Internationalization in Russian universities during the pandemic of COVID-19: Lessons for succeeding in the new reality

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Abstract
The pandemic of COVID-19 became a resilience test for internationalization in Russia and emphasized many systemic trends, both promising and concerning. The turbulence and instability during the pandemic initiated the growth of internationalization activities at the institutional level in two directions: first, it increased attention to the quality of work with current international students, including student support, adaptation issues, student engagement, and second, due to the risks in student enrolment, it brought universities to rethink their internationalization instruments and strategies for work with international applicants and future students. Indeed, the ongoing changes in global education call for reconsideration of the priorities and methods of internationalization: new forms of internationalization become widespread practices, new instruments are necessary for student recruitment, and new push and pull factors come into play. While internationalization of education in Russia during the pandemic was addressed at the national level to a degree, the universities carried out the key activities and had to come up with solutions “in the field”. The paper aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of Russia's transition through the pandemic and tackle the changes at the university level, based on a comparison of data of the survey of international departments of Russian universities conducted in 2020 and the survey of 2021, supported by semi-structured interviews. The research
offers insights on the capacity for change and resilience in Russian universities within the internationalization domain and can help to develop data-driven approaches for improvement of organizational capacity of universities.

Пандемия COVID-19 стала проверкой на устойчивость к интернационализации в России и усилила многие системные тенденции, как положительные, так и негативные. Турбулентность и нестабильность во время пандемии способствовали росту активности вузов в части интернационализации по двум направлениям: во-первых, в части качества работы с действующими иностранными студентами, включая поддержку студентов, вопросы адаптации, вовлечение студентов. Во-вторых, с учетом рисков падения числа иностранных студентов, университетам пришлось активно переосмысливать инструменты интернационализации и стратегии работы с иностранными абитуриентами.

Происходящие изменения в глобальном образовании требуют пересмотра приоритетов и методов интернационализации: новые формы интернационализации адаптируются все активнее, появляются новые инструменты набора студентов, вступают в действие новые факторы притяжения и выталкивания. В то время как интернационализация образования в России во время пандемии в определенной степени поддерживалась на государственном уровне, вузы осуществляли ключевую деятельность и должны были быстро реагировать на новые вызовы в реальном времени. Целью статьи является анализ анализа изменений на уровне университетов на основе сравнения данных опроса международных отделов российских университетов, проведенного в 2020 г., опроса 2021 г., и последующего качественного исследования. Исследование дает представление о способности российских университетов к изменениям, их устойчивости в сфере интернационализации, и может помочь в разработке подходов для улучшения организационного потенциала университетов в международном образовании.
1 | INTRODUCTION

The changes that occurred due to the outbreak of the pandemic of COVID-19 became the main agenda in higher education discourse during 2020–2021. Scholars expect deep systemic changes in higher education as we know it (Marginson, 2020a), and point out the long-term effects of the pandemic (de Wit & Altbach, 2021; Hudzik, 2020); and while the unpredictable dynamics and complexity of direct and indirect effects of the lasting pandemic still do not allow to evaluate its aftermath fully, the research based on data collected in 2020–2021 academic year provides an opportunity for evaluation of the intermediate effects, changes, and trends in higher education.

The quality of internationalization in universities globally during the pandemic was impacted by several key factors. First, the resilience and adaptation capacity of higher education systems to the “new normal” play a key role in sustaining and advancing international activities. Second, the epidemiological conditions, migration, and travelling regulations determine the openness and attractiveness of a country as a study destination as well as its ability to fully engage in the offline international activities. Multiple additional factors come into play: for example, the changes at the job markets and global and regional political turbulence always had an impact on the quality of internationalization, however, the importance and impact of these factors increased as well, which calls for faster responses from universities.

At the national level, internationalization in many countries was somewhat overlooked during the pandemic (Taradina et al., 2021) as the governments focused on issues that required an immediate response, both in higher education (e.g., providing access to higher education for different groups of students, and adjusting the teaching and learning to the requirements of epidemiological safety) and in broader domains such as healthcare, social policy and support for the national economies. The response to the pandemic in international education was carried out mostly at the university level: online teaching for international students, academic and social student engagement, academic mobility, adjustment and development of new administrative procedures, accommodation issues, safety protocols, and other essential activities were initiated and implemented by universities, which made university leadership and pro-active attitude of university-level actors (i.e., academics, administrators, etc.) crucial for sustaining internationalization.

