Challenges to Internationalization in Russian Higher Education:
The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the International Student Experience

M. O. Abramova, A. V. Filkina, E. V. Sukhushina

Maria O. Abramova, Candidate of Sciences in Philosophy, Director of the Center for Sociology of Education, Institute of Education, National Research Tomsk State University. Email: abramova@mail.tsu.ru (corresponding author)
Aleksandra V. Filkina, Candidate of Sciences in Sociology, Research Fellow, Center for Sociology of Education, Institute of Education, National Research Tomsk State University. Email: lexia@inbox.ru
Elena V. Sukhushina, Candidate of Sciences in Philosophy, Dean of the Faculty of Philosophy, National Research Tomsk State University. Email: elsukhush@inbox.ru

Address: 34a Lenina Ave, 634050 Tomsk, Russian Federation.

Abstract   The COVID-19 pandemic has essentially jeopardized the internationalization processes in higher education. International travel restrictions, financial insecurities, and the introduction of distance learning formats have been posing serious challenges for international students. The present study is based on data obtained in a countrywide survey of Russian university students conducted in June–July 2021 as part of the project Research and Instructional Design Support for the Development of a Quality Measurement System in Higher Education During the COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond. International students' perceptions of distance learning, its quality and challenges are analyzed. Judging from international students' responses to the questionnaire, the process of their adaptation to the new study conditions has been routinized. Among the benefits of online learning, international students name the logistic ones such as mobility, relative cost-effectiveness, and optimization of time. Perceptions of the communication constraints related to learning from a distance are largely negative. In addition, international students perceive themselves as a more vulnerable category compared to Russian students and obviously gravitate toward in-person learning. For the most part, international students are ready for blended learning, but remote formats of communication and learning should be applied to them with more caution than with Russian students.

Internationalization of higher education is a key manifestation of globalization, which has swept over multiple spheres of life in modern society [Altbach 2019]. It implies purposeful integration of international and intercultural dimensions into national higher education systems, which involves international mobility of students and scholars, global university rankings, and internationalization of the curriculum, teaching, and learning [de Wit 2019].

International mobility provides an additional source of income for universities and promotes the development of domestic human capital by attracting talent from abroad. For Russian universities, internationalization is a mechanism for keeping up with the global educational and research agenda; in many rankings, the number of international students is a significant quantitative indicator of university performance [de Wit 2019]. From a broader perspective, internationalization in education is a "soft power" tool reflecting the global impact of host countries [Mellors-Bourne et al. 2013; Antonova, Sushchenko, Popova 2020].

This article zeroes in on a meaningful aspect of internationalization: foreign students who come from the "near abroad" (post-Soviet states) and "far abroad" (all other foreign countries) to study in Russian universities.

International enrollment in higher education had been constantly expanding up to spring 2020. Over the last fifty years, the number of mobile students enrolled in tertiary education programs worldwide doubled every decade, reaching 5.3 million in 2017 [OECD2019]. In the context of internationalization and massification of higher education, which are integral components of global economic and political processes, researchers projected further increase in international student enrollments and in the number of international educational and research collaborations [De Wit, Altbach 2021]. The COVID-19 pandemic triggered a crisis of academic mobility all over the world: following campus closures, a lot of students found themselves isolated in dormitories or had to go back to their home countries.

There is no consensus among researchers as to the long-term effects of the pandemic on academic mobility. Some predict a considerable and steady decrease in incoming international students and students willing to enroll in distance or blended learning programs in foreign universities. Such a conclusion is reached, for instance, by looking at the results of surveys conducted in spring 2020, at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic [Mok et al. 2021; Haugen, Lehmann 2020; Aristovnik et al. 2020].[1] Others, like Altbach and de Wit, contend

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[1] Mercado S. (2020) International Student Mobility and the Impact of the Pandemic//BizEd: AACSB International. https://bized.aacsb.edu/articles/2020/june/covid-19-and-the-future-of-international-student-mobility (https://academ.escpeurope.eu/pub/IP%202020-73-EN.pdf); ICEF (2020) US: COVID-19 Impacts Include Campus Closures and Recruiting Challenges. https://monitor.icef.com/2020/03/us-covid-19-impacts-include-campus-closures-and-recruiting-challenges/

that the crisis-induced decline in international academic mobility is temporary, so one can only expect a restructuring of mobility patterns, probably changes in sending and destination countries or even learning formats, but the trend for internationalization of higher education will continue.[2] Survey findings show that the majority of students intend to return or have already returned to study abroad, whether online or in-person.[3]

One year into the pandemic, the situation remains quite ambiguous. While in-person learning has been resumed in some countries, distance learning continues to prevail in others. A number of questions regarding formats of international student mobility in the present-day context remain unanswered [Yıldırım et al. 2021; Li 2020].[4]

In Russia, naturally, increasing the number of international students is a priority for higher education policy. Russian universities engage in student mobility programs with the near-abroad (mostly) as well as far-abroad countries. International enrollments in Russian higher education has been constantly growing over the recent years, doubling between 2007 and 2017 to reach 260.000 [Gurko et al. 2019] and increasing by 17,000–20,000 each subsequent year to make 315,000 in 2020, which is almost 8% of total tertiary enrollment in Russia.[5]

