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Problems and Prospects of the Online Model for Exporting Russian Education in the Context of Digital Inequality

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ABSTRACT

Russia has historically been a favored destination for international students, a trend continuing through 2020–2022 despite pandemic challenges, quarantine measures, remote learning adaptations, and evolving geopolitical dynamics. The pandemic prompted significant digital transformations in universities, revealing varying digital readiness among Russian institutions for the abrupt shift to online education. This led to the emergence of a novel "digital didactics" methodology. Russian universities adopted digitalization not only for education but also for supporting digital students' socio-psychological adaptation and devising recruitment strategies via social networks. In these circumstances, digital inequality emerged as a critical concern. This issue is not only evident at a global level but also across various stages of foreign students' education, spanning from virtual admissions to final certification. This study analyzes the global experiences and recommendations for crafting an optimal model for online educational engagement with foreign students and categorizes Russian universities based on their digital readiness for education export and identifies challenges in engaging foreign students and attracting applicants.

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Introduction

The Russian government's initiatives and the endeavors of Russian universities had brought about a noteworthy rise in the count of foreign students and revenue from educational exports by 2022. The total number of foreign students in Russia increased from 298,000 in 2019 to 315,000 in 2020, 324,000 in 2021, and further to 354,000 in 2022 (V vuzy Rossii, 2022). The recovery of the international educational market began in 2022 with the lifting of quarantine restrictions and the opening of borders and air traffic. In Russia, the notable rise in foreign student enrollment owed much to the streamlined migration procedures or their absence, alongside the high proficiency of universities' international admission services. A substantial contribution came from the measures introduced under the federal project *Eksport obrazovaniia* [Education Export], which adapted regulatory support for foreign student admissions, eliminating the need for original diplomas and recognition confirmations (in the case of distance learning) (Ob osobennostiakh priema, 2020, 2021).

In 2022, however, the growth of Russian educational exports was hurdled by the sanctions imposed by Western countries, which resulted in severed humanitarian ties with "unfriendly nations," transportation disruptions due to flight cancellations, financial obstacles in money transfers, social network restrictions, and a substantial information campaign (Rostovskaya & Skorobogatova, 2022, p. 107).

Furthermore, as digitalization takes center stage within Russian universities, fostering both educational and psychological well-being for digital students, it's notable that certain countries, like China, have extended their reliance on remote learning due to ongoing quarantine measures, as evidenced by their continued adoption of distance learning throughout the 2022–2023 academic year.

Analysis of global practices reveals that educational institutions adopted a pivotal strategy to attract and retain students by offering diverse models of distance learning. As Mr. Borhene Chakroun, Director of the Division of Policies and Lifelong Learning Systems at UNESCO, explained, "effectiveness hinges on four levels of readiness: technical, content, pedagogical, and monitoring and evaluation" (UNESCO, 2023). These dimensions encompass access to remote learning options, the availability of online content aligned with national curricula, the pedagogical readiness of educators as well as parents and caregivers, and the monitoring of student progress.

The use of online education has revealed problems with the digital divide, including challenges in accessing distance learning, assessing knowledge fairly, and training teachers. Hence, the primary goal of this study is to identify challenges arising from the digital divide when integrating digital technologies into different phases of foreign students' educational journey. We intend to analyze existing global experiences and recommendations for crafting an optimal model for educational engagement with foreign students in the context of digitalization.

Literature Review

As part of the Russian government's priority project *Razvitie eksportnogo potentsiala rossiiskoi sistemy obrazovaniia* [Development of the Export Potential of the Russian Education System] (2017–2018), and in alignment with the four service supply modes recognized by the World Trade Organization, five key models of educational export have been defined: internal internationalization, collaborative educational programs, establishment of Russian educational institutions abroad, online education, and network universities (Krasnova, 2021).

