

Bridging Minds: Enhancing Educational Exchanges between Russian and Asian Universities in a Multipolar World

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Abstract

This article examines how educational exchanges between Russian and Asian universities are evolving within an emerging multipolar world order and how they can be strengthened. Drawing on secondary data from scholarly literature, policy documents and official statistics, the study uses qualitative content analysis to identify key patterns in motivations, structures and perceived outcomes of cooperation. Internationalisation theory, soft power and multipolarity provide the main analytical lenses. The review shows that many exchanges remain numbers-driven and state-centred, prioritising recruitment targets and geopolitical signalling over deep curriculum integration and shared governance. At the same time, regional initiatives and joint programmes reveal growing efforts to construct alternative Eurasian knowledge spaces beyond traditional Western hubs. The study concludes that enhancing Russian–Asian exchanges require embedding internationalisation into teaching and institutional practice, reframing soft power as mutual and people-centred, and designing polycentric, knowledge-diplomacy partnerships. Recommendations are offered as a basis for future empirical, multi-sited research.

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Introduction

International higher education has hugely grown throughout the past 20 years as it is estimated that in 2022, there were 6.9 million international student enrolments against 2.5 million in 2002 (International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2024). As much as the biggest number of international student populations are still in OECD countries, recent information indicates that there is a shift in destination

destinations and a gradual rebalancing of the top four classical Anglophone hosts (OECD, 2025). These changes can be seen in terms of the larger changes in the world political economy and in the pursuit of cheaper, more culturally near, and geopolitically aligned studies globally in the region of Asia, Eurasia, and the Global South. Meanwhile, universities are being pressured to internationalize due to reputation, financial and labor-market congruency reasons (Buckner, 2019).

Researchers are becoming more likely to frame internationalization as a global paradigm that has been locally adjusted, influenced by the histories of individual nations and positionality in the world system (Buckner, 2019; Zhang and Cao, 2024). According to the recent studies, the positive aspect of cross-border cooperation is combined with the controversy of inequality, commercialization, and cultural homogenization in higher education (Zhang and Cao, 2024). Simultaneously, there is an increasing body of literature that believes education to be a prominent resource of soft-power, which states leverage through scholarships, branch campuses and academic partnerships to develop influence and legitimacy in foreign countries (Gauttam et al., 2024). Under a multipolar order, where no one bloc takes the lead, international education is a strategic field where the new and existing powers are competing and collaborating to influence norms, elites, and regional orientations.

These dynamics in Asia have been aggravated by the pivot of Russia towards the East and its extended Eurasian agenda. Research indicates that the policy-makers of Russia are beginning to consider connectivity with Asian partners (economic, infrastructural, educational, and so forth) as a core part of their great-power approach (Javaid et al., 2025; Silvan and Kaczmarek, 2023). Russian universities have also enhanced their international recruiting and mobility policies at the institutional level and have made Russia a more desirable non-Anglophone study destination, particularly to Asian, Middle Eastern, and African students (Minaeva and Prostakov, 2022). China and Russia are using the educational exchanges, language advertising, and scholarships as the most instrumental instruments in their competition over the hearts and minds in Central Asia, showing the blatantly geopolitical nature of academic collaboration (Rashidov et al., 2024; Supyaldiyarov et al., 2024).

However, regardless of this emerging body of literature, the current body of work tends to be single-corridor (e.g. Russia-China or Russia-Central Asia), or foreign policy and soft power, or aggregate mobility patterns, instead of the educational logic, institutional practice and mutual learning that lies at the core of inter-university exchanges between Russian and Asian universities more generally (Gauttam et al., 2024; Silvan and Kaczmarek, 2023). Little is done to assess these partnerships as being reimagined in a multipolar world, and how this would play out in terms of curriculum and governance and academic cultures both in the context of Russia and Asia. This gap is what the present work, entitled "Bridging Minds: Enhancing Educational Exchanges Between Russian and Asian Universities in a Multipolar World," attempts to accomplish, i.e. shift the focus on seeing students and programs as the means of influence to viewing exchanges as the sources of mutual knowledge. The study hopes that through the analysis of motivations, structures, and perceived benefits and risks on either side will yield empirically based recommendations to make cooperation more equitable, sustainable, and pedagogically significant.

