



## Studying challenges faced by international students enrolled in English Medium Instruction programs at Russian University

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### Abstract

**Introduction.** *The article examines the problem of integrating international students pursuing English Medium Instruction (EMI) programs into the academic environment of the Russian University. The study aims to identify the discrepancies in the attitudes of international students and their professors to the challenges faced by international students that intervene with the successful integration.*

**Materials and Methods.** *In order to identify the main groups of challenges faced by international students, general scientific methods were used: analysis, synthesis, and generalization of the existing research. To determine the consistency in the views of international students and their professors a diagnostic method was applied: a survey in the form of Likert scale. The reliability of the data obtained was verified using triangulation approach in its two forms: method triangulation (literature analysis on the research problem and the survey method in the form of a Likert scale) and data triangulation (answers to a survey were given by two different groups of respondents).*

**Results.** *It was revealed that the successful integration of international students into the academic environment of the Russian University is aggravated by four groups of challenges: linguistic, academic, social and cultural ones. Analysis of the research findings showed a number of inconsistencies in the views on the challenges of international students demonstrated by international students and their EMI professors. The attitudes of international students and their EMI professors do not match on the following issues: the level of English language proficiency; the level of analytical skills of international students; the degree of adaptation to a new cultural environment; the perception of culture shock; the communicative abilities of international students in social and academic interaction; the level of awareness of the social and cultural life demonstrated by EMI professors.*

**Conclusions.** *The authors summarize the differences in the views of international students and their teachers on linguistic, academic, cultural and social difficulties. It is concluded that increasing the degree of consistency between the views of teachers and international students will make it possible to adjust the design and implementation of EMI programs and support the successful integration of international students into the academic environment of the Russian University.*

### For citation

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### Keywords

*Integration; Academic environment; English Medium Instruction programs; International students; Language-based difficulties; Academic difficulties; Cultural difficulties; Social difficulties.*

### Introduction

International students are one of the valuable assets of universities worldwide as they bring financial benefits to the university, contribute to its academic reputation, enrich the diversity of students' cohorts and often become the ambassadors of the institution in their home countries<sup>1</sup>. One of the ways to increase the amount of international students at a university is to introduce education programs where the language of instruction is English. English Medium Instruction (EMI) was originally conceptualized as "The use of the English language to teach academic subjects (other than English itself) in countries or jurisdictions where the first language of the majority of the population is not English" [1, p. 37]. To attract more international students many countries initiate national projects and devise policies to internationalize their education systems [2–11]. However, to attract international students is not enough. Both university administration and academic staff have to provide support to international students and help them integrate successfully into a new academic environment.

N. Zepke and L. Leach consider integration to be synonymous with mutual assimilation, in which not only students must adapt to the academic environment of the university, but the university must also create conditions for the successful integration of students [12, p. 47]. Thus, the integration of international students into the academic environment of the university should be a mutual process of change to create a

favorable psychological and educational environment.

International students enrolled on EMI programs of tertiary education face certain challenges in their social and academic life [13]. They need guidance and support from the university authorities, university services and faculty [14]. To provide support to international students the academic staff should know the challenges that international students face. However, the faculty often demonstrate low intercultural awareness and find themselves frustrated expressing much concern about how to assist students with diverse cultural backgrounds [15]. To decrease the frustration of both faculty and international students the bridge should be built by sharing the understanding of international students' challenges and, thus, contributing to the enhanced learning environment and wise pedagogical support.

Extensive research in EMI has classified the challenges faced by international students. Most foreign researchers have described the categories of international students' challenges from different perspectives, namely, faculty perceptions and international students' opinions.

A. G. Trice studied the American faculty's points of view and concluded that the most challenging factors for international students were English language fluency; work on academic assignments; the achievement of academic goals; difficulties in cultural and social norms [16]. S. Evans and B. Morrison have analyzed the attitudes of Hong Kong EMI faculty to

<sup>1</sup> Forbes-Mewett H. *Foreward in exploring the social and academic experiences of international students in higher education institutions*; (eds) Bista K, Foster C., PA: IGI

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international students' challenges. The results showed that the faculty focused mostly on the academic challenges of international students, in particular, professional vocabulary issues, lectures' comprehension, problems with academic style and difficulties with meeting institutional requirements [17]. E. Acar has researched the experience of Turkey EMI lecturers that taught international students. The author conducted interviews with EMI lecturers and singled out the following recurrent problems: adaptation to a new educational system, language accents, time management issues, isolation and grouping [18]. L. Jin and J. Schneider have grouped the challenges of international students into three primary types: academic challenges, sociocultural challenges, and challenges related to finances, legal status, and professional aspirations. The most often cited challenge for EMI education programs is low English language proficiency [15].