The concept of "education export" has emerged relatively recently, driven by the rapid increase in the number of foreign students and intentional state policies. Authors like A. L. Aref'ev (2017), M. Yu. Makhotaeva et al. (2019), and V. I. Skorobogatova (2021) have delved into the phenomenon of education export, exploring various aspects, from marketing characteristics to the creation of appealing educational programs. Additionally, the Russian International Affairs Council's annual study, *Elektronnaia internatsionalizatsiia: Angloiazychnye internet-resursy rossiiskikh universitetov* [Electronic Internationalization: English-Language Internet Resources of Russian Universities] (2015–2022), centers on promoting Russian education through university English websites (Russian International Affairs Council, n.d.). The potential of virtual learning for education export capitalizes on the benefits of education digitalization in today's universally virtualized society (Shapovalov, 2014).

The comprehensive analysis of e-learning in Russia and globally, encompassing stages, classifications, and key development factors has been performed by G. A. Krasnova and G. V. Mozhaeva (2019). Their study identifies challenges in Russian universities' digital learning, including legislative regulation gaps, lack of systematic online education development monitoring, and digital inequalities.

There has been increased scholarly interest in the notion of digital inequality (Ragnedda, 2018; Ragnedda & Kreitem, 2018; van Dijk, 2013; Vartanova, 2002). J. van Dijk (2013) identifies three tiers of digital inequality: the initial tier pertains to physical access to infrastructure, the second involves digital skills and competencies, and the third encompasses the benefits accrued while utilizing the Internet fully (p. 28).

International insights into digital transformation are articulated through analytical reports and publications, including those addressing universities in the context of COVID-19. Works such as *COVID-19 Impact on International Higher Education: Studies & Forecasts* (German Academic Exchange Service, 2020), "Digitalization in Education: Challenges, Trends and Transformative Potential" (Schmidt & Tang, 2020), and materials

from the 12th International Conference on Technology, Education, and Development (Gómez Chova et al., 2018) provide a platform for these perspectives. A recurring theme in these publications is that "digital transformation in higher education transcends mere technology. It aims to introduce novel methods that sustain user-centered services amidst shifts in technology, competition, audience needs, and behavior" (Seres et al., 2018). However, concerning foreign students, this task appears to be more challenging, requiring both regulatory and organizational changes for its resolution.

Materials and Methods

The article draws upon various sources divided into four groups. The first group comprises studies from international and national organizations, including statistical data. The second group consists of monographs, articles by Russian and foreign researchers, analytical reports, and materials from international and Russian conferences. The third group encompasses Russian regulatory legal documents, acts pertaining to education, migration policy, and digitalization of education. Lastly, the fourth group includes websites, online platforms, and Internet portals.

In its annual reports, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (2019) published materials on student migration flows. These reports draw on statistical data from various international organizations, including UNESCO and the International Organization for Migration. The empirical foundation of this study rests on official Russian and international educational statistics, content analysis of relevant documents from foreign and domestic educational systems, and conclusions drawn by the authors at several conferences held between 2020 and 2022. The research employs analytical, methodological, comparative legal, and classification methods to achieve its objectives.

Results and Discussion

The rise of the online model of educational export in Russian practice can be attributed to the widespread adoption of mass open online courses (MOOCs) and online learning as a form of distance education. This approach involves active synchronous interaction between teachers and students through e-learning tools on the Internet.

Following the transition of the entire educational process to a remote format in 2020–2021, the distinct boundaries of Russian universities' target models for exporting educational offerings became increasingly blurred. These models shifted substantially toward a hybrid format, each of them incorporating online learning as a significant component.

Mobile learning is considered a pivotal strategy for educational development. According to UNESCO's definition, "mobile learning implies the use of mobile technology, both separately and in conjunction with other information and communication technologies (ICTs), to organize the educational process, regardless of the place and time of training. Learning can take many forms: with the help of mobile devices, students can access educational resources, connect with other users, and

create content in and out of the classroom" (UNESCO, 2013). During the 40th Session of the UNESCO General Conference held in November 2019, the Recommendations on Open Educational Resources[1] were endorsed to advance the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals. Among these goals, open educational e-courses have been cited as a highly accessible tool within the realm of higher education.

Initially introduced in prestigious American universities such as the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Harvard, and Stanford in 2011, the concept of MOOC gained traction with the launch of the Coursera[2] online platform. Over the span of a decade, by 2021, the global count of online course participants had reached 113 million, with Russia ranking 7th and having a total of 2.4 million participants (Coursera, 2021).

