

HERB



Higher Education in Russia and Beyond

International Students: Crossing Borders, Enriching Cultures

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Dear colleagues,

In recent discussion on internationalisation, the role of international students as main drivers has been rightly reconsidered. Though there is no doubt that they originally served as a physical trigger to the processes which lead to major change in the formal and informal curricular, and facilitated the transformation of the concept of internationalisation itself, they still remain an important factor which is being recognised as a very important one for further development of international higher education. Albeit international academic mobility is still often favoured as the most vivid and measurable indicator of internationalisation, there is a deepening awareness of the fact that it reflects more significant shifts in the way the purpose and function of tertiary education is being considered and perceived.

That's why we believe it is a timely moment to focus the 12th issue of *Higher Education and Beyond* on international students, their importance for higher educational institutions and the change they bring.

There were three viewpoints chosen for introducing and discussing the topic, the first one focusing on general trends of what can make countries more attractive educational destinations for international students and research unveiling the pull factors for leaving home country in search for better academic knowledge and career prospects.

The second outlook presents different models and tool of attracting international students: from perceiving international students as the key factor for the region's and university development, to seeing strategy for international recruiting as a major instrument of international branding and advancement in world university rankings.

And, finally, the third standpoint is about role international students play in changing and developing university community, which is not possible without involving domestic students on the one and rethinking the strategy for internal communication and students' services evolution.

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National Research University Higher School of Economics

National Research University Higher School of Economics is the largest center of socio-economic studies and one of the top-ranked higher education institutions in Eastern Europe. The University efficiently carries out fundamental and applied research projects in such fields as management, sociology, political science, philosophy, international relations, mathematics, Oriental studies, and journalism, which all come together on grounds of basic principles of modern economics.

HSE professors and researchers contribute to the elaboration of social and economic reforms in Russia as experts. The University transmits up-to-date economic knowledge to the government, business community and civil society through system analysis and complex interdisciplinary research.

Higher School of Economics incorporates 49 research centers and 14 international laboratories, which are involved in fundamental and applied research. Higher education studies are one of the University's key priorities. This research field consolidates intellectual efforts of several research groups, whose work fully complies highest world standards. Experts in economics, sociology, psychology and management from Russia and other countries work together on comparative projects. The main research spheres include: analysis of global and Russian higher education system development, transformation of the academic profession, effective contract in higher education, developing educational standards and HEI evaluation models, etc.

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The Center for Institutional Studies is one of HSE's research centers. CInSt focuses on fundamental and applied interdisciplinary researches in the field of institutional analysis, economics and sociology of science and higher education. Researchers are working in the center strictly adhere to the world's top academic standards.

The Center for Institutional Studies is integrated into international higher education research networks. The center cooperates with foreign experts through joint comparative projects that cover the problems of higher education development and education policy. As part of our long-term cooperation with the Boston College Center of International Higher Education, CInSt has taken up the publication of the Russian version of the "International Higher Education" newsletter.

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Study in Russia, Study in English

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The numbers of international students entering Russian universities from the West are still low. The scope and quality of English-taught education, uncertainty in terms of what to expect and, moreover, a lack of updated and relevant information seems to hold a lot of these students back. In this article I will explore the mobility of Dutch students to Russia.

Introduction

Two years ago our office, the Netherlands Education Support Office, was given the task to actively promote study opportunities in Russia among students in the Netherlands. No easy task because we were to focus on full-time bachelor's and master's programs in Russia. That focus was necessary because outgoing degree-seeking mobility of Dutch students has hardly grown in the past years and lags behind other EU-countries (2% of the Dutch student population against an EU average of 3.3%). [1] International credit mobility on the other hand is 22% above the EU-benchmark that was set at 20% of all graduates for 2020 but we do not see these students flocking to Russia (yet). Still, our office notices there is latent interest among Dutch students to travel eastbound and more often than not, they return home hugely enthusiastic about their stay in the Russian Federation. These students are the ideal promotion tool for Russian higher education institutions.

Outgoing Mobility

According to OECD statistics, the Netherlands ranked 53rd worldwide and as such well behind EU-peer countries in diploma mobility for the year 2013/14 with almost 14.000 students. Most of them studied in the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium (Flanders), the UK, Germany and the US.

We have already seen a radically different picture regarding credit mobility figures of students at Dutch higher education institutions (the above mentioned 22%). Internationalisation among students also varied greatly across schools and faculties. In the Netherlands, programs related to agriculture and environmental studies, arts and culture, engineering, healthcare, and economics and business score significantly higher than law, education, and human and social sciences. This coincides with worldwide trends as we learn from TopUniversities.com. [2] Finance remains an important factor (actually, number one factor) for students in the Netherlands to refrain from studying abroad. This is something Russian institutions should take into account when pricing their (English-taught) programs.

I will get back to that a bit later. Other factors influencing outgoing student mobility are of course family and friends and social circumstances. However, information (or a lack thereof) plays an important role for students deciding whether to stay or to go.

Paint the Right Picture

It was this lack of information that our office had to deal with. A lot of it had been gathered before by the Nuffic head office in The Hague, including info about visas, registrations, Russian language courses and possible scholarships. Information on (English-taught) programs themselves was missing.

However, looking at student mobility numbers in the Netherlands, we also thought that it would be highly unlikely that these students would choose a full-time bachelor's or master's program, even if available in English, let alone in Russian with a prep-year to study the language. This meant that short-term programs (again, credit mobility!) needed to be promoted in order to — in the long term — take away some of the uncertainty students have considering degree-programs in Russia.

Why would few students from the Netherlands opt for a full-time bachelor's or master's study in Russia? A few factors (finance, family, quality, circumstances) have already been mentioned above. Updated information is another one, and our office works on it continuously. On the other hand, image is important as well. Russia is an attractive and exotic destination but mostly for those who have already visited it at least once. Thus, we started showing the Russian country side, the green mountains of the Altai, the wooden architecture in Siberia, the palaces in St. Petersburg, the Red Square and nightlife in Moscow wherever we could — on the website, via social media — gathering likes and shares from students who had not yet visited the country.

This combination of bright pictures and updated information is, nevertheless, not enough. The receiving side (Russian universities) cannot always match this picture. English-language landing pages are often lacking on university's websites (students had to deal with PDF or Word files instead, sometimes even in Russian). The contents of study programs were not described, so that students did not know what to expect, and there was even no basic info about how to apply, how to get to the place, what to do and what to gain. Also, the costs should be more clearly stated, as well as perhaps the local Big Mac index, to show the cost of living (which varies hugely from Moscow to Samara or Tomsk for example). This can be a big asset for those cities located outside Russia's expensive capital (although student housing remains incredibly cheap all over Russia, including Moscow, in comparison with the Netherlands).

Another reason why students in the Netherlands stay put is, according to Nuffic research, the high quality of the education offered in the Netherlands at a relatively low price (for EU students). This does not create incentives to seek options abroad. Dutch and EU students pay about 2,000

euros per year at government funded institutions for their studies in the Netherlands, which is cheaper than quite a few options offered (in English) by Russian universities.

Of course, it simply creates demands, and up till now, few full-time English taught programs are available in Russia. Moreover, as mentioned above, Russian universities often state that they offer such programs but in fact they do not, they are merely waiting for students to apply. But how can they apply if the programs are not being properly promoted or even visible online? Therefore, the launch of the website studyinrussia.ru was a good move; it seems to gather a lot of updated info. Although, to be honest, we hear from students that not all programs listed as English taught are actually full-time English taught.

