

Special Aspects of International Students' Socio-Psychological Adaptation at Modern Universities

Aspectos especiales de adaptación sociopsicológica de estudiantes internacionales en universidades modernas

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ABSTRACT:

The article is devoted to the analysis of the reasons for socio-psychological adaptation of international students at modern universities. The results of a series of surveys conducted in an interethnic university are given. The example of RUDN University has demonstrated that the social and physiological factors are dominant in the de-adaptation. The article also offers a number of tools to increase the effectiveness of international students' adaptation.

Keywords: Socio-psychological adaptation, social integration, university, international students

RESUMEN:

El artículo está dedicado al análisis de las razones de la adaptación sociopsicológica de los estudiantes internacionales en las universidades modernas. Se presentan los resultados de una serie de encuestas realizadas en una universidad interétnica. El ejemplo de la Universidad RUDN ha demostrado que los factores sociales y fisiológicos son dominantes en la desadaptación. El artículo también ofrece una serie de herramientas para aumentar la efectividad de la adaptación de los estudiantes internacionales.

Palabras clave adaptación sociopsicológica, integración social, universidad, estudiantes internacionales

1. Introduction

In the globalized world, the number of universities with a high percentage of international learners is growing. Most of these universities are located today in the US, Britain, Australia, France and Germany. Nevertheless, the number of multinational universities and institutes is

increasing every year in China, Russia, Japan, Eastern Europe and other countries. This is the reason for the formation of a special multicultural environment in the institutions of higher professional education that requires special organization and management. The primary reason for this is because the increase in the number of international students has not only a positive multiplier effect on the development of the university (its inclusion in prestigious world rankings, increasing the university's competitiveness in the global educational services market), but also leads to some difficulties that in case of inadequate and untimely solution can result in the directly opposite effect (the decline of the university's reputation in the global educational market). The reasons for these difficulties are determined by, not the least, the inadequate adaptation of international students to studies in a foreign country.

The key problems faced by international learners in the early years include a clash with a new linguistic and sociocultural environment, climate and time zone change, new methods and forms of instruction, a change of work and rest schedule. All these factors lead to physical and psychoemotional stress, provoking changes in behavior, apathy, bad habits, and increasing incidence. As a link in the chain reaction, the international students' stresses lead to an increase in the number of conflict incidents at the university, accidents, deterioration in academic performance, and decreased discipline. This provokes a further increase in the number of dissatisfied students, and then to the deterioration in the reputation of the higher institution in the national and world educational environment. All of the above underscores the relevance of the problem of the psychological adaptation of international students to the conditions of life and study in the new climatic, sociocultural and foreign environment that modern multinational universities face today. The negative consequences of de-adaptation of international students, factors preventing the effective inclusion of international students in the university's life and the educational process, the authors' proposals for specific tools to improve the adaptation of international students at a modern university are also relevant and important.

2. Literature review

The idea of adaptation of the individual to the environment was considered by well-known philosophers (Descartes, Durkheim, and Montesquieu), however, the science of sociology began to study the process of social adaptation only at the beginning of the last century. From that moment on the theoretical and methodological foundations of this problem were laid, a number of serious scholarly papers were published. For example, Thomas and Znaniecki (1920) developed a methodological tool for analyzing adaptation of educational migrants in a new socio-cultural environment, but it should be noted that their research was conducted about a century ago, and today some conclusions require a revision of the relatively modern social, economic and other conditions. Parsons (1955) revealed the content and functional significance of adaptation as a fundamental property of social systems. The problems of studying the cross-cultural adaptation of international students at international universities were also investigated by modern authors: Di Marco (2004), Shafaei and Razak (2016), Szabo and Marian (2017), Chai, Krägeloh, Shepherd, and Billington (2017). Nevertheless, a universal toolkit for increasing the effectiveness of overseas students' adaptation was not presented. Such authors as Bukhari and Saba (2017), Schartner and Young (2016) considered the impact of adaptation problems on the satisfaction of international students studying at modern universities, but they did not examine the categories of more adaptive and less adaptive students, representatives of various world cultures.