Comprehensive online educational programs, allowing individuals to earn bachelor's, master's, or PhD degrees without the need to be physically present at an educational institution, have been established on online platforms such as Coursera, Udacity[3], and EdX[4].

The first online platforms, Lectorium[5] and Universarium[6], appeared in Russia in 2012. During the same period, several Russian universities, including the Moscow Institute of Physics and Technology, St. Petersburg State University, and Tyumen State University, joined the online platform Coursera, which had previously only offered courses from foreign universities. Leading the way in terms of online course offerings until February 2022 was the Higher School of Economics. Furthermore, in 2020, Russia launched its first English-language online *Master in Data Science* program (Sidhu, 2019). English-language courses on global platforms primarily catered to foreign students who, by selecting courses from a specific university, were often inclined to continue their studies at a familiar institution.

In today's evolving geopolitical landscape, the sanctions imposed on Russia, among other things, include restrictions on access to educational resources for political reasons. In March 2022, Coursera introduced the following limitations on its platform: "We are taking the following action in regards to business in Russia: We are suspending all content from Russian university and industry partners including courses, specializations, and degrees. Content from Russian partners will no longer be discoverable or available on Coursera's platform for new enrollments. We believe access to education is a human right. As such, Coursera will remain available in all regions where there is not a government sanction" (Maggioncalda, 2022). It is noteworthy that Coursera acknowledges education as a fundamental human right.

The removal of Russian universities from international educational platforms like Coursera and EdX created the need to explore alternative digital solutions. On September 5, 2022, *Kontseptsiia gumanitarnoi politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii za rubezhom* [The Concept of the Humanitarian Policy of the Russian Federation

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[1] https://www.unesco.org/en/legal-affairs/recommendation-open-educational-resources-oer

[2] https://www.coursera.org

[3] https://www.udacity.com

[4] https://www.edx.org

[5] https://www.lektorium.tv/mooc

[6] https://www.universarium.org

Abroad] was approved by the Decree of the President of the Russian Federation No. 611 (Ob utverzhdenii Kontseptsii, 2022). It clearly outlines the core values that the Russian Federation presents on the global platform, seeking better understanding and recognition. Education is presented as a key driver of this effort. Moreover, in the updated version of *Kontseptsiia gosudarstvennoi politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii v sfere sodeistviia mezhdunarodnomu razvitiiu* [The Concept of International Development Assistance], a central aspect of Russia's involvement in global development is described as the empowerment of human potential in recipient nations. In the updated version of this document, for the first time, the prime focus of Russia's engagement in international development is linked to providing citizens of recipient nations with the opportunity for tuition-free education in Russian universities and colleges (O vnesenii izmenenii, 2023). This reaffirms the significance of educational migration and emphasizes the importance of promoting Russian education as a constituent element of foreign policy.

The rise of online learning across different educational levels can be attributed to changing preferences among applicants and the increasing demand for online degree programs and courses. This shift is well illustrated by the growing number of Russian students engaging with the Coursera platform.

Since 2019, an important criterion for assessing the international activities of Russian universities was the information on online courses published on open educational platforms, provided as part of monitoring the international activities of educational organizations of higher education (O provedenii monitoringa, 2019). An open educational platform is defined as a platform that collaborates with three or more Russian and/or foreign higher education institutions, offering a diverse range of students the chance to enroll in specific online courses from any location worldwide (Metodicheskie rekomendatsii, 2019).

In 2021, the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of Russia initiated an effort to connect universities to the Modern Digital Educational Environment in the Russian Federation platform (O gosudarstvennoi informatsionnoi sisteme, 2020).

Universities' experiences with online education have highlighted, however, various issues of digital inequality when organizing educational processes for foreign students located outside of Russia. These problems range from limited Internet access to varying technical capabilities of Internet service providers in different countries such as differing Internet access channel speeds, insufficient bit rate for live video and audio translations, and restrictions on using public domain software. These challenges, in turn, hinder the seamless delivery of high-quality electronic educational resources (Rostovskaya et al., 2021). In essence, one of the fundamental issues in digital interaction lies in technical and access-related problems, constituting the first level of digital inequality.

