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## Internationalization of Higher Education in Russia: Regional Perspective

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### Abstract

The risks of non-fulfillment of the target indicators of the federal project “Export of Education”, which are systemic in nature and are associated with the peculiarities of the socio-economic, cultural development of Russian regions and their conditions for implementing the internationalization of higher education, have undergone a transformation during 2020-2021 in the context of a pandemic and active use of distance technologies and electronic educational resources. This placed the emphasis on the level of competitiveness and the development of these technologies in comparison with large international providers - foreign universities. The goal of this paper is to identify and substantiate internationalization features of Russian higher education at the regional level and to forecast further scenarios of development in the context of a long term impact on public policy in this area. The research revealed and systematized the features of the internationalization of higher education at the regional level with their division into positive, negative, and crisis features. Trends in the number and structure of foreign students studying in Russia were identified and analyzed. The calculation of the effective rating of foreign students by importing countries was carried out. The authors developed and tested a six-factor function for assessing the level of internationalization of the university. The paper presents a model of interaction between regional universities and universities participating in the implementation of the Federal project “Export of Education”.

*Keywords:* internationalization, export of education, networking form, international students’ recruitment, regional universities, digitalization.

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## **Introduction**

Despite the rapid development of distance learning technologies and digitalization of the higher education in Russia, there are still disparities in regional export increase depending on the university location and status. In the course of Russian Federal Project “Export of Education” implementation, numerous non-fulfillment risks of the project target indicators were identified by Russian and international researchers (Ermakova & Nikulina, 2019; Krasnova, 2020). They include low revenues from higher-educational export; a lack of flexible financial mechanisms and impulses for talented international undergraduate, graduate and postgraduate students; insufficient accommodation and academic infrastructure; a significant lag behind major international providers in the number and quality of MOOCs; economy losses because of inability to replenish aging Russian population by highly qualified international graduates, a lack of income from additional expenses of international students for leisure activities, accommodation and meals. The Covid-19 pandemic further aggravated internationalization of Russian higher education (Zernov, Manyushis, Valyavsky, & Uchevatkina, 2020; Pletneva & Ochirova, 2020). However, goals of national development and distance technologies use coordinated and reevaluated the internationalization of higher education in Russia.

## **Purpose and objectives of the study**

The purpose of the paper is to examine main features of internationalization in regional Russian higher educational institutions, to indicate the major factors influencing quantitative indicators of internationalization, to analyze the structure of international students by importing countries, as well as to study interaction between universities involved in internationalization within the framework of network agreements. The paper also sets out to perform a trend analysis of the development and implementation of distance technologies, and other electronic educational resources applied in order to increase the competitiveness of Russian regional universities through internationalization.

## **Literature review**

A number of scientific works of international (Crăciun, 2018; de Wit & Altbach, 2021; Thondhlana et al., 2021) and Russian researchers (Anpilova & Bondarev, 2018; Filippov, 2015; Imankulova & Moshlyak, 2019; Stepanova & Buletova, 2018) investigate the forms and directions of internationalization of higher education which are in demand and bring revenue to the university.

The studies examine the influence on professionalism of the personnel, including teaching and administrative staff, resources and infrastructure of Russian universities involved in the internationalization. Works of Adamkulova (2015), Lijun, Pogorelskaya, & Yun (2020), Mashuryan & Petrosyan (2018), Rytov (2017), Titarenko (2019), Yun (2019) are related to the globalization trends in higher education of the former Soviet Union republics.

Special emphasis in the paper is put on determining the features of the internationalization of higher education in countries which traditionally are popular among international students (Great Britain, Germany, USA) or, conversely, are less popular (Vietnam, Mongolia) (Bolshova, 2013; Dzhurinsky, 2020; Gundsambu, 2019; Parulava, 2017; Patsukevich, 2019; Vo, 2019; Zhadovets, 2015). Additionally, we reviewed the articles exploring the potential of academic programs in English for internationalization (Guzikova, 2019; Kecherukova, 2017).

The conducted review has testified to the relevance of the chosen topic both in international and Russian scientific works. In this study, the authors focused on substantiating methodological foundations for various forms of regional higher educational internationalization. We took into account the identified trends in the dynamics of the number and structure of international students by importing countries and the author-developed approaches to assessing the level of internationalization of higher education.

### **Methodology**

The authors applied both traditional methods of system analysis including comparison, dynamic analysis, and other methods of statistical analysis, as well as the use of an expert approach to solving a number of research tasks.

The applied quantitative research methods include methods of grouping, systematization, dynamic and index analysis, structural and rating analysis, extrapolation and trend determination, methods of factor analysis and a multivariate model construction, processing of primary and secondary data on the number of foreign students using graphical and tabular analysis in order to determine the risks and features of higher educational internationalization at the regional level.