International students' attitudes to the challenges they face have been extensively studied by I. Aizawa, H. Rose, G. Thompson, S. Curle [2], J. Pun, X. Jin [19], S. Ecochard, J. Fotheringham [20], E. Cena, S. Burns, and P. Wilson [21], and N. T. Tang [22]. I. Aizawa et al offer to divide the challenges of international students into four categories: language-related challenges, institutional challenges, culture-related challenges, materials-related challenges [2]. J. Pun, X. Jin focus on language challenges and consider them being the most important ones for EMI education programs [19]. S. Ecochard and J. Fotheringham distinguish three groups of challenges: academic, language and socio-cultural challenges [20]. In their research the authors state that many factors influence the success of international students that have to cope with differences in teaching methods, classroom dynamics, traditions in teaching and learning, methods of assessment and

academic assignments. The situation is aggravated by low language proficiency of international students, unfamiliar colloquialisms, and idiomatic language used by the professors, and by socio-cultural challenges including public transport, accommodation, making friends with local students, getting accustomed to local weather and food.

E. Cena, S. Burns, and P. Wilson conducted interview with 16 international students at an institution in Northern Ireland [21]. Their results show that the main challenges are the academic ones as they affect the quality of study of international students. Adjustment challenges come second and they are mostly connected with language and cultural barriers. N. T. Tang [22] analyzed the challenges of international students studying at EMI programs. Along with traditional groups of challenges singled out by researchers (academic and cultural ones) he distinguishes specific types of challenges: structural and identity-related ones. The structural group of challenges refer to insufficient number of EMI programs that limits the choice of international students, to the reluctance of EMI staff to develop EMI courses, and insufficient support form EMI academic staff in the classroom. Identity-related challenges refer to the EMI policies of a particular university that may be different from the EMI policies of the institution the international students come from causing misunderstanding between students and university administration.

Russian literature on the challenges of international students studying at EMI programs is scarce. The focus of researchers until recently has been on the adjustment difficulties of international students that study at Russian medium instruction programs which is not the focus of our research [23].

Thus, language, academic, cultural, and social challenges are the most reiterated ones in the literature. There is little evidence in the

research literature on the challenges of international students that study at EMI programs where the voices of both faculty and international students are heard and analyzed. Thus, this research fills this gap and sheds light on the challenges that face international students studying at EMI programs at a Russian university.

The study aims to identify the discrepancies in the attitudes of international students and their professors to the challenges faced by international students studying at EMI programs at a Russian university.

### Methods

The study was conducted at a regional university located in Chelyabinsk. South Ural State University enrolls approximately 21 000 students, where international students make up about 7% of the entire students' cohort. The largest number of international students come from former Soviet republics and China. About 10% of students come from Iraq, African countries and India. By 2022 the university had offered 24 EMI programs, 10 of them are Master's programs in Economics, Information Technologies, Mechatronics, Architecture, and Philology, five Bachelor programs are in Information Technologies, Economics, Business Communication.

To achieve the purpose of the study a mixed-methods approach or triangulation research design was used. Triangulation refers to the use of multiple methods or data sources in qualitative research to develop a comprehensive understanding of phenomena [24]. The study employs two types of triangulation: method triangulation (literature analysis, Likert scale survey) and data source triangulation (both international students and EMI faculty answered the survey). Triangulation is motivated by the necessity to describe and compare the challenges

of international students from the point of view of international students and from the point of view of their professors.

The data for analysis were obtained via Likert scale survey with international students that study at EMI education programs of South Ural State University and EMI content teachers that deliver courses in English for international students. The Likert scale survey was created using Google forms and involved 40 statements. 10 statements were created on each group of challenges: language-related, academic, cultural and social ones.

The language-related group of challenges included questions on the difficulties in lectures' comprehension and lectures' content processing; the degree of language support the lecturers provide for international students, difficulties in self-expression and thought organization in English; grammar and vocabulary challenges; difficulties in fulfilling written assignments.

The academic challenges were presented by the statements on the degree of adaptation to a new academic environment; on the level of critical reading skills' development, attitudes to participation in discussions; difficulties in interaction with both students and professors in the classroom; attitudes to teaching methods, assessment methods, and pedagogical approaches used by Russian professors.

