

Ways of International Students' Adaptation: Club of International Friendship

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Abstract

The issue of international students' adaptation is being discussed all over the academic world. According to our observations, one of the best ways is to create an experimental platform for the implementation of effective ideas connected with the adaptation. We have called it the Club of International Friendship (CIF) "UNITY!" For this, 207 international students of our institute took part in the questionnaire. Our Club is aimed at overcoming any difficulties international students may have. Currently, we are analysing the process of co-adaptation, considering it as the critical element of effective inter-cultural integration.

Keywords: Internationalisation; International students; Adaptation; Club of International Friendship; Students' Community; Co-adaptation, Russia.

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Introduction

It remains well established that agencies like *The Study, EU Country Ranking 2017 for International Students* – one of the gateways to the universities of Europe – pays attention to education and its vital factors – teaching quality, general availability of English-taught-programmes into consideration for evaluation of a country's universities in established international university rankings (THE, QS, ARWU and US News). According to their evaluation, Germany and the Netherlands demonstrates the best results in teaching quality. The United Kingdom occupies second place in international rankings because of a number of renowned universities. While Russia occupies the fourth place in this ranking, Sweden occupies the fifth position (The Study... 2017).

Nonetheless, worldwide in 2017, there were five most top international universities, and they are Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, Zurich, École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne, University of Hong Kong, National University of Singapore, Imperial College London (Marquis et al., 2018). The top 5 universities with the highest percentage of international students in 2017 are American University of Sharjah, United Arab Emirates, Central European University, Hungary, London School of Economics and Political Science, Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland, University of Luxembourg (International student Table 2017). Their attractiveness proves the favourable conditions these universities can offer to international students (The Study... 2017).

As a teacher of the second language for international students and according to my observation during the teaching process and extracurricular activities, we consider, the primary importance of the international students' successful adaptation is in their ability to master foreign languages, especially the language of the host country and the international language (Lee and Ciftci, 2014; Leutwyler and Meierhans, 2016). To improve the situation concerning the effective adaptation of

international students, we need to improve their knowledge of English and to create conditions for raising their status for their participating in different projects and scholarships (Hayes, 2017; Marginson, 2012; Sherry et al., 2010; Emelyanova, 2016). Moreover, for excellent sociocultural adaptation, the linguistic confidence in the second language is of great significance. For academic adaptation, the role of integrative motivation is even more significant (Hernandez, 2010; Yu and Downing, 2012; Schartner and Young, 2016).

The common challenges that most international students have to face are social-cultural, academic, linguistic and cognitive (Biserova and Shagivaleeva, 2019, Ecochard and Fotheringham, 2017; Zakirova and Volodina, 2018). To adapt in new "life and study abroad require tremendous effort and talent...it's about forming cosmopolitan and multilingual citizens" (Ecochard and Fotheringham, 2017: 100). Of course, the role of a teacher, an educator is significant in the process of adaptation, since they are aware of the potential difficulties, challenges that international students may have, and they will support inter-cultural friendship as one of the factors of their better integration. One of the reasons is that as a result of this friendship and cooperation international students have access to those things that only local students know (Hendrickson et al., 2011).

It is vital to avoid the formation of separate groups of international students (sub-cultures) because this problem of isolation exists and "if educators can facilitate their cultural learning and awareness they may become less inclined to isolate themselves from other culture" (Rienties and Eimear-Marie, 2014: 165). Considering the university as the principal venue for international adaptation of students, not only in terms of academic adaptation but also with respect to social and cultural, we need to focus on their challenges, difficulties in preventing them from being isolated (Biserova and Shagivaleeva, 2019; Wu et al., 2015).

The practical process of the adaptation includes culture shock, which is necessary for further social interaction and friendship development, even trying to find some cultural similarities (Gareis 2012; Williams and Johnson 2011). All of these components support the formation of their inter-cultural communication competence as well as other professional competencies, which leads to inter-cultural friendship and relational identity (Belford, 2017; Biserova and Shagivaleeva, 2019; Khenner, 2018; Trede et al., 2013).

There are two types of transitional experience: maturation and human development, and intercultural adaptation. The transition is a complex phenomenon which synthesises linear inter-cultural adaptation and a set of shifting associations between language mastery, social interaction, personal development and academic outcomes (Gural and Pavlenko, 2011; Gu et al., 2010).

