

The Role of University Championships in the Socio-Cultural Integration of Foreign Students

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Abstract. In the context of increasing international academic mobility, the sociocultural integration of foreign students is a key challenge for higher education institutions. This study examines the role of university championships in the integration process, using both qualitative and quantitative methods, including surveys conducted with foreign students, interviews with coaches, and direct observations. The results indicate that 75.9% of students perceived sports competitions as an important tool for social integration, while 65.5% emphasized the development of intercultural skills through collaboration in mixed teams. Additionally, 69% of participants reported increased self-confidence, and 55.2% considered sports activities a conducive environment for improving language skills. However, 20.7% of students faced adaptation difficulties due to cultural and linguistic differences. Interviews with coaches highlighted their essential role in promoting inclusion, reducing language and cultural barriers, and facilitating collaboration through extracurricular activities and intercultural workshops. Direct observations revealed positive interaction patterns, such as informal leaders and mutual support among participants, contributing to a diverse and inclusive environment. Thus, university championships serve as a valuable platform for the sociocultural integration of foreign students, yet optimizing organizational strategies remains necessary to overcome the identified challenges.

Key words: university championships, sociocultural integration, foreign students.

Introduction

In a global context marked by increasing international academic mobility, the sociocultural integration of foreign students has become a key priority for higher education institutions. According to UNESCO data, the number of international students has risen significantly in recent decades, reaching over six million in 2023. This highlights the need for effective strategies to support their integration into academic and social communities (Glass, Gómez, Urzua, 2014; Poalelungi, 2022). University championships, by their collaborative and inclusive nature, provide an ideal platform for fostering intercultural interactions. These sporting events offer foreign students the opportunity to overcome

linguistic and cultural barriers, fostering a sense of belonging and reducing social isolation. Recent studies indicate that sports activities have a positive impact on social cohesion, encouraging mutual respect and collaboration among students from diverse cultural backgrounds (Arseni, Leşco, 2024; Leşco, Onoi, Razmireţ, Lungu, 2024; Leşco, Razmireţ, 2024). Furthermore, the dynamics of academic migration are influenced by geopolitical and economic factors, underscoring the importance of a university environment that supports integration and values cultural diversity (Poalelungi, 2022; Zlate, 2006). University championships align with modern educational goals, preparing students to collaborate in a globalized world. In this regard, the topic is particularly relevant, addressing both current challenges and future needs in international education. The sociocultural integration of foreign students within the academic environment is a crucial component of their educational and personal success. Research emphasises the importance of developing intercultural friendships in the adaptation process. Foreign students who face barriers to accessing recreational activities are less likely to establish social connections with both local peers and other international students, which can lead to a diminished sense of institutional belonging (Glass, Gómez, Urzua, 2014). However, existing literature offers limited data on the impact of sports activities in facilitating these essential interactions (Leşco, Onoi, Razmireţ, Lungu, 2024, p. 683). Investigating how foreign students integrate into the informal social life of the host institution and expand their social networks through recreational activities is not only a theoretical gap but also a relevant issue from an applied perspective. In this context, university championships play a significant role. At the Institute of Physical Education and Sport of Moldova State University, the subprogram *"Sociocultural Integration of Foreign Students through Sports, Tourism, and Recreational Activities"* was launched, emphasizing the importance of sports in the integration process. These competitions provide foreign students with opportunities to interact and collaborate with local peers, facilitating their adaptation to the new cultural and social environment. Sports play a unique role in promoting social inclusion due to their universal nature (Onoi, Golovei, Lungu, 2023). Participation in sports activities, such as university championships, supports:

- The development of interpersonal connections;
- Improvement of language skills;
- Promotion of cultural diversity;
- Strengthening team spirit and solidarity.

A central figure in facilitating sociocultural integration is the coach, who fosters an inclusive environment, promotes mutual respect, and supports the personal and professional development of foreign students. Moreover, participation in sports activities not only promotes physical health but also contributes to the development of social and intercultural skills. Thus, university championships become essential platforms for the sociocultural integration of foreign students, offering them a favorable setting for interaction and mutual understanding. The **National University Championships (NUC)** are organized under the aegis of the Moldovan Federation of Student and Veteran Sports, in partnership with the Ministry of Education and Research, the Council of Rectors, the National Olympic and Sports Committee, national sports federations, higher education institutions, associations, leagues, and sports clubs. The **NUC-2024 edition** included students from higher education institutions in the Republic of Moldova, as well as students from affiliated colleges (as part of university teams). The competition is open to Moldovan citizens, foreign students, and stateless individuals holding a residence permit in Moldova. All students are eligible to participate, regardless of their study format, including those enrolled in master's and

residency programs (Federația moldovenească a sportului studentesc și a veteranilor sportului).

