).

The IA method, developed by NovaTris pedagogical engineers, is based on six theoretical foundations: a fluid approach to interculturality, the capability approach, experiential learning, the awareness approach, the mirror effect, and the accompanying stance (Neamț 2022, 265). The goal is to guide learners from a “self” to a “transformed self,” beginning with encounters with the Other, through reflection, experience, and verbalization (Neamț 2022, 267-268). IC cannot be directly taught, but it can be guided through experiences with alterity, helping learners build their own intercultural competences. This approach promotes learner autonomy, enabling individuals to engage confidently and understandingly in intercultural contexts. The pedagogical tools developed by NovaTris are available online and target specific IC components, such as attitudes, values, communication skills, and reflection-based skills (Neamț 2022, 271). These tools align with descriptors from FREPA and can be integrated into activities identified by DICE, allowing for targeted development of IC.

Therefore, we have two main approaches to developing IC for French-speaking students. The first is integrating IC into the teaching of RSL through target-language activities, following principles and cognitive operations outlined by European language policies. However, as noted by Ursa (2017), this approach may result in minimal or inexistent IC development. The second approach focuses on experience-based and reflection-based activities, guiding students to develop IC at their own pace, as IC development cannot be forced. This can primarily occur in the contact language of the group, in our case French, but may also include RSL activities depending on language proficiency levels. I argue that these approaches complement each other rather than being mutually exclusive. As an RSL teacher, I adopt a dual role of teaching both language and IC, aiming to initiate IC development from the beginning, even with beginner-level students, since “once interculturality is developed, language skills are accelerated and become more substantial” (Ursa 2017, 334) ¹⁰.

Assessing Intercultural Competence

The question of whether intercultural competence can be assessed is widely debated. GPIE acknowledges the need for assessments and reference frameworks to define skills associated with a plurilingual and intercultural

¹⁰ „Odată câștigată această interculturalitate, evoluția competențelor lingvistice ar fi mai rapidă și mai consistentă” (Ursa 2017, 334). My translation.

mode of operation (GPIE 2016, 69). FREPA is one such framework, though it is not yet widely accepted, and we are still in the early stages of developing assessment methods. While knowledge and skills (ability to observe, analyse or compare cultural facts), can be assessed through tests or tasks GPIE warns that this is based on overly simplified cultural entities, such as nation-states, which intercultural education aims to challenge (GPIE 2016, 70). One early solution to this challenge was the creation of the *Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters* (Byram et al. 2009), which emphasizes observation and real experience but is not suitable for summative assessment. GPIE recommends more informal, formative assessments, where teachers continuously assess learners' progress to provide guidance (GPIE 2016, 70). From my perspective, the key focus here should be on "guidance."

As intercultural relationships are built through interaction with the Other, evaluations must also be multidimensional, including the perspectives of both parties. Like GPIE, Dervin advocates for formative assessment through self-assessment, co-assessment, and group assessment, rejecting quantitative summative evaluation. Since IC development is a lifelong process, Dervin suggests evaluations should address the ethical, ideological, relational, and representational aspects of intercultural encounters. In our academic context, where there is no specific course dedicated to IC, this ideal is challenging to implement. However, intercultural accompaniment may provide a more feasible approach. This method supports learners in asking questions about concepts like intercultural competence, stereotypes, identity, and culture.

Student Migration, Needs, and Integration

An understanding of international student typologies can shed light on the motivations and needs that influence the development of IC and guide classroom activities. Student mobility is influenced by social and economic position, which in turn determines the type of training sought. Those in less favourable positions typically pursue local education, while those with more resources may have access to prestigious institutions or international programs (Garneau 2007, 14). Long-term mobility, particularly for full academic programs, is often statistically defined as international migration (King and Raghuram 2013). For medical students, migration is typically long-term, voluntary, and driven by intergovernmental and institutional agreements, culminating in a diploma and possibly permanent relocation (Ioniță and Vlad 2022). Garneau's insights align with migration determinants identified by Harfi and Mathieu, such as the quality of education in the home country, access to host country institutions, cost of living, recognition of diplomas, language learning opportunities, and the presence of presence and accompanying networks, especially student associations (Harfi

