

## **Adaptation Challenges of Domestic and International Students in a Russian English-Medium Instruction University**

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### **ABSTRACT**

With the increasing focus on the internationalization of higher education, universities are developing student mobility. This paper examines the challenges experienced by domestic and international students who adapt to a Russian English-medium instruction university. A mixed-method approach with interviews and surveys was utilized to specify, evaluate, and discuss the students' internationalization experiences in these educational settings. The results indicated that both groups of students mentioned different aspects of language barriers, friendship networks, and university social life as critical areas for adjustment. Domestic students avoid taking part in university social life, instead focusing on their academic performance, this fact probably rooted in the Russian approach to secondary education. The specific finding of the Russian educational landscape is a lack of differences between domestic and international students concerning academic integration. All of this suggests institutions to adopt more student-oriented adaptation mechanisms, informed by the concept of inclusion in education; these implications are discussed.

**Keywords:** international education, international students, Russia, student adjustment, student diversity

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## INTRODUCTION

The internationalization of higher education (HE) has become an ongoing trend for many universities worldwide. This tendency brought together students with different socio-cultural, linguistic, and ethnic backgrounds (Ivanova et al., 2018; Yuan et al., 2019). As a result, research established that sojourners arriving to study at foreign universities experienced numerous challenges that play a critical role in their academic and socio-cultural adaptation to host institutions. Globally and in Russia, these hindrances include, but are not limited to, language barriers (Akanwa, 2015; Arefyev & Sheregi, 2014; Beregovaya & Kudashov, 2019; Li et al., 2018), institutional support (Ivanova et al., 2018; Smith & Khawaja, 2011), social isolation (Bittencourt et al., 2021; Markina, 2018), and difficulty in developing friendships with local students (Golubkina et al., 2018; Guo & Guo, 2017). Moreover, domestic students have their own issues with internationalization. Russians expected that their international classmates would have a general knowledge of the host country's history and cultural aspects (Novgorodtseva & Belyaeva, 2020). Yuan and colleagues (2019) established that studying under an internationalized curriculum led Chinese students to confusions concerning individual, academic, and cultural identities. Anglophone students expressed resentment at the education quality because of the lower entry requirements for their international peers and their negative effects on the grade for teamwork (Marangell et al., 2018). Not surprisingly, the literature has been centered on understanding students' real experiences and mechanisms of adaptation to an internationalized environment (Bittencourt et al., 2021; Rienties et al., 2012; Zhou et al., 2008).

Following the internationalization trend, Russian universities have started introducing English-medium instruction (EMI) programs over the past decade (Block & Khvatova, 2017; Plakhotnik & Volkova, 2020). To provide an excellent learning experience, it is paramount for educators to examine what is necessary for both domestic and international students to adapt to such universities successfully. However, little is known about EMI students' experiences with adapting socially and academically to Russian institutional settings. Prior research mostly considered international students' adaptation to Russian-medium instruction universities (Beregovaya & Kudashov, 2019; Golubkina et al., 2018; Novgorodtseva & Belyaeva, 2020). This study aims to address a gap in cross-cultural adaptation literature by investigating international and domestic students' experiences in a Russian EMI university. These findings can have meaningful implications for international partners of Russian and other post-Soviet countries' universities, professional associations, students, scholars, and teachers preparing to study at or collaborate with HE institutions in these regions.

## **INTERNATIONALIZATION IN RUSSIAN HIGHER EDUCATION: PROGRESS SO FAR**

The general definition of internationalization encompasses “the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions, or delivery of postsecondary education” (Knight, 2004, p. 11). Depending on the needs and expectations, internationalization initiatives vary from country to country (Hill et al., 2019; Uzhegova & Baik, 2020). While universities in Western countries were gradually advancing in their internationalization, post-Soviet HE institutions experienced several challenges in becoming competitive globally, due to a number of structural and economic differences (Dobbins & Kwiek, 2017; Yudkevich, 2014). Before joining the Bologna Process in 2003, Russia was isolated from the main developments in the internationalization of higher education, which led to a lack of English proficiency overall and in the education sphere, in particular (Frumina & West, 2012). In a 2013 OECD report, Russia was marked as a country that had “no or nearly no programs offered in English” (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2013). Most international students coming to Russia before that time were from post-Soviet countries, accounting for 76% of all international students in 2010/2011 (Rosstat, 2020). Such sojourners experienced a relatively small cross-cultural transition due to the absence of language barriers and having general knowledge about the host culture. Besides, they thought more highly the Russian education market, in general (Arefyev & Sheregi, 2014).