These challenges are relevant across the globe and spared no country, yet some countries and institutions are able to provide a faster response, due to the high capacity of universities, national education systems, and national economies altogether (Marinoni et al., 2020b). For other countries, particularly, for developing non-Anglophone countries, internationalization contained additional challenges even before the pandemic (e.g., language barrier and low level of internationalization of universities), and the turbulence of the past two years may play out more negatively for them. However, the effective and politically sustainable internationalization is possible when all global actors have a relatively comparable capacity to internationalize as it ensures a more meaningful academic and cultural cooperation and decreases the possible negative effects (such as brain drain, neo-colonial effects on education systems, etc.). Thus, it is crucial not only for particular countries, but for the quality of international education globally, that the gap between these two types of universities does not increase and the achievements of the previous years in this domain are not lost.

In this paper we address these issues for the internationalization of the Russian higher education sector during the pandemic. Our research questions are:

Q1. How did the vision and strategy of Russian universities change during the pandemic?
Q2. What are the changes and challenges of Russian universities in work with current international students?
Q3. What are the changes and challenges of Russian universities in work with perspective international students?
Q4. What are the administrative and managerial barriers for Russian universities in international activities during the pandemic?
Like in many other countries, the reaction of the Russian higher education system to the pandemic crisis went through two phases. The first “stress-test” phase started in March and lasted till the end of summer 2020, and during this stage, universities had to come up with immediate responses in conditions of complete uncertainty. The second phase started with the new academic year of 2020–2021, when institutions started adapting and developing long-term solutions for risk mitigation in new conditions, relying on the experience, failures and findings of the previous academic term.

The research shows that the response to the pandemic crisis was uneven in different types of institutions. The size of Russian higher education system is 966 universities, excluding branch campuses and 4.7 million students (Rosstat, n.d.). By April of 2020, more than 90% of Russian universities moved to the online mode of teaching. However, in the first month of the pandemic, 38% of students indicated that universities are not prepared for online delivery (this opinion was especially relevant for students at medical universities (53%) and colleges of art (49%)) (Bekova et al., 2021). While LMS systems were at place in 88% of Russian universities, only in 45% of institutions digital infrastructure was adequate in course delivery, management and administrative operations and daily communications (Karlov et al., 2020).

In addition to academic matters, institutions were handling the unprecedented additional workload related to the arrangement of safety and emergency procedures. According to the official statistics, there are 6.6 million of registered cases overall, and as of July 2021, there were three waves of the pandemic in Russia: May 2020, November 2020 and June 2021, however, the crisis began at the end of March. The emergency measures included ensuring access to study equipment, providing organizational, information and psychological support for students and academics staff, reorganization of examination procedures, support in student employment and financial support for students, as well as safety precautions, and support for students and academics on quarantine (Klyagin & Makareva, 2020).

Evaluating the long-term transformations and challenges in higher education in Russia over the year of 2020, scholars emphasize several trends. First, as Russian higher education system is highly centralized (Blyakher, 2013; Platonova & Semyonov, 2016), the key strategic activities for mitigation of the pandemic at the national level were conducted with the active participation of the Ministry of Higher Education and Science which allowed to provide a system-scale response and sustain the resilience of higher education system in general. While the national support refers mostly to the work with domestic students, it gave universities some capacity to address other issues, such as internationalization activities. Second, unlike neo-liberal education systems which are highly dependent on tuition revenue (Leask & Ziguras, 2020; Maslen, 2020), Russian universities rely to a large extent on public funding and were able to keep their financial stability to a degree. However, as Abramov points out, high centralization and lack of university autonomy also tends to hinder the potential of universities for development due to the emphasis on administrative procedures and high level of bureaucratization which can replace universities’ search for innovations, experiments and new solutions (Abramov et al., 2021). Particularly, Abramov et al. (2020) indicated two trends, which occurred due to the shift to remote teaching and learning: from one hand, it led to the rival of academic autonomy due to academic self-management, development of professional networks and community support. From the other hand, it enhanced the administrative control and digital bureaucratization in universities, which is perceived as a threat to academic autonomy. This also applies to internationalization and is not unique to Russia. Even before the pandemic ‘administrative/bureaucratic difficulties’ were mentioned as a main obstacle for internationalization in the 5th Global Survey of Internationalization of Higher Education by the International Association of Universities (IAU), based on data from 2018 (Marinoni, 2019).

Talking about student experiences, there were several groups that appeared to be more vulnerable to the transformations during the pandemic and were affected the most. First, the freshmen students were tangibly impacted due to the lack of skills of independent learning. Second, students of programmes in engineering, natural sciences, arts and culture were affected more than others due to specifics of their study fields, and the importance
of on-campus and laboratory modules. The research also shows that remote learning exacerbates the inequality of educational opportunity between students from different socio-economic backgrounds (Bekova et al., 2021) and the learning loss, in turn, has negative implications for the higher education system altogether.

