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Stress Factors among International and Domestic Students in Russia

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Abstract

The paper examines the key stress factors affecting the academic achievements of international and domestic students in Russian universities. Information about the sources and levels of stress was elicited through a 16-item Likert-style questionnaire. The results of the survey indicate that most of stress factors are mainly the same for both groups of students. These factors are work load, lack of sleep, and deadline pressure among others.

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1. Introduction

The beginning of the 21st century is characterized by the rise in globalization, a process which diminishes the necessity of a common and shared territorial basis for social, economic and political activities, processes and relations (Crane & Matten, 2010). This process has affected all parts of contemporary life. One major aspect which has undergone changes due to globalization is education in general, and higher education, in particular. To be an effective partner in the global world, a country has to have strong, quality education and be open to offer it to anyone in the world. The Russian Federation is an active participant of the globalized education market.

During the last decade, higher education in Russia has gone through massive transformation. Currently institutions of higher education in Russia are cooperating with leading scientific and educational centers in the USA,

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Europe, Asia, and Latin America, establishing joint educational programs and participating in collaborative projects, using Russian and foreign funds (Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation, 2013).

Since joining the Bologna Process in 2003, there has been a steady increase in the number of foreign students in Russia. There have been expansions in educational services export, especially to the CIS countries. Currently, approximately 57 thousand students from various CIS countries are enrolled in numerous higher education institutions across Russia. This comprises 56% of the total number of international students studying in Russia today (Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation, 2013).

As cited on the National Research Tomsk Polytechnic University (TPU) website (2013a), according to Alexander Arefyev, a Deputy Director of the Center for Sociological Research of the Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation, more than 39% of the foreign students in Russian Universities come from the CIS countries, more than 35% - from Asian countries, students from the Middle East and North Africa make up 6.3%, from other African countries - 6.9%, representatives of Western Europe comprise 4.4%. The most popular fields of study among foreign students are engineering and technical services, which are chosen by 19.7 % of students (TPU, 2013a).

Tomsk Polytechnic University has about 20 years of experience in teaching foreign students. Today, more than 2000 students from 40 countries, such as Austria, Czech Republic, Brazil, Jamaica, Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Egypt, India, Iraq, China, Bangladesh, Mongolia, Australia, and many others attend the University (TPU, 2013b).

Studying in a higher education institution can be stressful, particularly for international students, who leave their home to study in another country. Unlike native students, international students need to develop bicultural competence, as they maintain their own values while adjusting to the practical, interpersonal, and emotional challenges encountered in the host country (Noh & Kaspar, 2003; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007; Musgrave-Marquart, Bromly, & Dalley, 1997). Most students are young adults who are in the process of developing personal characteristics and identity in order to function with a greater psychological and financial independence (Furnham, 2004). Such demands are more complex for the international students, who have to adapt to a new culture, language, academic and social environment. Taking into consideration the importance of international students, it is necessary to evaluate their adjustment to the university life and to compare their experiences with those of the domestic students. The purpose of this research study was to conduct such comparative investigation.

Studies that look into the experiences and adaptation of students to university lives have been carried out before. Some studies focus on financial factors. For example, Roberts, Golding, Towell and Weinreb (1999) found that the majority of university students have problems meeting their financial commitments. In particular, financial strain has been commonly reported among first year university students who are either moderately or severely stressed by the task of managing money (Tyrell, 1992). Financial concerns are commonly identified as one of the greatest sources of stress for international students as well (Chen, 1999; Lin & Yi, 1997; Mullins, Quintrell and Hancock, 1995, Mori, 2000). Specifically, increasing tuition fees and living expenses are notable areas of concern (Chen, 1999).

International students also experience a range of emotional stressors. These include not only typical developmental challenges of most students (autonomy, intimacy, belief systems), but also difficulties associated with their international status, such as being away from one's loved ones for prolonged periods of time, guilt, discrimination, and intense pressure from families and home culture to excel academically (Mori, 2000).

Furthermore, academic-related issues have been found to pose considerable concern for students (Rice and Dellwo, 2002). Academic demands often create significantly more problems for international students than their domestic counterparts (Burns, 1991). Past research findings have shown that academic related problems are of major concern to international students (Hashim & Zhilliang, 2003; Misra, Crist & Burant, 2003). These problems are heightened as international students try to master a new language and grapple with specifics of the educational system they are now experiencing. For example, in Russia, foreign students have to master the Russian language suitable for academic purposes in just 1 year prior to beginning of studies in their major.

As many students move away from home and their familiar environments, they may lose important support structures that have acted as powerful coping mechanisms in times of stressful life events. Social support helps in personal adjustment. Sarason, Sarason and Pierce (1990) suggest that social support can be two-fold: instrumental and emotional. Instrumental support involves assistance with practical problems, while emotional support is associated with the knowledge that one is valued, supported and belongs to a group (Sarason et al.). Domestic students have been shown to have lower levels of adjustment at entry and three months into the semester, likely

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