Sandel paid attention to the influence of social media on the cross-cultural adaptation of overseas students (2014). Tomin, Sakharova and Eremina studied the intercultural adaptation of students in the information field of cross-cultural interaction, and also drew attention to the notion of adaptability; nevertheless, they also did not specify categories of more adaptive international students (2014). The problem of socio-psychological adaptation of international students is also considered in the works by Lynn and Douglas (2010). Schotte, Stanat and Edele (2017), Castro and Aristegui (2014), Scherto (2007), and Yu Xiulan (2015). Certain aspects of adaptation of students-carriers of different cultures were

studied by Meng, Zhu, and Cao, who studied the processes of adaptation of students from China (2017). Machart investigated this issue regarding Asian students (2018). The adaptation of Chinese students was also considered by Zhang and Wang (2015).

Thus, today the problem of socio-psychological support of international students demonstrates the diversity of approaches and the absence of a single point of view on the phenomena that determine its effectiveness. This necessitates further additional research, obtaining reliable results, developing effective measures to improve the system of socio-psychological support for international students at modern institutions of higher professional education.

3. Goals and objectives of the study

The purpose of this publication was to study the main aspects of international students' socio-psychological adaptation at modern universities. To achieve the key goal of the publication, the authors posed a number of tasks: establishing the dependence between the low level of adaptation of international students and the reduction of the university's competitiveness in the global educational space; studying the main reasons for de-adaptation of international students; conducting a series of surveys on the problems of overseas students' adaptation at the RUDN university; identifying more 'adaptive regions' depending on the region of arrival of an international student; developing recommendations for improving the level of adaptation of overseas students at modern universities; substantiating the need for the psychological support for international students at every modern university with a high percentage of international learners.

4. Methodological basis of the research

International students studying at one of the most multinational universities of the Russian Federation – the Russian University of Peoples' Friendship (RUDN University) were the object of the study presented in this article (RUDN, n.a.). The sample totaled 340 overseas students. The survey was conducted in the form of a series of questionnaires from 2004 to 2016. The survey was aimed at identifying the most important factors impeding successful socio-psychological adaptation of international students, as well as distinguishing the most adaptive students, representatives of other cultures. The methods of analysis and synthesis, study and generalization, a sociological survey were used in the research.

The academic papers of foreign and Russian authors, as well as the results of the authors' survey were the sources used as a basis for the provisions and conclusions of this publication.

5. Results

As a result of the analysis, the main features of international students' socio-psychological adaptation at modern universities were reflected; a link was established between the low level of international students' socio-psychological adaptation and the low level of the university's reputation in the educational services market (national and global); three key groups of factors (physiological, personal, social ones) were identified that hinder the successful adaptation of international learners; for the first time, the main factors of international students' de-adaptation at the Russian university were established (social: adaptation to other people's norms, traditions, lifestyle, forms of education, language problems); the groups of overseas students – representatives of other cultures that are least adaptive to Russian culture (the Africans from Non-Arab countries and the Chinese) were identified. The key recommendations for the improvement of the system of international students' socio-psychological adaptation were given: to create a specialized psychological support service for international students, involve actively tutoring services and university administration, monitor adaptation problems among overseas international students on a regular basis, intensify extracurricular activities, and provide personal approach to socio-psychological adaptation. Provisions, conclusions and practical recommendations can be used in further studies of issues of international students' socio-psychological adaptation at

modern universities all over the world, as well as in the practical activities of institutions of higher professional education.

6. Discussion

The article analyzes the peculiarities of international students' socio-psychological adaptation at a modern university, and presents the results of a series of surveys to identify the problems of their socio-psychological adaptation at a Russian university. Based on the results of the sociological survey, studies of academic contributions in this area, the authors compiled a list of recommendations that would promote increasing the level of socio-psychological adaptation of overseas students. Particular importance is assigned in the list of recommendations to the service of psychological support for international students.