The pandemic revealed tangible difficulties related to the inequality at the institutional level as well. Like in other countries, top institutions in Russia (e.g., Federal universities and National Research Universities as well as traditionally leading universities) appeared to be more resilient and prepared for the pandemic crisis due to a more developed digital infrastructure, higher level of digital literacy among teaching and administrative staff. For the small regional universities, the transition did not go as smooth and student and academic experienced more negative effects both with respect to quality of education and well-being.

One of the most significant changes the education domain in Russia during the pandemic is the rise of the private education sector represented mostly by online learning platforms. Russian EdTech industry is growing two times faster compared to the world EdTech (25% Compound annual growth rate in Russia and 13.5% globally). This trend can be explained by several preconditions that relate mainly to the rapid changes at the Russian job market. The first one is the growing demand for professionals in digital economy (e.g., in field of programming, UX and design, marketing, project management etc.) which is not met by Russian universities yet. Second, the freelance employment (i.e., work on a per-job or per-task basis, including work on remote basis) in Russia increased 76% only in one year—the research shows that only 29% of freelance workers are employed in the sectors connected to their university qualification, and EdTech became the key industry that responded to the demand for the lifelong learning in Russia (Netology, 2021). In addition, the advantages of private EdTech companies, such as advanced learning analytics, very developed cooperation with industry and business, flexibility and a much higher autonomy and capacity for change, compared to Russian universities, boosted the growth of the sector. While it is difficult to evaluate the quality of education in private EdTech, the cumulative revenue of top-60 EdTech companies in Russia reached 458.3 million USD (Ryzhkova et al., 2021).

3 | INTERNATIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION IN Russia DURING THE PANDEMIC OF COVID-19

Internationalization of higher education in Russia is affected both by internal and global changes. During the past decade, the number of incoming international students on Russia was growing, and in 2020, Russia was 7th largest destination for international students, with the main student flows from former Soviet countries and China. The majority of international students were enrolled in universities in metropolitan cities (predominantly, Moscow and Saint-Petersburg). The majority of students were studying at the bachelor level and only 10% of international students was enrolled at the Master’s programmes. The pull-factors for Russia as a study destination include low tuition fees and availability of governmental funding, good quality of education, lack of language barrier for students from Russian-speaking countries (Nefedova, 2021). The barriers for international students in Russia before the pandemic included language barrier (for non-Russian speaking students), low level of internationalization of the study and living environment, complex visa regulations, and low visibility of Russian universities at the global education market. The emphasis of internationalization policies was placed on inbound student mobility, while other domains of internationalization were less developed.

As of 2021, Russia accommodated more than 395,000 international students (Project Atlas, 2021). At the national level, there were several actions, which aimed to support international students during the pandemic—mostly from the Russian Ministry of Higher Education and Science and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. As many students stayed in Russia during the first wave of the pandemic, Russian government issued several immigration and visa regulations, which allowed holders of student visas to prolong their stay in Russia. In addition, government provided methodological recommendations for universities: for example, it was recommended that international students can stay in the dormitories till the end of the term without paying accommodation fee, and
universities were advised to assist students with medical and travelling issues on the individual basis, addressing requests from each student individually. The opinions of international students regarding their study experience in Russia during the pandemic are not unequivocal (Abramov et al., 2021). The concerns are related mostly to online study mode, which was evaluated as efficient only by 50% of international students. The main difficulties are related to the lack of communication with teachers and peers, poor quality of digital university infrastructure, and low quality of the internet connection. The main problem, however, was related to the difficulties in studying specific subjects in the online mode (engineering, natural sciences, arts, medicine). However, students also indicate positive sides of their remote experience such as decrease of living expenses and better organization with respect to time-management (Abramova et al., 2021).

Overall, the experiences of international students during the pandemic were not very different from the experiences of domestic students who report same difficulties in online learning. In addition, the data show that a significant share (46%) of international students would prefer a blended learning format rather than full-time on-campus studies (Abramova et al., 2021), which provides a potential for blended degree programmes in future.

Another trend that emerged during the pandemic is the growing share of Russian EdTech at the global market, including online learning platforms, which aligns with the rate of growth of EdTech at the domestic market in Russia. Online education products include higher education and professional programmes, language training, education courses for pupils, as well as software for online teaching and learning. The revenue of Russian EdTech at foreign markets exceeded 13 million USD (Ryzhkoa et al., 2021) which is higher than the tuition revenue from education export in Russian universities. It is curious that unlike Russian universities, private EdTech is expanding its share at the European and American markets. These changes have not affected internationalization in the university environment yet: the practices of collaboration between private EdTech and Russian universities are only emerging, and the perspective advantage of such partnerships, and knowledge and technological spillover in this internationalization of higher education is not yet explored.

