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POPULATION AND DEVELOPMENT

MENTOR SEMINAR

RESEARCH TOPIC:

TRENDS AND DETERMINANTS OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENT MIGRATION TO RUSSIA

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Introduction and Rationale

Even though, Russia not sufficiently explored within the anglophone literature as a destination in international student migration, the country is still key in this phenomenon, especially as a possible destination of international students.

The rationale of this particular study consists of the following two purposes: (1) integration of theoretical and experimental knowledge on the trends that underlie the movement of international students destined for Russian institutions of higher education; and (2) identification of the determinants leading to the choice of Russian institutions of higher education as a study venue with the potential of leading to further migrations into or out of the region after completion of higher education.

Literature Review

The mobility of international students to study in Russia has had a complex and sometimes contradictory pattern over the past two decades: phases of gradual growth due to government scholarships, low tuition costs, and cultural ties with the former Soviet Republics interspersed with disruption due to episodes of geopolitically driven crises. The growth of the early 2000s and the subsequent decades of the 2010s represented the active engagement of the Russian government with the process of internationalization; the late 2010s represented an ambitious target of the attraction of a certain number of degree-level students (Minaeva & Prostakov, 2021).

There are certain structural pull factors that appear again and again. To begin with, the cost factor matters immensely. Russian scholarships and the availability of Russian government-funded places (programs like "Open Doors") make studying there significantly cheaper than studying in the West. This makes it an attractive option for students coming from developing countries. Such scholarships and funding thus form a very effective tool of attraction. (Nafedova, 2017).

Second, linguistic, cultural, and historical ties define the flows: former Soviet countries (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Belarus, Mongolia) and countries with close ties with the Russian government/ economy offer a considerable supply of students owing to ties with Russian citizens or a familiarity with the Russian education system. (Reeve, 2023).

Third, program availability (in Russian and increasingly English), a strong tradition of study in STEM and medicine, and scholarship pipelines based on academic achievement have made particular disciplines (engineering, medicine, computer science, economics) highly desirable. (Mohammed & Denisenko, 2024).

Regional diversification is a significant new trend; various reports point out that there has been an appreciable increase of students from African countries during the 2010s and the first years of the 2022-2023 interval due to active recruitment and scholarship programs offered by various institutions. This development partially compensates for the contraction of student inflows from the Western and certain European countries but also fuels certain worries (OECD, 2025).

One indispensable pull factor that apply to Russian institutions include the relative low tuition fees compared with Western institutions; the availability of government scholarships that offer tuition fees, accommodation costs, and stipends; English-language programs offered at certain

institutions; the reputation of certain technical and medical programs; the affinity that Russian institutions share with countries of the former Soviet empire; and the affordability of a Russian education. (Nikou & Luukkonen, 2023).

Also, Historically Russia has been strong in STEM education and medicine, and that attract students looking to gain technical expertise or pursue practical medical training. Institutional reputation, whether technical or medical universities, serve as a draw for students who come from areas with underdeveloped offerings in that specific area (Khokhlova et al, 2022).

Hypotheses

H1 (Trend hypothesis): The number of overseas students at Russian institutions of higher education has grown during the investigated period; this growth accelerated after the establishment of scholarship programs.

H2 (Sending-country determinants): The number of students sent from a sending country correlate positively with (a) historical-culture links (ex-USSR countries), (b) the presence of scholarships or government deals, and (c) the youth population of the sending country; and negatively with geographical distance and countries with a higher GDP per capita (students in these countries tend toward Western countries).

H3 (Field of study preference): STEM disciplines (engineering, medicine, applied sciences) and economics/business draw the highest numbers of foreign students in Russia (Table 4).

H4 (Policy sensitivity): Policies on visas, scholarships, and languages of instruction affect the origin composition and the absolute numbers of enrollment each year.

Methodology

The study employed a quantitative and observational approach, particularly; using the method secondary data analysis, with the purpose of examining the trends and factors of the mobility of international students to Russia. This investigation combines the collection of datasets with descriptive and inferential statistics. Data were collected from reputable sources, which include UNESCO institutions, national higher education records, and the world's economic databases like OECD.