Generally, three styles of adaptation are considered in the literature. They are positive and connected, unconnected and stressed, and distressed and risk-taking (Russell et al., 2010; Hoang and Tran, 2018; Tran, 2011).

The relevance of the adaptation study is obvious worldwide. Sometimes acculturative stress and difficulties with adjustment to the environment of the host country are inevitable. Acculturative stresses are language barriers, educational challenges, loneliness, discrimination and practical problems associated with changing environments (Smith and Khawaja, 2011). According to other research findings "the most significant acculturative stressors are a linguistic adaptation, social network, political identification and discrimination" (Yu et al., 2016: 300-315).

Nevertheless, in the era of globalisation when we speak about "never finished cultural negotiation", "international education offers

not just problems and barriers but opportunities for novel activity and personal growth" (Marginson, 2014:6-8). Psychologically, it is of great importance to construct a positive attitude to the adaptation issues and to perceive them as challenges rather than difficulties. The concept of "challenge" should have a positive connotation. Undergoing adaptation challenges, international students form their hybrid identity and agency freedom (Marginson, 2014; Volet and Jones, 2012). In the process of self-formation, it is better not to underestimate the role of agency in international students' sociocultural adaptation.

Thus, the aims of this research were as follows:

- to consider the issue of international students' adaptation;
- to reveal the current challenges and strategies of inter-cultural integration;
- to create and to assess the effectivity of educational space for students' interaction called the Club of International Friendship (CIF) "UNITY!".

Methods

Participants

For this research, 207 international students, aged 17 – 32, had taken part in our questionnaire survey. The breakdown is as follows:

- 107 (55, 2%) – male students,
- 100 (44, 8%) – female students.

Their year of study ranges from the 1st year to the 4th year. The international students are from Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Iran, and Tajikistan. One hundred thirty-four students have come from Turkmenistan, 31 from Uzbekistan, 25 from Tajikistan, and 17 from Iran. Kazan Federal University served as a platform for creating a club, as the number of international students continues to increase every year.

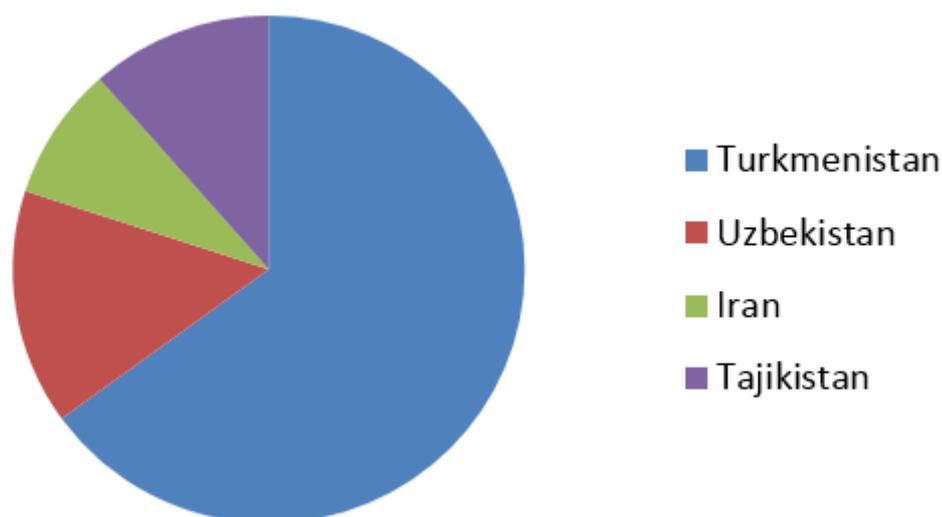


Figure 1: Country of Origin
Source: Based on Original Research Findings

Research Design

During this research, we applied the international students' questionnaire (see Appendix). Since 2016, the Club itself has been an experiential educational platform, it should be noted it is not being an online platform, but a real educational space for students' interaction. As a teacher and a coordinator of the club, we are considered active observers of the working process. Before conducting the research, we accomplished recommendations from the specialists and academics from the Institute of Psychology and Education of Kazan Federal University.

It was announced that there is a questionnaire for international students and the idea was that it is their free choice and they could fill in the form, though it was not obligatory. Those international students who wanted to answer the questions, they clearly saw the real goal of this work. In summer 2017, the process of conducting the survey was started. However, later on, it became necessary to create a Google form to make the questionnaire more available and to calculate all the results automatically with the help of this electronic system.

