

# Foreign students at Russian universities: intercultural interaction as a basis for countering extremism

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**Abstract.** The paper raises an actual issue of the mechanisms for foreign students' socio-cultural adaptation in modern conditions of education in the Russian Federation, as a measure to counter extremism. The authors analyze the results of their own sociological research conducted among foreign students of Volgograd State University. Based on the data obtained, the authors came to the conclusion that properly developed mechanisms of foreign students' socio-cultural adaptation to new living conditions positively affects the quality and quantity of students' knowledge, skills and abilities. Moreover, integration of foreign and Russian students is essential, but the emphasis in educational field should take into the account foreign students' socio-cultural specifics. A student can show high rates of entry into the proposed socio-cultural environment, acceptance of attitudes, values, norms of the host country. In order to conduct a competent policy of intercultural interaction, it is necessary to create a clear program for the prevention of interethnic conflicts and extremism among students.

**Keywords:** student migration, adaptation practices, Russian education, socio-cultural space, foreign culture.

## 1 Introduction

The globalization of the modern world affects all spheres of human activity, all social institutions. Education does not stay away from these processes. Every year, more and more countries become participants in the unified worldwide educational space, providing universal educational services; more and more students from other countries visit the Russian Federation on a student visas and study at Russian universities. The issue of student migration is becoming relevant. Student migration is the movement of students who study outside their homeland or citizenship for a period of more than 1 year [1].

As a result of the internationalization of higher education, an increasing number of young people are planning to study in another country, while considering international

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education as a way to permanent residency within a country. Factors that influence foreign students in their choice of institutions for higher education along with the quality of education, the following factors were determined: living conditions in the country, the university staff and teacher's hospitality, assistance in adapting, tolerant attitude to representatives of different nationalities in the region of study.

Despite all the advantages of international education, the risks associated with the penetration of extremist sentiments into educational institutions with foreign students, the emergence of conflicts on ethnic and religious grounds, the rejection of a different culture by both foreign students and students of the host country are also increasing.

Various sociological studies conducted in our country indicate the existence of negative attitudes towards migrants in Russian society. Young people and the student audience are especially vulnerable to such manifestations. Researchers claim that youth extremism today is a disciplinary concept, studied as a socio-cultural phenomenon. There are still disputes about the very definition of youth extremism, which is expressed in hatred and hostility towards representatives of, among other things, another culture, religion, nationality.

Statistical data and sociological studies show that the donor countries of foreign students in the Russian Federation are China, Iraq, Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Moldova, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan [2]. It should be noted that 25% of respondents expressed a desire to stay after studying for permanent residence in Russia [3]. Suchlike implementation is confined to particular spheres to form a positive image of the nation. Higher education today is one of the most efficient instruments of the "soft power" implementation in the countries of Central Asia, for it allows securing friendly political and economic elite as well as enhancing the quality of labour migrants to the Russian Federation [4].

Coming to another country, young people do not always find a common language with their surroundings, they don't know local traditions. It takes them a long time to get used to the rules of living together in dormitories and they cannot adapt to new living conditions [5]. Not all of them can or want to contact national communities or Diasporas for assistance in various issues, including domestic ones.

Thus, they become isolated and easy targets as well for people who can attract them to extremist activities. Sometimes foreign students consciously or unconsciously can themselves be translators of radical or extremist ideas, representing organizations whose activities are prohibited in the territory of the Russian Federation.

## 2 Materials and methods

One of the universities in Russia that train foreign students is the Federal State Autonomous Educational Institution of Higher Education "Volgograd State University" – (VolSU). According to statistics, as of September 1, 2021, about 510 foreign students are studying there in bachelor's, master's and postgraduate programs. Interaction with foreign students is carried out by the Institute of International Education. The adaptive capabilities of the VolSU include socio-cultural mechanisms.