Over the last decade, several reforms have been launched to transform Russian higher education and lift national HE institutions in global rankings. In 2012, the Russian government implemented the federal program ‘5–100-Project,’ to advance at least five HE institutions into the top 100 universities worldwide by 2020. Altogether, 21 national universities were gradually selected for this program—15 in 2013, and other 6 HE institutions were added to this group in 2015. The result was an increase in the share of international students in Russia, from 2.2% in 2010/2011, to 7.3% in 2019/2020 (Rosstat, 2020). In this measurement, international or mobile students were defined as individuals “who have moved from their country of origin with the purpose of studying” (OECD, 2013, p. 305). Moreover, according to the Russian Ministry of Science and Higher Education, there are separate indicators for international students from CIS, the Baltic States, and Georgia (all being in the same group), and other countries, as presented in Table 1 from 2010 to 2020.

**Table 1: Number of International Students in Russia 2010–2020**

Indicators	2010/2011	2016/2017	2017/2018	2018/2019	2019/2020
International students, thou. persons	<b>153.8</b>	<b>244.0</b>	<b>260.1</b>	<b>278.0</b>	<b>298.0</b>
By region:					
<i>the CIS, Baltic, and Georgia</i>	116.7	186.8	191.6	198.7	205.9
<i>Europe</i>	1.3	2.5	2.7	3.1	2.8
<i>Asia</i>	28.1	37.5	47.4	55.5	65.4
<i>Central and South America</i>	0.9	1.8	2.0	2.4	2.8
<i>North America (the United States and Canada)</i>	0.1	0.4	0.2	0.3	0.2
<i>Africa</i>	6.7	12.6	15.0	16.7	20.7
Share of international students in total number of students, percent	<b>2.2</b>	<b>5.5</b>	<b>6.1</b>	<b>6.7</b>	<b>7.3</b>

Additionally, in 2017, to involve the remaining Russian public universities into internationalization, another state project called ‘The Development of the Export Potential of the Russian Education System’ (Presidium of the Presidential Council for Strategic Development and Priority Projects [PPCSDPR], 2017) was developed. According to this document, attracting international students, running advertising campaigns, and encouraging domestic student mobility are supported by legislation from the Russian government. All these measures are aimed at stimulating all Russian public universities to include internationalization in their strategic development programs before 2022 and increase the number of international students threefold by 2025. This project is a part of non-energy non-commodity export promotion policies aimed to diversify Russian exports with more technologically advanced goods and services. In 2018, the Russian government included non-energy non-commodity export promotion in the National Development Goals (World Bank [WB], 2020).

To summarize, all these educational reform initiatives lead university leaders to develop various internationalization activities, in part by attracting international students (and faculty) through EMI programs. However, foreign and domestic students are different in their adjustment to the university experience (Marangell et al., 2018; Merola et al., 2019). This fact indicates a necessity to examine and develop appropriate mechanisms for the adaptation of learners to international/intercultural environment, internationalized curricula, and teaching practices (Jones & Killick, 2013; Knight, 2004; Ryan, 2011).

### **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF STUDENT ADAPTATION TO EMI UNIVERSITIES**

Commonly, adaptation refers to the relatively stable changes in an individual or group, in response to external requirements (Berry, 1997). Cross-cultural adaptation has two fundamental dimensions—psychological (e.g., sense of well-being) and socio-cultural (e.g., social skills for a daily intercultural living) (Ward & Kennedy, 1993). The former is predicted by one’s personality, life change events, coping styles, and social support; the latter is connected to behavioral competence, such as knowledge about the host culture, language ability, degree of contact, and intergroup attitudes (Berry, 1997; Ward & Kennedy, 1999). All these factors affecting an individual’s cross-cultural adaptation were combined in an acculturation framework developed by Berry (1997), updated in 2005 (Berry, 1997, 2005). Berry (2005) defined acculturation under this model as “a process of cultural and psychological changes that involve various forms of mutual accommodation, leading to some longer-term psychological and socio-cultural adaptations between both groups” (p. 699). Researchers have applied this model as a conceptual lens to make sense of how international students can function in dominant cultures (Li et al., 2018).

