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Impact of the Pandemic on the Learning Process of Foreign Students Studying in Russia and Prospects for Educational Migration

Andrey N. Zharov ^a, Liliya Beloglazova ^{a, *}, Natalia G. Bondarenko ^b, Galina V. Brega ^c

^a Peoples' Friendship University of Russia (RUDN University), Moscow, Russian Federation

^b Pyatigorsk Institute (branch) of the North-Caucasus Federal University, Pyatigorsk, Russian Federation

^c Financial University under the Government of the Russian Federation, Moscow, Russian Federation

Abstract

Globalization in the field of science and education has intensified the so-called student migration. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, universities have been forced to quickly reorganize their educational activities with the help of distance learning technologies.

The article is aimed at identifying the COVID-19 impact on student migration and the development of distance learning.

The article presents a brief review of the current state of student migration all over the world and identifies the approaches to the concept of student migration, as well as its advantages and disadvantages for all participants in the educational process. In the course of the study authors used several general scientific and special methods: comparison and generalization, applied in the process of analysing researchers' views, the abstract logical method applied in the process of formulating research conclusions. The main method of the research was expert survey. Based on an expert survey, the authors identify the key aspects of the COVID-19 impact on student migration, the conditions necessary for improving the quality of distance learning services for foreign students at the university level, and the ways of enhancing the cognitive activity of foreign students during distance learning in the context of the pandemic. In the conclusions, the author determines that COVID-19 leads to serious structural changes in higher education institutions due to the development and spread of new learning technologies, as well as changes in world educational migration.

Keywords: COVID-19, international students, distance learning, cross-border education, student mobility.

* Corresponding author

E-mail addresses: Beloglazova_lb@pfur.ru (L. Beloglazova)

1. Introduction

Migration processes play a huge role in the formation of the cultural, educational, and professional environment in the world in general and in countries in particular. The world becomes a single entity, and this process is facilitated by both the activities of international organizations, in which graduates of various higher education organizations work, and communication on the Internet. Today, the scientific, educational, and professional environment becomes international and acquires more and more qualities of migration mobility, that is, the ability of an individual or a social group to respond to the challenges of the time by changing the environment and updating the way of life. The educational environment quickly reacted to global trends and created new migration conditions for the applicants. Student migration, in addition to economic benefits, is a source of resupplying the economy with highly qualified workers. In many countries, it is considered to be the first step towards labor migration (mainly on account of the representatives of missing categories of specialists).

Over the past years, before the pandemic, the number of international students, especially from East Asia, increased rapidly, and the number of international students within the sub-regions also continued to grow. A large number of international students attend educational institutions in the countries of the European Union, the USA, Canada, and the UK, trying to get a better education (Waters, 2012).

The UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report notes that in 2018 China continued to be the main source of international students worldwide (UNESCO, 2018). Thus, in the 2017–2018 academic year, there were more than 360 thousand Chinese students in the US. According to the Ministry of Education of China, the number of Chinese students studying abroad in 2018 reached 662,100 people. However, East Asia was not only a major source of international students but also an important destination for international students, who mainly came from the sub-region. Thus, the number of foreign students in higher education organizations in China in 2018 exceeded 490 thousand people. Students from South Korea accounted for the largest number of international students in China. This number was followed by the number of students from Thailand, Pakistan, and India. New Zealand and Australia have also attracted a large number of international students. The number of international students in Australia has grown since 2012, reaching a record level of nearly 760,000 people in 2019 (a 9.7 % increase in comparison with 2018). In New Zealand in 2016/2017, there were more than 91 thousand international students, mainly from China and India.

According to the study, the share of student migration is 2.1 % of the total number of international migrants, which is three times less than migrant workers (European Migration Network, 2019). However, the outbreak of the COVID-19 and the measures taken by the countries to prevent the spread of the virus have both direct and indirect impacts on student migration.

Considering the above-mentioned information, the study of the future of study migration and the development of distance education in the context of the COVID-19 makes it possible to improve the functioning of higher education institutions, to foresee the possible consequences of the choice of educational options by applicants, to plan measures to respond to trends in the educational process, and to develop measures to adapt policies in the field of education.

