

Internationalization of Higher Education in Russia: A Case Study of Siberian Transport University

Nekhoroshkov V.

Department of International Business and Tourism
Siberian Transport University
Novosibirsk, Russia
met@stu.ru

Kobeleva E.

Department of English Language
Siberian Transport University
Novosibirsk, Russia
kobelevaep@mail.ru

Komkova A.

Department of English Language
Siberian Transport University
Laboratory of Semiotics and Sign Systems
Novosibirsk State University
Novosibirsk, Russia
raykova88@mail.ru

Krutko E.

Department of English Language
Siberian Transport University
Siberian Institute of Management - the Branch of the
Russian Academy of National Economy and Public Service
Novosibirsk, Russia
e.a.krutko@mail.ru

Abstract – Recent trends in society towards global engagement resulted in the significant changes in higher education around the world. Academic and research institutions demonstrate a growing interest in the processes of internationalization of higher education, at the international, regional, national, and institutional levels. The issue is especially relevant in the context of Russia's extremely ambitious Priority Project to develop the export of Russian education until 2025. Generally speaking, most Russian scholars see the framework of internationalization as a combination of several components – cultural, educational, economic, and administrative. In parallel with other higher education institutions, Siberian Transport University (STU) takes some urgently needed measures to address the challenges of internationalization. The authors consider the role of interfaculty collaboration aimed at implementing the concept of Content Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) in the professional training of university students.

Keywords—*internationalization, internationalization strategy, higher education, Bologna process, academic and professional mobility, interfaculty collaboration, CLIL, Russia*

I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years our society has undergone profound changes associated with scientific and technological progress, the challenges of world urbanization, migration and demographic changes, the acceleration of social life. Much research has focused on the processes of internationalization observed in all spheres of human activity. Internationalization and global engagement are becoming key trends in the development of national systems of education in Russia and abroad. Numerous investigations of Russian and foreign researchers have highlighted the problematics of internationalization of higher education associated with the cultural impact of university education, synergy of humanitarian and natural sciences, intercultural communication, digital and blended learning, international credit and degree mobility, the introduction of

international standards for measuring the quality of education defined by the Bologna Declaration.

The increased attention to the internationalization of Russian higher education system is the result of the country's integration into the global educational space. Although internationalization has become a mainstream of practices and policies in education at the international level, it should be admitted that at the moment there is no single policy or strategy for the internationalization of higher education system in Russia, both at the regional and national levels. The lack of uniform strategy is in some way offset at the institutional level: the increasing number of the Russian higher education institutions have integrated internationalization, to varying degrees, in their mission and vision. It can be seen in the activities of the leading universities in Russia.

Therefore using the case study of Siberian Transport University it is possible to observe that the global knowledge economy requires all universities to be the competitors for students, faculties, strategic partnerships, and research funding, as well as to prepare their graduates to be global professionals, scholars, highly demanded and competitive. Revealing the mechanism of the implementation of an international component into the existing curricula, programs, research, teaching and learning processes may contribute to the understanding of the process of internationalization of higher education. Thus, more research is needed on the experience of Russia and other countries in implementing the provisions of the Bologna process.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the theoretical and practical aspects of the internationalization process, identifying some challenges and obstacles for the Russian higher education system and proposing possible ways of overcoming them.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The concept of internationalization as an increasingly important issue in higher education globally was first introduced in the early 1990s. Since then, there have been many approaches to understanding the purpose and meaning of internationalization. “Internationalization is one of the major forces impacting and shaping higher education as it evolves to meet the challenges of the 21st century. Overall, the picture of internationalization that is emerging is one of complexity, diversity, and differentiation. The internationalization of higher education is a process in rapid evolution – both as actor and as reactor to the new realities of globalization and to the rather turbulent times facing higher education” [1, p. 9].

While being more and more discussed, internationalization in the context of higher education is interpreted and used differently, in different countries, different institutions, and by different scholars. Interpretation varies depending on the identified causes of internationalization, differences in the socio-economic realities in the countries, proposed activities, policies and services.