As indicated in the latest Global Digital 2023 report, there are currently 5.16 billion Internet users in the world, accounting for 64.4% of the global population. Over the past year there has been a 1.9% growth in the number of Internet users (Kemp, 2023). Regrettably, there is a notable lack of analysis concerning Internet usage for educational purposes even though Internet access plays an important role in facilitating the export of education to priority regions.

In the current landscape, the Russian Federation designates certain regions as priority areas, focusing on "friendly" and "neutral" nations, which includes BRICS member countries, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation members, CIS countries, and members of the Eurasian Economic Union. Strengthening comprehensive partnerships with African nations also remains a significant focus of Russia's foreign policy. During the Plenary Session of the Russia–Africa Economic and Humanitarian Forum in July 2023, Russian President Vladimir Putin highlighted this trajectory, stating:

> Nearly 35,000 African students are studying at Russian universities, and this number is growing every year. The quota for African students financed from the federal budget has increased by 150 percent over the past three years and will exceed 4,700 people in the next academic year. (Plenary session, 2023)

The recruitment of African students, along with the digital promotion of Russian educational programs and fostering educational engagement with foreign students, poses significant challenges for universities due to the fact that Internet usage levels in Africa remain the lowest among major regions. Only 43.2% of the population in African countries has access to the Internet, underscoring the profound issue of digital inequality in this context (Figure 1).

Figure 1
Internet World Penetration Rates by Geographic Regions, 2022

Note. Source: https://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm
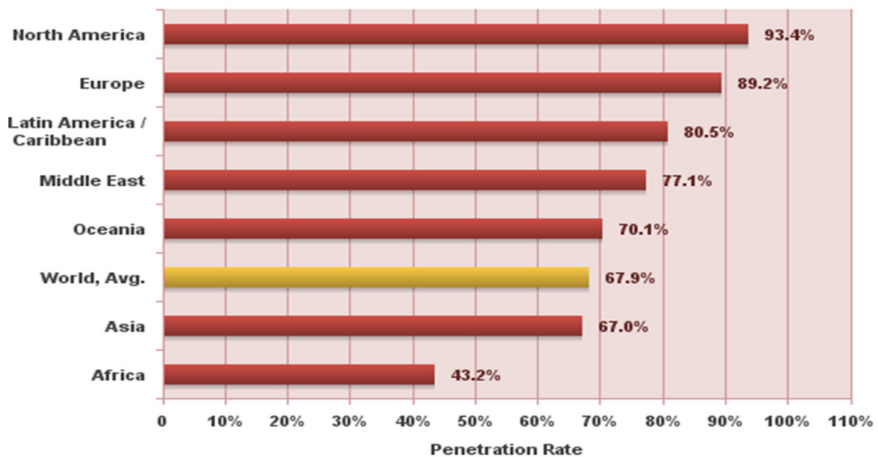
Figure 1 illustrates the global distribution of Internet users by regions, showcasing an average worldwide Internet penetration rate of 67.9%, with the highest rate at 93.4% in North America.

Given these statistics, it becomes worthwhile to analyze the trend of attracting foreign students from African countries to Russia. Notably, over the past three years, this growth has doubled, signaling the increasing popularity of Russian education.

The percentage of Internet users in a specific country plays a pivotal role in shaping the marketing and educational strategies of universities (Table 1).

