



Original Contribution

ANALYSIS OF STUDENTS' OPINION ON THE ROLE OF CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN A GLOBALISED SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

The study examines the attitudes, perceptions, and behavioural manifestations related to cultural awareness, intercultural tolerance, and academic adaptation among medical students at the Medical University of Pleven. The theoretical framework emphasises tolerance as a necessary virtue in the context of cultural diversity and a globalising society. Between March and May 2025, the Department of Social Medicine and Health Management conducted an online, anonymous survey among 119 Bulgarian medical students from 2nd and 6th year. All respondents participated in the study voluntarily. The survey was approved by a decision of the Ethics Committee, Proceedings Form № 82. Based on empirical data showed a high degree of intercultural sensitivity and a positive attitude towards cultural diversity, regardless of the academic level, is established. The analysis revealed that students at an advanced stage of their studies more often reported difficulties in adaptation, which probably reflects the accumulated academic workload. Participants perceived intercultural communication as a valuable experience, and intercultural initiatives enjoyed wider support, despite the low levels of active engagement. The results underscore the importance of targeted educational policies in fostering intercultural competence in medical education.

Keywords: intercultural tolerance, cultural awareness, academic adaptation, medical education

INTRODUCTION

*"Tolerance makes differences possible,
and differences make tolerance necessary."
Michael Walzer, On Toleration [1]*

In the context of a globalising world in the 21st century, societies are becoming increasingly diverse in terms of culture, religion, language, and values [2].

In a number of literary sources, globalisation is defined as "a global phenomenon representing a process of increasing economic, social, technical, political, and cultural interconnections and relationships between individual countries, organisations, and people." Depending on the affected sphere, it can be qualified as economic, social, technological, or cultural [3-5].

This article focuses on cultural globalisation, which is based on the exchange of information

and the universalisation of cultural traditions, customs, and practices.

The issue of tolerance is also of interest to Bulgarian authors and scholars. One example is V. Ivanova et al., who mention the following definition of culture given by Adam Cooper in 1994: "Culture is acquired, adaptable, symbolic behaviour based on a full-fledged language, associated with technical ingenuity; a complex of skills, which in turn is based on the ability to organise exchange relationships between communities" [2].

In her work, Zarkova defines the characteristic of one's own/foreign as a fundamental conception in the construction of personal and collective worldviews, pointing out that this oppositional pair plays a key role in the formation of identity, both in the individual and in the cultural group [6].

Various factors influence how each individual perceives their own culture ("own" from the above-mentioned oppositional pair), as well as

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cultures that are new/unknown to them ("foreign" from the above-mentioned oppositional pair). Upbringing (family), social environment, personality traits, media (social networks, films, news, books, etc.), education, and others shape attitudes and perceptions towards one's own culture and cultures different from it to varying degrees.

In the process of perceiving a "foreign" culture, the approach is usually oriented from the outside in and is based on a pre-formed ethnocentric perspective that reflects the cultural perceptions and value attitudes of the observing subject [6].

If individuals or a group of individuals have a pronounced sense of superiority of their own culture or race, they would not be able to express a desire to communicate with people of a different cultural background. They close themselves off within the framework of the familiar and refuse to accept what is different and new. On the other hand, if individuals (or a group of individuals) have a more intercultural perception of the world around them, they would be inclined to explore and possibly accept a different point of view. Here, the emphasis is on tolerance and its key role in individual and group perceptions of cultures different from their own.

In a study published in 2015, Zornitsa Ganeva has tried to make a connection between tolerance and politics, pointing out the vital meaning the former has. She emphasises the need to implement the most appropriate policy among societies that are culturally and ethnically diverse. As an initial example of such a policy on a global level, she cites the policy of multiculturalism. Ganeva mentions the serious consequences of the events on September 11, 2001, and their negative impact on multiculturalism as a political vision not only in the United States, but also in Canada, Europe, and Australia [7,8,9]. In addition, as early as 2010, politicians, such as A. Merkel stated that the policy of multiculturalism had failed [7,9].

