

Challenges of International Students' Adjustment to a Higher Education Institution

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ABSTRACT

The relevance of this work is determined by the real problems of foreign students' adaptation to the educational environment of Russian high school. International students face certain problems, complicating adaptation to a new lifestyle, to the educational environment of the Russian high school, to a completely new social and cultural environment. Every year more and more foreign students come to Russia to get higher education, and every foreign student goes through an objective process of adaptation to college life. This article aims to develop recommendations, basic principles for an educational institution that provides educational services to foreign citizens. The leading method to the study of this problem is a qualitative method of case-study, which allows to focus on practical knowledge about real everyday situations, faced by foreign students in Russia. The case-study method provides an opportunity to pay close attention to the impact of social, cultural and academic factors on their adaptation. The article revealed that international students often face a series of transitional difficulties immediately after arriving to study in Russian universities. The problems are cataloged according to academic, social and cultural aspects. The article states that in order to overcome these problems, the students use resources provided mainly by the university. On the other hand, it is found out that these problems motivate foreign students to develop strategies to meet emerging challenges. The data obtained can be used in the practice of the university administration, faculty and staff to timely detect and eliminate academic, social and cultural challenges faced by international students at the beginning of their studies in Russia. Attention to these issues will provide more adequate support for foreign students.

KEYWORDS

International students, higher education, academic challenges, social isolation, cultural adjustment

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Introduction

Given the recent demand for internationalization and globalization, a cross-border student mobility increased all over the world.

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During 2015 the number of international students studying in Russian universities increased by 14.1% and reached 186,606 (Malykhin, 2015). The number of foreigners enrolled at our universities, increased by 9.8% (up to 59,300), of which one in five (11,090) entered on state quotas, and the amount of those whose who entered on state quotas increased by 55.5% over the year.

According to statistics, most international students in Russia come from Kazakhstan (53,809 or 28.8%), followed by Belarusians (17,724 or 9.4%), Ukrainians rank third (15,978 or 8.5%), the top-five is closed by representatives from Turkmenistan (15,631 or 8.4%) and Uzbekistan (15,025 or 8%). The top-ten also includes Azerbaijani, Chinese, Tajiks, Moldavians and representatives of India (Gelbras, 2002).

International students study in more than half of the today's 950 educational public and private higher education institutions in Russia.

They contribute to the diversity and internationalization of academic and public activities. For example, these students bring different perspectives to problems in the classroom, enhance the mutual understanding and appreciation of the differences found around the world. Therefore, it is important to accept international students in Russian universities, because of their contributions to the student society on so many various levels. These levels include academic prestige, cultural exchange and financial income.

To begin with, international students are extremely important to the higher education of any country for both academic prestige and financial advantage. Thus, for example, it is found that students demonstrate a lot more interest in their studies, if they attend an academic institution enrolling a number of international students (Celleja, 2000). As a rule, international students are hard-working. In contrast to the Russian students most foreigners going to college are eager to learn. Almost all international students show a great desire to get straight A. The basic level of the subject skills of international and Russian students can be about the same, and sometimes it is even higher among the foreigners, because more hours may be provided for the academic discipline. Therefore, it is often international students who help Russian ones to understand the most complex issues. Russian students have more incentive to study the subject, which spurs a sense of competition with international students (Knyazeva et al., 2010). Thus, international students in some way enhance the academic performance of universities in which they study, because they show a good level of academic training. Especially, when the student's country sends him to study abroad, then there is quite a rigorous selection of candidates. Not only the applicant's performance in basic subjects is taken into account, but also his common cultural competence. In this case, the Russian university gets decent, academically prepared students. Even if they have a high rating in their countries, international students, however, must meet the requirements in language training. Namely, these students bring new ways of thinking and intensify competition in academic achievement.