In the context of the current study, Berry’s framework (1997, 2005) provides one perspective on student adaptation to an institution where they engage in intercultural relations or, in our case, to EMI university settings. However, this model has not been used in its entirety. The literature review showed widespread consensus on the importance of language competence and social support via friendship networks and institutional assistance in adapting to host-university life (Glass et al., 2014; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). According to Berry’s framework (1997, 2005), all these challenging issues are associated with acculturative stress. The following sections review studies on student friendship networks, institutional support through integration practices, and language competence in internationalized university environments.

## **Language Competence**

The linguistic ability remains a central index for student adaptation (Ivanova et al., 2018; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Ward & Kennedy, 1993). Language proficiency is acknowledged to accelerate academic and social integration into university systems (Akanwa, 2015; Beregovaya & Kudashov, 2019; Li et al., 2018), as well as socio-economic, behavioral, and emotional outcomes (Piller, 2016). Language difficulties and subjective cultural differences constrain international students' leisure participation more than the study loads (Glass et al., 2014). It is worth keeping in mind that language differences are associated with disruptive effects on communication due to a lack of vocabulary or a difference in accents (Pudelko & Tenzer, 2019). Not surprisingly, language skills among students and the staff were identified as the decisive obstacle to internationalization in emerging countries (Hill et al., 2019). Hence, the literature on mobility and scholar careers has associated language barriers with a low proficiency in organizational language (or, in the current case, English for university staff members) and/or in the country language of the university (Russian for the international students in this study) (Arefyev & Sheregi, 2014; Pudelko & Tenzer, 2019).

Studies conducted in Russian-medium instruction HE institutions have shown that, for international students, language barriers are the most challenging issue (Arefyev & Sheregi, 2014; Beregovaya & Kudashov, 2019), coupled with weather conditions (Golubkina et al., 2018). However, little is known about student experiences in Russian EMI universities, as learning in English is a new approach in this country.

## **Institutional Integration Practices**

According to Berry's framework (1997, 2005), positive cross-cultural adaptation is usually characterized by striving for an integration acculturation strategy, which requires mutual accommodation between international and domestic students. Integration takes many forms (Merola et al., 2019); research specifically suggested that social and academic integration, which together form institutional integration (French & Oakes, 2004), bolster students' persistence to graduate (Glass et al., 2014; Tinto, 1997). According to a student retention model of Tinto (1975), updated in 2012, individuals' integration is based on their adjusting to HE institutions' academic and social systems (Rienties et al., 2012; Tinto, 1975, 1997). Academic integration refers to grade performance, skill development, and knowledge acquisition. Social integration, however, is connected to participation in university life and can be related or unrelated to one's studies (Rienties et al., 2012). Such adjustment can take the form of developing friendships, participating in formal and informal social activities on campus, doing sports, and team-based projects (Merola et al., 2019). This results in developing communicative and linguistic skills, higher awareness of cultural differences, and greater tolerance (Golubkina et al., 2018; Novgorodtseva & Belyaeva, 2020). Besides, participation in social events on campus, such as

volunteer services and cross-cultural events, can help students experience university culture (Akanwa, 2015).

The greater social context is undoubtedly vital for internationalization (Marangell et al., 2018). To this end, it is essential for university staff to develop innovative ways for institutional support, involving all learners in university life. In essence, it leads to the process of inclusion in education. This concept is concerned with identifying and removing barriers for students who may be at risk of marginalization, exclusion, or underachievement (Ainscow, 2005, p. 119). Hence, the design, selection, and use of particular adaptation mechanisms should arise from perceptions about all students' needs.