As an alternative policy, Ganeva points to the policy of interculturalism proposed by the Council of Europe, which encourages cooperation between all countries that aim for European integration, accepts the rule of law, and can guarantee respect for democracy, fundamental human rights, and freedom. The first document adopted was the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms in 1950, intending

to achieve unity among its members in the protection and realisation of ideals and principles as a common heritage, facilitating their economic and social progress [10].

As a key document published by the Council of Europe in 2008, Ganeva points to the White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue, with the motto "Living Together as Equals in Dignity", which highlights the need for intercultural dialogue in achieving tolerance among culturally diverse societies. They describe several terms apart from intercultural dialogue, such as multiculturalism, social cohesion, stakeholders, public authorities, integration, and positive action. Intercultural dialogue is defined as "an open and respectful exchange of views between individuals and groups of different ethnic, cultural, religious, and linguistic backgrounds and heritage, based on mutual understanding and respect" [7,11]. The White Paper addresses the importance of pluralism, tolerance, and a broad worldview for the acceptance of cultural diversity. On the other hand, these are defined as potentially insufficient. The Council of Europe suggests that intercultural dialogue should be considered a key tool for accepting and managing cultural diversity, as it is the key to Europe's future. They point out the incomparable usefulness of the intercultural dialogue – it can prevent conflicts of different nature – ethnic, linguistic, religious and cultural, and add: "It enables us to move forward together, to deal with our different identities constructively and democratically based on shared universal values." [11].

In order to become fully aware of the above-mentioned terms, a track of the different conceptions of tolerance as a virtue over the years has been made. Historically, the concept of tolerance can be traced back to ancient India during the reign of King Ashoka (around 206 BC), who called for religious tolerance in an attempt to overcome the negative consequences of religious conflicts during that period [12].

In Europe, the concept of tolerance began to develop as a result of the desire to resolve the various religious conflicts that arose in the 16th and 17th centuries [12].

The need to develop a comprehensive interpretation of the concept of tolerance reached its peak in 1995, when UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation) and the UN (United Nations) General Assembly drafted the Declaration of Principles on Tolerance [13]. Among the many definitions of tolerance in the literature, the most accurate definition is given in Article 1 of this document: "Tolerance is respect, acceptance, and appreciation of the rich diversity of our world's cultures, our forms of expression, and ways of being human. It is fostered by knowledge, openness, communication, and freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. Tolerance is harmony in diversity. It is not only a moral duty, but also a political and legal requirement. Tolerance, the virtue that makes peace possible, contributes to the replacement of the culture of war with a culture of peace." [13].

Article 6 of the Declaration of Principles on Tolerance states: "In order to raise public awareness, highlight the dangers of intolerance, and respond with renewed commitment and action in support of the promotion of tolerance and education, we solemnly declare November 16 as the annual International Day for Tolerance." [13].

In this regard, 1995 was proclaimed by the UN General Assembly, on the initiative of UNESCO, as the Year of Tolerance [14].

Verkuyten and Kollar describe the most valuable meaning of tolerance to be: "a critical and adequate response to the challenge of how conflicting ways of life can freely express themselves and peacefully coexist with each other." [15].

Yerastova-Mykhalus, I. and Savytska, A. state the global necessity for people to communicate effectively and peacefully in a multicultural environment, sticking to humanistic ideas and rights. They outline the need of the worldwide population to be able to combine this ability in their occupational background, no matter the sphere they develop themselves in [16].

Tolerance is a value-based principle for a humane response to the complex and multifaceted changes in the developing global society. The focus from which tolerance should be viewed can be group-based or individual-based. From the perspective of the social community, the development of a society shapes the social-group

value system. From the perspective of the individual, people evolve and, in addition to established values, generate new ones in line with dynamic social changes. Thus, tolerance is becoming increasingly important. It is a preeminent value and should be considered a supreme virtue along with justice, altruism, empathy, and others.