Table 1

The Number of Foreign Students From African Countries in Russia and the Level of Internet Access in These Countries (%)

Country	Number of students		Percentage of Internet users, %
	for the year 2018	for the year 2021	
Algeria	613	1,224	70.9
Benin	232	281	34.0
Botswana	126	175	73.5
Burkina Faso	15	59	22.0
Burundi	116	98	10.2
The Gambia	20	37	33.0
Guinea	181	384	34.7
Guinea-Bissau	298	406	35.2
Egypt	2,342	12,355	72.2
Zambia	626	637	21.2
Zimbabwe	435	488	34.8
Cape Verde	22	30	69.8
Cameroon	581	769	45.6
Congo	745	818	22.0
Democratic Republic of the Congo	365	481	22.9
Côte d'Ivoire	563	682	45.4
Mali	110	127	34.5
Morocco	2,380	3,132	84.1
Mozambique	134	153	20.7
Nigeria	1,398	1,684	55.4
Rwanda	37	143	30.5
Senegal	104	213	58.1
Somalia	73	105	9.8
Sudan	263	381	28.4
Sierra Leone	44	86	21.2
United Republic of Tanzania	73	106	31.6
Togo	18	42	35.0
Uganda	53	75	24.6
Central African Republic	11	26	10.6
Chad	206	310	17.9
Eswatini	70	78	30.3
Ethiopia	39	75	16.7
Republic of South Africa	575	638	72.3
Total	12,868	26,298	–

Note. Source: The table was compiled by the authors based on the data of the annual monitoring of the international activities of the Ministry of Education and Science Russian Federation, the data resulting from statistical observations and taken from the Global Digital Report 2023 (Kemp, 2023).

In a broader context, it is noteworthy that there has been a substantial increase in Internet users across African countries over the past five years. There is, however, a considerable disparity in the degree of digitalization among African nations. Countries exhibiting elevated digitalization levels, according to the metrics such as the number of Internet users, social media engagement, and digital tool utilization, include North African countries like Algeria, Morocco, and Egypt. Conversely, Sub-Saharan countries have markedly low levels of Internet accessibility, evident in the rankings for Internet access in countries like Burundi, Zambia, Somalia, the Central African Republic, and Chad.

While it may be challenging to draw a direct correlation between the surge in the number of African applicants and the extent of Internet users, it would make sense for universities to consider this indicator both when recruiting foreign students and when planning the learning process. Prospective students' choice of a destination to study is influenced by a multitude of factors, including a university's standing in global rankings, the testimonials of current students, educational quality, and post-graduation employment prospects. A significant hurdle for African students seeking Russian education lies in mastering the Russian language, navigating cultural differences, and achieving sociocultural adaptation. To surmount these barriers, fostering remote interaction through digital resources becomes pivotal.

Consequently, for numerous universities, a central objective during the pandemic was to establish remote preparatory departments to facilitate Russian language instruction and to retain prospective students. Some Russian universities have effectively addressed the challenge of bridging the digital divide through the adept application of digital technologies: for instance, the Patrice Lumumba Peoples' Friendship University of Russia (RUDN) and Don State Technical University have implemented the Distance Preparatory Department initiative to provide Russian language training for aspiring international students.

When designing educational processes, it's important to consider national specifics, taking into account factors like disparities in time zones, alignment with the national economic context, digital development index, and level of digital maturity.

At Don State Technical University, the entire educational process is conducted through the digital platform *SKIF.Mezhdunarodnyi* [SKIF.INTERNATIONAL]. Here, e-courses created by instructors from the International Department are posted in a module format, which contributes to a more flexible learning experience for students (Novikova, 2020).

The Patrice Lumumba Peoples' Friendship University of Russia also emphasizes the use of ICT technologies to attract foreign students at the school level. They have developed a system of Olympiads in school subjects and the Russian language for school children from abroad. Additionally, specialized classes have been established in developing countries (with their number reaching 41 in 2023), where RUDN teachers provide advanced-level instruction in school subjects. These classes are conducted both in-person and online.

