



# Relationship between Adaptation and Coping Behaviour of International Students in Russia

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The purpose of the study presented in the article is to generalize theoretical and empirical studies on the relationship between adaptation and coping behaviour of international students in Russia. There is a pronounced tendency towards the increase in international students wishing to obtain higher education in Russia. Not only the "geography" of international students is expanding, but the number of Russian universities willing to enrol the students is also increasing. In conditions of modern multicultural education an individual must actively adapt to inevitable changes due to the very specifics of any internationally oriented university. Expansion of academic mobility practices (educational, communicative, sociocultural, etc.) leads to a wide variety of problems and risks. We summarized the data of fundamental and applied studies on the problems of adaptation and copying behaviour of international students. We noted that adaptation of the students is a complex phenomenon that includes several different types of adaptation (physical, moral and informational, sociocultural, etc.). Success of the adaptation process is ensured by the adequate interaction of international students within the sociocultural and intellectual environment of the university. The results of the study can be implemented in the development of educational programs for academic mobility of students, as well as the youth policy programs.

**Keywords:** foreign students, difficult life situation, adaptation, coping behaviour, coping strategies.

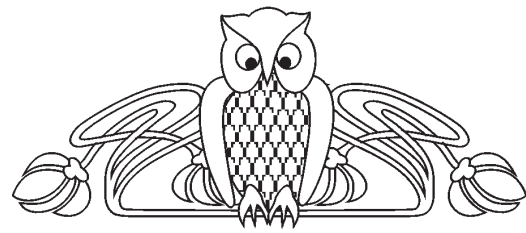
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## Introduction

More recently, it has become a frequent phenomenon when young people from different countries come to study in Russia. However, foreigners face a number of problems when they arrive in the country that differs from their homeland in culture, traditions and even language. Such problems include adaptation to a new social environment, the language barrier, living conditions, legalization, as well as a number of other difficulties. Many international students can face a sociocultural shock associated



with unusual realities of a new place and new living conditions. Foreigners have to adapt to the new conditions. Basically, a person experiences similar stress when he/she comes to another country, which is different from his/her native one. Therefore, when changing the culture and realities, some foreigners find themselves in a very difficult situation.

It is specifically important to consider that international students are mostly very young people who have just finished school, left their usual conditions, life, and relatives. Clearly, everyone experiences such dramatic changes in their lives differently and suffers from anxiety, unequally aware of the severity of the effects. For many people it is difficult to cope with these changes, but step-by-step almost everyone gets used to the new lifestyle and realizes that they can adapt to the new conditions and continue to live on, becoming accustomed to a previously unknown culture. In this regard, it is very important for international students to be able to cope with numerous life problems and difficulties, maintain psychological health and successfully develop their skills, adapting to both social and personal transformations and crises. We raise the question whether it is necessary to consider this phenomenon, on the one hand, as adaptation to the new requirements of the emerging international system, and, on the other hand, as a partnership of national educational systems at the international level.

The purpose of the study presented in the article is to generalize theoretical and empirical studies on the relationship between adaptation and coping behaviour of international students in Russia.

## Adaptation problems experienced by international students

There are very few papers written by modern researchers showing the specifics of socio-psychological adaptation of the 1<sup>st</sup> year international students at Russian universities [1, 2] presenting the level characteristics of adaptation process [3], or describing difficulties of adaptation process, such as linguistic, moral and informational, climatic, material, communicative and other issues.

For sure, the ability to overcome the difficulty of "entering" the new macro-(ethnosocial and ethnocultural) environment and micro-(interethnic) environment is of particular importance [4]. Arriving in Russia, international students are also "entering"



the new sociocultural environment where at first they find it hard to adjust. The socio-ethnocultural adaptation of foreigners involves the ability to maintain a regular way of life (if it does not contradict the way of life typical of the country), in adopting a foreign culture, respecting foreign traditions, values and norms. It is possible that the person becomes nostalgic after some period of time, when he/she gets used to the new conditions and feels tired from someone else's social environment that he/she cannot accept as his/her own.