Will the ongoing pandemic lead to an outflow of international students from Russian universities? To a large extent, it depends on their perceptions and feelings about the situation with the pandemic in general and the transition to distance learning in particular. The new circumstances faced by internationalization-oriented universities should be subjected to analysis. The key research question that the present study attempts to answer is, how did international students perceive distance learning in the academic year 2020/21? In particular, what advantages and challenges of distance learning matter for them? do Russian and international students differ in their perceptions of distance learning? and are there any fundamental differences within the category of international students? Answers to these questions will allow

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[2] Altbach P.G., de Wit H. (2020) COVID-19: The Internationalization Revolution that Isn't//University World News. March 14. https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20200312143728370

[3] ICEF (2021) Survey Highlights Student Views on Returning to Study Abroad. https://monitor.icef.com/2021/07/survey-highlights-student-views-on-returning-to-study-abroad/

[4] Mitchell N. (2020) Students to Decide Which Institutions Survive COVID-19//University World News. May 07. https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20200507135847614; Lane J.E., Borgos J., Schueller J., Dey S., Kinser K., Zipf S. (2021) What Is the Future for International Branch Campuses?//University World News. March 13. https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=2021031012405285

[5] Form of Federal Statistical Monitoring VPO-1 "Information about a Higher Education Institution Offering Bachelor's, Specialist's, and Master's Degree Programs". https://minobrnauki.gov.ru/action/stat/highed/

assessing the risks and prospects of internationalization of higher education in Russia.

1. International Students During the Pandemic: Review of Literature

Researchers of higher education studying the status of international students during the COVID-19 pandemic mostly focus on how students cope with the transition to distance learning and how it has affected their mental health. Surveys were carried out to find out how students solved some practical problems (visas, financial issues, etc.) and how they reacted to decisions made by host governments and host universities; to a somewhat lesser extent, such studies address the sociocultural aspects of adjustment to distance learning. The majority of publications on international student experiences during the pandemic target local contexts, surveying particular groups of students in specific universities.

1.1. Specifics of transition to distance learning in different categories of international students

Emergency transition to distance learning became a major challenge for students. Studies performed during the first months of the pandemic show that online learning was perceived controversially by Russian [Zakharova, Vilkova, Egorov 2021] as well as international students, the latter expressing more negative views on the quality of distance learning than the former [Noskova et al. 2021]. In RUDN University, some positive effects of the transition to online learning for international students were revealed: students' attention concentration improved (especially in language lessons and project-oriented seminars) due to minimization of student-to-student distractions; teachers greatly improved their ability to use a variety of multimedia resources, which is a feature that had been unavailable in some classrooms lacking the necessary equipment; and some of the students studying from their home countries maintained high levels of motivation and participation. The challenges of transitioning to distance learning in RUDN University included the negative impact of technical issues on student attendance and involvement, the lower number of face-to-face social interactions, and the increased number of opportunities for cheating and other forms of malpractice [Novikov 2020].

Researchers report that distance learning formats exacerbate socioeconomic educational inequalities [Bekova, Terentev, Maloshonok 2021]. International students from developing countries are the most vulnerable category, in particular due to relatively high cost of internet access, poor internet connectivity, and lack of electricity in their home countries [Owusu-Fordjour, Koomson, Hanson 2020; Kapasia et al. 2020; Demuyakor 2020; Wang, Zhao 2020].

Students enrolled in majors requiring a lot of practice—mostly medical, but also some artistic and technical specializations—expressed their dissatisfaction with various "ersatz" hands-on learning practices [Li et al. 2021; Noskova et al. 2021; Tyumentseva, Kharlamova, Godenko 2021].

1.2. Mental health and accommodation issues

Studies conducted in February–May 2020 show, expectedly, a considerable increase in the incidence of anxiety, depressive states, and other mental health disorders among students [Cao et al. 2020; Aristovnik et al. 2020]. One of the key stressors was the outbreak itself, meaning a threat to physical health. Besides, there were various institutional problems associated with government policies: border closures, international travel restrictions, the economic recession that led to financial constraints, etc. College and university students have been traditionally more vulnerable to mental health disorders due to academic stressors, as compared to individuals in the same age bracket but not enrolled in tertiary education, so campus closures and isolation caused by the pandemic had a severe impact on their mental wellbeing [Fialho et al. 2021].

Students' perceptions of study conditions depend largely on the institutional environment and on how effectively visa, registration, insurance, accommodation, and tuition issues are solved. A special survey administered by Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) Consortium in July 2020 showed that, along with concerns about maintaining good health, the top three most stressful issues for international students during the pandemic also included managing their visa status and having adequate financial support [Chirikov, Soria 2020]. In a number of countries, international students became a marginal group because they were ineligible for economic securities and relief programs provided to residents by host governments [Coffey et al. 2020; Firang 2020]. Furthermore, preventive and supportive measures provided by the respective institution or authorities were positively related to students' satisfaction and trust gains [Sarker et al. 2021].

1.3. Cross-cultural barriers

Cross-cultural interactions and cross-cultural adjustment have always been in the focus of research on international student experiences [Li, Zizzi 2018; Straker 2016; Khanal, Gaulee 2019; Jones 2017]. When young people come to study in a foreign university, they have to learn to communicate with students from differing cultural backgrounds and to adapt to the new social norms relating to daily living such as recreation and food practices as well as to the academic culture such as the structure of student-teacher interactions, penalties for plagiarism, and the rules of in-class discussions [Rivas, Hale, Burke 2019]. At first, cross-cultural communication may be encumbered due to lack of meaningful interactions between international and domestic students, often negative stereotypes about international students, and their experiences of identity crises. Problems in intercultural communication are observed in English-speaking countries as well as in Asia (China, South Korea) [Lee, Bailey 2020]. Language barriers represent another source of problems, such a prominent one that the topic of linguistic racism has been brought up again lately [Dobinson, Mercieca 2020].