The Volga Research Medical University relies heavily on its distance education website[7] as a key platform for knowledge integration and feedback. This website

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[7] https://sdo.pimunn.net/

supports a system of network provision of students with materials for self-study, as well as intermediate and final control of knowledge (Levanov et al., 2020). This system enables students to engage with presentations, online video lectures, and undertake intermediate and final assessments (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Structure of Distance Learning (the Case of the Volga Research Medical University)
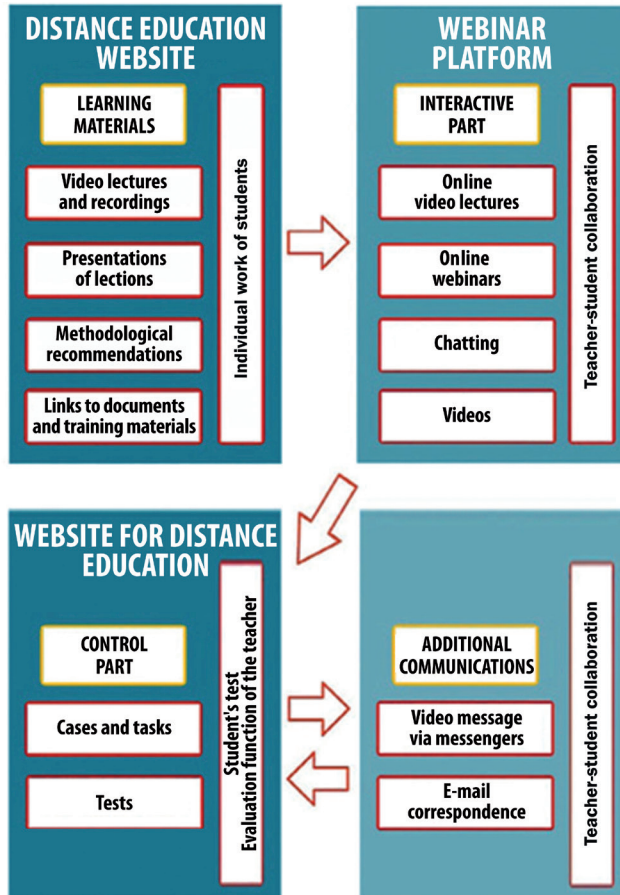
Note. Source: Levanov et al., 2020; trans. by T. Rostovskaya, V. Skorobogatova, & V. Kholina.

Figure 2 demonstrates that the distance learning system comprises four modules: a training module, an interactive module for seminars and discussions, a control module, and a communication module.

In the current landscape, universities exhibit varying degrees of implementation of digital technologies when engaging with foreign students. Several universities, primarily regional ones, utilize conventional software platforms like Moodle[8] for

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[8] https://moodle.org/

organizing their educational processes. In contrast, other regional institutions, such as Togliatti State University, have responded to intense competition by creating their own digital ecosystem known as the Rosdistant University.[9] This ecosystem comprises eight subsystems, including a subsystem for data integrity control, four databases (for teachers, students, digital footprint, and content), as well as the requisite IT infrastructure for their successful functioning. The implementation of this system has yielded significant results, including notable increases in student enrollment and geographical coverage. The number of foreign students has surged twelvefold, from 190 people in 2014 to 2.3 thousand people from 23 countries in 2022 (Krishtal et al., 2022).

Leading universities in the country, such as Tomsk State University (TSU), are adopting a versatile hybrid learning format known as HyFlex. This format involves designing and implementing educational programs for three distinct student groups, each following one of the three possible paths: traditional classroom learning, synchronous remote learning through videoconferencing, and asynchronous independent learning utilizing online content in an electronic training course via a Learning Management System (LMS). A state-of-the-art hardware and software setup at TSU has facilitated the establishment of 45 classrooms capable of accommodating 2,500 students in-person and over 4,500 students online simultaneously (Shepel et al., 2022). As such, student needs and capabilities are maximally taken into consideration.

If we look at the way Russian universities use digital tools, we can divide them into three groups. The first group employs traditional digital tools to engage with foreign applicants and students; however, these tools lack integration, often resulting in what is termed "patchwork" informatization. Universities of the second group have established digital ecosystems that encompass all operational processes and an educational environment integrating modern digital tools for teaching and assessment. The third group consists of advanced universities that, in addition to digital ecosystems, possess university management structures and innovative educational technologies enabling the creation of personalized learning paths (e.g., Tomsk State University, Tyumen State University).

The primary challenges in optimizing digital tools for education export can be classified as follows:

• Establishing a digital environment, which involves addressing technical hurdles;

• Implementing digital learning technologies, which includes the creation and dissemination of high-quality educational content in foreign languages;

• Formulating digital models for process organization, such as digital marketing, designing international service digital interfaces, and implementing digital document management.

