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Article

University Sport, Means of Integration for the Foreign Students: Challenges and Opportunities in the Context of Migration

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Abstract: This article aims at analyzing to what extent university sport can serve as an effective means of the foreign students' integration and identifying the main challenges and opportunities they encounter in the integration process in the context of migration. The purpose of the study is to analyze the role of university sports activities in facilitating the foreign students' integration. Within the research there was made a quantitative analysis, based on data collected through a survey applied to a sample of 134 foreign students enrolled at a university in Moldova. Of these, 25.4% come from Ukraine, 15.7% from Romania, 17.9% from Greece, 14.2% from Russia, and 26.9% from the regions of the Middle East and India. There were conducted 20 interviews with the foreign students to gain a more detailed understanding of their experience of participating in sports competitions. The results indicate that by participating in university sports competitions, the students have improved their perception of the local culture, overcome language barriers and at the same time there were identified integration challenges. Thus, university sport is not only a recreational activity, but also an essential framework for the foreign students' integration, contributing to a unique academic and social experience.

Keywords: university sport; integration; foreign students; migration

1. Introduction

With the intensification of migration processes and the increase in the number of the foreign students who chose to immigrate to the Republic of Moldova, it became imperative to adopt a systematic and coherent approach to their integration. In Moldova, this topic has not been addressed on a large scale in the specialized literature. There is a significant gap in local research on how sports activities can facilitate the foreign students' social and cultural integration, thus providing an opportunity to explore the impact of university sport on social cohesion and academic adjustment. This study will bring new perspectives and strategies to support the foreign students' effective integration in Moldovan universities.

In the international specialized literature, sport is a subject of increased interest, being recognized as a potential tool for the foreign students' integration and adaptation. Starting from the theory of interculturality, sport is not only a physical activity, but a social space where individuals from different cultural backgrounds can interact, share values and build social relationships [1]. In

this context, the research carried out in Moldova [2] emphasizes the fact that the foreign students' participation in sports activities contributes to overcoming language and cultural barriers, thus strengthening the cohesion between students groups. This perspective is also supported by the international studies [3–5], which argue that extracurricular activities, especially sports, play a decisive role in the process of social and intercultural integration. These activities create opportunities for the development of interpersonal relationships and for intercultural interaction, thus helping to reduce isolation and improve the sense of belonging to the community.

Another important aspect of this phenomenon is the connection between the students' social integration, mental and physical well-being. Participating in sports activities not only improves social relationships, but also contributes to maintaining mental health, reducing stress and anxiety associated with the transition to a new cultural environment. This is a conclusion supported by local researchers [2,6], who demonstrate how sports can become an effective channel for promoting health and well-being among foreign students.

The analysis of the challenges identified in the research on the foreign students' participation in university sports highlights the following major problems: language barriers, cultural differences, limited access to resources, discrimination, racism, etc. Each of these challenges has a significant impact on the foreign students' integration in university sports activities and can affect the participants' cohesion in the competitions and the sense of belonging to the academic community. Language barriers represent one of the most significant obstacles in the foreign students' participation in sports activities. Studies [7,8] show us that communication difficulties prevent students from effectively integrating into sports activities. They not only have problems in understanding technical instructions, but also in building social relationships with their teammates. These communication barriers can diminish the feeling of inclusion and create a distance between the local and foreign students, affecting the foreign students' performance and motivation to be actively involved in sports.

Cultural differences are another important factor regarding the foreign students' participation in sports activities. Studies carried out by researchers [9,10] point out that different cultural norms and values can cause tensions and misunderstandings. Each culture has its own norms regarding sports, collaboration and competitiveness. When these norms are in conflict, difficulties may arise in communication and in establishing trusting relationships within different activities. This can negatively affect group cohesion and the sense of foreign students' belonging, who risk feeling marginalized or excluded.

Limited access to sports resources is another major challenge, especially in small universities or in developing countries such as Moldova. Research done both at the international and national level [11,12], emphasizes that limited sports resources, such as the lack of adequate equipment or sports infrastructure, can represent a barrier for the foreign students, who need support to integrate. These limitations can lead to a reduced participation of the foreign students in university sports activities, diminishing their opportunities for socialization and integration.

Analyzing these challenges we can mention that the foreign students' participation in university sports is affected by complex factors, involving both linguistic and cultural aspects, as well as access to resources. To promote the foreign students' effective integration, universities should take steps to mitigate these barriers by offering language courses, cultural awareness programs and improving sports infrastructure. Thus, sport can become an appropriate environment for intercultural interaction and social cohesion among students from diverse backgrounds.

The opportunities that sport offers to the foreign students, the specialized literature provides solid evidence that underlines the major benefits of involvement in sports activities, contributing to their integration and well-being [13,14].

