

Learning Experience of Vietnamese Students in Tomsk Polytechnic University (TPU) Degree Programs

Tatyana PETROVSKAYA

Tomsk Polytechnic University, Tomsk, Russia
pts@tpu.ru

Andrei FAERMAN

Tomsk Polytechnic University, Tomsk, Russia
andorey2010@mail.ru

Cam Nhung PHAM

Tomsk Polytechnic University, Tomsk, Russia
nhung5782@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Tomsk Polytechnic University (TPU) is one of the leading universities in international education in Russia. About 2000 international students from more than 30 countries study at TPU. Vietnamese students have been studying at TPU since 2001, with their numbers increasing annually, so that there are now more than 200 Vietnamese students at TPU. To date 125 students from Vietnam have graduated from TPU. Thus TPU has a wide experience in teaching international students.

The subject of this research is the system of training international students and the special support and guidance program for new international students at Tomsk Polytechnic University. A unique three-level system for training international students has successfully been implemented at Tomsk Polytechnic University. A special support and guidance program helps new international students to adapt to the multicultural environment of TPU.

A specific feature of teaching international students at TPU is the concept of a student-centred learning environment. The main principle of all three training phases is an individual approach. The result of this approach is high academic progress and successful social adaptation of Vietnamese students.

The process of social and academic adaptation has a great influence on the training of international students.

Keywords: *Learning experience, international students, student-centred educational environment, social adaptation, Vietnamese students, Tomsk Polytechnic University.*

INTRODUCTION

Studying abroad has a number of difficulties associated with it, including the need to adapt to a different climate and changes in the social and cultural environments. All of these issues are extremely relevant for Vietnamese students in Siberia. However, the number of students from Vietnam at TPU is growing every year, and the retention is 98-99%.

In 1998, the first international students came to Tomsk Polytechnic University from Cyprus. The first two students from Vietnam arrived in Tomsk in 2001. Since 2004 TPU has been one of the five Russian universities that provide education to students from Vietnam in the framework of an intergovernmental agreement.

The number of international students at TPU is growing every year. Students from Vietnam constitute a large part of the enrolment. In 2006, more than 240 students from 17 countries studied at TPU. In 2009, 361 international students had pursued academic instruction at TPU. In 2010, TPU had 487 students from 26 foreign countries, 169 of whom were Vietnamese. At the end of 2012, 643 international students studied at TPU, of whom 204 students were from Vietnam.

Students' opinions about TPU's education system are constantly being monitored. A questionnaire, interview guides as well as direct observation have been used as the statistical methods in this research.

Changes in both the academic infrastructure of TPU as well as the system of collaboration with international students have been carried out on the basis of the aforementioned research. Thus, the system of education for international students at TPU can be considered as a practical result of this study. In this paper the structure and its characteristics will be described in detail.

VIETNAMESE STUDENTS AT TPU

During the period from 2001 to 2012, the number of Vietnamese students studying at TPU has grown from two to 204 students.

The majority of Vietnamese students at TPU are pursuing career paths in technical specialties like Oil and Gas Engineering, Computer Science and Computer Facilities, Electronics and Nanoelectronics. Since 2010 Vietnamese students have been studying in the specialty Translation and Translation Theory and Foreign Area Studies.

A good indicator of academic achievements of Vietnamese students is their participation and success in competitions. Vietnamese students win prizes each year in mathematics, physics and chemistry both in Tomsk and throughout all of Russia. Annually TPU students from Vietnam win the competition for the scholarship awarded by the Governor of the Tomsk Region.

Vietnamese students are active not only in academic and scientific fields, but also in the social sphere. In 2005, the association of Vietnamese students was founded. One of the Vietnamese students organised the English speaking club which continues to the present day. In 2011, Vietnamese students in Tomsk founded a group that conducts charitable activities, both at the university and in the community.

EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

The university has specialised infrastructure to work with international students, which is accredited by the Institute of International Education and Language Communications (IIELC). A fundamentally new aspect is that the education of international students in TPU is divided into three phases.

