Buletinul Ştiinţific al Universităţii Politehnica Timişoara
Seria Limbi moderne

Scientific Bulletin of the Politehnica University of Timişoara
Transactions on Modern Languages

Vol. 24, Issue 1 / 2025

Respectful Communication: Towards an Ethics of Academic Mobility

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Abstract: The article outlines a framework for ethical academic mobility, addressing the challenges faced by students, educators, and administrative staff participating in international exchanges. Central to the guide is respectful communication, emphasizing empathy, respect, cultural openness, legal compliance, and sustainability as principles for fostering mutual understanding and constructive dialogue. The guide also highlights academic integrity and responsible conduct as essential values, promoting collaboration and inclusivity. Drawing on the example of Politehnica University of Timișoara, it integrates cultural relativism with universal ethical standards, offering practical recommendations. The article advocates for embedding these principles into university policies and training programs, enhancing the global academic experience.

Keywords: Academic Mobility, Respectful Communication, Ethics, Cultural Openness, Sustainability, Academic Integrity

1. Introduction

Today we are witnessing an effervescence of unprecedented academic exchanges. Every year, hundreds of thousands of students, teachers and researchers, administrative staff from Europe participate in academic mobility outside their home country. This mobility allows students to travel and study abroad, teachers and researchers to work, conduct research or participate in international projects. Even administrative staff participate in exchanges of experience in other academic institutions for professional development, learning good practices, expanding the network of contacts and supporting the internationalization of the academic institution. In 2020, 1.46 million foreign students were studying undergraduate studies in Europe. Through Erasmus+ alone, 648.000 people benefited in 2021 from

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the funds made available by the European Union for academic mobility and international projects. The 2021 budget was EUR 2.9 billion that financed 19.000 projects and around 71.000 organisations.

The RespectNET project funded by the Erasmus+ program with identification code: 2021-1-IT02-KA220-HED-000027578 aims to promote and encourage respectful scientific dialogue in the academic sphere and in relation to civil society. Civilized dialogue is the central element of this initiative and is considered a necessary prerequisite for all that means authentic communication, collaboration, citizen dialogue, civic involvement, scientific debate or debate on broad social or political issues. The stake of respectful communication (where the name of the project comes from) is so great that the very fate of democracy depends on it. Genuine democracy (and here we can give as an example the deliberative democracy of Jurgen Habermas, facilitated by communicative rationality) is not possible without the existence of broad debates based on arguments on matters of public interest, decisions being taken by considering the best arguments.

If respectful communication is the solution for integrating diverse interests and solving the thorny problems of the society in which we live, then the diseases of communication are the number one enemy of all that means cooperation, collaboration, communion, sharing, tolerance and acceptance. Social networks have only exacerbated these communication disorders. Because communication here is indirect, sometimes anonymous, uncensored and unspoken, they have often become the site of a dialogue that incites hatred, bullying, disinformation, fake news, conspiracy theories and disinformation. In this context, the RespectNET project aims to increase the media and communication skills of students and academic staff and to develop a code of respectful dialogue within the university and in relation to all institutional partners. For this, it is necessary to acquire skills of rational analysis, interpretation, argumentation, critical thinking and effective communication.

We aim to outline a blueprint for a code of communication and respectful behavior in university mobility and especially in Erasmus+ mobilities. These programs funded by the European Union benefit in large numbers both the students of our university, as well as the professors, researchers and administrative staff of Politehnica University of Timisoara. Therefore, our proposal for a Code of Ethics of Conduct and Academic Communication could be of benefit to all those accessing these mobilities.

2. The Ethics of International Mobility as Academic Ethics

It is important to note that discussions about the establishment of academic ethics at the official level in Romania are not new. In our country, the Ethics and Academic Integrity discipline was introduced by Order of the Minister of National Education no. 3131/2018 dated January 30, 2018. According to this order, the Ethics and Academic Integrity discipline must be included in the curricula of all university programs in the national education system. Thus, at the bachelor level, the discipline has optional status, while at the master and doctoral level the discipline is mandatory.

