



UNIVERSITATEA BABEŞ-BOLYAI
BABEŞ-BOLYAI TUDOMÁNYEGYETEM
BABEŞ-BOLYAI UNIVERSITÄT
BABEŞ-BOLYAI UNIVERSITY
TRADITIO ET EXCELLENTIA



STUDIA UNIVERSITATIS
BABEŞ-BOLYAI



PSYCHOLOGIA PAEDAGOGIA

F.O.H.E.

The Future of Higher Education –
evidence-based approaches and practices

16th -17th of May 2025

**STUDIA UNIVERSITATIS BABEŞ-BOLYAI
PSYCHOLOGIA-PAEDAGOGIA**

**F.O.H.E.
The Future of Higher Education –
Evidence-based approaches and
practices**

16th -17th of May 2025

Guest Editors:

Adrian OPRE, Dana OPRE & Adina GLAVA

Volume 71, Special Issue, March 2026

ISSN (online): 2065-9431 | ISSN-L: 1221-8111

©2025 Studia UBB Psychologia-Paedagogia. Published by Babeş-Bolyai University.
Licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives
4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

STUDIA UNIVERSITATIS BABEŞ-BOLYAI PSYCHOLOGIA-PAEDAGOGIA

Web site: <https://studiapsypaed.com/>

Contact: studia.psiedu@gmail.com

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF:

Researcher SEBASTIAN VAIDA, Ph.D., Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

EDITORIAL BOARD:

Professor ION ALBULESCU, Ph.D., Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

Associate Prof. MIRELA ALBULESCU, Ph.D., Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

Professor MUŞATA BOCOŞ, Ph.D., Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

Associate Prof. CAROLINA BODEA-HAŢEGAN, Ph.D., Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

Vanessa BOTAN, Ph.D., Nottingham Trent University, UK

AUREL BUMBAŞ, Ph.D., Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

Psychologist IULIA BUTEAN, Ph.D., Romania

Professor CONSTANTIN CUCOŞ, Ph.D., Alexandru Ioan Cuza University, Iaşi, Romania

Professor HARRY DANIELS, Ph.D., University of Oxford, UK

Psych. DANIELA DUMULESCU, Ph.D., Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

Psychologist SIMI ECHIM, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

Professor ALIN GAVRELIUC, Ph.D., West University of Timisoara, Timișoara, Romania

Associate Prof. ADINA GLAVA, Ph.D., Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

Associate Prof. CĂTĂLIN GLAVA, Ph.D., Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

Associate Prof. ANDREEA HATHÁZI, Ph.D., Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

Associate Prof. DOROTHEA IONESCU, Ph.D., Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

Lecturer Eva KALLAY, Ph.D., Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

Phd Student Miriam KENYERES, Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

Professor ROMIŢĂ IUCU, Ph.D., University of Bucharest, Bucharest, Romania

Lecturer JANOS REKA, Ph.D., Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

Professor MARKUS A. LAUNER, Ph.D., Ostphalia University, Germany

Associate Prof. IOANA MAGDAŞ, Ph.D., Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

Associate Prof. CODRUŢA MIH, Ph.D., Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

Lecturer GIORGOS NICOLAOU, Ph.D., University of Ioannina, Greece

Professor ADRIAN OPRE, Ph.D., Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

Lecturer DANA OPRE, Ph.D., Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

Lecturer ELENA PĂCURAR, Ph.D., Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

Phd Doris POP, Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

Professor VLADIMIR RADULOV, Ph.D., University of Sofia, Bulgaria

Lecturer Diana TODEA-SAHLEAN, PhD, Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

Lecturer FLORIN SALAJAN, Ed.D., North Dakota State University, USA

Professor CRAIG R. SEAL, Ph.D., University of California, San Bernardino, USA

Professor CRISTIAN STAN, Ph.D., Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

Psychologist LAVINIA ŞUTEU, Ph.D., Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

PhD Raluca D. SZEKELY-COPÎNDEAN, Romanian Academy & Babeş-Bolyai University

Lecturer CAMELIA TEGLAŞ, Ph.D., Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

Professor CHARLES TEMPLE, Ph.D., Hobart and William Smith Colleges, Geneva, USA

Professor LASZLO TOTH, Ph.D., Hungarian University of Sports Science

Lecturer BOGDAN TULBURE, Ph.D., West University of Timișoara, Timișoara, Romania

Professor DOREL UNGUREANU, Ph.D., West University of Timișoara, Timișoara, Romania

YEAR
MONTH
ISSUE

Volume 71 (LXXI) 2026
March
Special Issue

PUBLISHED ONLINE: 2026-03-26
ISSUE DOI:10.24193/subbpsyped.fohe

S T U D I A
UNIVERSITATIS BABEŞ-BOLYAI
PSYCHOLOGIA-PAEDAGOGIA

F.O.H.E.

**The Future of Higher Education –
Evidence-based approaches and practices**

16th -17th of May 2025

CONTENT/ SOMMAIRE/ INHALT/ CUPRINS

Anișoara PAVELEA, Lorina CULIC, <i>Service-learning - An Effective Pedagogy for Communication Science</i>	5
Mălina-Elena GRIGORIȚĂ, <i>Student Well-being in Higher Education: Insights from International Academic Mobility Experiences</i>	29
Diana-Crina MARIN, Mihaela-Gabriela NEACȘU, Mușata-Dacia BOCOȘ, <i>eTwinning Projects – A Means to Promote Growth Mindset and Well-being in Education</i>	41
Carmen COSTEA-BĂRLUȚIU, Laura Elena RUNCEANU, <i>Ableism in Romanian Universities. An Exploratory Study</i>	59

Horățiu CATALANO, Ana RUS, Gabriela MESTIC, Simona VOIN, Anca ANI-RUS, <i>Grit as a Predictor of Student Engagement in Learning Activities</i>	77
Raluca POP, Anamaria MARC, <i>Exploring Pre-Service Teachers' Intercultural Communicative Competence and Global Citizen Learning in a Blended Intensive Program</i>	105
Csilla SÓGOR, <i>Developing Learning Techniques While Learning Modern Teaching Methods Within the Framework of Teaching Methodology of Chemistry and Didactics of Science Subjects</i>	117
Adina GLAVA, Dana OPRE, Adrian OPRE, <i>Writing Effective Learning Outcomes: Bridging Research and Classroom Practice</i>	131

Service-learning - an effective pedagogy for Communication Science

Anișoara PAVELEA^{1*} , Lorina CULIC¹ 

ABSTRACT. Service-learning has been proven to be one of the high-impact educational practices in higher education. Over the last decade, service-learning has gained momentum in colleges and universities across the globe, reflecting its demonstrated benefits for faculty, students, and partnering organizations. For communication science students in particular, service-learning represents a valuable pedagogy, contributing to skills development, and providing structured opportunities for reflection. Drawing on a qualitative case study exploring the integration of service-learning into a communication science curriculum, this paper seeks to present the main institutional and pedagogical challenges associated with this process for faculty and proposes evidence-based strategies to address them effectively.

Keywords: service-learning; communication; higher education; faculty development; pedagogical challenges.

1. SERVICE-LEARNING – ONE OF THE HIGH-IMPACT EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

High-impact practices usually refer to educational practices with unusually positive benefits, such as increased participation in educationally meaningful activities, improvements in in-depth learning, positive outcomes for students from historically underrepresented groups, and increased graduation rates (Bray et al., 2018).

¹ Babeș-Bolyai University, Faculty of Political, Administrative and Communication Sciences, Department of Communication, PR and Advertising, No.71, Traian Moșoiu, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

* Corresponding author: pavelea@fspac.ro



Service-learning (SL) has been acknowledged by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (2007; Kuh, 2008) as an innovative and high-impact practice gaining attention in higher education, along with first-year seminars and experiences, internships, learning communities, writing-intensive courses, common intellectual experiences, collaborative assignments and projects, diversity/global learning, undergraduate research, and capstone courses and projects. It is well established that high-impact practices promote four major learning outcomes, namely “knowledge of human cultures and the physical and natural world, intellectual and practical skills, personal and social responsibility, and integrative learning” (Schneider, 2007, p. 3). Engaging in high-impact practices benefits students and encourages gains in knowledge, skills, values, capacities, and competences, allowing students to engage locally and globally, to understand, evaluate and solve significant problems, and to interact with diverse others, therefore “getting the most out of college” (Kilgo et al., 2015). Bringle (2017) shows that integrating service-learning with other high-impact practices, such as research, study away, and internships and pre-professional courses, can produce more extensive, robust, distinctive and transformational outcomes for students than compared to traditional pedagogies. He talks about eleven different combinations, ranging from first-order high-impact practices, such as immersive service-learning, to third-order participatory community action research immersive civic internship/pre-professional, and offers relevant examples from previous research for most of them. When compared to other high-impact practices, SL has been proven to have the greatest impact on student outcomes, regardless of the bachelor student’s year of study (Finley, 2011). Where lies the added value of service-learning? Bringle (2017) considers that SL is valuable due to reflection, partnerships and focus on diversity. SL allows students to gain a deeper understanding of class content transferred into experiential learning activities outside the classroom, in different real-life settings, where they can interact directly with community partners (Brand et al., 2019). Reflection is a crucial component of high-quality service-learning projects (Lorenzo Moledo et al., 2021). Well-designed reflection activities help students connect theory with practice, integrate their own personal learning objectives into service activities, and link their contribution in SL projects to future career pursuits (Mitchell & Rost-Banik, 2019).

Service-learning is based on experiential learning, as students are required to go into their communities, identify relevant issues and community needs, partner with different organizations to tackle major problems, and connect their direct experience with course content. By applying what they learn in a real-life setting, students move from the basis of Bloom’s taxonomy of learning to the top levels. Working with and for the community allows students to gain valuable experience that represents “good preparation for citizenship, work, and life” (Kuh, 2008, p. 1).

As a form of civic engagement, service-learning is defined as “a course-based, credit-bearing educational experience in which students (a) participate in mutually identified and organized service activities that benefit the community, and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of personal values and civic responsibility” (Bringle & Clayton, 2012, p. 105, adapted from Bringle & Hatcher, 1996, p. 222). SL can take the form of direct service, indirect service, research, or advocacy (Bringle et al, 2016). The European Association of Service-Learning in Higher Education (EASLHE) mirrors this definition by describing Service-Learning (SL) as “an experiential educational method in which students engage in community service, reflect critically on this experience, and learn from it personally, socially and academically” (www.easlhe.eu, 2021).

While Robert Bringle (2009) insists on the importance of implementing credited SL activities in higher education, as they increase students motivation and reflect the institutional commitment to integrating these high-impact practices into curricula, Furco and Norvell (2019) stress upon the fact that SL tends to be value-laden, therefore we should pay attention to how authors from different backgrounds have defined this term, as it reflects the position and the research priorities of each country and region where it has emerged.

In the US, where both researchers have activated for most of their careers, SL has a longstanding tradition, and most universities have embraced a scholarship of engagement (Boyer, 1990). The movement started around the 1980s, when universities were concerned with the quality of education and educational reforms advocating for social changes and volunteering, student disengagement from their communities, and lack of preparedness towards participation in the civic life of their communities (Ehrlich, 1999; Hepburn, 1997). Service-learning was promoted as an answer to these concerns and proved to be an inspired decision as more than 1100 institutions have become members of the Campus Compact initiative (Campus Compact, 2016), and the Carnegie Elective Classification for Community Engagement was established. It soon became the most valuable acknowledgment and ranking of university efforts in this area. Regional accreditation standards and research grant criteria are considering SL practices and other forms of engaged research and teaching, and these practices are recognized even by popular rating systems, like US News and World Report (Gelmon et al., 2006). In South America, due to its roots in the catholic tradition infused with Paolo Freire’s pedagogy (Freire, 1970), the SL methodology spread organically and was frequently associated with the idea of philanthropy and volunteerism. In the African context, SL has evolved in close

connection with the social reconstruction of the state, as a community development, where universities are key actors in addressing inequality through civic engagement and collaborative partnerships (Stanton & Erasmus, 2013). In many Asian countries, SL is similarly considered as a mechanism for civic formation and nation and democratic-building (Ma, 2024).

Unlike North and South America where SL has been developed for the last four decades, in Europe, SL emerged later, starting with the beginning of the twenty-first century (Compare et al., 2024). In 2019, the European SL association (EASLHE) was created, with the intention to facilitate and stimulate the SL institutionalization process and to generate national networks while increasing the interconnectedness among European scholars (Aramburuzabala et al., 2019). The Central and Southeastern European Network, a collaborative informal platform was established with the support of CLAYSS in 2016, which advanced the SL agenda in the region through training and development, technical assistance, publications, and academic events (Avruj & Batista, 2022, in Gregorova et al., 2024).

Much of the work in the European area has been influenced by the American tradition of SL. In Eastern Europe, SL has become an awareness tool for promoting understanding of the role of education in democracy (Gelmon et al., 2006). Separately or together with other educational practices, such as first-year seminars, learning communities, and undergraduate research, SL results in increased faculty and peer interaction, enhanced critical thinking and writing skills, and higher levels of engagement (Brownell & Swanner, 2009). SL is considered a transformative methodology (Mezirow, 2000; Rodríguez-Izquierdo, 2021), and study abroad SL has produced impressive feedback from students who consider these types of educational experiences as life-changing (Kiely, 2004). The multiple benefits of SL will be presented in detail in the second section of this article.

Still, few studies have investigated the benefits of SL for Communication, Public Relations and Advertising students (Akpabio, 2012; Corbett & Kendall, 1998; Grow & Wolburg, 2005; Hettche & Clayton, 2013; Oster-Aaland, 2004; Silverman, 2007; Stevens, 2001; Zwarun, 2007). There is a general lack of studies that examine the challenges associated with the implementation of SL methodology in Romania (Rusu et al., 2014; Chiorean, 2025; Tripon & Drăghici, 2024; Pavelea & Culic, 2022), where “service-learning pedagogy still presents a novelty for many academics and students” (Ilic et al., 2021), a country that does not have a strong tradition of SL scholarship in HEI. The present study seeks to address these gaps and broaden the understanding of the challenges associated with the implementation of a SL course within one of Romania’s largest North-Western universities. We aim to bridge the knowledge gap on SL in communication-related programs, and contribute to the understanding of SL institutionalization in countries with limited SL tradition in higher education.

1.1. The value of SL for universities, instructors, community partners and students

The value of SL has been extensively documented, and several criteria have been used to assess the quality of a SL course. Most researchers have looked into course design, learning outcomes, students, instructor, and community partners (Bingle et al., 2013; Furco, 2003). Reflection is an essential part of the SL experience (Jacoby, 2015). But it would be foolish to believe that by just following these guidelines, students' outcomes will be reached equally (Steinke et al., 2002). Service-learning practice differs significantly from one course to another, depending on course design and philosophy, student experience and feedback, relationships with partners and their engagement, instructor experience and expertise, and institutional settings (Matthews et al, 2023). The requirements of SL experiences related to students' preparation for the service activities, percentage of course units dedicated to SL, the type of service, the amount of service provided, duration and intensity of service experiences are important factors to take into consideration when starting a SL course.

For **universities**, SL is a tool for attaining institutional objectives, such as social responsibility, civic engagement, outreach, assistance to local communities, crowdsourcing and fundraising (Gelmon et al., 2006). Universities adopt SL either top-down, as a reaction to educational reforms, or as part of a long-term strategy of a new managerial team, or bottom-up, initiated by champion faculty, "early adopters ("first-generation faculty"), predominantly risk-taking "visionary instructors" willing to experiment on limited resources with SL's possibilities" (Abes et al., 2002). What are the advantages for both institutions and individuals who would like to embark in these initiatives? For universities, the benefits are multiple, starting with fulfilling their triple mission and reducing the "town gown" division. Isaacson et al. (2005) argue that SL helps universities overcome perceptions of being distant or paternalistic by creating more reciprocal relationships with local communities. It enables institutions to contribute directly to community needs while still fulfilling their core educational mission.

For **instructors**, this transformative methodology can increase motivation and satisfaction, self-efficacy and sense of competence (O'Meara, 2023; Kinloch et al., 2015; Compare et al., 2024). It provides them with rich opportunities to teach in a real-world manner that has the potential to link educational content with everyday life (Watkins & Braun, 2005; Carrington et al., 2015), deeper learning and retention, more in-depth class discussion due to the increased knowledge of real contexts, transformed attitudes towards learning, and an enhanced sense of responsibility for personal development and empowerment

(Isaacson et al, 2005). Instructors usually choose one of three formats for SL courses: discipline based, problem based or project based (Tijmsma et al., 2020). SL courses enhance collaborative relationships between instructors, students and community partners who learn from each other (Compare et al, 2022). SL is a versatile methodology that can be used within a variety of disciplines, and in a diverse manner, employing students' multiple intelligence and learning strategies. It provides instructors new research opportunities, methods, and teaching activities (Soukup, 1999; Darby & Newman, 2014). But instructors' experience in SL is relevant in designing and implementing this type of high-impact practice. As Matthews et al. (2023, p. 172) show, "teaching and developing a service-learning course is an iterative and ongoing process that evolves with each implementation". Therefore, most research on instructors' motivation to engage in SL experiences present both the benefits and the challenges associated with SL methodology, usually mentioning additional time, logistics and efforts needed to implement SL projects (Abes et al., 2002; Darby & Willingham, 2022; Hou, 2010; Mayer, 2022).

For **community partners**, the success of university-community partnerships can be attributed to the four Rs described by Butin (2003): mutual respect, relevant activities for all the partners, critical reflection, and reciprocity of exchange, influence and generative transformations. Community organizations cherish the net value of service, the continuity of programs, students' and their families' support and interest, the accomplishment of their mission and the increased visibility (Isaacson et al, 2005). Community partners gain access to students' skills and knowledge (Geringer et al, 2009), which tend to be extremely important in the face of resource constraints, and contribute to students' high-quality learning experiences by fulfilling a mentoring and co-teaching role (Chika-James, Salem & Oyet, 2022; Rinaldo, Davis & Borunda, 2022).

Several meta-analyses and systematic literature reviews have documented the contribution of SL to **student** a) academic outcomes, such as increased motivation, positive attitude towards school, ability to apply knowledge in real-life settings, b) social outcomes, such as social capital development, social awareness, a deeper understanding of diversity, equity and inclusion, reduced stereotypes, c) personal outcomes, such as self-awareness, increased self-esteem, career choices, skill development in areas related to communication, conflict management, teamwork, analytical skills, and problem-solving, and d) citizenship outcomes, such as civic responsibility, participation, social justice attitudes, social responsibility (Bonastre et al., 2021; Celio et al., 2011; Compare & Albanesi, 2023; Conway, et al., 2009; Farmer & Perry, 2016; Novak et al., 2007; Salam et al, 2017; Salam et al., 2019; Warren, 2012; Yorio & Ye, 2012). Others have analyzed the positive effects of SL on students' social-emotional gains (Shapiro, 2021; York &

Fernandez, 2018), character development (Brandenberger, 2023), graduation and retention rates (Keup, 2005; Lockeman & Pelco, 2013; Matthews et al., 2015; Swail et al., 2003; Wyels & Martinez, 2024), career readiness and smoother transitions into new careers (Farmer et al., 2016), or other employment-related benefits, due to gained valuable skills that are usually not acquired in classroom (Carrington et al., 2015; Taylor & Raykov, 2014). Matthews et al. (2015, p.14) have investigated the job-related benefits of service-learning activities in college for graduates representing a sample of more than 20 majors and have shown that compared to students who have not taken the opportunity of engaging in SL activities, those who have, report receiving higher starting salaries (on average by \$6,500), receiving raises more quickly (two and a half month faster), and being more likely to have gained full-time employment in their first job (two months sooner). Therefore, Matthews and his colleagues (2015, p. 14) conclude that “although education—and SL and community engagement in particular—cannot and should not be reduced to a “dollars and cents” equation that overlooks the myriad human and personal development benefits of higher learning”, SL has some quantifiable benefits for universities and graduates.

1.2. SL in Communication science curricula

For communication science students especially, SL represents a valuable pedagogy, contributing to skills development, and providing structured opportunities for reflection. It is “a natural fit” (Isaacson et al, 2005). However, when we say communication science, we refer to the Romanian higher education institutions (HEI), where areas such as communication, journalism, advertising, and public relations are being included. We do not relate to speech communication and disorders students, who are usually assimilated to psychology or educational science in our national context, or to communications which resides in IT.

The SL methodology is incredibly adaptable and has been incorporated into a wide range of academic fields all around the world. Previous research has documented the integration of service-learning methodology into various communication programs. It has been used in Public Speaking courses (Weintroub, 1999), Communication Campaigns (Kinneck, 1999), Small Group Communication (Yelsma, 1999), Organizational Communication (O’Hara, 2001), Media Production (Keller, 1999), Mass Communication (Bachen, 1999; Crabtree, 1999), Interpersonal Communication (Culic & Pavelea, 2022; Souza, 1999; Steimel, 2013), Intercultural Communication (Blithe, 2016), Public Relations (Muturi et al., 2013; Texter & Smith, 2023), New Media (Moody & Burleston, 2013), or Journalism (Bryant et al., 2011; Clark, 2013; du Toit, 2022; Flournoy, 2007; Novek, 2023). Most faculty think of Campaign courses as suitable areas for SL. Today, several generations of graduates “are alumni of SL classes, and new variations of campaigns courses — from health

communication campaigns to fundraising campaigns and integrated marketing campaigns classes — are expanding the opportunities for SL to specialized arenas” (Kinnick, 1999). Valuable insight comes as well to communication scholars from marketing (Martin, 2015; Petkus, 2000; Hollenbeck, 2024) and business courses using SL (Pless et al, 2011, Snell et al., 2015, Grotrian-Ryan et al., 2016), as these subjects tend to be included into curricula of Communication science departments.

2. CASE STUDY – SL IN AN INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION CLASS

The application of SL in an undergraduate Interpersonal Communication course taught to first-year Communication and Advertising students at one of Romania’s largest and oldest universities is documented in this paper to provide an example of its use in the Romanian context and to present the findings from this trial. Similarly to other communication departments, the service-learning methodology was introduced to students as a new methodology aimed at boosting their employability skills by providing examples of valuable learning in real-life settings. Just like Oster-Aaland (2004) says, this initiative “had typically included but a single aficionado of service learning who served as an early adopter demonstrating to others that communication students could relate to community organizations in ways other than internships” (p. 348). The course was designed as a first-year bachelor’s degree class, mandatory for more than 300 students coming from two different majors (Communication and Advertising), and two study-tracks, regular and long-distance.

The objective of the class was to familiarize students with basic theoretical concepts and models that explain human behavior in social interaction through service-learning projects. We aimed to connect the theory of human interaction with community-based application, therefore throughout the second semester of their first-year, students have learned in class about the social self, social perception and cognition, interpersonal relationships, prosocial behavior and aggression, intimate relationships, social influence, stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination. During by-monthly seminars, they learned about service-learning methodology, met with community partners and previous students who presented their own projects as best cases, then were assigned to teams of four or five, where they have designed, discussed, implemented and evaluated a service-learning project reaching at least 30 beneficiaries. The class was based on the mixed model of SL implementation (Culcasi & Venegas, 2023), which combined the top-down pre-structured project (in collaboration with a short list of community partners, mainly alumni-led organizations), with the bottom-up perspective (allowing students to choose the social needs, activities and/or their own choice of community partners to carry out their projects).

For the vast majority of students this was their first-ever experience with SL. The Communication Department focuses mainly on research and project-based learning. Students have three semesters of practicum and are usually encouraged to undertake both individual and group research projects, to participate in conferences, to do internships, study abroad and engage in extracurricular activities. Their curriculum incorporates classes on media effects, advertising, communication, ethics, corporate social responsibility, event planning, public relations and public health campaigns.

For the semestrial projects, students followed the CLAYSS service-learning five-stage model (Sosa Rolon, 2020), including: motivation, diagnosis, project design and planning, implementation, and closure and multiplication. Students worked in teams of four or five, placed alphabetically (for regular students), and free choice for the ones enrolled in the long-distance track. The reason behind placing students in alphabetical order is that it helps in terms of logistics, it encourages them to make good use of the school semester schedule, and it replicates real-world settings of workplace environments where one does not get the opportunity to select co-workers, but rather works in preset teams. For long-distance students, as they do not have the opportunity to meet in person, flexibility of choosing teams is an advantage, since it is more difficult for them to organize in teams due to the fact that most of them fall into the non-traditional students category (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1998), being typically older, independent from parents and working full time while enrolled, having dependents, raising children as single parents, or having graduated a previous major. Especially for long-distance programs, these nontraditional students are now “the exception that becomes the norm in higher education” (Dunn, 2025, January 16).

2.1. Challenges for faculty implementing SL methodology

Implementing service-learning projects is difficult not just for students, but faculty as well, as it requires time, effort and logistics. Even though it is not difficult to conceptualize “the notion of adding community service to academic courses, the practice of integrating service and learning is anything but simple” (Howard, 1998, p. 21). The experience we have had with the Interpersonal course mirrors Culcasi & Venegas’s (2023) meta-analysis findings. Based on 88 articles analyzing SL’s impact on soft-skills development in HEI, published between 2013 and 2022, the meta-analysis indicates seven main challenges of SL for faculty. We will follow these seven categories of challenges to illustrate our experience with SL methodology and to propose a series of strategies to overcome them.

1. Changing the course structure

As previously stated, the integration of SL into course work requires a series of changes to course structure. A thorough examination of similar initiatives in US institutions has guided our approach, as the university does not have a SL center or support staff for such endeavours. We had to use flexibility in course design, so we organized the seminar around SL, and dedicated the first two class meetings to introducing students to this methodology, presenting previous successful projects and inviting second-year students and partners to present their SL initiatives, answer questions and indicate resources to current students enrolled in the class. Clear articulation of SL requirements in course syllabus, including recommended readings, references, assessment criteria, and class requirements were presented to students during the first two meetings. Given the fact that this is a class on Interpersonal Communication, a number of weekly hours of interacting with the partnering organization and beneficiaries of the SL project was recommended to students.

2. Maintaining a close connection between learning and service goals

Class discussions helped students reinforce connections between course content and service experiences. But maintaining a close connection between learning and service objectives is extremely challenging with large groups of students, who have varying motivation levels, engagement and learning objectives. As the course has two instructors, one for the teaching section and another one for seminar activities, good collaboration and communication between the instructors became a priority. The previous long-term collaboration between faculty was a plus, and it became a psychological support system during the implementation phase, when tasks diversified and students' needs became prominent. To reinforce the connection between course content and service experiences, the instructors used class discussion, periodic check-ins with the student teams, and structured-reflection prompts at the seminar to track student progress. Tackling challenges encountered by students and addressing them during seminars helped faculty monitor the varying degrees of student engagement, and class discussions deepen student understanding of how theory applies to real life.

3. Structuring or accompanying partners

Instructor and community partners' connection is challenging, since when one is working with large groups of students such as in this case, it is extremely difficult to manage the relationship with various community partners, and it requires a consistent amount of time and energy. Cyclical partnerships greatly lessen the amount of time and effort faculty spend overseeing SL courses (Hollenbeck, 2024). Based on instructors' personal network, we have established

connections before the beginning of the semester activity mainly with alumni, who are accustomed to communication curricula, program requirements, students' skills level and expectations. They acted as mentors for students and have guided their steps into the SL projects, thus also reducing instructor workload. Continuing previous partnerships with more than half of the previous partners has allowed us to provide diverse partnerships for almost two-thirds of the students' body. The remaining 35% were given a list of community organizations from which they could choose to contact for their project, according to team members' own interests and selected topic. One particular challenge was related to competing teams of students choosing the same partnering organizations. Continuous debriefs during seminars helped normalize student expectations and provided opportunities to include topics like social comparison, fear of missing out and self-esteem to the conversation. Communication with partners enabled faculty to keep track of students' progress and anticipate potential problems. Ongoing communication has been maintained either face-to-face or through Zoom meetings, phone calls or emails. However, developing a dedicated institutional infrastructure for SL for coordinating partnerships, supporting faculty and ensuring equitable distribution of students across organizations would greatly facilitate the process and will contribute to more consistent and high-quality SL experiences for students.

4. Employing different assessment strategies

Diverse assessment strategies have been employed. Attendance and active participation in class was encouraged and constituted a bonus. Half of the final grade was a written multiple-questions exam, assessing the learning part, and half was the service-learning project. Details and specific expectations for the service activities were planned and articulated. As mentioned before, students had three monthly assignments during the semester: one individual, and two team assignments. Also, three different points of data collection were used for a research project that students were encouraged to complete, of which the last one dealt entirely with reflection prompts. The DEAL model of reflection (Ash & Clayton, 2009) guided class conversations with students throughout the entire semester. Diversifying the assessment criteria and designing a clear rubric allowed faculty to split workload and also to have a detailed image of students' participation, engagement and outcomes.

5. Managing students' uncertainty

Students' uncertainty was a result of a series of factors. The most notable ones were team structure, lack of knowledge and experience with SL methodology, approaching deadlines, communication with partnering organizations, and logistics.

Although grading criteria were clearly outlined in the course syllabus and reinforced during seminar sessions, students with irregular attendance often faced information overload, which intensified their stress levels.

Team structure was a constant challenge. Even though we have organized students alphabetically into teams of five, flexibility and adaptability were required, as dropout rates and final lists of students were to be updated at the end of the school year, so we did not have any means of identifying students who were not actively involved in the projects. Therefore, after the first two seminars, we checked the composition of each team and in some cases reassigned students to other groups. Offering students' previous projects as best practice examples made the SL project tangible, gave them a boost of confidence and reduced the overwhelming feeling that they had too much to handle, too much information to consult. Also, by encouraging second-year students to share their honest opinion about the benefits and challenges of implementing SL projects made the whole experience more relatable.

The Q&A session at the end of each meeting has been proven to represent a good strategy for dealing with students' uncertainty. We have provided evaluation grids for the entire project and accurate instructions for all three assignments, dealing with motivation and diagnosis, planification of activities, and implementation and evaluation. As noted in earlier, implementing SL projects can be challenging for first-year students, especially if this is their first meeting with the methodology (Pavelea & Culic, 2022). For most students, the lack of knowledge regarding SL in general is an important barrier, but for those who have been involved in volunteering projects, the process might have seemed familiar. This is the reason why a short needs assessment aiming to identify students' previous experiences in either volunteering or service-learning activities has proved to be highly informative.

Communication with partners is mentioned by students as one of their main challenges, and one possible explanation could be that they tend to rely more on virtual communication and text than interpersonal communication (Hollenbeck, 2024). Even though mediated communication is more time-effective, consistent with previous studies (Schroth, 2019), we have observed that students' preferred mode of communication tends to influence their skillset, especially the adeptness in listening, questioning, intercepting conversations, problem-solving and resolving conflict, their use of language in real-workplace settings, and consequently their inability to socialize spirals into anxiety and stress. Inevitably, we have observed that current gen Z requires significant effort and time on the side of the instructors for stress management, validation, and mental health support. Faculty have to put on multiple hats when dealing with these sensitivities, to ensure students are provided the necessary support.

6. Balancing the community partners' expectations with students' skills

Team composition was extremely important for the outcome of the SL project. We encouraged students to start working on the project as soon as possible, to contact their colleagues, establish team rules and principles, assign individual roles, identify personal and group learning objectives, and normalize expectations. Time management and teamwork are usually important predictors of SL projects' success. Working in teams posed important challenges for both students and faculty, but also encouraged self-awareness and self-discovery. Students soon realized that they possess different skillsets, knowledge and values. They cannot be proficient in all areas of the SL project, therefore oftentimes faculty addressed grievances, stressed the importance of academic engagement, long-term goals and personal responsibility for managing one's own academic experience in university. The faculty encouraged students to connect this experience not just with future training in event planning, SNS management, communication strategies and other similar electives at their choice, but also with career interests, career plans and objectives.

Community partners' expectations tended to be realistic, since most of them were alumni, with a fair knowledge of communication curricula, assessment criteria, school to work transitions and gen Z profile. Still, partners' expectations tended to depend on the size of the partnering organization they represented. Most of them were NGOs, other small or medium enterprises, and few - large companies. Involving partners in students' assessment, similar to previous practicum initiatives, was challenging, but their feedback regarding students' skills, engagement level, motivation and accomplishments became a useful component of the final grades.

7. Maintaining the balance between student initiative and faculty leadership.

Faculty leadership is important as it sets the tone of the SL projects. Ideally, faculty would take part in most of the SL activities together with students, as their guidance and engagement has been proven to be a strong predictor for students' met objectives and for the quality of reflection. Given the fact that our class consisted of more than 300 students, it would have been almost impossible to join all their initiatives, due to time constraints. Students' initiatives were encouraged and faculty monitoring was implemented mostly during seminar activities and online check-in meetings. Student-led learning and collaboration between SL stakeholders was underlined. For the dissemination phase, students were encouraged to use hashtags, so that anyone could have access to the resources and outputs of their projects. Special emphasis has been put on students' empowerment and self-determination in the current academic context, guided by principles of andragogy and heutagogy.

3. CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

SL is both transformative and complex—it requires thoughtful design, consistent mentoring, and adaptive logistics, significantly more workload and more risk-taking than traditional college courses (Smith-Paríolá & Gòkè-Paríolá, 2006). It is not an easy task, as it is usually designed to meet the needs of four constituents: faculty, administration, students and community partners. The benefits for all these stakeholders are noteworthy and previous literature has extensively documented them. It is not surprising that recent studies place SL among the top ten high-impact practices in HEI and the institutionalization practices of SL in academia have increased during the last decades.

Integrating SL into the curricula is easy to conceptualize, but the actual implementation of the methodology raises several challenges for faculty especially. Culcasi & Venegas's (2023) meta-analysis organizes these challenges for faculty in seven distinct categories, dealing with: changing the course structure, maintaining the connection between service and learning, working with partnering organizations, designing assessment strategies, managing students's uncertainty, balancing community partners' expectations with students' skills, and managing tension between student initiative and faculty leadership.

For each of these challenges, our experience with SL within an Interpersonal Communication course designed for Communication and Advertising students revealed several strategies for successfully grappling with them. First, changing the course structure requires faculty knowledge, experience and vision, strong intercollegiate collaboration and support from management. Other documented experiences and best practices become valuable resources, but adapting their input to local specificities is a must. For universities who have institutionalized SL practices, support teams come into place and their expertise lessens the implementation of SL methodology. Clear articulation of SL requirements in course syllabus, including recommended readings, references, assessment criteria, and class requirements are mandatory. Second, as most academics recommend, academic credit is for learning, not for service, but faculty has the autonomy to design assessment criteria that would suit best the class objectives and student outcomes. Class discussions encourage critical reflection on student learning, normalize expectations, and help faculty save time when addressing common student concerns. Third, recruiting alumni-led partnering organizations proves to be a smart decision, as they have previous experience with program requirements, curricula and students' profile, are easy to find through personal or professional networks, and are eager to give back to their alma mater. Fourth, SL might be difficult to introduce to undergraduate students, but it is an extremely versatile methodology that can be employed equally by faculty from diverse backgrounds,

and thus it is flexible and easily adaptable, even in terms of assessment criteria. Consecrated models of reflection, such as the DEAL model (Ash & Clayton, 2009), support faculty's assessment philosophy and can be incorporated into mixed assessment criteria in SL courses. Fifth, especially in an academic environment, where students compete for scholarships, internships, and jobs, faculty have to put on multiple hats, fulfill diverse roles and strive to address students' needs while lowering the uncertainty levels. They provide teaching, research, counselling, mentoring, career guidance, and several other support activities, accompanying students in their academic experience. Sixth, community partners' expectations tend to be accurate when they are alumni, but initial conversations with them before the beginning of the school semester can set the tone for the relationships with students, for the level of engagement and the magnitude of tasks required. Last, but not least, students' level of experience with SL and with university requirements in general can become a serious obstacle for designing and implementing high-quality SL projects, especially within the context of university short-term semestrial format. But introducing students to SL from freshmen level can be beneficial for institutions, as more faculty are able to relate to students previous experiences and design more meaningful project-based, experiential, or place-based learning opportunities, to name just a few.