The statements made on cultural challenges included the questions on the degree of self-adaptation and integration into a new community; cultural barriers, culture shock; whether new social roles cause feeling of frustration; if international students feel prejudiced attitudes by local students and do they think they match the expectation of Russian professors.

The social group of challenges present the statements on the difficulties to find accommodation, to use local transport and health

insurance system; to get accustomed to local food; to make a new circle of friends; to cope with the feelings of loneliness and homesick; to stand the challenge of whether conditions.

The survey was conducted at SUSU University in May, 2022. The data from the open and closed questions of the survey was analyzed using Excel©. 22 international students and 21 EMI professors took part in the survey. One student surveyed studies for a PhD degree in Information Technologies, eight international students study for Bachelor degrees, and 13 international students study for Master degrees. The age of students ranges from 20 to 43. For most of the students it was the second year of study at the university. The EMI faculty deliver EMI courses at Bachelor, Master and PhD degree programs. They teach content on Economics, Information Technologies, Philology and Linguistics. 21 professors teach at 7 Bachelor's degree programs, 12 professors teach at Master's degree programs, and 1 professor teaches at PhD degree program. All the professors are from South Ural State University. Their experience in EMI ranges from less than a year to more than three years.

### Results

This analysis aims to compare the views of international students and EMI faculty, to find out the matches and mismatches of respondents' opinions which may help understand the needs of international students and enable them to successfully integrate into the academic environment of a Russian university by providing them necessary support. The results show that the faculty and international students have both

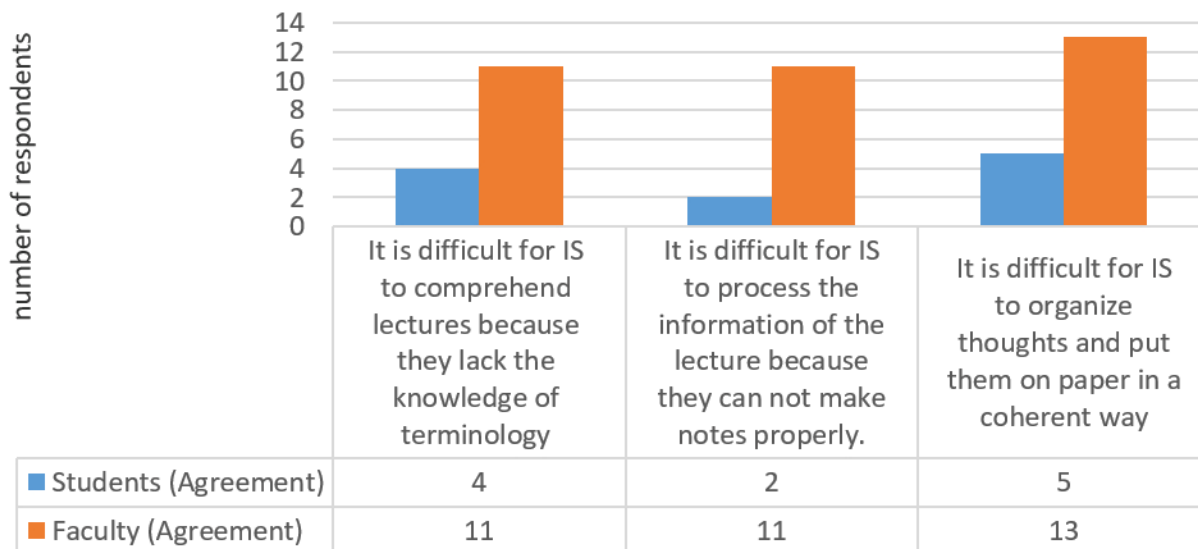
overlapping and opposite points of view on the major challenges of international students.

More than 50 % of the faculty consider international students have low English language proficiency that interfere with high academic results while few international students admit they have language-related issues. The results on Figures 1 and 2 show that there are some language issues that faculty and international students percept differently, namely, epy knowledge of terminology, note taking skills, academic writing, lack of English vocabulary, usage of grammar structures to express thoughts in productive skills.

Figure 1 shows that about 50% of the faculty consider international students have low knowledge of terminology, are not skillful in content processing and have problems with a cohesive representation of their thoughts in written assignments.

Only 18% of international students agree with their professors. The discrepancy may be explained by the fact that international students enrolled on EMI programs at Russian universities have different education backgrounds, thus, they may have different traditions of knowledge transfer. If their national education systems are based on rote learning and memorization it is challenging for international students to express their thoughts in a coherent way as they had not enough experience in it. The findings are consistent with the recent studies [25; 26] that confirm the idea that the difference between international students' education backgrounds and a new academic environment may cause problems in the classroom and slow down classroom dynamics.