### **Student Friendship Networks**

Several studies highlighted the critical role of supportive, social, and friendship networks (Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Zhou et al., 2008) for student adaptation. These types of relationships provide much-needed social support (Furnham, 2004; Hendrickson et al., 2011), reflect the degree of contact, and eliminate social isolation (Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2013). In the seminal study of Bochner and colleagues (1977), foreign student social networks were classified under three categories: (a) *a co-national network* with compatriots in the host and home countries, established to maintain the original cultural values and behavior (Golubkina et al., 2018; Zhou et al., 2008) and to accelerate understanding of a new culture through conversations and intellectual exchange with those who experience similar attitudes (Bittencourt et al., 2021; Woolf, 2007); (b) *a network with host nationals*, such as home-based students, faculty, and counsellors, established to facilitate academic and professional success; (c) *a multi-national network* with non-compatriot international students, established to boost engagement in recreational activities or get advice. Although international students initially prefer interactions with co-nationals (Glass et al., 2014; Guo & Guo, 2017; Zhou et al., 2008), previous studies demonstrated that friendships with people from the host country are universally more valuable to adapting students (Akanwa, 2015; Golubkina et al., 2018; Novgorodtseva & Belyaeva, 2020; Ward & Kennedy, 1993).

Accordingly, to gain insight into learner experiences, four specific research areas were developed to explore student adaptation to such settings: internationalization experiences, language use, friendship networks, and institutional support via academic and social integration practices.

### **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

This research delves into how internationalization experiences, language use, student friendship networks, and academic and social integration practices were interpreted and experienced by domestic and international students. In line with these points, two overarching research questions (RQ) are as follows:

RQ1: What internationalization experiences are important for domestic and international students of a Russian EMI university?

RQ2: What challenges do domestic and international students face in terms of friendship networks, language use, and academic and social integration?

Drawing on the concept of inclusion in education (Ainscow, 2005), university adaptation should establish a congruence between perceptions and initial expectations of all learners and university offers (Deil-Amen, 2011; Glass et al., 2014). Therefore, the third research question focuses on comparisons between domestic and international students regarding their social and academic integration.

RQ3: How are academic and social integration different for domestic and international students in a Russian EMI university?

Assuming that local and international students will have different wants and needs, this question goes beyond merely expecting such variations. The particular point is to identify the discrepancies between social and academic integration inside each group of learners.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Data Collection and Context**

The data were collected from students studying at one of the Russian research-intensive universities specializing in management and social science, located in the metropolis of the North-West region in 2019–2020. Since 2013, this university has been actively involved in the internationalization process, being a member of the federal program ‘5–100-Project.’ Since then, three bachelor’s and seven master’s programs, conducted entirely in English, have been opened on this campus to attract international students. The admission requirements include, alongside professional knowledge, evidence of English proficiency—either in the form of passing the Unified State Exam (USE, EGE) in English or an international certificate such as IELTS or TOEFL. A key target indicator of the university development program is increasing the percentage of international undergraduates and postgraduates in full-time student enrolment to 20% by 2030. Overall, 315 international undergraduate and postgraduate students were studying on this campus during the research, which accounted for 5.3% of the total student enrolment there. The five countries from which the most significant number of international students came were, in descending order, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, China, Belarus, and Moldova.

Given this study’s exploratory nature, a mixed-method research design involving qualitative and quantitative methods was applied (Zachariadis et al., 2013). This approach enabled us to show more valid results by finding agreement across different research strategies (Turner et al., 2017). First, interviews with students were conducted to capture their respective experiences in an



internationalized context. Next, an online survey was performed to identify the participants' opinions about their academic and social integration. In this study, all non-Russian citizens who moved to the country with the purpose of studying were considered to be international students.

### **Qualitative Method**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to grasp students' attitudes during their university adaptation. This method allowed us to gain deeper insights into the entirety of students' integration experience and hidden aspects of university life (Qu & Dumay, 2011). The interview questions centered on students' previous academic backgrounds, internationalization experiences, and drivers of and obstacles to adaptation. The questions were mostly open-ended, to learn participants' perceptions and interpretations, and their order and specifying details varied for each interview, depending on the interviewees' responses. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, their duration varied from 30 to 60 mins.