Qualitative methods applied by the authors include methods of strategic analysis: SWOT analysis, expert assessments of 'scenarios' methods with the help of which the composition and classification of the features of the internationalization of higher education in the regions were clarified.

The authors carried out the theoretical analysis of electronic educational resources development.

The researchers also studied the regulatory framework in the field of online learning, methodological foundations of digitalization in the field of higher education, and performed the comparative analysis of digitalization models in overseas and Russian universities.

## Results

In order to clearly present the content of internationalization and its boundaries in the paper, the internationalization of higher education is referred to by the authors as:

- *in a wider perspective* as a targeted public policy introducing modern approaches to teaching and research in order to increase competitiveness of the national model of higher education in the international market due to integration of new educational standards and technologies including distance learning;

- *in a narrower perspective* as adoption and use by a higher educational institution of rules and technologies applied in successful global practice of educational activities, teaching and learning process in order to guarantee the participants (academic staff and students) application of skills and competencies that will be in demand in any global economy.

Internationalization is one of the concepts characterizing the process of purposeful goals convergence, having implications for the entire university sector, and stakeholders in a higher educational institution. It has significance for the interaction of actors and the development of appropriate policies within higher education. The involvement of government and institutions in this process, as well as the use of higher education as a foreign policy resource are conditioned by the development of technologies, well-being and necessity to promote their interests globally. The authors of the paper present the main forms of internationalization of higher education in a matrix tabular form, taking into account the functions of the educational institution and the level of implementation (table 1).

Table 1. Matrix of University Internationalization Forms

Distribution by function and implementation level	Macro-level	Meso-level	Micro-level
<b>In Research Area</b>	- joint research projects with international partner university, implemented inter alia through a system of international grants; - participation in international and regional associations, foundations and projects	- internships for teaching staff, students, graduate students, young scientists	- organization and participation in scientific and practical events; - expansion of publication activity in global research journals
<b>In Academic Area</b>	- joint programs with international partner university in the framework of the educational process	- development of curricula that meet international standards; - admission of teaching staff from the international labor market	- introduction of a point-rating system (credit system)
<b>In Service provision Area</b>	- exchange of teaching staff, students, graduate students (academic mobility); - creation of joint associations of universities; - providing conditions for the participation of graduates in the activities of the international labor market	- special adaptation and academic programs for international students; - implementation of educational programs in foreign languages (English)	- organization and participation in summer, winter schools (including joint ones) by both students and faculty members

One of the main models for the internationalization of higher education is the Bologna Process within the EU which was designed to increase international competitiveness of the European higher education system and contributes to the development of its nations. The promotion of this model is supported by UNESCO, the World Bank and the OECD (OECD, 2019). As a result, even leaders in the internationalization of higher education, including USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand adopt the EU experience (for example, in the field of recognition of qualifications) and adapting it to their national realities. Thus, despite claims of cultural diversity, there is an educational standardization and the use of English as a language of instruction and research. According to UNESCO, 45 per cent of all international students study in the EU. Nonetheless, the United States continues to be the leader in international student admissions, accounting for nearly 25 per cent of the global market.

US universities have the largest number of overseas branches in the world. They are characterized by a higher level of decentralization of the educational system, including internationalization processes (more than half of US universities and colleges develop their own internationalization policy). The use of the English language creates the richest electronic educational resources, for example, Coursera is the largest supplier of MOOCs, a significant part of which is centered in the US. Moreover, an extended duration of stay after graduation is provided for international students who can reside in the United States for a year without additional visa documents and work at universities, research organizations or business sector.

Taking into account the clarification of the content and forms of internationalization of higher education and the experience of global countries in this area, the authors have identified and systematized main features of internationalization of higher education at the regional level:

- *positive features* allowing a medium term involvement of Russian regional universities in internationalization: high mobility, availability of distance technologies and their active implementation in the educational process following the COVID-19 pandemic, accumulated experience and best practices of leading Russian universities in the emerging market of higher online education, gradual formation of marketing programs and a network of recruiting agencies;
- *negative features* inhibiting internationalization in regional universities and increasing disparities, inequality in development, in competitiveness in the national and international markets: complicated migration procedures, insufficient number of English speaking faculty and administrative staff, disparities in financing of national and regional universities, outflow of qualified personnel, regional disparities in social and economic development.