One of the important problems in the international students' adaptation in Russia is their language studies. The most difficult aspect is dissimilarity of the Russian language to other languages, including Cyrillic alphabet, and the content itself. There are significant differences between the colloquial and the written (literary) languages. This affects the perception of information; students often experience significant difficulties in understanding lectures or preparing for their classes. The number of difficulties arises – adaptation to the language, adaptation to the culture, adaptation to the society. Therefore, to study the Russian language in Russia means not just to master the learning or communication tool, but also to explore the culture, customs, literature and achievements of the Russian cinematography, theatre, etc. Finally, as a result of the studies, they become able to understand the Russian character and engage in closer interaction with representatives of the new culture. In other words, the experience of communicative interaction in the new conditions and communication environment significantly allows to solve a number of problems for the students adapting to them.

Language education brings about the need for international students to be ready and capable to live and work in a changing world with its problems, to successfully implement various forms of communication with speakers belonging to foreign linguistic cultures. Since the ability to verbal communication at the intercultural level affects the sphere of social relations between people, it is necessary for students to develop not only language skills, but also personal qualities that allow them to effectively interact and conduct a peaceful dialogue with representatives of other cultures. The personal qualities must, first of all, include intercultural tolerance, i.e. the ability to understand, accept the cultural characteristics of a representative of another culture, seeing him/her as a bearer of other values, ways of thinking, forms of behaviour and thereby avoid intercultural conflicts.

Intercultural tolerance is an integral quality characteristic of a linguistic persona in general and a secondary linguistic persona in particular. Intercultural tolerance is both a value and a goal for students. In order for an individual who has grown up in one linguistic culture to be able to understand the peculiarities of another foreign culture and be tolerant of

them, it is necessary that the educational process is not only aimed at improving communicative skills, but also helps students to become familiar with the cultural phenomena of the target-language country. Moreover, alongside description of the cultural characteristics of the country and native speakers of the target language, it is recommended to discuss the problems of the ever-changing global world – the problems of racism, discrimination, ethnocentrism, national problems and ways to solve them.

### **The problem of coping behaviour**

The person's adaptation to life can be disturbed in a difficult situation due to external or internal influences. An individual cannot satisfy his/her life needs with previously developed methods and models of behaviour. In this regard, it is particularly relevant to address the issue of an individual's development of effective coping behaviour strategies.

According to the majority of researchers, coping behaviour is one of the types of social behaviour associated with ensuring productivity, maintaining the health and well-being of a person [5, 6], characterized by a person's focus on overcoming difficult life situations in ways appropriate to personal characteristics and situations [7]. The meaning of this kind of a person's social behaviour, according to T. L. Kryukova [8], is to master, solve, ease, get used to or evade the requirements of a difficult situation.

Without getting deeper into the historical and psychological background of the problem development, we note that the operationalization of the "coping" construct is associated with its interpretation as a way of person's behaviour in stressful situations, as a mechanism for overcoming (stopping) stress (regulating emotions and controlling over the problems that cause distress) [9], as a mechanism for regulating (maintaining) the balance between the requirements of the environment and the internal resources of the person as a subject of adaptation [10], as the quality of the individual (stress resistance, resiliency, etc.) [11], as manifestation of subjective human capacities in mobilizing the personal potential in solving the emerging problems, and the choice of strategies to cope with difficult life situations [12].

We should note that there are two fundamentally different approaches to the definition of coping in the psychological literature. Proponents of the first approach see coping as a broad concept that includes psychological defence mechanisms alongside conscious, transformative strategies. 'Broadly speaking, *coping* includes all types of the subject's interaction with external or internal tasks – attempts to master or ease, get used to or evade the requirements of a problem situation' [13, p. 21]. R. Lazarus and S. Folkman [14] define coping as a dynamic interaction of a person with a situation, as cognitive, behavioural and emotional efforts aimed at eliminating external



or internal contradictions. In this case, according to the data obtained from foreign sources, the following concepts are actively used: “active coping”, “transformational coping”, “regressive coping”, and “avoidance coping”.

