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**LEARNING CHALLENGES AND BENEFITS DURING THE
INTERNATIONAL WORKSHOP ON URBAN REGENERATION**

Oana-Ramona Ilovan (a), Kinga Xénia Havadi-Nagy (b)*, Maria Eliza Dulamă (c), Paul Mutică (d), Emanuel-Cristian Adorean (e), Alexandra-Maria Colcer (f), Paula Olivia Cimpoieș (g)

*Corresponding author

(a) Babeș-Bolyai University, 5-7 Clinicilor St., Cluj-Napoca, Romania, ilovanoana@yahoo.com

(b) Babeș-Bolyai University, 5-7 Clinicilor St., Cluj-Napoca, Romania, xeniahavadi@yahoo.es

(c) Babeș-Bolyai University, 7 Sindicatelor St., Cluj-Napoca, Romania, dulama@upcmil.ro

(d) Technical University of Cluj-Napoca, 34-36 Observatorului St., Cluj-Napoca, Romania, paulmutica@yahoo.com

(e) Babeș-Bolyai University, 5-7 Clinicilor St., Cluj-Napoca, Romania, adorean.ec@gmail.com

(f) Babeș-Bolyai University, 5-7 Clinicilor St., Cluj-Napoca, Romania, colcer_alexandra@yahoo.com

(g) Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj School of Public Health, Faculty of Political, Administrative and Communication Sciences, 7 Pandurilor St., Cluj-Napoca, Romania, paula.cimpoies@publichealth.ro

Abstract

We analysed university students' opinions about their gained educational and personal benefits and challenges faced during an international and interdisciplinary workshop on urban regeneration, organised with the collaboration of Babeș-Bolyai University, in Cluj-Napoca, Romania, in the period 31st May-2nd June 2018. The M.Sc. and Ph.D. students taking part at this workshop were from Romania, Estonia and Italy. Besides these students, participants were researchers, practitioners, activists, public authorities' representatives, senior planning officials, community leaders, academics, private stakeholders interested in city development, policy makers, investors/entrepreneurs, urban planners, etc. from Romania, Italy, Russia, Estonia, and Poland. Their fields of study were also different: Geography, Sociology, Architecture, and Urban Planning. To find out the learning challenges and benefits these students experienced during the workshop, we collected data by administering a questionnaire. We questioned them about their motivation to participate at the workshop, their interest level in urban regeneration, the sources of their knowledge about urban regeneration processes, their satisfaction degree about participating at the workshop, the challenges they had to cope with during the proceedings, the participation benefits for their professional and personal development, etc. We assessed their learning experience and suggested ways to improve it.

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Keywords: University students; learning; interdisciplinarity; transculturality, territorial development.



1. Introduction

In the educational sphere, the Romanian post-socialist context required curricular changes in the field of Geography, both in the pre-university system (Jucu, 2012; Ilovan et al., 2018) and in the university one (Dulamă & Ilovan, 2016; Jucu, 2014). However, this focus on improving geographical education was not singular, the entire Romanian educational system requiring amendments, from very diverse perspectives: competence-based curriculum (Andronache, Bocoş, & Neculau 2015; Peculea, Andronache, & Bocoş, 2017), learning styles and development of professional skills (Catalano & Chiş, 2016; Chiş & Grec, 2017), didactic communication (Cuc, 2013b, 2014), assessment (Stan & Manea, 2015), cultural diversity (Cuc, 2013a), educational management (Manea, 2014; Precup & Chiş, 2017), etc.

On urban regeneration/redevelopment, there is a vast amount of published papers and books. There is a general reference to urban regeneration in the specialised literature as the large-scale process of adapting the built environment to the rigours of the state (Jones and Evans, 2008, p. 2). Jones and Evans (2008) focus on the emergence of urban regeneration as a policy domain, urban economic regeneration, issues of sustainability, of design and cultural elements of regeneration. Other authors review the concept of cultural quarter and of making a typology (Montgomery, 2003, 2004). In Romania, redevelopment is discussed related to territorial identity (Ilovan, Jordan, & Havadi-Nagy, & Zametter 2016a; Ilovan, Scridon, Havadi-Nagy, & Huciu 2016b; Nicula, Stoica, & Ilovan 2017; Scridon & Ilovan, 2016), to resilience (Bănică & Muntele, 2015, 2017; Bănică, Istrate, & Muntele, 2017), to social economy (Drăgan & Popa, 2017), to spatial restructuring (Jucu, 2016) or to industrial restructuring (Voiculescu & Jucu, 2016).

