

## Encountering an Alternative: Virtual Student Mobility Holding up a Mirror to Russian Higher Education Teaching Culture in Crisis

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### Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

### Abstract

Virtual student mobility (VSM) exposes students to diverse teaching cultures and pedagogical approaches, potentially transforming their perceptions of opportunities and aspirations. Student-centered approaches, often implemented during VSM, prioritize nurturing relationships and fostering cooperative interactive dynamics between students and teachers. This stands in stark contrast to the authoritarian models prevalent in Russian higher education, which aim to control learners through forceful, oppressive methods. An interpretive phenomenological analysis of 18 in-depth interviews with VSM participants from Russia reveals that VSM may allow Russian students encounter an alternative. They thus become able to recognise the normalised under the state of 'educational dictatorship' coercive and often emotionally abusive behaviour of lecturers in Russia, who themselves struggle due to the lack of resources and support, as neither the norm nor normal. The findings underscore VSM's transformative potential, enabling students to think within the global circuit of opportunities and strive for self-actualization.

### Full paper

This study examines the impact of virtual student mobility (VSM) on Russian students' perceptions of teaching culture and their aspirations towards international education. Drawing on Mittelmeier et al. (2021), it highlights how VSM exposes students to new pedagogical approaches and other educational socio-cultural spaces. Amidst the academic profession crisis in Russia (Denisova-Schmidt, 2020), this research demonstrates that VSM introduces Russian students to often new to them student-centred approaches to teaching, thereby enhancing their aspirations for further studies abroad in line with the Aspirations-Capabilities framework of migration (de Haas, 2021).

According to Charles (2016), traditional, more authoritarian educational models such as in Russia, aim at establishing control over learners and are based on forceful and oppressive teaching methods to make students conform to the educator's goals. In contrast, it can be argued that student-centred approaches, prevailing in the West and adopted more and more across the globe, resonate more with progressive views and, therefore, do not aim for direct dominance over students but instead focus on nurturing the educational relationship, facilitating an interactive and cooperative dynamics between students and teachers (Charles, 2016). The paper argues, based on literature review and its philosophical reconceptualization, that in the absence of the means to exert positive educative violence

as a way of enforcing students' adherence to the rules and regulations, lecturers in Russia often resort to 'negative educative violence' (Charles, 2016) in the form of emotional abuse (verbal and non-verbal, e.g. neglect) (Nearchou, 2017) exacerbated by the crisis of teaching profession. This negative educative violence is, nevertheless, perceived by all stakeholders as divine violence with lecturers endowed with the power and vocation to 'do good' whatever the means. The resulting state of 'educational dictatorship' (Marcuse, 1969) is thus normalised and remains largely intangible and unacknowledged by students unless they personally experience an alternative, even if only online.

Using an interpretive phenomenological approach, as it allows for exploration of how individuals make sense of their own lived experiences (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012), the empirical part of the study analyses 18 semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted with Russian students who participated in various forms of VSM between 2020 and 2023. The respondents repeatedly emphasised such aspects of their VSM experience as freedom of expression, the approachability of lecturers, and their respectful attitude, and contrasted this humanistic approach to teaching with their experiences within the Russian higher education. While the VSM experience as such can already act as a 'rite of passage' *en route* to international education for Russian students caught in the entangled geo-political crises (Tishenina, forthcoming), this observed contrast in approaches to teaching was one of the most prominent themes, and most respondents acknowledged that this awareness has significantly strengthened their desire to pursue education abroad.

The findings underscore the potentially transformative impact of the VSM experience on students' perceptions of the educational opportunity structure by not only empowering but also encouraging them to think within an international, global circuit (Brooks & Waters, 2009), particularly should other educational systems appear more conducive to students' basic psychological needs (Deci & Ryan, 2002) and align more with the inherent subjectification purpose of education (Biesta, 2009). On the other hand, the finding also reveals that students might make a conscious choice to stay aiming at bringing about positive changes to education system in Russia through the research and/or practice they envisage for themselves. The findings, thus, contribute to the understanding of how exposure to alternative teaching approaches and educational environments can shape students' aspirations and perceptions of educational options available to them as well as their understanding of what quality education entails. The study suggests that VSM can play a crucial role in the global educational ecosystem, not just as a substitute for physical mobility but as a significant educational experience in its own right.

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