

LANGUAGE AS MEANS OF MUTUAL INTEGRATION IN MULTICULTURAL UNIVERSITY ENVIRONMENT

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Considering openness of modern Russian education to international students from all over the world the university has been undergoing a huge transformation into a multicultural and multilingual space that provokes new challenges for both administration and students. Addressing these challenges requires a common starting point for adaptation, socialization and further integration. And that common substance is neither more nor less than the language (both native and foreign) that proved to be the best facilitator. Any language (Russian, English and national languages of all students) has an endless capacity to create an international student-friendly environment within the campus and foster mutual integration of students from various cultural backgrounds. Authors come up with the model of deep integration based on building shared lingual environment, seen as a task for University administrators.

Key words: internalization, university, international students, language, multiculturalism, intercultural communication, integration

Internationalization has been one of the dominating policies in higher education systems of the majority of countries in the world over the last few decades. Already in 2004 OECD published a book on internationalization trends in higher education addressing main opportunities and challenges in this field and noting a rapid increase in the international student mobility flows [4, p. 11].

Russia is no exception in this trend. The number of international students has increased 4 times since 2000 and reached almost 245 000 international students per year in 2016 [2, p. 145-146].

These are some reasons for this tendency towards the increase in the number of international students enrolled at Russian HEIs:

1. The inability of the higher education system in some countries to meet the national demand in higher education in different spheres (especially, in the field of Medicine) (this concerns mainly Asian, African and Latin American countries);
2. High value of international diplomas of higher education in these countries;
3. The policy of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation aimed at promotion of the Russian higher education abroad, including:
 - scholarships of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Education: e.g. the quota for education of foreign citizens and persons without citizenship in the Russian Federation realized in cooperation with Rossotrudnichestvo aimed at attracting up to 15 000 foreign citizens (in 2017) to study for a Russian higher education degree [3];
 - websites launched with the aim to promote higher education in Russia (Russia.study, Study in Russia, etc.) and operating with the input from all universities involved (regular update of the information about study programmes, activities for international students, etc.);
 - work of Russian Embassies and Consulates, Centres of Science and Culture, etc. in the sphere of promotion of education in Russia.
4. Interest of Russian HEI in increasing the number of international students and their active involvement the recruitment process.

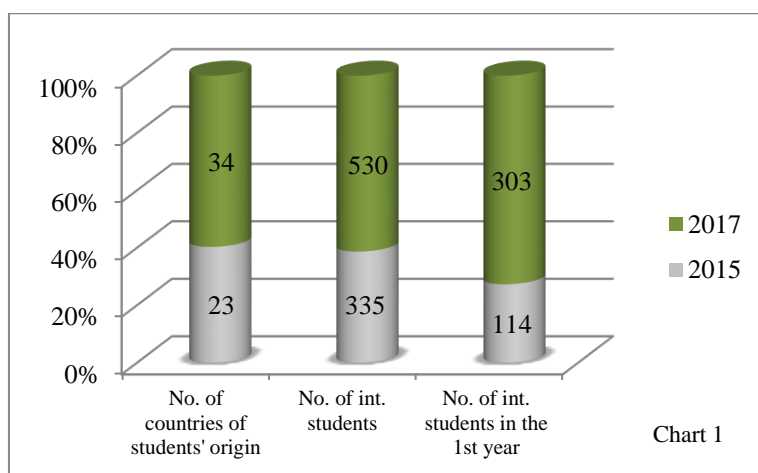
Following the current trends in higher education and recommendations of the Ministry of Science and Education universities are constantly chasing for internationalization as a vague tool of superiority though understanding very little about its nature and inner value. However, real internationalization occurs not outside the University, city, or even home country, but within the University environment, when it becomes able to adopt and take advantage of the power of the culture and language with which it comes in contact with.

Each Russian university develops its own internationalization strategy and means of students' integration. This article describes best practices of integration tools developed by Immanuel Kant Baltic Federal University.

Immanuel Kant Baltic Federal University being a federal University (in line with 9 other Russian HEIs) and a participant of the Russian Academic Excellence Programme 5-100 strives to attract a large number of international students and widen its international cooperation geography.

In this respect the University has shown a significant increase in numbers even within the last two years. The bar chart below illustrates these developments (see Chart 1).

The widening of cooperation geography and the rapid increase in the number of international students triggered the acute necessity to tackle the issue of students' integration and thus, internationalization at Home. Enrollment of students from many different countries and cultures, new for IKBFU, determined the necessity to introduce new approaches towards dealing with diversity and difference.



In the chase for international students and programs the majority of participants of this running are obviously forgetting that it is all in vain if we can attract students but have no “carrot” to keep them.