There are various approaches to the concept of student migration in the scientific literature (Table 1).

Table 1. Approaches to the concept of student migration

Source	Definition
Findlay, 2010	A mass socio-cultural phenomenon, when people leave their places of permanent residence and move to a different region or country to receive education
King, Raghuram, 2013	Temporary stay of students on the territory of the educational institution with the subsequent return to the place of residence. On the one hand, speaking about the territories of arrival and departure, it can be considered to be a set of relocations of students. On the other, from the point of view of a student, it is a set of relocations necessary for the achievement of the goal of migration

Raghuram, 2013	Relocation of people who belong to different age groups and who are either consumers of educational services in another country or participants in academic exchange programs outside their country
Hawthorne, 2012	Intentional temporary relocation of people, who move to a foreign country to receive higher education

The main institutional forms of student migration, according to Jenny McGill ([McGill, 2013](#)), can be considered to be student mobility and cross-border education.

Cross-border education is considered to be all types of higher education programs and other types of educational services when their consumers (students or listeners) are outside the borders of the country of the educational organization ([Chetro-Szivos, 2010](#)). Thus, cross-border education does not always require the physical movement of a person to another region or country of the world for educational purposes. The latest methods of e-learning allow acquiring knowledge remotely in the home country. This type of education, according to C.A. Farrugia and J.E. Lane, is almost deprived of the features of student migration, since there is no integration of a student into another culture. It also reduces the possibility of the transformation of student migration into labour migration, therefore the consequences of this type of education will mainly have only a personal effect ([Farrugia, Lane, 2012](#)). Jane Knight ([Knight, 2014](#)) singles out two main forms of cross-border education dissemination: 1) education at a foreign university for a limited period or the entire period of study; promotion of the educational programs in a traditional form through the creation of representative offices, affiliates or campuses; 2) educational programs abroad with electronic resources for distance learning; franchising educational programs (up to 75 % of all exports of educational services), which is granting a foreign provider of exclusive rights to implement their educational program abroad.

The authors of works devoted to student mobility distinguish between two types of it: vertical and horizontal ([Collins, 2012; Knight, 2012](#)). Vertical student mobility is considered to be the education only in a foreign university, and horizontal student mobility is considered to be the education abroad for a limited period. According to Laura Prazeres, a set of legal, organizational, economic, and informational actions of the state is needed to activate academic mobility. These actions should be aimed at creating such an environment, which would be appropriate for the implementation of the right to academic mobility for those who are involved in the educational and scientific process ([Prazeres, 2013](#)). The researcher considers organizational actions to mean infrastructure support, the basis for the formation of which should be open access to educational programs and related services. The tools of the state regulation economic mechanism of the process of enhancing academic mobility, according to the researcher, should be aimed at ensuring the affordability of education abroad and ensuring motivation and stimulation for the return of the young specialists.

The generalization of the researchers' views indicates the presence of the following positive features of student migration: a degree certificate recognized all over the world; improved foreign language skills; communicative experience in an intercultural environment; communication practice in international organizations; employment opportunities in international companies ([Adnett, 2010; Crossman, Clarke, 2010](#)).

Several researchers note that in general, student migration positively affects the home country ([Skovgaard-Petersen, 2013; Alghamdi, Otte, 2016](#)). The most important condition for this process is the return of emigrants from abroad. Thus, on condition of the migrant's return, the country receives a more educated specialist, since the social and cultural experience, gained during the years of studying abroad, presupposes better adaptive characteristics. Among the positive consequences, the researchers also mention the establishment of academic and business networks, the exchange of information between highly qualified specialists, promising scientific research, and saving money on the education of qualified specialists.

At the same time, the researchers note several advantages of student migration specifically for foreign countries ([Gribble, 2008; Choudaha, de Wit, 2014](#)). They are geopolitical, economic, demographic, and social advantages. To be more precise, they are significant financial inflow to the national economy, the development of the tourism industry, and an increase in profit from the growth of tourist flows; the development of innovative material and technical components of the

educational industry, the expansion of the range of educational services, and accelerated integration of national universities into the international scientific and educational space; the improved demographic indicators due to the rejuvenation of the population and its quantitative increase; intellectualization of human capital and potential provision of the national economy of the country with highly qualified specialists, which, in turn, accelerates scientific and technological progress and economic development.