4 | THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In order to address the institutional perspective on the changes and challenges during the pandemic and aims to analyse the capacity of universities to meet these challenges and institutionalize the responses to crisis, we use the institutional theory.

Scott defines institutions as "cognitive structures", normative and regulative actions that provide stability and meaning. The organizational structure is characterized as adaptive being formed in relation to the characteristics of the participants, influences and forces of the environment (Flatch & Flatch, 2010; Scott, 1987, 2001). In addition, the theory supports the notion of the importance of the actors' perspective in decision making, and according to Gornitzka, "organizational choice and actions are limited by various external pressures and demands, and the organisations must be responsive in order to survive" (Gornitzka, 1999, p. 7).

The institutional theory is used in higher education research as one of the approaches for addressing how universities are implementing and adapting organizational change (Cai, 2015). In this research, we aim to explore the most significant factors that affected the universities in Russia during the pandemic and the attitudes of the institutional actors in responding to these changes. Based on the findings of the research, we further suggest the trends that are likely to become institutionalized in universities and explore the limitations and barriers (such as limitations in human resources, methodological resources, technological capacity, etc.) for institutionalization of other trends and practices at the current stage of university development in Russia.

Using this theory as an overarching approach, we, however, did not apply any specific analytical framework for several reasons. First, while there are several frameworks for evaluation the quality of internationalization in universities (e.g., Aerden, 2014; Ilieva, 2016, etc.), they lack items which may be relevant, or even critical, for the
analysis in times of a specific crisis such as the global pandemic with its particular challenges, implications, crisis responses and mitigation procedures. Second, in order to capture the immediate changes, the first part of the research was launched during the most turbulent months of 2020, and in order to provide a timely snapshot, the research did not use an analytical framework at that time; instead, the survey items were based on the key internationalization activities relevant for the Russian universities and key domains of work with international students during the pandemic in universities across the globe (safety, organization of study process, administrative challenges, student support, well-being, immigration and accommodation issues, and student recruitment). At the same time we build on the conceptual framework of internationalization in higher education as developed by Knight and de Wit (1995), further developed by de Wit (2002) and by de Wit et al. (2015) and its implementations at the institutional and national level: the why (rationales), what (programme strategies), how (organizational strategies) and the outcomes and impact of internationalization. We apply that to the Russian higher education context, as there is not one model that fits all in internationalization, specific contexts are defining the directions internationalization takes.

5 | METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION

The purpose of this research is to identify the key challenges and expectations for internationalization in Russian universities during the pandemic from the university management perspective.

The research was implemented in two stages. During the first stage, the survey was conducted among vice-rectors for international cooperation, which included representatives of 45 Russian universities, including 9 Federal universities. In order to evaluate the changes over the pivotal year of 2021, the results of the survey are compared to the results of the similar research conducted in 2020 (Minaeva, 2020). In order to keep the validity of the sample, we have counted one response per university, and used the data collected from the same 45 universities in 2020 and 2021 to analyse the perception of the changes throughout the year of 2020. The results in the further sections as presented as a share of responses, where 45 respondents represent 100% of the sample.

The survey consisted of several parts: (1) current strategic approach to internationalization, (2) challenges related to work with current international students, (3) challenges related to work with perspective students, (4) administrative challenges and university barriers and capacity to cope with change, and, finally, (5) vision, strategy and focus of internationalization activities for the upcoming five years.

Prior to the participation in the survey, the respondents were provided with information about the purpose of the research, which was included in the description of the survey on the survey webpage. Participants were guaranteed that the results of the survey were used by the researchers only for scientific purposes and is not distributed to the third parties.

The second part of the research presents the results of 25 semi-structured expert interviews conducted among the directors of international offices of Russian universities. Number of the respondents for the qualitative part of this research is smaller than the research sample for the quantitative part, due to the limited time availability of respondents to participate in an interview. However, we consider a research sample to be valid as the qualitative part aimed to explore the takeaways, vision and strategies for the upcoming five years in detail, while the purpose of the quantitative part was to analyse the significance and prevalence of the trends for the internationalized universities Russian higher education system altogether. The participants of the qualitative research represent large Russian institutions, both metropolitan and regional, with a strategic focus on internationalization. The interviews focused on several specific topics: student mobility, work with international academics, internationalization of research, internationalization at home, and takeaways, expectations and concerns related to the pandemic.