We present the results of the trend analysis examining changes in number and structure of international students by importing countries. It has significance for objective assessment of internationalization in Russian regional higher education. Figure 1 shows the result of calculating the dynamics of the number of international students accounting for the specified target indicators of the federal project “Export of Education”. The Project goal is a systematic two-fold increase in international students by 2025. The examples of international students’ dynamics are presented per 10 thousand people in Volgograd, Voronezh and Astrakhan regions and indicate significant variables leading to uneven changes in the medium and long term perspective (Fig. 2).

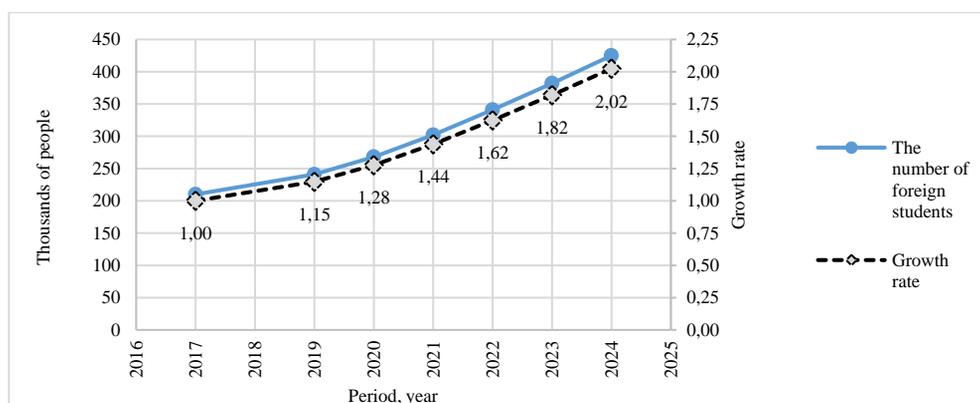


Figure 1. Dynamics of International Students in Russian Universities in accordance with the Federal Project “Export of Education” targets for 2018-2024

The comparison of trajectories in the number of international students per 10 thousand people in the population of the three selected regions allows us to see both general trends in growth or decline and differences in particular numbers. Thus, in the Voronezh region this indicator is significantly higher both in the compared regions and on average in Russia. The factors that led to such discrepancies include a more developed economy of Voronezh in comparison with the other two regions, a better offer of higher educational programmes in the market as well as a wider training material, technology, personnel and scientific support. At the same time, the curve showing the ratio of the indicator for the Voronezh and the Volgograd regions has gone up sharply since 2014, that is, the difference in the number of international students is only growing.

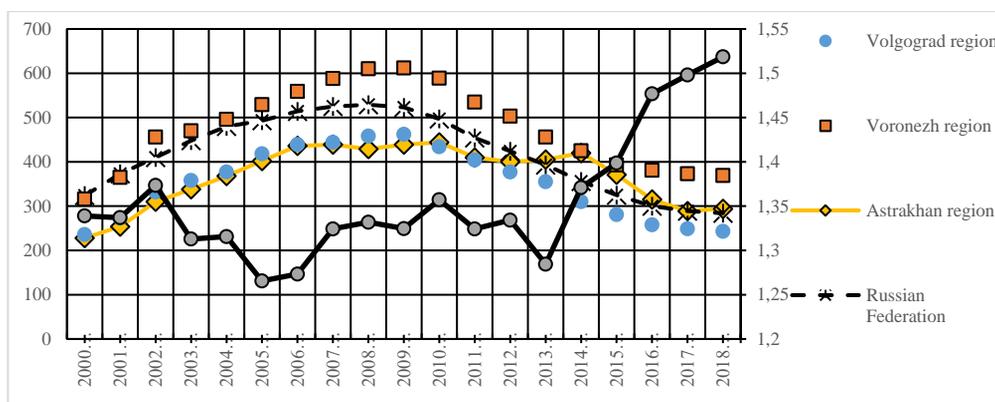


Figure 2. Dynamics of Undergraduate, Specialist, and Graduate International Students in Russian Universities by 10 000 people in local population (as of the beginning of academic year, people)

Figure 3 reveals the result of calculating the indicators of the dynamics of the number of international students including the forecast values for the period 2020-2024. We compared the growth rates of the number of international students as of the current data. In conformity with indicators of the Federal Project, it can be stated that other things being equal, the forecast curves diverge sharply. Overall, it can be seen that as of the end of 2024 the following results have been obtained:

- Using *extrapolation method*, we have determined the projected number of international students in the Volgograd region in 2024 which equals 3431 people. This value is sufficient to provide an increase in their number by 64 per cent in conformity with 2.02 target growth of the Russian Federal Project “Export of Education”;
- By applying traditional *statistical forecasting* based on the persistence of future changes and extrapolation, we have identified transferring of the revealed trend from actual data to the forecast period.