Social networking is one of the most obvious benefits of participating in sports. Thus, the authors [15,16] emphasize the fact that sports facilitate social interactions between the foreign students and their local colleagues, accelerating the integration process. By participating in practices and competitions, the students will not only develop their athletic skills, but also have the opportunity to

form strong relationships that provide emotional support and strengthen their sense of community. In the university context, this aspect is particularly important, as the foreign students often face social isolation and lack of a support network, and sport can serve as an essential platform for building these bonds.

The development of intercultural skills is another benefit highlighted by literature [17,18]. Thus, we believe that sport will provide an ideal setting for students to interact with people from different cultures and learn about cultural diversity. This interaction will help develop intercultural skills such as empathy, mutual respect and understanding of cultural differences, essential in a globalized world. Sport facilitates an informal cultural exchange [9], where students can learn through direct experience, developing a better ability to communicate and collaborate with people from different cultural backgrounds. In this sense, sport becomes an unconventional educational environment that prepares students for their future careers in multicultural societies.

Improving physical and mental health is another strong argument in favor of participating in sports activities. According to the authors, Bota and Enachi [19,20], regular physical activity is essential for maintaining a state of well-being, especially for the students who face the stress of adapting to a new environment. Cultural changes, language difficulties and academic pressure can create anxiety and stress for the foreign students. Sport not only improves physical health, but plays an essential role in reducing stress and anxiety, contributing to a more balanced mental state [21]. Participating in sports provides a way for students to better manage the emotional and psychological challenges associated with transitioning into a new cultural environment.

These opportunities underline the fact that sport not only facilitates the foreign students' integration, but also contributes to the development of essential intercultural competences and to the improvement of their general health. By promoting these activities in the university environment, educational institutions can support the foreign students' effective integration and increased physical and mental well-being, contributing to their academic and personal success.

In this research we will highlight the complexity of the interaction between sport and sociocultural integration, highlighting both the opportunities it offers and the challenges it entails, providing a stable theoretical framework to understand how participation in sports activities can shape social relations between different communities.

At the same time, analyzing the theoretical sources regarding the foreign students' socio-cultural integration [5,9,15], we can report that the main deficit of the analyzed or implemented initiatives consists in the lack of an integrated character of the proposed activities. In this context, it is highlighted the need to include, in addition to the standard methods frequently used, an important component dedicated to physical and sports activities. These activities contribute significantly to the integration process due to their unique characteristics, facilitating the reduction of negative effects such as anxiety, low tolerance or "culture shock", supporting the acquisition of communication skills, strengthening self-awareness as an individual and promoting gradual integration in new conditions of life in an adapted and natural way.

The purpose of the study is to analyze the role of university sports activities in facilitating the foreign students' integration. In this context, special emphasis is placed on the challenges and opportunities that the foreign students encounter in the context of migration, considering the various difficulties they may have in adapting to a new culture and academic environment. At the same time, there is an emphasis on the collaboration between universities and the local community, exploring how sport can act as a connecting tool between students and locals, thus facilitating cultural and social integration.

To achieve the proposed goal, there was formulated the hypothesis that the foreign students' participation in university sports activities will significantly contribute to facilitating their sociocultural integration. This participation will not only improve their social skills, but also help build stable intercultural relationships, essential for a successful adaptation to a new environment. This idea aligns with the research that demonstrates that sport can be an important catalyst for social integration, fostering collaboration, mutual understanding and community cohesion [22,23].

2. Materials and Methods

The study is based on the analysis of legislation on migration, statistical and administrative data [24], at the same time there was used empirical and analytical material, scientific hypotheses and conclusions presented in the works of the researchers on the problems of the foreign students' integration.

2.1. Participants

For the selection of study participants, there were applied clear inclusion and exclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria concerned the foreign students registered at a university in Moldova, who expressed their voluntary agreement to participate and provided relevant information for the research objectives. Following the initial survey, the final number of participants was reduced to 134, as a result of some students' exclusion for various reasons, including failure to meet eligibility criteria (e.g. lack of foreign student status), refusal to participate, incomplete completion of responses or voluntary withdrawal from the study. Of these, 25.4% are students from Ukraine, 15.7% from Romania, 17.9% from Greece, 14.2% from Russia, 26.9% from the Middle East and India, later there were organized 20 interviews with the foreign students to gain a deeper insight into their experiences of participating in sports activities.

Following the analysis of the sociological survey conducted among the foreign students and the various integration processes, they were invited to participate in university competitions alongside their colleagues from the host country, but also in other activities organized within the institution. At the same time, there were monitored the university sports activities carried out during one semester (January - June 2024), in order to observe the social interactions between the foreign and local students.

