

MOTIVATIONS, EXPECTATIONS, AND REALITY OF RUSSIAN STUDENTS DECIDING TO PURSUE GRADUATE DEGREES IN U.S. INSTITUTIONS

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ABSTRACT

The paper draws upon the findings of the questionnaire examining motivations and expectations of Russian students seeking higher education in the United States, the least addressed population in the existing body of literature. The authors dwell upon the discrepancies between the expectations and real experience of students coming to the USA to study. Overwhelming majority reported their perception of education overseas as a chance for professional prosperity and personal reinvention. It obviously provides better opportunities to find a well-paid and prestigious job. The research participants believe that their high demands toward academic exposure are better met in the U.S. due to a number factors and offered resources there. Among those are high-tech libraries with worldwide access to online resources, cutting edge technologies and latest facilities for extra-curricular activities, less formal environment in the classroom, internships, and applied nature of education. The research is based on the material of the questionnaire conducted via Google Docs, inquiring about academic and personal aspects of studying abroad.

Keywords: motivations, expectations, Russian students, graduate degrees, education overseas.

INTRODUCTION

Just recently the phenomenon of brain drain has been rather acute in Russia. The reasons are better paid positions overseas, approval in academic and research circles, research opportunities, up-to-date facilities and support of science. That proves, once again, that level of education and academic expectations in Russia are high enough, but, apparently, they did not seem applicable to the Russian setting due to the incongruity with what employers could suggest in return. Today, the situation is significantly better and opportunities of one's applicability for compliant remuneration are broader. That has created competitiveness on the labor market. "Knowledge and skills are the priority values in human life in the information society, making important focusing on the type of training which stimulates the intellectual and moral development of the student's personality, activates his potential, forms critical thinking" [1]. International education experience significantly enhances the resume of a potential employee. Education overseas is valued due to the nature of bringing novelty into the existing work paradigm that, globally thinking, impacts the economics of the country [7]. It also affects national security matters. There has not been any research published on the motivations of Russian students to study abroad yet. This paper, thus, is intended to make this gap smaller by examining the reasons Russian students are drawn to study abroad programs and their experiences and attitudes toward the U.S. education system. We expect discrepancies between their expectations and reality of practices they experience. The research questions, which will either confirm or deny our expected discrepancies, are as follow:

1. What are Russian students driven by in applying for education overseas?

2. What expectations and realities do they face undergoing education in U.S. institutions?

METHODOLOGY

Ours, is a small-scale research, where both qualitative and quantitative measures are required for evaluations on the motivations, expectations and possible discrepancies between anticipated and real experience of students coming from Russia to pursue graduate study in the United States. Data comprise 10 graduate students' responses studying all over the US. The subjects under study applied to a U.S. university either with the involvement of a third party (agency, Ministry of Education, grant, etc.) or directly without mediator assistance. The respondents completed the questionnaire regarding academic and personal outcomes. Our research tool makes ample use of open-ended questions inquiring about personal accounts and beliefs of the respondents toward education abroad. We came up with closed-ended questions to be exhaustive enough in diversity of responses and relative ease of answering survey questions. The questionnaire was conducted via Google Docs, which provides a nice summary of responses. However, there are some clear limitations to our method. At times, we relied on snowball sampling nominating the subjects from our immediate environment and reaching others through their social network (for instance, contacting Aygul's academic advisor from American Councils for International Education to help spread the word for respondents need). Limited sample of participants as well cannot guarantee the generalizability of findings. Moreover, the questionnaire form with ample use of required open-ended questions turned out to be challenging for completion having excluded a number of participants. However, those questions were to compensate for the absence of follow up interview to gain in-depth understanding of quantitative questions and case studies.

RESULTS

Section 1. General Data

6 female and 4 male students, the age group ranging from 22 to 28 (22 – 3, 23- 1, 24- 3, 26 -2, 28-1), two of which are married, were surveyed. The research participants are currently majoring in Computer Science, International Business, TESOL, German Studies, Middle Eastern Studies, Political Science, Linguistics, Public Health, and Finance, thus providing a rich diversity of current educational trends. Findings indicate, that six out of ten students underwent application process with the involvement of a third party (Ministry of Education, agency, grant, etc.), whereas the rest got accepted with the efforts of their own. All the respondents but one have been abroad before entering an American university.