For Communication students, SL represents a good fit, as so many other studies have shown, and we can only hope that more universities and Communication programs will embrace this methodology. We are looking forward to developing a national alliance for SL in HEI and to align our objectives to the worldwide activity of such organizations, so that more students and faculty can benefit from the experience of such initiatives.

SL is not for everyone, as it presents a series of noteworthy challenges, but the rewards for implementing such a methodology at any level of education have been documented extensively for the last five decades. Especially for HEI who make it their mission to contribute to society through education, research and community outreach, SL is here to stay. With the constant tension between two types of mindsets opposing the idealistic champions of SL to the pragmatic ranking-focused neoliberal academics of Fleming's (2021) Dark Academia, faculty have to decide which category they choose. More and more, the early-adopters, predominantly risk-taking visionary instructors willing to experiment on limited resources with service-learning possibilities (Abes, Jackson & Jones, 2002) are being replaced by less idealistic, more focused second-generation faculty, who guide their career on guaranteed outcomes and pragmatic gains, who seek tangible rewards and instant gratification. Still, SL institutionalization takes time. There are no recipes, just guidelines, and management support is crucial for faculty motivation, continuing partnerships and student engagement.

Institutionalizing SL in higher academia could encourage those who seek to employ such methodologies to make room for them and implement community outreach initiatives in their personal career plans for the benefit of universities, students, and communities.

Given all these arguments for implementing SL projects with communication science students, we agree with George Kuh (2008), Chancellor's Professor Emeritus of Higher Education Emeritus at Indiana University, when he says “When I am asked, what one thing we can do to enhance student engagement and increase student success? I now have an answer: make it possible for every student to participate in at least two high-impact activities during his or her undergraduate program, one in the first year, and one taken later in relation to the major field. The obvious choices for incoming students are first-year seminars, learning communities, and service learning” (p. 21). In today’s increasingly polarized societies, marked by fake news, misinformation and disinformation, anxiety and shifting realities, communicators' role becomes crucial. Educating caring communicators as critical reflective practitioners who work with and for their communities through SL courses incorporated in their initial training has proved to be a good decision. Institutionalizing SL and designing large scale communication departments or university strategies supported by SL centers can open the road to high-quality educational practices, designed to increase students' civic engagement in the long run and to strengthen high-impact collaborations in our communities.

REFERENCES

- Abes, E. S., Jackson, G., & Jones, S. R. (2002). Factors that motivate and deter faculty use of service-learning. *Michigan Journal of community service learning*, 9(1), 5-17.
- Akpabio, E. (2012). Beneficiaries’ perspective on service learning: Case study of advertising and public relations campaign course. *SAGE Open*, 2(3), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244012460694>.
- Applegate, J. L., & Morreale, S. P. (1999). Service-learning in communication: A natural partnership. In Droge, D. & Murphy, B.O. (Eds.), *Voices of strong democracy: Concepts and models for service-learning in communication studies* (pp. 35–42). Washington, DC: American Association for Higher Education.
- Ash, S. L., & Clayton, P. H. (2009). *Learning through critical reflection: A tutorial for students in service-learning*. Raleigh, NC: Authors.
- Association of American Colleges and Universities & National Leadership Council (U.S.). (2007). *College learning for the new global century: A report from the National Leadership Council for Liberal Education & America’s Promise*. Association of American Colleges and Universities. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED495004>

- Bachen, C.M. (1999) Integrating communication theory and practice in community settings: Approaches, opportunities, and ongoing challenges. In Droge, D. & Murphy, B.O. (Eds.) *Voices of strong democracy: Concepts and models for service-learning in communication studies* (pp. 13–24), Washington, DC: American Association of Higher Education.
- Blithe, S. J. (2016). Teaching intercultural communication through service-learning. *Communication Teacher*, 30(3), 165-171.
- Boyer, E. L. (1990). *Scholarship reconsidered: Priorities of the professoriate* (Special Report). The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.
- Bonastre, C., Camilli, C., García-Gil, D., & Cuervo, L. (2021). Implicaciones educativas y sociales del aprendizaje-servicio con métodos mixtos a través de un meta-análisis [Educational and social implications of service-learning using mixed methods: A meta-analysis]. *Revista Española de Pedagogía*, 79(279), 269–287. <https://doi.org/10.22550/REP79-2-2021-05>.
- Brand, B. D., Brasca, K., & Sass, M. (2019). The community outreach model of service-learning: A case study of active learning and service-learning in a natural hazards, vulnerability, and risk class. *Higher Learning Research Communications*, 9(2), 1-18.
- Brandenberger, J. W. (2023). Investigating personal development outcomes in service learning: Theory and research. In P. H. Clayton, R. G. Bringle, & J. A. Hatcher (Eds.), *Research on service learning: Conceptual frameworks and assessment* (Vol. 2A, pp. 133–156). Routledge.
- Bray, S., Kuh, G. D., & Kinzie, J. (2018). What really makes a “high-impact” practice high impact. *Inside Higher Ed*.
https://accreditation.ncsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/221/drive/1Lfx8nkAjI8_m3k6imx2RbS1CumVc4iR6/QEP-What-Really-Makes-a-HIP-High-Impact.pdf
- Bringle, R. G. (2017). Hybrid High-Impact Pedagogies: Integrating Service-Learning with Three Other High-Impact Pedagogies. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 24(1), 49-63.
- Bringle, R. G., & Clayton, P. H. (2012). Civic education through service-learning: What, how, and why? In L. McIlrath, A. Lyons, & R. Munck (Eds.), *Higher education and civic engagement: Comparative perspectives* (pp. 101- 124). New York: Palgrave.
- Bringle, R. G., & Hatcher, J. A. (2009). Learning and Curricular Engagement. *Institutionalizing community engagement in higher education: The first wave of Carnegie classified institutions: New directions for higher education*, (147), 37.
- Bringle, R. G., & Hatcher, J. A. (1996). Implementing service learning in higher education. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 67(2), 221–239.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.1996.11780257>.
- Bringle, R. G., Clayton, P. H., & Hatcher, J. A. (2013). Research on service learning: An introduction. In P. H. Clayton, R. G. Bringle, & J. A. Hatcher (Eds.), *Research on service learning: Conceptual frameworks and assessment*, Vol. 2A (pp. 3–25). Stylus.
- Bringle, R. G., Reeb, R., Brown, M. A., & Ruiz, A. (2016). *Service learning in psychology: Enhancing undergraduate education for the public good*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

- Brownell, J. E., & Swaner, L. E. (2009). High-impact practices: Applying the learning outcomes literature to the development of successful campus programs. *Peer Review*, 11(2), 26-30.
- Bryant, J. A., Schönemann, N., & Karpa, D. (2011). *Integrating Service-Learning Into the University Classroom*, Jones and Bartlett Publishers.
- Butin, D. (2003). Of what use is it? Multiple conceptualizations of service-learning within education. *Teacher's College Record*, 105(9), 1674–1692. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1065160>.
- Campus Compact. (2016). *2016 Campus Compact executive summary* [Executive summary]. Campus Compact. <https://compact.org/sites/default/files/2022-04/2016>
- Carrington, S., Mercer, K. L., Iyer, R., & Selva, G. (2015). The impact of transformative learning in a critical service-learning program on teacher development: Building a foundation for inclusive teaching. *Reflective Practice*, 16(1), 61–72. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623943.2014.969696>.
- Celio, C. I., Durlak, J., & Dymnicki, A. (2011). A meta-analysis of the impact of service-learning on students. *Journal of Experiential Education*, 34, 164-181.
- Chika-James, T. A., Salem, T., & Oyet, M. C. (2022). Our gains, pains, and hopes: Community partners' perspectives of service-learning in an undergraduate business education. *SAGE Open*, 12(1), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440221082157>.
- Chiorean, C. (2025). Integrating service learning into university education – case study: Service learning (SL) students project “Contactless in bus”. In *INTED2025 Proceedings* (pp. 104-114). IATED.
- Clark, L. S. (2013). Cultivating the media activist: How critical media literacy and critical service learning can reform journalism education. *Journalism*, 14(7), 885-903.
- Compare, C., Pieri, C., & Albanesi, C. (2022). Community-University Partnership in Service-Learning: Voicing the community side. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, 26(2).
- Compare, C., & Albanesi, C. (2023). Belief, attitude and critical understanding. A systematic review of social justice in Service-Learning experiences. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, 33(2), 332-355.
- Compare, C., Rivero, C., Vargas Moniz, M. J., & Albanesi, C. (2024). Autonomy, competence, and relatedness: unpacking faculty motivation in service-learning. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 43(6), 1210-1226.
- Conway, J. M., Amel, E. L., & Gerwien, D. P. (2009). Teaching and learning in the social context: A meta-analysis of service learning's effects on academic, personal, social, and citizenship outcomes. *Teaching of Psychology*, 36, 233-245.
- Corbett, J. B., & Kendall, A. R. (1998). Evaluating service learning in the communication discipline. *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator*, 53(4), 66-76.
- Crabtree, R. (1999). Communication and Social Change: Applied Communication Theory in Service-Learning. In Droge, D. & Murphy, B.O. (Eds.) *Voices of strong democracy concepts and communication studies* (125-136). Washington, D.C.: American Association of Higher Education.
- Culcasi, I., & Venegas, R. P. F. (2023). Service-Learning and soft skills in higher education: A systematic literature review. *Form@ re-Open Journal per la formazione in rete*, 23(2), 24-43. <https://doi.org/10.36253/form-14639>.

- Culic, L. I., Pavelea, A. (2022). Enhancing students' interpersonal skills through an experience-based service-learning project: A case of active learning. In K. Enomoto, R. Warner & C. Nygaard (Eds.), *Active Learning in Higher Education* (pp.154-180). Oxfordshire, U.K.: Libri Publishing Ltd.
- Darby, A., & Newman, G. (2014). Applying Motivation Theory to Faculty Motivation to Utilize Academic Service-Learning Pedagogy. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, 18(2), 91–119. <https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.1998.0003> (PDF retrieved from <https://openjournals.libs.uga.edu/jheoe/article/view/1116>).
- Darby, A., & Willingham, L. (2022). Faculty motivation in service-learning based on expectancy x value theory. *The Journal of Experiential Education*, 45(3), 337–353. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10538259211058292>.
- du Toit, J. E. (2022). Agents of Change: Journalism Education as Critical Service-Learning. In *Role of Education and Pedagogical Approach in Service Learning* (pp. 75-92). Emerald Publishing Limited.
- Dunn, T. (2025, January 16th). *When the Exception Becomes the Norm. The rise of non-traditional students in higher education* (issue brief). Manhattan Institute. <https://manhattan.institute/article/rise-of-nontraditional-students-in-higher-education>.
- Ehrlich, T. (1999). Civic and Moral Learning. *About Campus: Enriching the Student Learning Experience*, 4(4), 5-9. <https://doi.org/10.1177/108648229900400403>.
- European Association of Service-Learning in Higher Education. (2021, January). *A European framework for the institutionalisation of service-learning in higher education: Policy brief*. European Observatory of Service-Learning in Higher Education. https://www.eoslhe.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/EASHLE-Policy-brief_SL-in-European-Higher-Education_web.pdf.
- European Association of Service-Learning in Higher Education (EASLHE). (n.d.). *European Association of Service-Learning in Higher Education*. <https://www.eoslhe.eu/>
- Farmer, B., & Perry III, L. G. (2016). University-community engagement and public relations education: A replication and extension of service-learning assessment in the public relations campaigns course. *International Journal of Research on Service-Learning and Community Engagement*, 4(1), 235-254.
- Finley, A. (2011). Assessment of high- impact practices: Using findings to drive change in the Compass Project. *Peer Review*, 13(2), 29-33.
- Fleming, P. (2021). *Dark academia: How universities die*. Pluto Press.
- Flournoy, C. (2007). Doing learning: Investigative reporting and service learning. *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator*, 62(1), 47-61.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
- Furco, A. (2003). Issues of definition and program diversity in the study of service-learning. In S. H. Billig & A. S. Waterman (Eds.), *Studying service-learning: Innovations in education research methodology* (pp. 13–34). Routledge.
- Furco, A., & Norvell, K. (2019). What is service learning?: Making sense of the pedagogy and practice. In Aramburuzabala, P., McIlrath, L. & H. Opazo (eds.). *Embedding service learning in European higher education* (pp. 13-35). Routledge.
- Gelmon, S. B., Holland, B. A., Driscoll, A., Spring, A., & Kerrigan, S. (2006). *Assessing service-learning and civic engagement: Principles and techniques*. Campus Compact.

- Geringer, S.D., Stratemeyer, A.W., Canton, A., & Rice, W. (2009). Assessing service-learning outcomes in a principles of marketing course: A team-based vs. individual-based approach. *Journal for the Advancement of Marketing Education*, 14, 1–12.
- Gregorová, A. B., Malkic, E., Butyka, M., Zeka, H., Bejenaru, S. (2024). Promoting Civic Engagement, Inclusiveness and Quality Education through Central and Southeastern European Network for Service-Learning. *RIDAS. Revista Iberoamericana de Aprendizaje-Servicio*, (18).
- Grotrian-Ryan, S., Ryan, K., & Jackson, A. (2016). Instilling Service Learning to Undergraduate Business Students: A Case Study Approach to Understanding Business-Related Concepts with the Use of Kiva. *Journal of Education and Learning*, 5(1), 104-113.
- Grow, J. M., & Wolburg, J. M. (2005). Service learning across the curriculum: A collaboration to promote smoking cessation. *Journal of Advertising Education*, 9(1), 5–18.
- Hase, S., & Kenyon, C. (2000). From andragogy to heutagogy. *Ulti-BASE In-Site*, December, . <http://pandora.nla.gov.au/nph-wb/20010220130000/http://ultibase.rmit.edu.au/New/newdec00.html>.
- Hettche, M., & Clayton, M. (2013). Web site design and content management analysis: Opportunities for service-learning projects. *Journal of Advertising Education*, 17(1), 26-35.
- Hepburn, M. A. (1997). Service Learning in Civic Education: A Concept with Long, Sturdy Roots. *Theory Into Practice*, 36(3), 136–142. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1477326>.
- Hollenbeck, C. R. (2024). Service-Learning And Community Partnerships With High Societal Impact. *Marketing Education Review*, 34(4), 275-290.
- Hou, S. I. (2010). Developing a faculty inventory measuring perceived service-learning benefits and barriers. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 16(2), 78-89.
- Howard, J. (1998). Academic service learning: A counternormative pedagogy. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 1998(73), 21–29. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tl.7303>.
- Isaacson, R., & Saperstein, J. (2005). *The art and strategy of service-learning presentations*. Cengage Learning.
- Jacoby, B. (2015). *Service-learning essentials: Questions, answers, and lessons learned*. Jossey-Bass.
- Keller, V., Harder, J., & Kois, C. (2023). Community Media as a Pedagogical Laboratory. In Droge, D. & Murphy, B.O. (Eds.) *Voices of strong democracy concepts and communication studies* (137-144). Washington, D.C.: American Association of Higher Education.
- Keup, J.R. (2005). The impact of curricular interventions on intended second-year enrollment. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 7(1–2), 61–89. <https://doi.org/10.2190/4HCP-975W-6W2Q-UPKO>.
- Kiely, R. (2004). A chameleon with a complex: Searching for transformation in international service-learning. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 10(2), 5-20.
- Kilgo, C. A., Ezell Sheets, J. K., & Pascarella, E. T. (2015). The link between high-impact practices and student learning: Some longitudinal evidence. *Higher Education*, 69, 509-525. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-014-9788-z>.
- Kinloch, V., Nemeth, E., & Patterson, A. (2015). Reframing service-learning as learning and participation with urban youth. *Theory Into Practice*, 54(1), 39–46. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00405841.2015.97766>.

- Kinnick, K. N. (1999). The communication campaigns course as a model for incorporating service-learning into the curriculum. In Droge, D. & Murphy, B.O. (Eds.), *Voices of strong democracy concepts and models for service-learning in communication studies* (155-164). Washington, D.C.: American Association of Higher Education.
- Kuh, G. D. (2008). *High-impact educational practices: What they are, who has access to them, and why they matter* (Vol. 9). Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities.
- Lockeman, K.S., Pelco, L. E. (2013). The relationship between service-learning and degree completion, *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 20(1), 18-30.
- Lorenzo Moledo, M., Sáez-Gambín, D., Ferraces Otero, M. J., & Varela Portela, C. (2021). Reflection and quality assessment in service-learning projects: When, with whom, and why. *Frontiers in Education*, 5, Article 605099. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2020.605099>
- Ma, H. K. (2024). *Reflection of service-learning development and its network in Asia*. *Revista Iberoamericana de Aprendizaje-Servicio*, 18, 106–119. DOI 10.1344/RIDAS2024.18.8
- Martin, M. C. (2015). Service learning as marketing pedagogy: Practical, theoretical and institutional perspectives. *Academy of Educational Leadership Journal*, 19(2), 109–127.
- Matthews, P. H., Dorfman, J. H., & Wu, X. (2015). The impacts of undergraduate service-learning on post-graduation employment outcomes. *International Journal of Research on Service-Learning and Community Engagement*, 3(1), 1-12.
- Matthews, P. H., Lopez, I., Hirt, L. E., Brooks, S. O., & Furco, A. (2023). Developing the SLQAT (Service-Learning Quality Assessment Tool), a quantitative instrument to evaluate elements impacting student outcomes in academic service-learning courses. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, 27(2), 65-94.
- Mayer, K. A. (2022). Facilitators and barriers to critical service-learning goals in a community-academic relationship. *Nurse Educator*, 47(2), E34–E38. <https://doi.org/10.1097/NNE.0000000000001101>
- Mezirow, J. (Ed.). (2000). *Learning as transformation: Critical perspectives on a theory in progress* (The Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series) (Vol. 371). Jossey-Bass. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED448301>
- Mitchell, T. D., & Rost-Banik, C. (2019). How Sustained Service-Learning Experiences Inform Career Pathways. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 25(1), 18-29.
- Moody, M., & Burlison, C. (2013). Using service-based, collaborative teaching in journalism courses. *Teaching Journalism and Mass Communication*, 3(2), 1-10.
- Muturi, N., An, S., & Mwangi, S. (2013). Students' expectations and motivation for service-learning in public relations. *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator*, 68(4), 387-408.
- Novak, J. M., Markey, V., & Allen, M. (2007). Evaluating cognitive outcomes of service learning in higher education: A meta-analysis. *Communication Research Reports*, 24(2), 149-157.
- Novak, E. (2023). Read all about it! Using civic journalism as a service-learning strategy. In Droge, D. & Murphy, B.O. (Eds.) *Voices of strong democracy concepts and communication studies* (145-154). Washington, D.C.: American Association of Higher Education.

- O'Hara, L. S. (2001). Service-learning: Students' transformative journey from communication student to Civic-minded professional. *Southern Journal of Communication*, 66(3), 251-266.
- O'Meara, K. (2023). Research on faculty motivations for service learning and community engagement. In P. H. Clayton, R. G. Bringle, & J. A. Hatcher (Eds.), *Research on service learning: Conceptual frameworks and assessment* (Vol. 2A, pp. 215–243). Routledge.
- Oster-Aaland, L. K., Timothy, L. S., Paul, E. N., & Judy, C. P. (2004). The Status of Service Learning in Departments of Communication: A Follow-Up Study. *Communication Education*, 53(4), 348-56.
- Pascarella, E. T., & Terenzini, P. T. (1998). Studying college students in the 21st century: Meeting new challenges. *The Review of Higher Education*, 21(2), 151–165.
<https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.1998.0003>
- Pavelea, A., Culic, L. I. (2022). Challenges and benefits of service-learning. A Communication Science students' perspective. In Jandric, I.; Bilic I. *Community-engaged university. Proceedings of the 1st International Scientific and Professional Conference on Service-Learning "Community-engaged University", 2022*.
- Petkus Jr, E. (2000). A theoretical and practical framework for service-learning in marketing: Kolb's experiential learning cycle. *Journal of marketing education*, 22(1), 64-70.
- Pless, N. M., Maak, T., & Stahl, G. K. (2011). Developing responsible global leaders through international service-learning programs: The Ulysses experience. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 10(2), 237-260.
- Rinaldo, S. B., Davis, D. F., & Borunda, J. (2022). Delivering value to community partners in service-learning projects. *Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship*, 8(1), 68-78.
- Rodríguez-Izquierdo, R. M. (2021). Aprendizaje-servicio y desarrollo de la competencia intercultural: Aplicaciones educativas en contextos de diversidad cultural (pp. 191–202). In I. González-Falcón (Ed.), *Atención a la diversidad cultural en el contexto educativo: Claves y aportaciones para la escuela inclusiva*. Pirámide.
- Rusu, A. S., Bencic, A., & Hodor, T. I. (2014). Service-Learning programs for Romanian students—an analysis of the international programs and ideas of implementation. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 142, 154-161.
- Salam, M., Awang Iskandar, D. N., Ibrahim, D. H. A., & Farooq, M. S. (2019). Service learning in higher education: A systematic literature review. *Asia Pacific Education Review*, 20, 573-593.
- Salam, M., Iskandar, D. N. F. A., & Ibrahim, D. H. A. (2017). Service learning support for academic learning and skills development. *Journal of Telecommunication, Electronic and Computer Engineering (JTEC)*, 9(2–10), 111–117.
- Schneider, C. G. (2021). *Making Liberal Education Inclusive: The Roots and Reach of the LEAP Framework for College Learning*. Association of American Colleges and Universities.
- Schroth, H. (2019). Are you ready for Gen Z in the workplace? *California Management Review*, 61(3), 5–18. <https://doi.org/10.1177/000812561984100>.
- Shapiro, R. (2021). Redesigning a university class in classroom behavior support: Social emotional learning and positive behavior support strategies taught through service-learning. *Journal of Service-Learning in Higher Education*, 12, 72-82.

- Silverman D. A. (2007). Organ donation awareness campaigns in a PR campaigns course. *Journalism and Mass Communication Educator*, 61, 411-429.
- Smith-Paríolá, J., & Gòkè-Paríolá, A. (2006). Expanding the parameters of service learning: A case study. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 10(1), 71-86.
- Snell, R. S., Chan, M. Y. L., Ma, C. H. K., & Chan, C. K. M. (2015). Developing civic-mindedness in undergraduate business students through service-learning projects for civic engagement and service leadership practices for civic improvement. *Asian Journal of Business Ethics*, 4(1), 73-99.
- Sosa Rolon, J. A. (2020). Resourcebook for the development of service-learning projects. CLAYSS, México: Archivo Digital. Retrieved from https://www.clayss.org.ar/04_publicaciones/SLEasternEuropeResourcebook.pdf.
- Soukup P.A. (1999). Service-learning in communication: Why? In Droge D., & Murphy B.O. (Eds.), *Voices of strong democracy: Concepts and models for service-learning in communication studies* (pp. 7-12). Washington, DC: American Association of Higher Education.
- Souza, T. (1999). Service-Learning and Interpersonal Communication: Connecting Students with the Community. In Droge, D. & Murphy, B.O. (Eds.) *Voices of strong democracy concepts and communication studies* (77-86). Washington, D.C.: American Association of Higher Education.
- Stanton, T. K., & Erasmus, M. (2013). Inside out, outside in: A comparative analysis of service-learning in the United States and South Africa. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, 17(3), 61-94.
- Steimel, S. J. (2013). Community partners' assessment of service learning in an interpersonal and small group communication course. *Communication Teacher*, 27(4), 241-255.
- Steinke, P., Fitch, P., Johnson, C., & Waldstein, F. (2002). An interdisciplinary study of service-learning predictors and outcomes among college students. In S. H. Billig & A. Furco (Eds.), *Service-learning through a multidisciplinary lens* (pp. 73-102). Information Age Publishing.
- Stevens, B. (2001). Cross-cultural service learning: American and Russian students learn applied organizational communication. *Business Communication Quarterly*, 64(3), 59-69.
- Swail, W.S., Redd, K.E., and Perna, L.W. (2003). *Retaining minority students in higher education: A framework for success*. Educational Policy Institute.
- Taylor, A., & Raykov, M. (2014). The long-term outcomes of community service-learning. *Higher Education*, 67(2), 221-239.
- Texter, L. A., & Smith, M. F. (2023). Public relations and public service: Integrating service-learning into the public relations seminar. In Droge, D. & Murphy, B.O. (Eds.) *Voices of strong democracy concepts and communication studies* (165-175). Washington, D.C.: American Association of Higher Education.
- Tijmsma, G., Hilverda, F., Scheffelaar, A., Alders, S., Schoonmade, L., Blignaut, N., & Zweekhorst, M. (2020). Becoming productive 21st century citizens: A systematic review uncovering design principles for integrating community service learning into higher education courses. *Educational Research*, 62(4), 390-413.

- Tripon, C., Drăghici-Popa, A.M. (2024). Growing sustainability (SDGs) in universities by service-learning projects activities-case study. *Journal of Educational Sciences & Psychology*, 14(2), 45-56.
- Warren, J. L. (2012). Does service- learning increase student learning?: A meta- analysis. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 18(2), 56-61.
- Watkins, M., & Braun, L. (2005). *Service-learning: From classroom to community to career*. Jist Life Publishing Inc.
- Weintraub, S. (1999). Giving students “all of the above”: Combining service-learning with the public speaking course. In Droge, D. & Murphy, B.O. (Eds.) *Voices of strong democracy concepts and communication studies* (119-124). Washington, D.C.: American Association of Higher Education.
- Wyels, C., & Martinez, M. V. (2024). Service Learning in the First Year: Enhanced Retention and Graduation Rates for First-Year and Transfer Students from Underrepresented Groups. *International Journal of Research on Service-Learning and Community Engagement*, 12(1), 1-15.
- Yelsma, P. (1999). Small group problem solving as academic learning. In Droge, D. & Murphy, B.O. (Eds.) *Voices of strong democracy concepts and communication studies* (87-96). Washington, D.C.: American Association of Higher Education.
- Yorio, P. L., & Ye, F. (2012). A meta- analysis on the effects of service- learning on the social, personal, and cognitive outcomes of learning. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 11(1), 9-27.
- York, T. T., & Fernandez, F. (2018). The positive effects of service-learning on transfer students' sense of belonging: A multi-institutional analysis. *Journal of College Student Development*, 59(5), 579-597.
- Zwarun, L. (2007). Assessing outcomes of service learning in advertising courses. *Journal of Advertising Education*, 11(1), 5-16.

Student Well-being in Higher Education: Insights from International Academic Mobility Experiences

Mălina-Elena GRIGORIȚĂ¹ 

ABSTRACT. This qualitative study explores how Romanian university students perceive and describe institutional practices that foster student well-being based on their experiences during international academic mobility programs (e.g., Erasmus+).

The study involved interviews with ten participants who completed academic exchanges in various European universities. The data were analyzed thematically to identify recurrent features of educational practices and institutional support systems that were perceived to positively impact students' emotional, social, and academic well-being.

The findings highlight several key aspects of effective practice abroad: personalized teacher-student relationships, accessible psychological counseling services, collaborative learning environments, and inclusive campus spaces designed to support mental health. Participants also reported a general culture of care and trust that encouraged autonomy, open communication, and a more human-centered approach to academic life. Many of these elements were either absent or less emphasized in their Romanian university context.

This study offers concrete insights into transferable practices that may guide the development of more emotionally attuned, student-centered approaches in Romanian higher education. The results are relevant for institutional policymakers, educators, and university support services aiming to build a more holistic and evidence-informed approach to student well-being.

Keywords: student well-being, emotional support, social support, international mobility, higher education, educational practices

¹ Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași, Romania, Email: malinagrigorita@yahoo.com



1. Literature review

Specialist research indicates that *well-being* is a dynamic equilibrium between an individual's emotional, social, and cognitive resources and the challenges they encounter. Dodge et al. (2012) elucidate this concept clearly, depicting it as a dynamic equilibrium between resources and challenges. Well-being emerges as an unstable equilibrium point between two opposing forces: on the one hand, the individual's psychological, social, and physical resources, and on the other hand, challenges from the exact domains. Furthermore, Diener et al. (2018) define well-being as a composite of life satisfaction, positive and negative affect, maintained in a balanced relationship.

Under university circumstances, multiple elements affecting student well-being emerge through factors like academic stress alongside adjusting to self-direction man, aging time, and establishing new social contacts. According to Baik, Larcombe, and Brooker (2019), well-being development in students includes individual elements like mental health conditions and resilience while also incorporating university resources like staff support and academic relationship quality. The educational space within universities fosters the growth of safety perspectives and feelings of belonging as essential components of good learning outcomes.

The ERASMUS+ international academic mobility programs help improve university environmental well-being among students because maintaining interpersonal relationships remains vital for mental health (Chica et al., 2025). Joining mobility programs requires students to move beyond comfort zones by embracing different academic and cultural settings while potentially creating opportunities for better or worse well-being experiences (Chica et al., 2025). Students gain intercultural competencies along with personal self-confidence and develop interpersonal relationships through their exposure to diverse cultures and the creation of worldwide connections (Tran & Vu, 2018).

Using international mobility packages allows students to develop their identity while gaining psychological strength, intercultural skills and professional advancement (Chen, 2023). Potential adaptation difficulties consisting of homesickness together with culture shock and language barriers result in psychological stress that generates feelings of solitude which temporarily impact the health status of students (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016). The achievement of these mobility programs is mainly based on both successful integration into the host community and appropriate university support along with student friendships. International students need interpersonal relationships as personal and social development proceeds in parallel with their educational attainment through globally mobile programs.

According to Carol Ryff's theoretical framework of 1989, well-being involves both reaching maximum psychological outcomes and maximising the potential of human beings. Ryff's model of psychological well-being specifies six interconnected aspects which include autonomy, self-acceptance, purpose in life, positive relations with others, environmental mastery and personal growth. Factors that play a central role in the worldwide educational movement become essential because students experience situations that test their identities, mandate adaptation, and offer opportunities for personal development and self-discovery.

Additionally, the PERMA model, developed by Martin Seligman (2011) and part of the positive psychology paradigm, provides a broad framework for assessing well-being as a combination of elements contributing to a fulfilling life. Its components positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment allow for the examination of well-being from a psychological perspective and social and experiential viewpoints. This model helps study the experiences of international students, as it enables an investigation of how they experience positive emotions in a new cultural context, how actively they engage in academic and community life, how well they understand their decision to move abroad, and how they capitalize on their academic and personal success.

Various studies conducted throughout the past decade explore how studying abroad transforms student personal development alongside their academic growth since students gain improved cultural understanding combined with better language abilities and enhanced career prospects (Brooks & Waters, 2011; Tran & Vu, 2018). Research exploring student well-being as a result of these overseas experiences has discovered that international study builds mental health yet causes short-term emotional distress during transition (Chen, 2023; Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016). Research has yet to clarify the reasons behind which students benefit better from study abroad experiences while other students struggle under similar educational conditions. Research has not established what enables certain students to derive greater benefits from these experiences, although all these students participate within comparable educational environments. The elements of personal characteristics together with environmental conditions appear to have a significant impact on mobile student well-being.

The study of subjective and contextual well-being requires proper investigation because of educational globalisation and growing international student mobility. Well-being studies adopt two separate approaches that evaluate it either through psychological methods or institutional analysis. Correct evaluation of well-being depends on the combination of multiple academic views. Well-being evaluation needs to integrate perspectives that combine motivation systems

with student resilience and intercultural abilities while also analysing external university policies and cultural settings and social networks. Research on comprehensive explanatory models about intercultural adaptation processes together with their influence on student well-being remains limited, especially when applied to international mobility programmes (Chen, 2023; Tran & Vu, 2018).

2. Research methodology

2.1. The Purpose of the study:

The aim of the research is to determine how Romanian students perceive and describe institutional practices that support student well-being based on their experiences with academic mobility programs, such as Erasmus+. The research seeks to identify effective educational practices and support systems that positively influence social, emotional, and academic well-being so that they can serve as models of good practice for the Romanian higher education system. The objectives of the research are as follows:

0.1 – Identifying Romanian students' perceptions regarding the institutional practices that contributed to supporting their well-being during international academic mobility.

0.2 – Identifying the types of institutional practices (counselling services, social integration, academic support) that students consider to have had a positive impact on their well-being.

0.3 – Formulating recommendations based on institutional best practices, applicable to the Romanian higher education context, to support student-centered education focused on well-being.

2.2. Methodology:

The methodological design focuses on developing a semi-structured interview guide, applied to a sample of 10 Romanian students who have experienced international mobility at universities in various countries (Spain, Belgium, Portugal, Czech Republic, Latvia, Poland, France, and Germany). The research instrument used, the interview guide, contains a series of 7 questions. We informed the respondents about the anonymity of their answers and the strict use of the collected data for research purposes. The instrument was administered both online and in person. The dimensions covered in the interview guide are: personalised teacher-student relationships; accessible psychological counselling services within the university environment; collaborative learning environments;

inclusive spaces on campus and; transferable practices in the Romanian university system. We developed the interview questions around these dimensions, drawing from the reviewed literature. However, the questions were open-ended, allowing room for respondents to elaborate. Respondents had about 3 minutes to answer each question. Thus, an interview lasted approximately 20 minutes.

The option for the semi-structured interview is more potent than other qualitative instruments, mainly because it offers the researcher direct access to information that a quantitative instrument cannot provide, while remaining flexible and adaptable (Ruslin et al., 2022).

3. Results

The research dimensions underwent a thematic analysis, creating the *table 1*. The research identifies the essential topics that Romanian academic mobility participants revealed during their interviews. The data sets out emotional care provision alongside professor-student connection attributes and ways teaching evaluates students alongside cooperative learning areas and university services. Most participants detected substantial differences between the support provided for their well-being at the host universities and the support received in Romania. The students repeatedly mentioned empathetic teaching, scheduling flexibility, psychological counseling access, structured relationships, and relaxation-orientated student activities within their study experience.

Table 1 - Thematic analysis of research dimensions and resulting themes

Investigated dimension	Main themes	Frequency of respondents' answers
Personalized teacher-student relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Openness and accessibility of teachers • Development of an empathetic relationship • Clarity of requirements and additional explanations • Flexibility and openness to change 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Professors openly encouraged participation, provided clear guidance for exams, responded promptly to emails, and were flexible with project and assignment deadlines. - Clear deadlines and a structured teacher-student relationship encouraged the development of autonomy and personal responsibility.