Club Activities

Within the framework of our International Club of Friendship, the project "Students for Students" is based on the cooperation between

local and international students. The idea of this project differs from the well-known established projects in Europe – the "buddy" programme. "Students for Students" project supports the concept of experiential, interactive learning while implementing new educational technologies in the university. For effective inter-cultural communication in poly-lingual space, co-adaptation is inevitable. Our experimental platforms under the slogan "learn with us!" for studying English as a foreign language (elementary and advanced levels), Russian for international students (for better communication with local peers) are becoming more popular among the students.

We try to find proper ways for their better adaptation and support and to create a friendly atmosphere. Club challenges are to expand the contacts of the students and teachers with international peers and to work in cooperation with partner universities aimed at implementing projects that reveal the national peculiarities of the peoples, their culture, customs and traditions. For example, #followmeto (when we have imaginary "trips" to different countries), or #madeinChina (activities related to the Chinese language and culture) to explore and develop creative and intellectual abilities of the international students (literary evenings, quizzes, performances, competitions), to organise

educational course on international examinations, and summer and winter schools in the framework of “RuStart” programme (Fayzullina, 2017).

Results

In our institute, we focus mostly on teacher education and international students come to us to become teachers, and it is vital to know their individual backgrounds and preconditions. These preconditions are an openness to new experiences, interest in the unfamiliar and tolerance of ambiguity (Munthe, 2017). In the

process of the observations and the analysis of the international students' survey, we conclude that a better adaptation of these students depends on their social and individual backgrounds. The process of international students' adaptation includes three steps: autonomy, assimilation, and integration, going to the level of interaction (Grebennikova, 2011). It is also needed to try to reduce the time for international students' autonomy and assimilation, though these two steps in the process of adaptation cannot be fully avoidable.



Figure 2: The Structure of the Club
Source: Based on Original Research Findings

They want to be teachers and to study two foreign languages: English and Russian that is why they have come to our town to get a higher education. The special atmosphere of a small town helps them concentrate on their study, and psychologically it is more comfortable to start an independent life far from home and parents in such surroundings. Though some of the international students do not like the town,

because it is small, still the majority consider that the town is beautiful, and they like the institute with its rich history. They find it difficult to get accustomed to the incomprehensibility of the language (they mean the Russian language) and to the climate, of course. The common problems that they face are the language barrier (43.3 %), social and living conditions (17.9%), and document issues (13.4%).

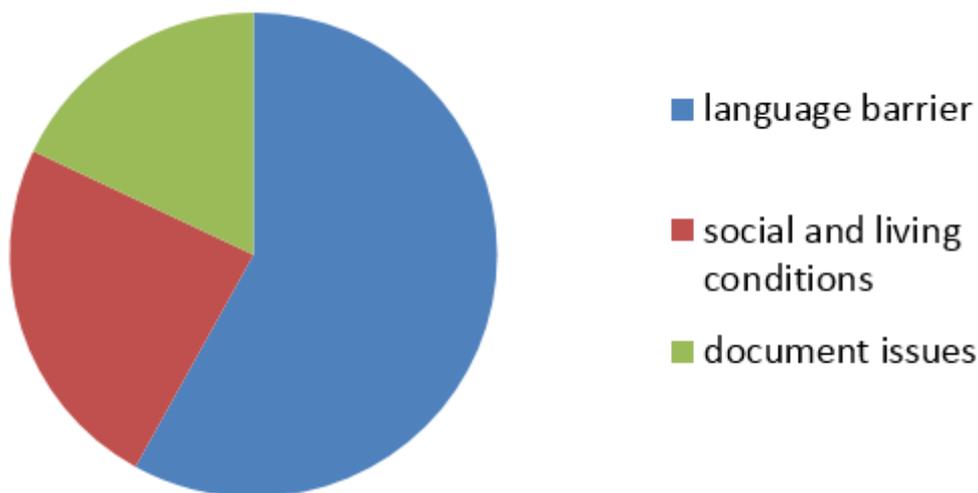


Figure 3: Problems Faced by International Students
 Source: Based on Original Research Findings

Though they feel homesick (17.9 %), the international students have a positive attitude to their life and study and express their happiness (62.7 %) (Figure 4). The majority of the students (84 %) have local friends (Figure 5). They characterise their education environment as a

good one (70.1 %) and excellent (13.4 %) (Figure 6). Students consider Russia as an international country and Russian as an international language. The reason is that mostly they come from former Soviet Republics.