Table 1. Foreign Travel Experience, by Gender

	Female	Male
Traveled alone	83%	75%
Traveled with a group	66%	50%
Exchange student	50%	0%
Service learning	50%	0%

This section revealed that female students had more general experience traveling abroad than males. It also showed that female students were more likely to have participated in a study abroad and service learning programs.

Section 2. Predispositions to Study Abroad

Results reveal the direct relationship between studying abroad and job opportunities [8] as well as background stimulators having already been present in the subjects' lives, which played a decisive role in

taking part in study abroad program, such as, using a foreign language, international business experience, international collaboration (Table 2).

Table 2. International Aspects Involved in Most Recent Job

Using intl. expertise/ cultural knowledge	60%
Participation in intl. prof. organization	60%
Speaking a foreign language	70%
International travel	20%
International collaboration/ joint projects	50%
Hosting foreign visitors	20%

Together with the importance of the job factor, the survey also established that personal growth factors, such as developing cross-cultural competency, have made education abroad truly significant for the respondents [5]. The setting of new goals and learning objectives that meet the need of developing the students' ability to use a language as a tool of communication and generalization in the context of the dialogue of cultures is the most relevant to the requirements of the modern society development. [6]

The conclusion was drawn from the results of the question on how important the participants found education abroad experience in relation to a series of factors, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Influences in Decision to Study Abroad

	Strong	Moderate	Cumulative	Not influenced
Experience living in another culture	60%	30%	10%	0%
Travel and adventure	50%	40%	10%	0%
Personal Growth	90%	10%	0%	0%
Learning more about the country	30%	40%	30%	0%
Learning a foreign language	60%	30%	10%	0%
Future career	90%	10%	0%	0%
Advice of friends/ acquaintances	0%	20%	60%	20%
Related cultural/educational background of family	0%	30%	30%	40%
Friends/ acquaintances in that country	0%	20%	50%	30%
Advice of university faculty/staff	10%	10%	10%	70%

When asked an open-ended question Why have you decided to study abroad?, the participants mostly noted the high-level of preparation in the U.S. academia due to high-tech facilities, research-orientedness, and the like. They believe, that their high demands toward academic exposure are better met in the U.S. Equally important driving force was the opportunity “to meet like-minded people”, to find diversity of opinions, publicity, freedom of speech, personal enrichment they hoped to gain in the multicultural environment. Among exceptional answers, there was realization that study abroad programs do not provide an escape for those seeking freedom or financial security and intense graduate study demands sacrifices in private life.

Section 3. Motivations and Expectations

As illustrated in Table 5 below, among the most prominent intentions that shaped the participants' behaviors toward education abroad is the desire to improve professional situation.

Table 5. Motivations to Study Abroad

Search for a new experience	80%
Improve a professional situation	90%
Improve social situation	50%
Search for liberty/pleasure	50%
Learn other languages	60%

Surprisingly, many reported that they expected American education to be a lot easier than it is in fact, sadly noting “studying abroad requires full devotion”. One of the insights into this erroneous perception might be American cinematography and TV with the abundance of college movies depicting joyful and effortless lives of high school and undergraduate students [10].

Section 4. Expectations and Reality

When asked Have your expectations matched the real experiences of studying abroad? What were discrepancies like, if any?, overwhelming majority responded positively. Among the instances of inconsistency comparing to the home country education were the grading system, critical thinking performance demand, a larger load of reading and writings due to school's quarter system:

“The differences were very significant. Like, the final grade in the US is usually composed of class participation, homework, midterm and final exams, etc. In order to get a good grade, one has to study throughout the semester. This is in contrast to Russia, where the final grade only depends on one final exam”. The pleasing discrepancies were the ability to compose one's semester with required and elective courses, to audit classes, applied nature of education, plenty of opportunities for professional growth, cutting edge technologies and research. There also were reports on unattractive issues such as non-acceptance of American culture: “I think most of the expectations have been met. However, some particular things such as style of life in different places, mentality, and food distracted me from liking the place and made me love my home country more.”; the idea of a lifelong education, which intrudes into private life objectives: “After Master's program I'm doing PhD now. Really, I don't like studying anymore, but can't work right now in the US because of visa and study was an option”.

