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## STUDENTS' FOREIGN LANGUAGE CHALLENGES IN ACADEMIC MOBILITY PROGRAMS

Research article

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### Abstract

International academic mobility provides students with the opportunity to gain new knowledge and experience, and their competitiveness as future specialists increases. Today there are many programs of international academic mobility, some provide grants for internships and study abroad. Russian universities strive to conclude agreements with partner universities and implement international academic mobility programs, but the low level of foreign language proficiency of the majority of Russian students reduces the chances of their participation in international academic mobility programs. Students cannot participate in the competitive selection, since foreign language proficiency must be at least B1 level, according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), and they also experience certain difficulties when studying in a foreign language at a foreign partner university. In addition to the formation of regulatory mechanisms for the implementation of academic mobility, it is equally important to create linguistic conditions for the development of international cooperation in the field of education. This article is devoted to identifying and studying the language difficulties and needs of participants in international academic mobility programs that they encountered while studying at a foreign university. The interview method was used, 61 students of Kazan Federal University took part in the survey.

**Keywords:** international academic mobility, student mobility, higher education, language training, foreign languages.

## ПРОБЛЕМЫ СТУДЕНТОВ С ИЗУЧЕНИЕМ ИНОСТРАННОГО ЯЗЫКА В РАМКАХ ПРОГРАММ АКАДЕМИЧЕСКОЙ МОБИЛЬНОСТИ

Научная статья

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### Аннотация

Международная академическая мобильность предоставляет студентам возможность получить новые знания и опыт, повышается их конкурентоспособность как будущих специалистов. На сегодняшний день существует множество программ международной академической мобильности, некоторые предоставляют гранты на стажировку и обучение за рубежом. Университеты России стремятся заключать договоры с университетами-партнерами и реализовать программы международной академической мобильности, но низкий уровень владения иностранным языком большинства российских студентов уменьшает шансы их участия в программах международной академической мобильности. Студенты не могут участвовать в конкурсном отборе, поскольку владение иностранным языком должно быть не ниже уровня B1, согласно общеевропейской системе уровней владения иностранным языком (CEFR), а также они испытывают определенные трудности при обучении на иностранном языке в зарубежном университете-партнере. Помимо формирования нормативных механизмов реализации академической мобильности, не менее важно создавать языковые условия для развития международного сотрудничества в области образования. Данная статья посвящена выявлению и изучению языковых трудностей и потребностей участников программ международной академической мобильности, с которыми они столкнулись при обучении в зарубежном университете. Использовался метод интервью, в опросе принял участие 61 студент Казанского федерального университета.

**Ключевые слова:** международная академическая мобильность, студенческая мобильность, высшее образование, языковая подготовка, иностранные языки.

### Introduction

International mobility increased significantly before the Covid-19 pandemic. Most Russian universities were able to strengthen ties with foreign partner universities, which in turn increased the importance of the Russian diploma and the recognition of Russian universities [1]. In addition, Russian students and teachers were able to get acquainted with new educational programs that exist abroad, enrich theoretical developments with practice abroad and develop training modules in conjunction with partner universities [2]. In order to develop university education, academic mobility made it possible to master foreign experience in organizing the educational process. At the same time, the prestige of the university is growing, which sends its students to study abroad [2].

In the scientific foreign literature, many aspects of international student mobility are considered. Thus, the factors of intercultural sensibility, as well as the influence of social networks on the success of studying and staying abroad, were analyzed by Baker-Smemoe and others using the example of 100 students [3]. Socialization in the country of a foreign

language, as well as the development of identity, learning in a foreign language, were considered by Wang [4], Kinginger [5]. The development of language competence among students, participants in the Erasmus and Erasmus+ programs, was analyzed in the works of Papatsiba [6], Tragant [7], Klapper & Rees [8]. Analysis of selected scientific literature on the problem of academic mobility gives reason to say that academic mobility contributes to the development of such personal qualities of students as intercultural competence, patience, problem-solving skills, communication skills, self-confidence, professional skills such as computer knowledge, ability to study independently, in-depth knowledge in their professional field and subject area [9], [10]. The authors note that the goal of academic mobility is a versatile education in the chosen specialty, understanding of different cultures and societies, acquaintance with other learning systems [2], [11], [12]. Of particular interest are works that describe the phenomenon of the so-called Erasmus bubbles [13], [14]. The phenomenon describes situations when students, regardless of the host country and the language of the country, speak English in educational and domestic situations. This fact leads to consideration of the importance of the English certificate before mobility, as well as the relevance of English for the success of training and a comfortable stay in another country. In this case, it seems important to reverse the initial inequality of English-speaking students from students for whom English is a foreign language.

Russia is included in international educational processes and develops cooperation with universities from various countries [15]. In the Russian literature in the works of E.L. Emelyanova, L.V. Znovenko, D.R. Erova, P.V. Terebina, A.A. Shakirova etc., the issue of organizing academic mobility of Russian students is widely covered.

A separate place to the problem of organizing academic mobility in connection with the study of a foreign language is given in the works of O.V. Proskura, M.G. Minin, I.Yu. Gerasimchuk, A.R. Akchurina, M.P. Trofimenko, S. Michelotti, V. Lasanowski and others. These studies are mainly focused on incoming mobility with language programs designed specifically for the adaptation of foreign students.