Secondly, international students constitute an increasingly important source of ethno-cultural diversity. They enrich the cultural diversity with their own home culture and ethnic knowledge. In addition, international students help the faculty and students to develop their cultural sensitivity and skills in working with people from different social and cultural backgrounds. International students may provide opportunities for the Russian faculty,

students and the whole society to practice speaking different foreign languages, gain practical knowledge about other cultures and traditions. Hammer et al. (2003) found that “as one’s experience of cultural difference become more complex and sophisticated, one’s potential competence in intercultural relationship increases”. In addition, when a person is exposed to a variety of cultures, he or she has a lot of opportunities to compare and build a more diverse world picture.

Thirdly, international students make an important investment in the economy and international relations through their tuition fees and living expenses. Teaching foreign citizens can become, according to UNESCO experts, one of the most lucrative exports of the XXI century. For example, China alone pays one billion US dollars annually for teaching its students, trainees, graduate students abroad (Gelbras, 2002). As a whole, according to the US Department of Commerce expenditures of international students enrolled in all 50 states contributed more than \$30 billion to the US economy in 2014 (Opendoors, 2015).

However, many international students face challenges as they get higher education outside their home countries. They face obstacles such as different food, unfamiliar living conditions, financial problems, finding balance between studies and work. They have to fit themselves to the schedule of classes, learning styles, other possible difficulties related to language, culture, personal barriers. A student may encounter a number of difficulties of the transitional period from everyday situations in daily life and to cultural adaptation. And if the institution is going to enroll international students, these issues should be considered and taken into account.

The following assumption provides the basis for the current research. In the school year 2015/16 Vyatka State University of Humanities taught more than 10 thousand students from 39 regions of Russia and 100 international students from 11 states of the former Soviet Union and beyond. International students’ enrollment is essential for integration into the international educational community.

In this connection, the research will explore the following questions: (1) what are the academic, social and cultural difficulties of international students in Vyatka State University of Humanities? (2) What kind of support and resources are needed to overcome these difficulties?

Despite the fact that coping strategies are discussed a lot and actively in the scientific literature, further studies are needed to explore these issues, but in a different context. The aim of this study is to provide recommendations, guidelines for an educational institution that provides educational services to foreign citizens in the Volga-Vyatka economic region.

Methodology

Study Design

Qualitative case-study method was applied, since the aim of this study was to understand the depth of adaptation faced by international students studying in the cities of the Volga-Vyatka economic region. Case study is the most appropriate qualitative research methods for the study of the subject, as it focuses on the practical knowledge of the real-life situations and careful attention to the influence of social, political and other factors on the situation.

Participants

Ten participants were selected as international students, who studied in undergraduate and graduate programs in Vyatka State University of Humanities. Using random sampling, limited the representativeness of the study. However, in order to ensure greater representativeness, we controlled some demographic variables. For example, participants from different countries, such as China, Iran, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan were selected.

Similar background helped to establish the necessary trust-based relations with research participants. Throughout our research, we strengthened close friendship with our members. We met with our members at festivals and holidays. Thus, the established warm relations allowed our members to share their experiences of living in Russia. The students were selected on the basis of the following criteria. (1) They are enrolled in undergraduate or graduate program. (2) The duration of stay in Russia was less than three years. The duration of stay may also influence the adaptation difficulties, therefore, this study focused on students who recently arrived in this country. (3) Students had the experience of taking language courses.

Data Accumulation

Interview sessions took place in a research laboratory or at their place of residence of the participants, if there were problems with mobility due to a lack of private vehicles. Each interview lasted 70 minutes. Each interview was recorded on video or a voice recorder. The interview questions were related to the experiences of international students, since they came to study in the city of Kirov. This was a semi-structured interview. Thus, each participant answered similar standardized questions and a range of possible options. This arrangement of the interview allows to get more detailed information based on the students' responses. The relevance of this approach is to understand the respondent's point of view, rather than generalize about their behavior. The value of the interview of this type lies in the fact that it opens a new field of research (Bondareva et al., 2014). Interviews were conducted mainly in Russian. Immediately afterwards they were transcribed. Observations, thought-starters, crossing researcher's mind during the interview, were recorded, later to be compared with interview transcripts.