During the pandemic, foreign students undergoing cultural adaptation found themselves even more isolated than usual. Those who

studied from their home countries were more comfortable with distance learning than those who stayed in dormitories [Li et al. 2021]. Language barriers, which played a significant role pre-pandemic, may be even stronger in distance learning [Novikov 2020]. Complete lack of face-to-face interactions with peers and faculty may have a negative impact on both academic performance and cultural integration [Ibid.]. Researchers have been enquiring how students will develop sense of belonging and identity if they learn from a distance all or most of the time [Yıldırım et al. 2021; Rathakrishnan et al. 2021].

There is little data on international students' distance learning experiences in times of COVID-19. Available Russia-based analytical studies describe isolated cases (usually students of one university, sometimes two) or rely on very limited samples. This article presents findings that complement the results of a qualitative study performed in spring 2020 [Abramova, Sukhushina, Rykun 2020]. It has been over a year since the pandemic began, which means that a full academic year has passed in the new reality. Lectures, seminars, admissions, exams, and graduations were administered mostly or entirely from a distance, which provides an opportunity to evaluate more deliberately the early response of the higher education system to the crisis and examine the transformations it has undergone so far. Results of the present research can be useful for understanding the global agenda as well as for designing education policy in Russia, as they present a rather broad picture of experiences of international students studying in Russian universities during the pandemic.

2. Data Collection Method

The present study is based on data obtained in a countrywide survey of Russian university students conducted in June–July 2021 as part of the project Research and Instructional Design Support for the Development of a Quality Measurement System in Higher Education During the COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond. The project was administered by a group of 13 universities on behalf of the Ministry of Education and Science of Russia. Data was collected via online questionnaires between June 1 and July 16, 2021. As soon as the universities were informed about the survey, they emailed the link to the questionnaire to their students or posted the relevant information in student accounts, on the university's official website, or its social media accounts. The final database included responses provided by 36,519 students from 473 Russian universities, including 3,909 international students (10.7% of the sample) from 289 universities. The survey covers all the regions of Russia, all the types of universities (leading, flagship, and all the other types), and three types of degrees: Bachelor's, Specialist's, and Master's. Respondents were allowed to choose between Russian and English as survey languages, which was followed by a filter question, whether they were a Russian or international student. Of international students, 24.8% (970 people) completed the questionnaire in Eng-

lish. Participants in the study include international students from 133 countries, of them 83% studying in Russian, 21% in English, and under 1% in another language (5% of the students specified two languages). Students from the near-abroad countries account for 52%; and those from the far abroad, for 48% of all international students. Other descriptive statistics for the sample are given in the Appendix.

3. Questions to Compare the Learning Formats

Analysis was performed for questions that allow comparing in-person, distance, and blended learning formats in terms of students' preferences ("If you could choose the format of learning, what would you choose?") and education quality improvement ("Which format of learning do you think provides the best quality of education?").

For the purpose of analyzing distance learning experiences, respondents were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the following statements:

- I was able to study effectively in an online format.
- I was able to interact effectively with other students in my online classes.
- I was able to interact effectively with other students outside of class.
- I enjoyed studying in an online format.
- I felt comfortable participating in class discussions online.
- I received the support that I needed from teachers to successfully study online.
- I was able to interact effectively with teachers outside of class.
- I have more free time since we started to study online.
- I study less effectively in an online format.
- I became less tired of studying due to distance learning.
- With a distance learning format, I often postpone my assignments.
- I like to study online more than studying offline.
- During distance learning, it is easier for me to ask questions and participate in discussions.

For the purpose of determining the benefits of distance learning, respondents were asked: «What are the positive sides of online learning at the university? You can choose all relevant answers». The following statements were suggested:

- More time to sleep and recharge
- I can study anywhere
- I spend less money (on commute, rent)
- It is more comfortable for me to participate in discussions
- I can do multiple things at once
- It is easier to receive study materials (presentations, assignments)
- It is easier to balance work and studies
- Online classes are more interesting

- I communicate with other students easier, comfortably
- I communicate with lecturers easier, less formally
- If other, please spec ify: …………. .
- I see no positive sides of online learning

For the purpose of assessing the challenges that students faced in distance learning, respondents were asked: "What are the negative sides of online learning at the university? You can choose all relevant answers." The following statements were suggested:

- Lack of personal communication with lecturers
- Lack of personal communication with other students
- Bad conditions for online learning (bad internet connection, devices)
- It is hard to find a place where I will not get distracted
- It is hard to navigate programs and platforms for online learning
- Lessons are interrupted because of bad internet connection, pranks, etc.
- It is harder to concentrate during the lesson
- It is harder to concentrate when studying by myself
- It is harder to ask and answer a lecturer's questions online.
- I feel lonely, more isolated during online learning.
- Some courses can not be studied online
- If other, please specify: …………. .
- I see no negative sides of online learning

For the purpose of evaluating students' perceptions of education quality, respondents were asked whether they were satisfied with learning overall and whether they had thought about withdrawing from the university before graduation within the current academic year. In addition, international students' perceptions of workload in distance learning were measured by asking them whether they considered distance learning to be more challenging for international students than for Russian ones.