Thus, M. Harari characterizes the internationalization of higher education by the presence of an international component in the content of the curriculum, academic mobility, technical assistance and cooperation programs [2]. A similar approach to the definition of the term of internationalization has been proposed in the work of researchers J.A. Mastenhauser and B.J. Ellingboe [3]. Scientists S. Arum and J. Van de Water consider the internationalization of higher education as a set of activities, programs, and services in the framework of international research, educational exchanges, scientific and technical cooperation [4, p. 191-203].

Somewhat later, Canadian professor J. Knight defined the internationalization of education as “the process of integrating an international dimension into the teaching/learning, research and service functions of a university or college. An international dimension means a perspective, activity or service which introduces or integrates an international/intercultural/global outlook into the major functions of an institution of higher education” [5, p. 3].

However, in 2003, J. Knight revised the definition, presenting it as follows: “Internationalization at the national, sector, and institutional levels is defined as the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of postsecondary education” [6, p. 2]. The given definition is still the most commonly accepted one, though a number of other attempts has been made to clarify and specify the notion. For instance, M. Soderqvist, in turn, proposes to understand the internationalization of higher education as the transformation of a national university into a leading international one, accompanied by the inclusion of an international component at all management levels to improve the quality of educational services and research, and to achieve the formation of desired competencies [7, p. 26].

P.G. Altbach suggests that the internationalization of education refers to “the specific policies and initiatives of countries and individual academic institutions or systems to

deal with global trends. The examples of internationalization include policies relating to recruitment of foreign students, collaboration with academic institutions or systems in other countries, and the establishment of branch campuses abroad” [8].

In addition, there have been introduced two other important terms: (1) internal internationalization or “internationalization at home”, meaning a diversity of activities that helps students develop the required international understanding and intercultural skills; (2) external internationalization or “internationalization abroad”, meaning education across borders, including such aspects as the circulation of students, scholars, faculties, and programs [1, p. 22].

The approaches to understanding and defining the process of internationalization in the field of higher education may vary considerably due to different reasons. J Knight notes: “An “approach” is different from a “definition.” Even though different countries (or even institutions within a country) may hold a common interpretation or definition of “internationalization,” their implementation plan may vary due to different priorities, culture, history, politics, and resources. An approach is not fixed. Approaches change during different periods of development. In many cases, countries or institutions believe that they are using different approaches at the same time, or they believe that they are in a transition period from one approach to another. There is no right approach” [1, p. 31]. As a result, there can be distinguished the following approaches to addressing the process of internationalization:

- process approach, focusing on the internationalization process as the one which integrates an international dimension into the major functions of the university or college;
- activity-based approach, involving the development of international interaction at all levels (extracurricular activities, scholar/student exchange, technical cooperation, etc.);
- competency-based approach, focusing on the development of professional competencies that meet the requirements of modern society, economy, labor market, etc.;
- strategic/organizational approach, relating to the development of aspects of internationalization in the field of management and organization of the educational process [5, p. 3-4].

Moreover, in an effort to measure and assess internationalization outcomes and impact the following dimensions have been proposed: faculty involvement in international activities, international scholars and students, internationalized curricula, courses and study abroad programs, university/college leadership [3]. Internationalization has gradually become a broad umbrella term covering a variety of components, dimensions, approaches, and activities.

The traditional educational model in Russia seems not able to adequately respond to the challenges of modern requirements, and therefore the Russian higher education sector “appears to be not quite competitive” with the best world

universities [9]. It is necessary to develop new approaches to the practice of university education. “Revitalization of the work in the field of education internationalization of Russian higher education institutions was caused by management interventions by the public authorities (in particular, the adoption and implementation of the “5-100” of the project, associated with the entry of at least 5 Russian universities in the top 100 universities in the world until 2020)” [10].

The literature review showed that a conceptual framework for internationalization of higher education is seen by most Russian scholars as a combination of several components – cultural, educational, economic, and administrative. Internationalization is understood as an integrative process of introducing international standards into the educational process of the Russian universities.

The expansion of the study of theoretical and practical aspects of the education internationalization generated considerable recent research interest in describing the emergence of the phenomenon in a broad historical, political, and ethnocultural context [11], in examining the differences in the practical experience of universities in different countries: in the United States [12], Great Britain [13], Japan [14], Australia [15], Korea [16], China [17], Kazakhstan [18] and others.