The activities took place in larger groups, as, in addition to the foreign students, there were also included colleagues from the host country. This approach can be considered an essential condition, which significantly contributed to the efficiency of the integration process. Participation in these activities took place on various platforms, such as classrooms and sports fields, depending on the objectives set for each activity. Special attention was paid to the organization of dynamic and sports games, their selection being adapted to the preferences expressed by the participants.

At the same time, there was applied an online questionnaire to assess the foreign students' well-being, both in the initial and final stages, with the aim of analyzing the impact of sports activities on their integration process.

For completing the online questionnaires, we provided with instructions explaining that their participation is completely voluntary and anonymous and that there are no right or wrong answers, as we only want to know their perception of socio-cultural in-tegration and the impact of sport activities on the integration process. The estimated average time for completion was 20 minutes. The research protocol was approved by the Ethical Commission of the State University of Physical Education and Sport in Chisinau (Moldova, No 01-14/22/09.01.2024).

2.2. Variables and Measurements

Participation in university sports activities is one of the central variables that re-fers to the degree of involvement of foreign students in sports activities organized within the university, including competitions, training sessions and other similar events. Participation is measured by the frequency and type of activities in which stu-dents have taken part, which can give a clear picture of their interest and willingness to integrate through sport into the university environment. Socio-cultural integration is assessed from multiple perspectives, including the foreign students' adaptation to the cultural and academic context of the university, as well as the interpersonal rela-tions between foreign and local students. It also assesses the impact of sport activities on the integration process, observing whether they contribute to reducing cultural bar-riers and promoting a more open and inclusive environment.

Online questionnaires were used to collect information about foreign students' perceptions of the integration process before and after participating in sport activities. The questionnaires included questions about the impact of the activities on their well-being, cultural integration and interpersonal relationships. In addition, a total of 20 international students were interviewed in order to gain a deeper understanding of their experience of participating in university sport activities. The interviews were useful to explore students' subjective emotions and perceptions, providing a personal perspective on the integration process.

A statistical tool used for organizing and interpreting the questionnaire data is the dendrogram which helped us to identify patterns and groups of students based on their integration characteristics, thus providing a clear picture of the diversity of foreign students' experiences.

Indicators such as motivation to study, language skills, satisfaction with social interactions and access to sports activities were used to assess the level of integration. These indicators allow a detailed measurement of various aspects of the integration process and how sport activities influence these dimensions.

The measures of this study provide a clear insight into the impact of sport activities on the socio-cultural integration of foreign students, highlighting both the benefits and challenges associated with this process.

2.3. Statistical Analyses

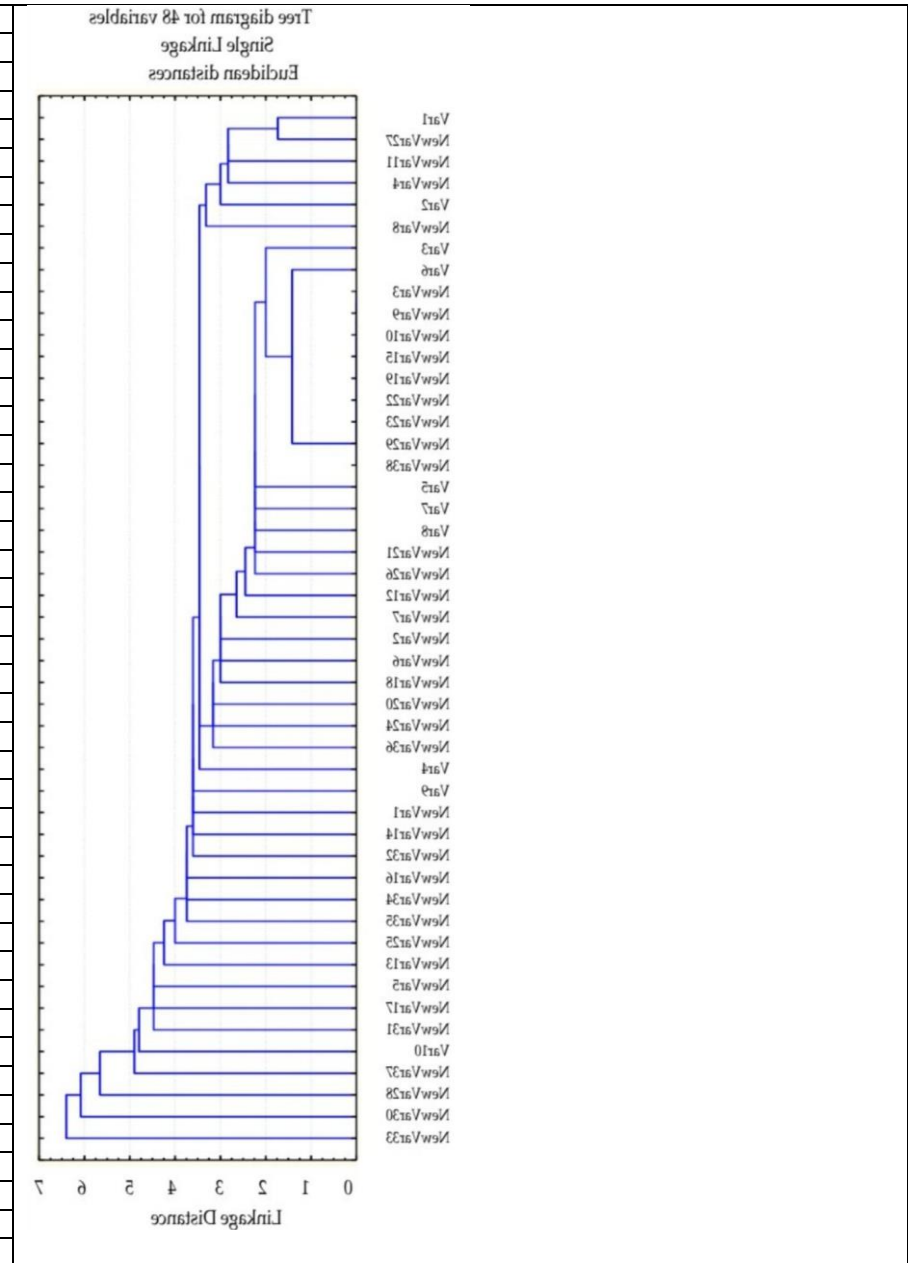
To analyze the responses from the questionnaire given to the foreign students, we used the dendrogram, which is an effective tool for organizing and interpreting data according to similarities or differences between them. The difference value was calculated through the clustering method, in our case it is the Euclidean distance, being essential in the dendrogram.