Study in Russia, Study in English

Perhaps, to kick-start some of these programs, they should be actively promoted among Russian students: why wouldn't they want to study (at least partly, or do their master's) in English? It enhances language and intercultural skills of both Russian students and teachers and immediately solves another complaint of foreign students. The complaint that they move to Russia for their studies, but interact only with other foreigners, studying in a tailor-made program, specifically for them, instead of joining a regular course (in English) with Russian students. But the biggest benefit would eventually be the fact that Russians would get an opportunity to study in an international classroom, without having to travel abroad, which would also enhance their professional development, broaden the perspective of both Russian and international students and important networks they are starting to build. Russian higher education institutions would benefit too as international classroom is an important part of Internationalisation at Home activities, which "can drive curriculum change, innovation and rejuvenation." [3]

To summarise, Russian universities need to start offering more English-taught programs. From the start, Russian students should be actively encouraged to enroll in them as well. The programs should be well promoted and visible on the latest digital media; foreign alumni should be actively used as ambassadors for the universities. Financial support in the form of grants and scholarships would obviously have an impact too. By attracting more students from the Netherlands to Russia we help reach mobility goals set by the both the Russian and Dutch governments. Not a bad thing. Let's get to it.

References

- [1] See <https://www.nuffic.nl/publicaties/vind-een-publicatie/uitgaande-studentenmobiliteit.pdf> (in Dutch) for information on outgoing mobility of students in the Netherlands.
- [2] See https://www.topuniversities.com/system/files/pdf-uploads/qs_world_grad_school_international_students_mobility_2014.pdf for trends in international student mobility.

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- [3] Internationalizing the Curriculum (Internationalization in Higher Education Series). Leask, B. 2009; 2015.

Who Are Tajikistan's International Students?

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The Global Trend for Cross-Border Learning

Students from all corners of the world have been travelling the globe for hundreds of years in pursuit of higher education outside of their own country's borders. This trend has been growing substantially in recent years as communication becomes faster and more widespread, and travel becomes cheaper and easier. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) estimates that 4.5 million of the world's students were studying abroad in 2015.

Since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, the parallel opening of borders and reduction in state funding for higher education has led to a small but growing number of Central Asian nationals seeking to pursue higher education abroad.

In 2012, I undertook the first survey specifically focused on the experiences of international students from Tajikistan. I wanted to find out more about how this global trend to study abroad was evolving in Tajikistan, where its students were studying, and how studying abroad affected their wellbeing.

Study abroad: The View from Tajikistan

UNESCO estimates that in 2015, around 13,000 Tajik nationals studied abroad. This represents around 6% of the total tertiary student body in the country. For comparison, this is about half the rate of outbound mobility from Kazakhstan, but over five times as high as Russia's proportion of students who study at home vs those who study abroad. Most of Tajikistan's international students head to countries in Central and Eastern Europe, with Russia by far the most popular host country. This is unsurprising given the countries' recent shared history, and the continuing high regard given to the Russian higher education system in Tajikistan.

Over 100 respondents completed my survey, which was delivered in English. Snowball sampling was the main technique used to identify participants. The combination of the language of the survey and the sampling method leads to a depiction of the respondents as a homogenous sample, thus enabling an in-depth understanding of this group.

40% of the respondents had studied or were studying in Europe (including Russia and Turkey), 40% were in North America, 19% in Asia, 1% in Central/South America and none in Australasia. It seems that students from Tajikistan tend to follow the pattern noted in the literature of “drifting” from east to west.

Who Leaves Tajikistan to Study Abroad?

The self-selecting participants in the survey were almost equally split by gender, with 48% of respondents male and 52% female. Most respondents reported that they under the age of 24 when they had first started studying abroad. Around 40% held a school leaving certificate (attestat o srednem obrazovanii in Russian), usually received at the age of 17 or 18, and another 40% already had an undergraduate diploma/degree, usually received in one's early 20s, by the time they had left the country.

Around a third of the respondents were going abroad for a full undergraduate degree, and half went to study for a master's degree. Whilst questions that could have directly inferred income or class background were deliberately excluded from the survey, the information provided by respondents suggests that they may come from higher social class backgrounds.

Why Do Tajik Nationals Study Abroad?

Individuals' choices about studying abroad were influenced by a number of push and pull factors. These are factors that either stimulate a student to study away from their home country or something that attracts them to study in another country.

Push factors included the availability of subjects abroad that are not offered in Tajikistan, and the desire to remain overseas temporarily or permanently. Although corruption in the Tajik higher education system was not given as a choice in this question, several respondents referred to it in their free text feedback.

In my study, respondents listed multiple reasons for wanting to study abroad but the pull factors dominated their motivations. Over 80% of respondents listed their aim to improve their academic knowledge and improve their career prospects as the most important reasons for studying abroad. The next most popular choice, selected by half of the participants, was the push factor of wanting to study a subject that was not available in Tajikistan.

Where Do Tajik International Students Go and What Do They Study?

The respondents' choice of institution for their study abroad reflected the seriousness of their, with quality an over-riding factor. Two high quality English-medium

institutions in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan were the most popular destinations for survey respondents.

Other students had secured places at top-ranking UK and US universities, with the London School of Economics & Political Science (LSE) and the University of Oxford featuring strongly. This aligns with a 2011 report from neighbouring Uzbekistan which surmised that where cost was not an issue for students considering study abroad, the quality of education offered was paramount.

The subjects students pursue demonstrates a clear tendency for social sciences and also for more practical/vocationally-oriented areas such as business/management studies over more traditionally “academic” subjects. The popularity of these types of courses reinforces the supposition that Tajik nationals see study abroad as a way to improve their career prospects. In my sample, the most popular fields of study were: politics and international relations, business studies, economics, education and development studies.

What Is It Like Being an International Student from Tajikistan?

The majority of respondents reported a generally positive experience of study abroad, with positive responses outweighing reported problems by an average of 7:3. The survey results demonstrated very few problems in adapting to life as an international student. This included making local friends and using English as a medium of study.

This stands out against the more usual expectation that international students may suffer from culture shock, which is often heightened when the differences between the individual's home country and the country being visited are greater. With nearly 75% of my respondents having moved to a country where English is an official language, it could have been expected that the adaptation process would have proved more complex given that English has no official status in Tajikistan.

Somewhat more difficult to adapt to was working out how to navigate the country's bureaucratic requirements and understanding the academic requirements of the course and the host university. Differences in learning and teaching methods stood out as a challenge for around half the respondents, as did the academic level of the study program.

Other issues that Tajikistan's international students found particularly challenging included financial matters and being away from friends and family. However, very few respondents (less than 10%) reported experiencing any major socio-cultural adaptational issues or discrimination.

Where Are They Now?

At the time of the survey, just over half had completed their course of study abroad. Of this group, 70% were in employment, which compares very favourably to the general employment rate in Tajikistan. A further 20% had gone on to further study, 5% were full-time parents and only 5% were unemployed.

Respondents in employment showed the highest tendency to return to Tajikistan. Of those who stayed abroad, the two biggest destination countries were the UK and the USA, with the others scattered around the world. This result was surprising as a popular perception in Tajikistan is that once an individual has the opportunity to go abroad, they are likely to stay abroad to continue pursuing better opportunities.

A Transformational Experience

On the whole, Tajikistan's international students present themselves as a positive and inquiring group. My survey respondents relished the opportunities they had to immerse themselves in the academic standards of the course, to live in a new country and culture, and to travel and enjoy social events and activities.

Interestingly, respondents' attitudes to their time abroad varied by the career sector they were working in (for those in employment). Those working in the private sector were less positive about the impact of study abroad on their career prospects, whereas respondents who said they were working for an NGO or in academia/teaching assigned greater value to their study abroad.

At its deepest, studying abroad can be a profoundly transformational experience. Many of the survey respondents said they had changed greatly as a result of their experiences. This feeling is neatly encapsulated by the words of one respondent:

"I am so much [a] different person now than I was back then. Education here has broadened my mind to the things that I had no idea of their existence and as I grow in possessing my knowledge I see the opportunities that I can get, and the things that I can do in my life and with my life. I am [a] much happier person now than I was before."

Ties that Bind: International Students at a Christian University

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In the present article we will analyse the specific case of a Russian Christian university, St. Tikhon's Orthodox University, to understand the role and results of the internationalisation process for an institution with a strong confessional identity.