6.1. Application

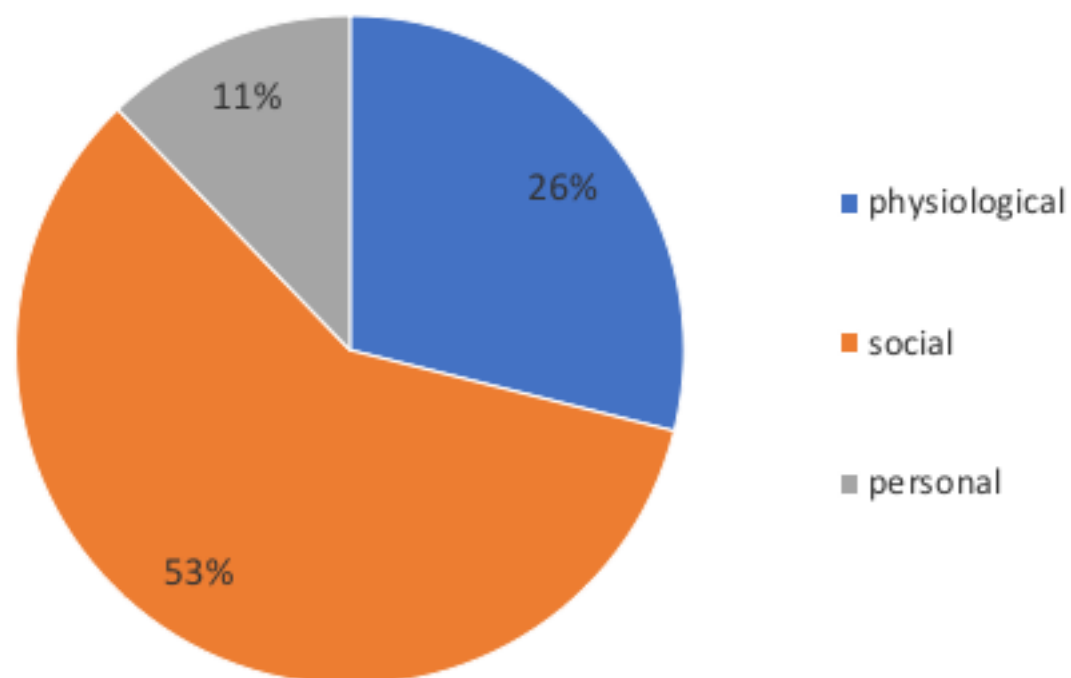
The results obtained, as well as the theoretical and methodological provisions and conclusions of this publication can be used by the scholars dealing with this issue, as well as in the practice of universities with a high percentage of international learners, in order to build a competent and effective system of socio-psychological adaptation of overseas students.

6.2. The main problems of international students at modern universities

In the process of training at a modern university international students experience significant adaptive difficulties in the new socio-cultural and linguistic environment, in the conditions of other methods and forms of training, in a new climate, a complete change in the mode of work and rest. As a result of the authors' survey of the overseas students at the Peoples' Friendship University of Russia, the following groups of key problems faced by foreigners in the period of adaptation to education in the new country were identified: physiological (getting acclimatized and habituated to new foods); social (adaptation to other people's norms, traditions, lifestyle, forms of education, language problems). Personal problems (difficulties in communication with fellow students) come easy to international students according to the results obtained (Fig. 1).

Fig.1

The main problems faced by international students
in the course of adaptation to study in Russia



Source: compiled by the authors

Thus, international students, especially the freshers, experience problems in acclimatization, adaptation to new living conditions, manifestation of ethnocultural stereotypes (domestic nationalism) in some regions of education, language barriers, problems in adapting to new norms of behavior and other forms of education. However, it should be taken into account that depending on the region of study and the region of the student's arrival, the significance of these factors will be different (table 1).

Table 1
Differences in the adaptation of students from different countries (in %)

The most difficult for an international student in Russia	The country of arrival						
	Latin America	China	Arab countries	Asia	Arab countries of Africa	Africa	Europe
studies	11.39	20.25	6.32	16.45	1.26	43.03	1.26
daily life	9.49	6.70	10.61	15.08	4.46	52.51	1.11
leisure	7.35	7.35	14.70	16.17	5.88	48.52	0
communication with classmates	14.28	7.14	0	21.42	0	50	7.14
communication with other people	9.67	6.45	11.29	16.12	1.61	54.83	0
other	12.9	9.67	12.9	19.35	0	41.93	3.22

Thus, of all international students, the students from non-Arab countries of Africa (43%) and China (20%) experience the greatest difficulties in the field of educational activities. Africans

from Non-Arab countries experience the greatest problems practically in all other spheres: daily life, leisure, communication with other people. Chinese students experience considerable difficulties only in studies. Students from Latin America have difficulties in communicating with classmates, and students from the Arab countries of Africa and Europe experience practically no difficulties (Vitkovskaya, 2005).