and Mathieu 2006, 36). Once abroad, international students often gravitate towards communities with cultural similarities, providing a sense of belonging in a foreign environment, since “the student can feel at home - or at least in a more familiar environment - and among peers with the fact of being a ‘foreigner’ as a common feature” (Pleyers and Guillaume, 2009)¹¹. These “community bubbles” are a response to the initial shock of encountering cultural difference (75), although, in today’s digitally connected world, I argue that the traditional notion of culture shock may no longer apply, especially given the cultural proximity of IHUMF French-speaking students (see further analysis of the questionnaire responses). Technology, especially communication with family and friends, plays a crucial role in emotional support during the adaptation process (Peng 2016). Repeated exposure to the host country’s language and social environments fosters not only language skills but also intercultural competence. However, while socialization can help develop IC, empathy, and plurilingualism, it can also lead to feelings of anxiety and discomfort, limiting the depth of identity transformation in intercultural education (Guichon 2020, 163).

The integration of international students is academic, social, and personal. Social integration is defined by Berthaud as “a process of socialisation into the university environment, based on social interactions, combining quantitative aspects (involvement) and qualitative aspects (perception), relating to the peer group (other students) and comprising three dimensions (structural, functional and subjective)” (Berthaud 2019, 4)¹². Academic integration, on the other hand, is “the student’s academic performance, their level of intellectual development and the image they have of a positive experience in terms of intellectual development” (Sauvé et al., 2006)¹³.

International students often lack the social and cultural capital of domestic students. The Student Development Theory analyses how academic services can improve the academic and social integration of international students. Despite the availability of academic services, studies show these remain insufficient: “services related to the student living experience (e.g. accommodations, cultural and social activities) and comfort (e.g. student employment/living expenses, security) are also needed to improve the international student experience”

¹¹ « L’étudiant peut se sentir chez lui – ou en tout cas dans un milieu plus familier – et entre pairs avec le fait d’être ‘étranger’ pour trait commun » (Pleyers and Guillaume 2009, 75). My translation.

¹² « un processus de socialisation au milieu universitaire, reposant sur les interactions sociales, mêlant des aspects quantitatifs (l’implication) et qualitatifs (la perception), se rapportant au groupe de pairs (les autres étudiants) et comprenant trois dimensions (structurale, fonctionnelle et subjective) » (Berthaud 2019, 4). My translation.

¹³ « la performance académique de l’étudiant, son niveau de développement intellectuel et l’image qu’il a de vivre une expérience positive sur le plan du développement intellectuel » (Sauvé et al., 2006). My translation.

(Ballo et al. 2019, 18). Formal and informal interactions between international students, academic staff, and domestic students regarding academic, linguistic, and social issues should improve integration and, in turn, enhance the development of IC.

For international students at medical universities, including IHUMF, choosing Romania may be motivated by economic factors, familial connections, linguistic proximity (Ioniță and Vlad 2022), and easier access to medical studies (Endrizzi 2010). IHUMF positively addresses these factors, alongside cultural proximity and the presence of numerous student associations and the French Institute. Moreover, Hirsch (2016) argues that students' academic and social integration directly influences their commitment to the institution and degree completion. This is especially true for academic integration, as demonstrated by Pop and Lotrean's study on Romanian and international graduates at IHUMF: "Intrinsic motivation is the primary factor driving student engagement in research, while institutional factors, such as educational, financial, and community influences, also have a substantial impact on research involvement" (Pop and Lotrean 2024, 15). Their study highlights time constraints as a significant barrier for international students, who face additional pressures adapting to new educational systems and learning a new language (15). I would argue that learning Romanian does not significantly hinder scientific investigation, since medical research is conducted mainly in English or French, but it impacts learning in general. A key difference noted by the study that university structures and services should address is the "research culture differences between Romanian and international students" (18), and I consider that it would have also an impact on developing IC.