Thus, the problem of defining the concept and essence of the process of internationalization in the field of education has occupied the minds of researchers for more than two decades. Neither the concept of internationalization nor the debate over its meaning is new: a lot of work has been accumulated on theoretical and practical issues of internationalizing education around the world. Yet, it is not clear how this process will evolve in Russia, especially in the absence of a single national strategy for the internationalization of higher education.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As discussed previously, internationalization is an integrative process of introducing international standards into the research, the curriculum, teaching and learning activities of the Russian universities. Special emphasis is placed on the inclusion of the international content into curricula, exchange and cooperation programs in order to make students, scholars, institutions more competitive in the global economic marketplace. This means preparing graduates to work in international or multicultural context, as well as to meet world standards in their profession [22].

The Statistical Collection “Export of Russian educational services” [19] reflects the dynamics of international student enrollment in Soviet/Russian higher educational institutions for the last 65 years, as well as changes in countries of origin of students in full-time programs in Russian higher educational institutions for academic years 2006/2007 through 2016/2017.

As it is stated in the survey, the total number of foreign citizens enrolled in Russian universities in the 2016/2017 academic year increased by 28.6 thousand over the number in 2015/2016. In terms of the type of educational institutions, the largest increase was registered in the academic year 2017/2017 in industrial higher education institutions and in classical universities (by 12.5 thousand), while the number of foreign students in pedagogical increased by only 1.2 thousand. The

increase in the number of foreign students in full-time education was achieved mainly in the higher education institutions located in three federal districts – Central (by 9.5 thousand), Privolzhsky (by 6.4 thousand), and Siberian (by 4.3 thousand).

According to the statistical survey, the most popular specialties among foreign citizens in 2016/2017 academic year were engineering and technical (22.1 % of the total) and medicine (20.0 % of the total), as well as economics and management (13.2 %). At the same time, the number of students studying aviation and rocket and space technology, reproduction and processing of forest resources and technology of food products and consumer goods decreased slightly [19].

Since the present research aimed to study the theoretical and practical aspects of the education internationalization in Russia, the challenges for the Russian higher education system and possible ways of overcoming them are considered on the example of Siberian Transport University in Novosibirsk. STU provides qualified specialists in the fields of railway transport, transport construction, economy and law, management and service, IT and environmental protection.

As a result, the following means to promote the education internationalization at STU have been identified: aiding students in broadening their cross-cultural experiences (academic and professional mobility, participation in international conferences, congresses, symposiums); enhancing students’ foreign languages proficiency (CLIL, extracurricular foreign language courses); subsidizing foreign students enrollment (international student mobility, internships).

Thus, STU has entered into a number of partnerships with the leading educational institutions, community organizations, and government agencies. The university offers the following academic mobility programs:

- Dual Degree Program, bachelor’s degree in International Business (Binghai University, Qingdao, PR China), since 2016;
- Master's Program in Civil Engineering, International Business, Corporate Governance (Beijing Transport University, PR China), since 2006;
- Master's Program in International Management (University of Western Scotland, United Kingdom), since 2014;
- 1 term academic mobility program "Construction of railways, bridges and transport tunnels" (Kazakh Academy of Transport and Communication of M. Tynyshpayev, Kazakhstan), since 2009.

Fig. 1 reveals the number of STU students enrolled in dual degree opportunities in engineering and economics in 3 year dynamics.

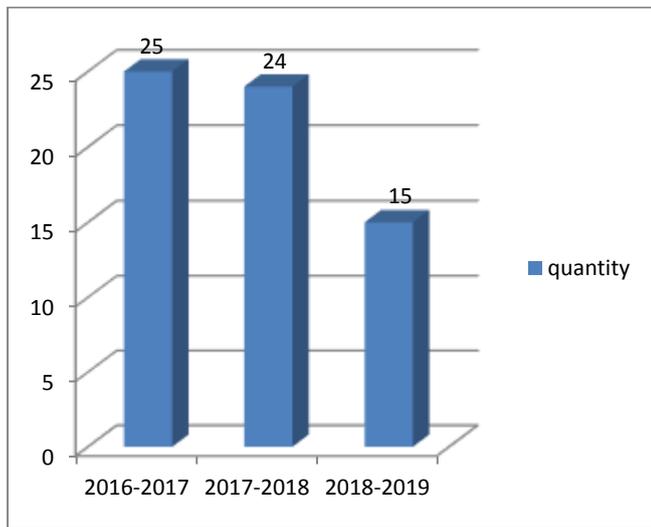


Fig. 1. The amount of the STU students involved in academic mobility programs

Over the past three years, the number of international students pursuing academic degrees at Siberian Transport University has been gradually rising (Fig. 2). At present, 325 foreign students from 10 countries (Fig. 3) study at STU.