Literature Review

The internationalisation of higher education has been broadly conceptualized as a scholarly requirement or a policy of statecraft. The traditional definitions focus on international, intercultural and global aspects of the roles of universities (Knight, 2012; de Wit et al., 2015). Later literature emphasizes that as the world

order changes, competition to attract talent, research capacity and soft power becomes more prominent in internationalisation (Kapfudzaruwa, 2024; Marginson, 2025). In this regard, education relations between Russian and Asian universities are not the neutral academic nature but the geopolitical activity. They overlap with the emergence of China, projects of regionalisation like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and the need to de-Westernize as a source of knowledge (Yue et al., 2022). Meanwhile, the critical scholarship cautions against internationalisation repeating inequalities and favouring the English language, mainstream epistemology, and institutions that are well-endowed (Lee and Stensaker, 2021). In a research project whose name is *Bridging Minds: Enhancing Educational Exchanges between Russian and Asian Universities in a Multipolar World*, this extended literature offers an analytical perspective using which mobility, partnership and knowledge flows are entrenched in the dynamics of changing global power relations.

Historical attitudes towards Soviet and Russian higher education indicate that foreign policy objectives that included relations with Asia have long been connected with educational exchanges. Yudkevich (2025) follows the development of the framing of the international students in Soviet universities as the force of solidarity and modernisation to the friendly states, in particular in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Since 1991, Russian universities still accepted applicants of former socialist and postcolonial allies, however, on marketised and decentralised terms (Arefiev, 2005; Kuraev, 2014). The historical and conceptual study by Kuraev (2014) suggests that the idea of internationalisation in Russia is an amalgamation of continuity and the Soviet past with the new rules of rankings, tuition revenues and status competition. These legacies determine the current relations with Asian partners: although a significant number of Asian students continue to imagine Russia in symbolic terms of scientific power and political cooperation, they can now assess it as a possible choice in an overcrowded international education market (Hong and Xiao, 2023). Still, even the historical literature is mostly Eurocentric or based on relations between the Soviet and the West, and there is a gap in terms of the long-term dynamics of the relations between Russia and Asia in terms of universities that this research aims to fill.

Modern policy-based research reveals the desire by Russia to be a high-quality higher education exporter with Asian nations being central to the strategy. Malinovskiy and Chankseliani (2024) reveal that the Russian federal government has encouraged the recruitment of international students as one of the methods of modernising universities and exude soft power, typically with performance metrics to reward the number of foreign students. According to statistical and policy reports, the number of international enrolments has been growing steadily since the end of the 2000s, with the largest sending countries being China, India and Central Asian states (Kuzminov & Yudkevich, 2022; Gromov, 2016). This growth however is very concentrated in a few elite universities and urban centres. The institutional strategy studies indicate that several universities do not have consistent long-term partnerships diversification and the development of profound collaborations outside the mere mobility flows (Hong and Xiao, 2023). This literature highlights the fact that Russia is interacting with Asian students and universities through the lenses of national export agenda, however, it gives less emphasis to how the Asian partners themselves view and negotiate such interactions in the context of a broader multipolar environment.