SPSS 15.01 software was used to analyze the questionnaires and to extract descriptive statistics about the participants, while using Microsoft Excel -2010 software, means, standard deviation and correlations were calculated.

3. Results

Following the survey, we identified various integration processes that have a significant impact on daily activities, the educational process and the students' psycho-emotional state (Figure 1, Table 1).

Attributes that define the level of the foreign students' integration
Motivation to study in a university in the Republic of Moldova
Specific psychological traits
Foreign students' individual characteristics
Motivational and axiological foundation
Common values between cultures in contact
Knowledge about the new sociocultural environment
Linguistic competence
Adaptation to the new linguistic context
Satisfaction with the quality of social and intercultural interactions
Existence of interactions between teachers, local students and foreign students
Encouragement to overcome communication barriers in the new social environment
Self-organization capacity
Presence of friends who speak Romanian
Level of communication skills' development
Need for affirmation in a new cultural environment
Benefits of interacting with older peers
Sociocultural values of the new community
Understanding behavioral norms and their specifics
Degree of compatibility between cultures and values
Possibility to socialize with people from the same country
Development of relevant personal and psychological traits
Increasing essential professional skills
Access to modern learning technologies and information resources
The educational environment within the university
The mentor's presence or support
Organization of trainings and other activities for integration into the university environment
Periodic organization of sports and recreational activities with the foreign students' active involvement
Knowledge of the culture, history and traditions of the host country for foreign students
Characteristics of life in an international community
Tolerance and social openness of the environment
Access to cultural experiences (visits to theatres, museums, exhibitions)
Support offered to students by the staff in the deans' offices and departments
Personal development
Possibility of maintaining a healthy lifestyle
Access to adequate medical services
Resolving administrative issues such as documentation
Dormitory accommodation assistance
Support for providing food in canteens
Climatic-geographical conditions in the host country
Adequate physical training
High level of physical and mental endurance
Motivation to continue studies in the host country
Participation in scientific research activities



Financial stability	
Existence of preferred recreational activities in the new environment	
Participation of foreign students in sports, tourism and leisure activities	
Organization of free time for foreign students	

Figure 1. Clustering algorithms and internal and external conditions that determine the indicators of the foreign student's integration.

Table 1. The impact of factors on the main parameters of the foreign students' integration (n = 134).

Name of the parameters	Value of Factorial impact	Value of Factorial impact (%)
1. Access and possession of a living space	0,532	12,57
2. Socio-psychological factors (including the cognitive component)	0,679	16,04
3. Communication competence	0,828	19,56
4. Adaptation to the sociocultural context	0,452	10,68
5. Climatic and geographical conditions	0,436	10,30
6. Integration in the educational environment	0,739	17,46
7. Financial situation	0,567	13,39

To determine the indicators of the foreign students' integration, clustering algorithms are useful because they allow the students' grouping according to various characteristics relevant to integration and, at the same time, highlighting the relevant factors that influence the foreign students in the first stages of their studies. The data obtained show that social factors (communication between individuals and social relations) are objective causes of pressure on personality, along with biological factors.