The choice of the participants of this particular occupation is based on the fact that usually international offices are more involved in daily procedures and are able to highlight the practical challenges of internationalization at the university in detail (which was the aim of the qualitative stage of the research).
As suggested by Melikyan, Russian universities can be divided into four clusters based on their internationalization profile: flagship universities, leaders, recruiters and outsiders (Melikyan, 2018). The majority of respondents in both samples belong to the first two clusters: they represent high-ranked institutions with a developed internationalization strategy and are located in Moscow, Saint-Petersburg, and large regional cities; therefore the perspective of universities with a lower internationalization profile may be not reflected in this research.

Another limitation of this research is that while it discovers the perspective of university staff and their evaluation of changes in their work and their perspectives on internationalization, the student perspective is not included in the analysis and is presented only in literature review based on available research conducted by other scholars.

6 | INSTITUTIONAL PERSPECTIVE ON CHALLENGES DURING THE PANDEMIC

The overall priorities of the universities in internationalization activities have not changed significantly during the pandemic. The main interest lay in field of international student recruitment with an emphasis on Bachelor’s and Specialist programmes. It is worth noting that while recruitment at the Master’s level is considered as a high priority, the share of Master’s students remains very low and covers only 10% of all international students. Short-term mobility is considered as a less significant goal for internationalization strategies, the same relates to academic mobility. Figure 1 provides a detailed statistics on the strategic activities in the surveyed institutions. The respondents were offered to indicate multiple responses, and the X axis shows the share of popularity of a response in percent.

Overall, the respondents indicate that the workload of international departments significantly increased (68% in 2020 and 62% in 2021). Respondents do not report significant difficulties related to internet access and online interactions with colleagues and international students. The main issues are related to an increase in the number of official procedures (48% of respondents) and underdeveloped digital infrastructure of universities (45%).

![FIGURE 1](https://wileyonlinelibrary.com) Strategic internationalization activities in Russian universities by percent of respondents, 2020–2021. Source: Compiled by the authors based on data collected for the present research [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]
# Changes in work with international students during the pandemic of COVID-19 in Russian universities

| New challenges related to migration procedures | 2020 | 2021 | 2020 | 2021 | 2021 | 2021 | 2020 | 2021 | 2021 | 2021 |
|-----------------------------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| New challenges related to accommodation of international students | 19.7% | 17.5% | 14.6% | 30% | 21.3% | 7.5% | 16.4% | 20% | 14.8% | 20% |
| New challenges related to study process | 7.8% | 5.0% | 14.1% | 12.5% | 14.1% | 7.5% | 25.0% | 32.5% | 39.1% | 40% |
| New challenges related to psychological support | 4.7% | 7.5% | 10.9% | 7.5% | 17.2% | 12.5% | 35.9% | 30% | 31.3% | 37.5% |
| New challenges related to organizational support | 7.1% | 5.0% | 9.5% | 15% | 26.2% | 22.5% | 33.3% | 32.5% | 23.8% | 35% |
| New challenges related to safety | 11.9% | 2.5% | 9.5% | 0 | 14.3% | 37.5% | 28.6% | 37.5% | 35.7% | 50% |

Source: Compiled by the authors based on data collected for the present research.
Evaluating the consequences of the pandemic of COVID-19 in 2020 and 2021, the respondents indicate that the challenges related to migration issues became more difficult in 2021 compared to the first year of the pandemic. Issues related to organization of study process remain challenging for almost half of institutions. The most troubling domain of work with international students is related to safety precautions, and it became more challenging over the year. Issues related to accommodation of international students during the pandemic, on contrary, are not as challenging—this can be explained by the fact that most universities have their own accommodation buildings and accommodation fee is not higher than 50–100 USD per month (StudyinRussia, 2021). Psychological support for international students, which is usually not a typical practice in Russian institutions, became a significant part of work of international departments during the past two years (Table 1).

In addition, data indicate the cases of discrimination of international students during the pandemic due to their foreign status—while the number of respondents who reported such incidents is not high (5% of respondents indicated the cases of discrimination towards the Chinese students and 7.5% for students from other countries), it is a warning sign that calls for actions at the university level. It is worth emphasizing that this data provide only a perspective of university managers and does not cover the view of international students, which is crucial for evaluating the scale and nature of possible discrimination of international students. While the research evidence in this article highlights the visibility of discrimination at some universities, further research is needed to address this issue fully and evaluate its scale on campus, especially given that no research on this topic was conducted for Russian universities.

