

International University Freshmen's Perceptions on Culturally Diverse Community and Internal Stakeholders' Tactics

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ABSTRACT

The paper explores first-year students' feelings about international university campus. Increasing globalisation of education raises a number of issues related not only to internationally accepted standards of qualifications and degrees, curriculum development, faculty competences, but also to domestic and international students' tolerance, community building, etc. The research focuses on the first-year domestic and international students' attitudes to their own and other cultures, students' readiness to share their personal psychological environment with epy representatives of other cultures. The study started with literature review and further used surveys for experimental analysis of students' perceptions on culturally diverse community. Most surveys engage current undergraduate and final year students, with no particular attention to those who have just enrolled. The present paper argues that the novice students' surveys could contribute to mapping potentially sensitive zones regarding novice students' engagement into the university multifaceted landscape. Respondents were asked about the reasons to choose the international university for studies, attitude to other cultures, readiness to accommodation with foreigners. The above survey helped to draft preliminary recommendations regarding ways and instruments for the university internal stakeholders to efficiently interact with domestic and international students to foster their social maturity within international university landscape and its multicultural environment.

KEYWORDS

University internationalization, domestic and international students, students' cultural diversity, international campus, students' survey

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Introduction

Globalization and internationalization make a profound impact on the higher education development and set new tasks for universities that tend to become international in terms of faculty and student body, courses and curriculum content, governance system, campus environment. Against the above background students' attitudes to the university international nature become of

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critical importance as they are not only participants but also creators of and contributors to the university environment.

Students' survey have become a critical instrument of assessing the current state of affairs in the university status and measuring its progress, adapting its action plan and policies to leverage international standards and national societal needs. The survey allows educational institutions to get feedback regarding students' satisfaction with instruction quality, educational facilities, teachers' performance, overall university campus life and maintenance. Through the surveys the educational institution management could identify the issues that raise students' concerns, desires and needs.

The National student survey platform (2016) has been put in operation in various countries (see, for example the national surveys in the UK, USA). Surveys produce a strong effect on the overall university profile within the international landscape. The World University Rankings consider the respective results on the ongoing basis. Regarding the surveys a number of preliminary notes require consideration.

First, surveys are conducted for various purposes. Thus, National students survey in the UK aims at final-year undergraduates and focuses on the courses quality (National student survey: on-line). Although it should be taken into account that students themselves pay attention not only the quality of instruction. For instance, Times Higher Education survey of UK universities current students has revealed 9 provisions that students view as the most important ones while considering the university quality. Among the respective variables the first three cover staff and lectures quality, helpfulness of the faculty, course structure, while others concern community atmosphere, social life, campus environment, extracurricular activities, facilities quality (THE Student Experience Survey 2016 results, 2016).

It seems to be an international trend as, for instance the USA national survey of student engagement also considers students perceptions of the college environment among the key five topical modules (The NSSS survey, 2016). Thus, the overall university campus atmosphere in terms of students' physiological comfort is not less important than academic quality issues.

Next, it seems important to bear in mind that traditionally universities conduct surveys of current students and graduates, as well. Nevertheless, in today's multicultural environment of an international university it seems to be of current importance for the university management, academic faculty, services in charge of students' social support and extracurricular activities to get aware of first year students' views on the university ethnical and cultural diversity for mainstreaming further policies to strengthen the institution international environment.

Another point to be mentioned refers to possible variations and differences in views of domestic and international students.

The above preliminary implications laid grounds for relevant literature review.

Literature Review

Researchers agree that university-based surveys of international and domestic students are effective tools to defining gaps between the two student

streams and integrate them into a single community through international campus environment (Scheuer & McLaren, 2012; Young, 2014; Cheng, 2013).

Campus potential and relevant tasks related to the due campus development as response to the challenges of internationalization has been mentioned in a number of publications (Scott, 1994; Russell, Rosenthal & Thomson, 2010; Kravets, 2013).

Both educators and researchers stress the importance of bridging the gap between internationalisation and multicultural education and specify this task within the overall campus environment development (Olson, Evans & Shoenberg, 2007). Campus is viewed as “the world at your door” (Celleja, 2000).