Language difficulties and their components were also studied, which showed that the main linguistic problems for overseas students at a Russian university are in the perception of lecture material (35%) and when working with education books (33%) (table 2)

Table 2
Language difficulties experienced by international students (in %)

In communication with people around them	10
While working with education books	33
While perceiving lectures	35
In oral recitations	18
In leisure time	1
No language difficulties experienced	3
Other	0

As can be seen from the table below, the majority of international students, both males and females, assess their relationship with Russian classmates as positive (79.83 and 83.32%, respectively). Their relationship is negatively assessed by 7.56% of male students and only 3.7% of female students. It is noteworthy that none of the international female students is in conflict with Russian students, while 2.1% of international male students have conflicts with Russian classmates (table 3)

Table 3
Relationship between international students of different genders and their Russian fellow students (in %)

	"lots of friends"	"amiable relations have developed"	"scarcely communicating with others"	"relations do not develop"	"constantly conflicting"
males	45.16	34.67	8.87	5.46	2.10
females	38.88	44.44	12.96	3.70	0

It should be noted that there are no sharp differences in the assessments by students from different countries of their relations with Russian fellow students. Most of them positively assess their relations with their Russian counterparts (table 4)

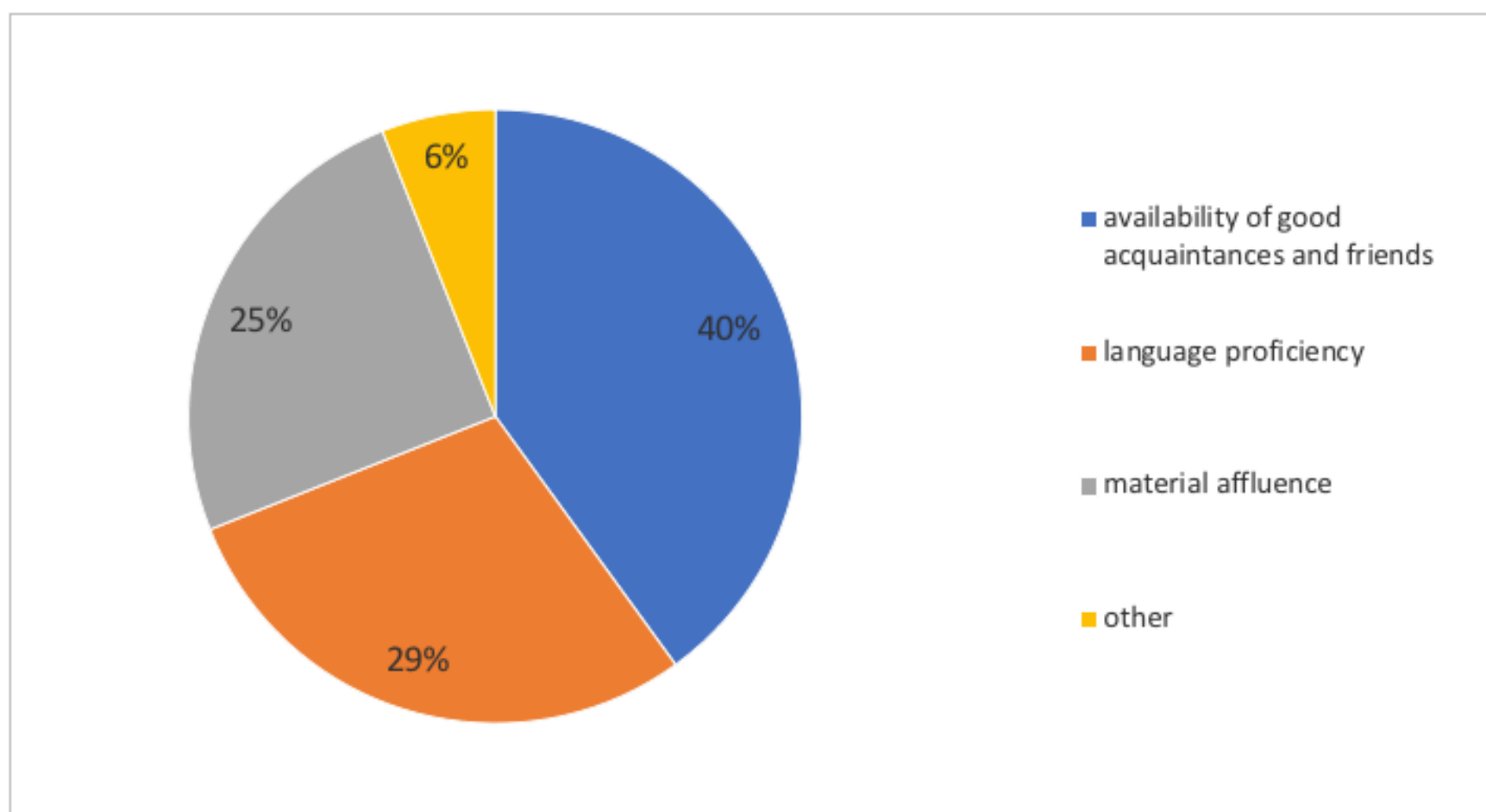
Table 4
Relationship between international students from different countries and resident students (in %)