St. Tikhon's Orthodox University was founded in Moscow in the 1990s, after decades of atheism having been taught in main universities as a science, with the aim of educating people in faith and making them aware about the Christian origins of their culture. Originally, it was founded to provide theological education for laity: it was organised as a Theological Institute, and it was only in 2004 that it received university status with about 10 different faculties. Besides the Theological School, it includes Schools of Sacred Arts, Sacred Music, Philology, History, Education, Social Sciences and Economics, Computer Science and Applied Mathematics, as well as Centre of Distance Learning in Theology.

The Christian identity of the university attracts international students from orthodox families who want to enter a faith-based institution.

Since most of St. Tikhon's University international students are undergraduates who enter this institution for bachelor's programs, the first part of this article will be dedicated to this group, taking into consideration their country of origin and their educational choices. Next to them, there is also a relatively low number of students from Western European countries, both exchange students and free movers. In this case too we will give a picture of the countries of origin, as well as of the most attractive faculties and programs.

International Students Applying for Bachelor's or Master's Programs

Most of the international students who enroll at St. Tikhon's University are Russian-speaking students from former Soviet countries; they apply for bachelor's or master's programs. They make up 3.8% of all students. It is interesting to look at the statistics to understand what countries international students come from and what faculties they prefer. They mainly come from Ukraine (60%), Belarus (11%), Moldova (11%) and Kazakhstan (6%). Speaking of their academic choice, statistics for the last 3 years provide the following picture: the most attractive faculty is surely the School of Sacred Arts, which hosts 23% of all international students, followed by the School of Philology and the School of Sacred Music, both with 15%. The School of Sacred Arts offers study programs that prepare specialists in such important areas as icon painting, monumental art, restoration, Christian arts history and theory, sacred sewing. The school offers study programs both in Byzantine and Russian sacred art traditions, and in the modern arts. Students receive a theological education as well, which is necessary for those who work in this field.

It is also noteworthy that the Faculty of Theology, the oldest and largest one, is just after the School of Education (10.5%) with 9.5% of all international students. The remaining students are distributed among other faculties, the most popular two among them being the School for Missions and the School of Social Sciences (5%). It is

also interesting to note that students from Kazakhstan and Moldova have a strong preference for the School of Philology and the School of Social Science, while those from Ukraine and Belarus are attracted by the School of Sacred Arts.

Exchange Students and Free Movers

Concerning exchange students, the countries of origin are not the same as for international students entering bachelor's or master's programs. We observe 3 different directions in defining internationalisation strategies: establishment of partnerships with universities in countries with an orthodox tradition; partnerships with Christian universities all over the world; partnerships with universities with developed theological studies programs.

When it comes to the first direction, the main partners are the University of Bucharest and the Serbian University of Nish. There is an exchange program with the Romanian partner that attracts theology students interested in studying icon painting, while Serbian students are generally interested in Slavistics.

The oldest partnerships are those with universities with developed theological studies programs, in particular the Humboldt University in Berlin, University of Fribourg (Switzerland), Free University in Amsterdam and Radboud University Nijmegen (Netherlands). In the case of Humboldt University, St. Tikhon's University has actually a high number of outgoing students and no incoming students. The reason is that Humboldt's Theological Faculty does not offer Russian studies, while St. Tikhon's theology students are encouraged to study German and can benefit from scholarships from Christian Foundations for spending a semester at German universities.

The most successful exchange program concerns the third direction. The most significant example is the partnership with the Catholic University of Sacred Heart: since 2007, St. Tikhon's has had 41 incoming students from Milan attending courses offered by the School of Philology for one or two semesters. All these students were doing Slavistics and wanted both to improve the language and to attend courses that would give them the necessary credits. Generally they choose such subjects as Russian literature, linguistics, English communicative course, and Russian as foreign language, which is an additional intensive course. Besides that, in the recent years St. Tikhon's University has hosted a rising number of students interested in such subjects as management and finances.

International guest students can also apply as free-movers: they can study for one or two semesters without enrolling into a specific exchange program. They often come from Germany, USA and Italy. For them, the most attractive faculties are the School of Sacred Arts and the school of Philology, closely followed by the Theology Faculty. German and American students mostly apply to the School of Sacred Arts and the Theology Faculty, while Italians apply to the School of Philology.

Summer Schools

One of the most attractive options for students who want to improve Russian and to learn more about Russian culture is the Summer School. Since 2015, the School of Philology offers a two-week program aimed at introducing students to the peculiarities of the Russian culture in the light of the orthodox tradition. That is why the participants can study iconography and the basics of orthodox culture alongside Russian literature, for example. The initiative turned out to be successful especially among first- and second-year students, i.e., students who want to approach the Russian world but are not yet ready to participate in exchange programs. One of the program's results is a strengthened partnership with international institutions such as the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, which is now official partner in this project.

Some Reflections

While the presence of students from ex-soviet countries was from the very beginning not surprising, the presence of students from Western European countries is a recent phenomenon which needs to be taken into account by the university's leadership. Moreover, while in the past 25 years the international target group consisted only of Orthodox students, recently the university has also opened its doors to international students belonging to other confessions, which bring about some practical and theoretical issues that need to be reflected on.

Many challenges, such as managing diversity on campus, comprehensive internationalisation or internationalising of university environment are actually not prioritised at St. Tikhon's University because of the low number of international students from Western Europe or the USA. Nevertheless, the university is reflecting on internationalisation and making little but significant steps, starting from its own identity and pressing challenges.

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Why International Students Choose the Study at Higher School of Economics

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Russian Universities Facing Double Challenge

Growth of a number of students is a key factor in changes in educational systems worldwide. The overall growth

in the number of students is also accompanied by the increasing number of students studying abroad. In this context, many states have started investing significant funds to promote national systems of professional education in the global education market, while universities have begun to actively promote their educational programs overseas.

Russian universities have faced dual difficulties: challenges throughout the internal changes of system of higher education, and changes in Russian political, economic and social order after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In the Soviet times, programs for attracting foreign students were developed at the governmental level. On the eve of the collapse, the USSR was the third in the world by the number of foreign students, after the USA and France.

After the demise of the Soviet Union, the situation changed significantly: relations with many states were broken, and there was a drop in the quality of higher education due to economic and other reasons. There has been a steady decline in interest towards the Russian language: during the last two decades, the number of Russian-speaking people has decreased from 350 to 260 million people approximately.

Promotion of the Russian language in the former Soviet countries is at the moment primarily conducted by Federal Agency for CIS Affairs, Compatriots Living Abroad, and International Humanitarian Cooperation (Rossotrudnichestvo) in the CIS, but their financial and organisational resources are severely limited. Speaking about countries beyond the former Soviet Union, interest in the Russian language rapidly declined after the collapse of the Soviet Union and is unlikely to grow in the near future. This is the main reason why Russia would probably cease to be a significant player in the global educational market in 10 years. It is therefore necessary to develop educational products in the English language but this is a very long-term process.

Despite the fact that the problems of transformation of Russian universities were widely reflected in academic papers, existing research on the motivation of international students who choose to study in Russia is minimal. In this article I will try to partially answer this question using the example of National Research University Higher School of Economics, one of the leading Russian universities.

Potential Students from CIS Countries

Since the majority of foreign students represent the CIS countries, I carried out a sociological survey taking into consideration the main factors why applicants from the CIS countries choose HSE. The online survey was conducted during the International Academic Competition (Olympics) of Youth-2015 held by Higher School of Economics. [1] Data was collected in October 2015. The questionnaire was completely filled in by 640 persons, including 285 people who stated that HSE was their top choice. Thus, the further analysis involved only these respondents. They were asked about the main selection criteria of a higher education institution. It turned out that the two ba-

sic reasons are high level of education provided by a higher educational institution as well as good job prospects. Somewhat unexpectedly, many respondents also indicated that the existence of international connections and training programs abroad was important for them too.

One of the hypotheses tested in the study was an assumption that applicants from the CIS are mostly focused on free higher education. The results show that almost 50% of high school leavers were considering the option of getting free education, while the other half noted that it would depend on the costs whether they pursue further education or not.

The respondents were also asked about their plans after graduation. It turned out that more than half (57.6%) intended to stay in Russia, another one-third (31.7%) had not yet decided what they would do, and a very small share of the respondents intended to return to their home country (4.7%). The remaining 6.1% intended to leave for another country upon graduation.