In international scientific literature, urban regeneration was discussed also from the necessity of having qualified professionals that aim at improving our cities in a sustainable and creative manner (Stangel & Twardoch, 2016). Therefore, field trips proved to be essential for stimulating university students'/citizen's "involvement, critical thinking and sensitivity to place" (Stangel & Twardoch, 2016, p. 58). In this context, a series of educational experiments were realised recently, involving university students into urban regeneration projects (Buzasi & Csete, 2017; Caneparo & Bonavero, 2016; Fumo, Violano, & Castelluccio, 2017; Higuera, Gonzalez, & Lamiquiz, 2016; Sassano, Graziadei, Amato, & Murgante, 2017; Stangel & Witeczek, 2015; Stangel & Twardoch, 2016), with a strong emphasis on participants' interdisciplinary cooperation for urban identity recovery, while answering the needs of the local community (i.e. empowering it and involving it in urban planning choices).

Such an educational experiment, apart from its strong research aim, was the international three-day urban regeneration workshop that we organised in Cluj-Napoca, Romania, in the period 31st May-2nd June 2018, where the participants were exposed to four different case studies with obvious social and economic benefits of urban renewal. According to its Call for papers, this workshop aimed at:

“exploring the challenges and issues of urban regeneration in shrinking cities world-wide (setting the scene for the following debate on post-socialist cities); sharing critical views and research results (theoretical and empirical) of current issues on urban regeneration in post-socialist cities, theoretical discussions and developments among researchers coming from different countries and scientific background, who demonstrate a critical engagement with urban regeneration policies; creating a network among participants

with common research and urban development interests and, thus, enabling the submission of research projects with national and EU funding; facilitating know-how and experience transmission to public administration; connecting the academic ideas to the practitioners' area in a joint experience of collaboration; engaging the associations and practitioners involved in sustainable urban projects, that have innovative ideas and want to share their experience (chances and challenges) and methods, and to come with ideas and support for their colleagues; bringing in public institutions, sharing and exchanging experiences, because the public administration (first of all the local government) has strategic relevance for development at diverse territorial levels (local, regional, national) and it is crucial for the sustainability of regeneration initiatives, based on culture, new welfare services, economic activities, and ways of providing housing for low-income and vulnerable families and so on; covering a range of issues on "urban mainstreaming", such as: urban design, territorial and environmental development, community participation, local/strategic planning, smart cities, urban renewal and resilient cities, urban gardening, community action in the regeneration process, urban development, and management strategies." (Ilovan & Havadi, 2018).

The proposed topics of interest in the context of post-socialist cities were the following: "urban regeneration and community development; urban regeneration processes and regional development; research methodology for the study of urban regeneration; social inclusion and cultural innovation; sustainable urban regeneration through multicultural heritage; (re)inventing urban (re)generation: building the present by (re)constructing the past; urban renewal and resilience: a comparative perspective; fragmented cities: governance and urban renewal; urban regeneration as displacement; innovative approaches to urban regeneration in the EU; urban regeneration and territorial planning; urban regeneration and public policy. *Type of public to engage*: researchers, practitioners, activists, public authorities, senior planning officials, community leaders, academics, university students, private stakeholders interested in city development, policy makers, investors/entrepreneurs, urban planners, professional organisations, cultural associations, political party representatives, etc." (Ilovan & Havadi, 2018).

This international workshop was supported by WeRise (Urban Regeneration Collective), Italy, U-RISE (Urban Regeneration and Social Innovation Master), IUAV University of Venice, Italy, and by *Territorial Identity and Development* Journal (Ilovan & Havadi, 2018).

Besides scientific paper presentations during the diverse workshop sections, it included field trips to four locations representative for the diversity of urban regeneration initiatives in Cluj-Napoca. The first was Liberty Technology Park: a private, investment intensive, economic initiative for the regeneration of a former industrial derelict space, which turned a brown-field into a modern, ecologically friendly office area used by different stakeholders, and with various services offered to them by the management). La Terenuri [At the Playgrounds] – Mănăştur is an initiative developed and led by the local community, in a residential area: a group of activists and residents use a green area and adjacent rather derelict sport area for community activities. They try to raise awareness, to involve the population in activities and decision-making applying the principles of participative bottom-up approaches. H33 is a grass-root initiative of industrial reconversion of a former distillery into a space for cultural and other activities, and the Paintbrush Factory is a contemporary artists' regeneration initiative for a former derelict industrial space through cultural activities.