It is important to emphasize that the integration process depends considerably on the way the academic space is organized, the relevance of educational activities for the foreign students and the opportunities for quality interaction between them and the social and educational community. This structuring helps us understand the complex relationships between different factors and establish priorities in order to develop in the future a sustainable integration program through sports, tourism and agreement activities for the foreign students.

In Figure 2 and Table 2 we present the determining factors and the characteristics of the difficulties of integrating the foreign students into the university environment, according to the results of the January 2024 survey.

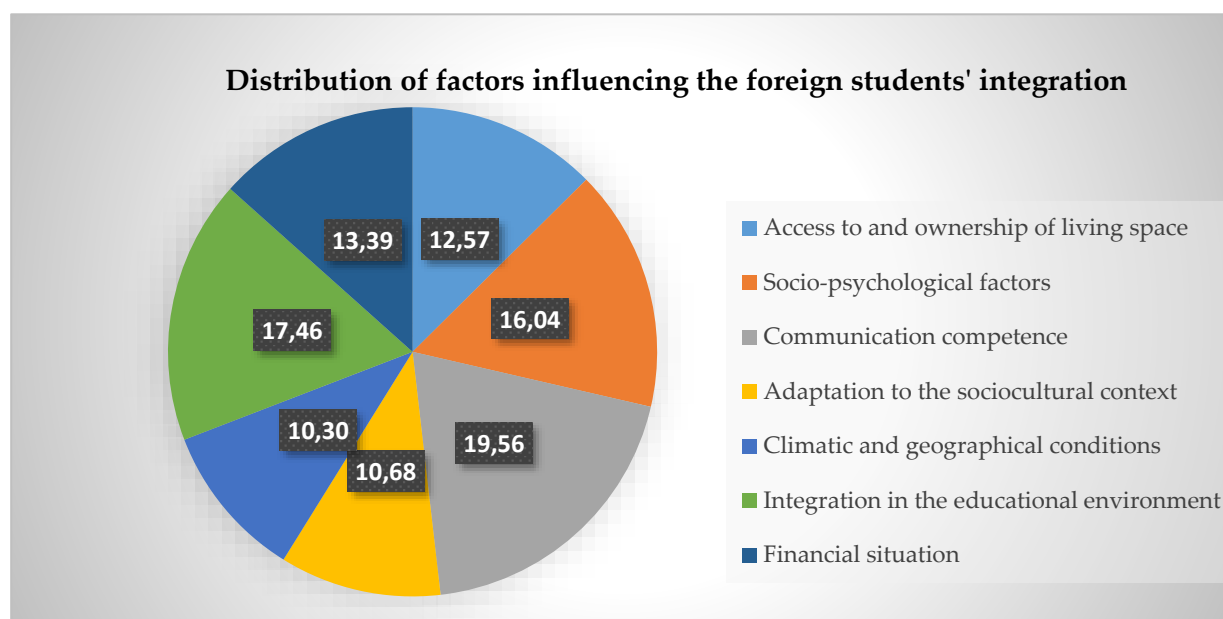
**Figure 2.** Distribution of factors influencing the foreign students' integration (n = 134).

Table 2. Factors and characteristics of the foreign students' integration difficulties (n = 134).

Factors	Characteristics of difficulties
Social-psychological factors (including the cognitive component)	Learning activities include information assimilation, specific requirements, material presentation, as well as tasks volume and complexity. Also, factors such as the level of competence in the Romanian language, the differences between the educational systems in Moldova and other countries, along with the requirements and format of the assessments, significantly influence the educational process.
Adaptation to the sociocultural context	Compliance with specific norms and rules, distinct from the traditional ones, the high level of social diversity in activities, the accentuated dynamism, the socio-cultural diversity and the lack of quality recreation options.
Communication competence	The need to continuously interact with many diverse social groups, the complexity of communication with representatives of educational and administrative structures, fellow students and other residents of the dormitory, as well as daily interactions with the society members in everyday contexts - all this takes place in an urban environment with a high information density, against the background of a lack of communication with close people and a feeling of isolation in a foreign country.
Financial situation and access to living space	Challenges in the independent management of housing issues, budget management, planning and saving resources, the need to live and constantly interact with other students, financial dependence on the family and the difficulty of balancing studies with a job are essential aspects of adaptation to student life.