Community bubbles exist, particularly for French-speaking students at IHUMF (Mărcean and Ursa 2016), where intercultural competence is often lacking: "although they are a minority in Cluj-Napoca, they do not feel marginalized, as long as the ontological and behavioural relationship is with the French space of origin or with the peer group that shares their identity and behavioural values"¹⁴ (Ursa 2017, 343). Their interactions are mostly with academic staff or for basic needs, not fostering deeper personal relationships. However, by staying connected to their cultural community and engaging in relevant activities, students can participate in meaningful intercultural exchanges that validate their identity (Guichon 2020). This is exemplified by the *Heritage Cultures and Languages Student Club*, started in 2025 by RSL teachers at IHUMF, which encourages self-reflection on identity.

¹⁴ „deși sunt o minoritate în Cluj, nu se simt marginali, atâta timp cât raportul ontologic și comportamental se face cu spațiul francez de origine sau la grupul de colegi care le împărtășesc valorile identitare și comportamentale” (Ursa 2017, 343). My translation.

Perez-Encinas and Rodriguez-Pomeda (2018) identify four stages in the international student lifecycle. The pre-arrival stage involves gathering information to make informed decisions. The arrival stage focuses on orientation, integration, and non-academic services (Perez-Encina and Rodriguez-Pomeda 2008, 21). IHUMF supports this with Orientation Week and services complemented by student organizations. The during stay stage emphasizes academic support, health, well-being, and Romanian language learning, in addition to extracurricular intercultural activities. The final stage, re-integration into the home country, addresses reverse culture shock, though many students return home frequently, limiting this phase. To identify and analyse the presence and change in knowledge, attitudes and imaginary worlds, associated to academic and social integration, and intercultural competence I conducted two activities: creating advertising posters and completing a double survey.

The advertising poster

The advertising poster activity, though not new in RSL teaching, allows for analysis beyond linguistic competence. Students (2-3 per group) created outdoor advertising posters, choosing between promoting Cluj-Napoca (six posters) or the University (seven posters). They defined the target audience (French-speaking countries), the poster's purpose (attracting French-speaking tourists and students), and the content. The task was non-compulsory but rewarded with course participation points. The first analysis focused on the slogan, wording, and iconography, related to identities and imaginary worlds. In the second stage, I focused on identifying the scope (creating awareness, shaping perceptions), functions (informing, persuading, reminding, building brand identity), and appeal (emotional, rational, humorous, celebrity) (Nicola and Dan 2009). These elements provide insight into the resources activated in developing students' IC. The final stage involves analysing the questionnaires administered after distributing the posters.

Instruments for Data Collection

This study is based on a qualitative, intensive survey with a small population, aiming to deepen the understanding of IC. Though the sample is not statistically representative, the responses provide meaningful insights into IC development. A conventional, non-random sampling was applied to two groups from the first year, second semester, Faculty of General Medicine, French section, (34 students total), through an exploratory survey (Şandor 2011, 116-124).

Two types of surveys were used by the means of questionnaires, designed by predefining goals and perceptions (Bhandari 2023): the first aimed to assess perceptions of the urban space and social integration (Qc for the city) and academic integration (Qu for the university) pre-arrival and during stay. Each group completed one of these questionnaires, which contained 12 questions, including two closed-ended, one open-ended conditioned on the previous answer (filter question), five open-ended and four mixed. Although not a quantitative analysis, I used mixed Linkert-type closed-ended questions and open-ended final question as a follow-up, using the classical “other” option. The 34 students did not respond individually but reformed the initial groups and responded as groups. The second questionnaire (Qi) focused on development of social and academic integration in the host country, and the evaluation of stereotypes. Qi included 16 questions: four closed-ended demographic questions, six mixed, two filter questions, and three open-ended questions. Special attention was paid to open-ended questions, which encourage more detailed, open responses, especially on sensitive topics (Rouder et al. 2021). Thematic analysis, using post-coding, was applied for qualitative analysis (Şandor 2011, 111). The focus will be mainly on Qc and Qu. Qi was answered by 23 students. Qc and Qu were self-administered via Microsoft Forms, in the presence of the teacher, and anonymously. Q1 was exclusively self-administrated via Microsoft Forms. Answers to all questionnaires were given between December 20204 and January 2025. Posters were handled in during January 2024.