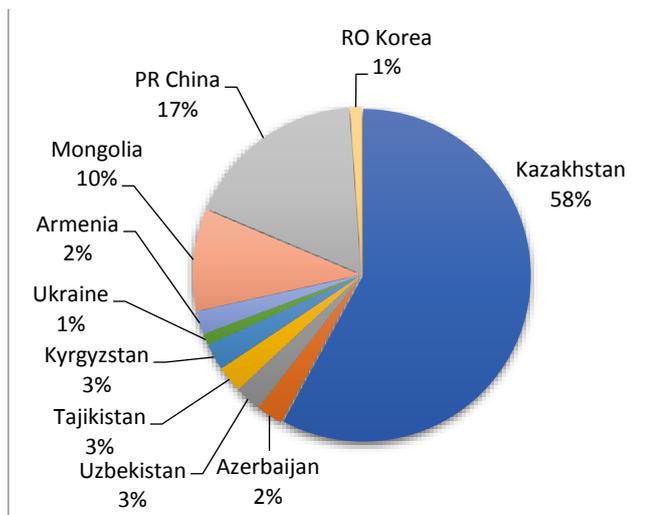


Fig. 2. Amount of foreign students enrolled at STU

Our teaching experience allowed identifying the basic requirements to graduates: they must be highly demanded and competitive professionals in today's global world. Firstly, it is the development of the professional competencies, sufficient for workplace success. Secondly, it is an advanced level of foreign language knowledge and professional communication skills, which, obviously, lays the foundation for both degree and credit mobility in terms of its internationalization. Thirdly, IT skills are necessary to efficiently meet the challenges of using modern digital technologies, to work and interact in the open information space. All these aspects contribute to the mobility of graduates [20, p. 14-16].

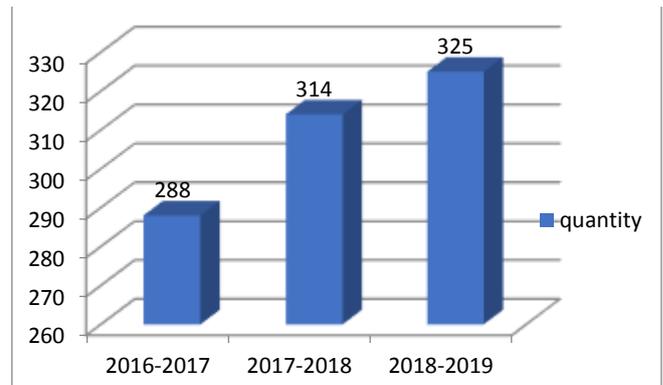


Fig. 3. STU: foreign countries (%) where students come from, 2018

However, the implementation of the internationalization strategy at the institutional level can be rather challenging. Besides the fact that such essential components in the internationalization of higher education as international exchange and cooperation may be limited due to insufficient resources in the university, there are other challenges too.

In this context, it is suggested to consider some problems of different nature that prevent the implementation of the above stated measures, aimed at ensuring the qualification requirements for university teaching staff and students. Such problems comprise, for instance, the lack of curriculum carried out in a foreign language, an insufficient number of innovative educational programs and courses capable of increasing the competitiveness of graduates in the world market, inadequate knowledge of a foreign language.

To overcome the problems identified, it is proposed to create the unique innovative educational environment for special training of the management and teaching staff at the university, increasing their foreign languages proficiency, intensifying the development of bilingual educational programs in priority areas highly-demanded by Russian and foreign employers, and promoting the teachers implementing educational programs and scientific supervision in foreign languages.

