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International Scientific Conference**CHINESE MASTER STUDENTS IN RUSSIAN UNIVERSITY:  
ADAPTATION AND EDUCATION ISSUES**Natalia V. Khisamutdinova (a)\*  
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Natalya.khisamutdinova@vvsu.ru**Abstract**

The study examines issues concerning education of Chinese master students in Russian universities. This topic is gaining great relevance today both in connection with the transition of Russia's higher education to a multilevel system, and the tasks of increasing the internationalization of educational services by Russian universities. The presence of master programs has been considered lately one of the main criteria of the university innovative potential for it meets the objectives of the education continuity. As an example, the implementation of master programs for international students at the Vladivostok State University of Economics and Service (VSUES) is considered. Particular attention is paid to Chinese students who represent the most massive contingent of foreign citizens studying at universities of the Russian Far East in general and at VSUES in particular. The goal of the research, carried out empirically (questionnaires, personal interviews, and observations), is to identify the factors influencing the adaptation of Chinese master students in the Russian university educational environment and the associated effectiveness of their cognitive process. Some measures to improve the master training and increase the efficiency of master courses are proposed. The research results can be of practical value for university faculty engaged in international master students teaching.

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*Keywords:* Russian universities, master programmes, Chinese students, quality of education, adaptation

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## 1. Introduction

The research reveals some mounting questions of Chinese master students' education at Russian universities. It is they who constitute the main contingent of foreign students in the Russian Far East universities. As an example, the implementation of master programs at the Vladivostok State University of Economics and Service (VSUES) is considered. The relevance of this topic is due, on the one hand, to the growing internationalization of educational services, and on the other hand, to the increasing demand for master's degrees. The entrance of young people from abroad to Russian universities cannot be separated from difficulties of their adaptation to the educational process when teaching traditions and existing curricula differ from those they had at home.

Despite the fact that a lot of articles have been written about international students in Russia (Arnaut & Tatarinova, 2019; Morozova, 2018; Semin, 2020, etc.), only in recent years, attention has been paid to master programs (Alenkina, 2020; Ivaschenko, 2015; Neumoeva-Kolchedantseva, 2019; Nikulina, 2012; Trubcheninova & Gazizov, 2018). Researchers are often interested in issues associated with teaching certain academic disciplines, which is understandable. Master programs as a relatively new institution in Russia have not yet been finalized. For a number of courses, they are just being created, and academics are looking for their own way in this process, trying to connect the course content with practical application, make it interesting and accessible. Any general analysis of the master training, including teaching international students, has not yet been carried out, and many questions, therefore, require additional development.

## 2. Problem Statement

With Russia's joining the Bologna Convention and the transition to a multi-level system of higher education, students have got new opportunities. After graduation with a bachelor's degree, they can continue their studies under master programs receiving in-depth and more specialized training. Master programs fully meet the tasks of the education continuity and, in recent years, their implementation is considered one of the main criteria of the university innovative potential (Ivaschenko, 2015). Universities are interested in the expansion of this educational level. The more master programs have been created the easier it is for students to find the desired one. The university, therefore, has got the opportunity of a favorable student enrollment, which is important in the face of strong competition in the educational services market.

The demand for master programs is also observed on the part of students, especially since employers began to require a master's degree when hiring. In 2005 only 1% of the total student number in Russia continued their education after having got a bachelor's degree. In 2013 12% of all graduates from Russian universities received a master's degree (Ivaschenko, 2015). This trend is also obvious in Vladivostok. In VSUES, only 12 students started attending master classes in 2007 when the first master programs had been implemented, while at present there are more than 500 master students, including 45 people from the Asia-Pacific Rim countries, mostly from China. "International relations and cross-border cooperation", "International economics", "International management" are among the most demanded training profiles for Chinese students. However, in general, the number of students from other countries in Vladivostok

universities show negative dynamics (Arnaut & Tatarinova, 2019) which can be considered a warning fact for the university. With a full-cycle program for international students in VSUES, preparatory department – bachelor's degree – master's degree, the falling-off tendency may have a detrimental impact on the future enrollment on the master programs. It makes us think about effective measures to improve the situation.