### Language-related Challenges: students-faculty mismatch of opinions



**Fig. 1. Students-faculty mismatch of opinions on language-related skills**

Figure 2 illustrates that while 67% of the faculty agree that international students face language-related challenges with vocabulary, grammar that impact the quality of written assignments only 13% of international students agree. The results contradict to the study conducted in the USA in 2005<sup>2</sup>, where the faculty pointed out high level of English language proficiency of international students.

This suggests that the perceptions of faculty and international students may differ because professors and students have different levels of expertise. Students demonstrate “unconscious incompetence”, the term introduced by W. S. Howell<sup>3</sup> in 1981, as they are not aware how

to complete their assignments, how to formulate arguments and are not aware that they are incompetent.

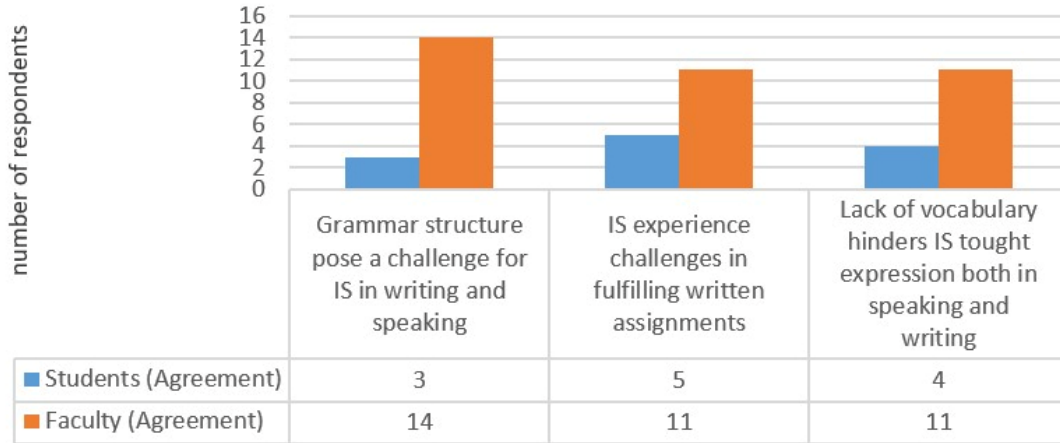
In its turn, the faculty suppose that students should have learnt these things at school, or as Bachelor or Master students and it is not the academic staff responsibility to teach them either General or Academic English. Another reason for the discrepancy may be the cultural one. For example, in Arabic culture it is not accepted to criticize students and the teachers at schools do not stigmatized their pupils for mistakes. Thus, very often Arabic students are surprised that bad quality of their works is not praised but criticized by Russian faculty.

<sup>2</sup> Zhu W., Flaitz J. Using focus group methodology to understand international students' academic language needs: A comparison of perspectives. *TESL-EJ*, 2005,

vol. 8 (4), pp. 1–9. URL: <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1068108Adam>

<sup>3</sup> Howell W. S. *Emphatic Communicator*. Featured Edition Publisher: Wadsworth Pub Co, 1981. 255p.

Language-related Challenges: students-faculty **mismatch** of opinions

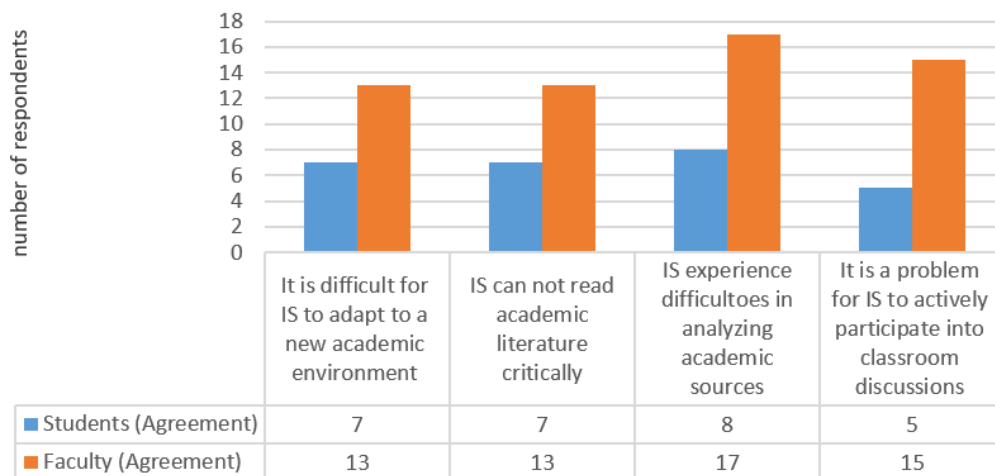


**Fig. 2. Students-faculty mismatch of opinions on language-related skills**

Figure 3 shows that the faculty and international students disagreed on a number academic challenges. About 60 % of faculty agreed that international students faced difficulties in adaptation to a new academic environment, reading academic sources, analyzing them critically, and participating in classroom discussions. These results agree with the previous EMI research that found that international students had difficulties in understanding and fulfilling reading tasks [27;