2. Problem Statement

The problem was the little knowledge about the impact of scientific workshops on M.Sc. and Ph.D. students' educational and personal development (i.e. Urban Regeneration Workshops).

3. Research Questions

What are the university students' opinions and impressions about their educational and personal benefits and challenges participating at scientific workshops? What are the results of assessing their experience?

4. Purpose of the Study

The aim was assessing students' learning experience and finding solutions for improving it. Secondly, it was gaining insight from the participants for a more effective organisation of future workshops.

5. Research Methods

Research took place during and after the international workshop on Urban Regeneration, in May and June 2018. Details about data collecting and processing, participants, and research material are presented below.

5.1. Data collecting and processing

Student participants at the workshop were kindly asked to complete an online questionnaire, a few weeks after the workshop ended. The questionnaire was realised using the Google Forms application from Google Drive. We collected their answers in an Excel file. The questionnaire data were completed by the authors' observations made during the event.

5.2. Participants

15 university students participated at the workshop and 14 of them completed the questionnaire. Out of the 14 students, 9 were M.Sc. (4 from Romania and 5 from Italy). Four of the five Ph.D. students were from Romania and one was from Estonia. They graduated Geography (5 students), Architecture (2), Urban Regeneration (5), Regional and Urban Planning (1), and Regional Development (1). One could notice that they were quite specialised on urban areas (Geography, Architecture, Urban Regeneration), complemented by Humanities (social innovation) or technical focus (GIS, environmental engineering).

5.3. Research material

The research material is represented by the answers to the online questionnaire.

6. Findings

Findings are based on the analysis of students' feedback (i.e. their answers to the online questionnaire). The foreign participants attended all the events (presentations and field trips) during the

Urban Regeneration Workshop or participated at least at 80% of this scientific event. Romanian participants' level of participation was lower, ranging from 40 to 80%, whereby it is important to mention that most of them volunteered in the event organisation and could not attend the entire manifestation due to organisational duties.

Over 85% of the respondents had a high satisfaction level with the event, being very content (57%) or content (28%). 14% of the respondents noticed some pleasing aspects, but, at the same time, considered that some organisational issues needed improvement.

Regarding *their decisive reasons for attending this event*, the respondents named *the possibility to meet and interact with specialists in different fields* (78%), followed by *the possibility to learn new ideas* (64%) as a very important motive for attending the workshop. *The chance to present their own ideas to others* seemed to be less important, for 14% even not important at all. The internationality of the event, *the chance to learn about urban regeneration chances and challenges from different regions and countries* were also quite important (35%) or very important (57%) for most of the respondents.

The three-day full workshop programme, with presentations and field trips, seems to be differently challenging for the participants (Table 1), where 35% considered it challenging and 7% as not challenging at all. We also must consider, that not all the respondents had a 100% participation level. In this context, 42% of the respondents had difficulties in *understanding the differences between the cultural backgrounds that make for different urban regeneration in different countries*, explained probably by a lack of socio-cultural background information about the case study countries. Most of the participants had certain difficulties *to understand what the specialists were trying to communicate*, problem which could be rather connected to the presenter's skills, his or her elocution, or to the quality of the PowerPoint presentation. Presentations in English were not challenging for the respondents, meaning that at this study level (Ph.D. and M.Sc.) the students were proficient English users. This could be also explained by a larger experience in attending international conferences.

Students were also asked to grade *the most rewarding aspects during the workshop*. The general chance to learn was rewarding (56%) and very rewarding (21%) for a large share of the respondents. Over 90% of the respondents considered meeting people and establishing connections for the future as rewarding and very rewarding as well. This was complemented by the aspect of learning *about possible further cooperation possibilities and scientific conferences on the topic*, appreciated by 70% of the respondents as rewarding. The fun factor was also important, so it would be appropriate to apply the principles of edutainment when planning and conducting such events. Practising English and speaking in public was also considered a positive side effect of participating at this kind of events.

Table 01. Students' opinions on the challenging and less challenging aspects during the workshop (where 1 means not challenging and 5 means very challenging)

Assessed aspects	1	2	3	4	5
	Number of students				
Managing to stay focused, the programme was really crowded	1	3	3	5	2
Understanding what the specialists were trying to communicate	2	4	3	3	2
Making connections between the different aspects of city management and urban regeneration on the whole	-	4	5	1	4
Understanding the differences between the cultural backgrounds that make for different urban regeneration in different countries	-	5	2	6	1
Presentations in a foreign language (English)	7	3	-	3	1

They also wrote concerning *the aspects about urban regeneration that were most interesting for them*. The most interesting topics for the respondents in connection with urban regeneration were the cultural activities (85%) and the temporary uses (92%) as regeneration potentials. The topic of urban regeneration processes initiated by private investors is less popular than the bottom-up practices or the top-down policies.