Data Descriptions and Analysis

Table 1. Trends in International Student Enrolment in Russia

Year / period	Total International Students	Source
~2019 (pre-pandemic baseline often cited)	~300,000	OECD (2021).
2020	~315,000	UNESCO (2025)

2021	~324,000	UNESCO (2025)
2022	~351,500	Atsyor (2023)
2023	~376,000	UNESCO (2025)
2024	~355,000	Business and Financial Times, 2024
2025	~414,000	(RACUS Group, 2025)

Table 2. Top sending countries and estimated students

Sending country	**Approx. number of students in Russia**	**Source**
Kazakhstan	~62,500	ICEF Monitor (2023)
China	~40,000	ICEF Monitor (2023)
India	31,444	ICEF Monitor (2023)
Uzbekistan	25000	ICEF Monitor (2023)
Belarus, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan	21,500	ICEF Monitor (2023)

Table 3. Top sending countries and estimated students

Determinant (pull/push)	**Score (1–10)**	**Justification for Score**
Cost & scholarships (affordability)	9	Tuition and living costs in Russia are relatively low compared to many Western countries, and there are many government-funded scholarships (Nikou & Luukkonen, 2023)
Availability of government quotas & scholarships	10	The Russian government provides state-financed budget places ("quotas") for foreign students. The quota has been raised in recent years (e.g., to 30,000). (Interfax, 2024)
Proximity / historical ties (CIS)	8	Shared language, education systems, and historical ties make Russian universities especially attractive to students from CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) countries. (Reeve, 2023)
Program reputation (medicine, engineering)	8	Russian universities have strong traditions in medicine, engineering, and sciences; many medical schools are well recognized internationally. (Fly Homes, 2025)
Labour market / migration prospects	6	For some students, studying in Russia is seen as a pathway to work or stay. But in practice, getting work visas or permits after graduation can be complex. Also, many students leave for their master's or job elsewhere. (Plavo and Slovo, 2025)

Language & instruction options	7	While many programs are in Russian, there is a growing number of English-taught courses in Russian universities, widening appeal. (Reeve, 2023)
Recruitment networks & diaspora referrals	7	Word-of-mouth, recruitment via embassies or "Russia House" and agents are quite important; historically, diaspora and intergovernmental ties help maintain student flows. (This is inferred from the quota/scholarship system and recruitment via embassies). (Interfax, 2024)

Table 4. Study Areas and their Popularity

Field of Study	**Score (1–10)**	**Justification for score**
Medicine	10	Medicine (general medicine, dentistry, pharmacy) is consistently reported as the single most popular choice for international students in Russia — large intake via government quotas and many specialized medical programmes attracts students from Asia and Africa. (Open Doors, 2025)
Clinical Medicine / Public Health	9	Clinical medicine and public-health specializations are highly popular (closely linked to medicine overall), with growing interest in postgraduate clinical and public-health training (Open Doors, 2025)
Engineering & Technology	9	Engineering & technology (including traditional engineering, power/oil & gas, and technical specialties) remain a top choice for international applicants to Russian universities. (Open Doors, 2025)
Computer / Data Science	8	IT, computer science and data-science programmes have strong and rising demand among international students, driven by global job prospects and Russian university offerings in CS/AI. (Mishra, 2022)
Biology & Biotechnology	7	Biology & biotechnology attract a solid share of international applicants (research and MSc/PhD tracks), but overall intake is lower than medicine, engineering and CS. (Mishra, 2022)

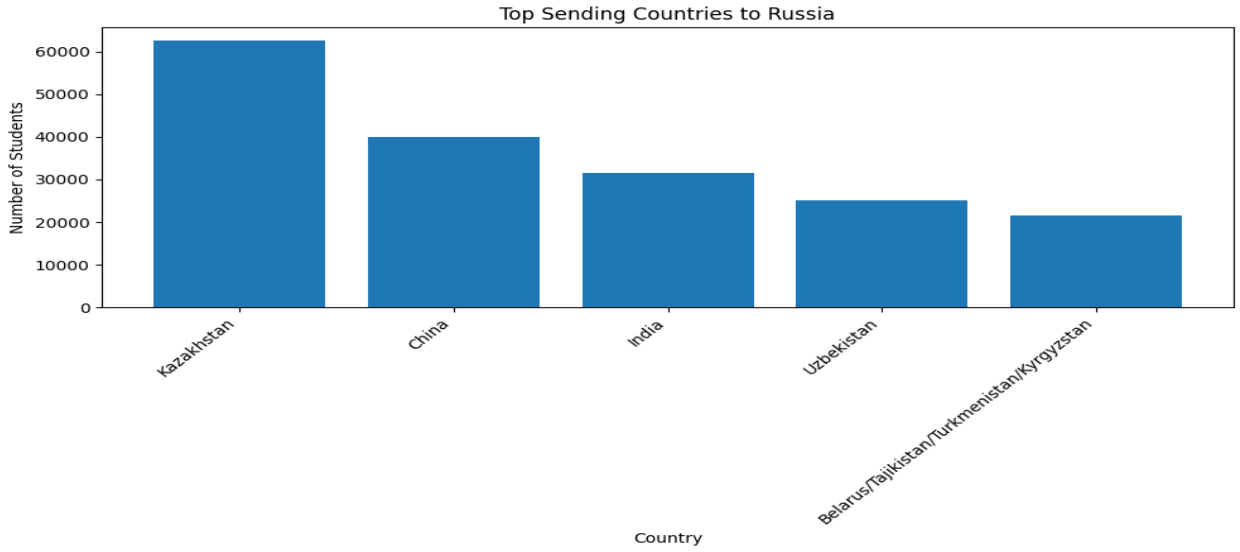
Results and Discussion

Figure 1. Trends in international student enrolments from 2019 to 2025

Source: Author's computation (2025).