Investigated dimension	Main themes	Frequency of respondents' answers
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Professors and people around embraced changes more flexibly and openly than in other contexts. - All professors were very attentive to the needs and wishes of the students (3 students). - Teachers are generally very understanding and willing to provide support, whether academic or personal. - The teachers were friends, in no way superior to me (3 students).
Accessible psychological counseling services in the university environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Easy access to psychological counseling services • Clear role of academic tutors in monitoring well-being • State involvement in supporting students • Personalized support and understanding from teachers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Students are more supported than in Romania, primarily based on the professors' attitude. At least with us, they were very kind, understanding, and supportive. On the emotional side, students are encouraged to seek help from a psychologist, their counseling needs are acknowledged, etc. Also, the state supports them with job offers, scholarships, and so on. - In the host university, emotional support was much more visibly organized through dedicated psychological counseling services that were accessible and constantly promoted (4 students). - Academic tutors had clear and implicit roles in looking after the general well-being of students (2 students).
Collaborative learning environments (teaching-learning-assessment)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interactive and stimulating teaching practices • Flexible assessment • Personalized academic support in the learning process • Active and collaborative learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The teaching practices were excellent: many presentations, surprise guest speakers, interactive events, and pitch-type exercises. Although the assessment methods were rigorous, this high standard proved highly beneficial, as the responsibility for managing stress

STUDENT WELL-BEING IN HIGHER EDUCATION:
INSIGHTS FROM INTERNATIONAL ACADEMIC MOBILITY EXPERIENCES

Investigated dimension	Main themes	Frequency of respondents' answers
		<p>fell on the student, who was thus encouraged to step out of their comfort zone and develop resilience constantly.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The final test in many subjects was replaced by an individual or group project. I found it to be a very good method that did not cause students as much stress or anxiety as an exam (2 students). - In one of the seminars, we had to write an academic paper with a colleague, which we were to present at the end of the semester. Until then, we worked closely with the professor, who gave us many suggestions and helped us find resources. - The professor answered in great detail every question that arose during the writing of the paper, and this mattered in the end because we knew that the presentation we had worked on was done according to high academic standards. However, we also received a lot of help in preparing it. This played an important role in reducing stress. - Many courses had a flexible structure, with an emphasis on active and collaborative learning. - Assessments were diversified - not just exams, but also projects or presentations - and feedback was constructive. In addition, there are counseling sessions before exams, which significantly reduces stress (3 students).
<p>Inclusive spaces on campus</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Various services for student well-being 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - There were various services for student well-being, such as psychological counselling, tutoring, and a code-accessible quiet room

Investigated dimension	Main themes	Frequency of respondents' answers
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extracurricular activities oriented towards socialization and emotional balance • Mutual support among students • Student involvement in campus life 	<p>where the only rule was the prohibition of electronic devices.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The university regularly organizes extracurricular activities, such as Drawing Night, board games, and sports events, which allow students to relax and socialize outside the academic schedule. - A "small gesture" that would make a big difference would be for the teacher to assume a role as a guide and partner, not just as an authority. - We had a participation fee, and those without financial means did not pay it. - What I noticed, however, is that students had much greater flexibility in scheduling exams. This meant that if you were emotionally affected by a personal issue, you could minimise its impact on your academic progress. - More professors in Romania could make a list of general topics around which students could propose specific subjects they are interested in. - A simple gesture, like sincerely asking at the beginning of the class, "How are you feeling?" or "Do you need support?" greatly changes the atmosphere. - Senior students support first-year students or those coming on mobility from foreign countries (2 students).
Transferable practices in the Romanian university system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adaptation of study programs and pedagogical relationships • Practical and collective learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A curriculum adapted to the present and future demands is essential, as well as a pedagogical approach that moves away from

STUDENT WELL-BEING IN HIGHER EDUCATION:
INSIGHTS FROM INTERNATIONAL ACADEMIC MOBILITY EXPERIENCES

Investigated dimension	Main themes	Frequency of respondents' answers
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Flexibility in assessment · Improvement of the teacher-student relationship 	<p>rigid hierarchies. In my international experiences, professors treated students as future colleagues and fostered a collaboration relationship, not one of unilateral authority.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Professors should focus, at least occasionally, on building the student group as a community, not just on the cognitive aspect. - Practical work (we created a website in WordPress, and we worked on a Business Plan). - Flexibility in exam scheduling (i.e., having the option to choose between two or more periods), placing greater emphasis on critical thinking rather than memorization, and discussions based more on practical examples than mere theory. - A more open relationship between students and professors, with greater availability for support and clarifications. - Regular extracurricular activities. Dedicated spaces for relaxation, such as quiet rooms, where students can disconnect from academic stress. - Professors could set aside a few minutes at the beginning or end of the class to answer students' questions without the pressure of formalities. - Offering an option to discuss academic or personal difficulties privately would convey empathy and encourage trust-based relationships (2 students).

A university culture focused on attentiveness and cooperation creates important positive effects on student welfare. This culture manifests itself through formal university code of conduct and operates also through casual interactions between faculty members and their students. This culture exists through a combination of established guidelines, friend-based help, sincere dialogue and various educational along with social activities.

The other universities feature three elements that include individual student assistance alongside flexible examination methods alongside emotional support for students by teaching staff. Student participation remains important to improve both university life activities along with the construction of an academic community that supports student connection. There are many transferable practices that could be implemented in the Romanian university system (see Table 1), which we included under the dimension *Transferable Practices in the Romanian University System*, such as organizing counseling services that are visible and accessible to everyone, expanding assessment options, providing opportunities for informal discussions during classes, and encouraging a more equal relationship between professors and students. These components can have a significant impact on creating more open, compassionate, and student well-being-centered learning environments.

The Romanian university system fails to combine academic development with social requirements and emotional support into a unified and coordinated approach to student well-being. Student support services currently operate in a fragmented manner with insufficient promotion and limited to selected initiatives, plus a general absence of consolidated student need comprehension. The professorial relationship with students typically maintains a professional hierarchy. The educational atmosphere must depend on empathetic relationships because formal hierarchy in these interactions prevents such development. In terms of policy, there are no clear rules or institutional plans that explicitly focus on student well-being. There is a need for institutional and national policies that establish minimum standards for psychological counseling services in universities, training for professors in socio-emotional support, greater flexibility in curricula and assessment methods, and funding for extracurricular activities that help students integrate and find balance. It is possible for universities to become more people-centered rather than focused solely on performance. This could be achieved through the implementation of clear policies and adequate resources to support this goal. It could also help bring Romania's educational system closer to European standards.

4. Discussions

The Romanian university system fails to combine academic development with social requirements and emotional support into a unified and coordinated approach to student well-being. Student support services currently operate in a fragmented manner with insufficient promotion and limited to selected initiatives, plus a general absence of consolidated student need comprehension. The professorial relationship with students typically maintains a professional hierarchy. The educational atmosphere must depend on empathetic relationships because formal hierarchy in these interactions prevents such development.

University policies and institutional policies lack specific frameworks dedicated to student well-being. Institutions and governments in Romania must work together to create nationwide psychological counseling quality standards for universities which should include professor socio-emotional support training alongside curriculum and assessment flexibility and financial support for student extracurricular programs.

Universities have the ability to evolve into people-oriented institutions without losing their performance-oriented focus. A combination of defined policies with sufficient resources will enable the accomplishment of this goal. Such an approach would assist in making Romanian education meet European standards.

5. Conclusions

The study is useful because it shows concrete student requirements about academic well-being. Such policy developments concerning this matter emerge at a time when education policies worldwide prioritize these issues more strongly. The analytical approach revealed practical methods which can optimize university conditions in Romania by adopting institutional transformation measures. This investigation deals with institutional elements together with mental approaches. This research creates an essential basis for exploring strategies to develop an education culture which shows empathy while remaining flexible and placing students at the center.

REFERENCES

- Baik, C., Larcombe, W., & Brooker, A. (2019). How universities can enhance student mental wellbeing: the student perspective. *TFO Collections*, 674–687. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2019.1576596@tfocoll.2022.0.issue-best-paper-prize-higher-education-research>
- Brooks, R., & Waters, J. (2011). *Student mobilities, migration and the internationalization of higher education*. Springer.
- Chen, L. (2023). *International Student Mobility: Exploring the Psychological Effects on Identity Awareness on a Global Perspective*. In *Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on Interdisciplinary Humanities and Communication Studies*. 10.54254/2753-7048/28/20231362
- Chica, Ó. D., Engrácio, H. W. A., Rodrigues, F. L. A., Maria, C., & Fonseca, F. (2025). Factors influencing the subjective well-being of Erasmus students: an Iberian study. *Observatorio (OBS*)*, 19(2), 227-248.
- Diener, E., Oishi, S. & Tay, L. Advances in subjective well-being research. *Nat Hum Behav* 2, 253–260 (2018). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-018-0307-6>
- Dodge, R., Daly, A., Huyton, J., & Sanders, L. (2012). The challenge of defining wellbeing. *International Journal of Wellbeing*, 2(3), 222-235. doi:10.5502/ijw.v2i3.4
- Forbes-Mewett, H., & Sawyer, A.-M. (2016). International Students and Mental Health. *Journal of International Students*, 6(3), 661-677. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v6i3.348>
- Ruslin, R., Mashuri, S., Rasak, M. S. A., Alhabsyi, F., & Syam, H. (2022). Semi-structured Interview: A methodological reflection on the development of a qualitative research instrument in educational studies. *IOSR Journal of Research & Method in Education (IOSR-JRME)*, 12(1), 22-29.
- Ryff, C. D. (1989). Happiness is everything, or is it? Explorations on the meaning of psychological well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 57(6), 1069–1081. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.57.6.1069>
- Seligman, M. (2011). PERMA – A well-being theory by Martin Seligman. Retrieved from: <https://www.habitsforwellbeing.com/perma-a-well-being-theory-by-martinseligman> [15 December 2017].
- Tran, L. T., & Vu, T. T. P. (2018). *Student Mobility from Australia to the Indo-Pacific via the New Colombo Plan. Higher Education in Southeast Asia and Beyond*. Singapore: HEAD Foundation. <https://headfoundation.org/2018/01/31/higher-education-in-southeast-asia-and-beyond-hesb-issue-03/>

eTwinning Projects – A Means to Promote Growth Mindset and Well-being in Education

Diana-Crina MARIN^{1*} , Mihaela-Gabriela NEACȘU² ,
Mușata-Dacia BOCOȘ³ 

ABSTRACT. eTwinning projects provide an excellent opportunity to organize various didactic and educational activities based on international collaboration and cooperation. The learning opportunities offered to teachers and students participating in these projects are diverse and serve as a means to develop scientific, collaborative, pedagogical, language, and digital competencies. These projects are based on modern pedagogical approaches used in different educational environments, which promote well-being in the school environment and foster a growth mindset in education. We consider that eTwinning projects should be introduced to all future teachers during both their initial and continuous training. This paper outlines the benefits of collaboration between eTwinning ambassadors and university teachers and the benefits of participating in eTwinning projects.

Keywords: eTwinning, projects, international collaboration, growth mindset, well-being, initial teacher' education

1. INTRODUCTION

The eTwinning projects are educational projects co-funded by the European Commission, launched in 2005 as a key component of the Commission's eLearning program. Since 2014, they have become an integral part of Erasmus+, the European Union's program for Education, Training, Youth, and Sport.

¹ National Academy of Music "Gheorghe Dima", Specialized Department with Psycho-Pedagogical Profile, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

² The National University of Science and Technology POLITEHNICA Bucharest, Faculty of Educational Sciences, Social Sciences, and Psychology, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

³ Babeș-Bolyai University, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

* Corresponding author: diana.marin@amgd.ro



The main goal of the eTwinning action is to enhance digital collaboration among European countries, their educational systems and structures, and to encourage the development of collaborative projects between educational institutions across Europe at all levels of education. The eTwinning program aims to promote educational partnerships, teamwork, the exchange and transfer of ideas and good educational practices, and to foster effective communication and electronic cooperation through the European School Education Platform (ESEP), involving as many categories of educational stakeholders as possible: teachers, school managers, school inspectors, pedagogues, etc. Thus, starting in 2005, a strong virtual educational community was created, based on mutual educational support, dedicated to building collaborative projects through European school partnerships, considered true European school networks. Initially, 26 European countries were involved, with Romania joining in 2007. The European Commission co-finances eTwinning actions through the Erasmus+ program. In 2022, eTwinning brought together 43 partner countries from Europe and beyond, building a virtual learning community that offers a framework for project-based collaborative learning and international virtual partnerships. The eTwinning platform promotes educational performance and enables the exchange of good practices between schools, intercultural dialogue, pedagogical innovation, and the professional development of teachers and other individuals involved in education.

In Romania, the National Agency for Community Programs in the Field of Education and Vocational Training (ANPCDEFP) has been coordinating eTwinning programs since 2022. The study titled “Partnerships for Learning. Experiences of Students, Teachers, and Schools”, published in 2022 by a group of Romanian researchers as a research report, presents the evolution of eTwinning projects over the past 10 years in our country. The eTwinning Romania community and the number of collaborative projects within the virtual eTwinning partnerships are growing. The eTwinning Annual Theme for 2024 was “Well-being at school”, which highlights educational initiatives that aim to improve learning outcomes, socio-emotional competencies, mental health, overall life satisfaction of pupils, and their ability to cope with life or learning challenges. It also emphasizes that teachers and pupils alike should contribute to creating safe and positive learning environments. The eTwinning annual theme for 2025/2026 focuses on developing “Skills for life”, highlighting the essential competencies that pupils need not only for academic success but also for their personal and professional development.

Through this study, we aim to highlight the advantages of implementing eTwinning projects. The involvement of both teachers and students in eTwinning projects has led to the development of new individual, collective, and organizational

competencies, as well as to increased visibility and institutional prestige of the schools, many of which have received the title of “eTwinning School”. Likewise, some teachers have earned the title of “eTwinning Ambassador”.

For an educational institution to join the eTwinning virtual community, the first step is to register and create an account on the European School Education Platform. The European School Education Platform (ESEP) serves as a hub for the European educational community involved in eTwinning projects. It brings together teachers, researchers, and educational policy-makers with the aim of sharing the latest information, practical examples, studies, research, publications, courses, and other valuable resources, as well as identifying future partners for their Erasmus+ projects.

By working interactively in TwinSpace, students create and share educational resources, engage in multicultural and transnational projects, become more responsible for their learning, and develop creativity, initiative, teamwork, critical thinking, responsibility, autonomy, and self-reflective and self-assessment skills (Istrate, 2013, Voicu, 2022).

2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

2.1. The Intensification of Interuniversity Partnerships – A Contemporary Educational Trend

The ESEP platform may also be accessible to the university environment, provided that a prior agreement is signed between the interested university and the National eTwinning Center, within the National Agency for Community Programs in the Field of Education and Vocational Training. “The eTwinning platform unites schools across Europe with the help of ICT tools and offers school leaders and staff the opportunity to share their experiences and offer mutual assistance” (Nychkalo, Muranova, Voliarska & Matulcikova, 2024, p. 151).

In recent years, we have witnessed a growing trend of partnerships between universities. This trend aligns with one of the core values that underpin the educational vision of the Higher Education Law no. 199/2023. Thus, according to Article 3, paragraph (2): “The vision of this law is centered on the following values: (...) j) collaboration, through the development of interuniversity partnerships, partnerships with public or private research institutes, with public or private economic operators, including for the development of interdisciplinary study programs, as well as for any other types of projects; k) consultation, by involving stakeholders in the design and implementation of legislation, strategies, and policies in the field of higher education”.

eTwinning initiatives are expanding into higher education, encouraging close collaboration and the exchange of good practices between professionals working at both levels of education. “In a study on collaboration between pre-service and in-service teachers, pre-service teachers appreciated insights from in-service teachers’ experience to help them understand the current educational environments” (Lee, Jung, Shin, Otternbreit-Leftwich & Glazewski, 2020, p. 6).

2.2. Familiarizing future student teachers with the opportunities and tools of eTwinning projects

At the university level, initial teacher education institutions in Europe receive eTwinning support from their national agency or through eTwinning ambassadors, in order to familiarize future teachers with the opportunities of European eTwinning collaboration. “eTwinning is an international social network for students and their teachers to collaborate across Europe. It provides a secure platform for the implementation of various projects and opens up new dimensions to the teaching and learning process” (Takátsné Lucz, 2021, p. 2).

This enables students to discover and implement project-based teaching, multidisciplinary work, develop their ICT and language skills, engage in European, international, and intercultural exchanges with teachers from other European education systems, and enhance both their professional and personal skills. Pedagogical approaches to disseminate the benefits of collaborative learning through eTwinning projects may take the form of introductory eTwinning modules integrated into initial teacher education curricula, the launch of collaborative eTwinning projects for teacher educators and/or students, or the dissemination to students of best practices from teaching practice schools involved in eTwinning projects with pupils. “In the 21st century being able to collaborate and work well in teams, to share ideas and knowledge with others, and also to learn from others are some of the most important aspects of the learning process.” (Takátsné Lucz, 2021, p. 2). In 2022, the European Prize for Initial Teacher Education was launched to celebrate the most active initial teacher education institutions in eTwinning. The prize identifies, celebrates, and promotes the work and activities carried out by institutions in three key areas: curriculum integration, project implementation, and research outcomes. “eTwinning fosters partnerships between schools in different countries, encouraging collaborative projects that enhance digital literacy and pedagogical approaches” (Farrell, Rice & Qualter, 2024, p. 3).

2.3. The Importance of Ensuring Well-being and Developing a Growth Mindset in Education

Current trends in the field of Educational Sciences highlight the need to use positive pedagogical approaches that help students develop harmoniously and experience positive emotions, while continuing to stay motivated to learn even when facing various challenges. “Some evidence suggests growth mindset can have a positive effect on students beyond academic achievement, including more positive attitudes towards school, higher academic confidence and psychological well-being, increased motivation and school engagement, and higher academic resilience and persistence” (Yan & Schuetze, 2023, p. 4). The growth mindset is associated with positive beliefs and expectations from teachers regarding the development of students’ intelligence, academic performance, and abilities. This mindset is based on the premise that intelligence levels can increase, and academic performance is influenced by several factors such as setting realistic learning goals, focusing on the learning process, systematic effort, positive thinking and strategies, life satisfaction, applying effective coping strategies, and avoiding stress (Jacovidis, Anderson, Beach & Chadwick, 2020). “Students with a growth mindset, or incremental theories, believe that intelligence and abilities are malleable and can be developed with effort. However, students rarely hold one mindset, exclusively, in all circumstances” (Yan & Schuetze, 2023, p. 3).

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methods used in our research were the pilot study and the systematic review of the literature on the benefits of participating in eTwinning projects. This study aims to identify the main advantages of involving university teachers and students in eTwinning projects, as well as to determine how eTwinning ambassadors can be effectively involved during university courses. In the 2024–2025 academic year, we organized activities that could be included in an eTwinning project in order to test their effectiveness on students’ well-being and to investigate whether, with the support of teachers and eTwinning ambassadors, students are able to write eTwinning projects. The study involved 25 students, enrolled in the pedagogical teacher training module, aged between 20 and 22, who were not involved in eTwinning projects before. The participants in our research were enrolled in the Theoretical Faculty of the “Gheorghe Dima” National Academy of Music. The other purpose of our research is to establish the main advantages of organizing eTwinning projects at the pre-university

level, based on the research articles published in two well-known databases. A systematic review of the literature was performed using the keywords “eTwinning” and “projects”. The inclusion criteria applied were as follows: the scientific papers must have been published within the last 10 years, must address the advantages of initiating and participating in eTwinning projects, and must be written in English. The databases consulted during the research were ProQuest Central and ScienceDirect. 43 eligible studies were included in the qualitative synthesis, while 5 of them were excluded. The exclusion criteria were that the articles did not discuss the advantages of involving teachers and pupils in eTwinning projects, were written in a language other than English, or focused solely on the benefits of Erasmus+ initiatives (see Figure 1).

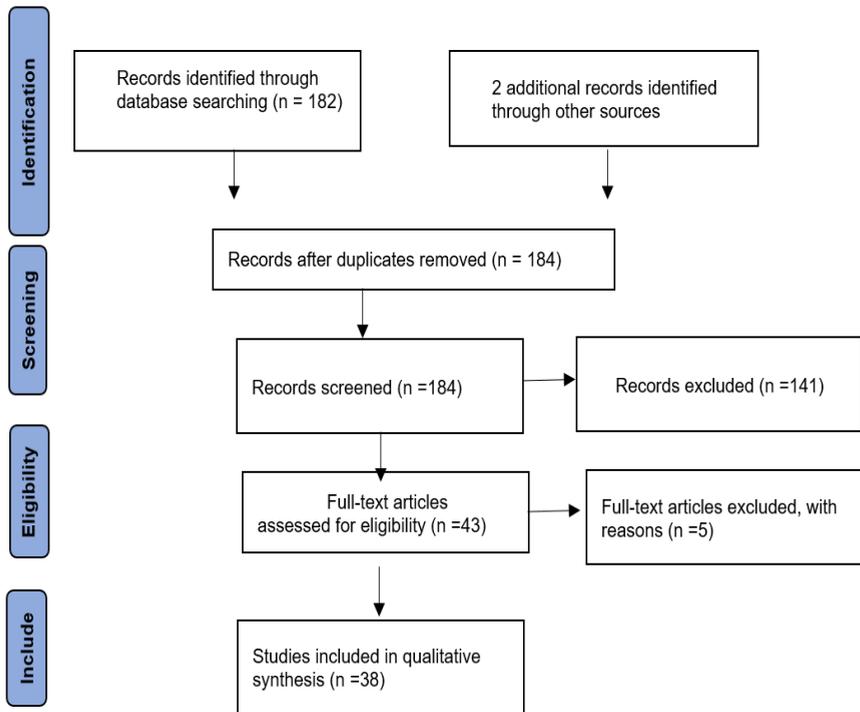


Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Chart illustrating the study selection process for identifying the main advantages of involvement in eTwinning projects

Official documents available on the ESEP platform and on the webpage of the Romanian National eTwinning Centre were also consulted.

The research questions that guided the study are:

- What are the main advantages of involving students and university teachers in eTwinning projects?
- What are the main advantages of participating in eTwinning projects at pre-university level that could be highlighted during the initial teacher education?
- Can eTwinning projects contribute to promoting students' well-being and fostering a growth mindset?
- What are the main advantages of cooperation between university professors and eTwinning ambassadors?

4. RESULTS

In the academic year 2024-2025, we have implemented a pilot study in order to establish the efficiency of three didactic activities that were organized to familiarize the students with the specifics of eTwinning projects. The content of university courses was diverse and included similar activities to those that could be integrated into an eTwinning project that can be registered on the ESEP platform. Students benefited from information regarding the benefits of participating in eTwinning projects. During these activities, successful eTwinning projects were presented through cooperation between university teachers and eTwinning ambassadors. Students were encouraged to write eTwinning projects that can be applied at the pre-university level. Some of the students' projects were presented and submitted for publication at the National Student Symposium "MUSIC - Elements of Didactics of Musical Specialties". The titles of the projects presented at the symposium are:

- Presentation of the eTwinning Project "Music and Film: How Are Stories Told Through Music?"
- Presentation of the eTwinning Project "Interactive Strategies and Their Impact on Music"
- Presentation of the eTwinning Project "Introduction to Score Writing Programs"
- Presentation of the eTwinning Project "Music Through the Eyes of Olympiad Students"
- Presentation of the eTwinning Project "The Harmony of Nature"
- Presentation of the eTwinning Project "Music and Trees"
- Presentation of the eTwinning Project "Carols from the Heart of Europe"
- Presentation of the eTwinning Project "Folk Harmonies"
- Presentation of the eTwinning Project "Chamber Analyses on Symphonic Pieces".

The students showed openness towards eTwinning projects and understood the benefits of collaboration and working in a team. Also, the students were very creative, and even though their task was hard, they managed the situation very well and considered the activity beneficial. They expressed their interest in participating in didactic activities during which eTwinning ambassadors could be invited. The students mentioned that the proposed activities helped them better understand aspects related to the specifics of the teaching career and improved their learning processes. The main advantages for students of organizing this type of activity are:

- Understanding the specifics of the teaching career and the main responsibilities of teachers;
- Knowing the existing trends at the European level in terms of optimizing teaching, learning, and evaluation processes;
- Ensuring the practical relevance of pedagogical disciplines taught in higher education;
- Identifying ways to improve the quality of educational processes;
- Openness to involvement in project-type activities and to use the principles of active and interactive instruction;
- Developing students' knowledge regarding the pedagogical concepts often used in the activities of teachers;
- Understanding the usefulness of participation in international projects.

In the opinion of the students, the main advantages of the collaboration between the university professors and the eTwinning ambassadors are ensuring the applicative nature of learning by promoting successful projects. These represent one of the few systematic initiatives to promote eTwinning projects at the university level in Romania. Based on the positive feedback of students, our initiative will serve as the basis for organizing future eTwinning projects carried out for the benefit of students enrolled in the pedagogical module. The activities carried out generated positive emotions in the students and contributed to the creation of a growth mindset in education.

The research papers analyzed during our systematic review revealed that some of the advantages of involving teachers and pupils in eTwinning projects are associated with enhancing the quality of education, improving teachers' professional competencies, and developing pupils' academic and daily life competencies. Regarding higher education, the main advantages presented are:

- the need to familiarise students with the eTwinning program and eTwinning initiatives;
- development of professional and personal competencies;
- improving the understanding of the pedagogical concepts, European tendencies, and modern teaching approaches.

The main advantages of implementing eTwinning projects, which could be presented by university teachers or eTwinning ambassadors during university courses and workshops, are presented in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1. *Identified benefits for teachers regarding participation in eTwinning projects*

Main advantages	Sources of information
Encourages cooperation and communication between teachers and creates an authentic European educational community	Bernárdez-Gómez, Bolarín Martínez, González-Barea & Rodríguez-Entrena (2024); Farrell, Rice & Qualter (2024); Takátsné Lucz (2021); Lee et al. (2020); Ceschi et al. (2021); Esen & Kaplan (2024); Acar & Peker (2021); Boehme (2024); Öztürk, Karamete, Çetin & Korkusuz (2022); Şenel & Han (2024)
Encourages the sharing of teaching experiences, exchange of ideas, and best practices	Bernárdez-Gómez et al. (2024); Farrell, Rice & Qualter (2024); Nychkalo et al. (2024); Crişan & Albulescu (2018); Esen & Kaplan (2024); Acar & Peker (2021); Canals-Botines & Raluy Alonso (2021); Alzubi (2023); Lopriore (2021); Lee et al. (2020); Nelimarkka, Leinonen, Durall & Dean (2021); Şenel & Han (2024)
Promotes effective and modern pedagogical practices focused on integrating digital technologies in the teaching, learning and assessment process and increases the efficiency of teaching processes through effective use of digital technologies	Farrell, Rice & Qualter (2024); Cîmpean & Bocoş (2022); Bernárdez-Gómez et al. (2024); Esen & Kaplan (2024); Lewis & Decuyper (2023); Vettorel (2024); Öztürk, Karamete, Çetin & Korkusuz (2022); Şenel & Han (2024)
Offers teachers real opportunities to develop professional competencies	Takátsné Lucz (2021); Esen & Kaplan (2024); Kurt & Koçer (2023); O'Dowd & Dooly (2022); Lee et al. (2020); Şenel & Han (2024)
Facilitates the creation of high-quality learning experiences	Farrell, Rice & Qualter (2024); Nychkalo et al. (2024); Alzubi (2023); Şenel & Han (2024)
Encourages integrated teaching approaches	Takátsné Lucz (2021); Esen & Kaplan (2024); Canals-Botines & Raluy Alonso (2021); Alzubi (2023); Masterson (2020)
Stimulates innovation and creative teaching approaches (e.g., flipped classroom and facilitates practice-based research)	Crişan & Albulescu (2018); Farrell, Rice & Qualter (2024); Vettorel (2024); Şenel & Han (2024)
Facilitates collaboration between teachers and librarians to improve teaching effectiveness	Lujanac (2019); Mota & Francisco (2019)

Main advantages	Sources of information
Promotes learning by doing, investigation, critical thinking, and reflection	Esen & Kaplan (2024);
Improves the linguistic skills of the teachers	Esen & Kaplan (2024); Acar & Peker (2021); Vettorel (2024); Şenel & Han (2024); Nychkalo et al. (2024)
Contributes significantly to the development of intercultural competencies	Esen & Kaplan (2024); Camilleri (2016); Masterson (2020); Pathak (2022)
Improve teachers' pedagogical competencies	Lewis & Decuypere (2023); Acar & Peker (2021); Camilleri (2016)
Recognizes the effort of the teachers and their successful projects with prizes, National or European Quality Labels	Lewis & Decuypere (2023); Acar & Peker (2021);
Provides efficient learning opportunities during the initial and continuous training of the teachers	Lewis & Decuypere (2023); Acar & Peker (2021)
Changes teachers' perspective on the teaching profession, by improving motivation, productivity, and self-confidence	Acar & Peker (2021); Camilleri (2016); Şenel & Han (2024)
Improves the quality of teaching and learning processes	Acar & Peker (2021); Camilleri (2016); Alzubi (2023)
Develops interest in applying innovative teaching approaches	Acar & Peker (2021)
Promotes inclusive pedagogical approaches	Canals-Botines & Raluy Alonso (2021); Ungureanu (Erdeli) & Roman (2023)
Facilitates finding and creating useful and attractive resources and teaching materials	Botturi, Kappler & Negrini (2018); Nelimarkka, Leinonen, Durall & Dean (2021); Şenel & Han (2024)
Facilitates cooperation for creating and publishing research or didactic materials	O'Dowd & Dooly (2022);
Consolidates the teacher-pupil relationship	Şenel & Han (2024)
Improves the prestige of the teaching profession	Şenel & Han (2024)

Table 2. *Identified benefits for pupils regarding participation in eTwinning projects*

Main advantages	Sources of information
Supports the development of digital skills for students	Cîmpean & Bocoş (2022); Farrell, Rice & Qualter (2024); Esen & Kaplan (2024); Acar & Peker (2021); Cîmpean, Găzdac, and Bocoş (2024); Camilleri (2016); Canals-Botines & Raluy Alonso (2021); Öztürk et al. (2022); Heinzmann et al. (2023); Şenel & Han (2024)
Facilitates the development of key competences recognized at the European level	Cîmpean & Bocoş (2022); Şenel & Han (2024)
Develops students' language skills	Botturi et al. (2018); Takátsné Lucz (2021); Tutunea (2021); Vettorel (2024); Canals-Botines & Raluy Alonso (2021); Masterson (2020); Mandelj & Bajda (2019); Stavvytska (2017); Stergaki, Kougiourouki & Passa (2025); Şenel & Han (2024)
Promotes project-based learning, discovery learning, and engages students in research activities, encouraging individual and group activism	Takátsné Lucz (2021);
Supports personal development and increases students' motivation	Lujanac (2019); Masterson (2020); Şenel & Han (2024); Esen & Kaplan (2024); Camilleri (2016)
Strengthens the sense of belonging to an educational community, openness, and emotional connections among project members	Lee et al. (2020); Acar & Peker (2021); Şenel & Han (2024)
Facilitates the experience of positive emotional states	Lee et al. (2020); Şenel & Han (2024)
Encourages sustainable initiatives and behaviors	Brković, Pons & Parnell (2015); Esen & Kaplan (2024)
Develops essential 21st-century skills and important life skills, such as: cooperation, communication, responsibility, empathy, adaptation, flexibility, creativity and critical thinking, tolerance and acceptance of diversity, social, collaboration, and teamwork skills	Esen & Kaplan (2024); Găzdac, Bocoş & Cîmpean (2024); Acar & Peker (2021); Cîmpean, Găzdac & Bocoş (2024); Camilleri (2016); Tutunea (2021); Vettorel (2024); Canals-Botines & Raluy Alonso (2021); Chojak (2024); Boehme (2024); Masterson (2020); Mandelj & Bajda (2019); Ungureanu (Erdeli) & Roman (2023); Pathak (2022); Şenel & Han (2024); Cîmpean & Bocoş (2022); Stergaki, Kougiourouki & Passa (2025)

Main advantages	Sources of information
Contributes significantly to the development of intercultural competencies	Esen & Kaplan (2024); Acar & Peker (2021); Camilleri (2016); Tutunea (2021); Vettorel (2024); Canals-Botines & Raluy Alonso (2021); Masterson (2020); Şenel & Han (2024)
Improves learning processes and pupils' autonomy in learning	Găzdac, Bocoș & Cimpean (2024); Şenel & Han (2024); Cîmpean & Bocoș (2022); Marin & Bocoș (2024); Takátsné Lucz (2021); Lopriore (2021); Heinzmann et al. (2023)
Increases self-esteem and socio-emotional competences	Mandelj & Bajda (2019); Şenel & Han (2024)

On the ESEP platform (European School Education Platform), a wide range of educational courses and projects are available, including those focused on well-being (1397 projects and 724 courses) and growth mindset (47 projects and 135 courses), according to our analysis conducted on May 12, 2025. In addition, a series of events have been organized to promote the importance of maintaining students' well-being, enhancing their motivation for learning, adopting positive teaching practices, and fostering a growth mindset. These initiatives contribute to improved academic performance, higher levels of student engagement, better emotional regulation, the development of resilience, and a more inclusive and supportive school climate.

5. DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

This paper highlights the main benefits of involvement in eTwinning projects. The results obtained reveal the advantages of initiating and engaging students in international collaborative projects, which have a positive impact on the development of their competences. One of the main limitations of the research is the relatively small number of participants and scientific papers that explore in depth the benefits of participating in eTwinning projects. In this regard, future studies could investigate the perspectives of eTwinning ambassadors regarding the advantages of systematic involvement in such projects, particularly in terms of developing teachers' professional and personal competences. The data obtained indicate that it is essential for teachers to benefit from strong initial training in order to be able to effectively initiate and implement eTwinning projects. In this context, the role of eTwinning ambassadors is particularly important, as they can support and guide teachers throughout the project implementation process. The

study emphasizes the positive impact of eTwinning projects on the development of both students' and teachers' competences, supporting current European initiatives aimed at expanding and strengthening these educational activities. The research findings align with the information available on the official eTwinning platform and support the use of this framework as a tool for pedagogical innovation. The publication of this study is relevant as it demonstrates that eTwinning projects can significantly contribute to improving the learning process by offering opportunities for the development of digital, collaborative, and language competences. At the same time, these projects promote student-centered educational practices that contribute to students' well-being and the formation of essential life skills for academic success and personal fulfillment. For future research, it is recommended to conduct longitudinal studies that investigate in greater depth the effects of continuous participation in eTwinning projects on the development of teaching competences. Most of the scientific articles published highlight the fact that eTwinning projects are associated with students' well-being and with positive, modern pedagogical practices in which the pupils are at the center of the educational process. By analyzing the training opportunities provided to teachers in recent years and other information available on the ESEP platform, we can conclude that eTwinning projects are a means to promote a growth mindset and well-being in education through the promotion of positive pedagogical practices.

The results obtained cannot be generalized, but they highlight that eTwinning projects are a valuable tool for the digitalization of education, the promotion of positive teaching practices, innovative pedagogical approaches, the development of students' motivation for learning, and the creation of a positive educational climate. The findings support existing European initiatives to promote eTwinning projects. These projects increase the efficiency of teachers' activities and develop the key competences. Based on the results obtained, we emphasize that the main benefits of participating in eTwinning projects include: the enhancement of initial teacher training during university studies, the promotion of positive and innovative teaching approaches, the development of teaching competences, the creation of interdisciplinary projects, a deeper understanding of the importance of fostering a positive climate focused on students' well-being and a growth mindset in education, as well as the improvement of educational processes and the increased visibility and reputation of educational institutions.

The experiences, advice, and best practices shared by eTwinning ambassadors could serve as valuable starting points in teacher training. We emphasize the need for close collaboration between eTwinning ambassadors and university professors involved in initial teacher education. Introductory eTwinning courses can be offered to students to help them understand both the benefits of collaboration with other teachers and the advantages of participating in

eTwinning projects. eTwinning ambassadors can present good practices and examples of successful project implementation, while university professors can introduce innovative and modern pedagogical approaches and procedures, underlining the necessity of digitalization in education.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors have equal contributions.