	"lots of friends"	"amiable relations have developed"	"scarcely communicating with others"	"relations do not develop"	"constantly conflicting"

Latin America	38.46	15.38	38.46	5.12	2.56
Arab countries of Africa	55.17	34.48	6.89	3.44	0
China	54.83	25.80	6.45	12.90	0
Asia	48.97	40.81	6.12	4.08	0
Europe	36.36	63.63	0	0	0
Arab countries of Asia	39.43	39.43	14.78	4.22	2.11
Africa	25.00	75	0	0	0

Overseas students consider the availability of good acquaintances and friends among the resident students (40%), language proficiency (29%), and material affluence (25%) to be important criteria for successful adaptation in a foreign cultural environment (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2
Important factors of successful adaptation in a foreign cultural environment (in %)



6.3. Phases and methods of managing socio-psychological adaptation of international students

All foreigners studying in another country undergo three typical phases that characterize the process of the individual's adaptation to a new culture. Thus, during the first phase of their stay in another country, the students experience an emotional uplift, a sense of optimism and hopes for their successful education at the university. During the second phase, as the students join everyday activities and meet with difficulties, their initial positive emotions may turn into depression, embarrassment and sometimes even into hostility to another

country. If the difficulties encountered in this critical phase of the process of adapting to another culture are resolved, the international students adapt to the new situation and are able to work effectively and contact successfully with the residents, which characterizes the third phase of socio-psychological adaptation for training in another country. Otherwise, there is de-adaptation of international students, which entails a number of serious physiological, psychological and behavioral problems.

In the course of international students' socio-psychological adaptation, it is important to take into account all aspects: social, pedagogical, socio-psychological and medical-biological ones (table 5). Accordingly, various directions in adaptation should be developed: psychological, methodological, social, corrective-diagnostic, additional education, and so on.

Table 5
The main aspects of international students' adaptation

The main aspects of adaptation	Characteristics
Social	This aspect involves adaptation to the new ethno-cultural environment, to the social micro- and macrostructure, adaptation to the training group, to the faculty members, etc.
Socio-psychological	This aspect is associated with specific personal parameters: personal characteristics, temperament, nervous system type, levels of conformism and communicativeness.
Pedagogical	This aspect is manifested in the peculiarities of adaptation to a new pedagogical system, a different system of instruction, the need for mastering a large flow of information in a non-native language, and new training requirements.
Medical and biological	This aspect is aimed at determining ways to adapt the body to new, unusual climatic conditions, to create a system of medical care, including the prevention of diseases.