According to the visualized data in figure 1 above, there is an overall positive structural pattern in Russia's foreign university inflows, with accelerated growth after 2021 to 2023, indicating counter-cyclical appeal in response to changes, increased scholarships, and strategic recruitment in Asia and Africa. The likely policy-related realities in 2024, such as visa complexities and exchange rate turbulence, are normalized by the remarkable growth in 2025, with approximately 414,000 inflows, demonstrating swift market adjustments in finding new destination options for increasingly mobility-restricted students. Russia's increasing status as an education hub with flexible costs, now in sync with changing SHG, is thereby highlighted.

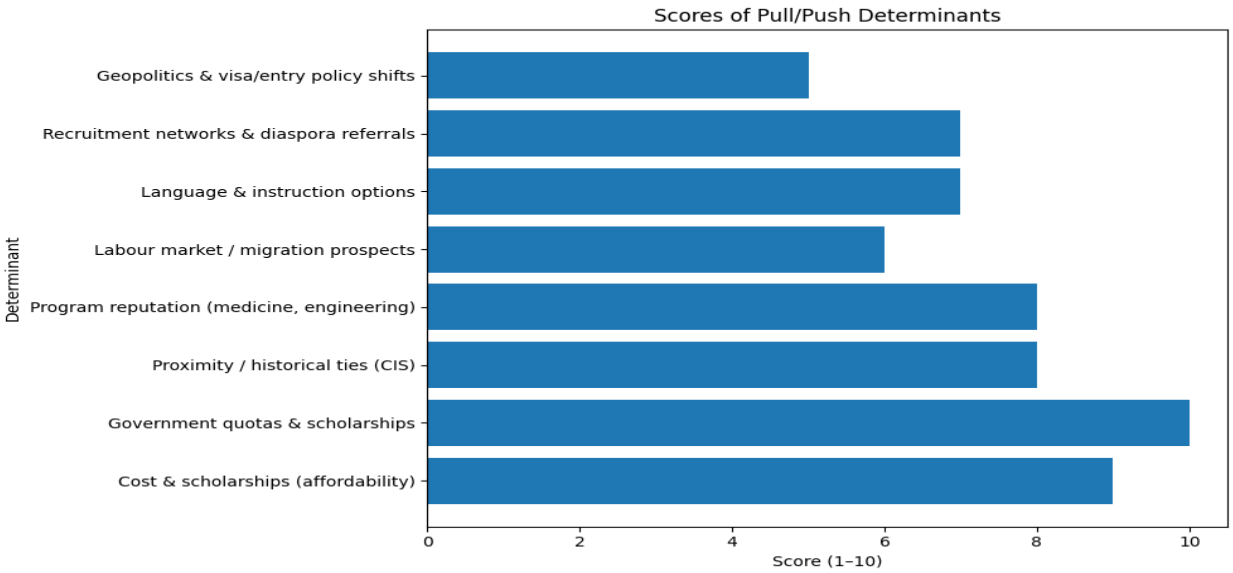
Figure 2 Number of international students in Russia according to their region/countries of origin



Source: Author's computation (2025).

The figure 2 above indicates that Russia's inward flow of international students demonstrates a marked regionalization, with Kazakhstan, China, and India occupying an unmistakable demand tier, certainly facilitated by their natural proximity, language bonds, and affordability analyses indicated in recent mobility reports. The prominence of CIS nations in particular underscores ongoing post-Soviet associations in these regions, again indicating these institutional associations maintain their powerful role in shaping international mobility. At the same time, China's precipitous growth, coupled with India's expanding figure, reflects Russia's deepening value proposition for Western nations seeking an alternative, albeit in costs now exacerbated in many Western countries by tightening visa policies in such areas as STEM education.