However, it is important to note that the year of 2020 saw sharp changes in provision of educational services, which allows us to expect new possible vectors in higher educational development, therefore, considerable variations in forecast scenarios.

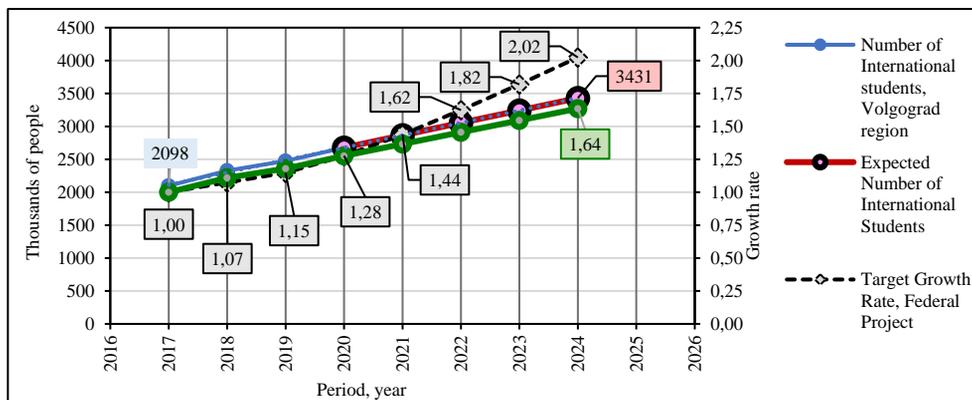


Figure 3. Dynamics of Full-Time International Students in Volgograd Region and Forecast for 2020-2024

The same conclusions can be drawn in Figure 4 regarding the dynamics in the number of overseas students in the Voronezh region. It is very clear from the overall trend in factual and expected indicators, including internationalization, that potential for higher education development in this region is considerably stronger than in Volgograd:

- By method of extrapolation we have determines the projected number of international students in the Voronezh region by 2024 to be 7430. It doubles of the Volgograd region indicator and ensures 2.89 fold rise, while the expected by the Federal Project “Export of Education” increase is only 2.02 times.

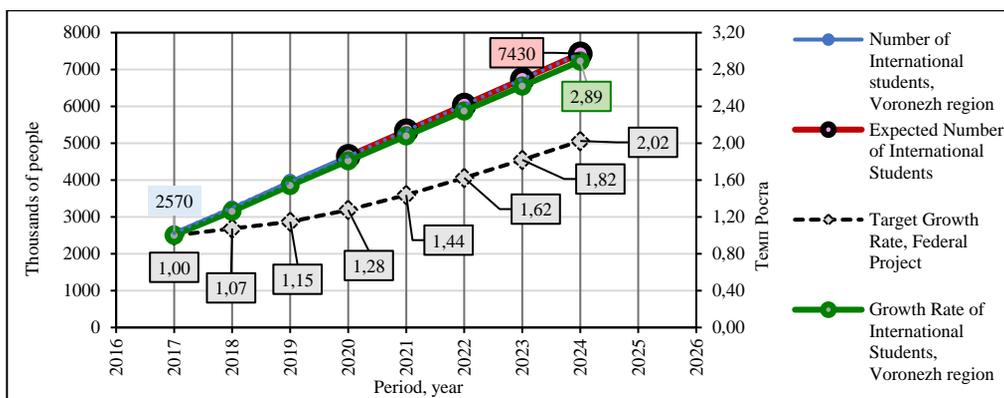


Figure 4. Dynamics of Full-Time International Students in Voronezh Region and Forecast for 2020-2024

Figure 5 reveals the result of structural analysis of the number of overseas students by importing countries for 2017-2019. It shows the former Soviet Republics, India, China, Iraq, Egypt, Ghana, Malaysia, some African and Middle Eastern countries occupying dominant positions as source nations for Russian higher educational market. This is traditionally associated since Soviet times with popularity of medical, engineering and technical training courses, the long established system of cultural and academic exchanges, proficiency in Russian language for academic purposes, relatively easy adaptation to living conditions in Russian regions.