Speaking about the negative consequences of student migration for the migrants' home country, the researchers name the risk of loss of labour potential and the transformation of student migration into labour emigration; deteriorating population structure due to the increased average age of the working population; the threat associated with the slow development of scientific and technical progress of countries (Oosterbeek, Webbink, 2011).

According to J.-J. Soon (Soon, 2010), an effective migration policy may help to mitigate these negative consequences, including the simplification of the procedure for the recognition of degree and qualification certificates obtained abroad; the introduction of loans for study abroad, which would contain financial mechanisms to encourage return.

Research hypothesis: COVID-19 causes important structural changes in higher education institutions due to the development and further spread of new educational technologies which can ultimately change world educational migration.

Research objectives:

- to identify key aspects of the COVID-19 impact on student migration;
- to identify the conditions necessary for improving the quality of remotely provided educational services at the university level and the ways of enhancing the cognitive activity of foreign students during distance learning in the context of the pandemic.

2. Methods

To achieve the goal of the study, we applied several general scientific and special methods. First of all, it is necessary to single out the methods of comparison and generalization, applied in the process of analyzing researchers' views, the abstract logical method applied in the process of formulating research conclusions, and the expert survey method.

The database of the research is represented by two types of literature. The first one includes research aimed at examining the features of student migration, and the second one includes research aimed at analyzing the viability of using distance learning technologies.

It should be noted that the method of literature analysis is used in the vast majority of studies on student migration, which became the basis for its application in this study. At the same time, the expert survey method is not used often; however, the results of studies (Chetro-Szivos, 2010; Collins, 2012; Crossman, Clarke, 2010) indicate its effectiveness, which also served as the basis for choosing this method in our study.

The literature review was carried out using the methods of theoretical generalization, comparative analysis, analysis, and synthesis, which made it possible to identify the approaches to the concept of student migration, as well as its advantages and disadvantages for all participants of the educational process.

The main research method was the expert survey.

The study was conducted from December 1, 2020 to February 31, 2021.

The survey involved experts in the field of providing educational services to foreign applicants for higher education and distance education from Russia, Kazakhstan, and Belarus (40 people), whose professional activities had been carried out for more than 10 years. The age of the experts was 35-45 years; 17 of them were men and 23 were women.

The experts were asked to fill out a semi-formalized online questionnaire using e-mail.

The questionnaire included the following questions, which had to be answered in a free form without limiting the number of answer options:

What, in your opinion, are the key aspects of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on educational migration?

What, in your opinion, are the conditions for improving the quality of distance learning services for foreign students at the university level?

In your opinion, indicate possible ways to enhance the cognitive activity of foreign students in distance learning during the pandemic.

Using the expert survey method, key aspects of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on educational migration were identified, including the impact on the prospects for educational migration, the conditions for improving the quality of remotely provided educational services at the university level, and ways to enhance the cognitive activity of foreign students during distance learning during the pandemic.

Next, the experts ranked the expert opinions. The consistency of expert opinions was assessed by the value of the concordance coefficient for

$$W = \frac{12S}{n^2(m^3 - m)}$$

where S is the sum of the squared deviations of all estimates of the ranks of each evaluation object from the average value; n is the number of experts; m is the number of evaluation objects.

Statistical processing of the survey results, obtaining descriptive statistics (percentage of expert mentions), and determining the concordance coefficient were carried out using the SPSS software product.

All the participants were informed about the purpose of the survey and knew that the authors of the survey would publish a summary of the results.

3. Results

Based on the expert survey, we identified the key aspects of the COVID-19 impact on student migration (Table 2).