The present study attempted to emphasize the prominent role of foreign languages proficiency as a pragmatic tool for the development of a global academic network and the basis for the efficient international academic communication. Otherwise, the development of Russian education in the context of the internationalization and, accordingly, the fulfillment of the measures listed above would be open to question. However, the knowledge of a foreign language without any professional background becomes strongly insufficient for a wide range of specialists. Thus, instead of being a separate purpose of education, it should be converted into a very important tool for a specialist in a certain field, their competitive advantage.

As far as the basic requirements to a modern university graduate are concerned, some modernization of the educational process organization, foreign languages and core disciplines teaching and, with highest priority, the teaching staff training is needed.

In the absence of unified requirements, priority is given to the teachers of core disciplines speaking foreign languages (level B2-C1 according to the Common European Framework of Reference, CEFR) and possessing methodological competence in the field of the Content Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). CLIL is an approach to bilingual education that assumes synchronous studying of a core discipline by means of a foreign language. It comprises two learning models that prioritize either a particular subject or a foreign language (content-led and language-led models). However, the number of teachers with dual specialization both in a core discipline and a foreign language is very limited at STU.

The implementation of the concept (CLIL) in the professional training of university students, leads to a serious contradiction between the insufficient foreign language proficiency and the lack of competence in a particular professional area (economics, law, customs studies, etc.). One of the solutions is a professional retraining of foreign language teachers, which would provide the desired level of their competence. However, the teachers, in this case, need retraining in several professional fields, since their work is not limited to teaching students of one specialty. Another approach is improving foreign language skills of the core disciplines teachers with further development of a course in a foreign language (mainly English) as a result of team-teaching. Thus, the most realistic way to resolve the above mentioned contradiction is achieving synergy in professional communication of the teaching staff at the university.

Hence, the efficiency of the Content Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) centers on the interfaculty collaboration. Its various forms are successfully applied in the Siberian State University, but the degree of the collaboration is rather different: developing foreign language courses regarding the instructions and advice of specialized departments; joint development of a curriculum in a foreign language by the representatives of some departments; conducting training workshops; joint classes held by a linguist and core subject instructor.

Among such practices, aimed at developing interfaculty collaboration at STU, a pilot project “Developing foreign languages competence of the university teaching staff” is worth mentioning. It involves Civil Law, Economic Theory and Crisis Management, State and Municipal Management, Engineering Graphics, International Business and Tourism Department academic staff. Apart from placement testing, the modular course develops communication, sociocultural, and teamwork skills. One more project – an advanced training course for teachers of Foreign Language Department “Methodology for interdisciplinary training” is proposed as well.

Besides, the accumulated experience in the interfaculty collaboration makes it possible to particularly emphasize the organizing students’ research projects in foreign languages [20, 21]. Project work is interpreted as the subject-subject interaction of the educational process participants, aimed at searching for an appropriate decision of a problem concerned with a professional field by means of a foreign language. In fact, the themes of the projects reflect the specifics of student professional training.

IV. CONCLUSION

The study indicates that for two decades the concept of internationalization of higher education has been attracting the attention of a large number of researchers who examined its various aspects at the institutional, regional, national, and international levels. The internationalization of education is a process that is actively developing globally.

The absence of a single policy or strategy for the internationalization of higher education in Russia, both at the regional and federal levels, is partly compensated by the exceptional activity of some Russian universities. The case study of Siberian transport University deserves attention due to its special focus on the interfaculty collaboration and its role in the strengthening professionally-oriented training of university students.

One of the main directions of reforming the educational process in the Russian universities in the context of the internationalization is the implementation of a set of measures that improve the quality of professional training of the university graduates. However, professional training of a modern, mobile specialist, demanded and competitive, is practically impossible without effective teaching of a foreign language. The current trend in teaching foreign languages is associated with the increased integration of the language and a particular professional field. In this regard, there is a contradiction in deciding on the professional readiness of the university teachers to meet the new requirements of internationalized education.

The central issue addressed in the study is the strengthening of interfaculty collaboration, aimed at implementing the concept of Content Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) in the professional training of the university students. The project activity of students in a foreign language has proved its high efficiency both in terms of the implementation of this concept and as a form of study at a university that meets the requirements of professional mobility.

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