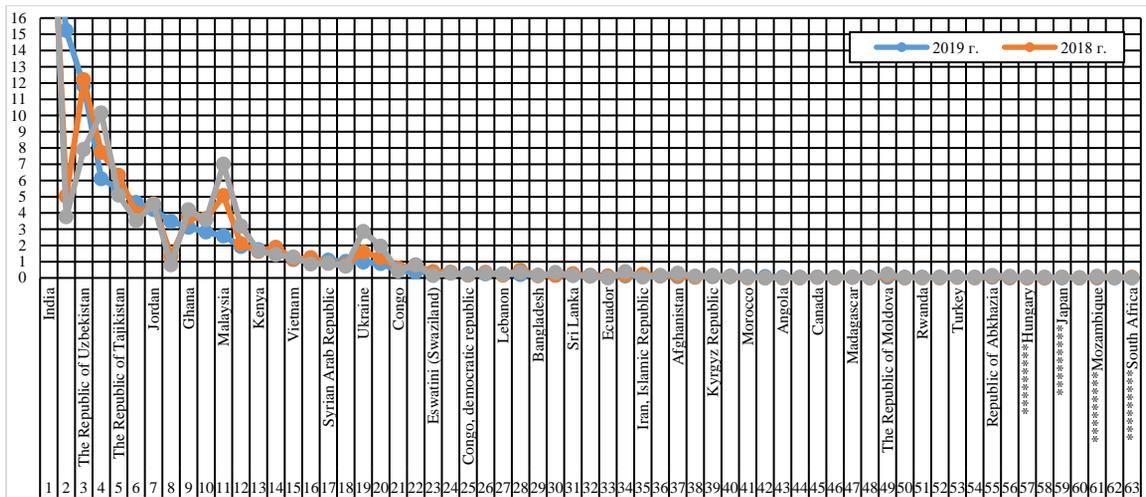
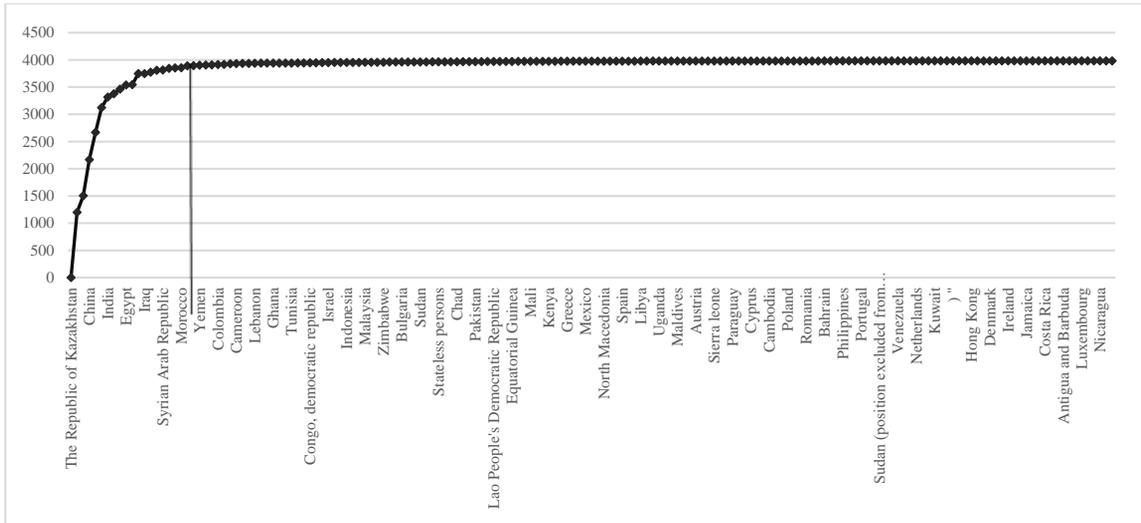
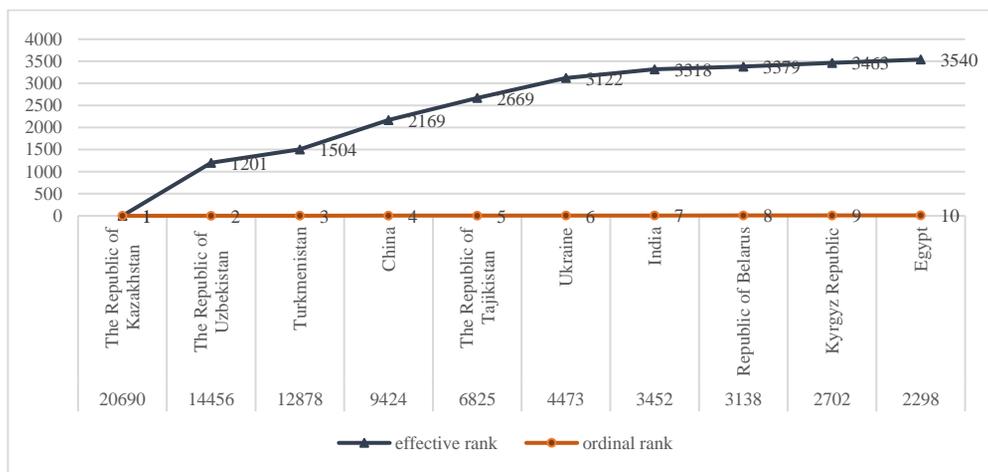