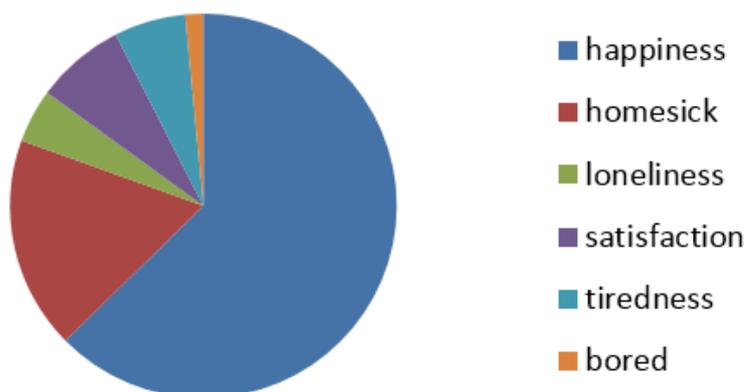


Figure 4: Feeling of the International Students
 Source: Based on Original Research Findings

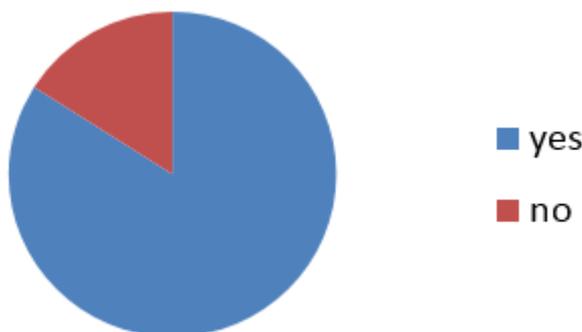


Figure 5: International Students having Local Friends
 Source: Based on Original Research Findings

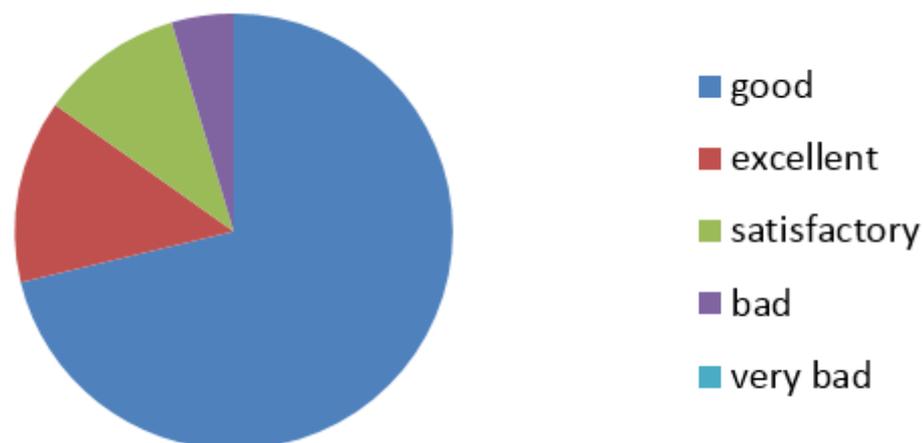


Figure 6: Education Environment According to International Students
Source: Based on Original Research Findings

Discussion

There are different so-called clubs of international friendship all over the world – some of them that requires mentioning are – Singapore Polytechnic International Students' Club (SPISC), International Students' Club in the University of Cyprus, International Friendship Club (IFC) at Western Illinois University the official international club of Charles University in Prague, and many others. The main goal of these Clubs are to create favourable conditions for international students' better adaptation in a host university in a more entertaining way.

The researchers in their robust critique of reciprocity and adaptivity in international education further develop this idea of mutual understanding, the crucial importance of creating poly-lingual education environment (Liyanage et al., 2018). It is vital to bear in mind that the idea of adaptation is a two-sided process (Akanwa, 2015). It is also essential to get the idea of the process of adaptation, not to fix the result of some statistics at a certain period.