In contrast to undergraduate education, which sees international students' dropout (for various reasons), almost all who start training under the VSUES master programs finish the course. This fact does not mean that there are no problems and master training is smooth and painless for all students including those from China. As they say, strong motivations make them adjust to all difficulties, though with great efforts. Thus, it becomes important to identify factors that influence the master students' adaptation in the Russian university and, consequently, the effectiveness of their educational and cognitive process. It will contribute to improving the quality of educational services, both for international and Russian students.

### **3. Research Questions**

Although adaptation is a multifaceted process that includes both entering a new climatic zone and overcoming psychological barriers, with the perception of unusual socio-cultural stereotypes, the primary factor for this research is the students' adaptation to the educational environment of Russian universities. This factor often turns out to be decisive for their assimilation of academic material and, consequently, the effectiveness of their learning. The success of adaptation in this case depends not only on personal factors (level of basic knowledge and skills, motivation to acquire knowledge, and personal traits) (Koval et al., 2019), but also on the teaching format and university conditions, such as a timetable, structure, and content of master courses. In this regard, the research focuses on the Chinese students' opinions on the following issues:

- connection of the adaptation with the level of proficiency in Russian;
- -issues of acquiring knowledge under the master program different from the bachelor majoring;
- issues related to homework and self-instruction (including distance learning during the coronavirus pandemic);
- problems of writing a quality master dissertation.

### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The goal of the research is to identify factors which affect the international master students' adaptation in the Russian university preventing efficient learning. In this regard, the author sets the following tasks to be solved:

- taking into account the different level of proficiency in Russian to propose measures to facilitate adaptation for those Chinese students who did not learn Russian as their major at the bachelor level;
- to propose measures which can provide more complete course mastering by those students who have chosen a master program different from their bachelor profile;

- to consider issues related to the students' homework and self-instruction (including distance learning during coronavirus pandemic) in order to improve their educational and cognitive process;
- to consider problems associated with writing a master thesis and suggest ways to solve them.

The implementation of these research tasks will contribute to improving the quality of educational services in general and making master training more efficient, both for international and Russian students.

## 5. Research Methods

The research is mainly based on the materials collected by empirical methods: surveys, questionnaires, interviews, observations. The questionnaire was completed by 30 first and second-year Chinese master students under the "International Relations" and "International Economics" programs. The author's own experience of working with Chinese students was also useful as well as summarizing other teachers' experiences. The students' answers made it possible to clarify how the master program requirements and teaching methods correspond to their expectations and capabilities, to identify problems arising in their learning, and to propose recommendations to improve the work with international master students.

## 6. Findings

Although in the questionnaire and interviews, all of the surveyed students call the master programs useful for their future employment, only 62% of them are fully satisfied with the educational process, and the rest are more likely satisfied than not. The main troubles are associated with their insufficient adaptation to the new educational and cognitive conditions. When asked how learning at the Vladivostok university differs from what they had in China (excluding the language), the answers boil down to the following: there are a lot of students in the student group in China, where you are invisible and your participation in classes is often reduced to a simple presence in the classroom. In VSUES, the number of students in the classroom is small, you are within the line-of-sight distance with the teacher at all classes and can be asked at any time. In China, there is little communication between teachers and students, while in Russia there is a lot of the individual approach, that forces you to always be ready for classes.

All 30 respondents called a confident knowledge of the Russian language a prerequisite for successful studies, but actually, the level of their proficiency in Russian differs greatly. A number of them were majoring in Russian for some years, both in China and Russia, whereas others had a short-term language learning at the courses organized in VSUES and other Russian universities for international students entering various bachelor programs. This fact makes us suggest dividing all Chinese master students into two groups. The first one will embrace those who learned Russian as their major and have more or less profound knowledge of it. As a rule, they connect their future job with international areas, including Russia. The students who learned Russian not as their major but as a useful instrument for their education in Russia will constitute the second group. They need bachelor's and master's diplomas for their good employment in China.