The factors influencing the degree of adaptation of foreign students can be conditionally divided into those occurred in educational activities (objective reasons) and in everyday life in the host country[6]. New forms of learning, assessment and control of knowledge can serve as agents of adaptation, as well as socialization, integration into a new team, knowledge of the legislation of the host country, features of household arrangement, intercultural interaction. Almost everyone who comes to study from abroad faces such difficulties.

Using the methods of sociological research, we tried to investigate the mechanisms of foreign students' adaptation in Volgograd State University. Empirical data come from the author's research, conducted in January-March 2021. A sociological survey of foreign

students enrolled in bachelor's and master's degree programs at VolSU “Adaptation of foreign students at Volgograd State University” was organized and the data were processed using the STATISTICA software product.

### 3 Results

All students who took part in the survey were conditionally divided into two groups: 1st group – students from neighboring countries (Uzbekistan, Tajikistan). 2nd group – students from foreign countries (Iraq, China, Vietnam, Ghana and Guinea). Students from the first group tend to know the Russian language, local traditions, and Russian basic cultural values; they are often in touch with Diasporas located in the Volgograd region. Volgograd State University cooperates with Diasporas, participates with them in solving foreign students' problems which makes adaptation of students easier and more successful.

263 foreign students took part in the questionnaire survey; 176 – from the first group, and 87 foreign students from the second group (continuous survey method). The survey was conducted using Google Form technology.

The first block of questions in our questionnaire was an introductory block aimed at collecting primary data about respondents (gender, age, marital status, etc.). The second block included questions aimed at finding out the degree of satisfaction of respondents with studying at the Volgograd State University. The third block is related to the identification of problems in the process of adaptation and intercultural communication [7].

Foreign students of the Volgograd State University were asked to give answers to the question (multiple choice): “what difficulties did you encounter when moving to Volgograd?” According to respondents, the main difficulty is lack of proper knowledge or insufficient knowledge of the Russian language (62%), lack of information given in their native language (36%), insufficient awareness of the legislation of the Russian Federation (57%), everyday difficulties (28%), it is not always possible to find friends (33%).

Further, all respondents were asked to evaluate the completeness of information about the university provided on the Internet and on the website of Volgograd State University. 53% of students satisfactorily assess the completeness of the information provided on the Internet about the university. It should be noted that students from near abroad (75% of respondents) were more satisfied with the information than those from far abroad (42% of respondents). It can be explained primarily by students' knowledge of the Russian language, since there is more information in this language about the university than in foreign languages. Lack of proper knowledge of the Russian language is called by foreign students as the main adaptation difficulty (47% of respondents). Students from Africa, the Middle East, China and Vietnam have the least knowledge of the language.

Foreign students from CIS countries assume that they speak Russian sufficiently enough to study in the Russian Federation. However, there is an increasing trend proving the necessity of additional courses of the Russian language for most applicants from the former Soviet republics.

Preparatory courses “Russian as a foreign language” have been conducted at the Volgograd State University. Language is taught by teachers of philology both individually and in groups. According to the results of the training, certification is carried out.

A group of students who have been trained in preparatory courses was identified among the respondents. It was they who were asked to evaluate the work of the preparatory courses. 73% of international students gave a positive assessment. Nevertheless, every fourth foreign student noted a low level of language proficiency. According to respondents' opinion that is the reason of the further educational process. Among all respondents, 23% indicated that they experience difficulties in mastering the educational material.

All respondents were asked the question “Where did you study Russian?”. Almost a third of respondents, 31%, said that they studied Russian at the preparatory courses of the Volgograd State University. About half of the respondents (49%) noted that they studied Russian in their family or in a Russian-speaking environment in their country. Thus, we can conclude that students who come from countries with which Russia shares a common historical past adapt to new conditions faster.