In this context, from the perspective of the organization of activities, the main mission of higher education institutions is to make optimal use of academic and socio-cultural resources, in order to create favorable conditions for the foreign students' active involvement in various types of activities. These measures aim at facilitating the completion, with a minimum of difficulties, of one of the most complex stages of their academic training.

The analysis of the presented factors indicates that "integration" involves the assimilation of social experience and personal development through well-structured educational activities, which support the formation of a proactive attitude in the process of learning norms, values, types of activities, social roles and interpersonal relationships [25,26]. Thus, for a complete and effective adaptation, it is essential to create conditions that encourage an active involvement of the foreign students, facilitating their harmonious integration into the new social and academic environment.

Following the analysis of the sociological survey conducted among the foreign students and the various integration processes identified, they were invited to participate in university competitions alongside their colleagues from the host country, but also in other activities organized within the institution. The aim was to strengthen the link between sports and academic activities, demonstrating that involvement in sports can contribute to a more balanced and satisfying educational experience. Also, by actively participating in sports events, the foreign students can feel that they are part of the university community.

Between February and April 2024, the National University Championships took place in various sports events [27]. Higher education institutions from Moldova participated in these competitions, and the events were organized within the Physical Education and Sport institute of Moldova State University. The competitions included a variety of sports events, in which the students from higher education institutions competed at the national level. These events were characterized by a significant intensity and by moments of visual and emotional impact, generating a special reaction among the public. Table 3 shows the calendar of the National University Championships from Moldova, which provides a clear structure of the competitions and the periods allocated to each sports event.

Table 3. Calendar of National University Championships from Moldova (February-April-April 2024).

Nr.	Sports tests	Period
1.	Volley-ball	26.02.2024 – 01.03.2024
2.	Futsal	04.03.2024 – 07.03.2024
3.	Chess	12.03.2024 – 14.03.2024
4.	Basket-ball	21.03.2024 – 22.03.2024
5.	Table tennis	26.03.2024 – 29.03.2024
6.	Judo	03.04.2024
7.	Free fights	10.04.2024
8.	Football - tennis	22.04.2024 – 26.04.2024

Among the participating students, most came from Ukraine, migrating due to tensions in their country. Their involvement in the National University Championships, alongside their colleagues from the host country, had a significant impact, both personally and academically. Participating in this event provided everyone with valuable opportunities for social integration, personal development and improving collaboration skills in a multicultural environment, thus contributing to strengthening their intercultural competences and adapting to the university educational context.

In order to gain a detailed perspective on the experience of the foreign students who participated in the sports competitions of the National University Championships, we conducted an interview, which provided us with relevant information. Thus, we identified how well these competitions succeeded in facilitating their integration into the university environment and what impact they had on their cultural and social adaptation. In Table 4, there are presented the data illustrating the motivation, the level of satisfaction of the foreign students, but also the challenges encountered in sports competitions.

Analyzing the information obtained from discussions with the foreign students, we notice that the motivation to participate in the National University Championships is diverse, including "integration" (the need to adapt to the new environment), "experience," "competition," "health," "activity physical," "socialization," "personal development," etc. These reasons reflect both personal desires (health, experience) and social goals (integration, adaptation, socialization). Likewise, we note that most students rated the experience with high scores (4 or 5), indicating overall positive feedback. Among the main challenges encountered we mention 'language barriers', 'cultural differences', 'competition pressure', 'participation conditions', 'limited support', etc. We state that participation in sports activities has brought multiple benefits for the foreign students, offering them opportunities for integration and personal development, but also challenges related to adapting to a new environment. The high level of satisfaction suggests that, overall, these sports experiences are formative and particularly meaningful.

Table 4. Foreign students' motivation, satisfaction and challenges for participating in sports activities.

Nr. of students	Country	Sports test	Motivation of participation	Level of satisfaction (1-5)	Challenges	Opportunities
S1	Ukraine	Free fights	Integration	4	Competition stress	New friends
S2	Kazakhstan	Kingboxing	Social adaptation	5	Language barriers	Abilities improvement
S3	Greece	Judo	Integration	3	Participation conditions	Socialization
S4	Romania	Football-tennis	Health	5	Reduced support	Networking
S5	Ukraine	Muay Thai	Physical activity	4	Language barriers	New knowledge
S6	Russia	Badminton	Socialization	4	Cultural barriers	Social support
S7	Ukraine	Futsal	Experience	5	Competition	Skills developed
S8	Azerbaijan	Free fights	Cultural integration	5	Cultural differences	Fun. Academic performance
S9	Ukraine	Judo	Personal development	3	Stress and anxiety	Integration
S10	Ukraine	Volley-ball	Experience	4	Participation conditions	Team spirit
S11	Ukraine	Football	Socializing and making friends	4	Language barriers	Learning a new language
S12	Russia	Rhythmic gymnastics	Maintaining health	3	Lack of time due to studies	Access to sports facilities
S13	Greece	Judo	Participation in local competitions	5	Cultural differences in the rules of the game	Developing self-confidence
S14	Romania	Wrestling	Fun and relaxation	4	Adaptation difficulties to a new group	Creating a healthy routine
S15	Ukraine	Football	Academic support	5	Stress and anxiety	Networking
S16	Greece	Judo	Discovering a new culture	4	Cultural stereotypes	Building a positive image about different cultures
S17	Ukraine	Free fights	University representation	5	Lack of experience in organized sports	Developing a sense of belonging
S18	Israel	Taekwondo	Reducing academic stress	5	Social isolation	Forming a social support network
S19	Romania	Free fights	Professors and Dean's recommendations	5	Lack of previous experience	Integration
S20	Ukraine	Judo	Development of sports skills	3	Limited access to equipment	Increasing personal performance