Table 2. The key aspects of the COVID-19 impact on student migration

No.	The aspects of the COVID-19 impact	%*	Rank
1	Difficulties associated with administrative procedures of admission to a foreign higher education institution (a university) and travel to a foreign country for education. Most countries have closed their borders trying to stop the spread of the virus on their territory, and many universities have also been closed during the pandemic	85 %	1
2	Several countries have changed or adapted their migration procedures at the national level, often in collaboration with higher education institutions. Many universities have also adapted their admission procedures	82.5 %	2
3	Several countries have issued guidelines for universities to facilitate the migration of international students as much as possible while respecting the safety measures adopted to prevent the pandemic spread. Different countries have different views on allowing foreign students to enter the country if they study online. Some countries have urged students to get their visas in advance to be able to enter immediately as soon as entry restrictions are lifted	80 %	3
4	Travel restrictions imposed in many countries can jeopardize the ability of international students to be present at the institution where they were enrolled or planned to enroll. This has prompted some countries to introduce exceptions aimed at preventing the revocation of visas or permissions and giving international students additional time to complete their studies	80 %	4
5	In general, international students are allowed to stay in the country for a certain period after graduation to find a job or start a business. However, the pandemic could jeopardize the ability of international students to achieve such goals within the usual period because of its negative impact on the labor market	77.5 %	5
6	Many international students are unable to return to their home countries due to travel restrictions, which potentially entails an	72.5 %	6

	uncertain legal position for students that could prevent future migration		
7	The crisis has impacted the ability of international students to provide for themselves while studying since many of them are often dependent on student work. The ability of the student's family in the home country to provide for the student may also be negatively affected by COVID-19. This situation affects both future international students and students who are studying abroad now	7.5 %	7

Note: compiled based on the expert survey; * – the percentage of expert references

The value of the concordance coefficient $W = 0.82$ ($p < 0.01$), which indicates a strong agreement of expert opinions.

Thus, most experts believe that the main aspect of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on educational migration (Table 2) was the difficulty in completing the administrative procedures necessary for entering a foreign university and arriving at the place of study. Most countries introduced quarantine restrictions on entry. Universities, in turn, were also closed for quarantine, despite the fact that several countries and universities changed or adapted the procedures for admitting foreign students. For those who are already studying, they introduced exceptions necessary to complete their studies.

The experts noted that COVID-19 encourages higher education institutions to introduce innovative solutions in a relatively short period and introduce distance learning using a variety of web servers, platforms, resources, and social media. According to the experts, the following conditions are necessary for improving the quality of distance learning services for foreign students at the university level (Table 3).

Table 3. The conditions necessary for improving the quality of distance learning services for foreign students at the university level

No.	Conditions	%*	Rank
1	to choose educational platforms on which distance learning of foreign students will be carried out, to define the forms of work of teachers with foreign students, the principles of students' progress evaluation, to specify strategies for teachers' behavior in various problem situations that may arise during distance learning of foreign students	85 %	1
2	to clearly define and unify the requirements for the educational process participants in the context of distance learning	82.5 %	2
3	to create instructions, including in the form of a video, for the work on recommended educational platforms and post them on the university website	80 %	3-4
4	to define and unify the methods for creating and using distance courses in the educational process that would meet modern requirements; to create variable methods for distance learning for foreign students	80 %	3-4
5	to organize professional filming of teachers' lectures	77.5 %	5
6	to ensure the protection of intellectual property rights of teachers as developers of distance courses for foreign students	72.5 %	6

Note: compiled based on the expert survey; * – the percentage of expert references

The value of the concordance coefficient $W = 0.79$ ($p < 0.01$), which indicates a strong consistency of expert opinions.

Thus, the main measure for improving the quality of distance learning services at the university level for foreign students (Table 3) is an adequate definition of the distance learning educational platform, forms of work of teachers with students, the policy of evaluating learning outcomes, and the behavior of teachers in problem situations associated with distance learning.

At the same time, clear regulation of requirements and timely communication of them to foreign students, as well as the development of instructions for distance learning and their placement on the university website, become no less significant.

The experts identified the main ways of enhancing the cognitive activity of foreign students during distance learning in the context of the pandemic (Table 4).