The processes of globalisation and migration lead to increased cultural exchange. As a result, the world as we know it is becoming increasingly interconnected and interdependent. Tolerance plays a key role in promoting cooperation and understanding among different communities. It promotes the acceptance of cultural differences, peaceful conflict resolution, and teamwork to achieve common goals [17].

Individuals in most societies have diverse cultural backgrounds. If unity cannot be achieved among them due to insurmountable cultural differences, prevailing prejudices, and stereotypes, this would lead to conflicts and misunderstandings. Therefore, intercultural tolerance, effective intercultural communication, and a willingness to engage in intercultural interaction are essential for preventing tensions and maintaining a balanced and harmonious society.

Violeta Periklieva and Ivaylo Markov have explored the socio-cultural adaptation of British medical students in Bulgaria, affirming the need for change. Despite extraordinary events, such as the COVID-19 global pandemic, they describe our world as going through "the age of migration". They also note several factors that contribute to this phenomenon, such as the need for manual labour, urbanisation, and war situations. In recent times, educational migration at university level has rapidly increased. Students can also be seen as migrants over the period of their studies abroad [18].

Internationally mobile students are "a very small fraction of the total stock of migrants" [19].

In 2013, King and Raghuram stated their numbers have risen almost four times faster than total international migration [20].

Periklieva and Markov described some statistical trends showing that the number of international students rose from 2.1 million in 2000 to 5.6 million in 2018. According to Migration Data Portal their number for 2022 was 6.9 million [21].

As top destinations for studies abroad, Bhandari and Blumenthal pointed out the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, Australia, and France [22].

Bulgaria is not ranked in the top positions but remains a desirable destination for international students. According to the Open Society Institute - Sofia, in 2024, their countries of origin are Greece - 3147 students (20%), the United Kingdom - 2221 (14%), Ukraine - 1655 (11%), Germany - 1484 (9%), and Italy - 1031 (7%). The most popular fields of study are Medicine – 4496 students (64%) and Dental Medicine (10%). [23].

For 2024, the Medical University of Pleven has been ranked fifth among all English medium medical programmes in Bulgaria, for the number of international students - 1237 preceded by the Medical University of Sofia – 3316, Medical University of Plovdiv – 2526, Medical University of Varna – 1769, and Sofia University – 1332 [23].

Stefania Giannini, UNESCO's Assistant Director-General for Education, said: "The future of higher education is global, digital and mobile. With millions more people pursuing degrees and alternative credentials, international cooperation on qualification recognition is more critical than ever to support mobility and safeguard trust in qualifications." [24].

The **objective** of this study is to analyse the attitudes, perceptions, and behavioural responses of medical students pursuing a master's degree at the Medical University of Pleven, regarding the role and importance of cultural diversity in a globalising society. The study aims to establish the level of cultural awareness, intercultural tolerance, and readiness for intercultural interaction among future medical doctors, as well as to track possible differences in attitudes depending on the course of study.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Following a decision by the Ethics Committee at the Medical University of Pleven (Proceedings Form №82), we conducted a study among Bulgarian medical students at the same university during the 2024/2025 academic year. The sample included second and sixth year full-time students. The selection of these two groups allowed for a comparison between students with different levels of academic experience and provided an opportunity to track changes in attitudes towards cultural diversity during the course of study.

The survey covers various aspects of student opinion on cultural diversity, its impact on the academic environment, and its significance in the context of a globalising society. The questionnaire consists of three parts, the first of which examines attitudes and perceptions towards different cultures. It focuses on the intercultural competences of students, which are analysed through 13 statements presented in tabular format. A 5-point Likert scale is used to assess how closely these statements correspond to the students' opinions. The second part examines students' adaptation to the university environment, their participation in student mobility programmes, communication, and friendships with people from different cultural backgrounds. The third part provides information about the course of study, gender, and age of the specific student, while maintaining complete anonymity. The results presented reflect both the cognitive and behavioural attitudes and the actual experiences of students in a multicultural university environment.