REFERENCES

- Acar, S., & Peker, B. (2021). What are the Purposes of Teachers for Using the eTwinning Platform and the Effects of the Platform on Teachers? *Acta Didactica Napocensia*, 14(1), 91–103. <https://doi.org/10.24193/adn.14.1.7>
- Alzubi, K. A. A. (2023). The Effectiveness of Students' Use of Computer Modeling in Learning Engineering Mathematics. *International Journal of Emerging Technologies in Learning (IJET)*, 18(06), pp. 17–27. <https://doi.org/10.3991/ijet.v18i06.37683>
- Bernárdez-Gómez, A., Bolarín Martínez, M. J., González-Barea, E. M., & Rodríguez-Entrena, M. J. (2024). How are the Sustainable Development Goals being worked within the Schools? *Journal of Teacher Education for Sustainability*, 26(2), 162–193. <https://doi.org/10.2478/jtes-2024-0021>
- Boehme, K. (2024). "Sharing Worldviews: Learning in Encounter for Common Values in Diversity" in School and Teacher Education – Contexts in Germany and Europe. *Religions*, 15(9), 1077. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15091077>
- Botturi, L., Kappler, D., & Negrini, L. (2018). Digitally-supported language exchanges in primary school: The AlpConnect project. *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching*, 8(4), 795–843. <https://doi.org/10.14746/ssl.2018.8.4.5>
- Brković, M., Pons, O., & Parnell, R. (2015). Where Sustainable School Meets the "Third Teacher": Primary School Case Study from Barcelona, Spain. *Archnet-IJAR: International Journal of Architectural Research*, 9(2), 77–97.
- Camilleri, R. (2016). Global Education and Intercultural Awareness in eTwinning. *Cogent Education*, 3(1), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2016.1210489>
- Canals-Botines, M., & Raluy Alonso, A. (2021). How to Use Storytelling in a Strategic Partnership Between Higher Education and Primary Schools: Writing for Inclusion. *Studi Sulla Formazione/Open Journal of Education*, 24(1), 185–189. <https://doi.org/10.13128/ssf-12732>
- Ceschi, A., Perini, M., Scalco, A., Pentassuglia, M., Righetti, E., & Caputo, B. (2021). Foster Employability and Fight Social Exclusion Through the Development of Lifelong Learning (LLL) Key-Competences: Reviewing Twenty Years of LLL Policies. *European Journal of Training and Development*, 45(6/7), 475–511. <https://doi.org/10.1108/EJTD-07-2019-0126>

- Chojak, M. (2024). Shaping Entrepreneurial Attitudes Among Young Children on the Basis of the “Entrepreneurial Kids” International Project. *Education Sciences*, 14(1), 74. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci14010074>
- Cîmpean, E., & Bocoș, M. (2022). Developing Digital Competence and Media Literacy Through PBL: Web 2.0 Tools Used in #DigitalEU – We’ll Do! eTwinning Project. *Educatia 21 Journal*, (22), 87–96. <https://doi.org/10.24193/ed21.2022.22.10>
- Cîmpean, M.-E., Găzdac, V., & Bocoș, M. (2024). Developing Life Skills Through Erasmus+ Accreditation: Presentation of the E+ SKILLS FOR LIFE eTwinning and Erasmus+ Project. *Educatia 21*, (28, Suppl. Special Issue), 181–187. <https://doi.org/10.24193/ed21.2024.28.20>
- Crișan, G. I., & Albușescu, I. (2018). Developing Visual Art Competence in Young Students (7–9 Years Old): A Comparative Study Involving Students From Romania, Poland, Turkey, and the Republic of Moldavia, Participants in the eTwinning Programme. *Educatia 21 Journal*, 16(1), 145–152. <https://doi.org/10.24193/ed21.2018.16.18>
- (2023). *Data citation: A guide to best practice*. Publications Office of the European Union. <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/cd2ef628-c14e-11ed-8912-01aa75ed71a1>
- Esen, H., & Kaplan, A. Ö. (2024). What Remains in Students From an eTwinning Project: The Case of ŞEBIT Project. *Acta Didactica Napocensia*, 17(1), 92–103. <https://10.24193/adn.17.1.8>
- eTwinning Romania. (2022). *Studiu – parteneriate pentru învățare: Experiențe ale elevilor, profesorilor și școlilor*. <https://etwinning.ro/studiu-parteneriate-pentru-invatare-experiente-ale-elevilor-profesorilor-si-scolilor/>
- European School Education Platform. (2025, September 3). *eTwinning annual theme 2025/2026: Skills for life*. <https://school-education.ec.europa.eu/en/discover/news/etwinning-annual-theme-20252026-skills-life>
- European School Education Platform. (n.d.). *eTwinning for future teachers*. <https://school-education.ec.europa.eu/en/etwinning/etwinning-future-teachers>
- Farrell, R., Rice, M., & Qualter, D. (2024). Navigating the Digital Transformation of Education: Insights From Collaborative Learning in an Erasmus+ Project. *Education Sciences*, 14(9), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci14091023>
- Găzdac, V.-A., Bocoș, M.-D., & Cîmpean, M.-E. (2024). eTwinning/Erasmus+ project „S-TEAM in kindergarten”. *Educatia 21 Journal*, 28(Special Issue), 146–151. <https://doi.org/10.24193/ed21.2024.28.15>
- Heinzmann, S., Paul, S., Hilbe, R., Schallhart, N., & Egli Cuenat, M. (2023). Development of Productive Language Skills Through Language Exchange in Primary Schools in Switzerland – An Exploratory Intervention Study. *European Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 11(1), 98–131. <https://doi.org/10.1515/eujal-2021-0024>
- Istrate, O. (2013). (coord.). *Rolul proiectelor educaționale realizate prin parteneriate școlare internaționale. Raport preliminar eTwinning RO12*. București. TEHNE – Centrul pentru Inovare în Educație. https://etwinning.ro/eTw_RO12_raport_preliminar.pdf

- Jacovidis, J. N., Anderson, R. C., Beach, P. T., & Chadwick, K. L. (2020). *Growth Mindset Thinking and Beliefs in Teaching and Learning* (pp. 1–61). International Baccalaureate Organization. <https://www.ibo.org/globalassets/new-structure/research/pdfs/growth-mindset-policy-paper.pdf>
- Kurt, E. N., & Koçer, H. (2023). Participation Rights of Transnational Immigrant and Local Children in Class Lives in Preschool Education. *Çukurova Üniversitesi Eğitim Fakültesi Dergisi*, 52(2), 351–380. <https://doi.org/10.14812/cuefd.1261482>
- Lee, D., Jung, J., Shin, S., Otternbreit-Leftwich, A., & Glazewski, K. (2020). A Sociological View on Designing a Sustainable Online Community for K–12 Teachers: A Systematic Review. *Sustainability*, 12(22), 1–26. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12229742>
- Legea învățământului preuniversitar. (2023). *Monitorul Oficial al României, Partea I*, Nr. 614/ 5 iulie 2023.
- Legea învățământului superior. (2023). *Monitorul Oficial al României, Partea I*, Nr. 614/ 5 iulie 2023.
- Lewis, S., & Decuypere, M. (2023). ‘Out of time’: Constructing teacher professionalism as a perpetual project on the eTwinning digital platform. *Tertium Comparationis*, 29(1), 22–47. <https://doi.org/10.31244/tc.2023.01.02>
- Lopriore, L. (2021). More than Meets the Eye: Research and Practice in Italian Foreign Language Policies and Education *European Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 9(1), 69–88. <https://doi.org/10.1515/eujal-2020-0025>
- Lujanac, A. (2019). *School library as the active learning center of the school*. IASL Annual Conference Proceedings, October 2019, 1–5. <https://doi.org/10.29173/iasl7372>
- Mandelj, N., & Bajda, U. (2019). Empowering transliteracy in the school library through international collaboration. In *Proceedings of the 48th Annual Conference of the International Association of School Librarianship and the 23rd International Forum on Research in School Librarianship* (October 21–25, 2019, Dubrovnik, Croatia). <https://doi.org/10.29173/iasl7367>
- Marin, D.-C., & Bocoș, M. (2024). Investigating the Reading Preferences of Second-Grade Pupils Through Creation Lessons. *Educatia 21 Journal*, 27, 123–129. <https://doi.org/10.24193/ed21.2024.27.12>
- Masterson, M. (2020). An Exploration of the Potential Role of Digital Technologies for Promoting Learning in Foreign Language Classrooms: Lessons for a Pandemic. *International Journal of Emerging Technologies in Learning (ijET)*, 15(14), pp. 83–96. <https://doi.org/10.3991/ijet.v15i14.13297>
- Mota, C. S., & Francisco, B. (2019). *Empowering School Libraries through International Projects*. In *IASL Annual Conference Proceedings, October 2019* (pp. 112–114). International Association of School Librarianship. <https://doi.org/10.29173/iasl7385>
- Nelimarkka, M., Leinonen, T., Durall, E., & Dean, P. (2021). Facebook is not a silver bullet for teachers’ professional development: Anatomy of an eight-year-old social-media community. *Computers & Education*, 173, 104269, 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2021.104269>

- Nychkalo, N., Muranova, N., Voliarska, O., & Matulcikova, M. (2024). *Integration of Ukrainian Children and Youth Using Digital Tools in the Educational Environment of Slovakia. Information Technologies and Learning Tools, 101(3)*, 150–166.
<https://doi.org/10.33407/itlt.v101i3.5657>
- O'Dowd, R., & Dooly, M. (2022). Exploring Teachers' Professional Development through Participation in Virtual Exchange. *ReCALL, 34(1)*, 21–36.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0958344021000215>
- Öztürk, G., Karamete, A., Çetin, G., & Korkusuz, M. E. (2022). The Web 2.0 Workshop for the Teacher Candidates: A Mixed Method Research, *Acta Didactica Napocensia, 15(1)*, 38–51. <https://doi.org/10.24193/adn.15.1.4>
- Pathak, A. (2022). Effects of Social Media on the Academic Performance of Higher Secondary Students. *NeuroQuantology, 20(13)*, 2405–2423.
 doi:10.14704/nq.2022.20.13.NQ88300
- Şenel, M., & Han, N. (2024). A Comparative Study of eTwinning Projects from the Perspectives of Turkish and European Preschool Teachers. *Shanlax International Journal of Education, 12(2)*, 66–81. <https://doi.org/10.34293/education.v12i2.7224>
- Stavytska, I. (2017). Modern Tendencies in Foreign Language Teaching. *Journal of Intercultural Management, 9(4)*, 21–30. <https://doi.org/10.1515/joim-2017-0018>
- Stergaki, C., Kougiourouki, M., & Passa, E. (2025). The Contribution of eTwinning Projects to the Development of Students' Linguistic, Communicative, and Collaborative Skills in Primary Education: Teachers' Perspectives. *European Journal of Education and Pedagogy, 6(2)*, 78–84. <https://doi.org/10.24018/ejedu.2025.6.2.945>
- Takátsné Lucz, I. (2021). *Web 2.0 Applications as the Tools of Motivation in Secondary Physics Education. Journal of Physics: Conference Series, 1929(1)*, 1–9.
<https://doi.org/10.1088/1742-6596/1929/1/012041>
- Tutunea, G. (2021). Acquiring intercultural communicative competence through virtual exchange. *Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, Philologica, 13(3)*, 44–61.
<https://doi.org/10.2478/ausp-2021-0027>
- Ungureanu (Erdeli), E. M., & Roman, A. F. (2023). Inclusive Education through the Friendship Bridge Project. *Educatia 21 Journal, 25* (Special Issue), 248–255.
<https://doi.org/10.24193/ed21.2023.25.27>
- Vettorel, P. (2024). Primary Teacher Education: Reflections on Pedagogical Perspectives from Global Englishes and ELF. *Research Papers in Language Teaching and Learning, 14(1)*, 25–34. <http://rpltl.eap.gr/images/2024/14-01-25-Vettorel.pdf>
- Voicu, C. V. (2022). *Competențele secolului XXI prin parteneriate Twinning. Ghid metodologic.* https://view.livresq.com/view/62ea83c1d21cae0008549eab/#73the_book_of_the_our_seasons_p
- Yan, V. X., & Schuetze, B. A. (2023). What Is Meant by “Growth Mindset”? Current Theory, Measurement Practices, and Empirical Results Leave Much Open to Interpretation: Commentary on Macnamara and Burgoyne (2023) and Burnette et al. (2023). *Psychological Bulletin, 149(3–4)*, 206–219. <https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000370>

Ableism in Romanian Universities. An Exploratory Study

Carmen COSTEA-BĂRLUȚIU^{1*} , Laura Elena RUNCEANU² 

ABSTRACT. This study explores the concepts of able body and able mind in the Romanian academia. Ableism is present and hidden in universities and it is unacknowledged, hence the need to open a discussion around this topic. Teaching and research staff participated voluntarily in the first qualitative study on academic ableism in Romania, upon our knowledge. The results of our reflexive thematic analysis point to the perception of able body and able mind as related to the functional, performative body and mind. This is reflected in the three main themes, as evident in the current Romanian university context: (1) A healthy, functional, and autonomous body, (2) A functional and adaptive set of cognitive, executive, communicational and socio-emotional skills, and (3) Values, attitudes, knowledge, skills and resilience at work. The results of this study are aligned with the current research on academic ableism in other parts of the world.

Keywords: academic ableism, able body, able mind, norms, standards

Motto: *“It is important to stop and think, think, think – about the nature of processes and practices of academic ableism; how to drill down to ableism’s subtleties and hiddenness. It is imperative that we embrace this challenge.” (Campbell, 2020, p. 207)*

Consider how often does an individual use the verb “to be able” in a regular day?

Ableism derives from this verb, and it is a complex concept that evolved in the context of civil rights movements in Britain and the United States of America during the 1960s and 1970s (Albrecht, 2005) and occupies an increasingly important

¹ Babeș-Bolyai University, Faculty of Psychology and Sciences of Education, 7 Sindicatelor Street, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

² Jönköping University, School of Education and Communication, Research Group Communication, Culture and Diversity, Jönköping, Sweden

* Corresponding author: carmen.costea@ubbcluj.ro



place in contemporary discourses (Felder, 2025). Campbell (2019) locates the “birth” of the concept in May 1981, and it describes in a special issue of the journal “Off Our Backs” the negative stereotypes towards disabled people.

Although as a concept ableism is often contested and it has a “...limited definitional or conceptual specificity” (Campbell, 2009, p. 5), “the ‘business-as-usual’ forms of ableism are so absorbed into the function of Western societies” (p. 18), that it permeates the society and it is embedded in its ideologies, cultural norms, institutions and their structures, processes and practices. Ableism and its values, norms and practices are often described as a system of prejudice, discrimination and exclusion of disabled people. Terry (1996) includes ableism alongside other forms of “-ism” (e.g., sexism, racism, ageism) to describe a “set of assumptions and practices that promote unequal treatment of people because of apparent or assumed physical, mental, or behavioral differences.” (p. 4-5), whereas for Wolbring (2008), ableism is „an umbrella ism for other isms such as racism, sexism, casteism, ageism, speciesism, anti-environmentalism, gross domestic product GDP-ism and consumerism. [...]. Ableism is one of the most societally entrenched and accepted isms.” (p. 253). People are familiar with the concepts of sexism and racism, while “...ableism is generally perceived as a strange and unfamiliar concept...” (Campbell, 2009, p. 19).

Fiona Kumari Campbell, a leading and influential theorist of ableism, and of *Studies in Ableism* as a research methodology, invites us to reconsider how we think about the body and defines ableism as an epistemology “...A network of beliefs, processes and practices that produce a particular kind of self and body (the corporeal standard) that is projected as the perfect, species typical and therefore essential and fully human. Disability, then, is cast as a diminished state of being human.” (2001, p. 44). Consequently, “...a chief feature of an ableist viewpoint is a belief that impairment or disability (irrespective of ‘type’) is inherently negative and should the opportunity present itself, be ameliorated, cured or indeed eliminated.” (Campbell, 2009, p. 5). In 2017, Campbell expands the definition of ableism to a “. . . system of causal relations about the order of life that produces processes and systems of entitlement and exclusion. [...] A system of dividing practices, ableism institutes the reification and classification of populations. Ableist systems involve the differentiation, ranking, negation, notification and prioritization of sentient life.” (p. 287–288), These ableist practices vary over time and by context (Campbell 2019, 2020) and sometimes the ableist acts can be unintentional (Dunn, 2019).

Campbell’s understanding of ableism in connection to the norm is synthesized in her description of the ableist imaginary that “...tells us what a *healthy body* means – a *normal* mind..” and it “relies upon the existence of an unacknowledged imagined shared community of able-bodied/minded people,

held together by a common ableist homosocial world view that asserts the *preferability* of the norms of ableism...". (2019, p. 147). In a similar vein, McRuer (2002, 2006), the theorist of compulsory able-bodiedness, examined the influence and role of a culture that "...assumes in advance that we all agree: able-bodied identities, able-bodied perspectives are preferable and what we all, collectively, are aiming for. A system of compulsory able-bodiedness repeatedly demands that people with disabilities embody for others an affirmative answer to the unspoken question, 'Yes, but in the end, wouldn't you rather be more like me?'" (2002, p. 93). This system is oppressive because "...compulsory able-bodiedness functions by covering over, with the appearance of choice, a system in which there actually is no choice." (2006, p. 7). In an approach that brings together bodies and minds, and expands McRuer's theory, Kafer (2013) discusses compulsory able-bodiedness and compulsory able-mindedness.

Conceptualizations and theories of ableism, implicitly bring into the forefront various understandings of ability and its normative dimensions (e.g. Wolbring, 2008; Campbell, 2008, 2009, 2017, 2019, 2020; Goodley, 2014, 2025; Felder, 2025) and as such the concept is imbued with social norms and evaluations regarding what is considered an able-bodied/minded individual in a specific historical, ideological, political, and socio-cultural context. Thus, ableism values physical, emotional, and mental capital, following socially constructed expectations regarding abilities (Loja et al., 2013). Everybody is affected by the "...cultural ideals of normalcy and ideal form and function." (Kafer, 2003, p. 8). Even though "the ideology of ability remains largely unquestioned" (Siebers, 2008, p. 81), and the term is lacking a conceptual basis (Felder, 2025), ability remains "...central to the production and enactment of a deficit lens." (Parekh, 2017, p. 339)

It is evident that ability and disability co-exist in complex connections, and "The category of "disabled" can only be understood in relation to "able-bodied" or "able-minded," a binary in which each term forms the borders of the other." (Kafer, 2013, p. 6). The opposite connotations of these two categories and their implications for the lives of individuals are telling since "Disability all too often appears in our cultural psyche as a problem of body or mind, as an object of rehabilitative or curative intervention. Ability, meanwhile, is posited as an idealized marker of successful citizenship." (Goodley, 2018, p. 5). When discussing ableism in education, Felder (2025) understands it as "...a normative problem because it privileges certain expectations of ability that are presented as universal or self-evident.", which leads to "...practical challenges in that these expectations produce concrete mechanisms of exclusion." (p. 860). Given the "ablecentrism of our culture" (Kafer, 2003, p. 81), none is immune to "unquestioned ableist assumptions" (Hehir, 2002, p. 5) and ableist experiences, since sooner or later everybody will have one or another type or disability (Nario-Redmond, 2019; Goodley, 2018).

But what does disability mean? Historically, the concept evolved and was shaped by different ideologies, social movements and cultural contexts, and theorized within a multitude of models. It is not the purpose of this article to discuss these conceptual and theoretical frameworks; however, it is important to highlight that beyond the well-known dichotomy between the medical model of disability and the social model of disability other alternative approaches for theorizing and understanding disability emerged. Based on the social model of disability, Kafer (2013) introduces the political/relational model of disability, where "...the problem of disability no longer resides in the minds and bodies of individuals but in the build environments and social patterns that exclude or stigmatize particular kinds of bodies, minds and ways of being." (p. 7). Zaks (2024) suggests changing the name of the medical model of disability to the normalization model of disability because "This would help conceptually highlight that historically, the model of disability that dominated society sought to oppressively normalize bodies and brains..." (p. 3248) and "...emphasizes the injustice of the abnormal/normal binary" (p. 3249). A plethora of definitions of disability exists, and we have chosen the comprehensive formulation of Shakespeare and Watson, two disabled scholars, according to whom "Disability is the result of the interaction between physical- or mental-health conditions, individual psychology, and environmental and social factors, which include culture. It is a dynamic, scalar, multi-factorial experience, which can be very different for different people with the same impairment in the same setting, let alone the billions of disabled people around the world. These differences could be the result of impairment/illness, gender, class, ethnicity, environment, personality, upbringing, social and political barriers, or even luck." (2023, p. 18). Furthermore, the lived experiences of disability (and ableism for that matter) are specific to a historical moment and its ideologies.

Disabled scholars are in turn subjects and objects of ableism, and some of them are referenced in this article as they are theorists of ableism and/or activists for social justice and disability rights, (e.g. Brown, Campbell, Kafer, Shakespeare, Watson). In his foundational article *Eliminating ableism in education*, Hehir (2002) considers that "As it is the case with racism and sexism, progress toward equity is dependent first and foremost on the acknowledgment that ableism exists in school." (p. 22); and acknowledging that ableism exists in universities, as well. In his critique of higher education and its role in the creation and perpetuation of ableism, Dolmage (2017) introduces *academic ableism* and discusses how "...academia powerfully mandates able-bodiedness and able-mindedness, as well as other forms of social and communicative hyperability, and this demand can best be defined as ableism. In fact, few cultural institutions do a better or more comprehensive job of promoting ableism." (p. 7). In the seminal interdisciplinary

work *Ableism in Academia: Theorising experiences of disabilities and chronic illnesses in higher education* edited by Nicole Brown and Jennifer Leigh (2020), theories of ableism in academia are illustrated or emerge from lived experiences and challenges of disabled academics. Ability and ability-related expectations are at the core of academia, where “Ability privilege expects each university student and staff member to be a ready-made, able-bodied-and-minded human being; willing and able to access the normatively constructed physical environment and learning culture of the university. And these expectations feed ingrained ideals associated with academic excellence and intellectual elitism.” (Goodley, 2025, p. 1005). Academia means competitiveness in international rankings, research and teaching excellence, access to grants etc. which contributes to the promotion of ableism and individualism and makes it “possible and indeed desirable to be a ‘superhuman’ academic” (Campbell, 2020), with recent research indicating a direct link between the neoliberal current in universities and ableism (Dolan, 2023; Rodgers et al., 2023; Gillberg, 2020; Olsen et al., 2020; Peruzzo, 2020; Goodley 2025). Hence, it is not surprising that disabled, neurodivergent and/or chronically ill academics are under-represented in universities and they are concerned for being taken seriously for their work when compared to their non-disabled, healthy colleagues (Brown and Leigh, 2018; Lindsay and Fuentes, 2022). Ableist norms define what success is and the values underpinning higher education can contribute to the exclusion of disabled academics when “High expectations calibrated according to standards designed for individuals without disability, further alienate and marginalize academics who do not fit the able-bodied norm. This ethos excludes those who are not able to keep up with the established ableist view of what it means to be successful.” (Yerbury and Yerbury, 2021, p. 507). Institutionalized ableism can create, maintain and perpetuate barriers in the careers of disabled academics, and it manifests in institutional standards, policies and procedures, unequal power relations, negative attitudes, discrimination and exclusion, microaggressions, lack of accessibility and workplace accommodations, and excessive workload (Bromser-Kloeden, 2025; Levitt, Thelwall and Moreira, 2024; Brown and Ramlackhan, 2022; Lindsay and Fuentes, 2022; Saltes, 2022; Merchant et al., 2020; Mellifont et al., 2019; Sharma et al., 2025).

Research question

This study is a part of a broader research that aims to explore academic ableism in Romanian universities.

The research question is: „How does the teaching and research staff conceptualize ableism in the current context of Romanian universities?”.

Participants

A total of 19 teaching and research staff selected by convenience participated in this study based on voluntary consent. The sample was heterogenous in terms of location, as well as demographics. Their age ranged between 25-57 years; 14 participants identified as women and 5 participants identified as men.

Regarding professional experience, the sample included participants at the beginning of their career, as well as participants with extensive work experience: 2 participants had between 1-10 years of experience in university, 8 between 11-20 years, and 9 between 21-30 years.

Concerning their health status, 7 participants reported they had a chronic physical illness and 1 participant considered that he/she had a disability.

Regarding their position in university, 3 participants were professors, 6 assistant professors, 6 lecturers, 3 assistants, and 1 doctoral student.

At the question if they would disclose the presence of a disability if they had one, 5 participants gave positive responses, such as: *"I do not need to hide it, the institution needs to be informed if I suffer from an illness that can affect my performance"*.

Instrument and procedure

The instrument used in the current research was developed following a literature review. The questionnaire has 8 demographic questions (experience in academia, position, age, gender, presence of a visible/invisible disability, chronic illness, and/or mental health problem) and 17 open-ended questions on the concept of ableism, institutional policies and norms, disclosure of disability, chronic illness and/or mental health problems, experience of ableism in Romanian universities) grouped under the following general domains and sub-domains:

1. The domain "Ableism as a concept" includes the following subdomains:

- Opinions regarding the able body;
- Opinions regarding the able mind;
- Professional standards and conduct required for working in the university.

2. The domain "Institutional policies and norms" includes the following subdomains:

- Advantages enjoyed by people who are physically and mentally able (for example, in promotion, obtaining grants, remuneration);
- Equal access for people who have a disability, chronic illness, and/or mental health problems;

- The university work environment and the expectation that academic and research staff perform at a high level, be healthy, capable, and mentally balanced.

3. The domain “Disclosure of disability, chronic illness, and/or mental health problems” includes the following subdomains:

- Conditions (environmental or individual) under which, if a person had a disability, chronic illness, and/or mental health problems, they would speak openly about their situation;
- Open discussions on issues related to disability, chronic illness, and/or mental health problems;
- The risk that a person with a disability, chronic illness, and/or mental health problems may lose their job at the university;
- Subtle negative messages, hostility, or tension in the university work environment directed at people who have taken sick leave.

4. The domain “Experiences of ableism in higher education institutions” includes the following subdomains:

- Support offered by the university to teaching and research staff who have a disability, chronic illness, and/or mental health problems, as well as the conditions under which a person would seek such support;
- Physical and psychological impact of the professional standards and conduct requirements imposed on teaching and research staff.

The questionnaire developed was uploaded in an online format using Google Forms and was sent to the respondents. The questionnaire was confidential, and the responses collected were anonymous. This data collection method was used because it protects the personal identity and ensures confidentiality in responses.

The qualitative data analysis followed the steps of the reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2006) and the authors chose inductive coding for data analysis.

The reflexive thematic analysis places researcher subjectivity and reflexivity at the core of the process, and the researcher’s role in generating ideas is essential. When multiple researchers are involved in the data analysis process, data coding implicitly requires collaboration among them and transparency in communication, which facilitates reflection and nuanced analysis of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Braun and Clarke (2006) proposed six phases in data analysis, adapted to the research question in an iterative and flexible process. These phases and the processes associated with each are summarized as follows:

1. Familiarizing yourself with your data: Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.

2. Generating initial codes: Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.

3. Searching for themes: Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.

4. Reviewing themes: Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis.

5. Defining and naming themes: Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.

6. Producing the report: The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis. (2006, p. 87)

Regarding the authors' positionality, the first author approached the data in clinical and psychotherapeutic perspective, while the second author is positioned in the field of critical disability studies.

Results and discussion

The results discussed in this article represent a part of a larger study on ableism in Romanian universities. The topics covered in this article are the perception of able body, able mind, and the academic standards associated with these. Other topics included in the research were presented elsewhere (Costea-Bărluțiu & Runceanu, in press).

We analyze and discuss the answers from these three questions: 1. „What does an able body mean to you?”, 2. „What does an able mind mean to you?”, and 3. „What does it mean for you to be able to achieve the professional and conduct standards necessary for working in the university?”.

Following the steps proposed by Braun & Clarke (2006), the authors identified three themes that are discussed in relation to the questions and are illustrated by excerpts from participants' answers.

- Theme 1: A healthy, functional, and autonomous body
- Theme 2: A functional and adaptive set of cognitive, executive, communicational and socio-emotional skills
- Theme 3: Values, attitudes, knowledge, skills and resilience at work

A healthy, functional, and autonomous body

The following characteristics were considered specific for the able body, as grouped in these sub-themes.

1. Physical health equals the absence of pain, illness, disability, limitations, normal functioning, and youth.

This was identified as a characteristic of the able body by 10 respondents. One account that illustrates this characteristic is: *“body of a relatively young person who has no daily aches and pains, who can use all their limbs, who has no difficulty climbing stairs if the elevator is full, who can play a game or take part in a short notice charity cross-country run without having to go to physiotherapy afterwards”*.

Other accounts were:

“A healthy, complete body that functions within normal parameters.”

“This concept refers to a physically healthy body that functions optimally.”

Some of the responses implied that a healthy body is also a normal one, health was considered the parameter of normality of the body.

2. Functioning in daily activities and the ability to perform daily activities.

This was identified as a characteristic of the able body by 10 respondents. Some examples of accounts that illustrate this are:

“A body that [...] functions without significant limitations in daily activities.”

“A good state of health, a body that can perform daily activities at levels that are characteristic for their age, gender, physical abilities, and type of work.”

“A body capable of carrying out activities.”

“A body that allows for the performance of daily and professional activities.”

“A body able to carry out routine activities.”

“A body that enables a person to accomplish various physical goals.”

3. Independence, autonomy - ability to function independently without support.

“I believe that a physical disability does not necessarily imply a person’s inability to do something or to be autonomous in general, so I would say that a capable body is also a body that finds its own strategies and resources (ideally with social and family support) to evolve, to build as independent a life as possible. If I were to generalize, I think a capable body is an autonomous or largely autonomous body.”

“A body that does not limit a person’s independent functioning (endurance, flexibility, strength).”

4. Vocationally capable - the ability to work, perform tasks, aptitude.
"A person who has the professional ability required for the work they do and can enjoy the non-professional life they lead."

"Someone physically healthy enough to perform their tasks."

5. Mental health and intellectual abilities.

"Physical and mental functioning in normal parameters"

"Physical and intellectual capacity."

6. Adaptability - physical capacity to adapt to context and demands (resilience, flexibility, resourcefulness).

"healthy body both physically and mentally, which can adapt easily and quickly to different situations"

7. Functioning despite difficulties.

"A functional body, even if it has some difficulties"

There was also one account that critiqued the idealized definitions of the body:

"I don't believe in a standard definition of the capable body—one rooted in the way Humanism and the Illuminism viewed the human being and their body as a perfect, symmetrical, rational embodiment, the center of the universe (following the model of the Vitruvian man)."

A functional and adaptive set of cognitive, executive, communicational and socio-emotional skills

The respondents listed the following characteristics, grouped in these sub-themes:

1. Cognitive functionality.

The ability to perform several cognitive processes: *"Capacity to reason, make decisions, explain, make connections, provide examples."*, *"The ability to analyze, interpret results, [...] intervene depending on the situation"*

Thinking logically, rationally: *"to make logical connections, reasonings, and judgments"*, *A logical, rational mind that does not allow itself to "malfunction."*, *"the ability to make rational decisions"*

2. Capacity for intellectual work, learning, concentration, memory.

"It is also a mind capable of intellectual work, where specific skills are needed depending on the field of activity—so a mind that can self-discipline (I mean patience, focus, repetition of tasks/information, assimilation of diverse and abundant information)."

"A mind with sufficient professional and non-professional intellectual abilities"

"A mind capable of performing activities."

"A mind that enables the carrying out of daily and professional activities."

"An intellect able to carry out routine activities required by its field of competence."

3. Decision making, judgment, adaptation, insight, and responsibility, in support for everyday life.

"Ability to make decisions that facilitate success, effectiveness and adaptation"

"An individual's quality of being endowed with intelligence and the ability to make decisions that facilitate success in personal and professional activities."

"A mind that can process information and make decisions in order to adapt to various situations."

"The ability to make rational decisions."

4. Mental health.

Characteristics such as lack of dysfunction, identifying reality, distinguishing fact from fantasy or delusion were identified by 6 respondents.

"The concept signifies mental health and functionality."

"Someone who has a lucid mind."

"Mental functioning within normal parameters."

"Psychologically healthy."

"A capable mind should allow a person to identify real situations (past, present, and projected into the future), to clearly distinguish them from imaginary, fanciful, or fantastical ones; to identify danger and risk"

"Discernment."

5. Mental flexibility, adaptability.

"A mind that functions optimally and ensures the individual's adaptation and development throughout life."

6. Emotional skills.

"Self-regulation, handling intense situations, without violence"

"That we can express our frustration without yelling or other violent Expressions (verbal or otherwise)."

"Empathetic."

7. Self-discipline (waking up on time, punctuality) and responsibility.

"That we can wake up at a set time; that we can be at place X at time Y to do Z, all agreed beforehand"

"Responsibility, accountability."

8. Social skills, ability to interact healthily in social contexts.

“Interacting with strangers without anxiety and stress, paying attention to someone's story for 10 minutes, even if that person is not particularly close or familiar to us”

“Work both individually and in a team.”

9. Creativity, innovation, critical thinking, metacognition.

“For me, it is a creative, [...] highly adaptable (flexible), critical, hyper-analytical mind that can self-regulate and manage diverse and intense situations. It is a mind with a highly developed metacognitive component”

“The creative, healthy mind.”

10. Connection with the body.

“A mind that is connected to the body and to what the body feels.”

11. Morality.

“To identify, differentiate, and understand positive/correct/moral situations as opposed to negative/vicious/immoral ones.”

One of the responses mentioned contemporary contexts that can be threatening and dangerous, leading to difficulties defining the able body and the able mind:

Still, I believe that in the current global situation, with wars, multiple crises, and major sociopolitical instability, it is difficult to define both a “capable mind” and a “capable body,” because it seems to me that on a broader and deeper level, the human being is significantly affected, and the consequences—largely negative—will probably be visible in the long term.

Values, attitudes, knowledge, skills, behaviours and resilience at work

The responses to the question “*What does it mean for you to be able to achieve the professional and conduct standards necessary for working in the university?*” are varied and complex and they are grouped in the following sub-themes:

1. Training, professional competence in teaching, intellectual abilities.

“Professional, up to date with information in the field, or capable of explaining theoretical aspects.”

“They should be capable of critical and analytical thinking.”

“Continuing specialization in the field (e.g., accessing further training opportunities)”

“Possibility to participate in courses/trainings on relevant topics”

“Course preparation, seminars”

“A specialist in their field, and a good teacher”

“The ability to provide intellectual knowledge at a higher level of rigor, suited to requirements, and to stimulate students’ desire for learning the profession.”

“For someone to be capable of meeting the professional and conduct standards required in university work, they must ensure high-level specialized training, engage in continuous professional development”

2. Openness towards students, with tact, passion and enthusiasm for work with students, patience, motivating attitude towards them and empathy.

“Proper conduct, open with students, with a positive attitude and tact.”

“From a psycho-pedagogical perspective, they should be someone who wants or at least is excited/enthusiastic/passionate about the idea of interacting with students and teaching (with everything this work involves: patience, creativity, pedagogical tact, attention, preparation of courses/seminars, etc.).”

3. Research capabilities.

“To be, first of all, a good researcher, capable of writing specialized articles with ease.”

4. Collaboration, team spirit, communication skills.

“Good communication skills”

“Collaborate consistently with colleagues”

“Able to work in a stimulating environment”

“Teamwork.”

5. Professionalism and responsibility: punctuality, reliability, respect for engagements and deadlines.

“To always be present in classes, according to a predetermined schedule, not randomly; to catch up with meetings they miss for various reasons, including professional ones, instead of simply skipping them”

“To complete administrative tasks requested by colleagues on time”

“Be willing to invest substantial time in fulfilling their professional responsibilities”

“Implies that a person can fulfill the tasks and requirements of the position”

“To be able to carry out their duties according to the job description and regulations.”

6. Ability to withstand pressure and critical feedback, stress management, self-regulation skills, willingness to make sacrifices.