The interview transcripts were analyzed via the thematic content analysis method (Burnard, 1991). First, reflective notes summarizing the main ideas and topics raised by the respondent were made after each interview. Second, the interviews were transcribed, and all themes relevant to students' adaptation and internationalization experiences were open-coded and listed. This list was reread to exclude irrelevant themes and merge similar topics in order to develop a unified list of codes. Lastly, the transcripts were coded again according to this unified list, and the pieces of interviews relevant to each particular theme were grouped and given an appropriate title.

Overall, 21 interviews with both domestic and international students from undergraduate (81%) and postgraduate (19%) levels were conducted. The interviewees were recruited through international students' societies, other relevant communities at the university, and the snowball method. The interviewees came from Russia (11), ex-USSR countries (4), Africa (3), Middle East (2), and Asia (1). This classification of countries by region is used intentionally to highlight the number of Russian-speaking students from ex-USSR countries. Out of all the interviewees, 11 were female and 10 were male. The interviewees' average age was 22.4 ( $SD = 2.55$ ) and 19.7 ( $SD = 0.91$ ) for international and Russian learners, respectively. The length of stay in Russia ranged from 1 to 4 years ( $M = 2.70$ ,  $SD = 0.82$ ) for student sojourners.

### **Quantitative Method**

An anonymous questionnaire was disseminated among 280 students studying in programs conducted in English. The students were contacted online with the help of the heads of two international student associations at the university. All participants completed the survey voluntarily and were informed about the goal of the study. Overall, 102 surveys were returned, an acceptable response rate for organizational studies (36%) (Baruch & Holtom, 2008). Of the total, international

and domestic students constituted 51% and 49%, respectively. The sojourners came from 24 countries of the following regions: ex-Soviet Union (42%), Europe (23%), Asia (11%), Middle East (10%), Africa (10%), and Latin America and the Caribbean (4%). Regarding gender, 55% were females, and 45% were males. The average age of international and domestic students was 22.7 ( $SD = 4.00$ ) and 20.0 ( $SD = 1.16$ ), respectively.

The questionnaire included two sections: demographic and university-related characteristics (age, gender, country of origin, study year, and mode) and assessment of academic and social integration, measured on a seven-point disagree–agree scale. Two single-item measurements for academic and social integration were developed on the basis of the literature review and then discussed by three subject matter experts. Each expert evaluated to what extent this single item captures critical aspects of the construct measured and its utility for practitioners (Fisher et al., 2016). According to the feedback, the items for academic and social integration were ‘In your opinion, how well are you integrated into the university’s academic life (classes, exams, studies, in general)?’ and ‘In your opinion, how well are you integrated into the university’s social life (students’ clubs, career days, public lectures, parties, etc.)?’

Statistical analysis was performed via SPSS 20.0 for Windows. First, descriptive statistics were calculated for age, academic, and social integration. Then, independent-samples *t*-test was used to analyze the discrepancy between domestic and international students regarding integration forms. Finally, the paired-sample *t*-test was run to compare social and academic integration for each group of learners.

### **Limitations**

This research has several limitations. First, it explored students studying at only one English-medium instruction institution located in a Russian metropolis. The findings might differ if the sample included individuals from other Russian universities. However, the region of origin makeup of international students mirrors that which is common for other Russian HE institutions (Rosstat, 2020). Second, non-Russian-speaking students used English to answer the interview questions, while other participants communicated through their mother tongue. Thus, the former could not express their opinion in greater detail; however, all interviewees had opportunities to revise interview transcripts. Third, previous studies established other challenges influencing university adaptation, such as ethnicity, socio-economic status, and gender (Deil-Amen, 2011; Guo & Guo, 2017; Jones & Killick, 2013; Markina, 2018; Rienties et al., 2012), all of which went beyond the scope of this inquiry. A final caveat is that doing the survey was voluntary, and the results may have been impacted by what types of students chose to respond.