One of the parallel bodies of literature is devoted to the experiences and adaptation of international students in Russia, which can be important insights to a project intending to bridge minds. Both quantitative and qualitative research have demonstrated that the stressors experienced by international students are usually diverse and may comprise academic demands, bureaucracy and language barriers (Kosheleva et al., 2015). Ibragimov et al. (2021) underline that the local attitudes are colored by the

Russian mass media discourses regarding migrants and foreigners, which have an impact on the sense of safety and belonging of the international students to the campus. Adaptation studies also indicate that these challenges can be reduced with the help of peer networks, informal mentoring and co-curricular activities (Latipov et al., 2017). Though most of the respondents value the comparatively low tuition rates and the high levels of disciplinary training in some of the areas, they also cite low English-mediation, unstable services, and confusion regarding degree recognition in their native countries (International Students in Higher Education Institutions in Russia, 2021). Though such studies often do not differentiate systematically between Asian and other cohorts, they point to the fact that in order to facilitate and improve educational interactions, there is need to consider the realities of daily life mobility, rather than high-level agreements.

The bilateral collaborations between Russia and China have taken a middle stage in the literature of the Russian-Asian higher educational exchanges. Katkova, Sidorov and Wu (2018) report the development of Russian-Chinese collaboration in the form of language programmes and short-term exchange to the joint degree schemes and the strategies aimed at exporting the educational services conditionally. They see these efforts as elements of a larger repertoire of soft-power, which correlates with the 1997 Russian-Chinese statement on a multipolar world order. In an analysis of China basing on that it seeks to become a global education hub, Smirnova (2017) contends that the Russian universities are experiencing stiff competition with Western and Asian universities which are more globalised in terms of ranking and research networks. According to policy analysis, Russian-Chinese cooperation is becoming more and more anchored in the BRI framework with universities being key players on infrastructure, energy and technology projects (Niu, 2025; Pan, 2013). However, this scholarship is very China-centred and would rather view other Asian partners as peripheral and would not talk much about how Russian-Chinese models of cooperation can inform or limit the interaction of Russia with South Asian, Central Asian, or Southeast Asian universities.

The second important line of research is one offered by multilateral initiatives, notably the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) University and the BRICS Network University. The Academic Cooperation Association (2011) explains that SCO University is a network of networks which connect dozens of Russian, Chinese, Kazakhstani, Kyrgyz and Tajik universities by joint programmes and mobility programmes. In its turn, the further scrutiny of the SCO shows that education, culture and people-to-people interactions have become the major aspects of its extended security and economic course (Turner, 2005; Twenty Years of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, 2021). Research observes that SCO University and BRICS Network University are striving to design less Western-driven models of accreditation and funding of professional training and research collaboration (Pestereva and Kholina, 2019). Nonetheless, the commentators also mention the long-standing issues of governance, its unequal involvement and insufficient acknowledgment in joint degrees (Academic Cooperation Association, 2011). Even though these initiatives represent the attempts to institutionalise Eurasian and Global South academic spaces, there is still scattered empirical data on how they influence real-life university-university interactions, especially outside the elite schools.

The Belt and Road Initiative has already created a burgeoning literature which places higher education at the centre of the Chinese regional policy, which has significant consequences to Russian-Asian relations. Yue et al. (2022) survey BRI higher education studies and find that they focused on policy coordination, talent development, language, and culture promotion, and building of the community of education. Numerous research highlights the growing collaboration of Chinese universities with partners in Central

Asia, South Asia and Southeast Asia, usually via scholarships, joint institutes and cross-border campuses (King, 2020; Gunter and Raghuram, 2018). Niu (2025) reasons that the BRI leads to multipolarity in the international higher education by spreading the student flows and research partnerships not only out of historical Anglo-American destinations. This situation is both an opportunity and a threat to Russia: its universities will have a unique chance to establish themselves as either complementary or alternative destinations in a wider Eurasian area, but they also run the risk of being shadowed by the vastly larger financial and institutional capabilities of China (Smirnova, 2017). There are only limited studies that explicitly discuss the cooperation of Russian and Asian universities to follow BRI structures, which allows considering more subtle approaches to the mechanisms of partnerships and expectations.