“He/she should be very open, flexible, capable of sacrifice, of assumption and of receiving and very critical feedback. Given the pressure and often toxicity of the academic environment, I believe that being capable means (especially if you have a disability, or if you are a woman or a queer person) being very resilient and tough, able to self-regulate and not give up your work and passion because of the environment itself.”

7. Rising up to high demands, awareness and achievement of high performance in the field.

“From an intellectual standpoint, I believe they should be very aware of these standards, well trained and competent in the field they want to pursue”

“To meet the performance levels required by the workplace”

“It almost requires being super-human if you have high standards”

8. Mental health, balance and well-being, satisfaction with work, adaptability.

“To be able to use and mobilize their resources, to integrate opportunities, to access resources, to benefit from a calm, positive, supportive environment”

“To find satisfaction in their work, and to experience well-being.”

“A high degree of dedication to the field is expected.”

9. Academic integrity, respect for diversity, non-interference in procedures, morality and ethics.

“Academic integrity”

“To allow unpleasant procedures, such as appeals, contested elections, disciplinary matters, to follow their natural course without interfering privately with committee members”

“To not denigrate colleagues or students within the university, even in private”

“To not sexually harass colleagues regardless of how much alcohol (or other substances) they have consumed”

“To not mock minority groups of any kind or tell jokes at the expense of such people”

“To be inclusive in wording and sensitive to the diversity around them. In short, to be a professional and just that—not their private self while at work—to wear the “work mask,” in line with the job description, and not behave as they would in private life among friends.”

“Display moral and honest behavior.”

“To demonstrate competence in the field of teaching and research. To respect ethical principles in relations with students and colleagues and in research.”

“Transparency in decision-making, material support for teaching and research activities”

“To respect the university’s code of ethics”.

To summarize, the themes and the sub-themes illustrated by excerpts from the respondents' answers, have at the core the ideal professional working in academia, with an ideal body and mind that meets the explicit and implicit academic norms that remain largely unquestioned.

Conclusions

The **overarching theme** of the perception of the able body and able mind is related to the **functional, performative body and mind**. This is reflected in the three themes and their respective sub-themes, and it is evident in the current Romanian university context.

The capable body and capable mind represent, from the perspective of the respondents in this study, a functional and performative ideal of the human being, centred on efficiency, adaptability, and autonomy. The capable body is seen as healthy, complete, young, autonomous, and functional—that is, a body that can carry out daily and professional tasks without difficulty, without physical limitations or special needs; the capable mind implies a set of social, cognitive, and emotional competencies, combined with responsibility, ethics, psychological balance, adaptability, and an orientation toward success and creativity. This view emphasizes performance and self-sufficiency, outlining a model of the “ideal” person who functions optimally in all areas of life, which is a profoundly ableist vision of the human being, as also discussed in the literature review.

Regarding the ability to meet the professional and conduct standards required for working in a university, we found that ableism in academia manifests through the tacit or explicit expectation that the members of the academic community (professors, researchers, students) function at an almost superhuman level of performance and resilience, marked by high standards as the norm, without taking into account the diversity of abilities or individual limitations (physical, mental, emotional). There is also the expectation that these members be constantly available, passionate, autonomous, and emotionally and cognitively balanced, regardless of context or stage of life. Another relevant aspect is the idealization of continuous performance across multiple domains (ease in academic writing, flawless teaching, stress management, acceptance of critical feedback, ability to contain high pressure and fulfil all tasks with high achievements). It is noteworthy that there is a diminishing recognition of the need for support, accommodations, or human limitations, and a promotion of a “perfect” professor or researcher model, who is competent, calm, empathetic, dedicated, always functional.

As our results show, ableism is typically normalized within post-secondary education, despite the increase of attention on higher education institutions to ensure that they reflect the diversity of their communities. In order for the equity, diversity and inclusion frameworks to build a culture of belonging for academics, they must allow for self-understanding of the issues around ableism and perceptions of normalcy by the students and staff.

One limitation of this study is due to the selection of participants, by convenience and the small sample size, which does not support generalizations following the qualitative data analysis. However, given that this is the first study on this topic in the Romanian context, upon our knowledge, it opens fresh perspectives and hopefully meaningful debates within and outside the academia.

REFERENCES

- Albrecht, G. L. (2005). ABLEISM. In *Encyclopedia of Disability* (Vol. 1, pp. 1–4). SAGE Publications, Inc. (Accessed online 25 August 2025)
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77–101.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health, 11*(4), 589–597.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806>
- Bromser-Kloeden, T. (2025). Navigating environmental academia in a disabled body: an embodied autoethnography of ableism and advocacy. *Disability & Society, 40*(1), 213–218.
- Brown, N., & Leigh, J. (2018). Ableism in academia: Where are the disabled and ill academics? *Disability & Society, 33*(6), 985–989.
- Brown, N., & Leigh, J. (Eds.). (2020). *Ableism in Academia: Theorising experiences of disabilities and chronic illnesses in higher education*. UCL Press.
- Brown, N., & Ramlackhan, K. (2022). Exploring experiences of ableism in academia: a constructivist inquiry. *High Educ* **83**, 1225–1239.
- Campbell, F. K. (2001). Inciting Legal Fictions: “Disability’s” Date with Ontology and the Ableist Body of the Law. *Griffith Law Review* *10* (1), 42–62.
- Campbell, F. K. (2008). Refusing Able(ness): A Preliminary Conversation about Ableism. *M/C Journal, 11*(3). Retrieved from
<https://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/view/46>
- Campbell, F. K. (2009). *Contours of Ableism: The Production of Disability and Abledness* (1st ed. 2009). Palgrave Macmillan UK.
- Campbell, F. K. (2017). Queer Anti-sociality and Disability Unbecoming: An Ableist Relations Project? In O. Sircar, & D. Jain (Eds.), *New Intimacies, Old Desires: Law, Culture and Queer Politics in Neoliberal Times* (pp. 280- 316). New Delhi: Zubaan Books.

- Campbell, F. K. (2019). Precision ableism: a *studies in ableism* approach to developing histories of disability and abledment. *Rethinking History*, 23(2), 138–156.
- Campbell, F. K. (2020). The violence of technicism: Ableism as humiliation and degrading treatment. In Nicole Brown & Jennifer Leigh (Eds.), *Ableism in Academia* (p. 202-224). UCL Press.
- Dolan, V. L. B. (2023). "...but if you tell anyone, I'll deny we ever met." the experiences of academics with invisible disabilities in the neoliberal university. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 36(4), 689–706.
- Dolmage, J. T. (2017). *Academic Ableism: Disability and Higher Education*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Dunn, D. S. (2019). Outsider Privileges Can Lead to Insider Disadvantages: Some Psychosocial Aspects of Ableism. *Journal of Social Issues*, 75(3), 665–682.
- Felder, F. (2025). Unveiling Ableism in Education: A Critical Examination of its Normativity and Implications for Learning in Schools. *Educational Theory*, 75(5), 848–864.
- Gillberg, C. (2020). The significance of crashing past gatekeepers of knowledge: Towards full participation of disabled scholars in ableist academic structures. In N. Brown & J. Leigh (Eds.), *Ableism in Academia* (p. 11). UCL Press.
- Goodley, D. (2014). *Dis/ability Studies: Theorising disablism and ableism* (1st ed.). Routledge.
- Goodley, D. (2018). The Dis/ability Complex. *DiGeSt: Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies*, 5(1), 5–22.
- Goodley, D. (2025). Depathologising the university. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 33(3), 1001–1018.
- Hehir, T. (2002). Eliminating ableism in education. *Harvard Educational Review*, 72(1), 1–32.
- Kafer, A. (2003). Compulsory Bodies: Reflections on Heterosexuality and Able-bodiedness. *Journal of Women's History*, 15(3), 77–89.
- Kafer, A. (2013). *Feminist, queer, crip*. Indiana University Press.
- Levitt, J. M., Thelwall, M., & Moreira, F. (2024). Identifying disability-related barriers to academic employment. *Studies in Higher Education (Dorchester-on-Thames)*, 49(11), 2104–2115.
- Lindsay, S., & Fuentes, K. (2022). It is Time to Address Ableism in Academia: A Systematic Review of the Experiences and Impact of Ableism among Faculty and Staff. *Disabilities 2* (2), 178–203.
- Loja, E., Costa, M. E., Hughes, B., & Menezes, I. (2013). Disability, embodiment and ableism: stories of resistance. *Disability & Society*, 28(2), 190–203.
- McRuer, R. (2002). Compulsory Able-Bodiedness and Queer/Disabled Existence. In S. L. Snyder, B. J. Brueggemann, & R. Garland-Thomson (Eds.), *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities* (pp. 88-99), New York: Modern Language Association.
- McRuer, R. (2006). Introduction: Compulsory Able-Bodiedness and Queer/Disabled Existence. In *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (pp. 1-32). New York, USA: New York University Press.

- Mellifont, D., Smith-Merry, J., Dickinson, H., Llewellyn, G., Clifton, S., Ragen, J., Raffaele, M., & Williamson, P. (2019). The ableism elephant in the academy: a study examining academia as informed by Australian scholars with lived experience. *Disability & Society*, 34(7–8), 1180–1199.
- Merchant, W., Read, S., D'Evelyn, S., Miles, C., & Williams, V. (2020). The insider view: tackling disabling practices in higher education institutions. *Higher Education*, 80(2), 273–287.
- Nario-Redmond, M. R. (2019). *Ableism: the causes and consequence of disability prejudice*. Wiley Blackwell.
- Olsen, J., Griffiths, M., Soorenian, A., & Porter, R. (2020). Reporting from the Margins: Disabled Academics Reflections on Higher Education. *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research : SJDR*, 22(1), 265–274.
- Parekh, G. (2017). The tyranny of “ability.” *Curriculum Inquiry*, 47(4), 337–343.
- Peruzzo, F. (2020). I am not disabled: Difference, ethics, critique and refusal of neoliberal academic selves. In Nicole Brown & Jennifer Leigh (Eds.), *Ableism in Academia* (p. 31). UCL Press.
- Rodgers, J., Thorneycroft, R., Cook, P. S., Humphrys, E., Asquith, N. L., Yaghi, S. A., & Foulstone, A. (2023). Ableism in higher education: the negation of crip temporalities within the neoliberal academy. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 42(6), 1482–1495.
- Saltes, N. (2022). “It’s all about student accessibility. No one ever talks about teacher accessibility”: Examining ableist expectations in academia. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 26(7), 674–700.
- Siebers, T. (2008). *Disability theory*. University of Michigan Press.
- Shakespeare, T., & Watson, N. (2023). Frameworks, Models, Theories, and Experiences for Understanding Disability. In R. Lewis Brown, M. Maroto, & D. Pettinicchio (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of Disability*. Oxford University Press.
- Sharma, R. H., Asselin, R., Stainton, T., & Hole, R. (2025). Ableism and Employment: A Scoping Review of the Literature. *Social Sciences (Basel)*, 14(2), Article 67.
- Terry, P. M. (1996). “Preparing Educational Leaders to Eradicate the ‘isms.’” Paper presented at the Annual International Congress on Challenges to Education: Balancing Unity and Diversity in a Changing World, Palm Beach, Aruba, July 10–12. Obtained from Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC).
- Wolbring, G. (2008). The Politics of Ableism. *Development (Society for International Development)*, 51(2), 252–258.
- Yerbury, J. J., & Yerbury, R.M. (2021). Disabled in academia: to be or not to be, that is the question. *Trends in Neurosciences*, 44(7), 507–509.
- Zaks, Z. (2024). Changing the medical model of disability to the normalization model of disability: clarifying the past to create a new future direction. *Disability & Society*, 39(12), 3233–3260.

Grit as a Predictor of Student Engagement in Learning Activities

Horățiu CATALANO¹ , Ana RUS² , Gabriela MESTIC³ ,
Simona VOIN⁴, Anca ANI-RUS^{5*} 

ABSTRACT. *Grit*, defined by perseverance and passion in achieving long-term goals, can be considered a predictor of students' academic engagement and success. The present study investigates the relationship between students' level of *Grit* and the engagement they demonstrate in their educational path. Student engagement can be characterized by active participation in learning activities, increased motivation for achieving performance, and self-study related discipline.

The study has made use of the questionnaire-based survey as a quantitative data collection method and the focus group method as a qualitative method. The level of engagement was assessed through the Academic Engagement Scale (*Academic Engagement Scale*), developed by D. Rovan and collaborators (2016), having 15 items, structured across three dimensions: behavioral, emotional and cognitive. To measure the level of *Grit*, the *Grit Scale* has been used which has been developed by A. Duckworth and consists of 10 items. The sample of participants consisted of 76 students, enrolled in the specialization Primary and Preschool Educational Pedagogy.

The results showed that a high level of *Grit* can enhance student involvement in learning activities, thus leading to better results and implicitly to increased performance.

¹ Department of Education Sciences, Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences, Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania, horatiu.catalano@ubbcluj.ro

² Department of Education Sciences, Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania, ana.rus@ubbcluj.ro

³ Department of Education Sciences, Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania, gabriela.mestic@ubbcluj.ro

⁴ Doctoral School "Education, Reflection, Development", Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania, simona.nacaianu@ubbcluj.ro

⁵ Department of Education Sciences, Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania, anca.rus@ubbcluj.ro

* Corresponding author: anca.rus@ubbcluj.ro



In order to be able to improve both the level of *Grit* and academic engagement, it is important to provide students with attractive, personalized learning experiences according to their individual needs.

Keywords: *Grit*, academic engagement, academic success, students.

1. Introduction

Within the context of contemporary education, student engagement in learning activities has become a topic often addressed in studies pertaining to academic success in higher education. Involvement in learning activities refers not only to the student's physical presence in the classroom, but also to the active participation in the teaching process, the motivation they feel for performance achievement and their ability to self-regulate.

According to the existent body of research, student engagement exceeds the purely cognitive dimension of information acquisition being additionally reflected in behaviors, attitudes, and affective reactions that determine the degree to which the student actively participates in the educational act. Thus, involvement in learning activities should not be understood as a stable trait, but rather as a dynamic behavior, influenced by the learning context, emotional experiences as well as by the pedagogical strategies used. This concept is a complex and dynamic construct, manifested through behavioral, cognitive and emotional components that directly influence the quality of students' educational experiences. Understanding these dimensions allows for a more nuanced analysis of how students relate to the learning process highlighting the essential role of the educational context in supporting active engagement. Consequently, it is important to identify the personal characteristics that can foster maintaining a high level of engagement, even in challenging situations.

In this regard, it is essential to understand the psychological factors that can influence the degree of involvement of students, one of these factors being the *Grit*, introduced by A. Duckworth (2018) in her studies, a concept that refers to the perseverance and passion of a person to achieve long-term goals. Studies argue that *Grit* may be associated with academic success, resilience to difficulties and intrinsic motivation (Hodge et al., 2018; Liu, 2021; Babiera & Quirap, 2024).

However, the relationship between *Grit* and students' involvement in learning activities has not been thoroughly explored in the Romanian academic context. Given the increasing pressure to perform in a competitive educational system, understanding how *Grit* influences learning engagement becomes essential for students. The concept of *Grit* sums up resilience, conscientiousness, self-control

and perseverance, essential constructs for academic success (Bashant, 2014). In the educational context, resilience is regarded as a process, a capacity or a result of successful adaptation, regardless of the difficult circumstances a student goes through, being considered an important component that determines success in one's learning endeavors (Hodge et al., 2018).

Taking into account these theoretical considerations and the need for a deeper understanding of the psychological mechanisms that support student engagement in learning activities, this study aims to investigate the extent to which *Grit* can predict this involvement. The results of our study can contribute both to completing the specialized body of research and field literature and to support the emergence of educational strategies aimed at the development of perseverance and student engagement in learning activities.

1.1. Students' Engagement in the Learning Activities

Involving students in learning activities is a complex, multidimensional concept that reflects how students engage in learning, both behaviorally and cognitively or emotionally. It is considered a very strong predictor of academic success (Green et al., 2012; Eryilmaz, 2015) as students achieve higher levels of information processing (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012).

Higher education students perceive engagement in academic activities as essential for their development, for integration into the academic community and for the preparation needed for the labor market, significantly influencing their perseverance and success in higher education (Sá, 2023).

Engagement in learning activities is the degree to which a student is actively involved and connected to the educational process with the aim of learning and achieving optimal results (Lopez-Aguilar et al., 2021). According to Y. A. Qurratuaini and collaborators (2022), this engagement time can also be defined as a state of mind related to academic life, characterized by: (1) *vigor* (feeling resilient and energetic); (2) *dedication* (pride and enthusiasm); (3) *absorption* (focusing on academic activity).

Other studies offer a different perspective on engagement (Sajib, 2024), highlighting three main dimensions of it: (1) behavioral, (2) emotional, and (3) cognitive. These dimensions generate results such as activity related persistence, learning satisfaction and academic success (Astin, 2014).

Another point of view related to the involvement in learning activities is offered by A. A. Asanre and collaborators (2024), who define involvement according to the quantity and quality of the behavioral, emotional, cognitive and psychological responses that students manifest in relation to the lived experiences. Thus, involvement plays a key role in supporting the cognitive, social and emotional development of students, through the three defining dimensions.

Involvement is frequently used as an indicator of the efficiency and quality of the educational system as well as of one's overall academic success. Students with a high level of involvement can show a positive attitude, oriented towards educational goals (Wilson et al., 2021), thus adopting a growth mentality, with a greater openness to progress.

On the one hand, several researchers (Zhao et al., 2021; Al-Rashidi, 2025) associate learning activities engagement with the students' well-being and their ability to adapt to the educational environment. Conversely, other researchers argue that the involvement is not limited to the physical participation of students in courses, but consists of a complex and constant interaction between the time, effort, and resources invested by them and the conditions that the institution provides for the unfolding of the activities (Popandopulo & Kudysheva, 2019; Tholibon et al., 2022).

The categorisations of engagement styles highlight that students do not engage in learning activities in a single fashion. H. Coates (2007) identifies the following engagement styles: (1) intense; (2) independent; (3) collaborative and (4) passive. Among these, independent involvement emphasizes the student's own initiative, favoring self-directed study and critical thinking (Trowler & Trowler, 2011). Collaborative engagement is based on teamwork and constant interaction with peers. This type of engagement contributes to the development of social skills and the improvement of problem-solving skills. At the opposite pole is passive engagement, in which student participation is minimal, and knowledge is received without active contribution, which limits the potential for deep learning (Matos et al., 2023).

1.1.1. Student Engagement Dimensions in Learning Activities

Approaching student engagement in learning activities, through the three component dimensions (1) behavioral, (2) cognitive and (3) emotional, allows capturing the complexity of how students participate and engage in the educational process. Although described separately, these dimensions work in close interdependence: emotional engagement can support active participation, and cognitive engagement often develops in contexts where the student feels motivated and connected with the learning activities. Specialized literature highlights the distinct role of each dimension in maintaining academic motivation and perseverance (Alrashidi et al., 2016). In this regard, their analysis is essential for this study, given the link between the level of *Grit* and how students engage in learning activities.

a) *Behavioral engagement* is the visible dimension of student involvement in academic and institutional activities, and is frequently considered a direct indicator of active participation in the educational process. The field literature emphasizes

that this form of involvement is manifested through a series of positive and responsible behaviors, which reflect the compliance with the norms and rules of the educational institution, but also with the aspect of avoiding disruptive conduct (Finn & Zimmer, 2012; King, 2020). A central element of behavioural engagement is active participation in the learning process, including maintaining attention during classes, engaging in discussions, asking questions and asking for further explanations when necessary. Such behaviors lead to an increased interest in the studied content (Napitupulu & Susti, 2023; Ningsih, 2025). Another important component is the involvement in extracurricular activities, which extend the academic experience beyond the classroom. Participation in student projects, university organizations, cultural events or sports competitions contributes to the development of social and organizational skills, being associated with a smooth academic adaptation and positive long-term results (Wu & Fernando, 2023).

b) Cognitive engagement refers to the depth with which students process information, the mental strategies they use in learning, and the level of intellectual effort invested in academic tasks. This dimension reflects the student's willingness to exceed basic requirements and engage in a deep, comprehension-oriented and self-regulating learning process (Alrashidi et al., 2016). This type of involvement involves the use of complex learning strategies: (1) processing and organizing information, (2) monitoring your own progress and (3) self-assessment in relation to the proposed objectives. Students who exhibit a high level of cognitive engagement take responsibility for their own learning process, seeking to understand the relationships between concepts, adapting their strategies according to the difficulty of the task (Trowler & Trowler, 2011; Pohl, 2020). At the same time, in this dimension, the student's disposition to make additional intellectual effort is taken into account, even when learning activities are complex or demanding. Cognitively engaged students are characterized by perseverance, intrinsic motivation, and a desire to improve their performance through exploration and critical reflection. Cognitive engagement is particularly important for authentic learning as it fosters the formation of stable mental structures, the development of critical thinking and the integration of concepts, directly contributing to higher academic performance (Finn & Zimmer, 2012; Doolittle & Byrnes, 2023; Ismayilova, 2025).

c) Emotional involvement refers to all the emotional reactions that a student experiences in relation to different aspects of the educational environment (academic activities, networking with colleagues and teachers, the environment, etc.). This dimension reflects how emotions influence participation in learning activities and can encompass both positive experiences (enthusiasm, interest, satisfaction, well-being, etc.) and negative emotions (anxiety, frustration, boredom, sadness, disappointment, etc.). The presence or absence of these affective experiences

are relevant indicators of emotional engagement, influencing how the student connects with assigned learning tasks (Cook et al., 2020; Bhaw et al., 2024; Sobreira et al., 2025). In this study, the emotional dimension of academic engagement is analyzed through performance anxiety, a negative affective indicator with significant potential to limit student participation in educational activities. Elevated levels of anxiety can reduce motivation, impede concentration, and decrease engagement at both behavioral and cognitive level, emphasizing the important role emotions play in the learning process.

1.1.2. Repercussions of Low Student Involvement in Learning Activities

In addition to the positive effects of heightened academic engagement, it is necessary to point out the long-term consequences if this involvement is low, thus resulting in absenteeism, boredom and an inability to retain the covered body of information. Other authors complement this vision by suggesting that non-involvement can arise from inertia, apathy or disillusionment, and some students fail to connect with the university environment due to incompatibility between personal values and expectations, in relation to those promoted by the institution (Aloka et al., 2023).

The learning environment plays a key role in shaping students' engagement styles, and educational contexts that support learning are associated with higher levels of participation and engagement (Guzman & Doronio, 2025). This diversity of engagement modes emphasizes the importance of tailored educational strategies, capable of stimulating the active participation of all students.

Moreover, student engagement is strongly influenced by the way teaching activities are designed. Studies show that strategies such as active learning, collaboration, use of constructive feedback, frequent interaction with teachers or the use of online learning environments can significantly increase the level of engagement (Alrashidi et al., 2016; Matos et al., 2023)

Starting from the studies under analysis, we contend that academic engagement is the result of a shared responsibility between the student, teachers and the institution, all stakeholders having active roles in generating qualitative learning experiences, requiring active collaboration and involvement from all parties involved in the higher education learning/teaching process.

1.2. *Grit – Students' Passion and Perseverance Related to Learning Activities*

The power of passion and perseverance contributes to the creation of a significant academic experience, supporting engagement, growth and continuous progress. Students who manifest a high level of *Grit* manage to maintain their motivation even in tense situations; they also manage to look for additional

resources for learning and overcome the obstacles inherently present in their university training. They are able to adapt their strategies and find effective ways of organizing and managing tasks, which, in turn, favors the development of a proactive attitude towards their academic activity (Wati, 2017).

Grit is defined as a stable tendency to maintain interest and effort in achieving long-term, established personal goals. Achieving these goals requires perseverance and passion (A. Duckworth, 2018). The author, through her theory, connects *Grit* with people's potential to effectively achieve their goals. According to some studies, *Grit* is considered a predictor of educational and professional success, due to the fact that passion and perseverance, manifested in the long term, significantly influence the development of professional skills (Arabacioglu, 2024).

Among students, this feature is associated with the degree of involvement in learning activities in order to achieve a higher level of academic performance (Park et al., 2018). Field researchers have frequently analyzed the relationship between *Grit* and various psychological factors relevant to one's academic path, highlighting the fact that perseverance and passion to achieve long-term goals, contribute to maintaining students' emotional balance in demanding educational contexts (Fabelico & Afalla, 2020; Muniz, 2024).

Studies elaborated by M. Wati (2017) and J. Biglete (2025) frequently describe high-level *Grit* students as engaged, consistent, and motivated in learning activities, even when they encounter difficulty in achieving goals. However, this perspective can sometimes be excessively optimistic or insufficiently supported from an empirical standpoint. Specialized literature draws attention to important limitations of the concept. In its traditional definitions, *Grit* combines perseverance and passion for stable goals, being associated with the ability to maintain focus and overcome academic challenges (Hernandez et al., 2020).

Some research studies show that *Grit* overlaps considerably with other traits, such as conscientiousness or self-control, raising questions about its distinctive value as a predictor. In addition, *Grit* puts a strong emphasis on individual responsibility, a standpoint that may ignore the important influence of the educational context, social support or institutional resources. Moreover, the idea that *Gritty* students always manage to push their boundaries can create an idealized view of perseverance. Some authors believe that while *Grit* may contribute to the development of resilience and adaptation after failure, it does not guarantee performance, and in some situations, persistent effort may become counterproductive, preventing strategy change or the dismissal of unrealistic goals (Gjedia, 2015; Jachimowicz et al., 2018; Datu, 2021).

Without an appropriate level of motivation and perseverance, student involvement in academic activities could become superficial, lacking in commitment and continuity. *Grit* allows students to realize that the learning process is

complex and individualized, and each student has both strengths and areas that require improvement (Tiwari & Verma, 2023).

Students with a high *Grit* level tend to manage negative emotional reactions more effectively and stay anchored in tasks, capitalizing on self-regulation strategies that help them overcome difficulties (Lagos & Magallanes, 2020; Putri & Ingarianti, 2024). They understand that performance anxiety is part of the academic experience, conversely being able to turn it into a stimulus for perseverance, maintaining interest, effort, and long-term engagement.

Research shows that perseverance and passion for personal goals contribute both to sustaining effort and behavioral discipline, and to the use of effective cognitive strategies in the learning process (Park et al., 2018).

As mentioned earlier, *Grit* is a central psychological factor in understanding how students structure and support their involvement in long-term learning activities (Duckworth et al., 2007; Hernandez et al., 2020). Research shows that perseverance and passion for personal goals contribute both to maintaining effort and behavioral discipline, and to the use of effective cognitive strategies in the learning process (Park et al., 2018; Gjedia, 2015).

The analysis of the relationship between *Grit* and the three dimensions of academic engagement addressed in this study (behavioral, cognitive and emotional) allows for a complex understanding of how students engage in learning activities.

2. Research Methodology

2.1. Research Aim

The purpose of the present study is to examine the extent to which students' *Grit* level predicts their academic engagement, operationalized through behavioral, cognitive, and emotional dimensions (performance anxiety). The study aims to highlight the role of *Grit* as a predictor of active student engagement in learning activities.

2.2. Research Objectives

01: Assessment of the *Grit* level among students.

02: Measurement of the level of academic involvement, operationalized by the behavioral, cognitive and emotional dimensions.

03: The analysis of the relationship between the level of *Grit* and each of the three dimensions of academic engagement: behavioral, cognitive, and emotional.

O4: Investigating how *Grit* predicts academic engagement of students on three dimensions: behavioral, cognitive, and emotional.

2.3. Research Questions

Q1: What is the relationship between students' *Grit* level and their academic engagement, on the behavioral, cognitive and emotional dimensions?

Q2: To what extent does students' *Grit* level predict academic engagement on the behavioral, cognitive, and emotional dimensions (performance anxiety)?

2.4. Research Hypotheses

H1: Students' *Grit* level correlates positively with the academic involvement, on the behavioral, cognitive and emotional dimensions.

H2: The *Grit* level significantly predicts students' academic engagement across the behavioral, cognitive and emotional dimensions (performance anxiety).

2.5. Research Variables

VI (predictor): *Grit*

VD1: Behavioural engagement

VD2: Cognitive engagement

VD3: Emotional engagement (performance anxiety)

2.6. Participants and Procedure

At the early stage of the study, the students who were part of our sample received information about the research development and its duration, consent agreements have been signed, respecting the conditions for the collection of personal data detailed in the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). According to EU regulations, as per law 679/2016, this agreement ensures a high level of protection of individuals and diminishes problems related to the flow of personal data, ensuring that the level of protection of the rights and freedoms of individuals with regard to the processing of such data is equivalent in all member states.

Our sample was a convenience based one, being made up of 76 students, female and male, enrolled in The "Babeş-Bolyai" University of Cluj-Napoca, at the Extensions of the University of Nasaud and Targu Mures, following the specialization Primary and Preschool Educational Pedagogy, from the I, II and III years of study, frequency and distance education forms of study. Convenience sampling was chosen, because through this method, researchers have the opportunity to form the sample of participants relatively easily and in a fairly short time (Curelaru, 2022).

2.7. *Materials and Methods*

Our study was both a quantitative and qualitative one, using as research methods questionnaire-based survey and the focus group method. The questionnaire-based survey is one of the most widely used methods in quantitative research, constituting an effective way of obtaining information by means of coherent recorded questions, presented in a logical sequence, requiring the respondent's provision of a written answer. Combining the focus group with the questionnaire-based survey is an advantage in identifying the respondents' opinion, providing a better analysis of the answers and comprising suggestions for interpreting the collected data (Chelcea, 2022). The focus-group method is a flexible one highlighting differences of opinion between participants, providing new perspectives on the subject (Nyumba et al., 2018).

In order to streamline the focus group organisation, the sample of participants was divided into groups of up to 20 people for the method to be effective. The duration of the discussions during each meeting was about one hour in the instances when the question and answer session was added at the end of the session. In the first part of the focus group, participants were given information on the meaning of the concept of *Grit*, then discussing the relationship between the students' level of *Grit* and their academic engagement. This method was used in order to enable participants to become familiar with the key concepts related to *Grit* and its impact in the activities carried out by students. The discussions started from the initial question *What does academic involvement mean for you according to the three dimensions: behavioral, cognitive and emotional?*

The discussions then continued drawing on the provided questions: *What is the relationship between students' level of Grit and their academic engagement?* and *To what extent does the Grit level of students predict academic engagement on the behavioral, cognitive, and emotional dimensions?*

The study participants were asked to answer each question individually before sharing their answers within the group in order to identify common perspectives. The participants' answers were analyzed through *the large table method* (Chelcea, 2022), which allowed us to analyze the information taking into account certain categories drawn from the three questions.

Additionally, in order to assess students' educational engagement, we have used the Academic Engagement Scale (AES), Rován et al., 2016, consisting of 15 items that reflect how students engage in learning activities and how they experience them cognitively, behaviorally, and emotionally. Answers are offered on a Likert scale with 5 points, where 1 *fully disagree*, and 5 means *fully agree*.

The instrument assesses the three dimensions of educational engagement:

1. *Behavioural engagement*: reflecting the active engagement and attention level manifested during class interaction. Included items: 1, 5, 7, 8, 11, 14, 15 (Examples of items: *I am very focused in class; I pay attention in class.*).
2. *Cognitive engagement*: it refers to the depth of information processing, use of learning strategies, and knowledge integration. Included items: 4, 6, 9, 13 (Examples of items: *When I study, I ask myself questions to ensure that I understand what I focus on. I correlate ideas that I learn during class time with my daily life.*).
3. *Emotional engagement/performance anxiety*: gauges the negative affective reactions associated with the learning process, such as restlessness, tension or stress. Included items: 2, 3, 10, 12 (Examples of items: *I always feel anxious in class; I am restless when I study.*)

Higher scores on behavioral and cognitive engagement reflect an increased level of educational engagement. Higher scores on emotional engagement/performance anxiety indicate a higher level of learning-related stress and are negatively interpreted in the context of effective engagement. For measuring the level of *Grit*, *The Grit Scale* was used. It was developed by A. Duckworth (2018), consisting of 10 items (examples of items: *Obstacles do not discourage me. I don't give up easily; I finish whatever task I start.*).

3. Results

The qualitative analysis of the data obtained within the focus groups was carried out by means of the large-scale mass method (Chelcea, 2022), aiming at completing the quantitative data, in order to obtain an overview of the issues addressed. This method has allowed us to organize responses under thematic categories and to identify differences or similarities expressed by participants. Thus, we obtained the following thematic categories: (1) Dimensions and characteristics of engagement in learning activities; (2) Relationship between *Grit* and involvement; (3) The importance of *Grit* in the development of each dimension of engagement.

The categorization of the received answers was made by two evaluators according to the scheme presented, calculating the Alpha Krippendorff coefficient of fidelity. This coefficient is suitable for analyzing qualitative data encoded by several evaluators for different measurement levels, missing data or sample sizes (Krippendorff, 2019). Following the analysis, we obtained an Alpha Krippendorff

fidelity coefficient of 0.860, indicating a satisfactory level of agreement between the evaluators, as suggested by K. Krippendorff (2019). A value of ≥ 0.80 is generally considered satisfactory, which is acceptable for drawing triangulated conclusions based on the evaluated data.

Regarding the first thematic category, *Dimensions and characteristics of involvement in learning activities*, there was a tendency in participants' responses to perceive behavioral engagement as a basic condition in learning activities. An example of the participants' response is: "For me, behavioral engagement means to be present at the courses, to do your homework even though you may not really like the subject.". Regarding the cognitive dimension of engagement, most of the participants' responses were oriented towards the ability to understand concepts, an example of the received answers being "Cognitive engagement means trying to understand concepts, not just to memorize them, although I often resort to memorization". Emotional involvement is generally considered an action deployed in order to avoid unpleasant feelings. One of the answers provided by the participants is "Emotional involvement means not to be totally bored during the course, to feel that what you do makes sense, even if the enthusiasm is sometimes small.").

Following the analysis of this thematic category it has become apparent that the involvement in learning activities is recognized by students as a multidimensional, even hierarchical construct based on behavioral engagement. Cognitive engagement has the most obvious dissonance, in the sense that students recognize the value of authentic learning, deep understanding, but frequently admit that they resort to superficial strategies, such as memorizing amounts of information.

From the analysis of the responses, it was observed that students perceive the relationship between Grit and engagement positively, in the sense that Grit makes the difference between engagement based on impulse (in the moment) and engagement based on discipline and long-term goals.

In the second thematic category connected to the relationship between *Grit* and engagement, the majority of the answers have emphasized the fact that *Grit* is the foundation of engagement, in all its dimensions ("Without passion and consistency, you get involved only when it is easy or interesting."; "Even if I receive a small grade, I continue to make an effort to achieve a more important goal").

From the analysis of the responses, we have observed that students' perception of the relationship between *Grit* and engagement is a positive one, in the sense that *Grit* makes the difference between impulse-based (momentary) engagement and discipline-based and long-term goals engagement.

The third thematic category included views on the importance of *Grit* in each dimension of engagement. Thus, most of the participants considered behavioral engagement as the dimension that is most influenced by *Grit* (“I think *Grit* predicts behavioral engagement the most, because perseverance forces you to be present and work, regardless of the mood you are in.”). Some responses have stated that *Grit* may be a predictor of cognitive engagement, but only in the case of in-depth learning (“A *Gritty* student does not give up on a complex topic, focusing on it until he understands it.”). Other responses stated that *Grit* cannot predict engagement (“I may be persistent for hours on end, but if I don't have the right cognitive strategies or if the subject is too abstract, *Grit* doesn't really help me understand. I can read countless times, but I still resort to memorization in this case.”).

Regarding the emotional dimension of engagement, the participants stated that *Grit* can be a predictor of it (“*Grit* helps me to be optimistic and think about the end result, even if sometimes I feel overwhelmed by the situation.”).