The **objective** of this research is to analyze the impact of university championships on the sociocultural integration of foreign students, identifying the role of these sporting events in promoting inclusion, intercultural interactions, and social adaptation in a multicultural university environment. To achieve this objective, the study formulates the hypothesis that the participation of foreign students in university championships will significantly contribute to their sociocultural integration, fostering interpersonal relationships between foreign and local students and enhancing their sense of belonging to the academic community.

Methodology

The study combined both qualitative and quantitative methods to obtain a clear picture of the impact of university sports competitions on the sociocultural integration of international students. A sociological questionnaire was applied to a sample of 29 international students. The questionnaire, structured with both closed and open-ended questions, was distributed online and in physical format to facilitate participation. Its purpose was to explore students' perceptions of the role of sports competitions in their academic and social integration, as well as their impact on the development of intercultural relationships. In parallel with the questionnaire, interviews were conducted with 15 coaches involved in organizing university championships. The questions focused on how sports activities facilitate the integration of international students and on the educational and social strategies used to foster collaboration and communication among participants. This method provided valuable insights into professional perceptions and the challenges encountered in organizing such events. To gain a deeper understanding of the social dynamics within the competitions, direct observations of participant interactions were also conducted. These observations aimed to analyze students' behaviors, their collaboration in mixed teams, and the extent to which they felt part of a diverse environment. The observations enabled the identification of interaction and integration patterns that could not be captured through questionnaires or interviews. Additionally, official university championship documents (Federația moldovenească a sportului studentesc și a veteranilor sportului) were analyzed, including competition regulations and organizational reports. This analysis offered a clearer understanding of institutional strategies implemented to encourage the integration of students from diverse cultural backgrounds and how extracurricular activities were structured to support this process. The collected data were analyzed using data processing programs such as *SPSS* for quantitative analysis and *NVivo* for qualitative data analysis, allowing for the identification of trends and correlations between participation in university championships and the sociocultural integration of students. The research was conducted in a university environment that fosters cultural diversity, within championships that included not only sports competitions but also intercultural workshops and social events to encourage interactions among students from different parts of the world. As a result, sports activities were perceived not only as an opportunity for competition but also as a tool for integration and social education, contributing to a more inclusive university environment. These methods and materials were essential in understanding how university championships contribute to the sociocultural integration of international students, highlighting both the challenges and opportunities of this process.

Results

The study results highlighted the significant impact of university sports competitions on the sociocultural integration of international students, revealing both the benefits of these activities and the challenges faced. The majority of surveyed students (75.9%) stated that participating in sports competitions helped them integrate socially, considering these events as an ideal setting for interaction and forming new friendships. Similarly, 65.5% of respondents reported that they learned to collaborate better with people from different cultures, emphasizing the role of these competitions in developing intercultural skills. However, approximately 20.7% of students reported difficulties in adapting to the rules or dynamics of the competitions, attributing these challenges to cultural or linguistic differences. Another significant aspect is that 69% of respondents acknowledged that participating in sports competitions increased their self-confidence, making them feel more comfortable in interactions with their peers. Additionally, over half of the students (55.2%) perceived these competitions as a valuable opportunity to learn the local language through frequent interactions with teammates and coaches. Despite the overall benefits, 20.7% of students reported challenges in the integration process, highlighting difficulties in adapting to the competitive context and interactions with students from other cultures. This indicates the need for more well-defined strategies to support these students in their integration process. Table 1 and Figure 1 illustrate the responses of international students regarding the impact of university sports competitions on sociocultural integration.

Table 1. Responses of international students regarding the impact of university sports competitions on sociocultural integration (n=29)

Question	The answers of foreign students	
	Yes (%)	No (%)
Sports competitions helped me integrate socially.	75,9	24,1
I learned to collaborate with people from other cultures.	65,5	34,5
I have had difficulty adapting to competitions.	20,7	79,3
I consider competitions a favorable environment to learn the local language.	55,2	44,8
Participating in competitions helped me develop my self-confidence.	69,0	31,0