Respondents were also asked which format of learning they currently had (in-person, distance, or blended) (offline, blended, online), whether hybrid learning was in place (where some students attend physically and others study from a distance), and where they had spent the academic year 2020/21 (in Russia or in their homeland).

The following sociodemographic characteristics were considered in analysis: home country (the list of countries was recoded into "far abroad" and "near abroad"), year of studies, type of program, field of study subject area, and levels of proficiency in Russian and English.

4. Survey Results   While all Russian universities had to switch to distance learning in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 breakout, the transition became op-

tional in the academic year 2020/21: some classes were delivered online, and others in-person, largely at the discretion of university administrators. At the moment of survey in June 2021, over one third of international students (39%) continued studying entirely online (as compared to only 10% of Russian students). One third studied in the full-time in-person learning format (33%), and one in four was enrolled in blended learning programs, with courses taught partly in classroom settings and partly online.

Hybrid learning is another quite popular format where some students attend class in-person while others join the class virtually from home (39%). Foreign students, especially from far-abroad countries, were more likely to remain in distance learning, while their Russian peers returned to in-person education (online learning was reported by only 14% of Russian students). Commitment of international students to distance learning may be involuntary: less than half (43%) of them stayed in Russia throughout the academic year 2020/21, while nearly one third (30%) did not leave their home country, almost one in five (17%) came to Russia in the midst of the academic year, and one in ten (11%), vice versa, came back to their home country during that period.

4.1. Perceptions of learning formats: international students consider in-person learning to be of higher quality
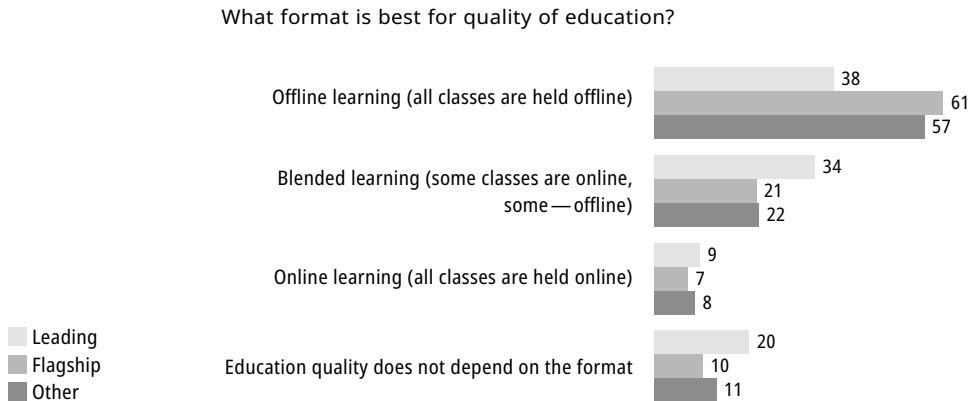
International enrollments in Russian universities do not appear to be reducing dramatically: overall, foreign students are satisfied with learning and are not showing symptoms of mass withdrawal. When answering the question about overall satisfaction, most of them agree (83%, as compared to 81% among Russian students), the "Fully satisfied" option being selected 10% more often by international students than by their Russian peers: 38 and 28%, respectively ($\chi2 = 189$, $p = 0.000$). The overwhelming majority intends to continue education, while only 3% are planning to withdraw, and 8% are hesitant, which is only 1–2% higher than among Russian students ($\chi2 = 42.9$, $p = 0.000$).

When evaluating their personal experiences of emergency distance learning, students expressed diametrically opposed opinions: nearly half of them (48%) liked learning online from a distance, and a slightly lower proportion (44%) did not. While 39% of international students prefer remote learning over in-person learning, exactly one half (50%) do not agree with this statement.

Neither international nor Russian students currently associate entirely online learning with quality education (Figure 1). However, foreign students are more likely to advocate for in-person learning, which is considered to be of higher quality by 47% of international students as compared to 38% of Russian students, whereas blended learning is recognized by a quarter of international (26%) and 33% of Russian students ($\chi2 =150$, $p = 0.000$).

However, it would be wrong to say that international students want in-person education or nothing. It is true that they are more likely to prefer classroom-based learning: 35% of international and 23% of Rus-

Figure 1. **The format of learning that provides the best quality of education, as perceived by international students, by type of university**, %.

What format is best for quality of education?

Legend: Leading, Flagship, Other

	Leading	Flagship	Other
Offline learning (all classes are held offline)	38	61	57
Blended learning (some classes are online, some — offline)	34	21	22
Online learning (all classes are held online)	9	7	8
Education quality does not depend on the format	20	10	11

sian students would prefer to study fully offline. However, a significant proportion of international students would choose blended learning if they had this opportunity (42%). Obviously, they highly appreciate the benefits of distance learning despite challenges of various kinds. Only 16% of international and 20% of Russian students are willing to study entirely online ($\chi2 = 310$, $p = 0.000$).

The type of university attended plays a significant role in how international students perceive different learning formats. Students of leading universities are more likely to believe that education quality does not depend on the format and less likely to consider in-person learning to be of better quality. Education quality perceptions of international students enrolled in leading universities are similar to those of Russian students, probably because leading universities provide more adequate conditions for studying from a distance.