Interpreting the IHUMF Advertising Posters

I post-coded and grouped discourse topics into four categories and counted the occurrences: *university structures and services* (USS, 9), *academic quality* (AQ, 7), *city life and culture* (CC, 4), and *socio-academic integration* (SAI, 3). USS includes campus facilities, technologies, sport areas, cafeteria with special students’ menu, language of studies, Romanian language classes, and international student presence (e.g., Erasmus and other). AQ includes study quality, diploma recognition, Shanghai ranking, renowned academic staff, competitiveness, and CV advantages. These findings align with migration determinants identified by Harfi and Mathieu (2016). CC focuses on life quality, dynamic city life, restaurants, history, intercultural encounters, cultural immersion, and a welcoming community. SAI covers academic staff availability, good class ambiance, family/acquaintance presence at IHUMF, student associations, and integration opportunities, such as sports and social activities. These arguments, especially those in CC and SAI, seem to emphasize intercultural competence and integration, presenting students as connoisseurs about the new culture, in line with advertising discourse strategies.

However, interpretations of the questionnaires may provide a different view of the realities behind CC and SAI.

As expected, the slogans¹⁵ are aligned with the AQ discourse theme, and were probably created afterwards: 1. “Innovate. Heal. Inspire. Start your journey to save lives”, 2. “Become a doctor in Cluj-Napoca”, 3. “UMF is the best university in Romania”, 4. “Discover medical excellence at UMF Cluj-Napoca! Open Doors Day”, 5. “Come and study at UMF in Romania. A healthy body in a healthy mind. Combine sport with medical studies”.

Iconographic factors include high-quality internet images (4) and personal photographs (3), mostly from campus or university, with a few images of the city and festivals (3). Given the advertising topic, I expected the scope of the posters to create awareness and communicate product benefits. The function was to inform and persuade, and the appeals were rational. The posters introduce a product to potential customers who may not have been aware of it, but most do not communicate unique features or benefits, with a few exceptions that include CC and SAI. The informing and persuading functions are fully met, and the advertising appeals are rational, except for the emotional appeal embedded in SAI, referencing the support of bubble communities.

Interpreting the Findings of Qu

I analysed Qu mainly for changes in knowledge and attitudes from the pre-arrival to the during stay stage and how the posters’ representations matched students’ perceptions. Since the posters mostly covered factual information, I did not expect major changes.

The focus of both questionnaires is the same, differing only in their focus—city vs. university. Q1 traces taking accountability of the choice, is it made to please the teacher or to get a benefit or is it really the topic they have something to say about. Q2 tracks the shared perception of the group: they all agree, without debate, or have gone through debates that mirror the negotiation of imaginary worlds, with *yes*, *no*, *we reached an agreement* or *other* options. Q3 (“Was the information you used already known to you before arriving in Cluj?”) measures pre-arrival knowledge, from complete, partially complete, absent or other. Q4 (“Does the image you had formed of the city/university before arriving match that of your posters?”) identifies correspondence between poster perceptions of the academic and urban environment with real perceptions after arrival, with the possibilities *yes*, *partially*, *not really*, *other*. Q5 (“If not, what has changed in your perception of the city/university after arrival?”) identifies factors of real

¹⁵ One poster has no slogan, and another is conceived as an advertising leaflet.

perceptions through open-ended responses. Q6 establishes changes in perception at group level, with *yes, no, we reached an agreement* or *other* options. Q7 determines the sociometric factors of the target population. Q8 identifies the reasons of the strategies applied and acts like a two-sided mirror, reflecting sides of their own identities. Q9 (“Do you think your poster could change your target audience’s perception of this Romanian city/on the studies in Romania?”) aims to relate to the change of perceptions in the origin society, again with a two-sided mirror effect. Answers can be *yes, a little, yes, a lot, maybe, no* and *other*. Q10 and Q11 analyse their perception on influence of space placement in the origin community. Q12 (“Has the creation of these posters had any effect on the way you perceive the city/the university?”) evaluates the effect of this specific activity on the stability or change in their own perceptions.