Some researchers try to understand the essence of genuine tolerance and interpret it as an ability to live among ethnocultural differences that we cannot endorse or as a “virtue” that allows us to accept: beliefs that we consider false; actions that we consider unfair; institutional arrangements that we consider cruel or corrupt; and people who embody what we confront [8]. Others, on the contrary, provide convincing arguments for the so-called “conditional tolerance” which requires us to constantly discuss and reflect on the limits of what we are willing to endure or tolerate [9]. People become more tolerant after they learn more information about interethnic minorities and about interethnic tolerance in general. In this sense, increasing interethnic tolerance can become part of the state educational policy of educating the population [10]. At the same time, it is believed that young people are more tolerant due to the presence of flexible views and unsettled principles, or due to the level of education and living in megacities.

## 4 Discussion

Accepting foreign students to Volgograd State University, it is necessary, in our opinion, to place special emphasis on information given in the languages of the donor countries. Studying the potential market of such countries, you need to pay attention to the simplicity and accessibility of the site so that the applicant can easily find the necessary information.

Respondents were also asked to tell about activities that would help them adapt to the new socio-cultural living conditions. Foreign students noted that holidays of various nationalities are held (69%), as well as following activities: events dedicated to the celebration of the Victory Day in the Second World War (45%), joint viewing of films (87%), visiting museums (25%). Certain difficulties are caused by reading books and listening to music (12%), which can be assumed as difficulties of linguistic nature.

Recognizing the importance of the development of human capital, many countries contribute to the growth of international student mobility through various state grants and scholarships for their citizens and foreign students. Nevertheless, there is a lack of research on the state’s benefit from sponsoring scholarship programs and study abroad grants in the context of the development of the country’s human capital [11].

This task is actualized by a number of circumstances of modern realities. The need to create a digital twin / double for each university has become a trend due to the importance of providing applicants, students and graduates with the most accessible educational environment. The high-quality digital environment of a university during the spread of pandemics is an important condition for maintaining the stability of the educational process. Today, the ability of universities to quickly adapt the digital educational space to the needs of distance learning is a significant sign of the viability and quality of the management staff of higher education institutions [12].

Ethnicity. Realizing the influence of popular mass media on the formation of ideas about and race among the younger generation, American researchers have long been talking about the threat of “ethnic and cultural war” [12], as well as the influence of ideology that determines social, cultural and political discourse. One of the ways to solve this problem is seen in the development of critical thinking of citizens in an ever-growing multiracial and multicultural world.

## 5 Conclusion

However, universities are the main coordinators of the process and each university should have a program on countering extremism. In our opinion, the main tasks of countering extremism in the student environment are: teaching tolerance through the system of intra-university education and upbringing; development and implementation of methods for monitoring, forecasting, diagnostics and prevention of inhumane manifestations in the educational environment of the university [13]. In connection with the tasks set, it is necessary to intensify educational work with foreign students in educational institutions in the following areas:

- improvement of the foreign students' adaptation procedure and the formation of a tolerant consciousness of the educational activity's subjects;
- familiarization of students with the legislation of the Russian Federation and local acts of the university concerning not only migration policy, but also the legislation of the Russian Federation;
- creation of a comfortable microclimate at the university, contributing to the formation of a culture of peace, a culture of human relationships among students, a legal culture and a positive attitude of students to universal values;
- using the educational opportunities of academic disciplines to prepare foreign students to live in a multipolar, multinational and multi-confessional world;
- conducting creative, educational and scientific student events involving foreign students, representatives of various religious and political views, youth movements, volunteer centers;
- actualization of individual work with students within the framework of this program;
- involvement of foreign students in the social life of the university, in student self-government bodies, clubs, detachments, clubs, creative teams, etc. [7];
- intensification of educational work among students on the problems of extremism, terrorism and xenophobia;
- creation of an effective education system in the field of cultural and confessional diversity, the historical unity of the inhabitants of our country, the history of religious intolerance, genocide and other crimes generated by extremism and terrorism.

Thus, it can be stated that the Russian education system has begun its way to enter the international educational market. Relevant approaches to the study of the mechanisms of socio-cultural adaptation of foreign students in Russian universities are sociological methods, monitoring of student adaptation, in which a special place is occupied by activities to counter extremism.

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