4.2. The upsides of distance learning: mobility and cost-effectiveness

Among the benefits of distance learning, international students appreciated quite highly the practical conveniences: mobility, relative cost-effectiveness, time optimization, and opportunity to combine work and study (Figure 2). For Russian students, these practical conveniences are even more important: describing the advantages of distance learning, they were more likely to check answers like "I have more time for sleep and rest"—52% as compared to 35% among international students ($\chi2 = 279$, $p = 0.000$), "I can study from anywhere"—68% as compared to 53%, "It saves me money"—60% vs. 40% ($\chi2 = 452$, $p = 0.000$), "I can multitask"—44% vs. 34% ($\chi2 = 105$, $p = 0.000$), "Getting study materials is more convenient"—45 vs. 35% ($\chi2 = 109$, $p = 0.000$), and "It is easier to combine study with work"— 58 vs. 36%, respectively ($\chi2 = 495$, $p = 0.000$). That is, most Russian students have learned to make use of their extra time and financial resources, in particular combine study

Figure 2. **The upsides of distance learning as perceived by Russian and international students**, %.
What are the positive sides of online learning at the university?
You can choose all relevant answers.

Percentage of Russian students
Percentage of international students

Statement	Russian	International
I can study anywhere	68	53
I spend less money (on commute, rent)	60	40
It is easier to balance work and studies	58	36
It is easier to receive study materials (presentations, assignments)	45	35
More time to sleep and recharge	52	35
I can do multiple things at once	44	34
It is more comfortable for me to participate in discussions	22	18
I communicate with lecturers easier, less formally	15	15
I see no positive sides of online learning	8	14
I communicate with other students easier, comfortably	10	12
Online classes are more interesting	11	12

with work or other activities. For a lot of international students, apparently, those benefits are less obvious or less significant.
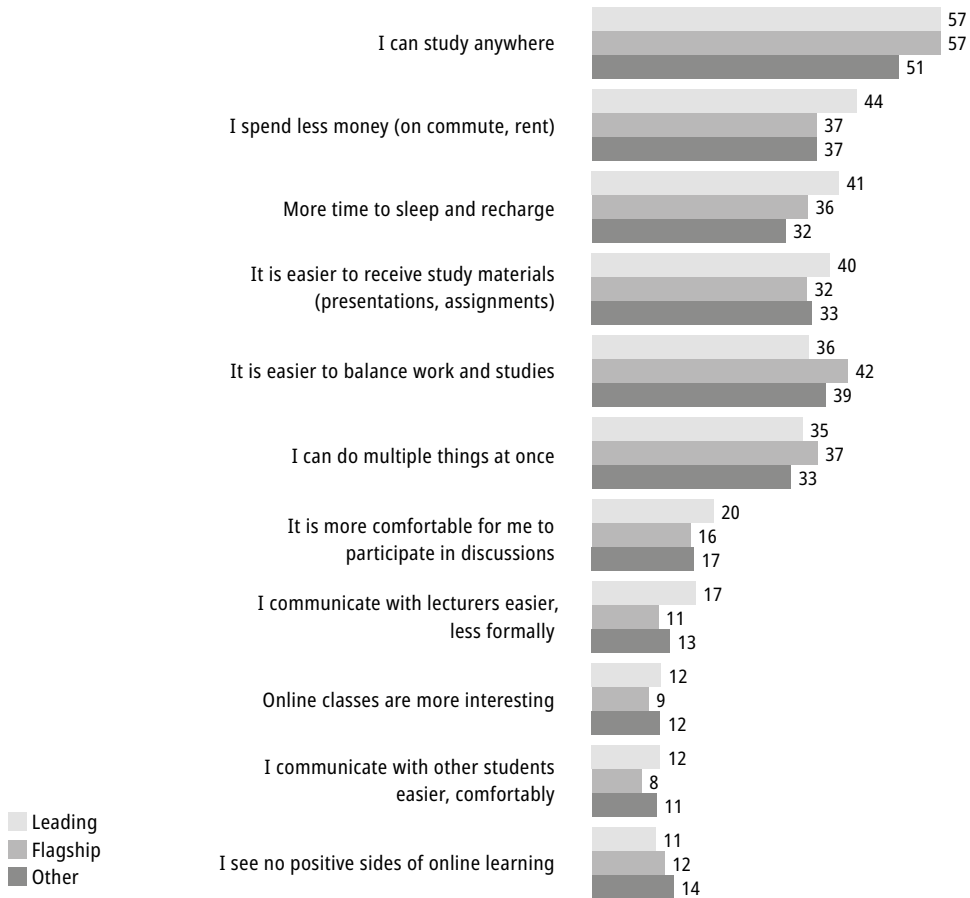
As for the communication aspects of distance learning, not many international students seem to like them: only 11% find it easier to interact with peers in distance learning, 15% feel more comfortable interacting with faculty from a distance, and 18% highly appreciate discussions in online classes.

Perceived benefits of distance learning differ essentially across the types of universities (Figure 3): international students enrolled in leading universities are more likely than others to check closer and more informal communication with faculty (17 vs. 11–13%, χ2 = 14.4, p = 0.001) and convenience of getting study materials (40% vs. 32–33%, χ2 = 15.5, p = 0.000). These patterns, along with the opinion that education quality does not depend on the learning format being more widespread among international students, allow suggesting that communication in distance learning was organized more effectively in leading universities.