Theorizing multipolarity and higher education geopolitics offers a valuable context into which the Russian-Asian relations can be observed. Marginson (2025) suggests that the higher education space within the world is not structured around one western core as it is becoming multipolar, with emerging centres in East and South Asia as well as a decentred research capacity. Oldac and Yang (2021) also demonstrate how the partnerships between China and Turkey are indicative of the larger trends in which systems viewed as peripheral create new patterns of connection. Kapfudzaruwa (2024) argues that traditional postcolonial paradigms, based on a straightforward NorthSouth dichotomy, do not represent the multipolar relationships of power in the areas where the state such as China, India and Russia are both former colonies, regional powers, and aspiring hegemonies. Higher education in this literature has been viewed as a factor which has been influenced as well as influencing geopolitical realignments. Nonetheless, Russia has been conceptually viewed either as a residual European actor or a security player and not as a proactive education partner in Asia, so this study has created a conceptual gap that the current study can fill.

Although there is a lot of available studies, it can be observed that there are a number of gaps when the literature is considered through the bridging minds lens. To start with, empirical efforts are so biased on the topic of Russian-Chinese relations, where relatively low interest is in exchanges with South Asian, Southeast Asian and some Central Asian systems outside of Kazakhstan (Hong and Xiao, 2023; Yue et al., 2022). Second, numerous studies are at the macro-level and geopolitical stories or at the individual student level, but seldom do they relate both scales to study how the everyday academic collaboration is influenced by the higher-level strategies. Thirdly, very little comparative research exists, which explicitly compares the view of Russian and Asian universities on partnership rationales, expectations and perceived benefits. Lastly, the normative aspects of bridging minds - i.e. mutual understanding, epistemic justice and co-creation of knowledge - are frequently suggested but rarely implemented (Lee and Stensaker, 2021; Kapfudzaruwa, 2024). Such gaps explain why a study which preempts the qualitative, relational and reciprocal of educational interactions between Russian and various Asian universities in a multipolar world is worthwhile.

Making its way into this pool of literature, the current study is expected to make three principal contributions. Theoretically, it combines internationalisation research, geopolitical theory of multipolarity and research on the experience of students and staff to come up with a conceptualization of how educational exchange can be viewed as a political and human process (Marginson, 2025; Yudkevich, 2025). Empirically, it aims to go beyond the prevailing emphasis on Russian-Chinese relationships and use the insights of various Asian subregions, thus covering a broader range of patterns of cooperation, limitations and inventions (Yue et al., 2022). As a methodology, it focuses on qualitative research on how administrators, academics and students perceive bridging minds, their perceptions of reciprocity, sharing

knowledge and long-term collaboration. By doing it, the study answers the calls of more context-sensitive and multi-scalar studies of internationalisation that are inclined to consider both the structural power relations and local agency (de Wit et al., 2015; Lee and Stensaker, 2021). Finally, it is intended to produce suggestions of the means of improving educational relations between Russian and Asian universities based on life experience and directed towards a more inclusive multipolar order.

Research Questions:

- 1) How do Russian and Asian universities currently design, implement, and experience educational exchange programmes (student/staff mobility, joint degrees, research collaboration) within the context of an emerging multipolar world?
- 2) What strategies and mechanisms can effectively enhance the quality, reciprocity, and sustainability of educational exchanges between Russian and Asian universities?

Research Objectives

- To analyse the existing structures, practices, and perceptions of educational exchanges between Russian and Asian universities, focusing on motivations, challenges, and perceived benefits for key stakeholders (administrators, academics, and students).
- To develop evidence-based recommendations for strategies and mechanisms that can improve the quality, reciprocity, and long-term sustainability of educational exchanges between Russian and Asian universities in a multipolar world.

Methodology

This study uses only secondary data because it was not possible to collect primary information through surveys or interviews. The research is based on existing journal articles, books, policy papers, official reports, and online statistics related to Russian higher education, Asian universities, student mobility, and international cooperation in a multipolar world. Relevant materials were identified through academic databases such as Google Scholar using keywords including “Russia,” “Asia,” “educational exchanges,” and “internationalisation.” After collecting documents, the most suitable sources were selected according to their relevance to the research questions. These sources were examined using qualitative content analysis. Key ideas and themes -- such as motivations, challenges, benefits, and policy strategies—were identified, compared, and grouped to find patterns across different authors. By relying on established literature and official data, this secondary-method approach provides a structured and cost-effective way to understand and evaluate educational exchanges between Russian and Asian universities.