The statistical analysis employed descriptive statistics, with qualitative variables presented as absolute and relative frequencies (counts and percentages). Differences between the study groups were evaluated using the nonparametric χ^2 (chi-square) test. Data processing and statistical analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics version 26, and Microsoft Excel 2019 was used to present the results graphically. In all statistical tests, the results are considered statistically significant at a significance level of $p < 0.05$.

RESULTS

The empirical study was conducted among 119 medical students, enrolled in a masters degree programme at the Medical University of Pleven. In terms of gender distribution, 76 (63.9%) of the respondents were women, and 43 (36.1%) were men. This distribution reflects the established trend of a dominant female presence in the higher medical education system in Bulgaria.

In terms of age structure, the largest share of participants falls into the age group up to 26 years ($n=113$; 95.0%), followed by the group over 26 years ($n=6$; 5.0%). This age distribution is consistent with the typical chronological course of medical education, in which students begin their studies immediately after completing secondary education and reach their final

courses at the end of the second or beginning of their third decade of life.

The distribution by year of study covers participants from the second and sixth years as follows: 67 (56.3%) and 52 (43.7%), respectively. This sample structure allows for a comparative analysis between students in the early stages of their studies and those in the final stages, which creates conditions for tracking potential evolution in attitudes towards cultural diversity in relation to accumulated academic and clinical experience.

In terms of cultural awareness and intercultural tolerance, 46 (38.7%) of the surveyed students rate their level of knowledge of other cultures as high or very high, while 67 (56.3%) rate it as average. Only 6 (5.0%) respondents indicated that they had rather limited knowledge in this area ($\chi^2 = 125.325$, $df = 4$, $p < 0.001$). A similar positive attitude was recorded in relation to the perception of the importance of intercultural tolerance in a professional context – 104 participants (87.4%) agreed with the statement that intercultural sensitivity would help them in their future professional development ($\chi^2 = 136.252$, $df = 4$, $p < 0.001$).

The analysis of the data did not reveal a statistically significant dependence of the variable "course of study" either in terms of self-assessment of cultural awareness ($p > 0.05$) or in terms of the perception of the role of intercultural tolerance in professional realisation ($p > 0.05$). The lack of statistically significant differences between second- and sixth-year students suggests relative homogeneity of views on the indicators studied. The data show a formed and stable understanding of the importance of cultural awareness and intercultural competence, which is not significantly influenced by the academic stage of training.

Attitudes towards cultural diversity and foreign students are an important indicator of the intercultural openness and readiness of future medical professionals for effective communication in a multicultural environment. When asked about the training of foreign students at the Medical University of Pleven, 97 (81.5%) of the students expressed a positive attitude, while 7

(5.9%) expressed reservations or hesitation ($\chi^2 = 115.076$, $df = 4$, $p < 0.001$).

With regard to the perception of cultural diversity as a public resource, a significant proportion of participants expressed a clearly positive attitude. A total of 98 (82.3%) of the respondents agreed with the statement that people from different cultural backgrounds bring valuable perspectives to society – 65 (54.6%) chose the option "Agree", and 33 (27.7%) chose "Strongly agree". Eleven (9.2%) respondents have a neutral position, while 10 participants (8.4%) stated complete or partial disagreement ($\chi^2 = 112.807$, $df = 4$, $p < 0.001$). The data show that the majority of students perceive cultural diversity not as a threat or challenge, but as an opportunity for social and professional enrichment, which testifies to the existence of intercultural sensitivity and awareness of the importance of tolerance in a globalising society (**Figure 1**).

When analysing the relationship between this attitude and the course of study, no statistically significant correlation was found ($p > 0.05$), which indicates relative stability of perception regardless of the academic stage of study. Similarly, no statistically significant relationship was found between the course of study and attitudes towards foreign students ($p > 0.05$). The results indicate a high degree of cultural openness and acceptance among the surveyed students, with no significant differences between those in the initial and final stages of their medical education.