Figure 5. International Students Structure by Importing Countries in Volgograd region for 2017-2019

The distribution international students source countries into the Russian Federation was carried out by the authors according to the data of 2019. We applied the developed *effective ranking method* (Buletova, Zlochevsky, & Sharkevich, 2017) which is based on the “leveling” of any ordinal ranking and takes into account the nonlinearity of the distribution of the ranked units as a simulated linear rank distribution with an open scale (Fig. 6). According to the result of 171 countries positioning (Fig. 6, a), nonlinear and linear distribution zones can be identified. There is no significant contrast in the number of overseas students, (Fig. 6, b), however if we present the result of the distribution for the 10 leading countries in student import and compare it with the Russian Federation, the difference is noticeable. Furthermore, a high potential for Russian higher education is seen in attracting more Russian-speaking international students.



a) Effective Rank Distribution of Countries-Importers of International Students into Russian Federation, 2019 (max – 20, 690 students; min – 1 student)



b) Effective Rank Distribution of Leading Countries-Importers of International Students into Russian Federation, 2019

Figure 6. Effective Rating of International Students in Russia by Importing Countries, 2019

Let us supplement the ranking distribution of students importing countries by the *ABC analysis* (Fig. 7). It reveals that 14 out of 171 countries (group A) provide 85.1 per cent of international students, while second group B of contributors, presented by 44 countries, supply 12.1 per cent of the total number of overseas students. Group C incorporates 113 countries (which is 66.1 per cent of all the providers) supplies only 2.8 per cent of international students. The distribution must be taken into account in the strategy for the development of internationalization and export of higher education both nationally and regionally.

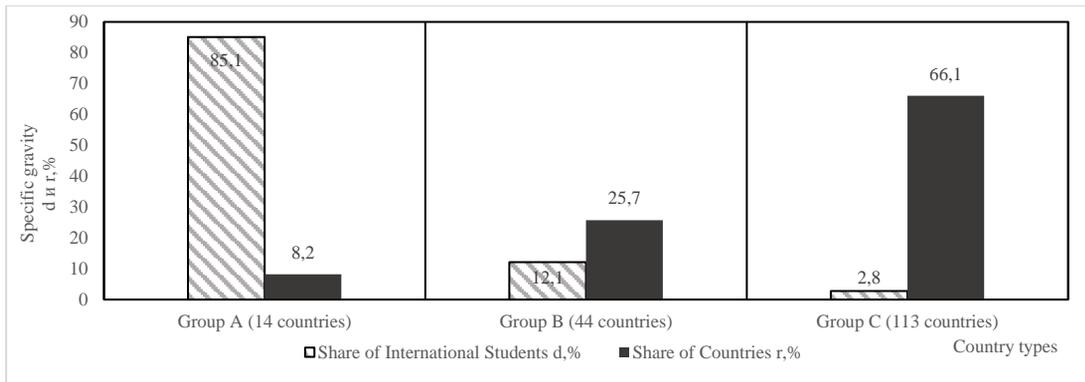


Figure 7. Distribution of Countries by Groups A, B and C

The six-factor function system was developed by the authors for assessing the level of internationalization in order to effectively manage the process both at the level of an individual university and the strategic planning system of Russian higher education:

$$Y = f(S_i, k_S, T_i, k_T, E_i, k_E) \tag{1}$$

where  $Y$  is the internationalization level of university;

- $S_i$  – Impact of Internationalization on research;
- $k_S$  – Research Ratio (macro, meso and micro levels);
- $T_i$  – Impact of Internationalization on curricula;
- $k_E$  – Academic Coefficient (macro, meso and micro levels);
- $E_i$  – Impact of Internationalization on Educational Services;
- $k_E$  – Service ratio (macro, meso and micro levels).

$S$  factor includes:

- $S_1$  – availability of international joint research, grants, etc;
- $S_2$  – accessibility of internships for international exchanges;
- $S_3$  – joint conferences, joint research publications.

Therefore,  $k_S$  can be considered as the activity coefficient of the research component of the higher educational internationalization.

$T$  Factor consists of:

- $T_1$  – availability of joint global programs;
- $T_2$  – accessibility of curricula that meet international standards;
- $T_3$  – application of academic credit rating system.

Taking into account such a classification,  $k_T$  can be considered as a coefficient of the development of academic activities in the framework of the higher educational internationalization.

Factor  $E$  content:

- $E_1$  – academic mobility;  
 $E_2$  – accessibility of educational programs in English;  
 $E_3$  – presence of summer / winter schools, other cultural and educational exchanges.