Although from one third to one half of the surveyed international students rated distance learning as highly convenient, the overall per-

Figure 3. **The advantages of distance learning for students by type of university**, %.
What are the positive sides of online learning at the university? You can choose all relevant answers.

|	Leading	Flagship	Other
I can study anywhere	57	57	51
I spend less money (on commute, rent)	44	37	37
More time to sleep and recharge	41	36	32
It is easier to receive study materials (presentations, assignments)	40	32	33
It is easier to balance work and studies	36	42	39
I can do multiple things at once	35	37	33
It is more comfortable for me to participate in discussions	20	16	17
I communicate with lecturers easier, less formally	17	11	13
Online classes are more interesting	12	9	12
I communicate with other students easier, comfortably	12	8	11
I see no positive sides of online learning	11	12	14

centage of those who perceive it as beneficial for themselves is much lower than among Russian students. The upsides observed by international students mostly have to do with "logistics" of distance learning— but not communication. International students of leading universities were more likely to check the benefits associated with learning organization: getting study materials, interacting with faculty, etc.

4.3. The downsides of distance learning: communication issues

Perceptions of distance learning disadvantages are quite similar between international and Russian students (Figure 4). About one third of the respondents reported socialization issues: lack of interactions with faculty (37%) and peers (36%); technical issues: poor infrastructure (36%) and internet connectivity (34%); psychological effects: difficulty

Figure 4. **The downsides of distance learning as perceived by Russian and international students**, %.
What are the negative sides of online learning at the university?
You can choose all relevant answers

Percentage of Russian students
Percentage of international students
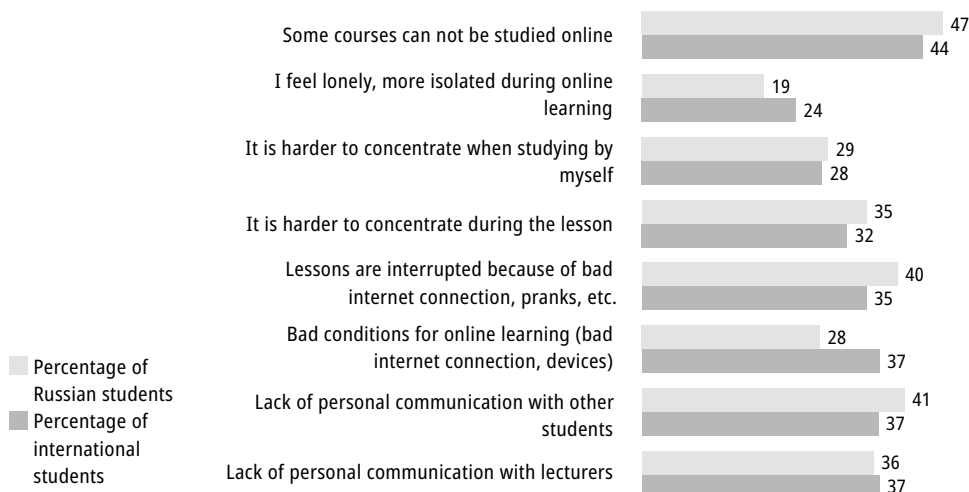
concentrating during self-study (27%) or in class (31%). Nearly half of the respondents (43%) are convinced that some disciplines cannot be studied from a distance. International students are more likely to feel lonely and isolated ($\chi2 = 19.7$, $p = 0.000$) and to report poor technical infrastructure ($\chi2 = 90.7$, $p = 0.000$) than their Russian peers. Thirteen percent of foreign students see no downsides in distance learning.

Half of the international respondents (53%) report studying less effectively in distance learning formats, as compared to 42% of the Russian students who agree with this statement ($\chi2 = 200$, $p = 0.000$). Nearly half (48%) of international students admit procrastinating more, as compared to only 34% of Russian students ($\chi2 = 518$, $p = 0.000$).

International students tend to perceive themselves as a more vulnerable category: 45% of them think that they experience more difficulty learning from a distance than their Russian peers, while one third (35%) see no difference, and only one in ten suggests that distance learning is less challenging for international students. The share of those convinced that foreign students have more problems with distance learning is higher among respondents from far-abroad countries than from the post-Soviet states (61 and 41%, respectively, $\chi2 = 183$, $p = 0.000$). Apparently, language barriers play a certain role here: the lower perceived proficiency in Russian, the more likely a student is to find it more difficult to study from a distance ($r = 0.14$, $p = 0.000$). Proficiency in Russian also correlates with some other perceived learning experiences: productivity of interactions with peers ($r = 0.18$, $p = 0.000$) and

Figure 5. **Difficulty of learning for international students in comparison to Russian students as perceived by students from far- and near-abroad countries**, %.
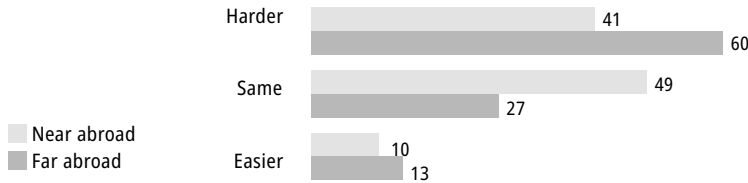
overall learning satisfaction (r = 0.22, p = 0.000). Naturally, students from far- and near-abroad countries differ in their Russian skills: only one in ten students from the far abroad rates their proficiency as nine or ten on a ten-point scale, compared to an overwhelming majority of students from the former Soviet Republics (79%).