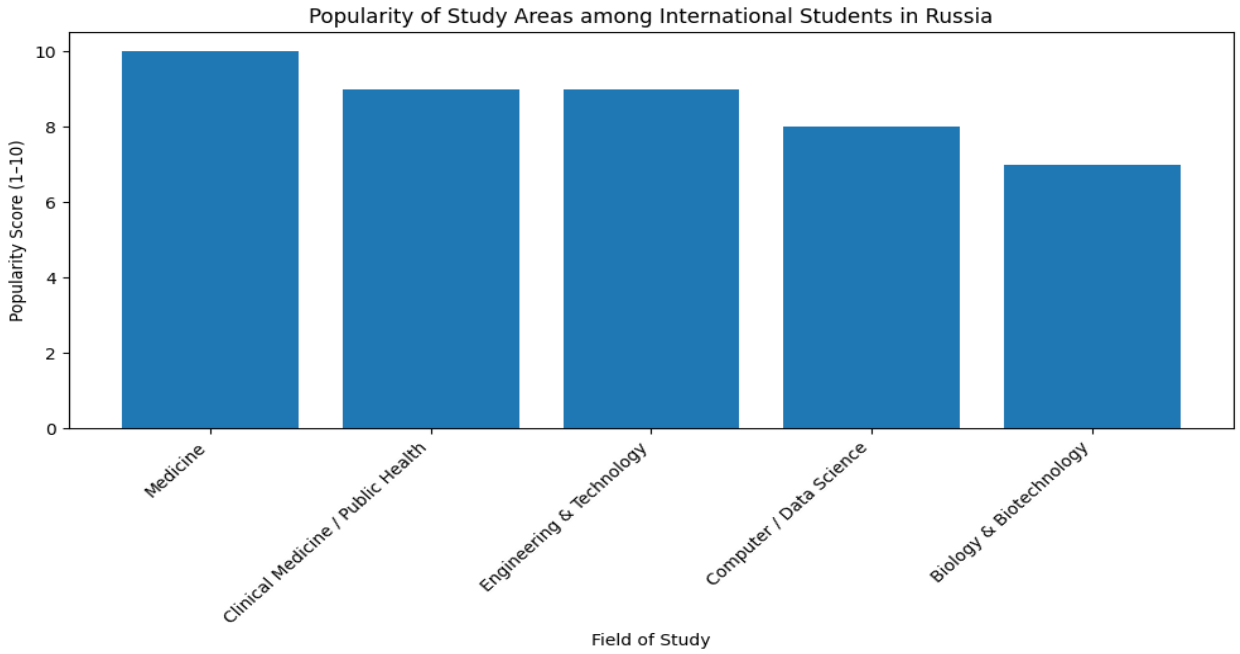
Figure 3. Pull/Push factors that influences international student migration to Russia



Source: Author's computation (2025).

It appears from the graphic visualization in figure 3 that there is a sharp concentrated mass in regard to affordability and quota support, which shows Russia's international student inflow is primarily pushed by policy- and cost-related pull forces, not market-based academic competitiveness. By their high levels, scholarships, proximity, and quality in science, tech, engineer, medical studies point to Russia's competitiveness being grounded in policy-based strategic investments rather than in international recognition prestige. Mid-level factors, such as labor market opportunities and language, record systemic challenges in Russia's capacity to transform international student flow into permanent migration, weakening overall pull forces in spite of impressive entry incentives. Overall, it becomes visible in drawing patterns there is now an operationalized policy-based recruitment process in Russia's international student pull policy, yet again hampered by graduated post-education transition outcomes.

Figure 4 popular fields of study and their popularity by score



Source: Author's computation (2025).

Score distribution in figure 4 above represents sharply the preference patterns of the field of study of among international students in Russia, with medicine representing a peak, signifying longstanding demand patterns coupled with Russia's historical capacity to accommodate substantial state-sponsored intakes. Chaining closely together in second place are clinical medicine/public health and engineering, representing a substantial secondary peak, signifying professional labor market pipeline appeal, along with Russia's advantage in delivering applied, 'doable' training in these areas. The medium-high score in computer/data science reflects an increasingly steep demand curve, aligning with broader international mobility in digital skills, represented in modern, growing markets. By contrast, the medium biotechnology group reflects 'niche' research-based migration patterns, largely driven by institutionalization patterns, rather than mainstream appeal.

Conclusion

These empirical patterns clearly indicate Russia's international inflows are conditioned by a cost-elastic, policy-dependent mobility structure in which costs, state-imposed quotas, and historical-regional associations have consistently mattered more than market-based intellectual contestations for tertiary education. Data analysis on drivers identifies realignments in international geopolitics, combined with strategic expansion in scholarships, to have strengthened regionalization in Asia and Africa, while CIS nations have remained firmly embedded in institutional, cultural associations. Discipline-based preferences, especially in core areas like medicine and engineering, point to an underlying supply-side specialization paradigm in which demand patterns are driven to align with Russia's pre-established advantage patterns. These findings clearly point to Russia's emergent prominence in international mobilities being conditioned not only by its institutional presence, interventions, in world mobilities, but its capacity to resolve post-study transition constraints for integrative mobility.

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