Students from Non-CIS Countries

In the 2015/2016 academic year, HSE opened 17 English-language master's programs, with total enrollment of 568 students. HSE has a number of academic mobility programs, under which 360 foreign nationals came to the university in 2015 for a period of at least a month, the top sending countries being Germany, South Korea, USA, China and the UK. The most popular are one-semester programs, including English-based courses and intensive Russian language course.

According to a survey conducted by HSE Center for Institutional Research, motivation of foreign students enrolled for short-term and long-term programs (bachelor's or master's) differs radically. Speaking of short-duration programs, students are attracted by the opportunity to learn more about Russian culture and Moscow, and to study Russian.

As for degree-seeking students arriving in Moscow, for them the main driving factor is the reputation of the university and selected academic programs. Besides that, they consider educational experience in Russia as a way to broaden their horizons and to 'challenge' themselves — mainly because of climatic conditions and different culture. Thus, it is possible to say that the image of the university is a significant demand factor, and the university should take active steps to promote its educational products.

Conclusion

I can conclude that for CIS nationals, obtaining higher education in Russia mainly has to do with the goal of finding employment in the Russian economy after graduation. Therefore, many high school graduates from the CIS countries are ready to pay for Russian higher education when they find its quality high enough. As Russian language is losing popularity in the world, it is necessary to provide educational programs in English to recruit students from far abroad countries in order. However, working with this target group is a rather expensive process.

On the one hand, all this enables the country's leading universities to promote their educational services abroad using the funds allocated under the 5-100 Program; on the other hand, there are difficulties with promotion due to weak infrastructural support of Russian higher education abroad.

Note

[1] I am very grateful to Svetlana Barsukova, Professor at the Faculty of Social Sciences (HSE), and Tatiana Chetvernina, Director of International Admissions (HSE), for their help with the survey.

Regional Model of Attracting International Students: the Case of Tatarstan

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Active engagement of local territories (regions, cities) in the global competition for international students may be considered as one of the key factors of a region's development, which can enhance its competitive potential both at national and international level.

Regional Benefits

Research carried out in various countries (e.g. "Higher Education in Region and City Development" by the OECD, 2007-2012) shows that international student mobility has a significant impact on socio-economic, demographic, political and cultural aspects of local development.

The most apparent effect, as foreign experts believe, is the economic effect embracing the growth of direct revenues in local budget from tuition fees and living expenses by international students/families, and also the increase of indirect revenues influencing the regional economy in the long term. Indirect economic benefits may include: new jobs; growth of high-qualified human resources; growth of foreign investments into the region; improvement of demographical situation, etc.

As for Russia, the influence of international students and alumni on the regional economies has not been scrutinised so far — perhaps due to undervaluation of the outcomes and prospects of educational migration for our country.

Regional Context of B. Clark's Triangle of Coordination

Since foreign citizens arriving for study purposes in a particular region of a country influence all the important spheres of the regional development such as the economy, social sphere, and security, building a coherent regional system of attracting international students is the most justified mechanism for managing this process. Therefore, the well-known Clark's triangle of coordination (B. Clark, 2011) may be transformed into the "regional authority — regional business — regional academic community" form.

Measures to manage the process at both institutional (mostly academic) and national levels have been thoroughly studied and described, also by the authors. Here we will dwell in greater detail on primarily non-academic regional aspects.

A region's interest in attracting international students may be reflected in diverse strategic policies, initiatives and programs developed and implemented with support of regional authorities (e.g., the International Education Sector Strategy (Victoria State Government, Australia), Education Strategy (Shanghai Municipal Education Commission, China), Study in Bavaria program (Germany), Study in Wroclaw program (Poland), etc.).

As for Russia, funds from the budgets of specific regions are rarely allocated to support income student mobility. Nevertheless, when aligning the system of attracting international students, regional authorities may contribute in the form of regional scholarships/grants for international undergraduate and postgraduate students, financial and administrative support for universities' campus development, municipal subsidies and other allowances for incoming students, etc.

Developing such a strategy, regional authorities should consider a number of factors influencing international students' selection of a place of study (Theory of Push and Pull Factors. Becker, Kolster, 2012). Factors concerning a country as a study destination to a large extent can be extrapolated to the choice of the local territory. Peculiarities of national mentality account for choosing a specific region similar in terms of ethnic, cultural and religious traditions.

Arrangement of a safe and multicultural environment for international students in the region is an important area for universities and regional authorities to collaborate in and share responsibilities. In this regard, their communication with local representative offices of international students' home countries and national diasporas plays a crucial role. Diasporas can help in forming a positive image of living and studying in a given region among their compatriots abroad. Also, they may be able to provide financial, social and other support to students, and assist in their employment during the study period and after graduation.

An active participation of regional businesses, including joint and international ones, in attracting international students cannot be overestimated. Support may include but is not limited to academic scholarships/grants as well as internship placement for international students during their study, job placement upon graduation, contribution to endowment funds of local universities, etc.

Case of Tatarstan

Being one of the most economically developed, innovative and investment-attractive regions of Russia, the Republic of Tatarstan considers the increase in the number of international students in the region up to 15,000 by 2025 as a key indicator of its human potential development (Tatarstan's Strategy of Social and Economic Development 2030). Half of the international alumni must have an opportunity to find employment in the Republic after graduation.

In 2015, Tatarstan was among the top-5 Russian regions with the largest amount of international students (7,972). This is to a great extent a result of the active cooperation between regional authorities and universities in promoting the region's academic potential globally. Using the example of Kazan Federal University, the local leader of international cooperation (with 4,252 international students in 2016), the following measures may be taken into account:

- Targeted regional grant support for KFU international students (Scholarship Program for Chinese Tatars since 2005);
- Tatarstan's representative offices abroad as a platform for promoting KFU's academic potential;
- Participation of KFU staff members in official delegations of the Republic of Tatarstan to foreign countries and arrangement of regular visits of foreign government and business delegations to KFU with a view to extend academic cooperation;
- Creation of international centers and joint laboratories with international high-tech companies (Intel, Cisco, Rohde & Schwarz etc.) at KFU, initiated and supported by regional authorities;
- Support and development of the university's infrastructure (comfortable dormitories in the University Village, the University Clinic, which is especially important as 40% of KFU medical students are foreigners);

- Promotion of KFU as a platform for large-scale international events organised with support of regional authorities (International Youth Summit of BRICS 2015, International Olympiad in Informatics IOI 2016), etc.

Conclusions

The Tatarstan regional model of attracting international students based on the B. Clark's triangle of coordination may be characterised by availability of a targeted regional policy and measures to improve regional infrastructure, establish a friendly multicultural environment in the region, and introduce various academic, financial, marketing tools of international student recruitment.

The extension of cooperation between local universities and businesses, regional legal and regulatory enhancement, and the establishment of a regional center for international student recruitment and support would facilitate further development of the region and implementation of the international student recruitment strategy.

International Marketing Practices and Geo-Targeting

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Background

With its long-standing and successful history of 115 years, Peter the Great St. Petersburg Polytechnic University (SPbPU) has gained a well-worn image of a truly cosmopolitan university welcoming overseas students from all over the globe. A stable increase in the number of international students amounting to over 5,000 people from more than 100 countries proves this. This also gave the grounds for SPbPU to be considered as a top technical international university in Russia backed by the number of overseas visiting professors exceeding 200 over the last year. Nowadays the university provides more than 100 international

educational programs with over 20 master's programs in English, about 30 double degree programs at different levels, and around 25 ECTS-bearing summer school modules.

International Student Profile

When it comes to the profile of international students, it should be highlighted that it is quite diverse. Providing insights into the split of international students by type of programs it should be noted that the majority of them (62%) come for full-degree programs, around 21.5% go for short-term programs followed by 16.5% of foundation program participants. The top sending countries are China and CIS states — they make up about a half of all international students at the university. Speaking about aggregate geographical segments, most of participants come from Asia followed by a remarkable input from European countries, and there is tangible contribution from Latin America and the Middle East as well.

