

VI International Forum on Teacher Education

Russian Higher Educational Export Strategies in Digital and Global Perspective

Natalia E. Buletova* (a), Ekaterina V. Stepanova (b), Alexei A. Sokolov (c)

(a), (b), (c) *Volgograd Institute of Management, branch of RANEPa, 400066, Volgograd (Russia), 8 Gagarin street, buletovanata@gmail.com*

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to determine the features of export development of Russian higher education at the level of a particular region, taking into account situations typical of ordinary regional universities and branches regarding the national policy to stimulate educational export and digital technologies use. The authors also substantiate the need for the development and adoption of measures aimed at solving interregional and interuniversity inequality problems taking into account financial and other resource opportunities of a given university.

When writing the paper, we applied methods of system analysis which include comparisons, dynamic analysis, other methods of statistical analysis, a set of expert methods, including in-depth interviews, surveys, brainstorming, and SWOT analysis.

The research results include the collection and processing of in-depth interviews with experts who are employees of international departments of universities of the Volgograd region, a survey of foreign students studying in regional universities and branches, on the basis of which the features of the implementation of the higher education export growth strategy by regional universities were determined and SWOT-analysis was conducted in order to identify risks and opportunities of regional universities and regional economy for educational export and its development.

The authors' findings include justification of digital technologies growing role in increasing the accessibility of Russian higher education to foreign students, justification of high role of higher education export for the regional economy and developed measures for the strategic development of export of higher education on the example of a regional university.

Keywords: export of educational services, student, export potential, economic potential.

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Published by Kazan federal university and peer-reviewed under responsibility of IFTE-2020 (VI International Forum on Teacher Education)

* Corresponding author. E-mail: buletovanata@gmail.com

Introduction

Among all National Goals and Strategic Objectives of the Russian Federation established by the Decree of the President of the Russian Federation of July 05, 2018. No.204 “Executive Order On National Goals and Strategic Objectives of the Russian Federation through to 2024”, a federal project “Export of education” is being implemented within the framework of national project “Education” which will be implemented from December 01, 2019 in the amount of financing 107.5 billion rubles (13.7% of the total budget of the National Project).

In compliance with the project passport, the goal is defined as doubling the number of foreign student in the Russian higher educational institutions. In order to implement the goal, investments are planned in the development of higher school infrastructure, implementation of system of measures aimed at increasing the demand and competitiveness of Russian education, including issues of employing foreign students in the Russian labor market, implementation of training courses and programs by Russian professors in English.

Target indicators attainability of the federal project “Export of Education” is related to the need to double the number of foreign students in Russian higher educational institutions by the end of the federal project implementation varies considerably not only for different Russian universities but also for different regions with strong imbalances in social, economic and cultural development.

High digitalization rate of Russian and global higher education requires a review of economic and export potential of education in terms of increased demand, affordability and educational technologies. Russian higher educational institutions differentiation by status, funding arrangements and quality requires determining the key advantages of individual regions and their universities through the development of regional and local export strategy for certain areas of training and measures to rely on the positive dynamics of foreign students. It is to take into account external and internal factors, restraining export growth, system of image events that form a favorable information field in the professional area and allow to control the demand for education services from international high school graduate.

Purpose and objectives of the study

The purpose of the study is to examine the export potential of the higher education system of the Russian Federation on the example of a number of universities in the Volgograd region in the perspective of active use of digital technologies and globalization advantages in other nations that have traditionally been successful in the international educational services market.

The second expected result is measures development to equalize interregional and interuniversity inequality in the implementation of export potential which taking into consideration the content of the Russian “Education Export” federal project.

Literature review

To date, there is much data on regulatory, methodological, scientific substantiation of the content and methods of achieving strategic goals for higher education export development at the macro and micro level of decision-making. There are sources that allow us to assess the developmental level of the studied subject and results of the increase of scientific knowledge by the present paper.