Talking about the expectations for the enrolment numbers in the future, universities show concerns about the competitiveness of Russia as a study destination: 82% of respondents expect the decline of international student numbers in 2021 (the share of respondents expressing these concerns for 2020 intake was almost the same—84%). The expectations about the decrease of student flows from various destinations have changed over the year: the respondents are less concerned about CIS markets and expect a significant decline from other regions (Figure 2).

Talking about the effect of a possible decrease of international enrolment on universities, the respondents indicate the financial loss as most noticeable consequence (54.5%), which is followed by reputational loss (35%), and the decrease of the quality of education environment in university (18.2%). Even though the tuition revenue from international activities is not a major resource for university funding, the one of the objectives before the
One of the most significant changes in the international student recruitment over the academic year of 2020–2021 is that Russian universities became far less keen on using international recruitment agencies (from 70.6% in 2020 to 42.4% in 2021) and tend to rely more on their own representation and promotion channels on the global market, putting more emphasis on advertising via social media and promoting study programmes via online education fairs (Figure 3).

This can be explained by two factors: on the one hand, universities expect the decline of student enrolments via recruitment agencies; on the other hand, SMM and other instruments of digital marketing allow the universities to develop a more profound relationship with potential students, gain trust for their university brands, and create data-driven marketing campaigns which are tailored for the needs and study programmes of a specific institution.

The data from the survey also support this suggestion: during the pandemic, universities showed a proactive attitude in work with perspective international students (Figure 4): more than 65% of institutions carried out additional recruitment activities via different online channels, increased the number of scholarships, and adapted new enrolment procedures (60% of respondents indicated that application procedures will be carried out online in 2021 intake).

One of the barriers to online promotion is the underdeveloped internationalization of the digital profiles of Russian universities. The previous research shows that websites of institutions are not sufficiently internationalized and do not provide clear information for international students (Timofeev et al., 2020). This is confirmed by the results of the survey: for example, only 62% of universities provide relevant information on international enrolment procedures on their web-sites.

Not surprisingly, in the spring of 2020, there was a high demand from universities for governmental support in student mobility. Over the year, the demand for assistance in student recruitment somewhat decreased (from 68% to 45.5%). The same can be said about methodological support, which can be an indication that some universities...

**FIGURE 3** International student recruitment instruments in Russian universities by percent of respondents, 2020–2021. Source: Compiled by the authors based on data collected for the present research [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]
FIGURE 4  Additional institutional initiatives in international student recruitment by percent of respondents, 2020–2021. Source: compiled by the authors based on data collected for the present research [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

FIGURE 5  Expectations of Russian universities for different types of governmental support by percent of respondents, 2020–2021. Source: compiled by the authors based on data collected for the present research [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]
adapted to new conditions and developed solutions at the university level. At the same time, the need for additional governmental funding is still high, and universities indicate the need for differentiated types of national scholarships (Figure 5).

Among the practices that can potentially increase the quality of internationalization in Russian universities, the most popular domains were development of partnerships with foreign institutions (81%). Development of online and blended programmes for international students (72%), increase of visibility of Russian universities in the online space (69%), and development of applied programmes and internships for international students (59%).

7 | RETHINKING INTERNATIONALIZATION: LESSONS AND EVOLVING PERSPECTIVES IN HIGHER EDUCATION STRATEGY IN RUSSIAN UNIVERSITIES

This part presents the results of 25 semi-structured expert interviews conducted among directors of international offices of Russian universities, which aimed to explore the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the internationalization of Russian universities and universities’ takeaways, vision, and strategies for the upcoming five years. The participants of the research represent large Russian institutions, both metropolitan and regional, with a strategic focus on internationalization. The interviews focused on several specific topics: (1) student mobility, (2) internationalization of research, (3) internationalization of university environment, and (4) takeaways, expectations, and concerns related to the pandemic.

Not surprisingly, work with current and perspective international students was extremely challenging during the first months of the pandemic. However, overall, the respondents evaluate the response of the universities in internationalization in conditions of the pandemic as satisfactory. A significant share of international students remained in Russia, and the typical challenges were related to organizational matters (accommodation, safety regulations, medical assistance), visa regulations, financial matters of international students, and, most importantly, health issues (especially, support for students during quarantine and hospitalization). In addition, some institutions were providing additional assistance (e.g., by covering travel expenses for student flights to their home countries, providing free meals, etc.). The workload of the international departments increased significantly as many universities processed student requests individually on a case-by-case basis.