Strategy and New Practices

Due to its historical background, the university has always maintained the status of a large-scale and international institution hosting overseas students from the very beginning. On top of that, the national academic excellence 5-100 Project and participation in world university rankings have led to adjustment of the university's development strategy in favour of internationalisation. Tracing the trends of international education market the university has been constantly updating its strategy for international recruitment and has secured a stable position, which is rewarding. Such huge markets as China and Latin America are of key priority for now. These markets are worth developing for several reasons: population size; demand for affordable tuition fees and living costs, which are available in Russia so far; no significant preference for English, so prospective students still may choose which new language to learn; and keen interest in Russian culture and mentality.

Thanks to Google Analytics, we have been able to trace demand for full-degree programs among Columbian students and short-term programs among Brazilian ones; Yandex.Metrica analytics tool shows that there is huge interest for programs in Russian in China and CIS countries. A recent quantitative survey in Latin America carried out by QS on commission of SPbPU confirmed the trend and showed the preference for studies in Russia among 45% of the respondents, revealing a high (about 30%) demand for management and business studies.

On 19 April, 2017, the university opened SPbPU Information Center in Madrid (Spain) in order to reach out to the huge Spanish-speaking community and bridge the EU continent and Latin America to reinforce liaisons. The Alexander Pushkin Fund, with its long-standing experience of establishing links in Spain, was chosen as a launching platform. The staff and the head of the Information Center speak both Spanish and Russian. The Center has already helped sign 14 cooperation agreements with Spanish institutions. For instance, MPU (Madrid Polytechnic University) and SPbPU have decided to create scientific groups to

work on joint research projects and establish a Seed Fund for this purpose. First seminars on how to teach Russian as a foreign language have already been held by SPbPU experts at the Information Center. There are of course pending activities to develop academic mobility as well.

The Chinese market is not easily reachable either. SPbPU was the first to open its Representative Office in Shanghai, securing higher results of brand promotion within this market. The office is run by a Chinese chief executive with enormous experience of dealing with the Russian market, who also speaks Russian and has understanding of the Russian mentality and culture. There are three more workers at the office and one manager focused on marketing the university's technological solutions in China and carrying out contract operations in order to connect science and business.

Besides doing profound research and a offering standard range of services, the objectives of the Representative Office in Shanghai are to perform innovation and know-how activities and facilitate technology transfer. That is why the office was opened in the new innovative Pudong district of Shanghai (the future Silicon Valley of China). As a result, there are challenging opportunities to establish joint ventures for new materials in electronics industry and new techniques for medical use based on terahertz emissions; there is also cooperation in the framework of the medical cluster. Moreover, there are some inter-university projects under consideration of the Ministry of Science and Technology of China in the areas of telecommunications, simulation modeling, and big data management.

The office acts as an information center for Chinese students and facilitates the enrollment process as well, since there are two main obstacles on the way of recruitment: linguistic barrier and limited internet access. The staff participate in important exhibitions and arrange school tours. Chinese students may participate in webinars, open doors events, come to or call the office and get relevant advice.

Recruitment Tools and Geographical Targeting

SPbPU's international profile shows that the geography varies significantly depending on the type of program. Therefore, marketing strategies should be developed with the geographical aspect in mind.

While bachelor's and master's programs in Russian as well as the foundation program are in demand among students from Asia, CIS and African countries, there is also stable demand for English-taught master's programs among students from Asia, the Middle East and Europe. There is also rapidly growing interest originating from Latin America. Short-term and exchange (semester-long) programs in English are very popular among students both from European countries and from North America. Summer School students mainly come from Europe, around a quarter — from Asia, and practically equal shares of more than 10% each arrive from Latin America and the USA. This helps understand the importance of geo-targeting.

For instance, students from Latin America still prefer face-to-face interaction, making SPbPU participation in fairs quite efficient, while in the case of students from Asia, Africa and the Middle East there will be a boosting growth of mobile users by 80% by 2020 [1], which implies efforts to be done in terms of adaptive web-site coding and SEO-optimisation. As for students from Europe and America, they prefer to get information both via online resources and by e-mailing partner universities.

SPbPU runs quite a complex policy of international recruitment. 35% of marketing activities goes to traditional tools of attracting students such as word-of-mouth knowledge, recruitment agencies, B2C exhibitions and student fairs. SPbPU has recently shifted towards digital marketing in accordance with the most recent data analysed, which showed better recruitment performance via online channels rather than traditional ones. Such an approach is backed by recent research published by QS World University Rankings [2]. Educational web-portals, ranking web-sites and Facebook turned out to be the most efficient tools for click-through-rate leading to the university's English website. It is interesting to note that social networks and educational web portals generated 31% and 30% leads respectively but analysing the efficiency of online applications completed (so-called leads), educational web portals showed a rather high performance of 49%, while Facebook – 18% only (Google Analytics, 2016). Social media enhancement and webinars have been taking on new significance as well. Promotion using online resources of partner institutions, associations and organisations are of key importance since the information is focused on a highly motivated niche target audience.

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Summer University as a Tool to Attract International Students

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In 2014, International Summer University was launched at Higher School of Economics in addition to other summer programs. The Summer University (SU) is a platform where students from all over the world come for two months to take courses by HSE's leading professors. SU is aimed at three equally important goals: making regular HSE programs and exchange education (exchange programs, study abroad) attractive for international students, internationalising educational processes at HSE, and improving the university's international visibility. On the one hand, the Summer University shares some features typical for traditional summer schools, on the other hand, it is quite different from other short-term educational programs. In this brief paper I will try to: a) identify SU student body; b) analyse SU student body; c) outline prospects for further development.

Many universities all over the world currently offer summer schools. [1] However, there are different approaches as to what summer schools and their target audiences are. For example, summer schools offered by universities in the UK are open not only for full-time students but for everyone who wants to study (this concept is known as continuing education or long-life learning). American universities are well-known for their summer semester programs open both for international participants and for local students who want to study something in addition to their chosen major. Originally, European universities would offer socially- and culturally-oriented programs with a minor teaching component. However, the students' attitude towards summer courses is changing: they are eager to study more and even to take exams during the summer in order to add on to their education and – oftentimes – to shorten its duration.

There is an evident shift from free-based to fee-based programs. Each university has its own logic behind its summer schools, and their organizers have different missions. The Summer University at HSE was originally aimed at improving the university's international visibility and recruiting international students, i.e., it was not meant to “start earning.” Nevertheless, in two years the project became self-supporting. Still, it is also successful in solving its main task: the efforts hurled into attracting students to SU automatically help promote the HSE brand.

Our university has a long-standing tradition of organizing summer schools, and you can find an impressive list on our

website. Some of the projects listed are Russian, others – international; some summer schools are held in Moscow, others – in regional campuses; some are teaching-oriented, others – research-oriented; some are multidisciplinary, others focus on a specific topic; some are held in Russian, others – in English; some are new, others have had more than 10 editions, etc. [2] What distinguishes SU from regular summer schools is mainly the fact that it is a university-scale project (i.e., the so-called centralised model).

SU is an educational project: the participants follow academic courses and earn ECTS credits. The Nizhny Novgorod and St Petersburg campuses take part in SU alongside the head campus in Moscow. English is the working language of this two-month program. Each participant can build their study program individually. Participation is fee-based.