28]. Nevertheless, only 22 % of international students stated they experienced these difficulties. The principal reason can be the absence of clear entrance requirements for the study skills and abilities of international students as regional universities fight for the number of international students not for their quality. As a result, the university get students with weak high order thinking skills while international students are reluctant to admit they have underdeveloped analytical skills.

Academic Challenges: students-faculty **mismatch** of opinions



**Fig. 3. Students-faculty mismatch of opinions on academic skills**

Figure 4 shows the areas where the respondents' opinions overlap. About 65 % of respondents reported that international students did not encounter difficulties in interaction with faculty and classmates, and the international students did not feel isolated. This can be explained by the fact that most of the international

students surveyed are from Eastern countries and they demonstrate an eastern style of communication where mutual respect, hospitality, and respect to the old are important values. These international students try to avoid conflict, find a compromise in any clash of opinions and show great respect to their professors.

Academic Challenges: students-faculty **match** of opinions

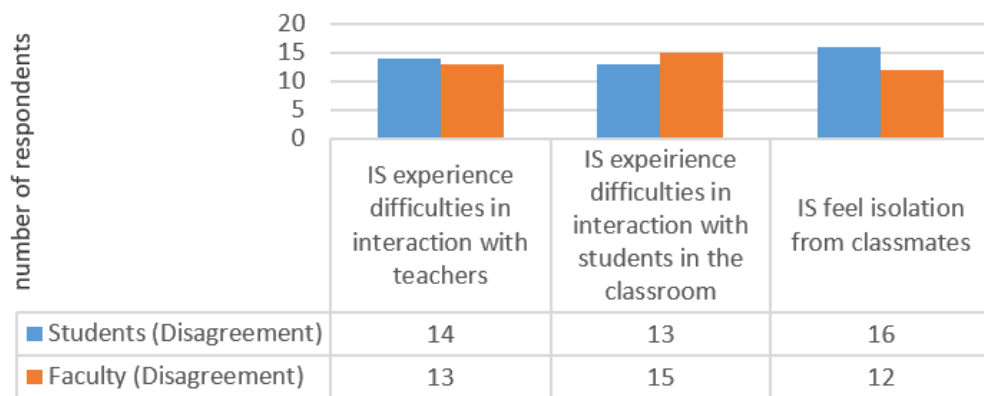


Fig. 4. Students-faculty match of opinions on academic skills

Both faculty and international students showed high degree of awareness of the cultural challenges. Figure 5 illustrated that faculty and

international students had mostly similar opinions on a set of cultural challenges.