Attitudes related to intercultural sensitivity and tolerance in interpersonal communication are reflected in students' assessments of their own behaviour and emotional reactions in the context of cultural diversity. The results show that 108 (90.8%) of the students make a conscious effort not to make judgments based on cultural affiliation, and 104 (87.4%) agree that they strive to understand the point of view of people from different cultural backgrounds. On the other hand, 88 (73.9%) of the respondents share that they have felt uncomfortable when hearing negative comments about foreign cultures, which indicates the presence of internally perceived intercultural sensitivity and empathy towards cultural differences (**Figure 1**).

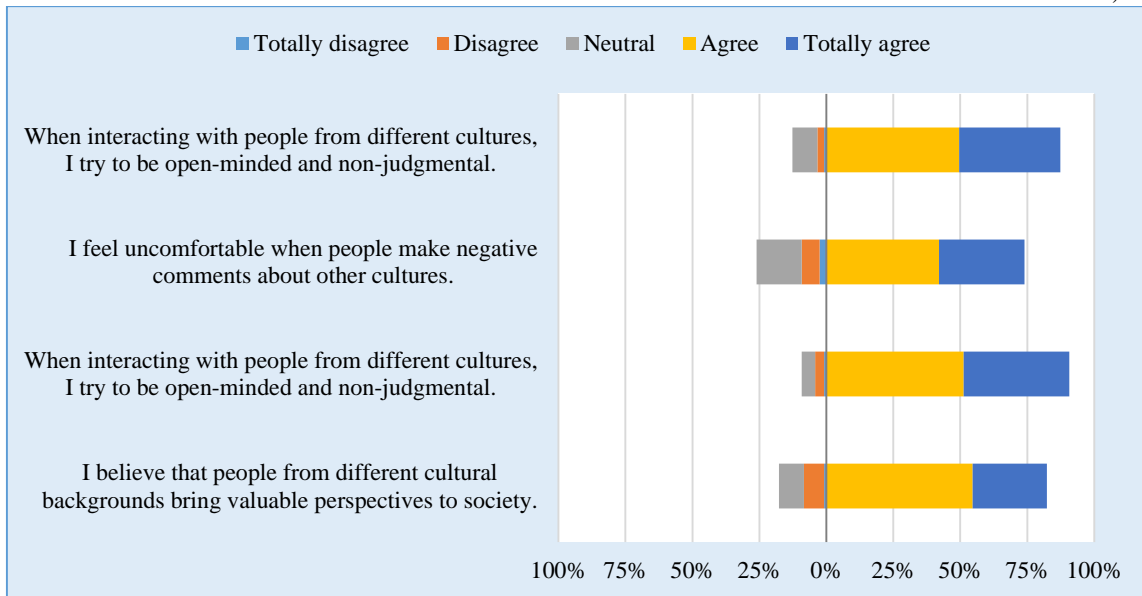


Figure 1. Students' attitudes towards cultural diversity and intercultural tolerance

The process of academic adaptation and intercultural interaction among students reveals both positive aspects and specific difficulties related to integration into a new educational and cultural environment. Regarding the academic environment, 95 (79.8%) of the students consider themselves to be well adapted, while 24 (20.2%) report some difficulties ($\chi^2 = 72.681$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.001$). The results show that the degree of academic adaptation is statistically significantly related to the stage of education ($\chi^2 = 6.447$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.011$, $\Phi = 0.233$). Of the second-year students, 59 (88.1%) self-identify

as well adapted to the academic environment, while among sixth-year students this proportion is significantly lower – 36 (69.2%). Accordingly, 8 (11.9%) of the second-year students and 16 (30.8%) of the interns reported difficulties in adaptation. This shows that students in more advanced courses more often experience difficulties with academic integration, which could be explained by the accumulation of academic workload, higher academic expectations, and possibly professional stress in the final stages of their studies (**Figure 2**).