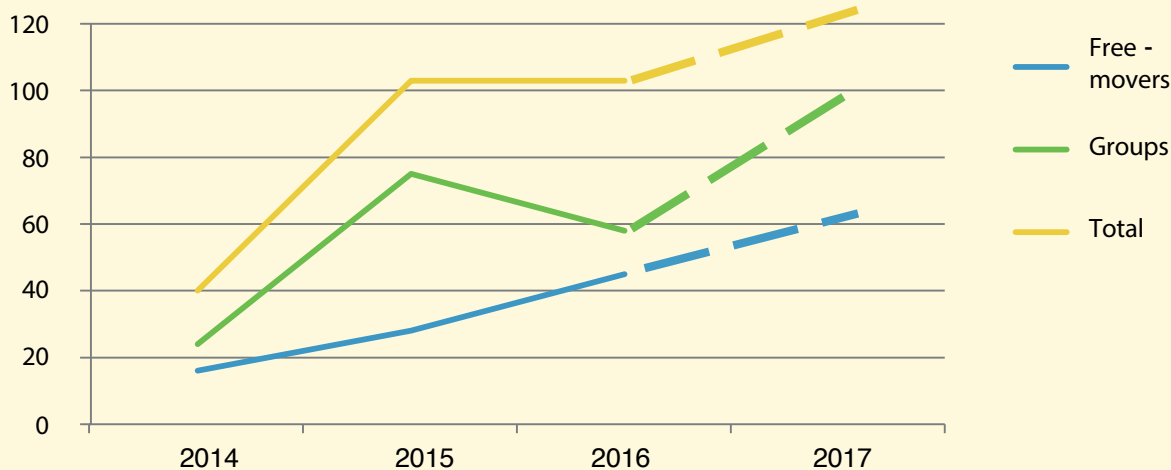
One of the main drivers behind the idea of starting a summer university was the impressive number of disciplines already taught in English both at bachelor's and master's level. [3] The task was to choose the courses that would, on the one hand, be attractive for international students, and on the other hand, show them how they continue their education at HSE. In the end, the courses that are part of SU cover most of the university's educational programs: from economics and international relations to history and mathematics. Russian languages courses have become an important part of SU too. The combination of specialised disciplines and the opportuni-

ty to study the language of the host country is one of our Summer University's most important competitive advantages.

Each year at the end of the program the students fill out an anonymous evaluation form. 79% of the free-mover [4] respondents said they would definitely recommend HSE SU to other international students; another 17% considered this a possibility. The participants were also asked to assess whether their experience at SU had met their original expectations. Most free-movers said SU had lived up to their expectations (53%) – or even exceeded them (10%).

SU, which is a relatively long program that offers a large variety of courses, is designed in such a way that is attractive both for free-movers and for institutional partners. Many – if not most – foreign universities require their students to gain study abroad experience, so a short-term educational summer program gives international students a wonderful opportunity to see for themselves what studying at HSE is like. SU student body composition is quite interesting, so here is statistical data for the past three years and an estimation for 2017 (Figure 1). The number of free-movers has been growing gradually. Students coming in groups (sent by institutional partners) lead to spikes in participant numbers. However, there are some risks associated with student groups: if they suddenly cannot come for this or that reason, the number of participants decreases substantially.

Figure 1. SU Student body composition



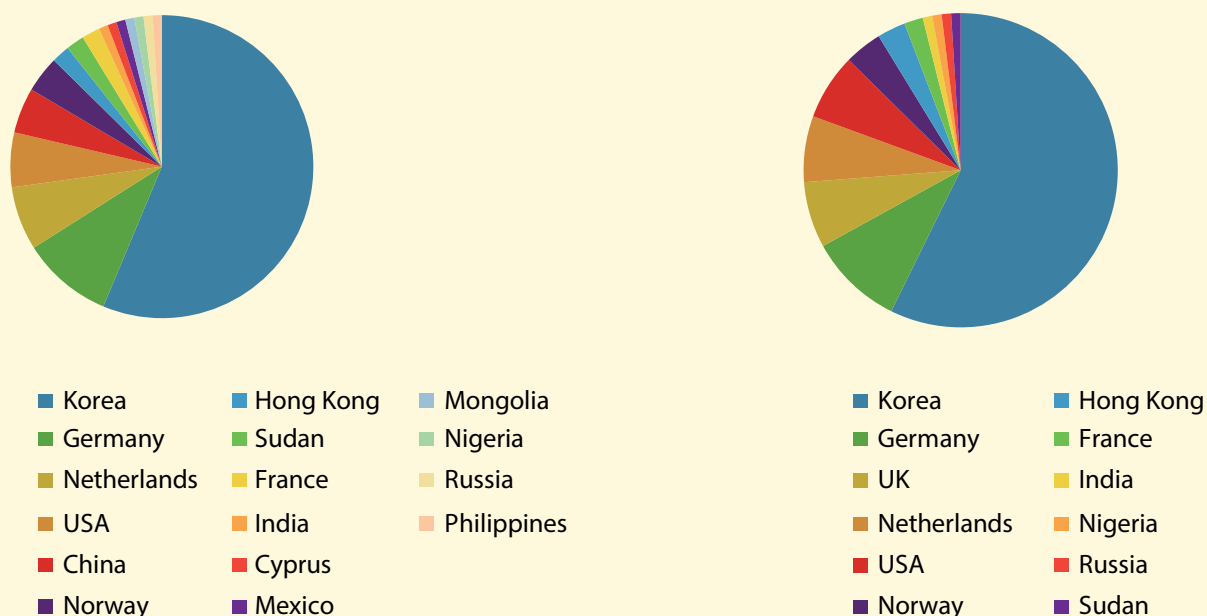
In order to minimise risks we need to employ two strategies: recruit new free-movers and expand the list of our institutional partners.

Institutional contacts found within SU significantly help to activate project cooperation with partner universities as well as broaden the existing and establish the new exchange programs.

The Summer University can be seen as part of our “internationalisation at home” activities. On the one hand, HSE students [5] seize every opportunity to interact with in-

ternational students, they organise various trips and excursions and show their university and their city to the foreigners so that the latter feel less disoriented in a new place, especially since they often speak very little Russian or none at all. This also gives HSE students a wonderful opportunity to practice foreign languages with native speakers – and this goes not only for English but also for Korean, Chinese, Spanish, German, etc. On the other hand, HSE faculty build a unique experience of working with a multinational audience, and get acquainted with various academic traditions and cultures.

Figure 2. Student body by citizenship (left) and by home university country (right), 2016



We have also found out that we need to collect two parallel statistics sets in terms of SU's international study body composition. Figure 2 shows that we have hosted participants from China – however, all of them were studying outside their country; at the same time, none of the students from UK universities that we have hosted were actually UK citizens. This only proves that education is becoming more and more globalised.

It is interesting that students interested in SU and in full-time degree programs differs substantially in terms of geographic representation:

	SU	Master's programs
CIS	0	60%
Europe	23%	10%
Asia	66%	17 %
Afrika	3%	9%
North America	7 %	2%
Central America	1%	0.5%
South America	0	1.5%

2016 data on the number of SU enrolments and enrolments to HSE master's programs.

Thus, we can identify potential growth areas in our work towards recruiting students for these two different purposes.

Despite the fact that the share of SU international participants who later come to HSE to spend a semester or even enroll into one of our master's programs is low (about 3-5%), we expect this figure to grow exponentially with the continuous overall increase in the number of SU students. SU alumni's testimonies show that they would like to continue their studies at HSE.

There is a practical limitation to a substantial increase in the number of SU participants: student dorms are fully booked in the summer. In other words, the factor that drives many foreign universities to expand their summer schools – i.e., to make use of the dorms that stay unoccupied during the summer, – is not applicable in our case. This is an important new challenge for SU.

37% of the SU participants said that their main problem is linguistic barrier [6]; 27% mentioned the difficulties they encountered when applying for a visa and obligatory registration with the migration authorities. 57% of them asked SU team for assistance on various issues, another half used the help of student buddies. Most of the respondents (70%) evaluated their buddies' help as "excellent" or "good."

SU remains to be aimed at recruiting full-time international students to HSE. At the same time, SU is also ready to become a platform that would offer preparatory programs for prospective students from abroad. For example, those who study Russian or need to take another bridging course before the start of another academic year may join SU. We are witnessing an emerging trend where vacation period is viewed as an opportunity to continue education, to learn

something new abroad rather than simply time off. From this point of view, the Summer University can potentially become a self-sufficient study format instead of being just an option that complements the existing educational line-up.