Scholars, policy makers, university management and faculty lay special emphasis on domestic and international students’ interaction. While some scholars focus on comprehensive studies of students’ attitude to culturally diverse or non-diverse communities (Summers & Volet, 2008), others regard international students as vulnerable population, referring to students’ respective experiences at the University of Toledo (Spain) and the Midwestern US university (Sherry, Thomas & Chui, 2010). Representatives of various schools of thought agree that international students influence domestic ones (Altbach, 1991), while overseas students face difficulties in social situations, including campus life (Barker et al., 1991), the latter takes place in various parts of the globe, going from New Zealand (Beaver & Tuck, 1998) to the USA (Barratt & Huba, 1994).

Researchers also keep track of students’ internationalization issues within particular national context in Canada (Grayson, 2008), South Korea (Jon, 2009), the USA (Le, 2010), Australia (Collet, 2010), Asian-Pacific region (Kell & Vogl, 2012), New Zealand (Left without a choice: How international students are exploited in New Zealand, 2016) and other countries and regions, as well.

Regarding the Russian Federation the above issues seem to be critical, as well, given the increasing ethnical and cultural diversity of major Russian universities due to global migration. Nonetheless, it should be acknowledged that international universities are urged to education for global connections and local commitments (American Council on Education, 2013).

The purpose of the present study is to identify the first year students’ perceptions of the Russian metropolitan university international landscape. The understanding of domestic and international students’ attitudes to other national cultures, to the country of their university studies, to the international campus will help the internal stakeholders (university management, faculty staff, service for students’ social support and extracurricular activities) map potentially sensitive issues regarding novice students’ self-esteem, further academic progress, social engagement within university multifaceted landscape, graduates’ attitude to the country of their university studies.

Research Methodology

The research was conducted at the Peoples’ Friendship University of Russia (RUDN University, Moscow, Russian Federation) that currently enrolls students over 150 countries.

The research methodology stood on on-line survey through university intranet system that provides confidentially with regard to individual’s personal

data. Students were asked just to mention the subject area of their studies and their representing local national (Russian) culture or their belonging to the international students' pool. The on-line survey engaged first year full-time students (2909 persons that comprised 65% of the total first year student body). The survey covered a set of questions and stimuli statements in a number of areas related to students' attitudes and expectations regarding the international nature of the university campus.

First, the research aimed to identify if the university international nature matters for prospective students. The relevant information was gathered through the analyzing respondents' reasons to choose the RUDN university which has been known for its international experience regarding both education and research.

Further set of questions focused on novice students' tolerance to other cultures, their readiness to live and study in an international environment

The research tried to map students' attitude to their own domestic culture and other national cultures. The survey focused on the respondents' attitude to the international accommodation. Further study aimed at understanding students' attitude to make friendship with foreign students and to keep friendship with foreign nationals after graduation. The final questionnaire identified the percentage of students who would like to stay in Russia after their graduation. Research methodology also included comparison (Fedotova & Chigisheva, 2015) and interpretation of the obtained data.

Results and Discussion

Students' reasons to choose the RUDN university are identified in figure 1. The weightings reveal that the university reputation as that of an international higher education institution goes among four key priority reasons for students' decision in favor of the university as the place of their studies. Therefore both local and international students are conscious about values of internationalized education environment and the possibility to study in the international community does matter for youngsters. The figure shows that there are no sharp gaps between the domestic (35,5%) and international (31,5) students in terms of the internationalization importance. The data collected makes it of current importance for the university stakeholders to foster the university policy of domestic and international students interaction as based on the idea of students' sustainable engagement in building international community, each student's capacity to contribute to the positive international environment. University officers engaged in governance activities and faculty staff could use the novice students' attitude to the internationalization level by engaging novice students in university promotion activities, such as university open days, university visibility in digital media, university presentation at educational fairs and exhibitions, etc.

The domestic and international students' attitude to their own and other cultures is presented in figure 2.