Data Analysis

Analysis of the data was mostly inductive. During the analysis, we were guided by numerous qualitative studies and available literature. Individual interviews were transcribed and analyzed. The data were encoded using the open coding process and emerging themes were analyzed individually and by means of interviews for further analysis.

We distinguished the following categories (1) challenges and difficulties faced by the participants in different environments (academic, social and cultural); (2) strategies used to overcome these struggles; and (3) recommendations for higher education institutions. Within each category some possible theme is discussed, followed by a presentation of potential strategies used and recommended by the participants.

Results and Discussion

The results showed that international students faced various problems in Russia. They had to deal with people, society and university to control their psychological condition, as well as behavioral changes in order to adapt to the new settings. The results will be cataloged in terms of academic, social and cultural aspects. The group of academic difficulties included four themes related to the difficulties of international students in learning and academic achievement.

Academic Barrier

During the interview, participants spent considerable time discussing issues related to the study. All participants, regardless of their cultural background, argued that their teachers they were good, professional and easy to go on contact with students. Nevertheless, they noted difficulties in communicating with their teachers because of cultural differences, expectations, which were different from the expectations of the teachers, as well as language barriers (mainly international students from other countries: China, Iran).

Theme 1 (Interaction with Teachers). Difficulties of interaction and communication took place in the classroom. Students both from collectivist and individualistic cultures came across these situations. For example, a participant (Excerpt 1) said that from his point of view, it is considered rude, ill-mannered to interrupt the teacher speaking. In addition, international students also worried about the fact that they were treated as international students. The student said that awareness on the part of teachers and students of the fact that they were in fact international students was important for them to adapt to new circumstances of life (Excerpt 2).

Excerpt 1

I raised my hand to ask a question. However, I kept silence until the teacher noticed me. I waited. In China it is impolite to interrupt the teacher. He didn't see me and the topic that I would like to take part in, was already over. The teacher continued to talk to other students, even though they didn't raise their hands to ask a question. So I just didn't express my opinion on the topic. No one waited for me. They just kept talking (Yuan, China).

Excerpt 2

I wondered if the teacher knew that I was an international student or not. I wanted to participate in the discussions, but worried that he could misunderstand me. He could think I was a bad student, since I couldn't express my thoughts clearly. Sometimes the grading system and written assignments are very different. The works are graded very differently, not what I was used to. For example, I needed to express my thoughts more specifically, and not in an abstract way. I tried to do my best at the lessons, but I needed more time to get used to it (Alexander, Kazakhstan).

Theme 2 (Isolation from Classmates). Isolation happens when you try to adjust to a new group and find new friends. In this research international students faced different types of isolation both in the classroom and in their public life. Usually these students take a more passive role in the beginning, but eventually they exhibit different strategies to take part in social activities or in the classroom discussion.

Excerpt 3

I played table tennis. When they chose teammates, I was always the last. [The researcher asked]: Why do you think they didn't choose you in the beginning? I don't know why! Maybe they think I'm an international student, or they don't know who I am. I'm used to it. I asked who wanted to play with me (Qi, China).

Excerpt 4

Teachers used group discussions in the classroom. My classmates didn't usually invite me to join their discussion. (Mohammad Reza, Iran).

Excerpt 5

My main challenge is now to make friends at the university and in everyday life. I don't know how to make friends with my classmates. I'm waiting for them to come to me and start a conversation (Dinara, Turkmenistan).

Theme 3 (Language Barrier). Language is a big hindrance in participants' academic adaptation. Many participants admitted that the Russian language was a problem for them, although they had been learning it for a few years in their countries. Many participants have to spend extra time on improving their Russian.

Excerpt 6

I can't understand many words in listening, particularly because of the speech rate and pronunciation. I take Russian courses in a linguistic center in Kirov, I also took Russian courses in my home country. Nevertheless, they are very different. I used to understand Russian very well in my home country. I think it's a simplified version for understanding. And here, people speak very quickly. Now, I understand part of the conversation. Sometimes I misunderstand something. My classmates laugh, but I don't (Lin, China).