The analysis of our respondents' opinions on the importance of *Grit* in each dimension of engagement highlighted a hierarchy of influence. Most participants positioned behavioural involvement as the most strongly predicted dimension of *Grit*, due to its role in supporting effort persistence and physical presence, even in the absence of intrinsic motivation.

Therefore, according to qualitative results, based on focus group analysis, *Grit* is a predictor of behavioral engagement (of sustained action) and emotional engagement (of emotional stability), but it is ineffective as a predictor of cognitive engagement (of the quality of information processing).

For the analysis of the data and the interpretation of the results quantitatively, we used the SPSS version 29 program. Before testing the research hypotheses, a descriptive analysis of the data was carried out, in order to highlight the main characteristics of the sample and the distribution of the investigated variables. This stage allowed understanding the general levels of academic engagement and *Grit* among students, forming the basis for further interpretation of the relationships between variables. At the same time, in order to assess the internal consistency of the instruments used, the Cronbach alpha coefficient was calculated for each scale. The results showed good fidelity in relation to both instruments, with values of 0.87 for *The Academic Engagement Scale* (AES) and 0.81 for *The Grit Scale*. These values confirmed that the measurements are reliable and appropriate for subsequent statistical analyses.

The descriptive statistics for each construct were calculated: behavioural engagement, cognitive engagement, performance anxiety, overall academic engagement score (AES) and *Grit*. Testing of the normality of the data distribution

was carried out through the method of the Skewness and Kurtosis coefficients, the values indicating a normal distribution, within acceptable limits (± 2) (Cohen et al., 2002).

Table 1

Descriptive statistics

	N	Minimu	Maximu	Std.					
		m	m	Mean	Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis		
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
Engagement_b chav.	76	2.29	5.00	4.1034	.60815	-.472	.276	-.193	.545
Anxiety	76	1.75	5.00	4.0033	.85097	-.899	.276	.034	.545
Engagement cog	76	3.00	5.00	4.2895	.53705	-.335	.276	-.760	.545
AES	76	2.73	4.33	3.5886	.33385	-.326	.276	-.415	.545
GRIT	76	2.60	5.00	3.7558	.67392	.128	.276	-1.038	.545
Valid (listwise)	N	76							

The descriptive statistics analysis of the variables included in the study provides an overview of the levels of academic engagement and *Grit*, as well as the distribution of responses, which are essential for the preliminary evaluation of the data (Field, 2024; Pallant, 2020). Behavioral engagement is high among students ($M = 4.10$, $SD = 0.61$), with scores ranging from 2.29 to 5.00. The distribution is slightly asymmetric to the left (skewness = -0.47), which indicates a general trend towards higher values of behavioural engagement, according to the criteria of asymmetry interpretation (Cohen et al., 2002). Cognitive engagement also records high values ($M = 4.29$, $SD = 0.54$), and distribution remains close to normal with reduced asymmetry (skewness = -0.33), suggesting acceptable distribution for further analysis (Cohen et al., 2002).

The global academic engagement score (AES) shows a moderate to high average ($M = 3.59$, $SD = 0.33$) with a low dispersion, suggesting a high homogeneity of responses (Gijbels & Omelka, 2013). With reference to *Grit*, students exhibit

a medium to high level of perseverance and passion for long-term goals ($M = 3.75$, respectively $SD = 0.67$), the distribution being almost symmetric (skewness = 0.13), indicating a balanced variability at the sample level (Field, 2024).

In what concerns the emotional engagement variable (performance anxiety), we state that items have been coded in reverse, so higher scores indicate a lower level of anxiety. The average obtained ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 0.85$), along with negative asymmetry (skewness = -0.89), suggests that most students report a reduced level of anxiety, while lower levels of the scale correspond to an increased level of anxiety (Pallant, 2020). This peculiarity of the scale highlights the fact that the sample is predominantly characterized by a relatively stable and adaptive emotional level in evaluation situations.

To test the first hypothesis, namely that students' level of Grit is positively correlated with academic engagement across the behavioral, cognitive, and emotional dimensions, Pearson correlations were conducted, and the results are presented below:

Descriptive statistic results show that students demonstrate high levels of engagement, both behavioral and cognitive, moderate levels of global engagement, high levels of *Grit*, and low levels of performance anxiety.

High *Grit* scores reinforce the idea that perseverance and long-term motivation can contribute to a more active involvement in the educational process. These data support the continuation of correlational and regression analyses to test relationships between variables.

For testing the first hypothesis, ***the students' Grit level correlates positively with academic engagement, on the behavioral, cognitive and emotional dimensions.*** Pearson correlations were made, and the results can be observed below:

Table 2

Correlations between academic engagement and the Grit level

		Engagement_ behav.	Anxiety	Engagement_ cog	AES	GRIT
<i>Engagement_cog.</i>	Pearson	1				
	Correlation					
	Sig. (2-tailed)					
<i>Anxiety</i>	N	76				
	Pearson	.527**	1			
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000				
<i>Engagement_cog.</i>	N	76	76			
	Pearson	.598**	.284*	1		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.013			
<i>AES</i>	N	76	76	76		
	Pearson	.771**	-.056	.708**	1	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.630	.000		
<i>GRIT</i>	N	76	76	76	76	
	Pearson	.565**	.485**	.366**	.328**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.001	.004	
	N	76	76	76	76	76

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The undergone analysis of Pearson correlations focused on the relationships between the level of *Grit* and the three dimensions of academic engagement: behavioural, cognitive, and emotional (performance anxiety). The obtained results indicate the existence of statistically significant relationships between variables, suggesting that *Grit* is a psychologically relevant factor for understanding how students engage in academic activities.

Moderate and significant positive correlation was identified between ***Grit and behavioural engagement*** ($r = .565, p < .001$). This association indicates that students with higher levels of perseverance and passion for long-term goals tend to actively engage in learning activities, constantly attend classes, engage in discussions, and meet academic requirements. The relationship suggests that the behavioral dimension of engagement is sensitive to specific traits of *Grit*.

A significant, lower intensity positive correlation was identified between ***Grit and cognitive engagement*** ($r = .366, p = .001$). This result indicates that although the relationship is not as strong as that between *Grit* and behavioral engagement, students with higher levels of *Grit* tend, however, to contribute greater intellectual effort and use more effective learning strategies, manifesting an increased ability to self-regulate. Therefore, even with moderate intensity, the relationship remains relevant and supports the idea that *Grit* contributes to students' cognitive engagement.

The relationship between ***Grit and emotional engagement*** (performance anxiety) is positive and significant ($r = .485, p < .001$). Given that the scale items have been coded in reverse, higher scores indicate a lower level of anxiety. Thus, the correlation reflects the fact that high-*Grit* students exhibit less anxiety in learning situations, an aspect that consequently contributes to more stable and adaptive emotional engagement. This association is consistent with studies advocating that perseverance and motivational stability can cushion the effects of negative emotions in evaluation contexts (Datu et al., 2018; Jerrim, 2022; Yang, 2023).

Grit is also positively correlated with the total score of academic engagement ($r = .328, p = .004$), which shows that more persevering students tend to show a higher level of engagement in learning activities.

Pearson's correlations results show that the level of *Grit* correlates positively and significantly with all dimensions of academic engagement analyzed (behavioral, cognitive, and emotional) indicating that more persevering and goal-oriented students tend to show a higher level of academic engagement.

Thus, the hypothesis that ***students' Grit level correlates positively with academic engagement on the behavioral, cognitive and emotional dimensions is validated***.

For testing hypothesis 2, ***the Level of Grit significantly predicts students' academic engagement on the behavioral, cognitive and emotional dimensions (performance anxiety)***, three simple linear regression analyses were performed, having *Grit* as an independent variable and the behavioral, cognitive and emotional engagement (performance anxiety) as dependent variables.

Table 3

The results of the simple linear regressions having Grit as a predictor of academic engagement dimensions

Dependent variable	B	R	R²	t(74)	F(1,74)	p
Behavioural engagement	0.51	.565	.319	5.89	34.69	< .001
Cognitive engagement	0.14	.18	.032	1.57	2.46	.12
Emotional engagement (performance anxiety)	0.61	.485	.235	4.76	22.66	< .001

Simple linear regression analysis showed that *Grit* exerts a significant influence on students' level of **behavioral engagement**, with the model being globally significant, $F(1, 74) = 34.69, p < .001$. The non-standardised coefficient $B = 0.51$ indicates that for each increase with a point on the *Grit* scale, the behavioural engagement score increases by an average of 0.51 points (Holman, 2022). This relationship is statistically sustained, as shown by the value $t(74) = 5.89, p < .001$, which confirms that the effect is significant. The model explains a considerable percentage of the variance in academic behavior, $R^2 = .319$, which means that 31.9% of the observed differences between students in terms of their behavioral engagement can be attributed to their level of *Grit*. These results suggest that more persevering and consistent students in pursuing goals tend to be more actively involved in learning tasks, to be more attentive during classes, and exhibit performance-oriented behaviours. This result is consistent with research highlighting the link between *Grit* and sustained effort (Duckworth et al., 2007; Hou et al., 2022; Guo et al., 2023)

Regarding **cognitive engagement**, the results indicate that *Grit* is not a significant predictor of it, with the model not being significant $F(1, 74) = 2.46, p = .12$. Although the regression coefficient has a positive value ($B = 0.14$), which would suggest a slight increase in cognitive engagement with *Grit* growth, this relationship is not statistically sustained, $t(74) = 1.57, p = .12$ (Opariuc-Dan, 2009). The model explains a very small percentage of the variation in responses, $R^2 = .032$, equivalent to only 3.2% of the variability, which indicates a very small effect (Sava, 2011). This lack of significance may reflect the fact that cognitive engagement is more determined by internal factors such as metacognitive

strategies, self-regulation, or learning styles rather than by traits such as *Grit* (Waheed, 2025). Thus, even if persistent students are motivated to put effort into their learning, this does not automatically generate a high level of cognitive engagement.

Regression analysis results indicated that *Grit* is a significant predictor of **emotional engagement** (performance anxiety), with the model being significant $F(1, 74) = 22.66, p < .001$. Thus, the *Grit* significantly predicts its variation, $B = 0.61$, with a robust statistical effect, $t(74) = 4.76, p < .001$. The model explains 23.5% of the variability, $R^2 = .235$, a significant percentage, which reflects an effect of medium to large size (Holman, 2022). Given that the scale items have been coded in reverse, a positive coefficient suggests that students with high levels of *Grit* tend to experience lower performance anxiety. This relationship indicates that passion and perseverance are personal resources that can help maintain emotional balance in stressful academic situations.

The result is consistent with studies that emphasize the role of *Grit* in regulating negative emotions and maintaining motivation. According to these studies, people with high levels of *Grit* have a greater ability to tolerate the emotional discomfort associated with assessment situations, persist in difficult tasks, and maintain motivation even when faced with obstacles or failures. These individuals tend to exhibit increased emotional resilience, which allows them to more effectively manage anxiety, stress or performance pressure (Eskreis-Winkler et al., 2014; Brooks & Seipel, 2018).

Simple linear regressions have shown that *Grit* is a significant predictor for two of the dimensions of academic engagement: behavioral engagement and emotional engagement, explaining a considerable proportion of their variability. Students with high levels of *Grit* tend to be more active in academic tasks and exhibit increased emotional stability in assessment situations. Conversely, *Grit* does not significantly predict cognitive engagement, suggesting that this form of engagement is influenced by other factors or is partially overlapped with behavioral engagement.

Therefore, the second hypothesis of the study, *The Level of Grit significantly predicts students' academic engagement, on the behavioral, cognitive and emotional dimensions (performance anxiety)*, is partially confirmed.

4. Limitations, Discussions and Conclusions

The objective of this study was to investigate the relationship between students' level of *Grit* and their academic engagement, both globally and on three dimensions: behavioral, cognitive and emotional. The results obtained provide a complex picture of how perseverance and a passion for long-term

goals can influence student engagement related to learning, thus contributing to understanding the psychological mechanisms that support academic success.

The analysis of qualitative data from the focus groups organized with the students participating in the study showed that engagement is a multidimensional construct, and *Grit* is the foundation of engagement, in all its dimensions. These views are supported by the results of the Pearson correlations, which have shown that *Grit* is positively and significantly associated with all dimensions of academic engagement (behavioral, cognitive, and emotional). Students with higher levels of *Grit* tend to be more active in learning activities and exhibit lower levels of performance anxiety, which suggests better emotional adaptation in the academic context. These findings are consistent with the literature, which describes *Grit* as a stable factor contributing to maintaining effort and overcoming obstacles (Duckworth et al., 2007; Hou et al., 2022; Guo et al., 2023).

However, simple linear regression analyses have shown that *Grit* significantly predicts only two of the dimensions of academic engagement: behavioral engagement and emotional engagement. Thus, students with a high level of *Grit* exhibit a heightened involvement at the behavioral level, in learning activities, and a reduced level of performance anxiety. The results show that *Grit* functions as an important personal resource for sustaining constant effort and managing negative emotions associated with educational activity. These findings are also supported by a thematic analysis of responses within focus groups, in which participants described *Grit* as closely related to perseverance, self-discipline and emotional stability. Participants noted that *Gritty* people tend to make constant effort, stay engaged in tasks even under difficult conditions, and manage the pressure of assessments more effectively. In their opinion, *Grit* manifests itself through action-oriented behaviours (active participation, study related continuity and taking responsibility), but also through the ability to maintain a balanced emotional state.

On the other hand, the study participants pointed out that the influence of *Grit* on cognitive engagement is much lower, with other categories of factors being significant (information organization, application of cognitive and metacognitive strategies, motivation, etc.) This qualitative perspective aligns with quantitative results, which have shown that *Grit* does not significantly predict cognitive engagement.

This interpretation is consistent with studies conducted by A. Duckworth and his collaborators (2007), which showed that individuals with high levels of *Grit* are able to remain focused on their goals even in conditions of difficulty or stress, showing a superior ability for emotional self-regulation. In addition, research by L. Eskreis-Winkler and his collaborators (2014), as well as H. D. Mason (2018) confirms that *Grit* contributes to reducing vulnerability with reference

to negative emotions by developing tolerance for frustration and persistence in the face of academic challenges.

In contrast, *Grit* was not found to be a significant predictor of cognitive engagement, although the correlation between the two variables was positive. One possible reason as to why *Grit* has not been shown to be a significant predictor of cognitive engagement may be related to the nature of the construct itself. *Grit* includes a passion for long-term goals and perseverance in effort, dimensions that can overlap with aspects of behavioral engagement, such as self-regulation and effort regulation. Thus, the variability explained by *Grit* can be absorbed largely by the behavioral component, allowing a diminished effect on cognitive engagement in the regression model (Popușoi, 2022).

Moreover, the literature suggests that while *Grit* positively correlates with cognitive engagement, other psychological factors such as self-control, conscientiousness, or metacognitive strategies may have stronger predictive power for academic results and cognitive engagement (Hodge et al., 2018). These results indicate that cognitive engagement, as opposed to behavioural and emotional engagement, may be more influenced by specific cognitive processes than by the passion and perseverance measured by *Grit*. Cognitive engagement may depend largely on factors such as cognitive self-regulation, metacognitive strategies, or intrinsic motivation not included in the model under analysis. Thus, *Grit* tends to support the behavioral and emotional dimensions of engagement in particular, while cognitive engagement may require additional educational support.

The results have partially confirmed the hypothesis related to the fact that the level of *Grit* predicts students' academic involvement on all three dimensions (behavioural, cognitive, emotional). With regard to research limitations, the small sample size ($N = 76$) reduces the generalization of results. The sample comes from a single university programme (Pedagogy of Primary and Pre-primary Education), which may affect generalisation for other specialisations as well. At the same time, the correlational design does not allow the formulation of causal conclusions, the identified relations indicating only associations. On the other hand, the absence of other relevant psychological variables (self-control, self-efficacy, intrinsic motivation or metacognitive strategies) may limit the explanatory power of the regression model used, especially in the case of cognitive engagement.

The present study demonstrates that *Grit* is a relevant indicator for understanding behavioral and emotional engagement, but it also suggests the limits of its influence when it comes to cognitive engagement. These findings are important both theoretically and practically, indicating that the development of *Grit* can help improve students' active behavioral engagement and emotional stability, whereas educational interventions aimed at increasing cognitive

engagement should target skills such as self-regulation, planning, learning monitoring and the use of effective cognitive and metacognitive strategies (Efklides & Metallidou, 2020; Wang et al., 2025). The study provides a relevant contribution to the academic engagement field highlighting the need for integrated educational interventions that take into account the differentiated role of *Grit* in the learning process. At the same time, the results open directions for future research, such as the analysis of the role of learning environments, intrinsic motivation or metacognitive strategies as part of the relationship between *Grit* and cognitive engagement.

REFERENCES

- Aloka, P., Opondo, C. M., & Ooko, M. (2023). Expectations, culture, and adaptation to higher education institutions by first-year students. In *Handbook of research on coping mechanisms for first-year students transitioning to higher education* (pp. 1-20). IGI Global. <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-6684-6961-3.ch001>
- Al-Rashidi, A. H. (2025). Academic engagement and its relation to academic competence among secondary school students, from the perspectives of school counselors. *International Journal of Innovative Research and Scientific Studies*, 8(1), 1024-1035. <https://ideas.repec.org/a/aac/ijirss/v8y2025i1p1024-1035id4504.html>
- Alrashidi, O., Phan, H. P., & Ngu, B. H. (2016). Academic engagement: an overview of its definitions, dimensions, and major conceptualisations. *International Education Studies*, 9(12), 41-52. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/ies.v9n12p41>
- Arabacioglu, T. (2024). Scratch, computational thinking, and *Grit*: At the beginning, during, and after the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Instructional Technology and Lifelong Learning*, 5(1), 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.52911/itall.1391292>.
- Asanre, A. A., Ifamuyiwa, A. S., & Abiodun, T. O. (2024). Dimensions of Students' Academic Engagement as Predictors of Senior Secondary School Mathematics Achievement. *Journal of Science and Mathematics Letters*, 12, 27-33. <https://dx.doi.org/10.37134/jsml.vol12.1.4.2024>
- Astin, A. W. (2014). Student involvement: A developmental theory for higher education. In *College student development and academic life* (pp. 251-262). Routledge. http://chawkinson.pbworks.com/w/file/fetch/122997693/Student_Involvement_A_Development_Theory_for_Highe.pdf
- Babiera, R. E., & Quirap, E. A. (2024). Learners' *Grit*, Self-Regulation, and Classroom Engagement. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Analysis*, 07(04). <https://doi.org/10.47191/ijmra/v7-i04-45>
- Bashant, J. (2014). Developing *Grit* in our students: Why *Grit* is such a desirable trait, and practical strategies for teachers and schools. *Journal for Leadership and Instruction*, 13(2), 14-17. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1081394>

- Bhaw, N., Kriek, J., & le Roux, P. (2024). Emotional and User-experience Factors Influencing Student Performance: A Case Study of First-year Online Computer Programming Assignments. *UnisaRxiv*.
<https://doi.org/10.25159/unisarxiv/000096.v1>
- Biglete, J. (2025). Evaluating teachers' *Grit* in learning recovery and performance in the Philippine Professional Standards for Teachers (PPST) in San Pablo City public secondary schools: Inputs for an instructional supervisory plan. *Pantao, International Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences*, 4(3).
<https://doi.org/10.69651/pijhss0403463>
- Brooks, N. G., & Seipel, S. J. (2018). *Grit* and the information systems student: a discipline-specific examination of perseverance and passion for long term goals. *Information Systems Education Journal*, 16(1), 21-32.
<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1173722.pdf>
- Coates, H. (2007). A model of online and general campus-based student engagement. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 32(2), 121-141.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02602930600801878>
- Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2002). *Research methods in education*. Routledge.
- Cook, C. R., Thayer, A. J., Fiat, A., & Sullivan, M. (2020). Interventions to enhance affective engagement. In *Student engagement: Effective academic, behavioral, cognitive, and affective interventions at school* (pp. 203-237). Cham: Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-37285-9_12.
- Chelcea, S. (2022). *Metodologia cercetării sociologice. Metode cantitative și calitative*. București: Editura Prouniversitaria.
- Curelaru, M. (2022). Eșantionarea. În L.R Diaconu-Gherasim, C. Măieran & M. Curelaru (coord.), *Metode cantitative de cercetare. Designuri și aplicații în științele sociale* (pp. 295-318). Iași: Editura Polirom.
- Datu, J. A. D., Yuen, M., & Chen, G. (2018). The triarchic model of *Grit* is linked to academic success and well-being among Filipino high school students. *School Psychology Quarterly*, 33(3), 428. <https://doi.org/10.1037/SPQ0000234>
- Datu, J. A. D. (2021). Beyond passion and perseverance: Review and future research initiatives on the science of *Grit*. *Frontiers in psychology*, 11, 545526. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.545526>
- Doolittle, P., & Byrnes, M. (2023). Cognition and Learning. *Educational Principles and Practice in Veterinary Medicine*, 79-132.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119852865.ch3>
- Duckworth, A. (2018). *Grit. Puterea pasiunii și a perseverenței*. București: Editura Publica.
- Duckworth, A. L., Peterson, C., Matthews, M. D., & Kelly, D. R. (2007). *Grit*: perseverance and passion for long-term goals. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 92(6), 1087.
- Efklides, A., & Metallidou, P. (2020). Applying metacognition and self-regulated learning in the classroom. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education*.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/ACREFORE/9780190264093.013.961>

- Eryilmaz, A. (2015). Positive psychology in the class: the effectiveness of a teaching method based on subjective well-being and engagement increasing activities. *International Journal of Instruction*, 8(2), 17-32.
- Eskreis-Winkler, L., Shulman, E. P., Beal, S. A., & Duckworth, A. L. (2014). The *Grit* effect: Predicting retention in the military, the workplace, school and marriage. *Frontiers in psychology*, 5, 36. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2014.00036>
- Fabelico, F., & Afalla, B. (2020). Perseverance and passion in the teaching profession: Teachers' *Grit*, self-efficacy, burnout, and performance. *Journal of Critical Reviews*. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3655146
- Field, A. (2024). *Discovering statistics using IBM SPSS statistics*. Sage publications limited. <https://vlb-content.vorarlberg.at/fhbscan1/330900091084.pdf>
- Finn, J. D., & Zimmer, K. S. (2012). Student engagement: What is it? Why does it matter?. In *Handbook of research on student engagement* (pp. 97-131). Boston, MA: Springer US. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4614-2018-7_5
- Gijbels, I., & Omelka, M. (2013). Testing for homogeneity of multivariate dispersions using dissimilarity measures. *Biometrics*, 69(1), 137-145. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1541-0420.2012.01797.x>
- Gjedia, R. (2015). Teaching and Learning Motivation, *European Journal of Social Sciences*. 3. 10.26417/ejser.v3i2.p113-122
- Green, J., Liem, G. A. D., Martin, A. J., Colmar, S., Marsh, H. W., & McInerney, D. (2012). Academic motivation, self-concept, engagement, and performance in high school: Key processes from a longitudinal perspective. *Journal of adolescence*, 35(5), 1111-1122. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2012.02.016>
- Guo, Y., Luo, S., & Tan, Y. (2023). Purpose in life and academic performance: *Grit* mediation among Chinese college students. *Journal of Psychology in Africa*, 33(1), 69-74. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14330237.2023.2175970>
- Guzman, J. L., & Doronio, R. (2025). Classroom Environment and Learning Styles As Predictors of Student Engagement. *International Journal of Interdisciplinary Viewpoints*, 1(4), 467-493. <https://doi.org/10.64612/ijiv.v1i4.29>
- Hernández, E. H., Moreno-Murcia, J. A., Cid, L., Monteiro, D., & Rodrigues, F. (2020). Passion or Perseverance? The Effect of Perceived Autonomy Support and *Grit* on Academic Performance in College Students. *Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute*, 17(6), 2143-2143. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17062143>
- Hodge, B., Wright, B., & Bennett, P. (2018). The role of *Grit* in determining engagement and academic outcomes for university students. *Research in Higher Education*, 59(4), 448-460. <https://doi.org/10.1037/EDU0000153>
- Holman, A. C. (2022). Considerații cu privire la analiza statistică a datelor. În Diaconu-Gherasim, L.R., Măirean, C., & Curelaru, M. (coord), *Metode cantitative de cercetare: designuri și aplicații în științele sociale* (pp. 388-406). Iași: Editura Polirom.
- Hou, X. L., Becker, N., Hu, T. Q., Koch, M., Xi, J. Z., & Möttus, R. (2022). Do *Grittier* people have greater subjective well-being? A meta-analysis. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 48(12), 1701-1716. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01461672211053453>

- Ismayilova, T. (2025). Improving cognitive activity in higher schools: active learning and strategies for the development of critical, logical and creative thinking. *Scientific Works*, 92(4), 216–218.
[https://doi.org/10.69682/arti.2025.92\(4\).216-218](https://doi.org/10.69682/arti.2025.92(4).216-218)
- Jachimowicz, J. M., Wihler, A., Bailey, E. R., & Galinsky, A. D. (2018). Why *Grit* requires perseverance and passion to positively predict performance. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 115(40), 9980–9985.
<https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1803561115>
- Jerrim, J. (2022). The power of positive emotions? The link between young people's positive and negative affect and performance in high-stakes examinations. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 29(3), 310–331.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0969594X.2022.2054941>
- King, K. (2020). Interventions to enhance behavioral engagement. In *Student engagement: Effective academic, behavioral, cognitive, and affective interventions at school* (pp. 133–156). Cham: Springer International Publishing.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-37285-9_8
- Krippendorff, K. (2019). Content Analysis: An Introduction totions.
<https://doi.org/10.4135/9781071878781>
- Lagos, H. O., & Magallanes, C. I. (2020). Stress and Coping Strategies of High School Teachers of Antique Diocesan Catholic Schools. *Philippine Social Science Journal*, 3(2), 83–84. <https://doi.org/10.52006/main.v3i2.175>
- Liu, J. (2021). The Role of *Grit* in Students' L2 Engagement in the English as a Foreign Language Classroom. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, 749844.
<https://doi.org/10.3389/FPSYG.2021.749844>
- López-Aguilar, D., Álvarez-Pérez, P. R., & Garcés-Delgado, Y. (2021). El engagement académico y su incidencia en el rendimiento del alumnado de grado de la Universidad de La Laguna. *RELIEVE. Revista Electrónica de Investigación y Evaluación Educativa*, 27(1).
- Mason, H. D. (2018). *Grit* and academic performance among first-year university students: A brief report. *Journal of Psychology in Africa*, 28(1), 66–68.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14330237.2017.1409478>
- Matos, B. C., Ribeiro, F. M. S., Carlos, V., & Fardilha, M. (2023). Incorporation of different and purposeful students' engagement strategies to achieve deep learning experiences. *INTED Proceedings*. <https://doi.org/10.21125/inted.2023.1255>
- Matos, B., Gonçalves, L., Rodrigues, M., Ribeiro, F., Carlos, V., & Fardilha, M. (2023). Incorporation of different and purposeful students' engagement strategies to achieve deep learning experiences. *INTED Proceedings*.
<https://doi.org/10.21125/inted.2023.1255>
- Muñiz, F. B. (2024). Explorando la Resiliencia: Un Estudio Cualitativo Sobre *Grit* en Profesores del Sector Rural (Master's thesis, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile (Chile)). <https://doi.org/10.7764/tesisuc/ing/89132>

- Napitupulu, E. H., & Susanti, A. E. (2023). *Mengupayakan keaktifan belajar siswa dengan penerapan metode tanya jawab. [Promoting students' learning engagement with the application of the question and answer method]*. 3(2), 32–46.
<https://doi.org/10.19166/kairos.v3i2.7151>
- Ningsih, S. (2025). Konstruksi Keterlibatan Siswa Pada Proses Pembelajaran Di Kelas. [The Construction of Student Engagement in the Learning Process in the Classroom]. *Educatio*, 20(1), 11-17.<https://doi.org/10.29408/edc.v20i1.26765>
- Opariuc-Dan, C. (2009). *Statistică aplicată în științele socio-umane. Noțiuni de bază: statistici univariate*. Cluj-Napoca: Editura ASCR.
- Pallant, J. (2020). *Ebook: SPSS Survival Manual: A Step by Step Guide to Data Analysis using IBM SPSS*. McGraw-Hill Education (UK).
- Park, D., Yu, A., Baelen, R. N., Tsukayama, E., & Duckworth, A. L. (2018). Fostering *Grit*: Perceived school goal-structure predicts growth in *Grit* and grades. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 55, 120-128.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cedpsych.2018.09.007>
- Pohl, A. J. (2020). Strategies and interventions for promoting cognitive engagement. In *Student engagement: Effective academic, behavioral, cognitive, and affective interventions at school* (pp. 253-280). Cham: Springer International Publishing.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-37285-9_14
- Popandopulo, A. S., & Kudysheva, A. A. (2019). Diagnostics of Metacognitive Involvement in the Activities of Students in the Learning Process at a University. *ARPHA Proceedings*, 1145-1156. <https://doi.org/10.3897/AP.1.E1088>
- Popușoi, S. (2022). Metode statistice asociative. În Diaconu-Gherasim, L.R., Măirean, C., & Curelaru, M. (coord), *Metode cantitative de cercetare: designuri și aplicații în științele sociale* (pp. 407-423). Iași: Editura Polirom.
- Putri, S. S. S., & Ingarianti, T. M. (2024). Relationship between *Grit* and subjective career success in teacher. *Jurnal Ilmiah Psikologi Terapan*, 12(2), 107-113.
<https://doi.org/10.22219/jipt.v12i2.31513>
- Qurratuaini, Y. A., Zamralita, Z., & Saraswati, K. D. (2022). The role of social support and *Grit* towards academic engagement among college students. In *3rd Tarumanagara International Conference on the Applications of Social Sciences and Humanities (TICASH 2021)* (pp. 1567-1572). Atlantis Press.
<https://doi.org/10.2991/assehr.k.220404.252>
- Rovan, D., Ljubin Golub, T. & Petričević, E. (2016). Construction and validation of Academic Engagement Scale. Unpublished manuscript. Department of Psychology, Faculty of Teacher Education, University of Zagreb, Croatia.
- Sá, M. J. (2023). Student Academic and Social Engagement in the Life of the Academy—A Lever for Retention and Persistence in Higher Education. *Education Sciences*, 13(3), 269. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci13030269>
- Sajib, M. S. H. (2024, June). Determining Factors and Correlation of Factors Influential for Student Engagement. In *2024 15th International Conference on Computing Communication and Networking Technologies (ICCCNT)* (pp. 1-6). IEEE.
<https://doi.org/10.1109/icccnt61001.2024.10724770>
- Sava, F. A. (2011). *Analiza datelor în cercetarea psihologică*. Cluj-Napoca: Editura ASCRED.

- Skinner, E. A., & Pitzer, J. R. (2012). Developmental dynamics of student engagement, coping, and everyday resilience. In *Handbook of research on student engagement* (pp. 21-44). Boston, MA: Springer US. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4614-2018-7_2
- Sobreira, J. G., Oliveira, E. de L., Lima, L. B. de O., & Frazão, M. A. (2025). A relação entre a ansiedade e desempenho acadêmico em universitários. *Contribuciones a Las Ciencias Sociales*, 18(5), e18262. <https://doi.org/10.55905/revconv.18n.5-401>
- Tholibon, D. A., Nujid, M. M., Mokhtar, H., Rahim, J. A., Rashid, S. S., Saadon, A., Tholibon, D., & Salam, R. (2022). The factors of students' involvement on student-centered learning method. *International Journal of Evaluation and Research in Education*, 11(4), 1637-1646. <https://doi.org/10.3897/AP.1.E1088>
- Tiwari, S., & Verma, K. (2023). A Critical Study of Angela Duckworth's *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*. *Research Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 14(3), 152-154. <https://doi.org/10.52711/2321-5828.2023.00031>
- Trowler, V., & Trowler, P. (2011). Conceptual overview of Student Engagement. *Leadership Foundation for Higher Education*. <https://eprints.lancs.ac.uk/id/eprint/61686/>
- Waheed, Z., Tham, J., & Ooi, B. K. (2025). The Impact of Self-Regulated Learning Strategies on Academic Performance: A Systematic Review. *Social Science and Human Research Bulletin.*, 02(08). <https://doi.org/10.55677/sshrb/2025-3050-0803>
- Wang, X., Jantharajit, N., & Srikhao, S. (2025). Unlocking Learning Potential: The Impact of Integrated Cognitive Strategies on Vocational Students' Academic Performance. *Journal of Education and Learning*, 15(1), 208. <https://doi.org/10.5539/jel.v15n1p208>
- Wati, M. (2017). Being a Role Model to Motivate Students. In *1st Yogyakarta International Conference on Educational Management/Administration and Pedagogy (YICEMAP 2017)* (pp. 124-127). Atlantis Press. <https://doi.org/10.2991/yicemap-17.2017.20>
- Wilson, D., Wright, J., & Summers, L. (2021). Mapping patterns of student engagement using cluster analysis. *Journal for STEM Education Research*, 4(2), 217-239. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41979-021-00049-z>
- Wu, Y., & Fernando, Y. (2023). Development of Student's Innovation Skills through Extracurricular Activities. *Journal of E-business and Management Science*, 1(2), 170-180. <https://doi.org/10.61098/jems.v1i2.106>
- Yang, L., Yan, Z., Zhang, D., Boud, D., & Datu, J. A. (2023). Exploring the roles of academic self-concept and perseverance of effort in self-assessment practices. *Assessment in education: principles, policy & practice*, 30(2), 104-129. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0969594X.2023.2191161>
- Zhao, Y., Zheng, Z., Pan, C., & Zhou, L. (2021). Self-esteem and academic engagement among adolescents: A moderated mediation model. *Frontiers in psychology*, 12, 690828. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.690828>

Exploring Pre-Service Teachers' Intercultural Communicative Competence and Global Citizen Learning in a Blended Intensive Program

Raluca POP^{1*} , Anamaria MARC² 

ABSTRACT. This paper aims to expand knowledge on undergraduate students' development of intercultural communicative competence by examining the global citizen learning mindset facilitated by Erasmus Blended Intensive Programs (BIP). The mobility experience aligns with the internationalization of educational practices, enabling undergraduate students to develop global citizenship and thereby enhance their employability. A survey was used as the main research instrument. The study included 17 participants, and the data collected were analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively through descriptive statistics offered by Google Forms' built-in tools and content analysis. The findings are similar to those of previous research, indicating the usefulness of participating in projects that provide relevant learning contexts and hands-on experiences, which contribute to the professional development of pre-service teachers.

Keywords: undergraduate level; intercultural communicative competence; education; academic exchange program; global learning; pre-service teachers.

ABSTRACT. Erkundung der interkulturellen kommunikativen Kompetenz und des Global-Citizen-Lernens angehender Lehrkräfte in einem Blended Intensive Program. Dieser Beitrag verfolgt das Ziel, das Verständnis für die Entwicklung interkultureller kommunikativer Kompetenz bei Studierenden im Grundstudium zu vertiefen, indem er den durch Erasmus Blended Intensive Programmes (BIP) geförderten global citizenship-orientierten Lernansatz in den Blick nimmt. Die Mobilitätserfahrung fügt sich in die Internationalisierung

¹ Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

² Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

* Corresponding author: raluca.petrus@ubbcluj.ro



pädagogischer Praktiken ein, die darauf abzielen, Studierende zur Ausprägung globaler Bürgerschaft zu befähigen und damit ihre Beschäftigungsfähigkeit zu steigern. Als primäres Forschungsinstrument wurde eine Umfrage eingesetzt. Die Studie umfasste 17 Teilnehmende, und die erhobenen Daten wurden mittels einer Kombination aus qualitativer Inhaltsanalyse und quantitativer deskriptiver Statistik (unter Verwendung der integrierten Funktionen von Google Forms) ausgewertet. Die Befunde stehen im Einklang mit früheren Forschungsergebnissen und unterstreichen den Mehrwert der Teilnahme an derartigen Projekten, da sie relevante Lernkontexte schaffen und praxisnahe Erfahrungen ermöglichen, die zur professionellen Entwicklung angehender Lehrkräfte beitragen.