Speaking about enrolment for degree programmes, the respondents point out that, despite negative expectations, the dip in student numbers in 2020 was not as dramatic as it was expected. Nevertheless, the enrolment rates in many institutions are somewhat decreasing—not only due to the pandemic but also due to the political turbulence and unstable economic situation in sending countries (e.g., in Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan). Institutional recruitment initiatives help to keep the numbers at approximately the same level, but increased competition from the English-speaking countries, as well as regional competitors such as Turkey and China, remains high. At the same time, entering new education markets requires effort, time, financial capacity, and university leadership, therefore it is perceived as a possible but not a fast solution.

The short-term mobility, on the contrary, almost ceased—as the borders were closed and travelling almost stopped, physical mobility became impossible. Since both incoming and outgoing students value the real-life international experience, many preferred to postpone their studies for 1–2 years instead of taking online courses abroad. Some institutions take an opportunity to replace short-term mobility with online courses with their international partners, but in many cases, it is quite challenging due to the lack of experience in the promotion, design, and delivery of joint online courses.

Talking about a long-term perspective for international student recruitment, almost all respondents express concerns about the decrease of competitiveness of Russia as a study destination in the upcoming five years. It was expected that changes in student flows and a decrease in international enrolment in the leading markets (such as USA, UK, Australia) would provide opportunities for other education exporters, including Russia, however, the data from the interviews do not confirm that and shows that the professional community anticipates more challenges than opportunities. First, aside from traditional competition from English-speaking countries
and Europe, respondents expect increased competition from Asia-Pacific countries. Second, a rather unequivocal opinion among respondents is that it will be very challenging for Russian institutions to win over their niche in the online education market, given high competition from more prestigious universities with a much more internationalized digital environment. In addition, respondents point out that Russia’s main student flows come from countries where students tend to not consider online degree programmes as a good alternative to on-campus studies.

The expectations from the blended degrees, in contrast, are quite optimistic, given that within this mode of delivery, students still would spend a tangible amount of time on campus and will have an opportunity to apply for a job in Russia after graduation: it allows higher flexibility for programme design and helps minimize the expenses for students and universities. There is also a growing interest in blended double-degree programmes in cooperation with foreign institutions.

Confirming the results of the survey, the respondents point out the growing importance of digital channels in international student recruitment. As digital marketing heavily relies on data, institutions put more emphasis on understanding their potential students, their needs and concerns, and invest in the image and presence of the university on the internet. However, the gaps in digital culture are still not overcome: many universities do not have sophisticated representation in social media and user-friendly university and study programme webpages, and many cannot build effective communications with perspective students in the online environment.

The respondents indicate that academic mobility is funded mostly by governmental programmes, and international scholars in Russian universities typically do more research than teaching. During the pandemic, almost all international scholars returned to their home countries, which affected research in engineering and natural sciences more than other fields. At the same time, the number of international research cooperation initiatives at the institutional level and the number of international cooperation agreements increased due to new online collaborations; however, the question of efficiency of the online university cooperation remains open, and only about 20 percent of respondents express confidence in their lasting effect and productive outcomes.

The participation in international scientific events increased as well, which is explained by the low cost of participation in online conferences and easy access to online events. The effects of moving international academic events online in Russia are still understudied, but some respondents express concerns about the value of international conferences compared to offline events; the concerns are related mostly to poor networking opportunities and low engagement and opportunities for in-depth discussions in the online format.

Talking about the internationalization of the university environment in conditions of the pandemic, the respondents express several concerns. First, the internationalization of digital infrastructure remains a serious challenge for universities. Support of online international student communities and the creation of a digital environment for international student engagement are somewhat addressed in several institutions, but this trend does not have a systemic nature or well-established practical solutions yet.

The second concern is related to international skills of teaching and administrative staff and the importance of training for university employees:

We have many ideas but who will implement them? We need to invest more in work with our academics and management so that they understand values and needs of the [international] community. This is what we try to do. (Female, 39)

The data indicate that the creation of a professional community with international skills and values in the universities remains a challenge, and even though in some institutions this process is well-developed, the majority of respondents point out the shortage of English-speaking academic and managerial staff.
Talking about the capacity and potential of Russian universities for change, the respondents emphasize the importance of the institutional corporate culture and the role of the leadership at the university level as a primary condition for success in this domain:

We provided training on internationalization for Russian educators, and received very mixed reactions: some colleagues are not open for change and some have a very proactive attitude [...] which reflects how the university culture can be encouraging in certain institutions and overwhelming in others. (Female, 36)

The interview respondents point out that there is a contradiction between support of internationalization of education at the national level and the complexity of national regulations for international students and graduates. While the official national strategy encourages internationalization, legislation and practical governmental support are not always in accord with internationalization. For example, the respondents emphasize the contradictions in visa regulations, which still have significant bureaucratic barriers for international graduate employment; in addition, the political difficulties between Russia and other countries create barriers for student recruitment from certain regions.