Excerpt 7

I do not have enough skills of the Russian spoken language, when I go to the bank or call the internet company. I rarely understand all the talk, when I call to set up my internet account. I need to ask them to speak slowly and repeat several times. I feel very bad (Qi, China).

Excerpt 8

My knowledge of Russian is not very good. Sometimes, I really cannot understand the lecture. Reading is very difficult. I do not understand a lot of words. When the teacher gave the task to discuss some topic in the group, I was left alone. My classmates probably do not want me to join their group. They talk fast and loud. Sometimes I find it hard to follow them (Yuan, China).

Theme 4 (Burden of Parental Expectations).

Parents of many international students studying in Russia, place some expectations upon them, such as a high degree of proficiency in Russian, completing undergraduate or master's course of study, financial support and future career. Usually, studies abroad are more expensive, so international students feel more pressure, because of their parents' undue expectations, which are to be justified in a short period of time.

Excerpt 9

When I called home, my parents always asked if I could already speak Russian. That means ... they already thought I was fluent in Russian. Or they asked, "How are my grades." It was very hard to tell them that I need more time. Also, I would like to graduate as quickly as possible, because of the high cost of education. I did not want to go home, till I completely finished my courses of studies (Asliddin, Tajikistan).

Social Barriers

Theme 5 (Communication Models)

International students face challenges not only in the classroom but also in their social life. For example, they say that when they visit social events they have to deal with different communication patterns. For example, there is a radical difference in the behavior of people in Russia and other countries when they receive gifts. In Western culture, etiquette requires to open the gift immediately to show your appreciation and delight. However, in the East people are not used to open a gift in front of other people, so sometimes western conduct pattern causes inconvenience to international students. Participants also noted that because of differences in communication patterns they experience some awkwardness in social interaction.

Excerpt 10

Once I went to a Christmas party at which my friend gave me a gift and a card. I thanked him and put the gift in my bag, but my friends have asked me to read out the card. I felt confused and said I would read it later (Dinara, Turkmenistan)

Most participants spoke about their experiences of social isolation and loneliness. It was especially difficult for students who did not have relatives or friends in Russia. Many of the statements were related to difficulties of establishing friendly relations with the Russian students.

Excerpt 11

I see that I have no opportunity to communicate with my fellow students, other than in the classroom. I came to study here on my own initiative and I don't have relatives in Russia. About my classmates, we meet a few times a week and don't speak a lot about our private things. They have their own friends and family. Usually, they leave immediately after classes (Doston, Tajikistan).

Cultural Barrier

The participants were from other cultures, which differed from the Russian culture. Thus, the participants experienced culture shock due to differences in views and values. When entering into a new culture, they had to deal with different systems of values, models of communication, signs and symbols of social communication and patterns of interpersonal relations. For example, foreign students faced behavioral norms to the concept of "time" in different cultures. Sometimes, it could easily cause confusion and anxiety. More specific topics associated with this are discussed below.

Theme 6 (Reacting to the Notion of Punctuality)

Excerpt 12

I made an appointment with a teacher for consultation. Nevertheless, I had to wait for 30 minutes. I don't think it is right (Timur, Uzbekistan).

Excerpt 13

I went to the swimming pool to swim. I came earlier and waited for at least 2 hours to swim in the pool. In my country, people don't have to wait. People are allowed in the pool, whenever they come (Gong, China).

Theme 7 (Reacting to Biased Attitude towards International Students). International students noted that there is prejudice and discrimination in the educational and social life. For example, they were ignored in the classroom during public activities. Participants of the survey claimed that their Russian peers tried to treat them, being hardly aware of their cultural backgrounds. Also the respondent said that they were willing to share information about their culture, to help Russians get to know them better. These words show that foreign students are ready to take an active role in improving mutual understanding between students from different cultures.