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As we pointed out elsewhere,

> Academia ethics is a specialized type of ethical reflection applied to an area of crucial importance for the moral health of a country, namely the academic field. It is difficult to argue enough how vital it is to ensure integrity as a cardinal value for the academic world. The academic sphere is that privileged area of specialized training and high-level research from which the expectations of society are also high. It is the training environment for future specialists in different fields, opinion leaders, politicians and managers in the administration. Universities are the main institutions in which knowledge is created and disseminated (Băiaș, Luminosu, Suciu, 2018, p. 3).

Academic ethics is a type of applied ethics whose norms are derived at the intermediate level from the values of the code of ethics of the respective academic institution (in our case, the Code of Ethics and Deontology of the Politehnica University of Timisoara), and at the highest level are the values and general ethical principles accepted by the society. Thus, academic ethics, as applied ethics, merely customize the general principles of the society in which we live. Nor could it be otherwise, since between academic life and society should be a coherence and an ethical consistency without which singular individuals would be deprived of moral compass and ethical landmarks. This makes the awareness of the values of academic ethics a long-lasting one, because once assumed, these principles will constitute benchmarks not only for the academic sphere but also for professional and personal life.

> Academia is thus a crucible for the formation and perfection of the character of young people with a strong impact on the morals of a society. The mission of a university is not only to create specialists in the various fields of science, technology, arts or humanism but also to form personalities and propose human models (ibid., p. 5).

In addition to a so-called “apophatic”, “negative” ethics, which warns against violations of the good in the academic sphere (plagiarism in all its forms, self-plagiarism, contract cheating, honorary authorship, falsification of data, etc.) and in its continuation, we identify a so-called “positive”, “affirmative” ethics that trace the landmarks of desirable behaviors and moral conduct in the academic sphere. Within this affirmative ethics, we propose to initiate a new chapter that deals with issues little addressed in Romanian literature, namely the issue of moral conduct in the case of academic mobility.

The need for such a new chapter in a proposal for academic ethics and integrity stems, as I pointed out at the beginning, from the large number of participants (students, teachers, researchers, administrative staff) in international mobility, as well as from all those characteristics that make these mobilities often real challenges: the novelty of the environment, cultural differences, linguistic specificity, religious and spiritual characteristics, the peculiarity of social customs, human diversity, etc. An ethics of academic mobility should start from the idea of moderate cultural relativism and have at its core a concept of effective communication.

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3. Moderate Cultural Relativity

Cultural relativism is the view that one's beliefs and practices must be understood based on the characteristics of the community to which they belong. According to cultural relativism, cultures are incomparable and irreducible: the norms and values of one culture cannot be judged based on the norms and values of another culture. There are no higher and lower cultures, just as there are no "good" and "bad" cultures. A culture must be understood based on its specificities and not in comparison with other cultures, possibly the culture of which we belong. The opposite of cultural relativism is cultural ethnocentrism, the tendency to place at the center our culture and to judge other cultures from this perspective. Thus, the culture to which we belong is considered 'normal' or 'correct', and all the others are more or less close to this 'normality'. Of course, at the gnoseological level, such a judgment is erroneous because it involves personal or group projections determined by the illusion of a subjectivity that flows over the world. This creates the premise for stereotyped thinking and belief in ethnic superiority that can lead to discrimination, xenophobia, racism, and all sorts of other "isms".

Cultural relativism must not be understood as necessarily leading to excessive moral relativism, that is to say, to the belief that there are no standards of universality as to what is good and what is bad, just and unjust, no universal moral laws that apply to all men beyond any differences between them. It is true that due to cultural, spiritual and religious differences, different communities interpret in different ways ethical aspects and propose different solutions. Thus, what some societies consider ethical, natural, normal, is considered unethical, unnatural and prohibited by other societies (for example, equality between sexes, interracial marriages, divorce, religious tolerance, acceptance of sexual minorities, etc.). However, certain moral values tend to be absolute (that is, valued in all societies) because non-compliance would jeopardize the very existence of those societies (e.g. murder, theft, deception, etc.). In the context of this discussion, it should not be forgotten that man is not only the product of the culture, but also of his own choices. People can have their own opinions and values, which are not the same as those of the culture they belong to. It is precisely this space of individual freedom that leaves room for overcoming prejudices and stereotypes, discrimination and ethnocentrism. Of course, cultural relativism does not mean accepting degrading, dehumanizing or even violent practices just because they would be considered normal in certain marginal societies.