Theoretical Framework

Theoretical background of the study is a combination of the concepts of internationalisation of higher education, soft power, and multipolarity. To begin with, the study is informed by the perspective by Knight of internationalisation which entails activities of incorporating international and intercultural aspects in the aim, operations and provision of higher education (Knight, 2012). In the current research, one of the major manifestations of this internationalisation process is considered to be the educational exchanges between the Russian and Asian universities. Second, the framework employs the concept of soft power by Nye, implying that a country is able to impact on other people without necessarily applying force (Nye, 2004). The scholarships, student mobility, and joint degrees are observed as the tools that can create

favorable images, trust, and long-term relationships between Russia and the Asian states. Third, the research is informed by the research on the multipolar world, whereby power and influence are equally distributed among multiple centres without one block taking control over the others (Acharya, 2017). This can be used to understand why Russian and Asian universities have been in search of alternatives to strictly Western partnership and why new regional networks are coming up. The combination of these three viewpoints enables the framework to investigate exchanges as not only technical academic processes, but also as tools of cooperation, competition, and mutual understanding in the evolving world order.

Discussion

Internationalisation logics in Russian-Asian cooperation

Considering the internationalisation perspective, it can be noted that, to a large extent, the current Russian-Asian exchanges are based on rather traditional motivation, i.e. reputation, market share and attraction of talents, but not profound academic integration. The classic typology provided by Altbach and Knight (2007) indicates that a considerable portion of mobility and joint-degree plans throughout the globe remain competitive in branding and money-making, despite applying the language of partnership. The same can be said about the policies in Russian higher education: according to the analyses, Russian higher education is highly focusing on the visibility in international rankings and export of educational services, whereas the strategies of institutions, in most cases, are dispersed and project-oriented (Nekhoroshkov, 2019; Rozhenkova and Rust, 2018). The strategy of recruiting international students in Russia is also commented by the desire to recruit those with post-Soviet and Asian citizenship as the means of strengthening the influence in the region (Grove, 2017). Meanwhile, the opponents of the so-called numbers-driven internationalisation claim that quantifying the number of students and agreements and not paying attention to mutual curriculum change or shared governance will result into a superficial cooperation (Brandenburg and de Wit, 2011). Combined, the initial research question displays that most of the Russian-Asian projects are still guided by a competitive, state-based model of internationalisation, in which strategic objectives are formulated, based on geopolitical and status logic rather than a ideally shared academic missions (Huang, 2007; Internationalization of Higher Education in Russia, n.d.).

Soft power: education as attraction and signalling

Using the soft power theory, the educational exchanges are regarded as a means of attraction and signalling on both the Russian and the partners in Asia. Nye (2005) believes that higher education is an important source of soft-power due to having the ability to influence the preference in the long run through culture, values and personal connections. The Confucius Institutes of China and international student diplomacy are studied to demonstrate the explicit approach to framing scholarships, language programmes and campus life as a soft-power investment (Yang, 2010; Bislev, 2017; Lo, 2011, 2021). The documents of Russian policies also introduce outbound and inbound mobility as a new leadership tool, and education is a harmless means of exerting influence throughout Eurasia (Torkunov, 2013; Rozhenkova and Rust, 2018). Media and policy observers note that recruiting campaigns rely heavily on the students of strategically vital areas, particularly of post-Soviet and Asian nations, rather than on global diversification (Grove, 2017; Hudson, 2022). Nonetheless, the empirical literature regarding the experiences of students indicates that soft power does not necessarily originate; perceptions are determined by the quality of academics, daily experiences and attitudes towards political ambitions

(Crowley-Vigneau, 2022; Leskina and Sabzalieva, 2021). RQ1 hence suggests that the Russian-Asian interactions are now a blend of authentic motive of education with instrumental market logic of branding and the soft-power delivers are a conditional and not assured possibility.