Table 4. The ways of enhancing the cognitive activity of foreign students during distance learning in the context of the pandemic

No.	Ways of enhancing the cognitive activity	%*	Rank
1	to maintain communication with foreign students through various communication channels (mobile communications, instant messengers, e-mail, social networks, free educational platforms) not only during the classes	85 %	1
2	to obligatorily turn on the video camera during online classes: the responsibility of both students and teachers increases significantly when they see each other and have feedback	82.5 %	2
3	to make classes regular; it is advisable not to change the time and duration of online classes (from an hour to an hour and 20 minutes)	80 %	3
4	to send messages or e-mails with an exhaustive and logically structured list of tasks for every class	80 %	4
5	to alternate the types of educational activities and tasks, for example: preparation of computer presentations and their further presentation, participation in discussions of the speeches, solving tests and situational problems, reading/listening/watching lectures, drafting documents by hand and using a computer, creation of test questions and cases, preparation of projects, writing essays and scientific publications (abstracts), etc.	77.5 %	5
6	to conduct online classes in the form of consultations with explanations of the most difficult to understand or controversial issues and various visual aids (presentations, videos, slides with structured text, etc.)	75 %	6
7	to involve foreign students in discussions, which include the preparation of relevant and interesting topics and questions	75 %	7
8	to use the individual approach in education, which includes the student's ability to choose the topic of coursework, the form of education and the way of communication with the teacher, etc.	72.5 %	8
9	to abandon the traditional online lectures in favor of the so-called "flipped" lessons: students get acquainted with the electronic version of the lecture and then discuss it during an online class	70 %	9

Note: compiled based on the expert survey; * – the percentage of expert references

The value of the concordance coefficient $W = 0.83$ ($p < 0.01$), which indicates a strong agreement of expert opinions.

Thus, the main method to enhance the cognitive activity of foreign students during distance learning in a pandemic (Table 4) is to ensure constant communication with them through various communication channels. At the same time, it is desirable to have video contact, observe the regularity of online classes and assignments, alternate types of educational activities and tasks, conduct online classes in the form of consultations and discussions, and introduce flipped lessons.

4. Discussion

Despite the working experience in the field of the distance education system, the surveyed experts noted certain difficulties in the processes of distance learning organization and support for foreign students.

The first group of difficulties common for teachers and students is associated with the transition to the distance learning format. The second group is related to the educational migration of students under the influence of the transition to distance learning.

Firstly, for the majority of teachers who work with foreign students, especially for those who do not work in the field of information and communication technologies, the problem was the materials and digital resources preparation and their further arrangement on a digital platform. Experience has shown that all the developments that teachers used during the past years do not fit the distance learning format. The experts cited examples when qualified teachers with a high teaching level easily hold lectures for foreign students while having only a plan or the key points of the lecture. However, the digital presentation of educational material means a completely different way of teaching. However, the digital format for presenting educational material suggests a completely different way of teaching.

According to one of the respondents (Expert 12), today it is no longer enough to have text content, created in a text editor. For a high-quality distance presentation of the materials, it is necessary to transform the teacher's experience into the form of symbols, select illustrative material, learn how to create presentations, etc. Besides, the format of the e-course includes not just simple slides, but such slides that connect the text with graphs, that include animation, explanations, video recordings, etc. It is also necessary to know how to use tools for creating e-courses, tests, interactive simulators, etc.

Secondly, there appeared a problem with the organization of education in a different format and the development of other methods and techniques for working with the audience remotely. According to one of the respondents (24 years of work experience), this means that the teacher should be able not only to compile an electronic textbook and fill it with appropriate content but also to develop such tasks for students, the solution of which would contribute to the comprehensive development of the person and the formation of relevant competencies. For this purpose, it is advisable to examine and implement methods of working with digital content, methods of remote work, ways of organizing group, collective, or creative work for foreign students during self-study time.

The experts noted that the methods for working with digital content do not replace traditional methods, but enrich and expand them. Therefore, it is advisable to learn how to harmoniously combine them, expand, and add interactivity, which will help optimize the learning process.

To other difficulties, the experts attributed the problems that are characteristic of the training of all students. Summarizing the experience of researchers and the results of our expert survey, we highlighted the four most important problems that arise in distance learning:

- the difficulty of identification. The problem lies in the impossibility in certain cases to identify the person performing the task or test; this is especially true for international students.