8  |  CONCLUSION

Since the spring of 2020, higher education is going through the rapid transformations, and while many trends are rooted in pre-pandemic issues, new factors become an integral part of higher education domain (de Wit & Altbach, 2021; Marginson, 2020b). There are several specific factors that are likely to affect internationalization of universities in Russia and globally.

First, the resilience of different education systems during the pandemic is a major factor for successful internationalization, not only because stable education systems are more attractive for international students but also because resilient universities have more resources to carry on international activities and develop new practices. Second, new practices such as virtual mobility, virtual research cooperation, online international student communities, etc., are becoming more widespread. While it is expected that after the pandemic many activities will return to the on-campus format, the digital domain is most likely to become a tangible part of education in general and internationalization in particular, as the critical mass of universities is actively adopting digital instruments for teaching, research and managerial tasks. Online and blended degrees come into play and have the potential of becoming a significant part of education export, which makes digital infrastructure and digital academic culture important factors in creating a welcoming international environment.

Finally, the change in pull factors for international students affects the map of student flows: many students reconsider and postpone their plans for studying abroad due to financial and health issues, epidemiological conditions and safety issues in different study destinations, political environment, and multiple other factors. This can potentially weaken the position of current leaders at the global education market and allow new actors to take their niche.

During the pandemic, Russian universities took a rather active role in sustaining internationalization. Most activities were directed to work with international students, which is not surprising given the traditional priority focus on student mobility over other forms of internationalization, and according to the data presented in this paper, due to the effort of Russian universities, the challenges of the pandemic were mitigated to a fair degree. Nonetheless, for international education in Russia, there are several specific challenges. First, in conditions of a rapidly transforming world, when it becomes harder and harder to remain unchanged, university leadership and motivation for change and capacity for adopting innovation becomes a very important factor of academic
success. In addition to strategic vision of internationalization, this implies creation of an innovative university culture, and development of new competences among academic and managerial staff. The second challenge is ensuring and developing the quality of digital practices. This relates to supporting the quality of online teaching and development of internationalized virtual teaching, development of culture in Russian universities, internationalization of digital environment, as well as taking advantage of other opportunities provided by digital domain (such as blended degree programmes, online cooperation with foreign institutions in teaching and research, creating international student communities, using learning analytics for international teaching, development of digital student support services etc.). Another possible promising opportunity is cooperation with Russian private EdTech sector for sharing practices and development of international education products. In addition, support from the national government, including legislative support in migration regulations, methodological support, and financial support, is crucial for internationalization in Russia and for reducing the gap among institutions in internationalization.

While many international activities such as student mobility and education export imply a high degree of competition between actors, there is another perspective that should not be overlooked: international cooperation in the academic community can be a very helpful response to the ongoing crisis and challenges brought by the pandemic, political turbulence, national and other disturbing modern trends. Such aspects of internationalization as development of digital international research environments and support of cooperation initiatives both at the institutional and national levels can be a valuable help in mitigation of the consequences of the crisis and reduction of its immediate and long-term negative effects.

In a comparative study of international student mobility and recruitment in non-Anglophone countries, including the case of Russia, the editors (de Wit et al., 2022) conclude that “despite greater challenges and a less advantageous starting position compared to their English-speaking competitors, many non-Anglophone countries establish themselves as successful study destinations and find their niche in the global market. However, in conditions of constantly tightening global competition, countries with education export ambitions must take a systematic and comprehensive approach to recruitment. Such an approach must involve strategic and operational initiatives in the framework of comprehensive internationalization—and not be primarily driven by rationales of revenue generation, soft power, and rising in the rankings.” This is a lesson that certainly also applies to the Russian case.

**CONFLICT OF INTEREST**
Ekaterina Minaeva and Larisa Taradina whose names are listed immediately below certify that they have no affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest (such as honoraria; educational grants; participation in speakers’ bureaus; membership, employment, consultancies, stock ownership, or other equity interest; and expert testimony or patent-licensing arrangements), or non-financial interest (such as personal or professional relationships, affiliations, knowledge or beliefs) in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

**DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT**
The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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**ENDNOTE**
1 A specialist’s degree qualification provides an opportunity to carry out professional activity that requires a more advanced level of higher education in comparison with a bachelor’s degree. The period of study according to the specialist’s degree programme amounts to not less than 5 years.
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