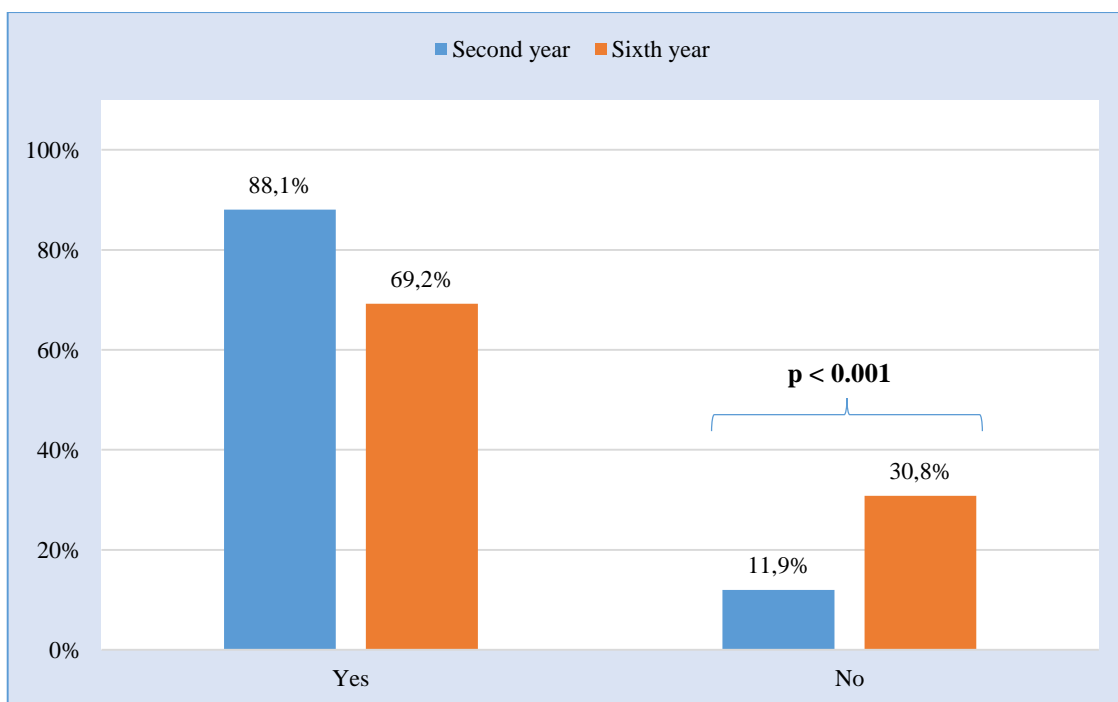


Figure 2. Impact of academic progress on perceived adaptation to the university environment

The participation rate of second- and sixth-year students in student mobility or exchange programmes is relatively low, with only thirteen students (10.9%) taking part. Among those who did not participate, 11 students (9.2%) cited administrative issues and language barriers as their primary difficulties, whereas one student (0.8%) mentioned financial limitations.

However, a significant proportion of students – 87 (73.1%), stated that they often communicate with people from other cultures, and 86 (72.3%) indicated that cultural differences can enrich the educational process at the university.

Institutional support for cultural diversity is reflected in the organisation of intercultural events and initiatives aimed at promoting interaction, tolerance, and mutual understanding among students. The data show that 95 (79.8%) respondents support the holding of events in a university environment that promote intercultural tolerance ($\chi^2 = 108.521$, $df = 4$, $p < 0.001$), with 63 (52.9%) of them having participated in the annual International Day university initiative. Of these, 6 (5.0%) were actively involved in the organisation or presentation, while 57 (47.9%) attended as spectators. Fifty-six (47.1%) participants did not participate in the event, which may be due to a lack of awareness, motivation, or sufficient engagement ($\chi^2 = 42.874$, $df = 2$, $p < 0.001$). This is a one-of-a-kind event bringing together students, teachers and citizens from different cultural backgrounds. The idea behind International Day held each May at the university is to demonstrate unity between different nations by displaying local food and beverages for degustation, music, dances and costumes. The symbolic fee for entering the event, five leva, is gathered for a charity cause previously chosen by the student council.