In accordance with this distribution,  $k_E$  is a measurement of impact of Internationalization on Educational Services which takes into account the levels of their implementation. Table 2 shows the result of using this function to compile a system of indicators that determine the degree of influence of each factor on the internationalization of higher education of an individual university.

Table 2. The system of Six-Factor Function for assessing University Internationalization Level

Factors Composition	Calculation formula	Results Interpretation
Level of Research internationalization	$k_S = \frac{\sum S_i}{S_{min}}$ <p>где  <math>\sum S_i</math> is total number of joint research projects at all levels;  <math>S_{min}</math> is the minimum permissible number of joint research projects within the framework of internationalization (equals to 3)</p>	$k_S$ must be > 1 If $k_S < 1$ , this is evidence of incomplete research internationalization. If $k_S = 1$ , this is min. required level
Level of Academic Internationalization	$k_T = \frac{\sum T_i}{T_{min}}$ <p><math>\sum T_i</math> is total number of joint teaching projects across all levels;  <math>T_{min}</math> shows the minimum allowed number of teaching projects within the framework of internationalization (equal to 3)</p>	$k_T$ must be > 1 If $k_T < 1$ , this is evidence of an incomplete academic internationalization. If $k_T = 1$ , this is min. required level
Level of Educational Services Internationalization	$k_E = \frac{\sum E_i}{E_{min}}$ <p><math>\sum E_i</math> is total number of joint teaching projects across all levels;  <math>E_{min}</math> is the minimum allowed number of teaching projects within the framework of internationalization (equal to 3)</p>	$k_E$ must be > 1 If $k_E < 1$ , this is evidence of an incomplete internationalization of the educational services If $k_E = 1$ , this is min. required level

The integral indicator  $I_{inter}$  will be as follows:

$$I_{inter} = k_S * 0,4 + k_T * 0,4 + k_E * 0,2 \quad (2)$$

The minimum allowable value of Inter for a positive assessment of the level of internationalization of university is 1. On the example of Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration (RANEPA) and Plekhanov Russian University of Economics (PRUE), two of the largest federal universities of the Russian Federation and their branches in the Volgograd region (Table 3).

Table 3. Results of Internationalization Level Assessment on the Example of the Selected Universities

University	$k_S$	$k_T$	$k_E$	$I_{inter}$
RANEPA	$\frac{5}{3}$	$\frac{4}{3}$	$\frac{6}{3}$	$I_{inter} = 1,667 * 0,4 + 1,333 * 0,4 + 2 * 0,2 = 1,6$
VIM, branch of RANEPA	$\frac{2}{3}$	$\frac{1}{3}$	$\frac{1}{3}$	$I_{inter} = 0,667 * 0,4 + 0,333 * 0,4 + 0,333 * 0,2 = 0,47$
PRUE	$\frac{5}{3}$	$\frac{4}{3}$	$\frac{5}{3}$	$I_{inter} = 1,667 * 0,4 + 1,333 * 0,4 + 1,667 * 0,2 = 1,53$
Volgograd branch of PRUE	$\frac{1}{3}$	$\frac{1}{3}$	-	$I_{inter} = 0,333 * 0,4 + 0,333 * 0,4 + 0 * 0,2 =$

The obtained results of the application of the six-factor function to assess the university internationalization level on the example of two large Russian federal universities and their branches indicate that branches, as a rule, are less involved in internationalization processes despite the presence of international students (mainly Russian-speaking representatives of the countries of the former republics of the USSR). In these conditions, the development of a network form of education and the active use of distance technologies, MOOCs and electronic educational systems in the coming years should radically change the situation on the ground both for branches of large universities in the country and for local regional universities.

Taking into account the results obtained, the authors have developed and proposed a model for strategic planning and management of the higher educational internationalization. We developed the model of interaction between regional universities and universities participating in the implementation of the Federal Project “Export of Education”, based on the use of a networking form of implementation of educational programs (Fig. 8).