The issue of adaptation should be considered according to this division: whether a student has to adapt to the peculiarities of a Russian university, or the university should be adapted to international students adjusting its educational process to their needs. We conclude that it is preferable for the first group of students to adapt themselves to Russian conditions including the educational system. This will help them to better understand Russia and get used to the Russian mentality, traditions, and customs. It will be easier for them to work at Russian enterprises or with Russian partners after getting a master's degree. As for the second group, it is important to have the educational environment adapted to them. Favorable conditions can, for example, include lecturing in the students' native language. In this case, they will master the academic material in full without extra effort. This circumstance has been taken into account in VSUES. Since 2018, master students from China have been listening to some lectures in Chinese or with translation into it. The survey confirms the thesis of two approaches to adaptation. When asked who they communicate with after classes, Russians or compatriots, all respondents from the first group named Russians ("to train the Russian language", "to get to know future colleagues better"). Most of the second group respondents prefer to communicate with Chinese students.

VSUES organizers of master programs work in close cooperation with Chinese educational institutions and recruiting companies, which allows having at least the medium-term planning and opening new master programs according to the employment market demands (Semin, 2020). At the same time, the students have the opportunity to choose a program quite different from their previous specialty and master a new type of activity. This can be considered a privilege, however, even Russians, having chosen a new educational direction, experience problems due to weak basic knowledge (Nikulina, 2012, p. 197). It is much more difficult for international students, as evidenced by their answers to the questionnaire. Those who have got a bachelor's degree in Russian philology and chose the International Relations master program had to acquire basic knowledge of this course independently. "I understood nearly nothing as a first-year master student. After having read some textbooks I started to comprehend the topics more or less clear", says W.X.

75% of the respondents consider useful to have preparatory (or adaptation) courses in two or three principal disciplines for preliminary preparation of students for a new master profile, which will be also helpful for some Russian master students. It would also be useful to compile a glossary of basic terms in Russian and other languages (English, Chinese, Korean). This wish was expressed by 63% of the survey participants including those who were majoring in Russian.

The presence of people with different basic knowledge in the same classroom creates difficulties for lecturers who have to adapt their lectures so that all the students present, including the Chinese, could follow them. In the mixed Russian-Chinese groups, such methods of active learning as games, case studies, discussions are of little use due to the students' different levels of basic knowledge and proficiency in Russian among the Chinese. What is really important here is use-of-aids teaching. Schemes, diagrams, graphs - all these aids can provide easier comprehension. It has become still more essential in the current pandemic when the Chinese students are mostly in China and distance learning is the only possible way of teaching. Some researchers say, digital texts are perceived less fully and accurately than paper texts affecting the quality of information processing (Mangen et al., 2013) and it is necessary to strive to make texts easy to read, divided into paragraphs, and written in simple language without any ambiguity.

A significant part of the master students' learning is homework and self-instruction. The personal experience shows that Chinese students generally are hardworking but often misunderstand the assignments and do not complete the tasks properly. They admit it in the questionnaire, "Sometimes I do not quite understand what I must do, then I do the best I can." Present attempts to cope with this situation do not fully meet the quality education requirements. There are examples of false mutual assistance of the Chinese when the most prepared student spreads his answers among the others (Selivanova et al., 2020). Teachers do not always notice this phenomenon or turn a blind eye to it creating a precedent and diminishing the value of the master program. The way out of this situation is seen in a more accurate correlation of the task volume and the time required to complete it, and in a more specific and precise formulation of the tasks.

A special issue is the master's thesis, which must be written in Russian and even creates difficulties for students majoring in Russian (Robotova, 2006). When asked about it, only five respondents reported that they were writing (or intending to write) his thesis all alone. Others are hoping for an academic advisor or Russian friends. Although most advisors undertake editing students' works, even so, the content is greatly simplified. In this regard, it seems fair to divide the Chinese students into two categories in relation to the thesis as well, allowing some of them to write it in Chinese. An alternative is the choice of a topic closely related to the student's job (Trubcheninova & Gazizov, 2018). Otherwise, the practice of seeking help from a supervisor and even ordering a dissertation for a fee will continue.

## 7. Conclusion

Thus, a two-fold approach is proposed to Chinese master's students' adaptation and their learning organization according to the level of Russian language proficiency and goals of acquiring the master's degrees. Self-adaptation of persons with a bachelor's degree in Russian and work plans in the international sphere will facilitate their further cooperation with Russian partners. For those who used Russian as a tool for obtaining education in Russia, it is important to create favorable conditions and facilitate their educational and cognitive process. This can be preparatory courses, term glossaries, writing a master's thesis in the native language, or choosing topics related to their job. These measures will contribute to the efficiency of Russian master programs for international students.

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