

The problem of adaptation of foreign students studying in Russian universities

El problema de la adaptación de estudiantes extranjeros que estudian en universidades rusas

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ABSTRACT:

The goal of the article is to analyse scientific sources together with psychoeducational literature and articulate the concept of "adaptation", the specifics of sociocultural adaptation of foreign students, which should be taken into account within communication and studying. The article articulates the concepts of "adaptation" and "sociocultural adaptation" through analysis of psychoeducational literature. Main methods of adaptation of foreign students are discussed: psychological, social, ethnic. A conclusion is made that subjective and objective factors have significant influence on the adaptation of foreign students. Introduction of foreign students to academic groups with Russian students contributes to better acquisition of the established order of university, to comprehension and mastering of new cultural contexts and meanings together with values of new sociocultural environment. Active involvement of foreign students in teaching and educational process shapes the personality of a student

RESUMEN:

El objetivo del artículo es analizar las fuentes científicas junto con la literatura psicoeducativa y articular el concepto de "adaptación", las especificidades de la adaptación sociocultural de los estudiantes extranjeros, que deben tenerse en cuenta en comunicación y estudio. El artículo articula los conceptos de "adaptación" y "adaptación sociocultural" a través del análisis de la literatura psicoeducativa. Se discuten los principales métodos de adaptación de los estudiantes extranjeros: psicológico, social, étnico. Se ha concluido que los factores subjetivos y objetivos tienen una influencia significativa en la adaptación de los estudiantes extranjeros. La introducción de estudiantes extranjeros a grupos académicos con estudiantes rusos contribuye a una mejor adquisición del orden establecido de la Universidad, a la comprensión y el dominio de nuevos contextos y significados culturales junto con valores de nuevo ambiente. La participación activa de los estudiantes extranjeros en el proceso

1. Introduction

Integration of higher education in Russia into worldwide educational space presupposes admission of foreign students. Having foreign students in universities is a key element of internationalized development of the country's higher education, as well as guarantee of high quality educational services and attractiveness of a higher educational institution at global and international market of educational services.

Foreign students are studying in Russian universities on the basis of different exchange programmes, mostly in state higher educational institutions. The majority of foreign students come from CIS countries (Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia), Africa (Nigeria, Morocco, Ghana), Middle East (Iraq, Jordan, Turkey), Asia (India, China, Vietnam).

During the last decades the international rating of Russian higher educational institutions has been slowly but steadily increasing and, as a result, there are more foreign students going into higher education in Russia. Rapid increase in the export of Russian educational services (among top priorities in the international activity of Russian universities), internationalisation of education, increased the number of foreign students in Russian higher educational institutions, bilateral agreements between states on collaboration in the field of education, science, and culture, interuniversity agreements on academic exchange are the evidence of active integration into the world community, while the increased number of foreign students, studying in Russia, shows how much the country is integrated into the world community.

The timeliness of the research subject is conditioned by the complexity of sociocultural adaptation processes connected with the growth in the number of foreign students in Russian academic community. Formation of the country's positive image among the foreigners requires introducing them to Russian sociocultural values. The issue becomes more topical in the context of admission of more and more foreign students to Russian universities. One of the key tasks is to develop a program of ensure adaptation and integration of foreign students into Russian society.

2. The process of adaptation of foreign students

Adaptation and ability to adapt guarantee active and creative life; they are a prerequisite of success in life, which consists in external and internal equilibrium of personal expectations and abilities, in the balance of harmonious personality and professional and social environment. Adaptation (from Latin *Adapt – I am adjusting*) means accommodation, getting used to changing conditions of the environment. Social and psychological adaptation is individual accommodation to group standards and, vice versa, accommodation of social group's interest to a certain person within the group (Zakharenko, Komarova, and Nechaeva, 2008).

The process of adaptation of foreign students is conducted at different levels and includes psychological, social, cultural, domestic, climatic, physiological, intercultural adaptation, which are closely related to mental, emotional, intellectual, and physical load. Entering a new community, students undergo sociocultural adaptation which, according to T.G. Stefanenko, in the wide sense is a complex process, through which a person achieves conformity (compatibility) with new social and cultural environment and, in the strict sense, is a result of successful entrance into society, which is expressed in the sense of inner satisfaction and abundance of life (on the inside) and active participation of a person in social and cultural life of a group in particular and society on the whole (on the outside) (Stefanenko 2003).