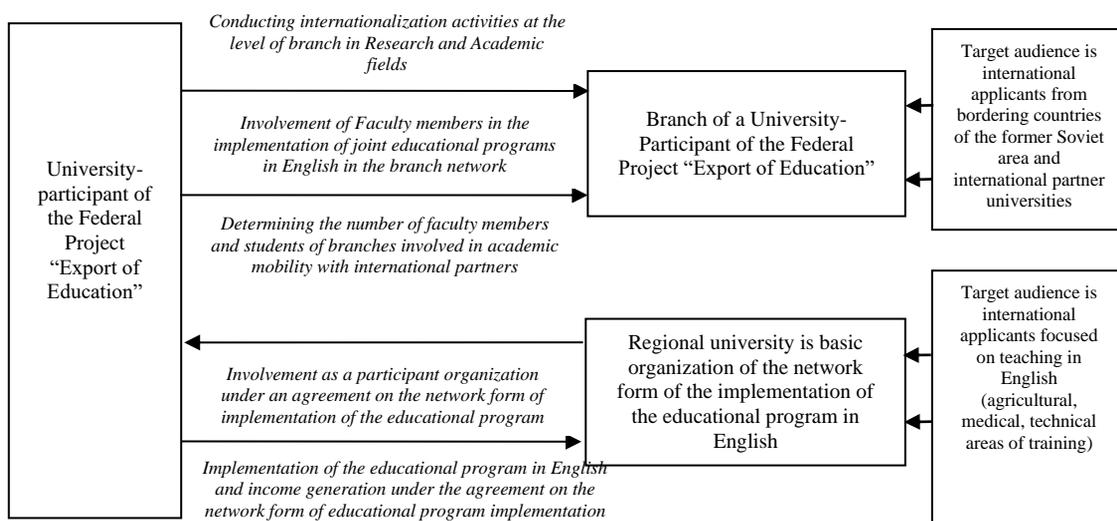


Figure 8. Interaction Model between Federal and Regional Universities Implementing Federal Project “Export of Education”

### Discussion

The study of main internationalization features of higher education in regional universities made it possible to identify the following issues:

- internationalization of a regional university (or a branch of a larger federal university) is characterized by both positive and negative factors which are quite systemic and stable in nature. They affect export potential of education and attainability of goals and objectives of national and federal projects in the field of higher education;

- in different Russian constituent entities, there are inconsistencies in trends of international students increase, however, the importing countries supplying overseas students are mostly the same. This might be explained by varying policies of internationalization, available resources, including intellectual ones, insufficient number of educational programs in English. Many regions conclude agreements with international partner universities and collaborate with Rossotrudnichestvo allowing them successfully implement the recruitment of international students for educational programs in Russian and, at the same time, develop internationalization in other areas including research;

- internationalization is poorly developed in the current model of interaction between large Russian federal universities, their branches and other regional universities. It is manifested in absence of mutual agreement network system of implementation of academic programs in English. The lack of demand for such programs in regional universities is another issue affecting incomplete use of university resources (teaching, cultural, educational, and intellectual) capable to increase internationalization level. As a result, the higher education export and other areas of internationalization within the university are limited.

On the example of Volgograd Institute of Management, branch of RANEPА, one can see positive shifts in increasing the level of internationalization at the meso- and micro-levels due to the intensification of international research cooperation with international partner universities and funds (Germany, Egypt, Italy, USA), as well as attracting the resources of the main university (RANEPА Moscow) using distance technologies to solve problematic issues at the regional level.

## **Conclusion**

Current trends of internationalization of higher education in Russian regional universities include:

- establishing partnerships with universities implementing Federal project “Export of Education”, conclusion of network agreement on joint implementation of educational programs in English. It expands possibilities for attracting international students, ensures global competitiveness and income growth of Russian regional universities;

- internationalization of higher education through distance technologies and electronic educational resources, organization and participation in a number of joint research, academic and cultural events in a remote format require regional universities to promptly transform the approaches used by participants (teachers, leaders, students) in the field of international interaction. Achievement of international standards and application of best academic and research practices is possible only in partnership with international organizations;
- regional universities have the opportunity to actively introduce internationalization by attracting resources from larger universities of the country on the basis of partnerships through network agreements on joint implementation of educational programs, research with global partners.

In Russia, the normative legal act on the application of the network form of the implementation of educational programs came into force only on September 22, 2020. Therefore, the use of higher education in the integration of higher education faces a number of problems. The main issues include a low level of motivation of universities to participate in network interaction due to the lack of mechanisms of financing and control, especially in the context of academic mobility. Another negative factor is a low level of trust of teaching staff in the educational policy implemented at the university (especially at the regional level). The lack of integration of curricula and different educational standards together with high bureaucracy and inflexibility of the administration in regional universities also slow down internationalization. Furthermore, not all the participants in educational process are positive about the benefits of online training programs and introduction of courses in English.

However, it is important to understand that despite active use of distance technologies because of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is necessary to preserve the traditional format of research and teaching activities, and combine it with distance technologies while ensuring high quality of both forms. The faculty members and administrative staff should be trained at special methodological and professional training courses on new learning formats applied in programs for international students, English language and international culture workshops contributing to trust and motivation increase. In conclusion we can state that all these issues addressed may contribute to academic and research mobility and impact the internationalization level of higher educational institutions in Russian regions.

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### **Competing interests**

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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