The data proves that there are no drastic differences regarding domestic and international students' views of their own and foreign cultures. Moreover the high percentage (over 70%) of replies that reveal domestic and international students' same attitude to domestic and foreign cultures proves university students' high level of tolerance towards other cultures. Such a situation should

be strongly supported through all levels of the university governance, starting with action plan of the vice rector for student affairs and going down to the faculty level. As for academic studies the positive attitude to various cultures could be fostered through the international principle of the student group formation, comparative international perspective of the curriculum and course subjects delivery. A significant potential for the adequate activities can be found in extracurricular activities with an intercultural component, for instance, days of national cultures of different countries from which students enroll in the international university, performances, sport and other events engaging international student body.

Figure 1. Students' reasons to choose the RUDN university

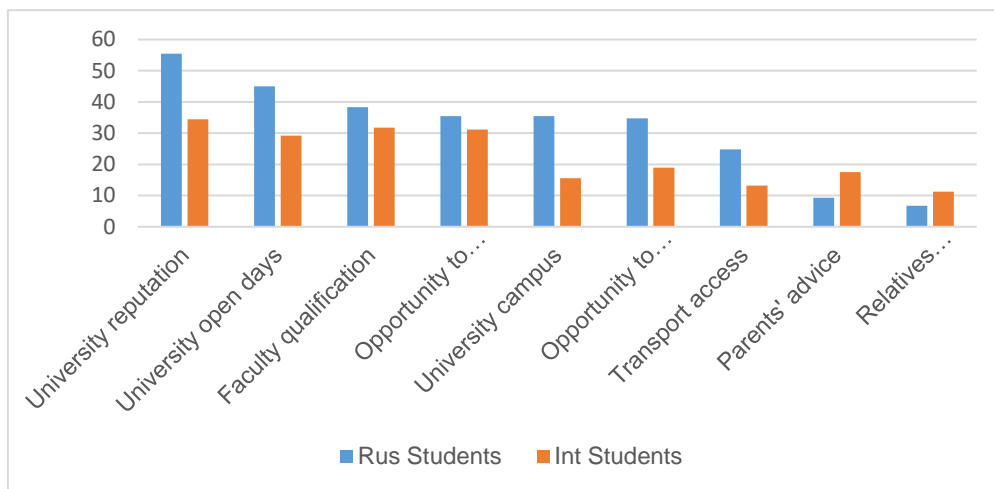
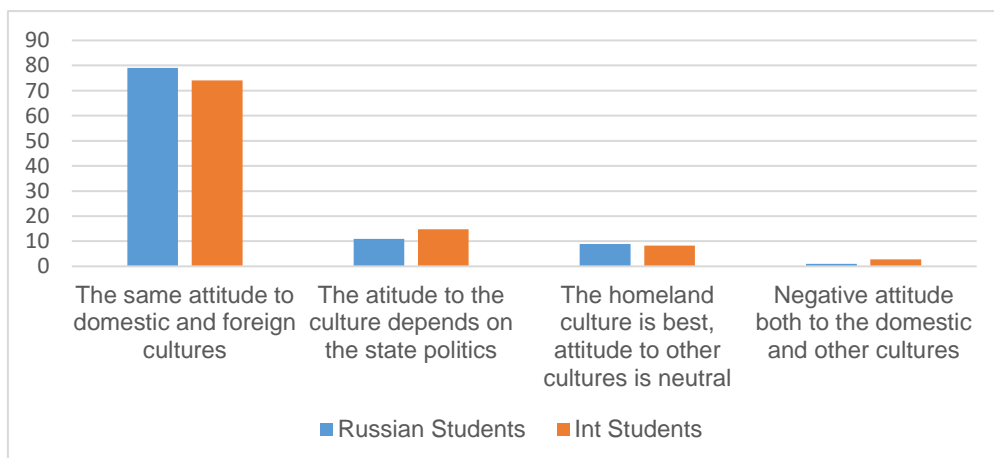


Figure 2. Students' attitude to one's own domestic culture and other national cultures