We believe that sports activities, in addition to influencing the general integration processes, also contributed to the improvement of the foreign students' psychological state. The verification of the psychological state was carried out by analyzing the data collected from the questionnaire regarding their well-being. Table 5 and Figure 3 show the mean values for the three scales (Well-being, Activity, Mood), both at the initial and final stages.

Table 5. Assessment of the foreign students' well-being means at initial and final testing (January and September 2024, (n=20)).

Scale	Initial testing 01.2024	Final testing 09.2024	Average difference
Well-being	2.00	2.60	+0.60
Activity	1.80	2.10	+0.30
Mood	2.10	2.80	+0.70

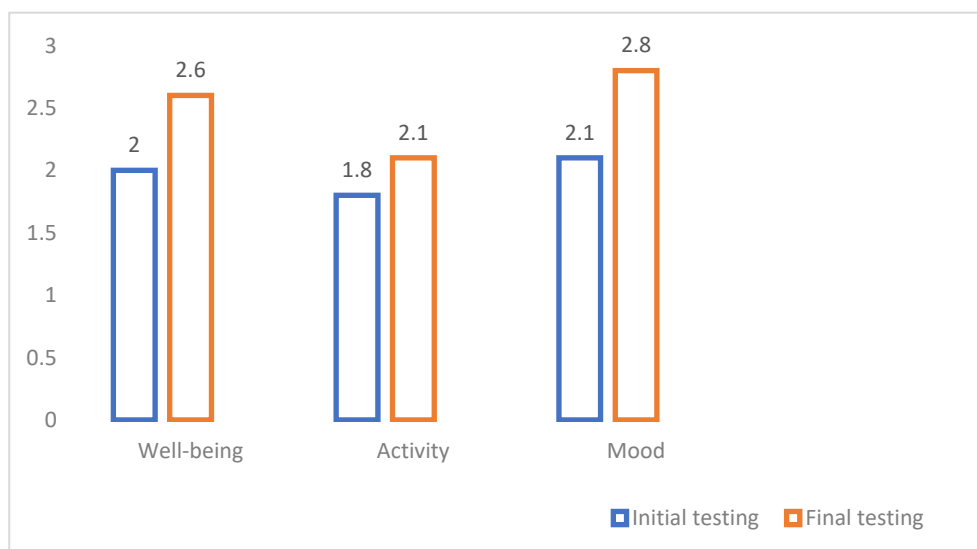


Figure 3. Comparative analysis of the initial - final indices regarding the foreign students' well-being. *Notes:* * Significant difference ($p < 0,001$) between initial and final testing regarding well-being and mood; Significant difference ($p < 0,05$) between initial and final testing regarding activity.

The graph above illustrates the evolution of the mean values for the three scales analyzed, highlighting a moderate increase between the initial and final testing for each scale, confirming a clear impact of sports activities on the foreign students' integration. In this context, it is important to take into account other relevant factors. First of all, the survey can be considered partially "subjective", since the assessment of the psychological state is, in our opinion, significantly influenced by physiological factors, which can vary according to the degree of fatigue, the health of the subject, the time of testing, meteorological conditions. Also, despite a statistically significant positive trend, the actual increases in mean values are relatively small, the largest increase being 0.7 points (on the mood criterion). These results suggest the need to implement a sociocultural integration program for the foreign students, based on specific sports activities.

4. Discussion

The obtained results suggest that the foreign students' involvement in university sports activities contributes to facilitating their integration process and supports their personal development, aspects that are consistent with the conclusions of previous studies on their social integration [28,29]. Participating in competitions alongside colleagues from the host country provided the foreign students with valuable opportunities for socialization and adaptation, fundamental elements for an effective transition in the new educational environment.