A number of Russian researchers such as (Zashchitina, 2018; Stepanov, 2019) investigate features and strategic approach to the export of national higher education as a direction of the state foreign economic policy. The question of interests and priorities of the Russian national higher education system was studied in works of (Arefyev & Dmitriev, 2018; Krasnova, Baykov, & Arapova, 2018; Artemova & Pototskaya, 2019).

Special emphasis of this study which the authors identified in the relevance and purpose of the paper is made on determining features of formation and implementation of export strategy in the field of higher education at the regional level. Previously, researchers studied the constituent entities of the Russian Federation in their works, for example (Krupskaya, Kukushkina, & Gladyshev, 2018; Shvakov, 2018; Shtykhno, 2018; Makarova, 2019; Semenova, Balyasnikova, & Dryzhenko, 2019).

Other authors such as (Bobyly, 2018; Buletova & Gurcina, 2019; Krasnova, 2019; Ruchkin, 2019) pay special attention to export potential studies of Russian education in global countries which outline the features of interaction with foreign partners. The works of (Okuneva, Leibovich, & Tovasheva, 2015; Arzhanova & Thieves, 2016; Melikyan, 2018; Yatsenko, 2018; Beznosova & Galiakhmetova, 2019; Buletova & Sokolov, 2019; Prostov, Popova, & Stepanova, 2019) determine the factors and conditions for the adaptation of foreign students to Russian higher education system.

All the above stated theoretical and methodological assumptions testify to the relevance and quite high interest to the topic in international and Russian sources.

In this study, the authors focused on substantiating the methodological foundations of strategic export management of education at the regional level, taking into account data from surveys of foreign students and examples of best practices in the work of higher education institutions at the level of the constituent

entities of the Russian Federation on international students recruitment and solving issues related to their education, extracurricular activities, practices and employment.

Methodology

We applied traditional methods of system analysis which include comparisons, dynamic analysis, other statistical analysis methods and a set of expert methods including in-depth interviews, surveys, brainstorming and SWOT analysis.

Quantitative research methods included:

- Methods of grouping, systematization, dynamic and index analysis.
- Methods of factor analysis including factors division into external and internal.
- Questioning and primary data processing to determine risks and possibility of considering education exports as a factor of the economic potential growth of the regional economy.

The qualitative methods applied by the authors in the study included:

- An in-depth interview conducted of international departments employees in higher educational institutions of the Volgograd region;
- SWOT strategic analysis method which clarified the content of Russian higher education export strategy in the regions of the Russian Federation;
- brainstorming conducted within the framework of the “working group” of international departments’ experts in higher educational institutions of the Volgograd region in order to study international markets for educational services, their prospects and restrictions for Russian educational export (a case study of South Africa).

Theoretical analysis of the researches on the problem of export increase of education in regional higher educational institutions was based on regulatory and methodological conditions assessment for the implementation of the educational process for export, taking into account the concepts and trends in the digitalization of higher education and the application of the proctoring method in international and Russian universities.

Results

Systemic shortcomings of migration legislation that regulates educational services export, incoherence and fragmentation in development and managerial decision making at the regional level are substantial issues of export development in Russian educational institutions. If the first issue relates to the federal level of decision-making, the need for a systematic and economically viable approach to the development of the export of educational services is solved locally with the availability of resources and development strategies.

The current legal regulation of exports defines the goals and strategic objectives of the development of the Russian Federation in the following areas:

- ensuring global competitiveness of Russian education;
- the entry of the Russian Federation among the 10 leading countries of the world for the quality of general education, as well as in expanding the presence of Russian universities in the top 500 global university rankings: Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), Times Higher Education (THE), QS World University Rankings (QS);
- a two-fold increase in the number of international students studying in educational institutions of higher education and scientific organizations, as well as a series of measures to employ the best of them in the Russian Federation

The federal project “Export of Education” foresees the creation of modern university towns that meet international standards and sanitary norms. It also includes regulatory legal framework development for improving the procedures for entry, exit, stay in the Russian Federation, employment and internships of international students and stateless persons during their studies at the territory of the Russian Federation. Another measure stipulated in the project is organization and state support of summer and winter schools to promote Russian education abroad. The government information system “Modern Digital Educational Environment” was created on the basis of an information resource that provides “one-stop-shop” access to online courses offered by various educational platforms in order to systematically improve the quality and expand the possibilities of lifelong education due to the wide use of educational online content. Studies in foreign languages of some academic disciplines, courses, modules are aimed at improving the comfort of teaching foreign citizens, reducing the period of their adaptation, as well as improvement of linguistic skills of Russian faculty members and students.