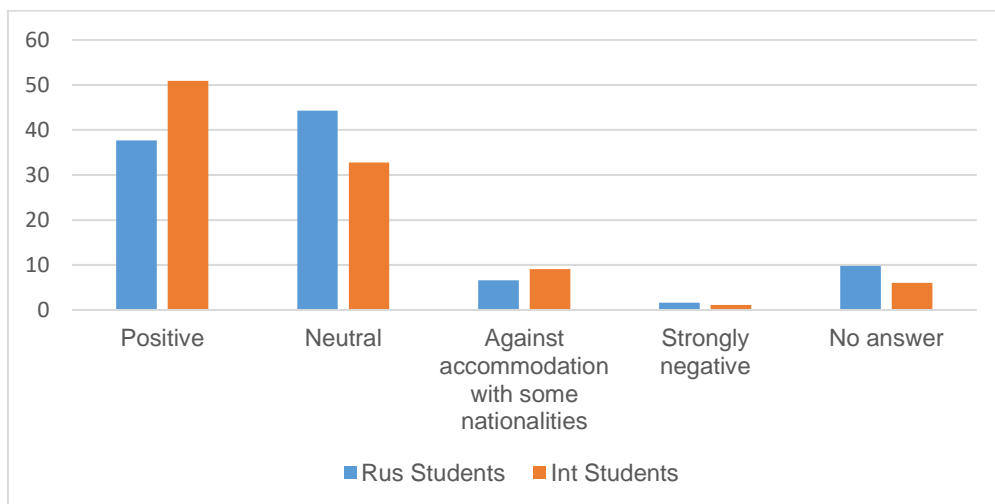


The domestic and international students' attitude to international accommodation in campus is presented in figure 3.

The weightings reveal that international students (50,9%) are more positive towards international accommodation that domestic students (37,7%).

Meanwhile more local students (44,3%) than international students (32,8%) feel neutral about the above situation. With regard to the point under study the following remarks might be made. Dormitory tutors play a very important role in providing a positive supportive atmosphere in the university residences. They should follow and promote the principle of the international accommodation in the university dormitories. At the same time taking into account respondents' remarks on their negative attitude to the accommodation with some nationalities, students' socio-cultural background, psychological specifics should be subject to careful consideration while the decisions on student accommodation are taken as individuals differ. Moreover, students' future area of professional activities might be taken into account, as well. Students from the same faculty or institute can collaborate while learning and they are likely to maintain further communication after graduation for cooperation within academic or industry settings.

Figure 3. Students' attitude to the international accommodation

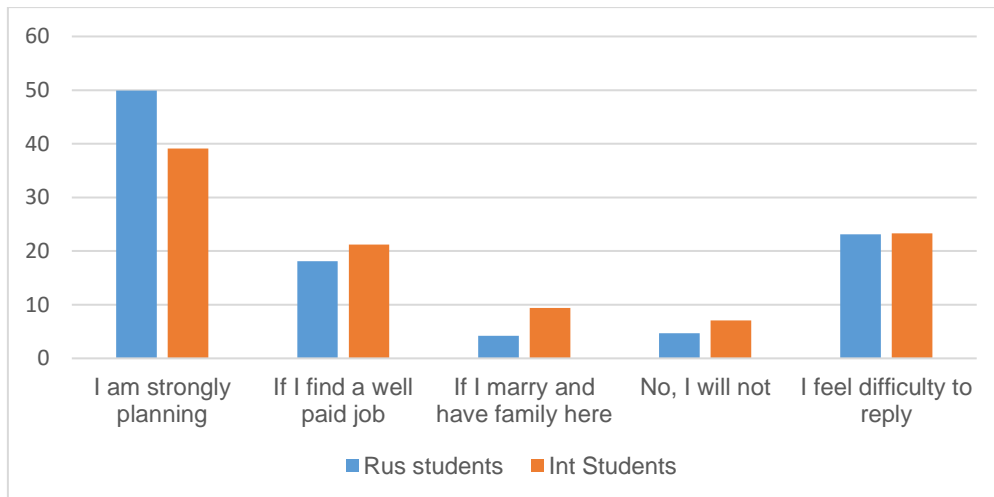


The domestic and international students' attitude to possible stay in Russia after their graduation is introduced in figure 4.

