MASTER PROGRAMS FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN RUSSIA: BARRIERS AND CHALLENGES TO OVERCOME

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Abstract
The system of higher education in Russia is developing rapidly in accordance with global trends and processes occurring in the world. On the one hand, we feel a significant influence of the Bologna process, when students of different specialties get the opportunity to enroll in any master’s program: in Russia, the master’s program is not always seen as a deepening and specialization in the field of knowledge already received in the undergraduate program, but also as an opportunity to get a completely new specialty (for example, a student with a bachelor’s degree in biotechnology may attempt to get a master’s degree in Innovation management). On the other hand, Russian universities are interested in attracting foreign students, the number of whom has recently increased significantly. In connection with these trends, educational institutions face plenty of challenges that complicate the educational process and also affect its effectiveness. This is especially evident in the master’s training, where in a relatively short period (one/two years) a student must master the specialty at a sufficiently high professional level. To implement this, students should have satisfactory knowledge when entering a master’s program. However, the system of entrance examinations in the Russian Federation is highly regulated: tests in the entrance examination work lead to the problem of “guessing” the correct answers and do not always provide a correct assessment of students’ knowledge. This gives rise to another important problem: students with good command of the specialization (who have studied the necessary subjects at the undergraduate level for 4 years) and students who are not always familiar with the material are in the same class. This greatly complicates the educational process. In this regard, the Faculty of Economics in Lomonosov Moscow State University attempted to resolve these challenges not in the learning process, but at the stage of preparation for entering the master’s program.

In the proposed article we describe the experience of developing a distance system for training foreign students for one of the master programs at a Russian university, which reduces the gap between the knowledge of enrolling students, improves professional vocabulary in Russian, and also provides an opportunity to get acquainted with the cultural features of education in Russian universities. All these are to lead to an increase in the efficiency of the master courses educational process.

Keywords: foreign students, students’ training, students’ preparation, international education system, higher education institution.

1 INTRODUCTION
Modern globalization processes are reflected in any sphere of life, including in education. The accessibility of higher education makes possible the convergence of different cultures and the dialogue of nations and allows us to share experiences and practices in the course of interaction. Thanks to the Bologna process, we can talk about expanding access to higher education, increasing mobility of students and teachers, and ensuring the successful employment of university graduates due to the fact that all academic degrees and other qualifications should be focused on the labor market demands.

It should be noted that in the current market conditions, future students have the opportunity to become more “universal” and during the course of study they get not one specialty, but at least two, because the present flexibility and accessibility in education allows them to do it. The existing bachelor-master system of studies greatly simplifies professional diversification. As the practice of leading universities of Russia (Lomonosov Moscow State University and RUDN University) shows, master programs are becoming less in demand with a view to deepening knowledge in a particular area, on the contrary, students seek to get benefits from interdisciplinary approach in education. Increasingly frequently, students tend to choose another, new for them direction for the continuation of higher education. In this regard, a number of problems associated with the organization of the
educational process arise during the course. On the one hand, a training program for students of
different specialties needs a flexible approach, taking into account the peculiarities of students’
professional training. On the other hand, the increasing number of foreign students (including in
Russian universities) requires considerable attention to the difficulties arising from the language barrier.

In this article, the authors, practicing teachers of Lomonosov Moscow State University and RUDN
University, will consider the main problems slowing down the qualitative progress of the educational
process and describe the practices used at the Faculty of Economics at Lomonosov Moscow State
University to solve them.

2 METHODOLOGY

The training of foreign students in universities is of interest to methodologists of all countries, since the
main purpose of education is a quality learning process without distraction to language, cultural and
organizational problems. In Russia, the question of training foreign students is regarded in the works
of such scholars as TM. Balykhina [3], M.A. Ivanova [4], A.I. Surygin [7] and many others. Among
Western scholars, we note J. Abe, D. M. Talbot, R. J. Geelhoed [1], M. B. Buckelew, A. Fishman [2],
L. Lattuca [5], and M. W. Sidle, J. McReynolds [6].

Many of the world’s leading universities focus not only on the learning process itself, but also on the
integration of foreign students into the educational process. For example, the University of Michigan
pays special attention to bridging differences, improving the academic class climate, promoting
academic integrity and other aspects of adaptation [8].

In Russia, a lot of study programs have been proposed for foreign applicants in the framework of the
Study in Russia project with the support of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the
Russian Federation [9]. Thanks to this project, foreign students join the educational process within the
preparatory faculty, where they can study the Russian language in a volume sufficient to study at a
Russian university, receive a certificate confirming the level of proficiency in Russian, train in
specialized subjects, get acquainted with Russian traditions, and adapt to new conditions of life.