Representatives of the second approach distinguish coping and defence as specific forms of behaviour. So, for example, N. Haan [15], proposing a similar differentiation of concepts, clarifies that coping mechanism and defence mechanism are based on identical processes, but have the opposite focus. The researcher distinguishes between these mechanisms according to several parameters: in particular, coping is flexible, purposeful, and considers peculiarities of the situation; defence is rigid and automated, while emphasizing that coping involves processes of thinking, analyzing the situation and is highly differentiated, while defence mechanisms involve a greater number of unconscious reactions [15].

In general, we note that, despite the large number of studies carried out in the field of coping strategies, the question of its various strategies remains debatable and the most complicated one. When overcoming difficult life situations, a person uses a wide range of active (coping strategies) and passive (defensive mechanisms) strategies, which are the most important forms of adaptation processes. In this regard, L. I. Antsyferova's opinion is appealing to us. According to it, 'coping is a process where at different stages the subject uses various strategies, sometimes even combining them. Moreover, there are no strategies that would be effective in all difficult situations' [16, p. 16]. It is necessary and possible to teach a person to overcome life difficulties, but it is the person who chooses the methods based on his/her individual psychological characteristics, life experience, significance of events and other factors [17].

Empirical studies of foreign students' coping strategies in the new sociocultural and educational conditions show that the preferences of foreign students in overcoming difficult situations are associated with significance reassessment (subjective decrease) of the emerging difficulties [18], self-control of emotions and a rational choice of the further behaviour strategy [19], and specific strategies of self-presentation (exemplary conduct and desire to please other people) [4]. The data presented in a number of studies [1, 18, 19] shows that Russian students demonstrate the preference for manifestation of self-control, self-possession, internal repression, and independence in overcoming difficult life situations to a lesser degree.

## Conclusion

Summarizing the foregoing, we emphasize that the study on international students' psychological adaptation requires the integrated approach and comprehensive analysis of subjective and objective

difficulties that a person faces in the new life conditions, as well as various kinds of individual and psychological indicators and personal characteristics that contribute to or prevent the person's effective adaptation.

The results of the study can be implemented in the development of educational programs for academic mobility of students, as well as youth policy programs.

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**Соотношение адаптации и совладающего поведения иностранных студентов в России**

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Цель исследования, представленного в статье, заключается в обобщении и теоретико-эмпирическом изучении проблемы соотношения адаптации и совладающего поведения иностранных студентов в России. Выраженной тенденцией является увеличение количества иностранных студентов, желающих получить высшее образование в России. Не только расширяется «география» контингента зарубежных обучающихся, но и увеличивается количество российских вузов, готовых принять иностранных студентов. В современном поликультурном образовании от

личности требуется активная адаптация к неизбежным изменениям, обусловленным самой спецификой международно ориентированного вуза. Расширение практики академической мобильности (образовательной, коммуникативной, социокультурной и др.) порождает множество разнообразных проблем и рисков. Обобщены данные фундаментальных и прикладных исследований, посвященных проблеме адаптации и копинг-поведения иностранных студентов. Отмечено, что адаптация иностранных студентов – это комплексное явление, включающее несколько разноуровневых видов адаптации (физическая, нравственно-информационная, социокультурная и т. д.). Успешность процесса адаптации обеспечивается адекватным взаимодействием иностранных студентов с социокультурной и интеллектуальной средой вуза. Прикладной аспект исследуемой проблемы может быть реализован в разработке образовательных программ академической мобильности студентов, а также программ молодежной политики.

**Ключевые слова:** иностранные студенты, трудная жизненная ситуация, адаптация, совладающее поведение, копинг-стратегии.

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