Multipolarity and the Making of Eurasian higher education spaces

Russian-Asian cooperation under the multipolar lens is seen as part of broader actions of constructing other regional knowledge spaces instead of adhering to Western-led examples. Studies of Eurasian higher education regionalism reveal that the Eurasian Economic Union and the Belt and Road Initiative by China intersect in Central Asia in order to establish new cross-border educational structures, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation University and networked degree programmes (Leskina & Sabzalieva, 2021). Bazavluk, Kurylev and Savin (2022) understand such forms of development as manifestations of Eurasianism, when education assists in the legitimisation of the more multipolar order, where regional blocs are the centre of power and the single hegemon is no longer required. Novelli (2023) also contends that the education policy is becoming more influenced by the conflicts between various geopolitical projects and shifting to the multi-polar world between Western hegemony and multi-polar one. In this regard, Russian-Asian interactions are applicable to both individual universities and also regional strategies aiming to re-orient the knowledge production towards the non-traditional Anglo-American centres (Huang, 2007; Internationalization of Higher Education in Russia, n.d.). RQ1 thus reveals that such alliances are entrenched in contesting views of world order, in which co-operation could serve to foster learning together and to institutionalise new hierarchies in geopolitical relations.

Deepening Internationalisation beyond Numbers

In order to improve exchanges, the internationalisation lens recommends that it should change the approach of counting mobility into changing curricula, pedagogy and governance. As Altbach and Knight (2007) indicate, sustainable internationalisation needs to incorporate the global and comparative perspective into programmes as opposed to viewing mobility as a supplementary factor. Brandenburg and de Wit (2011) even add a note of caution that partnerships and English-medium programmes are in danger of draining out the pedagogical core unless directed by a sense of common values and social responsibility. In the case of Russian-Asian cooperation, such a solution would imply a common design of joint modules, supervision, and assessment standards that would be actually a combination of epistemic traditions, language and regional case material, rather than an export of Russian or Asian models (unaltered) (Gao, 2014; Huang, 2007). The secondary data about the strategies of the regions in Russia indicate that even though the country policy is fragmented, the individual universities have implemented the targeted internationalisation effectively to enhance the quality of teaching and the professional training (Nekhoroshkov, 2019; Buletova et al., 2021). Interactions that correspond to such institution-level quality agendas (not merely as a diplomatic project), by aligning Russian-Asian exchanges, is a direct answer to RQ2 because it makes the partnerships agendas of each, academically transformative.

Reframing Soft Power as Mutual, People-Centred Influence

More reciprocal enhancement strategies are also indicated in the soft power theory. Nye (2005) emphasizes that the attraction that is most enduring is based on realistic values and facts and not a one-sided message. Education diplomacy studies help understand that international students can act as an ambassador only in case of a respectful conversation, and not a tool of political storytelling (Bislev, 2017; Cerasi, 2019). The evidence concerning the educational soft power in China additionally reveals that the

perceived legitimacy and the sensitivity to the local issues are as important as scholarships or university facilities (Lo, 2021; Yang, 2010; Higher education as soft power: Sino-Lanka case, 2024). The extension of this to Russian-Asian exchange implies practical solutions co-created culture programmes, alumni networks facilitating two-way movement, and open communication on issues of political constraints. The experiments with collaborative degrees and network universities are already discussed as soft-power instruments (Shenderova, 2023; Rozhenkova and Rust, 2018; Grove, 2017). The implication of RQ2 is that these instruments may be re-structured as less one-way influence and more on common platforms where Russian and Asian students co-define research agendas and outreach to the public in such a way that they mutually reinforce soft power.