The respondents also named the fieldtrips, which illustrated their focus of interest: social innovation or collective work for H33, reconversion of industrial areas for the Liberty Park, or bottom-up initiatives related to La Terenuri [At the Playgrounds] – Mănăştur and to the Paintbrush Factory. Important to point out might be one student's affirmation that: *Field trips say sometimes more than presentations about these things*, affirmation which illustrates the importance of field trips for scientific events. The respondents named either all the four field trip destinations, or one of them reasoning their choice. Three respondents did not answer this question.

The field trips illustrated effectively the topic of the event, gave opportunity to discuss with local people involved in urban regeneration initiatives and pointed out the differences between various approaches. Further on, the visits enabled interesting debates about the peculiarities and limitations/difficulties of urban regeneration processes. Students also had the opportunity to experience similarities and differences of urban regeneration initiatives compared to those from their home country.

Answering the question about *which presentation they enjoyed the most*, the respondents named various presentations, and argued with their field of interest, the innovative methodology applied by the presenter, the practicability of the addressed topic, clarity and message that had been delivered, while the presenter's elocution was also a possible answer. Not only the addressed topic, but also the authors' presentation skills contributed to the success of a paper.

About *how much they were directly involved in urban regeneration projects*, these students answered that they studied urban regeneration for the Ph.D. thesis (1), worked in urban regeneration projects led by municipalities (3), worked in urban regeneration projects led by NGOs (4), not directly involved at all (5 Romanian students), did internship (1), and participated in a workshop (1). Most of the Romanian respondents are not actively involved in urban regeneration projects. This could be explained by the fact that their focus of study was only partly related to urban regeneration, but could express also a shortcoming of the educational system. The respondents whose study focused on urban regeneration were more involved in this kind of projects, either initiated by municipalities or by NGOs. This could also reflect their field of interest related to urban regeneration.

About *the sources of their knowledge on urban regeneration processes*, students gave several variants: focus of their studies (50%), scientific literature/research (64%), conferences (64%), workshops (1 student), project participation (50%), internships (1 student). Being M.Sc. and Ph.D. students, the respondents used various and usually multiple sources to gain information about urban regeneration processes. Scientific literature and research is a common source of knowledge for students, being confirmed also by the respondents. For most of the Italian and Estonian respondents, urban regeneration was the focus of their studies. This was true only for two of the Romanian participants. About half of the respondents had also applied experience in urban regeneration, either by participating in urban regeneration projects or attending internships in this field.

Dependent on the level of involvement in urban regeneration projects (complemented by the focus of their study), there were noticeable differences between students concerning the source of knowledge about urban regeneration processes: those who were directly involved in urban regeneration initiatives, indicated project participation as main source of their knowledge in the field. The others gained information mainly through literature research and conferences.

The input, which the participants gained during the workshop can have various and multiple further uses. Writing about *their intention to use/apply the gathered input*, students chose cooperation in projects with the workshop attendees (64%), cooperation in publications with the attendees (42%), maintaining the relationship with the representatives of the visited urban regeneration initiatives (57%), applying the input into ongoing projects (50%), and attending further conferences (50%). The answers reflected the usefulness of this kind of events to the professional and personal development of the participant young academics, and, at the same time, their desire to follow up or get involved in practice in urban regeneration projects.

7. Conclusion

The proposed activities, involving the members of the academic community going on field trips and interacting with the local community, promoted a series of highly valuable results for the educational process: education centred on forming active citizens, for the benefit of the society; cognitive transfer and outreach, characteristic for learning and teaching in a Humboldtian university; initiating collaboration among participants and between them and representatives of the local social and economic environment, thus strengthening knowledge transfer and this relationship. The Humboldtian model is completed by the entrepreneurial one, enabling involvement in solving societal problems. These results are to be included under didactic excellence enabling the academic community' sustainability and civic empowerment.

Solutions for improving students' learning experience during such a scientific event include the following: a student-centred educational process, students' more frequent active involvement in such activities, students' direct involvement in urban regeneration actions, and raising students' awareness about the opportunities to get involved at the beginning of their Bachelor's studies.

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academice și responsabilizare civică [Didactic excellence for a sustainable academic community and its civic empowerment] (Ilovan, 2018).

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