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ACHIEVING EXCELLENCE THROUGH INTERCULTURAL TEAMWORK: LESSONS FROM A STUDENT-LED EUROPEAN COLLABORATION IN CHIȘINĂU, REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

OBȚINEREA EXCELENȚEI PRIN MUNCA ÎN ECHIPĂ INTERCULTURALĂ: LECȚII DINTR-O COLABORARE EUROPEANĂ CONDUSĂ DE STUDENȚI LA CHIȘINĂU, REPUBLICA MOLDOVA

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Abstract: *Articolul examinează modul în care munca în echipă interculturală poate contribui la obținerea excelenței în proiecte educaționale și organizaționale. Scopul cercetării este de a identifica factorii care transformă diversitatea culturală dintr-o simplă caracteristică a grupului într-un avantaj real pentru performanța echipei.*

Cercetarea utilizează o abordare calitativă, bazată pe analiza literaturii de specialitate, analiza de documente publice și un studiu de caz asupra Community Student Meeting in Chișinău, eveniment european organizat în februarie 2024 cu participarea studenților și trainerilor din mai multe țări europene. Rezultatele evidențiază rolul obiectivelor comune, al comunicării interculturale, al inteligenței culturale, al încrederii și al leadershipului incluziv în atingerea excelenței.

Studiul arată că diferențele de mindset și stil de viață nu blochează colaborarea atunci când echipa creează claritate, flexibilitate și spații reale de învățare comună.

Key words: *muncă în echipă interculturală; diversitate culturală; comunicare interculturală; performanța echipei; leadership; studiu de caz*

JEL CLASSIFICATION: M14, F23, J24.

INTRODUCTION

In a global environment, excellence is no longer built only through technical knowledge or individual talent. It is increasingly built through the ability to work with people who think differently, communicate differently, and come from different educational, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds. This is especially visible in universities, student organizations, NGOs, and international projects, where diverse teams are expected not only to cooperate, but to deliver results, represent institutions well, and create meaningful learning experiences.

The present article examines how intercultural teamwork can support excellence in practice. The research objective is to identify the factors that help culturally diverse teams move from simple coexistence to real performance. The central argument of this study is that diversity alone does not produce excellence. What matters is the way diversity is guided through communication, trust, common goals, and inclusive coordination. To explore this idea, the article combines relevant academic literature with a qualitative case study of a student-led European event organized in Chișinău in February 2024.

MAIN CONTENT

Brief review of the literature

Research on multicultural teams shows that cultural diversity is not automatically positive or negative. Instead, its effect depends on team processes and context. A major meta-analysis by Stahl et al. (2010) demonstrated that cultural diversity tends to generate both gains and losses: it can increase creativity and satisfaction, while at the same time creating risks related to conflict and lower social integration. In a later retrospective, Stahl and Maznevski (2021) emphasized that diversity does

not influence performance directly; it works through mediating variables such as creativity, cohesion, and conflict, and through contextual factors such as task complexity, tenure, and whether the team works face to face or at a distance.

Other scholars explain more clearly what helps culturally mixed teams work well. Matveev and Nelson (2004) found that cross-cultural communication competence has a significant relationship with multicultural team performance. Tenzer et al. (2014) showed that language barriers can weaken trust formation if team members misread each other's competence, intention, or emotional tone. At the same time, Wang et al. (2019) concluded that deep-level diversity can strengthen team creativity and innovation, especially when teams are collocated and work on interdependent tasks. Shan et al. (2021) and Pirlog (2021) added an important idea: cultural intelligence improves multicultural team effectiveness through common ingroup identity and communication quality (Covaş, Pirlog, 2019). Taken together, these studies suggest that excellence through intercultural teamwork is built through structure, interaction, and shared meaning rather than through diversity by itself.

Research method

The article uses a qualitative exploratory approach. More specifically, it relies on a case study supported by document analysis and reflective observation. The documentary base includes scientific literature on multicultural team performance and public information about the event Community Student Meeting in Chișinău, hosted by the "Ion Creangă" State Pedagogical University of Chișinău on 9-11 February 2024 (UPSC, 2024; Diez, 2024). The reflective component is also important because the author was part of the organizing team as HR Coordinator within ESN Chișinău. This insider perspective makes it possible to observe not only the formal structure of the event, but also the human dynamics behind it. The case study does not aim at statistical generalization. Its purpose is analytical: to understand how intercultural teamwork functions in a real student-led European project and what practical lessons can be drawn from it.

Results and discussion

The case is relevant because it brought together more than 40 students and trainers from several European countries in a shared learning environment (UPSC, 2024; Diez, 2024). According to the organizer's perspective, participants included people from Portugal, Belgium, Romania, and other countries, which created a genuinely intercultural setting. What made cooperation possible was not only the international character of the event, but the presence of a clear common purpose: learning, exchange, and contribution to a European educational initiative. This supports the literature showing that diverse teams perform better when members have a strong shared frame and understand why they are working together.

A second important finding is the role of structured interaction. The event included training sessions, collective activities, and informal moments of exchange. These elements created a practical common language even when participants came with different communication styles and expectations. In intercultural teamwork, excellence rarely appears through spontaneous chemistry alone. More often, it is built through repeated interaction, visible coordination, and a rhythm that helps people feel included. In this case, the training format did exactly that: it aligned people around useful content while also giving them space to build familiarity and mutual respect.

A third finding concerns the nature of challenges. Based on the organizing experience, the main difficulties were not major value clashes, but smaller differences in mindset, life rhythm, social energy, punctuality expectations, and ways of approaching communication. These micro-differences matter. Left unmanaged, they can create distance, frustration, or false assumptions. Yet in this case they were softened through active coordination, human flexibility, and a supportive climate. From an HR and team-management perspective, this confirms a simple but important lesson: multicultural teams do not need perfect similarity; they need emotional maturity, role clarity, and facilitation strong enough to prevent everyday differences from turning into relational barriers.

Finally, the case suggests that excellence in intercultural teamwork should be understood as a process capability. In other words, teams need to turn diversity into learning, not merely tolerate it. The

event generated value in several ways: it expanded perspectives, strengthened international exposure, encouraged knowledge exchange, and showed that a student-led team from Moldova can coordinate a European-level experience with real impact. This is an important insight for higher education and youth organizations. Intercultural teamwork is not only a soft skill; it is a strategic capacity linked to human capital development, internationalization, and the quality of collaborative results.

CONCLUSIONS / RECOMMENDATIONS

The study confirms that achieving excellence through intercultural teamwork depends less on the mere presence of diversity and more on the quality of coordination around that diversity. The literature and the Chișinău case study point in the same direction: common goals, communication competence, trust, cultural intelligence, and inclusive leadership are the main conditions that allow diverse teams to perform well. Excellence appears when differences are organized into cooperation, not when differences disappear.

For student organizations, universities, and project teams, several practical recommendations follow. First, intercultural teams should establish common expectations early, especially regarding communication, time, and responsibilities. Second, formal activities should be combined with informal interaction, because trust is often built outside strictly technical tasks. Third, coordinators should act not only as administrators, but also as cultural bridges able to read group energy and reduce small tensions before they grow. Although the study is limited to one case, it offers a clear conclusion: when diversity is matched by structure, empathy, and purposeful leadership, intercultural teamwork can become a real path to excellence.

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