A foreign student is an established personality requiring adaptation to the reality and specifics of Russian society. We understand adaptation as the process of psychological, social, and

cultural accommodation, which includes the acquisition of social standards and norms of behaviour and communication, as well as traditions, values of Russian culture, linguistic specifics, which is necessary for comfortable life of foreign students in Russia. In our opinion, sociocultural adaptation is a complicated process that can only be successful in case of interaction between personality and environment. Person's ability to satisfy his/her needs without any internal and external conflicts, to perform professional activities, including studying, efficiently is the evidence of high level of adaptation.

Among the main methods of adaptation of foreign students are the following: psychological, social, ethnic. Let us discuss the psychological side of this phenomenon first. Multisidedness of adaptation is the result of sociocultural and socio-psychological differences between the sides, the acquiring and the adapting ones. Social adaptation of foreign students to a different ethnic environment has its internal and external manifestations. While the external nature of adaptation reflects the grade of foreign students' involvement in social and cultural life activity of the host society and specifics of interaction with its members, the internal nature inevitably shows in psychological and spiritual-cultural attitude of the one getting adapted to new environment (Ji-yeon Lee, Ayse Ciftci 2014). Essential basics of adaptation of foreign students consist in their capacity for purposeful adaptive activity, transformation of themselves and the environment, in conscious exchange of activity and information, which requires selective value attitude to the environment and self-knowledge. Personal components related to emotions, character traits, will, and temperament contribute to adaptation activity. (Brisset, Safdar and Rees Lewis 2010)

For that reason, adaptation of foreign students and their study of new sociocultural experience are, first of all, related to comprehension and acquisition of new cultural contexts and meanings, assimilation of values of a new sociocultural environment, which are reflected in the norms and requirements to various aspects of people's live activity. This, in its turn, considerably influences professional development of a foreign student.

Subjective and objective factors have significant impact on successful adaptation of foreign students. Among subjective ones are "cultural background" ("ethnically formed attitudes" – a set of moral and ethical standards of society and socially settled, sometimes logically incomprehensible subconscious beliefs in all manifestations of the nation's culture) and personal characteristics (adaptive potential), socio-psychological characteristics of students (Glass, Gómez and Urzua 2014).

3. Methods

In order to identify sociocultural specifics of adaptation of foreign students, we have conducted a continuous sampling social study through survey by hand-out questionnaire.

120 foreign students of a polytechnic higher educational institution were interviewed.

4. Results

In order to effectively recruit foreign students and develop successful advertising campaigns, it should be defined where foreign students received information on a higher educational institution and what their motives were. Going down in topicality, the list of sources for foreign students includes the following: from compatriots, graduates of the university, those who studied in a certain city or country (27%); from the ministry of education of their country (27%); from an official website of the university (23%); through Russian teachers or students, who work or study in their home country (16%). Only 2% gave the following answers: university advertisement in their country of origin; through organisations offering to find a university abroad. The option "Through direct contact with foreign universities or scientific and professional (individual) contacts of university heads" was not mentioned at all.

Among the reasons of choosing this particular university were (going down in topicality): prestige diploma (39%), contractual education within student exchange or grant (27%),

advised by parents, relatives, friends or acquaintances (22%), referral from the ministry of education or company (20%), good living and studying conditions (18%), recommended by graduates of the university (16%), good attitude to foreign students (10%), geographically convenient location of the university (12%), random choice (8%), the special subject I study can only be found in this university (6%), affordable cost of education (6%), willing to stay in Russia (6%), university advertising (4%).

In particular, among advantages that students will mention when recommending a university to their acquaintances is being easy to study there. Among the reasons that would stop them from recommending a university are social troubles, poorly equipped laboratories, language problems.

According to the results of the research, students evaluate certain aspects of studying rather highly (table 1).

Table 1
Level of satisfaction of different aspects of studying on a 1-5 scale (in % of the total number of the interviewed)

Rate	1	2	3	4	5	No answer	Total
Quality of education	2	6,1	6,1	28,6	42,9	14,3	100
Level of laboratory and practical sessions	2	6,1	8,4	38,8	20,4	14,3	100
Equipment of classes	8,2	6,1	20,4	16,3	20,4	28,6	100
Quality of textbooks and study guides	2,0	2,0	16,3	38,8	20,4	20,4	100

As for ideas on the improvement of the study process in the university, foreign students mentioned knowledge of English by English teachers, especially those teaching field-specific subjects; better provision of textbooks; improving the condition of classes, lifts, toilet rooms. As for language problems, according to the research, 12% of the interviewed evaluated their knowledge of Russian as excellent, while 35% said it was good and 14% called it satisfactory.