There are three factors of successful adaptation: sociocultural, socio-communicative, and general social factors (Modnov and Ukhova, 2013; Pogykaeva et al., 2016). The authors underline the role of the teachers' role in creating a "kind house" for international students, which is considered to be essential for their effective adaptation. This concept of a "kind house" really works, and one can easily prove it during social

and educational events that are organised at club. One of the first results is that in the framework of the community, a pilot educational platform "Students for Students" was being realised and were built on a project-based approach (Kazun and Pastukhova, 2018), which has a twofold purpose, it helps international students improve their knowledge, in addition to the curriculum, get support from their local fellow students. And for the students who organise this work, it is beneficial because they can get the experience that they need for their future career. We support different students' initiatives that help international students integrate into their new education space— such as *Watch with Us!*, *Walk with Us!*, *Learn with Us!*. They support the cooperation between local and international students. Active participants of the club serve as a representative of professional values of a new culture, "agents" of socialisation for international students. Analysing the experience, we have been working with the students, usually international students who are active and more flexible in their new surroundings, help other international students because they know how it is to be an international student, and local students sometimes just fail to understand the difficulties that international students may face day in day out, and it is also an urgent issue.

Adaptation of international students is a

multifold phenomenon, and it has interdisciplinary nature, it may be studied on the level of pedagogy, linguistics, psychology, cultural studies, history, sociology and others (Brisset et al., 2010; Volet and Jones, 2012; Yu and Downing, 2012; Schartner and Young, 2016; Munthe, 2017; Belford, 2017). A complex approach considering the issue of adaptation is mainly used (Montgomery, 2010; Rienties et al., 2012; Marginson, 2014; Schartner and Young, 2016; Tran and Gomes, 2017; Lomer, 2018).

It is also important to consider in detail the internal and external factors of adaptation. Internal factors or in other words psychological (subjective) ones include axiological basis, language basis, and communicative skills, the motivation for communication and study, psychological peculiarities, satisfaction, self-organisation, self-esteem, self-realisation and so on. External or socio-pedagogical (objective) factors are sociocultural values of a new society, the degree of similarities between cultures, the system of values, university education environment, new language environment, interaction between teachers, Russian and international students, Russian friends, organisation of leisure time, favourite activities and hobbies, accommodation, food and document issues, etc. (Grebennikova, 2011; Bekker and Ivanchin, 2015).

At our Club of International Friendship, we see the first step in the process of adaptation in the formation of language skills (primarily, Russian and English), using a communicative approach based on the interaction between students.

The importance of "preserving the diversity of languages and cultures, which is based on the following ideas: "The more languages a person knows, the richer, more tolerant and freer he is getting" is unquestionable (Mikheeva, 2011: 63-64). In this respect, the creation of a poly-lingual educational space for the productive activity of students plays an important role, both within the framework of the university and on the world platform. Four key principles influence the formation of the student's personality in poly-lingual education: the principle of culturality, dialogueness, integration and

mobility, in particular, academic mobility (Mosienko and Khazhgalieva, 2016).

Conclusion

The Club of International Friendship is a way of international students' successful adaptation. It is supposed to be an experimental platform for students' initiatives. The most important issues of international students' adaptation are language and culture barriers. Within the work of our club, we are searching for proper ways of overcoming these barriers. Our initiative "Students for Students" helps international students work with local ones to study, for example, spoken Russian. In the process of this mutual activity, we understand that it is so important for their social adaptation as well. We should take into consideration the international students' individual background. They help us integrate other international students into new surroundings. All of these factors are interconnected and interdependent. Besides the implementation of some social events, a better way of students' integration and interaction is academic educational activities. Thus, the club can not only lead to a better adaptation but also sustain in establishing a new qualitative level of students' education. These social, educational, and academic events and activities built up the concept of the kind house, which is a fundamental idea in the process of international students' adaptation.

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Appendix

The questionnaire has 15 items so far.

1. Your age
2. Your gender
3. Your country of origin
4. Your Year of Study

5. Number of years you have been in Elabuga
6. Your reason to study at Elabuga Institute of Kazan Federal University
7. What have you got used to quickly and easily in the town and in the institute?
8. What things do you find difficult to get accustomed to in the town and in the institute?
9. Your first impressions of the country, the town, and the institute. What did you feel?
10. What problems are you facing now, if any? (multiple choice)
 - culture barrier
 - language barrier
 - social and living conditions
 - document issues
 - your variant
11. Characterise your education environment (multiple choice)
 - Excellent
 - Good
 - Satisfactory
 - Bad
12. Do you have local friends?
13. How do you spend your free time in Elabuga?
14. What do you feel now? (multiple choice)
 - Loneliness
 - Homesick
 - Satisfaction
 - Tiredness
 - Happiness
 - Your variant
15. Do you like living and studying in Russia? Why?