## FINDINGS

The qualitative analysis examined internationalization challenges and opportunities that students reported during university adaptation. Themes and ideas were often similar between domestic and international participants. Many of the interviewees shared identical views and opinions, suggesting homogeneity in this university's student population.

At the beginning of the interview, participants were asked about their internationalized university life experiences to answer the first research question. Most participants (18 out of 21) expressed positive attitudes toward internationalization, which brought a new educational form—EMI programs. Furthermore, as in other countries (Guo & Guo, 2017), the enrolment of international students increased.

I like it [internationalization]; I think that it is an opportunity to see a different perspective, and it develops you as a person. (Russian student, Political science)

Most students (eight international, six domestic students) noted socio-cultural aspects of internationalization, namely having an opportunity to meet new people, develop intercultural understanding, and get used to a multicultural environment, as illustrated by the following comment:

I think it's good because a person coming to a different country will talk about their culture, learn something about other cultures. He or she will understand people from different countries — it will help bridging the gap a lot. (International student, Tajikistan, Management)

In the interview, nobody mentioned the competitive advantages of the internationalization experience for future employment. This point keeps the institution relevant to the needs of the society by providing a global workforce (Agnew, 2012; Marangell et al., 2018).

No Russian students perceived classmates from post-Soviet countries as 'international' peers, mostly due to the latter's host language fluency. Such sojourners, in turn, did not have any difficulty in host-university adaptation and mentioned that it was very easy for them to adapt compared with the non-Russian-speaking students.

The key interview themes related to adaptation were (1) lack of English-language information and the low level of English proficiency of the university staff, (2) involvement in social activities, and (3) direct support of student friendship networks. In the following sections and Table 2, these themes are shown, ordered by the frequency of responses and the potential impact that each experience has on adaptation.

**Table 2: Adaptation Challenges and Drivers**

Theme	International students	Russian students	Both groups
Language barrier	Lack of information in English in online university sources. Lack of Russian language proficiency.	–	Lack of English vocabulary and differences in accents among faculty, students, and staff.
University social life	Lack of social events in English.	Lack of motivation to participate in university social life.	–
Student friendship networks	Contacts with students from ex-USSR countries provide extra support.	–	Main adaptation driver providing support for academic and social integration.

### **Language Barrier**

The participants (18 out of 21) reported that the language barrier was the main problem for university adaptation and their studies. For example, all international students spoke about the current lack of English-language information in different university sources. Here is how one interviewee explained it:

Sometimes, on the same information platform, they do not provide the same information in English that they provide in Russian; it makes it challenging, because you need to have a Russian in your group to translate the information that was not provided in English. (International student, Ghana, Management Master's)

English-speaking participants stated that administrative staff often failed to understand them, and students would then communicate with their peers, as illustrated by this comment:

Sometimes, dealing with a certain department at the university, where no staff members speak English nor understand, it was quite difficult. (International student, Nigeria, Political Science)

Russian students (9 out of 11) mostly expressed resentment at the English proficiency of the faculty, as stated below:

I would say that [the level of English proficiency] varies greatly. There are professors with great English and those whose English is quite primitive. There is a contrast — professors with excellent English and those with mediocre English. (Russian student, Political science)

These comments suggest that developing administrative services for international audiences and monitoring English proficiency among staff members should be included in campus-wide goals. Such results are not unexpected; studies on internationalization in non-Anglophone emerging economies highlighted the lack of English language skills and of professional development of staff as a weakness in these countries (Hill et al., 2019).

### **Student Friendship Networks**

The topic of friendship networks was raised many times (16 out of 21), in response to different interview questions. At this university, students seek assistance from their peers first and only then consult with professors or administrative staff. The following comment illustrates this approach:

All of my friends are activists, curators, or something like that, so if I don't like something [related to university], I go and tell them, and we think of a solution together. (Russian student, Sociology)

The university provides several peer-mentoring programs and encourages students to participate in these activities. The examples below illustrate such support:

I think that the most useful and great guys overall were the curators. [...] They are always online, always ready to help. (Russian student, Philology)