Answering the question of how long they have spoken the Russian language, most of the students (65%) said that they had started learning it in this university, while 12% started learning the language before entering the university. Another 12% noted they had spoken Russian their whole life (their parents know the language). Only 2 students said they had learned the Russian language intentionally so that they could enter this university. It should be noted that one in five students would like the classes to be in Russian. Half of the interviewed (50%) would like the classes to be in foreign languages, in particular: in English - 40%, in French - 6%, in Spanish and Portuguese - 2% each.

The study has shown how well foreign students understand the provided literature and study guides. Only one in four students said they understood everything. Foreign students have troubles with understanding study guides in Russian.

Among the subjects that in foreign students' opinion should be paid more attention to in the university are: English, programming, field-oriented subjects, practical physics classes, but these were individual ideas.

Ways of spending free time allow to define how much foreign students are integrated into student life of university and life of Russian society on the whole. For instance, most foreign students spend their free time with their compatriots, which shows they are poorly integrated in

Russian society. This is only logical because, first of all, as it shows further, most students are not going to stay in Russia, second, language barrier has its influence together with the fact that all foreigners live close to each other. Growing difference of cultures, languages, appearance of the people of host country and foreigners slows down the integration of foreign students and worsens their language skills, while Russian students miss the opportunity to become familiar with another culture and practice foreign language with native speakers.

How do foreign students spend their free time? The following answers were given to this question (going down in topicality): listening to music, studying (practicing the language, doing homework or laboratory-based work, progress tutorial, visiting the library), reading books, going to the cinema, going for a walk, meeting friends, doing sports (football, basketball, fitness, dancing); online and watching TV, travelling around Russia, working.

61,2% of foreign students think their traditions of spending free time are the same as in Russia. The differences in spending free time are explained by different culture and mentality.

In our research we paid special attention to identifying hostility to the interviewed or other foreign students in the city they were staying and in their university. 55,1% of foreign students said they did not feel any hostility. Only one in five students admitted there was hostile attitude to them.

Foreign students were offered to evaluate several aspects of their life conditions on a scale of 1 to 5.

Table 2
Evaluation of several extracurricular aspects of living
(in % of the total number of the interviewed)

Rate	1	2	3	4	5	No answer	Total
Dormitory	46,9	27,4	10,2	4,1	8,2	8,2	100
Safety	8,2	10,2	16,3	36,7	12,2	16,3	100
Medical care	12,2	16,3	10,2	20,4	16,3	24,5	100
Leisure activities	6,1	2	20,4	28,6	16,3	26,5	100

As you can see from table 2, dormitory and medical care received the lowest rates. One of the most important indicators of life quality in another country is general level of safety of foreigners. It can be said that foreign students feel rather safe in the university, although 18% rated it as low (rates 1 and 2). As for domestic problem, students complained about poor living conditions, including the condition of toilets, windows, problems with shower, hot water.

As for the plans after graduating from the university, 16% of foreign students are going to stay in Russia, 45% are not going to stay and 29% have not decided yet. The majority of the interviewed (65,3%) believe they will easily find a job with a Russian diploma in their native country. Among the possible difficulties with job search in their native country are: having to confirm the diploma of higher education, to pass special exams; diplomas will have to be translated to French and English; Russian diplomas are not recognised in their native and other countries.

Nobody said there was no work in the field the student was specialising in here, which shows that foreign students are making a rational choice of subjects to study.

Foreign students who are planning to stay in Russia have the following goals (going down in topicality): would like to continue studying in Russia and take a postgraduate course; would like to work for some time in Russia to get professional experience in the field; would like to stay

and become a permanent resident of Russia.

Thus, adaptation of foreign students to sociocultural environment of university is a set of complex multiaspect processes. The nature of relationships shaping through these processes can be called controversial. Foreign students rate the quality of education as quite high. The majority of them have good or excellent knowledge of the Russian language which they studied in this university. Some foreign students complain about the difficulty in understanding the textbooks and study guides in their majors, especially if they are in Russian. Half of the students noted that they would like their classes to be in English. As for everyday life, new living conditions are fine for most students, they act in accordance with the requirements, thus reducing the distance in their relationship with local students and the host community.

That said, having certain language and everyday life problems, most foreign students are satisfied with their study process and relationships with other students; they see the administration of the university as the defenders of their interests. Only half of the students are definitely not going back to their home countries. The rest believe they will not have any problems with job search in their native country with a Russian diploma.