As Larry A Braskamp puts it students do not exist in vacuum – they are formed by the sociocultural environment around them [1, p. 2]. And thus, if the University wants to facilitate students’ integration into the University life it should address the issue of the sociocultural environment – create a certain campus culture and community.

At Immanuel Kant Baltic Federal University we came up with the idea of three elements as fundamental principles for successful internationalization strategy.

1. Internationally-driven faculty and administration staff;
2. Atmosphere of mutual collaboration;
3. Creation of a shared lingual environment.

In our opinion, it is the administration that plays an incredible role in promoting internationalization at home by creating international-friendly environment, supporting innovations in the field of curriculum development, giving space for students to show their creativity by means of extracurricular activities.

We understand that University faculty and administration should be open-minded and tolerant, speak a foreign language and demonstrate respect to native and foreign cultures. To achieve these goals we introduced the language program for University administration and staff who had the opportunity to attend language classes and then take an international exam to prove their language mastery. At the moment we are conducting seminars on intercultural communication, cultural and religion diversity both among tutors or buddies (students who work with international students) and University staff.

The second element “mutual collaboration” is easily realized through constant dialogue between people and cultures. To promote this dialogue we encourage and support various international events and festivals organized by students. Solving the problem of introducing people and cultures to each other we had to find a place serving as a meeting point. Now we have a co-working interspace in one of the reading halls that is used as a venue for international clubs, fun-zone and just a place where students (both Russian and international) can chat and discuss their everyday routine. Moreover, here students have an open access to the materials in foreign languages, as well as equipment, such as computers and printers. The instructions and manuals are

in translated into English, and the library staff has completed an English course. Thus, this learning space has a welcoming for international student atmosphere encouraging them to get involved into both studies and extra-curriculum activities.

The third element “creation of a shared lingual environment” is implemented in two steps. First the students get involved into social-cultural activities organized by the University and institutes administration. The series of such adaptation activities start from the very first days of their arrival with the event “Orientation week” which is a common practice in both Russian and foreign universities. The international students get first hand insight on the University administrative and education processes. The key goal is to make all important information available in the beginning and create a welcoming atmosphere through English and other foreign languages. A separate session of the orientation week is devoted to the development of the survival Russian skills through practical classes where, for instance, they are taught how to call an ambulance, as well as through a specially developed “Survival Russian” booklet as a part of a welcome pack.

After finishing the introduction the University holds a number of Russian language-oriented events. Some events take place once a year, for example, “Russian poetry contest” which is designed to celebrate the International Women’s Day, interest the international audience to read more Russian literature and promote the Russian language. In 2018 thirteen students from Iraq, Mongolia, Brazil, India and other countries signed up to read one poem in Russian. Preparing for the contest international students worked alongside with the Russian students which volunteered to help. Such experience has proved to be very rewarding for both sides and encouraged them to be more active and open in their university life.

Other events are hosted weekly, for instance, the Russian language club and Russian film club. The latter is conducted in the original language with English subtitles and mostly designed for international students with the intermediate level of command of Russian. To consolidate the newly gained material a small discussion club on sharing impressions is conducted at the end of each session. The Russian language club considers its key objective as to enhance communication skills through vocabulary, grammar and role games. These activities are conducted in Russian and through the language the clubs forms the understanding of the Russian culture, traditions and mentality.

It is worth mentioning that most socializing events are organized with the support of the IKBFU international student committee “Interclub”. These are Russian university students who volunteer to accompany international students, translate and assist in everyday situations. That allows ensuring a personal approach which is essential for successful adaptation. Thus, the events are conducted by students for students which builds up a solid multinational student community at the campus.

The second step is implemented by the international students and aimed to introduce their culture and language at the University level as well as at the level of the city. As an example, it has become traditional to conduct “My first lesson of a foreign language” where the international students as native speakers teach the basics of their mother tongue. Such event encouraged many Russian students to take in foreign language classes later and most importantly served as a cultural bridge between the nations and facilitated a mutual acceptance and understanding.

The international culture is also transmitted through such event as “Days of foreign culture” which encompasses countries from Asia to the Latin America. The international students with the help of their tutors prepare a presentation in the Russian language thus demonstrating their level of command of a new language.

The international students raise awareness of their cultures and languages as well through the clubs of foreign languages conducted on a volunteer basis for the University students. Today IKBFU holds the clubs of Portuguese and Japanese. The clubs of Spanish and Arabic are planned to be opened in coming months. Such mutual cultural sharing through the language both as a means of communication and common interest ensures solid foundation of bilateral assimilation and integration within the campus.

Thus, the abovementioned internalization strategy oriented to promote the multiculturalism via both Russian and a foreign language has proved to succeed in adaptation and integration at multiple levels: international student – Russian student, international student – teaching and administrative staff, international student – city residents and can be applied and developed further for better mutual understanding between different cultures.

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