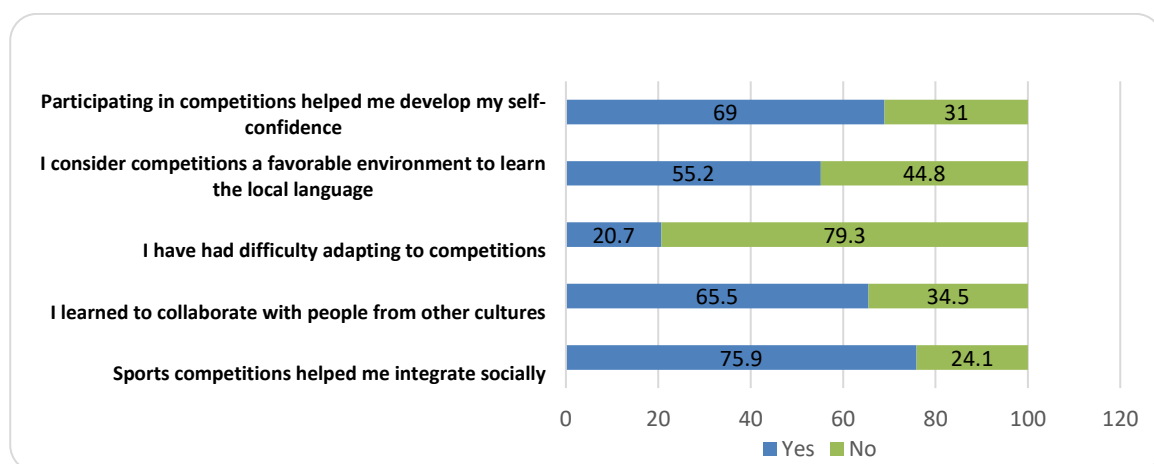


Figure 1. Perception of International Students on University Sports Competitions (%)

As previously mentioned, the coach plays an essential role in facilitating the sociocultural integration process of international students, acting not only as a sports guide but also as a facilitator of intercultural interactions and the creation of an inclusive environment. Thus, we conducted interviews with the 15 coaches involved in organizing university championships. The interview results highlight the importance of their interventions at various stages of students' participation in sports activities. Most coaches (80%) emphasized that teams composed of students from different cultural backgrounds significantly contribute to reducing linguistic and cultural barriers. They adopted specific strategies to encourage collaboration, such as organizing team-building sessions and promoting shared values such as respect and open communication. Coaches played a key role in transforming sports competitions into an educational space beyond the competitive aspect. They implemented extracurricular activities, such as group discussions, aimed at developing students' social and intercultural skills. In this context, coaches became mentors for international students, providing emotional support and assistance in overcoming adaptation challenges. During the interviews, coaches emphasized that the sociocultural integration of international students comes with various challenges. These include communication difficulties and differences in playing styles or attitudes toward competition. To overcome these challenges, coaches developed personalized approaches, adapting their training styles to meet the specific needs of international students. For example, visual methods and practical demonstrations were used to overcome language barriers. An important aspect highlighted by coaches is their role as cultural mediators. They facilitated the exchange of perspectives between international and local students, promoting mutual understanding and respect for cultural diversity. Through their active involvement, coaches created an environment that values each individual's contributions and encourages active participation in the academic community. Table 2 reflects the responses of the 15 coaches who participated in the study and emphasized the importance of university sports competitions in the sociocultural integration of international students. Thus, **86.7% of coaches** stated that mixed teams significantly contribute to intercultural interaction, promoting collaboration between students from diverse cultural backgrounds. **80% believed that sports help reduce linguistic and cultural barriers**, serving as an effective tool for

overcoming cultural differences. **73.3% mentioned that extracurricular activities**, organized alongside with sports competitions, support the social integration process. Additionally, **80% highlighted the importance of intercultural workshops** as ways to strengthen relationships and mutual understanding.

However, **60% of coaches** indicated that organizing championships involves specific challenges, such as adapting rules to cultural diversity or motivating students to participate actively.

Table 2. Coaches' answers regarding the role of university championships in the integration of foreign students (no = 15)

Aspects analyzed	%
Sport reduces language and cultural barriers	80,0
Intercultural interaction through mixed teams	86,7
Integration through extracurricular activities	73,3
Organization of intercultural workshops	80,0
Specific challenges in organizing championships	60,0

These results highlight the consensus of coaches regarding the effectiveness of sport as an educational and social tool, but also the practical difficulties that must be managed to optimize these processes.

At the same time, during the sports competitions we observed the interactions between the participants, offering a detailed perspective on the behaviors of the students, but also on the social dynamics in the mixed teams, thus, it allowed us to identify some essential aspects of the sociocultural integration process, which could not be achieved through other methods, such as questionnaires or interviews. In Figure 2, direct observations of student interactions during university championships are reflected.