5. Discussion

As S. Drokina notes, most foreign students come to Russia without any knowledge of communication culture or speech and everyday etiquette. The scientist believes that teaching foreigners intercultural communication in new conditions is an important element of educational activity. She stresses the importance of teacher's behaviour and attitude, and notes that pressure and didactic tone are inadmissible. The teacher should have special tact and eliminate annoying propaganda of his or her culture. Instead, cultures should be compared and it should be said that cultures bring nations together (Drokina 2007). So let us note that within the process of educational interaction teachers should be willing to develop their intercultural communication skills, which are closely related to successful adaptation of foreign students to new environment, especially at the initial stage of acquaintance with the country and its culture.

Researchers have found psychological tension in foreign students at the beginning of their acquaintance and adaptation to new sociocultural environment. They believe that the main obstacles in the process of adaptation and integration in a foreign society are refusing usual cultural values, looking for compromise in the existence of at least two cultures, and inequality of cultural positions of foreigners (Searle 1990).

We think such attitude is a bit narrow, as sociocultural adaptation is individual for each foreign student. Also, there are a lot of students from the post-Soviet territories, which have a lot in common with our culture, behaviour and communication standards. That is why such students do not face the above-mentioned obstacles. However, for students from far-abroad countries (Africa, Asia) studying in Russia may come as a cultural shock, which usually has positive consequences – it accelerates the acquisition of our values and standards of behaviour, contributes to the transition to the next level of personal self-development.

Let us identify three main levels of sociocultural adaptation of foreign students on the basis of the analysed works of foreign scientists (Wilson 2011; Ng, Ching Wang and Chan 2017):

Level of conflict and shock – a number of sociocultural factors condition certain behaviour of a person in order to integrate in a new environment. This is the initial level of interaction. Entering a university, young people face strange sociocultural space. It is especially harsh for foreign citizens as their integration in the educational space of Russia presupposes knowing the standards of behaviour and the system of values that would stimulate the acquisition of knowledge and professional training.

Organisational level is more about socialisation. Change in the personal worldview takes place at this level: certain values and value judgements appear together with the need of successful socialisation, which makes one look for ways to achieve success in a new society. For that

reason, at this level the success of sociocultural adaptation depends on student's individual worldview perception and ability to compare or combine different cultures.

The third level is a high one, the conscious level. This level sees the recognition of moral values related to the level of cultural development of the society. It presupposes the formation of the main life goal and directions, the aspiration to acquiring the desired social status on the basis of professional training.

It should be noted that taking into account value and communicative dimensions of culture allow to develop mutually respectful international interaction on the basis of ethnocultural stereotypes, values, traditions, and rituals of the representatives in the dialogue of cultures. This requires not only time, but trust and sympathy.

It should also be said that most foreigners study in academic groups together with Russian students, that is why their life activity is subject to common routine of the educational process in a certain university. This allows organising various educational events dedicated to organisation of professional work of future specialists, which both Russian and foreign students should be involved in. Such organisation of the educational process in a university allows to ensure foreign students overcoming the difficulties appearing as a result of differences in the educational systems of a foreign country and Russia, to acquire values, traditions, culture of the educational environment of a university. An important condition of successful adaptation of a student is his or her ability to evaluate one's skills in relation to educational tasks given as well as to order and rules determining their fulfilment.

Most researchers believe that the main obstacles to sociocultural adaptation are linguistic, religious, and cultural barriers. Religious and cultural factors should be taken into account when forming academic groups, settling foreign students in dormitories, choosing the method of teaching, and selecting teachers. Overcoming the language barrier is the most difficult part of sociocultural adaptation in Russia for foreign students from far-abroad countries. Becoming fluent in Russian takes time, patience, and diligence. Therefore, academic groups should be formed taking into account students' belonging to similar cultures, religion, and language. To help overcome the barriers in communication at the initial stage, it is recommended to use role play, dialogues, discussions, scenario-specific games in class, pay more attention to speech etiquette reminding of the intercultural changes.

6. Conclusion

Thus, having studied considerable amount of psychoeducational literature and the results of social study, we can make a conclusion that successful sociocultural adaptation requires:

from foreign students – overcoming language barrier and accepting a different lifestyle, culture, and values,

from the people around – basal acceptance and empathic attitude to foreign students (ability to understand feelings, emotions, needs of the others).

The number of foreign students studying in a country is the evidence of its involvement in the world community. During the studies in Russia, especially in the first years, a foreign student faces a plenty of problems with everyday life, adaptation to the society, specifics of educational activity. The task of university teachers in this situation is to find forms and methods of work facilitating the foreign student's getting used to a new environment.

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