Developing a digital environment involves various aspects of a university's operations beyond international activities, yet specific challenges and solutions arise when it comes to generating digital content and engaging with foreign students.

Considering the restrictions for Russian universities to publish in international educational platforms, there is a need to intensify efforts towards establishing online

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[9] https://www.rosdistant.ru/

platforms that aggregate various educational modules and open educational resources in foreign languages. However, the active use of online courses by universities brings forth the challenge of integrating these institutions in the creation of comprehensive educational content. Therefore, it is necessary to develop and enrich the national platform *Otkrytoe obrazovanie* [Open Education],[10] which, as of August 1, 2023, comprises 1,122 courses exclusively in the Russian language. The suggestion to consider leveraging this national platform for foreign students by supplementing it with online courses in foreign languages or creating a unified user-friendly aggregator platform for international students is discussed by Rostovskaya et al. (2021, p. 35).

In the field of education export, a significant challenge often stems from regulatory requirements and restrictions imposed by migration laws, which may include mandates for submitting original documents, extensive notarization demands, and so on. The use of electronic documents could significantly ease many of the challenges faced during the admissions process for foreign students. The experience of the 2020–2021 admissions cycle showed that the delayed provision of original documents did not result in significant adverse effects. For instance, starting from 2022, Armenia and later Uzbekistan have transitioned to electronic forms of education certificates with QR codes for verification.

The existing educational regulatory framework lacks provisions for electronic document management, necessitating the introduction of electronic documents into legislation. This aligns with broader trends in digitalization, including international practices. Digital repositories of educational records are actively utilized not only in individual countries but also by international bodies. For example, the West African Examinations Council[11] (WAEC) conducts exams and certifies educational achievements in English-speaking West African countries (Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Gambia).

Rostovskaya et al. (2021) suppose that in light of the expanding digital repositories for educational documents and qualifications, it is advisable to progressively eliminate the requirement for submitting documents in physical paper format, provided that digital data can be authenticated. Given the escalating competition for each foreign student and the concurrent pursuit of political influence, we would recommend to reconsider legal obstacles such as document legalization or original document submission, particularly when reliable information databases affirm the authenticity of educational records. Acknowledging that educational migration stands as a preferred form of migration and attracting foreign students yields both migration growth and economic benefits, it is important to prioritize the digitalization of migration registration procedures and entry-exit protocols for foreign students (Skorobogatova, 2022).

Conclusion

In today's geopolitical context, there is a clear strategic need to attract foreign students from priority regions and countries. University internationalization serves as

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[10] https://openedu.ru/

[11] https://www.waecgh.org/

a pervasive agenda transcending institutional boundaries. The optimal provision of digital services tailored to international students' needs is seen as a pivotal factor for the success of education export.

During the enrollment phase, universities face the need to create international marketing strategies, establish regulations for electronic internationalization, utilize Customer Relationship Management systems to manage large databases of participants in educational fairs and potential applicants, and enhance the use of online recruitment tools such as social media networks, website landing pages, and comprehensive program information dissemination.

The creation of a platform to host educational resources in foreign languages, potentially achieved through a consortium or association of leading universities engaged in Russian education export, is a necessity. The replication of best practices and the pursuit of optimal financial mechanisms for deploying software products and digital services already developed and validated by most universities remain crucial.

Equally important is for the government to focus on fostering a common understanding of terms related to digitalization in education. This entails amending educational legislation, establishing national platforms hosting open foreign-language educational resources that can be used and accredited as part of university educational programs, permitting the validation of education and qualification documents through digital means, and streamlining the recognition process.

The challenge of digital inequality is a pressing concern in the socio-economic advancement of nations and their regions. In the context of the Concept of International Development Assistance, attention should be directed towards helping countries to bridge the digital divide, which could involve the establishment of Internet access centers or leveraging satellite technologies. As this understanding of the digital divide is undergoing transformation, it could potentially acquire political dimensions. Russia should be poised to navigate these dynamics.

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