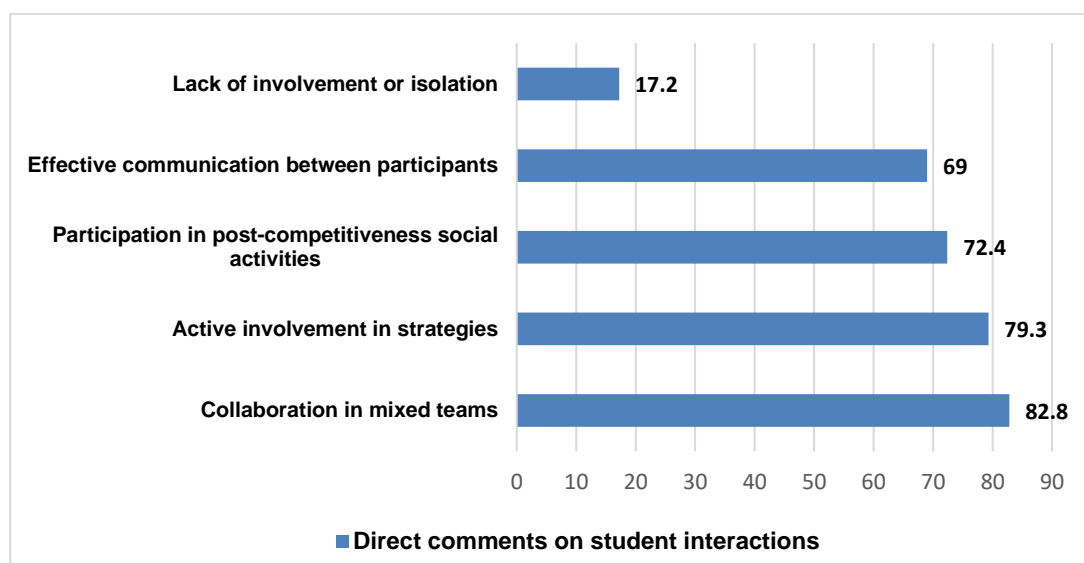


Figure 2. Direct observations on student interactions in university championships

During the competitions, international students demonstrated active involvement in team activities. Analyses revealed that teams exhibited effective communication, with students collaborating to achieve common goals. This collaboration was facilitated by team-building activities and the support provided by coaches, which helped reduce cultural and linguistic barriers. Likewise, students showed a high level of openness to cultural diversity, and the competitions provided an environment where they felt integrated into an inclusive setting. The observed interactions highlighted frequent exchanges of experiences and perspectives among participants, thereby promoting mutual understanding and team solidarity. Analyzing the behaviors of international students, we noted that in almost all teams, one or two members naturally assumed the role of informal leaders, facilitating cooperation among the other participants. In situations of conflict or difficulty, students supported each other, offering constructive solutions and helping their teammates improve their performance. Thus, most of the observed interactions were characterized by respect, encouragement, and mutual appreciation, contributing to the strengthening of intercultural relationships. However, there were also instances where cultural or linguistic differences created minor communication and collaboration challenges. These situations were generally managed successfully through the prompt interventions of coaches or teammates.

Conclusions

University sports championships serve as an effective tool for facilitating the sociocultural integration of international students, contributing to the development of interpersonal relationships, the improvement of intercultural skills, and a stronger sense of belonging to the academic community. Over 75% of students reported that participating in sports competitions helped them integrate socially and collaborate more effectively with individuals from different cultures. Coaches were perceived as central figures in this process, fostering an inclusive environment, reducing cultural and linguistic barriers, and organizing extracurricular activities that encourage intercultural collaboration. A total of 86.7% of

coaches emphasized the importance of mixed teams in promoting intercultural interactions. Direct observations highlighted positive interaction patterns among students, including mutual support, informal leadership, and frequent intercultural exchanges. Although most interactions were positive, some challenges related to cultural and linguistic differences were observed. While the majority of participants reported benefits, approximately 20% faced difficulties adapting to the competitive context, underscoring the need for more well-defined strategies to support international students.

Based on these conclusions, we recommend the following:

- **Universities** should organize workshops and orientation sessions to help international students understand the specific sports and cultural norms of the academic environment.

- **Coaches** should receive training courses to equip them with tools for managing diversity and facilitating collaboration in mixed teams.

- **In addition to sports competitions**, universities could organize social activities such as cultural evenings, excursions, and roundtable discussions to strengthen relationships among students from different backgrounds.

- **Organizing teams** should include qualified personnel to identify the difficulties students face and intervene promptly in cases of misunderstandings or conflicts.

Furthermore, universities should develop clear strategies that integrate cultural diversity into all aspects of academic life, providing continuous support to international students. We also recommend conducting periodic studies to monitor the impact of championships on sociocultural integration and to improve the implemented strategies.

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