At the regional level, using the example of constituent entities of the Russian Federation with low indicators of social and economic development compared with the leading regions, the situation varies considerably. Currently, in the Russian regions, numerous programs and resources for their universities are inaccessible or irrelevant. In order to indicate the most problematic and specific for the Russian regions' directions of the Russian educational export in 2018-2019 the authors conducted studies including in-depth interviews with international departments' experts of regional universities and foreign students studying in the Volgograd region.

Research results include the following observations:

- 1) Only 22.2% of cases international department experts confirmed that the university has full-fledged international department/departments responsible for admission of international students and work with them and support throughout the entire period of their study;
- 2) In the absence of such a department, work with international students is conducted by the Admission Committee or Curriculum & Instruction Department (the most popular answers), the third by frequency place is attributed to the Legal Department, the fourth to the Financial Department. As a result, there is a lack of systematic, strategic approach to recruitment and support of international applicants in regional universities;
- 3) The main problems faced by regional universities in organizing work of specialists in international admission who have the authority to conduct recruitment and support of international students were identified by the interviewees as follows: high staff turnover (28.6% of answers), lack of career growth or advanced training opportunities in foreign partner universities (21.4%). Another popular answer is poor knowledge of migration procedures and foreign laws of those countries that are potential suppliers of international students. In the survey there was "Other" answer option which received 28.6% of the respondents' answers and is exemplified as insufficient staffing; lack of time to participate in networking and experience-sharing events; low salary of department employees;
- 4) Another result of the interview aroused great interest of the authors of the paper. This is the experts' answer to the question about the most important problems that specialists in international activities of regional universities face and consider critical to solve as these difficulties directly interfere with the economic potential of higher education export abroad. The answers were distributed as follows: 11% of the respondents identified the most important and difficult to solve problems at the regional level as the legal and regulatory provision of the stay of international students in the Russian Federation during the period of study. Two positions became the second

most popular answer: the development and implementation of joint educational programs with foreign universities (9.6% of answers) and the development and implementation of online educational programs with the participation of international partners (9.6% of answers);

The answers to the question about what problems the university (branch) faces in the process of international students enrollment were distributed as follows (Figure 1).

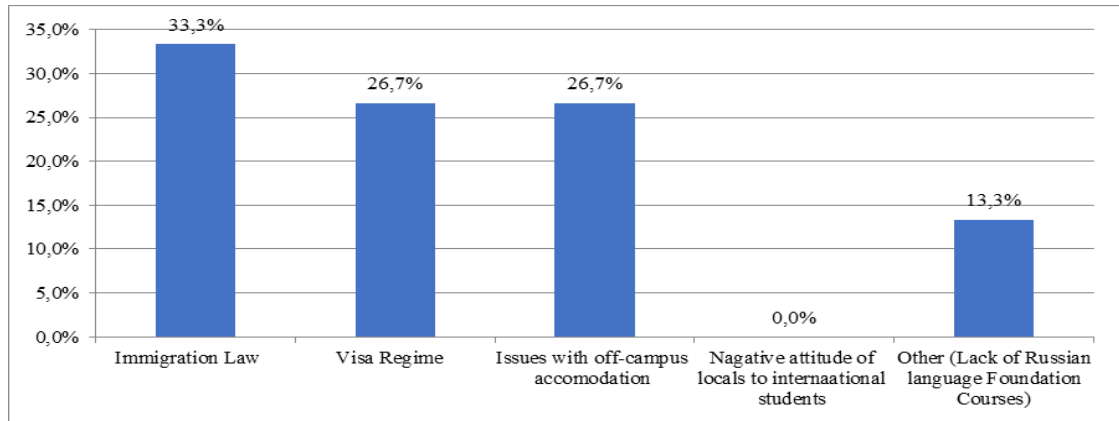


Figure 1. Distribution of in-depth interview answers by experts on challenges faces in international students enrollment