Using Knowledge Diplomacy to Steer Multipolarity

Lastly, the multipolar lens implies that the exchanges have to be improved by taking a proactive decision to make them look like the so-called knowledge diplomacy and not the bloc politics. Liu (2025) theorises international higher education as a two-way diplomacy where universities facilitate collaboration around common knowledge issues, particularly within the Belt and Road setting. The writer of this article (Novelli, 2023) also defends the idea of a critical approach to global agendas (including the SDGs) and ensuring that alliances are not new forms of reproducing hierarchies in the name of multipolarity. The experience of working on the Eurasian higher education spaces demonstrates that the Russian and Chinese initiatives may either squeeze out smaller partners or, when properly designed, establish true polycentric governance where Central Asian and other Asian universities co-decide norms and priorities (Leskina and Sabzalieva, 2021; Bazavluk et al., 2022). In this regard, RQ2 indicates practical systems like rotating leadership of consortia, joint funding calls and multi-campus research hubs, which involve actors other than Moscow and Beijing. Analysis of world higher education in the context of geopolitical repositioning highlights the need to become more poly-centric to ensure academic collaboration is inaccessible to penalties, crises and abrupt diplomatic changes (Kirk, 2025; Huang, 2007). In the present study, it is best to define Russian-Asian exchanges as explicit knowledge diplomacy to make clear how the bridging of minds can exist- even in the case when the relations between the states are strained (Zaheer, 2026).

Conclusion

The present study aimed at investigating the ways, in which educational interactions between the Russian and Asian universities are re-constructed and reconstructed in a new multipolar world, and how they could be improved. Referring exclusively to secondary sources and based on the theories of internationalisation, soft power and multipolarity, the discussion revealed that most of the existing initiatives are still quite figures-based and state-oriented. Mobility aims, recruitment initiatives, symbolic memoranda tend to take the place of more fundamental curriculum change, shared governance and learning together. Consequently, exchanges remain in some cases as much about status and policy signalling rather than actually being processes of bridging minds across institutions and societies.

Simultaneously, the analysis pointed to actual opportunities. In a soft-power view, Russian-Asian partnerships ought to establish a long-term trust and appeal, though only when the students and employees feel the high academic standards, respect and reciprocity, and not the one-way influence. These exchanges, as further demonstrated by the multipolar lens, are entrenched in larger agendas to develop alternative regional knowledge spaces not only in Eurasia but also along the Belt and Road where Russia, China and other Asian countries strive to leave their West-centric leanings behind.

The research questions are answered: the study finds that in order to improve the Russian-Asian exchanges, (a) the internationalisation within the universities needs to be deepened as co-created curricula, pedagogical and assessment practices; (b) the very notion of soft power should be re-imagined as a reciprocal, people-oriented form of influence instead of a one-sided projection; and (c) polycentric and inclusive partnerships of such kind must be designed, where universities are perceived as agents of knowledge diplomacy in a multipolar world. Since this was carried out using secondary data, future researches must involve the use of primary research with students, academicians and administrators in various Russian and Asian universities. This kind of empirical data would assist in trying to confirm or disprove the theoretical understanding provided herein and justify more practical and context-specific suggestions towards actually unifying minds in this changing Eurasian space of higher education.

Recommendations

- Create joint or co-taught classes, shared courses, and comparative case studies such that the Russian and Asian viewpoints are really represented in the classroom and not merely in the mobility figures.
- Increase language training (including Russian and Asian language, as well as English where necessary), pre-departure orientations, and intercultural workshops in order to limit adaptation issues and misconceptions.
- Agreements to be made on a reciprocal student and staff movement, shared supervision, and joint authorship of research such that the Russian and the Asian universities are equally benefitted.
- Form joint committees/ working groups (representatives of both sides) to discuss programmes, problem solutions, and plan new initiatives regularly on an equal basis.
- Emphasize working together on common problems of the region (e.g., energy, climate, technology, security) by developing joint research centres and conferences, and make universities the intermediary in a multipolar world.

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