MEDICAL EDUCATION OF FOREIGN STUDENTS IN RUSSIA: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

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Abstract

This study was designed to investigate general wellbeing, participation in social, leisure and recreational activities in Moscow to enhance the status and wellbeing of international students and better cater for their needs in the I.M. Sechenov First Moscow State Medical University (the First MSMU). The research included 120 third-year international students studying in the First MSMU. The survey was conducted via a printed questionnaire. The results of the survey were summarized by Dean's office for international students to optimize the educational environment of the University, for further increase of student's intercultural communication and their involvement in various kinds of activities. Students are encouraged to participate extensively in international conferences, scientific competitions, sport and cultural events. Enhancing of status and wellbeing of international students require the active participation of students in communication with Russian students, research projects and conferences.

Key words: *foreign students, medical education*

1. INTRODUCTION

Russia is becoming an ever more popular study destination for foreign students and attracts a huge number of Bachelor, Master and Postgraduate students from different countries. Russia prides itself on its centuries-long history of high quality education, worldwide degree recognition, and high demand for Russian graduates across the world, as well as on, the affordable educational programs.

At present the I.M. Sechenov First Moscow State Medical University is the biggest educational, scientific and medical complex in Russia for training, certification and continuing professional development of medical and pharmaceutical workers that contributes significantly to the domestic and global medicine. About 2000 international students and post-graduates from 74 countries study at First MSMU today.

Medical education has its own professional and academic aspects to it. Medical students must work with patients and gain experience in clinical settings.

According to recent reports, international students face numerous problems when they arrive in Russia – social adaptation, language barrier, ethno-cultural problems of interpersonal interaction, problems of security and life support, financial problems, and limited availability of professional literature in English, to name but a few.

In her comprehensive study of professional medical training in Russia, T.K. Fomina (2004) highlighted the role of teachers in the process of socialization of foreign students in medical schools.

C. Ichaka (2012) defined principle types of social interaction, and its influence on the process of students' adaptation in Krasnodar.

In his timely examination of medical education, S.V. Jargin (2013) outlined the main problems of postgraduate medical training in Russia.

According to A.P. Kozulina (2014), effective educational support for international students requires the creation of orientation programs for international students with their content built on the basis of the classification of the main problems foreign students come across during their studying at Russian colleges.

Recent research has suggested that foreign students face many challenges during their stay in Russia – a social adaptation, a language barriers, ethno-cultural problems of interpersonal interaction, problems of security and life support, financial difficulties, ecological and climatic features. Such difficulties lead to a disruption of adaptation, refusal to continue studies, burnout syndrome with different symptoms on psychosomatic level (O.S. Glazachev, 2011).

Although previous studies have addressed some aspects of medical education of foreign students in Russia, none have dealt with international students' views and attitudes regarding living and studying in Moscow and students' access to and participation in social, recreational and community pursuits as well as in research work.

In the present study we sought to investigate (1) general wellbeing, safety, and support services; (2) factors that international students may have considered when deciding where to study; and (3) participation in social, leisure and recreational activities in Moscow to enhance the status and wellbeing of international students and better cater for their needs in the I.M. Sechenov First Moscow State Medical University.

2. METHODS

Participants. Participants included 120 third-year international students studying in the First MSMU (70% females, 30 % males, mean age = 21.5±1.0).

Of the 120 respondents who completed the questionnaire 97.5 % came from Malaysia.

Procedure. The study period ran from May, 2014 through June, 2014.

A survey was conducted via a printed questionnaire which was comprised of four sections:

1. Personal data – age, gender, country of origin
2. Questions about participant's experience of living in Moscow (wellbeing, safety, and support services)
3. Questions about participant's experience of studying in the First MSMU (including items related to the factors that international students may have considered when deciding where to study, difficulties arising during studying, participation in any scientific activities, etc.)
4. Questions about social experience (participation in social and leisure activities in Moscow)

Statistical analysis was performed using SPSS version 16 for Windows (SPSS Inc., Chicago, Illinois, USA).

3. RESULTS

11.8% of comments discussed positive experiences while living and studying in Moscow. Students described their experiences as "pleasant", "wonderful", and "really good", and stated that they were happy living in Moscow.

Among problems most international students (63.3%) faced in Moscow they pointed out discrimination (racially offensive comments, jokes or gestures).

As for Russian traditions and cuisine, 46.3% of students noted that there are a lot of unique and interesting cultural events being held in Moscow. They were enthusiastic about learning more about the cultural differences among ethnic groups living in Russia.

Some important factors contributing students' perception of studying and living in Moscow were a high cost of living and hazards in the city, in their location, in their educational institution and on a public transport. 83.3% of students indicated that they had experienced an incident which made them feel unsafe in Moscow - witnessing of poor behavior of substance users (20.45%), traffic risks (28.75%), infection (27.76%) and poor weather conditions (23.05%).

Majority of students (56.7%) are able to communicate in the Russian language in normal daily routine. However, 12.5% of students are not able to communicate in Russian language at all.

The findings of this study reveal the reasons which might have influenced student's choice to study in the First MSMU - affordable tuition fees (20.6%), personal acquaintance (20.5%), partnership program (20.4%), scholarship (19.9%) and reputation of the University (18.6%).