Following discussion with experts of challenges their universities (branches) face in the process of international students training the answers were distributed as follows (Figure 2).

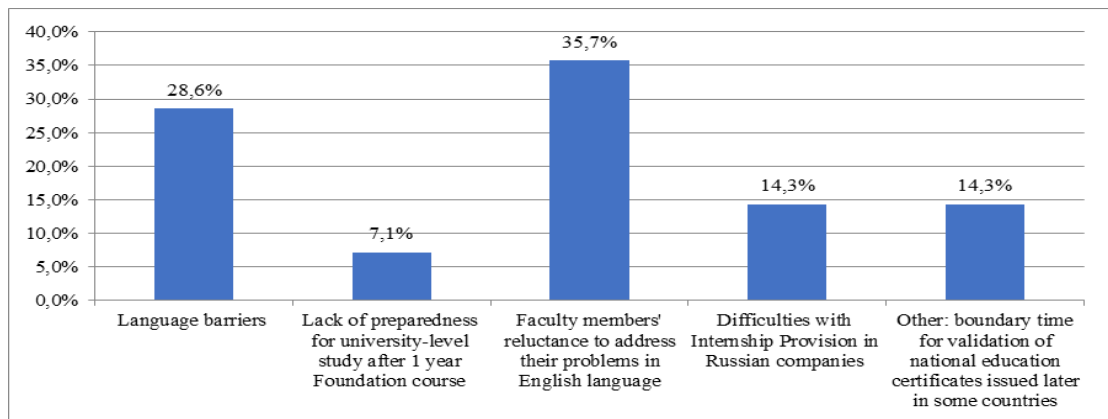


Figure 2. Distribution of in-depth interview answers by experts on challenges faces in international students training

When answering the question about the selection of countries where to recruit international students experts named two main reasons: (1) the presence of students from a given country at the university and the

possibility to use their informal connections (22.7% of the answers) and (2) the geographical proximity of the country to the region where the university is located (also 22.7% of answers) namely former Soviet republics where the language of instruction selected in the Academic Curriculum is Russian and adaptation of international students is easier.

Identification of reasons for foreign students' choice of regional universities (or branches) is another important outcome of experts' survey. The experts answers were distributed as follows: 21.4% replied that family members of international students previously studied at the same university. The second reason that received 17.9% of the answers is the low cost of training compared to studying in the country of residence of international students or in other universities around the world. Two answers came in third in terms of popularity of experts' answers: active recruitment campaign of the university in these countries (10.7% of answers), university's explicit website in foreign languages. Participation in educational exhibitions and fairs in host countries received 10.7% of answers which confirms the orientation towards neighboring countries or countries with a high share of Russian-speaking population.

To the question about the most popular and effective methods of informing and recruiting international students which are applied in the work of the experts we received three most popular answers: website of the university (26.7%); former students network in the counties of origin (26.7%) and joint scientific and academic projects of universities (10% of answers). All other answers gained less than 6% including holding summer and winter schools, work with foreign recruiting agencies, holding special international events, educational tourism, and academic exchanges.