The research identifies major challenges faced by the foreign students such as: language barriers, cultural differences and limited access to resources. These obstacles are consistent with research that has highlighted the negative impact of communication difficulties on the integration of the foreign students [7,30]. The specialized literature also highlights cultural differences as a significant factor influencing the integration process [9,10,31]. In our study, it was found that these differences affect their academic performance and can generate interpersonal tensions, thus highlighting the complexity of the dynamics of intercultural interactions.

The quantitative analysis carried out in this study, using a sample of 134 students, highlighted the fact that social factors have a significant impact on the integration process. The obtained data underline the importance of social aspects and communication in the students' integration in the new academic environment. The results of this analysis demonstrate that social interactions play an essential role in maintaining the international students' mental and physical well-being.

Previous studies [30,32,33] suggest that, in order to improve the migrants' experience, the community should implement strategies aimed at alleviating communication, cultural barriers, but also problems regarding discrimination, racism, discrepancies between the norms and values of the society of origin and those of the host society, living conditions in the host country. Our research makes a practical and dynamic contribution to existing integration strategies, demonstrating that the foreign students' participation in sports activities facilitates social interaction, creates an informal environment conducive to dialogue and promotes intercultural understanding. Through these activities, students benefit from opportunities for cooperation, empathy and relationship development, thus contributing to the reduction of linguistic and cultural differences. In this sense, sport becomes an optimal framework for the development of interpersonal relationships and for improving the sense of belonging in the academic community.

The researchers, D'Angelo and Makarova [1,15], emphasize the essential role of sport as a social integration factor for the foreign students, highlighting, at the same time, the challenges encountered in the context of migration. However, the data obtained in this study suggest that their participation in sports activities is associated with positive experiences, characterized by a high level of satisfaction, but also motivation. These results indicate that sport not only facilitates social integration, but also contributes to improving the general perception of adaptation to new cultural and social conditions.

Also, for the most effective integration of the foreign students, it is essential to implement sports activities programs at the level of the local community. They must aim at the active involvement of all decision-makers in promoting an inclusive educational environment that encourages the development of the spirit of tolerance, understanding and acceptance of diversity among the members of the local community.

Thus, in future researches we could investigate in detail how different types of sports events (team vs individual) influence the foreign students' integration, conducting longitudinal studies for a more comprehensive understanding of the long-term impact of sports activities on their well-being and integration, the examination of gender differences in participation in sports activities and their effects, the training of teaching staff for the development of intercultural competences.

At the same time, we believe that, in order to improve the effectiveness of sports activities in the process of the foreign students' socio-cultural integration, it is necessary to develop and implement a structured program of sports activities for them, which will be carried out over an extended period of time and provide an increased frequency of physical activities, sports and other events.

Practical Implication

Research results can be used to structure sports programs that foster interaction between foreign and local students, helping to reduce cultural barriers and facilitate intercultural communication. Similarly, higher education institutions can implement measures based on the findings of the study to encourage the active participation of foreign students in sport, tourism and leisure activities. At the same time, this study can be a support for university staff in organizing sports activities that foster integration and support the personal and professional development of foreign students.

Strength and Limitation

This study faces some limitations that should be addressed in future studies. This study has some shortcomings that should be addressed in future research. Although the study included 134 participants, the relatively small sample size may be a limitation in terms of generalizing the results to the entire population of international students. Consequently, for future research, we propose to significantly expand the sample and focus it on foreign students from all universities in the Republic of Moldova. In addition, the study was conducted in a relatively short period of time (January - June 2024), but we intend to continue the research in the long term in order to assess the effects of sport activities on the integration process of foreign students.

This study represents the first of its kind conducted in the Republic of Moldova, contributing to the development of an effective framework for the integration of foreign students through sport,

tourism and leisure activities. Through this approach, we aim to deepen and optimize existing strategies in order to support the integration of future foreign students coming to study in our country.

5. Conclusions

Overall, it can be concluded that the participation of the foreign students in sports activities not only facilitates their integration into the new sociocultural environment, but also contributes to optimizing physical activity, improving physical condition and increasing motivation for systematic exercise and sports. These findings are supported by the data obtained through the questionnaire and the individual interviews with the participants, which highlighted the essential role of physical activity in maintaining a good intellectual and physical capacity, in strengthening health and in preventing fatigue and some related conditions.

We believe that the study makes a valuable contribution to the specialized literature, emphasizing the sport importance as an integration tool and proposing solutions to improve the foreign students' experiences in Moldovan universities. By implementing these solutions, both the community and the universities will be able to contribute significantly to the creation of an inclusive environment, supporting both the students' social integration, health and well-being. These findings open new directions for future researches that can explore in depth the complexity of intercultural interactions in the context of university sports.

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