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Russian Universities in the Global Educational Market: Analysis of Choosing Russian Higher Education by Foreign Students From Non-former Soviet Countries/Анализ Выбора Российских Университетов Иностранными Студентами Из Стран Дальнего Зарубежья

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The internationalization of higher education in Russia has become a significant trend in recent years (Hong & Xiao, 2023). This process involves integrating global perspectives, practices, and experiences into the Russian education system, enhancing institutional reputation, and fostering international partnerships (Abbasov, 2024). However, challenges such as language barriers, cultural differences, and financial constraints persist. This study examines the motivations of international students from non-former Soviet countries for choosing Russian universities, the support provided by these institutions, and the challenges students face during their stay.

Russia has implemented various strategies to attract international students, including tuition-free education, dormitory accommodations, and English-taught programs. Initiatives like the 5-100 Project, launched in 2013, aimed to boost the global competitiveness of Russian universities by maximizing their position in the global research and education market (Kliucharev & Neverov, 2018). Participating institutions were required to achieve 15% international enrollment by 2020. Additionally, the "Study in Russia" portal, established in 2017, promotes over 500 Russian universities to prospective international students.

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining online questionnaires for international students and semi-structured interviews for experts from higher education institution in Russia who are responsible for the integration, adaptation, and recruitment/admission of international students. Data were collected from 123 international students from 28 countries who are enrolled in 23 universities in 12 different cities across Russia. They represented various academic levels: Bachelor's (45.5%), Master's (22%), Ph.D. (9.8%), preparatory faculty (12.2%), and specialization programs (10.6%). Most students (66.7%) received scholarships, with 68% stating they would not have chosen Russia without financial aid.

The study is guided by push-pull theory (Heberle, 1938) and self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Push factors, such as the lack of financial aid in home countries, and pull factors, including affordable living costs (M=4.3, SD=.89), scholarships (M=4.3, SD=1.1), and dormitory availability (M=4.1, SD=1), significantly influenced students' decisions. Participants valued Russian universities' reputation (M=3.9, SD=1) and the opportunity to learn Russian (M=4.2, SD=1). However, career counseling support was rated low, despite students valuing work opportunities during their studies.

Academic level influenced pull factors: preparatory students prioritized university reputation, Bachelor's students emphasized affordable living costs, and Master's/Ph.D. students valued scholarships. A significant relationship between push and pull factors was found (p<.001), with economic factors being the primary motivator. For example, 68% of scholarship recipients stated they would not have chosen Russia without financial aid, highlighting the importance of affordability.

Participants also faced challenges during their stay in Russia, including language barriers and difficulties integrating into the local culture. While language support services were highly rated (M=4.2, SD=1), career counseling was less available, creating a gap between students' expectations and institutional support. This discrepancy is critical, as many students view work opportunities in Russia as a key pull factor.

In conclusion, scholarships, affordable living costs, and language support are key factors attracting international students to Russia. However, universities must improve career counseling and address integration challenges to retain students. Policymakers should enhance financial aid and promote Russian education globally to remain competitive in the international market. By addressing these issues, Russian universities can better attract and retain a diverse pool of talented international students, contributing to the ongoing internationalization of higher education in Russia.

References

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