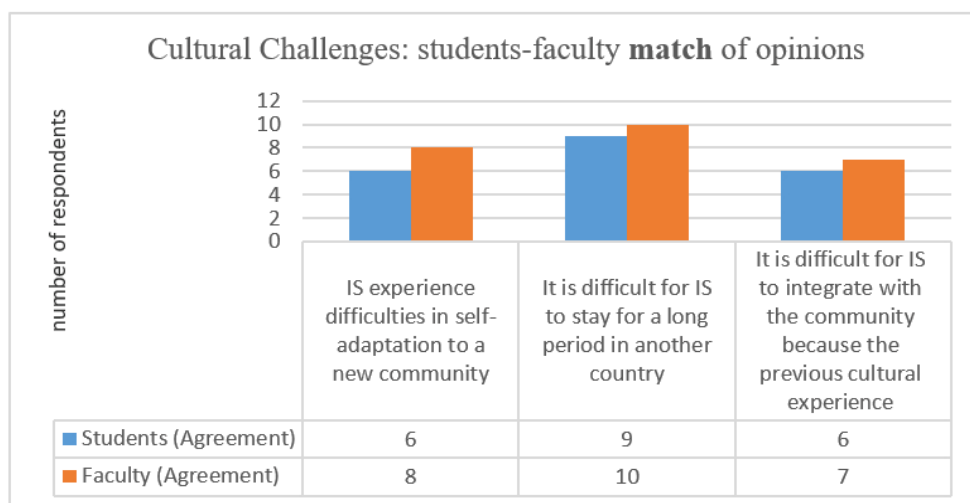


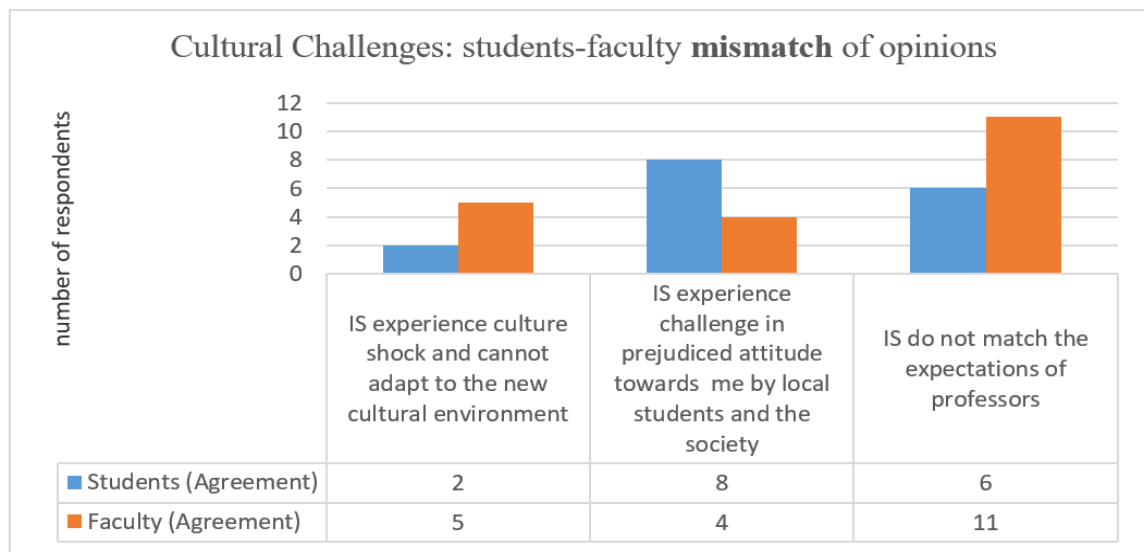
Fig. 5. Students-faculty match of opinions on cultural skills



The respondents agreed that international students faced difficulties in self-adaptation to a new community and integration into it, and encountered some cultural barriers while communicating with Russian students. Similar findings presented O'Reilly, A., Hickey, T. and Ryan, D. in their study of international students that were enrolled into an Irish university. They stated that the academic staff perceived that international students had problems with adapting to Irish culture and there was a lack of interaction between Irish students and international students [29].

Figure 6 illustrates the areas where the respondents showed the mismatch of opinions.

The faculty overestimated the impact of culture shock on international students. Only two out of 22 international students acknowledged they experienced culture shock. This can be explained by the processes rapidly developing in tertiary education, namely, globalization and internationalization. Many students go abroad for study and they can share their experiences personally or in social networks. Thus, for international students there are many sources of information about the country they plan to go. They can prepare themselves for some issues that traditionally cause culture shock.



**Fig. 6 Students-faculty mismatch of opinions on cultural skills**

A surprising finding is that only four members of the academic staff agreed that international students experienced prejudiced attitude by local students which is twice less than the responses of international students that stated the opposite. This can be justified by the fact that the faculty allegedly concentrate on the study process. They observe international students