The authors of the paper conducted surveys with international students of regional universities in 2018-2019 and obtained the following results. 22.4% of the examined international students were from the PRC, 10.5% were from Azerbaijan, 9.2% of the respondents were from Iraq, other popular neighboring countries were Armenia, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and African countries such as Guinea, Algeria, Ghana. A total of 120 students from 22 countries were included in the sample:

- The answers to the question on the factors that most influenced international students studying in regional Russian universities were as follows: affordable tuition (19%), advice from relatives, friends, acquaintances (13.8% of the answers), good Russian language skills (9.7% of answers); Also, the most popular answers with 9.2% of answers each include: friend or relative studying at the university and explicit website and constant support and feedback of advisors in the university;
- At the next step of the research, the authors divided the answers to this question received from international students from former Soviet republics and from far abroad, the results were

distributed as follows: international students from foreign countries chose the option of affordable tuition in 26% of the answers; low cost of living in the city where the university is located in 13.1% of the answers; advice from relatives, friends, acquaintances in 10.3%. Whereas students from neighboring Russian countries chose good Russian language skills in 26.3%, advice of relatives, friends, acquaintances in 21.1% of the answers, the possibility of employment in Russia after graduation in 15.8 % of the answers.

Questions regarding living conditions, average living expenses, consumer behavior and financial spending by international students were asked to assess the economic growth potential of educational export for the regional economies. The following answers were received in the results:

70.9% of respondents live in a dormitory, 16.5% rent an apartment, 6.3% lived with relatives; at the same time, living expenses for 60.5% of the respondents amounted to less than 2 000 rubles per month, for 13.2% of respondents from 2 to 5 thousand rubles;

- When assessing average expenses of international students on food and commodities, the following results were obtained: most of them (64.5%) spend less than 10 thousand rubles per month on food; at the same time, 11.8% answered that they did not know the exact amount was since they did not cover these expenses themselves; 75% of respondents spend less than 5 thousand rubles per month on household items and hygiene products. 65.8% spent less than 1.5 thousand rubles ongoing around the city per month; at the same time, there was low activity in moving both around the city and across the country for tourist purposes: 81.8% of the respondents go home only on vacation; if they stay on vacation in the city where they study then 41.2% just walk around the city, 30.6% do not go out at all (spend time on the Internet, they are just afraid to go out), and 16.2% travel during the holidays in the Russian Federation;
- When answering the question how much they spend per year average on traveling around Russia, 46.1% answered that they do not travel at all, 34.2% chose the answer from 2 to 4 thousand rubles per month, 11.8% chose the option of 5-10 thousand rubles per month;
- The authors were interested in the respondents' answers to the question what problems international students encounter when studying at universities of the Volgograd Region: 33.9% answered that they lack fluency in Russian; 15.7% selected the answer “no problem”; 11.3% indicated that they had financial difficulties; while 49.3% solved those problems on their own, only 11% did it relying on the help of university employees.

According to general statistical indicators of social and economic development of the region, the features of the development of educational institutions of higher education, the authors conducted a SWOT analysis, the most relevant results of which are presented in table 1:

Table 1. Strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats for doubling the number of international students in the subject of the Russian Federation (on the example of the Volgograd region)

Strengths:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Low tuition rate; - Low cost of living - Attractiveness for applicants from neighboring countries; - Digital technologies accessibility 	Opportunities:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Economies of scale: at low cost, the growth of international students, including distance learning online; - expansion of target countries list for international students recruitment (accessibility, security, employment)
Weaknesses:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Dependence on the Russian language fluency for international students; - Lack of preparedness for faculty members to teach international students in English, lack of intercultural awareness; - Low attractiveness of Russian higher education for international applicants from non-CIS countries with a high level of solvency 	Threats:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Low competitiveness in comparison with federal, national and foreign universities - low efficiency of personnel to conduct educational programs in English

The SWOT analysis results in which international departments experts of Volgograd region universities and international students studying for 2-3 years in the Russian Federation, the survey conducted to assess their involvement in the educational and extracurricular process, their solvency level indicate the non-use of universities and regional authorities of the economic potential of international students of the Volgograd region to generate additional income to the economy and budget from their direct and indirect expenses.