A wide arsenal of activities can be listed among the effective methods of socio-psychological adaptation: psychological counseling of international students by psychologists and social psychologists, extracurricular activities, team-forming activities, control over adaptation by the administrative staff of the university and faculty, and others.

One of the important roles in the process of socio-psychological adaptation is performed undoubtedly by the extra-curricular activities with international students, where they take a direct active part (excursions, competitions, cultural events, charity events, participation in various student associations, etc.). Thus, for example, at the RUDN University, the role of foreign communities is significant in the socio-psychological adaptation of students (there are more than 100 communities), and various joint student associations (Association of Asian Students, Federation of Students from Latin American Countries and the Caribbean, the Association of African Students, Association of Arab Universities) contribute to this adaptation as well. Within extracurricular activities, the team-forming activities (joint trainings on team building, participation in the preparation of thematic events, etc.) are also of great importance.

Joint living of students from different countries and regions of the world in the hostel rooms is another effective method of successful socio-psychological adaptation of international students. This rule has been valid in the RUDN University hostel for more than 50 years and has already proved its effectiveness in socio-psychological adaptation of international students who come to the university.

6.4. The role of the social support service for international

students

Due to the urgency of the problems faced by international students at modern educational institutions (both first-year and senior students), it is becoming important to form a psychological support system for international students at the university. A specialized service of socio-psychological support for studying foreigners should become the central link in this system. In addition, the university staff (the university administration, tutors, lecturers, psychologists (social psychologists) and students (both foreigners and residents) should be involved in the system.

The implementation of the idea of psychological support involves three interrelated tasks:

- 1) to monitor systematically the students' psychological and pedagogical status and the dynamics of its development in the learning process;
- 2) to create socio-psychological conditions for the development of students' personality and their successful learning, which involves the development of individual and group programs of psychological development based on the data of psychodiagnostics;
- 3) to create special socio-psychological conditions to assist overseas students with problems in psychological development and training.

The activities on socio-psychological adaptation, which can be the responsibility of the socio-psychological support service, may include: individual counseling of students by the support team; regular monitoring of the educational and personal stress of international students; organization of extracurricular activities; organization of trainings on socio-psychological adaptation; joint activities with the tutoring service and the university administration; trainings among teachers to increase the psychological competence and skills of working with international students; involving more experienced international students from senior courses into the process and so on.

A personal approach based on the compliance of specific forms of psychological support with the personal characteristics of students, their norms of behavior, needs, and motivational attitudes should be an effective principle in the process of international students' socio-psychological adaptation.

Thus, the individual factors ensuring the success of an international student's adaptation may include:

1. Individual factors (demographic and personal characteristics of the individual: age, gender, social origin, social status, education, etc., circumstances of the individual's life experience);
2. group factors (the degree of similarity or divergence between cultures, the peculiarities of the culture in which international students were brought up, the peculiarities of the host country, the psychological factors of adaptation to the training group (the psychological atmosphere and emotional state of students in the training group), socio-pedagogical factors (a new pedagogical system, a language barrier, a system for monitoring and evaluating knowledge), and others.

Only when these personal and group factors are taken into account, with regard to the country that sent the student to study abroad, and the socio-cultural characteristics of the host country, with the participation of all persons of the international student's adaptation process, it is possible to build a truly effective system of socio-psychological adaptation.

7. Conclusions

The goal set at the beginning of the research – to study the main features of international students' socio-psychological adaptation at modern universities – was achieved. As a result, key aspects of international students' socio-psychological adaptation were examined as a case study at an international Russian university, the relationship between the low level of international students' adaptation and the decline in the university's competitiveness in the global educational space was established; the most important causes of international students' de-adaptation were studied. A series of authors' surveys among international

students at the RUDN University resulted in revealing key problems that prevented their effective adaptation, the groups of foreigners that are least adaptive to Russian culture were identified, depending on the region of arrival (the Africans of non-Arab countries and the Chinese). The authors developed specific recommendations for improving the level of international students' adaptation at modern universities and justified the need for the psychological support of international students at every modern university with a high percentage of international learners.

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