The fact that 50 % of domestic students plan to work in their own country after graduation requires careful policy planning from the part of the University management, faculty, support tutors as the above figure means that other half of the domestic respondents consider the move to another country raising concerns of "brain drain". The fact that about 40% of international students do not refuse the perspective of stay and work in Russian after graduation is obviously positive. Nonetheless, regarding the figures of figure 4, a major load and burden fall on the university center for students' carrier support and development as about 20 % of international and local students relate their future stay in Russia with the job perspective and opportunities. Such a center should work in close and systemic cooperation with each faculty (graduate school), on the one hand, and with employers, on the other, to provide students with relevant information, to make students aware of further jobs specificity, requirements, and opportunities.

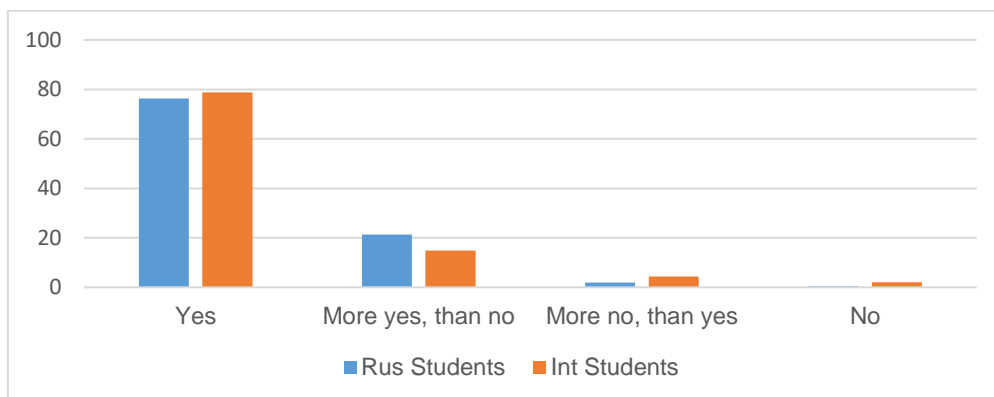
Students' attitude to make friendship with foreign students, and keep it after graduation seems to be a rather important indicator of the international university environment, as well. The figures of figure 4 reveal that both domestic and international students bear strong expectations regarding international friendship, the data confirms first-year students' aptitude to go beyond geographical borders.

Figure 4. Students' readiness to stay in Russia after their graduation



Students' replies prove their tolerance and readiness to move private relations through cross cultural settings. Thus, the university divisions that bear responsibility for student affairs have to boost cross cultural activities. Academic faculty should form sub groups and project groups for subject study on the cross cultural team principle.

Figure 5. Students' attitude to make friendship with foreign students, and keep it after graduation as well



Conclusion

The research findings confirmed the importance of studying novice students' attitude to the international nature of the institution. The relevant survey helps to identify the overall student body profile and reveals sensitive zones in student population's attitude to representatives of other cultures.

The research confirms that students who consciously choose an internationally oriented university bear a strong potential for the university internationalization at home and abroad.

The understanding novice students' attitudes to other national cultures, to the country of their university studies, to the international campus helps tailor the university internationalization strategy to concrete student population, defines the roles of university divisions and staff regarding the creation of a friendly, collaborative international community of like-minded individuals team.

The survey contributes to envisaging challenges regarding novice students' social engagement in the university landscape and confirm that developing student community as internationally friendly and supportive requires the university stakeholders collaboration, including management, faculty staff, divisions that are responsible for students' affairs and extracurricular activities).

The first year students' survey has made it possible to view the this audience from various angles and laid grounds for further recommendations regarding ways and instruments for the university management and faculty to efficiently interact with domestic and international students to foster their academic progress, social maturity, contribute to students' readiness to hurdle various issues and gaps related to multicultural academic community.

Moreover, survey data make it possible to guess that such kind of first students' survey contributes to students' meaningful activities within various international university settings.

Finally, students' replies confirm that the phenomenon of university alumni strongly valued in the international education and ranking depends on the ways the first year students of the university international community are treated and guided in terms of their attitudes and behaviour regarding peers from other cultures and counties.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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