Notes

[1] The first ever summer school started at Harvard University in 1871; it is still running

[2] Here are just some of the 2017 summer schools to give an example: V International Summer School on Higher Education Research; Summer School on Political Linguistics “Mediatisation of Politics: New Challenges” (Nizhny Novgorod); Russian Summer School of Institutional Analysis (RSSIA-2017); XI Russian Summer School on Labor Economics (RSSLE-2017); VI Summer School for Anti-Corruption Policy “Innovative tools to eradicate corruption”; VI International Summer School on Cyber Law; Russian Language, History and Culture Summer School “White Nights in the Urals”; VII International Russian-Chinese Summer School “Economic Instruments of Foreign Policy in the Modern World”; III HSE-NARFU Summer School “Complex Development of Sites with Unique Natural, Historical and Cultural Heritage: The Solovetsky Islands”; European Summer School “Exploring entrepreneurship.”

[3] In 2017, HSE catalogue of the disciplines taught in English listed over 300 items; there are 23 English-language master’s programs.

[4] Free-movers are students that seek opportunities to study abroad entirely on their own initiative.

[5] We are mostly talking about the members of the Buddy Club. However, Summer University Service Project is now listed on the Project Fair, which will help engage more HSE students.

[6] Source: SU-2016 participants survey.

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Centralisation and Decentralisation of International Student Support: Getting the Best of Both Worlds

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Nowadays universities do not need to be convinced that their student support services should take into account international students as well. However, a specific configuration of the support system depends on both external and internal factors. A lot is shaped by the context: national regulation, predominant language(s) in the country, changing demands of the job market; but no less important is the university’s strategy, i.e., the decisions on how to develop while taking the context into account.

Language barrier is the first and major hindrance in accessing the system of student support. The second obstacle is the lack of flexible interface for every university service, which would take into account the diversity of student body. In such circumstances, and when the number of international students is relatively small, it is often easier and more effective to start with a centralised approach, as it allows to ensure adequate and timely support of predictable quality to incoming international students.

However, despite the impression that this way a student can resolve all the issues in one place, it is a quasi-one-stop service because the central office is not a provider of university services but a mediator between students and relevant units. Consequently, it becomes the bottleneck which slows processes down when the number of international students grows. Moreover, a separate track of support creates an isolated bubble for international students, providing fewer possibilities for intercultural experience and, thus, increasing the risk of creating a split university.

Is Decentralisation the Answer?

Worldwide in the last years the idea of decentralising support for international students has been gaining popularity. It is usually based on the assumption that each faculty or school can better deal with their own target audience both in education and its administration. There are definite positive sides to the decentralised approach: it allows the university to “absorb” large numbers of international students and to immerse them into the environment. One of the greatest advantages of a decentralised system is that it provides room for multiple solutions and each faculty may choose what works best for them.

However, there is a downside: there is no single standard of support provision to international students across the university, and it becomes a sensitive issue for the students who take courses at different departments. Given this fact, it is crucial to maintain a delicate balance between providing adequate conditions for incoming internationals at any given moment and benefitting from decentralisation of university services.

Designing the Support Network: An Integrated Approach

Traditionally, in Russia all universities had a centralised support system as a legacy of the Soviet era because the majority of the students were coming to study at Russian-taught programs, so they would either take a prep year first or were already fluent enough in the language to receive education in it. HSE was in a similar situation until recently: the majority of its international students came from CIS countries and had quite a good command of Russian, and only a small number of students came to take courses in English.

When the number of international students who do not speak Russian increased at HSE in 2013 and the existing mechanisms could not cope with it, their support was transferred to a newly established Office of Internationalisation (OI). When choosing between a centralised and decentralised models, OI opted for an integrated approach: as a central office, it focuses on the strategy of development for support services in relation to internationals, on internal advocacy for their integration, and on designing standards of support and sharing them through training. Direct provision of support is carried out by frontline offices. The integrated model quickly proved effective thanks to its three main attributes: building a reliable frontline and back office, creating a professional community, and taking a deliberate approach to development.

Firstly, the frontline addresses routine tasks which can be formalised into guidelines and standard procedures. Central international student support office plays the role of a back office — troubleshooting non-standard cases, turning them into solutions and guidelines. It also shares good practices with frontline managers via regular meetings and workshops, and provides support directly to students when there is benefit from the scale. At HSE international student support office is the initial point of contact for

exchange students; it distributes them among frontline managers, updates the website for international students, organises orientation sessions and works with the student organisations. The major challenge in creating an integrated student support system was to find the right counterparts, and thanks to the institutional transformations HSE was undergoing, the OI was lucky to find like-minded colleagues in the support system for educational programs. Instead of previously common faculty-wide offices each programme got a dedicated manager, and university made English proficiency one of the requirements for hiring.

Secondly, Office of Internationalisation is deliberately working towards creating a self-perpetuating professional community among those who provide support to international students. One of the key tasks for the central office is to create opportunities and mechanisms for professional interaction, allowing the managers to sync in terms of the concepts used, how the processes are organised and what are the timeframes. This shared understanding enables such a support system to share knowledge not only between the center and frontline managers, but also within the community, which creates a synergetic effect.

Thirdly, OI acts as a think tank, making sure that plans for development of support services for international students stay in line with the university strategy. In the time when the context is changing fast, and universities respond by making the necessary alterations in their priorities and strategy implementation plans, the role of the central office is to proactively and timely ensure that international student support matches the current needs and anticipates the future ones.

The model's success still leaves room for improvement, especially regarding the issue of internal advocacy for the needs of international students and, more broadly speaking, internationalisation. Ideally, everyone who is involved in provision of student services would be taking into account students diversity (linguistic, cultural, etc.) in all of their everyday actions.

Nonetheless, rather than thinking of the integrated model as a preparatory phase and a milestone towards a decentralised approach, Office of Internationalisation treats it as a sustainable solution. It allows to adapt to the fast-changing external context, to analyse challenges and find ways of responding to them, at the same time mainstreaming internationalisation in the university. For this to work, OI takes on a mission of building a professional community involved in international student support and developing the strategy of development for support services which aligns with the university's evolving needs.

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How to Improve International Students' Russian Language Skills

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“Russian Makes Me Cry Sometimes” (A Student from Brazil)

Russian universities — members of the Global Universities Association have become active players on the international education market. [1] Although there is an onward trend of attracting students for English-medium study programs, international students are still more likely to study in Russian, which is often a non-easy task for them. Let's face it: Russian is a difficult language. Even for students with advanced speaking skills, writing in Russian might pose a problem. Universities, affected by the trend of going online, introduce more and more computer-based tests. Even if an answer is right, a spelling mistake might ruin the chances to get a high mark. Besides, even for students in English-medium programs, Russian remains the main instrument in administering their daily needs. In 2016, Ural Federal University conducted an internal survey of international students' needs and difficulties during their first year of study. The survey showed that students lack Russian skills when interacting with their surroundings.

Emergency Team on the Way Toward a Solution

The results of the survey, augmented by repeated complaints of international students and their professors about the low level of Russian proficiency, urged the international office of UrFU to brainstorm the issue. The main input came from a team comprising of the student council representatives, members of the international students support office, and administrative staff of what is known as “podfak” [the Preparatory department]. These groups of people have a positive record of working together. In 2015, they proposed a system of international students support for UrFU. This system includes Buddy Program

meant for streamlining international students arrival and paperwork procedures within UrFU, as well as cooperating with foreign students' ethnic communities to support them throughout their stay. Students from these projects create strong bonds with their charges and provide a constant flow of international students' feedback on their experience. After several attempts, the team agreed that the solution should be based on the following principles: 1) feasibility: minimal costs involved and no additional positions opened; 2) novelty: traditional practices, such as offering additional training by Russian teachers, are obviously insufficient; 3) practicality of the proposed ‘remedy’ and its preventive character; 4) steerability: the learning process and its results should be driven by the students.