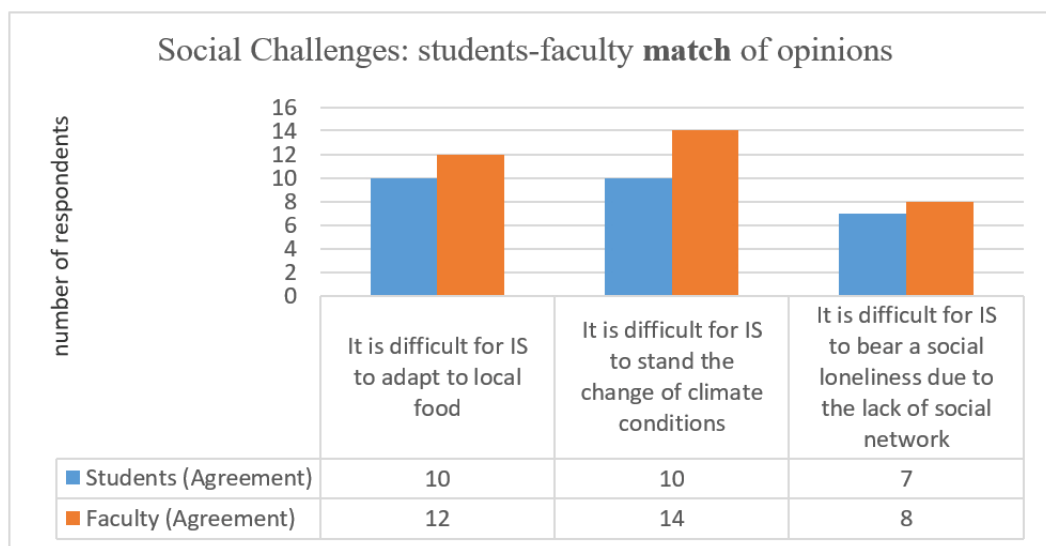
mostly in the classroom and they are not much involved into international students' social life. These findings are similar to the results described by J. Khanal & U. Gaulee where international students stated they were discriminated by their American groupmates [30].

Another point of disagreement is meeting faculty expectations. 52 % of the faculty stated

that international students were below their expectations while only 27 % of international students agreed. This suggests that often international students do not understand what the academic staff expectations are. Thus, to bridge the gap it is advisable for the faculty to articulate their expectations clearly and explicitly during the first classes of their EMI course.

The matches of opinions on social issues are presented on Figure 7. Similar responses were

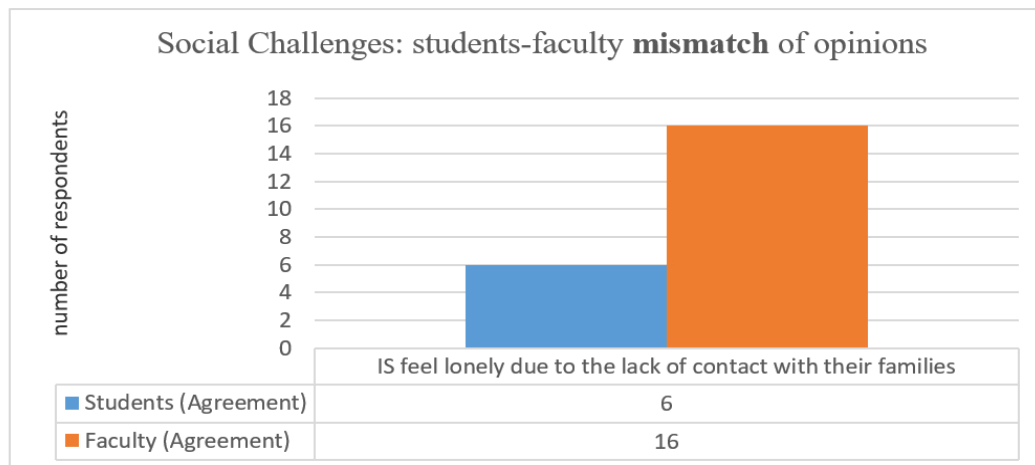
obtained on the issues of adapting to local food, weather conditions and to the lack of social communication. It can be explained by the fact that, though it is not easy to establish a new social network in a foreign country, international students are able to meet social challenges and cope with them. They rely heavily on the support of their peers that can provide them with a piece of advice.



**Fig. 7. Students-faculty match of opinions on social challenges**

Finally, the mismatch of opinions of the respondents was found on the issue of feeling loneliness that international students experienced being far from their homes. The results are presented on Figure 8. Surprisingly, 76 % of the faculty agreed that international students felt homesick and had the lack of communication with their families, while only 27 % of international

students agreed with their professors. There maybe two reasons for this mismatch. The first one is global connectivity, when international students use modern means of communication and stay in touch with their close friends and families, though not feeling alone and separated.



**Fig. 8. Students-faculty mismatch of opinions on social challenges**

The second reason maybe the generation gap. The faculty presents the generation of digital aborigines that use modern means of communication but do not become part of this virtual universe, thus, physical barriers have more importance for them. The majority of international students belong to the generation of digital natives and these two worlds, virtual and real ones, merge for them into one which helps them to stay emotionally healthy.

**Conclusions**

The study aimed to identify the discrepancies in the attitudes of international students and their professors to the challenges faced by international students studying at EMI programs at a Russian university that may help to solve the issue of successful integration of international students into a new academic environment. The conducted research allowed to reveal the areas of misunderstanding that aggravate the integration of international students into the Russian academic environment.