We are unique in a world of unique people. The challenge of the participant in academic mobility is to build bridges that connect these insularities, to build friendships and collaborations in a world that is becoming more and more global. She or he must find common values that unite, emphasizing congruences and not differences. Beyond customs and cultural peculiarities, there is a human nature that binds the whole of humanity.

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4. Principles for an Ethics of Academic Mobility: The Case of Politehnica University Timisoara, Romania

An ethics of academic mobility should find its foundation and agree with documents such as:

- The Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations;
- The Constitution of Romania as the supreme law of a democratic state;
- The Code of Ethics and Deontology of the Politehnica University of Timișoara.

Going through the Code of Ethics and Deontology of the Politehnica University of Timisoara, one will see that the values and principles on which it is founded are values and principles that are found in the Constitution of Romania (and of other democratic states) and they derive their substance from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Thus, the Code of Ethics and Deontology of the Politehnica University of Timisoara gives precedence to the following principles and values: the supremacy of the Constitution and the law, the priority of the public interest, justice and fairness, professionalism, impartiality and independence, loyalty, integrity, honesty and fairness, transparency, freedom of thought and expression, academic freedom, the exercise of personal autonomy, respect, collegiality, generosity, humanity, decency, and elegance.

As Emanuel Socaciu points out, every moral principle is accompanied by an interpretation and limiting conditions. For example, academic freedom cannot be invoked to justify the manufacture or falsification of research results. Or acceptance of diversity of opinions presupposes a limiting condition that excludes intolerant and racist opinions. The academic ideal of free discussion, rational argumentation, and critical thinking is also used in analyzing one's own moral values and standards so that their reassessment continues to maintain them as living landmarks of academic life (Socaciu, in Papadima, 2017 p. 13).

All the principles listed above provide a solid premise for a university's internationalization, but they must be specified, complemented, and exemplified. In this article, we will refer to both "incoming" and "outgoing" mobility. We will then propose a list of ethical values and principles that can guide participants in academic mobility.

a) *Empathy*, the principle that participants in mobility must have the ability to understand and share other people's perspectives, experiences, and feelings.

b) *Respect*, a principle by which members of the academic community participating in mobility must demonstrate an attitude full of consideration, politeness, and appreciation towards the people of the host country.

c) *Cultural openness*, a principle that calls for overcoming cultural prejudices and stereotypes. Academic staff should avoid staying in preconceived ideas and subjective, one-sided perceptions of people, customs, culture, morality, politics, religion, the standard of living, or alleged flaws of the country in which they will perform mobility.

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d) *Compliance with the laws of the host country, internal rules and regulations of the institutions*. This principle calls for adaptation to the host country's legal and regulatory framework, which requires an effort to inform in advance.

e) *Availability to communication* is the principle that participants should be willing to engage in dialogue with their colleagues from other countries or cultures, actively listening and encouraging communication, with the gift of leading to genuine exchanges of ideas and knowledge and progress on all sides.

f) *The representation with honor and dignity of the institution of which we belong* is the principle by which mobility actors must behave as dignified representatives of their university and present a positive image of it.

g) *Sustainability and environmental responsibility* is the principle that mobility participants must be aware of the environmental impact of their mobility and adopt practices to reduce this impact.

h) *Academic integrity* presupposes the adoption of honest behavior, adherence to academic ethical standards, and conduct that demonstrates respect for intellectual work and copyright.