To get familiar with the factors that stimulate and cause motivation to study abroad for this particular population, we should question what it is there in the United States appealing and different from a home-country institution. Aygul, as an ACTR and a Fulbright grantee, attests to the fact that education in the States is more formal concerning deadlines. Deadlines can be negotiated in Russia or they simply do not draw the immersive attention of the syllabi. Another characteristic of American graduate education stated by the respondents is absence of oral exams, presence of more essays, various writing assignments, and tests. From appealing differences the research participants noted independent research opportunities, applied character of education; opportunities for integration into an academic community, choosing classes for yourself vs. following one curriculum with a group back in Russia, less formal environment in the class, more extra-curricular activities options (i.e. gym, interest clubs, etc.), digital literacies (i.e. blackboard, d2l, connecting with professors via email, etc.), well-equipped libraries and online resources, and adherence to the code of honor. The one that the participants wish there were in the U.S. borrowed from Russian education system is supportive peers: “...in US often team work, students are less

supportive to each other, everybody focuses more on their own work, you have to ask for help and they will help, but in my own country, it was more natural to share everything.”

DISCUSSION

According to the findings, no significant difference in the predominance of a particular population inclined to study abroad has been detected. Previous exposure to traveling, be it in the form of service learning (e.g. Work & Travel USA program, which is an enormously popular student summer pastime in Russia), exchange student (40%) or prevaillingly stated traveling alone (80%)* in our small-scale study proved to be of significant cumulative character to study abroad decision making (Table 1). The findings about female students go counter King’s et al. [2] that females prefer to travel in groups, but rather prove variable heterogeneous applicability of female students on student exchange programs, while males are more conservative in their choices.

Notwithstanding, these gender manifestations did not get reinforced in an array of extra-curricular activities that the participants undertook to enrich their study abroad stay. The research participants mostly see education abroad as means of advancing career (Table 3). For further research, it would be insightful to have control and experimental groups to prove the assumption that the ones, who chose to undergo the application process for an international higher education, tend to have a relatively high level of international content in the occupational fields [4].

Table 3. Importance of Study Abroad in Relation to Objectives

	very important	somewhat important	cumulative
Broadening perspective on own culture	70%	30%	0%
Enriching personal life	60%	20%	20%
Furthering graduate education	100%	0%	0%
Success in present job	50%	30%	20%
Advancing career	90%	10%	0%
Finding first job	60%	20%	20%

Better job opportunities, prosperity, research-orientedness, competitive status in labor market upon return seem to motivate students coming from Russia noticeably. Whereas Waters’ study [3] reports on UK students going to the United States to pursue happiness, fun, and enjoyment, our small-scale study reveals counter-motivations of Russian students focusing on career advancing and furthering graduate study. The attitudes of the former might be different due to the satisfaction with the current well-being and academic opportunities provided by the home country. However, there is a feature of escapism similar to both UK and Russian students. The interpretation concerning the former again might differ – escapism from rigid British education, pressure to succeed that causes stress and burnout – that is escapism into an easier life. However, the latter population’s aspirations are desire to get immersed into ‘academic ebullient pot’ to have more exciting life choices [9]. The subjects’ motivations having led to the application process proved to be consistent with their expectations once they got accepted and immersed into the U.S. graduate school. The absolute agreement was detected on high value of study abroad since it promises better positions upon return to the home country. That means Russian students are foremost professionalism- and competency-driven when it comes to graduate education choices. They are very well aware of

potential benefits of such academic self-devotion. They approach study abroad with a calculative mind projecting it to the further occupational field.

CONCLUSION

Our research focused on motivations and expectations of Russian students toward the U.S. graduate school. Among the findings is what kind of population applies for education abroad programs. Comparative analysis discovered that previous exposure to traveling (exchange programs, service learning programs, etc.) proved to be of substantial cumulative character to study abroad decision-making. Female students appeared to have had heterogeneous foreign experience, while male students turned out to be conservative in their choices. Also the ones having had a relatively high level of international content in the most recent occupational fields are of higher inclination to further their graduate studies abroad. The reason behind it, is the perception of the direct relationship of studying abroad benefits to job opportunities. Thus, Russian students are foremost driven by clear motives to apply foreign education to advance their careers. As for personal objectives, study abroad is seen as offering 'fertile soil' for personal growth and personality establishment. Lastly, as opposed to the recent Russian phenomenon such as 'brain drain' mentioned in the introduction, this study detected that 70% of the participants are planning to go back to Russia. This might prove positive changes in the attitudes of Russian employers toward high-skilled, versatile, cosmopolitan -minded staff. Overall, we had several participants contacting us back to say that the survey made them reflect on the unique foreign experience they have been at the time undergoing.

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