Undoubtedly, knowledge of foreign languages is an important aspect of international academic mobility. However, in scientific and methodological works, the issue of special foreign language training of Russian students for participation in academic mobility programs has not been thoroughly studied. The insufficient level of proficiency in a foreign language today is an obstacle to the development of academic mobility of students [16]. Language becomes an indispensable condition for successful learning, mastering skills [17]. The search for more effective methods of learning a foreign language is becoming more and more relevant [18]. At the same time, the main goal of teaching foreign languages is the development of a student's personality, capable of integrating into the world community and ready for intercultural communication [19].

## Methods

Kazan Federal University (KFU) annually sends students to exchange programs at partner universities. The participation of KFU students in international academic mobility programs is administered by the Regulation on the Procedure for Organizing Academic Mobility of Students, Pedagogical, Scientific and Other Staff Members. This Regulation determines the general procedure for organizing academic mobility, organizational support for academic mobility, selection of participants in international academic mobility programs, financial support for academic mobility of students, information support for academic mobility. The Regulation uses the following concept of academic mobility. Academic mobility – "the movement of students and employees of KFU to different educational, scientific and other organizations for the purpose of training, teaching and research activities, exchange of experience, as well as for other goals in the field of education, science, medicine and innovation" [20].

International academic mobility of students at KFU is implemented within the framework of agreements with partner universities of KFU. These agreements determine the number of students, the conditions of their stay abroad, the language of instruction, etc. These agreements also determine the language requirements for students leaving to study at a partner university of KFU. According to these requirements, the student must have at least B1 knowledge of a foreign language according to the CEFR. The student must have this level at the time of participation in the competition.

This study contains data from one of the structural units of KFU on the number of students who completed exchange programs abroad from 2015 to 2020. During this period, 1407 students took part in international academic mobility programs (197 in 2015, 243 in 2016, 276 in 2017, 245 in 2018, 344 in 2019, 102 in 2020). Analysis of the data given in Table 1 showed that most often KFU students travel to Germany and China under international academic mobility programs.

Table 1 - Two main directions of international academic mobility of KFU students

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Year	China, %	Germany, %
2015	25	15
2016	29	27
2017	32	11
2018	28	16
2019	19	8
2020	6	16

The purpose of the interview was to identify and study the language difficulties and needs of participants in international academic mobility programs that they encountered while studying at a foreign university. 61 students aged from 21 to 30 years both female and male took part in the interview, they were asked to freely answer the questionnaire (Table 2).

Table 2 - List of interview questions

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№	Question
1	What kind of support did you receive prior to participating in the exchange program?
2	What problems did you face during your internship / study?
3	What language was the training at the host university?
4	Did you take language courses at the host university?
5	What language problems did you encounter while participating in the exchange program?
6	What was your level of language in the host university's program prior to participating in the exchange program?
7	What was the easiest for you while participating in the exchange program?
8	What was the most difficult for you while participating in the exchange program?
9	What skills, in your opinion, should be given special attention in the language training of students participating in exchange programs?

### Results and discussion

Most of the students who answered the questionnaire were students of the Institute of International Relations of Kazan Federal University (13,1%). The questionnaire showed that the majority of students (73,8%) studied at a foreign university in English. The questionnaire showed that for 31,1% of the respondents, understanding lectures in the studied discipline in a foreign language was a problem, and 14,8% indicated problematic the completion of tasks. Also, as one of the problems, 21,3% of the surveyed students indicated daily communication. As for the types of speech activity, the most difficult for the majority of students (42,6%) was speaking in a foreign language, and reading was the easiest for the majority of students (72,1%). Many students who studied abroad (93,4%) noted that the formation and development of speaking skills should be given special attention in the process of foreign language training of students leaving for international academic mobility programs.

### Summary

The conducted research allows us to conclude that it is necessary to organize a special foreign language training for students traveling under the programs of international academic mobility. If it is absent, it seems necessary to transform the existing approaches and methods of teaching foreign languages. It is important for students to understand the lectures and be able to communicate with professors and associate professors, as well as other students at the host foreign university. Thus, it seems important to analyze the existing methods of teaching students a foreign language and determine effective ones for their success in international academic mobility programs.

### Conclusion

In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, the development of international mobility has become a particular challenge for universities. The digital format of training in international exchange programs demanded high-quality knowledge of foreign languages of students. In this qualitative study, using interviews, we identified the problems that arise among students participating in international academic mobility programs while studying and living abroad. Analysis of the results of the interview of 61 Kazan Federal University students, showed that it is most difficult for students to understand lectures, perform tasks in special disciplines, and speak a foreign language. At the same time, they do not experience difficulties in reading foreign literature. Therefore, in order to optimize international academic mobility, the language teaching methodology should be aimed at strengthening the study of speaking and listening to an academic foreign language.

This research will be continued in the direction of developing a methodological system for teaching a foreign language to students for international academic mobility.

**Конфликт интересов**

Не указан.

**Рецензия**

Все статьи проходят рецензирование. Но рецензент или автор статьи предпочли не публиковать рецензию к этой статье в открытом доступе. Рецензия может быть предоставлена компетентным органам по запросу.

**Conflict of Interest**

None declared.

**Review**

All articles are peer-reviewed. But the reviewer or the author of the article chose not to publish a review of this article in the public domain. The review can be provided to the competent authorities upon request.

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