Among the things that helped me the most are the curators. I would often ask them different questions [...] I could find the information the hard way, but if there are curators — they are there for us to ask questions — I always used this opportunity, and they always replied to me. (International student, Kazakhstan, Sociology)

However, information about these programs is scattered among different sources. This fact makes it hard for students to learn about these opportunities, clearly understand their purpose, or find out where they can get the necessary help. Such issues are not new, as universities in developed countries faced similar problems (Akanwa, 2015). In this respect, Russian-speaking students from post-Soviet countries have a unique role in supporting international students from other countries. They assist the latter when there is a lack of information in English, as described below:

When I have any problem in general, I get in touch with my friends from Russia or the CIS countries, like Ukraine. When it comes to studies, I always write to the study office, but before that... I'd ask my colleagues, especially those who are international students [speaking Russian], because sometimes we get an email in Russian and there is nothing in English. (International student, Pakistan, Management)

Therefore, a subcategory can be added to Bochner et al.'s (1977) model of noninstitutional social networks, to distinguish between non-resident Russian-speaking students and other international sojourners. This category plays a significant role in shaping international students' recreational and educational experiences in Russian education settings. In reference to Berry's (1997, 2005) framework, home-based and international students strived for integration acculturation strategies, negotiating actively with others to seek information.

### **University Social Life**

Most participants (17 out of 21) reported that they were generally satisfied with their academic integration despite occasional minor issues. However, non-Russian speaking students' social integration remains a challenge for most Russian institutions (Markina, 2018). One reason for this fact is that Russian learners did not actively participate in social events because of their heavy study load or interests. Only 3 out of 11 domestic interviewees spoke about being actively involved in the university's social life. Statements made by two participants capture this finding:

I would not say that I participate a lot in [social events]. I am just not interested. (Russian student, Sociology)

I did not really have any time for [social events] — especially during the 1st and 2nd year; we had many classes on the same day, and I did not want to go to the university at the weekends. (Russian student, Logistics)

The participants went on to say that most social events were in Russian, which fact became an 'informal' communication barrier for international students, as reported below:

Some events were organized well, but I had difficulty with the first one. Some presentations were in Russian, so I was lost. Some were in English. Individual students doing specific activities at particular stations spoke English, so it was easy to communicate with them. But at the main event, the main speakers spoke in Russian. (International student, Ghana, Management Master's)

While the language barrier was the main obstacle for participation in social life for the international students, many locals simply did not see sufficient value in the university extracurricular activities. The view of participants emphasized the importance of the linkage between participation in social activities and their motivation. However, social connections acquired at these events "serve as a

vehicle through which academic involvement is engaged” (Tinto, 1997, p. 615). Therefore, any mechanisms enhancing engagement, such as listening to students’ voices, sharing learning experiences, or delegating managerial issues in organizing these activities, coupled with external impetus, may enhance students’ social and academic integration.

### Comparative Analysis of Social and Academic Integration

A statistical analysis was performed to establish the difference between domestic and international students in terms of social and academic integration. Table 3 reports means and standard deviations for age, as well as for social and academic integration for each group of participants. To start with, an examination of student differences, via the independent-samples *t*-test, showed a non-significant result between domestic and international students for both academic ( $t(100) = 0.994, p = 0.323$ ) and social ( $t(100) = -1.926, p = 0.057$ ) forms of integration. These results suggest that all learners are almost equally adapted to university life academically and socially.

An examination of the dissimilarity in social and academic integration, via a paired-sample *t*-test, indicated that these two variables differ significantly for domestic ( $t(49) = 7.344, p < 0.001$ ) and international ( $t(51) = 4.041, p < 0.001$ ) students. However, the latter demonstrated a lower discrepancy between these integration forms with paired mean differences, equaling 1.17, compared with 2.14 for locals. Since all participants scored significantly higher academic integration, it leads us to conclude that international and domestic students seem to be more adapted to studies than university social life within this educational context.