Empathy involves the ability to put yourself in another person's place and feel what that person feels. It means paying attention to others and being compassionate, benevolent, and understanding. Empathy plays a fundamental role in developing meaningful human relationships and promoting collaboration and understanding. When people feel understood, they tend to trust others and connect with them. We are empathetic when we are willing and have the ability to translate into someone else's skin. For example, one should be wondering what is it like to study or live in a country with different cultural elements than those at home, what behavior should one adopt, and what things one should respect to be welcomed in the host community.

Respect is a *sine qua non* condition of human interactions and represents the value from which collaboration can be built. It means recognizing the dignity of others, regardless of their opinions, orientations, and choices. It is natural that in the travels occasioned by academic activities, we show respect for the relationships that we establish there. For example, one should show a willingness to meet the needs of others being aware that people are more than their cultural, religious, or national identity (Wageningen University & Research, p. 3).

Cultural openness is the intellectual ability to grasp the peculiarities of other cultures and communities and to treat them in the sense of diversity. It calls for the existence of cultural sensitivity, the abstention from judgments that harm those in the destination country or region of mobility. We should appreciate the specifics and cultural richness of the host country even when the customs encountered differ from those at home, and avoid sensitive subjects, those that can harm pride or place hosts in an unpleasant position.

Compliance with the laws of the host country, internal rules and regulations of the institutions. Both within the institutional framework of the university and in society, the participant in mobility must prove the qualities of a colleague and a good

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citizen. He or she must know all those do's and don'ts in order not to put himself/herself in a position to break the norms and jeopardize collaboration. For example, participants in mobility must inform themselves, comply with the rules on their stay, and complete all formalities to ensure the legality of their stay. They must comply with the rules of accommodation and the use of facilities.

Availability to communication is a basic principle of academic exchanges that facilitates effective interaction between those engaged in international projects and mobility. Academic actors must use a language that is understood by all parties in dialogue (usually English), use appropriate means of communication in different communication situations (such as e-mail, virtual collaboration platforms, videoconferencing, face-to-face meetings, etc.), show flexibility and adaptability, be able to overcome technical or linguistic obstacles to ensure smooth and efficient communication.

The representation with honor and dignity of the institution of which we belong is a principle that aims to contribute to the maintenance of a positive image of the university and the increase of its international prestige. Exchange participants must respect the ideals, values, and ethical principles of their institution, follow codes of conduct and institutional policies, and respect the academic protocol, regardless of the occasion of such mobility: research internship, conference, symposium, project meeting, student exchange, exchange of experience, documentation internship, etc. Academic mobility actors should promote constructive dialogue, have a dignified academic outfit, promote institutional values, prove high professionalism, and avoid any conflicts, disputes, or behaviors that could affect the image of their university.

Sustainability and environmental responsibility is a principle to which members of the academic community, as well-informed professionals, with a superior awareness of the realities of the world in which they live, are called upon to adhere. They must be responsible for using resources, reducing greenhouse gas emissions, protecting fragile ecosystems, minimizing waste generation, and promoting renewable energy. Thus, for example, mobility actors are encouraged to use electric means of transport instead of those using fossil fuels, to share personal transport to reduce waste (car-sharing), to avoid products with excessive packaging, etc.

Academic integrity means respecting a moral code of academic life that includes values such as avoiding plagiarism and copying, ensuring rigor in academic research, and pursuing high academic standards. Behaviors such as plagiarism, self-plagiarism, coauthorship of honor, ghostwriting, falsification, and manipulation of research data are corrupt forms of academic integrity. For example, it is advisable for mobility participants to participate in training courses and interactive sessions for students and researchers to address topics such as plagiarism, proper citation, responsible use of project funds, or mobility.

4. Conclusion

The principles listed above may constitute the outline of a possible guide to be used by participants in international academic mobility. They are general enough to suit the

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various types of mobility today. These principles can be included in the training that mobility actors should carry out before departure, but they can also be included in the discipline of Ethics and academic integrity that is taught in Romanian universities. They can also be included in the Code of Ethics and Deontology of universities participating in mobility, confirming the efforts of internationalization and broad academic cooperation.

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