Negative perceptions of distance learning are the most prevalent among international students who stayed in their home countries throughout the academic year. According to survey data, almost one third of students were unable to come to Russia; remarkably, about the same proportion of foreign students had chosen a Russian university mainly because they wanted to study in Russia. Even though international students in this category recognize, as all the others, the benefits of distance learning—possibility of studying from anywhere (nearly 60%), saving on commuting expenses (nearly 50%), etc.—they are more likely (over 40%) to check such downsides as lack of face-to-face interactions with faculty and peers as well as technical issues.

A lot of international students experienced difficulties in distance learning, mostly those associated with socialization (constraints in communication with faculty and peers), but also technical issues and mental health problems (difficulty focusing, feelings of loneliness and isolation). A considerable part of international students, especially from far-abroad countries, tend to believe that they encounter more challenges in distance learning than Russian students. Apparently, such perceptions stem from language barriers and probably also have to do with the fact that organizational issues are tougher to manage from a long distance.

5. Discussion   Emergency transition to distance learning in spring 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic caused some critical changes to higher education systems across the world, jeopardizing further internationalization of universities. Amidst the pandemic-induced crisis, a number of experts predicted a short-term decrease in the number of internation-

al students[6] all over the world and in Russian universities in particular for reasons associated both with the pandemic itself as well as with drops in income and, as a consequence, a decline in purchasing power. No significant reduction in international enrollments is observed in Russia, and our research finds no symptoms of mass withdrawals. This confirms the assumption of Altbach and de Wit that internationalization of higher education will continue in one form or another [Altbach, de Wit 2020].

Over the past year, international students of Russian universities have adapted to the new circumstances [Tyumentseva, Kharlamova, Godenko 2021]; in some aspects, their perceptions of learning experiences are even more loyal than among Russian students. The situation initially perceived as force-majeure had been largely routinized: international students, just as their Russian peers, adjust their learning strategies to the new formats, adapt to the downsides of the new study conditions, and recognize their benefits. It does not mean that emergency digitalization of education has been smooth and successful; rather, students tend to accept the lack of alternatives in the current educational context. Right after the first wave of COVID-19, students around the world were highly satisfied with support received from their universities, yet they were still worried about their future careers and education quality and experienced high levels of distress [Aristovnik et al. 2020]. In the long term, international students studying or planning to study in Russia may restructure their educational trajectories in the light of new alternatives, such as opportunity to study in the world's top universities from a distance at prices comparable to online tuition fees in Russian universities. Such a possibility should be accounted for in higher education management.

5.1. Reasons for preferring in-person learning

In the past academic year, international students had to study from a distance more often and were less prepared for distance learning than Russian students. With the exception of 10% of "fans" of online learning, international students are more comfortable with classroom-based education, considering it to be of higher quality and seeing less benefits and more downsides in distance learning than their Russian peers. One of the reasons why foreign students prefer in-person learning probably has to do with their motivations for studying in Russia. First, they have an opportunity to enroll in prestigious majors [Arefyev, Sheregi 2014] because for many of them, higher education programs in Russia are of better quality than in their home countries while at the same time not as expensive as in Europe. The top priority fields of study among international students are medicine and life sciences [Gromov 2017]. Professional ambitions of foreign students

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[6] Mercado S. (2020) International Student Mobility and the Impact of the Pandemic//BizEd: AACSB International. https://bized.aacsb.edu/articles/2020/june/covid-19-and-the-future-of-international-student-mobility

make them gravitate toward in-person learning, which they perceive as more comprehensive and effective. Second, some students from the former Soviet Republics regard studying in Russia as a chance to emigrate. Third, there is a cohort of students from the far abroad who enroll in Russian universities specifically to study the Russian language and culture, so they want to be physically present in Russia, too [Koryagina, Korolev 2019].

Another complex reason for preferring in-person learning among international students apparently embraces socialization, technical, and mental health issues that such students encountered while learning from a distance during the past academic year.

5.2. Distance learning: how to mitigate the downsides

Above all else, international students complain about communication issues in distance learning: lack of interactions with faculty and peers or constraints in such interactions. Factors affecting communication in distance learning formats can be grouped into three main categories.

The first category is technical issues. With the emergency transition to distance learning, technical issues caused a lot of constraints, but some of them were tackled very quickly. Modern students possess advanced computer skills and learn to use new online tools easily, even though they prefer familiar programs over those recommended by universities, e. g. online communication platforms Moodle and BigBlueButton integrated with Zoom and WhatsApp [Aristovnik et al. 2020; Novikov 2020; Tyumentseva, Kharlamova, Godenko 2021]. Students also adjust quite well to the technical specifics of online communication, such as delayed responses or time differences if the student's country is in a different time zone. At the same time, the learning process can be greatly impeded by poor internet connectivity in some countries, mostly in Africa [Aristovnik et al. 2020] but in other countries as well, for instance in China, especially its remote and rural areas [Wang, Zhao 2020]. Nearly all the universities provided their students and faculty with equipment for temporary use [Abramova, Sukhushina, Rykun 2020], but obviously home infrastructure problems were not solved completely during the past academic year, since international students checked technical issues among the downsides of distance learning more often than Russian students.