The most prominent methods in which students obtain the information about MSMU are through government and educational foundations of their country (28.0%), internet (27.5%), and personal contacts (27.3%) and through educational agencies (17.2%). Students were asked to identify the difference(s) between their local universities and the First MSMU. The most prominent difference noted by respondents was the teaching methods (99.2%), student's group size (35.8%), and study materials (58.3%). In Malaysia, lecture or class materials in English are distributed among students either via online through university website or printed hardcopy before the corresponding lecture or class. Thus, students are able to prepare well before the lecture and class. In Russia, there are not enough materials in English being distributed to the students.

95.8% of students mentioned that the examination system in the First MSMU is different from examination system in Malaysia. 94.2% of students pointed out that they have certain studying obstacles. Lacking of concentration ranked first among all difficulties (80.0%). This might be due to long duration of lectures, classes and low language skills.

The other main difficulty was lacking of language skills (61.7%). Some professors could not deliver the lectures and classes in a comprehensible English manner, most international students found it hard to comprehend the content of the classes.

Students were asked to rate six facilities being provided in campuses of the First MSMU (on a 5-point scale where 1 = very bad, 2 = bad, 3 = moderate, 4 = good, and 5 = very good).

The results of this study show that students are not satisfied with Internet access (1.8) and medical care provided by University (2.8).

Students were asked to indicate if they were currently participating in any kind of scientific activities. Most of them (82.4%) actually indicated that they were not involved at all.

The highest amount of students (27.7%) has no interest in any kinds of scientific activities, 25.5% has no opportunities, 24.4% of respondents do not know how to start, and last but not least – 22.4% of those who were interviewed indicated that they had no time.

The top best experiences of the students were: acquaintance with dedicated lecturers, participation in sport events, and meeting with people having the same interest and passion.

On the other hand, the top worst experience encountered by students were conflicts with educational agents (18.8%) that were supposed to be responsible for the welfare of international students. The second worst experience was failure in obtaining credits for certain subjects (8.3%) hence having academic debt(s).

50.8% of international students indicated they had the chance to meet with Russian students, and 60.0% had the opportunity gain a familiarity with Russian culture.

Almost all of the respondents (96.7%) reported that they were experiencing stress in Moscow that might be due to various factors ranging from academic debt to daily lifestyle.

For this, respondents were asked whether they had participated in any of a wide range of leisure activities or if they had not participated, whether they would like to in the future. Most of the students cope with stress through various entertainment (78.3%), outdoor activities (49.2%) and indoor activities (35.0%). Around one third of students (27.4%) actually pointed out that they wish to have cultural events together with Russian students.

Respondents were asked if there was anything stopping them from participating in any of activities that they were interested in, and over two third (78.3%) of students indicated that there was the language barrier between them and Russians. Another frequent barrier reported was the high cost.

At the last part of the questionnaire, students were asked to write down their recommendations for the University. The most notable recommendations provided by international students were the following:

- More hands-on practical opportunities
- More opportunities to contact with patients in hospitals
- More scientific opportunities to be provided
- More cultural events involving both Russian students and international students
- More available hostel spaces for international students in university hostels
- Scientific circles being incorporated into curriculum
- Payment is being made directly to the University
- Internet access
- Less travelling to various places for different subjects

4. DISCUSSION

The study showed that foreign students studying in the First MSMU deliberately chose University for higher professional education. According to students, the University has a high reputation in foreign countries. Most foreign students take well to Russian system of higher education, Russian culture and traditions, as well as demonstrating the willingness to communicate with Russian students and participate in different cultural and scientific events.

However, the challenges that international students may face in Russia are: language barrier, high cost of living, conflicts with educational agents, discrimination and hazards (from climate to criminal). The evidence of this survey also revealed that most of students rather spend their leisure time passively by not participating in any scientific activities, additional educational seminars or lectures.

The University administration and Dean's office for international students react quickly to the wishes of students in terms of optimizing the educational environment of the University, increase intercultural communication of students and their involvement in various kinds of scientific, social and leisure activities.

Thus, International Students Scientific Association (ISSA) is a specially designed scientific platform for research activities of international students. With this astonishing platform, students are able to participate in various scientific works and researches together with the Students Scientific Society of the Russian Faculty. Furthermore, students have the opportunities to participate in international conferences, scientific competitions and Olympiads.

To eliminate the problems of intercultural communication, improvement was made in enhancing the quality of education including additional disciplines into the curriculum such as «Business Russian; Communication with patients in the Russian-speaking environment» and «Professional communication in the Russian-speaking environment; Professional communication».

Besides of studies and research activities, foreign students carry out various cultural activities and actively participate in sports competitions, including competitions between different universities in Russia.

As part of the organizational solutions, In February 2015 Dean's office for international students set up a tradition of regular meetings with the Dean in order to discuss challenging issues of the students and provide the possible solutions and answers to such issues and critical questions.

Enhancing of status and wellbeing of international students and better cater for their needs in the I.M. Sechenov First Moscow State Medical University require the active participation of students in communication with Russian students, research projects and conferences.

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