During pre-university education, international students study Russian language, introductory courses in mathematics, physics and other subjects, undertake courses to adjust to the Russian system of education, and acquire the basics of Russian culture. The first phase plays an important role in students' adaptation process. Student success during this period influences their path of further educational instruction.

For the next two years students are instructed in the department of professional education on a program of basic higher education using a common curriculum and adjusted educational and methodical materials. Instructing international students separately from the Russian students enables them to receive more personalised attention in the classroom as well as specially designed teaching materials.

Having achieved a high level of competence in the Russian language, they are then integrated into groups with Russian students of other institutes. Flexibility of the educational model gives an opportunity to be transferred to other institutes of the university to acquire basic educational programs provided the students have sufficient language abilities. The particular feature of this existing model of international education at TPU allows the retention of 98–99% of international students.

FLEXIBLE STUDENT-CENTRED EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

The TPU student-centred educational environment (SCEE) is aimed at increasing academic activity and responsibility of students, motivating the teaching staff to undertake professional development, thus ensuring that graduates enjoy competitiveness in the labour market and efficiency of the educational process.

The TPU standard of basic educational programs (TPU BEP) defines students' academic freedom, including choice of educational trajectory, taking into account individual capabilities and initial natural-scientific background within the

curricula of basic, extended and elite education, choice of profiles and alternative disciplines beyond BEP cycles, as well as within catalogues of Russian and foreign partner universities of TPU. Implementation of all the above mentioned components is ensured by the flexible structure and innovative content of BEP of a new generation.

The system of academic and social support contributes to the development of students' active participation and independence. It includes a set of programs, activities and university institutions that provide academic support for new entrants to integrate into the university community, consultation on better decision making for students' educational path and other aspects of academic studies, as well as social help and support to students and post-graduates. Alongside printed materials, a special internet-resource was created and is successfully functioning to guarantee quick and efficient orientation of students to the university research and educational community.

The key block of the academic support system is the academic and social adaptation program, which includes the various cycles of seminars, for example, Tools of Successful Study and Work with Information. These courses aim to create and develop key academic skills and abilities, primarily among first-year students. Psychological consultation contributes to social adaptation, the development of personal qualities and creation of a favourable and constructive environment within the group, dormitory and overall student community.

Students willing to undertake additional courses can enrol in summer or winter schools. The objective of such schools is to expand and deepen students' knowledge in general cultural aspects, natural sciences, more in-depth study in their chosen professional field, as well as courses for students facing difficulties in acquiring BEP.

The centre for Student Management was established to counsel students on a regular basis and provide immediate support in difficult educational and social situations. The Centre ensures feedback (including on-line feedback), provides coordination of activities within students' academic support and collects data for continuous monitoring and improvement of the educational process.

TPU has established a system of BEP materials alignment with university students. The system of academic control that sets the terms and rules of additional education contributes to an increase in students' academic independence and responsibility. The information system ensures communication between administrative staff and participants related to the educational process in the categories of, for example, student personal account, employee personal account, mentor, students' academic activity.

ORIENTATION PROGRAM

A special orientation program for international students has been developed to help students to adjust to university life and understand the different services the university offers. During orientation week, new students meet administrators, lecturers and students from other countries.

As for students from Vietnam, the Vietnamese Students Association is making a big contribution to the adaptation process of new students. Accompanied by an employee from TPU, some Vietnamese students meet new students at the airport. Thus the orientation program starts here. During their first week students receive basic information about the city, the university and the policies for foreign citizens in Russia. The program includes an orientation tour of the city, visiting museums at TPU and in the city, visiting hospitals, excursions to some university buildings, and shopping in town to purchase necessary items.

CONCLUSION

The rapid growth in the number of international students and in their social and academic activities was made possible because of a unique system developed and implemented at TPU. It includes a three-level system of education and a program of adaptation to a new social and cultural environment.

The process of social, cultural and academic adaptation plays an important role in the academic success of international students.

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