Schlüsselwörter: Grundstudium; interkulturelle kommunikative Kompetenz; Bildung; akademisches Austauschprogramm; globales Lernen; angehende Lehrkräfte.

I. Introduction

Due to globalization practices and internationalization of education, tertiary-level students are increasingly encouraged to spend time studying abroad to enhance their academic performance, develop foreign language proficiency, and broaden their intercultural communicative competence to enhance their career opportunities. Various empirical studies have addressed the educational value of academic exchange programs extensively, with numerous studies investigating the development of language proficiency and intercultural communicative competence as outcomes of participation in these programs (Behrnd and Porzelt 2012; Bohman and Borglin 2014; Cleak, Anand, and Das 2016; Pop 2024). Academic exchange programs provide a transformative experience by facilitating a shift in students' frames (Schattle 2008) and an opportunity to broaden perspectives of one's culture and values in contrast to the host culture (Selby 2008). According to DeLong et al. (2011), the time students spend abroad helps them become more proficient in navigating a globalized world and improves their cross-cultural learning and intercultural communicative competence, in addition to their global awareness. These represent strong pillars that define the professional requirements of 21st-century education. In light of globalization and internationalization practices, higher education aims to cultivate cross-culturally competent students (Killick 2020) who engage in a transformative sense of identity and belonging greatly influenced by intercultural interactions (Killick 2012).

Blended Intensive Programs (BIP) within the Erasmus+ framework represent short-term academic exchange programs that combine physical mobility with online courses and are addressed to all types of students from multiple

backgrounds, study fields, and cycles. These may last from 5 to 30 days. The BIP project referenced in this paper, entitled “Active Teaching Methodologies for Bridging Cultures and Building Global Mindsets in Teacher Training” took place in March 2025 at Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania (n= 21). The project aimed to develop participants’ ability to integrate, in their teaching, active methodologies that support interactive and collaborative learning, to develop their ability to understand and appreciate diverse cultures within the framework of global citizenship education, and enhance their intercultural communication skills. All participants were enrolled as pre-service teachers in teacher training programs at different partner universities located in Spain, Lithuania, and Poland. Consequently, the BIP project targeted the field of educational sciences.

Even if BIP projects have a brief duration, they can “boost participants’ global awareness, cultural sensitivity and employability skills” (Laine et al. 2025: 455). In addition to being platforms for international collaboration and shared collaborative learning, BIP projects provide an educational richness that, according to Trávníčková et. al (2025: 33), is linked to developing key competencies required for the labor market as well as transversal competencies (analytical thinking, multilingualism). Likewise, alongside the development of expertise in the field of study, BIP projects provide participants with experiential opportunities to enhance essential life skills and soft skills valuable in today’s job market.

This paper broadens the discussion about the way in which short-term academic exchange programs promote global citizen learning and intercultural communicative competence to equip pre-service teachers with pedagogical and procedural competences needed to navigate the ever-changing educational arena. Additionally, the paper provides an opportunity to reflect on BIP projects as experiential learning opportunities that broaden pre-service teachers’ experience by taking diverse roles in a multicultural and multilingual context.

II. Theoretical Framework

The global citizen is a multifaceted construct that is widely encountered in politics, business, economy, or education. Building on the concept of global citizenship perceived as “an attitude or stance towards the world” (Barrie, 2004: 269), Lilley et. al. (2014: 75) indicate “responsibility for a moral stance on human dignity, respect and concern for issues that impact global society”. A more recent perspective on global citizenship in the field of education has been addressed by Mercer et. al (2023), indicating the skills teachers and students should demonstrate in a fast-changing modern world: collaborative skills, critical thinking, intercultural competence, emotional self-regulation and wellbeing, and digital

literacies. These should be recognizable attributes in teachers and students acting as global citizens. Additionally, it is salient that the concept of the 'global citizen' is closely linked to Global Citizenship Education (GCED). UNESCO (2014) describes GCED as an educational approach that fosters respect for diversity, empathy, open-mindedness, and an appreciation of different perspectives and opinions.

The theoretical foundations of the present research lie at the intersection between several approaches to teaching and learning: Global Citizenship Education (GCED), Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) and Experiential Learning (EL). The argument in favor is that a BIP project connects students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds to collaborate toward analyzing different educational issues and attaining various learning outcomes. CRT regards cultural differences as a positive asset of the learning context. From this perspective, CRT is according to Gay (2018) the practice of "using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them" (2018: 36). Various parameters define EL. Still, for our BIP project, the most suitable definition is given by Beard and Wilson (2018), who suggest that "the experience of learning has potential for the transformation of the self" (2018: 12) as an outcome of the constant interactions between inner and outer worlds.

In this line of thought, CRT supported our BIP project to acknowledge diverse linguistic, cultural, and educational backgrounds, while the EL provided participants with hands-on educational contexts related to global challenges such as accessibility and differentiation. Due to its international format with participants from four universities abroad, these frameworks mutually reinforced one another in our BIP project by supporting students in developing their intercultural competence, social responsibility, and collaborative skills.

Therefore, an overarching concept governing all three approaches listed above is the Intercultural Competence (IC) model proposed by Deardorff (2009). This is a process-oriented model grounded in four pillars essential for developing intercultural competence: attitudes (respect, openness, curiosity), knowledge (deep cultural knowledge, sociolinguistic awareness), skills (listening, observing, interpreting), and desired outcomes (adaptability, flexibility, appropriate communication in intercultural contexts). The BIP project sought to strengthen participants' intercultural competence, as well as acknowledging that IC implies a lifelong process that cannot be fully achieved through short-term mobility alone.

III. Methodology

III.1. Purpose of the study

This research highlights the multifaceted benefits of blended intensive study-abroad programs and aims to explore how participation in an Erasmus BIP contributes to intercultural competence and global mindset development. The study can be relevant for universities designing short-term mobility programs.

The study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. How do participants perceive the intercultural learning opportunities offered by the BIP project?
2. What aspects of the program have contributed most to engaging in global citizenship learning?

III. 2. Research Design

The research was conducted in March 2025. A mixed-method approach was employed, combining qualitative and quantitative data collection to provide a wider perspective on respondents' views. The Google Forms questionnaire was given to participants on the last day of the project. Given the reduced number of respondents (n=17), the findings cannot be generalized. Still, the research is valuable for the qualitative analysis of the respondents' views about the intercultural learning opportunities offered by the project.

III.3. Participants and Procedure

The target group comprised undergraduate students (n= 21) enrolled in teacher training programs at four international universities from abroad. A total of 17 respondents provided valid answers. The survey was written in English. Responses were anonymous. Table 1 indicates respondents' profiles:

Table 1. Participant's profile

Participants	N	%
Age		
20	4	23.5%
21	4	23.5%
22	4	23.5%
23	4	23.5%
25	1	5.9%

Participants	N	%
Gender		
Female	13	76.5%
Male	4	23.5%
Country of origin		
Spain	9	52.9%
Poland	5	29.4%
Lithuania	3	17.6%
Foreign language competence		
English: Advanced level	6	
Intermediate level	11	
French: Beginner level	7	
Intermediate level	1	
Italian: Beginner level	1	
Intermediate level	7	
Romanian: Beginner level	6	

III.4. Research Instruments

The questionnaire comprised 19 items with a mix of close-ended (multiple choice, checkboxes or Likert scale) and open-ended questions organized into five main sections: Section 1 - Demographic details and respondents' profile (age, gender, linguistic competence, country); Section 2 - Contact with other cultures (frequency of travelling abroad); Section 3 - Openness, curiosity, and respect for difference; Section 4 - Insights into the BIP project. The quantitative data obtained were analyzed using Google Forms' built-in tools. The qualitative data were processed through a thematic conceptual analysis linking the qualitative answers to intercultural competence, global citizenship education, and experiential learning.

IV. Results

IV.1. Quantitative results

The majority of the respondents are females. The age range is between 20 and 23 years old, which is typical for undergraduate mobility programs. Students came from four different countries, representing the international mix intended by the BIP project. The multilingual profile indicates strong readiness

for intercultural engagement. This diversity supports fertile ground for intercultural learning.

As concerns frequency of travel abroad, most students reported traveling several times a year or once every six months. Most of them (88.2%) have engaged in travel related to studies, holidays (70.6%), music concerts (29.4%), visiting relatives (23.5%), and volunteering (17.6%). Respondents' answers were gathered through a checkbox item. Therefore, the total exceeds 100%. Findings suggest a generally internationally oriented student group that has often interacted with people from other cultures. Participants indicate that they have travelled abroad for a short-term period of 2-10 days (88.2%), 10-20 days (23.55%), 20-30 days (5.9%), or for several months (17.6%). Respondents' answers were gathered through a checkbox item. Therefore, the total exceeds 100%.

When in contact with a new culture, respondents observe first of all the food (100%), the traditions (82.4%), the history (70.6%), and the arts (64.7%), which represent the visible dimension of culture. A new cultural context may be difficult to comprehend due to language barriers. Additionally, Schartner and Cho (2017) suggest that a lack of experience in interacting with multicultural groups can negatively impact students' learning experiences and social contact abroad. Therefore, having in mind this language barrier, respondents were asked to indicate whether they generally feel anxious about travelling to a country whose language they don't know. While 35.3% don't mind the language barrier, 64.7% have experienced varying degrees of anxiety (35.2% to a small extent, 23.5% to a medium extent, and 5.9% to a great extent).

The contact with a new culture "is a transformative experience as it allows one to see the world from an alternative perspective" (Pop 2024: 109). But such a transformative experience can also be a source of anxiety. Respondents were asked to indicate to what extent a new cultural context can be a source of anxiety to them: 35.3% are not at all anxious, 29.4% are slightly anxious, 23.5% feel moderately anxious, while 11.8% feel very anxious. They enjoy travelling abroad (58.8%) because they can meet new people (58.8%) and experience a new culture (82.4%).

Respondents demonstrate awareness that by interacting with other cultures, they have the opportunity to understand how others care for the environment (47.1% agree and 35.5% strongly agree) and care for the well-being of all (52.9% agree and 35.5% strongly agree). These are recognizable markers of the global citizen learning mindset.

As intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes are elements that form the pillars of intercultural communicative competence, respondents' answers provided insights into each category. As the adaptability to new social norms specific to a certain culture is regarded, most students agreed (52.9%) and

strongly agreed (47.1%) that they practice adaptability strategies. Communication is a significant pillar in addressing language barriers when interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds. The majority of the respondents indicated that they don't find intercultural communication difficult. Therefore, only 11.8% of the respondents struggled with issues concerning this aspect. As cultural knowledge is concerned, the majority of respondents (88.2%) indicate that they have acquired factual information about Romanian culture and about other cultures present during the BIP (70.5%).

There was a strong agreement that participants enjoyed taking part in the BIP project (82.4% strongly agreed and 17.6% agreed), and 76.5% are considering keeping in contact with the other international students they have met in Cluj-Napoca. Communication with students from different cultures was highly effective (88.2%), while the remaining respondents (11.8%) considered it fairly effective. Collaboration with other participants in the BIP project was highly effective (88.2%), or fairly effective (11.8%). Collaborative skills and well-being are also attributes of global citizen education. Building on this idea, we have asked respondents if they have offered their help to BIP colleagues from other cultures. There was a strong agreement (70.5%) on providing help.

IV. Qualitative results

The thematic conceptual analysis linked the qualitative answers to the main concepts guiding the theoretical framework: intercultural competence, culturally responsive teaching, global citizenship education, and experiential learning. Participants' statements are showcased below, in word-for-word citation:

1. Concepts linked to Intercultural Competence and Culturally Responsive Teaching

1.1 Attitudes of openness, curiosity, and respect for difference:

[Meeting new people and cultures is always welcome]

[I have learned a lot from the cultures of my partners]

[I appreciated... talking with students from other countries about our cultural differences and mindsets]

Likewise, participants demonstrated willingness to engage with cultural differences and demonstrated empathy, curiosity, and openness.

1.2 Intercultural knowledge linked to cultural understanding

[Getting to know different types of educational systems]

[We had a lot of occasions to talk about our cultural differences]

Respondents express awareness of cultural diversity and understanding of diverse educational systems.

1.3 Communicative skills

[The bonding with the other students...]

[Teachers explained in another language that was not their mother tongue]

The comments showcase the development of intercultural communicative strategies across cultures.

2. Concepts Linked to Global Citizenship Education

2.1 Sense of belonging to a global community

[Meeting my Polish, Spanish, Lithuanian and Romanian friends in a future BIP]

[I'll always be grateful to the community... I would definitely say yes to another BIP]

Participants express a connection beyond national borders and lay the foundation for community building.

2.2 Appreciation of cultural diversity

[Learning about cultures, incredible friendships I have made]

[Being able to explore more of Cluj, visits to museums]

[Talking about our country, cultural differences and mindsets]

[We felt welcomed by the university and participants]

The word-for-word transcripts envisage intercultural appreciation and inclusive global citizenship characterized by diversity.

3. Experiential learning

[Talking with students from other countries]

[Visits to museums and around the city]

Students engaged in real-life intercultural interactions that offered hands-on experiences essential for learning through doing.

V. Discussions

Students consistently valued meeting international peers, engaging in cross-cultural groupwork, and learning about other cultures. There was high agreement that the BIP experience expanded their worldview and made them more aware of values different from their own. The majority of the respondents

indicated that they don't find communication across cultures difficult. Therefore, only 11.8% indicated struggles with this aspect, which showcases their adaptive skills.

The quantitative and qualitative findings complement each other. Data indicate high-perceived growth in intercultural awareness, communication strategies, and open-mindedness. Real-life interactions (groupwork activities and shared accommodation) were key contributors. The learning environment created by the BIP increased curiosity and engagement with other cultures. The visits to various museums and the guided sightseeing in the city have developed participants' intercultural knowledge. Therefore, in connection with the first research question, "How do participants perceive the intercultural learning opportunities offered by the BIP project?" findings indicate that the Erasmus BIP successfully created meaningful intercultural encounters. Short-term mobility can effectively foster intercultural competence, especially when combined with structured activities and international group work.

The interaction with students and teachers from other cultures has enhanced participants' reflection on ethical, cultural, and global dimensions. Participants have provided help to one another, cared for the well-being of others, and discussed educational topics from the perspective of Global Citizen Education. Therefore, the second research question, "What aspects of the program have contributed most to engaging in global citizenship learning?" could comprise both formal and informal activities conducted throughout the BIP project. Short-term mobility did not hinder learning as students highlighted immersion and hands-on experiences as strong drivers of learning.

One limitation of this research refers to the small number of participants. A larger participant sample, as well as research on long-term mobility stays or longitudinal studies, may be useful in depicting awareness of cultural diversity and understanding of educational systems.

VI. Conclusions

A diversified composition of participants and a combination of online and in-person teaching support cultural appreciation and learning about others. As such, our BIP project, placed in the context of higher education, has diversified the educational experience of participants with a focus on intercultural competence and global citizen learning. The study provides insights into the potential of blended intensive programs (BIP) to engage in international collaboration and support the internationalization of education.

REFERENCES

- Barrie, S. (2004). "A research-based approach to generic graduate attributes policy". *Higher Education Research & Development*, 23(3), 261-275.
Doi: 10.1080/07294360420000235391
- Beard, C., Wilson, J. P. (eds.) (2018). *Experiential Learning. A Practical Guide for Training, Coaching and Education*, 4th edition. USA, UK, India: Kogan Page.
- Behrnd, V., Porzelt, S. (2012). "Intercultural Competence and Training Outcomes of Students with Experiences Abroad". *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 36 (2): 213-223, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2011.04.005>
- Bohman, D., Borglin, G. (2014). "Student Exchange for Nursing Students: Does It Raise Cultural Awareness? A Descriptive, Qualitative Study." *Nurse Education in Practice* 14: 259–264. Doi: 10.1016/j.nepr.2013.11.006.
- Cleak, H., Anand, J., Das, C. (2016). "Asking the Critical Questions: An Evaluation of Social Work Students' Experiences in an International Placement." *British Journal of Social Work* 46: 389–408. Doi: 10.1093/bjsw/bcu126.
- DeLong, M. et al. (2011). "Cultural exchange: Evaluating an alternative model in higher education." *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 15 (1), 41–56.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315309334619>
- Deardorff, D. (2009). "Synthesizing conceptualizations of intercultural competence: A summary and emerging themes". In Darla Deardorff (ed.), *The Sage handbook of intercultural competence*, (pp. 264-270). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Gay, G. (2018). *Culturally Responsive Teaching. Theory, Research and Practice*. Amsterdam, New York: Teachers College Press.
- Killick, D. (2020). "Beyond competencies and silos: Embedding graduate capabilities for a multicultural globalizing world across the mainstream curriculum". *Research in Comparative and International Education*, 15(1): 27-35.
- Killick, D. (2012). "Seeing ourselves-in-the-world: Developing global citizenship through international mobility". *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 16(4), 372-389. Doi: 10.1177/1028315311431893
- Laine I, Pirrone G, Phan KHQ, Milotta M, Vääänen J, Hagen B. (2025). "Integrating real-world entrepreneurship with international learning: insights from a blended intensive programme". *Journal of International Education in Business*, vol. 18 (3): 438–461. Doi: 10.1108/JIEB-08-2024-0112
- Lilley, K., Barker, M., Neil, H. (2014). Educating global citizens in business schools. *Journal of International Education in Business*, vol. 7 (1): 72-84.
Doi: 10.1108/JIEB-06-2012-0010
- Mercer, S., Hockly, N., Stobart, G. & Lorenzo Galés, N. (2023). *Global Skills: Creating Empowered 21st Century Learners*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. Available at: <https://projectes.xtec.cat/internacional/wp-content/uploads/usu1767/2022/02/oup-expert-global-skills.pdf>

- Pop, R. (2024). Intercultural Communicative Competence: A Case Study on Academic Exchange Programmes. *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai Philologia*, 69(4), 97–116. <https://doi.org/10.24193/subbphilolo.2024.4.04>.
- Schartner, A, Cho, Y. (2017). “Empty signifiers’ and ‘dreamy ideals’: perceptions of the ‘international university among higher education students and staff at a British university.” *Higher Education*, 74(3), 455-472.
- Schattle, H. (2008). *The practices of global citizenship*. Plymouth, UK: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Selby, R. (2008). Designing transformation in international education. In V. Savicki (Ed.), *Developing intercultural competence and transformation: Theory, research, and application in international education* (pp. 1-12). Sterling, VA: Stylus.
- Trávníčková, H, Purk, J., Löhr, A. (2025). Preparing University Students for the Labor Market Differently: Lessons from the Blended Intensive Program (BIP), *ACC Journal* 31 (B): 33-42. DOI: 10.2478/acc-2025-0008
- UNESCO (2014), “Global citizenship education: Preparing learners for the challenges of the twenty-first century”, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000227729>

Developing Learning Techniques While Learning Modern Teaching Methods Within the Framework of *Teaching Methodology of Chemistry and Didactics of Science Subjects*

Csilla SÓGOR¹ 

ABSTRACT. In recent years, university instructors have observed that first-year students enrolled in the Faculty of Chemistry and Chemical Engineering possess a level of subject knowledge considerably below expectations, with many exhibiting fundamental deficiencies. Among students enrolled in the Hungarian-language programs of Chemistry and Chemical Engineering, 70% choose to complete the pedagogy module. Of these, 13.6% intend to work exclusively as chemistry teachers, while 18% remain undecided regarding their future career path. The rest plan to pursue research or engineering careers but do not exclude the possibility of teaching.

At the beginning of their studies, 40% of respondents expressed the hope that the methodology courses would help them become more confident professionally and improve their own learning techniques.

The first part of this study, the literature review, presents the thematic content covered in the methodology courses designed to develop students' key competencies—skills they will later need to cultivate in their own pupils when teaching chemistry. The second part examines students' learning habits, exploring how the pedagogy module contributes to their ability to develop autonomous and reflective learning strategies.

Keywords: Methodology of Chemistry Teaching, students learning habits, students learning techniques pedagogical content knowledge, chemistry teacher training.

¹ Faculty of Chemistry and Chemical Engineering, Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania, csilla.sogor@ubbcluj.ro



1. Literature Review

The transforming landscape of education increasingly emphasizes the process of learning rather than the mere transmission of knowledge. Twenty-first century pedagogy encourages teachers and teacher candidates to become conscious facilitators of learning processes, rather than simple conveyors of information. In science teacher education — particularly for chemistry students — this shift presents a unique challenge: how to integrate deep disciplinary knowledge with the development of pedagogical and didactic competences.

Teaching chemistry is a complex activity that involves abstract concepts and experimentation while requiring constant attention to student motivation. Therefore, the lack of pedagogical training can significantly reduce the effectiveness of instruction (Bennett, Lubben & Hogarth, 2006). The pedagogy module aims to develop both learning and teaching awareness among teacher candidates: understanding how learning occurs and how it can be effectively facilitated for others.

Modern educational approaches — such as cooperative learning, project-based learning, and digital learning environments — are closely linked to the development of self-directed learning (Kálmán, 2013). In mastering these methods, students are encouraged to rethink their own learning techniques, reflect on their effectiveness, and consciously shape the dynamic interaction between teaching and learning.

Shulman's (1987) seminal theory of Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) posits that effective teachers not only possess disciplinary knowledge but also know how to transform it didactically to make it comprehensible and learnable for students. He identified seven interrelated domains of teacher knowledge, encompassing instructional strategies, students' modes of thinking, and contextual awareness. PCK includes the use of analogies, illustrations, and explanations to address common misconceptions and adapt instruction to diverse learner needs.

From this perspective, the pedagogy module is not a supplementary component but a fundamental element of teacher education — one that integrates subject knowledge with pedagogical competence. Grossman (1990) later refined Shulman's model into a structure more suitable for empirical research, distinguishing four interconnected domains: Subject Matter Knowledge, General Pedagogical Knowledge, Pedagogical Content Knowledge, and Knowledge of Context. In Grossman's framework, PCK occupies a central position as it bridges disciplinary expertise, pedagogical understanding, and contextual factors. While Shulman's model incorporated broader theoretical and social dimensions, Grossman emphasized the practical interplay among these domains and the applied significance of PCK.

Research by Hattie (2012) further confirms that the most significant factor influencing teaching effectiveness is the teacher's ability to consciously guide learning processes and promote student understanding. Similarly, Feng et al. (2025), analyzing 82 studies on chemistry teachers' PCK published in SSCI journals, stress the importance of deliberately cultivating PCK in both teacher education and professional development—not merely through separate content or pedagogical training, but through their integration, considering students' prior knowledge, learning difficulties, and instructional approaches.

The development of teacher candidates' learning techniques is closely related to their metacognitive growth. According to Flavell (1979), *metacognition* refers to the awareness and regulation of one's own cognitive processes—a skill gradually developed during pedagogical training. In the methodology of teaching chemistry, this manifests not only in learning *what* to teach but also *how* to teach and how to reflect upon instructional decisions.

International literature underscores that one of the primary challenges of modern teacher education lies in bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application (Darling-Hammond, 2006). The pedagogy module provides the framework for this integration: it enables future teachers to interpret educational theories through the lens of their own learning experiences, thereby constructing a personal professional identity.

In summary, the literature highlights that the pedagogy module is not a formal requirement but a pivotal component of teacher education. It provides future teachers with the opportunity to interpret their disciplinary expertise within the dynamic process of teaching and learning while simultaneously enhancing their learning techniques, reflective capacity, and professional self-awareness.

Teaching Methods and Strategies in the Courses “Methodology of Chemistry Teaching” and “Didactics of Science”

Teaching chemistry presents a particular challenge: it involves abstraction, experimentation, and the continuous maintenance of motivation. The fundamental concepts of chemistry—such as *atom, molecule, ion; element, compound, mixture; physical change, chemical change, and amount of substance*—are not intuitive or naturally occurring ideas. Most students encounter them for the first time in school. The comprehension and internalization of these so-called *artificial concepts* are difficult precisely because they are not grounded in everyday experience (Szalay, 2015, p. 14).

Competence development in chemistry can only take place if we emphasize the understanding of these fundamental concepts that underpin chemical reasoning. When certain conceptual links are missing, students lose track of the logical structure of the subject and fail to grasp connections between topics. According to constructivist

theories of learning (Nahalka, 1998), this may lead to a rejection of new knowledge: students who do not understand a concept often refuse to engage with it further. Consequently, they may resort to rote memorization and quickly forget what they have learned, or they become indifferent, convinced that chemistry is inherently incomprehensible.

At the undergraduate level, *Methodology of Chemistry Teaching* is taught in the second year, while *Didactics of Science* appears in the first year of the master's program. The main objective of these courses is to equip students with methods that can make the teaching of chemistry—often perceived as difficult and dry—clear, engaging, connected to everyday life, and interactive. Ninety percent of students report having missed such approaches during their own chemistry classes in school.

In both courses, the teaching–learning process is interactive and does not follow the traditional *two-hour lecture plus two-hour seminar* model. Typically, a short theoretical introduction is followed by group work or by a *jigsaw method* session, where students collaboratively process parts of the theoretical content. Each session ends with a plenary discussion and synthesis.

At the bachelor's level, after a detailed analysis of curricula and textbooks, students explore topics such as:

- **Using history in chemistry teaching** (brief, 2–5-minute contextual digressions about scientists' lives or the circumstances of discoveries to stimulate curiosity);
- **Experimentation in the classroom** (student micro-experiments, inquiry-based learning);
- **Creation of educational materials** (concept maps, learning cards, educational board games);
- **Design and analysis of competence-based worksheets** (pairing, sequencing, true/false, classification, association, deductive and inductive reasoning, reading comprehension).

In the master's program, the focus shifts toward **problem-solving instruction, teaching chemical concepts, identifying and addressing misconceptions, interdisciplinary connections of chemistry, and project-based learning.**

The overarching goal of these courses is for students to learn methods that render chemistry meaningful and enjoyable, making complex topics accessible and relevant. Exams are conducted in an *open-book* format, allowing students to use printed or digital materials. Final grades combine the exam score with assessments of homework and classroom participation. A further objective is to ensure that by the end of the semester, students are able to navigate and systematize the relevant literature.

A. The Expert Jigsaw Method

The *Expert Jigsaw* strategy has proven to be a highly effective tool for processing new content. For example, when discussing chemistry textbooks, each student group analyzes one section of a four-part article (e.g., the textbook's purpose, structure and didactic functions). After mastering their assigned section, "experts" reorganize into new groups to share insights and reconstruct the full content collaboratively.

The final product of this process is a poster synthesizing the article's key ideas. The class concludes with a plenary summary to ensure conceptual accuracy. Experience shows that this structure promotes deeper engagement: students are more likely to read and internalize the material when they are responsible for explaining it to peers, and they produce remarkably creative posters. Moreover, by participating in this process, they implicitly acquire the jigsaw method itself, which they may later apply in their own teaching.

B. Historical Perspectives in Chemistry Teaching

Sparking and maintaining students' interest is essential in chemistry education. Historical contexts serve as an excellent tool for this purpose, linking curricular content with stories of discovery, scientific debates, and the evolution of chemical thought. Beyond expanding students' general cultural knowledge (for instance, through etymological notes), such narratives highlight the cumulative nature of scientific knowledge and foster critical thinking by examining scientists' mistakes and the revision of outdated theories.

Historical vignettes can also form the basis of *discovery learning* and *inquiry-based science education*. It is important for pupils to understand that scientific progress is the result of collaborative efforts among researchers across nations—including Hungarian and Romanian scientists, who have made significant contributions to chemistry.

Students are required to prepare short historical summaries aligned with curricular topics, drawing on studies by Keglevich (2017, 2018), and present them in seminars using various digital platforms such as *Book Creator* or *Canva*.

C. Inquiry-Based Learning

Inquiry-based chemistry learning (IBL) is implemented using Szalay's (2016) collection of 24 inquiry worksheets, adapted to the national curriculum. This method is entirely new to most students, who have rarely encountered it in school. Initially, they struggle to understand the essence of independent

investigation—they hesitate to make decisions, ask questions, or design research plans, fearing mistakes. Therefore, experiencing inquiry-based learning firsthand and analyzing both teacher and student roles in the process is essential.

As Korom (2016) explains, IBL does not necessarily require radical changes in teaching practices; familiar classroom experiments can be redesigned to provide greater autonomy in exploring phenomena. Since 2012, the *SAILS* project (Csapó et al., 2013) has documented the conditions and effectiveness of implementing IBL in science education.

D. Visualization in Chemistry Teaching

Concept maps and mind maps

While laboratory experiments are central to illustrating theory, simpler visual tools—such as periodic tables, charts, and flow diagrams—are also indispensable. In methodology seminars, students must construct mind or concept maps for specific topics and analyze examples created by school students. This helps reveal students' thought processes and potential misconceptions, while also confronting university students with their own misunderstandings.

Such exercises clarify how to structure information hierarchically and logically, and they encourage metacognitive reflection on learning organization.

Learning cards

Flashcards have become increasingly popular among international students, often supported by applications like *Anki* (from Japanese “anki,” meaning memorization). The method, originally proposed by Sebastian Leitner in the 1970s, is based on *spaced repetition*: cards are reviewed at progressively increasing intervals depending on how well the learner recalls each item. Correct answers move a card to the next box; incorrect answers return it to the first one.

During courses in Analytical Chemistry, it was observed that students often struggled to recall key reaction schemes or essential theoretical principles. Introducing learning cards proved highly effective for mastering basic reactions and concepts. (Fig.1)

From a cognitive perspective, this aligns with the *Spaced Repetition System (SRS)*, which facilitates the transfer of information from short-term to long-term memory by periodically reactivating learned material.

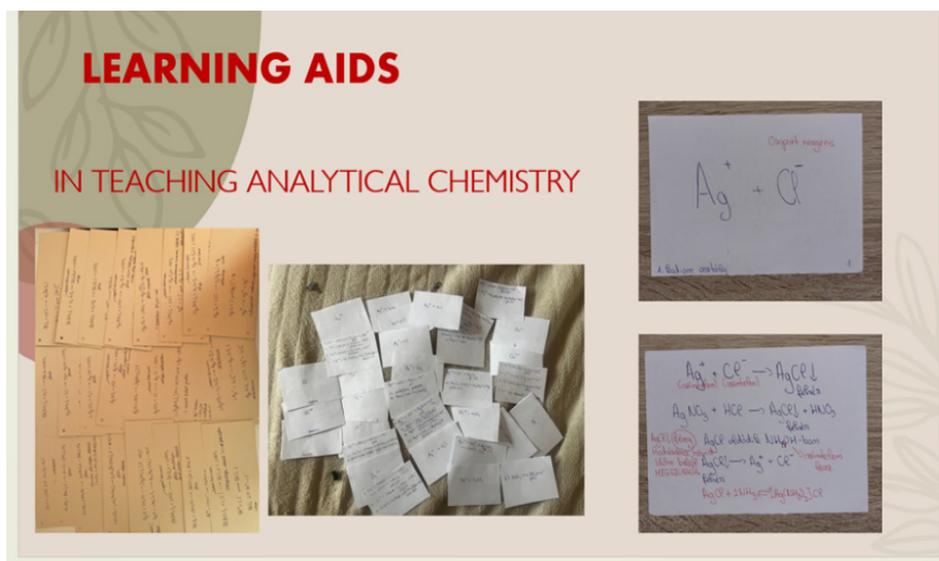


Figure 1. Flashcards made by students at Analytical Chemistry courses.

E. Chemical Misconceptions

The topic of *chemical misconceptions* provides a stimulating theme for methodology seminars. Numerous myths and misconceptions circulate in everyday discourse, often simplifying or distorting chemical phenomena. These misunderstandings may arise from gaps in scientific literacy, inaccurate media representations, or misinterpretations of everyday experiences.

The goal of chemistry education is to identify and correct such misconceptions while mapping students' conceptual frameworks. Through this process, teacher candidates not only learn how to teach specific concepts correctly and identify critical points of misunderstanding but also become aware of their own misconceptions and develop scientifically grounded thinking.

F. Microteaching and Pedagogical Practice

Self-evaluation and peer assessment are vital in establishing solid professional competence. These are implemented through *microteaching* sessions, in which students deliver short lessons to their peers following a school curriculum framework. Cooperative tasks also conclude with peer feedback. Learning to evaluate oneself and others fosters responsibility for learning, supports peers, and deepens understanding.

Kostiainen (2025) reports that teaching practice represents the most significant learning environment in teacher education, serving as the foundation for *meaningful learning*.

Master's students in methodology also participate in *peer mentoring* activities by correcting problem-solving exercises completed by undergraduates—a form of *learning by teaching*.

This *peer instruction* approach was originally developed by Eric Mazur at Harvard University in 1991. It is an interactive technique that integrates easily into traditional lectures, leveraging peer-to-peer dialogue to enhance conceptual understanding and problem-solving skills. The method is most effective when at least 80% of students are uncertain about a concept: brief paired discussions followed by class-wide reflection help clarify and consolidate understanding.

2. Purpose of the Study

The primary aim of this study is to explore how participation in the pedagogy module influences pre-service chemistry teachers' learning techniques and strategies. The research focuses on students' perceptions of pedagogical training as a space for developing autonomous, reflective, and effective learning habits.

The study addresses the following research questions:

1. Why do students choose the pedagogical module?
2. Which learning techniques and strategies do they prefer to use during learning?
3. How do chemistry students participating in teacher training perceive changes in their learning habits after attending pedagogical and methodological courses?
4. What kind of support would they need to make their learning more effective?

3. Research Methods

The study involved 28 pre-service chemistry teachers enrolled in Hungarian-language Chemistry and Chemical Engineering programmes at the Faculty of Chemistry and Chemical Engineering. Participation was voluntary. Most respondents were third-year undergraduate students, with an average age of 22.6 years.

Data were collected using an online questionnaire consisting of both closed and open-ended questions. The instrument examined students' learning habits, time-management strategies, preferred learning techniques, and perceptions of the pedagogy module. Items addressed note-taking practices, use of learning aids, changes in learning strategies compared to secondary school, and experiences with newly acquired learning methods.

Given the relatively small sample size, the study is exploratory in nature and aims to identify tendencies and patterns rather than produce generalisable conclusions.