The most widespread challenge for regional universities is the language barrier of the faculty members to conduct classes for international students in English. Moreover, few Russian universities occupy high positions in the international rankings of higher educational institutions or do not enter them at all. An example of low economic and social activity of international students in Russian regions indicates the low economic potential that export brings for their economy, guaranteeing that universities will only receive tuition fees with a high financial burden to provide the necessary infrastructure.

In Russia, the government program “Friendly Environment for International Students” has been developed and is being implemented within the framework of which rules are being developed for admission of international

students using proctoring without the need to come for entrance examinations to Russian universities, the system of training and accommodation in Russia for international students is most regulated at the federal and local levels students. It takes into account global, international trends in academic mobility associated with an increase in the number of foreign students and an increase in demand for higher education in countries with a multimillion and even billion inhabitants like China, India, Brazil or Indonesia.

Nevertheless, each university and the entire Russian system of higher education are currently engaged in:

- development and implementation of marketing strategy to promote their educational services at the international level while at the same time establishing partnerships with foreign universities which allows to access reliable information on local educational services market and offer a competitive product in the respective countries;
- improvement of information and enrollment policy of universities taking into account the surveys data of international students and trends in the promotion of educational services through social networks, via English version of the official website of the university and other Internet resources;
- further training for faculty members involved with international students from countries with high rates of income and quality of life, employment of English-speaking staff and personnel of international departments.

The most affordable activities for regional universities and sought after by international applicants and students are summer and winter schools, cooperation with resource centers for academic enrolment including in target countries, attracting international applicants and students to participate in academic Olympiads and online competitions that give privileges to enter Russian universities. This requires both human resources skills, for instance, English-speaking faculty members and personnel of international departments, stimulation of active position of former students acting as an ambassador of Russian higher-education in their countries, high-quality training programmes, and a business model to minimize costs of image-based cultural and academic projects for educational institutions.

Discussions

The study of the potential export market for higher education on the example of countries of Western Europe (Germany, France, Italy) and Africa (Egypt, South Africa) made it possible to identify priority strategies and tools for implementing national projects using the example of some regional universities and branches:

- the main constraints in increasing of Russian educational export among non-CIS countries are high transportation costs, inconsistencies of migration laws, low online presence, recognition and competitive level of academic courses for example proctoring is available only to large federal universities;
- a positive factor in increasing Russian educational export is the presence of long-term economic and political ties, for example, Russian cultural and business centers and trade representative offices which contribute to the availability of information and security, economic stability for intercultural and educational exchanges. Another positive factor is opening branches of Russian universities abroad to train students for Russian and international companies since this is one of the areas for the economies of these countries to get specialists who stay in this country. Digital technologies make the development of educational export more affordable and efficient for regional universities.

The positive example of the Republic of South Africa's economic strategy entitled "New Growth Path" has been implemented since 2010 and reveals the demand for highly trained specialists in particular areas. South African government guarantees to finance training in these areas, for instance, the plan ensuring national economy with 30,000 engineers and at least 50,000 skilled workers for improving the qualifications in key sectors of the national economy is implemented by local and international universities. Education is a key state priority in South Africa with a share of 20% in the national budget.

Conclusion

Current trends in the development of higher educational exports for the national system can be considered as follow:

- active use of digital technology to increase the availability of enrollment, admission procedures including entrance exam for international applicants through university educational portals and popular internet tools expanding possibilities of distance learning in English;
- taking into account the fact that full-time international students of Russian universities are consumers of local goods and services in the regions, potential employees and taxpayers, the authors of the paper conclude that their economic potential for different Russian regions is not fully understood and taken advantages by local universities and government authorities. Adaptation programmes, as well as extracurricular activities for international students residing in Russia 5-8 years, should be organized;

- universities going global pay particular attention to the content of their official websites in English maximizing creativity in its official social networks;
- digitalization and globalization are trends that open possibilities of the national higher education system for international students, including via affordable in application distance technologies, but it is necessary to unify migration laws, minimize language and cultural barriers, features that continue to act as constraints on exports of higher education in the Russian Federation.

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