The second category of factors affecting communication in distance learning is methodological issues, i. e. characteristics of online class organization and material presentation. Effectiveness of online learning depends on the designed and prepared learning material, the lecturer's engagement in the online environment, and lecturer–student or student–student interactions. "Teaching online is not simply putting learning materials online." [Aristovnik et al. 2020]. In a countrywide survey conducted in spring 2020, international students considered the main problem to be the absence of general logic in distance learning, which manifested itself in workload imbalances, lack of necessary online interactions, lack of feedback from faculty, and inad-

equate forms of practical training. The major reasons for that include faculty members' unpreparedness for online learning, their technological illiteracy, formalism, and lack of trust in e-learning [Abramova, Sukhushina, Rykun 2020]. Online delivery of material, especially when teaching international students, requires a well-defined class structure, simplified or adapted content, an opportunity for students to familiarize with lecture content and perform assignments at their own speed, and very clear instructions on using new online platforms, as instructions in a foreign language are extremely difficult to understand [Bao 2020; Novikov 2020].

The third category of factors inhibiting communication in online learning embraces language and cultural barriers, including cross-country differences in learning organization. In distance learning, international students experience even more challenges adapting to the new learning process than usual as they are isolated from the student community. Language barriers are perceived as a serious problem [Novikov 2020], first of all by students from the far abroad.

All the challenges associated with the transition to distance learning can be regarded as growth points. International students of leading universities already see more benefits in online education and give more positive ratings of its quality than in the early phase of the pandemic. Surveys show that Russian universities differ in the quality of online education [Koksharov et al. 2021], which means that there are groups of universities that were more effective in introducing distance learning practices. Such universities developed new methodological strategies that have shown good results and can be extrapolated to other types of universities. The high potential of distance learning formats is confirmed by the survey data showing that over 40% of international students would prefer blended learning.

The results of this research make it safe to suggest that remote forms of communication and learning can be applied to international students, but more caution should be exercised than with Russian students. Distance learning curricula should be adapted methodologically to meet the needs of international students. Ideally, course content and supplementary materials should be provided both in English and in the native language. It is not just language skill improvement practices that international students need; rather, they need new formats of participation in institutional academic processes. Even though some studies show that being at home during the period of distance learning contributes to more comfortable study conditions [Li et al. 2021], we suggest that on-campus experiences are critically important for increasing international students' learning satisfaction as well as for their cross-cultural adjustment [Tyumentseva, Kharlamova, Godenko 2021]. Foreign students could come to campus to take in-person exams, participate in summer and winter schools, and work on specific instructional modules. Such practices will allow them to spend some time at the university and immerse themselves into the university en-

vironment, thereby, among other things, increasing the motivation for learning in a large proportion of international students who want to actually study and work in Russia.

A number of limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings obtained. First, the survey was administered online by sending the link to the questionnaire to students via university administrators. Unequal representation of university categories in the sample, differential methods of informing students about the survey, and voluntary participation result in a number of biases that make it impossible to extrapolate the data unambiguously to all Russian universities, yet it can still be used to compare groups of students by various indicators. Another limitation on the interpretation of results is imposed by composition of the sample: international students of Russian universities come from a variety of countries in Europe, Asia, and Africa. Although the questionnaire for them was prepared in Russian and English, it is highly likely that there were students with insufficient proficiency in either language who refused to participate or gave invalid responses. Furthermore, grouping students into two large categories depending on whether they come from far- or near-abroad countries makes it impossible to account for cross-country differences, which very probably exist. In addition, the sample size does not allow making reliable inferences about differences between students form different countries or regions.

Finally, the present article covers only a small proportion of issues related to online education of international students as well as of the data obtained in the survey. In particular, it does not address specific psychological problems or learning and motivation strategies of international students in distance learning, which appear to be of high research interest.

Appendix Table 1. **Key characteristics of the international student sample.**

Variable	Percentage of the sample,%
Gender	
Male	53
Female	47
Degree pursued	
Bachelor	69
Specialist	18

Variable	Percentage of the sample,%
Master	13
Field of study subject area	
Life sciences (chemistry, biology, physics, etc.)	10
Mathematics	2
Economics and management	15
Computer sciences	5
Engineering and technology	24
Social sciences (sociology, psychology, etc.)	6
Education and pedagogical sciences	4
Humanities (philosophy, philology, etc.)	6
Arts and culture	3
Health and medical sciences	20
Agriculture and agricultural sciences	5
National defense and security, military sciences	0,3
Physical education and sports	0,4
Type of university	
Leading	47
Flagship	10
Other	43
Survey language	
Russian	75
English	25
Region of home country	
Near abroad	56
Far abroad	44
Learning format at the moment of survey	
In-person learning (all classes are delivered on campus) offline	28
Blended learning (some of the classes are delivered in person (on campus), and others from a distance; physical attendance is not required)	22
Distance learning (all classes are delivered online; physical attendance is not possible) online	33
No classes	17
Whereabouts during the academic year 2020/21	

Variable	Percentage of the sample,%
Stayed in home country for the entire period	30
Spent some time in Russia, then returned to home country	11
Spent some time in home country, then came back to Russia	17
Stayed in Russia for the entire period	43

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