The author analyzed the attitudes of EMI international students and their professors to the language-related, academic, cultural and social challenges that international students face.

Analysis of the results of the study showed a number of discrepancies in the views on the challenges of international students demonstrated by international students and their EMI professors.

In terms of the language-related issues international students and EMI academic staff showed discrepancies in the attitudes to the international students’ level of terminology knowledge, content processing, cohesive representation of thoughts in written assignments, knowledge of vocabulary and grammar. The EMI academic staff rated these skills lower than the international students. This suggests that international students have to raise their awareness on these issues and EMI academic staff have to provide measures to support international students and practice formative feedback.

EMI academic staff and international students demonstrated a number of discrepancies on academic challenges. The results showed that EMI academic staff rated lower the international students’ skills in reading and analyzing academic sources and considered international students not active enough in classroom discussions. This offers to organize special courses for international students on Academic English and on the development of High Order Thinking Skills

(HOTs) to provide them with necessary skills for academic success.

In terms of the cultural issues international students and EMI academic staff showed agreement on most of the issues but the EMI faculty overestimated the impact of culture shock on international students. A surprising finding was that the members of academic staff almost denied prejudiced attitude to international students by local students but international students stated that they experienced this issue quite a lot.

The survey results on international students' social challenges revealed that academic staff did not know much about these sphere of life as the faculty focused on the education process and were not interested much in the extracurricular activities of international students. Nevertheless, both international students and faculty stated that the most challenging things were adapting to local food, weather conditions and the lack of social communication.

The conducted research allows to conclude that increasing the degree of consistency between the views of teachers and international students will make it possible to adjust the design and implementation of EMI programs and support the successful integration of international students into the academic environment of the Russian University.

The study is not without its limitations. First, the respondents were from one Russian university which may not clearly present the situation in Russia as a whole. Second, the number of respondents was 43 which does not allow to make generalizations for all the students that study in Russia.

Further research is needed to find out the peculiarities of international students' attitudes to different groups of challenges and to evaluate the effectiveness of measures taken at different universities to make an effective and friendly education environment.

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## Исследование трудностей иностранных студентов, обучающихся на англоязычных программах в российском университете

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**Проблема и цель.** В статье исследуется проблема интеграции иностранных студентов, обучающихся на англоязычных программах, в академическую среду российского университета. Цель исследования – выявить степень согласованности во взглядах на трудности, с которыми сталкиваются иностранные студенты в процессе интеграции, двух групп респондентов: иностранных студентов, обучающихся на англоязычных программах, и их преподавателей.

**Методология.** В исследовании для выявления основных групп трудностей иностранных студентов были применены общенаучные методы: анализ, синтез, обобщение теоретических источников по проблеме; для выявления согласованности во взглядах иностранных студентов и их преподавателей на трудности был применен диагностический метод: авторская оценочная шкала Лайкерта. Достоверность полученных данных проверялась с помощью метода триангуляции в двух формах: триангуляция методов исследования (анализ литературы по проблеме исследования и метод опроса в виде оценочной шкалы Лайкерта) и триангуляция данных (ответы на опрос двух групп респондентов).

**Результаты.** В ходе проведенного исследования выявлено, что на успешную интеграцию иностранных студентов в академическую среду российского университета влияют четыре группы трудностей: языковые, академические, социальные и культурные. Анализ результатов исследования показал несогласованность во взглядах на трудности, с которыми сталкиваются иностранные студенты, самих иностранных студентов и их преподавателей. Отношения к трудностям иностранных студентов самих студентов и их преподавателей ЕМІ не совпадают по следующим вопросам: уровень владения английским языком; уровень аналитических способностей иностранных студентов; степень адаптации к новой культурной среде; восприятие культурного шока; коммуникативные способности иностранных студентов в социальном и академическом взаимодействии; уровень осведомленности преподавателей ЕМІ о социальной и культурной жизни студентов.

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**Заключение.** В заключении отмечается, что взгляды иностранных студентов и их преподавателей на языковые, академические, культурные и социальные трудности различаются в некоторых аспектах. Делается вывод о том, что повышение степени согласованности взглядов преподавателей и иностранных студентов позволит скорректировать проектирование и реализацию англоязычных программ и содействовать успешной интеграции иностранных студентов в академическую среду российского университета.

**Ключевые слова:** интеграция; академическая среда; англоязычные программы; иностранные студенты; языковые трудности; академические трудности; культурные трудности; социальные трудности.

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