Excerpt 14

I heard from one of my classmates, they (Russians) do not like foreign students. I do not know exactly why. Therefore, I have a feeling that they would not socialize with me. Now I have almost no opportunity to meet new people. But in general, I am ready to tell you about myself and the culture of my country. After that, they may change their minds (Asliddin, Tajikistan).

Adaptation Strategies

Studying abroad is not without difficulties, and we can confidently say that foreigners have a lot of problems with adaptation, which can affect their studies and the general impression of living in another country. While universities often offer a variety of support services for international students, it will be helpful for them to learn how to identify the problem in time and to get acquainted with the strategies to overcome it. The following sections will provide examples that the educational organization plays an important role in the adaptation of foreign students.

Theme 8 (Using Educational Resources as the Problem-Solving Strategy).

According to the research results, participants need special services, organizations such as student associations, centers and departments of foreign students' adaptation, international clubs and various student organizations for their successful adaptation in another country. Members of these organizations note that these support centers help to cope with stress, find like-minded people and learn to deal with various problems. For example, many foreign students take books from the scientific library, study in a relaxed atmosphere or visit the computer room, which is a multimedia classroom for several dozen workplaces, equipped with modern technology: personal computers with modern high-performance black-and-white and color printers, and high-performance A3 copier. One of the respondents said that he made an appointment with the curator at the hostel, being tired of the stressful learning environment at the university and interaction with teachers.

Theme 9 (Dormitory and Student Activities). To cope with these problems, the students tried to learn more about the new society and culture. For example, to improve their knowledge of Russian, some participants looked for a native Russian speaking roommate. One interviewee joined different students' communities. Socializing, she shares her culture and wants to improve relations with the Russian-speaking students through total immersion in their culture. Students participate in activities to expand the circle of acquaintances.

Theme 10 (Language Support).

Although most foreign students showed an understanding of written and spoken Russian speech on entering Russian universities, they have encountered some difficulties in oral communication in the university environment. Studying their major subject, students expect more language support. For example, excerpt 15 mentions that one of the participants (Asliddin) thought that he would have a Russian-speaking partner to practice speaking.

Excerpt 15

In my home country, I read and wrote a lot in Russian. When I have to talk to people, I get nervous and shy to speak. Sometimes, I cannot understand slang words, or they speak so fast. What I can do is to practice speaking in classes or to socialize more with my classmates (Asliddin, Tajikistan).

In addition, it is useful to carry out a complex of measures aimed at familiarizing international students with the rules and regulations of their stay in Russia, with the city sights and the university, to solve the problems of psychological nature (Kravets, 2013). Educational system in Russia is very different from what international students got used to. We have our own programs and standards, our education has its own specific features, therefore, orientation activities, information sessions will facilitate foreign students' desire to live and study in Russia.

Excerpt 16

At the beginning of the semester, I attended the adaptation event, met other students from different cultures, including Russian students, group curators. We started talking, and I was able to bring myself to use the Russian language. At least I could have an opportunity to speak Russian (Qi, China).

Theme 11 (Psychological Support). Only one of the ten participants mentioned the Psychological service of the university. She missed her parents and friends, so sometimes felt lonely. She made several appointments with a psychological services specialist to discuss her stress. The consultant provided psychological support on the issue of personal adaptation and favorable socio-psychological and pedagogical conditions of educational activity.

Theme 12 (Students' Organization). It is important for international students to interact with Russian students at the university. For example, the participants said that they discovered various clubs, sections, students' associations in order to reduce isolation from the Russian students. It is strongly recommended to use programs, building a cultural bridge between Russia and other countries. Through such interactions students will improve their language and communication skills, as well as they may better understand and adapt to the Russian culture.

Excerpt 17

When I joined the student chamber choir *Gaudeamus*, I was able to practice my language skills and learn different cultures. Although I no longer hang out with students from my country, I like to communicate with people from different countries, including Russia. I can use the Russian language to communicate (Doston, Tajikistan).