- the difficulty of control. The risk of incomplete assessment of students' competencies because most forms of control in distance learning are carried out in the form of tests or writing answers to the questions. In this case, according to the experts, it is difficult to assess the level of formation of general and professional competencies, especially communicative competencies, which are important for certain professions. Changes in the form of student assessment in the shortest possible time led to great difficulties, especially in areas with specific requirements for working with information or testing certain skills. The organization of online exams became a test not only of students' professional knowledge but also of their ability to quickly adapt to learning conditions.

- the problem of supporting student motivation. S. Brammer and T. Clark ([Brammer, Clark, 2020](#)) note that students have become the most vulnerable part affected by COVID-19, and the universities pay special attention to their interests in the development and implementation of appropriate measures. However, not every student can maintain motivation for independent work due to the absence of either an internal motivator for effective learning activities or external constant control from the teacher.

- the transformation of pedagogical activity. Researchers and teachers have also been significantly affected by COVID-19, as the pandemic has necessitated the largest and fastest transformation of teaching activities and assessment methods that has ever been observed in modern universities. This caused an increased workload for researchers and teachers required a combination of the efforts, including software training and co-working.

The presence in students and teachers of such character traits as discipline, clarity of implementation, and thoroughness in work made it easier to adapt to these changes. An important problem for teachers in this regard was the need to combine work at home and control over homework with other household duties, which blurred the lines between work and household

chores and led to longer work hours and greater workloads. In our opinion, this factor is one of the most negative for teachers in the transition to distance education.

Turning to the second block of difficulties, let us consider the problem of educational migration.

According to the Inform by the European Commission, before the COVID-19 pandemic, international university education, which was entirely conducted on the Internet, was quite rare and generally did not provide a basis for admission to foreign countries (EMN/OECD, 2020). As distance learning has gained popularity because of the pandemic, there appeared a problem of admission to full-fledged university distance learning. As many universities have switched to online education, countries are evaluating whether international students should be admitted and under what conditions.

For example, the Australian Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations includes Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) which oversees university standards. With the entry restrictions, Australian universities which offer online courses risked not meeting the quality standards. TEQSA has developed exceptions to the usual regulatory requirements and published a news bulletin for the providers of distance learning services for international students to help universities meet not only the minimum quality standards. In France, the Minister of Higher Education, Research, and Innovation and related institutions promoted the online course program during the lockdown to attract international students who were reluctant to come to France to study due to the pandemic. In Finland, online education did not prevent the issuance of an extended study permit, and the residence permit was not canceled due to the switch to distance learning caused by COVID-19. If an applicant for an extended permit cited COVID-19 as the cause of the constraints, and if before the COVID-19 this applicant studied well, the decision was in the applicant's favor, even if the learning outcomes did not meet the existing requirements. Israel has decided to admit foreign students for the 2020/2021 academic year, regardless of the type of education (distance or traditional form of education).

The limitations of the study include the size of the expert sample and the lack of experts from far abroad.

The prospect of further research may be an analysis of the prospects for educational migration in the post-pandemic period after the complete lifting of quarantine restrictions.

5. Conclusion

The following conclusions can be drawn from the study.

Global natural disasters, which include the COVID-19 pandemic, significantly affect the world, the development of the economy, and the transformation of social institutions.

COVID-19 challenges the main activities of higher education institutions based on a wide range of curricula significantly complicates the implementation of interactive, person-centered traditional classroom learning, based on many years of the university experience. To adapt to a long-term pandemic, universities need flexible and reliable educational models that enable them to constantly adapt to changes. COVID-19 has accelerated and enhanced long-term pedagogical trends by creating a natural experiment that tests and evaluates numerous innovations that will benefit students after the crisis.

One of these innovations is the active use of a new type of educational tool, which is distance learning technologies. They were used during the quarantine in conditions when the opportunities for visiting higher education institutions by applicants are limited or absent.

Thus, the research hypothesis is that COVID-19 causes important structural changes in higher education institutions due to the development and further spread of new educational technologies changing world educational migration.

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