The Principle of Scaffolding

As research shows, upon arrival, international students often experience acculturative stress and feel estranged from host university environment. [2] They might have difficulties adjusting to the university environment and might feel unable to find ways-out through a natural process of communicating with external world. A way to reach out to them is to involve them into interaction. Traditional fee-based courses of Russian seem to be too formal for the first step. A less formal self-help group where all participants have equal rights to decide when to meet and what to do is more appropriate. So, a first step towards involving students into communication was a student club of foreign languages. In this club some students volunteer to teach, they inform others about their wish via social networks and gather on a more or less regular basis. Classes vary in number of participants and last from two weeks to a semester. It may seem that regulation obscurity is a drawback. On the other hand, it is its strong point since in an informal gathering students choose content, methodology and frequency of training for themselves. This is a first step for a student to identify the need of improving his or her language proficiency.

Experience shows that the club of foreign languages is frequented by students looking for new ways of acquiring language skills. Such practices go under the general umbrella-term of ‘edutainment’. Having fun, student club of foreign languages creates the necessary environment for communicating in Russian and incentivises it. When students who have volunteered to teach at this club complain about their lack of pedagogical skills, it is important to provide them with professional support. Teachers of foreign language train these students in language didactics on a voluntary basis if the latter are willing to. Teaching staff from the exam center of Russian as a Foreign Language give advice on exams preparation methods. The next initiative to scaffold the Russian skills of international students is to establish an offline and online Russian corner. The existing library of “podfak” is to be transformed into a resource center with a set of teaching and testing materials for language levels from A1 to B2. These resources are to be made available online. A teacher will supervise this center by individually mentoring students in how

to proceed with materials for self-study. An important requirement for such person is to be able to advise visitors on personalising the learning process based on their individual learning styles and other parameters.

The idea of the student club has been implemented, and the feedback is positive. The number of participants is growing steadily. However, it is by far not enough. The current challenge for the team which came up with the scaffolding solution is to create an atmosphere of excelling in Russian by supporting student initiatives in Russian language contests. Here, again, the main idea is that students should exercise control over their learning process. The team that is responsible for the proposed solutions will monitor and evaluate the results, and suggest changes and improvements. Russian language should cease to be a reason to cry!

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Building Communication Bridges to Mitigate Language and Culture Barriers

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Every university which exists in an environment where English is not the first language is going to encounter obstacles in communicating with its international students. While developing towards a polylingual solution might seem preferable, in reality universities choose a less costly decision — English in addition to the local language(s), since it is the de facto lingua franca of international education.

Nonetheless, specific challenges and ways to address international students greatly depend on how widespread the knowledge of English is in the country and university environment. For example, the Netherlands and Sweden have many natural opportunities for universities to recruit people who will not experience the language barrier with international students. However, many other countries, including Russia, have very different starting conditions: according to the 2010 census, only 5.3% of the Russian population indicated knowledge of English. Of course it calls for deliberate extra efforts aimed at developing information channels and English interface of university services.

The main goal of building effective communication with international students is to ensure equal access to information about university regulations and procedures, so that all students could use accurate sources as a guide to university life. It is vital to empower students to resolve the situations they encounter at university in order to develop the skills necessary for future life. At the same time, university services need to have a flexible interface which can accommodate diverse needs of all students, including international ones, providing them with an opportunity both to use the electronic resources and request in-person consultations during visiting hours.

While trying to find an efficient solution to the abovementioned task, it is important not to confuse and conflate university environment and university services, as the efforts to make them inclusive for international students are vastly different. University services are a system of administrative support for education and research, and they can be relatively easily formalised, described and adjusted to accommodate international students. University environment, on the other hand, is hard to pin down: it includes traditions, specific culture of the institution and its faculties, its mythology and folklore, so to speak, as well as a variety of informal practices. Usually it is the university services which are implied when universities speak of supporting international students, but mainstreaming internationalisation and getting different university stakeholders on board is vital for advancing the inclusion of students into the informal curriculum.

HSE Case: Structural Design Comes First

In 2013 International Student Support Unit (ISSU) was founded within the Office of Internationalisation with a major task to provide efficient tools and mechanisms that would help to integrate into the HSE community the steadily increasing numbers of non-Russian-speaking international students pursuing degrees at English-taught programs.

The approach chosen was as follows: to identify the major barriers that prevent successful adaptation and further integration, and find a solution that would not only mitigate the barriers but would also match the needs of millennials and Generation Z. Examination of good practices at universities worldwide showed that a one-stop online information hub in English is vital for the positive experience of international students, since it is, firstly, an expected standard, and secondly, it guarantees access to information 24/7 for current and prospective students. While such digital solutions were common for universities globally, HSE was the first Russian university to develop such a comprehensive website for international students.

In order to help users navigate the system instinctively, content design was based on student life cycle: 1) “Before arrival”: when a decision to join the university is made, 2) “Upon arrival”: when a student starts their studies, 3) “Stay at HSE”: when a student adapts and integrates, 4) “Departure”: when a decision is made whether to stay in touch with HSE and whether to promote HSE among fellow students at a domestic university. The first three sections deal with various practical arrangements of the study process, accommodation, visa support and university facilities because bridging the gap between expectations and reality is crucial to retaining students, which can be done through providing clear and extensive information relevant for all stages of student life cycle at the university. However, since students’ choice of the university is greatly motivated by the institution’s academic reputation and the content of its courses, academic matters have a separately featured large section as well.

The “Departure” stage deserves special attention as it is often overlooked. Since the current global academic culture actively encourages students and faculty to change universities over the course of their career trajectory, so as to avoid academic inbreeding and ensure diversity of ideas, there is a need to make the finalisation of a degree or short stay as predictable and clear as the start of the studies. But apart from “finishing on a good note,” institutional information channels should provide clear options for staying in touch with the university and further education and research opportunities it offers to make sure that the university keeps a firm place in the network of academic contacts its international students (perhaps later to become post-docs and faculty members) build.

Providing Room for Reinforcing the Structure

It’s noteworthy to add that the webpage is not only in high demand among current and perspective international students [1] and a good tool of promotion when recruiting international students or presenting HSE for partner universities abroad, but it has also served a trigger for changing how the university perceives its international students. The initial content of the website <https://istudents.hse.ru/> (released on 28 July 2014) was created centrally by ISSU, who prepared all the content even though not being in

charge of particular processes. Although the website had never been static and kept developing based on the cases encountered during work and on the students’ feedback via surveys conducted by HSE Center of Institutional Research, now the actual services develop their English interface, allowing to link to their webpages for full information. It has enabled a major shift in design and concept of <https://istudents.hse.ru/>: from “patchwork” to communication hub.

What is also important, <https://istudents.hse.ru/> has proven to be an excellent means of involving international students into the university activities: a newly launched section Culture Kaleidoscope is a good example of the initiative when the event is designed, promoted and held by domestic and international students together, who write reports after the event for the website in order to involve even more students into future activities.

As a result, through tackling a seemingly simple task of creating a one-stop reference website for international students in English, we were able to address a number of different issues. Firstly, we identified the gaps in the existing information channels in English and were able to address them. Secondly, however, the language barrier was not the only or the major obstacle. Communication with different units revealed that the majority of processes and their interfaces are not tailored to address the needs of international students not only in terms of language but also in other aspects their international status brings. This triggered a wider discussion on how to develop university environment so that it could integrate diverse students, and how to make sure that the university answers the needs prompted by various differences, be it language, citizenship, culture or something else.

Thus, solving the task of creating an efficient and friendly service for international students through developing an online communication hub has become a strategic pocket for further development for student services at HSE (both online and offline) and building intercultural awareness across the campus.

Note

[1] According to Google Analytics, over 14,600 visitors viewed the <https://istudents.hse.ru/> website within three months after the launch on 28 July 2014; a year later within the same period the number of visitors grew 2.5 times.

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About HERB

Higher Education in Russia and Beyond (HERB) is a quarterly informational journal published by National Research University Higher School of Economics since 2014. HERB is intended to illuminate the transformation process of higher education institutions in Russia and countries of Eastern Europe and Central Asia. The journal seeks to adduce the multiple-aspect opinions about current challenges and trends of regional higher education and give examples of the best local practices. Our audience represents wider international community of scholars and professionals in the field of higher education worldwide. The project is implemented as part of cooperation agreement between Higher School of Economics and Boston College Center of International Higher Education.

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