This section presents the results and gives further analysis. The results showed that foreign students face a variety of problems, and they use a variety of strategies to adapt to unfamiliar surroundings. Logical reasoning and conclusions drawn from this study and presented in the following sections will be useful for any university, which enrolls foreign students.

Discussions

Struggles faced by foreign students are discussed in many scientific publications.

In a recent study conducted among 63 African students (44 – male, 19 – female) of the Kuban State University, the author (Kamara, 2012) found out that 59.9 % of foreign students are experiencing significant levels of stress especially in the first year of study. This tension arises from the need to study a non-native language and communicate with the Russian people as the representatives of other cultures, to solve struggles in education, housing, diet change (unusual food).

In another similar study, conducted in National Research Tomsk Polytechnic University among 60 students from China, Vietnam, Mongolia, Kazakhstan, Nigeria, Cote d'Ivoire, the authors (Kosheleva, 2015) pointed to another important stress indicator – climate conditions, that frightened a quarter of respondents (24.4%).

In contrast to the study conducted by J. Russell et al. (2010) among 900 foreign students studying in Australia, where one of the main types of stress was homesickness and culture shock, the least stressful in this publication of E. Yu. Kosheleva (2015) were such factors as distance from the family (16%), cultural differences (8.5%) and lack of friends (7.0%).

A. N. Tatarko (2009) studied the relationship between true and imaginary threats and prejudices against migrants from other cultures in Moscow. The results showed that prejudice against immigrants are associated with two types of threats: real, when the population is experiencing increased anxiety and especially fears for physical and economic security, and symbolic. Although according to the author there is virtually no real threat coming from migrants.

On the contrary, T. K. Fomina (2004) found out that foreign students by the fourth year of studies begin to feel almost at home: 52.7% of foreigners want to seek the help of a teacher, and 26.6% consider teachers to be their friends. This is explained partly by the fact that students become closely focused on their future specialization and professional assistance.

Arriving from another country, foreign students may face many difficulties in their daily lives. Therefore, immediately after arriving in a new country it is necessary to provide them with a support system. Even after they settle in a new place, foreign students will still experience a culture shock.

Conclusion

The results of this study may be taken as a basis for recommendations, used in the Russian higher educational institutions, on how to help foreign students to adapt successfully. Firstly, universities should have a Russian language program for international students in order to maintain their level of language proficiency. Language barriers may affect the academic training of students, participation in various activities as well as cultural understanding. Universities can conduct master classes, in which foreign students would become familiar with the use of spoken Russian language, commonly used slang words, as well as social and cultural norms of behavior in the Russian society in order to communicate effectively both in high school and in extracurricular activities.

Secondly, the Russian universities' students and teachers should be aware of the increasing value of cross-cultural mobility and the special significance of international students' effective integration in the new environment. For example, schools may invite foreign students to conduct introductory presentations on the peculiarities of schooling abroad. Universities' authorities, faculty should allow equal educational opportunities for all students. Russian students also need to develop intercultural competence to successfully interact with foreign students. It is extremely useful to provide training for staff, faculty, who will work with the enrolled foreign students.

Thirdly, it is desirable to carry out individual consultations, organize tutors' activities to supervise and assist international students to successfully complete the course of study, as well as to remove psychological stress. Fourthly, universities should offer foreign students special orientation courses or a program, introducing them on to the Russian culture in general and the academic culture in particular. These activities may include seminars with guest lecturers, qualified professionals, where foreign students could share their own experience of living in Russia, as well as visit companies and institutions, which can strengthen friendly relations with the local population.

Further Study Prospects

The results of this study should be interpreted with caution, since this study focused on a specific group of foreign students in a particular institution. Thus, the generalizability as an opportunity to spread the analysis results outside of this group of foreign students is limited. Further research could study other variables, such as motivation, cultural background, personality test, students' attitude to life and studies in Russia. A more thorough consideration of other factors, that are potentially relevant to these groups of respondents, may become the prospect of future research.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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