**Table 3: Means and Standard Deviations for Age and Institutional Integration**

Variables	Domestic students <i>N</i> = 50		International students <i>N</i> = 52		Total <i>N</i> = 102	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Age	20.04	1.16	22.67	4.00	21.38	3.24
Academic integration	5.70	1.31	5.44	1.30	5.57	1.31
Social integration	3.56	1.93	4.27	1.78	3.92	1.88

Note: *SD*—standard deviation.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The findings contribute to the existing cross-cultural adaptation literature on the student experience in an internationalized university environment, establishing the stages for further research in this area and suggesting certain implications for university management. *First*, home-based and international students are almost similarly adapted to academic life in this educational landscape, which contradicts some studies conducted in Western countries. For instance, in the Netherlands, international students with a (mixed) Western ethnic background performed better on academic and social integration than domestic peers (Rienties et al., 2012). Given the qualitative and quantitative results, this Russian EMI university rather successfully integrates all learners into academic life. This might be derived from the local education system, focusing more on academic success than developing social competencies (Froumin et al., 2018). This feature is likely to be so prevalent that once students are placed in this educational environment, it provides relatively high academic integration for everyone regardless of their country of origin. Thus, this result supports the notion that academic and social integration is multi-faceted, depending greatly on contextual factors.

*Second*, this study suggests that Russian students are less actively involved in university social life than their international peers. This discrepancy is likely to be rooted in the local high school system, focusing mostly on academic success (Kuzminov et al., 2011). For instance, research established that high school students with high academic achievement focus less on communicative interaction and emotional components in their motivation than their less academically successful classmates (Nikolaeva, 2018). In view of this, socio-academic interactions advocated by Deil-Amen (2011) could be used to enhance student involvement in social life. Personalized procedural help from administrative staff, coupled with mentoring by trusted teachers, can change students' minds regarding social activities. These techniques reflect the ideas of inclusion in education, which focus on supporting and welcoming diversity amongst all learners and responding to their needs (Ainscow, 2005), alternatively to traditional student integration practices that concentrate on university adjustments (Bittencourt et al., 2021).

*Third*, despite positive expressions toward internationalization, students did not mention it as a competitive advantage in the global labor market. It could also be connected to social integration resulting in a more profound knowledge about intercultural communication and global career prospects. Hence, universities should consider external incentives for student involvement in social life. To that end, Marangell and others (2018) suggested that activities geared toward boosting social integration should be included in the internationalized curriculum "for credit and in a facilitated, purposeful manner, rather than on an elective, make-your-own-experience basis" (p. 1450). This can be done through, for instance, various joint programs with host students, such as volunteering work, team-based projects, experiential learning, or other formal courses in which students can develop their competencies of intercultural communication. However, a lack of experience of participating in joint activities should be a particular concern of



faculty (Novgorodtseva & Belyaeva, 2020). Younger Russian students can be encouraged to participate in social activities for the purpose of, for example, enhancing their respective resumes or portfolios. All of the above means that educators should develop an introductory course for students in their early twenties, to stimulate participation in social life of the university, turning back to more student-oriented practices from inclusion in education.

Finally, the findings provide a more detailed portrayal of students' friendship networks. In Russian educational settings, several region-specific factors affect cross-cultural adaptation, one of them being the lack of English proficiency among staff members. As a result, multi-national networks, consisting of Russian-speaking students, mostly from post-Soviet countries, exist in the informal university culture. International participants indicated such social associations to be supportive and helpful for recreational and academic involvement in university life. When this is the case, administrators and student leaders should identify and support individuals who can link different social and linguistic groups, naturally making these persons university ambassadors. Hence, institutions can use such networks, through which to provide additional support to international students and to listen to student voices about university life (Hendrickson et al., 2011). Identifying similar networks in different settings can be a direction for future studies.

Overall, consistent with the recent study of international students in the United States (Bittencourt et al., 2021), these findings emphasized that social integration practices cannot fully satisfy domestic and international students' needs in terms of adaptation to an EMI university in a non-Anglophone emerging country. Both groups of learners described different challenges. Therefore, university leaders should reconsider the current adaptation practices, instead focusing on student diversity and mechanisms from the concept of inclusion in education (Ainscow, 2005), leading to an atmosphere of mutual engagement among all learners (Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2013).

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