For this study, I focus on Q3, Q4, Q5, Q9, and Q12. A special mention is deserved by one answer to Q10 and Q11: *Everywhere* and *I have the impression that the whole of France has negative preconceptions about Romania*. This is the only occurrence of a reference to cultural perception in any of the respondents to Qu.

Q3, Q4, Q5, Q9, and Q12 are interrelated and must be seen as corroborated, since the answers to each must relate with each other. They explore changes in knowledge and attitudes, reflecting students’ perceptions. Posters mainly cover university-related data, which students are generally well-informed about before arriving (Q3: 67% partial, 33% complete). Most answers to Q4 (56%) show stable perceptions, while 44% indicate partial change, mainly concerning city life (Q5). Inconsistencies were linked to one USS: the spread of classrooms across campuses. Responses to Q9 (67% *yes, a little*) reflect minor shifts in perceptions of their home community, relating to the university facts but not CC or SAI. Q12 shows minimal change in perceptions during their stay —factual information was confirmed, with only two mentions of discovering new university projects or cultural services.

Interpreting the city advertising posters

I post-coded and grouped discourse topics into eight categories, counting occurrences. *Cultural activities* (CA) (12) appear in 6 of 7 posters, covering theatre, history, architecture, museums, art, and traditional events. The word “culture” appears four times, but it remains a vague concept. *Public spaces and attractions* (PSA) (10) also appear in 6 posters, including Central Park, Ethnographic Park, Botanical Garden, Union Square, and the Salt Mine of Turda, a different city. This is likely based on online research. *Entertainment* (E) (7) focuses exclusively on concerts and festivals (music, food, sport, cinema), most of which occur in summer when students are absent. *University-related* (U) (4) highlights the

town's appeal as a student hub, including Erasmus and university rankings. *Going out* (G), *occupation* (O), *accessibility* (A), and *cultural diversity* (CD) (1 each) cover bars, restaurants, IT jobs, airport connections and local transport. The cultural diversity reference is tied to the trilingual plaque at the city limit, focusing on coexistence of majorities and minorities. However, it's unclear if this points to multiculturalism or interculturalism, which the slogan may clarify.

Iconographic factors mainly feature high-quality online pictures (5), with one poster using sketches and icons. No personal photographs are used, but the images align with discourse topics: Catholic Cathedral and Union Square appear 8 times, while parks, festivals (Untold and Color Run), Cluj Arena Stadium, Orthodox Cathedral and universities appear less frequently (twice). All other images only appear once (Opera and Theatre, Mine Salt of Turda, traditional food, central street). The *Mărțișor*, part of UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage, is used once. PSA dominates the imagery (18), with CA (3), E (2), and U (1) lagging behind, suggesting a stronger focus on public spaces. Slogans supported the discourse topics, from selective to almost all of them: 1. „Come to Cluj! Feel the passion, explore the adventure! Cluj-Napoca, where dreams come true”, 2. “Discover the life of Cluj! From culture to scenery and partying, you will find happiness!”, 3. “Cluj-Napoca: the beating heart of Transylvania!”, 4. “Cluj is waiting for you!”, 5. “You already love Cluj!” and 6. “Welcome to Cluj-Napoca. Come and visit the most beautiful city in Romania!” 1 endorses U, E, CA, 2 focuses on PSA (and E), 3 on CA and PSA, 4 covers E, G, U, and PSA sport, 5 brings PSA, CA, O, E, A, U together. 6 is the only one with a cultural reference, but the image shows poor infrastructure, contradicting the slogan. Moreover, the general impression is of dissonance between the slogan and the image, rather in an ironic way. The advertising identity was mainly attributed to a tourism agency (4), with one reference to a student association and the Tourist Information Centre. The posters aim to raise awareness, building brand identity based on students' perceptions of what might attract their target audience, drawn from their own identities. Unlike the university posters, they communicate product benefits. The main function is to inform and persuade, with rational and emotional appeals.

In conclusion, if I corroborate all the information, posters reveal once again the connoisseur stance, and a majority of PSA, CA and E discourse topics endorsed by slogans and images convey socialisation, social integration, a certain degree of belonging. However, advertising often idealizes integration, conveying the representation of another identity and its real impact on student perceptions will be assessed through the survey.