Intercultural interaction in an academic environment is not without its challenges, as in certain cases it can lead to tension, misunderstandings, or conflicts arising from cultural differences and communication barriers. When asked whether they had been in conflict situations with English-speaking colleagues, 13 (10.9%) answered affirmatively ($\chi^2 = 72.681$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.001$). In an additional question, the students who answered affirmatively about the existence of a conflict situation - 10 (8.4%) - indicated the lack of understanding on the part of their colleagues in English-language training as the main reason. Three (2.5%) students reported

that they had witnessed conflict between colleagues or that the conflict had arisen during a sports event ($\chi^2 = 262.210$, $df = 3$, $p < 0.001$). The results obtained outline communication barriers as a leading factor for the emergence of interpersonal tension in an intercultural environment.

DISCUSSION

In order to compare the results of the study, conducted at the Medical University of Pleven during the 2024/2025 academic year on the topic of intercultural tolerance, a search was conducted using keywords such as "intercultural tolerance", "medical students", and "Bulgaria" in the scientific databases PubMed, Google Scholar, ResearchGate and Web of Science. The results presented in the article by Musurlieva and Stoykova, entitled *Study on tolerance and society's attitude towards foreign students from different cultural communities in Bulgaria* are relatively close in thematic focus to the present study. They conducted a pilot study on 43 foreign students specialising in Medicine and Dentistry. The topics covered were - reasons for and duration of their stay in Bulgaria, ability to speak Bulgarian, knowledge of Bulgarian culture and customs, and how they themselves feel in Bulgaria. The results show that 54% of the foreign students have been in Bulgaria for at least 3 years, the main reason being their studies. When asked how they feel in Bulgaria, 67% chose the option "accepted", 19% felt like "unwanted foreigners", and 14% felt like Bulgarians. The majority of respondents - 70%, could speak Bulgarian, and 67% said they were familiar with Bulgarian cultural traditions. The conclusion they reached was that the academic community, students, and society as a whole were tolerant and respectful of the cultural identity of foreign students [25].

As a similar question in both surveys, the following emphasising knowledge about different cultures, stands out. The results obtained are close in value, with the only difference being in the subject of the study. Our study examined the opinion of Bulgarian students, whereas the study conducted at the Medical University of Plovdiv observed foreign students.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the study, several important conclusions can be drawn regarding cultural awareness, intercultural tolerance, and academic adaptation among medical students at the Medical University of Pleven. The sample included 119 respondents, predominantly

women and representatives of the group aged less than 26, which reflected the typical demographic characteristics of Bulgarian-speaking medical students. The inclusion of second and sixth-year students allowed for tracking differences in attitudes toward cultural diversity depending on the stage of academic and clinical training.

The analysis shows a high level of cultural awareness and a positive attitude towards intercultural tolerance among the participants. Most students demonstrate a conscious attitude to avoid stereotypical thinking and show sensitivity to cultural differences. No statistically significant differences were found between students at the initial and final stages of their studies in terms of cultural awareness and attitudes towards diversity, which indicates well-formed and stable intercultural perceptions.

At the same time, the data show that academic adaptation is influenced by the stage of study—students in advanced courses more often report difficulties, which probably reflects the accumulated academic workload and increased requirements at the end of their studies. Regardless, communication with representatives of other cultures is perceived as a positive and enriching experience, and support for intercultural events in the university environment is high, although active participation remains limited.

In conclusion, the results outline a profile of future medical professionals with a high degree of intercultural sensitivity, readiness to interact in a multicultural environment, and awareness of the role of cultural diversity in professional realisation. This highlights the importance of institutional support for cultural integration and the need for targeted educational strategies to promote intercultural competence in medical education.

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