However, when changing a specialty in a master course, it is not always possible for a student to go
through the full-time preparation for training. Taking into account this factor, we describe a blended
program created on the basis of the Faculty of Economics at Lomonosov Moscow State University,
which makes it possible for foreign students in the short term to obtain the necessary knowledge and
skills to continue studying in a master course on a new specialty for them. Let us note that the
program described in the Results is at the testing stage, and we will reflect its advantages and
disadvantages in our next research.

3 RESULTS

3.1 Barriers and challenges to overcome

The main reasons for the problems arising in the learning process are related to the following issues:

3.1.1 Entrance exams

In most Russian universities, the system of entrance tests is strictly regulated, where the main focus is
on formalized forms of knowledge assessment (formal tests, for example), because in Russian
practice creative tasks (with an ambiguous interpretation of the correct answer) can result in appeals,
courts and other complex procedures. The tests as one of the common practice and form of entrance
examinations sometimes lead to the correct answers guessing and does not guarantee 100%
effectiveness of the knowledge assessment of enrollees.

3.1.2 Education process

Despite the huge number of positive aspects arising from the diversity of students in the same group
(different backgrounds, nationalities, professions, etc.), sometimes certain difficulties appear in the
learning process:

• different background(knowledge on the studied subject) of students in the group does not
  always provide an opportunity to approach effectively the learning process.

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• the Russian language is quite difficult and complicated, and even if a person speaks Russian at a sufficiently high level, being in the audience, he / she faces certain difficulties in understanding fluent speech in a professional field

• cross-cultural and organizational issues take time to adapt, distract students’ attention and make it hard to fully immerse in a learning process.

Insufficient attention to these problems in universities reduces the effectiveness of training and education.

3.2 Educational program for foreign applicants

The above-described challenges need to be tackled, and Russian universities have long-standing methods and practices for pre-university students preparation before their university studies. For example, both at Lomonosov Moscow State University and at RUDN University there is a system of preparatory education for foreign students. Traditionally, foreign enrollees attend full-time Russian language courses for a year, and only at the end of the course they start to study the specialty in bachelor or master.

But addressing the issue of specific training for master programs requires the adaptation of existing approaches. Given the emerging opportunities in the field of distance education, the Faculty of Economics in LMSU developed a blended training program for foreign students (covering 3 months of study) dealing with the above-described challenges.

The training course consists of 2 stages:

1. The first stage, that lasts for 2.5 months, implies distance learning on the faculty educational platform, where students every week get access to a new topic according to the curriculum: video-lectures, text transcripts, tasks for self-examination are available for each topic.

   In addition to the educational materials a student can consult with the teachers (both in the form of organized forums for communication on the educational platform and individual teacher consultations), as well as participate in online webinars.

2. Following the successful completion of the distance part of the training, the program provides a full-time two-week module with teachers on the covered topics, and also allows students to concentrate on adaptation to the cross-cultural and organizational issues in the university.

Such course format solves several problems:

1. Availability of the video and text materials allows the student to get through the lecture for several times if necessary and gives time and opportunity for the student to master the terminology and prepare for oral perception of the material in the learning process. It also helps to overcome possible language barrier faced by foreign students who are going to studying the Russian Federation.

2. The selection of material and topics for a training program significantly increases the level of student knowledge, reduces the gap in the students background and improves the effectiveness of education in the University.

3. Strict regulation and organization of possible actions allows the student to focus on the learning process and results, rather than on solving problems arising in the educational process (especially at the online learning stage, where students are freed from all organizational and possible cross-cultural challenges that will certainly arise during full-time learning in a new country).

The blended learning system described above allows us to improve the foreign students integration process into a new cultural, linguistic and educational environment. Unlike the traditional form of training (the above-described preparatory education in RUDN and LMSU), this form allows us to focus on the learning process and make the integration process more gradual and less painful for a foreign enrollee.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The study showed that in modern conditions more and more students tend to continue their studies and receive a master degree on a new specialty. In this regard, it became necessary to create a
training course that will allow them to integrate into the educational process, without being distracted by language, cultural and organizational issues.

In this article, we examined the barriers and challenges faced by participants in the educational process, namely, we highlight the imperfection of the entrance exams and educational process itself.

In this regard, we examined how these problems are solved in Russian universities on the example of the Faculty of Economics at Lomonosov Moscow State University, where there was created a blended preparatory program. This program consists of two stages: online and offline.

We have described the advantages of such a program, for example: opportunity to revise the course if a student has language difficulties, clear and structured selection of material, and strict regulation of the learning process.

This program is at the testing stage and we do not exclude potential deficiencies, which we will describe in our further research.

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