Interpreting the questions of Qc

I approached Qc from the perspective of change in knowledge and attitudes related to pre-arrival and during stay stages, and the correspondence between the world represented in the poster and the students' representations of the host city. I will discuss Q3, Q4, Q5, Q9, and Q12. Unlike the factual knowledge from Qu, Q3 shows a lack of specific information pre-arrival (67% partially, 33% none). The activity developed new knowledge. Correspondence between prior knowledge and poster knowledge is minimal (50% saw no correspondence, 50% saw partial correspondence), as the lack of pre-arrival information was compensated by their research and 8 months spent in the city after arrival (Q4). New knowledge and perceptions were mostly positive (Q5), with improvements in their views on cultural activities, student life and number of students, life quality, cultural diversity, safety, and cleanliness. The only exception was a negative perception related to pollution, sidewalks, and mentalities. This group also responded negatively to Q9 and Q12, suggesting no intercultural development. I cannot but ask myself if this group of respondents was the creator of the number 6 advertising poster. Q9 responses (33% yes, 33% maybe) show a shift in perception. The poster activity helped discover socialization and festival opportunities, improving social integration. Pre-arrival perception, related to their origin community, mainly the young target public of the posters, and mirroring their own can be changed. The change in their perception as a result of the poster activity must be detailed: „selling the city” created the sensation of belonging (social integration), perception was already better during stay, but their research discovered new activities (socialization possibilities) and festivals (entertainment), perception changed for the better, from negative to very positive, during stay (social integration).

Data shows that pre-arrival and during-stay perceptions changed, but the poster activity had little impact. Social integration and socialization were achieved naturally during stay, which somewhat contradicts, albeit on a smaller scale, previous studies (Ursa 2017). Nevertheless, I must stress that there isn't any clear indication in the answers to any of the 12 questions that points towards integration or socialisation within the host society. It can be within the host society, ideally, but it can as well within the bubble communities. Or bubble communities are the most constant reference points in terms of shared attitudes, values, and behaviours, as well as socialization patterns. Are we witnessing such a drastic change after only 9 years¹⁶? The answers to my third questionnaire (Qi)

¹⁶ The study I am referring to was conducted in 2016 and focused exclusively on French students. However, Qc was carried out with French speakers, not all of whom are French, which may have made the group in Qc more open to communication.

targets not only the perception and evaluation of stereotypes but also the development of social and academic integration.

Selective interpretation of Qi

This survey will be discussed in another study, but I do find it necessary to give a preview in response to the question above. The answer is no, in terms of real integration and socialization. Qi answers show a change in perception, mainly in deconstructing stereotypes, partly through the poster activity, but also highlight the need for socialization and integration with domestic students and Romanians. Less than half of the students have Romanian friends (39.13%), and more than half (60.86%) have none or just a few. However, 100% of the latter want Romanian friends. The main reason for not having Romanian friends, crucial mediators for socialisation, integration, RSL development and above all, for intercultural development, is the lack of opportunity to meet them: "I haven't had the opportunity to meet them." International and domestic students do not share classes or buildings in the first years. I conclude that cultural activities and entertainment unfold within bubble communities (colleagues, associations). Qi results differ from 2016 findings, showing increased desire for socialization, integration, and IC development, while Qc results reflect the desired image of one of the (inter)cultural worlds.

Conclusions

While academic integration appears to be successful, social integration and the development of intercultural competence remain significant challenges. If the methods and strategies used in the RSL course are not effectively fostering IC as intended, and if academic integration, student commitment to the university are closely tied to social integration and personal development, it suggests that something in the current approach may not be working. If social integration is proven to be part of the students' needs and desires, there are no courses dedicated to intercultural accompaniment. This raises the question: are we doing enough to develop IC in our students? It might be time for academic staff and university services to come together and find a more effective solution.

In the line of Derwin, intercultural competence is not just a matter of allowing different cultures to interact. It involves understanding how individuals with multiple identities engage with others who have equally complex identities, and it focuses on enriching the experience for all participants. Developing intercultural competence cannot be achieved through academic integration and RSL classes alone.

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