4. Results

Among students enrolled in the Hungarian-language programs of Chemistry and Chemical Engineering, 70% choose to complete the pedagogy module. At the beginning of their studies, 40% of respondents expressed the hope that the methodology courses would help them become more professionally confident and improve their own learning techniques. 13.6% of the students intend to work exclusively as chemistry teachers, while 18% remain undecided regarding their future career path. The rest plan to pursue research or engineering careers but do not exclude the possibility of teaching. (Fig.2)

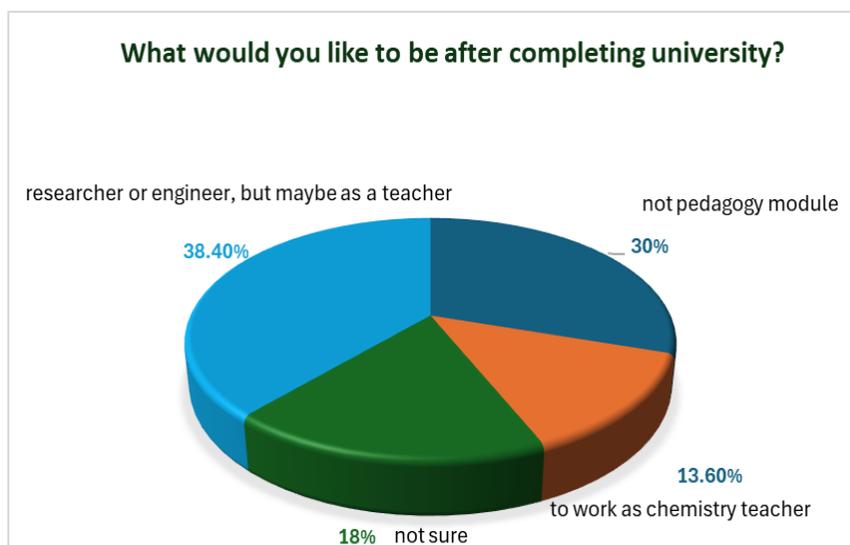


Figure 2. Statement by students enrolled in the Faculty of Chemistry and Chemical Engineering about what they would like to do after their university education

Approximately half of the respondents reported that their study habits had changed, either partially (40%) or completely (8%), compared to their earlier school experiences. Among the learning methods mentioned, 44% preferred handwritten notes, 9% used digital notes, 14% applied learning cards, and 7% used concept maps. 18% mentioned visual techniques such as drawing diagrams or sketches. (Fig.3)

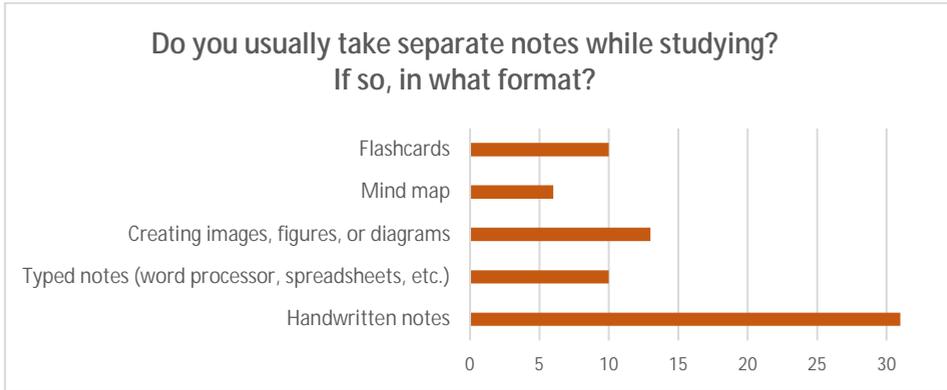


Figure 3. Learning by taking separate notes.

Most students reported studying primarily from printed materials, including personal notes and PowerPoint slides provided by instructors. Many also requested lecture notes from former students. Online courses and video materials were also frequently used to support learning. However, only a few students reported reading the recommended bibliography, and merely 4% actively searched for scientific papers related to the course topics. (Fig 4.)

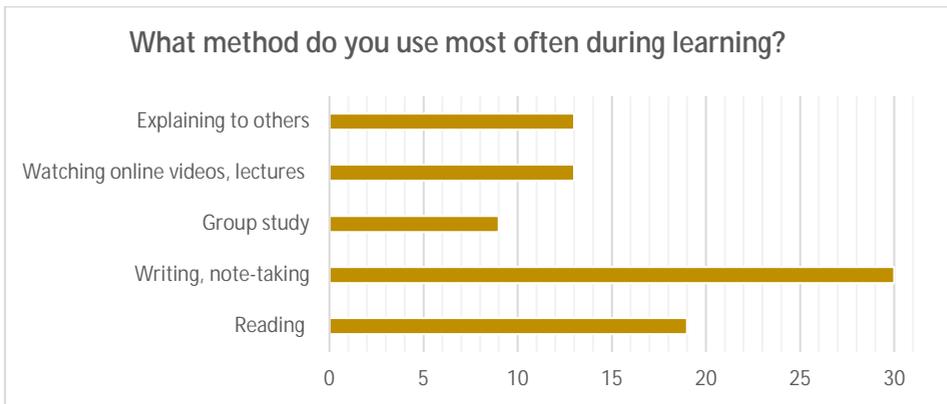


Figure 4. Learning methods.

Several respondents indicated that explaining material to others helped them consolidate their understanding—confirming the effectiveness of peer instruction and the “learning by teaching” approach.

Regarding the duration of study sessions, most students reported spending 2–3 hours per learning block, and some mentioned using the Pomodoro technique (25 minutes of focused study followed by a 5-minute break, with a longer break after four cycles).

When asked what hinders learning, 26% identified lack of motivation as the main obstacle—an issue that calls for serious reflection from educators. 58% wished for more practice exercises and self-assessment tests to prepare for exams, underscoring the need for formative assessment even at the university level.

Some students admitted that they were reluctant to ask questions during lectures and suggested implementing an anonymous “question box” at the end of classes, allowing them to submit questions that the teacher could address later.

Preferences regarding exam formats were diverse:

- 84% appreciated *midterm assessments* distributed throughout the semester,
- 70% favored *project work* and *open-book exams*,
- 16% preferred *oral exams*, while 52% would avoid them.

5. Discussion

Although the survey sample was small and preliminary, it underscores the importance of systematically examining students’ learning habits within each academic discipline (Fig.5). To meaningfully improve instructional methods, educators must not only evaluate teaching strategies but also analyze learning outcomes in parallel.

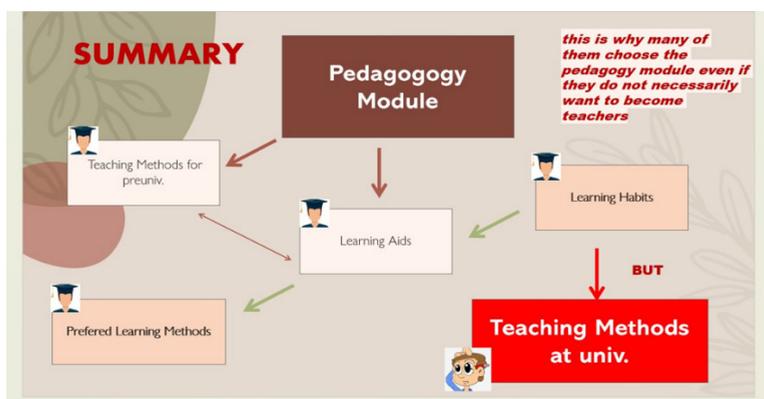


Figure 5. During the pedagogical module, students learn teaching and learning techniques and can improve their learning habits. The university can design its teaching methods according to the students' learning habits.

Moreover, students should receive explicit instruction in learning techniques to help them identify strategies that best suit their individual needs. This pedagogical support is especially relevant in science and engineering programs, where conceptual understanding and long-term knowledge retention are crucial.

The findings suggest that many students choose the pedagogy module even when they do not initially plan to become teachers. They are motivated by the opportunity to develop effective learning techniques, reflective thinking, and metacognitive awareness—skills that enhance both professional competence and lifelong learning.

6. Conclusion

This exploratory study indicates that pedagogical training in chemistry teacher education extends beyond formal qualification requirements. It is a transformative learning environment that enables students to reinterpret disciplinary knowledge through the dynamics of teaching and learning, to reflect on their own cognitive processes, and to cultivate the pedagogical content knowledge necessary for meaningful, learner-centered chemistry education.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bennett, J., Lubben, F., & Hogarth, S. (2006). Bringing science to life: A synthesis of the research evidence on the effects of context-based and STS approaches to science teaching. *Science Education*, 91(3), 347–370.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/sce.20197>
- Csapó, B., Csikos, Cs., Korom, E., Harrison, C., Black, P., Finlayson, O., van Kampen, P., McLoughlin, E., & McCabe, D. (2013). *Report on the assessment frameworks and instruments for IBSE skills – Part A. SAILS project.*
<http://www.sails-project.eu/sites/default/files/d2.2.pdf>
- Feng, D., Lifan, Z., Junhao, Z., Bingxin, D., & Wanrong, D. (2025). *Chemistry teachers' pedagogical content knowledge: A review of empirical research published in SSCI journals from 1986 to 2024. Teaching and Teacher Education*, 165, 105109.
- Flavell, J. H. (1979). Metacognition and cognitive monitoring: A new area of cognitive–developmental inquiry. *American Psychologist*, 34(10), 906–911.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.34.10.906>
- Grossman, P. L. (1990). *The Making of a Teacher: Teacher Knowledge and Teacher Education.* New York: Teachers College Press.
- Hattie, J. (2012). *Visible Learning for Teachers: Maximizing Impact on Learning.* Routledge, London.

- Kálmán, O. (2013). *Supporting Learning in Higher Education. Felsőoktatási Műhely*, 7, 15–22. (hun)
- Keglevich, K. (2017). *The History of Chemistry in Chemistry Teaching. Magyar Kémikusok Lapja*, 12, 370–375. (hun)
http://kemia.fazekas.hu/kemiatanaroknak/szakmai/mkl_2017_2018_kemiator_t_kemia_tan.pdf
- Keglevich, K. (2018). *The History of Chemistry in Chemistry Teaching. Magyar Kémikusok Lapja*, 9–14. DOI: 10.24364/MKL.2018.0.(73) (hun)
- Kind, V. (2009). Pedagogical content knowledge in science education: Perspectives and potential for progress. *Studies in Science Education*, 45(2), 169–204.
- Korom, E., Csapó, B., & Csíkos, Cs. (2016). The conditions for implementing inquiry-based learning in science education. *Iskolakultúra*, 26(3).
DOI: 10.17543/ISKKULT.2016.3.30 (hun)
- Kostiainen, E., & Pöysä-Tarhonen, J. (2025). Meaningful learning over the course of teacher education: Students' reflections. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 105241.
- Loughran, J., Berry, A., & Mulhall, P. (2012). *Understanding and Developing Science Teachers' Pedagogical Content Knowledge*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.
- Magnusson, S., Krajcik, J., & Borko, H. (1999). Nature, sources, and development of pedagogical content knowledge for science teaching. In J. Gess-Newsome & N. Lederman (Eds.), *Examining Pedagogical Content Knowledge* (pp. 95–132). Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Nahalka, I. (1998). Constructivist Pedagogy – A New Paradigm on the Horizon I–III. *Iskolakultúra*, 7(2–4). (hun)
- Nahalka, I. (2002). *How Knowledge Develops in Children*. Budapest: National Textbook Publishing. (hun)
- Shulman, L. S. (1986). Those who understand: Knowledge growth in teaching. *Educational Researcher*, 15(2), 4–14.
- Shulman, L. S. (1987). Knowledge and teaching: Foundations of the new reform. *Harvard Educational Review*, 57(1), 1–22.
- Szalay, L. (Ed.). (2015). *Methodology of Teaching Chemistry*. Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest. (hun)
- Szalay, L. (2016). *The Feasibility of Inquiry-Based Chemistry Teaching*. MTA–ELTE Research Group for Inquiry-Based Chemistry Teaching.
<https://ttomc.elte.hu/publications/90> (hun)

Writing Effective Learning Outcomes: Bridging Research and Classroom Practice

Adina GLAVA¹ , Dana OPRE¹ , Adrian OPRE* 

ABSTRACT. This paper examines the role of learning outcomes in the design of higher education curricula, focusing on the Romanian context and the broader European policy framework. Over the past two decades, higher education has shifted from a content-centered model toward a student-centered paradigm that emphasizes what graduates are able to demonstrate in terms of knowledge, skills, autonomy, and responsibility. Although learning outcomes were introduced within the Bologna Process to support transparency, comparability, and employability, their implementation often remains formal rather than transformative. Drawing on insights from the learning sciences, the paper highlights the importance of formulating outcomes that support deep understanding, knowledge transfer, and progression from novice to expert. It also discusses the distinction between knowledge, understanding, and skills, as well as the need to embed autonomy and responsibility within outcome statements. Finally, the study proposes the Rigour/Relevance Framework as a practical instrument for designing learning outcomes that integrate cognitive demand with authentic application contexts, thereby strengthening alignment between curriculum design, teaching, assessment, and the development of professional expertise.

Keywords: learning outcomes, competencies, deep learning, Daggett framework

1. The Romanian Higher Education Context in Relation to the Implementation of the Learning Outcomes Principle

A paradigm shift has been reshaping the mission of higher education over the past two decades: the central challenge is no longer how efficiently universities transmit information, but how intentionally they cultivate professional

¹ Department of Education Sciences, Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences, Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania.

* Corresponding author: adrianopre@psychology.ro



expertise. In a context where knowledge is abundant and rapidly accessible, the key differentiator becomes what students can actually do with what they know—how they reason, how they transfer learning to new and unfamiliar situations, and how they perform in complex, real-world contexts. This shift raises the stakes for curriculum design. Learning can no longer be reduced to content coverage; academic programmes must articulate clearly what graduates are expected to demonstrate, at what level of sophistication, and in which contexts of application.

The orientation toward learning outcomes emerged in Europe precisely as a response to these challenges. Within the Bologna Process, the language of learning outcomes was introduced at the Berlin ministerial meeting in 2003 and consolidated at the Bergen meeting in 2005 through the adoption of the Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area. Grounded in descriptors formulated in terms of learning outcomes, this framework marked a transition toward a student-centered paradigm. The new paradigm emphasizes demonstrable learning, employability, and the transparency and comparability of qualifications across systems.

Despite this policy commitment, the implementation of the learning outcomes approach remains uneven across many higher education systems, including that of Romania. In practice, learning outcomes may function either as the backbone of programme design and quality assurance or merely as a formal compliance layer that leaves teaching and assessment practices largely unchanged. This difficulty is often compounded by the proliferation of programme documents—programme descriptions, course syllabi, assessment frameworks, and diploma supplements—where outcomes may appear in different forms or levels of detail. When external standards and quality assurance requirements are added, learning outcomes may be perceived by academics more as administrative artefacts than as tools for guiding teaching, learning, and assessment.

The consequence of this “formalization without transformation” is significant. When outcomes lack clarity and practical relevance, teaching frequently defaults to lectures and examinations that privilege recall rather than competence, leaving students to infer how academic knowledge connects to professional practice. Yet a genuinely student-centred approach requires the opposite logic: what ultimately matters is not what teachers intend to teach, but what students are able to demonstrate at the end of a course or programme. For this reason, higher education institutions face the challenge of translating disciplinary knowledge into coherent, observable learning outcomes that support meaningful curriculum design, credible assessment, and clearer communication of graduate capabilities.

Learning outcomes constitute a central element in the design of the university curriculum because they mediate the relationship between institutional objectives and the individual needs of learners. They specify what students are expected to know and understand, what they should be able to do, and what types of attitudes or values they should develop, thereby providing a framework for organizing teaching and learning processes from a learner-centred perspective. As students' progress within a university level/cycle, as well as between levels, the corresponding programmes and courses must include learning outcomes that reflect progressively higher levels of complexity. In practice, these outcomes must foster the development of students' autonomy and their capacity to address less structured or unpredictable situations and tasks. Although the literature consistently emphasizes the importance of properly formulating learning outcomes for the effective design of curricula and assessment strategies, numerous studies show that their clarity and quality remain deficient, including in prestigious universities (Schoepp, 2019).

2. What are learning outcomes?

Learning outcomes are a central instrument in curriculum design and in the assessment of student performance, reflecting the shift from a content-centered approach to one oriented toward learners' concrete achievements. They define what a student knows, understands, and is able to do at the end of an educational process, and are articulated in terms of knowledge, understanding, and skills demonstrated at specific levels of autonomy and responsibility (European Commission, 2017).

An essential distinction in the formulation of learning outcomes is that between knowledge and understanding, on the one hand, and skills, on the other. Knowledge and understanding concern the mental representation of a field, with an emphasis on concepts, principles, theories, and models, and reflect the quality of understanding rather than the mere memorization of information. They involve the processing, integration, and analysis of information without its immediate application in practice. By contrast, skills refer to the application of acquired knowledge in concrete contexts; they are observable and assessable through performance and involve decision-making, adaptation, and problem solving (Biggs & Tang, 2011). This distinction thus underscores the transition from conceptual knowledge to the capacity to use and transform knowledge into practical outcomes. Educational contexts in which learning occurs help clarify this distinction. The theoretical-formative context, intended for the deepening of knowledge and understanding, includes activities such as debates, presentations,

discussions, papers, tests, and theoretical assessments, allowing students to process and analyze information without immediately applying it. By contrast, the practical-applied context supports the development of skills through the use of knowledge to produce concrete outcomes or to solve simulated problems or problems closely approximating real situations, by means of laboratories, practical exercises, projects, case studies, simulations, interventions, and placements (CEDEFOP, 2017). This organization highlights the complementarity of the two dimensions and the importance of the formative context in defining educational objectives.

Finally, the clear formulation of learning outcomes, correlated with the type of educational context, provides a coherent framework for teaching and assessment, ensuring alignment between institutional objectives and learners' needs. It also contributes to greater transparency of study programmes and to the development of the academic and professional competences required for active learning and the application of knowledge in new contexts (Kennedy et al., 2007; European Commission, 2017).

3. Why is it necessary to formulate the aims of a programme/course/learning sequence in terms of learning outcomes?

The formulation of learning outcomes is a foundational component of university curriculum design, serving multiple strategic purposes. As is already well known, expressing educational aims in terms of outcomes facilitates the international recognition of qualifications by providing a common language that enables comparison of the competences acquired by students in different educational systems (European Commission, 2017).

Another highly important, though unfortunately less frequently highlighted, aspect is that formulating educational aims in terms of learning outcomes is consonant with findings from the learning sciences. Within this framework, clearly defined learning outcomes can function as an essential link between emerging knowledge from the learning sciences and the concrete design of effective educational experiences. Studies in the learning sciences that analyse the differences between experts and novices, as well as the mechanisms of knowledge transfer, provide a solid theoretical framework for understanding how learning outcomes should be formulated. Research shows that experts and novices differ not only in the amount of knowledge they possess, but above all in the way that knowledge is structured and organized. Experts possess well-integrated cognitive representations organized around key concepts and fundamental principles, whereas novices tend to focus on surface features and fragmented information. Moreover, experts

demonstrate knowledge transfer, that is, the ability to apply intelligently what they have learned, knowing when, how, and why to use their information in new contexts (Bransford et al., 2010). This novice-expert difference has direct implications for the formulation of learning outcomes. If outcomes are expressed solely in terms of the accumulation of information or the reproduction of content, they risk supporting learning strategies characteristic of the novice level and limiting progression toward expertise. By contrast, outcomes formulated around conceptual understanding, the relationships among ideas, and the application of principles in varied contexts more faithfully reflect the way experts use knowledge. Learning outcomes that explicitly include the capacity to apply, adapt, and transfer knowledge to new problems encourage the design of activities and assessments that go beyond memorization and foster deep learning.

Therefore, integrating these findings from learning sciences research into the formulation of learning outcomes allows for better alignment between what is known about how people learn and the ways in which curriculum content, teaching, and assessment are designed. Concretely, learning outcomes become not merely statements with administrative or normative functions, but also pedagogical instruments that guide progression from novice to expert and support the development of transfer capacity, a central aim of education.

4. How do we formulate learning outcomes?

Learning outcomes represent a key concept used by specialists in the education system. They approximate as accurately as possible the actual competences required in professional contexts, thereby ensuring the academic and practical relevance of study programmes. Competence refers to the demonstrated capacity to use knowledge and skills in concrete work situations. It reflects what students are effectively and independently able to do, mobilizing a broad repertoire of knowledge and abilities in order to solve problems and make informed decisions in specific professional situations. In practical terms, competence is demonstrated when students are able to transfer the knowledge and skills acquired in relevant learning contexts to authentic professional contexts.

At programme level, the formulation of learning outcomes begins with the professional competences that students or graduates are expected to develop. A learning outcome is constructed by combining several elements: the subject of learning (the student or graduate), the action performed expressed by an action verb, the content, and the context in which it takes place. This structure may be synthesized as follows: Student/Graduate + Action + Content + Context (see figure 1). This algorithm may be used both for formulating outcomes on

the dimension of knowledge and understanding and for formulating skills-related outcomes. For example, a knowledge-oriented outcome may be: “Students describe, in their own words, the conclusions of statistical interpretations in the specialist articles studied,” whereas a skills-oriented outcome may be: “Students use SPSS in carrying out a research project.”



A particularly thorny and very frequent challenge in formulating learning outcomes concerns the representation of autonomy and responsibility. According to the EQF (European Qualifications Framework), beyond knowledge, understanding, and skills, learning outcomes are also formulated in terms of autonomy (the capacity for initiative and independent decision-making) and responsibility (assuming the consequences of one’s own activity). From our perspective, grounded in the literature and in international practice (Purvis & Winwood, 2023), autonomy and responsibility should not be formulated separately; rather, they should be integrated into the structure of outcomes concerning knowledge, understanding, and skills, because they constitute indicators of progress in the development of knowledge and skills. This integration has several advantages: it makes progression visible, removes ambiguity in assessment, and clearly aligns outcomes, tasks, and assessment criteria, helping the student understand what it means to become autonomous. Concretely, this progression may be illustrated as follows: in the first year, autonomy is limited and guided; in the second year, autonomy is moderate, with the student selecting concepts and justifying choices; at master’s level, autonomy is high, with the student creating original solutions and assuming responsibility for the impact of decisions. EQF qualification levels 6–8 explicitly reflect this progression, from the application of known procedures in predictable contexts to autonomy in complex contexts, the coordination of other professionals, and contribution to the development of knowledge.

To support the process of formulating learning outcomes, several strategies and instruments have been adapted and/or developed. One of the most intuitive instruments, and one supported by solid empirical evidence, is the Rigour/Relevance Framework, proposed and promoted by Willard Daggett as a representative of International Center for Leadership in Education (2014a, 2014b). This extends The revised Bloom’s Taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001) by making the

context of knowledge and abilities application explicit, thereby strengthening the connection between academic knowledge and professional practice. The framework functions as a progression tool, highlighting the pathway from novice to expert and integrating autonomy and responsibility directly into performance expectations. In addition, the alignment of the framework with the EQF descriptors for levels 6–8 provides a solid external benchmark and ensures the international consistency of the curriculum (Purvis & Winwood, 2023).

5. Rigour/Relevance Framework– an instrument for writing learning outcomes

The essence and components of Rigour/Relevance Framework

Bill Daggett’s Rigour/Relevance Framework can be repurposed as a framework for writing and evaluating learning outcomes in higher education. The framework brings together two essential dimensions of expertise: the level of cognitive demand (rigour) and the degree to which knowledge is applied in authentic contexts (relevance). It does not replace established taxonomies; rather, it builds on them to make the “quality of learning” observable by linking what students are asked to think with where and how they are asked to use what they know.

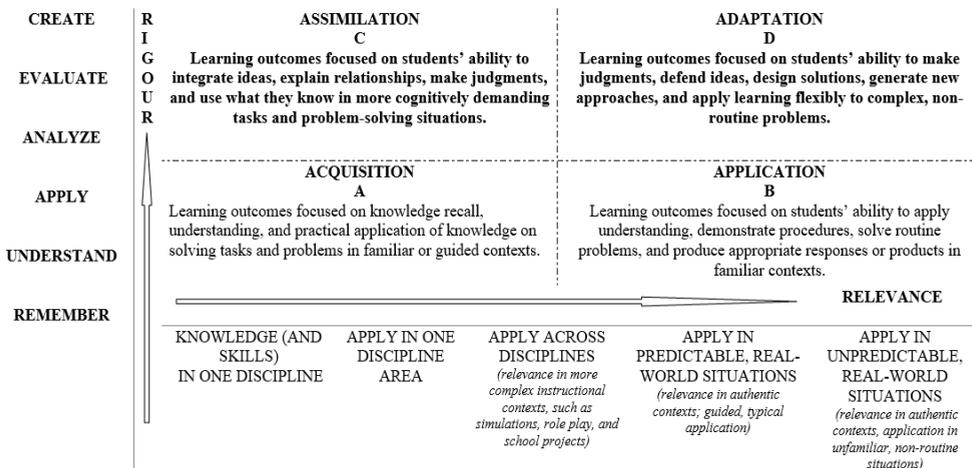
Dimension 1: Rigour (cognitive demand)

Rigour is anchored in the logic of Bloom’s revised taxonomy: from remembering and understanding toward analysing, evaluating, and creating. But in this framework, rigour is not merely a ladder of verbs; it is a progression in the depth, structure, and critical handling of knowledge. At the rigorous end, students are expected to construct coherent mental models of a field, integrate concepts meaningfully, justify interpretations, and examine assumptions critically, thus moving beyond routine reproduction into deliberate reasoning.

Dimension 2: Relevance (application context)

Relevance captures the contexts in which knowledge is applied, ranging from classroom-framed tasks to integrated and authentic life situations where information may be incomplete, constraints are real, and solutions require personal judgment and adaptation. Importantly, relevance is not only an external practicality; it also includes the student’s direct and personal engagement with learning and implies self-reflection, meaning-making, and connection to an emerging professional identity. In outcome terms, this means specifying the contexts and demands that invite students to internalize learning, not only to perform it correctly.

By pairing these two dimensions, the framework distinguishes between high-level cognitive operations performed within predictable disciplinary frames and cognitive and actional performances that require knowledge-in-use across varied, integrated, and sometimes messy conditions. Thus, four quadrants of learning acquisitions and performances are delineated. The four quadrants represent progressively more complex combinations of rigor and relevance. Quadrant A (Acquisition) refers to the basic acquisition of knowledge, where learners recall, recognize, and demonstrate understanding of essential concepts and information. At this level, learning remains relatively connected and is primarily associated with what students know. Quadrant B (Application) moves beyond recall toward the practical use of knowledge and skills in familiar situations, emphasizing correct routines, procedural accuracy, and problem-solving strategies. In this sense, it corresponds to what students can do with what they have learned. Quadrant C (Assimilation) involves deeper cognitive engagement with content, as learners analyze, reorganize, and critically approach concepts and themes already known in depth, while also identifying relationships and connections across ideas. Quadrant D (Adaptation) reflects the highest level of both rigor and relevance, as learners transfer knowledge and skills to new, unpredictable, and personally meaningful contexts. For students to navigate towards learning outcomes that fit this quadrant they must experience what is can be called an active and strategic engagement with knowledge and its respective practical and professional field, fruitful learning relationships, understood as connection with peers and ideas, empathy, and freedom, as well as learning experiences grounded in self-reflection, creativity, empathy, and personal developmental needs (ICLE, 2012, Daggett, 2014a).



Rigor/Relevance Framework, Daggett (2014a); International Centre for Leadership in Education (2012)

All these attributes of Rigour/Relevance Framework make it especially suitable as a shared “grammar” for outcomes. The instrument helps departments and study programmes providers preserve the disciplinary identity while aligning expectations across documents and making programme claims legible to students, quality assurance bodies, and employers. Focusing on the management of learning rigour and relevance can become a leverage for gradually supporting students deep learning, capacity of knowledge transfer and professional expertise.

Supporting deep learning, transfer and expertise through Rigour/Relevance Framework

The central marker of professional expertise is transfer: the ability to carry learning across problems, settings, and levels of uncertainty. A key value of the Rigour/Relevance Framework is that it prevents transfer from being treated as an optimistic by-product of “knowing theory.” Instead, it prompts educators to design outcomes and learning experiences that require recontextualization, explicitly recognizing what matters in a new situation, retrieving relevant knowledge, adapting it, negotiating constraints, and producing defensible decisions or outputs (ICLE, 2012).

This logic translates directly into assessment design. The framework provides reference points for diversifying assessment tasks along a continuum of authenticity, clarifying what counts as evidence of achievement at different points in a programme and supporting fair and equitable evaluation.

Academically situated performances

Even when rigour is high, many instructional assessment situations remain within stable disciplinary frames: debates, structured discussions, oral presentations, essays and reports, theoretical tests, or other conceptual examinations. These can demand analysis, evaluation, and even creation, but typically operate in a predictable “classroom-like” context where cues are familiar and prototypical and criteria are largely academic.

Authentic performances.

As relevance increases, instruction and assessments require students to mobilize knowledge to solve problems in simulated, near-real, or fully authentic contexts: laboratories, practical exercises, projects, case studies, simulations, guided interventions, internships or practicum activities, and the production of tangible outputs such as prototypes, portfolios, analyses for real clients, professional documents, validated products (ICLE, 2012). These tasks foreground judgment under constraints and make competence visible as performance rather than recall.

By mapping outcomes and, consequently instruction and assessment across these types of training experiences, the framework helps curriculum teams move from general intentions (“students will understand/apply/solve”) toward explicit evidence conditions: what students must do, under what circumstances, and with what level of cognitive challenge and authenticity. This strengthens alignment between intended outcomes, teaching strategies, and assessment, while making expectations transparent rather than implicit and instructor – dependent (Crețu, 2019).

Making Learning Progression Visible: Building Autonomy and Responsibility

A significant benefit of this framework is that it allows autonomy and responsibility to be treated as vectors of performance rather than as generic “add-ons.” In practice, autonomy is visible in how a task is carried out: the degree of initiative, the quality of judgment, the management of uncertainty, self-monitoring and revision, and the ability to proceed with less scaffolding. Responsibility is equally embedded in performance: anticipating consequences, justifying choices with evidence, respecting standards, managing risk, and accounting for ethical and professional implications. Two students may produce similar final products while differing profoundly in the guidance they required and the robustness of their decision-making. So autonomy and responsibility must be written into the conditions of outcomes, not appended as vague statements. This aspect is essential for longitudinal coherence and for attempting to reduce the gap between academic leaning and labour market expectations (Finch et al., 2008). When autonomy and responsibility are formulated separately, programmes often end up repeating the same generic descriptors year after year (“works independently,” “shows responsibility”), obscuring real progression. When embedded within the framework’s logic of increasing rigour and relevance, the developmental storyline becomes concrete: early outcomes can legitimately include guidance and structured contexts, while later outcomes require self-direction and accountability in ill-structured, integrated, or authentic situations.

A concrete way to secure progression is to anchor expectations in the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), especially Levels 6–8 (bachelor’s, master’s, doctoral). EQF descriptors (2017) scale not only knowledge and skills, but also responsibility and autonomy, offering a shared reference for what “more advanced” means across disciplines:

- EQF Level 6 (Bachelor’s): emphasizes competent performance in known procedures and generally predictable contexts. Outcomes may include scaffolding, such as applying a given method to a structured case or justifying choices using provided criteria. The graduate profile does not typically imply strategic leadership or redefining problem spaces.

- EQF Level 7 (Master's): shifts toward autonomous judgment in complex, unpredictable contexts. Graduates decide what should be done, justify choices, integrate knowledge across fields, and manage or transform situations that require new approaches. Outcomes can credibly involve coordinating the work of others and taking responsibility for professional and ethical impact.
- EQF Level 8 (Doctoral): culminates in the capacity to develop new knowledge, operating at the frontier of a field through research and innovation, demonstrating substantial authority, integrity, and sustained commitment to generating new ideas and processes.

Daggett's model complements EQF by translating these descriptors into teachable and assessable patterns: as rigour and relevance rise, the expected level of self-direction and accountability rises accordingly. Progression is no longer reduced to "harder content," but becomes a shift in performance conditions (predictable to unpredictable), scope of responsibility (individual contribution to coordination and transformation), and nature of outputs (application to the creation of new knowledge).

Used as a guide for writing learning outcomes, the Rigour/Relevance Framework functions as a practical grammar for making outcomes "performable." It helps programmes specify both the sophistication of thinking students must demonstrate and the conditions under which that thinking counts as credible evidence of learning. When positioned intentionally along the two dimensions, outcomes stop being generic statements and start guiding instructional design, assessment choices, and students' progression from novice performance to professional expertise.

6. Conclusion

Although the learning outcomes paradigm has been widely adopted in European higher education as a means of supporting student-centred learning and transparency of qualifications, its implementation often remains superficial. When learning outcomes function mainly as formal requirements rather than as guiding principles for curriculum design, teaching, and assessment, their transformative potential is limited. Strengthening their practical use is therefore essential for aligning higher education programmes with the development of meaningful professional competencies.

Formulating educational goals in the form of learning outcomes also legitimizes a broader conception of performance. Outcomes can capture not only correct routines and problem-solving strategies, but also professional

values and functional attitudes - how graduates engage strategically, regulate their learning, relate responsibly to others, communicate with empathy, and sustain quality under constraints. In line with what cognitive psychology and learning sciences emphasize, durable learning goes beyond storage of information towards the construction of mental models, reasoning strategies, and patterns of judgment that can be retrieved, adapted, and transferred. “Knowing” is inseparable from “being able to use what one knows.” By aligning intended outcomes, teaching, and assessment through a structured progression of rigour, relevance, autonomy, and responsibility, the construction of expertise becomes visible as a step-by-step process—transparent to students, credible to employers, and coherent across an entire curriculum.

REFERENCES

- Anderson, L. W. & D. R. Krathwohl, D. R. (Eds.) (2001). *A Taxonomy for Learning, Teaching, and Assessing: A Revision of Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives* (Pearson Education Group, 2001)
- Biggs, J., & Tang, C. (2011). Train-the-trainers: Implementing outcomes-based teaching and learning in Malaysian higher education. *Malaysian Journal of Learning and Instruction*, 8, 1-19.
- Bransford, J. D., Brown, A. L., & Cocking, R. R. (2000). *How people learn* (Vol. 11). Washington, DC: National academy press.
- CEDEFOP (2017) *Defining, Writing and Applying Learning Outcomes: A European Handbook*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.
- Council of the European Union (2017). Council Recommendation of 22 May 2017 on the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning and repealing the recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 April 2008 on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning. Official Journal of the European Union, C 189/15.
- Crețu, D. M. (2019). Designing rigorous and relevant learning experiences for future teachers. In *MATEC Web of Conferences* (Vol. 290, p. 13002). EDP Sciences. <https://doi.org/10.1051/mateconf/201929013002>
- Daggett, B. (2014b). Addressing Current and Future Challenges in Education, ICLE. Retrived from https://cdnsm5-ss14.sharpschool.com/UserFiles/Servers/Server_976073/File/About%20Us/strategic-planning/orientation/2-AddressingCurrentandFutureChallenges.pdf
- Daggett, W. R. (2014a). *Rigor/Relevance Framework*®. International Center for Leadership in Education. Retrived from http://nyctecenter.org/images/files/Publications/Rigor_Relevance_Framework_2014.pdf

- European Commission (2017). European Qualifications Framework (EQF).
<https://europass.europa.eu/en/european-qualifications-framework-eqf>
- Finch, D., Falkenberg, L., McLaren, P. G., Rondeau, K. V., & O'Reilly, N. (2018). The rigour–relevance gap in professional programmes: Bridging the ‘unbridgeable’ between higher education and practice. *Industry and Higher Education*, 32(3), 152-168.
- Finch, D., Falkenberg, L., McLaren, P. G., Rondeau, K. V., & O'Reilly, N. (2018). The rigour–relevance gap in professional programmes: Bridging the ‘unbridgeable’ between higher education and practice. *Industry and Higher Education*, 32(3), 152-168. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09504222187682>
- International Center for Leadership in Education (2012). *Rigor and Relevance for All Students and Instructional Strategies for Each Quadrant*. Retrived from:
http://s3.amazonaws.com/scschoolfiles/121/rigorrelevance_activity_pack.pdf
- Kennedy, D., Hyland, A. & Ryan, N. (2007) *Writing and Using Learning Outcomes: A Practical Guide*. Cork: University College Cork.
- Purvis, Alison, and Bridget Winwood. “A guide to writing learning outcomes in higher education” (2023). <https://doi.org/10.25416/NTR.23559972.v1>
- Schoepp, K. (2019). The state of course learning outcomes at leading universities. *Studies in Higher Education*, 44(4), 615-627.